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## **Shock Therapy Salvation**

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Flannery O'Connor saw mankind as consumed with self-righteous disposition and self-preoccupation, making it necessary to use powerful and graphic descriptions to capture the average individual's attention. She was a writer with a mission: a mission that demanded the undivided attention of her readers. She was adamant in her determination to reach what she saw as a lost and morally decaying world. Mindful of the intense changes taking place in America during the late 1950's and early 1960's—feminist movements, the Beatles, and free love, to name a few—she saw the secular world as presenting many obstacles to living a spiritual life. O'Connor used the medium of the written word to deliver shocking and violent revelations to allow personal spiritual assessment and enlightenment to the gift of grace.

The use of violence in O'Connor's works could possibly be interpreted as a measure of urgency on the part of the author. O'Connor, a victim of the disease lupus, was keenly aware of her limited time on this earth; this awareness was brought to light by the death of her father at a relatively young age from the same disease. As a writer, she worked to create riveting prose; as a Christian, she worked to create compelling parables. Being inspired by her religious convictions, she intertwined her prose and parables to complete one work that would grab the reader's conscience and make him realize the actuality of his sinful nature. She would convey this message of revelation via violence. "O'Connor's characters lose or find their soul-saving grace in painful, chaotic circumstances that bear little or no resemblance to the slow but sure progress to the Celestial City of repentant pilgrims in traditional religious stories" (qtd. in Meyer 350). She was trying to elicit the reader's immediate attention and immediate spiritual repentance.

Understanding the concept of grace is key to understanding O'Connor's use of violence in her stories. Grace, in Christian belief, refers to the undeserving forgiveness and gift of salvation presented to each and every individual by Christ. Because each individual is sinful by nature, no one individual is

more deserving than another of Christ's grace. O'Connor delivered one theme of her message to mankind when she exposed the nature of man's evil soul. In "Good Country People," Manly Pointer cloaks the devil within himself by using the guise of a Bible salesman to gain the trust of Hulga and her mother; his true desire is to devastate and humiliate Hulga by stealing her prosthetic leg. The only reason for stealing the leg is to satisfy a sadistic pleasure. In "The Life You Save Might Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet presents himself as a kindly man willing to marry Lucynell regardless of her disabilities; in reality his sinful goal is to con what money he can from her mother and forsake all responsibility to Lucynell. In the end, Shiftlett leaves Lucynell an abandoned and pathetic soul scarred with the vengeance Satan breeds into the soul of man. With these stories, O'Connor teaches the reader that naivety can be the open door through which evil can enter into the unsuspecting life to wreak havoc and foster spiritual apathy.

O'Connor's stories point a spiritual finger at characters drowning in an ocean of self-righteousness. She gives the reader the impression that there is possibly no greater self-damning prospect than the idea that an individual is good enough to deserve the gift of Christ's grace. In "The Displaced Person," Mrs. McIntire seems certain of her own goodness. Yet in the end, she stands idly by with Mr. Shortly and watches the collision of the tractors that results in the death of Mr. Guizac. Mr. Shortly's fainéant response to the collision satisfies his jealous rage after he is denied a position on the farm. Mrs. McIntire's enfeebled response to what may have been a deliberate act of murder is in fact compliant with Mr. Shortly's sin. It is in this macabre moment she must confront the revelation that she is no more righteous than a common, sinful farm hand.

In "Revelation," the reader is introduced to an eclectic collective of souls at a doctor's office. Conversations between Mrs. Turpin and other waiting patients paint a picture of someone cemented in sanctimonious self-worth. Mrs. Turpin has a need to heap repeated judgments and offhanded insults on to the heads of those she deems less worthy than herself; she validates only individuals who meet her standard of appearance while completely ignoring the essence of their souls. O'Connor uses an unlikely character to deliver a sobering message to Mrs. Turpin; Mary Grace, a young girl, somewhat mentally disturbed, can see through the outer shell to Mrs. Turpin's void soul. Mary Grace kindles reactions to Mrs. Turpin's comments into a raging fire that

explodes in a violent attack. Later, after returning home, Mrs. Turpin goes out to her hog parlor and is confronted with the realization that she is among the least who walk the paths to salvation and that those she has judged will walk before her. O'Connor reminds the reader in this story that God can make use of even a meek soul to deliver a powerful message; an individual's own perception of self-goodness is not God's perception of goodness.

One of O'Connor's most profound revelations comes in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In this story an entire family is murdered before a grandmother can see the fallacy in her own sense of self-worth. The grandmother is a domineering, ill-tempered, judgmental woman living with an identity crippled by nostalgia. Her unrelenting persistence and defiance of her son's wishes lead the family into tragic peril. Even at the height of the crisis, as her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren are being led to their deaths, she can think only to beg for her own life. It is not

until the final moments before her own death that she understands she is staring at the face of evil incarnate and realizes her own faith falls victim to doubt under the weight of such strain.

O'Connor explained her choice of the use of violence as a need "to expose the 'distortions' of 'modern life' that appear 'normal' to her audience...to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" ( qtd. in Meyer 349-350). O'Connor's work is meant to compel the reader to reflect upon his own life and look for complacency that has found residence in the recesses of the mind blinded to Satan's distorted view of a normal world and spirit-filled individuals.

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