US novelist and short-story writer. Her works have a great sense of evil and sin, and often explore the religious sensibility of the Deep South, as in her novels *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). Her work exemplifies the post-war revival of the gothic novel in southern US fiction.


One of the most important voices in American fiction, Flannery O'Connor's art combines jarring intensity, stylistic economy, sardonic humor, intellectual richness, and spiritual depth. Her importance is all the more striking in being based on a relatively small number of fictional works: O'Connor completed but two novels and two collections of short stories before lupus erythematosus cut short her life at the age of 39. Yet she also wrote several essays and lectures, many dozens of reviews, and hundreds of letters, all of whose relation to her fiction remains one of the most interesting critical questions about her art. Alternately categorized as a Southern writer and a Catholic writer, her fiction's aesthetic power and indeterminacy defy easy categorization.

Born on March 25, 1925 in Savannah, Georgia, Mary Flannery O'Connor grew up as an only child in an observant Catholic family and attended parochial school, her Catholicism remaining a vital force throughout her life and art. After moves to Atlanta and Milledgeville, Georgia, O'Connor attended Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College and State University), where she contributed stories, poems, essays, and cartoons for the college literary magazine. In 1945, she was accepted for graduate study at the State University of Iowa (now the University of Iowa), having been awarded a journalism scholarship there. Within a semester, she applied to the university's now prestigious Writers' Workshop, and worked closely first with Paul Engle, and later with Andrew Lytle. Other writers and critics she encountered in the program included Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Austen Warren, and Paul Horgan. She completed her MFA in creative writing in the spring of 1947, her master's thesis a collection of short stories entitled *The Geranium* with a title story published the previous year in *Accent*. At the same time, she won a Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award for the work she had completed on her first novel. In 1948, she moved to Yaddo, the artist's colony in Saratoga Springs, where she met Robert Lowell, Edward Maisel, Elizabeth Fenwick, and Elizabeth Hardwick. Following political upheaval at the colony, she moved to New York and met her future editor, Robert Giroux, and also Robert and Sally Fitzgerald — a couple devoutly Catholic and literary, whose habits were more compatible with O'Connor's than were those of Yaddo, and whose lifelong friendship would extend into literary executorship following her death. For almost two years, she rented the Fitzgeralds' garage...
apartment in Connecticut, babysat their children, and shared with them during meals and conversation.

At Christmas time 1950, just before returning home to Milledgeville, O'Connor experienced the first symptoms of what she would later learn was lupus, the incurable autoimmune disease that had killed her father nine years before. O'Connor moved back to Milledgeville, to a farm called Andalusia that had been bequeathed to her mother and uncle. She continued working on her novel *Wise Blood*. It was published in 1952, after significant revisions suggested by the writer Caroline Gordon, who became a close friend and correspondent. Despite an improvement in O'Connor's health which allowed her to move back with the Fitzgeralnds the same year, she soon suffered a relapse of symptoms and returned to Milledgeville, where she was told she had lupus. For the 12 remaining years of her life, O'Connor remained at Andalusia, living quietly and productively, settling into a disciplined routine of writing – cared for by her mother, surrounded by the peacocks that she loved, and occasionally traveling, despite her illness, to visit friends or engage in literary activities. Her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, was published in 1955, and she continued to write and publish short stories while working on her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, which came out in 1960. She continued to produce short stories, essays, and reviews until her death on August 3, 1964. A second collection of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, was issued posthumously in 1965.

O'Connor's works are consistent in style and vision. Their distinctive style is bare and carefully crafted, rejecting a strong authorial voice or commentary in favor of vivid depictions of characters and actions by narrative voices who integrate colloquial slang, biting irony, powerful similes, and subtle shifts in tone. The stories are unsettling, an effect heightened by her use of the grotesque, an aesthetic of distortion and disjunction that we often associate with medieval gargoyles. The grotesque in O'Connor's art takes the form of characters who are maimed or freakish (such as a man whose fetish is stealing women's prostheses), similes whose simple disjunction evokes physical discomfort (as in "her eyes fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin"), and plots that turn suddenly and intensely violent (as when a comically depicted family outing ends in a mass murder). Early critics used this grotesque element to categorize O'Connor as an example of "Southern Gothic" literature, or of "the school of Southern degeneracy" – a phrase that she poked fun at in her essay, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction." O'Connor herself defended these jarring elements as a form of what Nathaniel Hawthorne described as "romance" – that is, fiction that focuses on the unusual and the extreme, that "lean[s] away from typical social patterns, towards mystery and the unexpected" (1969, 40). While the grotesque is a means of jolting readers out of their complacency, for O'Connor, it also contains an essential truth: "It is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature" (1969, 45). O'Connor's writings about her own art reveal a consistent and complex religious and philosophical vision, although critics remain divided on the extent to which her clear and almost dogmatic pronouncements adequately explain her aesthetic achievement.

Yet there is no denying that the Christian notions of sin, grace, and mystery permeate all of her works. And each one of her stories, she says, contains a moment of grace – a moment "in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment" (1969, 118). She offers some examples – in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," when the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children; in "The Artificial Nigger," when an unexpected encounter with a statue allows Mr. Head and his grandson to reconcile; in "The River," when a boy is driven to find the Kingdom of Christ and drowns himself. Each of these moments is morally, politically, and humanly problematical and the cumulative effect is not to proselytize, but to shock the

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/o_connor_flannery
reader into contemplation. O’Connor wrote, “The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists” (1969, 171). Indeed, she described the novelist most cryptically, as a sort of prophet who “descend[s] through the darkness of the familiar world into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking” (1969, 50).

O’Connor’s theological taste was extensive and eclectic, embracing classical ecclesiastical figures, as well as modern theologians on the edge of orthodoxy, several of whom she reviewed for the Bulletin, the Catholic diocesan paper for which she wrote dozens of reviews between 1956 and 1963. She spoke enthusiastically about Hans Küng, Karl Rahner, Jean Danielou, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, about whom she wrote to Fr. J. H. McCowan that he “died in 1955 and so far escaped the Index, although a monition has been issued on him. If they are good, they are dangerous” (1979, 571). She wrote that she “cut [her] aesthetic teeth on” Jacques Maritain’s Art and Scholasticism, which taught her the Thomistic phrase she applied to her own activity: “the habit of art” (1979, 216). Of the Church Fathers, St. Thomas was her foremost theological influence; O’Connor repeatedly called herself a Thomist – albeit “a hillbilly Thomist” (1979 81) and she admitted to her friend, Betty Hester, that she read Thomas’s Summa Theologica “for about twenty minutes every night before I go to bed” (1979, 93). But some critics argue that she owes an equal aesthetic debt to St. Augustine, whose account of intellectual pride and command of jarring imagery echo the themes and spirit of her own art (see Giannone 12; Asals 229; Baldwin).

O’Connor’s literary influences were varied and extensive. In addition to admiring Nathaniel Hawthorne, as mentioned above, she stated that her foremost literary influence, “the largest thing that looms up,” was Edgar Allan Poe (1979 99). She also called herself “a great admirer of Conrad,” whose artistic vision, combining fidelity to concrete particularity with openness to mystery, reflected her own convictions. She read the Catholic novelists François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, Léon Bloy, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh. She also read and admired Henry James, Gustave Flaubert, Honore de Balzac, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, and Nikolai Gogol. Of the Southern writers, she appreciated Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, and William Faulkner – although she wrote of the latter, “Probably the reason I don’t read him is because he makes me feel that with my one-cylinder syntax I should quit writing and raise chickens altogether” (1979, 292).

O’Connor’s works won several awards during her writer’s life, including a Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award for first novel (1947); a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant (1957); an honorary doctorate of letters from Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame (1962); and three first prize O. Henry Awards (1956, 1962, 1964). Her work also received two posthumous awards: her Complete Stories won the National Book Award in 1972, and her letters, edited by Sally Fitzgerald under the name The Habit of Being, received a National Book Critics Circle Special Award for 1979.

SEE ALSO: The Southern Novel (AF); Welty, Eudora (AF)

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/o_connor_flannery
APA

Chicago
https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/o_connor_flannery

Harvard

MLA

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/o_connor_flannery