Flannery O'Connor and the Art of the Story

Susan Srigley

In a posthumous collection of Flannery O'Connor's essays and public lectures titled *Mystery and Manners*, we read her observation that "it takes a story to make a story" (202). The idea sounds simple enough; O'Connor is drawing attention to the way stories generate and live in other stories, yet the idea can also provide an approach for the interpretation of her fiction. How do the stories *within* O'Connor's stories help us to understand her fiction in more nuanced ways, and how can looking at the different levels of a story teach us something about reading generally? This essay will use the "story within a story" approach to read O'Connor as a writer who understood herself to be writing from within a storytelling religious tradition, and as such, an author whose work reveals multiple layers of meaning available to the discerning reader.

Rather than assuming one way of reading or interpreting O'Connor, I will argue that O'Connor's use of biblical narratives and allusions, as well as literary and theological texts, in fact *expands* the possibilities for the interpretation of her stories. Stories not only make stories, they make the story larger and open to further exploration. O'Connor laments that in the teaching of literature, and in this case the short story, interpretation often leans toward narrowing what the story can yield, with more focus on *the* (i.e., one) meaning: "In most English classes the short story has become a kind of literary specimen to be dissected" (*MM* 108). She resists this type of reduction of meaning in a story to a statement or an idea, and instead she suggests that "a story isn't any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase, unless it hangs on and expands in the mind" (108).

For this discussion I will draw on O'Connor's essays in *Mystery and Manners*, not as a template for how to read her work but in order to explore O'Connor's ideas about interpretation itself, including the interpretation of both fiction and the biblical texts. We will look at three dif-

ferent stories by O'Connor to find examples of biblical allusions, references to other works of literature, and theological ideas. These examples will inform our discussion by demonstrating how such allusions can reveal a more expansive reading of O'Connor's art.

Interpretation and Levels of Meaning

O'Connor affirmed the significance of region for any writer, and as Ralph Wood and others have carefully traced, the South undeniably influenced her writing. When she talks about the stories that have shaped her own, she is referring specifically to the biblical stories as the ones that "make" hers. She says, "The Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete has conditioned the Southerner's way of looking at things. That is one of the reasons why the South is a storytelling region" (*MM* 202). Not only the drama of the stories themselves but also the biblical insistence on portraying the concrete action of the human/divine encounter is what she has learned. And this can be seen in much of what she says about fiction writing. O'Connor recalls us to the fact that the stories that live in her fiction do not appear out of nowhere—they are part of her region and her life as a writer. However, this does not necessarily imply that their meaning is already determined, since stories have lives of their own, full of paradox and tension. In this regard, O'Connor recognized the limitations of literalism when reading both literature and the biblical texts.

In her essay on "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" O'Connor explains how the medieval commentators on scripture interpreted the text according to its different levels of meaning. The *literal* level of the text covered the details of the narrative, and within that literal rendering one could also discern other voices of the text: "one they called *allegorical*, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called *tropological*, or *moral*, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called *anagogical*, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (72). What she describes here is what Origen (c.

185-254 C.E.), one of the first systematic theologians of the Christian faith, also wrote about the different levels of meaning in the biblical texts. He argues in *On First Principles*:

> Now what man of intelligence will believe that the first and the second and the third day, and the evening and the morning existed without the sun and the moon and stars? And that the first day, if we may so call it, was even without a heaven (Gen. 1:5-13)? And who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, 'planted a paradise eastward of Eden,' and set in it a visible and palpable 'tree of life,' of such a sort that anyone who tasted of its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life; and again that one could partake of 'good and evil' by masticating the fruit taken from the tree of that name (Gen 2:8,9)? And when God is said to 'walk in the paradise in the cool of the day' and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events (Gen. 3:8). (qtd in Kerr, 47)

The purpose in referencing this passage from Origen is to further emphasize the point that O'Connor is making about interpreting scripture, and also literature. She attests to the fact that the earliest Christian thinkers were not biblical literalists, and the different types of meaning to be found in scripture were connected to a larger, multivalent view of life itself. O'Connor continues her point, suggesting that "although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this *enlarged view* of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate." (*MM* 73) (emphasis mine). Different levels of meaning imply this expansion of vision, rather than a narrowing of vision often evident in literal-only readings of texts.

Even though Flannery O'Connor identified herself as a Catholic, and there is considerable discussion in the scholarship about how her

religious faith is evident, or not, in her fiction, the point to be made here is that O'Connor did not see her religious views as having a limiting effect on what she expressed in her fiction. In fact, as her comments in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" illustrate, she witnessed a more expansive and open approach to interpretation in the ancient commentators on scripture than one might find in a modern reader of the bible. O'Connor explicitly links this approach to biblical exegesis with fiction in her essay, and it offers a method of interpretation for reading O'Connor's own work. This is especially evident when she employs the biblical stories in her writing in order to increase the symbolic landscape even further.

Before turning to particular examples of stories and literary/theological allusions in O'Connor's fiction, some brief remarks on the relationship between religion and literature are worth exploring for this discussion. There are clearly parallels that O'Connor notes between the interpretation of fiction and the interpretation of biblical texts. In both instances, she argues for a multilayered approach to the different voices of the text, and in her fiction it is often biblical stories that provide the interpretive opening into larger vistas. Interestingly, O'Connor's Catholic faith is more often thought of as something which potentially limits her creativity, whereas she countered this idea as a mistaken assumption, especially the opposition between creativity and dogma: "I have found that people outside the Church like to suppose that the Church acts as a restraint on the creativity of the Catholic writer and that she keeps him from reaching his full development" (*MM* 177). Dogma, she says, should not "fix anything that the writer sees in the world"; instead, O'Connor argues that "the Catholic fiction writer is entirely free to observe. He feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe" (178). If one thinks about the biblical stories in O'Connor's fiction as stories open to multiple meanings and interpretation rather than interpretively fixed dogma, the possibilities for interpreting her fiction increase.

It is not surprising, therefore, that literature sometimes offers access

to moral and religious questions in unconventional ways. In the case of O'Connor's storytelling, one can read a story about a character from the American South of the 1950s and be drawn into the theology of a fifteenth-century Italian mystic. And because her fiction is open to different levels of interpretation, without being explicitly religious, there is a wider appeal and a wider audience who can appreciate her work. Essentially, the genius of O'Connor's fiction, seen from within the richness of a storytelling tradition that deals with questions of meaning, is the way the reader is ultimately invited *into* the interpretation. Stories have lives of their own, and the interpretive process itself is part of the experience of those stories. To say there is one method, or a set formula or meaning to O'Connor's use of biblical stories and theological texts is to reduce the potential for myriad openings into her art. One of O'Connor's comments to Dr. Ted Spivey in a letter (dated 25 May 1959) reflects her resistance to formulaic readings of symbols/imagery:

> Week before last I went to Wesleyan and read 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.' After it I went to one of the classes where I was asked questions . . . 'Miss O'Connor,' he said, 'why was the Misfit's hat *black*?' I said most countrymen in Georgia wore black hats. He looked pretty disappointed. Then he said, 'Miss O'Connor, the Misfit represents Christ, does he not?' 'He does not,' I said. He looked crushed. 'Well, Miss O'Connor,' he said, 'what is the significance of the Misfit's hat?' I said it was to cover his head; and after that he left me alone. Anyway, that's what's happening to the teaching of literature. (*HB* 334)

In this humorous episode, Flannery O'Connor is serious about articulating her mistrust of interpretations that make a particular symbol *equivalent* to a particular meaning. The prevalence of "Christ figures" in discussions of literature, rarely with any conscious analysis of what that means beyond the phrase itself, is one type of obstacle O'Connor describes in her letter. These cautions about symbolic interpretations that determine meaning in advance reveal O'Connor's penchant for

images and stories that invite further questioning. She says that what makes a story "work" is an action or a gesture "that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make" (*MM* 111).

Stories Within Stories

Probably the best way to explore how Flannery O'Connor uses stories within her stories is to look at some examples of them in the fiction. To illustrate this I will refer to her use of an episode from the biblical narrative about Moses in "Parker's Back," a theological idea about purgatory from the mystic St. Catherine of Genoa in her story "Revelation," and finally an allusion to another work of literature by Fyodor Dostoevsky in her story "Greenleaf." The purpose of drawing attention to these stories is not to offer up set interpretations, but rather to demonstrate how carefully O'Connor worked with literature, scripture, and theological ideas in the creation of her fiction. She did this neither to appear erudite, nor to propose a symbolic key to the meaning of a story, but in order to allow the reverberations of other ancient and modern stories to give depth and complexity to the characters and lives in her stories.

"Parker's Back"

"Parker's Back" is a story that overflows with biblical and theological allusions on questions of beauty, idolatry, sacramentalism and incarnation, but for the purpose of this discussion I will refer to one episode in which Parker encounters God in a theophanic vision. In her essay "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor describes the specificity required when writing out of the conviction that God reveals Godself and is known and experienced through relationship. She says, "it is the experience of an encounter, of a kind of knowledge which affects the believer's every action" (*MM* 160). She cannot avoid that she is a writer who believes in the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (161). In "Parker's Back," the main character is searching for a "religious"

tattoo to appease his wife who is not particularly thrilled with Parker's tattoos covering most of his body. He wants to get a tattoo on his one remaining blank canvas, his back, and he cannot decide what kind of religious motif to choose. As he is out baling hay one morning, the vision of what the tattoo needs to be comes to him. O'Connor uses imagery reminiscent of the scene in Exodus 3: 2-7 where Moses encounters God in the burning bush.

In Exodus 3, Moses has been tending flocks for his father-in-law when he comes across a bush engulfed in flames that is not being consumed. Moses turns away and God says to Moses, "'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of our father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'" (Exodus 3:5-7 *NRSV*). What O'Connor manages to convey in "Parker's Back," by a few noticeable allusions to this biblical story, is the idea of an encounter, not with some vague spiritual feeling but a real beckoning that speaks to Parker. In the story, Parker circles a tree on the tractor, which for him is only an inconvenience, and sees suddenly "the tree reaching out to grasp him. A ferocious thud propelled him into the air, and he heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, 'GOD ABOVE!'" (*CW* 665). While the tree and the tractor burst into flame, Parker notices that his shoes have been thrown off his feet. Unwittingly, Parker *encounters* God in the burning tree, which had reached out to him and which now left him with the clear impression he was on holy ground: "if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it" (665). On the heels of this experience, Parker understands that the only possible religious tattoo would be an image of God. O'Connor's use of the Exodus story to frame that of Parker's evokes O'Connor's idea of the *encounter* with God, lived and felt in the flesh and experienced as holy. The reverberations from Exodus that continue in "Parker's Back," including the Israelites' struggles with idolatry and Parker's struggle with his wife's accusations of idolatry, only deepen the possibilities for interpretation.

"Revelation"

Another example of how O'Connor layers ideas in her fiction is through her extensive reading in philosophy and theology. A reference to something she has read can sometimes yield a clue about a deeper idea she wants to explore. For example, in the story "Revelation," Ruby Turpin has a revelatory experience that O'Connor, in a letter to Betty Hester, describes as a "purgatorial vision" (*HB* 577). In a letter written much earlier to Hester (25 November 1955), O'Connor discusses the idea of purgatory according to the mystic St. Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) who wrote a *Treatise on Purgatory* that O'Connor had read. O'Connor laments to Hester that she did not fully bring out the idea of Purgatory as the beginning of suffering for Mrs. McIntyre in her story "The Displaced Person." She then explains that St. Catherine conceived of Purgatory as self-realization (118). O'Connor notes the challenges associated with writing about internal spiritual reorientations for her characters. In the case of "The Displaced Person," she adds, "Understatement was not enough. However there is certainly no reason why the effects of redemption must be plain to us and I think they usually are not" (118). O'Connor's comment *could* allow the possibility that she may have stumbled across an idea for a story in which she would represent a purgatorial transformation of self-realization according to St. Catherine of Genoa.

The story "Revelation" chronicles the spiritual movement of Ruby Turpin's soul from being judged a "wart hog" through her purgatorial ascent to a proper vision and understanding of herself in relation to God. In her efforts to make sense of being called a "wart hog from hell," Ruby must descend into herself and grapple with the meaning of the judgment. The struggle is fierce as she seeks alongside Job and other biblical characters to find a response that will justify herself to God. However, what she discovers in the process, which has its culmination in her final vision, is that it is precisely her self-justification that hinders her ascent. Ruby needs to be purged of the idea of her own righteousness and to seek the source of righteousness outside of the

shallow category of a "good disposition." She takes it for granted that her religious beliefs keep her in right relation to God, but she lacks a proper relation to herself; she does not understand who or what she is. In a sense, Ruby needs to be confronted with herself from a perspective different than her own. Her self-love distorts her vision of others: religious self-satisfaction makes her a harsh critic. As the story unfolds, Ruby's self-righteous attitude is revealed as irresponsible and harmful to others: her love of her Christian virtue is a disordered form of love. Instead of loving God and others, she loves herself more than everything by priding herself on her goodness. The point of the purgatorial experience, therefore, is not to punish the rebel or the hypocrite, but to bring them to a realization of the order of love.

What O'Connor's reference to St. Catherine of Genoa and her *Treatise on Purgatory* brings to an interpretation of this story is the theological question of who the self is before God (a question central to O'Connor's thought) and the ethical implications for this in Ruby Turpin's experience. This is *the* question of the story, shouted out to God, then returned and asked of Ruby also: "Who do you think you are?"(*CW* 653). Purgatory, or a purgatorial vision as Ruby experiences it and St. Catherine describes it, is the cleansing of the soul from self-love in order to know who the self is more truly in relation to God. In Ruby's case, self-love inflates her image of herself and her Christian virtue, in turn making her love her own goodness more than God. What she learns from her purgatorial vision is that her virtue is only a false moral superiority when it is divorced from a love of God and others. It takes her virtues being "burned away" for Ruby to begin to see how love is the ordering force of morality in her vision.

"Greenleaf"

In her essay that appeared as the introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, O'Connor makes reference to one of Dostoevsky's characters from his novel *The Brothers Karamazov.* The topic pervading the essay is the problem of suffering. O'Connor was asked by the Sisters of

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta to write about a young patient who had suffered and died from a tumor that had disfigured her face since birth. O'Connor declined the invitation to write the memoir, leaving that up to the nuns who knew Mary Ann, but she did agree to write the introduction. O'Connor concludes the essay with a description of one particular reaction to suffering: "One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him" (*MM* 227). Foremost in her mind is Ivan Karamazov's heated conversation with his younger brother Alyosha in the chapter called "Rebellion," where Ivan makes his argument against God. As O'Connor notes, "Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment" (227). The problem is a serious one. How does one respond theologically to the question of human suffering, and in particular children's, who seem even less likely to have done anything to warrant their suffering?

While O'Connor engages the question of suffering and Ivan Karamazov's response directly in this essay, she presents another kind of response in her story "Greenleaf." In something of a side story, the character of Mrs. Greenleaf presents herself as another irritation to the more pressing concerns of the protagonist Mrs. May. Mrs. Greenleaf provides a counterbalance to the "efficient" Mrs. May. Her housework, gardening and mothering skills were all lacking, but more significantly, her own preoccupation was something that Mrs. May considered completely useless: Mrs. Greenleaf prayed. The episode where Mrs. May confronts Mrs. Greenleaf is preceded by a description of her strange habit of what she called prayer healing:

> Every day she cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper—the accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorces of movie stars. She took these to the woods and dug a hole and buried them and then she fell on the ground over them and mumbled and

groaned for an hour or so, moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying down flat and, Mrs. May suspected, going to sleep in the dirt. (*CW* 505)

In this story, O'Connor's connects her art to Dostoevsky's story through the newspaper clippings, a key part of Ivan's speech in "Rebellion." In Dostoevsky's account, Ivan Karamazov is so outraged by the suffering of 'innocent' children that he gathers the newspaper records of the terrible suffering of children in order to mount his case against God. He says to Alyosha: "You see, I'm an amateur and collector of certain little facts; I copy them down from newspapers and stories, from wherever, and save them—would you believe it?—certain kinds of little anecdotes. I already have a nice collection of them" (239).

When Mrs. Greenleaf prays over newspaper clippings in O'Connor's story, thus invoking Ivan's rebellion, the story expands, the prayer healing becomes a response and part of a larger conversation about God and the meaning of suffering. How is Mrs. May's reaction like or unlike Alyosha's? In what way does Mrs. Greenleaf's use of the clippings differ from Ivan's? These are differences worth noting, where O'Connor gestures to possibilities beyond Ivan's questioning. Ivan focuses on the suffering of children; for him, children are the only "innocents," and therefore no justifiable reason can be argued for their suffering. His newspaper collection is part of a legally inspired case that he makes against God; his engagement with actual children is minimal. Mrs. Greenleaf, on the other hand, has no intellectual use for the clippings; she takes them into the earth and throws her whole body over them, taking on the sufferings in those words as if they were her own: "Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (*CW* 506). Also interestingly, the clippings that Mrs. Greenleaf collects are not just the sufferings of children. Ivan is trying to make a rational argument, and so his concern is to show the logical problem of reconciling a good God with innocent suffering. He does not intend to alleviate suffering; he wants to make a

point. Mrs. Greenleaf's response is felt in body and soul, and she takes on *all kinds* of suffering: women, criminals, children, large-scale disasters such as train wrecks and plane crashes and even the sufferings of divorcing movies stars. The opening into further speculations about the question of suffering, theodicy and the meaning and efficacy of prayer over rational argument are all initiated by O'Connor's use of Dostoevsky's trope of the newspaper clippings.

The Moral of the Story?

One might still ask: To what end does Flannery O'Connor employ these biblical, literary and theological references in her stories? The simplest answer once again is her claim that it takes a story to make a story, and all of these have fueled her imaginative art. But surely there are reasons to account for *which* particular stories she uses? I have argued elsewhere (*Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*) that O'Connor's moral universe is framed by an ethic of responsibility, an ethic that she draws from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In her essay "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," she makes the claim that what the shared sacred history of the South allows is "the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity" (203). The moral of the story is not so much prescriptive about a particular code of living as it is an invitation to think about how human choices have both visible and invisible consequences and effects. Human beings do not live entirely unto themselves, and so every action affects oneself and others in ways that are not always apparent outwardly. O'Connor is not interested in simply reiterating some kind of moral message in her fiction; she wants to bring the questions to life by engaging the ancient sources, and other writers, who are trying to understand the meaning of suffering, the problem of evil, the absence or presence of God. Above all, her moral framework can be best summed up as encompassing rather than restricting. As she says in "The Teaching of Literature,"

> So far as I am concerned as a novelist, a bomb on Hiroshima affects my judgment of life in rural Georgia, and this is not the result of taking a relative view and judging one thing by another, but of taking an absolute view and judging all things together; for a view taken in the light of the absolute will include a good deal more than one taken merely in the light provided by a house-to-house survey (*MM* 134).

From a brief overview of some of the sources that feed her fiction, one can situate O'Connor's stories within a larger tradition of thinking about meaning in human life. What can we gather from an approach to her fiction that makes room for multiple voices in the text and that recognizes different levels of meaning in a story? Certainly there is hope for the richness that comes when there is diversity of thought and interpretation. Some may enjoy O'Connor's stories on the simplest level of the literal text; some may appreciate her use of allegory or the moral symbolism that provokes the reader to think existentially about the meaning of a story. Others still may be transformed by the experience, or encounter with the text, invisible threads weaving their way into the mind or heart of the reader. All of these are part of reading O'Connor's fiction. Both her stories and those she evokes offer the possibility of the enjoyment of good fiction and keep moral wondering alive.

Works Cited

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Random House, 1991.

Kerr, Hugh T., ed. *Readings in Christian Thought*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1966.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Collected Works*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Library of America, 1988.

____________. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. (Cited in the text as *HB*).

____________. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961. (Cited in the text as *MM*).

Srigley, Susan. *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2004.
St. Catherine of Genoa. "Purgation and Purgatory." *Classics of Western Spirituality: Purgation and Purgatory and the Spiritual Dialogue*. Trans. Serge Hughes. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979: 71-87.
Wood, Ralph. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.