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Joanna Horton
Ouachita Baptist University

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Joanna Horton

Dr. Amy Sonheim

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Flannery's "Daunting Grace": O'Connor's Nuanced Portrayals of Disability

In 1946, while attending graduate school at Iowa State, a twenty-one-year-old Flannery O'Connor wrote the following in her prayer journal:

All boils down to grace, I suppose. Again asking God to help us be sorry for having hurt Him. I am afraid of pain and I suppose that is what we have to have to get grace. Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace, Oh Lord. Help me with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing. (10)ⁱ

In many of those early prayers, O'Connor expressed a longing to write a good story, recognizing that whatever grace she got would likely be accompanied by sacrifice or suffering on her part. In an undated, hand-written prayer, she asked God for His inspiration to "express man's emptiness without Thee; that I may put into my work Thy greatness, Thy goodness, Thy mercy, so that it may echoe Thee, and let the disconsolate know that Thou are with them."ⁱⁱ In 1953, after being diagnosed with lupus, she would write to Robert Lowell that she could "with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing," acknowledging that, had she not been forced to move home and observe her surroundings so intently, she would not have written the stories she did (*Habit of Being* 57). O'Connor's biographer Brad Gooch points out that "For the dedicated writer there was no surer sign of grace than writing a good story," calling lupus O'Connor's "daunting grace" (229). To combine Gooch's language with that of O'Connor's prayer journal, I wish to express that the "grace" of writing a story entailed the painful, or daunting, kind of grace, of O'Connor's having

lupus. Many scholars have examined her fiction for how having lupus influenced O'Connor's writing, despite O'Connor's stated wishes to the contrary. O'Connor, a New Critic among New Critics, objected on numerous occasions to the assumption that her lupus had anything to do with how or what she wrote, responding in one interview that "the disease is of no consequence to my writing since for that I use my head and not my feet."ⁱⁱⁱ Initially, I was similarly interested in connecting her own perspective toward disability with that of her disabled characters', whose physical defects, I assumed, were symbols of spiritual insufficiency or corruption. Now, however, my initial approach seems overly simplistic. Rather, if we understand O'Connor's conception of suffering as an experience which prepares us for grace, we may discern which characters receive grace through suffering and which refuse to recognize their need.

Objecting to much of the scholarship about disability in O'Connor's life and fiction, Kathleen Spaltro says that many scholars ignore O'Connor's source of theological comfort:

...O'Connor perceived disability and death as meaningful events in a mysterious drama of spiritual development. While readers need not deny the pain she must have experienced in resolving her physical crises, they must not presumptuously dismiss her acceptance of this rationale or its power and validity for her.

Furthermore, they misread her fiction if they imagine that unresolved resentment governed her creations. On the contrary, her 'struggle to accept and with passion' led her to create a universe of characters who often submit unwillingly rather than accept and who sometimes passionately refuse to evolve. (36-37)

In other words, there is a tricky line between honoring O'Connor's wish that her private life be disconnected from her writing and realizing that her circumstances did have an effect on what she "was given the grace to write about."^{iv} However, in considering O'Connor's influences,

readers should not dismiss her acceptance of lupus, nor should they assume that her disability defined her as a person. In fact, Timothy Basselin, who literally wrote the book on O'Connor's disability, says that "O'Connor's denial that her illness had any effect on her writing... was aimed at the presumption of any pity that may have led others to sentimentalize her life, or worse, her fiction" (7).

In his book *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity*, Basselin asserts that, in regard to disability studies, people—and Western societies, in particular—are prone toward two extremes: either dehumanizing the disabled or sentimentalizing their condition. Either way, able-bodied people have a hard time responding well to those are in some way not able-bodied, physically or mentally. Consider, for example, O'Connor's story "The Comforts of Home," in which the protagonist, Thomas, views the resident nymphomaniac, Star Drake, as a "moral moron," undeserving of sympathy, while Thomas's mother goes to the other extreme and excuses all of Star Drake's faults, assuming Star has no choice in how she behaves (*Complete Stories* 385).^v Thomas clearly considers Star less than human, but even his mother may do so implicitly when, comparing her son with Star, she denies that Thomas has "No bad inclinations, nothing bad [he was] born with" (CS 393).^{vi} While the mother's compassion is impractical and perhaps confused, her response to Star's aberrant behavior is prompted by kindness: "In the presence of such an affliction as this, his mother seemed bowed down by some painful mystery that nothing would make endurable but a redoubling of effort" (CS 388). Star's behavior grows increasingly aggressive toward Thomas, with her overfamiliar gaze "[playing] over him" at dinner, her following him up and down the stairs sighing, and finally, her appearance in the doorway of his bedroom naked (CS 390). All of these actions the mother

excuses as part of Star's "affliction," not recognizing how deliberately Star manipulates her by threatening to commit suicide (CS 388).

In the mother's depressed response to Star, whom she cannot fix, but only pity, we see one of the many possible responses to "painful mystery." Discussing the need for her writing about mystery in a rabidly secular and scientific era, O'Connor notes that "Since the eighteenth century, the popular spirit of each succeeding age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man. . ." (*Mystery and Manners* 41).^{vii} In other words, under modernity, disability signifies something to be fixed through human effort. To those who think of themselves as able-bodied, disabled persons are uncomfortable reminders of humanity's limitations. For O'Connor, however, suffering was neither something to be edged around politely, nor something that pathetically gave her more insight into Christ's redemption (the sentimentalist view).^{viii} Rather, her lupus and, eventually, her death were something to be accepted, and accepted, if possible, with joy.^{ix} As Basselin suggests, "Acceptance of life as given, even those aspects of life that culture labels grotesque, is central to her work, and is so because it was central to her acceptance of the mystery of her disability" (6). Rather than constantly attempt to explain away suffering, O'Connor was content with more mystery than was socially acceptable. If one examines disability in her stories within the framework of mystery—not attempting to psychoanalyze O'Connor, nor dismiss the insights that having lupus may have given her—the reader is prepared to see where she was able to "express man's emptiness" without God. If "there is . . . a fiction which speaks of grace by describing its absence," the reader may look at characters such as Joy Hopewell and Mr. Shiftlet and see more than caricatures defined by symbolic disabilities (2). I am intrigued, like Spaltro, by O'Connor's "universe of characters who often submit unwillingly rather than accept and who

sometimes passionately refuse to evolve” (37). Perhaps knowing O’Connor’s response to her illness as being something given and therefore meaningful may aid in understanding certain of her characters, especially those who have no such conception of suffering as grace.

The first of these characters is one whom readers might not initially identify as someone who has experienced undeserved suffering. In O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” a recently escaped convict called The Misfit murders a self-righteous grandmother and her family on their way to Florida. While I recognized his brutality right away, it took a second reading to recognize The Misfit’s mental instability. It took me a third reading to catch the dialogue where The Misfit explains why he was punished, saying ““It was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I know that for a lie”” (CS 130). The reference to psychoanalysis as part and parcel of The Misfit’s experience at the penitentiary did not fully make sense to me until I traveled this year to Central State Hospital in Milledgeville, founded in 1883 as the “Georgia Lunatic Asylum.” In fact, O’Connor’s hometown was known for being the site of the acres and acres of lunatic dormitories, then those dormitories were recycled into the penitentiary. While not excusing The Misfit’s actions, the consideration either that he was mentally unstable or mistakenly treated as such is an interesting one. Either way, he cannot understand what it is that set him apart from his siblings early on, nor does he accept that his punishment and resulting suffering ““match”” what he feels he actually deserved (131).

In complete contrast to The Misfit’s refusal to accept his suffering is the hermaphrodite, who appears in the 1954 story “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.” The hermaphrodite serves as a conduit of grace for a confused yet prideful child of twelve, who only recognizes the contradictions within her own soul when she tries to understand how a person “could be a man and woman both without two heads” (CS 245). The hermaphrodite’s testimony to the gawkers is

one of acceptance, to which he adds an admonition, saying that ““God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it...I don’t dispute hit”” (CS 245). The hermaphrodite’s assertion that God must have wanted him to be a hermaphrodite is a blatant affirmation of God’s sovereignty. Not only that, but it is also a clear example of O’Connor’s conception of “passive diminishments,” or suffering that, since there is no changing it, one must attempt to accept.^x

The character readers likely identify most with disability is Joy Hopewell, from “Good Country People,” whose wooden leg is swiped by the devious villain, Manley Pointer. Despite having a PhD in philosophy, Joy—calling herself Hulga to spite her mother—has returned to the country, not because of her leg, but because of a heart condition. The mother, Mrs. Hopewell, takes the sentimentalist view toward disability, assuming that, if Joy had only grown up having both legs—if she had “had any *normal* good times”—her personality would have turned out pleasant (CS 274). This is as naïve a view as the one held by the mother in “The Comforts of Home,” who assumes that Thomas neither has any “bad inclinations” nor any hatred toward other people, merely because, under her view, he has had everything (CS 393). Mrs. Hopewell identifies Hulga’s ugliness with her disability: “[she] excused this attitude because of the leg” (CS 274). Often, Hulga’s wooden leg is identified as the crux of the story, as representing some deeper element of her character that is first exposed to vulnerability by Manley Pointer, then cruelly taken advantage of. Others have identified her leg as a symbol of her intellectual crutch—in her refusal to admit the possibility of salvation in the Biblical sense, relying instead on her knowledge of philosophy and nihilism to “save her.” While these interpretations are not incompatible with a view of disability as opportunity for grace, I would object to the notion that

the leg is merely a symbol. I especially object on O'Connor's behalf to those readings of Hulga as being purely auto-biographical. Spaltro, too, would likely take issue with Inez Martinez' "Flannery O'Connor and the Hidden Struggle of the Self," in which Martinez claims that both O'Connor and her character, Joy/Hulga, struggle between libidinal and antilibidinal sides of the ego. Spaltro explicitly condemns other psychoanalytic analyses, such as those of Hendin and Park, who assume Flannery was repressed and rebellious: "By insisting on O'Connor's repression and denial, they not only misread her struggle as a disabled woman but, disjoining her art from her life, misread her stories as well" (37). While Hulga certainly struggles with placing her identity in her handicap and defining herself by it, there is no evidence that O'Connor did the same. Rather, by allowing her characters to respond differently to their afflictions—to use Spaltro's phrasing Hulga "submit[s] unwillingly rather than accept[s]," O'Connor was not dogmatic nor high-handed in how she presented the orthodox response to suffering. Her treatment of disability was much more than either catechism or complaint; she neither insisted that suffering have a ready-made bright side to it, nor did she use her fiction to rage against her own confining circumstances.

The last of these disabled characters, and the one I will treat most extensively, is Tom T. Shiftlet, from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," written in 1953. In this story, the one-armed Mr. Shiftlet wanders onto the farm of Lucynell Crater and her afflicted daughter (also named Lucynell Crater), looking for work as a handyman. Throughout, Mr. Shiftlet avoids Mrs. Crater's ploys to match him with her daughter, claiming that it would be beneath his morals to marry even "the Duchesser Windsor" if he could not provide her a honeymoon trip (CS 152). When the mother reluctantly lets him take the car (which he has been eyeing the entire time), he weds Lucynell to promptly abandon her at a diner, driving alone into Mobile and imploring God

to “Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!” (CS 156). By the end of the story, the reader realizes that all Shiftlet’s talk of having a “moral intelligence” is a sham—he only ever wanted the car. However, his remorse at the end of the story, even if hypocritical in nature, makes it difficult to say emphatically that Mr. Shiftlet did not experience grace. Based on early drafts of “The Life You Save,” I think that O’Connor developed the character from a slapstick, violent villain (whose physical disability represented a lack of spiritual wholeness) into one of the characters who, when confronted with suffering as Spaltro says, “passionately refuse[d] to evolve” (37).

In one early draft in particular, Mr. Shiftlet is a character of extremes, initially showing a good deal of tenderness for Lucynell, but after their marriage berating her with harsh language, language which does not affect her in the slightest, her being deaf and mute (12).^{xi} After dumping Lucynell, Mr. Shiftlet encounters the hitchhiker and is so enraged by the boy’s description of his mother as a “flea bag” that he threatens him physically: “[he] stands over him, his empty coat sleeve flapping in the wind like a broken wing. In his other hand he holds a monkey wrench” (14). The intense feeling Mr. Shiftlet has about his mother becomes more apparent when yet another early draft is considered, this one a background sketch of the character as a child. At age ten, his religious and doting mother has a phrenologist, Dr. Sparks, examine the boy’s head, as she is convinced he ought to be a missionary and wants to know how to make him be one. Dr. Sparks advises her never to *make* him do anything again: “‘Let him do what he pleases,’ the old man said, ‘and he will do the right thing! Count upon it!’” (21). From this fragment, we see a background of Mr. Shiftlet’s relationship with his mother, as well as his sense of purpose, his impatience with being hindered, and perhaps his lack of a moral conscience, since Dr. Sparks has affirmed his ability to search out truth on his own.^{xii} In

consecutive drafts, Mr. Shiftlet consistently points to things with his missing arm while claiming he can fix anything that is broken. He acknowledges with a “sullen dignity” that he is not a whole man, but he tries to make up for it with what he calls “moral intelligence” (7). Mr. Shiftlet’s training as a preacher is much more apparent in early drafts, with him rattling off doctrines of *Imago Dei* and the Fall of Man, much to the boredom of Mrs. Crater. Later, O’Connor is content to have him weakly philosophize “what is a man?” (148). He compensates, in other words, for his physical deficiency with an attempt to be morally or spiritually superior, not realizing how hypocritical his attempted kindness to the hitchhiker is after his abandonment of dumb Lucynell a hundred miles from her home. Rather than deal with the guilt he feels, he flees into Mobile, where, in the final draft, his future is uncertain.^{xiii}

Charles Hegarty argues that Shiftlet evolves through succeeding drafts into a nuanced protagonist who may have experienced grace by the story’s end, the story itself having “evolved from farce to melodrama and finally into a profound parable of the mystery of redemption” (28). Hegarty sees the disability, the incomplete arm, as an emblem for the incompleteness of the man:

...it is his most obvious emblem of participation in the human condition, his stump, which is sticking out of the car window. It is this real part of Shiftlet, this aspect of his personality which could never be concealed by duplicity...which causes him to say ‘I am a man, even if I ain’t a whole one,’ and forces him to recognize his moral intelligence. (29)

Hegarty concludes that O’Connor, by leaving Mr. Shiftlet’s fate so open-ended in the final draft, presents him as “a man of possibility, as a man being pursued by saving grace” (29). I think that what Hegarty says has merit; perhaps Mr. Shiftlet’s end is purposely not as clear cut as some of the characters previously discussed. I tend to see him as having refused grace, evident in his

“[stepping] on the gas” in an attempt to escape confrontation. However, I agree with Hegarty that O’Connor became more ambiguous about his ending through consecutive drafts (CS 156). Grace may yet be accepted off-screen in *Mobile*. Or it may not be. The intriguing thing about O’Connor and her writing about suffering and disability is that she never forces it to be meaningful. Violence does not *automatically* mean the receiving of grace—rather, characters choose for themselves how they will respond.

Flannery O’Connor was concerned with two attitudes toward the disabled—one a dehumanizing treatment of the person *as* their disability, and the other a condescending sentimentality that assumed suffering must give one a special kinship with Christ. To my own assumption that she, as someone with a debilitating disease, would have known first-hand various responses to any such situation, she likely would have scoffed. She did not seem to consider herself to be an authority on suffering or disability—rather, she accepted that, for her, lupus was part of her life. Other than to admit certain benefits of being forced to stay in the South and write about it well, her letters tend to be cheerful affairs, in which she discusses operations and blood transfusions in passing. This is not to dismiss O’Connor’s physical pain—it is merely to affirm that her stories and her identity as an artist transcend her personal circumstances. In 1960, O’Connor was asked by some nuns to write about a twelve-year-old girl named Mary Ann who had lived her short life with a cancerous tumor that deprived her of her sight in one eye. Hearing the nuns speak of how Mary Ann was marked by a “beautiful brave spirit” *despite* her “physical defect,” O’Connor refused on the grounds that she was “not capable of writing her story” (*M&M* 214, 215). This is not to say O’Connor would not have been able to craft a good story out of the elements provided by the girl’s caretakers, but the story would not have been about Mary Ann, only a cliché about a particularly pious child with a tumor disfiguring half of

her face. After reading the nuns' account of Mary Ann, O'Connor did write an introduction to their memoir, in which she wrote that:

The creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what P re Teilhard de Chardin calls 'passive diminishments.'
(*M&M* 223)

In other words, the Christian is the one who ought to be able to see all of life as being given, and with that understanding, "build upon [diminishment]" (*M&M* 223). Recognizing that all of humanity is imperfect spiritually—that there is, in fact, no one born with no bad inclinations—allows the Christian to look at physical imperfection and not flinch. This perspective, foreign to the modern sensibility, allowed Flannery O'Connor to see Mary Ann not as a mistake on God's part or an evidence of divine caprice, but as an "extraordinarily rich little girl" (*M&M* 223). In Mary Ann, readers may find the grace in acceptance that, if O'Connor had not illustrated it *by* its absence, would have been so lacking in O'Connor's fictional characters.

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Notes

ⁱIn early 1947, she clarifies how grace is attended by suffering, saying that "The intellectual and artistic delights God gives us are visions and like visions we pay for them; and the thirst for the vision doesn't necessarily carry with it a thirst for the attendant suffering" (28).

ⁱⁱN.p., n.d.

ⁱⁱⁱFrom an interview given to *Time* magazine.

^{iv}In this early draft of *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor reflects on vocation and what it means for the Catholic fiction writer:

I do not believe that the Church asks the Catholic fiction writer to write only about the acceptance of grace, or even to write about its acceptance at all, if that is not what he is able to do. Talent is a mystery and it cannot be forced into this or that channel at the will of the writer. Any vocation carries its limitations with it and the writer cannot choose what he is able to make live. He must write about what he has been given the gift to write about. There is a theology that describes God by saying what He is not and there is also a fiction which speaks of grace by describing its absence. (2)

^vAll references to short stories come from this volume, *Flannery O'Connor: the Complete Stories*, hereafter referred to as *CS*.

^{vi}One particular quotation from the mother is telling, as she responds to Star Drake: "'Thomas does not hate you,' his mother said. 'We are not the kind of people who hate,' she added, as if this were an imperfection that had been bred out of them generations ago" (*CW* 396).

^{vii}Hereafter referred to as *M&M*.

^{viii}In a letter to Janet McKane, written August 27, 1963, O'Connor wrote the following: "I don't much agree with you and your friend, the nun, about suffering teaching you much about the redemption. You learn about the redemption simply from listening to what the Church [*sic*] teaches about it and then following this to its logical conclusion."

^{ix}In a previous letter to McKane, O'Connor had acknowledged the link between suffering and joy, saying that "I guess what you say about suffering being a shared experience with Christ is true, but then it should also be true of every experience that is not sinful. I mean that say, joy, may be a redemptive experience itself and not just the fruit of one. Perhaps however joy [*is*] the outgrowth of suffering in a special way."

^xThis idea of "passive diminishment" was heavily drawn from O'Connor's reading of P re Teilhard de Chardin, who clarified that what suffering *could* be avoided *ought* to be. Rather, what pertains here is "unavoidable suffering." Under Teilhard's view, "From the perspective of spiritual evolution, the real loss for a person derives from the refusal to accept unavoidable suffering and thus evolve further" (Spaltro 36-37).

^{xi}At one point, O'Connor seems to have intended Mr. Shiftlet to be the central protagonist in a series of stories which would potentially be prepared for film. Of the three stories, two of the titles are mentioned, "The River" and "The Life You Save Could Be Your Own." The third, "Good Country People," I infer from the first line included at the end of the draft: "Mrs. Hopewell lives alone with her daughter" (15). This would make sense of the elemental characteristics of Manley Pointer which Mr. Shiftlet shares in this draft, such as his possession of a "hollow Bible" containing playing cards with lewd pictures (10A).

^{xii}Elsewhere, Dr. Sparks says a curious thing regarding Christ: "'Madam!' he said, and his voice trembled with emotion, 'had I been there to feel Jesus['s] head, he would never have died on the cross!'" This suggestion matches with Mr. Shiftlet's confused feeling on guilt when he leaves Lucynell in the diner. He does not *think* he has any need to feel guilty, lacking any feeling of need for grace or redemption. Yet the guilt is there regardless.

^{xiii}In a previous draft, O'Connor had him return to a wife and family, at whom his rage—built up from his guilt about Lucynell, presumably—boils over and he takes to the room with a baseball bat, before leaving again, feeling relieved. The previous-married Mr. Shiftlet is almost a completely different character. The reader would have to discount all the previous remarks Mrs. Crater made about there being no "place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man" (152). The remark would not have affected a married Mr. Shiftlet in the same way as a single character. Additionally, if Mr. Shiftlet were married, all doubt of whether his motives were at least partially sincere would go away. He would have come on the place with the express intention of deceiving Lucynell Crater and getting a car.