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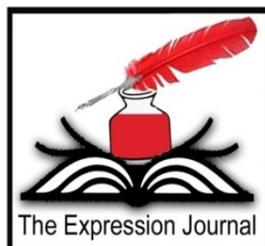
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## **FLANNERY O'CONNOR AS AN ARTIST OF THE RARE ORDER WITH HER TRAGIC AND SUBLIME EXPRESSION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE WITH A FOCUS ON VIOLENCE AND DEATH IN HER LITERARY WORLD**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores and gives an account on sublimity of expression in human existence with reference to Flannery O'Connor's Stories of Violence and shows how the themes of her stories dealt with alienation, concern for the relationship between human and God. Generally her writings were set mostly in traditional beliefs and religious morals of Catholicism. And also they were inseparable from the religious consciousness. Her characters are the products of her own life experiences such as her lonely tragicomic search for redemption, violence, phantasmagorical and grotesque. Bringing home the point, all abnormalities have become normality here through her writings.

### **Keywords**

Violence, Catholicism, Religiousness, Transcendence,  
Grotesque, Analogical Vision.

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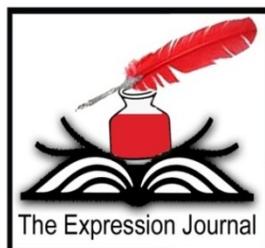
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Flannery O' Connor is universally acknowledged as an artist of the rare order, with her tragic, sublime and beautiful expression of human existence and her life relating to the world she lives and to the God she prays. It would be quite unfair to take her fiction as its face value. Though her attitude to life is Christian, the morals that elude her work are applicable to mankind in general. David Ezgenschuiler obviously writes:

“Miss O'Connor sensed that man's various problems were interconnected; that a serious distortion in one dimension of man's spiritual psychological and social nature would cause distortions. And, as a devout Christian, she believed that the fundamental causes of these distortions were religious, centering on man's proper relation to God. She could therefore sustain an integral view of human life and describe that human comedy without despair or cynical amusement” (P 379).

As a prolific letter writer, her letters are nothing but are anatomical study of her personality. She was such an unfathomable artist who wrote with compassion and authority, depth and understanding, grace and kindness.

In the words of Leonard Casper:

“The thrust of her work is into the heart of paradox, epitomized by serious consideration than man's morality might be an act of grace and the occasion of death a prophetic sign...” (P 291).

Violence is one of the main ingredients of O'Connor's stories. She knew well that she was addressing through her stories an audience who lead their life with a little, smugness, totally unaware of any divine implications in their lives. Though she knows her readers, that evidence has become a normal way of life, she uses it not as a subject, but as a weapon, to jolt her readers out of

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their rusted sense of complacency. On reading her stories, one can easily gain an insight into her personality, ideas, inspirations and aspirations. Her life and fiction blends beautifully that one cannot study one without the other. Despite the fact that she was a creative writer of excellent cadre, Flannery O'Connor knew well the limitations of creativity. In *The Church and the Fiction Writers*, she writes about the concrete material of a writer as:

“The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than, the reader, to be humble in the face of what – is, what – is in all he has to do with; the concrete in his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them” ( 385)

Such a prolific writer was born into a catholic family on 25<sup>th</sup> day of March 1925. She was the only child of Regina Cline and Edward Francis. Enjoying the bliss of being the only child, she led a serene childhood. Even in childhood days, she loved writing and had a penchant for the odds. She got acquainted with sorrow early at the age of twelve and her father developed disseminated lupus. The dreaded disease took the life of her father, which O'Connor suffered later at the age of fifteen. She graduated from Georgia State University in 1945. At the University of Iowa, she joined the 'writers workshop' under the direction of Mr. Paul Engle, her teacher who felt that her prose, “was imaginative, tough, active; just like Flannery O'Connor herself. The stories were quietly filled with insight, shrewd about human weakness, hard and compassionate” (P 7).

O'Connor was essentially a Christian writer, who wrote with her Christian upbringing. Though being a Catholic and living in an area of Protestants, she made no distinction between them, in her stories. To Sister Marielle Gable, she wrote in 1963 as : “our Catholic mentality is great on paraphrase ... logic, formula, instant and correct answers”. O'Connor always felt that the priests and runs in the church who preach the Bible are ignorant of the world outside and hence their preaching are not properly understood. The Bible and its message, has not touched the hearts of the people. Such a problem by Catholic writers, she points out in *Novelist and Believer* that “They never subject their vision to any test or challenge from the realities outside the church” (Robert 19). Being a Catholic did not restrict her potentialities as a writer. Actually it has only helped to deepen her vision of the mystery of life.

Even though O'Connor wrote novels like *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear it Away* her real strength lies in her short stories. From *The Geranium* to *the Judgement Day*, one can find her strength increasing as a short story writer. C. Hugh Holman observes:

“..... O'Connor will survive as a master of the short story form. Her stories are based on what she calls “analogical vision”... the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation” (Holman 418).

Flanner O'Connor had an astounding critical intelligence which turned her out to be her own critic. Her growth and development in a short span of life reminds one of Keats. As a devout Christian, her deep seated religiousness influenced all her writings. For her, the real meaning of life is centred in our Redemption by Christ and what she sees in the world she sees in its relation to

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that. A close reading of her fiction makes it clear that she is not only interested in bringing out the grotesque and violent forms in men but gives a positive denouncement, in the form of possible redemption. She does not impose her views on religion, but in a subtle manner shows her characters the path to redemption and opportunity of salvation. She is not without compassion, but is in a compulsion to show the Fallen nature of man. So her works may sometimes support the accusation. But in her vision, one can sense her coming close to love.

O'Connor's themes are traditional, but the measure of violence and grotesquerie used in her literary world makes it new – a different mode of fiction in modern literature. The world of hers is filled with murderers, oppressors, mutilated beings, cowards and fundamentalists. Her characters project her animosity to the God forbidden world. She has powerful symbols and images in her stories. Certain symbols strike one throughout the stories like 'the red blazing Sun', 'mutilated eyes', 'the Jesus – Seeing', 'hats', 'the color red, Peacocks'. The bull is a powerful symbol in "*The Greenleaf*". As David Ezgenschuiler puts it,

“... Her art was primarily of the concrete world  
in which the transcendent was manifested” (P11).

The modern world is the kind where morality has been stripped off and religion decayed. What was shocking to one's ancestors does not shock the modern man. All abnormalities have become normality here. To make such people see reality, Flannery O'Connor resorted to violence. O'Connor herself said:

“I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (P 40).

According to O'Connor, violence takes place due to deteriorated sense of religion. Man is haunted by God; but he is not sure if he should believe God whom he has not seen. Thelma J.Shinn writes:

“O'Connor ... knew that the violence of rejection in the modern world demands on equal violence of redemption – man needs to be struck by mercy; God must overpower him. And man must reach God through an equal violence” (P 59).

O'Connor strongly felt that an assault to the psyche, or the body, is the only way to make man see reality. She uses violence, not only as a shock therapy, but also as a warning prophecy. Her characters spring from raw, sentimental life. They are capable of pain and pleasure. Sharing Josephine Hendin's view, they are violent, which leads to murder or commit suicide. They are representatives of O'Connor's sense of revolt. She creates the reality of people living in cold blood. When one is comfortably reading her stories and being amused by the grotesque characters, she jolts the readers by the terror and violence in her characters. As Melvin J.Friedmann says,

“... we almost willingly suspend disbelief  
in the face of impossible happenings of  
unlikely people” (P 23).

In the story, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, one is faced with such disbelief, when the travelling family, is subjected to violent death, in the hands of the escaped convict – The Misfit. Here the assault is on the psyche as well as the body. The intelligent, educated family, is threatened by the evil, illiterate Misfit. The grandmother's death proves the assault on the psyche where she fails to infuse sense into the evil Misfit. The bull, in the story "*The Greenleaf*" is another agent, through

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which Mrs. May is subjected to violence. Her standards of judgement, regarding class and money has been thrashed by the bull, who kills her to realization. Again Mrs. McIntyre, realises her responsibility to human beings, through the death of the immigrated Polish, Mr. Guizac, who was run over by a tractor. Till then, Mrs. McIntyre felt that her judgement of them being displaced people, was right and felt it necessary to send them off, when Mr. Guizac was planning to get his cousin married to one of the Negros. But through the violent death of Guizac, she learnt her mistake.

The physical violence that one faces, is less torturing then the violence on the psyche. Absury in *The Enduring Chill* suffers such a mental violence, at not being able to die; Julian in "Everything that rises must converge" suffers a mental shock, and an assault on his psyche, at the realisation of being lost in the world, without his mother. Julian thought he was more sensible than his mother who died for the sin of social bigotry. But Julian's judgement proved to be wrong. Even Misfit realizes that the kind of life he leads in meanness and "it's no real pleasure in life." Josephine Hendin says:

"O' Connor's heroes have lost all sense of human kinship... Having taken the right to act inexplicably as God, O'Connor's hero finds himself in godlike isolation, alien to human suffering and joy. He can kill without pleasure or remorse" (P 36).

O'Connor strongly feels that secular man cannot live with his standards of judgement. This is what is felt by subjecting certain characters of hers, to violence. Thus, Mrs. May in *Greenleaf*, Mrs. Turpin in *Revelation* Mrs. Chestiny in *Everything that Rises must Converge*, the grandmother in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* – all prove to be wrong. O'Conner resents intellectually proud people. Joy Hulga who is a Ph.D is brought to realization through Manley Pointer, who runs away with her artificial wooden legs. This was the assault on the psyche of the intelligent Hulga. People like the Misfit become violent to the extent that their senses are numb to the point of extinction. O'Connor's violence is not without purpose. Through violence, she jolts the reader into things, who considers normal, magnifies it's seriousness and shows the path to redemption.

O'Connor always wrote with death beside her. She accepts death as a reality to be faced, which every Christian should undergo in a Christian way. Death is a path of salvation. O'Connor's characters achieve grace in the form of revelation of their ineptitude through death Mrs. May, Mrs. Chestiny, the grandmother, Norton – all die in their new realization of God. To conclude, it may be said that O'Connor does portray people who are deformed, physically and spiritually, puts them in violent throes only to find themselves falling on the feet of God. And the silence of the world is shattered by violence which has now become an indispensable part of life.

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