

O'Connor and the Grotesque

1. Read and briefly discuss these excerpts from "The Landscape of the Grotesque" by Gilbert H. Miller.

Flannery O'Connor once remarked that the most memorable event in her life prior to the publication of *Wise Blood* was the featuring of a bantam chicken which she had trained to walk backwards by Pathe newsreels. Mary Flannery was six years old at the time, attending parochial school in Savannah, Georgia. Later, while enrolled at Peabody High School in Milledgeville, where the family had moved in 1938, she confounded her home economics teacher by outfitting another bantam hen in a white pique coat and striped trousers which she had designed and sewn to specification. Up to the time of her death in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine, Miss O'Connor retained this fondness for domestic fowl, especially house varieties which were eccentric rather than normative. She even confessed to favoring barnyard birds "with one green eye and one orange or with overlong necks and crooked combs. I wanted one with three legs or three wings but nothing in that line turned up."

Unable to locate her ideal grotesque among God's humbler creatures, Miss O'Connor turned to her fellow human beings. And here she discovered a Goyaesque assortment of deformed individuals which she made as unique and imperishable as her bantam hens. In dealing with these human grotesques, the author was writing from personal and drastic experience; she lived in a region where Bible Belt values strongly affected both culture and the human will. Moreover Miss O'Connor's own affliction, which she carried with her during the major part of her literary career, forced a certain austerity upon her fiction; inevitably she transferred personal agony and suffering to her work. Yet in dealing with her characters' agonies, and in sustaining her own, Flannery O'Connor was sardonic rather than sentimental. She wielded a literary hatchet rather than a handkerchief; she realized that only a stern intellect, an adamant faith, and an accretion of humor which usually shaded into the grotesque could confront suffering, violence, and evil in this world.

In the fictive landscape which she created, Flannery O'Connor's grotesques—deformed in body and soul alike—wrangle with ultimate problems which also must have beset their creator. Her use of the grotesque to establish the moral and aesthetic climate of a work is pronounced... (1-2)

[T]he grotesque projects a world vision that is framed by distinct techniques: in the best grotesque art, vision and technique must function congruently. The vision itself presents existence as deprived of meaning. All traces of natural order are willfully subverted so as to produce an alienated world, a world in which man, sensing the radical discontinuity of things, is estranged from his environment. This division between man and his environment is what actually produces the grotesque, or the absurd, wherein man discovers that in a universe which is disjointed and senseless, which is contradictory in every aspect, he is something less than what he should be (5).

The grotesque character is a comic figure. It is impossible to sympathize with him, despite his agonies because we view him from a detached perspective, and when we are not emotionally involved in his suffering, we are amused (7).

The major comic technique utilized by the writer of the grotesque is exaggeration, and this method inheres in the genre in several ways. One of the most common applications of exaggeration can be located in deformity (8).

Another variety of exaggeration which is pervasive in the grotesque is melodrama, a form of heightened action, frequently comic, which relies upon suddenness, surprise and shock. Many of O'Connor's stories strikingly illustrate the value of exaggerated action. Although many of her endings are melodramatically surprising, they are also ridiculous and horrible; thus the magnification of action through melodrama can easily result in a grotesque effect... (9).

2. In the space below, list as many examples of the grotesque (in body and/or SOUL) as you can find in the stories we've discussed. Your examples may be quoted or paraphrased.