

O'Connor and the Moment of Grace

1. Read and briefly discuss the following excerpts.

[J]ust at the idea of grace figures prominently in Catholicism, so it does in O'Connor. Critic Carter W. Martin notes, "Most of the short stories are constructed in such a way as to dramatize the sinfulness and the need for grace..." and goes on to delineate two different kinds of grace normally received by the characters, "prevenient grace—which moves the will spontaneously, making it incline to God—and illuminating grace, by which God enlightens men to bring them nearer to eternal life." That is to say either a kind of spark that ignites a low smolder of realization, or full-blown revelation. Usually the character "recognizes his need for repentance and either accepts or ignores the opportunity. In a few stories there is no indication as to the response of the character to his new insight." The latter is the case in "Parker's Back," "The Enduring Chill," and "Good Country People" among others (4).

From "The Dark Side of the Cross: Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction" by Patrick Galloway

Although O'Connor completed thirty-one short stories and two novels, she is best remembered for nearly a dozen works of short fiction. These major stories may be classified as typical O'Connor short stories for a number of reasons. Each story concerns a proud protagonist, usually a woman, who considers herself beyond reproach and is boastful about her own abilities, her Christian goodness, and her property and possessions. Each central character has hidden fears that are brought to surface through an outside figure, who serves as a catalyst to initiate a change in the protagonist's perception. O'Connor's primary theme, from her earliest to her last stories, is hubris—that is, overweening pride and arrogance—and the characters' arrogance very often takes on a spiritual dimension.

Closely connected with the theme of hubris is the enactment of God's grace (or Christian salvation). In an essay entitled "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," O'Connor states that her stories are about "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" and points out that the most significant part of her stories is the "moment" or "action of grace," when the protagonist is confronted with her own humanity and offered, through an ironic agent of God (an outsider) and, usually through violence, one last chance at salvation. O'Connor's protagonists think so highly of themselves that they are unable to recognize their own fallenness because of Original Sin, so the characters typically are brought to an awareness of their humanity (and their sinfulness) through violent confrontation with outsider figures (687).

From "Flannery O'Connor" by D. Dean Shackleford in *Short Story Writers*, edited by Frank Magill

2. Discuss what you consider to be the moments of grace in the stories we've read. Write your results in the space below and on the back of this sheet.