

IB/AP English 11

**O'Connor's Background**

1. Read the short biography from "Flannery O'Connor" by D. Dean Shackleford in *Short Story Writers*, edited by Frank Magill. Discuss connections you see between O'Connor's life and her work.
2. Read "A South Without Myths" by Alice Walker, a contemporary American writer who grew up in the South. Briefly discuss the article in terms of O'Connor's treatment of the South.

from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"  
Flannery O'Connor - edited by  
Frederick Asals (photo)



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

**Biography** - Flannery O'Connor's relatively short life was, superficially, rather uneventful. O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia, to Regina Cline and Edward Francis O'Connor, Jr. She was their only child. O'Connor's father worked in real estate and construction, and the family lived in Savannah until 1938, when the family moved to Atlanta. In that year, Edward O'Connor became a zone real estate appraiser for the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Shortly thereafter, O'Connor and her mother moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, and her father became so ill that he had to resign from his job in Atlanta and move to Milledgeville. On February 1, 1941, Edward O'Connor died.

In her youth, O'Connor was diagnosed with the same disease that had killed her father when she was almost sixteen. Her short life would end tragically from complications related to disseminated lupus, a disease that attacks the body's vital organs. From the fall of 1938 until her death, O'Connor spent most of her life in Milledgeville, except for brief hiatuses. After graduating from the experimental Peabody High School in 1942, O'Connor entered Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College) in Milledgeville, where she majored in sociology and English and was graduated with an A.B. degree in June, 1945. While in college, she was gifted both in drawing comic cartoons and in writing. In September, 1945, O'Connor enrolled at the State University of Iowa with a journalism scholarship, and in 1946, her first story, "The Geranium" (later revised several times until it became "Judgement Day," her last story), was published in *Accent*. In 1947, she received the master of fine arts degree and enrolled for postgraduate work in the prestigious Writers' Workshop. She was honored in 1948 by receiving a place at Yaddo, an artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York.

Planning never to return to the South, O'Connor lived briefly in New York City in 1949 but later moved to Ridgefield, Connecticut, to live with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald. Robert Fitzgerald is best known as a classics scholar and a translator of such works as the *Odyssey* and *The Iliad Plays*. City life was too much for O'Connor, but she became quickly acclimated to life in slower-paced Ridgefield. In January, 1950, she underwent an operation while visiting her mother during Christmas. She remained in Milledgeville until she returned to Ridgefield in March.

In December, 1950, O'Connor became extremely ill en route to Mill

→ edgeville for Christmas. At first it was believed that she was suffering from

*Short Story Writers*

acute rheumatoid arthritis, but in February, after being taken to Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, O'Connor was diagnosed with disseminated lupus erythematosus. As a result of her illness, O'Connor would remain under the care of her mother for the rest of her life, and in March, 1951, she and her mother moved from the former governor's mansion in Milledgeville to Andalusia, the Cline family's farm, which was on the outskirts of town. O'Connor's mother, a Cline, was part of a family who had played a significant part in the history of the town of Milledgeville and the state of Georgia. Like many O'Connor protagonists, her mother, using hired help probably very often similar to the "white trash" and black field hands of O'Connor's fiction, ran Andalusia as a dairy farm.

Meanwhile, O'Connor continued to write when she was not too weak. During the rest of her lifetime, she wrote fiction and befriended many people, some, such as the woman referred to in the collected letters as "A," through correspondence, others through frequent trips to college campuses for lectures, and still others through their visits to see her at Andalusia. Though her illness restricted her life considerably, she was able to achieve greatness as a writer, with a literary output that had already become a permanent part of the canon of American literature since World War II.

Physicians were able to control the effects of lupus for years through the use of cortisone and other drugs, but in early 1964, O'Connor, suffering from anemia, was diagnosed with a fibroid tumor. The operation to rid her of the tumor reactivated the lupus, and O'Connor died of kidney failure in August, 1964. In her last months, most of which were spent in hospitals, O'Connor worked slowly but conscientiously on the fiction that was to appear in her second (and posthumous) collection of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

Throughout her life, O'Connor remained faithful to her Catholic and Christian beliefs. Although her letters and fiction indicate frequent humor and self-mockery over her illness, it seems clear that O'Connor did not wish to be treated like an invalid, and she did not fear death, because she held to the Christian belief in immortality. While some critics recognize elements of anger, bitterness, and frustration in the fiction, perhaps it was through her craft that she was able to vent her feelings in a more fruitful way. Friends and acquaintances admired her for her wit, her intelligence, and her sharpness of tongue, but they also admired her for her courage.

# A South Without Myths

by Alice Walker

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I discovered O'Connor when I was in college in the North and took a course in Southern writers and the South. The perfection of her writing was so dazzling I never noticed [at the time] that no black Southern writers were taught. The other writers we studied-Faulkner, McCullers, Welty-seemed obsessed with a racial past that would not let them go. They seemed to beg the question of their characters' humanity on every page. O'Connor's characters-whose humanity if not their sanity is taken for granted, and who are miserable, ugly, narrow-minded, atheistic, and of intense racial smugness and arrogance, with not a graceful, pretty one anywhere who is not, at the same time, a joke-shocked and delighted me.

It was for her description of Southern white women that I appreciated her work at first, because when she set her pen to them not a whiff of magnolia hovered in the air (and the tree itself might never have been planted), and yes, I could say, yes, these white folks without the magnolia (who are indifferent to the tree's existence), and these black folks without melons and superior racial patience, these are like Southerners that I know.

She was for me the first great modern writer from the South, and was, in any case, the only one I had read who wrote such sly, demythifying sentences about white women as: "The woman would be more or less pretty-yellow hair, fat ankles, muddy-colored eyes."

Her white male characters do not fare any better-all of them misfits, thieves, deformed madmen, idiot children, illiterates, and murderers, and her black characters, male and female, appear equally shallow, demented, and absurd. That she retained a certain distance (only, however, in her later, mature work) from the inner workings of her black characters seems to me all to her credit, since, by deliberately limiting her treatment of them to cover their observable demeanor and actions, she leaves them free, in the reader's imagination, to inhabit another landscape, another life, than the one she creates for them. This is a kind of grace many writers do not have when dealing with representatives of an oppressed people within a story, and their insistence on knowing everything, on being God, in fact, has burdened us with more stereotypes than we can ever hope to shed.

In her life, O'Connor was more casual. In a letter to her friend Robert Fitzgerald in the mid-'50s she wrote, "as the niggers say, I have the misery." He found nothing offensive, apparently, in including this unflattering (to O'Connor) statement in his Introduction to one of her books. O'Connor was then certain she was dying, and was in pain; one assumes she made this comment in an attempt at levity. Even so, I do not find it funny. In another letter she wrote shortly before she died she said: "Justice is justice and should not be appealed to along racial lines. The problem is not abstract for the Southerner, it's concrete: He sees it in terms of persons, not races-which way of seeing does away with easy answers." Of course this observation, though grand, does not apply to racist treatment of blacks by whites in the South, and O'Connor should have added that she spoke only for herself.

But *essential* O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture. If it can be said to be "about" anything, then it is "about" prophets and prophecy, "about" revelation, and "about" the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance of spiritual growth without it.

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