

For all its horror: the demon- haunted literary vision of Flannery O'Connor

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Be sober and watch:
because your adversary the devil,
as a roaring lion,
goeth about seeking whom he may devour.
1 Peter 5:8

The dragon sits by the side of the road,
watching those who pass.
Beware lest he devour you.
We go to the Father of Souls,
but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.
Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis*, XVI¹

Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzling you
Is the nature of my game
The Rolling Stones, "Sympathy for the Devil"

From at least the seventeenth century up to the present, the figure of the Devil has provided a major character or dramatic theme in both Christian and secular literature. Representations have ranged from the so-called "Romantic

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Satan” of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) through to Mikhail Bulgakov’s disruptive trickster Devil in *Master and Margarita* (1967) and to pulp fiction writers like Dennis Wheatley, whose lurid and titillating images of the Devil and his agents in *The Devil Rides Out* (1934) and other novels have left an enduring mark on popular culture conceptions of demonic evil.² While many of these writers have at times adopted Satan as a figure of comedy, romance, social critique, or for the more cynical purpose of selling pot-boiler fiction, few have featured much reflection on what traditional theology called the *mysterium iniquitatis* (the mystery of evil) or the role of personified evil in the drama of redemption. For most fiction writers, the reality of the Devil as, in the words of Jeffrey Burton Russell, the personification of “radical evil,” has been at best a theologically medieval conception to be jettisoned along with other benighted pre-modern superstitions.³

One writer, who has enjoyed a great vogue over recent decades, stands starkly against the grain here: the American Roman Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964). O’Connor’s fiction, perhaps more than that of any other twentieth century writer, dealt almost entirely with the mysteries of evil and grace, and frequently featured what Russell aptly described as “epiphanies of Satan himself.”⁴ These devilish characters have malign and destructive intentions that are revealed to the reader but not to the protagonists who are often blinded and usually only alerted to them by a frequently violent and always confronting moment where the reality of human sin and the offer of God’s grace are made starkly manifest. In O’Connor’s own words, all her stories were “about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it,” but she also recognised that “most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal etc.”⁵ The Christian readers of her time, she opined, wanted their “grace warm and binding, not dark and disruptive.”⁶

While O’Connor certainly acknowledged the dramatic appeal that the diabolical could hold in fiction, she did not believe in separating the literary and the literal in this regard. Instead, O’Connor held that the reality of personal evil could not be separated from a wider theological worldview:

To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must name himself, and not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion. Literature, like virtue, does not thrive in an atmosphere

where the devil is not recognized as existing both in himself and as a dramatic necessity for the writer.⁷

The centrality of demonic personal evil in O'Connor's writings, then, has long been acknowledged as a key element of her literary vision and has been the subject of considerable commentary from both literary critics and theologians alike.⁸ A few have accused her of being either "on the Devil's side" (in a literary sense) as writer and critic John Hawkes' famously opined.⁹ Others have slyly questioned O'Connor's theological orthodoxy and suggested that an almost Manichaean dualism pervades her work (an accusation she fastidiously rejected).¹⁰ Such suggestions have usually been offered by literary critics rather than theologians, often with the intention of wresting O'Connor's legacy as a writer from her many Christian admirers and apologists. As I will argue below, however, such an approach does violence to O'Connor's own statements about the nature of her writings. Such critiques, even if read by Christian readers, have certainly not diminished her popularity. However, what Hawkes referred to as her "exploitation of the 'demolishing' syntax of the Devil,"¹¹ continues to unsettle readers, as indeed it did in her own short lifetime.

It is the contention of this paper that O'Connor's fiction, understood on its own terms and from O'Connor's reflections in her non-fiction writings, offers a compelling literary demonology and narrative depiction of personified evil operating in an everyday setting. It is also a powerful witness to the reality of human sin for an audience in the early 1960s who O'Connor acknowledged as "[putting] little stock either in grace or the devil."¹² To a contemporary Christian world, that has in part said "farewell to the Devil,"¹³ and a secular culture that continues to hold a perverse fascination with a caricatured supernatural Devil (but fails to appreciate the more banal manifestations of personal evil which are witnessed in the everyday) O'Connor's fiction takes evil seriously. However, she does it in a way that is neither transparently catechetical nor piously imbued with a credulity toward demonic "signs and wonders" which marked much Catholic literature of her time.¹⁴

O'Connor's Devil is one who names himself with a specific personality for every occasion. In her fiction, we see a compelling antidote to the trend, found elsewhere in recent Christian writings on the topic, to either rationalise or sensationalise evil. In this way, O'Connor's writing sails carefully between the "two equal and opposite errors into which our race

can fall about the devils,” that C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) warned his readers about in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters* (1942): “to disbelieve in their existence” or “to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”¹⁵ Before moving to analyse some specific examples of the operation of literary devils in O’Connor’s short stories, however, it is important to explain the background to the often violent and grotesque way in which O’Connor structures these “satanic epiphanies.” We can do this by examining O’Connor’s own occasional and epistolary writings to better gauge why such a dark theme loomed so centrally in her literary vision.

O’Connor’s demon-haunted literary vision

Reflecting on her own work in 1961, O’Connor mused that “I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.”¹⁶ The immediate context of this comment was her reflection on an extended correspondence with her friend, the writer and literary critic John Hawkes. Hawkes—not sharing O’Connor’s Catholic worldview—had suggested in as many words that like William Blake had said of John Milton, “like a true poet,” O’Connor was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it.”¹⁷ For Hawkes, O’Connor’s literary devils belonged to the Romantic tradition that viewed the Devil as a Promethean figure, rebelling against divine tyranny. This Devil held, in Milton’s famous phrase, that it was “better to reign in hell than serve in heaven,”¹⁸ suggesting that O’Connor revelled in her literary devils’ escapades as they wrought havoc on the unwary. Hawkes was, of course, speaking in literary terms, and while always remaining cordial (if ironic about Hawkes’ failure to understand her literary thrust) O’Connor answered his challenge unequivocally in what is perhaps the most clear-sighted expression of her belief in a literal as well as a literary devil:

I think the reason we can’t agree on this is because there is a difference in our two devils. My Devil has a name, a history and a definite plan. His name is Lucifer, he’s a fallen angel, his sin is pride, and his aim is the destruction of the Divine Plan. Now I judge that your Devil is co-equal to God, not his creature; that pride is his virtue not his sin; and that his aim is not to destroy the Divine Plan because there isn’t any Divine Plan to destroy. My Devil is objective and yours is

subjective. You say one becomes “evil” when one leaves the herd. I say it depends entirely on what the herd is doing.¹⁹

O'Connor felt that the herd, in this case modern America, was going its own way and had replaced Christian faith with a counterfeit gospel based in human reason and secular perfectibility which ultimately amounted to nihilism. O'Connor's view of this modern gospel was made explicit throughout her occasional non-fiction prose, but is best embodied in the words of the false prophet Hazel Motes' "Church Without Christ," in her first novel *Wise Blood* (1952):

I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to Fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and No Judgement because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.²⁰

In answering Hawkes, O'Connor went on to lament that reviewers had misunderstood her intentions here by psychologising her work on this point—a tendency that has increased manifold since her death. These comments on the devil, coming only a few years before her untimely death in 1964, are not throwaway remarks by an intensely religious author seeking to justify a well-earned reputation for focusing on the grotesque and violent (*Time* magazine had famously dubbed her “Ferocious Flannery”²¹). Rather, they reflect O'Connor's mature reflections on a theme that, while residing at the heart of her fiction, increasingly preoccupied O'Connor toward the end of her life as she wrestled personally with debilitating lupus. But it was a theme that had been present in her writings—as Hazel Motes' perverse *kerygma* of “Church Without Christ” aptly illustrates—from the very beginning.

Catholic commentators have opined that O'Connor's quite literal understanding of the mystery of evil, the figure of Satan, and Original Sin was in large part formed by the catechetical style of religious education that marked American Catholicism during that era (she was raised in parochial schools in Georgia).²² One can see throughout her non-fiction writings the influence of the rote learning of the Baltimore Catechism. Even a cursory reading of O'Connor's fiction makes clear a deceptively simple and catechetical vision of the human condition and its need for grace and restoration in the face of radical evil and original sin. O'Connor made the inseparability of her central theological and literary commitments clear:

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means for me that the meaning of life is centred in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in literature.²³

The difficulty that O'Connor alludes to here was what she saw as the encroaching dominance of a secularist worldview where the core mysteries of the Christian faith, while still present in a watered-down and distorted way, were no longer central concerns. In her famous turn of phrase—here speaking of the modern American South—while modern society is “hardly Christ-centred, it is most certainly Christ-Haunted,” and O'Connor believed that this haunting could be instructive for a Christian writer.²⁴ However, in an atmosphere in which the Christian narrative was increasingly overlooked, its communication required a distinct and forthright form:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.²⁵

Clearly, many of these large and startling figures who assume a pivotal dramatic role in O'Connor's writings are her literary “devils”. Their mission to thwart God's plan of redemption in the lives of her characters drives almost all her narratives, but their plan to bring about the ruin of souls is almost always thwarted through a surprise moment of grace. The hard-of-heart are brought face-to-face with their culpability before God—though a dramatic resolution is not always forthcoming. For this purpose, however, O'Connor saw her literary devils as a dramatic necessity, for in her writings “the devil accomplishes a good deal of the groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective.”²⁶ In O'Connor's fiction there is much of Thomas Aquinas' challenging suggestion that “God allows evil to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom.”²⁷ However, while O'Connor certainly read widely in neo-Thomist theology—famously describing herself as a “Hillbilly Thomist”²⁸—she entertained some suspicion of Catholic

theological abstraction when it came to communicating religious truth in fiction. In general she preferred dogmatic truths to appear through the mouths of her “backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists” whose uncompromising Gospel contrasted so starkly with “those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development.”²⁹

While theologians could talk in abstractions about evil—a vice that she lamented was often indulged in by the Roman Catholic intelligentsia³⁰—O'Connor believed that in literature only the concrete and literal would do. It is this belief in what she considered theological realism that informs the often-violent manner by which her characters are brought to a stark and uncompromising realization of their need for redemption. As she comments:

I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work.³¹

Over her career, the use of characters embodying personal evil to highlight the mysteries of evil and grace remained a touchstone of her prose. Moreover, her use of these characters attests to her understanding of her vocation as a Christian writer—to speak unflinchingly about the theological reality of the human condition. For O'Connor it was the perennial temptation of the Christian novelist to “forget that the devil is still at his task of winning souls and that grace cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring.”³²

At the beginning of O'Connor's first collection of short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1950)—which she aptly described as “stories about original sin”—one encounters the epigram from the prologue to Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Orations* (which appears at the beginning of this article). This much-commented on quotation epitomises her understanding of both the role of fiction and the vocation of the Christian writer. For O'Connor, “No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell, and this being the case, it requires considerable courage, at any time, in any country, not to turn away from the storyteller.”³³ The Christian writer, likewise, “will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for.”³⁴ For O'Connor, however, it remained the “horror” of the

human condition which was foremost and while her writings are perhaps didactic, they are hardly catechetical (even if her theological formation was):

I don't believe that you can impose orthodoxy on fiction. I do believe that you can deepen your own orthodoxy by reading if you are not afraid of strange visions. Our sense of what is contained in our faith is deepened less by abstractions than by an encounter with mystery in what is human and often perverse.³⁵

The seriousness, then, with which O'Connor treats these themes of fall and redemption often scandalised her readers. O'Connor was often criticised for including unedifying and grotesque characters, unaware how such devils acted as unwitting agents for the intrusion of grace into characters' lives who aptly demonstrated O'Connor's belief that modern man had lost a sense of the reality of evil and humanity's need for redemption. But O'Connor was unapologetic here, both to her religious audience and to secular readers. She believed the former ran the risk of forgetting the reality of the fall amid theological abstraction while the latter had to be shaken from their complacency but had become so deaf to religion that only jolting violence would remind them of this reality:

There is something in us as story-tellers, and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance of restoration. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but he has forgotten the cost of it. His sense of evil is deluded or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the *price* of restoration. He has forgotten the cost of truth, even in fiction.³⁶

It is in this narrative motion of fall and redemption (or the offer of restoration), that Russell, among others, identified as "satanic epiphanies" in O'Connor's fiction. But both are a theological necessity in O'Connor's demon-haunted literary vision.

O'Connor's literary devils

Russell's "satanic epiphanies," are deliberately scattered through O'Connor's two novels and numerous short stories.³⁷ To survey all of these would be

impossible in a short article. Instead, here I will restrict myself to looking at the depiction and function of literary devils in four of O'Connor's better known short stories: *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1953), *Good Country People* (1955), *The Comforts of Home* (1960) and *The Lame Shall Enter First* (1962).

A Good Man is Hard to Find

Published as part of her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* tells the unsettling story of a horrific encounter between a decidedly unsympathetic middle-American family on a road-trip and a psychopathic band of ruthless murderers. This story contains arguably the most well-known of O'Connor's devils in the character of The Misfit—an escaped murderer on the run in the rural backwoods of the American South. The Misfit is a foreboding presence from his first appearance as a tight-jean-wearing man in a black hat carrying a gun. From when he is first observed peering down the embankment at the old woman and her family, his malicious intent is apparent. The debonair grandmother, whom the narrative has hitherto depicted as the epitome of Southern ladylike gentility and self-satisfaction, is immediately struck by his familiarity. In the process of recognition, the grandmother is brought, through her efforts to tempt the devilish Misfit, to an eventual recognition of her own fallen nature.

The majority of the story shows the grandmother grappling desperately with the demonic Misfit as she seeks to appeal to his humanity, but her exaggerated Southern graces here only allow her to appeal to his pride: his noble blood and the unproven (and clearly false) impression he's "a good man at heart."³⁸ Here, the superficiality of appearances, and the devil as a figure of pride, are brought together in the grandmother's attempts at sycophancy. Like the devil's offers to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew's temptation scene (Matt. 4:1–11), the grandmother's first attempts only appeal to worldly comforts. But The Misfit is a decidedly anti-Christ figure—a position made clear by several distorted gospel allusions throughout the text.³⁹

"You could be honest too if you'd only try," said the grandmother. "Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."⁴⁰

The grandmother's idea of the "good life," which she holds out to The Misfit, is one of banal worldly comfort and superficial appearances. The

Misfit, however, has no illusions here, and in a vague murmur remarks, somewhat knowingly, that "Yes'm, somebody is always after you."⁴¹ This phrase could refer to either the Devil or Christ, but its import becomes clear as the narrative progresses: the quest for worldly security is fruitless and only a decision between Christ and the world is what truly matters.

Having failed to persuade The Misfit with worldly comfort, the grandmother instead resorts to tempting him with religiosity and begins speaking about Jesus. The grandmother insists that were The Misfit to pray, Jesus would help him. The Misfit, however, will have nothing of it, responding, "I don't need no hep . . . I'm doing alright by myself."⁴² Deadened by incarceration and what he perceives as the mismatch between crime and punishment, The Misfit believes he has no need for Jesus who "thrown everything off balance."⁴³ In a stark expression of his nihilistic gospel, The Misfit proclaims:

Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.⁴⁴

In a last-ditch and resigned effort to save herself, the grandmother half-heartedly replies, "Maybe he didn't raise the dead." The Misfit, however, is still untouched. He has rejected Jesus and if he had accepted him, he wouldn't be where he was. It is here that the moment of grace intervenes:

His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder.⁴⁵

Suddenly, in a moment of realisation, the grandmother sees that The Misfit, like her ingrate son Bailey and his spoilt progeny, is only another child of Original Sin. Here she is moved to a recognition of her own fallen state. She is no longer the genteel Southern dame proud of her good breeding, but the every mother (and every father) who shares in the stain of Original

Sin. This moment of theological clarity, however, is met by the wrath of The Misfit. Perhaps because his satanic role of bringing about wanton destruction to the divine plan has, at least in the case of this old woman, been thwarted. He “sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down and took off his glasses and began to clean them.”⁴⁶

The grandmother’s eleventh hour realisation, however, is redemptive and her mortal body is depicted in a grotesquely beatific state, “half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.”⁴⁷ The Freudian or perhaps Jansenist readings sometimes imputed to O’Connor here may appear almost irresistible, but the theological significance of the grandmother’s dying moment is made clear against the backdrop of the story’s title and reinforced by The Misfit’s immortal declaration, “She would have been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”⁴⁸ Only by the threat of judgement and violence has the grandmother been moved to recognise there are no good men (or women), but those whose righteousness has been vouchsafed by Christ and who acknowledge their need for redemption. For all her secular graces, there is but one Grace that ultimately matters.

Good Country People

In *Good Country People*, O’Connor pokes fun at the mores of Southern gentility—particularly amongst the female characters. Mrs Hopewell and Mrs Freeman are two matronly busybodies marked out by the frivolous nature of their conversations. These women contrast almost wholly with Hulga (or Joy), Mrs Hopewell’s daughter and the female equivalent of the male secular humanists found in O’Connor’s other stories. Hulga’s belief in her own self-sufficiency and nihilism—brought about by education, including a doctorate in philosophy—coupled with her aloofness, prove her ultimate downfall. Having lost her leg at age ten in a shooting accident and possessing a weak heart, Hulga delights in her contemptuous attitude toward her flighty mother. Her mother, on the other hand, laments how her daughter’s intellectual sophistication has in many ways prevented her from being one of those good country folk for whom her mother expresses such a patronising admiration. As the story unfolds, Hulga seeks predatorily, and with deceptive ease, to seduce the seemingly hapless Bible salesman—Manley

Pointer. Hulga emphasises her nihilistic worldview and celebrates the fact that by her self-sufficiency, she can rename herself and recreate her world in contrast to the reality that faces her.

From Pointer's entrance into the story, the reader is left with an inkling that he is more than he lets on and that, despite his charade of rustic simplicity, he is in fact far cleverer than he appears. By means of this feigned simplicity, Pointer ingratiates himself to Mrs Hopewell, who despite finding him a terrible bore, feels restrained by the dictates of matronly Southern hospitality to invite him in to dinner. What occurs during this meal and its aftermath is that Pointer awakens in Hulga a latent erotic desire unfamiliar to her nihilistic philosophy. After their brief rendezvous and walk to the property gate—an event that provides the nosey Mrs Hopewell and Mrs Freeman with fresh gossip—Pointer, with a fumbling artifice, arranges to meet Hulga the following day. Self-satisfied in her condescension toward this country rube, Hulga fantasises about seducing Pointer and by doing so corrupting his seemingly good country Christian appearance. Little does Hulga know, however, that it is she who is in fact the one being seduced and that she has let down her guard.

The satanic epiphany comes at the end of *Good Country People*. While cavorting in a hay loft, Hulga permits Pointer to remove and cast aside her prosthetic leg and shows his true self by opening the cover of his Bible to reveal it is in fact hollow and the inside contains a flask of whiskey, pornographic playing cards, and a blue box of condoms. Suddenly disarmed of her self-sufficient rationalism and her necessary appendage, Hulga is brought to realise that in her pride she has given up her soul (symbolised by her prosthetic leg) and placed it in the hands of a clever devil in Pointer. As she desperately pleads with him to return her leg, Pointer brusquely throws her prosthetic into his suitcase, alongside other symbols of his hidden degeneracy. He throws the suitcase down the manhole leading to the hay loft before informing Hulga of his ruse to seduce vulnerable disabled women and steal the appendages without which they cannot function. Hulga's growing outrage, helplessness, and disbelief at what has transpired is contrasted with Pointer's confidence as he informs her that for all her learning, she is not as intelligent and above the "good country people" of the story's title as she pretends. He informs her, "I'll tell you another thing, you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing since I was born!" Pointer has no delusions, "I hope you don't believe that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end

is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!" The story ends with Mrs Hopewell and Mrs Freeman digging onions and watching the "simple" Pointer slinking away, Mrs Freeman noting with some irony, "Some can't be that simple," she said. "I know I never could."⁴⁹

As a demonic character, Pointer, like so many other similar characters in O'Connor's fiction, shatters Hulga's pride and in a spectacular reversal, turns her malign intentions back on her. Like the Devil of scripture who seeks to appeal to vanity in his attempts to tempt Christ in the wilderness (in O'Connor represented by the backwoods—a place of frequent revelation), the demonic Pointer targets Hulga at her most vulnerable point—her perverse pride in her prosthetic leg ("she was as sensitive about her artificial leg as a peacock about his tail"⁵⁰)—but unlike Christ who can answer the Devil's challenge, the proud yet fallen Hulga is left bereft at Pointer's malevolent self-disclosure and the story ends with his cruel ruse going undiscovered except by the humiliated Hulga.

The Comforts of Home

In *The Comforts of Home*, the reader meets Thomas, a historian in his mid-thirties whose well-bred do-gooder mother has welcomed into their home the nineteen-year-old delinquent Star Drake (her other name is Sarah Ham). Thomas disparagingly calls Star "the little slut" (she is also referred to as the "nymphomaniac").⁵¹ As the story progresses, Thomas' domestic complacency is shattered as the aptly named Star Drake turns his world upside down and brings about the accidental death of his mother and Thomas' own downfall. Here O'Connor's characterisation again shows the more seductive side of evil and the way that between reviling and pitying Star/Sarah, O'Connor hints that Thomas is vaguely aware of the lust she awakens in him and forced to confront how little ultimately separates them in their fallen state.

As the narrative begins, Thomas' mother is seduced, like many others in O'Connor's fiction, by worldly appearances. Reading about Star's arrest for bank fraud in the newspaper, the mother proclaims, "She doesn't look like a bad girl," and moreover that "She looks like a wholesome girl." Thomas, the dismissive and world-weary cynic quips in reply that "Wholesome people don't pass bad checks."⁵² Thomas is ensconced in his domestic sphere and its carefully crafted and controlled comforts when his mother invites "the little slut" to disturb his peace and bring chaos to his ordered world. Like some medieval succubus, Star appears uninvited in Thomas' room late

at night, and like Aquinas' prostitute, he is forced to drive her from his presence. However, unlike Aquinas, Thomas has no real sense of personal evil and like so many of O'Connor's characters has entirely intellectualised the problem of evil:

The devil for Thomas was only a manner of speaking, but it was a manner appropriate to the situations his mother got into. Had she been in any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil, that if Antony of Egypt had stayed at home and attended to his sister, no devils would have plagued him.⁵³

O'Connor, of course, believed in no such moral middle ground. In mockery of Thomas' deluded philosophical moderation, Star's every action throughout the story is seemingly calculated to unsettle, titillate, or manipulate him and he reacts with increasing rage. Star at times leers at him, winks, or smiles suggestively, and eventually attempts to seduce him during a car ride home:

[T]he quality of her look was such that it might have been her hands, resting now on his knees, now on his neck. Her eyes had that mocking glitter and he knew that she was well aware that he could not stand the sight of her. He needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption, but blameless corruption because there was no responsible faculty behind it. Absently he asked himself what the attitude of God was to this, meaning if possible to adopt it.⁵⁴

Here we see Thomas' hubris, to see Star through philosophical eyes that approximated to those of God, rather than to realise how for all his aloofness, the demonic Star was calculatingly pushing his buttons and making a mockery of his feigned virtue of moderation and self-control.

While cast as a somewhat doddering old lady, Thomas' mother is his foil here who tries to suggest to him, on repeated occasions throughout the story, that he place himself in Star's shoes. Her entreaties, however, are ultimately banal. Thomas is well-bred and was not born with "bad inclinations".

Instead, Thomas is reminded that “We are not the kind of people who hate,” for in Thomas’ mother’s eyes this was “an imperfection that had been bred out of them generations ago.”⁵⁵ Like in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, it is this denial of Original Sin and its consequences that ultimately leads to Thomas’ destruction.

After repeated provocations, including Star’s half-realised suicide attempt, Thomas is finally driven to act. When his late father’s handgun briefly vanishes, Thomas finally seals his own fate by stooping to Star’s level and attempts to frame her by placing the handgun in her open pocket book. While this scene is pregnant with a certain sexual symbolism involving the pistol and the red pocket book—which exudes the “unmistakable odor of the girl”⁵⁶—it is this act that seals Thomas’ fate and ultimately becomes the occasion of his own destruction. Caught in the act by Star, who continues to goad him, Thomas aims the gun at her but inadvertently shoots his mother. Through his actions, Thomas highlights his fallen nature, precisely the fallen inclination that his mother had sought to warn him about (but which she believed his good breeding made him immune to):

The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts until all shrieks were stilled and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order.⁵⁷

The consequences of Thomas’ indignation and belief that he was sufficient to exorcise the demonic Star, however, become immediately clear and rather than banishing evil, his “logical” distortion of the situation is brought to bear on him. The full weight of Thomas’ insufficient understanding of evil—that Star lacked the capacity for responsibility—is precisely the distorted logic that the investigating policeman, Sheriff Farebrother, brings to the crime scene:

The sheriff’s brain worked instantly like a calculating machine. He saw the facts as if they were already in print: the fellow had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl. But Farebrother had been too quick for him. They were not yet aware of his head in the door. As he scrutinized the scene, further insights were flashed to him. Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to

collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. He was accustomed to enter upon scenes that were not as bad as he had hoped to find them, but this one met his expectations.⁵⁸

In *The Comforts of Home*, the devilish Star is a disruptive, chaotic presence who the secular Thomas foolishly dismisses as not ultimately responsible for her actions. He fails to realise, though it is made clear throughout the narrative, that Star Drake is an active force willing his destruction at each step and whose fallen nature he himself shares. In an irony, despite his expressed philosophy of moderation, Thomas is driven to fits of excess by Star's provocations. The aloof and self-contained historian, for all his learning and carefully ordered existence, is not immune to the intrusion of personal evil into his life and its ultimate consequences.

The Lame Shall Enter First

One of O'Connor's last writings, the novella *The Lame Shall Enter First*, is often seen as structurally similar to O'Connor's second and most celebrated novel, *The Violent Bear it Away* (1955). Both centre on father-son relationships in the presence of an interloper who tragically highlights the alienation of the father-son bond, ultimately resulting in the son's death and a moral reckoning for an emotionally absent father. In *The Violent Bear it Away*, however, the aloof father, Raber, continues to shut himself off even at the moment of drowning (but also baptism) of his mentally retarded son Bishop. Raber pretends to be immune to the cries of his child and is secretly grateful to Tarwater for carrying out an act of euthanasia he had dreamt of but been incapable of executing. In *The Lame Shall Enter First*, however, the social worker Sheppard realises at the eleventh hour that his belief he could redeem the demonic Rufus Johnson from his criminal inclinations was foolhardy. The young delinquent accuses Sheppard to the police of "Immor'l suggestions."⁵⁹ Sheppard is suddenly struck by how he has neglected his own child, the slovenly Norton. In the moment when this grace breaks through, Sheppard experiences:

A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of light. The little boy's face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light. He groaned with joy. He would make everything up to him. He

would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father. He jumped and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again.⁶⁰

However, this moment of realisation, where the scales drop from Sheppard's eyes, only comes when he also realises Johnson's truly diabolical nature. "He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson," and Sheppard's proud "image of himself shrivelled until everything was black before him."⁶¹ This moment of reckoning comes too late. In the powerful concluding paragraph of the story, Sheppard discovers the young Norton having committed suicide in a desperate attempt to join his dead mother among the stars:

The light was on in Norton's room but the bed was empty. He turned and dashed up the attic stairs and at the top reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit. The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space.⁶²

Unlike the ambivalent devils of O'Connor's earlier fiction, however, Rufus Johnson is a far more clearly malevolent agent of the son's demise. While in *The Violent Bear it Away* Tarwater—after being drugged and raped—belatedly accepts the prophetic mantle foisted upon him by his eponymous grandfather and turns to the city to "Go warn the children of God of the swiftness of God's mercy,"⁶³ Johnson is, despite his fundamentalist theologizing, a far more consistent demonic presence.

From his first entry into the story, Johnson's calculated cruelty is rarely lifted and the reader is only afforded brief instances of a more human side. From the outset, Johnson is, moreover, under no illusions about his status, as he tells Sheppard during their first sustained dialogue in the reformatory. Asked to explain why he does what he does (that is, commit acts of wanton destruction and criminality) Johnson is unambiguous, "Satan," he proclaims from blackened eyes, "He has me in his power."⁶⁴ Sheppard, however, like so many other O'Connor characters, is unable to fathom or credit the explanation of this delinquent. Johnson (like Tarwater) is merely the product of an abusive backwoods fundamentalist grandfather who had beat religion into Johnson with his belt-strap. Like a good secular counsellor, Sheppard's mind

turns, “the line of his thin mouth set with pride,” to a belief that what he was seeing was “some elemental warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now.” He imagines the signs on the side of some backwoods road “DOES SATAN HAVE YOU IN HIS POWER? REPENT OR BURN IN HELL. JESUS SAVES,” and resolves with a despair quickly transformed to outrage that Johnson would “know the Bible without reading it.” Sheppard’s reply is swift: “Rubbish!” he snorted. “We’re living in the space age! You’re too smart to give me an answer like that.”⁶⁵

For the remainder of Johnson’s well-earned incarceration, Sheppard continues to try to excite what he sees as Johnson’s native intelligence, utilizing the skills of pop psychology and the wonders of astronomy to “give the boy something to reach for beside his neighbor’s goods.”⁶⁶ However, this all proves in vain and Sheppard’s belief that perhaps he can “explain” Johnson’s devil to him proves in vain. Sheppard’s failure to recognise the devil when he so explicitly names himself here proves to be his ultimate undoing. He tries, in fits of self-satisfaction punctuated with disappointment, to turn Johnson onto a good path—in his words, “to make him useful”—in a sense amenable to Sheppard’s closed materialist universe.⁶⁷ Here the image of the telescope, viewing the ends of the material cosmos, becomes powerfully evocative as the narrative develops and as astronauts become the pinnacle of secular achievement which Sheppard holds out to young Johnson, but pointedly not to his neglected and motherless son Norton.

The demonic epiphany of Johnson in *The Lame Shall Enter First* is one that tempts Sheppard’s pride and self-sufficiency. In doing so, he appeals to Sheppard’s secular benevolence only to draw him into his sin, and slyly congratulates him for it. Blind to his own pride, Sheppard frequently self-congratulates or self- consoles himself that his intentions toward Johnson have been nothing but benevolent and when things begin to go wrong, deludes himself that he has nothing to be sorry for. To his own mind, Sheppard is without sin and smug in his self-delusion that by all his powers of reason and knowledge he can work to perfect Johnson’s distorted nature without God’s grace. Johnson, on the other hand, despite his diabolical inclinations, is not so deluded to the reality of evil and ominously warns Sheppard: “The devil has you in his power.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

So what, then, does O'Connor's fiction bring to a contemporary audience? As suggested at the beginning of this article, O'Connor's writings and the devils therein provide a literary witness to the reality of radical evil. They highlight to a secular reader particularly, in stark and compelling terms, the inescapability of evil and suggest an antidote to the kind of self-satisfaction that accompanies so many attempts to perfect nature without grace. While not evangelical or catechetical, O'Connor's fiction is instructive. O'Connor saw, even in her own days, a world increasingly blind and deaf to the reality of evil and as such the accompanying action of God's grace.

For Christians, who may be understandably scandalised by the intensity and moral degradation that inhabits O'Connor's literary world, she offers something else. Especially in our own times, Christians have focused on the more sensational and excessive ideas about supernatural evil. In recent years across Christian traditions, documents have been penned and books written about demonic possession, exorcism, and spiritual warfare, many of which see the Devil as a powerful force in the modern world—almost dualistically equivalent to God—who presents himself in astounding “signs and wonders.”⁶⁹ Without denying such realities, such an emphasis in much Christian reflection on Satan and the mystery of evil has distracted us from the banality of evil. It has distracted us from the manner in which the operation of sin in the everyday lives of humanity manifests itself. It has detracted from the ways in which a devil (who is real in a way that should not quickly be demythologised), stalks humanity like a roaring lion. The fate of O'Connor's homespun and inoffensive do-gooders—often parodying an insipid liberal Protestant cultural Christianity—pierces this façade. Without supernatural incursions into the natural order, it reminds us that in terms of the central Christian mystery, for all its horror, humanity was considered worth saving. O'Connor's story bears witness—in a way that neither faux Catholic horror films and Pentecostal spiritual warfare manuals can—to the *price* of our redemption and the depths of God's love. Perhaps, more unsettlingly, she also reminds us, as Pope Paul VI shocked the world by noting in 1972: “evil is not merely a lack of something, but an effective agent, a living, spiritual being, perverted and perverting. A terrible reality. Mysterious and frightening.”⁷⁰

Endnotes

- 1 This is a paraphrase of O'Connor's. The full quote in translation reads: "But a dragon is keeping watch beside the road you are walking. Take care lest he bite you with unbelief. He sees so many on the way to being saved, and seeks whom he may devour. The end of your journey is the Father of Spirits, but the way lies past the dragon." [Trans. Library of Christian Classics].
- 2 See, for example, Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
- 3 Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1–6.
- 4 Russell, *Mephistopheles*, 290.
- 5 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrer Strauss Giroux, 1979), 275.
- 6 Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 862.
- 7 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 117.
- 8 The bibliography here is extensive. For a selection, see Preston M. Browning Jr., "Flannery O'Connor and the Demonic," *Modern Fiction Studies* 19, no. 1 (1973): 29–41; *Flannery O'Connor: The Coincidence of the Holy and the Demonic in O'Connor's Fiction* (Chicago: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974); John Desmond, "Flannery O'Connor's Misfit and the Mystery of Evil," *Renascence* 56, no. 2 (2004): 129–137. Robert Drake, *Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," *The Sewanee Review* 70, no. 3 (1962): 395–407; Regis Martin, *Flannery O'Connor: Unmasking the Devil* (Ann Arbor: Sapientia Press, 2005); Marion Montgomery, *Hillybilly Thomist: Flannery O'Connor, St. Thomas and the Limits of Art* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006); Paul W. Nisly, "The Mystery of Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Gothic Power," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 11 (1982): 25–35; Mary R. Reichardt, *Exploring Catholic Literature: A Companion and Resource Guide* (London: Sheed and Ward, 2003), 145–161; Thelma J. Shinn, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," *Contemporary Literature* 9, no. 1 (1968): 58–73; Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005); Jessica Hooten

- Wilson, *Giving the Devil His Due: Demonic Authority in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Fyodor Dostoevsky* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017); Ralph Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
- 9 Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," 400.
 - 10 For a discussion of this see esp. André Bleikasten, "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor," in *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.: 1985), 138–158; and Thomas M. Carlson, "Flannery O'Connor: The Manichaean Dilemma," *The Sewanee Review* 77, no. 2 (1969), 254–276. For O'Connor's response to this see O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 68.
 - 11 Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," 398.
 - 12 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 118.
 - 13 To use the translated title of a controversial theological text: Herbert Haag, *Abschied vom Teufel* (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1969).
 - 14 For example here, see Léon Cristiani, *Evidence of Satan in the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961) and O'Connor's review of this in *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews*, compiled by Leo J. Zuber, edited with an introduction by Carter W. Martin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 139f.
 - 15 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fontana Books, 1965 [1942]), 8.
 - 16 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 118.
 - 17 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 6.
 - 18 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 263.
 - 19 O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 456.
 - 20 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 59.
 - 21 Shinn, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," 59.
 - 22 See, for example, Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, "Flannery O'Connor and the Cartoon Catechism," in *Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor: Sacrament, Sacramental, and the Sacred in Her Fiction*, ed. Joanne H. McMullen and Jon Parrish Peede (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007), 102–116.
 - 23 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 32.
 - 24 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 861.
 - 25 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 112.
 - 26 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 117.
 - 27 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.1.3.

- 28 O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 81.
- 29 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 859.
- 30 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 858f.
- 31 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 112.
- 32 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 864.
- 33 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 35.
- 34 O'Connor, *Collected Writings*, 808.
- 35 O'Connor, *Collected Writings*, 863.
- 36 O'Connor, *Collected Writings*, 863.
- 37 Russell, *Mephistopheles*, 290, n. 60, lists a series of other characters.
- 38 Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrer, Strauss and Giroux), 128.
- 39 For example, The Misfit's discomfort with children contrasts with Matt. 19:14 and the theft of clothes from previous victims can be read as a perversion of the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5:40.
- 40 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 129.
- 41 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 129.
- 42 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 130.
- 43 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 131.
- 44 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 132.
- 45 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 132.
- 46 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 132.
- 47 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 132.
- 48 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 133.
- 49 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 288.
- 50 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 288.
- 51 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 383.
- 52 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 386.
- 53 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 385f.
- 54 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 390.
- 55 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 385.
- 56 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 402.
- 57 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 403f.
- 58 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 404.
- 59 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 480.
- 60 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 481f.
- 61 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 481.

- 62 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 482.
- 63 O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 478.
- 64 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 450.
- 65 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 450f.
- 66 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 450.
- 67 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 450.
- 68 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 478.
- 69 For this tendency both in Roman Catholic and Protestant circles, see Michael W. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (London: Bantam, 2001) and Sean McCloud, *American Possessions: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States* (New York: Oxford, 2015).
- 70 Pope Paul VI, "Deliver Us from Evil," *L'Osservatore Romano*, November 23, 1972, 3.