

Questions and Proposals about Flannery O'Connor's short stories, 'Greenleaf' and 'Revelation,' in addition to some excerpts from O'Connor's letters and essays which may help the reader reflect on O'Connor's project generally. (These excerpts are at the end of this document.)

(NOTE: For users of these study guides, the edition of O'Connor's stories referred to by page number in the questions below is the 1971 Noonday edition of her Complete Stories.)

Questions about "Greenleaf"

1. In a letter to "A" dated April 4, 1958, O'Connor wrote: "All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it,..." (*The Habit of Being*, p. 275). And if you go ahead and read through *The Complete Stories*, you'll see that this is true—nearly every one of them features a character who, like the Grandmother (in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"), or Joy (in "Good Country People"), or Mrs. May (in "Greenleaf"), is, for whatever reason, unwilling to "support" "the action of grace." It does seem, however, that in more stories than not, O'Connor takes care to demonstrate why it is that this "unwilling" character is also, perhaps, *unable* to support that action. What is it about Mrs. May's life that might be hindering her willingness, ability, readiness, to experience or support grace?

2. Romantic or sexual associations are present throughout the description of the bull, both at the beginning of the story, when we first see him, and in the story's final scene. In the first scene he is likened to "some patient god come down to woo her" (p. 311), and then on the next page to an "uncouth country suitor." Then, at the end of the story, the bull buries his head in Mrs. May's lap, "like a wild tormented lover," one of his horns piercing her heart, the other curving around her side and holding her in an "unbreakable grip" (p. 333).

Why do you think O'Connor wants these associations in the story? How are they a part of its larger meaning?

3. Judgment, especially the final kind, seems very much on Mrs. May's mind. On page 324, presented with the Greenleaf sons' six small children, Mrs. May feels as if "she were on trial for her life, facing a jury of Greenleafs." Then, later in the story, just before her final encounter with the bull, Mrs. May envisions submitting a life of labor before "any kind of judgement seat" (p. 333).

How is Mrs. May's anticipation of final judgement acting on her? (I'm being intentionally vague, here.) Is her anticipation bringing her closer to her life?

4. Twice in the story we see lilies. Of the Greenleaf family we hear that they had "no worries, no responsibilities. They lived like the lilies of the field." (p. 319). Then, two pages later, we see Mrs. May's "delicate blue-veined little hand" "dangl[ing] from her wrist like the head of a broken lily." The reference to the Biblical verse, "Consider the

lilies of the field,” is unmistakable. What connections do you see between this verse and O’Connor’s story?

Questions about “Revelation”

1. Ruby Turpin seems a more complex character than is typical of an O’Connor story. Do you agree with this estimation? If so, how is she “more complex” than the other O’Connor protagonists we’ve read? And how does this difference alter, influence, expand your experience of O’Connor generally?
2. What do you think is meant by Ruby Turpin’s question in the final pages of the story, “How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” (The question is found at the bottom of page 506 in the Noonday edition many of us are working with.)
3. The last pages of “Revelation” show Ruby Turpin experiencing a kind of revelation. Why do you think O’Connor elected to end the story not with the contents of that revelation, rather with Ruby turning back to her earthly life?

Questions about O’Connor’s fiction generally:

1. A question for personal reflection: In earlier meetings, we have talked a little about O’Connor’s fiction as seeming at once “real” and somehow beyond the real, beyond the reach of ordinary logic and even ordinary time. (O’Connor herself described her stories as having a “permanent quality”—a curious description, but one worth puzzling over. See *The Habit of Being*, p. 221.) Does the peculiarity of O’Connor’s fiction make it hard for you fully to absorb its lessons? Why, or why not?
2. In nearly all the O’Connor stories we’ve read together, the sky is one of the only details of place O’Connor spends any time describing. Why do you think she’s so interested in the sky?

Some excerpts from O’Connor’s essays about writing and religion

What follows are a couple of excerpts from O’Connor’s book of essays, *Mystery and Manners*. Perhaps they will illuminate O’Connor’s fiction for you in new ways.

1. “It is generally supposed, and not least by Catholics, that the Catholic who writes fiction is out to use fiction to prove the truth of the Faith, or at least, to prove the existence of the supernatural. [. . .] No one certainly can be sure of his low motives except as they suggest themselves in his finished work, but when the finished work suggests that pertinent actions have been fraudulently manipulated or over-looked or smothered, whatever purposes the writer started out with have already been defeated. What the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all, is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be

humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them. (“The Church and the Fiction Writer,” *Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962, pp. 145-146).

2. “...When Walker Percy won the National Book Award, newsmen asked him why there were so many good Southern writers and he said, “Because we lost the War.’ He didn’t mean simply that a lost war makes good subject matter. What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country.

Not every lost war would have this effect on every society, but we were doubly blessed, not only in our Fall, but in having means to interpret it. Behind our own history, deepening it at every point, has been another history. [. . .] In the South we have, in however attenuated a form, a vision of Moses’ face as he pulverized our idols. This knowledge is what makes the Georgia writer different from the writer from Hollywood or New York. It is the knowledge that the novelist finds in his community. When he ceases to find it there, he will cease to write, or at least he will cease to write anything enduring. The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location.” (“The Regional Writer,” *Mystery and Manners*, p. 59.)

3. “St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things. To the person who believes this—as the western world did up until a few centuries ago—this physical, sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source. The artist usually knows this by instinct; his senses, which are used to penetrating the concrete, tell him so. When Conrad said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe, he as speaking with the novelist’s surest instinct. The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality. This in no way hinders his perception of evil but rather sharpens it, for only when the natural world is seen as good does evil become intelligible as a destructive force and a necessary result of our freedom.” (“Novelist and Believer,” *Mystery and Manners*, p. 157)

