

Questions about Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back"

Note: The edition referred to in the questions below is the 1971 Noonday edition of O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*.

As many of you know, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) interests her readers for many reasons, not just for the way she wrote her fiction. (And just in case you're coming to that fiction for the first time, O'Connor is the author of two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960), and thirty-one stories, collected in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955), and, posthumously, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965).) She is interesting for the way she led her life: diagnosed in 1951 with disseminated lupus, for which, at the time, there was no cure, O'Connor accepted the limitations to her physical opportunity as the chance, essentially, to write the best stories she was capable of, making the most she could both of her circumstances and her gift. She is interesting as a theologian and philosopher: a deep reader into writers as diverse in their relationship to God as C. K. Chesterton and John Paul Sartre, O'Connor's own theology was at once rigorously intellectual and fiercely orthodox. She is interesting as a Southerner, especially for her own interest in the Southern Protestant Fundamentalist, whom she believed capable of true redemption (as contrasted with the "smug", Sunday-only breed of Catholic with which so many of her stories take issue.) She was interesting as a friend, for the honesty and humor with which she needed people and let them need her. For many of her admirers, O'Connor has become a kind of saint, an imaginary friend at once like oneself, yet far greater than oneself, to whom one might appeal not just out of intellectual or aesthetic desire, but spiritual desire as well.

For this reason—for the richness and splendor of the O'Connor Allegory, we might say, the O'Connor Myth—it is sometimes hard to get at the fiction, to what it's actually saying and doing. And so in the study materials to follow, I'm going to focus *on the text*, asking the innocent sorts of questions O'Connor's first readers may have asked when they encountered her stories in literary journals (in which the stories first appeared to the public) and first editions. (Lucky readers!)

1. So let's look at the first couple of pages of "Parker's Back" and pause for a moment over O'Connor's prose. Some of it is suggestive of good schooling, we might say—schooling at the "right" sorts of institutions—and some of it, maybe most of it, is not. Take a look, for example, at the fourth from last sentence in the second paragraph on the first page of the story (which is p. 510 if you're working with the Noonday edition of *The Complete Stories*.). "Her being against color, it was the more remarkable she had married him." This sounds like beginning or "bad" writing. Also note the many run-on sentences in the story, such as: "At intervals a car would shoot past below and his wife's eyes would swerve suspiciously after the sound of it and then come back to rest on the newspaper full of beans in her lap." (That's the second sentence of the second paragraph in the story.) Or how about the following sentence: "If he had been certain she was jealous of the woman he worked for he would have been pleased but more likely she was concerned with the sin that would result if he and the woman took a

liking to each other.” Again, the writing sounds—well, how does it sound to you? We expect in published literature to encounter prose that sounds like it took a special kind of education and/or talent to craft. Of course, this prose took a lot of time to craft as well—though the effect O’Connor was after was never “polish” or “beauty” for its own sake. Instead she was after—well, again, how does the prose sound to you? Having finished the story, and having begun to articulate what you feel it’s about, why do you think *this* kind of prose needs to be in *this* kind of story?

2. Images having to do with vision are frequent in the story. (I count at least twenty). You’ll also find many images having to do with things-outside and things-inside, in particular outside and inside the human head. Much of the story’s meaning, we might say, is ultimately expressed through, or embodied in, these images. What do you think they add up to say? And, what do they do to your own ability to “see”—or even to “witness?”
3. There are two moments in the story in which it seems Parker is being acted upon almost by a kind of divine intervention, moments we might call conversion experiences. The first is the moment when Parker’s tractor crashes and bursts into flames (p. 176 if you’re working with the Curtis edition, p. 520 if you’re working with *The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor*.) Parker’s response is to yell “GOD ABOVE!” in an “unbelievably loud” voice and then to go get a religious tattoo. And the second moment comes while he is sampling those religious tattoos—the options are arrayed in a book at the office of the tattoo artist—and, after he has flipped past a “pair of eyes,” Parker hears a voice say, “GO BACK” (p. 178, Curtis edition, p. 522, *Complete Short Stories*). What do you make of these moments of the story? If you do ultimately believe that Parker has been the recipient of God’s grace—and you may not believe that—do you feel that the grace has come through a kind of super-natural intervention? And, if you don’t believe that, how has grace come to him? Lastly, what do you think *Parker* believes has happened to him?
4. One of the most powerful and also confusing moments in the story comes near the very end, on the bottom of p. 183 in the Curtis edition, and in the middle of p. 528 in the *Complete Short Stories*. Parker is trying to get back inside his home after having slept a night away at the Christian Mission. He’s knocking and knocking, but his wife, Sarah Ruth, won’t let him in. What follows is long scene in which Parker keeps identifying himself with “still no sound from inside.” And, when Sarah Ruth does speak, she is referred to not by name but as “the voice.” The scene takes up nearly a full page, even though all that’s happening in it is that Parker is trying to get inside and identify himself. This is to say that it’s not a very full or dynamic or visually or aurally “interesting” scene, yet for me—and this is my proposal—it’s probably the most significant scene in the story, the scene that bears the story’s meaning most vividly and totally. Go ahead and reread the scene. Do you agree with this proposal? Disagree? Why, or why not?

Looking forward to seeing you Monday,

Emilie