



4-2016

Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Grace

Emily Strong

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, emilyvstrong@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Strong, Emily (2016) "Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Grace," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol9/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Grace

Emily Strong

The fact that Flannery O'Connor was a Catholic is obvious. Although she lived in a predominately Protestant society, she made her faith and intentions clear, and very few scholars have dared to question it. "Flannery O'Connor was something of an anomaly," writes critic Jessica Riedmueller from *The Philological Review*, explaining O'Connor's unique religious situation, "a Catholic, living in Georgia and writing about her Fundamentalist Protestant neighbors. Writing mostly during the 1950s, when Catholicism struggled to survive among the Southern Protestant denominations, O'Connor formed her fiction and her characters according to the teachings and dogmas of the Church" (23). However, the topic of debate that has been tossed around by many scholars is her concept of grace. Even outside of the context of O'Connor's fiction, there exist numerous debates on how to define it, how it works, and how it affects one's personal life. While O'Connor professes to be a stalwart Roman Catholic, some elements of the Protestant view of grace seem to have seeped, perhaps intentionally, into her fiction, implying that she may actually be less concerned with the exact doctrine than the general concept of conversion itself.

In order to fully analyze O'Connor's works from these perspectives, it is necessary to understand the theology behind how Catholics and Protestants understand grace, beginning with the Catholic's individualistic version. Grace is defined by the *Catechisms of the Catholic Church* as "the free and undeserved

help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life." Catholics view grace as a favor from God offered freely to all men to save them from their fallen state of sinful human nature. The *Catechisms* go on to say:

The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. . . . Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.

This states that, although any merit that man has is given from and attributed to God, one still must act in "collaboration" with him to become one of the "faithful" and to attain salvation. While the ability for anyone to attain grace is a gift from God, effort to be righteous in this life—including ordinances such as the sacraments—is required in order to receive grace's full power. Both Protestants and Catholics believe that grace was made possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. However, they differ in their ideas of how or if we gain spiritual merit to obtain grace and become saved.

According to Protestantism, the relationship between grace and man's merits on earth works more subjectively. While there are varying denominations within Protestantism itself—including Lutheran, Calvinist, and Arminian interpretations—their core teachings insist that grace is a gift given from God to those he sees fit to bestow it upon. Whether it be the predetermined "elect" or all mankind, depending on which theological perspective one holds, man's mortal merits are inconsequential and even unnecessary when held in contrast to the grace provided by Christ's Atonement. Because people are unworthy creatures compared to the divinity of God, nothing they do can truly earn them a spot in Heaven; they can only attain eternal life through God's will and mercy. All one must do is have faith, believe in him, and hope that he is merciful (Robinson). A simple explanation of this concept is provided by Dewey Wallace Jr. in his essay on the history of predestination in Protestantism: "Redemption is entirely a gift of God quite apart from human merit. . . . [T]he elect were chosen before they did good works in order that they might do them" (203–204). In short, "the elect" according to the Calvinist terminology—in modern Protestantism this more often applies to all mankind—are already saved because of grace; mortals only do good works as a form of gratitude for this salvation, not because those

works would help them earn it. Interpretations from the Arminian denomination suggest that one can fall from grace if horrendous sins are committed, but it is God alone who can save them, not their works here on earth. This concept of grace being given and not earned is a foundational principle of all Protestant denominations.

After considering these varying perspectives, one must ask: Where does Flannery O'Connor's concept of grace fit into all of this? Of course, generally our first thoughts turn to the most common answer: Catholic—and this is not an erroneous response. In fact, she would more than likely agree wholeheartedly. We see this spelled out by many O'Connor scholars, including Thelma Shinn, who writes, “Man needs to be ‘struck’ by mercy; God must overpower him. And man must reach God through an equal violence: ‘In a corrupt world,’ Miss O'Connor is saying, ‘redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute, irrevocable sacrifice’” (58). While she toys with the concept of grace through violence—an element of O'Connor's fiction that is often examined in academia—Shinn also illustrates O'Connor's belief that man must “sacrifice” (a form of worldly merit) in order to fully receive God's grace. This implies that the Lord requires effort on man's part in order to be redeemed. A violent act of God may first elicit this response, but it is up to the individual person to respond to that act with their own righteous sacrifice.

This explanation of sudden conversion, however, becomes complicated upon further doctrinal study. The very idea of being “struck” by grace can be interpreted as distinctly Protestant. Grace through the lens of Protestantism is seen as more of a one-time event. You either are saved or you are damned, there is no gray area between the two. Catholicism, on the other hand, often views grace as more of an ongoing process of conversion. In a critical article published in the *Flannery O'Connor Review*, Critic Lorna Wiedmann points out this discrepancy, explaining, “Such features as . . . the suddenness of conversion are operative Protestant, rather than Catholic, norms, for the Catholic stance features successive gradualism, rationalism, and cooperation in grace.” To be “struck” by God's mercy is almost like forcing that grace upon an individual who has shown no signs of cooperation until that point. Granted, O'Connor adds that “man must reach God through an equal violence,” implying that the person must make a grand sacrifice in return in order for the working of grace toward redemption to be complete. This, however, is cancelled out by the fact that the very act of being struck by grace already takes away their agency to make that necessary sacrifice; the sacrifice is already made for them, whether

they like it or not. Is it truly a sacrifice worthy of salvation then? Or is it God selectively choosing them to be saved by His own will, regardless of what they have done to deserve it?

In O'Connor's story "Greenleaf" we see this point illustrated through the goring of Mrs. May by the bull, which symbolizes Christ seeking her out in order to bring her to true conversion, according to most O'Connor scholars. The bull continually shows up in her life, trespassing on her property, no matter how hard she tries to avoid it. Eventually the bull kills her, which O'Connor uses as a symbol of Christ giving her a rude awakening to the wrongness of her pretended worship. Her very life was sacrificed for the sake of being saved by grace, and although there is debate as to whether or not she realized her mistakes and accepted that gift, one would venture to wonder if her choice even mattered at that point. After all, she did not choose to die and willingly come to Christ. From the Catholic viewpoint, she would have needed to perform an act of true conversion in return before her time had come. If she actually was saved it would have been simply because of her newfound moment of truth, demonstrating the Protestant "suddenness of conversion," as Wiedmann puts it. The fact that Christ had to come after her and strike her like a bull in order for grace to save her suggests that all of her former good works she had previously performed, however superficial, would have meant nothing. In essence, that would mean that God simply chose her to be saved regardless of her previous actions, echoing the Protestant understanding of grace.

O'Connor's "Revelation" also presents some notable Protestant themes through Mrs. Turpin's vision, which seemingly contradict the traditional Catholic view. When she sees the vision of "a vast horde of souls [that] were rumbling toward heaven," she sees people from every class and type, including "battalions of freaks and lunatics" (508). This image gives us the idea that *all* who are believers will be saved, not just those who live in a certain way or do certain things. In fact, those who Mrs. Turpin describes as having "always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right" (508), or in other words those who had dedicated their lives and resources to attaining earthly merit, bring up the rear in the procession toward heaven. In a Catholic view, those people should have been leading the march. But this is not the case in "Revelation": all those who have faith in Christ no matter who they are or what they did have been saved by grace.

Many of O'Connor's works present this issue of how grace and merit correlate, shown through her archetypal "grotesque" characters (Drake). "The

Lame Shall Enter First” is a great example of this. Sheppard dedicates his whole life to being a good person and serving others, and Johnson is a selfish and manipulative child who trashes people’s homes and wreaks havoc wherever he goes. Ironically, the story ends with Johnson calling Sheppard a “big tin Jesus,” claiming that “[t]he Devil has him in his power” (480), effectively leading to Sheppard’s moment of striking truth and conversion. O’Connor often uses unlikely characters such as Johnson, the Greenleafs, Mary Grace, etc., to bring the main character to this point of spiritual realization. Flannery O’Connor critic Robert Drake noticed this as well, stating, “Yet it is often those whom the ‘upright’ and ‘wholesome’ regard as grotesque become chosen vessels indeed. . . . The *real* grotesques are the self-justified, the *apparent* grotesques may be the blessed.” Although Sheppard seemed to have been the better man initially, it is soon apparent that he is intended to be the “*real* grotesque.” He attempts to justify himself, like Drake suggests, by telling himself, “I have nothing to reproach myself with” (481) repeatedly after Johnson’s accusations. Johnson plays the part of the blessed “*apparent* grotesque,” which character-type Drake goes on to describe as “a whole lot nearer the truth than the more ‘enlightened’ but godless intellectuals” (Drake) such a Sheppard.

Interestingly enough, while Johnson is supposed to be the character “nearer to the truth,” his form of worship is far more comparable to the Protestant faith than the Catholic faith that O’Connor supposedly intended Sheppard to convert to. Wiedmann highlights this problem by pointing out that “when Norton insists that his (Norton’s) father is ‘good’ because he helps people, Johnson retorts, ‘Good! . . . I don’t care if he’s good or not. He ain’t right!’ This is a Protestant, not a Catholic, pronouncement: Luther, for example, had insisted that ‘. . . asses would make it to heaven if good works were the key’ to salvation” (Wiedmann). Clearly Johnson is more concerned with Sheppard’s faith than with his works. Sheppard himself comes to the realization that “he had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton” (O’Connor 461), implying that all of his good works had profited him nothing because he didn’t have faith in Christ. None of his earthly merits could save him. In another instance, when Norton asks if his mother is in hell, Johnson promptly asks, “Did she believe in Jesus?” to which Norton responds that she did, and from this information Johnson concludes that “She’s saved” (462). He didn’t ask what Norton’s mother had accomplished to deserve salvation. According to both Johnson and the Protestant faith, all his mother needed to do was believe and she would be saved. While it is doubtful that Johnson was intended to be a role model

for Christians to take notes on, his character is used to bring Sheppard to the Christian faith—but through Protestant principles, not Catholic.

If all of this evidence is there, then one must wonder: Why did O'Connor allow Protestant themes to infiltrate her Catholic writing? Was it intentional or accidental? O'Connor herself admits, "I won't ever be able entirely to understand my own work or even my own motivations" (qtd. by Popova). However, for someone who evidently is very knowledgeable about both Catholic and Protestant doctrine, it seems improbable that she would have overlooked these overlapping elements in her writing. Perhaps she wanted to appeal to diverse audiences, highlight the discrepancies she sees in Protestantism, or even go beyond the particularities of doctrine to address the deeper issue of false conversion.

It is possible that she chose to use Protestant characters and teachings to break past a barrier between her and her intended audience—namely Southern Protestants. Because her message is supposed to be stalwartly Catholic, which she was very outspoken about, many Protestant readers could potentially resist her message. However, if she were to make subtle compromises in her theology, she might be more successful in capturing their attention and helping them relate to her writing. O'Connor is, in essence,

blending Southern Protestant culture with her Catholic faith. In the South, 'A Catholic can't write about a Catholic world because none exists so he has to write about a Protestant one' (qtd. in CW, "Letters 1954," 921). O'Connor shapes her fiction according to Catholic principles, but she populates it with Protestant characters—a mixture that can be rather confusing to a reader unfamiliar with either Southern culture or Catholic theology. (Riedmueller 22)

Perhaps she blurred the lines between the Southern Protestant culture and her Catholic theology, creating Protestant characters like Johnson, in order to bring her fellow Southerners one step closer to her idea of true conversion.

Additionally, while it may seem apparent that O'Connor disapproved of her Protestant neighbors' religion, she could have been using foundational Protestant themes to point out the wrongness and superficiality of their present-day worship. In a letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey, O'Connor writes, "The Catholic finds it easier to understand the atheist than the Protestant, but easier to love the Protestant than the atheist. The fact is though that the fundamental Protestants, as far as doctrine goes, are closer to their traditional enemy, the Church of Rome, than they are to the advanced elements of Protestantism"

(qtd. in Heschman). She clearly is sympathetic toward the *founding* principles of Protestantism. It is the *modern* form of Protestant worship that she detests, which she expresses in another letter:

One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling instead of thought, and gradually to come to believe that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention. (qtd. in Niederauer)

The worshippers she truly condemns are those who are lukewarm in any religion, not just Protestants. While she may not have agreed with their doctrines, most early Protestants were at least strong and active in their faith. The problem, according to O'Connor, is that many modern-day Protestants have abandoned their belief and made religion into "our own sweet invention."

This idea of false or lukewarm conversion is presented in her literature through her characters Mrs. May, Mrs. Turpin, and Sheppard. Mrs. May looks down on Mrs. Greenleaf for rolling around in the dirt yelling Jesus's name, but in the end it is Mrs. May who needs grace because her faith was nonexistent. She even describes herself as "a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (O'Connor 316). Mrs. Turpin, although allegedly a pious Catholic woman, is in actuality a hypocrite who cares more about worldly possessions than following Christ's example of love and compassion. Her judging attitude is distinctly anti-Christian, when one looks at it from the Bible's description of a true, charitable disciple's perspective. Sheppard blatantly refuses to believe in religion altogether, even going as far as heatedly commanding Johnson to stop teaching Norton about it at the dinner table. Johnson may not have been a devout Catholic, but he was at least devout in his own belief in God, and that fact alone made him superior to Sheppard, who didn't believe at all. All three of these characters fit the mold of those described in O'Connor's letters who are lax in their faith, and whom she expressly disapproved of.

As we see from these characters, the themes in O'Connor's works are not simply Protestant versus Catholic; the religious tension exists more accurately between the converted and the faithless, no matter what faith that may be. In *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, critic Marvin Friedman writes concerning O'Connor's literature:

For in each work, it is the impulse toward secular autonomy, the smug confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts, that she sets out to destroy . . . Again and again she creates a fiction in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to what she calls “reality”—the recognition of helplessness in the face of contingency, and the need for absolute submission to the power of Christ. (120)

Friedman points out that O'Connor doesn't limit her religious criticism to Protestants alone, she writes about all those who value secularism over God. Perhaps O'Connor included Protestant perspectives of grace because she was less concerned with the exact doctrine as she was with the conversion itself. It may not have mattered to her what idea of grace was used, as long as it brought the unbeliever to the realization of their mistakes so they could accept Christ as their Savior and live accordingly.

Flannery O'Connor may have been an outspoken and devout Roman Catholic, which is undoubtedly true, but her writing is not completely one-sided in its religious teachings. As we see from texts such as “Greenleaf,” “Revelation,” and “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Protestant beliefs have crept into her Catholic message, thus complicating the rigidly didactic purposes of her literature. However, we must consider the idea that these inconsistencies in doctrine were not accidental. Perhaps she wrote these texts to appeal to her Protestant readers, recognizing that they would be more prone to persuasion toward Catholicism if she made some subtle compromises between faiths in her writing. It is also possible that O'Connor wasn't quite as concerned with the Catholic version of grace as she was with conversion through any means. We cannot know for sure, but these questions must be considered when we talk of her unique portrayal of grace. If we only interpret O'Connor through a strictly Catholic lens, we may be limiting ourselves from seeing the bigger and more complete picture of her grace.

Works Cited

- Catechisms of the Catholic Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano 1993.
Web. 27 October 2015.
- Drake, Robert. *Flannery O'Connor; A Critical Essay*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996. Print.
- Friedman, Melvin and Clark, Beverly. *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1985. Print
- Heschmeyer, Joe. "Flannery O'Connor on the Eucharist and Church History." *Shameless Popery*. Lamansky, John @ Catholic FAQ, 20 Apr. 2012. Web. 4 Dec. 2015.
- Niederauer, George. "Flannery O'Connor's Religious Vision." *America: The National Catholic Review*. America Media: A Jesuit Ministry, 24 Dec. 2007. Web. 5 Dec. 2015.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971. Print.
- Popova, Maria. "Writing for the Godless: Flannery O'Connor on Dogma, Belief, and the Difference Between Religion and Faith." *Brain pickings*. n.p, n.d. Web. 4 Dec. 2015.
- Riedmueller, Jessica. "The Not-So-Sophisticated Roman: The Catholic Voice of Flannery O'Connor's Southern Fundamentalist Brethren." *Philological Review* 2005: 22-36. Web. 27 Oct. 2015.
- Robinson, B.A. "Comparing the Beliefs of Roman Catholics & Conservative Protestants." *Religious Tolerance*. Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 8 Jul. 2013. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.
- Shinn, Thelma. "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace." *Contemporary Literature* 1968: 58-73. Web. 28 October 2015.
- Wallace, Jr, Dewey. "The Doctrine of Predestination in the Early English Reformation." *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 1974: 201-15. Web. 27 October 2015.
- Wiedmann, Lorna. "Flannery O'Connor's Six Protestant Conversion Tales." *The Flannery O'Connor Review* 1 Jan. 2014: n. page. EBSCOhost. Web. 28 October 2015.