O'Connor's Search For the Father

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Absence affects literature, and plays a role in Flannery O’Connor’s short stories. In Flannery O’Connor’s short stories the father is often absent. This paper will examine three specific short stories that fit this concept: “Greenleaf,” “The Enduring Chill,” and “Parker’s Back.” In these short stories, the father’s absence negatively affects his children. Research supports this, stating that “85% of all children with behavior disorders are from fatherless homes” (Rosch 7). In each of these stories the children suffer from behavior disorders that negatively impact their futures. These behavior disorders consist of “unhappiness or depression” and an “inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers” (“Behavioral Disorders”). Fatherless children struggle more than their counterparts; these three short stories verify this reality, in the forms of Scofield and Wesley (“Greenleaf”), Asbury and Mary George (“The Enduring Chill”), and Parker (“Parker’s Back”). These five characters struggle with behavior disorders and finding meaning in life. Illustrating the father’s absence in her short stories, O’Connor highlights the negative effects of not growing up with a father, especially in regards to these five children. Wade Horn says, “Absent fathers threaten every aspect of children’s well-being” (Wetztein). Men’s-rights groups agree, stating that “fathers themselves are indispensable to their children’s well-being” (Wetztein). The absent father changes the outcomes of these three stories and the futures of their children. O’Connor explores the well-being of these fatherless characters, revealing their lack of wholeness.

O’Connor’s personal life follows this fatherless pattern. At the age of fifteen, “O’Connor’s father, to whom she was very close, died of systemic lupus erythematosus” (Budy 58). Her own father’s absence shapes O’Connor’s stories and family dynamics within these
stories. This paternal absence leads both O’Connor’s characters, as well as herself, in search of
the divine father, God. O’Connor, a devout Catholic, understood the role of God as father from
her study of the Bible in Mass. Multiple scriptures from the New Testament explain the concept
of God as the Father of all people, and our special role as his children. The Bible verses that will
be used in this paper illustrate the Christian belief of God as our Father, important in
understanding how O’Connor fills the paternal gap in her own life and in the life of her
characters. In O’Connor’s journal she actively states her struggling search for God, saying, “
‘My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well not have made me.’ O’Connor can
only conclude that as a creature of God, made in God’s image, she should be equipped to know
and feel that God” (Srigley 30). O’Connor’s personal search allows us to understand why her
characters continue in the search for her, all of her stories ending in a powerful manifestation of
divinity.

This search for God is realized through the agent of grace, which structures O’Connor’s
short stories. Grace in this paper will be defined as God reaching out to all in love with the power
to save, and our inability to reach salvation alone or through good works. Focusing on the
concept of grace, O’Connor says of her writing, “…my subject in fiction is the action of grace”
(O’Connor & Fitzgerald 118). All of O’Connor’s stories lead to spiritual enlightenment, where
the main character is violently thrust into God’s grace. The absence of the father leads to an
essential need for grace that only a Heavenly Father can supply. O’Connor’s short stories and
personal life portray families without fathers and the subsequent negative effects on family life
and children; the father’s absence illustrates the presence of God the Father as he extends grace
to these incomplete families, filling the paternal gap.
O’Connor’s works are full of religious symbolism, hearkening to her Catholic roots. It is a Catholic, as well as a general Christian belief, that God is our Father. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church it states, “God's love for Israel is compared to a father's love for his son. His love for his people is stronger than a mother's for her children” (“I Believe in God”). This great love models the love a father has for his children, and it is this love that God extends to all through his grace. The current Catholic Pope, Pope Francis, also shares this thought, saying, “[God] is the Father who opens doors for us… God is a Father who caresses us” (Chiodo 37).

This means that God is a universal Father who provides assistance we could not receive alone, as well as someone who cares for and about our spiritual well-being. Catholicism clearly supports the ideology of a Heavenly Father, and his role in spiritual development and progression.

There are many scriptures that explain this parent-child relationship with God. In the Bible the Apostle Paul teaches, “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (King James Version Acts 17:28). Paul explains that we are God’s offspring, or his children. This puts God in the role of Father. Like an earthly father, God gives us spiritual life and provides for us. This places us in the role to receive his assistance and his constant love. In the book of Hebrews it further explains, “Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?” (King James Version Hebrews 12:9). Here God is compared to “fathers of our flesh,” or earthly fathers. This comparison is important in noting the paternal gap in O’Connor’s short stories and the subsequent need for grace, or God’s fatherly touch and direction. Because God is “the Father of spirits”, he is also the father of things that are spiritual. He enables every person to obtain spiritual things, often through interactions with his grace. Direct reference is made to being
“children of God” in the book of Romans, which reads, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God” (King James Version Romans 8:16-17). Because we are heirs of God, we are entitled to receive the blessings God has in store for us. We receive these blessings through grace, which brings us salvation.

O’Connor’s understanding of God as Father, and each of us as his children, is seen in her short stories and is experienced by her characters, especially those who are fatherless. By ending each of her stories with moments of revelation and grace, O’Connor completes these fatherless homes with the presence of a Heavenly Father.

O’Connor herself lived in a fatherless home for more than half her lifetime. She clearly understood the struggles of living without a father. This may be why she was so devout in her faith and worked to gain a relationship with God, her divine Father. O’Connor illustrates the difficulties of living without her father in her letters, which include comments “with refrains of ‘You can’t get ahead of mother’ and ‘My parent is back at large…;’” these comments portray Mrs. O’Connor as “domineering, invasive, and aloof…” (Reuman 201). “Greenleaf” and “The Enduring Chill” feature mothers who are similarly domineering and who seem to negatively affect their children’s lives. This maternal rule has a strong impact on O’Connor’s writing, and adds strong background to the absence of the father and the search for wholeness in God the Father.

“Greenleaf,” “The Enduring Chill,” and “Parker’s Back” all feature fatherless families, with the mother raising the children alone. This has a profound impact on how the children grow up, and allows for O’Connor to span the paternal gap with God and his grace. In “Greenleaf,” Mrs. May raises her two sons, Scofield and Wesley, by herself. The only other family in “Greenleaf” are the Greenleafs, consisting of a mother, father, five daughters, and two sons. The
presence of Mr. Greenleaf further emphasizes the absence of Mr. May. This paternal absence affects Mrs. May’s two sons, who are not as successful as the Greenleaf boys, O.T. and E.T., who are described as “advanced in the world” (O’Connor 317). This advancement leads Mrs. May to view the Greenleaf boys as progressing and happy. Her son, Wesley, by contrast, hates everything about his life. Mrs. May says, “He didn’t like anything… he hated the twenty-mile drive and he hated the second-rate university and he hated the morons who attended it” (O’Connor 319). While O.T. and E.T. become sergeants in the army, Wesley is unable to serve and Scofield only serves two years before ending his military service because “he had not cared for it… he was only a Private First Class” (O’Connor 318). The Greenleaf boys are better able to progress, going on to marry and have families of their own. Scofield and Wesley, by contrast, live at home and don’t care about their futures. The presence or absence of a father in the May family affects the direction of the boy’s lives and their ability to move forward with confidence.

In contrast, the way Mr. Greenleaf treats his sons leads to their self-confidence and hope in the future. He “never lost an opportunity of referring to them by their rank” (O’Connor 318) and “never hesitated to let [Mrs. May] know that in any circumstance in which his own boys might have been involved they… would have acted to better advantage” (O’Connor 317). Mr. Greenleaf’s positive influence on, and treatment of, his sons has a direct impact on their successful lives. Mrs. May, on the other hand, says to her sons, “O.T. and E.T. are fine boys… they ought to have been my sons” (O’Connor 321). Mr. May’s absence, and Mrs. May’s mistreatment of Scofield and Wesley, lead to unsuccessful sons. Research studies support that…“living apart from one’s biological father is associated with a greater risk of adverse outcomes for children and adolescents, regardless of race, education, or mothers’ remarriage” (qtd. in Carlson). These adverse outcomes of living at home, unmarried and unconcerned about
the future, show the results of Mr. May’s absence and how Scofield and Wesley’s lives are negatively affected.

Due to the impact of living in a fatherless home, the May family needs God’s grace, rather than the Greenleafs. Mrs. May serves as the recipient of this grace. When Mrs. May accepts God, and her need for him, the paternal hole closes; God, serving as the Father, completes the family. O’Connor does not tell readers what happens to her characters after this revelation and spiritual contact with God. This correlates with her own life and its uncertainty. What is important in O’Connor’s short stories is contact with God’s grace, which enables her characters to choose whether they will embrace God or not.

“The Enduring Chill” also illustrates the absence of the father and therefore need for a Heavenly Father. The short story features Mrs. Fox, the mother of Asbury and Mary George. Mr. Fox died years before, and his absence negatively affects his children. Mary George says of Asbury, her brother, “he was not an artist and that he had no talent and that that was the trouble with him;” O’Connor states that “Mary George was not a happy girl herself” (O’Connor 363). Living without their father, Mary George is unhappy and Asbury struggles internally. Studies show that, “Compared to children living with two married biological parents, children living apart from their fathers are… more likely to experience depression and anxiety, and more likely to report externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems” (qtd. in Carlson). Like the May boys in “Greenleaf,” the Fox siblings are unsuccessful and unhappy. Due to their father’s absence, Asbury and Mary George struggle to find purpose in life. Asbury is unable to progress as an artist and gives up, returning to live at home. Mary George does become a principal, but is still living at home unmarried. Mrs. Fox runs a strict home and oppresses her children. Asbury further explains this oppression when he writes to his mother:
I came here (New York) to escape the slave’s atmosphere of home... to find freedom, to liberate my imagination, to take it like a hawk from its cage... and what did I find? It was incapable of flight. It was some bird you had domesticated... I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can’t create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. Why didn’t you kill that too? Woman, why did you pinion me? (O’Connor 364)

Mrs. Fox’s negative impact on Asbury’s life is made clear in this letter. Asbury describes his home as a “slave’s atmosphere” and feels the need to escape the oppressive environment to progress. The absence of a father is found between every line. Asbury has been “domesticated” by his mother, unable to pursue the things he loves and start his own life successfully. O’Connor expresses similar feelings, “[her] sense of entrapment, impotence, and frustration in the face of her mother’s willful blindness and infuriating dominance” led to “a fierce and boiling rage which precluded any chance of sustained and unconflicted love” (Reuman 214). This “sense of entrapment” leads to an active search for completion and fulfillment in life, ultimately leading one to God. O’Connor seeks this fulfillment in religion and illustrates it in her short stories with the need for grace. Asbury receives this fulfillment through grace at the end of the story, becoming part of a complete family as God the Father steps in, one again closing the paternal gap.

Asbury actively searches for fulfillment. He claims that, “he had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was sending him Death” (O’Connor 373). Asbury recognizes a need for some kind of god, something to worship that will help him reach self-satisfaction and completion. Asbury searches for “some last meaningful experience for himself” as he thinks he is about to die, unconsciously trying to fill the gap his absent father has caused
(O’Connor 378). He does not believe in God, but ultimately receives grace from his Heavenly Father. It is only after Asbury’s “frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming” breaks down that he receives God’s grace (O’Connor 382). Asbury’s puts up defenses and is unable to move forward in life due to the absence of his father. Asbury realizes his life contains meaning after he encounters his Heavenly Father through grace.

Parker, in “Parker’s Back,” is constantly searching for this same meaning in his life. In “Parker’s Back” there is no mention of Parker’s father. Wetztein states that the greatest problem fatherless children face “is ‘poverty of spirit… a child needs massive amounts of nurturing’ from parents… without that nurturing, the child will not grow up to become a competent and compassionate adult who is capable of working and raising a family” (60). Parker illustrates this problem in his struggles to get along with his pregnant wife and remain employed. He is constantly searching for gratification in life, unable to find satisfaction in his family or work. He even questions why he remains with his wife, the text stating, “Every morning he decided he had had enough and would not return that night…” (O’Connor 518). This spiritual poverty leads Parker on his unconscious search for a father figure; this journey brings him to his eventual encounter with God and his grace.

Parker’s mother attempts to help him by bringing him “to a revival with her, not telling him where they were going” (O’Connor 513). Although Mrs. Parker attempts to help her son, she is still oppressing him. She does not tell him where she is taking him or give him a choice. This impacts Parker negatively; he runs away from his mother and joins the Navy. Parker’s tries to fill his paternal absence with tattoos, which only leave him feeling dissatisfied. Parker describes the effect of his tattoos “not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched” (O’Connor 514). It is only after Parker gets a tattoo of Christ on his back that he
realizes his subconscious search. This tattoo leads him back home and fuels his revelation of God’s grace. Upon returning home Parker notes that, “his dissatisfaction was gone…” (O’Connor 527). Parker’s Christ tattoo paves the way for his moment of grace. As Parker uses his full name to enter his house (Obadiah Elihue, a name that means “servant of God”) he has a spiritual encounter with his Heavenly Father; he then feels whole, stating that, “all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (O’Connor 528). Parker receives God’s grace, enabling him to feel “light pouring through him,” God’s light. By recognizing his role as God’s servant, and ultimately his child, Parker finally feels satisfied, having closed the paternal gap.

“Greenleaf,” “The Enduring Chill,” and “Parker’s Back” all follow the same pattern. Each of the central families is fatherless. This has a strong impact on the children: Scofield, Wesley, Asbury, Mary George, and Parker. All five of these characters struggle with behavioral problems and the inability to move forward successfully with their lives. Each of them is holding back, searching for something that will give them a sense of security and purpose. Four of the five characters do not get married or fail to permanently move out of their mother’s house. This paternal lack leads to a moment of grace in each story. Mrs. May, the mother, receives grace in “Greenleaf.” Asbury and Parker, fatherless sons, receive grace in their respective stories. Without the father’s absence, the presence of God the Father would not be as easily seen. It is easy to understand the necessity for grace and a Heavenly Father’s touch in these homes where the earthly father is absent.

O’Connor demands grace for these fatherless characters, saying that, “There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored” (O’Connor & Fitzgerald 48). This
need for God and his saving grace shape all of O’Connor’s short stories. Essentially, each story continues and complements O’Connor’s personal search for her divine Father in Heaven. Understanding her role as a child of God, O’Connor actively pursued a relationship with God throughout her life. Each of her fatherless characters stands by her side, struggling to make something of the life they have received. O’Connor provides the ending she strove towards in her personal life in her short stories, bringing her characters to God’s grace. This grace, which underscores God’s role in each person’s life, helps us understand our role in relation to God. Like children dependent on their father for nourishment and love, all people are dependent on God for spiritual nourishment and love. The ultimate show of God’s love is in his grace, something unearned and undeserved. O’Connor successfully fills the paternal gap with a demand for grace, revealing her characters as God’s children and God as their Heavenly Father. Although O’Connor states that her goal in writing is to bring her characters God’s grace, she is more accurately bringing them to God the Father.
Works Cited


*The Bible*. Authorized King James Version, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013.