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On Symbols and Shadows

Flannery O'Connor's Jungian Concept of Grace

Joshlin Sheridan

While participating in a literary circle discussing whether or not the Catholic Eucharist was purely symbolic, the fiery Flannery O'Connor famously responded, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it!" (*Habit* 125). O'Connor, a deeply devout Catholic, reveals through her short stories and personal letters a strong desire to prevent religion from becoming merely symbolic or explainable phenomena. Especially frightening to her was the notion that psychology would replace religion, because she viewed psychology as "not an adequate instrument for understanding the religious encounter" (*Mystery and Manners* 165). In a June 1962 letter, she expressed disdain that the modern world would "gradually . . . turn religion into poetry and therapy" (*Habit* 479). Yet, a deeper study into O'Connor's personal life reveals her fascination with psychology, particularly the works of Carl Jung. She records in her notes that she had read several of his books, including *Modern Man in Search of the Soul*, *The Undiscovered Self*, and books about Jungian psychology by Victor White and Josef Goldbrunner (Rowley 92). Several of these heavily annotated books were even in her personal library at the time of her death (Wehner 299). Her studies of Jungian psychology were not a replacement of her religion but a supplication to her understanding of "psychic realities" (qtd. in Beaven 19). However, literary theorists suppose that these very realities bleed into O'Connor's religious reflections and subject her works to be viewed through psychoanalytical

perspectives. Despite authorial objections and “given the nature of her work,” writes James Mellard, “what surprises one . . . is how infrequently a [psychoanalytical approach] has been taken” (628). By studying Jung’s theories on symbols and the unconscious shadow, O’Connor’s works reveal themselves to be highly psychological in nature and execution. In this paper, I will explore how Flannery O’Connor’s concept of grace closely parallels Carl Jung’s description of individuation, meaning the development of one’s self out of the unconscious in order to become a well-functioning individual. Although the concept of grace is spiritual and the concept of individuation is psychological, both act as forces intended to save mankind from the darkness of his own unconscious.

One of Jung’s greatest contributions to psychology is his study on archetypes and symbols. According to Jung, every person has, in addition to their unique “immediate consciousness,” a “collective unconscious” comprised of inherited “collective, universal, and impersonal . . . pre-existent forms and archetypes” (qtd. in Beaven 28). This is to say that every person unconsciously understands the same systems of symbols. Jung wrote about symbols that apply to all walks of life, including symbols of Christian theology. In his book *Aion*, Jung explains how Christ’s resurrection is symbolic for men’s struggle to overcome psychological failure and achieve individuation, or the highest state of being:

The God-image of man was not destroyed by the Fall but was only damaged and corrupted, and can be restored through God’s grace. The scope of the integration is suggested by . . . the descent of Christ’s soul to hell, its work of redemption embracing even the dead. The psychological equivalent of this is the integration of the collective unconscious which forms an essential part of the individuation process. (*The Collected Works* 39)

This quotation explains how just as Christians view grace as redemption from fallen mankind, understanding symbols of the collective unconscious will lead to a process of individuation through overcoming the “fall” that every human experiences. While Flannery O’Connor would certainly not agree with the resurrection of Christ being purely symbolic, interestingly enough, her stories are filled with symbols and archetypes that Jung identifies as part of the collective unconscious. Thus, when her characters receive divine grace, it actually mirrors the same process that Jung describes in achieving individuation.

A prominent way that this symbolic acceptance of grace presents itself in O'Connor's work is through her use of imagery of the natural world. Most of O'Connor's characters have a moment of revelation when they are in pastoral settings, as opposed to urban environments. Carl Jung would not see this use of natural imagery as purely a rhetorical or religious device but rather as a reflection of the unconscious self. In *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, Jung argues that "all the mythologized processes of nature . . . are in no sense allegories . . . rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to a man's consciousness by ways of projection—that is mirrored in the events of nature" (Jung 6). This means that O'Connor's use of natural imagery represents man's desire to achieve individuation, equivocal to redemption. In O'Connor's speech, "Novelist and Believer," she talks unfavorably about how the modern reader, "if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature" (*Mystery and Manners* 165). This is evidence of her view, concurrent with Jung's, that nature coincides with moments of divine grace. A prominent example of this is O'Connor's repeated use of the setting of forests in her fiction.

In the psychological and mythological world, trees are often symbolically equivalent to "growth" and "inexhaustible life . . . a symbol of immortality" (Cirlot 328). This principle is apparent in O'Connor's "The Enduring Chill" wherein divine grace, as facilitated in a forested setting, is Asbury's only means of overcoming his atheism and having a chance at receiving exaltation, an inexhaustible eternal life with God. In the story, the college boy, Asbury, moves from the booming New York City to his small hometown of Timberoo, which is surrounded by "black woods" (*The Complete Stories* 357). It is only after Asbury watches the urban train and "his last connection with a larger world . . . [vanish] forever" (358) that his true process of receiving God's grace through the Holy Ghost can begin (382). Asbury's deepest desire is to die and return to his atheist god, "Art" (373). Yet, when he moves to his home in the forest, his wishes are unfulfilled. He discovers that his sickness is not terminal, forcing him to live a "frail, racked, but enduring life" (382). In addition, he can no longer reject God because of the "enduring chill," or the influence of the Holy Ghost that "descend[s]" upon him at the end of the story (382).

This setting of the woods as the scenery for divine grace is not unique to "The Enduring Chill." This same religious imagery is found in "Parker's Back." Parker's catalyst for change comes when he is in the fields and a tree

catches fire (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 520). He discovers the need for God in his life which drives him to literally impose God upon himself by tattooing a "stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes" on his back (522). The ending bestowal of grace and redemption comes as he is "leaning against [a] tree" (530). This parallels biblical stories wherein the need for divine salvation is also heavily based on the natural imagery of trees. The fall of Adam and Eve takes place in the "garden of Eden" (*King James Version*, Genesis 3.24), and forbidden fruit separates man from God. In the Bible, trees are not only associated with the fall of mankind, but also his redemption. At the end of Christ's mortal ministry, he prays in a garden of olive trees and is thereafter nailed to a cross, often called "a tree" (Matthew 26–27). While O'Connor uses this symbol of the tree as a rhetorical device to reveal the fall and redemption of man, Jung would see this symbolism as a part of our collective unconscious, enabling us access to self-betterment.

In addition to the symbolic and unconscious symbolism of the forest, Jung also identifies stars as a symbol of psychological grace, or individuation. He wrote, "Astrology, like the collective unconscious with which psychology is concerned, consists of symbolic configurations: the "planets" are the gods, symbols of the powers of the unconscious" (*Letters* 175). This symbolism is matched in O'Connor's "The Lamé Shall Enter First" wherein a young boy, Norton, becomes obsessed with looking at stars through a telescope in order to glean divine inspiration and closeness to his deceased mother (*The Complete Stories* 479). He unfortunately never achieves this grace to which he aspires due to his tragic death, hanging himself from an attic beam in an attempt to reach the stars (482). Norton's inability to understand the true mystery of godliness and reach his mother in a non-suicidal manner and his inability to become a fully mature, individuated adult could be attributed to his father's neglect. Norton's father, Sheppard allows his son to eat stale cake (446), focuses his attention primarily on Rufus, a boy from the streets, and discourages his son to believe in an afterlife (461). In fact, when Norton exclaims to his father that he has "found" his mother through the telescope, Sheppard responds, "You don't see anything in the telescope but the star clusters," denying the godliness of their symbolism (479). These combined factors stunt Norton's proper understanding of grace and his process of individuation. Sheppard realizes all too late that his son hangs in a "jungle of shadows," (a symbol that will be explored later in this paper), light-years away from

his intended “flight into space” and years away from his intended adult maturity (482). The stars, these beacons of divine light, connect both O’Connor and Jung in their interpretations of grace.

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence of O’Connor’s incorporation of Jungian psychology is not seen through archetypal symbols, but rather through the symbolic incorporation of Jung’s theory of “The Shadow.” Carl Jung’s theory fundamentally describes how every person possesses an unconscious collection of undesirable personality traits and behaviors. In his book *Psychology and Religion*, Jung writes, “everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is (93). In her own journal entries, O’Connor describes her fears and insecurities as a shadow that “obscure[s] the dreamy moonlit world of her faith” (Crank 126). In one opening prayer, she writes, “Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth’s shadow that keeps me from seeing the moon . . . what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon” (qtd. in Crank 126). This quote shows the incorporation of the two previously mentioned Jungian theories: the divinity of astronomy, as she symbolizes God as the moon, and the realization of her inner “shadow” of unconscious undesirable traits—in this case her lack of divine adoration. For O’Connor, grace is the means by which she could expose and assimilate her own shadow.

This desire to expose the inner shadow is also reflected in the narratives of her short stories. Many of her characters, even the religious ones, are ignorant of their flaws. For example, Mrs. May in “Greenleaf” does not see the fault in her pride of socioeconomic standing, and Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First” is so preoccupied with Johnson’s foot that he does not acknowledge his neglect of his own son. Jung would see these characters as not yet achieving individuation because they have not “recognized and dealt with [their] shadow” (Beaven 26). Therefore, some sort of confrontation or awakening must occur before the individual can progress.

For O’Connor, this individuation occurs as her protagonists, even the presumably righteous ones, encounter some sort of suffering. In order to receive grace or individuation, her characters pass through “physical, psychic, and spiritual pain from a variety of sources—disabilities, displacement, discrimination, disorientation, disease, death” which all can cause undesirable “shadows” at an unconscious level (Leigh 365). O’Connor

describes this human condition of suffering as “a shared experience of Christ” (*Habit of Being* 527). Here we see how just as O’Connor’s view of suffering reconciles Christ and man, Jung’s individuation is a representation of how the self and the shadow assimilate. In addition to human suffering, O’Connor’s assimilation with the internal shadow often comes through a confrontation with another character in the story, namely a devil-like figure.

The devil-like character in O’Connor’s stories serves as the vehicle by which grace can penetrate the hearts of the characters. A prime example of the shadow figure in O’Connor’s work can be found in the short story “Revelation.” Herein, Mrs. Turpin’s ignorance to her vanity drives her to put herself above Christ, “sometimes occupying herself at night naming the classes of people” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 491). Her false understanding of deity “keep[s] her from acknowledging her shadow . . . the first step of a painful process of individuation which can lead to the realization of God and of the self in God” (Beaven 26). The means by which Mrs. Turpin faces unconscious is through the shadow character and devil figure, Mary Grace.

As Rebecca Rowley argues in “Individuation and Individual Experience: A Jungian Approach to O’Connor’s ‘Revelation,’” the young “fat girl,” Mary Grace, is a reflection of Turpin’s ugly, unconscious (97). Although they differ in age and appearance, Mary Grace and Mrs. Turpin seem to share a deep psychological or spiritual connection, as evidenced by Mary Grace’s all-knowing glare. They are perfect strangers, yet Mrs. Turpin is convinced that “the girl [knows] her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 500). In line with Jungian psychology, it is only through a confrontation with Mary Grace that Mrs. Turpin is exposed to her pride and “fallen nature”; Mary Grace calls her “an old wart hog” from “hell” (500).

However, Mrs. Turpin’s desire to rise out of her fallen state does not come immediately. When Mary Grace throws her human development textbook (499), this foreshadows Turpin’s future process of individuation, a further “development” into a self-actualized being. After her encounter in the doctor’s office, she spends several more hours thinking about Mary Grace’s words while eating dinner, lying down, talking to the hired help, and washing off the hogs. The image of “a razor-blacked hog . . . snort[s] into her head” and taunts her previously held social beliefs (502). This process of accepting grace, that concludes in her final vision of the procession of souls into heaven, mimics two aspects Jungian individuation: that individuation can often take

time and present itself through dreams. Her moment of revelation can be considered a spiritual awakening, but also a deeper understanding of her repressed desires and pride through facing the shadow of her unconscious.

Unlike "Revelation," many of O'Connor's stories feature a more sudden bestowal of grace. Jung's theory of the shadow also accounts for why O'Connor's initiation of the divine intervention, or start of the process of individuation, often comes in violent situations. According to Jung, "The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate. That is to say, when the individual remains undivided and does not become conscious of his inner opposite, the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves" (*The Collected Works* 71). Thus, in order to achieve individuation, a person must face his inner shadow and assimilate it into the consciousness of his psyche, but if this process does not occur naturally, "the world" forces the act upon the man. This theory seems familiar to any reader startled by the religious violence in O'Connor's stories. These encounters are unlikely, yet to O'Connor, they are situations of "realism" (*Mystery and Manners* 179). Realistically, her short stories do not depict the situations of daily living. The chances of a lost bull stabbing a farm woman ("Greenleaf"), or a tractor spontaneously catching a tree on fire ("Parker's Back"), or an escaped convict murdering a stranded family ("A Good Man is Hard to Find") are all quite small. However, these are the unique circumstances, necessitated either by "the world" or divine intervention that allow the characters to either receive grace or individuation.

The connection between Jung's theory of the unconscious and O'Connor's concept of grace can be summed up and illustrated through Plato's myth of the Man in the Cave. The setting of the cave, which could be a symbolic form of natural imagery, provides the ideal setting for the individuals inside to learn about themselves. According to Simon Beaven's interpretation, the characters in the cave cast dark shadows on the walls, a reflection of their grotesque inner selves. It is only by recognizing that these shadows come from themselves that the characters "turn around to discover the source of the light that casts the shadows" (Beaven 19). This would help them understand the larger reality in order to gain exaltation, or achieve individuation.

Ultimately, this seems to be the goal of both religion and psychology: to understand reality at large through a study of the smaller, interworking mysteries of the soul, which manifest themselves in both symbols and shadows.

A didactic argument as to whether psychology or religion provides a more correct interpretation of the universe is not as helpful as acknowledging the intimate connection between the two. By recognizing these similarities in O'Connor's work, there comes a roundness of interpretation, because texts, just as humans, are rarely one-dimensional. To understand the psychology woven into Flannery O'Connor's works is to have a deeper insight into the refining concept of grace that blankets the morals of her stories.

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