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The Liberty Belle: Reversed Gender Roles, Skewed Faith, and the Breakdown of Southern Myths in Flannery O'Connor's Patriarchal World

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor's short fiction is overrun with female characters that embody the lost and corrupted ideal of the Southern Belle. O'Connor's method of shocking her characters into belief seems to take a harsher and uglier turn when it comes to women and this is particularly relevant to characters that not only renounce their femininity but also lack true spirituality. In this essay I examine three of O'Connor's female protagonists and it is my contention that these three women are emblematic of the decaying myth of the Southern Belle and of its treacherous nature. All three abandon – to some extent – the foundations on which this feminine ideal is based and by doing so essentially reject patriarchal authority. It is important to take into account the fact that their overstated assertiveness is often a result of an inescapable and harsh reality. However, I argue that O'Connor denies these women even a shred of sympathy because for her, rejecting the patriarchal scheme of life is, to a very large extent, a way of rejecting God's authority. While O'Connor criticizes the feminine Southern ideal by showing how oppressive it is towards women and thereby exposes the hypocrisy of the myth, she also uses its duality to validate her wrath towards these women who abandon the feminine ideal – and thus God – only to retrieve and exploit it when it suits them. All three characters project an unreliable, traitorous sense of womanhood and believe they can outsmart God. O'Connor – their creator and punisher – thought otherwise.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, American South, religion, femininity, God, spirituality, short fiction

Introduction

In what might be considered the most climactic scene of Flannery O'Connor's story "Revelation," its protagonist, Ruby Turpin, demands answers and asks Jesus to clarify, "how am I a hog and me both?" (Complete Stories 506). She does this while standing in her pig parlor, frantically trying to make sense of her now shattered world order. Although this bizarre cry is directed at God, it is also a manifestation of an acute case of self-doubt and of an almost alarming female grotesque. Mrs. Turpin, like many other female characters in O'Connor's fiction, is an embodiment of a lost, corrupted ideal – that of the Southern Belle. O'Connor's method of shocking her characters into belief seems to take a harsher and uglier turn when it comes to her female creations, and this is particularly relevant to characters that not only renounce their femininity but also lack spirituality.

There are many speculations regarding O'Connor's personal life as well as its impact on her work, especially regarding her treatment of women. Having been house-ridden for most of her adult life, due to various illnesses, O'Connor was forced to live in rural Georgia, where the daily encounters between unenlightened humanity and divinity most likely inspired and influenced her creative zeal. I will argue that it was her deep and profound Christian belief that served as her greatest motivator, not a mind filled with misogynistic propaganda or self-hatred. O'Connor, I believe, was not an anti-feminist; she was simply – to put it bluntly – Pro-God.

This paper explores three of O'Connor's short stories and their female protagonists: Hulga from "Good Country People," Mrs. Turpin from "Revelation," and Mrs. May from "Greenleaf." I will argue that these three characters are emblematic of the decaying ideal of the Southern Belle and of its two-faced nature. All three women abandon – to some extent – the foundations on which this feminine ideal is based, and by doing so, they reject patriarchal authority. However, one can also view their assertiveness as a result of an inescapable reality, or as an attempt at gaining a sense control over their chaotic sense of existence. O'Connor denied these women even a shred of sympathy, but I do not believe she did so because she was an advocate of the repressive Southern Belle myth. It is my contention that for O'Connor, rejecting the patriarchal scheme of life

was, to a very large extent, a way of rejecting God's authority. I believe O'Connor was very much aware of the problematic nature of the Southern lady ideal and in fact criticized it by showing how oppressive it was towards women. She exposed the hypocrisy of the myth while at the same time using its duality to validate her wrath towards these women who abandoned the feminine ideal – and thus God – only to retrieve and exploit it when it suits them. All three characters project an unreliable, traitorous sense of womanhood and hold the belief that they can outsmart God.

The Myth of the Southern Belle

A thoughtful discussion on the duality and problematic nature of the Southern Belle myth, and its disintegration in O'Connor's works, must first involve a deeper understanding of the historical and social circumstances within which it was established. In her book, The Southern Belle in the American Novel, Kathryn Lee Seidel discusses the Southern Belle as an ideal woman, "sanctioned by Victorian morality and Southerners' image of the home as a persistent standard of order and decency" (6). In the antebellum period, the belle was "understood to be the repository of all that was best in and of the region" (Good 73) and as Seidel adds, "Southerners' notions of their aristocratic origins, assured the belle would be protected from reality, championed and wooed as befits a princess in her realm" (6).

Anne Goodwyn Jones also dates the origins of the myth's formation to the days of the antebellum South: Women were just as inferior as slaves and "gender constructions of women as essentially different from men, justified their inferior place" (46). This was taken as a law of nature, adopted even by women themselves. The myth evolved into an image of frailty and helplessness while there was a new fear rising from the potent masculinity of the African-American man. White men thus constructed their own sense of potency on the idea of being rescuers, helping the fragile white woman escape from the claws of the black man plotting to ravage her. The myth was particularly preoccupied with the white woman's body which was "revered as a marble statue. A Grecian urn, a human body that by nature resembled the finest productions of masculine art" (Goodwyn Jones 49). Women were viewed as the vehicle through which white men asserted their patriarchal power and authority. The delicate, chaste woman was a creation of masculine aesthetics, and although it

seems hardly likely that all – or even most – Southern women adhered to this ideal by way of nature, the "patriarchal authority over women's bodies, voices and freedom remained the sine qua non, however fiery and rebellious the woman" (Goodwyn Jones 50). The duplicity of the myth is both intriguing and mystifying: Women in the South were expected to maintain an inferior position but at the same time were exceedingly admired. As Cherry Good notes in her article, "The Southern Lady, or the Art of Dissembling,"

> [h]istorically, the ideal of the Southern lady lies at the very core of the culture and beliefs of the American South. The image of the lady and her adherence to a strict code of behavior, her dignity, morality, and chastity have resulted in the Southern male placing her upon a pedestal from which she finds it difficult to descend (73).

The inner-contradiction within which the myth was rooted, dictated a sexual double standard that simultaneously repressed and revered the Southern woman. In The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895, Jane Turner Censer emphasizes an important aspect of the myth, noting the "[b]elledom was simply the best-known phase in a life that otherwise was supposed to be largely oriented to self-abnegation and service" (11). The belle had the difficult task of constantly managing her appeal since "[b]eauty and captivating charm were admirable only when used unconsciously". Censer concludes that "a belle who self-consciously played on her attractiveness was regarded as a schemer whose arts and wiles might well create disgust and revulsion in her audience" (11). O'Connor's female characters, in all their grotesque glory, are also designed to arouse "disgust and revulsion" in their pathetic attempts to manipulate the myth.

It is also interesting to note that a belle's "career" was a short-lived one. In his article, "Frivolity to Consumption: Or, Southern Womanhood in Antebellum Literature," John C. Ruoff explains how the myth develops after the spoiled belle fulfills her intended destiny and marries:

> After the belle and her hero marry, an immediate transformation occurs. The mindless, irresponsible belle has thrust upon her the responsibility for the mansion and the welfare of the slaves. Once she receives the basket of keys which symbolize her domestic ascendancy, the plantation mistress ceases her earlier gaiety and becomes deadly dull. She vanishes from view, known to the world only by her magnificent repasts, her numberless children, and her final,

tragic, death of consumption or childbirth. Should she avoid an early death, the mistress lives to be a grand old lady respected throughout the county. This is the legend (214).

This is an important aspect of the myth to keep in mind when examining the women in O'Connor's short fiction since the treachery and confusion of the Southern Belle's legend – for all its contradictory demands – is evident in these characters' behavior.

When a socially constructed ideal transforms itself into an essential, undisputable fact of life, anyone who dares to deflect is received with great suspicion, criticism and prejudice. This can also be asserted with regard to religious belief and compliance with God's authority, since his presence and significance in one's life is measured in one's will to be dependent, submissive, and in need of protection – in this case, of a spiritual kind.

The digression from the Southern feminine ideal in O'Connor's stories, most obviously, works on the gender-oriented level but not exclusively so. Sarah Gleeson-White notes that O'Connor's fiction was haunted by "the burden of a simultaneously idealized and detested womanhood" (49) upon which the myth of the Southern Belle was founded. The dichotomy of that ideal proposes a challenge, and while reading O'Connor's works one cannot help but assume that she was aware of the marginalization women endured while having to uphold the ideal of the Southern lady. However, as I have mentioned, those who chose to reject the myth, were not celebrated as liberated women who dismantled an archaic system of gender constructs; in fact, they were punished for not knowing their place in the world, for not knowing their place within their relationship with God, and for parting with their feminine, fragile selves, only to reunite with the image of the helpless victim when they either had something to gain or were at the mercy of others. It seems, then, that O'Connor's protagonists represent the epitome of hypocrisy, and for that they pay a hefty price. These characters are not only depicted grotesquely and sometimes ridiculously, but their pretension eventually leads to a tragic conclusion.

O'Connor, Christianity, and the Female Grotesque

There is no denying that questions of religion, faith, and belief were very much on O'Connor's literary mind, and as Thelma J. Shin puts it, O'Connor had a mission and "she set out to wake the sleeping children of God" (58). She saw the need for man to literally be struck by mercy since "God

must overpower him" (Shinn 58). In 1957, O'Connor herself asserted that "the novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him; and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (Baumbach 345). O'Connor wanted to expose what she felt were abhorrent, un-Christian social phenomena and enlighten those who accepted these as a normal part of modern life. Her unusual "eye opener" involved an almost freak-show-like parade of grotesque characters whose stories' backdrop was at once decidedly Christian and traditionally Southern. Shinn remarks that most of O'Connor's female characters are portrayed as grotesque due to their oblivious attitude toward God: "They are so completely a part of the physical world that they simply cannot comprehend the spiritual world – they either ignore its existence or misinterpret its meaning" (62). This description of spiritual rebellion and blindness seems to perfectly reflect all three women in the stories I discuss, and it also alludes, yet again, to the broken-down image of the Southern Belle, whose "fragility guaranteed her distance from earthly interests" (Goodwyn Jones 50). These women do not know their place; not in a physical sense nor in a spiritual one. Their on-again, off-again love affair with their own femininity reveals irreverence and phoniness that for O'Connor, transcend social and gender constructs and relate directly to God.

Claire Kahane notes that "what clearly ties O'Connor's fiction to the modern Female Gothic is the pervasive issue of discovering a truth in 'a dark secret center' and giving it grotesque form" (245). Indeed, it seems that O'Connor, who indeed had "Christian concerns," could only uncover the truth and tear the masks off her female characters' faces by enhancing their oddities and absurdity while highlighting their freakishly ridiculous ways of thinking and behaving. However, it is not only their grotesque portrayal that gives away O'Connor's dissatisfaction with the women in these stories; it is, as mentioned, a means to convey a larger, more pressing problem – the spiritual one. As Richard Kane puts it, O'Connor's stories "often seem poised between two worlds: one filled with various rational answers to the problems of man's existence, the other composed of mystery and the irrational" (45). As the stories unfold we witness the downfall of the rational. Hulga's PhD and scientific outlook on life fail to come to her rescue. Similarly, Mrs. Turpin's neatly organized class system collapses, and Mrs. May's iron hand is not hard enough to stop the bull goring. O'Connor, says Kane, felt that "the person who at least glimpses into this second world – ominous though it

may be – is spiritually richer that the one who never does" (46). Still, a lesson with Flannery O'Connor is never taught without affliction, and a glance to the other side always comes at a price.

While some may find it surprising that O'Connor showed no compassion towards her female creations, in all fairness, O'Connor was less preoccupied with whether or not her characters required her sympathy since what they actually needed was the grace of God. Peter A. Smith argues that although these women are unlikable "all deserve credit for employing a clever strategy in attempting to survive in a man's world, while essentially manless" (35). This strategy, as I see it, is the exploitation of the myth: These women want to enjoy the power only men can attain in a patriarchal world, but they reduce themselves to submissive "lady-like mode" when things fail to go their way. It seems that O'Connor lacked feminist sensitivity since she harshly judged these women for their manipulative ways of conducting themselves in a tough world run by men. Her treatment of these women reinforced her belief in the ultimate patriarch who demands complete faith and reliance – two things that neither Hulga, Mrs. May or Mrs. Turpin could ever deliver. I tend to disagree with Louise Westling who suggests that by reading predominantly male authors, O'Connor "formed her imagination through male conventions of misogyny, so that when she returned to herself, she was more deeply imprisoned than ever" (57). I argue that O'Connor detested pretension, and thus characters that thought they knew everything there was to know about God had to learn the hard way that they were miserably wrong. This takes me back to O'Connor's declaration that a writer needs to show why these deviations are indeed vile human acts and not the norm. On that occasion she also added that the writer will have to take violent means since his vision is presented to a "hostile audience" (Baumbach 345). This, I argue, was not paranoia but a realization that in an ever-changing world, especially with gender roles rapidly altering, faith is not easy to assert or maintain. Shock and destruction were O'Connor's treasured running-mates in a long life "campaign" to make faith pure again, and rid the world of pretentiousness that attempted to rival divinity. Indeed, O'Connor often stated that she needed to paint ever more startling and grotesque images in order to get her point across.

O'Connor's Female Characters: The Fallen Myth

In "Good Country People," readers encounter Hulga, formerly known as Joy, who at 32 holds a PhD in philosophy but still lives at home with her mother, with whom she constantly clashes. As David Havird puts it, Hulga has "intellectually – at least – transformed herself into a man, a god" (23). Indeed, Hulga, with her wooden leg, ugly clothes, and scornful demeanor, not only forsakes every feminine aspect in her being, she truly believes that she outsmarts everyone around her. She has, as O'Connor puts it, "achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it" (C omplete Stories 273). In the Southern tradition, "movement away from the feminine ideal transforms a female body into an androgynous, sterile one," (Gleeson-White 47) but O'Connor takes it a few steps further in her descriptions of Hulga as the latter stumps around the house or stands "square and rigid-shouldered" (Complete Stories 274) with an icy look in her eyes. One can easily sympathize with Hulga, who, according to Lisa S. Babinec "withdraws and verbalizes anger and contempt in an effort to protect herself and to survive in her confusing, unsatisfying world" (14). O'Connor, however, sees right through Hulga's misplaced arrogance and arranges an encounter that will eventually force Hulga to face the nothingness she thought she believed in. Though she is surrounded by shallow, idiotic women, Hulga is the only one who gets struck by O'Connor's moment of destructive grace since she not only misunderstands her place in the world, she forms a system of belief – or disbelief to be exact – that O'Connor ridicules and aims to destroy. Hulga's individuality can be viewed, by feminist writers and critics, as refreshing and courageous, but for O'Connor, every move Hulga makes towards the realm of an imagined "higher knowledge" or "true enlightenment" pushes her one step further in the direction of humiliation and ruin. If it is pretense that evokes O'Connor's wrath, Hulga is guilty of it on both a physical and a spiritual level. She is not a believer in God and she sees herself as better than people who are believers. She also thinks that accumulating scientific knowledge gives her insight that others do not have; of course, she is bitterly mistaken. On a more earthly level, she is anything but a Southern Belle and is incapable of interacting with men on an emotional level. Her attraction to Manly Pointer, a bible salesman no less, seems odd at first but after we learn her plans of seduction are based on pretense and vanity, it becomes clear that whether it is God himself or his devilish messenger on earth, Hulga believes she outsmarts them both.

Going back to the issue of manipulating the myth, when O'Connor robs Hulga of her artificial leg, she exposes the ways in which even the obnoxious, asexual intellectual reaches for femininity as a life line, making her even more detestable for her hypocrisy. "Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether" (Complete Stories 289), and her deterministic system came crumbling. The climax of Hulga's rendezvous with Manly is the moment she is reduced to her mother's words and thus to the myth of the frail, helpless belle. "Aren't you just good country people?" (Complete Stories 290) she asks Manly, and instantly reveals the falseness of everything she had professed before. "I have been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (Complete Stories 291) Manly proclaims as he walks away from her, unscathed. Indeed, he might be a sinner but his disbelief is total and without any room for doubt, a conviction that O'Connor seems to respect. Hulga's intellectual pretense, on the other hand, disintegrates into docile femininity as soon as she is taken out of her intellectual comfort zone. O'Connor hits Hulga over the head with her own traitorous "ideals" and only at this delicate state of "female receptivity" (Havird 26) and complete humility can the word of God truly enter her heart. If Hulga was a "sleeping child of God" there is no doubt that she was very rudely awakened.

In "Revelation," we encounter Mrs. Turpin who also has somewhat of a problem with understanding her place in the scheme of things. She has a man in her life but "Claude is characterized throughout the story by his meekness and compliance with his wife's wishes" (Smith 40). Early on in the story it becomes clear who functions as the real "man" on the Turpin farm as well as in their marriage. However, it is not only with Claude that Mrs. Turpin has a dysfunctional relationship but also with another man in her life – her God. In her mind, she holds conversations with Jesus, wondering what she would have done if he came to her, prior to her creation, and told her she could not be herself and had to choose between being a "nigger or white-trash" (Complete Stories 491). Not only are these thoughts absurd and impossible, they expose an overblown ego of a woman who believes she is on a first name basis with the son of God. Her answer to Jesus' inquiry further reveals how delusional she is regarding her station: She would like to be "herself but black" (Complete Stories 491).

Mrs. Turpin is also obsessed with compartmentalizing people and we are told that at night, she occupies herself with "naming the classes of people" (Complete Stories 491). She constantly

measures herself in relation to others and has a frighteningly organized system for classification based on race, wealth, and ownership. She needs to know that she is better than others and her skewed logic leads her not only to believe that she is, but that Jesus favored her in the time of creation: "When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting 'Thank you Jesus'" (Complete Stories 499). Mrs. Turpin is another grotesque example of spiritual blindness and of a tragically misguided morality. She is physically and mentally bombastic and defies not only the image of delicate femininity but that of a true believer. Not unlike Hulga, she has also set up a system through which she sees herself and understands the world. Similarly, she also needs a slap in the face – or a book to the head – to shock her out of her complacency.

In the doctor's waiting room she continues to categorize and label everyone around her while assuming the position of a worldly, sophisticated woman. O'Connor, yet again, arranges an encounter with the agent of truth. Out of all the people sitting in the waiting room, Mary Grace is the only one who cannot overlook Mrs. Turpin's ostentatious, embarrassing behavior. She is revolted by her false airs and smugness, especially since she sees right thorough them, straight into the dark, racist and morally-impaired heart of the woman in front of her. Again, the female protagonist is exposed by a person who, for better or worse, has no affectations and stays loyal to an inner conviction. Mary Grace is an obnoxious, condescending, and esthetically displeasing young woman. Still, she knows who she is and makes no attempt to size herself up against anyone else. Mrs. Turpin's ridiculous front is too much for her to bear and their violent encounter leaves Mrs. Turpin fractured and confused as her system collapses and her self-assurance is robbed. Her gratefulness for being created just the way she was vanishes when the "old wart hog from hell" (Complete Stories 505) becomes a viable option. She discovers that she has no idea who she is and towards the end of the story, she struggles to get a new grip on her life.

Following the traumatizing incident at the doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin is not immediately transported into a realm of redemption and grace. Her consequent behavior is erratic and she desperately tries to redefine herself. "Once home and lying on the bed with Claude, Mrs. Turpin demands a kiss from him to reassure herself that she is, if not a lady, at least a woman and not a wart hog from hell" (Havird 22). This act of forced intimacy is another grotesque, twisted manifestation of the

Southern feminine gentility that she desperately clings to when her sense of authority is shattered. The dysfunctional relationship she has with God reaches a dramatic turning point at the pig parlor. She still believes she is in a direct dialogue with Jesus but this time she is geared for battle. Since she thought Jesus was just another player in her classification game, she demands to know why he left her team. "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (Complete Stories 506) she asks, still not realizing that she is anything but saved. Mrs. Turpin needs more than a flying book to the head in order to finally come to terms with her real place in the larger scheme of things. Her hypocrisy and her laughable spirituality turn downright offensive when she stands among the hogs, in an unforgettable scene, holding a phallic water hose as she frighteningly roars towards her once beloved Jesus, "[W]ho do you think you are?" (Complete Stories 507). Nowhere in the story is she more remote from the Southern lady or from genuine faith than in that moment – which, of course, makes it perfect for an epiphany. As she looks on to see the heavenly parade and its participants, she finally acknowledges her real status and is ready to be truly saved and perhaps move up the line to heaven. This, I believe, is also the redemption of her marriage. Her new submissiveness will help fix the problematic balance of power between her and Claude as "the new relationship between her and her lord and master promises to set aright her relationship with her emasculated husband" (Havrid 22). Once more, O'Connor reinforces a patriarchal sense of authority – domestic and spiritual – with a mighty blow.

Mrs. May, the protagonist of "Greenleaf," is a character type that O'Connor returned to in many of her stories; a woman running a farm by herself, facing a daily struggle to keep her workers in check, make a profit, and maintain some aspect of femininity. In Mrs. May's case, as with other so-called empowered women in O'Connor's stories, the dichotomy of her life eventually caves in and buries her. Similarly to Hulga and Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. May also has a disconnection with men and with patriarchal authority in particular. Managing her farm with no help and dealing with men on a daily basis has made her tough and business-minded. However, this is only an illusion of authority since her self-proclaimed "iron hand" receives almost no acknowledgement from her worker, Mr. Greenleaf, and especially none from her sons. O'Connor, I argue, suggests that the masculine position Mrs. May has undertaken, has damaged her maternal authority. There is a confusion of gender roles, and her sons, who are not economically dependent on her, choose to reject her

authority, both as a mother and as the owner of the farm on which they live. In turn, "Mrs. May correctly senses that Mr. Greenleaf hesitates to recognize her authority, though she cannot see that this is because he has witnessed the complete breakdown of her maternal authority over her disrespectful sons" (Smith 44).

Out of all the women in O'Connor's stories who turn their backs on femininity and then attempt to use it to earn sympathy, Mrs. May is perhaps the finest example. Like the other characters that I have discussed, she lacks conviction in her authority. With Hulga and Mrs. Turpin, the desperate escape to the defenseless feminine mode took time. In Mrs. May's case, her self-victimization and manipulation of femininity is woven into the story from the very beginning, and "her title as a 'lady' entitles her to complain about being abused and disrespected by her subordinates because she is only a woman" (Smith 36). This kind of duplicity backfires since it encourages everyone around her to dismiss her authority. "I'm the victim, I've always been the victim" (Complete Stories 327) is hardly what one would expect to hear from an empowered woman. The constant self-pity and the failure to exude any sense of wholehearted confidence – as a mother or as a farm owner – are probably the reasons why any attempt she makes to maintain authority is ridiculed by her sons: "Look at Mamma's iron hand!" (Complete Stories 322) yells Scofield as he dangles his mother's thin, veiny hand in the air, laughing. Similarly to the other women in O'Connor's fiction, particularly those discussed in this paper, Mrs. May's inability to connect with her sons and her worker is surpassed only by her greater inability to accept God into her heart. The appearance of the bull in the beginning of the story is almost like that of a gun in the first act. He is described as "some patient god come down to woo her" (Complete Stories 311), and as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that she is being tested. Mrs. May's dysfunctional maternal authority and spiritual blindness are enhanced when placed against Mrs. Greenleaf – a domesticated, hysterical, and God-fearing woman. Similarly to Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. May looks at people like Mrs. Greenleaf as white-trash and is appalled by her spiritually inspired physical convolutions. She has no capacity to comprehend Mrs. Greenleaf's intentions or actions since they are driven by true faith, while her faith, we are told, is false: "She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (Complete Stories 316). Just like Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. May has the notion that she knows what Jesus would really think of Mrs. Greenleaf's "healing" and as she

backs away from the dramatic scene she says, "Jesus would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" (Complete Stories 317). Mrs. May's words expose both her hypocrisy towards belief and her complete inability to comprehend the meaning of true faith or realize that it has nothing to do with clean clothes or with appearance in general. She criticizes Mrs. Greenleaf on two levels: as a believer and as a mother. These criteria for judgment are, of course, beyond absurd given the fact that she herself is a complete failure as both. Mrs. Greenleaf's submissive stance is very much in tune with the myth of the Southern Belle who is at her man's mercy. The totality of her belief acts to enlarge and emphasize Mrs. May's pretense and her inadequacy as a woman, a mother, and a Christian. It seems that "in contrast to Mrs. May, Mrs. Greenleaf has known her place all along – not only as regards her Lord, but also as regards her man" (Havird 20). When Mrs. Greenleaf asks Jesus to stab her in the heart there is something profoundly sensual and invasive in that image, and while Mrs. May recognizes this aspect, she scorns it. Ironically, that scene proves to be prophetic since Mrs. May, whose moment of grace is cruel and brief, receives the same treatment as she is gored by the "wild tormented lover" that pierces her heart, holds her in an "unbreakable grip," and is the final and only witness to "some last discovery" (Complete Stories 333-334) she whispers into his ear. Indeed, Mrs. May gets a "peek" into the other side but it is a brief one. Most of O'Connor's characters are worthy of an epiphany but not all of them are worthy of a second chance. Mrs. May has failed on too many levels and has manipulatively abused her situation too many times to deserve anything more than a fleeting glimpse into a world where Jesus is truly and most literally "in her heart."

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to demonstrate the parallels between the collapse of the Southern Belle myth and the abandonment of traditional feminine roles in Flannery O'Connor's stories. I have further argued that the female protagonists in her fiction are struck by a violent "moment of grace" not simply because they defy patriarchal authority in their unladylike behavior, but also because they manipulate their femininity, lack true conviction in their motives and actions, and fail to understand their proper place in the world. O'Connor satirizes the complete failure of these

women in their efforts to have their cake and eat it too. They are defeated due to their inability to realize that "any attempt to mix masculine and feminine roles is destined to fail" (Smith 47). Their authority is never truly accepted by the men surrounding them, but at the same time, the position they have taken upon themselves distances them from the image of the charming and delightful Southern Belle. As Peter A. Smith remarks that "these characters wind up being successful neither as 'ladies' nor as bosses" (47). Their blindness is not limited to earthly and social interactions or to their dysfunction within the patriarchal scheme; it is also, and perhaps more so, a spiritual blindness. Whether they reject God, are oblivious to him, or imagine a personal friendship with the almighty, all three women discussed in this essay think they know better. Hulga with her intellectual stance and both Mrs. May and Mrs. Turpin with their managerial attitudes, assume a masculine, god-like position not only in their defective relationships with men but with God himself. They all encounter a person whose complete conviction and totality expose their empty pretensions. They are ultimately stripped of their hypocritical facade when in a moment of uncertainty they are reduced to the helplessness, submissiveness, and powerlessness that they have so desperately attempted to escape. The refuge they find in that submissive stance is simultaneously related to their place in patriarchal society and to their attitudes towards God. Their "moment of grace" is a violent one, and it is often ironic. They are struck with their own deformed ideals that prove to be traitorous when it comes to dealing with the ultimate patriarch.

Undoubtedly a writer with "Christian concerns," and more importantly, Catholic ones, Flannery O'Connor saved a special form of treatment for her female characters, especially those that assumed masculine ways of thinking and behaving and needed a decent dose of God's saving grace. O'Connor combined "her Southern perspective with her Catholic beliefs and the resultant metaphysical confrontation – namely that between the traditional view of man’s relationship with God and the modernized scientific view purged of God – is so powerful that the presence of the grotesque is unavoidable" (Marion 101). I do not believe O'Connor wrote from a misogynistic stance and that she, in any way, thought that the destructive Southern Belle image was anything to aspire to. However, O'Connor had very little patience for characters, particularly women, that were not only oblivious as to where they really stood in the world but were also painfully blind with regard to where they stood in relation to God. O'Connor set out to open people's eyes and to shock

them into recognition just as she did with her characters. I argue that the breakdown of traditional female roles bothered O'Connor only in the sense that it made women who assumed masculine roles go on what one may call "a power trip." This was a phenomenon that a strict Christian would most certainly find appalling. O'Connor's mission was to dismantle that so-called "power," violently expose its falsehood and precarious foundations, and allow these women – most of them at least – a chance to face the reality of their weakness, to reassess their place in the world, and perhaps even find true faith.

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