

Flannery O'Connor and the Poetics of Prayer:  
The Analysis of *A Prayer Journal*

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*In dedication to Dr. Karen Prior,  
for teaching far more than lectures  
and influencing far more than grades.*

*“Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free – not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you.”*

*-Flannery O'Connor-*

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## Chapter 1

## Roman Catholic Influence: Prayer, Habit, and Identity

Prior to the recent discovery of her college prayer journal, kept between 1946 and 1947, knowledge of Flannery O'Connor's religious influence and activity had been restricted to her letters and published works, such as *Mystery and Manners* and *The Habit of Being*. Works such as these shed light onto O'Connor's background and religious views, making her Catholic faith obvious and explicit. This prayer journal exposes a new aspect of her faith – that is the personal relationship between herself and God shown through narrative. Her prayer journal makes it clear that her external expression of faith, showcased in most of her writing, exists as a consistent and natural outflow of internal personal beliefs. O'Connor's prayer journal, published as *A Prayer Journal* in 2013, showcases her personal spiritual life and habitual practices through this honest narrative with God.

W.A. Sessions discovered this prayer journal among O'Connor's various papers in Georgia. As he goes on to write the introduction for *A Prayer Journal* he states that “from the start the journal contained lyric outcries that became a singular dialogue. In fact, she seemed to be inventing her own prayer form” (viii). This discovery reveals a gap within academic scholarship surrounding O'Connor's faith and allows one to observe the inner motivations, habits, and practices surrounding O'Connor's journey as a writer. This inward journey will become foundational for more wholly understanding her literature. Through analysis of her prayers, then, one comes to see direct reflections of her personal prayer life and personal faith within the development of her writing.

*A Prayer Journal* offers an explicit and honest portrayal of O'Connor's prayer life. Analysis of these prayers shows that the influence and form of Catholic prayer sets a pattern for

her literature. Fundamentally, it was prayer that trained O'Connor and influenced her character by aiding in the formation of her identity as a Catholic writer – and this identity is communicated throughout her literature. Through prayer O'Connor learned to experience the world, interact with God, and reach spiritual truth through a material means. Therefore, prayer can be seen as one of the greater religious influences on O'Connor's life and talent as a writer. Prayer then, rooted deeply in the habits and practices of O'Connor's personal life and faith, acts as the foundational underpinning of her poetics. Prayer provides the foundation for the first element of her poetics – that being a consistent self-realized identity found in Christ, which becomes evident in her prayer journal and illustrated through the themes found within her literature. This poetic is directly linked to the very nature of prayer within the Catholic Church, which formed the habit of ritual within O'Connor's life.

James K.A. Smith's *Imagining the Kingdom* explores the power of ritual and habit in the formation of identity. These concepts directly apply to O'Connor's life and religious activity, for she remained enveloped by consistent practices of prayer and religion. Smith coins the phrase "liturgical anthropology" to explain the relationship between a physical practice and a spiritual experience (29). This term not only applies to a literal practice within the faith, but also to the relationship between the physical and spiritual being oriented around a story. Smith explains further:

States of the body "give rise" to states of the mind: here is the refusal of intellectualism and the recognition that our most fundamental orientations to our world (*habitus*, practical sense) are embedded in our bodies. So social order or social body recruits me by conscripting my body through the most mundane means: through bodily postures, repeated words, ritualized cadences. The body

politic implants me in a *habitus* by immersing me in an array of tangible movements and routines that effectively “deposit” an orientation within. (94-95)

According to Smith’s analysis, rituals cannot exist without an effect on the human spirit, for the spirit is constantly affected through bodily practices. Through prayer then, O’Connor experienced the power of habit and ritual as it transformed her prayer life and eventually shaped her writing.

Before she began composing what has come to be published as *A Prayer Journal*, O’Connor participated in these traditional prayers of the Roman Catholic Church, and this exercise ignited a desire and ambition for her personal faith that only grew stronger as time went on. She regularly attended and was regularly exposed to traditional prayer through Sacred Heart Catholic Church in her hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia. This practice primed her perception to the world, as Smith explains that “much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passional orientation to the world” (31). In this case, liturgical prayers provided the foundation from which O’Connor’s passions for God developed. Her personal experience with prayer and passion provide insight into this concept. For example, O’Connor writes in one undated entry of her prayer journal:

Intellectually, I assent: let us adore God. But can we do that without feeling? To feel, we must know. And for this, when it is practically impossible for us to get it ourselves, not completely, of course, but what we can, we are dependent on God. We are dependent of God for our adoration of Him, adoration, that is, in the fullest sense of the term. (8)

In this entry O’Connor recognizes the pivotal step of knowing, at least what one can know of God, before desire can be birthed. But once that desire is experienced it maintains the heaviest

influence for the direction of one's life. In this case, her adoration for God would have been shallow and, most likely, short lived, if not for the consistency of liturgical prayer – constantly reestablishing the truth of God and knowledge of His grace.

This explanation of “liturgical anthropology” and its effects on O'Connor's life is expressed for the purpose of understanding that the practice of prayer and its metaphysical nature laid its claim on the spirit and talent of O'Connor long before she came to realize her own potential and future as a writer. If it were not for this ritual training in the realm of spiritual practices and the Scriptures, O'Connor could not have gained the skills necessary that led to her success in the realm of writing and literature. The Catholic practices, such as prayer, uniquely equipped O'Connor for her future as a writer before her first story was ever written – and the evidence of such can be seen within her literature.

When O'Connor started writing her journal at the University of Iowa in 1946, she began with a specific purpose – one that can be inferred from the nature of the journal itself: Prayer. She writes in one undated entry, “I would like to write a beautiful *prayer* but I have nothing to do it from. There is a whole sensible world around me that I should be able to turn to Your praise; but I cannot do it” (7). From this entry one can observe that her aim from the beginning of its composition was to discover how to not simply pray, but to create beauty within her written prayers that would be satisfying to God. She combined her talent and her passion for God in an effort to create a unique type of worship. Written prayer, then, is seen as an extremely valuable tool to O'Connor, and through this medium she seeks not only to improve her spiritual walk but her literary journey as well. The spiritual truths gained from the church and her prayer life are so heavily integrated into her writing that one cannot exist without the other. Traditional Catholic prayer, then, and the foundational characteristics of a liturgical anthropology had its influence on

O'Connor through the faith, and these influences permanently altered the way she interacted with the world.

O'Connor remained wary, though, of the dangers that accompany such habitual prayer – as she found herself aware that prayer without what she calls “feeling” falls flat as worship unto the self instead of worship unto God. For example she prays, “My dear God, I do not want this to be a metaphysical exercise but something in praise of God. It is probably more liable to being therapeutical than metaphysical, with the element of self underlying its thoughts” (8). In this entry, O'Connor remains very conscious of her conception of “self” as it encroaches upon prayer, and specifies her concern through the writing process. She goes on to explain her ideal prayer by writing that “prayers should be composed I understand of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication and I would like to see what I can do with each without writing an exegesis” (8). In these statements within her prayers O'Connor reveals two things: 1) That the habit of prayer influences and forms the “self,” and 2) That the habit of prayer constructs the framework with which one interacts with the world.

The concept of the self is largely developed and influenced through her prayers and then illustrated through her fiction. From the context of her prayers, O'Connor's term “self” can be understood as an expression and aspect of her personhood. She grows and develops both as a Catholic and as a writer as she comes to a greater understanding of her personhood through the habit of prayer, allowing her to become more aware of how her fallen personhood encroaches on her perception of God. This maturing awareness of the self, then, experienced through prayer, acts as the underpinning for her poetics. When O'Connor prayed, her goal was to omit the self and engage the world through adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication unto the Lord. In one early 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 all the moon. The crescent is very beautiful and perhaps that is all one like I am should or could see; but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. I do not know You God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside. (3)

In this instance, again, prayer influences both the way O'Connor views herself and the way she approaches God. This passage illustrates O'Connor's struggle with her concept of self, as she understands it largely in negative terms. She views herself as an obstacle to overcome in her pursuit of God. In referencing herself as "one like I" she hints at a deeper understanding of herself being unworthy to glimpse any part of God, and that the image of herself – the "self-shadow" – alters her view of God altogether. Through this image she sees herself rightly in comparison to God and understands how her desires, wants, and pursuits have the power to blind her to His truth. Her desire, then, becomes a desire and a desperate prayer to "push herself aside" and to instead focus her energy and her mind on a greater God than herself.

This theme of identity, directly influenced from her personal prayer life, is found within several of O'Connor's prayers throughout the entire journal. O'Connor writes the following prayers with the same humble spirit of self-realized identity formed through an understanding of her place within the world in comparison to God. She prays, "Give me the grace, dear God, to adore You for even this I cannot do for myself" (8), "I don't know if I've ever been sorry for a sin because it hurt You. That kind of contrition is better than none but is selfish" (10), "I don't want to have created God to my own image as they're so fond of saying" (16), "I have nothing to

be proud of yet myself. I am stupid, quite as stupid as the people I ridicule” (19), “It doesn’t take much to make us realize what fools we are, but the little it takes is long in coming. I see my ridiculous self by degrees” (20). These prayers all follow the same line of thinking – a thinking directly influenced through a habitual intimate relationship with God. She comes to view herself through scriptural principles, understanding that she maintains a sinful nature that needs constant correction through the influence of Scripture, the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, prayer acts as the framework through which O’Connor constructs not only her character, being influenced by the morals and values of the church, but also forms her identity as she learns about the element of her fallen personhood within the concept of the self through interaction with God through prayer. This concept of the self is pivotal for basic functions within life. Charles Taylor discusses the idea of “inwardness” as a term to refer to this inner life, the interior narrative, that every human experiences, and which plays a large factor in understanding the concept of the self. Of this concept Taylor explains that “being is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues, to do with identity and how one ought to be; it is being able to find one’s standpoint in this space, being able to occupy, to be a perspective in it” (112). As O’Connor learns to function and communicate within the church, then, her awareness of the self cannot exist without the exterior influence of morals, practices, and rituals pressing in upon her. The self cannot exist without these accompanying exterior elements, for her interactions within them become evidence of this self. Therefore, O’Connor’s expression through prayer and through her writing functions as evidence of her interior narrative with God. And with this reality comes the danger of the self becoming corrupted through its expression – as for O’Connor this expression remains prayer.

O'Connor's participation within the liturgical prayers of the Church actively shaped something more foundational than her identity – it shaped her orientation to the world. A liturgical anthropology forms and shapes how someone perceives the world, and forms not only a person's identity, but also the way in which a person functions within a particular context and culture. A liturgical anthropology comes to form and influence identity by first influencing one's perception of the self. Identity becomes the end result of a perception primed by habit and desire. To elaborate further, James K.A. Smith writes:

We come to “see” ourselves in a certain way, not by introspection or reflection, but because we have absorbed a narrative that now functions as the background drama of our existence. So it's not so much that I “see” myself in this way as that I *act* in accord with the character I've assumed. This is not an identity that I have chosen; it is more like an orientation that I have assumed – a mode of comportment to the world that grows out of my implicit, tacit sense of who I am within an overarching story of the world. (127)

Therefore, O'Connor's religious activity within the church ultimately contributes to a perception of self that is founded in Catholic dogma. Richard P. McBrien writes, “Only when the human person is understood in this larger context – not only as an individual, but also as social being, as historical being, and as being-in-the-word – can our theology of human existence hope to be comprehensive and catholic” (158). Therefore, O'Connor's context and orientation within the Catholic faith and the history and social body of the Catholic Church influence her actions and perceptions within her assumed character of Catholic novelist. Yet O'Connor's assumed role as a Catholic novelist primes her to a specific set of challenges that she expresses through prayer.

As expressed by O'Connor above, maintaining a Catholic orientation to the world allows room for the possibility of corruption of the self as the focus of this orientation alters. Taylor writes that "the whole thing may be counterfeited. This is not to say that words of power themselves may be counterfeit, but the act by which their pronouncing releases force can be rhetorically imitated, either to feed our self-conceit or for even more sinister purposes" (97). This was a chief concern of O'Connor's as the teachings of the church place Christ as the foremost figure for adoration and devotion, yet the practices by which this adoration is trained to be expressed leaves room for apathy, laziness, or self-conceit. She writes ruefully in one journal entry that "the rosary is mere rote for me while I think of other and usually impious things" (38). This concept is again emphasized later in her journal when she writes:

My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well not have made me. And the feeling I egg up writing here lasts approximately a half hour and seems a sham. I don't want any of this superficial feeling stimulated by the choir. Today I have proved myself a glutton – for Scotch oatmeal cookies and erotic thought.

There is nothing left to say of me. (40)

This reality, therefore, brought O'Connor, and many within the church, to a place of constant self-reflection and refocus – constantly having to rightly place oneself in relation to God and consciously articulating the need for grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Kenneth Baker, a Jesuit theologian, writes on the topic of the necessity of grace in the Catholicism, "It has been pointed out that God has destined man to a supernatural end, namely, the face-to-face vision of God which involves a share in the divine life itself; such an end completely surpasses the natural ability of man to attain it" (25). In this way the sins and natural shortcomings of the church actively shape its identity as much as its holiness. In one letter to Dr. T.R. Spivey written on

August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1959 O'Connor elaborates on this tension within the Catholic Church between the concept of formed habit, grace, and sin:

The things that we are obliged to do, such as mass on Sunday, fast and abstain on days appointed, etc. can become mechanical and merely habit. But it is better to be held to the Church by habit than not to be held at all. The Church is mighty realistic about human nature. Further it is not at all possible to tell what's going on inside the person who appears to be going about his obligations mechanically. We don't believe that grace is something you have to feel. The Catholic always distrusts his emotional reaction to the sacraments. (qtd. in Giannone 85)

This framework, constructed through liturgical prayer and prayer as habit, fundamentally influences O'Connor's character by priming her to a specific religious context and religious orientation to the world. The liturgical teachings create an environment very aware of good and evil, heaven and hell, sinner and saint. They create a culture in which one can only experience God's love through acceptance of His grace, which ultimately means that one is unable to do enough good to earn God's love, and completely incapable of participating in any "salutary act" without the presence of divine grace (Baker 25). This is the attitude of O'Connor as the Catholic faith and habitual practice influences her character from birth. She states, "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction" (qtd. in Cash xiv). The habits formed through childhood and the outlet of religion dictate how she chooses to live out the rest of her life. As any habit alters the way in which one eats, sleeps, speaks, etc., spiritual habits are formed and carried out in similar

manners. Prayer, being a religious practice from a young age for O'Connor, daily alters the way in which she speaks, copes, stresses, and the way she writes – for she writes from her mind and spirit. James K.A. Smith explains of the spiritual effects of habits when he writes:

Christian worship and spiritual formation have long known and affirmed in practice that gestures are not just something we do but that they also do something to us – that kneeling for confession is a kind of cosmological act that inscribes in us a comportment to God and neighbor, a way of being-in-the-world that sinks into our bones and our old knees. The postures of our bodies spill out beyond the sanctuary and become postures of existential comportment to the world. (167)

Similarly to physical postures of prayer, verbal prayer alters the state of mind, and the state of the heart. While growing up not only incorporating physical habits, but verbal habits of prayer as well, O'Connor is brought to a place where her mind, spirit, and body were given unto God for worship. For O'Connor spirituality was not compartmentalized ritual but “the whole woman alive” (Giannone 33). This concept of spirituality, experienced through the whole being, aids in O'Connor's spiritual formation. Robert Mulholland has defined spiritual formation as “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (Mulholland 2016). Therefore, spiritual formation conforms to the concept of sacrifice as Christ sacrificed Himself for the sake of others. This same sacrificial attitude, concerning both body and spirit, translated over into the realm of writing. To write a prayer is to bring the whole mind, spirit, and body to a place of submission to the act of prayer. And the words themselves, being recorded, supply evidence of this place of intimacy in which the whole person stands in direct submission to God through the medium of written prayer. O'Connor engaged in these processes, resulting in prayers that existed not merely out of habit, but as an outflow of her character and orientation to the

world. The effect of prayer is a circular one, for she wrote her prayers to glorify God, and glorifies God through her written words. In this way her short stories become a type of prayer and worship.

The circular process between worship, prayer, and writing provides a framework that shapes O'Connor's fictional writing. The narratives in her fictional pieces, although written quite differently than the narrative structure of a prayer, maintain themes, structures, and imageries that point readers indirectly towards O'Connor's Christian values, morals, and practices. She transports her audience through appealing to the concrete, a technique that can also be traced back to prayer acting as the foundation of her poetics. For liturgy is not only habitual, but also sacramental, as has above been illustrated. For O'Connor, and within the Catholic faith, Truth and meaning are derived through physical practice and physical representation. Chryssavgis writes of this that "orthodox themselves are often enticed by the luggage that they carry around, by the symbolic explanation of every detail and gesture. Yet, liturgy is essentially symbolic of only one thing, 'the one that alone is necessary' (Luke 10:42)" (413). In other words, orthodox themselves receive and communicate their message of grace through this "luggage" – the sacraments and a sacramental perception of the world. Baker explains further that for the Catholic, and for O'Connor, "the sacraments of Christ are not just interior, invisible, spiritual or mental acts of some kind that take place in the inner recesses of the human spirit," but they are to be received and expresses through the physical world as God demonstrates through Scripture (169). In this way, to the Catholic, "the sacraments contain grace," meaning that "they can be and are used by God to communicate His grace to sinful men" (173). These characteristics of the orthodox practice of sacraments point to a fundamental relationship between the physical and

spiritual realm, which O'Connor embraced and maintains that the spiritual becomes accessible through the physical.

This transcendent aspect of O'Connor's spiritual journey within the Catholic Church spills over in the pages of her writing through deliberate prayer for clear Christian themes. In an early, undated prayer O'Connor writes, "Please let Christian principles permeate my writing and please let there be enough of my writing (published) for Christian principles to permeate" (5). This prayer clearly showcases O'Connor's desire for her faith and work to complement one another as an act of worship. Amazingly, every short story maintains characters, settings, and plots that transcend its physical world and deal directly with spiritual and religious issues and experiences. As O'Connor writes in one prayer, "Don't let me ever think, dear God, that I was anything but the instrument for Your story – just like the typewriter was mine" (11). From this prayer, her attitude towards writing becomes clear. Her identity, formed through a faith centered on Christ, becomes apparent as she realizes herself to be a vessel for God's story, not her own. Her attitude towards her own writing becomes clear. She writes to point her audience toward the greater Narrative – the Gospel. And just like God became incarnate flesh in order to save souls from death, so O'Connor appeals to the flesh, the concrete, in order to reach the spiritual. This active desire to instill her stories full of truth can be seen in one undated prayer entry:

Please let the story, dear God, in its revisions, be made too clear for any false and low interpretation because in it, I am not trying to disparage anybody's religion although when it was coming out, I didn't know exactly what I was trying to do or what it was going to mean. I don't know if it is consistent. Please don't let me have to scrap the story because it turns out to mean more wrong than right – or any wrong. I want it to mean that the good in man sometimes shows through his

commercialism but that it is not the fault of the commercialism that it does. I don't know, but dear God, I wish you would take care of making it a sound story because I don't know how, just like I didn't know how to write it but it came. (11)

This passage illustrates how her prayers foundationally shape and form the poetics of “identity” found within her literature. This prayer showcases O'Connor's thought process in working out Christian truths – wanting to showcase the grace of God through concrete means such as commercialism, and illustrating the tension between wrong and right. Her desire for a clear communication of truth is this prayer's top priority as she surrenders its contents in its early stages of rewriting and revisions to the Lord's desired purpose. She claims that the story simply came, or perhaps was given, and displays the humble attitude she maintains while writing. It becomes clear through this prayer that even her own stories – her ideas and her characters – are not perceived as her own, a direct influence from the Christian's perception of the self in comparison to God. She very actively surrenders her story as a direct reaction to her relationship with God and understanding of her self as only being a vessel for His worship.

Although it cannot be clearly determined which story O'Connor was referencing within the above prayer, and perhaps it was never actually published, her Christian belief of the self comes through within her literature and illustrates her religious foundation within prayer. For example, this concept is illustrated within the short story “A View of the Woods,” when O'Connor writes, “the old man looked up into his own image. It was triumphant and hostile. ‘You been whipped,’ it said, ‘by me,’ and then it added, bearing down on each word, ‘and I'm PURE Pitts’” (ETRMC 80). In this instance the reader observes a character in direct conflict with his own image and understanding of the self. This image being his own granddaughter, he is able to observe himself from the outside and realize the destruction that it causes to his own life. As

the story continues she writes, “he continued to stare at his conquered image until he perceived that though it was absolutely silent, there was no look of remorse on it” (80). This illustration of the destruction of the self allows the reader to catch a glimpse of the raw, sinful, and even murderous tendencies within humanity. That the grandfather in this story kills his own granddaughter and gains understanding about his own identity in the process, that being that he is exactly like Pitts, the person he hates most, opens him up to accepting the truth. The recurrent theme throughout her works is a direct outflow from her personal relationship with a God, which is evidenced within her prayers.

The theme of the self and identity founded within the concepts of Christianity continue within other stories such as “Revelation.” This story brings an average woman face to face with her own sin as she copes with an honest glimpse of herself being defined as a wart hog from hell (ETRMC 207). Within this chapter Mrs. Turpin experiences a true understanding of herself after seeing a vision that rightly placed her below everyone else she had disliked or disagreed with.

O’Connor writes:

There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatic shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And brining up the end of the procession was the tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God –given wit to use it right. (218)

This instance perfectly illustrates the understanding and shift that occurs within the mind of someone who recognizes her place, her perception of self, in comparison to Christ and His work. O’Connor realizes these same truths about herself as she interacts with God. The reality

and truths that she comes face to face with through prayer become evident through the themes within pieces of literature like this. Her fiction accurately showcases the idea of the self that the Christian experiences on a daily basis. As Mrs. Turpin's vision shifts and flips her idea and misconception of herself, so the truths gained through prayer and Scripture shift the perception of self as well.

But although O'Connor writes in this way, desiring to point the spirit towards truth, she does none of her characters or stories injustice by reducing them simply to tools just to meet a spiritual end. She creates fully developed round characters interacting with other fully developed characters, and places in them in ordinary places, such as a doctor's waiting room, a field, or a bus in order to appeal to the average man. In a letter to "A," written on August 2, 1955 O'Connor writes, "One of the most awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes the Incarnation; this is, nobody is your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (qtd. in Giannone 51). The challenge that O'Connor realizes very quickly is that her message doesn't match up with the values of her audience, and instead she conquers this challenge by appealing to her audience.

O'Connor's short stories maintain an honest portrayal of human life and human problems. This style opens up the work to a larger audience than that narrower audience found within the Church. In reference to O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf," for example, someone outside of the Church, like an atheist, could empathize or pity or hate Mrs. May, or he could understand her faults. An atheist could likewise condemn and belittle Mr. Greenleaf. An atheist could also look upon the last scene in horror as a bull gores Mrs. May. But after all these experiences with the characters, the atheist will walk away from the story changed and

maintaining “the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable” (ETRMC 52). Through walking side by side with the main character, the audience, no matter the faith or religion, sees the Truth. In a sense, O’Connor sets up the reader to be metaphorically gored by the bull as well, as one reads and discovers and is caught off guard by the Light just as the quickly as the character within the pages. In this way O’Connor uses the physical world to get the reader to experience the spiritual, and the reader gains a look into the basic underpinnings of Christianity. This effect reflects the framework of O’Connor’s perception to the world.

The prayers within *A Prayer Journal* showcase O’Connor’s value of prayer, as well as her reliance on her personal narrative with God to provide a spiritual understanding that she can incorporate into her literature and that ultimately forms the basis of her poetics. For her, worship and writing are one and the same, and the aim of each is to bring glory not to the self but to the One greater than herself. For this reason O’Connor’s specific focus on prayer supplies her an understanding of the way in which story works as a narrative that reveals spiritual truths regarding God’s grace, and man’s identity in God and Christ Jesus. The Church’s concept of liturgy, prayer, and religious activity plays its part in forming her religious habits as a young girl, while Smith’s concept of “liturgical anthropology” explains the perception of the self in determining identity. Time and maturity allow O’Connor the opportunity to practice these habits and rituals freely. She experiences for herself the reward of the mundane practices of the faith and finds the key to transcendent truth through written word. The Catholic Church not only trained her in her religious habits, but also informed her values and influenced her character and identity as she grew into a greater understanding of God, and consequently, herself as well. All of these personal and spiritual developments stem from an emphasis of prayer – and the evidence

of these can be viewed within her literature. The intensity and reality contained within her stories is due to her persistence within the struggle of prayer, a topic that will be covered in the next chapter. Ultimately, though, prayer and the consequences of that habit within her life create in O'Connor a desire to be "intelligently holy" and implement the principle of prayer into her writing as a natural act of worship (APJ 18).

## Chapter 2

## Sanctification and the Presence of Tension

*A Prayer Journal* displays the process of sanctification within the life of Flannery O'Connor, a principle that she illustrates through the presence of tension within her literature. The word "sanctify" literally means "to render holy or legitimate by religious sanction," or "to render worthy of respect" (*OED*). This term has come to be understood as a religious process, a continual process that sharpens and in a sense "purifies" the believer within the Christian faith towards greater glory in Christ – a process that can only occur after imputed righteousness has been received. Baker explains that within the Catholic Church, this term is understood as a "process by which a person, through faith in Jesus Christ, receives the sanctifying grace of God" (62). This process can never be complete on earth, as total holiness cannot be achieved in a fallen world; therefore the sanctification process in the life of a believer lasts a lifetime and reveals itself in a variety of different ways. O'Connor's prayers provide an intimate look into her personal life and journey within the sanctification process, and reveal a Catholic woman in constant tension and struggle with the acting out of her faith.

The process of sanctification within the personal faith of Flannery O'Connor provides the foundation for the second element of her poetics – that being the presence of tension. This tension is not to be confused with the violence present within her literature as well, as violence will go on to be explored as the third principle of her poetics. Tension, though, within her literature remains present as a reflection of the sanctification process of her Catholic faith. The concept of sanctification encompasses the process of struggle and purification of the believer when interacting with the secular world. Baker explains this concept in simpler terms, "Sanctifying grace is called by theologians an entitative habit of the soul because it perfects the

very substance of the human soul. We can acquire some habits, such as learning how to swim or play tennis, but the supernatural habit of sanctifying grace is infused into the soul directly by God” (64). Roman Catholic theology believes that “sanctification in its beginnings, processes and final issue is the full eradication of sin itself, which, reigning in the unregenerate, co-exists with the new life in the regenerate, is abolished in the wholly sanctified” (Williams 21). In this theology sanctification is viewed as present throughout the entire life of the believer and works towards the complete purification from sin, a process that cannot be wholly complete until final redemption after death. R.T. Williams goes on to clarify that “sanctification deals primarily with the question of purifying the heart from inherited depravity; and it also includes the matter of dedicating one’s life to God in consecration” (22). In dedication to God, one’s life undergoes changes that flow directly from the power of the Holy Spirit, but these changes are also experienced through conscious human effort as well – and there lies the struggle of the Christian faith, a struggle familiar within the life of Flannery O’Connor and illustrated within her personal prayers.

To further emphasize the significance of sanctification within the life of the believer, G.C. Berkouwer provides elements of sanctification that can be seen as consistent within the life of Flannery O’Connor, as evidenced by her prayers. Berkouwer emphasizes the importance of the Christian to distinguish sanctification not so much as a process, but as a progressive, and at times regressive, movement – “indicating that at least sanctification is concerned with the life of believers” (101). This progress is a “consistent and active endeavor” throughout the life of the believer (101). He goes on to explain four elements that make up life of the believer experiencing progress within sanctification:

1. Increasing knowledge of our sinful nature (109).

2. Increasing earnestness in seeking remission of sin and the righteousness of Christ (109).

3. Prayer to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit and a constant endeavor to be renewed more and more after the image of God (109).

4. The eschatological prospect: the goal of perfection (109).

These elements of sanctification remain present within her prayer journal and provide evidence of maturing and progression in her Roman Catholic faith. In desiring to increase her knowledge of her sinful nature O'Connor prays, "Please let some light shine out of all the things around me so that I can what it amounts to I suppose it be selfish. Is there no getting around that dear God? No escape from ourselves? Into something bigger?" (17-18). This prayer contains a confession of selfishness and a desperate plea for understanding. She desires greater knowledge of her sinful nature, as all she can see is the "self" and how that poses a challenge to her future. She finds herself concerned about the ability to escape the self, and also desires greater knowledge of that sinful self which resides in all of mankind. This attitude reinforces the first element given by Berkouwer in which her main desire is "increased knowledge" – a progressive characteristic of sanctification (109).

O'Connor goes on to write about prayer for the remission of sins and righteousness of Christ. She prays, "Dear Lord please make me want You. It would be the greatest bliss. Not just to want You when I think about You but to want You all the time, to think about You all the time, to have the want driving in me, to have it like a cancer in me. It would kill me like a cancer and that would be the Fulfillment" (36). This prayer falls well under Berkouwer's second element within sanctification as it showcases O'Connor's continual desire to be filled with the righteousness of Christ. This prayer displays a desire within O'Connor to want Christ, a desire

that is essential for the progress of sanctification. Therefore, she prays for desire, a desire that is completely dependent on God not only to provide, but also to maintain. Yet in the simple asking O'Connor fulfills part of her role through prayer, then waits upon God for His purifying work to continue within her life.

Berkouwer's third element of sanctification includes the continual desire to be changed more and more into the image of God. This element can be found within O'Connor's prayer on September 25, 1947: "Oh Lord, I am saying at present I am a cheese, make me a mystic, immediately...God loves us, God needs us. My soul too. So then take it dear God because it knows that You are all it should want and if it were wise You would be all it would want and the times it thinks wise, You are all it does want, and it wants more and more and more to want You" (38). This is a clear prayer for transformation – a transformation from one into another more like Christ. In this plea for transformation she also confesses the inability within her own soul to make God all she could want. She acknowledges that this desire not come naturally, but supernaturally. The desire for God can only come through transformation. A continual supernatural transformation into the image of God continues to show her where she falls short and where sin maintains control of her life. In this case, she confesses that sin largely maintains a stronghold through her desires. Her continual prayer remains one of a changed desire for God instead of self, and is showcased within the following prayer:

Mediocrity is a hard word to apply to oneself; yet I see myself so equal with it that it is impossible not to throw it at myself – realizing even as I do that I will be old and beaten before I accept it, I think to accept it would be to accept Despair. There must be some way for the naturally mediocre to escape it. The way must be Grace. There must be a way to escape it even when you know you are even below

it. Perhaps knowing you are below it is a way to begin. I say I am equal with it;  
but I am below it. (22)

This prayer illustrates the goal of perfection through God's grace within the life of the believer. In this prayer O'Connor finds herself struggling with the acknowledgement of her own mediocrity and is reluctant to apply it to herself and her own work. She identifies that the only way for one to escape the "despair" of mediocrity is an acknowledgement and acceptance of God's grace. Through the perspective of God's grace, the believer then maintains a correct view of the self, but also observes the reality that they are constantly being challenged to become more and more like Christ through the help of the Holy Spirit. O'Connor finally concedes that her work is below mediocre, a humbling confession, and therefore relies on the gift of God's grace to elevate her and her work towards perfection.

One of O'Connor's prayers clearly illustrates the sanctification process within her personal faith. She writes on April 14, 1947:

I must write down that I am to be an artist. Not in the sense of the aesthetic frippery but in the sense of the aesthetic craftsmanship; otherwise I will feel my loneliness continually – like this today. The word craftsmanship takes care of the work angle & the word aesthetic the truth angle. Angle. It will be a life struggle with consummation. When something is finished, it cannot be possessed. Nothing can be possessed but the struggle. All our lives are consumed in possessing struggle but only when the struggle is cherished and directed to a final consummation outside of this life is it of any value. I want to be the best artist it is possible for me to be, under God. (29)

This prayer remains consistent with her Catholic conception of sanctification and provides a glimpse of the struggle, both spiritually and artistically, within her daily life. O'Connor reflects an understanding of the Roman Catholic church's teaching that faith and works go hand in hand, that works is that evidence of faith which points the secular world toward God and His Truths. Therefore, O'Connor likely viewed her writing as a means through which she could exercise her faith and grew in maturity throughout the sanctification process. In the above-mentioned prayer O'Connor emphasizes the need for one to cherish the struggle, and to direct that struggle toward what she states as the "final consummation outside of this life" – that being the final glory in the presence of God in Heaven (29).

In the aforementioned prayer O'Connor clearly draws tension between the concept of craftsmanship, a concept directly relating to her work, and the concept of the aesthetic, directly relating to the Truth. Worship for O'Connor, then, includes the perfect combination of both of these characteristics and is most perfectly expressed through a combination of the aesthetic within craftsmanship. Likewise, this desire parallels her spiritual desires; as it showcases her desire to balance both the Truth of God and her art in order to more perfectly bring God glory and worship. Therefore, sanctification in the life of O'Connor accurately encompasses the two aspects of life that need constant renewal, Truth and beauty, which can be seen within the total act of aesthetic craftsmanship. Williams further emphasizes this element of sanctification when he writes that "in order to be sanctified one must do his part; thus it is evident that sanctification has both the human element and the divine element. It is both consecration and purification. These two elements combined constitute the great truth of entire sanctification" (23). O'Connor understands, through her Catholic faith, that the human and the divine must not only co-exist, but interact with each other through faith within the ongoing process sanctification – that purification

of the believer. The human element, then, is defined by “struggle,” while the divine element is defined by that truth which lies outside this life. The struggle encompasses the human incapability of reaching that Truth through action, while still desiring and moving toward Truth through supernatural understanding and wisdom granted by God. Through analysis of this prayer, O’Connor’s view on Sanctification can be broken down into three main points:

- 1) Sanctification is a physical, human experience, requiring human effort.
- 2) Sanctification is a spiritual experience in which God moves.
- 3) Sanctification is a progressive movement throughout the believer’s life.

Furthermore, the evidence of O’Connor’s personal Sanctification can be observed through her use of tension throughout her literature.

O’Connor’s written prayers provide insight into every believer’s plight – the tension that lies between works and grace, between intellect and will, and between knowledge of salvation and the work of sanctification. This tension is created between a constant desire for the believer to make physical daily decisions, act on choices, and implement the truth of Scripture into his life while at the same time always remaining incapable of ever experiencing final sanctification in this life. The struggle is found in the desire, the almost, and the not yet. This struggle is found in the desire for perfection, yet the inability to every achieve such perfection. Yet through this struggle O’Connor asserts, “I must grow. I have a right I believer to show such interest in myself as long as my interest is in my immortal soul and what keeps it pure. ‘Save to the pure and in their purest hour,’ Coleridge wrote – the gift of imagination functioned only then, only for those” (20).

This prayer, for example, provides an example of O’Connor directing her struggle for growth, both spiritually and physically within her work, toward God, or the things of God, and

therefore acknowledging this as the only avenue for real growth. To become pure, and to grow towards purity, becomes an act within the sanctification process. One can strive to walk in wisdom while at the same time committing a sin in that striving, such as selfishness – a paradox that can only be understood through the acceptance of grace. Therefore, the struggle becomes the believer’s active choices towards allowing God to transform his fallen heart and mind into a purified heart and mind – which is the ongoing process of sanctification. Williams explains that sanctification is the act of “removing impurity existing in the nature of one already born of the Spirit – the deliverance from sin as a tendency born with us” (21). This removing of impurity, therefore, cannot be accomplished without the believer’s willingness to participate in the process, as seen in O’Connor’s prayers above.

In another prayer written by O’Connor on May 30, 1947, she explains this struggle. She writes, “Conquer it but can’t throw it off, fight it and maim it but never kill it. It is hard to want to suffer; I presume grace is necessary for the want” (33). This prayer continues to portray the two contrasting principles within sanctification. The first two lines illustrate O’Connor’s “struggle,” her fight for purification and Truth, while the latter half illustrates the work of God in coming within her life and finishing what she is incapable of finishing – grace providing a desire for the fight. In this instance, O’Connor’s prayer centers on the difficulty she faces in allowing Truth and knowledge penetrate what she deems her “Titanic” (33). For example, she eagerly prays and hopes that Bloy<sup>1</sup> becomes “an iceberg hurled at me to break up my Titanic and I hope my Titanic will be smashed, but I am afraid it takes more than Bloy to destroy the age in us”

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Bloy was a French Catholic writer who “regarded literature as an instrument of the Apocalypse.” These references are the only included within O’Connor’s prayers, but it appears that she studied Bloy’s various texts and theories. Bloy himself was inspired by the 1846 apparition of the Virgin Mary at La Salette, and became convinced that “unless the wicked reformed and the people observed that Sabbath, the end time would come and engulf Christendom in fire” (Ziegler 653). Bloy maintained the belief of Dolorism, “a doctrine affirming the sanctity of suffering, holding that through mystic substitution, the martyrdom of innocents could redeem the transgressions of the guilty” (653).

(33). This “age,” she explains, refers to The Fall and Original Sin (33). Thus her prayers illustrate the futility, but also the necessity, of human effort in destroying and conquering sin. This prayer showcases the knowledge that O’Connor affirms within sanctification, that man must work and be willing while God covers all in grace while performing the ongoing act of purification within the life of the believer.

O’Connor’s spiritual belief and personal struggles within the faith, displayed in her prayers above, is also evidenced within her letters and other public writing. For example, she writes to “A” on July 20, 1955 that “it seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it, but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in the stories” (qtd. In Giannone 75). This entry to “A” shows O’Connor directly linking her personal belief to the themes, plot, and characters within her stories. The lack of what she calls “bitterness” in her stories is a direct result of her love for the world – a capability given by God alone. This achievement cannot be met without her fear of suffering, as she explains, due to the reality of the world and God’s compelling command to love as He has loved the world. The tension displayed in this instance displays her progress within sanctification, as her sinful nature influences her behavior and actions away from acting as Christ would. Yet through this struggle her stories remain free of the “bitterness” of struggle, instead eclipsed by the purifying glory of sanctification, which is the movement of God within a believer.

O’Connor’s prayers, observed above, display the process of sanctification within the life of the believer. Her prayers incorporate a struggle within her spirit while grappling with the realities of sin, and the continual beckoning of God to be shaped more and more into the image of Christ. This narrative between herself and God acts as the influential foundation for the

tension that presents itself within all of her writing. O'Connor's stories usually incorporate at least one character undergoing some type of transformation. This transformation can be observed as a spiritual shift within the character from a place of ignorance or misunderstanding to a place of illumination – a place of darkness to light. But before the actual transformation takes place, the moment of redemption, the characters first come head to head with the reality around them, which displays their shortcomings. This tension primes the character for preparation of the redeeming moment, a topic that will be discussed in the next chapter. In this way, through her own experience with sanctification, O'Connor's use of tension within her short stories brings a raw human element to her characters. In O'Connor's short essay entitled "Novelist and Believer," written in 1963, she explains how she desires for her stories and characters to display the real world "where there is obviously something lacking" and where there remains a "general mystery of incompleteness" (167). The "stretching" within the characters, a characteristic of tension, is found through that character's interactions with the mystery of incompleteness. Their fallen nature is revealed through their attempt at fulfilling that incompleteness with a variety of different pitfalls that are common to the human experience such as pride, knowledge, and material possessions. Their interactions with this general mystery reveal the fallen nature within themselves, and prime them for the redeeming moment that will bring a sudden and full transformation to the character. In this way the ongoing spiritual experience of sanctification within O'Connor's faith showcases itself within her literature.

Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Enduring Chill," for example, provides an excellent example wherein the main character is defined by a consistent tension throughout the story. From the beginning of this short story the main character, Asbury, is plagued by tension in a variety of different areas: physically, emotionally, and most importantly spiritually. Physically

he experiences extreme sickness, the “undulant fever” that plagues him continually. Asbury shows mental tension by expressing his clear disdain for being at home rather than in New York where he can more freely and openly converse with other artists. He also feels that “he had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was sending him Death” (ETRMC 103). This failure results in a great mental stretching as he wrestles with the ideas brought upon by his mother than he should work in the diary and give up his calling as an artist. But most significantly Asbury experiences a continual spiritual tension as the story progresses.

Upon the opening of the story Asbury confronts the concepts of death and God—a consistent theme. Similarly to the process of sanctification, Asbury progresses through different levels of belief until finally accepting Truth and experiencing an ultimate transformation. He begins the story aligned with his friend, Goetz, who “was certain that death was nothing at all,” a view that doesn’t settle well with Asbury as he approaches it with boredom and instead finds himself drawn towards a priest with a “taciturn superior expression” (86). Later, Asbury requests the presence of a Jesuit Priest by his bedside – a desperate plea for intellectual stimulation, and is instead confronted with questions of the spirit. The old Jesuit yells to Asbury, “The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are – a lazy ignorant conceited youth!” (107). In this moment, Asbury comes face to face with his sin nature, something that he either had ignored up until this point, or had remained unaware of throughout his life – a realization that he ponders with “large childish shocked eyes” (108). This realization brings Asbury to a more urgent place of tension within the story; for the first time he is confronted with his sin. Therefore, he becomes increasingly more aware of his fallen nature, an important characteristic within the sanctification process.

Asbury then finds himself wrestling with that “general mystery of incompleteness” which O’Connor references as a key feature of her fictional worlds (167). Asbury wrestles with the awareness of this lack by attempting to fill the void with something meaningful – and he determines he’s lacking communion (109). O’Connor goes on to write of this lack, “There was something he was searching for, something that he felt he must have, some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died – make for himself out of his own intelligence. He had always relied on himself and had never been a sniveler after the ineffable” (108-109).

Asbury confronts the mystery of the incomplete through reliance on his own intelligence – which ultimately doesn’t end in his favor. His desire to grasp at “something” illustrates a tension, a stretching, as he attempts to understand and find fulfillment through himself and his intellect. His failing efforts create greater tension for himself as he grows more and more desperate, seeking Truth. This tension is finally relieved within the redeeming moment after he sees himself in his mirror and gains an understanding of his own predicament. O’Connor writes that “Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror” (114). This final description illustrates the recognition of Truth, and remains consistent with the concept of sanctification. Asbury allows himself to become open to the acceptance of the Holy Spirit after seeing himself rightly, which was previously foreshadowed by the Jesuit priest, and immediately experiences a “purifying terror” – an accurate term for the believers conversation and sanctification experience. Through continual tension and struggle, Asbury stumbles toward Truth and experiences transformation of the mind, body, and spirit along the way. In this way, O’Connor’s personal experience with the progressive sanctifying

nature of Christianity showcases itself within her literature, and reveals spiritual struggles and Truths about the believer's faith in God.

The progressive movement of sanctification is a consistent theme within O'Connor's literature and can be seen in her short story "Judgment Day" as well. Martin explains that this theme is illustrated by a continual spiritual movement toward salvation and resurrection (138). He writes, "in varying degrees all of her stories symbolically represent the dramatization of a spiritual journey of the soul; such cosmic action is one form of symbolism in her fiction" (138). This dramatization of a spiritual journey is seen within "Judgment Day" as Tanner's physical and mental struggle parallels the spiritual tension within sanctification. The tension within this short story is found within the desire to return to the country in the South – Tanner's home, where he has learned to live with his best friend Coleman, a black man. Spiritual tension is also found within Tanner's contradicting behavior and beliefs towards racial issues. Tanner, seemingly being the only Christian presence within the story, encounters mental, physical, and spiritual tension as he journey's home and looks toward Judgment Day.

Tanner's reference to the coming Judgment Day brings significance to the story. As he struggles through his frustrations due to his physical state of being, all of the people around him deny having any faith in religion. His daughter states, "don't throw hell at me. I don't believe in it. That's a lot of hardshell Baptist hooey" (248). This statement lies in direct contradiction to Tanner's personal beliefs, and her statement of unbelief seemingly elicits remorse from Tanner early on in the story. O'Connor writes that "He kept his mouth stretched taut, his top plate gripped between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Still the tears flooded down his cheeks; he wiped each one furtively on his shoulder" (248). This contrast shades the main setting of the story in constant tension between belief and unbelief. The actions of the believer, Tanner, remain

in direct contradiction to the actions of the unbeliever, his daughter, yet O'Connor primes the audience to see the fault in Tanner's actions as he faces the tension within various cultural changes and movements of the time as well.

The acts of spiritual tension are observed during Tanner's stay in New York with his daughter. While living in the South, Tanner establishes a friendship with Coleman, his slave, and lives with him for years. The culture of New York city presents a situation that Tanner rejects, as he is only willing to accept the black man as friend if he conforms to the white man's way of living and acting, a lifestyle he became accustomed to while in the South. The acceptance of racial integration, and integrated racial marriages, such as that of Tanner's new neighbors, is the norm of the North. The tension exists in his rejection of this fact, and his desire to conform back to the old way of life in the South. Margaret Whitt writes, "through the years of his friendship with Coleman, Tanner believes he can extrapolate from that relationship an understanding of all black people" (157). Therefore, Tanner's time in the South provides him a false sense of right and wrong, which becomes more and more apparent to him as he interacts with his neighbors. The most significant source of tension within the story is seen when Tanner repeatedly tries to converse with his new neighbors, an inter-racial couple. He addresses his neighbor by the term "Preacher!" an old southern term he holds appropriate for a sullen seeming black man. O'Connor writes of Tanner's neighbor during one of these interactions:

And then his voice came out in the sound of an exasperation so profound that it rocked on the verge of a laugh. It was high and piercing and weak. 'And I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God.' The old man felt his heart inside him hard and tough as an oak knot. 'And you ain't black,' he said. 'And I ain't white!' The

Negro slammed him against the wall. He yanked the black hat down over his eyes. (263)

In this interaction, Tanner confronts the issues of unbelief and racism. Throughout this story the audience is given enough information to understand that he claims some sort of “Christian” faith, yet stubbornly holds onto the beliefs of the old South, blindly resisting any change within the North. In this passage Tanner equates the reality of God and Jesus with the racial division that lies between him and his neighbor. While the culture, and other Christians, around him have embraced racial integration, his opposition to the change brings an irony to the story. Instead of the tension existing between Tanner and the unbelievers in the story, the tension is found within Tanner as he chooses to ignore his own sins and act upon old beliefs. This interaction showcases Tanner’s hardened heart, instead of one receptive to change. Through this illustration, O’Connor displays the difficulty of change throughout the sanctification process for the believer, and the consequences that specific attitudes produce within this process.

Flannery O’Connor explores this necessity of human desire, and the necessity for the attitude of contrition concerning personal sins within the Christian faith. O’Connor writes in her prayer journal:

Contrition in me is largely imperfect. I don’t know if I’ve ever been sorry for a sin because it hurt You. That kind of contrition is better than one but it is selfish. To have the other kind, it is necessary to have knowledge, faith extraordinary. All boils down to grace, I suppose. Again asking God to help us be sorry to having hurt Him. I am afraid of pain and I suppose that is what we have to have to get grace. Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace. Oh Lord. Help me with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing. (10)

Contrition, then, existing as that sense of being “crushed in the spirit by a sense of sin,” remains an essential part of sanctification for the believer (*OED*). In this prayer O’Connor confesses to perhaps harboring a false sense of contrition, or a contrite spirit for the self and not for God. This awareness brings about a painful realization of the self, yet brings God’s grace and truth to light. This tension can be seen in the contrast between the intellect and the will. As O’Connor acknowledges that she knows her contrition should be directed toward sinning against God, her will and her actions display a different reality – much like that of Tanner, Asbury, or any number of her characters. Yet the simple presence of contrition in her prayers brings about an awareness of her sin, selfish or not. When reading “Judgment Day,” contrition remains the one element that is missing within Tanner’s actions, and therefore the spiritual tension he experiences becomes more obvious and pronounced.

This spiritual tension within Tanner leads the story to an ironic end, as Tanner’s death reaps judgment upon himself rather than those around him. The consistent hardening of his heart towards his own sin brings judgment upon himself during his journey home to the old South. Instead of being delivered safely home by his neighbor, he is found with “his head pulled down over his face and his head and arms thrust between the spokes of the banister; his feet dangled over the stairwell like those of a man in the stocks” (269). Tanner dies in a physical position similar to that of a prisoner – someone who deserves public shame for his sins against other men and against God. His consistent contradictory actions toward his black neighbor condemn him to a humiliating death in the stocks, reaping judgment upon himself and bringing justice to his actions. Therefore justice is brought upon Tanner and the tension is relieved through an act of violence, which rightly realigns him with God.

In both Asbury and Tanner, O'Connor creates characters that experience spiritual tension before ultimately coming to a place of understanding and acceptance of God's truth. Asbury depicts the unbeliever experiencing spiritual tension as he comes to realize the existence and presence of God and then eventually experiencing salvation. Tanner illustrates the believer who encounters difficult changes as his faith is challenged, and who experiences the consequences of his sin. Both characters ultimately experience a tension between intellects and will, showcasing different outcomes as they each tackle the challenges of the Christian life, faith, and the process of sanctification.

Thomas Aquinas, one of Flannery O'Connor's greatest influences, explores this issue of intellect versus will, and the progressive movement that occurs within each through the sanctification of the believer. He writes:

The act of the intellect is brought about by the presence of the things understood in the intellect; but the act of the will is accounted for by the inclination of the will toward the things willed. Thus the intellect is adapted by its nature to be perfected by something external that is related to it as act to potency. Hence man can be aided to elicit an act of the intellect by anything external that is more perfect in intelligible being: not only by god but also by an angel or even by a man who is better informed (but differently in each instance). (144)

According to Aquinas' analysis of the intellect and the will, the major area of tension within the life of the Christian can be found within the clashing of the intellect and the will as it adapts to new external influences. While the intellect is known through what is understood, the will is known through action upon that intellect. The intellect, then, is moved toward perfection by an external influence, usually an influence from a more perfect intellectual being – someone like

God who maintains a higher knowledge and understanding of the truths of life. The process that Aquinas alludes to, here, parallels that of sanctification. In the cases of Asbury and Tanner, their spiritual tension is seen and experienced as external forces act upon their current intellect, which both challenges them to act on a new intellect and alter their will to fit that new knowledge within the intellect. These external forces are seen through either physical means like a sickness in the case of Asbury, or other physical means such as a cultural change or a new location, such as in the case of Tanner. Both circumstances bring a new external force, and a higher intellect, which influences, changes, and challenges the thinking of these main characters, moving them forward within the process of sanctification.

The process of sanctification, as O'Connor understands and experiences it, is revealed through spiritual tension within her prayers and the characters within her short stories. One of the consistent poetics of O'Connor's prayers remains the struggle that exists between the will and the intellect, and desire to work for the self and the urgency of working to bring glory to God. This tension is ultimately best illustrated through the physical, and can be seen within two examples of her literature: "The Enduring Chill" and "Judgment Day." Both of these examples showcase characters that encompass the struggle characterized by a moving and forming Christian faith, further emphasizing the reality of O'Connor's own Christian faith. The spiritual tension within her own prayers and desires to glorify God are revealed through the challenges faced by two very different characters that maintain two different attitudes when facing challenges and struggle. Therefore, the second element of Flannery O'Connor's poetics, being the spiritual struggle characterized by physical tension, can be observed through the consistent and various struggles of her characters, and ultimately alludes to the process of sanctification within the life of Flannery O'Connor.

## Chapter 3

## A Prayer for Redemption

So far this analysis of *A Prayer Journal* has emphasized how Flannery O'Connor's reliance on prayer not only aided in forming the concept of the "self," which is evidenced through her writing, but also showcases the progressive movement of a maturing and growing Christian, a movement also evident through spiritual tension within her writing. The concepts of identity and sanctification in her writing illustrate the Catholic life from the inside, and showcases how the Catholic faith takes part in both forming character and supplying grace through struggle and tension. But O'Connor's prayers also uniquely showcase another aspect of her spiritual walk – the experience of redemption. The consistent presence of violence within O'Connor's short fiction illustrates the moment of redemption for the believer, and most effectively communicates the permanence of God's redeeming work.

The act of redemption within Christian theology contains many layers. Not to be confused with sanctification, which is the ongoing progress of transformation, redemption is one act, performed by God, through which all of mankind experiences deliverance from sin. "Redemption" from the Latin term *redemptionem* literally translates to "a buying back, releasing, ransoming" (*OED*). Wayne Grudem defines redemption as "Christ's saving work viewed as an act of 'buying back' sinner out of their bondage to sin and Satan through the payment of a ransom (though the analogy should not be pressed to specify anyone to whom a ransom was paid)" (1253). In the Christian faith, God completed this ransoming through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, an unblemished and perfect substitution for all sinners, once and for all. St. Thomas Aquinas, one of O'Connor's greatest influencers,<sup>2</sup> explains redemption as such:

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<sup>2</sup> "So I couldn't make any judgment on the *Summa*, except to say this: I read it for about twenty minutes every night before I go to bed. If my mother were to come in during this process and say, 'Turn off that light. It's late,' I with

Since Christ is a person of infinite dignity, any suffering of His has an infinite value and so suffices for the atonement of infinitely many sins.

Yet the redemption of the human race was accomplished, not by this or that slight suffering, but by Christ's death, which for reasons listed above, He chose to endure to redeem the human race from its sins. For in any purchasing transaction there is required not only a stipulated amount of appreciable commodity, but also the application of the price to the purchase. (297)

Redemption then, remains accessible to all mankind and received only through saving faith. The act of redemption on an individual is experienced through a spiritual transformation that correctly aligns the believer with God. This transformation touches everything in the believer's life through a violent shift – a direct result to Christ's sacrifice. This new spiritual reality, provided through Christ's work, alters the way a believer interacts with the world. Flannery O'Connor writes in one essay entitled "The Fiction Writer and His Country," that "this means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction" (qtd. in Hicks 162). Redemption in the life of Flannery O'Connor was not a passive acceptance of faith, but an active and demanding truth that touched every area of her life, especially her insistence in incorporating the presence of violence throughout her writing. The acting and shaping truth of redemption naturally translates into the image of violence, as only violence contains a sudden and shocking shift of being that remains consistent with the spiritual experience. Therefore,

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lifted finger and a broad bland, beatific expression would reply, 'On the contrary, I answer that the light, being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes,' or some such thing. In any case, I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas." *Habit of Being*, p. 93

violence remains the most accurate representation of this sudden and shocking spiritual experience.

In Flannery O'Connor's prayers, redemption is often referred to as God's *grace* – as redemption exists as an expression and offering of God's grace. In one letter written to "A" on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1958 O'Connor's explains of her work, "All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it" (qtd. in Giannone 16). She consistently pairs grace with the imagery of violence and transformation, which acts as the evidence of the redeeming moment for the character and the reader through depicting the physical sacrifice of the self. Violence acts a physical representation of a spiritual reality, and visibly showcases the believer's spiritual transformation through Christ's redeeming act. The act of redemption is characterized and referred to as a type of God's grace consistently within her prayers; therefore, the term "grace" refers back to the redeeming act of sacrifice by God. Nathaniel Micklem connects the term "grace" to redemption and defines it similarly. Micklem writes that grace refers to God's attitude and relationship towards us; it also refers to "the new relationship with God and to one another" (20). The traditional Roman Catholic term "grace" is more directly applied to "the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts" (21). This "working of the Holy Spirit" is only possible as a direct result of redemption through salvation in Christ. Therefore, the receiving of grace through redemption is seen as both a process and a fact (18). God's overall character, as He embodies grace itself, includes the act of redemption through Christ by offering redemption to the world. Therefore, O'Connor's prayers and writing illustrate both believers and unbelievers coming face to face with God's ultimate act of grace – the physical sacrifice of His son. Therefore, redemption and sacrifice – showcased through physical violence – remain allies within her literature for the purpose of showcasing this spiritual truth. By approaching

O'Connor's attitude toward redemption through this view of grace, *A Prayer Journal* provides a clear look into the act of grace and redemption on O'Connor's life.

There remain many parallels between grace acting upon an unwilling character in one of her short stories and grace acting upon the unwilling person of O'Connor. Through gaining the initial understanding of the "self" and experiencing spiritual tension, many of O'Connor's characters are consistently primed for the redeeming moment in every one of her stories. In much the same way, O'Connor's prayers reveal that she was primed for redemption through gaining and understanding of the self and experiencing spiritual tension within her own life, which was explored in the two previous chapters. Her own experience with these concepts supplies her an understanding of redemption, which she seeks to explore through prayer. Her prayers illuminate her growing understanding of redemption, and her efforts towards illustrating this concept within her writing. For example, in one prayer O'Connor explores the concept of hope and its role within redemption and the Christian walk:

Dear God, About hope, I am somewhat at a loss. It is so easy to say I hope to – the tongue slides over it. I think perhaps hope can only be realized by contrasting it with despair. And I am too lazy to despair. Please don't visit me with it, dear Lord, I would be so miserable. Hope, however, must be something distinct from faith. I unconsciously put it in the faith department. It must be something positive that I have never felt. It must be a positive force, else why the distinction between it and faith? I would like to order things so that I can feel all of a piece spiritually. I don't suppose I order things. But all my requests seem to melt down to one for grace – that supernatural grace that does whatever it does. (17)

In this prayer, O'Connor contrasts the concept of hope with the concept of despair. This prayer showcases O'Connor's natural progression in understanding the hope of redemption, and highlights the key to portraying that hope in concrete ways. She discovers through this prayer that hope becomes properly highlighted and emphasized through contrasting it with despair. She characterizes the Christian walk by an ongoing realization of hope, a "slow participation in redemption" (Martin 15). She classifies hope as a "positive force," and tries to separate it from faith alone (17). Hope in redemption, then, is characterized as a positive force, which becomes more evident as it is experienced alongside despair. Yet she acknowledges that her desire to order and understand such things is a desire to more fully understand redemption, which she defines as "that supernatural grace." Therefore, this prayer shows O'Connor's personal understanding of hope and redemption – that they are experienced separately from faith, and are illuminated with in her life through the co-existence with despair.

Another one of her prayers depicts a different kind of contrast in seeking further knowledge of redemption in her own life. She prays:

Give me the grace to adore You with the excitement of the old priests when they sacrificed a lamb to You. Give me the grace to adore You with the awe that fills Your priests when they sacrifice the Lamb on our altars. Give me the grace to be impatient for the time when I shall see You face to face and need no stimulus than that to adore You. Give me the grace, dear God, to see the bareness and the misery of the places where You are not adored, but desecrated. (9)

This prayer contains allusions to the Old Testament traditions regarding sacrifice and redemption. As O'Connor reflects on God's grace, the salvation He provided through the New Testament sacrifice of Jesus, she connects it to the Old Testament parallel and annual sacrifice

by the priests. Redemption, in both Old and New Testaments cannot be attained except through physical sacrifice – violence. She explains that after such actions took place, the priests were filled with “awe.” This “awe” indicates a type of transformation in the priests, which only occurs after the sacrifice has been made. In her prayer she asks for this “awe,” the grace which allows her to adore God. In a sense, this prayer reveals that she seeks after a tangible form of adoration – like the priests. The priests adored and were awestruck after they experienced the physical sacrifice of the lamb. In the same way, believers should be filled with awe after they experience the redeeming power of Christ’s sacrifice. Yet, for O’Connor, this adoration seems difficult to maintain, and so she continues to allude back to the reactions of priests, desiring the same awe-filled transformation that they experienced. Further into the prayer she specifically writes that she currently needs a “stimulus” to adore God, a physical reminder. Therefore, in her fiction, she incorporates a similar type of stimulus for her character’s redemptive moments – violence.

Violence, in O’Connor’s work, is never present without a purpose. Its place and its description always contain significance for the plot. Much like the themes of redemption and grace present the desire for a physical stimulus in her prayer life, O’Connor includes violence as a stimulus through which the characters find redemption and experience grace. In one letter written to “A” on October 1, 1960, she states, “This notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring” (qtd. in Giannone 45). Here O’Connor recognizes the need for a stimulus in order to experience the grace of God. In spiritual terms, the recognition of the corrupted self and sin acts as a stimulus that wreaks a type of spiritual violence within the believer. Therefore, grace brings pain before it brings joy. Giannone goes on to explain that O’Connor “directs our attention to the way that violence redirects our inner life. The wound of grace goes to the inmost center of our being, creating a

stark interior upheaval that overwhelms the soul with remorse. Painful contrition can turn one decisively to God” (46). As grace performs this way upon believers, creating an inner movement towards remorse that brings realization and primes them for redemption, so O’Connor uses violence similarly. Violence is never present for the sake of violence or shock, but instead it acts as a mechanism for inner movement towards redemption within the mind and heart of a character unwilling to receive this grace.

O’Connor explains this tendency towards the gothic, grotesque, and violent in one of her letters. She writes of this desire for spiritual motion:

But whatever Southern life many contribute to this impression of grotesquery, there is a more fundamental reason why these stories are the way they are. The reason is that the writer’s vision is literal and not naturalistic. It is literal in the same sense that a child’s drawing is literal. When a child draws he doesn’t try to be grotesque but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. I am interested in the lines that create spiritual motion. (qtd. in Martin 156)

This comparison, between the child’s attempt at drawing what he sees and the artist attempting to portray what he sees, simplifies the presence of violence in O’Connor’s literature. Violence acts as the lines that connect the full picture. As the audience seeks to find meaning within one of O’Connor’s texts, the presence of violence shapes the story and brings a purposeful distorted clarity to the events. Although the violence often distorts the picture, altering something traditionally pictured and accepted, that very distortion becomes the framework. From the moment of violence all else is understood as violence shifts the course of the story and the fate of the characters. Likewise, as violence acts as the spiritually redeeming point for the character, the

text is then read through the framework of redemption, illustrating the fact that all action led to that very moment of enlightenment and understanding. O'Connor aligns her stories in this way for the purpose of illustrating the spiritual movement within the life of believers as well. As the moment of grotesque violence shapes and frames the meaning of the story, so the moment of belief, the moment of salvation and redemption, shapes and frames the meaning of life for the believer. In this way O'Connor's violent illustrations speak to the experience of salvation and enlightenment in the believer's life, and points the audience toward redemption.

For example, the violence within "Parker's Back" acts as both the stimulus and redemptive moment for the main character. An early scene of violence pushes Parker towards a redemptive moment. O'Connor writes, "All at once he saw the tree reaching out to grasp him. A ferocious thud propelled him into the air, and he heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, 'GOD ABOVE!'" (232). This scene literally thrusts Parker into a new state of mind while pondering what his new tattoo will be. As his focus for the tattoo was already circling around some religious symbol to satisfy his wife, the violent jolt from his crashing truck brings him to a place where he, quite literally, desires the image of God upon him. From this moment forward O'Connor allows the reader to observe an inner shift in Parker – the "interior upheaval that overwhelms the soul." The reader becomes aware that violence begins this inner shift and brings him face to face with his own mortality as he observes his own shoes burning, but "he was not in them" (233). This image transforms him, and while driving on his way back to town begins experiencing the emotions that could be summed up as "awe," much in the same way that the Old Testament priests gazed upon their burning sacrifice and were filled with the "awe" that O'Connor anticipated. She writes of this redeeming moment, "Parker did not allow himself to think on the way to the city. He only knew that there has been a great change in his life, a leap

forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents accomplished” (233). This description of Parker’s experience aligns well with O’Connor’s description of hope described above as a positive force that she had never felt – something distinct from faith. Therefore, the violent jolt moved Parker from a place of religious disinterest to a place of hope, which eventually leads him on a journey towards faith in seeking God and experiencing redemption.

Parker’s redemptive moment is experienced after the accident has primed him to receive it. As Parker looks through several images of God, the tattoo artist specifically asks him, “Who are you interested in?” To which he responds, “God...just God” (234). Here Parker is seen actively seeking out something specific and “ordained” (234). He searches for it in the only place he’s found fulfillment before – tattoos. Tattoos remain a connected image to violence in that a tattoo is actually a type of violence on the body – a physical act that draws blood. Martin goes on to explain of the image as well: “Parker’s tattoos symbolize not only his vanity but his lifelong commitment to secular experiences which have no sustaining significance” (133). Therefore, it becomes significant, for Parker, that he attempt to redeem this vanity and commitment to sin by marking himself with the face of God. This action remains pivotal because it points towards God’s Redemptive plan regarding sin and humanity. O’Connor explains this redemption further in *Mystery and Manners* when she writes:

Story-writers are always talking about what makes a story “work.” From my own experience in trying to make stories “work,” I have discovered that what is needed is an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action in which the devil has been an unwilling instrument of grace. This is not a piece of knowledge that I consciously put into

my stories; it is a discovery that I get out of them. I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in the territory held largely by the devil. (118)

Redemption, then, plays out not only in the personal life, beliefs, and convictions of the character, but also plays a part in redeeming the presence of evil in the story. In “Parker’s Back,” this presence of evil is seen in the many tattoos on Parker’s body – something disgusting, yet appealing, to his saved wife until she finds them idolatrous. Yet after coming face to face with death and humanity, Parker finds himself caught up in God’s redemptive plan. Martin writes that Parker’s destiny becomes obvious when he “submits himself to carrying the image of Christ on his back, realizing finally that, like the other tattooed man, his existence might thus inspire others” (133). Redemption in the story is seen not only within Parker’s mind and spirit, but also physically on his body. Yet not until after accident, after there’s been an inner shift within Parker, are the tattoos redeemed and geared toward religion instead of acting as a manifestation of sin. Instead of presenting a mark of sin, they present the image of God.

During this experience, after the violent encounter with truck, Parker encounters a voice “as plainly as if silence were a language itself,” which points Him toward the face of God. To the Christian reader this silent voice vividly alludes to the Holy Spirit, as its seen interacting with many people throughout the biblical canon with “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19.11-12). As an active and practicing Catholic, O’Connor would have been familiar with this characterization of the Holy Spirit, and its role within man’s redemption. Christian doctrine recognizes the necessity of Holy Spirit to be received after one claims faith in Christ – it is a natural result of faith. Here, Parker is seen interacting with this voice, which alludes to the Holy Spirit, as it becomes increasingly clear to Parker what has occurred to him. His tattoo prompts such questions as

“Have you gone and got religion? Are you saved?” to which he gives empty denials that “seemed to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them” (238).

His redemption finally becomes clear at the end of the story when O’Connor writes:

Parker sat for along time on the ground in the alley behind the pool hall, examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was certain of it as he had ever been of anything...It was as if he were himself but stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night. (241)

This passage brings clarity to the state of Parker’s soul. Redemption becomes immanent after his encounter with death and humanity. This fact is seen even further as Parker realizes he can no longer call himself by his old name, “O.E.” His full name, Obadiah Elihue, finally settles over him as a sign of his redemption as a new man. As a new, redeemed man marked by the image of Christ, literally, upon him, he now suffers the consequences of salvation in Christ. As he whispers his true name to Sarah Ruth, a light pours through him, “turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (243). This imagery, alluding back to the Garden of Eden, rightly aligns Parker with God as man was originally aligned with God at creation. This realization brings Parker to a new realization of self, a self that remains identified with Christ and which experiences suffering alongside Christ. This suffering is immediately seen through Sarah Ruth’s abrupt denial of Christ and accusation of “Idolatry!” (244). Therefore, “Parker’s Back” showcases the progress of salvation and

redemption – both beginning with violence and ending with violence, in order to most accurately depict the reality of salvation within the life of the believer.

Another example of redemption within O'Connor's work is found within her short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Although all of O'Connor's stories utilize violence as a vehicle to illustrate redemption, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" very clearly showcases the concept of redemption through the two main characters. Although this story remains an earlier publication than the rest of the previous stories explored so far, this story contains the most violence as it showcases the deaths of six people. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" remains, still, one of the most commonly read stories to those studying literature and the grotesque style. O'Connor's use of violence uniquely transports the reader to see the act of redemption, and therefore experience it alongside the characters as well. O'Connor herself explains that violence remains one of the best avenues of communication for the Christian writer. She writes in *Mystery and Manners*, "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 and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience" (33-34). Here, O'Connor expresses the necessity for distortion and grotesque imagery for the Christian writer. The Christian writer relies on shock and violence in order to most effectively communicate the truth of the Gospel.

The violence within "A Good Man is Hard to Find" remains a consistent theme, bringing the characters toward the ultimate point of revelation and redemption. The climax of this story takes place after a violent car accident displaces the entire family in the middle of the woods. This action aligns the family to come into contact with The Misfit, a famous murderer and escaped convict that the grandmother read about earlier in the story. This initial car accident

primes both the characters and the audience for the moment of redemption, as it brings the setting into neutral territory – in the middle of the woods. Here, The Misfit and the grandmother are brought together and become the main focus of the story. These characters function together within the plot, as violent action takes place around them, their interactions reveal a similar nature.

O'Connor pushes the plot forward toward an interaction between these two characters. The Misfit and the grandmother represent two completely different worlds and backgrounds, and their interactions reveal the common thread of humanity that lies between them. The grandmother is characterized as “a lady” throughout the story, even after her death, as she functions as a representation of the traditional South. Her actions fundamentally led the family into the woods, as she alludes to personal memories of life during her youth in Georgia. Her physical appearance and presence within the family unit connect the family to its history, southern plantations and old church traditions. She maintains and presses the importance for her grandchildren to visit east Tennessee, as opposed to the usual Florida, so that they could “see different parts of the world and be broad” (137). She is further characterized by characteristics of the old South within her initial description. The grandmother adorns herself with white cotton gloves, a straw sailor hat with white violets, and white lace on her dress. The constant white imagery shades the grandmother in a type of childlike innocence. O'Connor writes, “in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (138). This line acts as foreshadowing as it links the image at the end of the story with her characterization in this line. After The Misfit shoots her three times in the chest, the grandmother is described as sitting “in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (152). The illustration here continues to showcase the desire

the grandmother maintains of expressing ladylike characteristics, even in the face of death. This characterization remains consistent throughout the story, and is directly contrasted by the presence of The Misfit.

The Misfit acts as the foil to the grandmother and vice versa. His character, demeanor, and physical description contrast the grandmother at every instance. O'Connor writes of his description that "his hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long creased face and didn't have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans that were too tight for him and he was holding a black hat and a gun" (146). This description depicts The Misfit as a wild and threatening source within the story, as his presence ushers in the deaths of the family, but also creates room for the redeeming moment within the grandmother. O'Connor gives the audience an indication of the significance between these two characters when she writes that, "the grandmother had a peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was" (146). The Misfit, although characterized and described as something foreign to the old southern world of the grandmother, maintains a presence that connects these two characters on a more spiritual level. His familiarity to her seems to go further than simple recognition. The Misfit is immediately familiar to her, and through their interactions and conversation it becomes clear to the audience that their differences are only superficial, as their similarities are seen in their struggling spirits.

As the title "The Misfit," indicates, his character is one of an outsider. The grandmother finds this point of commonality between them and reaches toward him in an attempt to save herself and her family. She states, "you shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell" (147). This appeal to The Misfit's

“goodness” is met with denial as he acknowledges the sin and evil within him, claiming that there remains “no pleasure but meanness” (152). Her appeal to his goodness in the face of such denial indicates a shallow spiritual understanding of the concept of “goodness.” Her blindness to the reality of her situation, and the reality between herself and The Misfit, parallels a spiritual blindness that The Misfit’s presence slowly strips away layer by layer. This spiritual blindness and hardened heart can only be stripped away through these rounds of violence as it transports the grandmother from a place of shallow security to a place of raw and desperate desire for understanding.

The grandmother is primed for her moment of redemption through cycles and rounds of acts of violence upon her family, and then eventually upon herself. O’Connor writes in *Mystery and Manners*, “violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace... This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world” (112). For example, it isn’t until after her son and grandson, Bailey and John Wesley, are lured into the woods to be shot that the grandmother engages The Misfit with more desperate spiritual conversation. She questions him directly “Do you every pray?” in an attempt to appeal to the shallow concept of goodness that she applies and maintains for herself. She attempts to engage him in spiritual matters and emphasizes prayer as a sufficient medium to bring him towards this concept of goodness. Yet these appeals are made in vain as The Misfit rejects any appeal toward his spirit. “If you would pray,” she states toward The Misfit, “Jesus would help you” (150). The Misfit remains a unique and fully round character as he acknowledges the truth of the gospel, yet displays a character that has fully and whole-heartedly rejected it as nonsense. He replies to the grandmother, “That’s

right...I don't want no hep. I'm doing all right by myself" (150). This specific interaction, after the first round of deaths, reveals the spiritual reality abiding within each of these two characters. The Misfit represents a full understanding of the gospel, yet a rejection of the Truth. The grandmother, on the other hand, displays a shallow understanding of the fundamental purpose of the gospel. This scene sets up the spiritual realities that go on to be further explored after the second round of deaths.

After the grandmother's daughter-in-law and remaining grandchildren and drawn off to be killed in the woods, O'Connor places the grandmother and The Misfit alone together. This isolation heightens the sense of desperation and depravity of the situation, as the grandmother realizes that she remains the last of her family and attempts to grasp the reality of an immanent death. Instead of appealing to prayer, the grandmother simply states the name "Jesus," over and over again. O'Connor writes that "the way she was saying it sounded as if she might be cursing" (151). This image remains significant and representative of the spiritual state of the grandmother. Her appeal to Jesus for help becomes distorted through her tone, indicating the reality of her inconsistent understanding of the faith. On the topic of Jesus, The Misfit expresses his frustration with the Christian faith, and reveals the significance of believing in Him. He states to the grandmother:

Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?...Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead, and He shouldn't have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left

the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. (151-152)

In this dialogue, The Misfit clearly explains and emphasizes the natural distortion of the gospel message. He comprehends that the action of the gospel throws the world off balance, distorting and transforming sinners into saints, and placing the deserved punishment of one unto the innocent. In this way The Misfit can be seen as a type of disfigured and grotesque prophet as he views himself as unjustly punished, or overly punished, for the actions he's committed, and allows that knowledge of injustice to inform his view of Christ. The reader is continually pointed toward Christ by this grotesque figure as The Misfit alludes to Christ in his conversation with the grandmother, and becomes the only character in the story that sees Christ clearly for what He is. The Misfit remains a character that understands Christ, yet rejects His offer of grace on the grounds of injustice. Much like Christ bore pain that was not merited, so The Misfit states that he "can't make what all I done wrong and fit all I done through in punishment" (151). Through experiencing this injustice, he rejects a God who would endure such a reality, and claims that He threw the whole world off balance. One writer, John Desmond, writes of this concept that, "The Misfit certainly claims his difference from people like the Grandmother and her family, who seem to accommodate themselves to the mystery of evil by ignoring it or glossing it over with platitudes; if so, then on this level The Misfit can be seen as O'Connor's scourge, a prophetic figure who raises the question of evil and redemption by Christ to a largely unbelieving audience in a stark and violence fashion" (131). Another indication that The Misfit represents a distorted prophetic figure is through the grandmother's reaction to him and the knowledge he expresses of God and of good and evil. As he speaks, the grandmother seems to lose some sense of the reality around her, and her disjointed speech leaves the word "Jesus" ambiguous. She speaks, "Jesus,

You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady! I'll give you all the money I've got!" (151-152). The context of the story showcases that the grandmother is speaking directly to The Misfit, yet she ambiguously references Jesus and His good blood, much like she appealed that The Misfit was a good man that came from a good family. Her dialogue reveals a contrast between The Misfit and this prophetic figure who knows of Jesus and brings a rejected knowledge of Him, as well as illuminates her misunderstanding of who Jesus was and the consequences of His reality. She states of Jesus, "Maybe He didn't raise from the dead," in a state of disorientation. This moment of spiritual tension displays a wrestling in the grandmother's spirit, and she experiences doubt in her former sense of goodness, perhaps for the first time, and this naturally places her in a state of humility before God's truth and the Gospel. Therefore, The Misfit's clear and direct speech on the topic of Christ lays the foundation for eventual enlightenment within the grandmother, and she comes closer to the point of grace and redemption.

The climax of this short story occurs in the final scene. The grandmother's moment of redemption comes to her as she finally learns to identify with The Misfit himself. O'Connor writes:

His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them. (152)

The grandmother's moment of redemption is fully experienced when she reaches out to comfort The Misfit by touching him on the shoulder. This physical movement, this movement from accusation to fear to confusion and then to final clarity and contrition demonstrates the spiritual movement of a believer in the face of redemption. Margaret Whitt also explains that for this character, the moment of grace and redemption not only transforms her spiritual reality, but the cultural reality she's built up around her as well. Whitt writes that in this moment of clarity before her death "the system of people in a class structure that Southern manners has imposed on her thinking gives way to an insightful collapsing of that artificial hierarchy – the grandmother acknowledges that she is no better than the Misfit" (47). Therefore, it seems that the hierarchy of the self, the false sense of control and power, is collapsed by the humiliating recognition of equality with such a grotesque figure as the Misfit. His harsh and sudden reaction to her touch indicates a sudden spiritual movement within the Misfit as well. Whitt draws upon the significance of O'Connor's "snake" reference, coupled with the number three, as the grandmother is shot three times in the chest. Whitt writes that, "in an allegorical reading, the devil is destroyed by Christ's goodness" (48). This interpretation is consistent with the interpretation of The Misfit as a twisted and disfigured prophetic figure who utilizes violence as a meaning for communicating the truth of the Gospel. The end of the story showcases The Misfit stating of the grandmother, "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (153). This statement indicates the necessity of violent revelation. Only at the point of death and does the grandmother finally grasp the humility and reality of the Gospel. After her death, as Hiram and Bobby Lee look down on the grandmother laying in the ditch, O'Connor writes that the "grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless

sky” (152). This description indicates the moment of redemption and the imputed righteousness received by the grandmother in her last moments. In the end she smiles with a childlike innocence, as she gazes up into the light of day. This imagery lends evidence towards the action of grace upon her, and indicates that unmerited imputed righteousness has been given despite her selfishness in life. According to The Misfit’s interpretation, the grandmother would have been a better person if she had grasped the moment of redemption every day of her life, as opposed to living a life of shallow faith, “ungrasping yet innocent,” up until her final moment of redemption (Whitt 48). Therefore, O’Connor accurately demonstrates the violence nature of redemption and grace within “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

These short stories illustrate O’Connor’s unique use of violence and the grotesque in order to communicate the spiritual reality of redemption, as well as the imputed righteousness of those who experience redemption. This reality is present not only within her short stories, but it can also be observed in her personal faith as well. O’Connor’s prayers demonstrate the faith of a young Christian wrestling with the reality of redemption – and struggling to express this reality through writing. By stripping reality down to a moment of violence, the essence of redemption can be understood and expressed by both Christian and secular audiences. O’Connor expands upon this topic one of her later prayers written on January 11, 1947:

And all these doctrines which deny submission deny God. Hell, a literal hell, is our only hope. Take it away & we will become wholly a wasteland not a half a one. Sin is a great thing as long as it’s recognized. It leads a good many people to God who wouldn’t get there otherwise. But cease to recognize it, or take it away from the devil as devil & give it to devil as psychologist, and you also take away God. If there is no sin in this world there is no God in heaven. No heaven. There

are those who would have it that way. But even among the literary now it is becoming popular to believe in God. There is a certain shocking something about it. But Catholics have to think certainly – as far as they are able – or as far maybe as they want to only. Me. I have to in an attempt to do this am I trying to shock with God? Am I trying to push Him in there violently, feet foremost? Maybe that's all right. (26-27)

This specific prayer seems to properly speak of the purpose of the violence within her literature, and the purpose of the violence of the Cross and salvation. She asserts that the very existence and presence of sin and hell within the world grants the believer evidence and hope of a heaven. That sin and violence, being redeemed and overcome by God Himself, acts as the most perfect display of redemption within literature and life itself. Therefore violence ushers the characters and readers into a place of shock and transformation as they attempt to grasp the gospel message. These shocking and violent moments within her literature most accurately display the raw moment of redemption for a believer as he comes to grasp the truth about himself in reference to the goodness of God.

## Conclusion

After keeping a fairly consistent prayer journal throughout the first two years of her college education at the University of Iowa, Flannery O'Connor writes her last prayer on September 26, 1947 with a spirit of resignation and humility. She writes:

My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well not have made me. And the feeling I egg up writing here lasts approximately a half hour and seems a sham. I don't want any of this artificial superficial feeling stimulated by the choir. Today I have proved myself a glutton – for Scotch oatmeal cookies and erotic thought. There is nothing left to say of me.

This prayer incorporates aspects of shame, desperation, and repentance. Although this journal ends in such a tone, with O'Connor feeling far away from God, the legacy left behind through her literature and letters still continues to usher their audiences into a fuller understanding of God and His reality of Grace and the gift of Redemption.

The tone of her prayer is reminiscent of a specific Psalm of David where he prays, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?...I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God. Be no far from Me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help” (Psalm 22.1,10-11). As O'Connor likely read the Psalms, her tone and use of hyperbole largely imitates this passage in Scripture and accurately paints a picture of the desperation of the human heart and depravity of the human spirit. Similarly, these prayers beautifully and artfully illustrate the heart of the author and go on to communicate the hope of Christ to the audience.

This reality of her writing, the way in which it ushers the reader into a spiritual experience and deeper understanding, showcases O'Connor's writing as uniquely consisting of

themes made up of the raw spiritual experience. O'Connor's prayer journal incorporates evidence of her personal spiritual experiences, her growth in her Catholic faith, as well as the fears and struggles she faces in her art. Therefore, these prayers allow readers a unique glance into the heart of O'Connor's work and Catholic faith in order to more accurately see how her poetics formed through her faith and remain consistently seen throughout her literature.

As discussed and explored in the first chapter, O'Connor's reliance on prayer and introduction into the world of prayer and religion from an early age, primed her to rely on prayer and her personal faith as it shaped her conception of the "self." Through the power of ritual and habit, O'Connor developed a "liturgical anthropology" that can be observed through her prayers and through her stories and other pieces of literature. Because the body and spirit are so greatly intertwined, the practice and habit of prayer altered the mind and spirit and O'Connor, which in turn grew and challenged her faith. For this reason her primary art form, story writing, takes on the form as worship unto God as she practices personal writing as worship. Her written prayers portray a desire for beauty within her writing and drive her forward toward writing for the purpose of worship. Her reliance on prayer also contributes toward her understanding of the function of narrative, as her written prayers place her in a narrative much greater than those found within her literature. Through prayer she aligns herself with a grand narrative, a metanarrative, which grants her a unique perspective within her short stories. Through close analysis, one can see that her prayers provide the unique foundation and understanding of the self within all of her literature. Therefore, prayer itself, both its form and function, acts as the first consistent poetic of her literature.

The second poetic of O'Connor's literature, as discussed within the second chapter, emphasizes the progressive movement of sanctification as it is seen and experienced within

O'Connor's personal faith and beliefs. Sanctification incorporates aspects of struggle and spiritual renewal as a necessity for maturity and ultimate perfection in Christ. This struggle within her personal faith is displayed through spiritual tension within her short stories. By displaying characters that grapple with truth throughout the story, O'Connor sets up a physical illustration of a spiritual movement. As the spirit struggles to move toward truth, understanding, and enlightenment, so her characters, such as Asbury from the short story "The Enduring Chill" and Tanner from the short story "Judgment Day," display a spirit of struggle as they come face to face with both spiritual and cultural changes. O'Connor writes in one letter to "A" on October 26, 1963, "It all comes under the larger heading of what individuals have to suffer for the common good, a mystery, and part of the suffering of Christ" (qtd. in Gionnonne 47). Therefore, the struggle and the suffering maintain their purpose in perfecting the individual believer towards a greater faith in God and Christ Jesus. This struggle becomes ultimately displayed through spiritual tension within the journey of her fictional characters.

Violence, the third element of O'Connor's poetics, is displayed through her fiction foremost. Yet this theme within her fiction can be seen to have its formation and foundation through her personal prayers. Through analysis of her prayers, one can observe the act of redemption as something shocking, requiring the act of sacrifice for its complete work. Through the Christian worldview this act of sacrifice is complete through the sacrifice of Christ. Yet this sacrifice provides the world opportunity for salvation and redemption – an experience is shocking and transformative. The act of grace through the sacrifice by Christ Jesus acts violently upon the soul as it uproots and transforms the soul and rightly aligns it with God. Therefore the act of violence acts as the most perfect form of physical illustration for this spiritual truth and

experience. In 1963 O'Connor writes in one essay entitled "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," concerning the presence of violence within her fiction:

I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned as considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (qtd. in Giannone 138)

Violence, therefore, acts as the most perfect illustration of the spiritual reality of both believers and non-believers. Because O'Connor utilizes violent scenes as a method of returning characters back to reality, the audience gains understanding through this experience as well. The impact of shock and violence most accurately displays the raw moment of redemption within humanity as it portrays an inner movement and transformation. Therefore violence remains a prominent aspect of O'Connor's poetics, and can be seen to be developed from her personal life and relationship with God.

The analysis of O'Connor's written prayers, thus far, have emphasized her Catholic poetics and the ways in which her faith influences her work. Her writing incorporates aspects of grace, prayer, sanctification, and redemption, elements that were all informed and influenced through Catholic doctrine. These themes remain woven throughout all of her writing and display themselves through her characters and plots, showcasing how her Catholic thought and values effectively communicate her faith. Yet this sacramental poetics, being influenced and formed

through Catholic doctrine, naturally adopts elements that illustrate specific tendencies within the Catholic faith that can be seen to contradict a biblical worldview. O'Connor's prayers reveal a foundational tension between a sacramental poetics and a belief in unmerited grace—a tension that can be summed up within the axiom: “The law of praying establishes the law of believing” (Duffy 184). O'Connor can be seen reconciling this more works-based theology of the Catholic Church with the biblical theology of justification by faith through her illustrations of grace within her short stories and continual prayers for grace. Therefore, O'Connor's sacramentalist poetics can be viewed not as a personal effort to work towards divine sanctification, but as a concrete illustration that points the audience towards grace in Christ Jesus.

O'Connor's sacramental poetics can be better understood through an understanding of “symbolic thinking” which Regis A. Duffy explains thoroughly in one of his essays (191). He writes, “Symbolic thinking is characterized by a profound respect for God's mystery and a grateful wonder for our access to participation in that mystery; symbolic thinking is concerned more with the larger purposes of God's mystery as revealed in Christ than with the impossible task of explaining how a mystery works” (191). This symbolic thinking can be seen in O'Connor's writing as a part of her sacramentalist poetics, as O'Connor continually makes connections between her physical characters and the spiritual truths contained in the scriptures, such as grace, sanctification, and redemption. Furthermore, one of O'Connor's greatest influences, Augustine, writes that the sacraments indicate two things: 1) “physical realities serve as a doorway to spiritual ones and 2) that there must be some connection between the sign and what is signified” (Duffy 193). This Catholic theology, then, leads to the conclusion that the “sign is grounded in God's creation and has an eschatological task to perform” (193). With this understanding, the sacraments can be seen to serve as an established medium that points the

world and church continually toward grace. According to this theology, O'Connor's works and fiction can be seen to maintain these sacramental elements as they serve as a medium that point toward grace as well. This theology foundationally differs from that of Protestantism, though, because there remains an emphasis on the sacraments themselves, which lends to a works-based theology, as opposed to that of salvation and justification by faith alone.

Justification by faith remains a Christian belief that combats any reliance on the works of the flesh, and instead allows believers to accept the unmerited grace of salvation and redemption, as well as experience continual, ongoing sanctification. As Paul writes in the book of Galatians:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?...For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith." (3.3-4, 10-11)

This scripture communicates Paul's urgency in appealing to the church to understand the relationship between action and belief. Although the purpose of the Catholic Church's participation in the sacraments is to point the church towards grace, a critical understanding of the emptiness of works must first be in place or the threat of a works-based theology can easily creep into the heart of a Catholic believer. Yet if and when a Catholic, like O'Connor, understands the biblical concept of justification by faith, the sacraments are then performed

within the church solely for the purpose of pointing the world toward Christ and deepening the church's "self-understanding," for Catholic doctrine holds fast that "God continues to teach the church through its sacramental practice" as it reinforces spiritual realities through physical ritual, much like the biblical practices of the marriage, communion, and baptism (Duffy 184). This principle of self-understanding can be seen overflowing naturally into the works of O'Connor. Both her prayers and her fiction portray the tension found between the concepts of justification by faith and justification by works, as well as showcase how the sacraments have established a habit of belief in her personal faith. Therefore, the violence contained within her stories represent God's grace taking action upon those who live by the law and works of the flesh, and bring redemption by revealing the unmerited grace of God.

For example, several of O'Connor's short stories display the need for grace, and grace alone, for redemption and transformation. Stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People," clearly display the tension that lies within the Catholic church regarding the concept of justification by faith and the more works-based message of the sacraments. These stories criticize the concept of "goodness," and showcase how humanity consistently falls short of the ideal. The ironic titles themselves contradict the existence of any true "good man" or "good country people" – for all are grasping for an understanding that lies beyond the realm of man and can only be understood through the acceptance of grace through salvation. In these stories, the main characters mask themselves with a perception of "goodness" yet gain further knowledge that goodness does not truly exist. This realization takes place through shocking or violent means, whether that is the loss of prosthetic leg or the loss of one's life. These endings leave the characters with a deeper self-knowledge as they learn how physical merits toward goodness ultimately fail and leave them with loss.

These stories embody a biblical understanding of grace through O'Connor's Catholic sacramentalist poetics. O'Connor utilizes physical story telling as a doorway to illustrate the biblical truth of grace and faith apart from works, and point audiences toward the grace of God. As her personal prayers reveal, faith in the unmerited grace of God brings her to a place of helplessness as she realizes she is incapable of anything apart from faith in His grace. Therefore O'Connor can be seen believing through faith as she cries out for the grace she cannot attain on her own, and in doing so acts upon the biblical principle of justification by faith. O'Connor prays:

Give me the grace, dear God, to adore You for even this I cannot do for myself.  
Give me the grace to adore You with the excitement of the old priests when they sacrificed a lamb to You. Give me the grace to adore You with the awe that fills Your priests when they sacrifice the Lamb on our altars. Give me the grace to be impatient for the time when I shall see You face to face and need no stimulus than that to adore You. Give me the grace, dear God, to see the bareness and the misery of the places where You are not adored but desecrated. (8-9)

In these words O'Connor can be seen acknowledging and surrendering herself to the work of God alone through grace, and cries out for transformation through faith. Therefore although O'Connor's Catholic faith has established in her the "law of prayer," these consistent confessions of faith through prayer have allowed her to gain deeper self-knowledge and align herself with a biblical understanding of justification by faith. Therefore, O'Connor's sacramentalist poetics can be seen contradicting a works-based theology, and instead embracing the established need for grace through faith.

Overall, O'Connor's prayer journal explores the gap between O'Connor's personal Catholic faith and the faith displayed within her short stories. Her prayers reveal the journey of a young Catholic dealing with the changes and challenges of the faith while functioning within a secular culture. This prayer journal provides O'Connor's traditional audience an opportunity to explore the growing and struggling faith of a young Catholic, and allow that understanding of her faith to shed new light and understanding onto the rest of her literature. O'Connor's prayers prove to play a part in the formation of O'Connor's identity as she grows in the faith and the church, lending direct influence towards her poetics consisting of the themes of prayer, sanctification, and redemption. In this way O'Connor's texts display the raw spiritual reality of the believer and become a form of worship unto God, which was O'Connor's foremost desire. The easy form and honesty of her prayers invite readers of any faith to explore the spiritual themes of the Catholic Church and discover how this faith can impact the life and work of those who claim it. O'Connor did not passively believe in God, but she desperately pursued him through the avenues of her talents and gifts, desiring ultimately to use her writing to create a piece of art worthy to bring glory to God. This drive and desperation for God is an aspect of her life and Catholic faith that should be observed and explored by all who encounter her. As she writes in one prayer on November 4, 1946, "Start with the soul and perhaps the temporal gifts I want to exercise will have their chance; and if they do not I have the best in my hands already, the only thing really needed. God must be in all my work" (21).

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