Protagonists and Antagonists in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

Author(s): William M. Burke

Source: *The Southern Literary Journal*, Spring, 1988, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring, 1988), pp. 99-111

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/20077931

Protagonists and Antagonists in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

by William M. Burke

Many of Flannery O'Connor's stories involve two characters in conflict, a relation of protagonist and antagonist central to the dramatization and development of her themes.[1] Although these relations vary from story to story, they may be broadly classified as relationships of metaphor and relationships of metonymy,[2] terms useful in distinguishing between stories

[1]For an interesting and different treatment of this subject see Frederick Asals "The Double in Flannery O'Connor's Stories."

[2]Recent theoretical discussions have restored attention to the significance of figures of speech in imaginative literature. One might examine Paul Ricouer's *The Rule of Metaphor* to see such a study at its systematic and complex best. Unfortunately, however, there has been little agreement on the number, example, and definition of the major figures of speech. As an illustration, Northrop Frye has issued conflicting statements about the figurative status of allegory. In *Anatomy* he suggests allegory is based on metaphor (92) and in *Code* he more narrowly classifies allegory as kind of analogue, and analogue as metonymy (8-11). But there is one fundamental ground for agreement, and that is the distinction between metaphor and metonymy that Ramon Jakobson elucidates in his essay on aphasia. In that essay Jakobson explains that metaphor involves relations of similarity, and metonymy relations of contiguity ("Two Aspects of Language" 76). Metaphor presents a relation of identity, whether logical or imaginative; metonymy a relation of association, whether syntactical or psychological. In metaphor, A is B or, less radically, A is like B: the relation is paradigmatic. Metaphor thus involves a bonding or fulfillment of terms, and Frye calls it the figure of immanence (*Code* 15) as

in which the protagonist and antagonist live in the same moral universe and stories in which they do not. In some stories the protagonist and antagonist are bonded by some essential moral principle, and we can call this relation metaphorical. A familiar example would be the moral identity shared by the Misfit and the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." When the grandmother in a moment of awakening tells the Misfit that he is one of her own children, she expresses her understanding of the spiritual reality in which they both dwell. In other stories, however, the protagonist and antagonist circle in different moral orbits, a disjunction we might call metonymic. In fact, the central revelation of the story may be that the two characters inhabit moral spheres related only by accident or association. In "Good Country People." for example, the prospect of dying that seems to bind Hulga-Joy and Manley Pointer is shown as a sentimentality masking their separate moral identities rooted in self-pity for Hulga-Joy, nihilism for Manley. The text, moreover, endorses neither view and implies no overriding transcendent reality.

We might say, therefore, that the Misfit and the grandmother, metaphorically related, participate in a spiritual reality immanent in the world. But Hulga-Joy and Manley, metonymically related, dramatize a world involved in competing and unreconciled moral dimensions. Where the relation of the Misfit and the grandmother reveals the presence in the world of a spiritual community linking all humankind, the relation of Hulga-Joy and Manley Pointer manifests a disruption of equivalence and a world destablized by competing moral forces. In short, when O'Connor uses character involved in a metaphorical relation, she figures a world in which understanding can be completed and filled. It is a world in which meaning is present and available through intuitions of unity and wholeness. In her fiction involving metonymic relation, however, the world is not whole and complete. There remain the competing moral schemes suggested but not clarified, and this disjunction may suggest an unspoken quality in her world of the ominous, of the dark and disturbing, of the malign. The implication is that O'Connor in her fiction does not consistently rewrite the same script, and that her religious perspective is more complex than generally acknowledged. Her vision was not established at an early age and then made sophisticated by her growing artistic skills. Rather, her fiction shows a

---

it creates a world of presence through likeness and identification. Metonymy, on the other hand, links differing terms through association, displacement, or contiguity; it involves a degree of accident, eccentricity, or arbitrariness. The relation is syntagmatic. There is an unaccountable feature in the relation of the terms, an unnamed quality or absence, and this unspoken quality is surely what Frye has in mind when he calls metonymy the figure of transcendence (*Code* 15).

fluctuation between inscriptions of a world in which a unity is suggested through the relation of the antagonist and protagonist, and a world in which the relation suggests an ambivalence that unsettles any sense of a fixed, understandable world. In this essay I want to discuss "Good Country People" and "Parker's Back" as representative of ambivalent or metonymic relations, "Revelation" and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as representative of unified or metaphorical ones.[3]

The surface differences between the Misfit and the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" are shown to disguise a relation in which they share a common moral and spiritual reality — a relation of metaphor. Morally, the grandmother and the Misfit are motivated by the principle of self-interest. The reflective Misfit articulates for the unreflective grandmother that since there is no clear proof that Christ ever raised the dead, human activity should satisfy private desires: there is "nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing someone or burning down his house or doing some other meanness" (*Stories*, 132). While the grandmother doesn't kill or burn down houses she does not avoid meanness in trying her best to enjoy the time she has left on earth. In order to get her way she sneaks her cat along for the trip and lies to the children about a "secret panel" in which there are hidden riches. Even when her son, daughter-in-law, grandbaby, and two semi-sweet grandchildren are murdered, the grandmother does not lose sight of her self-absorption as she offers to pay the Misfit to set her free so she might extend and enjoy the few minutes she has left on earth. She lives unreflectively the philosophy of her assassin, and her last enlightened statement-that the Misfit is one of her own children — may involve confession as well as comprehension.

Her last testimony reveals the spiritual kinship linking the grandmother and the Misfit, and it aptly illustrates Northrop Frye's contention that metaphor is a figure of immanence. When the grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her babies, as her own son, we are presented with a figure of speech suggesting a spiritual unity behind a world of apparent differences. She and the Misfit are participants in this reality and are spiritually related as mother to child. This unity is immanent in the world as is proper for metaphor. Befitting immanence, the revelation is helped along by natural means. First there is a Hawthornian wilderness that participates metaphorically in the action. The forest acquires an ominous, expectant quality:

[3]We find fictional worlds of wholeness in such works as *The Violent Bear It Away*, "The Artificial Nigger," "The Displaced Person," "Greenleaf," and "Everything That Rises Must Converge;" worlds of ambivalence in *Wise Blood*, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "The Comforts of Home," "Judgment Day," and "A View of the Woods."

we are told that "the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth" (*Stories* 127), that the wind moved "through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath" (*Stories* 129), and that there "was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun...nothing around...but woods" (*Stories* 131). In this live, participating moralscape the grandmother's sensibilities are shaken by the murder of her family and, more importantly to her, by the threat to her own life. The Misfit's wearing of her son Bailey's shirt helps trigger the direction her shift of consciousness takes. The suffering she sees on the Misfit's face finally meshes these natural events into her epiphanic awareness of the spiritual unity of all humankind.

Like the grandmother and the Misfit, Mrs. Turpin and Mary Grace of "Revelation" share a common spiritual disposition, a mutual piggishness. Fittingly, they cut the same round shape in space. Further, there is a mysterious bond of prior acquaintanceship, which goes beyond "time and place and condition" (*Stories* 500) and which leads to Ruby's redemptive vision at the end of the story. "Revelation" is a case of metaphorical relation between protagonist and antagonist that extends beyond the implications of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

When Ruby first sees Mary Grace she is struck by Mary Grace's fatness, her scowl, her face "blue with acne," and she thinks "how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age" (*Stories* 490). Like Mary Grace, Ruby is also overweight, but she does not recognize that the ugliness so evident on Mary Grace's flesh is a mirror of her own spiritual grossness. Where Mary Grace's coarseness is evident in her appearance and in her disposition, Ruby's is expressed most clearly in her hidden and secret thoughts. Her thoughts reveal a woman self-congratulatory and smug like the Pharisee who thanks God for not being like the Publican; she is a judgmental and swinish woman. When the white trash woman with the "snuff-stained lips" (*Stories* 492) comments on what green stamps can purchase, Mrs. Turpin thinks to herself that Ms. White Trash ought to get "a wash rag and some soap" (*Stories* 492). When Ruby examines the cotton dress of the old woman (incidentally, the kindest person in the office) she makes a mental note that the dress matches "three sacks of chicken feed in their pump house that was in the same print." (*Stories* 490). Ruby has equally sensitive reflections about the sick boy, the old man, the black delivery boy and, of course, Mary Grace. When she imagines the different classes of people in her world she concludes her fantasy by dreaming "they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (*Stories* 492). Mary Grace's warty skin and sour disposition are not as offensive and cruel as Ruby's spiritual warts and hidden thoughts. This disposition casts an ironic light on her silent observation that

"it was one thing to be ugly [Ruby] and another to act ugly [Mary Grace]" (*Stories* 492).

The metaphorical relation is established here, Mary Grace embodying Mrs. Turpin's spiritual condition, but it is deepened by Mrs. Turpin's recognition of prior acquaintanceship, an acquaintance that sets aside the normal dimension of time. After being battered by a textbook, Ruby has "no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition" (*Stories* 500). The source of this other-wordly knowledge is clarified somewhat when Mary Grace calls Mrs. Turpin a wart hog from hell, a metaphor suggesting the eternal presence of the supernatural in the natural. When Mary Grace makes this pronouncement we are told that "the girls' eyes and her worlds...brooked no repudiation;" Ruby "had been singled out for the message" (*Stories* 502). A mysterious bond between Ruby Turpin and moral reality is made immanent through the agency of Mary Grace. Forced to see her spiritual deformity through her antagonist, battered about the head and soul, Mrs. Turpin experiences the traumatic shock of recognition that provides the necessary psychological context to make her vision at the end of the story convincing. Sunset cooperates by producing a "red glow," a "visionary light" (*Stories* 508), a natural light for mirages, hallucinations, and visions. With her sight adjusted, Ruby sees that the natural world is joined to the supernatural. Mrs. Turpin discerns in the quirky dusk a highway leading from her pig parlor to heaven on which souls are cleansed and transformed, Ruby and her kind pulling up the rear even behind the "freaks and lunatics" (*Stories* 508) like Mary Grace, Ruby closer still to hog heaven than God's heaven, but on her way.

The metaphorical relation in this story suggests not only an order or human bonding, as in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" but also a hierarchical arrangement within that order. This spiritual order, so different from social classification, impinges on the human and becomes apparent in the real world when Mrs. Turpin finally confronts her counterpart, is visited by her likeness from that spiritual dimension. In these stories where the antagonists and protagonists are related metaphorically, the narratives are processes in time that produce discovery; revelation is a matter of discovering the right metaphorical connection.

Relations of metonymy in O'Connor present a more complicated world view. In "Good Country People," the basis for a relation between Hulga-Joy and Manley Pointer is a mutual assumption of shared value, and the climax of the story occurs when this assumption is proven wrong. What characterizes their relation is a difference in perspective or world-view, and the relation

becomes then one in which the known and understandable is linked to the ominously incomprehensible. That is, Hulga-Joy's nihilism is a masquerade for her indulgent self-pity in a psychological event we easily understand, but Manley Pointer's country bumpkin guise hides full conscious and malign nihilism that is unaccountable and ominous.

Both characters misjudge the sources of motivation of the other. Hulga-Joy believes that the essential fact of Manley Pointer's life is his heart condition. She learns from Manley that the reason for this thinking serious thoughts is that he may die. This diagnosis, of course, really describes Hulga, and it explains in large degree why she takes to her young suitor; she feels sorry for herself and now she can share her self-pity. She also takes to him because he is a suitor, her first, the first man to kiss her and the first man for whom she has scented herself with the sinus remedy Vapex. Her attraction to him is founded on an assumption of shared romance and a shared philosophical approach to impending early death. Even with a Ph.D. she does not understand the self-pity that fundamentally motivates her. Manley's assumptions about Hulga are quite different though equally mistaken. He believes first that they share a common nihilism. When Hulga tries to resist his ardent advances in the hayloft, he complains that she boasted of believing "in nothing" (*Stories* 290), a belief, presumbably, that should give license to do anything. This belief has formed the essence of his own character — "And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga...you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born" (*Stories* 291) — and his assumption of Hulga's belief in a valueless universe is evidenced when he opens his hollowed Bible to reveal the whiskey, pornographic playing cards, and condoms that comprise his most sacred practices. In Manley's nihilistic world, value is always selfdetermined, and this private judgment on value is conducive to fetishism. For Manley, unlike Hulga, love is a fetishistic activity in which both partners temporarily please themselves. As a fetishist inflating the significance of the quirky, he is attracted to Hulga because she wears glasses and has a wooden leg. Although he does not manage to seduce her, he does take away these trophies to join a glass eye and other curiosities of love. In this intriguing love story Hulga misreads both Manley and herself and Manley misreads Hulga.

The emphatic issue in the Hulga-Manley relation is her misreading of him and, by extension, herself. He is not the naive lover she fantasized, not the heart and head-weakened young man she could educate into the profundities of life in a godless, valueless world. He is, rather, her tutor. He exposes the philosophical nihilism of Hulga as a cover for her own private disappointments: her lost leg, her sense of physical ugliness, her exclusion from

romantic love. Indeed, at bottom she believes in compassion, justice, and love, as is shown at the end when in shock she rebukes Manley for not acting like good country people. Her loud atheism is not a rebellion against values like love, but a protest against being denied their consolation.

The seduction scene in the hayloft is an ironic drama that further clarifies the difference between these two. Throughout the encounter Hulga talks philosophy, while Manley talks love. Yet it is really Hulga who believes in love and Manley who philosophically sees through to nothing. Eliminating description and commentary we get the following dialogue:

Manley: You got to say it. You got to say you love me.
Hulga: In a sense, if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing.
Manley: You got to say it. I said it and you got to say it.
Hulga: You poor baby. It's just as well you don't understand. We are all damned, but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation.
Manley: Okay, but do you love me or don'tcher?
Hulga: Yes, in a sense. But I must tell you something. There mustn't be anything dishonest between us. I am thirty years old. I have a number of degrees.
Manley: I don't care. I don't care a thing about what you all done. I just want to know if you love me or don'tcher?
Hulga: Yes, yes.
Manley: Okay then. Prove it. (*Stories* 287-88)

Their crosspurposes are apparent in this intense moment: Hulga is intent on combining meaning with sex in an affirmation of love; Manley simply employs a tried and tested strategy for successful frolicking in the hayloft.

Thus Hulga and Manley do not share a moral principle but are divided by one. This division may be classified as metonymy, a relation in which two moral realities are in opposition without any apparent O'Connor espousal of one over the other. We can account for Hulga, like the Misfit or the grandmother, Ruby Turpin or Mary Grace, on psychological grounds. Her lost leg and thwarted romantic impulses lead to childish protest in the guise of philosophical nihilism. Antagonists in a metaphorical relation can also be accounted for. We can also explain the Misfit's action as the result of a confused and damaging childhood, a life of violence and incomprehension, and a penetrating if diseased mind. Mary Grace is accounted for more on literary or rhetorical grounds than psychological or social ones, but her close

physical resemblance to and understanding of Ruby Turpin show her function as a kind of alter ego — that is, as metaphor. Again, however, Manley is less easily comprehended.

The most persuasive view would be to understand him as a principle of evil, as a Satanic figure whose malign intentions require no sociological or psychological justification. In his Bible Manley substitutes seduction for scripture. He is also somewhat unearthly, having many names and no known address: "I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long" (*Stories* 291), he explains. He has believed in nothing since birth, and his nihilism is thus a given rather than an acquired attitude like, say, the Misfit's. And like Satan, he does God's work in awakening Hulga to her own metaphysical pretensions. Flannery O'Connor, moreover, had attested to her belief in Satan as a real entity.[4] It may be sufficient, then, to attribute the unknown and mysterious qualities of Manley Pointer to his function as a Satanic figure.

Such a reading, though, is not wholly satisfactory. The story really presents no Christian or theistic alternative; there is no situation in which theistic values are set against the nihilism of Manley and the sentimentality of Hulga-Joy: The Bibles in the story hardly serve as spiritual counterpoint. Further, the text is silent on any constructive effects of Hulga-Joy's awakening. Moreover, we cannot say with certainty that Manley is a Christian's Satan, a designation that places him consolingly in a conventional religious framework. His unmotivated malice might also be seen as evidence of a more autonomous and powerful Manichean principal at work in the fictional world of O'Connor.[5] The unaccountable malice of Manley involves a dark and unarticulated dimension. Finally, it may be possible to see in this story a correspondence with some Greek tragedy, in which Manley Pointer acts as Hulga-Joy's *nemesis,* restoring her not to a vision of Christian redemption but to an understanding of her self-deceptions.[6] O'Connor's familiarity with Greek literature is clear from her letters, and certainly it was nourished by

[4]See, for example, her letter to John Hawkes in which she says that "the Devil can always be a subject for my kind of comedy...because he is always accomplishing ends other than his own" (*Habit* 367). Or again, "we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit...with his specific personality for every occasion" (*Mystery* 117).

[5]Frederick Asals states that "O'Connor seems to be an inveterate 'Manichean' " (*Imagination* 120).

[6]Cf. Northrop Frye: "The righting of the balance is what the Greeks called *nemesis*: again, the agent or instrument of *nemesis* may be human vengeance, divine vengeance, divine justice, accident, fate, or the logic of events, but the essential thing is that *nemesis* happens, and happens impersonally, unaffected...by the moral quality of human motiviation involved" (*Anatomy* 209).

her friendship with Robert Fitzgerald. The parallels between Oedipus and Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* confirm a classical influence. In any event, the metonymic relation posits a world view more perplexing than a metaphorical one.

The relations between O. E. Parker and Sarah Ruth in "Parker's Back" may be understood in several conflicting ways. It is possible to label their relationship as either metaphor or metonymy. On the one hand we can read the story as a strategy of metaphor, almost an allegory, in which the conflict between O. E. Parker and Sarah Ruth approximates a debate between the body and the soul or, better, between the material and non-material dimensions of creation.[7] In such a reading, Parker and Sarah are metaphors of their conceptual equivalents, and the story dramatizes a movement of these separate dimensions towards each other. More specifically, the physical O. E. comes to recognize in a vague but true way the sacredness of the non-physical that infuses physical creation. In her turn, the harder-to-budge Sarah Ruth makes several concessions to the physical, such as getting married and conceiving a child. Less abstractly and more in keeping with the standard O'Connor method, we can read the unlikely pairing of O. E. and Sarah Ruth as a metaphor for the power of grace. In spite of nearly irreconcilable differences they are bound together by the mysterious action of grace, an action to which O. E. responds more fully than his reluctant wife. However, the relation between the two may also be viewed metonymically. O. E. can be viewed as a driven prophet-artist, compelled to inscribe on his own flesh the symbols of his mysterious life only to have this irresistible drive and its expression ultimately rejected by the more spiritual, the more transcendent, the different Sarah Ruth.

As a metaphorical relation, O. E. and Sarah Ruth share the natural bond immanent in an erotic creation. Although this bond is augmented by intimations of grace, it is rooted in the physical. O'Connor makes it very clear that O. E. has always enjoyed the life of the senses, and that is only his inability to copulate with Sarah Ruth outside of marriage that converts him to the state of holy matrimony. We are told that Parker "had other women but he had planned never to get himself tied up legally" (*Stories* 511). In fact, his marriage follows quickly a thwarted seduction attempt. When Parker gets Sarah to ride in his truck but fails to get her to lie down with him in the back, she indirectly proposes by telling him to wait until they are married. Ignoring this condition he pushes ownard only to have Sarah Ruth knock him from the truck, and this convinces Parker "to have nothing further to do

[7]O'Connor suggest as much in her letter to "A" (*Habit* 594). See also Dennis Slattery's fine study of this story.

with her" (*Stories* 518). Then they marry and she becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy is only one indication that she has appetities of her own. When he brings her a basket of apples he observes that she takes "an apple quickly as if the basket might disappear if she didn't make haste" (*Stories* 515). When he tells her that he has tattoos on parts of his body that she can't see. "two circles of red appeared like apples in the girl's cheeks and softened her appearance" (*Stories* 512). And although she refuses to look at his tatooed flesh and prefers him dressed, that preference is granted an exception in the intimacy of "total darkness" (*Stories* 519). It is difficult to account for Sarah's desire to marry a man so unlike herself unless the prospect of life with a sensualist has a strong appeal; after all, O. E. "had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn't" (*Stories* 510).

In spite of this physical compatibility, the two clearly differ about the more metaphysical tattoos. This conflict is essentially over Parker's need to find symbolic representations for the mystery of his life. Sarah has no appreciation for or understanding of these inscriptions. When Parker asks Sarah to point out her favorite among the tattoos we are give this bit of dialogue:

> "Which [tattoo] you like best?"
> "None of them," she said, "but the chicken is not as bad as the rest."
> "What chicken?" Parker almost yelled.
> She pointed to the eagle.
> "That's an eagle," Parker said. "What fool would waste their time having a chicken put on themself?"
> "What fool would have any of it?" the girl said and turned away. (*Stories* 515).

For Parker these tattoos are far from foolishness. Although on the one hand they promote his seductive qualities and make available to him "the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before" (*Stories* 513), they also link him with a physical, erotic creation. At another level, moreover, these tattoos serve as his response to life in a mysterious, created universe. His viewing of the tattooed man at the circus changed a boy who "never before felt the least notion of wonder in himself" to one affected by a "peculiar unease" (*Stories* 513). His tattoos are an attempt to calm his unease by inscribing on hs body a symbolic record of his life.

Sarah Ruth's refusal to accept Parker's tattoos approaches a rejection of Parker himself. What she rejects is the essential mystery of Parker's life that he himself cannot comprehend but which he is compelled to express in

hieroglyphics, in figures that are the stamp of his significance. His tattoos are no more purely ornamental to his being than is physical matter to the total creative scheme. In Sarah's denial of O. E.'s deepest aspiration we see the failure of a metaphorical bond. For Parker the tattoos comprise the primary evidence that his life has meaning, that a metaphorical principle of immanence binds those designs to a larger, invisible reality. For Sarah, Parker's spiritual orientation is "lies and vanity" (*Stories* 529); for her, he is an "idolator" (*Stories* 530).[8]

Sarah's judgment, moreover, carries with it the authority of the divine. In intriguing ambiguity, O'Connor connects the eyes and power of Sarah with that of the Christ Parker tattoos on his back. The "all-demanding eyes" (*Stories* 522) of the Byzantine Christ are "eyes to be obeyed" (*Stories* 527). Obedience here is implied obedience to Sarah: "It seemed to him that, all along...what he wanted was to please her" (*Stories* 527). When he considers the harsh eyes on the Christ he makes an automatic association with Sarah Ruth's "sharp tongue and icepick eyes" (*Stories* 524). In fact, Sarah's "eyes appeared soft and dilatory compared with the eyes in the book" (*Stories* 524). The relations among Parker, Sarah, Christ are perplexing. In tattooing his back does Parker misread divine direction? Or are Sarah and Christ mistakenly aligned?

When Sarah Ruth scourges the tattooed face on Parker's back it seems O'Connor is vindicating Parker. Certainly this scene is a reenactment of Christ's persecution. Nevertheless, Sarah is linked to transcendent authority; she remains powerful and incomprehensible. She is called a "giant hawk-eyed angel" (*Stories* 512); she has Parker "conjured" (*Stories* 510); and hs union with her is a reluctant vocation: "he could not believe for a minute tha he was attracted to a woman like this" (*Stories* 517). The nature of their relation remains eccentric, or metonymic.

The story ends untypically for O'Connor. Generally she dramatizes an epiphanic scene at the end where the protagonist, at least implicitly, arrives at understanding or revelation, as in the case of Mrs. Turpin or Hulga-Joy. In "Parker's Back," however, the revelation comes at mid-story when Parker is flattened Moses-like before the burning tree and flaming shoes. It is an event that marks "a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and there was nothing he could do about it" (*Stories* 521). This momentous event, however, is compromised by the ending when Sarah Ruth

[8]Andre Bleikasten argues that the dispute between Sarah Ruth and O. E. concerns the legitimacy of representing the sacred in imges. Sarah Ruth speaks for the "radical otherness of the Law" (13). Bleikasten also notes that "ambiguity doggedly persists to the story's very end" (16).

denies him and sends him weeping to the living tree in the backyard. Sarah's implacability diminishes the authority of the earlier revelation. Awakening is not here an awareness of connection between the natural and supernatural, the physical and spiritual, but a testing of this metaphorical relation that fails.[9] Where the grandmother and the Misfit share an ultimate reality, Parker and Sarah Ruth do not.

Parker's plight poses an interesting parallel to Flannery O'Connor's.[10] Like Parker, O'Connor saw her mission as an attempt to "reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible" (*Mystery* 98). She has also suggested that the impulse to write, like Parker's need for tattoos, is inexplicable: "The more stories I write, the more mysterious I find the process and the less I find myself capable of analyzing it" (*Mystery* 87). As being tattooed "satisfied" O. E. for "about a month" (*Stories* 514), so for O'Connor writing was the activity that gave her life essential meaning. She writes a friend, "I never completely forget myself except when I am writing and I am never more completely myself than when I am writing" (*Habit* 458). For both, the activity is religious. Parker's Byzantine Christ corresponds with O'Connor's story about the tattooed prophet. Completed just weeks before her death. "Parker's Back" stands as a poignant last letter to the world and as a statement on her life's mission submitted to God. Without bitterness it presents a world view in which the profound human desire for significance remains unsatisfied: each story is an attempt to write the absolute metaphor, but ultimate meaning has no metaphor, only the continual displacing configurations of metonymy.

Works Cited

Asals, Frederick. "The Double in Flannery O'Connor's Stories." *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 9 (1980): 49-86.

____. Flannery O'Connor: *The Imagination of Extremity*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982.

Bleikasten, Andre. "Writing on the Flesh: Tattoos and Taboos in 'Parker's Back'." *Southern Literary Journal* 14 (1982): 8-18.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1957.

[9]In an earlier draft O'Connor actually ends the story with Sarah Ruth abandoning Parker. The final two sentences of this draft conclude as follows: "There he was leaning against the trunk of the pine tree, crying like a baby. She turned and went back to the house and began to make her preparations to leave" (unpaginated).

[10]Bleikasten notes the parallel between Parker's predicament and O'Connor's calling Parker an "artist figure...a comically distorted projection of the writer" (17). He speculates further that Parker manifests O'Connor's guilt for refusing to accept nature without embroidery.

_____. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature,* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Jakobson, Roman. "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasia Disturbances." In *Fundamentals of Language* 1. Ed. Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle. The Hague: Mouton, 1956, 55-82.

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.

_____. *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor.* New York: Vintage, 1980.

_____. *Mystery and Manners.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.

_____. "Parker's Back." Unpublished Draft. The Flannery O'Connor Room, Ina Dillard Russell Library, Georgia Collge, Milledgeville.

Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.

Slattery, Dennis Patrick. "Faith in Search of an Imge: The Iconic Dimension of Flannery O'Connor's 'Parker's Back'." *The South Central Bulletin* 41 (Winter 1981): 120-123.