

A black and white portrait of a woman with short, dark, wavy hair and glasses. She is smiling and looking slightly to the right. Her hands are clasped together in front of her. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Robert C. Evans

The Critical Reception of Flannery O'Connor

"Searchers and Discoverers"

The Critical Reception of Flannery O'Connor, 1952–2017

*Studies in American Literature and Culture:
Literary Criticism in Perspective*

Brian Yothers, Series Editor
(*El Paso, Texas*)

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“Searchers and Discoverers”

Robert C. Evans



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Rochester, New York

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With sincere thanks for the work of
Robert E. Golden, R. Neil Scott, Irwin H. Streight, and Daniel Moran:
“searchers and discoverers”

At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers. . . .

—Flannery O'Connor

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Introduction

FLANNERY O'CONNOR is one of the most studied of recent American authors. The number of book-length critical works dealing with her fiction amounts, at last count, to around eighty different titles, not including reference works, biographies, and other texts whose main purpose is not essentially analytical. Nor does this count include the many books in which O'Connor is a major figure but not the sole focus (books, say, that compare and contrast her works with writings by other authors). If such volumes were added to the total, the number dealing with O'Connor would surely amount to over a hundred. And, of course, O'Connor has been central to hundreds of doctoral dissertations and masters' theses. In short, a virtual O'Connor critical industry has arisen and flourished, so that the attention paid to some of her contemporaries seems spotty in comparison. Search for "Flannery O'Connor" as a subject in the Library of Congress Online Catalog, and 173 items instantly pop up. Do the same for Eudora Welty, and the resulting total is 121; for Katherine Anne Porter, the result is 65; for Carson McCullers, the total is 61.

O'Connor, in short, has long been one of the best-loved and most-examined American writers of the twentieth century. Fortunately, she has also been exceptionally well served by her two main bibliographers, Robert E. Golden and R. Neil Scott. Golden's work, *Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide* (Mary C. Sullivan contributed the material on Gordon) appeared in 1977 as part of an ongoing series of annotated bibliographies. By annotating numerous early critical responses, beginning in 1952 and concluding in 1976, Golden contributed valuably to O'Connor studies. His book's chronological structure allowed readers to trace the growing development of O'Connor's critical reputation. Unfortunately, Golden was not able to include indexes covering subjects or topics, nor was he able to deal with books in real depth. (An article of my own, "Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction: Major Trends in Critical Commentary," published in 2016 and prepared with Professor Golden's blessings, does index the topics his book surveys.)

In contrast to the space limitations Professor Golden faced, R. Neil Scott's *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism*, published in 2002, seems anything but constrained. Running to 1,061 pages, with massively detailed indexes of topics and much more, Scott's book is extraordinarily impressive. Clearly a labor of genuine love, this book is one of several lasting contributions Scott made to O'Connor

criticism. Yet even Scott's volume suffers from two shortcomings. First, it is organized alphabetically rather than chronologically. It thus provides no clear sense of how commentary on O'Connor developed, year by year, in the period following 1976. Moreover, while Scott had much more space than Golden to devote to discussing individual books, even *his* annotations of them are often not much longer than those of individual articles. In both the Golden and Scott texts, then, books tend to be somewhat shortchanged. Thus the longest, most substantial studies do not receive the detailed attention they deserve. And, of course, twenty-first-century books on O'Connor are inevitably outside the scope of both of these pioneering early texts. The same is true of another immensely valuable volume, which Scott coedited with Irwin H. Streight: *Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews*, which focuses on early articles usually published in newspapers and magazines. Likewise, Daniel Moran's recent book, *Creating Flannery O'Connor: Her Critics, Her Publishers, Her Readers*, also tends to survey early responses.

The present book, then, seeks to build on the preceding work by Golden, Scott, Streight, and Moran, both by providing much material not included in their works and also by offering a resolutely *chronological* overview of the development of commentary on O'Connor. This book seeks to meet these objectives in several ways:

- First and foremost, the main focus of the present volume is on the eighty or so major critical monographs and collections of original essays published about O'Connor since her death in 1964. I have chosen to focus especially on monographs while supplementing such coverage with less extensive references to representative articles.
- Second, the present volume is structured chronologically throughout. It tries to show how commentary on O'Connor, especially in monographs, has developed year by year from the earliest stages to 2017. It shows how changes in O'Connor criticism have reflected larger changes in the general critical landscape and in various critical approaches and methods.
- Third, the present book is also organized topically, showing how various critics have addressed specific aspects of O'Connor's works, including her artistry, her theological concerns, her historical contexts, and her treatment of such topics as region, gender, and race. (Where a specific topic is not mentioned in discussing a particular book, it is safe to assume that that topic is not explored extensively in that volume.)
- Finally, the present book also tries to give some sense of developments in O'Connor criticism over the past seventeen years (years not covered in Scott's massive bibliography), surveying

not only books published during that time but also representative articles, including nearly complete coverage of articles from the *Flannery O'Connor Review*, which began publication at the very start of the new century. The present book covers roughly three hundred items not included in Scott's annotated bibliography, and it also covers all the books on O'Connor in greater detail than Scott was able to provide.

- The most recent *MLA* (Modern Language Association) *International Bibliography* cites roughly 1,650 items published on O'Connor since 1952. Of those, about 220 are unpublished dissertations, dissertations later published as books, or dissertations partly published in the form of articles. Moreover, roughly thirty of the items listed by the *MLA International Bibliography* are clearly and mainly biographical (not critical or analytical) in focus. If those 250 items are deducted from the roughly 1,600 total items, the more accurate number of published critical pieces becomes around 1,400. Many of the items listed among that number, however, are reprints of previously published pieces. If we assume, then, that roughly 1,200 of the items indexed in the *MLA International Bibliography* are critical and analytical, then the present book covers around half of that total: over six hundred items altogether. Coverage in the present book excludes very brief items and notes, and it also excludes, for the most part, items that are narrowly focused on just one work by O'Connor. The present book also covers roughly a hundred items not indexed by the *MLA International Bibliography*. In sum, then, and this is the key point: the *MLA International Bibliography* lists under a thousand "relevant" items; *The Critical Reception of Flannery O'Connor, 1952–2017: "Searchers and Discoverers"* covers roughly seven hundred items altogether.
- My goal has been to fit as many specific facts about O'Connor criticism (*not* biography) as possible into the space available. I hope that almost every single sentence of this book reports some particular insight or idea. I have mainly been concerned with offering as much detailed information as possible in a clear, coherent fashion. My greatest hope is that "*Searchers and Discoverers*" will be a useful book to all the many "searchers and discoverers" among current students and scholars of O'Connor.

1: Aesthetics: Style, Form, Themes, and Characterization

F^{LANNERY} O'CONNOR always contended that her work's value depended far less on its messages or meanings than on its artistry. A text had to succeed—first and foremost—as *art* before it could successfully affect a reader emotionally or intellectually. Badly written work, she felt, was not worth reading, no matter how virtuous or well-intentioned its “meaning.” Despite her own very strong Christianity (particularly her Catholicism), O'Connor disdained anything merely pious or drippingly saccharine, flaws she found in much “serious” religious writing of her time and flaws she deliberately opposed in her own style and methods. Ideas and sentiments alone, she believed, no matter how admirable, could not make “creative writing” real art. The true Christian artist, O'Connor thought, had to be an *artist* first and foremost, not a mere religious propagandist. Too many Christian writers, she believed, were, indeed, simple religious partisans, and O'Connor thought obvious religious dogma, tricked up in ineptly written works, did more harm than good. Unskilled “Christian literature,” in her opinion, was not only mocked by real artists but also corrupted the tastes of Christian readers.

These views are hardly surprising: after all, O'Connor was learning her craft just when the so-called New Criticism began to dominate thought about creative writing. While working on her MFA, she owned a thoroughly marked-up copy of one bible of the New Criticism: *Understanding Fiction*, by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. This extraordinarily influential book followed the even more influential *Understanding Poetry*, also by Brooks and Warren. The New Critics (or “formalists”) believed that every word mattered, as did its precise placement in a carefully designed whole. O'Connor was a committed formalist. This fact hardly explains everything about her art, but it does explain much. Some of her best friends, best teachers, and staunchest advocates were not only New Critics but *leading* New Critics. These included Allen Tate and his wife, Caroline Gordon. Through them and such others as Andrew Lytle and John Crowe Ransom, O'Connor quickly became a member in very good standing in formalist circles. She valued the opinions of such people, and they valued her art. They worked hard to promote her reputation through positive reviews, inclusion in journals and books they edited, and access to fellowships and prizes they could help

bestow. They recognized that O'Connor's works were sometimes textbook examples of the kind of writing they valued.

Eventually, other kinds of theorists would embrace O'Connor almost as firmly as the New Critics had. Indeed, her ability to appeal to so many different *kinds* of readers is perhaps key to her enduring and ever-growing stature. But few other kinds of readers have cared about O'Connor's *style* and *forms* as formalists did (and still do).

O'Connor's Stylistic Traits

Commentary on O'Connor's stylistic distinctiveness was prominent in criticism almost immediately. In the mid-1950s, her writings were compared to Kafka's and were repeatedly called "grotesque"—perhaps the most often used adjective to describe her fiction. Critics noted how she juxtaposed humor and horror and united realism and symbolism. They stressed her use of distortion, farce, satire, violence, and irony—all in a prose often praised for crystal clarity (Golden 13–20). Her work combined not only comic wit with grim seriousness but also the bizarre with accurate observation (Golden 21–26). Commenting on *Wise Blood*, her first novel, William Goyen in the *New York Times* in 1952 praised O'Connor for using a "Tennessee-Georgia dialect expertly wrought into a clipped, elliptic and blunt style" (4). He continued that O'Connor showed "a fierceness of literary gesture, an angriness of observation, a facility for catching, as an animal eye in the wilderness, cunningly and at one sharp glance, the shape and detail and animal intention of enemy and foe" (4). An unnamed reviewer for the *New Yorker*, however, observed in a brief squib that *Wise Blood* exhibits a "dry, withered prose that suits her subject very well but makes the reader wonder if the struggle to get from one sentence to the next is worthwhile" (Scott and Streight 12; hereafter cited as SS). Likewise, John W. Simons, writing in *Commonweal*, said of *Wise Blood* that its "style is bare and almost reportorial. The author is, so to speak, nowhere in sight, a virtue which is perhaps overvalued in the contemporary novel" (SS 14). Isaac Rosenfeld, in a review titled "To Win by Default" in the *New Republic*, similarly complained that *Wise Blood* "is not a clear book to read . . . and most of the transactions are conveyed in a symbolism which does not derive from the underlying meaning of the novel, but rather works the other way, constructing its meaning as it goes along" (SS 17).

But perhaps the most important event from the mid-1950s for students of O'Connor was the 1955 publication of her first book of collected stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Reactions to this book often commented on O'Connor's style, as when John Cook Wyllie, writing in the *Saturday Review*, called her phrasing "deadpan, unemotional, economical, intense, [and] clinical" and praised O'Connor by saying, "the

gal can really write" (SS 33). Sylvia Stallings, reviewing *A Good Man* for the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, similarly praised O'Connor's stylistic ability to "lay hold of the significant detail," saying that her "poetic awareness is constantly receiving, selecting the illustration which gives us a man or woman or a certain kind of hot summer evening living and whole" (SS 35). *Time* magazine called the book's style "witheringly sarcastic and highly unladylike," concluding that "Flannery O'Connor packs a punch in her short stories," exhibiting "sheer sardonic brutality" (SS 36–37). In the *New York Times*, Orville Prescott singled out eight unnamed stories in particular for being "quite wonderful in a gruesome way," saying that O'Connor's ability to "bring a loathsome human specimen to repellent life is amazing." Prescott also said that O'Connor's "cold, precise, brutal style has the shocking power of a blow between the eyes" (SS 37). Writing in the *Times Book Review*, O'Connor's friend and mentor Caroline Gordon praised her "unerring eye in the selection of detail and the most exquisite ear I know of for the cadences of speech" (SS 39). Similarly, an unnamed reviewer for the *New Yorker* asserted that the "macabre air that hangs over Miss O'Connor's stories, heightening their effect without concealing their lack of depth, is intensified by her particular use of the English spoken in the South" (SS 41).

Louis D. Rubin Jr., already a prominent critic in 1955 when *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* appeared, argued that O'Connor's short stories were more successful than *Wise Blood* (a widespread verdict) and particularly praised the stories' effective use of dialogue: "Miss O'Connor has an outrageously keen ear for country talk. There is also considerable humor. The incongruous, the hilarious, the absurdly comic . . . are grist to Miss O'Connor's mill. She relishes the ridiculous," as, for example, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" ("Two Ladies" 678). This emphasis on often outrageous, even grotesque humor helped distinguish O'Connor from many other Christian writers, as well as from many other Southern women writers. Rubin noted, for example, how much she differed from the gentler Eudora Welty and the more sentimental Carson McCullers. He also distinguished her fiction from the more naturalistic work of Erskine Caldwell, a male Southern author she sometimes resembled. Rubin, like many other critics then and later, thought O'Connor distinctively combined a deeply serious Christianity with often bizarre and shocking humor, especially in "Good Country People" (679). Her trademark style was crucial both to her intended meanings and to her intended impact.

Many reviews of O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), commented on its style. Dorothy Nyren, in *Library Journal*, wrote that "Miss O'Connor writes in fits and gasps, and more as one driven by a moral need than as an artist" (SS 71). Orville Prescott, in the *New York Times*, began by proclaiming that "Flannery O'Connor, whose talent for fiction is so great as to be almost overwhelming, is a sort of

literary white witch. She writes with blazing skill about the most appalling horrors and sometimes makes them seem entirely real and perfectly natural" (SS 78), while Granville Hicks, in the *Saturday Review*, asserted that "Miss O'Connor tells the story with stark power, making every detail carry its full weight" (SS 84). An unnamed reviewer for the *Washington Post* praised O'Connor for "neatly juggling pathos and humor" and for showing that "a poetic imagination can always triumph over fact" (SS 87), and Coleman Rosenberger, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, said that O'Connor employed "much individual vigor and industry, occasional humor of sorts, and some arresting theological symbols" (SS 88). *Time* magazine suggested that O'Connor's "hard prose seems armed with staring baleful eyes" (SS 93). Reviews of *The Violent Bear It Away* were far more numerous than for either of O'Connor's first two books, suggesting just how prominent a writer she had now become.

Observations about O'Connor's style similar to the ones already quoted continued into the early 1960s. The word "grotesque" continued to appear, but so did "Gothic." She was often called both dark and darkly funny. Sometimes her works were seen as too predictably grim, too remote from the kind of capacious, sunny realism favored by many readers, who found her works excessively, obsessively satirical and ironic. Her humor was sometimes criticized as joyless, but the word that kept cropping up to describe her style was, again, "grotesque" (Golden 26–31). She was said to write with remarkable, unflinching, stunning directness. Her writing was called macabre, tragicomic, vigorous, and distinctly Southern in its diction, dialect, and dialogue. Her style was said to resemble those of Poe, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, and Faulkner and was thought to emphasize sudden insight, especially in her conclusions. Commentators noted her ability to combine pathos and comedy, the tragic and the absurd, and accurate description with a wry eye for the ridiculous (Golden 31–53).

As Melvin J. Friedman noted in 1962 in his article "Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction," many of her fellow Christians failed to recognize just how thoroughly orthodox she was. They were offended by the very stylistic toughness, outrageousness, and lack of sentimentality she most valued in her own work. Many Christians wanted writings that were obviously pious, didactic, and even saccharine—writings O'Connor steadfastly refused to supply. Instead, she chose a style both brutal and absurdly comic. Indeed, in 1963 Brainard Cheney, a friend and fellow Catholic, praised her for creating a new "brand of humor based on the religious point of view" ("Miss O'Connor Creates Unusual Humor" 645). Cheney—unlike some other Christians—understood and appreciated her stylistic motives and achievements.

But her works challenged not only conventional Christian readers but conventional readers of all kinds, including those whose views were fundamentally secular. Friedman noted that a

Flannery O'Connor story or novel is always the slowly paced, leisurely uncovering of a series of unusual people and circumstances. She seems always intent on at first disenchanting us—mainly through a systematic puncturing of the myth of southern gallantry and gentility—and then restoring our confidence when she has forced us to view her world on her own terms. She forces us to go through a complete Cartesian purgation; our minds are cleansed of all previous notions. . . . We almost willingly “suspend disbelief” in the face of impossible happenings to unlikely people. This is part of what we must go through when we read most fiction writers. But never have I felt the compulsion to reject everything and start over again that I feel with Flannery O'Connor. (236)

He particularly cited *Wise Blood*, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and *The Violent Bear It Away* as works by O'Connor requiring this kind of fundamental purgation, this need to erase preconceptions if one hoped to understand both her methods and her meanings.

Most critics soon perceived that O'Connor wanted to discomfort her readers. She wanted to challenge all sorts of literary and social prejudices and compel readers (even those who largely agreed with her, but especially those who did not) to reexamine everything they thought they knew about nearly everything, including fiction's purposes and effects. She therefore often unpredictably blended comedy and tragedy in language that was clear, sharp, ironic, sardonic, and frequently laugh-out-loud funny. Few other Christian writers before her had been so obviously unsentimental and unsparingly satirical.

After O'Connor died prematurely on August 3, 1964, commentators increasingly began to celebrate her achievements. *Flannery O'Connor: A Memorial*, published as the Winter 1964 issue of a small journal, *ESPRIT*, was totally devoted to her work. Edited by John J. Quinn, this collection remains exceptionally valuable. It contains contributions by scores of commentators, some very eminent. Their commentaries make many points echoed repeatedly by other students of O'Connor's writings. Sometimes they amount to only a few sentences; sometimes they go on for several pages. Because almost all are untitled, in citing them I will generally cite the Quinn volume as a whole. (The full roster of writers is listed in the Works Cited section of the present volume.) Quinn's book reveals how often early readers agreed, but it also highlights their occasional disputes.

A sampling of comments from Quinn's volume suggests how O'Connor's style was initially perceived. It is called strange and frequently frightening, and on the very opening page the word “grotesque” already makes its first appearance. As noted above, this is perhaps the term most often used to describe O'Connor's writings, but critics have frequently

debated its meaning. They have also disagreed about whether her grotesque style is artistically justified or merely a kind of cheap, shocking sensationalism. This latter debate is already mentioned in Quinn's collection (17), and the word appears frequently throughout the book (23, 28, 31–32, 37, 45, 52, 74, 85). It appears just as often today. Most critics still agree that O'Connor's grotesque style and themes help make her work both distinctive and effective.

Other common assertions about O'Connor's style appear in the Quinn volume. Commentators note that her writing is largely traditional rather than experimental (3, 74), that she often implies beauty by emphasizing ugliness (4, 32, 37–38, 43, 45), and that she masterfully employs colloquial Southern diction, especially in dialogue (6–7, 55, 65). Her characteristic uses of humor and irony are noted (7, 16, 19, 27, 51, 53, 59, 61, 65, 75, 90), along with her ability to combine comedy and tragedy (8) and to write in ways that might seem "cold" (9), "hard" (22), "sardonic" (55), "shocking" (74), and "brutal" (90), but also "flat" (107) rather than sentimental (9, 26, 36, 55, 69–70). Her phrasing is called classical (17), intellectually dry (17), "striking" (76), and convincingly, unflinchingly realistic (18–19, 35, 60), especially in emphasizing violence (24, 90). Yet her stress on material reality is also said to imply intense concern with ultimately supernatural (especially religious, Christian, Catholic) dimensions of existence (27, 63), so that sometimes her works resemble allegories or morality plays (60, 72).

Besides offering general assessments of O'Connor's style, critics in the Quinn volume praise many specific stylistic features of individual works. John Clarke commends her "knack for the pithy simile" in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (6), just as he also admires the way she blended "comic and pathetic qualities" in her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (8). Francis X. Connolly praises the "intensely actual world" she had conjured up in *Wise Blood* (27), and he also appreciates how, in stories such as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "the voice of the hidden narrator is almost always ironic" (27). Elizabeth Hardwick extols O'Connor's "detached," "local," and "severe" humor in "A Good Man" (51), while Francis L. Kunkel praises the "comic breadth" of her work, asserting that "The Artificial Nigger" ranges "from the ludicrous and howlingly funny to the grim and quietly ironic" (59). Nearly every commendation of a particular work implies some broader praise; the stylistic traits critics admire in one text are usually ones they admire throughout O'Connor's works.

Of course, not all the commentary Quinn collected is entirely uncritical. O'Connor is faulted for alleged narrowness (22), lack of technical innovation (33), lack of truly major achievement (33), and sometimes off-putting dogmatism (33). Her emphasis on "mutilation, violence, and horror" could be seen as unintentionally humorous or as otherwise overdone

(36, 78), and she is sometimes accused both of unconvincing characterization (77) and of writing novels that are less successful than her stories (33, 83). But despite Quinn's admirable willingness to include some nay-saying, most of his contributors praise O'Connor highly, and other commentary from 1964 and 1965 reiterated points already made by Quinn's contributors and by earlier critics. Her writing was now increasingly being compared to the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and Nathaniel West. Her style was sometimes seen as intentionally plain, simple, honest, and concrete, although tinged with burlesque elements and paradoxes. Her humor was increasingly emphasized, but so was her stylistic austerity and her tendency to shock, and some critics even called her writing deliberately exaggerated and melodramatic, often to good effect (Golden 70–87).

The 1965 publication of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O'Connor's second (and posthumous) collection of stories, gave reviewers another opportunity to comment on her style, although many tended to sum up her recently concluded life instead. *Kirkus Bulletin*, in a remark typical of much commentary on O'Connor's phrasing, said that her "bits of rich, sharp humor proceed naturally from a vision sharp and whole" (SS 216), while Charles Poole, in the *New York Times*, stressed once more the "grotesque" nature of her writing (SS 219). In the *New York Times Book Review*, Richard Poirier suggested that O'Connor "may be the only writer of English or American fiction in this century whose style, down to the very placing of a comma, is derived from a religious feeling for the simplest actualities" (SS 227). An unnamed reviewer in *Newsweek* claimed that while "the surface of the stories delineates the sound and feel of life with absolute fidelity, the tensions gather underneath" (SS 232); Robert Osterman, in the *National Observer*, praised her "austere, elliptical style and almost conversational tone" (SS 259); and James P. Degnan, in *Commonweal*, after listing many vivid phrases, argued that these "brilliant, odd, absolutely original details grow directly from a brilliant, odd, absolutely original vision" (SS 264). In a long review in the *New Yorker*, Naomi Bliven noted "how briskly Miss O'Connor's language moves her narrative" and said that "her style is an unmannered and exact translation of things into words" (SS 286), while the prominent critic Irving Howe, in the *New York Review of Books*, called O'Connor's phrasing "firm, economical, complex" and praised her ear for dialect and her "slyly amusing" satire of genteel Southerners. But he also faulted some of her works for unevenness of style (SS 291–92).

Important evidence of O'Connor's growing recognition appeared in 1966 in a short volume, *Flannery O'Connor*, by Stanley Edgar Hyman, a highly influential critic. Limitations of space meant that Golden could devote only five sentences to summarizing the book; here I am able to treat this key volume in more detail. Hyman calls attention to O'Connor's

typical blend of comedy and tragedy (9), her use of “garish and diverse material” unified by “a heavy reliance on symbolism” (11–12, 20–21, 29–30), and her effective foreshadowing (12–13, 22–23). He also notes her frequently “sparse” language (23), her often memorable if sometimes shocking imagery (28–29, 40), and her debts to non-Southern authors, such as Nathaniel West and Fyodor Dostoevsky (43). He insists that she be judged primarily as a writer, not merely as a religious propagandist (44), and he argues that her real strengths included “the apocalyptic violence, the grotesque vision, and the vulgarity” of her works (44). He praises her symbolic use of oaths in *Wise Blood* (12), the same novel’s careful use of echoes (12–13), the unifying symbolism of *The Violent Bear It Away* (20–21), and that book’s “sparse and functional” language (23).

Yet even Hyman can find faults. He considers O’Connor sometimes too ironic, as in the ending of “Good Country People” (17); too melodramatic, as in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (18, 28); too simple, as in “The River” (19); too obvious, as in “A Stroke of Good Fortune” (19); too unrestrained, as in “The Comforts of Home” (28); and too long-winded, as in “Revelation” (18). He sometimes also faults her characterization (27), her symbolism (28), and her overreliance on deaths as ways to end her stories (45). Similar faults have been alleged by other critics, early and late. But Hyman and many of the other best literary minds of his generation greatly admired O’Connor’s writing despite their occasional misgivings.

Indeed, in 1966 another brief monograph, this one by Robert Drake, titled *Flannery O’Connor: A Critical Essay*, appeared. Drake reiterates many common claims about O’Connor’s style, but he also compares her stories both to the satirical cartoons she had drawn in college and to the vivid, unconventional writings of John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins (42). While Hyman considered O’Connor a better novelist than short-story writer (43–44), Drake thinks just the opposite (18). This issue is another perennial topic of O’Connor criticism, although Drake’s view seems more popular than Hyman’s.

Further evidence of O’Connor’s growing stature appears in a major critical anthology from 1966: *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor*, edited by Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson and including contributions from some of the most significant literary scholars of the day. Although most contributors focus on matters other than style, Friedman’s introduction notes that O’Connor’s methods were not especially experimental (9, 13, 15), that she often relied on understatement (14), and that critics almost always cited her emphasis on “grotesques surrounded by a gothic eeriness” (17). Friedman also contrasts O’Connor’s “chaste, unimposing sentences” with Faulkner’s often “prolix style,” and he quotes a French critic’s comments on O’Connor’s tendency to employ “cruel fantasy, black humor, and burlesque horror”

(30). O'Connor, in other words, was already beginning to develop an international reputation. Also in the Friedman-Lawson volume, Sister Mary Bernetta Quinn tries to define more precisely O'Connor's much-remarked use of "the grotesque." Quinn argues that O'Connor often depicted things that were "*distorted*," "*incongruous*," and "*ugly in appearance*," noting in particular her habit of comparing humans to animals (164; Quinn's italics).

Comments in the Friedman-Lawson volume discussing particular works by O'Connor often mention her style. Assessing "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Irving Malin argues that the story's emphasis on "claustrophobia, violence, and crooked sight" employed those traits as "emblems of the grotesque" (115). He goes on to observe how various stories in the collection of which that work is the title piece symbolize self-love "in terms of cold imprisonment, violent movement, and odd vision" (118). Also discussing "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Sister Mary Bernetta Quinn more generally calls O'Connor "a writer who can join laughter and pain simply, . . . who knows that tragicomedy and life are synonymous, as she portrays in stylized yet at the same time realistic prose" (174). Finally, Friedman himself offers particularly interesting comments about O'Connor's style, as when he claims that the

only peculiarly twentieth-century technique she uses with any regularity is what critics have labeled indirect interior monologue: Miss O'Connor penetrates the minds of her characters but usually preserves the objectivity of the third person and the correctness of the syntax. There is nothing of Flannery O'Connor's consciousness in these monologues, only the consciousness of her characters, yet the sober controls exerted on the language are her own. (196)

The Friedman-Lawson volume proved so helpful that it was republished, with additions, in 1977.

Among the stylistic comments by other critics published in 1966 were observations concerning O'Connor's use of reversals, her juxtaposition of opposed images, her subtle symbolism, and her lack of nostalgia. By 1968 her work was also being compared both to the Old Testament and to surrealist writings, and critics noted her use of sun and nightmare imagery and her close attention to her own verbal artistry (Golden 87–103). By 1968, yet another critical anthology had appeared. Edited by Robert E. Reiter and titled *Flannery O'Connor*, it reprints ten essays, some of them offering insightful comments on O'Connor's style. Her friend Brainard Cheney argues that she had

invented a new form of humor. At least I have encountered it nowhere else in literature. This invention consists in her

introducing a story with familiar surfaces in an action that seems secular, and in a secular tone of satire or humor. Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical and the action appropriate to it comes with a surprise, an unaccountability that is humorous, however shocking. The *means* is [*sic*] *violent*, but the end is Christian. (3)

Lewis A. Lawson, in another essay in Reiter's collection, also comments on O'Connor's style, asserting that if

the content of *Wise Blood* seems bizarre and ludicrous, the rhetoric only reinforces that appearance. Extremely incongruous images, oxymorons, and synesthesia convince us that here indeed is a strange new world. Objects are like humans and animals, human beings are like animals and insects, and animals are like human beings. . . . Her world frequently is that of a dream, with characters who transpose themselves, with aimless action endlessly performed, with bizarre mixtures of the known and the unfamiliar. (60–61).

If Reiter's 1968 collection was valuable, even more so was Carter W. Martin's substantial monograph from that same year. This work—the first truly book-length study of O'Connor—was titled *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*. Martin argues (as others had already, and as O'Connor herself agreed) that her style was indebted to Hawthorne and Poe (7). Martin also emphasizes her crucial “use of symbolism, the grotesque, humor, and irony” (8), but especially symbolism (139–51). His discussion of grotesque and Gothic elements (152–88) is particularly helpful, and he, like others, seeks to distinguish her grotesque, Gothic style from superficially similar traits in works by Truman Capote and Carson McCullers, finding O'Connor more serious and impressive than they and comparing her style instead to that of such other Southern writers as Faulkner, Welty, and Warren. His book insightfully discusses her focus on “(1) deformity and feeble-mindedness, (2) illness and disease, (3) animal imagery, and (4) machine imagery” (177) and includes fine chapters on her use both of “comic and grim laughter” (189–214) and of “satire and irony” (215–42). “Like Swift,” Martin argues, “O'Connor was moved by a savage indignation that man so often failed to achieve”—or even strove to achieve—“the reason and charity he is capable of” (217). His book not only offers sustained, perceptive attention to O'Connor's style in general but also discusses the styles of particular works. He finds “strong allegorical overtones” in “Judgement Day” (23), the use of symbolic objects in *The Violent Bear It Away* (81), a “ubiquity” of peacock symbolism in “The Displaced Person” (138), and a pervasive, complex use of fire symbolism in “Parker's Back” (141).

Other work from the late 1960s sometimes discussed O'Connor's style in original or unusual ways. Critics in 1968 note, for example, her use of such devices as (1) parables (Golden 103); (2) "non-Christian fables and myths" (104); (3) imagery of hunger, thirst, and silence (107); (4) allusions to Dante (109); (5) vision as a key metaphor (113); (6) symbols associated with water, sex, and coffins (119); and (7) archetypes associating the land with mothers and the sky with fathers (126). During the final two years of the 1960s, then, O'Connor was the subject of more than ninety separate articles, two collections of essays, and a first full-length monograph. By nearly every measure imaginable, she was now recognized as an important American author. Trouble, however, was just around the corner.

This was because 1970 saw the publication of Josephine Hendin's highly provocative book, *The World of Flannery O'Connor*. Hendin's iconoclastic comments on O'Connor's style, though brief, are worth quoting at some length:

O'Connor is best when writing like a devil of reduction, most convincing when most literal and least convincing when consciously symbolic. . . . [When] using the devil's voice for satire [as in *The Violent Bear It Away*], O'Connor becomes the devil herself. . . . [Much] of O'Connor's work tends to remain literal and never reaches a symbolic or even allegorical plane. . . . [She tends to use] the symbolizing process in reverse: a foreshortening of meaning that reduces significance instead of expanding it. What is immense and expansive is made to appear minute. O'Connor creates a language for a universe filled with shrunken objects, smelling remarkably like a chicken coop. (20)

According to Hendin, "O'Connor clearly intended 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' to *be* tragedy and *Wise Blood* to burlesque" tragedy, but Hendin thinks both works typified O'Connor's failure to create any real interest in her characters as genuinely human. Instead, Hendin argues, O'Connor "conveys a sense of consuming meaninglessness" that ultimately leaves readers cold (148). Hendin's monograph was the first of a number of book-length attacks on O'Connor's style.

Far more complimentary was a 1971 volume titled *The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor*, by Leon V. Driskell and Joan T. Brittain, who discuss O'Connor's biblical allusions (11) and her stylistic debts to other writers, including Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Nathaniel West, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and especially François Mauriac (14–32). Mainly, though, Driskell and Brittain emphasize themes rather than techniques. Other writers from the early 1970s did, however, occasionally comment in new ways on O'Connor's style, as in observations concerning

her black humor (Golden 133), her clever use of clichés (133), her metaphorical and symbolic use of death and fire (134), her emphasis on extremes to make her points (135), her exploitation of comic surprises (138), and her emphasis on images of sun and sight (148).

The 1971 publication of O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, which included some of her little-known early works, gave reviewers a chance to see her short fiction as a whole and comment on its general stylistic traits. Walter Clemons, writing in *Newsweek*, called O'Connor "one of the funniest American writers," although he also faulted her for occasional "melodrama" (SS 431), while Thomas A. Gullason, writing in the *Saturday Review* and noting that the *Complete Stories* offered twelve works appearing "in book form for the first time," also noted that in "her richest work she fuses comedy and tragedy, and the idiom and manner of her society" (SS 433). Doris Grumbach, in the *New Republic*, observed that O'Connor's "conviction that some of the truest voices are the most brutal has led some readers to call her fiction exaggerated. Others just say it's powerful" (SS 436). Alfred Kazin, in the *New York Review of Books*, wrote that one "particular feature of O'Connor's style is that a sentence is exact—not showily, as is the nature of rhetoric, but physically, the way different parts of a body fit each other" (SS 438), while in the *Library Journal*, John Alfred Avant observed that "at her distinctive best she used her strange humor and her carefully arranged clichés to build a powerful dark vision" (SS 445).

Several monographs, all published in 1972, testified to the strong and growing interest in O'Connor's fiction and sometimes commented on her style. David Eggenschwiler's *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor* notes mainly an "extreme stylization . . . [that] suggests allegory" (12), but in one particularly striking passage he observes that O'Connor "persistently represents cities as the domain of the devil (with similarities to Sodom and Gomorrah and to Augustine's earthly city), as a nightmare world, and as an insipid place full of lonely and flat people" (29). Eggenschwiler's volume was joined Gilbert H. Muller's *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque*, Sister Kathleen Feeley's *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*, and Miles Orvell's *Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*. Muller's volume, though brief, is very helpful in its comments on O'Connor's phrasing. He notes her emphasis on the "grotesque" and "absurd" (5) as well as on comic "caricature," "comic rhythm," comic stereotypes, and the grotesque "fusion of the animate and inanimate, the human and non-human" (10–11). He argues that O'Connor frequently uses exaggerated, sensational, and shocking violence because such violence raises issues relevant to "the moral and religious order of the universe" (77)—a claim almost all O'Connor commentators would support. Muller contends that her

need to make violence surprising accounts for the deceptively slow pace of many of [her] stories. As in southwestern humor, a tradition with which she was familiar, Miss O'Connor assumes the role of an impartial and seemingly detached narrator relating a tale which is filled with bizarre and violent action. The deliberately controlled, matter-of-fact omniscience works against the exaggerated effects of the violence to create an incongruity of tone which lends itself to the grotesque. (80)

Muller calls O'Connor's descriptions "terse and severe, tending always toward the impressionistic, in which landscape is distilled into primary images which render a picture of a violent physical world" (82).

In an especially arresting passage, Muller notes how O'Connor

invents a virtual directory of names which suggest ambiguities, contradictions, and obsessions. Among the more memorable characters who are thus caricatured are Tom T. Shiflett, the shifty and shiftless prankster in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and his prospective mother-in-law, Lucynell Crater, whose name reflects a wasteland environment; . . . [other targets include] Joy Hopewell, the cynical and atheistic cripple in "Good Country People," who by the end of the story is bereft of joy, hope, and well-being; and Haze Motes, the prototypical grotesque hero of *Wise Blood*, whose befogged vision is corrected only through the blaze of crucifixion. Caricature, whether in the form of name humor or broad stereotype, is properly grotesque, for it gets at the heart of absurd reality. (10)

Feeley's *Voice of the Peacock* argues that O'Connor's writings emphasize "bizarre situations and grotesque figures that shock one into thought. Never [in O'Connor] is the grotesque an end in itself" (7). Feeley claims that O'Connor "despised sentimentality" (33) and sometimes used symbols to suggest "spiritual alienation" (67). Commenting particularly on *Wise Blood*, Feeley praises O'Connor's ability "to deal with mystery (the touchstone of romance)" as well as "manners (the raw material of comedy)" (69). Feeley thus links two of O'Connor's favorite themes with two of her typical genres.

The final book from 1972, Orvell's *Invisible Parade* is so often cited as a classic of O'Connor criticism that it was republished under the title *Flannery O'Connor: An Introduction* in 1991. Orvell offers clear, sensible, sensitive readings of the details of specific works. Commenting on O'Connor's style, he notes her balance of "fact and mystery" (19) and her typical emphasis on satire (33). He claims, in fact, that "the techniques of satire are most successful in O'Connor when they are used to support a consistently comic, ironic characterization." Such, he thinks, "is

the case in her handling of certain would-be intellectuals, like Asbury in 'The Enduring Chill,' Julian in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,' and Calhoun in 'The Partridge Festival'" (47). Besides offering his own insights into O'Connor's phrasing, Orvell summarizes many ideas about O'Connor's style that most critics still take for granted.

Just the opposite is true of Martha Stephens's deliberately unorthodox 1973 monograph, *The Question of Flannery O'Connor*. Like Josephine Hendin, Stephens stimulates debate, partly by being so obviously confrontational. Concerning style, Stephens openly prefers O'Connor's most obviously comic tales, such as "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Good Country People," and "Parker's Back" (15), terming them "tautly controlled stories . . . full of exuberant comedy" and "'stretchers,' parable-like tall tales in the tradition of frontier and southern country humor" (15–16).

Stephens thinks the comedy in most of O'Connor's stories, however, "is much more caustic and more tense": something "sinister is at work all along, preparing the reader to have the grin wiped off his face" (16). Stephens faults the tone, spirit, design, phrasing, and implied outlook and attitudes of many of O'Connor's tales, including stories that other critics routinely consider among her best works. She contends that although "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" contains "some of O'Connor's best comedy," it "ends in a highly unsatisfactory way" because "the failure of the final scene—and hence of the story—seems to result from the fact that a tonal shift that occurs midway through the story finally runs out of control." This tonal problem, Stephens argues, "exists in one degree or another in nearly all of O'Connor's fiction": readers are never "sure how to 'take,' how to react to, the disasters that befall her characters" (17–18). Here and elsewhere, Stephens seems deeply troubled by comedies that strike her as finally unfunny: how, she asks, can one laugh about the death of a baby, as in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"? (18).

Reading Stephens can be both exasperating and deeply stimulating. O'Connor's admirers will find themselves continually "arguing" with Stephens, disputing point-by-point her many objections. This, in fact, is one reason her book is so valuable. Rather than merely affirming accepted ideas, Stephens continually forces us to rethink (and thereby, perhaps, strengthen) standard defenses. If O'Connor's admirers sometimes treat O'Connor as a saint, then Stephens is the devil's advocate.

Most of Stephens's objections have less to do with O'Connor's style than with her personality and ideology. Stephens is precisely the kind of secular humanist O'Connor often mocks. She cannot understand O'Connor's seemingly dark, often judgmental views. Answers exist to nearly all the criticisms she levels against O'Connor (criticisms, mainly theological, to which we will later return). Although those answers satisfy many readers, they are unlikely to satisfy Stephens and others like her.

Her book remains, then, an especially stimulating (or, for some, infuriating) volume.

Quite different is Dorothy Walters's 1973 volume, titled, simply, *Flannery O'Connor*. Walters explains how and why O'Connor was not a radically experimental writer. She notes that actions in O'Connor's works typically "proceed in orderly sequence to evident conclusions; there is no confusing manipulation of point of view, no violent wrenching of chronology, no playful jiggling of the interactions between exterior event and interior response" (22). Walters discusses O'Connor's stylistic penchant for tragicomic satire (25), and, in one especially efficient sentence, notes how O'Connor often employs "revelations of inner vanity, suggestive names, preposterous situations, banalities of dialogue, and reductive imagery" through which she "emphasizes the alarming discrepancy between inner image and outward impression" (27). Walters thinks O'Connor's "'puffed up' figures provoke our smiles as their follies are laid open before us; but, inwardly, we experience a slight dis-ease as we wonder if our own natures, too, may not be" similarly inane (27).

Walters offers many shrewd, sensible comments about O'Connor's style. She notes how "details of dress" suggest insights into characters and how O'Connor often uses dialogue to present "a kind of allegorical contest between opposing points of view" (28). Walters also memorably notes that O'Connor often uses

her pervasive irony to achieve a highly satiric picture of a folly-ridden world. The spectacle of humanity revealed to us in all its weakness and pride, the constant presentation of figures flattened almost to caricature, awake in us an infinite sense of superiority. At the moment of disaster, however, our satiric targets are suddenly transformed [in] to victims of outrageous calamity, and esthetic distance is abruptly shortened. We then witness a surprise reversal from the essentially comic to the overwhelmingly serious, and we are suddenly sobered by a terrible recognition with the smiles frozen on our faces. (29)

Walters is especially good on O'Connor's stylistic use of the grotesque (29–33), which creates a specifically "*Christian tragicomedy* where disaster is meaningful and man can still claim—or reject—his ancient spiritual heritage as the child of God" (39). And she discusses how O'Connor uses characters' conversations to present "a kind of allegorical contest between opposing points of view" (28). She mentions, for example, the banal conversations between Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard in "A Circle of Fire" and between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People." Walters comments that "Similar banalities pass for conversation in the doctor's office ('Revelation') or on the train (*Wise Blood*). The speakers rely on clichés instead of ideas, and they construct