

A Search for Redemption and Mystical Union: An Analysis of O'Connor's "Greenleaf" and "The Lame Shall Enter First"

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor is one of the modern spiritual writers and is identified with labels like Catholic writer, Hillbilly Thomist, Southern novelist, grotesque stylist etc. She deserves another equally convincing label—O'Connor the Mystic—her claim to be considered a mystic being based on the many instances of the description of mystic experience and the operation of grace in her motifs. Flannery O'Connor highlights her religious outlook of God in a nontraditional manner and allows others to obtain grace through her literature. Though faith underpins all of her work, she does not use it in a didactic manner as a medium to preach. Her short stories can be viewed as a search for redemption in Christ. These stories are quests which involve the hero's recognition of his vocation and end in his eventual ordination. There is an initial rebellion against belief, a crisis in faith, and a resolution in a 'moment of grace' in her stories. For O'Connor, the very act of writing was itself a redemptive process. Though O'Connor's works follow the features of Eastern as well as Western mysticism, the present study concentrates on the Christian mystical elements in O'Connor's "Greenleaf" and "The Lame Shall Enter First" as O'Connor was a Catholic writer.

Key Words : Redemption, dark night of the soul, intimacy with God, revelation, vision, divine grace, repentance, spiritual awakening.



Mysticism is popularly known as becoming one with God or the Absolute, may also refer to the attainment of insight in ultimate or hidden truth, and to human transformation supported by various practices and experiences. The mystic is not content to know about God, he longs for union with God (*Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* 1). On analysing the literary contributions of O'Connor, she can be placed in the group of mystics who wrote devotional works which depict the union of the soul with the divine. Her characters belong to the supernatural realm of spiritual sublimity and a natural flow of

mystical thoughts which can be seen in her entire works. It can be seen that many extraordinary mystical graces are showered upon her characters in various ways throughout their life stories. Though the mystic elements in her literature surpass human understanding it gives beauty to her narrative world.

“The whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul” says O’Connor in her work, *The Habit of Being* (100). Here darkness represents the loss of divine light. In mysticism the absence of God leaves a void in which the soul roams in falsehood and illusion. “The soul is conscious of a profound emptiness in itself, a cruel destitution.... It seems itself in the midst of ... miserable imperfections, dryness and emptiness of the understanding and abandonment of the spirit in darkness” (*Mysticism* 391). In the view of O’Connor, the dark night of the soul is essential in the growth of spiritual awareness. In the end, the dark night fades and the soul moves toward oneness with God.

O’Connor’s fictional works provide us with the glimpses of mystical element in common people. Each of her protagonists manifests a hidden talent for intimacy with God. O’Connor depicts each person as descending into the dark ditch of unbelief finally to emerge into God’s wonderful light. She sees disbelief as one path to God. The deformities of her characters form an opportunity to redeem their displaced souls and achieve grace. Though many of her characters suffer from spiritual incompleteness, Godly restoration is available to those who wish to transform themselves spiritually. Her stories are filled with mystical experience, from the visionary to the apparitional and even the prophetic. Its great emphasis is on interiority, the grace that transforms a human being into a new person, forming a new life. The mystic is in a spiritual journey in which he passes through self-formation and spiritual awakening. He may get various guides in his way to redemption as agents of grace. In its purest form mysticism is the grace of God—the presence of the divine.

In Flannery O’Connor’s view, grace is not at all the remuneration for the action of human beings, but it is an undeserved gift from God. While analysing the stories of O’Connor, it can be seen that many of her characters accept grace suddenly and miraculously without performing any good deed. Though at first glance, O’Connor’s stories are small in scope, they centre on revelation and provide certain religious vision. As God uses the marginalised people as his instrument of grace, O’Connor chooses marginalised characters for her stories. She uses children, criminals and freaks as Christ figures or the agents of redemption to receive God’s grace. They introduce grace into everyday life and provide opportunity to other characters to recognize the presence of grace. Though grace is offered always, the characters can accept it only when they collapse under natural circumstances. Though her characters try to escape grace, they cannot do so.

The story “Greenleaf” depicts the reception of unmerited grace by a selfish old lady Mrs May who thinks badly of everyone around her including her two sons, Scofield and Wesley. She considers Greenleaf family as inferior to them in social standing and intelligence and compares it with her own family. When she sees their farm and milking parlour, she thinks that they did not gain it themselves and was paid for by the Government. She blames others for her problems. Though she hates Mr Greenleaf, she hired him for fifteen years as her two sons are cruel and disrespectful. Mr and Mrs Greenleaf were Mrs May’s tenant farmers and Mr Greenleaf is a simple uneducated man. He does not work quickly or efficiently and seems ignorant, but he could raise two successful sons O.T. Greenleaf and E.T. Greenleaf. The Greenleaf twins, O.T and E.T run their farm together as a team. When the black worker says that they never argue Mrs May doesn’t accept it. “Hmp. I expect you just never heard them quarrel” (*Everything That Rises* 516). In her opinion it is an impossible fact.

Mrs May is awakened in the middle of the night by a bull at her window. “He appeared again in the same spot, chewing steadily, with a hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns” (501). We can see the bull as a Christ figure in the story. When it chews under Mrs May’s window, it wears a crown of thorns. It symbolizes Christ’s calling of Mrs May to belief. Mrs May is the only character in the story

who wishes the bull penned up or shot because she wants to keep it under control. It is an indication of Mrs May's lack of faith as she does not like to let God into her life. The control of the bull by Mrs May is symbolic of her authority over the Greenleafs.

Another symbol used to indicate Mrs May's lack of faith is the lack of sunlight. She finds out that the bull is owned by O.T and E.T Greenleaf. When she looks out of the window, "The cows were grazing on two pale green pastures across the road and behind them, fencing them in, was a black wall of trees with a sharp saw tooth edge that held off the indifferent sky" (511). Here the sun is blocked by the trees to indicate Mrs May is not allowing God into her life. She considers herself as a good Christian woman, but in reality she does not believe in any religion. In contrast, Mrs Greenleaf prays every day and is a religious woman. Mrs May considers Mrs Greenleaf as a white trash who keeps her children dirty. She thinks that her prayer-healing ceremonies of putting the newspaper clippings in a hole in the ground and then wallowing and praying over them are the action of a crazy woman. She thinks that it is better to wash her children's clothes rather than spending time in praying. Mrs Greenleaf's prayer session foreshadows Mrs May's death. When she spends her time in prayer with her legs and arms spread out, Mrs Greenleaf shrieks "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (506). In the end of the story the bull charges into Mrs May goring her with its horns. She dies when the horns of the bull pierced her heart. "One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip" (523).

The grace of God comes to Mrs May through Greenleaf family. But she is not a willing recipient of grace. She could run her farm successfully with the help of Mr Greenleaf though she knew nothing about farming. She never acknowledges the fact that the farm only became successful only after the arrival of Mr Greenleaf and his family. She is killed by the bull, and through her death she achieves grace. "She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed; the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky" (523). She had the expression of someone whose sight has been restored but finds the brightness of the light unbearable. "She seemed, when Mr Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (524). Her whispering into the bull's ear could be the word of acceptance or a prayer of repentance. She may realize her shortcomings and thinks that she is not in the path of God. With her death Mrs May starts a new life in Christ, a mystical union.

In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Rufus Johnson craves the union with the eternal and brings a message of judgement and annihilation to Sheppard and his son. When he was invited to stay with Sheppard and his son Norton, Rufus tries to evangelize the young child Norton. Sheppard is disappointed with his son's lack of intelligence and provides no guidance for his son though he needs it after his mother's death. He thinks doing good works for those outside the family will fill up the emptiness left within the family and suggests that with intelligence anything is possible. He is selfish and instead thinks that Norton is selfish and advises him, "If you stop thinking about yourself and think what you can do for somebody else, then you'll stop missing your mother" (*Everything That Rises* 597). He has high belief in his own importance. Though he has no actual faith, he considers himself Christ-like. We can understand this from Rufus' comment to Norton about him: "He thinks he's Jesus Christ!" (609). Though Sheppard's name suggests someone who guides others, he is unable to do it.

Rufus Johnson had been raised on the fringes of the society by his grandfather "in a shack without water or electricity" (596). But he has high intelligence and is a strong believer in the Bible. Sheppard ridicules him for his religious tendencies and thinks that he will be able to teach the boy to change his life by appealing to his intellect. But Rufus claims, "I believe it! ... Even if I didn't believe it, it would still be true" (627). Sheppard tries to reveal Rufus Johnson's foolish belief in Christianity and bought a special shoe for his club-foot. He tries to win over Johnson by his good deeds and considers himself as the saviour of Johnson. When Sheppard offers him a special shoe, he refuses to wear it because

he needs to have his physical handicap. He seemed to think that to get into heaven it is a requisite. Johnson has the capability to outsmart Sheppard and he responds, "Save yourselves Nobody can save me but Jesus" (624). Johnson does "not so much accept charity from Sheppard, as share what he knows—the gospel—with the hungry and the poor in spirit" (*Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring* 54). He teaches Norton about hell and heaven and tries to provide grace to both father and son.

Johnson remains marginalised from mainstream social norms in every sense. His grandfather had disappeared to the hills. He fits into O'Connor's archetype of "backwoods prophets in the secular city, who carry some overt manifestation of God's 'grace' to the modern world" ("Flannery O'Connor: Backwoods Prophets in the Secular City" 210). He eats out of trash cans and lives on the street. He has a kind of deviant behaviour which disturbs Sheppard and is also marginalised because of his club-foot. His message is directed at Sheppard: "Satan has you in his power ... not only me. You too" (*Everything that Rises* 627). His message does not find fertile ground with Sheppard, but it affects Norton so deeply that he commits suicide to join his mother in Heaven.

Sheppard denies the existence of hell and Rufus replies that those who deny hell deny Jesus. He says that the dead people go there and burn forever. Then Norton asks his father where his dead mother is. "Is she there burning up?" (611). Then Sheppard gives the answer, "No, no ... of course she isn't. Rufus is mistaken. Your mother isn't anywhere. She's not happy. She just isn't" (611). He had never told his son that his mother is in heaven as he did not believe in heaven or hell. Hence he tells Norton that his mother does not exist. This also reveals his lack of faith in religious matters.

While Rufus and Norton read the Bible, Sheppard asks Rufus to put the Bible away because he does not believe in it. Sheppard tells him: "That book is something for you to hide behind. It's for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet and figure things out for themselves" (627). This incident also reveals his lack of faith. Sheppard advises Rufus that it is not good for an intelligent man to believe in the Bible. Johnson gets angry and to prove his belief, imitating the biblical prophet Ezekiel tears out a page of the Bible and eats it. "The boy raised the Bible and tore out a page with his teeth and began grinding it in his mouth, his eyes burning" (628). He says that he will never eat earthly food again. His identification with Ezekiel shows his association with a prophetic tradition. He brings the message of the Lord to both Sheppard and Norton. He achieves grace as he believes in Jesus and shares the truth of the Bible.

An analysis of O'Connor's stories reveals that the problem of women or the issue of discrimination based on race and class relations is not the central theme of her stories. Her concern and focus are on spiritual matters which unite human beings with the Divine. Though her stories deal with the grotesque characters and violent actions, the purpose behind all these motifs is to humble the powerful and proud characters and make them realize their helplessness and emptiness before the Almighty and prepare them to receive the grace of God. In O'Connor's prophets the method of holy renewal through destruction could be discerned. According to the critic Coles, in the stories of Flannery O'Connor, "she pursued her main business of storytelling as a means of showing the depth of God's mysteries" (*Flannery O'Connor's South* 32). As a mystic, O'Connor tries to reveal the mystery of God through her writings and tries to show that Christian suffering is revelatory. Her stories clearly suggest that people can receive grace of God even when they do not deserve it.

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Biosketch



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