

## ABSTRACT

COOK, JONATHAN NEIL. The Carnavalesque Laughter of Flannery O'Connor. (Under the direction of Dr. Barbara Bennett.)

Critics often point out the incongruity between Flannery O'Connor's grotesque humor and her self-proclaimed Christian purpose. This paper uses Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque to argue that O'Connor's use of grotesque humor is essential to her purpose. Both O'Connor and Bakhtin distrust all-encompassing ideologies that claim to authoritatively categorize and explain existence. In the carnivalesque laughter created by the grotesque realism of Rabelais, Bakhtin finds a way to undermine worldviews that claim ultimate authority. Similarly, O'Connor uses concrete and grotesque, but humorous images to displace her readers' expectations and undermine their natural desire to explain existence at the expense of mystery. By opening her readers up to mystery, O'Connor prepares them to see the world, and the people in it, as they truly are: complex, flawed, and beautiful.

**THE CARNIVALESQUE LAUGHTER  
OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR**

by

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## Biography

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## Chapter One:

### Introduction

Flannery O'Connor herself made clear what she intended her fiction to accomplish. In her essays and letters she expressed her desire to use the grotesque to shock her readers into a realization of the true nature of their world and themselves. While O'Connor's stated intentions cannot be doubted, some critics find it hard to reconcile her Christian purpose with the extreme violence and grotesque humor that are pervasive in her work. Christina Bieber Lake points out that "[r]eaders have always stumbled over the dead bodies in O'Connor's fiction" (14). Louise Blackwell rightly recognizes that O'Connor "is revolted by the vulgarity of ignorant human beings, but ... violently opposed to the self-righteous person, whether he is a believer or a disbeliever in the Scheme of Salvation" (64). Andre Bleikasten puts it another way: "[w]herever she looks, she discovers nothing but meanness and ugliness, horror and corruption" (56). In recounting a couple of O'Connor's seemingly blasphemous moments, Marilyn Arnold states, "[n]o one dares to write like that, at least not in the name of Christian Redemption" (244). Bleikasten concludes that the revulsion, horror and blasphemy found in O'Connor's work undermine her Christian purpose and represent "Christian truths gone mad" and "the incandescent fragments of a shattered system of belief" (70).

Along with her extreme use of the grotesque, O'Connor is also admired for her distinctive humor. It can be argued that most of O'Connor's humor is dependent upon her grotesque imagery and that this dependence is part of what makes her humor so distinctive. Much of O'Connor's humor derives from the obvious gap between her characters' conceptions of themselves and her descriptions of them. That humor can be found in the

folly of these broken and disgusting creatures is troubling, but there is no doubt that many, including O'Connor herself, have found this humorous.

For a Southern female in the middle of the twentieth century, O'Connor is unusual in her grotesque humor, but for most humor theorists, even seemingly mild forms of humor are considered aggressive:

There are some very few theorists who regard humour and laughter as being a benign instinct of human beings, primarily amiable and genial in nature. The majority view, however, as is well known, contests this, and regards laughter as primarily derisive, a vestige of snarling attack and the whoop of victory. (O'Neill 69)

O'Neill goes on to point out that "Plato held humour to arise from delight in the suffering of others; Aristotle felt that the humorous is to be found in some defect, deformity, or ugliness in another" (69). This belief in the aggressive nature of humor continues through Hobbes, who, "in his *Leviathan* . . . defined laughter as a kind of 'sudden glory' at the misfortune of another" and through to "our own century Bergson's *Le Rire* of 1900 sees humour essentially as a punishment inflicted on the unsocial or at least as a castigation of stupidity" (O'Neill 69).

J. P. Steed asserts that while most superiority theories (theories that interpret humor as a display of dominance or aggression) of humor are "essentially alienating," Bergsonian humor is "essentially assimilating" (300). He rightly insists that O'Connor's humor is not simply aimed at her characters, but that the same rigidity that makes her characters so humorous and frightening can easily be perceived by and related to by the reader. For Bergson, the "principal trait of the . . . comic figure is inflexibility" (Steed 301). Any displays of inflexibility in an individual or group trigger a purely intellectual response of

laughter in the observer. Bergson posits “a momentary anesthesia of the heart” to explain the cruelty of responding with laughter to another’s misfortune (Bergson 118). “This social *function* of laughter, concludes Bergson, is to remove the inflexibility which is its object, through humiliation and ridicule” (Steed 302).

Steed explains how O’Connor draws her readers in with the comic inflexibility of her characters and then turns her readers’ assimilating laughter on themselves. According to Steed, O’Connor combines “[t]he 'comic violence' that takes place in the story . . . with the 'mysterious shock' created by the story" to make us "recognize the presence, or the real threat of the presence" of the "flaws and vices" that we find so shocking in her characters within ourselves (312-13). Steed shows that at the beginning of “Good Country People,” for example, “the reader laughs *with* Hulga” at “Mrs. Freeman’s and her daughter’s inflexibility with regard to marital matters and social propriety” (308). As the story progresses and the humor “gradually zeroes in on Hulga as its primary source,” Steed claims that the reader’s laughter becomes “the laughter of an imagined group” (309). “We, as readers, assume that other readers . . . will find Hulga’s inflexibility as ridiculous as we do; and indeed, we rely on this group complicity for our laughter” (Steed 309). In this way, Steed claims, the reader attempts to correct Hulga’s inflexibility, but “the gradual revelation of Manley’s deception” of Hulga and the reader redirects the laughter towards the reader (309). “The inflexibility and lack of self-awareness that we perceive in Hulga, we also perceive in ourselves, or at least within our imagined group. Thus, as our laughter increases, so does our uneasiness, and the Bergsonian effect of the humor crescendoes” (Steed 309). By arguing that O’Connor’s humor is essentially Bergsonian, Steed is able to show that the grotesque and horrible aspects

of her humor are essential to her corrective purpose and therefore not in opposition to her Catholicism.

While Steed correctly notes O'Connor's ability to create a sense of identification with her characters in her readers, her humor is not Bergsonian in a strict sense. O'Connor's readers do indeed laugh at her characters, and, in as much as they see themselves in her characters, laugh at themselves, but her use of humor is more nuanced than Bergson's theory of laughter as social correction allows for. A more satisfactory explanation of the sense of identification that Steed notices in O'Connor's grotesque humor can be found in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque.

John Parkin broadly defines Bergson as "an aggression theorist," "Freud...as a release theorist" and Bakhtin as "a thinker who tried...to combine the two" (140). Parkin asserts that Bakhtin's idea of "carnavalesque laughter involved an enormous release of tension and an aggressive denunciation of established ideas in an ambivalent matrix of praise and abuse which defied linear logic" (140). Parkin considers Bergson's laughter to be most akin to satire, which he defined as "a punishing laughter which applies a standard to [the victim's] performance, appearance, mentality or equipment" (51). On the other hand, Bakhtin's carnivalesque is closer to Parkin's idea of parody, the focus of which "represents an inversion of a standard whereby the bad actually becomes the good, the ugly the beautiful, while the stupid or the abject are praised or elevated" (51). While for Bergson humor is society's way of assimilating one who has gone astray, "Bakhtin sees laughter as a means by which the oppressed elements in Medieval society maintained their cultural identity and expressed their hostility to the ideology imposed on them" (Parkin 91). This is the key difference between humor as Bergson sees it and Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque humor: the carnivalesque

does not criticize one ideology to build up another. Laughter was not directed toward any specific institution, but “it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology” (*Rabelais* 94).

For Bakhtin, the very notion that any person or group could claim to have a monopoly on truth, or possess a complete explanation of existence, was absurd. According to Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Bakhtin believed that his generation, the generation of Russians coming of age during the Russian Revolution, was “presented with unusual dangers and unique opportunities” that created “particularly favorable conditions for study of the relativity of cultural systems” and “of the holes in the discursive walls erected by cultures to order their religions, laws, and genres” (297). As a product of his age, Bakhtin is obsessively “concerned with the breakdown of borders of all kinds” and is fascinated “by unusual combinations, mixings, the interpenetration of elements regarded at other times or by less heterodox contemporaries as mutually exclusive” according to Clark and Holquist (296). These “unusual combinations” that come about from the mixing of cultures often are the seeds of grotesque and comic images and situations. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin found a writer who lived in a tumultuous age much like his own and explored the complexities of the clash of cultures in humorous and grotesque tales. Bakhtin built around *Rabelais* a theory of the comic grotesque that finds its roots in the complexity and incomplete nature of human existence.

Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque is an extension of the atmosphere that appeared during carnival in the Renaissance. According to Bakhtin, carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms,

and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (199)

Carnival was characterized by grotesque parodies of official Church ceremonies and lampooning of high-ranking officials, as well as by general revelry. This was the people's way of asserting themselves against the seriousness and inflexibility of the ruling class. For Bakhtin, the dominant institutions of a society represent a false sense of completeness that emanates from a denial of the messy physical reality of life. Laughter, which is born from the incongruity between the official story and reality, and expressed through carnival, is a corrective to the fear and oppression that are brought about by a discourse that posits itself as supreme.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explores the idea of carnival and its literary equivalent, grotesque realism. To Bakhtin, according to Clark and Holquist, "the grotesque is the expression in literature of the carnival spirit. It incorporates what for him are the primary values: incompleteness, becoming, ambiguity, indefinability, noncanonicalism—indeed, all that jolts us out of our normal expectations and epistemological complacency" (312). In Bergson's theory, humor is society's reaction to an aberration. For Bakhtin, humor originates in society's inability to take successfully into account all aspects of existence. Both types of humor use an aberration as the focal point, but Bergson's theory is essentially negative, and Bakhtin's is essentially positive. Bakhtin believes that laughter, rather than being simply a tool for assimilation, is an expression of joy that comes from a realization that the world is too complex to be controlled and understood by one's oppressors. For Bakhtin, the grotesque is a physical manifestation of the falsehood of worldviews that purport to explain existence.

The key to Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism is an emphasis on concrete reality as opposed to ideological abstractions. According to Bakhtin, "[t]he essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19). Bakhtin's antidote for lofty idealism, which often leads to oppression, is a concrete expression of existence as it really is, as opposed to as it is imagined by a priest or politician. Rabelais' emphasis on defecation, sex and eating serve as a shocking reminder and celebration of physical reality. In Rabelais, the physical, or "bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" (Bakhtin 19). Rabelais' characters are endowed with massive appetites and body parts, expressing the "leading themes of . . . fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance" (Bakhtin 19). These images do not elevate an individual above the rest of society, but ground the individual in the physicality of all people. "Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic 'economic man,' but to the collective ancestral body of all the people" (Bakhtin 19). For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque serves as a concrete expression of the unity of the physical world against posited ideology that ignores the static nature of society and existence and, as a result, threatens the freedom of the individual.

Flannery O'Connor's grotesque images, when viewed in the light of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, can be seen as an extension of her emphasis on the concrete. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Wallace Stevens provides his modernist perspective of what art should look like: "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure." Stevens' schema is rooted in the Romantic and Modernist tradition that elevates human imagination over the material. According to Christina Bieber Lake, "O'Connor proposed an

entirely different set of ingredients” (25). First, for O’Connor, art must be concrete (Lake 25). O’Connor believes that “in order to find . . . the image of ultimate reality,” the artist “penetrates the concrete world” (*Mystery and Manners* 157). God, according to O’Connor, reveals himself in the physical world and abstract ideologies cannot explain the deep truths of existence. She states, “[f]or my part I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and the physical really are, then I will know what God is” (*Collected Works* 953); Lake points out that, for O’Connor, “[s]ince God reveals himself incarnationally—in the person of Christ and through his people and not in an abstract theorem—fiction should do the same” (29).

O’Connor’s fiction is, many believe, obsessed with the ugliness of the world and of human beings. She refuses to gloss over her characters’ physical weakness: she focuses on a teenager’s pimply face, a woman’s missing leg, or a head that looks like a cabbage. There is a fine line between the humorous and the grotesque, and O’Connor skillfully straddles this line, using the grotesque to accentuate her humorous images and humor to heighten her reader’s experience of the grotesque.

While some may interpret O’Connor’s focus on the unpleasant side of humanity as nihilistic, her concrete, ugly images are an integral part of her conception of the function of art. Lake claims that, in addition to being concrete, fiction, for O’Connor, must displace the modern reader’s tendency to elevate intellect and reason above the physical world: “The grotesque is O’Connor’s ultimate way of employing the method of the Incarnation to defy modern dualism” (Lake 36). O’Connor displaces the modern mind in three ways. First, she “draws attention to the body. Physical abnormalities—especially disabilities—serve as constant reminders of our embodiment, even to a culture that would rather ignore these bodies” (Lake 36). Second, her “grotesques defy the modern effort to attain conceptual

purity, to live in a world wherein all mysteries are explained” (Lake 36). And finally, “by representing the part of reality that cannot be tidied up and explained away, the grotesque in O’Connor’s fiction functions to displace characters (and readers) from the illusion of the autonomous self” (Lake 37).

During the Renaissance, Rabelais’ humor targeted the Catholic Church because the Church crafted the official narrative. In the same way, O’Connor’s humor reveals the limitations of two of the dominant narrative makers in her society: institutionalized racism and classism and secular humanism. However, like the carnivalesque, O’Connor’s grotesque humor does not undermine merely specific institutions, but all forms of ideology that try to circumscribe existence or claim unbounded authority. It may seem strange that someone so devoted to the Catholic faith would be distrustful of the ability of ideology to explain reality, but O’Connor’s religion did not claim to possess a monopoly on truth. As Melissa Simpson points out, “O’Connor . . . saw and accepted the faults of the Catholic Church and, from time to time, entertained doubts about her faith” (52). In a letter to Alfred Corn, O’Connor states that “[w]here you have absolute solutions . . . you have no need of faith” (*Habit of Being* 477). O’Connor would not deny the existence of absolute truth or the truth of the revelation found in the Catholic Church, but she would deny that any person could clearly define all of existence, and she distrusted anyone who claimed to have completed such a task.

The central focus of O’Connor’s grotesque humor is the prideful nature of human beings. Simpson concludes that “[m]ost of her stories follow a pattern: a character who is consumed with himself or herself, yet still hungers for a fulfillment that O’Connor felt only God could provide, encounters a turning point in which an epiphany is possible and grace is offered” (52). For O’Connor’s characters, pride manifests itself in their own personal

ideologies. For example, in “Revelation” Ruby Turpin creates a hierarchy of all people, including herself. She leaves no room for anything that exists outside of her ideology or that reveals that her ideology is incorrect. She labels grotesque anything that does not fit into her conception of existence, just as the reader sees Ruby Turpin as grotesque. This incongruity is humorous but, as Steed has shown, O’Connor turns the tables until her readers see themselves and the inflexibility of their own worldview reflected in Mrs. Turpin. Just as a posited and inflexible ideology is destructive to the other, it is also destructive to the self. The refusal to adapt ideologically and to accept physical reality results in being disconnected from the world and from other people, the two conduits through which O’Connor believes God can be experienced.

O’Connor and Bakhtin posit laughter as a corrective to the oppression and fear that inflexible ideology can create. “Absolutely central to Bakhtin’s notion of carnival is the principle of laughter,” claims Coates, who insists that there is “a strong conceptual bond in Bakhtin between laughter and the motif . . . of Christian love, or *agape*” (134). This bond expresses itself in relation to fear. For Bakhtin, “Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter” (*Rabelais* 54). It is “a form of enslavement more profound than any external force of oppression because of its ability to invade man’s soul” (Coates 135). Laughter “liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (*Rabelais* 105). In the light of carnival laughter, dogmatic ideology cannot be taken seriously, even if it is the ideology of one’s own self-importance: Bakhtin’s conception of “*agape* represents a refusal to claim one’s own ‘givenness,’ or closure, within the event of being. According to him, such a claim leads to spiritual death” (Coates 137). The practitioner of Christian love

and carnival laughter “overcomes a soul-destroying tendency to live for himself and retains his openness to the other, and to being in general” (Coates 137).

O’Connor’s use of grotesque humor is not, therefore, antithetical to her Christian faith or purpose, but also it is not didactic or tendentious. When viewed in light of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival laughter, O’Connor’s use of grotesque humor can be seen, instead, to subvert individualism and selfishness by using grotesque and humorous imagery that concretely illustrates the incompleteness of human knowledge and the interconnectedness and divinity of the physical world. Rather than teaching a lesson, the experience of O’Connor’s fiction is the lesson. Her use of grotesque humor facilitates an experience of the carnivalesque that simultaneously relieves fear and creates an openness to others and the physical world.

## Chapter 2: “Revelation”

“Revelation” is perhaps O’Connor’s most straightforward indictment of humanity’s tendency to create all-encompassing worldviews that attempt to explain God’s work in the world. In “Revelation,” O’Connor focuses on the harm these all-encompassing worldviews can do to individuals who overestimate their ability to perceive the overall order of the world. The carnivalesque in “Revelation” acts as a corrective to the sin of pride and breaks through as a healing force that destroys the yoke of inaccurate and inadequate dogmas and hierarchies.

Ruby Turpin is the protagonist of “Revelation” and the story is told from her perspective. O’Connor’s first description of her is that she is “very large,” so large that she makes the doctor’s office waiting room she brings her husband to seem “inadequate and ridiculous” (*Complete Stories* 488). Right away O’Connor symbolizes the grotesque nature of Mrs. Turpin’s ego through her grotesque physical size. She is too large to fit comfortably into a waiting room that, while small, presumably is adequate for most patients. The second thing O’Connor describes about Mrs. Turpin is that immediately after entering the room “she took in all the patients and sized up the seating situation” (488). This is an indication of Ruby’s need to classify and judge her neighbors. Ruby, as a respectable white woman, considers herself more worthy of a seat than any child or man—simply because of her color, sex, and socioeconomic position. The first person she sees is “a blond child in a dirty blue romper,” who she decides “should have been told to move over and make room for the lady” (488). She tells her husband to sit down, and he does “as if he were accustomed to doing

what she told him to” (488). The only other man in the room, who is described as “a lean stringy old fellow,” Ruby thinks is either “asleep or dead or pretending to be asleep so as not to get up and offer her his seat” (488). After sizing up the old man, her “gaze settled agreeably on a well-dressed gray-haired lady whose eyes met hers and whose expression said: if that child belonged to me, he would have some manners and move” (488). Ruby latches on to this lady as the only one in the waiting room who is in her social class.

At this point most readers can sympathize with Ruby’s situation: she is stuck in a tiny waiting room with no place to sit. Surely the little boy could at least be encouraged to make room for Ruby. The fact that the narration comes from Ruby’s perspective and elicits our sympathetic attitude towards her is an important element of O’Connor’s method. The narrator does not guide the reader’s interpretation of the story; the events themselves reveal their meaning. O’Connor’s inclusion of concrete details contrasts with Ruby’s and the narrator’s interpretation of events to reveal the complexities of existence and undermine Ruby’s attempt to situate herself above others. This contrast between concrete reality and Ruby’s interpretation creates irony and humor, but O’Connor deftly treads the fine line between humor and pathos to create a character that the reader identifies with. O’Connor starts with a concrete foreshadowing of Ruby’s overreaching by showing that she is too large for the room, but balances this with the pathos of Ruby’s situation. As the story progresses, O’Connor’s use of irony increases until the concrete finally breaks into Ruby’s fantasy.

Throughout the opening pages of “Revelation,” O’Connor expresses Ruby’s desire to live in a world devoid of complexity and ambiguity through her need to control the world around her. She controls her husband and decides that if she were the little boy’s mother, she would make him move and if she were in charge of the doctor’s office, she would empty the

ashtrays more often. When a seat opens up for Ruby in the waiting room, we are confronted with the concrete reality that Ruby, as much as she judges other people, cannot control her own body. O'Connor writes that "Mrs. Turpin eased into the vacant chair, which held her tight as a corset. 'I wish I could reduce,' she said, and rolled her eyes and gave a comic sigh" (489). When the stylish lady responds with "Oh, *you* aren't fat," Ruby replies "Ooooo I am too . . . Claud he eats all he wants to and never weighs over one hundred and seventy-five pounds, but me I just look at something good to eat and gain some weight" (490). The image of Ruby's "stomach and shoulders [shaking] with laughter" further suggests the fact that even Ruby's body rebels against her desire to categorize herself (490). According to Bakhtin,

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits; it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. (288)

The fact that Ruby wants to "reduce" reveals her desire to limit herself and limit her interaction with the world, but her body rebels. Ruby's interactions with other people require that she be limited. She cannot devour the world at the expense of others. The narrator's comparison of the waiting room chair to a corset is a concrete image that highlights the natural limits of the individual self. Ruby's body, on the other hand, exhibits nature's tendency to expand beyond her boundaries. Ruby is ashamed of her body and is afraid it is out of control. To compensate, she attempts to bring order to other aspects of her life. For O'Connor, a desire for order is not evil and Ruby Turpin is not an evil character.

Ruby exhibits the necessity of limitations in society, but she also exhibits the harm that a slavish adherence to false limitations can cause. She extends her desire for order into a control of other people and a false sense of her own uniqueness and importance.

Throughout the waiting room scene, Ruby creates an absurd hierarchy of being, and this is highlighted by the presence of a comic double. In the waiting room scene, Ruby gradually reveals her character by pointing out to herself how she is better than the other people in the room. When she sizes up Mary Grace, whose face is “blue with acne,” the narrator points out that “Miss Turpin herself was fat but she always had good skin” (490). Ruby classifies the small child’s mother and grandmother as white-trash, and then admits that “[s]ometimes at night when she couldn’t go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn’t have been herself” (491). She imagines that Jesus tells her that she can “either be a nigger or white-trash” (491). After pleading for Jesus to let her wait until another spot opens up, she says “All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one” (491). Ruby then imagines that Jesus “would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (491). From Ruby’s perspective, there is nothing worse than white-trash, but her racist and classist attitudes are comically mirrored in the white-trash woman. After Ruby describes to the waiting room how she is “tired of buttering up niggers” so that they’ll pick cotton for her, the white-trash woman announces “Two thangs I ain’t gonna do: love no niggers or scoot down no hog with no hose” (494). Ruby prides herself on how clean her hogs are, but the white-trash woman’s comments reveal the inherent absurdity of Ruby’s attempt to keep clean hogs. Her hogs live on pristine concrete slabs, separated from the filth of the earth, but as the

white-trash woman implies, clean hogs are still hogs, and no amount of soap and water will change that.

To contrast with the mood of anxiety and judgment in the waiting room, O'Connor introduces an African-American courier, who is relaxed and seems unfazed by the schemes and judgments of the women. In Bakhtin's terms, the courier can be seen as a representative of the carnival folk. He is subject to the social and economic rules that the white people in the waiting room represent, but he subverts their expectations by exhibiting poise and a buoyant grace that contrasts sharply with the rest of the room. His entrance is heralded with a "grotesque revolving shadow" that passes "across the curtain behind [Ruby] and [is] thrown palely on the opposite wall" (494). This is simply the shadow of the courier's bicycle wheel and its description as grotesque is ironic because it is the only ominous or freakish thing about the courier. The contrast of the shadow on the walls of the waiting room mirrors the contrast that the "very black" courier makes with the white people in the room (494). Ruby finds the courier grotesque simply because he is black. She has a racial bias against him, but the fact that she would consider a "neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black," to be fundamentally beneath her in God's hierarchy shows that she is a racist (491). The absurdity of this view is illustrated by the description of the courier:

He was chewing gum slowly, as if to music. He set the tray down in the office opening next to the fern and stuck his head through to look for the secretary. She was not there. He rested his arms on the ledge and waited, his narrow bottom stuck out, swaying to the left and right. He raised a hand over his head and scratched the base of his skull. (495)

The courier's rhythm and dexterity are refreshing compared to the uptight posturing, swollen ulcers and acne of people in the waiting room. When Ruby tells the courier that if he pushes a button it will summon the nurse, he responds without malice, if not without sarcasm: "Is that right?" the boy said agreeably as if he had never seen the button before" (495). We get the impression that he is humoring Ruby, but the narrator does not hint at this and Ruby certainly misses it. Through the narrator we only see how gracefully the courier moves and how deftly he handles the situation. Ruby's words reveal an ugly condescending attitude that is mirrored by the white-trash woman who says "They ought to send all them niggers back to Africa," after the courier leaves (495). Ruby weakly defends the courier by saying "There's a heap of things worse than a nigger," but her true feelings come through when, as an answer to a suggestion by the white-trash woman that African-Americans should be sent back to Africa, she says "They wouldn't want to go. They got it too good here" (495).

Ruby's defense of the courier elicits a strong reaction from Mary Grace: "the raw-complexioned girl snapped her teeth together. Her lower lip turned downwards and inside out, revealing the pale pink inside of her mouth" (495). Mary Grace has an animalistic response to Ruby's hypocrisy. Ruby feels that Mary Grace is "looking at her as if she had known and disliked her all her life—all of Mrs. Turpin's life, it seemed too, not just all the girl's life" (495). This shocks Ruby and she silently says, "Why, girl, I don't even know you" (495). This denial mirrors Peter's denial of Christ in the tension and confusion surrounding the Crucifixion. Mary Grace's name links her to Christ, whose mother was Mary and who, O'Connor believed, was the physical manifestation of God's Grace. In denying Mary Grace, who Ruby feels has an ugly disposition as well as an ugly face, Ruby is denying Christ and his work in the physical world. Mary Grace, like Ruby, is physically

large and grotesque, expanding past the boundaries assigned to her by her physical surroundings. She is also ill-tempered and rude, transgressing her mother's and society's rules of decorum. The grotesque description of Mary Grace's body and personality rivals that of any of O'Connor's characters, yet O'Connor makes it clear that she likes "Mrs. Turpin as well as Mary Grace" (*Habit of Being* 577).

The tension between Ruby's world of categories and decorum and the grotesque represented by Mary climaxes when Mary Grace hits Ruby in the face with her *Human Development* textbook. Ruby is in the middle of thanking Jesus "for making everything the way it is" when the book strikes "her directly over her left eye" (499). The surprise of the attack and the absurdity of Ruby's exclamations of thanks make the scene humorous, but the viciousness of Mary Grace's attack is extremely grotesque. Ruby's "raw face came crashing across the table toward her, howling. The girl's fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck" (499). Mary Grace's attack causes Ruby's vision and perspective to skew. First, her vision narrows, and she sees "everything as if it were happening in a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope" (499). Then Ruby's vision reverses, and she sees "everything large instead of small. The eyes of the white-trashy woman were staring hugely at the floor. There the girl, held down on one side by the nurse and on the other by her mother, was wrenching and turning in their grasp. The doctor was kneeling astride her, trying to hold her arm down" (499-500). At her most hypocritical, Ruby is given a violent vision of reality. Ruby sees Mary Grace being held down and violently subjugated by her mother, the nurse, and the doctor, because she has transgressed society's rules. Mary Grace's attack on Ruby is inexcusable, but O'Connor clearly suggests that Mary Grace may be a messenger from God. Ruby notices that Mary

Grace's eyes seem "a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air" (500). Looking directly into Mary Grace's face, Ruby finds that there is "no doubt in her mind that the girl [does] know her . . . in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition" (500). She asks what Mary Grace has to say to her and waits "as for a revelation" (500). Mary Grace says "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (500). Ruby is devastated by this and she seems to recognize that it is from God. Later, while tending to her hogs, she asks God, "'What do you send me a message like that for?' . . . 'How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?'" (506). O'Connor calls Ruby "a country female Jacob" (*Habit of Being* 577). Just as Jacob physically wrestled an angel, Ruby wrestles with Mary Grace and discovers that she is truly wrestling with God. Ruby acknowledges the intrusion of the complexities of the physical world and of other people into her hierarchy of existence. Her imagined conversations with Jesus and her rigid categorizations of the classes are destroyed by a physical encounter with a *Human Development* book, which might symbolize the complexities of the physical world.

For Bakhtin, "[t]o degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place" (206). Ruby Turpin's new birth comes in the form of a vision. After the attack, she is tending to her hogs and wrestling with the notion that God may be calling her a hog. Clearly, she is frustrated by the idea that the hierarchies that she had created to explain her place in the world have failed. "'Go on,' she yelled, 'call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom'" (507). She receives only her own

echo for a reply. When “[a] final surge of fury shook her and she roared, ‘Who do you think you are?’” she is granted an epiphany; her question is “returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood” (508). She instantly gains perspective. Ruby sees her husband’s truck in the distance and notices that it “looked like a child’s toy” and that at “any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud’s and the niggers’ brains all over the road” (508). Then her gaze turns to the pigs, who appear “to pant with a secret life,” and she looks at them “as if she were absorbing some life-giving knowledge” (508). Ruby is gaining a knowledge that there are things in the world that she cannot understand or control. Her husband could die at any moment; his body is fragile and so is hers. Her possessions are inconsequential to a large and strange universe; they are no more important than toys that can easily be destroyed. Ruby realizes hogs hold a secret that she cannot understand; they are wonderful and strange and not just possessions on concrete slabs. On a beam of light she has a vision of “a vast horde of souls . . . rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash . . . and bands of black niggers . . ., and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs” (508). Behind this procession she sees the people like herself who, in her estimation, “had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right” (508). These people “were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yes she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away” (508). This is a striking vision of carnival: the downtrodden and oppressed joyfully assert their flaws and their uniqueness while the ones who make the rules and write the official story look on in horror and amazement as reality, what O’Connor views as ultimate reality, intrudes on their ideological

constructions. Now Ruby, and, if O'Connor has succeeded, the reader, has a choice to make. Ruby is confronted with the mystery and complexity of the world, recognizing that all are touched by the Divine, and she must decide how to react. She could decide to embrace the freedom of knowing that she is not required to create hierarchies to make a place for herself and find the courage to embrace the uncertainty of the real world, or she could react with fear, retreating further into her fantasy world. O'Connor does not reveal which path Ruby chooses, but her skillful use of concrete images and her humor even amidst the grotesque reveal which path she believes Ruby ought to take.

### **Chapter Three: “Everything That Rises Must Converge”**

In “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” O’Connor reveals another side of the conflict presented in “Revelation.” Julian’s mother is nearly identical to Ruby Turpin: she is large in both body and ego and has a strong sense of her place in the hierarchy of the universe. Both Julian’s mother and Ruby Turpin are large and think of themselves as friendly and outgoing and both feel as if they know where they belong. What differentiates “Everything That Rises Must Converge” from “Revelation” is that, instead of experiencing the story through the eyes of the large overbearing woman, we see Julian’s mother through the eyes of her son.

Unlike Ruby and his mother, Julian rejects his society’s indicators of his place in the hierarchy of existence. He realizes that his mother lives “according to the laws of her own fantasy world,” and he resents her for feeling that she has been successful in living up to her imagined rightful place in the world while he feels that he is “too intelligent to be a success” (411). O’Connor must have felt that many modern readers would see themselves in Julian, who, to her, represents the modern secular humanist disdain for the quaint mores and ideologies of earlier eras. Certainly it is easy to identify with Julian’s feelings of frustration and embarrassment toward his racist and clueless mother, but by the end of the story we find that Julian is just as monstrous and grotesque as any of O’Connor’s characters.

As with Ruby, the first thing O’Connor notes about Julian’s mother is that she is overweight. Her doctor tells her “that she must lose twenty pounds on account of her blood pressure,” so Julian has “to take her downtown on the bus for a reducing class at the Y”

(405). As with Ruby, Julian's mother's weight can be seen as a grotesque representation of her refusal to conform to the standards of society. Just as Ruby Turpin says that she wishes she could reduce, Julian's mother has joined a reducing class to subjugate her body. Julian's mother's high blood pressure also symbolizes her body's refusal to be contained. For Bakhtin, "[t]he grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs" (318). Julian's mother's blood oversteps the bounds of her cardiovascular system and represents the inevitable clash between her ego and the rest of the world.

"Everything that Rises Must Converge" begins with Julian's mother "standing before the hall mirror, putting on her hat" (405). The theme of reflection comes up throughout the story; in this instance it highlights Julian's mother's obsession with positioning herself in the world. She is agonizing over whether or not she paid too much for her hat. Although the hat is "hideous" in her son's opinion, she thinks it looks good on her and is concerned only with its price. She does not want to misjudge the value of the hat because, to Julian's mother, properly evaluating things, objects as well as people, is a vital part of positioning herself in the world.

Julian is waiting for his mother to finish putting on her hat. His hands are behind him, and he appears "pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him" (405). The arrows come, taking the form of Julian's mother's fussing: "Maybe I shouldn't have paid that for it. No, I shouldn't have. I'll take it off and return it tomorrow. I shouldn't have bought it" (405). Like Saint Sebastian, Julian raises "his eyes to heaven," but in exasperation rather than devotion, and survives the attack (405). Julian feels that he humors his mother with the fortitude of Saint Sebastian, but the juxtaposition of Saint

Sebastian with Julian reveals Julian to be petty and small. Saint Sebastian is the patron saint of athletes because of the endurance he exhibited in surviving a barrage of arrows, and was frequently called upon during the plague because it was thought that he could protect plague victims. As the story progresses, Julian shows little patience with his mother and does not even attempt to protect her. This parody of Saint Sebastian backfires and instead reveals his own shortcomings. Since “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is narrated from Julian’s point of view, O’Connor uses the narrator’s own images to undermine his worldview just as she does in “Revelation.”

Julian’s mother’s new hat is purple and green and looks “like a cushion with the stuffing out” (405). Julian feels that it is “less comical than jaunty and pathetic,” and we are told that “[e]verything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him” (405). Julian’s mother’s “eyes, sky blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten,” and if she were not “a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put [Julian] through school and . . . was supporting him still . . . she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town” (406). Julian resents his mother’s innocence and is ashamed that she worked so hard to give him what he perceives as so little. From Julian’s mother’s perspective, “she had brought him up successfully and had sent him to college and he had turned out . . . good looking, . . . intelligent . . . and with a future ahead of him” (411). Julian feels that his mother’s hard work was misguided and that his accomplishments have been “in spite of her” (412). What makes this worse is that Julian’s mother feels that she has been living up to an upper class heritage. To Julian, the hat is a grotesque symbol of his mother’s failure to rise above her circumstances, a failure that he sees as pathetic. For Julian’s mother, the hat is an expression of individuality. The visual

extravagance of the hat and the fact that Julian's mother paid too much for it represents an overflow of Ruby's ego, and is an expression of her selfhood that defies the laws of taste and Julian's mother's frugality.

The hat, with its purple flap that protrudes "down on one side" and stands "up on the other," can also be seen as a grotesque affirmation of Julian's mother's connection with the rest of the world (405). In Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque, "[s]pecial attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or the world outside" (316). As Julian walks out of his house on his way to the bus stop, he sees that the sky is "a dying violet" that the houses on the street, which are "bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two [are] alike," stand out against (406). Each house has "a narrow collar or dirt around it" where a "grubby child" usually sits (406). The physical world becomes a grotesque representation of Julian's mother with "a dying violet" hat and a "collar of dirt" (406). The "bulbous" houses mirror Julian's mother's oversized figure and may symbolize a new life that is being birthed. For Bakhtin, "[v]arious deformities, such as protruding bellies, enormous noses, or humps, are symptoms of pregnancy or of procreative power" (91). Just as a *Human Development* book shocks Ruby Turpin into a new mode of existence, Julian is about to be delivered into a new world. His response to this grotesque representation of his mother is to walk "with his hands in his pockets, his head down and thrust forward and his eyes glazed with determination to make himself completely numb during the time he would be sacrificed to her pleasure" (406). He turns around to find his mother, a "dumpy figure, surmounted by the atrocious hat, coming toward him" (406).

Julian's mother justifies her hat by pointing out that she "at least won't meet [her]self coming and going," parroting the sales clerk who convinced her to buy the hat (406). It is important to her that she is recognized as an individual and that she maintains what she perceives as her place in the world. Like Ruby Turpin, Julian's mother believes that "the world is in . . . a mess," "the bottom rail is on the top," and that "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere" (406-7). Seemingly immune to the complexities of the world, she defines who she is by being thankful for who she is not. Speaking of her reducing class, she says, "Most of them are not our kind of people . . . but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am" (407). Julian's mother bases her self-worth on believing she is better than those around her, and also on believing that she tries to help those lower than herself. Julian reacts to his mother's condescension with righteous indignation: "'They don't give a damn for your graciousness,' Julian said savagely. 'Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest where you stand now or who you are'" (407). Julian realizes that his mother is living in a fantasy world. She bases her supposed social position on the fact that her father was "a prosperous landowner" and her grandfather was "a former governor" who "had a plantation and two hundred slaves" (407-8). She believes that African Americans "were better off when they were" slaves and that they "should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (408).

Rather than base his position in life on his class, Julian has a more modern approach to finding his place in the world. When Julian and his mother reach the bus stop, he begins to feel the weight of his mother's absurdity. He sees her "holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat, wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity" (409). To hurt his mother and to show that he rejects the traditional manifestations of class, he pulls off his tie

and puts it in his pocket. When she tells him his appearance is embarrassing her, he replies, “If you’ll never learn where you are . . . you can at least learn where I am” (409). When she threatens to go home, he “thrust[s] his face toward her and hisse[s], ‘True culture is in the mind, the *mind*,’ . . . and tap[s] his head, ‘the mind’” (409). The fact that he hisses clearly shows that O’Connor regards this elevating of the mind over the physical as demonic and the overly dramatic repetition and the tapping of his head comically hint that he is out of his mind. Instead of falsely basing his position in the world on heritage and class, Julian tries to base his position on his superior intellect and what he feels is his elevated sense of morality.

After Julian and his mother get on the bus, we see that, rather than find a place for himself in the world, he detaches himself from the world because he finds it repulsive. To escape the prattling of his mother and another lady on the bus, he hides behind a newspaper and withdraws “into the inner compartment of his mind where he spen[ds] most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him” (411). From this bubble he could “see out and judge” his mother and other people with “absolute clarity” (411). “Revelation” shows O’Connor’s view that those whose conception of their place in the world is based on social class are living a fantasy and are doing violence to the world and the people in it. However, to seek total detachment from the world because it is grotesque and deformed is equally destructive. Julian’s perception of his mother’s faults is keen, but his dependence on what he thinks should be rather than what truly is in the physical world blinds him to his mother’s virtues.

Ironically, Julian’s abhorrence of his mother also puts him in bondage to her. The narrator claims that Julian is “free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts” and “instead of

being blinded by love for [his mother] as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother” (412). However, every action he takes is rooted in his relationship to his mother. When an African American man gets on the bus, he deliberately sits down next to him because he knows that it will anger his mother. When he takes his necktie off, it is to anger his mother, but he also puts it back on because if he does not, she will go home. Julian’s desire to undercut his mother’s racism is so strong that he asks the large African American man for a light when smoking is not allowed on the bus and he does not even have a cigarette. He desperately wants to show both his moral and cultural superiority to his closed-minded mother by talking with the African American “about art or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them,” but he is comically thwarted by his own inability to meld his fantasies of how he will make reparations for his mother’s prejudice by befriending African Americans with the reality that most African Americans would rather he leave them alone (412). Julian comically fails to realize that his attempts to reach out are as condescending as his mother’s.

Julian considers leaving his mother alone and letting her get off of the bus by herself. He decides that when she asks him if he was going to get off with her, “he would look at her as a stranger who had rashly addressed him” (413). Because his mother does not conform to his idealized conception of reality, he emotionally abandons her. As he considers his final fantasy of bringing home a “beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman,” he sees his mother “through the indignation he had generated . . . across the aisle, purple-faced, shrunken to the dwarf-like proportions of her moral nature, sitting like a mummy beneath the ridiculous banner of her hat” (415). Julian has sucked all of the life from his mother, denying her the

abundance of being that she has previously exhibited. His grotesque fantasy of his mother is soon intruded on by a strong dose of reality.

Julian is “tilted out of his fantasy” as the bus stops and the door opens “with a sucking hiss” (415). Like the African American delivery boy in “Revelation,” the “colored woman” with her son, Carver, who board the bus inject the tension-filled bus riders with the spirit of carnival. The woman is “large” and “gaily dressed,” but “sullen-looking” (415). The adjectives used to describe her suggest an overabundance of being: she is a “giant of a woman” with a “bulging figure” that is “encased in a green crepe dress” (415). Her feet are “overflow[ing] in red shoes,” and she carries “a mammoth red pocketbook that bulge[s] throughout as if it were stuffed with rocks” (415). The little boy has on “a short plaid suit and a Tyrolean hat with a blue feather on it” (415). Like the courier, he exhibits a dexterity and playfulness that is lacking in any of the other characters: “Carver slid down from the seat but remained squatting with his back against the base of it, his head turned slyly around toward Julian’s mother, who was smiling at him. The woman reached a hand across the aisle and snatched him to her. He righted himself and hung backwards on her knees, grinning at Julian’s mother” (417). When his mother tries to control him, he “sho[ots] across the aisle and scramble[s], giggling wildly, onto the seat beside” Julian’s mother (417). Carver’s mother threatens to “knock the living Jesus out of” him (417). This links Carver, who represents the playfulness of carnival, with Jesus, just as Coates links Bakhtin’s conception of carnival laughter with Christian love. Julian’s mother is referred to as Carver’s “love,” showing the dual nature of carnival laughter (417). Even as Julian’s mother’s fall comes at the hands of Carver’s mother, Carver expresses love for Julian’s mother. She is brought into contact with the concrete reality of the African American woman’s purse, but this, for

O'Connor, is a loving act. As Carver's mother, the African-American woman is associated with Jesus' mother in the same way that Mary Grace is in "Revelation."

When Julian notices that the large African American woman is wearing the same hat as his mother he is elated that "Fate" would "thrust upon his mother such a lesson" (416). He realizes that this link with a lower class would upset her worldview and he takes delight in the pain that she must feel at the destruction of her beliefs. He feels that "Justice entitle[s] him to laugh," and he grins at her as if to say, "[y]our punishment exactly fits your pettiness" (415). For O'Connor, this sense of righteous indignation, as if Julian has a clear understanding of what a just punishment would be, is just as reprehensible as Julian's mother's sense of her own elevated place in society. "For a moment" Julian has an "uncomfortable sense of" his mother's "innocence," but he is taking too much joy in her fall to entertain the notion that she may not be fully at fault for her mistaken ideology (416).

Regardless of his mother's lack of full culpability, her worldview is destructive to herself and to the world around her. The large African American woman serves as a grotesque mockery of Julian's mother and the supposed superiority she stands for. Ruby Turpin decides that if she must be another class, she would like to be "herself but black," but Julian's mother actually is confronted face to face with herself as someone of another class. In addition to wearing the same hat, the African American woman is large, controlling, and dignified like Julian's mother. The underlying difference between the two is that, while Julian's mother adopts a dignified attitude of blissful condescension, the large African American woman must adopt a defensive posture to maintain her dignity.

The inevitable confrontation between Julian's mother and her grotesque double comes, like Ruby's encounter with the *Human Development* textbook, as a shocking

encounter with reality at a moment when she feels she is being charitable. Julian's mother seems shocked when she realizes that she and the large African American woman are wearing the same hat, but she recovers and smiles "as if the women were a monkey that had stolen her hat" (416). Of course, this only agitates the woman, who makes repeated efforts to keep her child away from Julian's mother. Oblivious to these efforts, Julian's mother insists on giving Carver a "bright new penny" as they go their separate ways (418). She undoubtedly views this as a gesture of kindness, but the African American woman cannot contain her frustration any longer and explodes "like a piece of machinery that ha[s] been given one ounce of pressure to much" (418). Through Julian's mother's condescending act, the African American woman is confronted with a racist worldview and reacts with a grotesque act: she knocks Julian's mother to the ground and triggers a devastating stroke. Throughout the story, Julian's mother is referred to in child-like terms, but now she returns to her childhood. She ignores Julian's attempts to take her to her class and tells him to "[t]ell Grandpa to come get" her (420). She has returned to a state of innocence where she cannot be blamed for her actions.

Before Julian realizes that his mother has had a stroke, he cruelly attempts to drive home the lesson that he feels she should learn. He says, "You got exactly what you deserved" and deliberately puts the penny back in her purse to humiliate her (418). Julian is correct when he tells his mother that she isn't who she thinks she is, but she also isn't who he thinks she is. He says, "From now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change," but he is the one that is about to be introduced to a new world (419). When he realizes that his mother has been drastically changed, his demeanor changes as well: "'Mother!' he cried. 'Darling, sweetheart, wait!'" (420). These are not the words of

someone who has “cut himself emotionally free” of his mother. This is Julian’s confrontation with reality. Up until now he has, like a baby, seen his mother only in relation to himself; she is not even given a name in the story but only referred to as “Julian’s mother.” It takes the violent destruction of his mother’s mind to make him realize that she is a valuable person, in spite of her faults, and that he loves her. Julian is about to leave his mental bubble and enter “the world of guilt and sorrow” (420). He selfishly separates himself from his mother and the world because they do not match his conception of how they should be. At the end, though, the harsh reality that he, too, is marred by the complexity of the world throws him into a new state of being. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque births a new world. The new world that the grotesque ushers Julian into is a world populated with living beings rather than just abstract ideas. Instead of defining himself by his idealistic desire to befriend African Americans, he sees himself in relation to a specific, living, flawed person: his mother. He can no longer separate himself from his surroundings by retreating to a fantasy world because he realizes that he cannot remove himself from being physically and emotionally entangled with other people. It is not until Julian has been stripped of his selfish fantasies that he can experience the physical world as it really is. He has suffered a great loss, but, for O’Connor, Julian is closer to a true communion with God and with man.

## Chapter Four:

### Conclusion

Flannery O'Connor uses the extreme incongruity between her characters' beliefs and the concrete world to create humor that reveals truths about the nature of the world. As Steed has shown, O'Connor skillfully uses humor to help her readers identify with her characters and to implicate her readers' own belief systems through the grotesque actions of her characters. In "Revelation," Ruby Turpin is an average white woman from the South with whom many of O'Connor's readers could identify. Over the course of the story, she develops into a comic character as it becomes increasingly clear how her own worldview conflicts with the real world. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian exhibits O'Connor's idea of how a secular humanist might respond to Ruby Turpin. He, like Ruby, starts as a sympathetic character who must endure attending to a needy mother, but he quickly becomes a comic figure as he discovers that his imagined solidarity with African Americans does not match reality. In Ruby and Julian, O'Connor creates realistic characters who exemplify two seemingly opposite worldviews, but shows how they are essentially the same. Both Ruby's racism and classism and Julian's humanism stem from a desire to create all-encompassing systems that provide them a way to delineate their place in the world. Even though Julian rejects his mother's hierarchies, he creates his own by rejecting the flawed world around him and elevating his own ideology. The climax of each story comes when physical reality suddenly and comically intrudes upon Ruby's and Julian's fantasies.

Steed uses Bergson's assimilation theory of humor to explain how the reader identifies with O'Connor's characters and then transfers their eventual judgment of her

characters onto themselves, but this is an incomplete analysis of the way O'Connor's humor works. Steed correctly recognizes the fact that O'Connor wants her readers to identify with her characters, but the overarching action of her humor is not aggressive or assimilating, as a Bergsonian reading suggests, but freeing in the same way that Bakhtin's conception of carnivalesque humor is freeing. While O'Connor's readers may react to her characters with a Bergsonian form of corrective laughter, O'Connor makes it clear through Julian that assimilating laughter is not her goal. Julian, taking the moral high ground, laughs at his mother's inability to interact with other races, but this stance is precisely what reveals his inability to connect with the world around him. His laughter does not bring his mother around to his viewpoint; instead it reveals within Julian the same intolerant attitude that she displays. By using grotesque imagery to illustrate the comic incongruity between overarching ideology and the physical world, O'Connor encourages her readers, who hopefully identify with her comic characters, to recognize the comic within themselves. She wants her readers to experience, along with her characters, the revelation that their attempts to master existence and avoid the experience of mystery are futile and comic. Both Ruby and Julian suffer from the devastating loss of the worldview that they have built their lives around. The reader who identifies with Ruby or Julian also experiences this loss, but the reader has the added luxury of distance. The comic climax brings a combination of pain and pleasure: pain suffered with the realization that their point of view is false, and pleasure from the experience of the comic.

Bakhtin claimed that "[m]edieval laughter, when it triumphed over the fear inspired by the mystery of the world and by power, boldly unveiled the truth about both" (93). Both Ruby and Julian fear the complexity of the world and selfishly retreat into their own beliefs

to bolster themselves and gain a mastery of existence, but in reality they are slaves to their own fears. O'Connor's grotesque humor is not intended to elevate her own ideology above another ideology the way satire does; she simply shows how ideology falls short when confronted with the material world. This is closer to Parkin's definition of parody. Through her use of parody, O'Connor hopes to relieve the fear caused by the mystery of existence and by the power of ideologies that posit themselves as complete. The grotesque in O'Connor's work reveals itself in the concrete details of the physical world—an oversized woman, an ugly teenager, a bulging purse—that destroy her character's abstract conceptions of reality. This destruction, for O'Connor, is an act of love: it is only when these false ideologies are destroyed that the individual can exist in a true, honest relationship with the people around her and with God, who is revealed through the physical world. Just as Coates claims that Bakhtin's carnival laughter can be seen as a manifestation of Christian love, the grotesque actions of Mary Grace and Carver's mother tear down the official ideologies that Ruby and Julian have set up and birth them into a new life that recognizes the mystery of the physical world, making room for the diversity of the people around them.

When seen in the light of Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, O'Connor's use of grotesque humor can be interpreted as a tool that she uses to usher her readers into a freeing experience with the mystery of the physical world. While at times terrifying and violent, O'Connor believed that the physical world is inherently good because it is created by God and is the way in which God reveals himself to humanity. Totalizing ideologies are destructive because they exist in opposition to the messy realities of the physical world. In "Revelation" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge," O'Connor shows how the grotesque physical world undermines ideology and creates an openness to the incomplete

nature of the physical world in her characters that she hopes her readers recognize in their own lives. For O'Connor, this openness is not only freeing to those who are limited by her characters' ideologies, but it is especially freeing to her characters who are held captive by the fear of their own ideologies and the mystery that their ideologies preclude. By using the grotesque, she attempts to displace her readers' mistaken ideologies and replace them with a new understanding of the mystery of existence. O'Connor believes that a healthy acceptance of the mystery inherent in the physical world destroys the pride that comes with an attempt to fully explain the workings of the universe and allows for the existence of a variety of people and for the work of God through these people in the world.

O'Connor's use of violent and ugly images to create grotesque humor does not exhibit a hatred for humanity, as some critics suggest, but it expresses her love for the actual physical world, imperfections and all. Certainly some of her characters and their actions are reprehensible, but O'Connor feels that God mysteriously works through these people and their actions. Through Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, these grotesques can be seen as the result of the physical world asserting itself against false ideologies—tearing them down so that the true nature of the world, and of God, can be experienced.

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