

# Southern Grotesque/Gothic

*In one letter Flannery describes current events in her small Georgia town: "Lately we have been treated to some parades by the Ku Klux Klan. They are all excited now about electing themselves a governor for the state. It's too hot to burn a fiery cross, so they bring a portable one made with red electric light bulbs."*





# Flannery O'Connor

Southern writer known for her keen explorations of **religious themes and southern racial issues** through masterful and affecting short stories and novels featuring absurd situations and grotesque southern characters of varying psychological extremes. She used **common speech, common places and common things to produce grotesquely comic and absurd effects to examine her religious concerns**. During Christmas 1950, developed the first signs of lupus. She accepted the affliction with grace, viewing it as a necessary limitation that allowed her to develop her art. Her lupus forced her to move back to Andalusia so her mother could care for her. She would spend the rest of her life as a semi-invalid, dividing her time between raising peacocks and honing her craft.



1925 –  
1964



# Christianity

In her own words: “The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; [...] to the hard of hearing you shout, and **for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.**”

She once said that,  
“while the South is  
hardly Christ-  
centered, it is  
most certainly  
Christ-haunted”



# The South as Setting

- In “What We Talk about When We Talk about the South,” by Edward Ayers, he suggests that the South (old and New) has experienced an identity crisis; specifically, he argues that:

Southern history bespeaks a place that is more complicated than the stories we tell about it. **Throughout its history, the South has been a place where poverty and plenty have been thrown together in especially jarring ways, where democracy and oppression, white and black, slavery and freedom, have warred. The very story of the South is a story of unresolved identity,** unsettled and restless, unsure and defensive. The South, contrary to so many words written in defense and in attack, was not a fixed, known, and unified place, but rather *a place of constant movement, struggle, and negotiation*.(emphasis added, 26)

# Important Elements in O'Connor's work

- **Allegory** – a literary device in which literal characters, objects, or events represent a symbol illustrating an idea or moral or religious principle
- **Catholicism** – the Christian faith, doctrine, system, and practice of the Roman Catholic Church, which is characterized by a hierarchic structure of bishops and priests as well as doctrinal and disciplinary authority
- **Cliché** – a trite or overused expression or idea, in FOC, often used ironically
- **Dialect** – a regional variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary
- **Grotesque** – a style of fiction where characters are flawed in such a manner as to invoke both empathy and disgust
- **Imagery** - a word or group of words in a story which appeal to one or more of the senses: sight, taste, touch, hearing, and smell
- **Irony** - the contrast between the literal meaning of what is said and what is meant
- **Metaphor** – a direct imaginative comparison between two unlike things
- **Southern Setting** - the time and place in which a story unfolds
- **Symbolism** - a device in literature where an object represents an idea

# Humor

- “And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga . . . you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!”

Thomas F. Gossett recounts “When Flannery O’Connor came to this part of the story, she laughed so long and so heartily that the book she was reading from slid to the floor and had to be retrieved by one of the students before she could finish reading it. The incident is, I think, a beautiful demonstration of how central a place humor plays in many of the stories which might at first glance seem anything but humorous. Here we see that Joy/Hulga, who really is a learned woman, can be, on a central issue, abysmally ignorant.”

From [http://www.compedit.com/flannery\\_o'conner.htm](http://www.compedit.com/flannery_o'conner.htm)



# Thematic Essay Questions:

- Catholics were a minority religious group in Georgia during most of the twentieth century, which was a topic of some of Flannery O'Connor's essays and letters. What effect would being Catholic in the predominantly Protestant South have had on Flannery O'Connor as a child and then later as an adult writer?
- The setting for Flannery O'Connor's fiction is the American South; however, her themes are considered by critics and readers to be universal. What makes O'Connor's work appealing to readers living outside the South? Do you think her stories have more meaning for readers who live in the South? Why or why not?
- One element of O'Connor's fiction that attracts so many readers is her humor. Do you find O'Connor's stories to be funny? Why or why not?
- Flannery O'Connor is a master at manipulating language, placing common words and phrases or clichés in a context that offers a deeper meaning than what initially appears on the surface. Discuss O'Connor's creative use of language using specific examples.

## From O'Connor:

In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself, and when this happens they become symbolic in the way they work. I once wrote a story called “Good Country People,” in which a lady Ph.D. has her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman whom she has tried to seduce. Now I’ll admit that, paraphrased in this way, the situation is simply a low joke. The average reader is pleased to observe anybody’s wooden leg being stolen. But without ceasing to appeal to him and without making any statements of high intention, this story does manage to operate at another level of experience, by letting the wooden leg accumulate meaning.



Early in the story, we're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is **spiritually as well as physically crippled**. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg. Now of course this is never stated. The fiction writer states as little as possible. The reader makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that he makes the connection, but the connection is there nevertheless and it has its effect on him. As the story goes on, the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning.



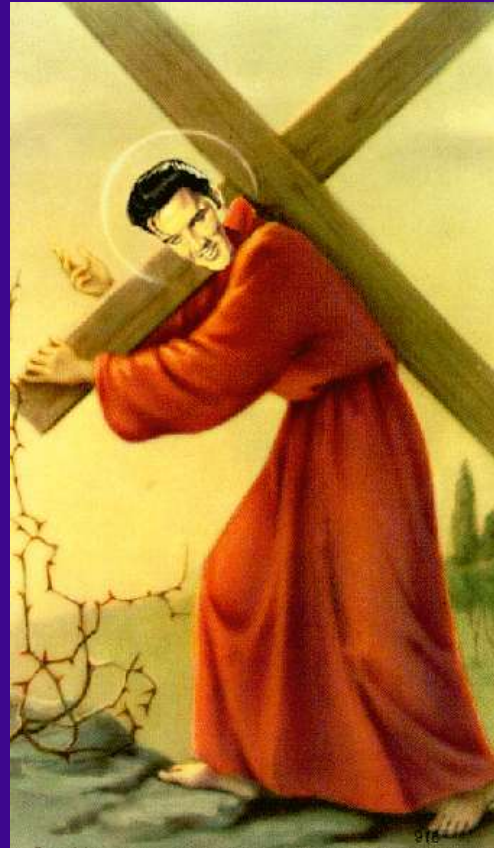
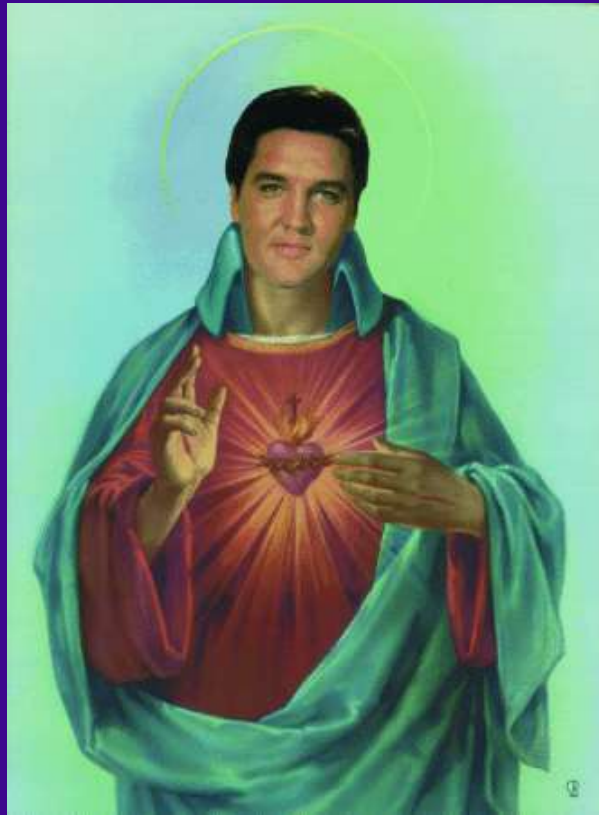
The reader learns how the girl feels about her leg, how her mother feels about it, and how the country woman on the place feels about it, and finally, by the time the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he has taken away part of the girl's personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time. (from "Writing Short Stories" in *Mystery and Manners*).

From "Tin Jesus: The Intellectual in Selected Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor" by J. Mitchell: "Through Joy-Hulga,. . .O'Connor's reader encounters vividly the folly of looking only to the self for guidance."

Get Right With God song connection

# Southern Gothic+Religion=Cult?

## Straight out of Flannery's Fiction



If Flannery O'Connor were alive today, would this be a subject?

# Video interp of the story available:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vZ7xQN4ehU> (part 1)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQN5F-7SswM> (part 2)



Audience Favorite" and  
"Best Actor" at The  
Milwaukee Short Film  
Festival - 2007

Another "Flannery-esque"  
connection: [Oh Brother Where  
Art Thou](#), with its mix of humor  
and darkness, that is innately  
Southern— full of contradictions.