

UNIT STUDY: FLANNERY O'CONNOR



"I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil."

Flannery O'Connor in *Mystery and Manners*

Many years ago, a SMU visiting professor in graduate school told our class she believed Flannery O'Connor was the greatest. Not the greatest woman writer, not the greatest Southern writer, or Catholic writer. Simply the greatest American writer, and that eventually the world of letters would recognize this fact. Literary greatness, however, in writing cannot be measured, but we have all balked at some literary entries in "top 100" lists. Since my first meeting and awakening to the greatness of Flannery O'Connor, I have rejoiced when encountering critics both secular and Catholic who praise her as great.

To prepare to write this Unit Study I started what I believed would be a quick web search. It turned out to be a several-days-long research project! I began wishing that I was writing a unit study about let's say Van Gogh or Saint Katherine Drexel—someone 'easy' with lots of obvious related subjects. The subject of Flannery O'Connor seems at once to be rather limiting and almost infinite. I found a myriad of new sources and was quite delighted for a while in just being immersed in Flannery O'Connor's thought. Leafing through past issues of *The Heart & Mind*, the shape of this unit study became increasingly crystallized in my mind.

A short biography of Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, GA but lived most of her life near Milledgeville, GA. Flannery went to graduate school in Iowa City and lived on the East Coast with the Fitzgerald family for a little while, but because of her chronic illness she returned to Georgia and lived there until her death at age 39. In the website below you will find a wonderful, detailed yet not overly long biography of Flannery O'Connor that includes her Catholic upbringing and life. <http://maryourmother.net/O'Connor.html>

Art appreciation

When one visits the Sistine Chapel or the Blessed Fra Angelico frescoes in Florence, the knowledge of the Gospel and Catholic themes is a subconscious aid to the appreciation of some of the best art ever accomplished. In general, the educated mind will enjoy beautiful art more fully. Imagery in literature, films' scenes, or side figures in paintings will go unnoticed to the mind that is unaware of their significance. In the same way, to appreciate

Flannery O'Connor (and to have more fun in the process!), it is very useful to be educated about this Southern Catholic writer. Fortunately, O'Connor did not shy away from talking about her own writing, so we are able to refer to her own words about her writing. We are also able to read what Catholic authors have written about her. Articles in magazines such as *First Things* and *Crisis* have shed light into her seemingly depressing or hopeless themes. Two books I mention below can me of immense help as well.

The reading of Flannery O'Connor is most certainly not to be taken lightly. In his senior year at a Catholic school last year, our oldest son read *Wise Blood*. I gave him some extra materials to aid him in the reading of O'Connor's well known novel, but in general the class did learn to appreciate what they read. I would recommend Flannery O'Connor—given the appropriate preparation—for the Junior and Senior years of High School, as an elective for students who have developed a personal love for the art of literature. Since Flannery O'Connor was a profoundly faithful Catholic and reflected this in all of her fiction, the Catholic student would be very well served indeed to study her art.

The key to reading Flannery O'Connor

"There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment," Flannery wrote in a letter to a friend. As she explained often, Flannery's fiction is preoccupied with bringing the characters to the moment of redeeming grace. We know as Catholics that the grace of God often comes through suffering. In the quasi-caricatures that Flannery O'Connor paints with her writing, this is true: grace will come through violence or a seemingly violent action in some way. The violence is not graphic, and violence is certainly not her objective. She believed that the desensitized general public needs to be shaken to perceive grace. "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace," she wrote.

When reading Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the reader, to best appreciate it, must keep in mind two major points. First, that she is painting pictures. Her characters and settings are exaggerated portraits of the world she lived in, and she wrote this way purposefully. Have fun with it. It is often hilarious, especially in subsequent readings of the same story. Second, that the underlying theme in O'Connor's fiction is the moment when her character will undergo a major moment of revelation, of grace, when his or her own sins, pettiness or self importance will be revealed to him or to her. This is the moment of God's mercy—this opening of the eyes into our own souls. Some stories will tell what happens to the characters after this moment, others will not.

An innovative format for a Unit Study: Led by Upper level High School Students

So this is the suggested format for this unit Study: it should be led by High School Students for High School students. Invite your parents, as some of them may be genuinely interested in learning more about this writer, but keep it at a High School discussion level. In your college application, you should list this effort under

extracurricular activities. It will look good! (We just sent our oldest to College, our second is beginning the same process of college-search, and this process will be the topic of my next Heart & Mind article.)

You should plan four meetings, weekly or every other week, depending on your group's preferences, distance, academic load, etc. You can also consider hosting it in summer—I've had much success in leading literary clubs during summer when, free from the usual academic load, everyone is a little more likely to read for enjoyment. We will limit the reading list to two short stories and two essays.

Prerequisites

Students participating of this Unit Study should come armed with four books (at least, anyway): (1) Flannery O'Connor's *The Habit of Being* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and (2) *Collected Works* (Library of America)—other editions would be fine as long as you check enough books out of the library to cover all of her work. You should not have trouble borrowing these from any library system.

Also, (3) Regis Martin's *Unmasking the Devil: Dramas of Sin and Grace in the World of Flannery O'Connor* (Gateway to Literature), Sapientia Press, 2002 and (4) *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings* (Modern Spiritual Masters Series), edited by Robert Ellsberg, Orbis Books, 2003. Neither volume is expensive and they come highly recommended for anyone interested in understanding and appreciating Flannery O'Connor's writing, most especially under a Catholic light. During discussion, use both of these liberally to find passages related to your discussion. With the help of the index it is easy to find passages of the story/essay you may be discussing.

1st meeting

Reading Assignment: *Revelation*

Possible questions/themes for discussion: The waiting room scene is a delight to read. Read excerpts aloud during the meeting to enjoy them together. Notice how Mrs. Turpin is constantly passing judgment on others—what does she see in her vision that is exactly the opposite of how she judges people to be? If you are interested, there is a marvelous literary analysis of this story (and other stories as well) at <http://mediaspecialist.org/on.html>

2nd meeting

Reading Assignment: *A Memoir of Mary Ann*

This is an interesting essay written per request about the death of a girl named Mary Ann. Themes for discussion (you may want to assign members of the group to bring something about each of these the discussion meeting): Nathaniel Hawthorne's story *The Birthmark* and the religious order founded by Hawthorne's daughter The Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne.

3rd meeting

Reading Assignment: *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

This is the best known story written by Flannery O'Connor.

Themes for discussion: Pinpointing the moment of grace, and the words of the Misfit who saw this happening in the grandmother. Grace actually come to both of the main characters in this story, can you see the transformation in the Misfit?

Many good analyses of this story have been written; refer to the books by Martin and Ellsberg above. <http://mediaspecialist.org/on.html> also has an excellent analysis of this story. Don't miss it!

4th meeting:

Reading Assignment:: *The Church and the Fiction Writer*

Themes for discussion: the responsibility of the Catholic writer in the world. The center motivation of the Catholic person, or writer—what is it?

I chose this for the last meeting because it is likely that the participant will have a n inclination to write. My hope is that reading O'Connor will inspire and guide your future literary inclinations!

Optional Research/Presentation Projects

In *The Habit of Being*—a compendium of her letters edited by Sally Fitzgerald—Flannery O'Connor expresses admiration and admits being influenced by various French Catholic writers and philosophers. Here are some of the names mentioned in her letters.

Georges Bernanos

Jacques Maritain

Leon Bloy

Francois Mauriac.

Who are they? What did they write? Four students should prepare a presentation on each of these. A short biographical sketch and a reading aloud of two or three representative pieces of their writing should suffice. Remember to list their major works, and an extra effort would be to dig through the *The Habit of Being* (using the index) to find the passages where Flannery O'Connor speaks about each of them.

Major works:

Wise Blood, 1952

A Good Man Is Hard To Find, and Other Stories, 1955

The Violent Bear It Away, 1960

A Memoir of Mary Ann. 1962

Three by Flannery O'Connor, 1964

Everything That Rises Must Converge, 1965

Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, 1969

The Complete Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor, 1971 - the National Book Award

The Habit of Being: Letters, 1979 (ed. by Sally Fitzgerald)

Georgia College and State University has the most comprehensive website on Flannery O'Connor:

<http://library.gcsu.edu/~sc/foc.html>

Recipe

Next time you have high school students over for a Flannery O'Connor discussion or study session, try serving southern Grits. Here is a delicious way to prepare grits which passed on to us by the Texan Henebrys.

Prepare 4 C quick grits according to package directions

Add:

1 can of green chilies

1 C of shredded cheddar

Bake it in a casserole pan for 40 min on 350 F.

The recipe can be easily doubled.

Enjoy!

Peafowl

Flannery loved and raised peafowl from the time she was a young girl. She lived most of her adult life with her mother and relatives in the family farm outside Milledgeville, GA, named "Andalusia", where she raised beautiful peafowl.

The farm today is run by a foundation and is open to the public.

Go to their website www.andalusiafarm.org/ for more information.

Lupus

At age 25, Flannery O'Connor was diagnosed with Lupus, the same disease that killed her father when she was still a girl. Lupus is an incurable disease but there are treatments available. The Alliance for Lupus Research has a website where information can be obtained about the disease's facets and treatments. <http://www.lupusresearch.org/>

Notes: All quotes from Flannery O'Connor were taken from *Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969, and *The Habit of Being*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reprinted 1988.

From Flannery O'Connor's Own Words:

"The universe of the Catholic fiction writer is one that is founded on the theological truths of the Faith, but particularly on three of them which are basic - the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. These are doctrines that the modern secular world does not believe in. It does not believe in sin, or in the value of suffering, or in eternal responsibility, and since we live in a world that since the sixteenth century has been increasingly dominated by secular thought, the Catholic writer often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it. This means frequently that he may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience."

"Catholic Novelists and Their Readers", in *Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.