

Review Article

GRACE THROUGH GROTESQUE IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S REVELATION

Kola Aravind^{1*}, Dr. P Venkata Ravi Kumar², Dr. Siva Nagaiah Bolleddu³, Yash Raj⁴

Dept. of English, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation (Deemed-to-be University)

Vaddeswaram, Guntur - 522502

Corresponding Author Email I'd: aravindmudhiraj@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Flannery O'Connor is an American short story writer and considered a prominent one in the canon of Christian fictional writing. *Revelation* (1965) is one of her most celebrated stories in all of her thirty two short stories. The select story is an embodiment of her objective of writings. O'Connor believes mankind should know and have God in their lives to realise their spiritual and moral depravity and then can transform themselves to lead a diligent and happy life. The article explores main character, Mrs Turpin of the select story who is in a false assumption of her self as a righteous person and a good Christian. She believes her treatment of poor and lowly people to be right, which in reality is not. This paper explores how God bestows his grace by providing her an opportunity to know her inner self through unexpected, abrupt and grotesque situations.

Key words: Grace, God, Self-righteous, Grotesque.

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INTRODUCTION:

Flannery O'Connor (1925 -1964) is an American short story writer and novelist. She has written thirty two short stories and only two novels. She belongs to canon of southern writers to which belong renowned writers like William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Audora Welty. O'Connor is a staunch Catholic and all her writing project her catholic faith. Her works' main projection is the spiritual degradation in the present world and emphasizes the need of God's grace to lead healthy and happy lives. She is considered one of the renowned writers in Christian Fiction for her catholic projections and spiritual themes. She is known for using the characteristic of "grotesqueness" in her stories to project the spiritual depravity.

O'Connor through the select story *Revelation*, tries to comment and highlight the hypocritical and spiritual deprived condition of modern humans through Mrs. Turpin, the main character of the select story. She tries to portray the modern man's illusion that he has faith in God but simultaneously harbors a nature to raise voice against the God himself when he is confronted with questions on his beliefs. Mrs. Turpin, a quinquagenarian is the main character of the story living with her husband Claud, a septuagenarian, looking after their farm and cattle. Claud has a swelling on his leg for which they go to visit a hospital. There, as Mrs. Turpin is involved in conversation with the fellow visitors and patients in the waiting hall, she was suddenly hit by a book thrown by a young girl making her semi-conscious for some moments. The girl seemed to be possessed by something unknown, and shouts "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" towards Mrs. Turpin [1]. Mrs. Turpin gains consciousness, rides home back. She was assured that it was God who chastised her through the young girl and falls in contemplation of why God called her "warthog" even though she is a kind, dutiful and church-going woman.

Mrs. Turpin is a self-loving individual and a hypocrite. She assumes herself to be a good woman as she has a good disposition, believes in the philosophy of helping others, being good to niggers and "a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman" [2]. But in reality, she is judgmental of people's appearances, expresses false kindness and lacks true belief and obedience in God. In the story, the moment she enters the waiting hall, she scans all the

people and categorizes all the children, girls, women and old into only two categories - good looking and bad looking. She uses "ugly", "dirty" and "trashy" for bad looking people and "well-dressed" for the good looking people. Her instinct of categorizing people this way reveals her nature of judging people based on their appearances. William J. Lisenbee in his book *The Crossroads of Eternity and Southern Distortion: An Analysis of Flannery O'Connor's Fiction* says that Mrs. Turpin's is a slave for judgment based on outer appearances and never sees into inner character of an individual [3]. She says that if God gives her two options to take birth as either "white-trash" or a nigger, she says would choose to be a nigger. This shows she is fine being a good looking nigger than to be a white who looks dirty, ugly and trashy.

She has a theory to categorize people in hierarchy. It has three levels with the least one containing both niggers and whites, who are all trashy and bad-looking, and highest level contains again both niggers and whites who are wealthy. Whether black or white, giving the lowest rank for the not-good appearing people in her mind shows her contempt for looking trashy and importance for good-looking appearances:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been [...] then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land [4].

In her conversation with a lady she expresses her character of being kind to the niggers who work on their farm and she assumes to be a kind person for having such kind of attitude towards them. But the real intention for being like this is revealed later in her own words - "I sure am tired of buttering up niggers, but you got to love em if you want em to work for you" [5]. It is only that she doesn't want them to resign the job on their farm and it was difficult for them to find niggers. So she displays this kindness only to intact them as laborers on their farm. She tries to justify her good nature by her own false evaluation. She says that if God wishes her to have birth as a wealthy woman but not having a

good disposition, she would never want it, portraying that having good disposition is very important and she is a kind of woman who values disposition over other things. But later she again thanks Jesus for not giving her birth as a trashy person, as she hates being trashy irrespective of having good disposition or not. This shows her double mind and hypocrisy.

Mrs. Turpin is in an illusion of believing herself to be a right person although with an underlying nature of self-love and obsession of good appearance. It is during this kind of speech of her portraying herself as a good woman, the young girl threw a book titled "Human Development" at her, calling her a warthog and yelling at her to go back to hell. For a few moments Mrs. Turpin hovered in a semi-conscious state. Being in this state she saw "the [girl's] fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition" [6]. Mrs Turpin felt a divine presence in her. She predicted it was God himself revealing his words towards her. So she acknowledged - "What you got to say to me?" [7]. The words God spoke, through the girl, confronted her about her true self, for the first time in her fifty years of life.

O'Connor wants to portray that God is not pleased with Mrs Turpin which is in contrast with her opinion, who believed God is with content for her assumed Good nature. But Mrs. Turpin couldn't understand why God called her a warthog and condemned her to hell. This is the point of time where Mrs. Turpin must introspect for her lacuna. God's confrontation is in actual is his grace for Mrs Turpin to realize her defects and reconcile with God. William J. Lisenbee in his book *The Crossroads of Eternality and Southern Distortion: An Analysis of Flannery O'Connor's Fiction* observes that the horrifying picture of being a warthog can be impetus for Mrs. Turpin to repent [8]. Instead of that, unable to look at the incident in an optimistic way of God's grace and accept the confrontation and condemnation, she rather spilled out her shallowness of faith. She got fired up with rage and questioned The Almighty God himself asking who he was to call her a warthog. "A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, "Who do you think you are?" [9]. Through this act of Mrs. Turpin, O'Connor tries to bring out the unreal and shallow faith and the rebellious nature the modern humans carry deep inside their hearts towards God.

As the story depicts, the biggest trait of Mrs. Turpin's judgmental nature based on appearance is itself against Godly life according to the Bible. As a Christian she is expected to follow all the statues laid down in the Bible. But she failed to follow the directives. It is written as said by the God "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature" [10]. This verse from 1 Samuel says the Lord considers the heart but not outwards appearance, and anyone to become an acceptable Christian is to imitate the likeness of Lord. But for all her life Mrs Turpin has been judging people based on only appearances concluding that she is ignorant of the statues to be followed. This is the reason why God confronted her. God wants her to stop her hypocrisy, come out from ignorance. As she couldn't understand the purpose of her confrontation, God revealed himself to Mrs. Turpin in a more tangible way by giving her a vision. The vision shows group of people ascending into heaven from the earth for judgment. In the vision she sees the people who she described "ugly", "trashy" and "dirty" were in first lines and even the niggers whom she not truly cared for also in front lines and she and her husband were at last:

Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. [11].

Flannery O'Connor projects this vision as a warning, not only to Mrs. Turpin but all the humanity as well. It is said all the niggers, other messy white people who were in waiting hall with Mrs. Turpin now are clean and in white robes while ascending into heaven. It is a clear declaration from God that, for him all are equal

according to outwards appearance and judgment is done according to their hearts. In this crowd, Mrs. Turpin and her husband are placed at last:

And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud [...] They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behaviour [...] Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. [12].

Even in their procession towards heaven, they carried the same virtues which they believed put them distinguished from others. But they are gradually plucked away from them. And this really brought worry on their faces because all their lives they believed these virtues to be paramount. This echoes a verse from Book of Jeremiah from Old Testament that God evaluates minds and hearts to judge and reward humans [13]. This vision is a message from God to Mrs. Turpin to transform and get passage into his adobe without hindrances. Flannery O'Connor, through this opportunity to Mrs. Turpin even after her living over fifty years in ungodly ways, tries to projects the love of God and his willingness to accept humans at any point of time irrespective of past they lived so far if they once start to imitate him. In the story, the title used for the book thrown at Mrs. Turpin is "Human Development". This title is used as a symbol by O'Connor for Mrs. Turpin as well as readers to say that there is a need to evaluate our psyches as we are unconsciously in illusion of our faithfulness and godly living. John Skyes in his book *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the aesthetics of revelation* comments on writing of O'Connor that he expects her writings to be the words that can bring change from a worldly life into spiritual life [14].

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