GRACE THROUGH GROTESQUE IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S REVELATION

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Received: 18.12.2019 Revised: 20.01.2020 Accepted: 23.02.2020

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.

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 harbor beliefs in the philosophy of helping others, being good to niggers and all her writing project her catholic faith. In her mind shows her contempt for looking trashy and importance for their appearances. O’Connor states 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 a way 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

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. 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
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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
the need and place of such a confrontation” [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 to call me a warthog?” Through this act of defiance [9]. Mrs Turpin
felt that God wants her to stop her hypocrisy, come out
and confront 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
loved 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.

As the story depicts, the biggest trait of Mrs. Turpin’s judgmental
nature based on appearance is itself against God’s 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
the height of his stature but on the heart” [10]. This verse from 1 Samuel says the
Lord considers the heart and not outward 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
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vision she sees the people who she described “ugly”, “trashy” and
“dirty” were in first lines and even the niggers whom she not truly
loved for also in front lines and she and her husband were at last:

Upon it a vast horde of souls were tumbling 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 mean white people who were in waiting hall with Mrs
Turpin now are clean and in white robes while ascending into
heaven. It is a dear 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 ungodly
if once they 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].

REFERENCES