

1997

Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy: The Politics of Grace and Vocation

Allison Jones

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Allison, "Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy: The Politics of Grace and Vocation" (1997). *Honors Theses*. 748.

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd/748

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Ogden Honors College at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact ir@lsu.edu.

Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy:
The Politics of Grace and Vocation

Allison Jones

Honors Thesis Committee:
Dr. Cecil L. Eubanks
Dr. T. Wayne Parent
Dr. Peggy W. Prenshaw

“The writer who emphasizes spiritual values is very likely to take the darkest view of all of what he sees in this country today. For him, the fact that we are the most powerful and wealthiest nation in the world doesn’t mean a thing in any positive sense. The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him.”

Flannery O’Connor, “The Fiction Writer and His Country”

“To the degree that society has been overtaken by a sense of malaise rather than exuberance, by fragmentation rather than wholeness, the vocation of the artist. . . can perhaps be said to come that much closer to that of the diagnostician rather than the artist’s celebration of life in a triumphant age.”

Walker Percy, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise”

INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy are two of the most influential writers of the modern South. Although their techniques, styles, and contents differ, they are very similar in their message. It is the intent of this essay to examine the relevance of these two writers to modern political philosophy. By examining the relationship between grace and vocation found both implicitly and explicitly in the works of these authors, a very similar world view emerges. By studying the fiction and nonfiction of O'Connor and Percy, as well as secondary criticism, a common diagnosis of modernity and the political philosophy that follows from it can be discovered. The works with which the following essay will be concerned include the O'Connor short stories "Revelation," "The Displaced Person," "The Artificial Nigger," and "The Lame Shall Enter First"; her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*; her essays, *Mystery and Manners*; and Percy's first four novels, *The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentleman*, *Love in the Ruins*, *Lancelot*; and his essays, *Signposts in a Strange Land*.

At first glance, O'Connor and Percy seem to bear only two points of resemblance: southern and Roman Catholic. These two factors are central to their nonfiction and fiction writing and serve as a departure point for comparisons. Both authors write about the twentieth-century condition, but they do not merely describe it; they level a judgment upon it. Though their means of forming this judgment or diagnosis of modernity vary, both authors come to the same unfavorable conclusion. Implicit in the works of O'Connor and Percy is a therapy that will remedy the illness, and it involves the role of grace in the world.

In studying any author it is often beneficial to examine the sources that have been influential upon him or her. The literary and theological sources that influenced Percy and O'Connor offer insight into and aid in understanding their work. The background influences upon the two authors often overlap, but important disjunctions exist. As is to be expected, an intense interest in and familiarity with Catholic theology was shared by both O'Connor and Percy. In her letters, *The Habit of Being*, O'Connor, a Catholic from birth, wrote extensively about her reading of Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and other theologians. These dogmatists appear to be some of the most important influences on O'Connor's own personal beliefs and her writing. Unlike O'Connor, Percy converted to Catholicism in his forties after intensive readings of the same theologians.

However, O'Connor's and Percy's influences differ especially in the area of nineteenth and twentieth century literature. Although O'Connor was extremely well read in areas as diverse as poetry, novels, and various forms of nonfiction, she was primarily interested in other Catholic writers, including Graham Greene, Robert Fitzgerald, Caroline Gordon, and Allen Tate. She corresponded regularly with Gordon, Fitzgerald and his wife, Sally, and relied heavily on their criticism of her work. Religion, specifically Catholicism, was a frequent topic of her letters; her discussions ranged from basic philosophical debates to explanations of dogma and the role of religion in the modern world. Additionally, her fiction is overtly religious in its tone and content. She directly addresses the state of the modern world, a world she feels is sorely lacking its spiritual grounding.

Although Walker Percy was equally well-read, the influences upon him were very different from O'Connor's. It is true that he was first drawn to Catholicism after reading

and debating Aquinas, Augustine, and other theologians, but he did not share O'Connor's intense interest in modern Catholic writers. His primary philosophical and literary influence was existentialism, as well as the phenomenology of Heidegger. The basic existential concepts of rotation, gaining a sense of novelty in the midst of ordinary; repetition, the reenactment of past experiences by isolating a time segment usually sunk in everydayness; and isolation feature prominently in his work. In Percy's work, man is sunk in everydayness and cannot escape. For Percy, like O'Connor, the twentieth-century is a time sorely lacking a spiritual grounding. His tone, however, is more obliquely religious than hers.

Although the authors differ somewhat in their selection of guiding sources, they both come to the same negative diagnosis of the modern world. It is, as they describe it, a world without meaning and fulfillment, a spiritually empty world due to the secularism of society. The remedy these two authors propose concerns an offering of the grace of God, a regrounding of society in the spiritual. Tied closely to the acceptance of grace in the fiction of these authors is the theme of vocation. For the characters of O'Connor and Percy, their resistance to grace is often a resistance to the vocation to which they are called by God.

It is the intention of this essay to study the previously mentioned works of O'Connor and Percy in the light of their concern with the issues of grace and vocation. The characters of these works all resist their vocations, that action to which God has called them to do. In this resistance, they are consequently resisting the grace of God. Each character must face God in his or her moment of grace, and their salvation is integrally tied to this moment. Closely related to the idea of grace and vocation are

issues central to political philosophy, including the essence of human nature; the relationship between will, faith, and reason; and the natures of modernity and political life.

THE FICTION OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful. . . . Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does."¹ This idea of resistance to grace is central to her fiction; indeed, she once noted, "It is the moment of grace that makes a story work"² Closely tied to O'Connor's concern with grace is another theme: vocation. In many, if not all, cases, the moment of grace experienced by a character is directly related to his or her vocation. More specifically, each character's resistance to grace is largely a resistance to his or her vocation, to that which God has called him or her. Grace is necessary to remind these characters that they have been called by God to perform a specific function.

Three categories of O'Connor characters will be explored, with the division based on the nature of the characters' vocations. The characters of the first category, Ruby Turpin in "Revelation" and Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person," must recognize that their vocation entails more than mere farm work. Both women consider themselves to be believers in God who practice their faith. They believe they are adequately managing their family farms, but they fail to see that their professed faith and belief in God has a direct relation to their daily lives and vocations, as well as the problems that exist in society. Importantly, both women deny any responsibility they have toward

fixing social problems. In the second category, the characters Mr. Head of “The Artificial Nigger,” Sheppard of “The Lame Shall Enter First,” and Rayber of *The Violent Bear It Away* resist their callings as parents and feel that they need no guidance or grace from God because they are living successfully without it. Finally, the last character, Tarwater of *The Violent Bear It Away*, resists his overtly religious calling to be a prophet because he does not feel it is fantastic enough for him. Although their specific vocations differ, all of the O’Connor characters discussed share an “ignorance of grace because of complacency, self-reliance, and pride.”³ They all represent man’s fallen state, and “to each is offered the opportunity of salvation”⁴ through their moments of grace.

In “Revelation,” Ruby Turpin is a woman who prides herself on her goodness and kindness towards all other people, even those beneath her in the social hierarchy, and she continually reminds herself of this benevolence to all people: “To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so.”⁵ She believes Jesus has blessed her with many things: her husband, Claude; their farm; her good disposition; and her generosity. But, for all of her self-righteous and self-serving thoughts, she truly is thankful for what she has been given. In other words, she suffers from that complacency that so often plagues O’Connor characters.

However, while waiting with Claude to see the doctor, she is forced to reevaluate her relationship with Christ. Upon entering the doctor’s office, she begins to classify the other patients based on their appearance, and she immediately identifies with and begins to engage in a conversation with a well-dressed woman. When the two women speak,

Mrs. Turpin's self-righteous, judgmental, and prejudicial opinions begin to emerge. These comments enrage the "pleasant" woman's college-aged daughter, Mary Grace, whose "eyes fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin."⁶ Ruby cannot understand why Mary Grace has singled her out. Finally, after Mrs. Turpin's truly genuine, but sarcastic-sounding, exclamation, "If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got. . . I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different . . . Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you,'"⁷ Mary Grace can stand it no more. She throws the book she has been reading at Mrs. Turpin and screams to her, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!"⁸

Even after Claude and Ruby return home to the farm, she cannot put Mary Grace's words out of her mind. She is furious that God would allow such a message to be sent to her. In her anger, she questions God, "What do you send me a message like that for? Why me? . . . It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to . . . Who do you think you are?"⁹ The narrator describes God's reply to Ruby:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. 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. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claude, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . . They 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. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.¹⁰

Mrs. Turpin is given her sign, a moment of grace, a vision of the Last Judgment in which her perfect social hierarchy has been turned upside down. The vision jolts Ruby out of her complacency and self-righteousness. The story ends without her response to God's grace, signifying that her acceptance to grace may not be necessary for her salvation. It is the shock of the vision which brings about her redemption. Additionally, signs of her redemption have been given throughout the story. First, she realizes that her neat system of social stratification is not perfect when it begins to fall apart with considerations of specific individuals, not just general groups of people. For instance, the black dentist and the common rich man are both problematic since they do not fit into their overarching group.¹¹ Second, she is truly thankful for what she has, and she recognizes that everything is a gift from God. Finally, she cannot put Mary Grace's words out of her mind because she realizes they contain some truth. These examples of the good qualities of her character, in addition to the shock that the vision produces, seem to indicate her salvation and her acceptance of both professing and living her Christian faith in her daily life.

In "The Displaced Person," Mrs. McIntyre owns a farm and dairy where a Polish family moves after escaping the Holocaust in Europe. Although she is originally unsure of accepting the family, the Guizacs, Mr. Guizac's extremely efficient work on her farm convinces her that she made the correct decision. She says, "That man there,--he has to work! He wants to work! That man is my salvation!"¹² However, she is not concerned with the horrors the Guizacs faced in Europe, nor is she eager to help them make a new life in America; she is most worried about her farm making money. She tells Mrs. Shortley, the farm help, that "after what those people had been through, they should be

grateful for anything they could get.”¹³ She capitalizes on the terrible circumstances that brought the Guizacs to her and feels the minimal salary and living arrangements she gives them are more generous than they should be. She even goes as far as to compare her own trouble keeping the farm from bankruptcy to the Guizac’s experiences in Poland.

Describing her thoughts, the narrator says:

She was sorry the poor man had been chased out of Poland and run across Europe and had had to take up in a tenant shack in a strange country, but she had not been responsible for any of this. She had had a hard time herself. She knew what it was to struggle. People ought to have to struggle. Mr. Guizac had probably had everything given to him all the way across Europe and over here. He probably had not had to struggle enough. She had given him a job.¹⁴

She continues her assertions of her lack of responsibility toward Mr. Guizac and his family throughout the story. They become more frequent when she decides to fire him because he tries to arrange a marriage between his niece and one of the black men who works on the farm. She can find no fault with his work; in fact, he is the best help she has ever had, and she knows it: “The Pole never did anything the wrong way, but all the same he was very irritating to her.”¹⁵ She has to fire him, she tells the priest who arranged the relocation of the Guizacs to Mrs. McIntyre’s, because “he’s upset the balance around here.”¹⁶ She does feel guilty, and this guilt causes her to delay giving him notice. She recognizes that she does indeed have a responsibility to him, even though she does not want to admit it because of her own prejudices: “[S]he felt she had been tricked by the old priest. He had said there was no legal obligation for her to keep the Displaced Person if he was not satisfactory, but he had brought up the moral one.”¹⁷ This moral obligation relates to the Golden Rule, one of the central tenets of Christianity. Mrs. McIntyre’s prejudices about Mr. Guizac’s nationality and values do not reflect the

ideals of Christianity in which she feels she believes. She realizes this conflict, but still cannot overcome her prejudices and act in a Christian manner towards him.

Ultimately, her prejudices overcome any sense of responsibility she feels toward Mr. Guizac. While out on the farm one day, she, along with Mr. Shortley and Sulk, a farm hand, witness Mr. Guizac's death. They watch him being run over and killed by a tractor and do nothing to save him. The narrator describes the scene and the three characters' responsibility, saying, "[Mrs. McIntyre] felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever."¹⁸

Although the three characters do not actually set the tractor in motion, their failure to act to save Mr. Guizac makes them as culpable as if they had run over him themselves.

Grace is offered to Mrs. McIntyre, but by failing to save Mr. Guizac, she does not accept it. Thus, Mr. Guizac is not her salvation, as she said earlier, but instead, he is her condemnation. He could have saved her, but her own actions do not allow him to. At the close of the story, Mrs. McIntyre experiences a nervous breakdown, and the only person who spends time with her is the Catholic priest toward whom she once felt animosity.

Thus the question of her salvation remains open; should she renounce her former prejudices and come to live out the teachings she had merely professed, salvation will be open again although she had rejected it once before.

The second group of O'Connor characters who are in need of grace are those who resist their vocations as parents. Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," Sheppard in "The Lambs Shall Enter First," and Rayber in *The Violent Bear it Away* all fail to be adequate parents to the children in their lives. Mr. Head is blinded by his own pride and superiority. Sheppard and Rayber are both so concerned with recreating troubled youths

that they fail to be fathers to their own sons. For these three men, their moment of grace entails a realization of their failure as parents.

First, Mr. Head in “The Artificial Nigger” is described in the beginning of the story as vain and proud; he does not consider himself in need of God. The narrator says of him, “Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character.”¹⁹ He believes his age and experience have made him a “suitable guide for the young,”²⁰ namely his grandson, Nelson, for whom Mr. Head serves as guardian. Mr. Head and Nelson plan a trip to the city so that Mr. Head can convince Nelson that there is no reason for him to want to leave home to move there.

Throughout the trip, Mr. Head takes every opportunity available to remind Nelson of Mr. Head’s wisdom in comparison to Nelson’s ignorance. The cruelest of these moments occurs when Nelson falls asleep and Mr. Head hides from him to show Nelson how lost he would be without him. The narrator says, “He justified what he was going to do on the grounds that it is sometimes necessary to teach a child a lesson he won’t forget, particularly when the child is always reasserting his position with some new impudence.”²¹ Nelson awakens to find his grandfather gone and begins to run, searching frantically for him, and in his anxiousness to find Mr. Head, Nelson runs into and knocks over an elderly woman. Not wanting to take responsibility for Nelson’s actions, Mr. Head, following at a distance, denies that he is the boy’s guardian. Mr. Head’s denial hurts and upsets Nelson in a way he has never experienced before, and nothing Mr. Head does thereafter leads Nelson to forgive him. As the two of them are walking through the city in silence, lost, the fear of death Mr. Head feels at not being able to get back to the

train station before dark forces him to realize how awful and sinful he has been, not just on this trip, but throughout his whole life. The narrator describes his awareness: "The speed of God's justice was only what he expected for himself, but he could not think that his sins could be visited upon Nelson, and that even now, he was leading the boy to his doom."²²

It is a statue of a black man, the artificial nigger, in someone's yard that saves Nelson and Mr. Head. The statue symbolizes the grace of God being offered to Mr. Head, and, as O'Connor once wrote, it represents the "redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all."²³ Mr. Head and Nelson are transfixed by the statue: "They stood gazing at the artificial negro as if they were faced with some great mystery. . . . They could feel it dissolving their differences like an action of Mercy. Mr. Head had never known before what Mercy felt like because he had always been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now."²⁴ Mr. Head realizes the importance of the gift he has just been offered, and he accepts it. Describing his acceptance, the narrator says:

Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again, but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. . . . He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought of himself as a great sinner before, but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair.²⁵

Thus, he realizes his sinfulness and his desperate need for grace and mercy from God.

When grace is offered to him, in the form of mercy, he accepts it readily. By this action of acceptance, he is able to make peace with Nelson, and the two return home bound by a love only God can create.

A second O'Connor character who denies his vocation as a father is Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First." Sheppard is afraid to love his son, Norton, because he reminds him of his dead wife, Norton's mother. Sheppard tries as much as possible to forget his wife in order not to experience grief or pain, but Norton has not been able to put his mother's death behind him because his father has not helped him to deal with his grief. Instead, Sheppard blames Norton's grief on selfishness. He thinks, "This was not a normal grief. It was all part of his selfishness. She had been dead for over a year and a child's grief should not last so long."²⁶ He believes that if Norton would do as he has done, burying himself in work, he would not feel any more grief. He tells Norton, "If you stop thinking about yourself and think what you can do for someone else, then you'll stop missing your mother."²⁷ In essence, he never really sees Norton for what he truly is--a young child who desperately needs his father in order to survive the loss of his mother.

Sheppard finds a surrogate son upon whom he can focus his attention in Rufus Johnson, a poor, lame, juvenile delinquent with whom Sheppard comes into contact at the city reformatory. Sheppard compares Norton to Rufus, thinking, "Johnson had the capacity for real response and had been deprived of everything from birth; Norton was average or below and had every advantage."²⁸ Sheppard invites Rufus to move into his house so that he can give Rufus everything he has never had, especially fatherly attention. But Sheppard's motives are not pure; he wants to help Rufus for his own personal satisfaction. The narrator describes his thoughts, "Nothing excited him so much as thinking what he could do for such a boy. . . . [H]e would encourage him in some particular intellectual interest."²⁹

Rufus arrives and brings with him the fundamentalist Christianity of his guardian grandfather. He tells Sheppard the Devil has possessed him, Rufus, and is the cause of his mischief. Sheppard is not religious, and he tells Rufus, “Rubbish! We’re living in the space age! You’re too smart to give me an answer like that.”³⁰ Sheppard stresses self-improvement through intellectual pursuits over spiritual growth. When Rufus continues to speak of Hell, the Devil, and God, Sheppard tries to convince him that he should not believe it because he is too smart. However, Rufus persists in his beliefs and begins to share them with the impressionable Norton.

Although Rufus continues to have problems with the law, Sheppard remains determined to transform him into his own image. In all of his dealings with Rufus, he is trying to instill in him his own personal philosophy, the idea that self-reliance and intellect are supreme. In short, he is trying to recreate Rufus into a copy of himself. Even Rufus sees that Sheppard is trying to usurp the divine roles of creator and savior when he tells Norton that Sheppard “thinks he’s Jesus Christ!”³¹ Sheppard gives Rufus chance after chance while constantly ignoring Norton. Finally, after Rufus has several run-ins with the law and Sheppard realizes that he cannot change Rufus’ behavior, Sheppard acknowledges that he can neither save nor recreate Rufus. He says, “I did everything I knew how for him. I did more for him than I did for my own child. I hoped to save him and I failed, but it was an honorable failure.”³²

This comment makes Sheppard realize the extent of his failure in his calling to be a father to Norton. He sees that the increase in attention towards Rufus means a decrease towards Norton. Additionally, he understands that he has not helped Norton through the

death of the boy's mother. This moment of recognizing his failure as a parent makes him open to receiving God's grace. The narrator describes his moment of grace:

Slowly his face drained of color. It became almost gray beneath the white halo of his hair. . . . His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation. Norton's face rose before him, empty, forlorn. . . . His heart constricted with a repulsion so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself.³³

But it is too late; Norton has killed himself, and it is largely caused by his desire to join his mother in heaven. Sheppard failed to give him the love and attention he needed, and Norton felt that his only alternative was to find his mother in heaven, where Rufus told him she would be.

Rayber, the schoolteacher in *The Violent Bear it Away*, like Sheppard, is another O'Connor character who resists his call to be a father to his own son while finding another boy toward whom he can turn his attention. The novel focuses on two relationships which highlight Rayber's need for grace and his refutation of his vocation. The first relationship is the one he shares with his son, Bishop, and the second is with Francis Tarwater, his nephew.

Throughout the novel, Rayber denies his calling to love and be a father to his son, Bishop. Bishop is mentally retarded, and Rayber believes it is useless to love him since he cannot fix Bishop by loving him. For Rayber, love must be useful and directed toward some cause. He tries to deny his love for Bishop, but he cannot:

For the most part, Rayber lived with him without being painfully aware of his presence, but the moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity.³⁴

He is afraid to love Bishop, not only because he cannot fix him, but also because he does not want to be subject to something he cannot control. In other words, he is afraid to love because he is afraid to lose control of his feelings, and he cannot control love. The narrator describes his attempts to control his love of Bishop: "He had kept it from gaining control over him by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline. He did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions. . . . He was not deceived that this was a whole or a full life, he only knew that it was the way his life had to be lived if it were going to have any dignity at all."³⁵ To love Bishop is not dignified, and, therefore, it should be avoided, Rayber thinks. In the moments when he is in control of his feelings, he ignores his fatherly duties to Bishop. In order not to love him, he must ignore him. But despite his attempts, he cannot always control his feeling for Bishop; sometimes they overtake him, and he is filled with a love he cannot explain or control.

Rayber turns his fatherly attentions, instead, to his nephew, Tarwater, who had lived with their uncle, Mason Tarwater, until his death. When Francis Tarwater, heretofore referred to as Tarwater, goes to Rayber after the death of their uncle, Rayber is ecstatic at the opportunity he believes has been given. He now can raise Tarwater and correct the damage done by Mason. Rayber tells Tarwater,

Everything he touched he warped. He lived a long and useless life and he did you a grave injustice. It's a blessing he's dead at last. You could have had everything and you've had nothing. All that can be changed now. Now you belong to someone who can help you and understand you. It's not too late for me to make a man of you.³⁶

Not only does Rayber intend to correct the influence of Mason on Tarwater, but he intends to rework him into his own image, someone dependent on himself alone.

Rayber believes that religion is useless, and one must rely not on God, but on his own

will, intellect, and reason. Rayber attempts to transform Tarwater by making him see the uselessness and irrelevance of the fundamentalism of their uncle. He once told Mason, “You’ve got to be born again, uncle, by your own efforts, back in the real world where there’s no savior but yourself,”³⁷ and these sentiments are what he tries to impose upon Tarwater. He believes that he has saved himself from the influence of his uncle, and therefore, by following his model, Tarwater can save himself in the same way.

While expending all of his time and energy on Tarwater, Rayber ignores Bishop. Tarwater, on the other hand, is fascinated by Bishop since he was told by his uncle that it is his, Tarwater’s, calling to baptize him. Although Tarwater tries to resist his calling, ultimately he cannot, and in baptizing Bishop, he drowns and kills him. It is this brutal act of murder that is Rayber’s moment of grace. The only thing that is able to make him see how he has denied his calling and failed as a father is the death of his son. But it is too late; Bishop is dead and Tarwater has gone off, “headed for everything the old man had prepared him for,”³⁸ a life of prophecy, the life to which God has called him but from which Rayber has tried to keep him. He has failed both his own son and the boy to whom he tried to be a father. O’Connor suggests here the idea that the stronger one’s resistance is to a vocation, the stronger one’s moment of grace must be. For those who resist fiercely, only great tragedy is able to awaken them from their condition.

The final division of O’Connor characters who resist their vocation concerns Francis Tarwater, a young man who denies his calling to prophecy. Tarwater is raised by his great-uncle, Mason, a fundamentalist Christian and self-proclaimed prophet. Tarwater is raised by Mason because his mother died in a car accident which induced his birth. Mason raises the boy in preparation for his calling to prophesy, which Tarwater

never wholly denies. He believes the situation of his birth signifies a special call by God to prophecy. He is “very proud that he had been born in a wreck. He had always felt that it set his existence apart from the ordinary one, and he had understood from it that the plans of God for him were special. . . .”³⁹

However, Tarwater considers Mason’s brand of prophecy too mundane for him. He believes he has been called for a more fantastic prophecy, along the line of the Old Testament figures of Moses, Joshua, and Daniel. Similarly, the main issue of contention between Mason and Tarwater is the baptism of Rayber’s son Bishop. Mason believes his own major calling is to baptize him, and he says that if he dies before it is done, it is the responsibility of Tarwater to do it. Tarwater disagrees, saying, “[God] don’t mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me,” thinking about “Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit.”⁴⁰ Mason does indeed die before he baptizes Bishop, and Tarwater thus first comes into conflict with his calling when he decides what he must do.

Tarwater believes that the death of his uncle will lead God to call him to prophecy in the grand form he desires. The narrator explains his wish: “When the Lord’s call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshy hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts.”⁴¹ Although a sign of this magnitude does not come, two things do happen: he is plagued by both an insatiable, constant hunger and a voice that begins to speak to him. Tarwater knows the hunger is a sign from God, but the voice, coming from inside of him, urges him to wait for a grander sign.

As hard as Tarwater tries to deny the hunger and his call to baptize Bishop, he cannot avoid it. He goes to the city to find Rayber, whom he has not seen in many years, and Bishop, whom he has never met. While staying with them, the hunger does not dissipate; instead it grows stronger, into “an insistent silent force inside him.”⁴² He has several opportunities to baptize Bishop, and Rayber even encourages it, hoping that the act will show Tarwater the futility of their uncle’s beliefs, but Tarwater never follows through because the voice convinces him not to and to “demand an unmistakable sign, not a pang of hunger. . . but an unmistakable sign, clear and suitable.”⁴³ Finally he can resist the hunger, a physical manifestation of his vocation, no more; he eats voraciously, and in doing so, accepts his calling to prophesy and to baptize Bishop. But, he does not act at the moment of first opportunity and appears to resist his calling yet again. Eventually, he succumbs, even while trying to resist. While boating alone with Bishop, Tarwater drowns him by holding him down in the water, in a manner similar to baptism by immersion, but even in killing him to prove he will not baptize him, he gives in and says the necessary words to baptize him. However, after baptizing while killing, he denies this violent acceptance of his vocation. He tells the truck driver who offers him a ride after he flees from Rayber, “I had to prove I wasn’t no prophet and I’ve proved it. I proved it by drowning him. Even if I did baptize him that was only an accident. Now all I have to do is mind my own bidnis until I die. I don’t have to baptize or prophesy.”⁴⁴

Thus, although Tarwater does physically accept his vocation in baptizing Bishop, he maintains that his acceptance was an accident and does not symbolize a true acceptance of it. The hunger returns, but he continues to deny it. Only a violent encounter with the Devil, in the guise of a man who gives Tarwater a ride, causes him to

realize that turning away from his vocation is impossible. He is drugged and molested by the man. Because his resistance has been so forceful, his moment of grace must be violent in turn. Explaining his final acceptance the narrator writes: "He knew he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked, as if touched with a coal like the lips of a prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again."⁴⁵

Tarwater finally realizes that he must accept his vocation as a prophet, and he finally accepts the message of his uncle that one cannot oppose the will of God. With this acceptance comes the magnificent sign he has been awaiting:

There, rising and spreading in the night, a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame. The boy's breath went out to meet it. He knew that this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him. He threw himself to the ground and with his face against the dirt of the grave, he heard the command. GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY. The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood.⁴⁶

After this powerful call, the one for which he has been waiting his whole life, he goes off to begin his prophecy in the city, "where the children of God lay sleeping," waiting for Tarwater's words.⁴⁷

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE WORKS OF O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor's concern with the resistance of vocation and the need for grace have definite political implications. In her fiction, the ideas of will, control, violence, and reason emerge, and they can be used to illustrate her views of modernity.

O'Connor's characters often use will and self-control in an effort to overpower God's call to them, as shown through characters in the stories "Revelation," "The Displaced Person," "The Artificial Nigger," and "The Lame Shall Enter First," and her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. Similarly, these characters, especially Mrs. McIntyre and Tarwater, are willing to use violent actions to prove their independence from God. Some of these characters, including Sheppard and Rayber, rely on reason at the expense of faith, while others, Ruby Turpin and Mrs. McIntyre, for example, profess faith but do not live it in their daily actions, and O'Connor criticizes each group equally. All of these related themes found in her fiction illustrate her belief that modernity is flawed in its increasing secularization and its consequential loss of spiritual grounding.

The O'Connor characters, Ruby Turpin, Mrs. McIntyre, Mr. Head, Sheppard, Rayber, and Tarwater, are all very strong-willed, and they resist the vocation God has planned for them. They believe that God's plan for them is inaccurate. Tarwater believes it is too mundane; he wants to be a more dynamic prophet. Ruby Turpin, Mr. Head, and Mrs. McIntyre consider it unnecessary since they are already adequately living it out through their faith. Sheppard and Rayber believe there is no plan from God; man plans and controls his own destiny. Each character believes he or she know what is best for him or her and needs no help from God. Additionally, they use will to resist God's plan instead of unconditionally accepting it.

Similarly, O'Connor's characters all try to control their own destinies instead of accepting God's vocation for them. Many of them, especially Tarwater, Rayber, and Sheppard, are motivated by the fear of losing control of their lives and thus relinquishing themselves to God's care and plan. This fear of losing control so dominates every aspect

of their lives that they refuse to experience basic human emotions, including love, sympathy, and compassion. They spend so much time and effort trying not to show emotions that they are blinded by things that occur right before their eyes.

Additionally, the presence of violence in the fiction of O'Connor comes in two forms: one form used by the characters and another used towards them. First, some characters, most notably Tarwater and Mrs. McIntyre, either perform or condone violent actions as a means, they believe, of illustrating their resistance to God's plan for them. They will do whatever it takes to prove to themselves and others that they control their own destinies. Second, O'Connor uses violence to show that for those who resist strongly, a forceful moment of grace is necessary. Ruby, Rayber, and Tarwater either have violence done to them or witness a violent act that is central to their moments of grace and subsequent acceptances of their vocations. As one critic notes, O'Connor's characters, as representative of the fallen human, "hear, refuse to listen, resist in [their] own ways, attempt to escape, and [are] finally struck down."⁴⁸ The reasons for O'Connor's use of violence are two-fold: one relates to the characters, the other to the audience. First, her characters resist so forcefully that the only way to reach them and change them is through violence. Second, O'Connor once wrote that her audience is "the people who think God is dead."⁴⁹ The modern audience, she believes, needs violence to change them, to make them see the flaws in themselves and their society, all of which directly result from the growing secularization of society. In her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country" she explains her technique: "When you have to assume [your audience doesn't hold the same beliefs you do], then you have to make your vision

apparent by shock-- to the hard of hearing you shout, and to the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures.”⁵⁰

Another theme present in O’Connor’s fiction, which is closely related to the resistance of grace and vocation, is the role of faith, in relation to both reason and good works. First, O’Connor clearly condemns the use of pure reason, as seen in her treatment of Rayber and Sheppard, both of whom rely solely on reason and ignore faith. These men are blinded by their reason and cannot see the importance of faith in the successful performance of one’s vocation. But she also condemns just as harshly those people who consider themselves faithful and religious, but do not practice their faith in daily life, as illustrated in Ruby Turpin and Mr. Head. Through her characters, O’Connor illustrates her belief that one’s works must be motivated by both reason and faith in order to live out the Christian values in which she believed.

Through these themes of reason, will, control, and violence, O’Connor’s diagnosis of modernity is clear. She sees a fundamental flaw in the secularization of the modern world which necessarily means a devaluation of the sacred. She argues for a return to the sacred, specifically to the orthodox Roman Catholicism she practices. This view is illustrated in her condemnation of reason and unsubstantiated faith. Her goal is “not to let us forget or dismiss-- not to let us off the hook of the rugged demands of faith.”⁵¹

The German theologian, Deitrich Bonhoeffer, was concerned with the distinction between cheap and costly grace, and his discussion is relevant to O’Connor’s fiction. According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace is grace lacking price or cost, and he believed it was the “deadly enemy of our church.”⁵² This grace requires nothing more of the person

than a proclamation of belief in doctrine; no action is necessary. It is “grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”⁵³ On the other hand, costly grace calls one to follow because “it costs a man his life and it . . . gives a man the one true life.”⁵⁴ It is the Incarnation. This costly grace and the Incarnation are issues with which O’Connor is concerned; they are central to her fiction. Her primary goal is to make her readers see the necessity of these issues.

Central to O’Connor’s use of the moment of grace is the transforming power it has on her characters. As earlier noted, the moment of grace is a turning point, often violent, in the lives of the characters. It forces them to acknowledge their resistance to their God-given vocation. Although she focuses on the transformation of the individual, parallels can be made to her view of the transformation of society. She does sense the need for change in the world, and she believes it is possible, but it can only be achieved by the transforming power of God’s grace. The social ills which faced her audience at the time she was writing and still exist today, including racism and secularization, are fixable, but only when the community becomes dependent on God and not the individual and realizes the importance of faith and grace and sees that they must be guides of their daily actions. Change must first be experienced in the individual, through his or her moment of grace, which forces that individual to understand the true vocation to which he or she has been called. From this “revelation,” or epiphany, the individual then comes to see how important the relationship between faith and works that O’Connor stresses truly is.

THE FICTION OF WALKER PERCY

The fiction of Walker Percy, like that of Flannery O'Connor, is concerned with the relationship between grace and vocation. Central to Percy's conception of vocation is his belief that the defining characteristic of man is his position as wayfarer, wanderer, or pilgrim. The primary function of this *homo viator*, or wayfaring man, is to search for an escape from the malaise of the modern world "in, through, and under the everyday."⁵⁵ Each of Percy's characters, including Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer*, Tom More of *Love in the Ruins*, Val Vaught and Sutter Vaught of *The Last Gentleman*, and Percival of *Lancelot*, chooses to confront the malaise in his or her own distinct way, but for all of them, the primary function of his or her vocation is to overcome this malaise.

Binx Bolling, the main character of Percy's first published novel, *The Moviegoer*, is the clearest and best example of *homo viator*. He is nearly thirty years old at the start of the novel, but he has no clear vocation. He is a stockbroker, but he is dissatisfied and incomplete. His Aunt Emily blames his emptiness and lack of fulfillment on his inability to decide upon a career in which he could "use [his] brain and . . . make a contribution,"⁵⁶ like medicine. She requests that he give her a definite answer on his thirtieth birthday concerning a career he will adopt because, "a thirty year old man ought to know what he wants to do with his life."⁵⁷ Binx, however, understands that a career in the traditional sense is not his true calling; the search is.

The search is the way that Binx seeks fulfillment and happiness in the everyday world. Throughout the novel, he engages in two kinds of search, vertical and horizontal, which although different in their natures, are the same in their ends of escape from everydayness. The possibility of the search emerges to Binx when he is faced with his own mortality during the Korean war: "I came to myself under a chindolea bush. . . .

[T]hat worst of time was one of the best. . . . [T]here awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search.”⁵⁸ This encounter with death leaves him with an insatiable curiosity to understand himself, the world, and his place in it.

Binx describes the various stages of his search at different times throughout the novel. The first search he undergoes is the vertical search: “If you walk in the front door of the laboratory, you undertake the vertical search. . . . [A]s you get deeper into the search, you unify. You understand more and more by fewer and fewer formulae. . . . Of course you are always looking for the big one, the new key, the secret leverage point, and that is the best of it.”⁵⁹ The vertical search is concerned with finding truth in abstract, scientific terms; it seeks to understand the truths of the universe through technical and scientific books, including *The Chemistry of Life* and *The Expanding Universe*, books Binx once read. Although there is excitement and discovery, this search ultimately ends in failure for Binx because it is only concerned with abstractions and scientific truths from which Binx is trying to escape because they shed no insight into his own human condition. The futility of the vertical search reflects Percy’s belief in the inability of science ultimately to answer metaphysical questions concerning the nature of man and his existence.

Ever the wayfarer, Binx begins a new search, the horizontal, as he calls it, after he realizes the vertical search will never produce answers to questions about his own existence and experience. The horizontal search is more concerned with individual truths generated by particular situations, not widespread general scientific truths. As one Percy critic defines it, it is the attempt by man “to live from day to day in the real

physical world of dreams, utopias, and abstractions.”⁶⁰ In this search, Binx participates in reality through his own experiences and feelings. He is not limited to objective observation, and his own experiences are not discounted because they do not fit into an objective, scientific model. Through the new search, Binx attempts to prevent abstraction and anonymity; he seeks to find his own definite place in the universe. He endeavors to be Somebody, Somewhere, at Sometime, instead of Anybody, Anywhere, at Anytime.

By the end of the novel, Binx is no closer to accepting his vocation as a wayfarer than he was at the beginning; indeed he says that he is in “the thirty first year of my dark pilgrimage, knowing less than I ever knew before.”⁶¹ It is time to face his aunt and answer her question about what it is he will do with his life, but he is still unsure. He has abandoned his search because “it is no match for my aunt, her rightness and her despair.”⁶² He believes Kate will not return to him, and despair and desire overwhelm him.

Just as Binx is about to succumb to this despair, he sees Kate. He thinks, “Is it possible that--it is not too late?”⁶³ She brings him grace; she saves him. He will marry her and go to medical school, he decides. However, he acknowledges that his true vocation is not medicine, nor stockbroking, nor anything else; it is wayfaring: “There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons. It remains to decide whether this vocation is best pursued in a service station or--.”⁶⁴ Although he is interrupted before he finishes, his meaning is clear. Grace

has enabled him to understand that his particular daily career is not important; it is his general, constant vocation as wayfarer that is.

The second of Percy's novels, *The Last Gentleman* is also concerned with the theme of grace and vocation, as illustrated in the characters of Val Vaught and Sutter Vaught, only one of whom sees the proper vocation and is receptive to grace. Val and Sutter are members of the Vaught family, with whom the novel's protagonist, Will Barrett, comes into contact, but each has an entirely different perspective on his vocation and the importance of grace.

Sutter Vaught is a pathologist who has been released from his job at the hospital and is unable to practice medicine. He is haunted by and concerned with the malaise that plagues so many Percy characters. He is aware of the malaise, having seen it in his patients. He tells Will about a man who had everything he needed or wanted and should have been happy but instead had a nervous breakdown:

He was a Deke from Vanderbilt, president of Fairfield Coke and a very good fellow, cheerful and healthy and openhanded. . . . There he stands in the living room dressed for work in his Haspel suit, shaved, showered, and in the pink, in fact still holing his attache' case beside him. All in order except that he was screaming, his mouth forming a perfect O.⁶⁵

This man who should have been happy and fulfilled, but is not, haunts Sutter. It enables him to understand the malaise, its cause and repercussions, but he is not able to escape it in his own life. He spends his days in the hospital as a pathologist, studying disease and death, but even this depressing job does not cure him, as spending time in the terminal ward cured the Deke from Vanderbilt; in fact, it seems only to sink him further into everydayness. For all his work with physical disease and the decay of the body, he is unable to understand or cure the spiritual disease of his existence.

Sutter's confrontation with the malaise leads him to seek a means to escape it and gain fulfillment. This search does not lead him to the spiritual or religious. In fact, he denies Val's opinion that wayfaring is part of the human condition. Through his case studies and other research, he comes to the conclusion that the only way to fulfillment is through sexual intercourse. He writes in his journal: "We are doomed to the transcendence of abstraction and I choose the only reentry into the world which remains to us. What is better than the beauty and the exaltation of the practice of transcendence (science and art) and of the delectation of immanence, the beauty and the exaltation of lewd love?"⁶⁶ However, this fulfillment through sex cannot last, and the only alternative is suicide, which he intends to commit after his brother, Jamie, dies of leukemia. Thus although Sutter is onto the malaise, his scientific, clinical bias blinds him from finding the cure, an acceptance of God's grace. He denies the transforming power of grace and is unable to understand his sister Val's vocation. There is some hope at the close of the novel that he will be saved. Sutter has postponed suicide because he is needed by Jamie, and he feels suicide is his only alternative after Jamie's death. However, Will tells Sutter that he needs him, opening up the possibility of Sutter's salvation, by allowing for the possibility of the two men acknowledging and helping each other to understand their condition as wayfarers.

Val Vaught, like her brother, Sutter, recognizes the malaise in herself and others, but unlike him, she is able to find an escape from it in her vocation as a Catholic nun ministering to a poor black community in Alabama. Her family, especially her father and Sutter, disapprove of what she is doing, considering her ministry unnatural and a waste of time. Her father explains his feeling to Will saying, "I mean to go and spend the rest of

your life not just with niggers but with Tyree niggers--do you think that is natural? . . .

Not even niggers have anything to do with Tyree niggers.”⁶⁷ He believes she has wasted her Agnes Scott and Columbia educations, as well as the money he gave her on her twenty-first birthday which she gave to her order’s ministry.

Val, however, sees the importance of her vocation. The children to whom she ministers are dumb because they grow up in homes where their parents do not speak to them. She is able to give them the gift of speech. She explains her job to Will:

When they suddenly do break into the world of language, it is something to see. They are like Adam on the First Day. What’s that? they ask me. That’s a hawk, I tell them, and they believe me. I think I recognized myself in them. They were not alive and then they are so they’ll believe you. Their eyes fairly pop out at the Baltimore catechism (imagine). I tell them that God made them to be happy and that if they love one another and keep the commandments and receive the Sacrament they’ll be happy now and forever. They believe in me.⁶⁸

Val enables them to discover their relationship with the rest of God’s creation. She does admit that she is motivated more by the linguistic phenomenon occurring than she is by charity, but in spite of these motives, she continues to minister to a sector of society to which no one else will. Additionally, she realizes that she is sinful, proud and full of wrath, but in acknowledging her flaws, she is making progress toward changing them. She realizes her need for grace, and indeed, she asks Will to pray for her “in order not to hate the guts of some people, however much they deserve it.”⁶⁹ Her role in the novel is crucial, because, as one critic notes, “Val, more than any other character in *The Last Gentleman*, is the spokesman for Percy himself as she draws the connection between naming one’s pain to another malaisian and then going on to become a sovereign creature able to choose not to believe scientific ‘experts’ on how best to live, but to choose the more difficult path of believing in God.”⁷⁰ Her faith in God and her openness to his grace

prevent her from being consumed by the malaise and turning to suicide, as Sutter nearly does.

Grace and vocation are present in *Love in the Ruins*, Percy's third novel, the story of Dr. Tom More's experiences with his invention, "More's Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer." He says, "With it, my little invention, in hand, any doctor can probe the very secrets of the soul, diagnose the maladies that poison the well springs on man's hope."⁷¹ He invents the Lapsometer to diagnose the spiritual problems of his patients, but even after he makes his diagnosis, he has no means of curing them.

However, before More can fully employ his Lapsometer, he must deal with the social chaos that exists around him. The Bantus, a black guerrilla force, have taken over part of the city in which he lives, and the government is trying to restore order. More believes the Lapsometer can stop the chaos, saying "It is still not too late! I can save you, America! I know something! I know what is wrong! I hit on something, made a breakthrough, came on a discovery! I can save the God-blessed Americans from themselves! With my invention!"⁷² But the scientific community is not supportive of More's Lapsometer; only Art Immelmann, a character who can be no one but the devil himself, shows an interest in it and takes it seriously, offering to buy it.

But Immelmann's purchase and reproduction of the Lapsometer cannot end the chaos. The Lapsometer by its nature cannot cure man and restore order because one cannot experiment on the soul without destroying it.⁷³ In fact, More's scientism and gnosticism are the actual causes of the chaos because he defines "being or spirit as a quest for knowledge," not a search for God and his saving grace, and "the wages of such a desire for knowledge can only be violence."⁷⁴

Only when More transfers his faith in his Lapsometer to God can the social order be restored and Immelmann be forced to leave. More's major flaw is that "he persistently finds it easier to believe in his own intellectual powers than in God's grace,"⁷⁵ but once he puts his faith in God, he becomes able to overcome this flaw. Finally, in praying through his namesake St. Thomas More, can Tom turn "his own despair around in time to stop the apocalypse."⁷⁶ More's moment of grace occurs when he prays to God through his namesake for assistance in removing Immelmann and restoring order to society. He prays, "Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence."⁷⁷ He has finally accepted his role as a wayfarer and believer, by realizing that "the only return that can save man from himself is Christ's."⁷⁸

Although Percy's fourth novel, *Lancelot*, is more apocalyptic and violent than his earlier works, the theme of grace and vocation is present through Father John, or Percival, the character to whom Lancelot Lamar confesses his story. Throughout Lancelot's tale, Percival's internal struggle with his faith and vocation becomes apparent even though he does not speak until the close of the novel. Percival is an old friend of Lancelot's who gave up his medical career, converted to Catholicism, and became a priest. It is in this dual capacity of friend and priest that he listens to Lancelot's story of rage and murder.

Although Percival does not ever speak directly to the audience, it is possible to learn of his struggles with his faith and vocation through Lancelot's comments during the course of the novel. It is obvious that listening to Lancelot's story is part of his priestly mission, and it is Percival who brings Lancelot back to his story when he begins to

wander and address tangential topics.⁷⁹ However, Lancelot does not merely accept Percival's vocation; he questions him about it, and in doing so, brings to light Percival's struggles.

Several incidents in the novel illustrate this struggle with vocation and grace Percival is undergoing. When Lancelot finally recognizes Percival as an old acquaintance, Lancelot confronts him about his vocation. He stresses his belief that Percival is losing his faith; he tells Percival that he, Lancelot, knows who Percival is, "a priest-physician. Which is to say, a screwed-up priest or a half-assed physician. Or both,"⁸⁰ and that "something went wrong with you too. Or you wouldn't be here serving as assistant chaplain or substitute psychiatrist or whatever it is you're doing. A non-job."⁸¹ Additionally, he mentions that he has seen Percival in the cemetery refusing a request of a woman in the cemetery: "You shook your head and moved on. But what could she have asked you? Only one thing under the circumstances. To say a prayer for the dead. . . . You turned her down."⁸² Percival never speaks, yet Lancelot does nothing to acknowledge a denial of his accusations by Percival, so we can assume that Lancelot's accusations are at least partially valid.

Although Percival is undergoing this crisis of faith, he continues to minister to Lancelot by returning to him and listening to his confession. But Lancelot still questions him about his life and the changes that are occurring. He notices that Percival is not wearing the usual priestly vestments. Repeatedly he questions Percival about a young woman he sees him speaking with on the levee outside the institution, and even goes as far as asking him if he is in love with her, which Percival again does not deny.

In his talks with Percival, Lancelot begins to bring attention to changes he has noted in Percival, changes that are signs of his acceptance of his vocation and God's grace. First, he begins to wear his "priest uniform"⁸³ again, and he prays alone in the grave yard.⁸⁴ All of these changes are noticed by Lancelot who says, "I have the feeling that while I was talking and changing, you were listening and changing. Am I wrong or have you reached a decision of sorts?"⁸⁵ Lancelot is right, Percival has indeed reached a decision; he has finally fully accepted his vocation and has decided to become the pastor of a "little church in Alabama."⁸⁶ Unlike Lancelot, he accepts his role in the world as wayfarer, which God has given him. He understands that it is not his duty to try to destroy the old world and create a new one, as Lancelot feels he is to do, but instead, to try to improve little by little the world in which he is placed. This acceptance is illustrated in his plans to move to Alabama and take a job many would consider too mundane.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE WORKS OF PERCY

Inherent in the fiction of Walker Percy are themes central to political theory, including theories of human nature and the role of politics, as well as a criticism of science and modernity. All of these ideas stem from and are closely linked to the issue of the relationship between grace and vocation. Thus, through his role as novelist, Percy takes on the role of diagnostician. In his essay, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," he says, "I refer to the diagnostic stance which comes so naturally to the physician-- diagnostic at the outset and in the end, one hopes therapeutic."⁸⁷ His diagnosis of the state of the modern world naturally implies a therapy, although he denied the role of

novelist as therapist. These terms, diagnosis and therapy, are words Percy used in describing the tasks of the fiction writer, and they are no doubt related to his medical training.

After attending University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and majoring in Chemistry, Percy attended Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons where he specialized in pathology. However, he was forced to abandon the medical profession after contracting tuberculosis during his internship. Even after turning to writing, Percy never lost the influence of his medical education, and his status as a “physician novelist” was central to his writing. For Percy, “scientific research, medical diagnosis, and fiction writing are essentially identical activities.”⁸⁸ He transformed his medical diagnoses into spiritual ones, where he began to diagnose the soul’s ill, the malaise, that plagues so many Americans and that “none of the institutions of contemporary society can heal.”⁸⁹ The purpose of his diagnostic method is to identify “the symptoms in such a way as to lead the reader into a fuller consciousness of the nature of his suffering.”⁹⁰

Although his medical training remained strongly influential throughout his life, he did lose the absolute faith in science he once possessed. In his introduction to *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*, editor and Percy biographer Jay Tolson writes, “[H]is once boundless faith in science was beginning to crumble. The adolescent who had believed that science would one day explain everything. . . was now beginning to see that it was a form of knowledge with distinct limitations.”⁹¹ He began to doubt his once held belief in the infallibility of science, and he realized the scientific method could never adequately answer questions concerning individual human beings.

He realized it was no longer possible to believe in an “all-transcending objective consciousness”⁹² which denies the “authority of individual experience.”⁹³ In Percy’s essay “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” he writes, “The secret is simply this: the scientist, in practicing the scientific method, cannot utter a single word about an individual thing or creature in so far as it is an individual but only as far as it resembles other individuals.”⁹⁴

His regard of the inadequacy of science mirrors the ideas of the twentieth century political theorist, Eric Voegelin, with whose work Percy was familiar. In his book, *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin sharply criticizes the rise of positivistic science because of its elevation of methodology and its exclusion of subjective value judgments. This belief in the supremacy of method which results in the promotion of “all propositions concerning facts. . . regardless of their relevance, as long as they result from a correct use of method,”⁹⁵ necessarily excludes from “science” anything that cannot be objectively and methodically measured, including all metaphysical questions concerning the true nature of man. Obviously, these ideas of the flaws of positivistic science are mirrored in the essays and fiction of Walker Percy.

Another area in which Percy is indebted to Voegelin concerns gnosticism, which Voegelin considered the nature of modernity. According to Voegelin, gnosticism sought to overcome “the uncertainty of faith”⁹⁶ by attempting to bring eschatological fulfillment to life on earth, instead of in the afterlife. In other words, “the spiritual strength of the soul which in Christianity was devoted to the sanctification of life could now be diverted into the more appealing, more tangible, and above all, so much easier creation of the

terrestrial paradise.”⁹⁷ Additionally, Voegelin believed scientism was one of the strongest varieties of gnosticism in the West.⁹⁸

This link of scientism and gnosticism is present in the fiction and nonfiction of Percy, especially in his works *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*. In *Love in the Ruins*, it is this scientist gnosticism that pervades the novel. Tom More, a “lapsed Catholic,” the protagonist, has lost his faith and hope after the death of his daughter, Samantha. He is spiritually empty and cannot find happiness, even with the help of his work, alcohol, or women. His community is in chaos, with different factions warring for control. Tom has invented the Lapsometer which he hopes will diagnose and cure the malaise which plagues mankind and thus save the world (and win for him the Nobel Prize). Through the use of the Lapsometer he hopes to be able to create an earthly paradise. Finally, with his Lapsometer nearly falling into the hands of the devil and society still in shambles, he realizes the only answer is God. His prayer through his namesake is what saves him. He finally realizes his own scientific gnosticism is not enough and that “grace is. . . the only recourse he has, just as it always was.”⁹⁹

In *Lancelot*, Lancelot Lamar shares Tom More’s desire for a new world order. Unlike Tom who realizes he cannot create it and returns to God, Lancelot burns down his family home, killing his wife and her lover. In contrast to Lance is Percival, his childhood friend and priest-psychiatrist. Unlike Lancelot, Percival has overcome his own doubt and accepts his place in the world God has created.

All of Percy’s characters, whether they fall prey to gnosticism or not, share the common characteristic of wayfaring. For Percy, the defining characteristic of human nature is man’s role as a wayfarer or wanderer. Man is foremost *homo viator*, or

wandering man, a phrase he borrowed from Gabriel Marcel, the Catholic existentialist philosopher who influenced Percy greatly. This condition of man as wayfarer figures prominently in Percy's fiction. All of his main characters, and many of the minor ones, are searching for something, that thing which will make their lives fulfilled. They are not and can never be fulfilled by a secular vocation alone. Mary Sweeny says, "Percy is speaking of one who is on a journey, alone, searching for his destination, of a God-made being who has a destiny and completion beyond earth, and upon which his individuality, sovereignty, and freedom are based."¹⁰⁰ For Percy, this lacking is definitely spiritual in nature. Modern society has become so secularized, scientific, and centered on reason that man has lost his spiritual grounding. Thus, he becomes susceptible to the malaise and realizes his role as wayfarer. Similarly, as Peter Hawkins notes, Percy's characters are "endowed with an extraordinary range of depth and self-awareness. . . . They are obsessed, articulate about their predicament, however hopeless they may actually be to altering it."¹⁰¹ Although many of Percy's characters recognize their status as wayfarers, they must experience a moment of grace before they are able to see that wayfaring is closely tied to their secular vocation.

Though the concept of man as wayfarer is the central component of Percy's theory of human nature, another issue relevant to it is the human capacity for change. Although Percy's characters receive their moments of grace, they do not experience dramatic epiphanies. For Percy's characters, change is incremental, almost unnoticeable, and largely internal. "Percy's characters do not leap. They take small, unsure, timid steps toward half-realized pilgrimages."¹⁰² Primarily, these changes are intended to make the character "more susceptible to grace."¹⁰³

Importantly, these incremental changes in the individual parallel incremental changes in society. This phenomenon is most clearly evident in *Love in the Ruins*, when at the end of the novel, the world is “in much the same old mess.”¹⁰⁴ It seems that in the fiction of Percy the practice of politics in the conventional sense is not of primary importance. It is something the wayfarer confronts if he must, but it is not his main concern. If man must encounter politics, it is not his job to change dramatically the political order, but instead to make incremental changes. It is clear that Percy shares Aristotle’s belief that politics is the practice of amelioration, of small changes within the given system, and does not entail dramatic changes or the creation of a new system.

CONCLUSION

Both Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy, through their fiction and nonfiction, acknowledge the duty of the writer to illustrate, even magnify, the condition of society, whether positive or negative. They participate in the diagnostic stance, as Percy calls it, whereby they diagnose the state of society, which for both authors was unfavorable. O’Connor and Percy share the opinion that modernity is overly secular and lacking a spiritual grounding.

But these two authors do not only diagnose the condition of modernity: they also, whether admittedly or not, provide a therapy, to use another of Percy’s terms, to remedy it. Although their individual approaches to this therapy differ somewhat, they hold in common the essential character of it, a recognition and acceptance of the grace of God. This grace, as it is found in the works of these authors, works through an individual’s vocation to which he or she has been called by God. When each individual

acknowledges his or her proper vocation, and thus the grace of God, the foundation is laid for the possibility of the occurrence of important changes that will minimize that secular in society and return it to its spiritually grounded state.

Importantly, these moments of grace, as O'Connor called them, are experienced by the individual. Both O'Connor and Percy stress that the beginnings of any change in society, political, social, or otherwise, begin with the individual. Once the individual overcomes his or her resistance to grace and change, not only is he or she open to redemption, but he or she also has the ability to bring about the changes necessary to return society to its proper state. But it is important to note that this ideal society never materializes in the works of either O'Connor or Percy. Both authors recognize that the world is imperfect and that only incremental changes created through the individual who follows his or her proper vocation and acts in accordance with the teachings of Christ can be expected. Thus, change is badly needed and definitely possible, but it requires the intercession of God, through the offering of his saving grace.

Bibliography

- Allen, William Rodney. *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer*. Oxford, MS: U P of Mississippi, 1986.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. "Costly Grace," *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (Harper San Francisco, 1990), pp. 323-326.
- Eubanks, Cecil L. "Walker Percy: Eschatology and the Politics of Grace." *Southern Quarterly* 18:3 (Spring 1980): 121-135.
- Gosset, Louise Y. "Flannery O'Connor." *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis Rubin, Jr., Blyden Johnson, Rayburn Moore, Lewis Simpson, and Thomas Daniel Young (Louisiana State U P, Baton Rouge, 1985), pp 489-93.
- Hardy, John E. *The Fiction of Walker Percy*. Urbana, IL: U Illinois P, 1987.
- Hawkins, Peter. *The Language of Grace*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1983.
- Hobson, Linda Whitney. *Understanding Walker Percy*. Columbia, SC: U South Carolina P, 1988.
- Kinney, Arthur F. "Flannery O'Connor and the Fiction of Grace." *Massachusetts Review* 27:1 (Spring 1986): 71-96.
- Lawson, Lewis. *Following Percy*. Troy, NY: Whitson, 1988.
- Martin, Carter W. *The True Country*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt U P, 1969.
- McFague, Sallie. "The Parabolic in Faulkner, O'Connor, and Percy." *Notre Dame English Journal* 15:2 (Spring 1983): 49-66.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Noonday, 1969.
- . "The Artificial Nigger." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1995.
- . "The Displaced Person." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1995.
- . *The Habit of Being*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979.
- . "The Lame Shall Enter First." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1995.
- . "Revelation." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Noonday, 1995.
- . *The Violent Bear It Away. Three by Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Penguin, 1983.

- Percy, Walker. *Lancelot*. New York: Ivy Books, 1977.
- . *The Last Gentleman*. New York: Ivy Books, 1966.
- . *Love In the Ruins*. New York: Ivy Books, 1971.
- . *The Moviegoer*. New York: Ivy Books, 1960.
- . *Signposts in a Strange Land*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991.
- Sweeny, Mary K. *Walker Percy and the Postmodern World*. Chicago: Loyola U P, 1987.
- Tharpe, Jac. *Walker Percy*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.
- Tolson, Jay, ed. *The Correspondence of Walker Percy and Shelby Foote*. New York: Doubletake, 1997.
- Tuttleton, James W. "The Physician-Writer and the Cure of the Soul." *New Orleans Review* 16:4 (Winter 1989): 17-21.
- Voegelin, Eric. *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

Notes

1. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979) 307.
2. Ibid., 465.
3. Carter Martin, *True Country* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1969) 29.
4. Ibid., 21.
5. Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," *Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday, 1995) 497.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 499.
8. Ibid., 500.
9. Ibid., 506-07.
10. Ibid., 508.
11. Ibid., 491-92.
12. Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," *Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday, 1995) 203.
13. Ibid., 196.
14. Ibid., 219.
15. Ibid., 230.
16. Ibid., 231.
17. Ibid., 228.
18. Ibid., 234.
19. Flannery O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger," *Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday, 1995) 249.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 264.
22. Ibid., 266.
23. *Habit*, 23.
24. *Artificial*, 269.
25. Ibid.
26. Flannery O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," *Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday, 1995) 447.
27. Ibid., 448.
28. Ibid., 449.
29. Ibid., 451-52.
30. Ibid., 451.
31. Ibid., 474.
32. Ibid., 480.
33. Ibid., 481.
34. Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away, Three By Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Penguin, 1983) 192.
35. Ibid., 193.
36. Ibid., 176-77.
37. Ibid., 168.

38. Ibid., 243.
39. Ibid., 147.
40. Ibid., 128.
41. Ibid., 136.
42. Ibid., 219.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 248.
45. Ibid., 266.
46. Ibid., 267.
47. Ibid.
48. Louise Gosset, "Flannery O'Connor," *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., et. al. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1985) 490.
49. Habit, 92.
50. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Noonday, 1969) 34.
51. Arthur Kinney, "Flannery O'Connor and the Fiction of Grace," *Massachusetts Review* 27:1 (Spring 1986) 75.
52. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Costly Grace," *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: Harper, 1990) 325.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Sallie McFague, "The Parabolic in Faulkner, O'Connor, and Percy," *Notre Dame English Journal* 15:2 (Spring 1983) 61.
56. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Ivy Books, 1960) 44.
57. Ibid., 45.
58. Ibid., 7.
59. Ibid.
60. Jac Tharpe, *Walker Percy* (Boston: Twayne Books, 1983) 51.
61. *Moviegoer*, 199.
62. Ibid., 200.
63. Ibid., 202.
64. Ibid., 204.
65. Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Ivy Books, 1966) 211.
66. Ibid., 278.
67. Ibid., 65.
68. Ibid., 237.
69. Ibid., 238.
70. Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia, SC: U South Carolina P, 1988) 53-54.
71. Walker Percy, *Love In the Ruins* (New York: Ivy Books, 1971) 6.
72. Ibid., 49.
73. Hobson, 70.
74. Ibid.
75. William Rodney Allen, *Walker Percy, A Southern Wayfarer* (Oxford, MS: U P of Mississippi, 1986) 85.
76. Hobson, 73.

77. Love, 322.
78. Allen, 99.
79. John E. Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana, IL: U Illinois P, 1987) 173.
80. Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Ivy Books, 1977) 7.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 148.
84. Ibid., 237.
85. Ibid., 238. 86. Ibid., 240.
87. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991) 205.
88. Lewis Lawson, *Following Percy* (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1988) 237.
89. James Tuttleton, "The Physician Writer and the Cure of the Soul," *New Orleans Review* 16:4 (Winter 1989) 20.
Doubletake, 1997) 5.
92. Peter Hawkins, *The Language of Grace* (Cambridge: MA: Cowley, 1983) 55.
93. Ibid.
94. Signposts, 214.
95. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 8.
96. Ibid., 129.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid., 127.
99. Allen, 138.
100. Mary K. Sweeny, *Walker Percy and the Postmodern World* (Chicago: Loyola U P, 1987) 10.
101. Hawkins, 101.
102. Cecil Eubanks, "Walker Percy: Eschatology and the Politics of Grace," *Southern Quarterly* 18:3 (Spring 1980) 123.
103. Hardy, 138.
104. Allen, 81.