

Jordan Cofer. 2014. *The Gospel According to Flannery O'Connor: Examining the Role of the Bible in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction*. New York: Bloomsbury. 144 pp. ISBN: 978-1-62356-088-1.

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In keeping with Flannery O'Connor's increasing prominence in the literary canon, a growing number of critical studies of her work have come out in recent years. Some approach O'Connor's fiction from the perspective of Christianity, in accordance with the writer's religious impulse and literary objectives. As she put it herself,

for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. (O'Connor [1969] 1970, 32)

I write the way I do because (not though) I'm a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement. (O'Connor 1979, 90)

For instance, Ralph Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (2004) analyses O'Connor's fiction in the light of Christian theology and Southern culture, while George A. Kilcourse's *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination* (2001) and Susan Srigley's *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art* (2004) examine the writer's work from the perspective of her philosophical and theological beliefs. Although drawing from these sources—comparatively more abstract or general in scope—Jordan Cofer's *The Gospel According to Flannery O'Connor* follows the path set by J. Ramsey Michaels's *Passing by the Dragon: The Biblical Tales of Flannery O'Connor* (2013): both are devoted to tracking the echoes of the Bible—both the Old and New Testament—in O'Connor's fiction. Although Cofer does not mention Michaels's book, his study offers a complementary analysis to the work of the latter. As Cofer himself argues with respect to previous approaches to O'Connor's fiction, “there are significant biblical allusions which have been overlooked,” and above all, “the methodology behind these allusions as a whole has been neglected” (3).

In the introductory chapter, Cofer discusses the book's objectives and quotes passages from O'Connor's essays to support the pertinence of his approach. In the same

vein as O'Connor deplores in *Mystery and Manners* the flood of bad fiction "for which the religious impulse has been responsible" (quoted in Cofer, 3), Cofer is concerned with "avoiding a monologic reading of O'Connor's work" (1), which would result in a formulaic and reductive interpretation. Nevertheless, the monologic/dialogic dichotomy does not seem particularly relevant in this book, given its aim of an unambiguously comparative close-reading. In my view, Cofer offers a substantial analysis of O'Connor's fiction, particularly appropriate, and perhaps even necessary, in a time when readers—including academic readers—have increasingly become unfamiliar with the contents of the Bible.

Although O'Connor remarked that in the American South "belief can still be made believable" because in that region "the Bible is known by the ignorant as well" ([1969] 1970, 203), the truth is that many biblical allusions in her fiction may pass unnoticed by present-day readers, including those from the American South: as O'Connor ironically portrays in "Good Country People" (1955), the Bible is no longer kept on the bedside table, but "in the attic somewhere" (278). That is one of the reasons why in her essays, she clarifies her authorial intentions, highlighting the difficulty of writing for an audience who does not share her beliefs and biblical background:

When you assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. (O'Connor [1969] 1970, 34)

These lines, which evoke the task of the biblical prophets—a role that O'Connor appeared to assume—are quoted by Cofer as the starting point for his analysis. He finds three methods in O'Connor's fiction, which are discussed in the introductory chapter and further examined throughout the book: (1) recapitulation or retelling of biblical stories; (2) inclusion of prophetic figures, also called backwoods prophets; (3) ironic reversals based on the Bible's reversing techniques. As such, the first chapter of Cofer's book, "Towards a New Approach to Flannery O'Connor's Fiction" (1-18) is devoted to a description of his objectives and to the explication of these three methods.

The chapter ends with the analysis of "Good Country People" (1955), a tale that conveys all three techniques working together. Cofer draws the connection between the term good—also central in O'Connor's best-known story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953)—to the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus replies to the rich young ruler: "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone" (Luke, 18:19). No doubt, it is the elusive notion of goodness that constitutes the core of the story, which O'Connor undermines in an original manner both in this tale and in the shocking "A Good Man," as Cofer points out. Surprisingly, however, he fails to relate O'Connor's focus on goodness to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), a tale

similarly engaged with ethical and religious issues, and full of biblical echoes and ironic reversals—an inescapable intertext for both tales by O'Connor. Cofer completes the analysis of "Good Country People" with a study of the main characters, Hulga Hopewell and Manley Pointer (the latter a Bible salesman), who unwillingly embody the figure of the backwoods prophet and also the method of ironic reversals. As Pointer says, quoting Matthew 10:39, "He who loses his life shall find it" (O'Connor [1971] 1990, 280): a foreshadowing statement that prefigures Hulga's surrendering of her wooden leg to the salesman and her finding of grace through his improper behaviour and shocking-but-enlightening final revelation (Cofer, 15-18).

Chapter two, titled "*Wise Blood* as a Primer for O'Connor's Religious Vision" (19-50), examines the development of the three Biblical-based techniques in O'Connor's first novel. Cofer pays special attention to this text, since, as he argues throughout the chapter, "many of the religious approaches to writing which she continued to cultivate through her writing career originate from within her debut novel" (23). The chapter opens with an introduction to *Wise Blood* (1952), and is followed by a section corresponding to each of the methods Cofer identifies in O'Connor's work, as mentioned above. The introduction summarises previous critical views and points out the influence of two novels on O'Connor's text: William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), which prefigure the grotesqueness and shocking violence of *Wise Blood*. Even though the concerns of these works depart from the objectives of O'Connor's fiction, the allusion to these novels is wholly appropriate, since it helps remind the reader that the Bible coexists with other intertexts in her writing.

While discussing a variety of biblical sources, Cofer focuses on the figure of Saul/Paul, given the striking parallels between his life, conversion and ministry and the character of Hazel Motes, the protagonist of *Wise Blood*. While the connections between Paul and Motes are quite evident (such as the similar violent impulse and literal blindness), there are other aspects that Cofer's study brings to light, like the duality suggested by the character of Enoch Emery: this name points not only to the Enoch who "walked with God," but also to Enoch, the son of Cain (45-46). Cofer includes this feature, dualism, in the section of "Reversals" and relates it to O'Connor's repeated use of "doppelgangers." As Cofer notes, this device "would become a stock trait in O'Connor's fiction" (46), and is conveyed, for instance, in the parallels between Julian's mother and her African-American counterpart in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" (1965). Furthermore, Motes can be taken as Enoch's ironic reversal and spiritual double, since both constitute two different sides of the same paradigm (48).

Chapter three, "From Dishonor to Glory: Biblical Recapitulation in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' and 'Judgment Day'" (51-72), examines O'Connor's method of biblical rewriting, connecting one of her earliest tales to one of her final ones. While "Judgment Day" (1965) is "possibly the most theologically explicit story within O'Connor's corpus," as Cofer contends (63), the biblical allusions in the former are

rather more subtle and have been completely overlooked, as Connor's critique of this tale demonstrates. In Cofer's approach, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) "is not merely an allusion to, but a radical re-writing of Christ's encounter with the rich young ruler" (56). In light of this original interpretation, the Misfit's attitude proves to be similar to that of his biblical source and double: both are troubled questers, but unwilling to give up their way of life and accept a new one. They "don't want no hep [sic]," and implicitly claim "I'm doing all right by myself"; in the end, both of them express their inner dissatisfaction: while the rich young ruler "went away grieving," the Misfit concludes: "It's no real pleasure in life" (62).

In chapter four, "The Terrible Speed of Mercy: Flannery O'Connor's Backwoods Prophets" (73-94), Cofer discusses the characteristics of these peculiar characters—the most powerful ones in her fiction—focusing on three works: "A Circle in the Fire" (1954), "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1965) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). Following the structure of previous chapters, chapter four starts with a general introduction and continues with three sections devoted to the analysis of the selected texts. Cofer notes the American South's traditional fascination with backwoods prophets, which O'Connor recreates through eccentric, violent, Bible-inspired figures "associated with austerity and fear" (74). As he discerningly concludes, "the myth of regeneration through violence" pervades not only the South, but American experience as a whole (76), and the Bible offers diverse instances of renewal through destruction, which O'Connor, prophet-like, adapts with visionary genius.

Chapter five, the last in the volume, analyses the most prominent examples of reversals in O'Connor's fiction: its title (which quotes from Matthew 20:16)—"So the Last Shall Be First, and the First Last: Biblical Reversals in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor" (95-131)—evokes not only a variety of biblical passages but also O'Connor's mastery of irony. As Cofer remarks, she was "the consummate ironist," and one of her tales was reprinted in Wayne Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) (Cofer, 95). The structure of previous chapters is maintained and the chapter focuses on three texts: "Parker's Back" (1965), "Revelation" (1965) and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1954). Cofer highlights O'Connor's interest in the Pauline epistles, foregrounding the quote from 1 Corinthians (3:19) that she marked in her own Bible: "For the wisdom of the world is foolishness before God" (97). Thus, in the last chapter of the book, Cofer refers again to the significance of one of his initial contentions: that the epistles of Paul are the most influential biblical texts in O'Connor's fiction (2).

To conclude, Cofer's book is a carefully structured and well-researched essay, which includes numerous and pertinent critical references to O'Connor's work and background. The volume contains an extensive and updated bibliography, and two different indexes, one of them devoted to the list of biblical references, which range from "Genesis" to "Revelation" (141-144). In short, a very useful and instructive study, which can be recommended to students, teachers, researchers and common readers of Flannery O'Connor's work.

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