

## PERSPECTIVES – News and Comments<sup>1,1</sup>

### Seeing Ourselves Rightly: Analyzing Spiritual Self-Awareness in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction as Literature Pedagogy for Moral Instruction

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#### Abstract

Homeschool teachers and mothers are thoroughly invested in the moral formation of their children and are therefore concerned with finding various ways to teach them morals and virtue. How can literature cultivate virtue in readers? Most scholarship that focuses on moral development by using literature is geared toward the classroom and forming good citizens for democratic societies. This scholarship leaves wide open the gap for focusing on people as individuals. Also, many literary theories focus on narrow aspects of a text without considering the total impact a piece of literature can have on a reader. This essay uses moral and biblical criticism to show how literature can help readers make connections between what we read and how it can help us to read reflectively to become better people. This essay shows how Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation" can be compared to Jesus's parables in the Bible to show how moral development begins with the self, then ripples out through the small community of the home and out into society. When we focus on changing ourselves and how we treat others, teaching our children to read reflectively to do the same, we will ultimately change society on a personal level and see people as the individual human beings that they are.

**Keywords:** moral and biblical criticism, self-awareness, virtue, homeschooling

AS A CHRISTIAN parent and homeschool teacher, I always try to find ways to teach moral values to my children, as well as try to cultivate virtue within myself. This can be accomplished through conversations about the content of the various media we consume. Literature can show the best and the worst of human behavior, giving us examples to emulate or to reject, very similar to how Jesus taught his disciples by telling stories called parables. Because of this, I approach what I read with the belief that the text has something to teach or a message to convey to the reader. In other words, literature has moral pedagogical value. This is not only true for children but for adults. Flannery O'Connor's fiction especially has great spiritual value for readers, particularly in how not to view oneself in relation to other people. As a Catholic believer, O'Connor's writings show how she was concerned with people and their relationship to each other, as well as to the Divine. She declared, "Good fiction deals with human nature" (O'Connor, 1970, p. 126). How then can reading literature provide insight into human nature? With respect to O'Connor's stories, many of her characters are proud,

hypocritical, and blind to their actual state in life. When we read a Flannery O'Connor story, we are shown the spiritual blindness of her characters, with the result that we should likewise see the spiritual blindness in ourselves.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction specifically can provide a model for readers to gain perspective of the human condition, and therefore can serve as an aid to moral development. Recent scholarship analyzing O'Connor's stories, such as that written by Ruth (2018), Prior (2018), and Visser (2016), have discussed how literature provides pertinent examples for cultivating virtue and moral development, or "the formation of conscience" (Ruth, 2018, p. 167). When characters in O'Connor's stories bring readers to reflect upon their own virtues and vices, they in turn will be able to model for their students and children why reflective reading is beneficial. This essay will show parents and teachers how Flannery O'Connor's literature provides spiritual lessons to readers, which they can apply to themselves, their students, and their children.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Perspectives – News and Comments" section of this journal consists of articles that are not considered "peer-reviewed."

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As my theoretical framework, I will apply both moral and biblical criticism to Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," showing the moral lessons and biblical connections that can be found in it. Moral and biblical criticism address the cultivation of virtue within individuals, pointing out what readers can learn from a literary work and apply to themselves. This is important for many Christian parents, as they often incorporate moral and biblical lessons into daily life experiences. Homeschool parents, like me, especially practice this, being that we have taken upon ourselves the responsibility for the majority or entirety of our children's education and development. Homeschool parents provide individualized instruction for their children over multiple years and grade levels. We are greatly invested in our children individually. We are also highly aware of the necessity for our own education and growth in virtue, since we are around our children all day, providing them with their primary example of adult behavior. Literature study provides an excellent opportunity to discuss a variety of subjects, the most pertinent being the building of moral integrity. In my homeschool, I tend to assign literature that corresponds with the time period of history that my children are studying. Understanding literature in its historical context helps to show how literature not only speaks to the individual, but also to an author's contemporary society and readers' social contexts.

In the following sections, I will first share about my experience with learning new ways to interpret literature in graduate school, define moral and biblical criticism as analytical lenses for interpreting literature, as well as explain how these lenses can be applied as character-building pedagogy. Self-improvement should not be the only goal when reading fiction, but Prior (2018) emphasizes that, "Through the imagination, readers identify with the character, learning about human nature and their own nature through their reactions to the vicarious experience" (p. 21). In other words, studying fictional characters helps us to learn more about ourselves. Following that section, I will discuss the scholarship which concerns analyzing literature for moral education, especially how this scholarship focuses on public group ethics rather than on private personal growth. Finally, I will analyze Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," explaining how this story relates to several parables of Jesus found in the Bible, using the theoretical framework of moral, biblical, and historical criticism to show how O'Connor addressed the issue of human and cultural pride, as well as how readers can learn about society and human nature from her stories, with the ultimate aim of individual change.

### Why Moral and Biblical Criticism?

OVER THE THREE years I spent in graduate school, I often struggled through my literature courses. Since my small Christian high school offered dual credit for some English classes, I earned all my college composition and English credits before I finished high school. My undergraduate degree is in Business, so I took my first college English course when I began

coursework for the Master of Arts in English program in 2017, ten years after completing my Bachelor of Science degree. I definitely faced a learning curve when it came to analyzing literature, as well as needing to refine my essay writing skills. My biggest struggle, however, was literary theory. This was a concept that was entirely new to me.

The course specifically focused on literary theory asked me to view literature in ways I had never thought to think about literature before. I was being taught to analyze what I read through the lenses of Marxist power struggles and class conflict, the symbolic nature of psychoanalysis and its search for unconscious influences, how the sexes were portrayed through a feminist reading, or the possible inability of language to effectively communicate with deconstructionist/post-modernist thought.<sup>2</sup> Trying to read the literature I was studying through those lenses was very difficult for me and stressed me out. I questioned my choice of study during almost every course and wondered whether the mental turmoil was worth my time. Applying literary theory felt like asking me to think in a way that was antithetical to how I was previously taught to approach a text.

As a lifelong Christian, I was taught to read a text exegetically. The word *exegesis* comes from Latin and Greek, formed from the prefix *ex-*, meaning "out of," and the root word *hēgeisthai*, meaning "to lead," with a literal translation of "to lead out" ("Exegesis," n.d.). According to the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary, the word has come into regular usage to mean "an explanation or critical interpretation of a text" ("Exegesis," n.d.). Reading exegetically means to take the meaning from the text, to reach an interpretation "out of" what is there. The literary theories we learned in our courses, then, felt very much like *eisegesis* to me, which is defined as "the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one's own ideas," and therefore the opposite of exegesis ("Eisegesis," n.d.). Reconciling how I was taught as a child to read meaning out of the text itself with how I was being taught to view a text through a specific imposed lens was a challenge.

I kept working my way through each course, though, despite my mental difficulties. As each course helped me gain a better understanding of literary theory, I have since found lenses that have worked for me for literary interpretation. New Historicism, which finds ways that a text interacts with and reflects its time period, has been especially interesting to me. Researching the aspects of a text that "reveal the economic and social realities" of the time in which it was written helped me analyze various literature for many of my research papers (Brewton, n.d.). Interpreting a text through a New Historical lens comes somewhat naturally to me now, because I consider the cultural context of a written work to be an important part of its analysis. The historical context of fiction helps readers to understand the cultural moments that influence an author's language, characters, attitudes, and actions within a story.

The question of what a work of literature meant was still a struggle for me, since, in our class discussions, we superficially

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about literary theory, see *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <https://www.iep.utm.edu/literary/> and *Purdue OWL* at [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject\\_specific\\_writing/writing](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing)

[\\_in\\_literature/literary\\_theory\\_and\\_schools\\_of\\_criticism/index.html](#).

ignored the various human issues that certain works of literature should help readers to think through. This led to confusion as to why we seemed to focus so much on discussing aspects imposed on a text, or even a text's form, rather than aspects brought out of it. Long (1989) posits, "When we ask ourselves what a text means, we are not searching for the *idea* of a text. We are trying to discover its total impact upon a reader—and everything about a text works together to create that impact" (p. 12). Many of the readings from my courses left impressions on me that we were not given ample opportunity to really think through and write about, and therefore think reflectively through together as a class. Consequently, the "total impact" that Long suggests readers seek to discover was unable to be fully explored in class or even by myself, since each week we moved on to the next module's readings. Not every course was clearly and overtly designed to fully build on the readings of the week before, thus a new module often meant a reading and a discussion prompt that felt unrelated to previous modules. Also, some writing prompts focused on technical aspects of a text, like how Shakespeare's *King Lear* was similar to or different from traditional tragic forms, with no mention of the human issues the play exposes. I wanted to be able to apply what I was reading to my own context of being a wife and a mother, as well as a homeschool parent, to utilize what I was learning in the program for individualized professional development.

Reading literature is about enjoying, as best one can, the aesthetic experience of the art of the written word, as well as learning more about the human experience from analyzing the work. In her non-fiction work, O'Connor (1970) recognized that, "There was a time when the average reader read a novel simply for the moral he could get out of it, and however naïve that may have been, it was a good deal less naïve than some of the more limited objectives he now has" (p. 38). Reading literature simply to find a moral does not fully recognize literature as an art form, and it reduces fiction to its utility.<sup>3</sup> However, reflecting on how fiction relates to other information we already know, especially about human nature and behavior, and therefore learning from what we read, is an effective way to think through how we can grow in character and virtue.

As a Christian homeschool parent, making connections between what my children and I are currently reading to what we have read before is a pedagogical method that I use frequently. I especially do this when I see connections between the history or literature we are studying and the tenets of our faith. Because of my Christian faith and background, I have an imperative understanding of the need for me to be a model for my children. Being able to learn from others is an important skill and reading literature can be a way to do so. Paul A. Taylor (2008) argues that "we derive insight from a work through entering, in imagination, into its fictional world; hence we learn from it while engaging with it *as* literature. What we learn, furthermore, both contributes to our understanding of the work and adds to the literary value it has for us" (p. 266). In other words, we experience a special kind of learning when we read fiction, one

which informs us about humanity while also helping us gain appreciation for the value of literature itself. Reading literature, then, can be a way to reflect on who I am as a person, and to learn from the author and the characters how to be more empathetic, as well as become aware of my own shortcomings. This is why moral and biblical criticism are the best lenses to interpret literature for applying what we read to ourselves.

Biblical criticism is not usually a term applied to analyzing literature or fiction. What is typically meant by biblical criticism is how one interprets the Bible itself. Harrington (2016) explains that biblical criticism "refers to the process of establishing the plain meaning of biblical texts and of assessing their historical accuracy" (n.p.). The term *biblical criticism* to a Bible scholar, then, is more synonymous with the term *literary theory* to a literature scholar. Biblical criticism as a literary lens compares fiction to forms, types, and stories from the Bible, and it is not uncommon in literary scholarship. Bennett (2013) and Dyck (2018) have recently discussed the influences of biblical texts and biblical literary forms on Herman Melville and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's writings, respectively. My specific brand of biblical criticism will be demonstrated below by considering how Flannery O'Connor's stories and characters are similar to stories and characters from the Bible, especially the stories called parables that Jesus told.

Essentially, how I employ biblical criticism as a literary lens is by freely discussing biblical references and similarities within a work of literature. Like New Historicism discusses how texts of a particular era share a common discourse, biblical criticism as a literary lens is a way to show how particular fiction shares a common discourse with themes, characters, and even phrases that are found in stories from the Bible. Western culture owes any concept of a redemption story to the Bible, and with an openly Christian author like Flannery O'Connor, redemptive themes, as well as the concepts of good, evil, and faith, should be expected to be found in her stories.

Along with biblical criticism, moral criticism is a way of learning vicariously through fictional characters. P. Taylor (2008) explains how simulation theory, empathizing or imagining ourselves as someone else, is a way that readers can learn by reading fiction. Taylor describes how literature can help us better understand humanity, and therefore ourselves, suggesting that, "By being taken, in imagination, into unfamiliar situations, we experience something of what it is like to live through those situations, and we may discover ourselves reacting with unexpected feelings and impulses" (p. 276). What this means is that the emotional responses we experience when reading literature help us to process the possibilities of human behavior, teaching us empathy or helping us think through our own behaviors. Taylor concludes that thoughtful reading "extends our knowledge of the range of what is human, compelling us to acknowledge proclivities of human nature—hence our own nature—which we otherwise tend to deny" (p. 276). It is very easy to deny our own faults, but when we read about a character whose faults are exposed, we should be able to

<sup>3</sup> See Lewis (1961/2013), *An Experiment in Criticism*, for an interesting examination of different kinds of readers and how they approach literature.

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reflect on the character's experience and compare it with our own. Reflective reading can help lead readers to moral improvement.

### Recent Literature Pedagogy Scholarship

READING LITERATURE FOR moral improvement is gaining attention among scholars and educators, though it is primarily championed by those who propose moral criticism in a classroom context. Carr (2019) argues for the benefit of finding examples to emulate from reading literature by "exploring the potential for moral exemplification of literature and arts" (p. 358). He explains how Plato's conception of education as being the pursuit of truth and beauty, though a Classical Greek idea, is a valuable concept for educating children (Carr, 2019). Carr particularly argues for moral literary education in the public school. Likewise, Brevetti (2016) wrote a personal account of student character formation during her first year of teaching. She asserts that discussing moral dilemmas in literature as a class is important, since "[i]t is these critical conversations which I have seen influence future actions, and subsequently, society as a whole" (Brevetti, 2016, p. 38). She shows what she herself learned about the imperative moral responsibility a teacher has, explaining that, "When a teacher models and encourages a behavior of virtue, children immediately feel it, responding in turn" (p. 41). Both Carr and Brevetti highlight the importance of teaching moral formation through literature in a traditional classroom.

Other recent scholarship discusses moral instruction with relation to global citizenship. Choo (2017) argues for reintroducing ethics into literature pedagogy for the sake of making cosmopolitan, global citizens. She, like Carr, discusses valuable educational methods of Ancient Greece, and she explains that, "The idea that the arts could exist for their own sake, with little practical relevance to social reality, was inconceivable" to the Ancient Greeks "because [the arts] were regarded as means to provoke ethical reflection and political discussion about civic matters" (Choo, 2017, p. 337). In other words, educating students in the arts helped to promote moral civic engagement. Choo argues that cosmopolitan ethical criticism should be used to teach students empathy, "to reflexively consider one's responsibility to the other" (p. 342). Essentially, this method focuses on training students to be compassionate global citizens. Similarly, Tladi and Makombe (2017) put forth moral criticism as a means to train citizens to be actively involved in government. Tladi and Makombe explain that, "Critical citizenship, in the context of this article, draws from democratic discourses that encourage citizens to participate constructively in the affairs of the state" (p. 413). While participation in the affairs of one's nation is important in republican-democracies, using civic participation as a defining principle for education only places people into certain groups, like lumping people into voting blocs, and does not recognize people as individuals. These approaches seem to do little to help people see the needs of those they meet on a day-to-day basis, since their focus is on an undefined "other" or on becoming public servants. Millions of people live their daily lives unaffected by global happenings, but every person encounters other individuals in their homes and neighborhoods. Focusing

education on ideology and collective socioeconomic issues may fail to help people learn to be reflective about their own thoughts, feelings, and prejudices. The primary goal of education, particularly in the study of literature, should be to help make individuals better people. Those efforts will move outward from individuals to society because individuals live in communities with other people.

Some scholarship on literary pedagogy is overtly political. Bracher (2012) proposes that schema criticism is a better literary theory than psychoanalysis, Marxism, and deconstructionism, and, while I would generally agree with that, his conclusions and ends are very different from why I might consider employing schema criticism as pedagogy. His overall end appears to be helping students think of lower-middle class people as victims so that they can support particular social policies that will work toward his version of social justice. I agree, though, that awareness does not always lead to action, as well as Bracher's idea that literature can help to shape a person's compassion for others by "evok[ing] prosocial emotions such as compassion in association with the suffering and distress of others" (p. 101).

Less political, but worth mentioning because of her similar conclusions to Bracher (2012), Sweet (2015) makes the case for the importance of the liberal arts in education, particularly that they help form good citizens who work toward greater societal justice. She explains how Kant's discussion of education, which "cultivates our native predispositions in order to contribute to the perfection of our moral character," applies beyond individuals to society (Sweet, 2015, p. 1). I agree with Sweet that education forms good citizens, but my concern *is* the individual person—especially since I am thoroughly invested in raising and educating my individual children—and how literature is especially pertinent in helping to morally form individuals.

Society is comprised of people, and though people are often described in general, grouped terms, it is the actions of individual people that cause a just society to take shape. The focus of my analysis of Flannery O'Connor's literature, which I will come to shortly, will be on individuals and seeing the faults within ourselves. O'Connor (1970) once said that "to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks" (p. 35). Therefore, I will argue that we cannot learn compassion for others until we see what is wrong within us, and I will show how the main character in O'Connor's short story "Revelation" comes to learn that for herself. O'Connor also said that knowing oneself requires a person "to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility" (p. 35). Humility is a virtue that most of O'Connor's characters lack, and they become prideful because they ignore that "Truth" for their own versions of reality. Alex Taylor (2019) has recently written about O'Connor's story "The Lame Shall Enter First," examining the connection between self-knowledge and pride, acknowledging that "[p]ride then, is generally not concomitant with true self-knowledge, which is rather a fellow traveler of humility" (p. 528). This is an important concept when analyzing O'Connor's fiction, because her characters tend to be prideful and to think they know themselves, but usually come to realize that their self-assessment was incorrect. Ruby Turpin in "Revelation" is one of O'Connor's characters whose pride blinds her from having compassion for those she encounters, though she considers herself to be righteous and compassionate.

Looking at this character in depth will show how pride gets in the way of the love and compassion that individuals need for others so they can develop good relationships and, in turn, form a just and civil society.

### The Pridefully Unaware in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S STORIES are full of characters who are proud, hypocritical, and blind to their actual state in life. However, because of O'Connor's Christian worldview, each character encounters a moment of grace from which they are offered the opportunity to repent. She was quite open about her viewpoint saying, "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that 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, 1970, p. 32). Because O'Connor's worldview allows for the possibility of universal, spiritual redemption, she humbles her characters and strips away their veneers, leaving them with nowhere to turn but the grace of God. Hubbard (2012) elucidates that in her stories, "O'Connor's salvation and her heaven achieve the fulfillment of the individual person, where the painful, purging grace of God serves to burn away the dross so that true identity might be restored" (p. 52). Naturally, burning is painful and destructive. However, like the scales that blinded the Apostle Paul and needed to fall away so he could have his sight restored (cf. Acts 9), burning is also an effective way to eliminate old, dead, unwanted impurities or rubble. And so, O'Connor brings her characters low so they can be given the opportunity to be raised.

This concept of humbling characters in order to lift them back up was likely influenced by O'Connor's knowledge of the stories in the Bible. My argument is informed by a parable that Jesus told his disciples. He said:

Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? . . . Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye," when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. (Luke 6:39-42, English Standard Version)<sup>4</sup>

How does one see if he is blind? Something or someone outside of himself must point out his problems, if he is blind to them. If he does not see a problem, he will not fix it. And if he himself is the problem, his blindness and self-deception can make him judgmental of others.

What precedes the parable of the blind leading the blind is the frequently quoted, "judge not, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37). Matthew's account of the same parable includes,

"For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). This statement is the key to understanding what Jesus meant: how you measure / judge other people is how they will measure / judge you. If a person cannot see his own failings, if he is blinded by his pride, how can he properly view what he perceives is wrong with somebody else? Or as Paul stated, "you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things" (Romans 2:1). Pride which blinds is that which keeps a person from seeing her own faults and flaws. If one does not see herself as flawed, she will only see the flaws in others.

Lack of spiritual self-awareness is a recurring theme that O'Connor explores in many of her stories: characters who are unloving and have conflicts in their relationships because they are too full of themselves to see how they are wrong or could be any different. This is why O'Connor's stories are so valuable for showing readers how they can grow in their relationships, personal character, and community. When we learn to see ourselves rightly, as flawed human beings, we will not be so quick to assume the worst of others, or to think that we are better than they are. We will be able to extend grace, that is undeserved kindness, to others, because we will recognize that we all need to be shown compassion at times.

One of O'Connor's characters who suffers from a prideful lack of self-awareness is Ruby Turpin in the short story "Revelation," which was first published in 1964. Right from the start Mrs. Turpin can be seen as a phony. The narration is third person limited, as it gives readers insight only into Mrs. Turpin's thoughts, which do not always match up with her words. In the first few paragraphs Mrs. Turpin measures the people and space in the doctor's waiting room where she has taken her husband Claud to get an ulcer on his leg checked. We know she is unimpressed that a little boy and an old man have not offered her their seats. But when a "pleasant lady" suggests that, "Maybe the little boy would move over," Mrs. Turpin replies with, "Somebody will be leaving in a minute," as if she was not just thinking about how she would do things differently, "If she had anything to do with the running of the place" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 489). This is certainly relatable, as we are all guilty of thinking worse things than what we say. It is part of the social contract in public spaces, though, not to openly criticize strangers when they do not live up to our expectations.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, Americans attempt to be polite in public and keep their negative thoughts to themselves, lest they be considered rude, though this is certainly not always the case.

Mrs. Turpin cares about how she appears to others, but she thinks categorically. In other words, everything and everybody fit neatly into a convenient mental box. She notices other people's clothing and their level of cleanliness, and each person is assigned a category in her mind. The narrator tells us that,

typically drive between the lines on the road, line up neatly at a cash register, etc. See Boettcher (2019) and Dicus (2015), for more information on the political nature of social contract theory.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture quotations in this essay are from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Social contract theory is typically discussed within a political context. For my purposes, I use the phrase "social contract" to encompass how Americans typically expect themselves and others to behave in public. For example, Americans

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“Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people” (O’Connor, 1971, p. 491). Mrs. Turpin in fact enjoys categorizing people, and she considers herself to be near or at the top of the social class hierarchy. This prideful way of thinking is influenced by Mrs. Turpin’s cultural upbringing. Her cultural mindset has two potential influences: consumerism and psychoanalytic thought.

Widespread consumerism was an issue in American society after World War II because of the promotion of American superiority in competition with Russia. This materialism plays enough of a role in Mrs. Turpin’s thinking that it leads to difficulties in her ability to neatly categorize some people. Bacon (1993) points out how Mrs. Turpin considers that “[t]he most significant goods . . . are shoes,” particularly since shoes play heavily into her interpretation of the people she sees in the doctor’s waiting room (p. 129). Bacon suggests that “consumerist values dictate the judgments Ruby passes on people. Such values, however, are displacing more traditional judgments based on race” (p. 129). Racial judgments did not fit well with newer consumerist categories for Mrs. Turpin. In her mental hierarchy, at “the bottom of the heap were most colored people” (O’Connor, 1971, p. 491). At the top of the hierarchy is where she wanted to position home and landowners. However, this distinction produced in her confusion over where to place “colored people who owned their homes and land as well” (p. 491). O’Connor makes it clear to readers that Ruby Turpin is a classist and a racist, and Mrs. Turpin does not like to think too hard about society’s changing categories since she is perfectly content with the categories she likes.

Mrs. Turpin’s classist, categorical thinking appears to also be strongly influenced by psychoanalytic categories of comparison. Like consumerism, psychoanalytic thought was popularly promoted during O’Connor’s lifetime. Vasileiou (2015) explains how O’Connor owned copies of Carl Jung’s work in the field of psychology, and that, “For Jung the modern human is a creature who believes in an ‘ordered cosmos’ during the day and ‘tries to maintain this faith against the fear of chaos that besets him by night’” (p. 46). The idea of confidence by day and fear at night is one that O’Connor used for Mrs. Turpin, describing that, “by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven” (1971, p. 492). Clearly the events of the Holocaust unconsciously troubled Mrs. Turpin, and the inclusion of these ideas of unconscious fears, which showed up for her at night, are a direct influence of psychoanalytic thought which was becoming popular in the first half of the twentieth century.

Other ideas from the field of psychology appear in “Revelation.” Hubbard (2012) explains how Jacques Lacan’s work in psychological development, particularly how children learn to identify themselves with their reflection in a mirror, begins in them a “lifelong process of maintaining [their] fictional identity” (p. 44). With personal identity tied strongly to descriptive language in comparison to others, the only means of individually forming identity, then, is by looking at whom an individual is not, and so the self is defined “only in relation to one another” (Hubbard, 2012, p. 44). By focusing on superficial distinctions like race and class, Mrs. Turpin’s manufactured

identity of being a good woman with a “good disposition,” which can only be formed by looking at herself in comparison to others, cannot withstand for long (O’Connor, 1971, p. 490). Her identity does not have a basis in reality as a whole, but it is influenced by her cultural upbringing and her own ideas.

Reality is comprised of more than just what the eyes can observe. Mrs. Turpin, however, bases her opinions only on what she can see. Her classism prevents her from fully listening to the others in the waiting room, and therefore from treating them as human beings with personalities, feelings, and personal histories. Because she has deemed one woman there to be “white-trash,” Mrs. Turpin does not converse as politely as the “stylish lady” or the “pleasant lady.” She tries to avoid talking to the white-trash woman at all. The other women, however, responded to her kindly, with typical small talk. When the white-trash woman declared she would never want hogs because they are dirty and stinky, Mrs. Turpin only “gave her the merest edge of her attention” to inform her that the Turpins’ hogs were clean and “they don’t stink” because they hose them off every day (O’Connor, 1971, p. 493). Mrs. Turpin followed up her statement in her own mind, thinking that the white-trash lady would not know how to care for hogs because she would never possibly be able to have one, thus presuming to know all about the woman based merely on how she looks. Dumas and Wilson (2013) suggest that “Ruby Turpin is trapped in a world of dualities: black and white, privileged-class and low-class, appreciative and unappreciative” (75). Mrs. Turpin only sees the “snuff-stained lips” and the “dirty yellow hair” of the white-trash woman, and does not quite see her as a person who is worthy of her attention because the woman is clearly beneath her, according to her categorical thinking (O’Connor, 1971, p. 492, p. 490). Dumas and Wilson (2013) explain that, to Mrs. Turpin, “Society is merely a hierarchy of classes with morality tied to status” (p. 75). Since the white-trash woman’s appearance marks her as low class to Mrs. Turpin, she has a low opinion of what the woman says. But if morality is truly “tied to status,” then Mrs. Turpin should have presumably been kinder in her treatment of the white-trash woman, since she thought she held a higher status than the other woman. Looking at Mrs. Turpin in this way, we can see that she does not actually live up to her own opinion of herself, because higher social status presumes consideration of and courtesy toward supposed inferiors.

Mrs. Turpin begins to show her true nature when her thoughts start spilling into her speech. Though she has been thinking about and categorizing what she sees, over the course of her conversation with the other patients in the waiting room, Mrs. Turpin starts saying things that she had only been thinking before. The superiority she feels toward others is evident when she speaks about the African American workers she and her husband employ on their farm. She explains that Claud picks up the workers in the morning and drives them home in the evening. The Turpins have given the appearance of being happy to do so, but Mrs. Turpin complains, “They can’t walk that half a mile. No they can’t. I tell you. . . . I sure am tired of buttering up niggers, but you got to love em if you want em to work for you” (O’Connor, 1971, p. 494). This particular racial slur, while still very common in regular speech in the 1950s and 1960s, and incredibly offensive today to the point that I did not want to spell it out, is a good indicator of Mrs. Turpin’s rotten attitude toward

those she considers to be beneath her. This is especially evident when we compare Mrs. Turpin's words for her workers to the different terms she thinks of for the "colored people who owned their homes and land as well[,] and the "colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 491). Clearly Mrs. Turpin is making distinctions between different kinds of African American people, since she is naming those who had moved up the consumer ladder differently than she named her employees. When the white-trash woman responds, "Two things I ain't going to do: love no niggers or scoot down no hog with no hose," Mrs. Turpin dismisses her with a condescending grin (O'Connor, 1971, p. 494). What Mrs. Turpin does not yet realize is that the white-trash woman is a vocally honest version of herself. Mrs. Turpin thinks she is a Christian woman, but she has failed to remember the Apostle Peter's admonishment to "love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

The failure to remember biblical teachings is another indicator that Mrs. Turpin's culture has a strong influence on her thinking. Mrs. Turpin holds debates with Jesus in her mind over what kind of woman he could have made her instead of herself (O'Connor, 1971, p. 491). However, her speaking to Jesus is not a clear sign of earnest faith, because she is thinking of Jesus in a way that does not align with how Scripture speaks of him. O'Connor herself said that "the word Christian is no longer reliable. It has come to mean anyone with a golden heart" (O'Connor, 1970, p. 192). Mrs. Turpin may not possess a "golden heart," but she thinks she does. This is because it became expected of postwar Americans to promote Christianity and capitalism in opposition to atheistic communism, or they might face social ostracism and harassment.

Being a good American in Cold War culture meant to go to church and to buy American goods. O'Gorman (2004) asserts that, "Insofar as the churches helped to define the United States as the antithesis of the Communist threat, they were a useful part of a culture that actively touted prosperity, convenience, and sunny optimism—all of which, of course, actually bore a profoundly problematic relationship to the central messages of the Gospel" (pp. 163-164). With biblical teachings that explicitly show that all people have equal standing before God, Mrs. Turpin's ideas have their roots solely in her culture. American culture may have seemed to promote Christianity, but "the postwar society professe[d] . . . a superficial religiosity" (O'Gorman, 2005, p. 174). Mrs. Turpin's religiosity is superficial, then, since she cannot help but thank Jesus that "He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly!" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 497). Hubbard (2012) also notes how Mrs. Turpin, though she expresses to be a churchgoer, shows how her hierarchical view of society exposes "the negligible impact these beliefs have on her attitude toward herself and others" (p. 48). Mrs. Turpin then seems to be like one of the many Americans that attended church in postwar America because that was the American Way.

Mrs. Turpin's behavior and attitude make her very much like the pharisee in Jesus's parable about the pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. In fact, it almost seems as if Jesus told this parable directly to people like Mrs. Turpin, since Luke wrote, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (Luke

18:9). In Jesus's parable, the pharisee is praying in the temple, thanking God that he is "not like other men," and then lists the outwardly good things that he has done (vv.11-12). The tax collector, on the other hand, merely prays, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" (v. 13). Jesus concludes the parable saying, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14). Humbling is exactly what happens to Mrs. Turpin. Just as she finishes thanking Jesus aloud for making things the way they are, a college girl named Mary Grace, tired of hearing Mrs. Turpin's racist talk, throws a book at her head, attacks her, then tells her, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 500). This public humiliation aligns with Jesus's saying that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled." Fowler (2015) has also made the connection between "Revelation" and the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector, saying, "The correspondence between Mrs. Turpin and the Pharisee is unmistakable" (80). The humbling and humiliating experience that Mary Grace gives Mrs. Turpin is the turning point toward Mrs. Turpin becoming righteous in the sight of God, and not solely in her own eyes.

Returning home from the doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin cannot forget Mary Grace's revelatory message. She spends the rest of the day thinking through what it means, because Mrs. Turpin cannot reconcile how she can be "a hog and me both? . . . saved and from hell too?" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 506). Her psychoanalytic categories of comparison fail to reconcile these opposing labels with her personal identity. Vasileiou (2015) acknowledges that psychology can diagnose the problem, but it cannot always provide an answer to it (p. 52). As Mrs. Turpin comes to understand, her problem is spiritual, hence she takes Mary Grace's message very seriously. The white-trash woman stands as Mrs. Turpin's opposite here, since she merely attributes the outburst and attack to Mary Grace's supposed insanity (O'Connor, 1971, pp. 501-502; Vasileiou, 2015, p. 49). The psychological answer was good enough for that woman, but not for Mrs. Turpin. This also highlights a biblical teaching that "many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). Which is not to say that Jesus did not offer himself for everyone, but not everyone wants to receive the revelation that He brings.

The location where Mrs. Turpin finally realizes her true status before God is of interest. Like the prodigal son in Luke 15, Mrs. Turpin comes to understand the revelation given to her while standing by a pigpen. Other scholars have noticed the similarity between Mrs. Turpin and the prodigal son, such as Wiedmann (2014, p. 44), but have not fully compared the two. Both the prodigal son and Mrs. Turpin are at their lowest point emotionally when they reach their moment of repentance next to the pigs. Mrs. Turpin, though, is a little more like the older brother in the prodigal son story. The prodigal son approached his father humbly, wishing to become his servant, not imagining that he would be fully restored and welcomed back as a beloved son (Luke 15:19). The older son, however, was angry with their father for fully pardoning and welcoming back his brother (vv. 28-30). Likewise, Mrs. Turpin angrily yells out, "Who do you think you are?" (O'Connor, 1971, p. 507). She does not understand how God would want the kind of people that she considered to be trash. But in response to her outburst, she receives a vision of all kinds of people crossing a bridge to

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heaven together, with those she despises leading the crowd, and people like her at the back. Visser (2016) says of the vision of the people parading to heaven, that “all Mrs. Turpin needs to see is the stratified social order that has provided her precarious self-image and which is exposed as a false belief” to remove her blindness (p. 154). She needed to realize that her conception of a social hierarchy was an earthly thing, and that even her “virtues [would be] burned away” as the heavenly host assembles (O’Connor, 1971, p. 508).

The ultimate takeaway from “Revelation” is that we can easily delude ourselves into patterns of thinking that are harmful to ourselves and others. Mrs. Turpin’s categories of people were based on culture and psychology, not on any higher authority than herself. Nevertheless, critics often disagree on whether Mrs. Turpin has actually repented or not. Dumas and Wilson (2013) think Mrs. Turpin “descends again into the shadows,” asserting that, “She does not have the capability to change her disposition because she cannot escape her binary thinking” (p. 87). Mrs. Turpin does not have that capability within herself, which is why the outside forces of Mary Grace and the vision by the pigpen are required to truly awaken her to supernatural reality.

Sanctification—a growing in holiness and good works—requires a dying to self, which is hard, slow, and painful, and only happens by the grace of God. Wiedmann (2014) agrees, saying that “a de-emphasis on human capacity implies a greater reliance on divine mercy” (p. 45). Mrs. Turpin needed to learn to rely less on herself and her own concept of virtue, and more on Divine Mercy. Conversely, Fowler’s (2015) analysis of Mrs. Turpin’s crisis seems to lean on the psychology that Hubbard (2012) and Vasileiou (2015) argue O’Connor was writing *against*. Explaining O’Connor’s own assertion that her characters experienced grace at a high cost which returned them to an essential identity, Fowler (2015) writes, “I think O’Connor means stripped of cultural signifiers that differentiate us and returned to a condition ‘beyond time and place and condition,’ that is, to an existence outside of existence in culture” (p. 81). I would argue that O’Connor actually meant an existence that transcends culture, with Jesus Christ as the unifier. Fowler (2015) somewhat acknowledges this in her conclusion, declaring that the “contact zone where everything converges” that O’Connor creates with her characters’ interactions “is the space where humans can converge with the Divine” (p. 86). Mrs. Turpin’s vision of the “vast horde of souls” depicts the unity of the Divine and humanity, as well as social unity centered around the Divine (O’Connor, 1971, p. 508).

Mrs. Turpin pre-revelation is a terrible example of a human being. She is haughty, condescending, and disingenuous in her treatment of others. Her pride in herself and the social structure in which she lived blinded her from seeing herself and others as God sees people. Prior (2018) explains that, “Mrs. Turpin’s pride has depended on her view of herself in relation to others in her social world. Her redemption is in undergoing the humbling vision in which she has taken her proper place in heaven as last, not first” (p. 230). The revelation from Mary Grace, and the subsequent vision by the pigpen, allow Mrs. Turpin to see herself in an equal category with those she had disdained. Her turning away from her former way of thinking provides a good example for readers. Like another Bible character, the rich young man (cf. Matthew. 19, Mark 10, Luke 18), the revelation for Ruby Turpin

is a word of law, a condemning word. She does not seem to go away sad, though, like the rich young man did, because she walked back to her house hearing “the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah” (O’Connor, 1971, p. 509). Candler (2010) explains that “it is not primarily physical but intellectual vision that must be transformed if we are to see the world truthfully” (p. 27). When we have a proper sense of self-awareness, we will see ourselves as we truly are, which is imperfect and no better than anyone else. Proper self-awareness helps us to view others with more compassion because we understand that we all have faults. And finally, like Mrs. Turpin, seeing ourselves rightly helps us see with clear eyes that the categories people use for each other are superficial and earthly.

## Conclusion

AS I HAVE shown, moral and biblical criticism of literature helps readers to see the spiritual blindness of O’Connor’s characters, as well as similarities between her stories and various biblical parables. How I have analyzed and explained these similarities is an exemplification of how I would teach my children to read O’Connor’s fiction. Since we believe and try to learn from what the Bible says, I always appreciate when I find reinforcement elsewhere for the morals and virtues I am trying to teach my children. By reflecting on what we read, we are able to make concrete connections between fiction and our daily lives. Thus, when my children see how spiritually blind a character like Mrs. Turpin is, they will see how they have been and can be spiritually blind. Reflecting on this knowledge, they will seek to improve themselves and their interactions with others.

Reflective reading for virtue, however, requires a humbling of the self if readers expect to learn about human nature or themselves from literature. A. Taylor (2019) asserts that, “Humility is the habit of living according to the truth of reason contained in true self-knowledge and knowledge of God, that insofar as God has created us . . . we are not ourselves gods and are properly subordinate to his divine rule” (p. 528). Flannery O’Connor’s character Ruby Turpin shows that, when we submit ourselves under Divine rule, not under some prideful self-made or cultural notion, we can learn to see the whole person and not just her appearance. By reading a character’s thoughts and observing the actions that take place in a story, we can, like Ruth (2018) suggests, decide that we “want to be otherwise” (p. 180). Readers can learn from Mrs. Turpin before her revelation about how they do not want to be. Likewise, they can learn from Mrs. Turpin’s vision how all people fit into only one category. Heeres (2016), having taught O’Connor’s stories to high school students, declares that his students “see themselves in the faults and flaws and foibles of characters” (p. 50). Based on these students’ experiences, as well as my own, O’Connor’s fiction teaches us about ourselves and our society, leaving each individual with the thought that I want to be better for the sake of our communities and relationships.

As a wife, mother, and homeschool teacher, I have the greatest influence in my home. Learning to read literature as it informs my faith and character helps me to do better at each of these vocations, since I have learned to reflect on myself in relation to the characters I read about. In my homeschool, I make

sure that my children are also learning to be reflective readers so that they can see how their individual lives affect the people they encounter at home and elsewhere. Reflective reading allows us to gain self-awareness, which helps us to be more compassionate toward others. Self-awareness lets us recognize that others have their own thoughts, feelings, and histories, as well. These others are naturally the people that we see, know, meet, and love: those in our community, with whom we can speak, help, or interact in ways we would not be able to with those we never come across. By focusing on the people that we encounter, we will create a ripple effect that can reach further than we ever could individually, hoping that our seemingly small efforts can make a large impact on society in general.

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## Endnote

1. The "Perspectives – News and Comments" section of this journal consists of articles that have not undergone peer review. \*HSR\*