The Habit of Being: Letters Study Guide

The Habit of Being: Letters by Flannery O'Connor

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This is a set of letters written by Flannery O'Connor. The first of these letters were written as part of a diary. These letters are divided by the years in which they were written. Over time, they show the development of a lady who represents some of the education and intellectual growth of a woman of the first half of the twentieth century. She was a functional Catholic, but this is not meant to indicate that she was not critical of beliefs and practices within her religion. Her personal maturation and the growth of her thought are shown in these letters.

The letters begin at the very start of her career as a writer, when she endeavors to find her very first literary agent. At that time she was a young, single Catholic woman in her early twenties. She graduated from women's college in an era when many higher educational institutions were single sex only. After that she attendws a graduate program in writing, and there were a handful of events that take place there - such as winning an award, that help to launch her literary career. By the middle of the book, her career has developed substantially, her health has deteriorated, and it seems that whether she liked it or not, she is going to be extremely single. She suffered from a number of financial concerns, some of which are completely normal and many of which occur in ways specific to her profession. It becomes clear during the course of these that she was a middle class woman. She was provincial, but when compared with others in the district she lived in, she was rather worldly and broad-minded. During much of the book, it is clear that the way she lived is humble, from an urban perspective. However, within a rural framework it is quite clear that she and her mother were far from being poor, although it was often just the two of them there. They owned the farm; they had the means to employ at least two workers for it; they had plenty of animals both for food and for fun.

Introduction, Editorial Note and The North

Introduction, Editorial Note and The North Summary and Analysis

Sally Fitzgerald provides an introduction. She knows the author personally. At the same time as providing a brief summary of her life, Fitzgerald also describes the delight and mystery that some of the letters contained in the book were written when Flannery was a young girl and had written them within the secrecy of her diaries. The writings in the book contain knowledge and awareness of her development as a writer, as a woman, and as a thinker. Part I: Up North and Getting Home, 1948 - 1952. Great appreciation is expressed during the Editorial Note to a number of people who have made this book possible and available to people. Many of these first epistles are quite brief.

Flannery's birthday is March 25, 1925. She was born in Savannah, Georgia and then moved to her mother's birthplace at age twelve, when her father had grown seriously ill. She lost her father at the age of fifteen, and remained in Milledgeville for her college education. This allowed her to remain close to her mother while attending a valuable women's college, resulting in her achieving an A.B. degree. This gave her both the advantages and disadvantages of a female only educational atmosphere. With her degree in hand in 1945, and quite clear on what she wanted, she went to a School for Writers in Iowa, at the State University.

Book 1, The Habit of Being : Chapter 2, Part II - Day In and Day Out 1953 - 1958 pgs 50 - 100

Book 1, The Habit of Being : Chapter 2, Part II - Day In and Day Out 1953 - 1958 pgs 50 - 100 Summary and Analysis

The editor has added a highly beneficial note to precede this section of writing. She points out to readers that Flannery was a well liked young woman who did fit into the community where she lived. The other main points that are emphasized are the loneliness of the writer and the writing process and the reality that Flannery, like so many of the rest of us, likes and needs others. The tone of Flannery's writing is distinctive in these letters. She had made considerable headway; in one of the very first letters she writes that a publisher The Kenyon Review sent her $1,000.00. She writes the dollar amount in an elongated fashion. She writes the letter in the vernacular, using the literary device of Georgian dialect and slang. This gives the writing a local quality and a spiritedness that is distinctive. Her years of effort are paying off. There is some criticism and admiration from others. She writes that she is being called "a commercial writer" because her novel Wise Blood has sold enough that she has met people who have read it for reasons other than as a favor to her. People are both honoring the fact that she now actually gets paid for this, and almost slandering her for precisely the same reason: they say that she writes what she gets paid to write.

Now that she is not living with the Fitzgeralds, she writes to them. She includes updates about her life and her professional development. The letters are charming and friendly. It is evident that in Georgia there are a number of Americans with Celtic surnames. O'Connor is typical of her American hometown in that regard. In sadder news about Flannery, she is suffering from health problems. She has some kind of ailment, lupus, for which she is medicated. Sometimes she is debilitated by this, but at other times she is not. She explains, shortly after a poem, that she goes out actively when she can and when she cannot then she does not. In the letters that she writes in Part II, she also provides details about herself which give a sense of depth to those interested in knowing her in detail and as a whole person. One of these she reveals in another letter to the Fitzgeralds. She writes that she is not good at fasting, although she does fine when it comes to praying. She also uses a palette knife for painting because she is working around how much she dislikes washing paint brushes.

Chapter 3, Part II Continued, pges. 101 - 150

Chapter 3, Part II Continued, pges. 101 - 150 Summary and Analysis

There are 275 letters in Part 2 of the book. They range in length from quite brief, as in one dated 5 December 1955 to Elizabeth McKee. She tells Elizabeth that Catharine Carver is leaving Harcourt Brace - which is the publisher Flannery has been working with the most. It matters a great deal to Flannery, of course. She writes that she will be able to stay if Denver Lindley becomes her editor. She is concerned about staying or leaving; she writes that she dare not leave unless Robert Giroux will be her editor at another publishing company. Furthermore, there is the matter of whether or not she needs to return $500 she has received as pay in reimbursement because of leaving the publisher as a consequence of Catharine deciding to quit her job there. There is some doubt as to whether or not Catharine's name has been spelled correctly because Flannery O'Connor is admittedly not a very good speller. The edition of The Habit of Being used to create the summary sets Part II as beginning on page 53. She is no longer in the protected sanctuary of Yaddo. She lives as a single woman in Milledgeville, Georgia. Her lifestyle is rural and often solitary, although not intentionally lonely. She very much likes the countryside and the area that she lives in. The main recipients of her letters during the beginning of the second Part have been: The Fitzgeralds, Elizabeth & Robert Lowell, Robert Giroux, Robie Macauley, Elizabeth Fenwick, Ben Griffith, Elizabeth McKee, Catherine Carver, Alice Morris, and the mysterious 'A'.

At page 100, the next summary chapter begins. There is no 'seam' in the actual book, but there is a letter dated 6 September 1955 which begins on page 99 and runs through the changeover into "Chapter 3, Part II Continued". Flannery has begun the letter with a reference to an earlier discussion about 'fascism'. She moves quickly onto communicating her beliefs about Catholicism. She asserts that the acts of violence committed by members of the Catholic Church as an organization are somehow 'sins' of the members of the Church, where the underlying principles of Catholicism have remained pure. She describes her view that principles are rarely mistaken, but that practice - the doing of any act that does not conform to that principle - is 'sin'. In the next letter, to Robie Macauley she writes about how one of her books has now sold 4,000 copies, about which she and Harcourt Brace are pleased. Robie writes short stories; Flannery complements how this other author is able to conjur up a sense for the atmosphere of a foreign location just after noting that her own agent is trying to sell one of O'Connor's novels to 'the French'. Andrew Litle, and 'A' are recipients of numerous letters, as are the Fitzgeralds.

Chapter 4, Part II Continued pgs 151 -200

Chapter 4, Part II Continued pgs 151 -200 Summary and Analysis

These begin on page 150 in the text used to derive the summary. In the first letter she starts off writing about her own fiction characters and plot-related information. She follows that with brief descriptions of the reviews that she has been writing and references to Catholic writings. Her Celtic British origins show when she refers to St. Patrick's Day parades. Common in Ireland and in America, these are almost unheard in Southern England. There is a note to JF Powers that went with the submission of a review with a bizarre comment about a cat she dislikes so much that she wants it to be run over. Next she thanks Denver Lindley for advising her against having her work published in Russian territory during the 1950s. She describes her current novel as Jungian rather than Freudian and believes that Carl Jung is "...as dangerous as Freud," (p. 152).

Her letters are now dated 1956. In her letter to Mrs. Rumsey Haynes of 29 April 1956 (p. 154), Flannery thanks the married couple for a wonderful visit together in Lansing and explains that she is back home with her mother. While away, her mother tidied her room. There is a letter to a Father John McCown, which only furthers the perception of how O'Connor lives in an America loaded with imported Celts, particularly Irish Catholics. A letter dated 11 October 1956 to William Sessions begins, "...I have just seen the Signet (35 cent) edition of my stories," (p. 178). A Mr. William Sessions befriends both Flannery and her mother. The editor explains that over the course of many years, he became quite devoted to them. Criticisms of literature, references to the progress of her professional writing career, and further discussions of Catholicism in her own experience, but also through reading and observation of the lives of others, appear. Many of Flannery's letters to 'A' run longer than many of the others. These can typically take up only two to three printed pages but are quite lengthy compared with the concise thank you notes that take two to four short paragraphs. The information that she shares is strongly connected with real life. In one letter to 'A' dated 29 November 1956, Flannery covers criticism of stories and of writers - that one mustn't be too harsh to beginners. Then she tells her audience of one about how geese cannot be fooled and then goes on to describe how her mother was persuaded to cook a goose and that it tastes alright but the whole episode did not go all that well. Then, prior to concluding even this one letter, she mentions Carol Johnson, a poet/ess who doubles as the only writer that Flannery claims to have intentionally written. Due to demands of space, it is not possible to comment on each individual letter.

Chapter 5, Part II Continued pgs 201 -250

Chapter 5, Part II Continued pgs 201 -250 Summary and Analysis

The chronological format for the body of Flannery's letter continues here. As the other changes in Part II, there is nothing in the book itself that resembles a chapter break or anything of the kind. The main recipients of letters during this batch of fifty pages are as follows: Maryat Lee, Granville Hicks, 'A', Lousie Abbot, Mrs. Rumsey Haynes, Denver Lindley, John Lynch, William Sessions, Elizabeth Fenwick Way, Cecil Dawkins, Ben Griffith, Thomas Stritch, and The Fitzgeralds. The majority of these people receive more than one letter from her. The first one that starts in this section is dated the 31 January 1957. This grouping ends with yet another letter to the Lowells on 10 November 1957 and to 'A' on 16 November 1957.

The letters give a pleasurable expression of the culture and time period from where they came. Flannery O'Connor is most certainly a Southerner. This woman is rural, but knows the city; she is excellently educated for her gender, country, and time but is self-aware that she is middle-class woman, not a graduate of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the country. Her religion and her surname give very clear indicators of at least some of how the British settled into America in her region. Her references to the technology at use during her lifetime help to place the location in history. Cultural conditions and conflict rear themselves very strongly during the first letter. In her letter to Maryat Lee of 31 January 1957, she writes of how one author uses both Manichean and Catholic patterns. This shows her learnedness, as St. Augustine of the Catholics spent time as a Manichean; that is a rather ancient sect. Soon thereafter, the monster of racism is shown to be running loose in broad daylight when she writes about how the Ku Klux Klan lit up a cross right on the lawn of the Court House and later rode around the area giving small gift baskets to feed to the poor. In her letter to 'A' dated 21 February 1957 she gives advice about her friend's characterization in A's own writings. There is some discussion of another woman who has been reading existentialists. O'Connor shares with 'A' that this other woman claimed to have "lost her homosexuality" (p. 202). In a letter to Louise Abbot, Flannery describes the house she lives in. Andalusia is a two-story white house placed four miles outside of town. In another letter to Louise that runs across pages 223 & 224, Flannery O'Connor gives constructive criticism. She writes that a story character's actions should come off to the readers as inevitable. She notes as a possible 'weakness' of Louise's story that the character seems to act out of what the author wanted to have happen rather than the actions having stemmed from the true nature of that very character.

Chapter 6, Part II Continued, pages 250 -300

Chapter 6, Part II Continued, pages 250 -300 Summary and Analysis

Page 250 is mostly filled with the remainder of a letter to 'A' and then, three quarters of the way down the page, the next begins. It is to Maryat Lee and is dated 31 January 1957. There are fifty-two epistles across this fifty page long stretch of text. As usual, there are a handful of recipients of her letters. Who these are shows both consistency and some change over the course of many years. During this section of Part II, Flannery O'Connor sends letters to the following: William Sessions, Granville Hicks, Elizabeth and Robert Lowell, 'A', Cecil Dawkins, Thomas Gossett, Sally & Robert Fitzgerald, Caroline Gordon Tate, Father John McCown, Elizabeth McKee, Marayat Lee, Elizabeth Bishop, Alice Morris, Ashley Brown, Robert Giroux, John Hawkes, Dr. T. R. Spivey. Of these, the Fitzgeralds and Lowell couples have been with Miss O'Connor from the beginning. Elizabeth McKee is also one of her earliest contacts. Father John McCown and the mysterious 'A' both enter into her life by the early portion of Part II. Dr. T.R. Spivey is one of the newest connections with whom she exchanges letters at this time.

This portion begins with a letter to William Sessions dated 3 November 1957. As is consistently the case, Flannery mingles the most mundane observations of fact with the more 'esoteric' or 'inner life'. She acknowledges and thanks for friend for having sent something from Italy. She shows that they have the Fitzgeralds as friends in common and asks him to write to her about them after he visits. She shares her impressions of another friend who they have in common, remarking that the other woman often makes her feel 'esteemed in that she has finally made it to 4th grade after having had to repeat the 3rd grade'. She then comments upon Europe. The following letter to Granville Hicks is a grand total of sixty-one words long, including the salutation but excluding the date. This length is definitive of Ms. O'Connor's brief letters. In the letter after that she tells friends that raising children in Boston is a bad idea because "They think anybody who did not go to Harvard or MIT is underprivileged," (p. 251). In a letter to 'A' dated 16 November 1957, in the midst of it she writes, "Once I heard the driver say to the rear occupants, 'All right, all you stove-pipe blonds, git on back ther.' At which moment I became an integrationist," (p. 253). She has mentioned both philosophy and theology between pages 250 - 253. The religious discussion deepens; she explains to Father McCown in a letter that 'measuring sin with a slide rule' is more apt to drive her insane than to cause her to convert into being a Baptist. One 17 April 1958 she informs Robert Giroux that one reason she needs a limousine to meet her at the airport in New York City is that she is on crutches. On page 288, she tells Marat Lee of how she failed her driving test with beautiful descriptions of the anxiety of the police patrolman who rode with her at the time. They both observe the obvious: that in order to improve she needs to practice driving more rather than avoiding it altogether.

Chapter 7, Part 2 - Conclusion with

Chapter 7, Part 2 - Conclusion with Summary and Analysis

This final section of Part 2, which shows in the book with the Roman Numeral II, consists of eleven pages. During these there are letters to the following: 'A', Cecil Dawkins, Father McCown, Dr. T. R. Spivey, Caroline Gordon Tate, and Robert Lowell. The letter to Cecil on 8 November 1958 includes constructive criticism about one of his fiction stories. She encourages him that it is the best work by him that she has yet read and she points out the one problem she has with it. She thinks that having a main character fall prey to one of his own prejudices makes that same character less sympathetic to readers. In the second paragraph she is onto an entirely different topic that includes religious cultural difference and the problem of evil and of salvation. She claims that Southerners feel that mankind has 'fallen' from God and into sin and that the grace of God through Jesus Christ is the only hope they have. She then claims that her perception of the Liberal religious view is that humans never fell in the first place and whether we/they have or not by our own efforts as individuals and as a group salvation shall be achieved. These are clearly very different views. Then, in her letter to Spivey, she shows that she is at least somewhat read on contemporary currents in published Catholic thought and debate. She thanks him for a book he either sent to her or recommended and then 'names names in modern Catholic theology'. 9 December 1958 she advises her friend Cecil of two totally different things. She tells him to concentrate on what he is writing and to ignore the rejections slips. Then she tells him to take cough medicine as she has actually broken one of her own ribs from coughing so hard. The last letter of the group describes the real connection with alcohol in her home life. There was a photo taken of her falling with a bottle in hand, but it was one of those illusions: the bottle was unopened and she had not ingested any but had slipped because the stairs were slick. She writes that they keep some liquor - white rum, as a pain killer and so she hadn't taken any since she broke one of her toes. Apparently she does not use it to alleviate her cough nor the pain of her broken ribs.

During these letters, the author continues to write with great clarity. Theology and philosophy are a steady trend in her mind, and while she is not a university professor, she is quite well-read on the subject and engages with others in these areas. She continues to be single but does not write about this as part of her suffering. Perhaps she felt it was not and maybe she felt it inappropriate to even mention it. The problems with her health give a thread of sadness running through the entire book to this point. She does not come across as a whiner, but rather as someone burdened by a delicate constitution rather than the blessing of great vigor, resilience, and resistance to injury or ailment. The writings are descriptive and conversational in their tone and manner. She is polite, but there is an intimacy to her letters which involve a reduction in proscribed politeness. Also in the letters throughout Part 2 of The Habit of Being, Flannery O'Connor shows that along with developing her own writing career she is also involved

with a select few friends with whom she exchanges constructive criticism of their writing and their professional careers as authors.

Chapter 8, Part III - pgs 301 - 350

Chapter 8, Part III - pgs 301 - 350 Summary and Analysis

This Part is entitled "THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY" and covers the years 1959 - 1963. The title of the Part is in fact the title of her second novel. She took seven long years to write the first draft. However, once she did have it together she speedily sent it off to friends to read and review critically. When they had helped her by providing constructive criticism, she made a number of changes as part of the revision process. All of her prior work served her in good stead at this point, because she was then able to get it rather rapidly to a publisher who in fact put it out within six months of her turning in the manuscript. Her first novel is titled Wise Blood, the second The Violent Bear it Away. The first letter in the new Part is addressed to her friends the Fitzgeralds. It from the beginning of 1959, and thanks them for the present of a dress they have bought and sent to her. She reports that it fits beautifully. She describes a bit of her writing process. She has already shared that, unlike some authors, she finds out how the story is going to go by writing the first draft rather than by consciously making a plan and then doing the writing after the manner of how builders implement architectural drafts. She notes that she has had enough of one of her characters at the time of the writing, showing a somewhat magical if comical ability to nurture and work with these sophisticated figments of the imagination.

There are fifty letters during this first portion of Part 3. Many of the recipients are by now rather familiar to the reader. The Fitzgeralds receive five letters from her during this part. The first is dated the very first day of 1959, whereas the last one was dated 1 July of the same year. Cecil Dawkins and 'A' are among those who receive more messages from her. In the first one she tells Cecil that she has completed the first draft of her novel and has celebrated by buying herself a new typewriter. She tells him of how her mother is out fixing water pipes while she is writing letters in her room. Finally, she explains the simplicity of how she will be living in a university dormitory for young women and will be paid to teach some classes. She describes the pay as, "I can live for a year on what they are paying me for a week," (p. 316). Her next letter to Cecil begins with criticism of a work entitled "Benny Ricco's Search for the Truth". She writes that is good, but makes criticism of two points. She devotes the latter half of the same letter to describing criticism that she received about "A Good Man is Hard to Find" at Vanderbilt. She was told she should have continued the story until the grandmother was rescued by the police, as she was the character that readers were identifying with. Her next letter to Cecil is dated 17 July 1959. She announces that her novel has been submitted and that Catherine Carver has told her it is the best work she has ever done. Flannery then explains that her mother is a very active woman but she is 'sort of' reading her daughter's novel. Because of the difference in behavioral preference, the mother is reading about two pages at a time and Flannery is only too aware that after that, her mother has grown 'antsy' again, so she gets up and moves around. She ends with what

may be a double entendre but might not even be one. She observes that if Cecil can drive balls into the dean of women of a university then it is good he golfs.

Chapter 9, Part III Continued pages 351 - 400

Chapter 9, Part III Continued pages 351 - 400 Summary and Analysis

This section begins with the tail end of another of her letters to 'A' and proceeds to one to Cecil Dawkins. At this point in the book it has grown clear what type of information she shares with whom. Readers develop a sense of her personality. Much of the information is common to all, and nevertheless, there is some which is very specific to the individual. There is a short note to Cecil which opens with thanking him for sending her and her mother some cheese as a present. The next letter is to 'A' and she admits that seeing her novel in print is turning out to be depressing for her instead of uplifiting as everyone would hope- including herself. She writes about how to handle an interview and confesses that she does not have much memory for how she answered the question of how being a Catholic influences her as a writer other than to have told the interviewer that it helps. In her letter to John Hawkes, who had sent the printed manuscript, she informs him of how the need for corrections had seemed overwhelming once she had seen the thing in print. It was so bad, she wrote, that she nearly vomited, or was otherwise 'sickened' by how bad it really was. She added that she made all the corrections that she could stand to make and then sent it back just before receiving the letter from John Hawkes to which this letter is a response. The next note is to Robert Giroux, to affirm that she has enclosed the corrections, which are called galleys. Next there is a letter to Louise Abbot, about God and theology. Faith, penance and the need for free will in relation with God and God's love are the topic. Next is a note to the Fitzgeralds, which relays information that the people who work on her mother's farm are able to be a two-car family. She reports that her mother wishes them the blessing of a refrigerator. She then writes 'A' that, although there is no so-called Catholic literature, there a number of competent poets who are Catholics. The next letter to Cecil is about her writing again. She has removed numerous "seems and as-ifs" (p. 356) from the manuscript that she had been oblivious of during her creation of the first draft. Immediately after that, there is another letter to 'A' that runs over a printed page in length. She discusses other writings and also writes about John Hawkes in it. Then there is a short one which is dated but has no name attached to it, which opens with her commenting that she harbors greater fear of her book not being controversial than fear of it stirring up controversy. There are another sixty letters between that one and page 400. A number of them are also written to Cecil and 'A'.

Chapter 10, Part III Continued pages 401 - 450

Chapter 10, Part III Continued pages 401 - 450 Summary and Analysis

In a manner that has begun to show some consistency, the first two letters in this batch are addressed to Cecil Dawkins and to 'A', respectively. Flannery O'Connor continues to switch in her letter writing from standardized educated English into the written version of the Georgian 'dialect' and 'accent'. It comes off as incongruous until some familiarity has been developed. By this point in this collection of her letters it has come to be an acceptable way for her playfully express her regionalism right in there with her more 'high brow' ways of writing. In this case, she writes that one of Cecil's visiting friends is a "pusson", (p. 401). At the end of the next letter, she notes that one of her women friends is going to Spain, despite not having won a Fulbright. On page 404 she assures Cecil that his pay from the publishers will arrive with the fee of $100 having already been removed. Page 406 holds a letter to Maryat Lee, which seems to be an inside joke. The salutation is "Dear Rayverberator" and she signs it "You obt servant, Tarfaulkner". Since many of the earlier letters of each section have been the ones to be most described before, here, later ones will be detailed. First, there are some of the same names and some new ones over the course of these fifty pages. Maryat Lee, 'A', William Sessions, Elizabeth McKee, Robert Giroux, Roslyn Barnes, John Hawkes, Father John McCown, James Tate, Ashley Brown, a Professor of English, Lousie and Tom Gossett, Elizabeth Fenwick Way, Marion Montgomery, Thomas Stritch, are those to whom the letters in these pages are addressed. Only the couples ever share any of the letters. 'A' receives a number of letters, whereas Thomas Stritch receives only one.

On page 414, Flannery O'Connor complains that a text book has been published that has one of her stories in it, but with the final paragraph of that story removed. Many letters later, on page 425, Flannery shares knowledge garnered from Caroline Gordon with John Hawkes. This knowledge is about the god Thor, of Scandinavia and to a lesser extent, Germany and 'the rest of the world'. He had a chariot driven by goats. He had a special 'formula' by which he could both kill and eat them in emergencies but was able to resurrect them the following morning, when their skins and bones had been saved, and spared from the destruction of eating. It is implied that he did this many times. Then, Caroline also taught that the goddess Frigga's chariot is drawn by felines, and finally that the chariot of the pagan goddess Venus is pulled by doves. O'Connor reports further on that she was temporarily hospitalized. The next page in a letter to James Tate, Flannery describes Maryat in an incredible costume, which is a Russian hat well over a foot high on her head, along with a long flowing black robe. Walking along, Flannery writes, she was seven feet tall in that 'get up'. During a letter to 'A' dated 4 February 1961 on page 430, she writes of Teilhard de Chardin, and on the subject matter of theology and conversion. She does not think that 'conversion' is something

that only happens to people one time and surmises that the process may differ from one person to another. Then, on page 436 there is one of her longer letters, this one to Maryat Lee. She writes of getting a portable television and of seeing Maryat's brother being broadcast, while telling watchers about the needs of women's colleges. On page 439 her letter of 13 May 1961 to 'A' reads, "...I see only one blot on your character. This is the way you wrap up packages," (p. 439).

Chapter 11, Part III Continued pages 451 - 500

Chapter 11, Part III Continued pages 451 - 500 Summary and Analysis

Here, Ms. O'Connor explains in one letter that "The Communist world sprouts from our sins of omission," (p. 450 - 30 Sept. 1961). She would not have called herself Ms. as many would in 2008. It is surprising when in her letter of 14 October 1961 she notes that "Louise has been drunk for the past two Mondays...[and that]...She is impossible when she is drunk, she insisted on polishing the sink with silver polish," (p. 451). During an epistle on page 456, Flannery describes finding body parts - at first this seems frightening and gruesome so that readers are relieved to the point of laughter when they find out that it is the description of a man who was alive, well and sleeping among a group of goats, half buried by them. Two pages later, amidst another one, Flannery finds humor in the reality of people getting the titles of her books incorrect. Meanwhile, Louise's drunkeness is becoming what readers might call 'an issue'. Charlotte Gafford 'stars' as a new name on the list of people who receive letters from Flannery O'Connor in 1962. During a letter to 'A' that runs across pages 466 and 467, Flannery reveals that they did have 'flu shots' back in 1962 - in this case it was a shot of penicillin. It comes up as the finale of a one page saga about how Louise's problem this week is not severe drunkenness by that she needs to break with tradition and go to a doctor for the first time at the age of fifty-six years old; the physician diagnoses her as having influenza and gives her a shot.

Page 470 contains a brief congratulatory note to Walker Percy on winning the National Book Award. She emphasizes his worthiness rather 'cuttingly' by observing that she hadn't expected the literary judges to show so much good sense in making their decision. There is a letter to Thomas Stritch and then one to the trusty Fitzgeralds, that concludes with "Around here it is not a matter of finding the truth but of deciding which lie you live with better," (p. 473). The next recipients are 'A', Robert Giroux, Granville Hicks, Maryat Lee, Elizabeth McKee, and then another new name: Alfred Corn. This is a relatively lengthy and sophisticated one that focuses on the topic of faith and skepticism. She recommends Creative Evolution by Teilhard de Chardin so strongly as to send him a copy, and gives a fairly complex account of how the barrage of new ideas often discovered by college freshman is known to cause skepticism and doubt and crises of faith is a rather well known phenomenon. Sister Julie and Charlotte Gafford are both new addressees of Flannery's letters. On page 482, a letter to Maryat Lee urges Maryat to improve her writing by 'coming' to the South. Cecil Dawkins, Alfred Corn, and 'A' receive the longest letters of all of those found during the 1962 and 1963 letters that appear between these pages.

Chapter 12, Part III - Conclusion with

Chapter 12, Part III - Conclusion with Summary and Analysis

There are seventy-nine letters in the remainder of Part III. It runs a little over above the norm at fifty-four pages, whereas the final section of Part 2 ran a little short. On Christmas day of 1963, Flannery writes to 'A' and admits that she is sick in bed. On the final day of 1963, she writes to Janet McKane where she reports that she is still ill, and that they are having an ice storm there in Georgia. Charlotte Gafford and Sister Mariella Gable are both sent letters during the end of 1963.

The author of these epistles has continued to express her personality in an intriguing way. In this regard, letters - as a form, do provide a special kind of prose through which people can express themselves. The main topics are writing, philosophy and theology, and daily life. With respect to writing, Flannery writes about her own career development and also helps a few others. Regarding her own 'stuff', O'Connor shares with others some of her efforts in writing a novel or story. She also writes about the editorial process. She includes information regarding agents and publishers and what kind of pay she receives. She applies her knowledge for people such as Cecil, whom she is advanced enough to help.

On the topic of faith, it is clear that Teilhard de Chardin is someone whose work she respects a great deal. She has also shown herself to be rather knowledgeable in terms of philosophy - she has read Simone de Beauvoir but is not so well read among the German philosophers. Her knowledge of theology is rather extensive within the limited scope of Catholic publications. This is one of the themes that naturally and obviously asserts itself during the letters.

Provincial Georgia has also been described, within the limited context of her home life. Flannery O'Connor is one of 'those single women'. In this regard, it means simply that there is no indication anywhere in any of her letters of interest or efforts to pursue or to find or even hope for a man to show romantic interest in her. This does not guarantee that she had no desires or interest in having a romance; the collection of letters may have been intentionally manipulated to hide this, but it is also quite possible that whether the men or other women liked it or not, Flannery O'Connor was not the type who gave her life over to the idea of marriage and motherhood. She does write of being viewed as a spinster, not even in jest, but there is the strongest suggestion that she is a celibate.

Chapter 13, Part IV

Chapter 13, Part IV Summary and Analysis

This Part is entitled 'The Last Year', 1964. The editor, Sally Fitzgerald, includes a page long introductory note in italics to better orient the reader. There is no known reason why, unless it was some kind of hidden strife or the fierce competitiveness of the writing profession, but Flannery O'Connor now old enough to be called Mrs. even though she wasn't married, was still awfully young for her era and country to be facing death. Her health deteriorated. Sally Fitzgerald writes that she is convinced that Flannery knew this, but kept an upbeat attitude to the whole situation. Those who were sent letters from her that have been used in this collection are Elizabeth McKee, Janet McKane, Sally & Robert Fitzgerald, Maryat Lee, Thomas Stritch, 'A', Robert Giroux, Louise and Thomas Gossett, John Hawkes, Louise Abbot, Dr. T. R. Spivey, Father John McCown, Richard Stern, Marion Montgomery, Charlotte Gafford, Cecil Dawkins, a Professor of English, Catherine Carver, and Sister Mariella Gable. There is one exception when she writes to Robert Fitzgerald rather than to both he and his wife at the same time. By now, all of these names have grown familiar to the readers. Naturally, it is not known from the collection itself whether this is just a small slice of the letters she produced if this is a greater portion of those she wrote during the years from 1948 - 1964. Among other things, it shows that one of Flannery O'Connor's traits was that she was able to maintain long term relationships with others, both within and outside of her own family.

In a letter dated 11 February 1964, with no name directly attached, but placed beneath another to Janet McKane and may also be to her, she writes that her blood count has improved. As a result she is working a great deal more. Here is where Sally's comments influence the readers; there is the subtle suggestion that her intention is to work a great more 'while she can'. The general tone of the letters is consistent with the rest. Either they have been assembled because they exhibit this similarity, or else they exemplify what Flannery O'Connor is like to the extent that this is possible through writing letters. The subjects are the usual. This time the new animals in her life are swans she has ordered. She writes about working to complete a book of short stories before the end of the year. She wrote very early on, when she first secured an agent, that she is not a fast writer. So, the bundle of short stories may or may not be done rapidly but are sure to be the center of some of her attention. Page 566 contains a letter to Louise and Thomas Gossett dated 18 February 1964. She writes that her ill health has forced her to cancel speaking engagements and then performs what is almost a ritual for her: to use a gentlewoman's English and then to turn around and write with Georgian dialect and accent, "He sho do move around aplenty," (p. 566).

Chapter 14, Part IV Conclusion and

Chapter 14, Part IV Conclusion and Summary and Analysis

This brings readers to the final set of letters. These begin on what is page 574 of the hardcover published edition by McGraw-Hill Ryerson. The first is to Maryat Lee, as described in the preceding summary chapter. The very last epistle is also to Maryat Lee. In the first one, she remarks that Miss Mary and she are both doing better. She also reports that the family does tend to live into their nineties, but that they 'creak' a great deal, rather like the wood planks of good, but old, flooring. There are letters to Elizabeth McKee, then Marion Montgomery, then another two before there is the next letter to Maryat. This begins with a direct response to something the other has written to her or has told her. She delves further into characterization as the topic. She remarks that [Ruby Turpin of 'Revelation'] is "a country female Jacob," (p. 577). After that she resumes writing about her health; she has a blood transfusion coming up. This letter is dated 15 May 1964. In the very last letter of the book, she returns to a form rarely used but seen at least once before in the collection of letters. It begins, "Dear Raybat," and finishes with "Cheers, Tarfunk." That was the final letter she ever wrote to anyone. Flannery completed it just six days prior to her death. Sally Fitzgerald explains that Flannery's mother mailed it for her after her daughter had died.

Readers have grown to know the author, if only vicariously, through the collection. The editor, perhaps unknown in the beginning, has been revealed to be a dearly trusted friend of the departed's during the book. This adds to the perception of the work as quite personal. She has graced her readers with a special flare, which, admittedly, might be expected from a professional author. Even so, the pattern is distinctive. The work is humbling; the reality of Flannery's success within her profession has not caused her to be blessed with happiness in all areas of her life. She often seems serene, or at the very least, Sally Fitzgerald perceives her to have been so. Rather than an exotic life filled with fame and glitz, Flannery O'Connor was a famous woman who never married and lived on a Southern farm with her mother until she met her end. During much of her adulthood, fresh air and farm animals were the respite from a room overstuffed with books and chronically far messier than her very active mother cared for. One hopes that this charming woman, with a rather fierce sense of humor - she often judged harshly, in a flippant manner, literary contest judges - did not die from the unrelenting mild agitation between herself and the furniture and her mother. Despite the delicacy and the sorrow of her poor health, Flannery O'Connor exhibited many qualities that women on the whole would be proud of. She was a bright, intellectual, well educated, wise, and successful spiritual lady. Though she lived humbly and may well have been as financially dependent upon her mother as she otherwise would have been to a husband, she showed much of the promise of what women can be and achieve. Given the sad stories women have heard about themselves, it is nourishing to be able to thank Flannery O'Connor for being such a high quality woman of twentieth century America.

Characters

Flannery O'Connor

This is the main character of this book of letters. She is the subject matter of the work, but not in the usual manner. The letters are not an autobiography in the typical sense, but as they are written by her and come from her perspective. As such, they are akin to an autobiography in that much about her is revealed and it does come from her own subjective perspective. The letters are often not purely 'about herself'. There is a sense in which they often are - even when she discusses business she is seeking to make contracts with 'her' publishers, for 'her' work. She is writing to 'her friends'.

As the centerpiece of the nonfiction book, Flannery O'Connor is thoroughly involved in every single 'chapter'. Her personality does come through in the letters, albeit with a flatness found in writing when contrasted to live experience of someone. Even so, it might be that her letters give a certain type of psycho-emotional intimacy that was no more easily had when she was present in person. She died in 1964

Flannery had persistence in her profession. While being talented in the area is a necessary element for success as an author, it is not the only qualification. She is very intent on the importance of earning money doing this - for the simple enough reason that unless she does she can't even afford to continue to do it. Her times at graduate school at the University of Iowa and at Yaddo were funded, but after that, crises followed anytime there was a funding problem. She managed to be effective with the help of an agent.

Flannery had the ability to be a bit harsh in her judgments of others, which often showed as congratulating a colleague on winning an award by admitting that she had assumed that the judges were idiots or ingrates or both. She does not seem to be self-aware of this characteristic in herself, or else does not view it as any kind of 'problem'. She is also able to take criticism, which is a necessity in her profession as it is in others. The intimacy with the work often makes a time gap needed between the initial production and then the criticism. More than once during the book, she notices after there has been a sufficient gap that she often sees embarrassing amounts of errors that she hadn't even noticed when she had written the first draft. She loves animals, lives frugally, and has a good sense of humor as well as the 'sharp edge' of judgment and criticism. She is extremely provincial in a Georgian way, and yet, for those of her town, she is rather broad minded and tolerant. A devoted Catholic herself, she has had at least one lesbian or bisexual female friend, and has had one or more friends who did not always have religious faith. This just goes to show that she was able to be friends a diversity of people.

Sally Fitzgerald

This is the editor and writer of Introduction and notes within the text. The book was published in the late 1970s. Sally also appears as someone to whom a great many of the letters from Flannery are directed, along with her husband. As such, she appears in multiple ways throughout the book, due to having had the privileged relationship with Flannery of being one of her good friends. Sally is a married woman, and the majority of the letters she receives are also addressed to her husband, assuming there are no secrets. Sally is apparently someone who Flannery trusts. Sally and her husband are shown to have succeeded in knowing Flannery for decades, and in that sense, show that they and Flannery O'Connor are adept at long term relationships with others. They may have taken this for granted or not - there is no clear message regarding whether or not they did from the letters themselves. Since the letters to the Fitzgeralds are not full of observations about them, there is only so much that is shared about Sally through these. Sally and her husband do send presents to Flannery now and then, which are often the first things mentioned in the responses they receive from her.

Gerald Becham

This man is named in the acknowledgments. As part of his job at Georgia Women's College, he was curator, or other official guardian of a collection of Flannery's letters and writings. Apparently, she or her mother or friends bequeathed them to the Georgia College Library as Flannery O'Connor was one their 'best products'. Little is mentioned of his life or his work in the book. He appears in the opening notice from the editor Sally Fitzgerald where he is thanked for having enabled the creation of the book, thanks to his work that has been mentioned above.

Maryat Lee

She is another recipient of many letters from Flannery. Maryat is another who Flannery kept in contact with for decades, as shown by the temporal distance between her first letter to Maryat and the fact that Maryat is the woman to whom Flannery sent the very last letter she ever wrote. Maryat Lee is also a woman. She has a sense of humor and there is at least one time when she has donned a most flamboyant costume and spent three days 'partying in Georgia'. As is the case with many of the people Flannery writes to, little about her is known, but Flannery gives every appearance of really liking her and of being glad to have at least periodic contact of some kind over the long haul. Letters to this woman occur in ever part of the book.

Elizabeth McKee

This woman is Flannery O'Connor's first literary agent. She is first contacted by Flannery O'Connor from Yaddo, which was a specially funded 'writers colony'. Flannery was able to get a place there immediately after graduate school. The first letter to

Elizabeth is one of the first in the book; apparently Miss McKee is a literary agent living in New York City. Flannery was recommended to Miss McKee by Paul Moor. The first letter is written with hope and deference, but also a fair deal of 'self-honesty'. Flannery does not pretend to be a different type of writer than the sort she really is, and in this case that means 'slow to produce'. The business relationship develops. Flannery works with McKee for a number of years and the letters between them are instructive as to how their professional relationship grows and how Flannery's career grows as a direct consequence. There are letters to her in all four parts of the book.

Robert Giroux

This is a man to whom there are many letters. He works at one of the main publishers of Flannery O'Connor's writings. He worked at Harcourt Brace and Company by the time Flannery contacted him in 1949. There are letters to him throughout the book, predominantly in this same tone of a valued business relationship. His letters exchanged with her are one of those through which the growth of O'Connor's professional career is best tracked. While there are not very many details about his personality or his private life included, he is a major figure in the collection.

'A'

There is no indication of who this actually is. Naturally, for people who knew Flannery well, the letters might give the identity away. However, for everyone else, there is no indication whatsoever. This is surprising, since this 'A' comes across as quite important. One reason for this is that while the letters do not begin until the 1950s, they are often the longest ones that she writes. As such, she reveals more about herself to this person, whoever he or she was or still is. Flannery trusts 'A' enough, at least at the letter writing distance, to go into detail about a range of interests and to express her personality. In this way, the impression is that 'A' is quite important to Flannery.

Cecil Dawkins

This man also receives letters throughout many decades. He is also a writer. Flannery O'Connor actually nurtures his writing career. She is a bit further along than he is in terms of her professional development as a writer. At times this is critique of characterization within fiction, and in other letters she suggests this or that regarding working with literary agents and the like. There are not many details about this man in terms of his daily living or preferences, other than that he is also a writer.

Catherine Carver

This is a woman who Flannery trusts to provide criticism of her fiction works. This is exemplified in a letter Flannery sent her dated 18 April 1959. There are only a few letters to this lady in the book; nevertheless, she is a rarity in being placed so highly by

Flannery as able to provide critiques of her writings. The letters to her appear in the second half of the book.

Flannery's Mother

Flannery does not refer to her mother by her ordinary name. However, the woman turns out to be very important in a variety of ways. In the first instance, of course, she raised Flannery and, together with her husband, made sure to have her daughter highly educated together. After the death of her husband, decades later, she remained a controlling owner of a farm. She provides support to her adult daughter during the vast majority of Flannery's life, and the book leaves the impression that she also outlived her own daughter. She is very unlike her daughter in that she is far more physically active. If nothing else, this prohibits her ability to be particularly bookish, but the impression made is that she simply isn't like that, although her daughter the writer is. She is an integral background figure during the vast majority of the book because Flannery O'Connor not merely stayed single, but lived together with her mother most of her adult life - whether this is because Flannery never married or if it was that the two wanted it this way is not specified.

Objects/Places

Andalusia

This is the name of the two-story white farm house that Flannery O'Connor and her mother live in during a large portion of the book. It is not explained whether or not this home has been in the family for generations or whether it is that Flannery's parents bought the place prior to her birth. It is located four miles outside of the town of Milledgeville, Georgia.

Milledgeville, Georgia

This is the hometown of Flannery's mother. Flannery spent the second half of her childhood living there, before her father's early death. She also attended a women's college there and lived near there, out at Andalusia with her mother. Millegdville, Georgia is host to a high quality women's college, Georgia College. It also has a sanitarium, and a prison which in one letter Flannery assures a friend, balances the town's 'lacy quality'. Milledgeville is a Southern town; much to the horror of many contemporary readers, this is exemplified not only by beautiful countryside but also by the broad daylight practices of the white supremist gang - the Ku Klux Klan.

the South

Flannery O'Connor describes this region as her own, but also as significant in literature. Later in the book, she warns at least one literary friend that one problem in the modern era is that the majority of Americans no longer believe that 'the South exists'. She further plays on this by including Southern dialect playfully in a great number of the letters found in this collection.

Yaddo

This is a writers' retreat located in Saratoga Springs New York. Right after she graduates from her Master's course in creative writing at the University of Iowa, she is able to get a placement at Yaddo. There the next step in her writing career is launched. She makes contact with the man who helps her to find her literary agent, Elizabeth McKee. She is among those who leave Yaddo over drama surrounding another resident who has lived there for five years without managing to get any of her writing published; the same woman is a Communist Party Member, which in the early 1950s of America is enough to cause the entire place to be invaded and investigated.

University of Iowa

Little is written of this place, other than it had the important role of being where Flannery O'Connor was able to pursue her Master's course after graduated from a women's college. She was accepted with a scholarship and won an award during her graduate program. As such, this is a rather treasured 'Alma Mater'.

New York City

Flannery visits this city the most early in the book. The reason is typically to attend meetings with her literary agent, and to meet with publishers. She goes to more than one place there. At times she stays with friends but other times she takes hotel accommodations.

Utah

This Southwestern state of America is mentioned almost exclusively with reference to a Utah's writers conference. She mentions this in a letter to 'A' dated 13 January 1962. She informs 'A' that it is her friend Jack Hawkes who is going to go there, not she.

crutches

During an unpleasantly long time of Flannery's adult life she isn't well. One side effect is that she has crutches much of the time, which is part of why she grows resistant to travel as she gets older. Her crutches are described as made of aluminum. With her typically good attitude, she points out that needing these things enabled her to be seated first on aircraft when she journeyed to Europe and that the Continentals were impressed by the fact they were made of this lightweight metal.

Catholic Church

Mother Church, is brought up numerous times throughout the collection of letters. The reason for this is Flannery's Catholicism. She does not get into naming precise temples, but she discusses her Catholicism so much that it would be out of place to not mention the religion and the Church which is one the most important ways Catholic messages are transmitted to the world 'at large'.

Wise Blood

This is the title of Flannery's first novel - the first one that she is able to have published after graduate school. She refers to it in a great many letters spread throughout the duration of the entire book.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

This is a short story by Flannery O'Connor that is referred to periodically throughout the letters. It is one of her most famous published works.

Themes

Philosophy & theology

It becomes clear during the collection of letters that Flannery O'Connor is rather well read in and interested in philosophy within and outside of a theological context. She refers to many of the European existentialists, particularly the French. She gives the impression that she even really has read Simone de Beauvoir. She shows the development of her thinking during the letters that she sends. For Flannery O'Connor, much of her philosophizing occurs within a theological context. She is actually a devout Catholic, and she reads up on many of the most popular writers within Catholic thought. One of her favorite thinkers is Teilhard de Chardin. She recommends one of his books to another late in the letters, during the early 1960s.

She writes about the matter of faith and the testing of faith and often the loss of it, either permanently or temporarily as a side effect of greater education. She explains in a handful of her letters that often the introduction of so many new ideas to college freshman causes the student to feel psychologically overwhelmed. This radically heightened and broadened awareness leads to questioning and doubting religious faith in those who 'used to have it'. Flannery claims that faith that returns after such doubts is somehow of a superior quality to what it had been before there had been any questioning. Perhaps the real reason is that the whole idea of faith as 'belief in the unknown' only returns when it more closely resembles knowledge for the believer or when the individual has learned something else that is highly important to him or her. In this case, it might be that someone resumes belief due to determining that the thought of St. Augustine is superior in its thorough analysis than those of an unbeliever or relatively unChristian thinker such as Friedrich Nietzsche. However, in all honesty, in many cases it might be that the individual gives more credence to abiding by the beliefs of his or her mother or father or harbors such belief and reverence for a minister from childhood that he or she 'will believe because Honored Figure of an Elder told me to and I will obey'. That is an extremely different reason, but its driving force should not be underrated in the depth psychology of any given individual. Augustine himself, after all, had no chance for reconciliation with his beloved mother unless he returned to being a Catholic. Flannery does not delve into that argument, but in one letter she writes one of her local Fathers in order to request permission just to read something that a bunch of Protestants want her to read for a reading group. She gives the Father that authority, or asks him to control her decision in this case - as it has theological and religious implications. As such, the significance of the personal relations should not be underestimated, however rarified the intellectual atmosphere, or however rigorous the analytical exercises. Flannery O'Connor was an intellectually developed, dedicated, intentional committed Catholic. As such, she was rather broad minded and tolerant of difference, including dissent among her friends.

Flannery's Writing Career

The Habit of Being provides an insider's account of a growing writer's career. At the beginning, Flannery is implied to have some talent. She was bright enough and from the sort of family that felt it worthwhile to invest in her higher education. At first, the devotion to her development was simply this, which is a lot. By the time she completed her undergraduate education she had shown such exceptional promise and had won the assistance of some especial benefactors such that she garnered a scholarship to attend graduate school. The money was used to sustain her while she pursued a Master's Degree in creative writing at the University of Iowa.

Soon thereafter, she won a place at Yaddo, the writers colony. There she was also financially sustained, albeit rather humbly. During this time there are a few important events shown in the letters in Part 1. She was recommended to Elizabeth McKee by Paul Moor. It is never known for sure whether or not that is why Elizabeth accepted Flannery. It may have been, just because it made it seem more likely that Miss O'Connor's work would be of high quality, or simply that the name of someone else who she knows works as an attention getter. This is crucial, as she is able to work with Elizabeth McKee to completely edit and market her first novel, Wise Blood.

Robert Giroux is another vital contact for Flannery O'Connor because he is from one of the publishers who works with her. He represents Harcourt Brace. Much of her work appears in magazines where short stories typically appear. The names of these, and of the stories, are scattered throughout the parts of the collection of letters. When the presentation is regarded on the whole, it is able to provide a reasonable clear sense of the pathway that Flannery O'Connor took to success as a writer. It is also humbling, because it reduces the entire notion of any 'glamour of success' down to its roots - these notes to the agent, the struggle of finding publishers, the agony of rewriting and of the mild horror of numerous errors found only after the first draft has been created and the reality of her messy bedroom at her mother's farm and her ailing health. Flannery's life as a successful author was not glamorous, but it was what she actually wanted, or else was something that she had fallen so deeply into the delusion that she wanted that she could no longer tell the difference.

Relationships

Flannery O'Connor was almost notoriously single, as far as can be discerned through The Habit of Being. Modern as she was, she still came from a generation where it was rather bizarre for a woman to go unmarried. While many women would still romance, Flannery was either terribly disabled romantically or so intent on her own concerns that men couldn't even get a decent crack at interesting her into a romance. It is possible that she did this, but that none of the letters she wrote about that topic have been included, or else it is that she really was a celibate due to being a devout Catholic and perhaps managed to evade the attachment to sensual pleasures - or despite suffering

from their nagging pull upon her, she carried on. Flannery never did become either a wife or a mother, but was a 'funny single woman' who had a career.

Flannery certainly did have relationships with people. One of her characteristics shown in the book is her willingness to sustain at least some kind of contact with others for decades on end. For many, this is a common practice, whereas for others, the only cases in which it occurs is with parents, siblings, offspring, and perhaps a spouse or a best friend. For Flannery O'Connor, she made efforts to do this with at least a batch of people. This shows clearly through the simple fact that there are people who she wrote to beginning in the 1940s and kept in at least some contact with them through the mail up until her death in 1964. Only some of these were business contacts. She certainly valued her friendships with people and a few of them sent her presents repeatedly. Not every relationship Flannery had was someone with whom she exchanged letters, most prominently, her mother.

Style

Perspective

The book has been compiled by one of the subject's closest friends, Sally Fitzgerald. Sally has included many letters which were sent to her and her husband from Flannery O'Connor herself. In this regard, the book is an unusual assemblage. There is a sense in which it is the sharing of memories of a dear deceased friend through reading letters she has left. There is another sense in which the same collection comes off more after the manner of an autobiography as presented through letters from Flannery O'Connor. Flannery's personal presentation through these works of nonfiction show a few essential features which amount to a real life 'persona', what the astrologers call the 'ascendant' - who some interpret by how this person comes across and what aspects of the inner life are shared, given that there is always something hidden.

As an autobiographical work, the author is Flannery O'Connor. First and foremost she is an American woman of the twentieth century. Secondly, she is a Catholic girl of Georgia - a Southerner. On this same level, she is writer and a single woman. All of these factors exert tremendous influence upon her lifestyle both in her thinking and in the events that shape those events. She is a well educated woman. This was only more rare fifty years ago than it is today. She has experience with both rural and urban atmospheres but ultimately is more of a countryside type, but in a special broad-minded rural way. After all, she was living just outside of a university town. Often in such places, the institution is viewed as a local cultural Mecca.

Tone

The tone of the work is realistic. The entire compilation is of nonfiction letters. There are themes running through the epistles. At the same time, the author was relating to whomever she was writing to at the time. They are presented with the view of having the entire set be a means by which readers can all get to know Flannery O'Connor better. Her writing is quite clear, and typically pertains to the facts at hand. She has a special way of combining the more sophisticated vocabulary of the well educated woman that she is together with a specifically Georgian vernacular. She toys with these within her letters for the purpose of self-expression. They give an individuality to the tone of the entire collection of letters.

The Habit of Being is a chronological work. By the end of it, there is shown to be a consistency to the author of the letters. It is possible that this regularity has been artificially constructed by the editors. However, it is more probable that it is as natural and behaviors such as reading and writing can ever hope to be. Individuality in some regards functions the same way as the human mind distinguishes plant species. Once one knows what kind it is, it only makes sense to expect from it, what its nature leads it to do. In this case, the themes found in the book are inherent to the individuality of

Flannery O'Connor herself. Again, the possibility that there is an error is admitted, but if the truth is well presented by the facts, then this is the case. Not every nonfiction book gives this type of biographical or autobiographical presentation of an individual. Only because it covers her later life, and is able to be looked at from after the end of it, is it so very obvious. Most people who knew Flannery were likely aware of this. This being the case, the overall tone is straightforward. It is highly informative and personalized. It is intentionally quite personal in many cases. There is some attempt to suggest the richness of life by mentioning multiple topics within most letters.

Structure

The book is divided in four parts. Each part contains letters from years. Part 1 has letters from 1948 - 1952. Part 2 covers the years 1953 - 1958. Part 3 runs across 1959 - 1963. Finally, Part 4 is markedly different in that it only holds letters from one year; all 1964. Part 1 begins with Flannery's years at Yaddo. Part 2 includes the changeover from Flannery's student lifestyle to that of a real professional writer. Parts 3 and 4 handle the writer's more mature years. It is especially noted in these parts when the reality that Flannery O'Connor was extremely single - meaning, not merely unmarried but a celibate without extensive dating or much of anything of the romantic kind at all, has the greatest effect. Sooner or later, there would have been a major changeover. Initially, the young girl grows up and is single just like all the other girls. Then, at some age - the normal age for this various with the part of the country and the cultural atmosphere's caused by religion, temperament and personal background, the young women pair up with a man. Either they work their way through a slew of suitors and ultimately marry some one and have offspring or else they turn into the abnormal. Flannery went 'abnormal' in this regard. When hordes of the girls she went to school with had become married women and mothers, O'Connor grew mature enough to be called a "Missus" but she was still living like a "Miss", there in her messy book laden room at her mother's.

The number of letters per section exceeds 275 in the cases of Parts 2 and 3. During Part 4, the editor and dear friend Sally Fitzgerald reveals to readers that Flannery's health had gone so amiss as to warrant a certain amount of dread. The letters in this section are not particularly different from the others in style of manner, but Flannery's ability to and willingness to travel has depleted. The book ends with Flannery's death. The last letter is actually to one of the long term contacts, Maryat Lee, and is one of just a very few that come with a built-in joke. It either lightens up the whole thing, that Flannery could show such good humor mere days before she died or else it makes the whole thing slightly ominous, like clowns before a disaster.

Quotes

"Mr. Ransom said he would take either "The River" or "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" for the Kenyon Review." p. 50

"I think Jung is probably just as dangerous as Freud." p. 152

"He sho do move around aplenty." p. 566

"is a female country Jacob." p. 577

"The Communist world sprouts from our sins of omission." p. 450

"Around here it is not a matter of finding the truth but of deciding which lie you live with better." p. 473

"...she is impossible when she's drunk...she insisted on polishing the sink with silver polish." p. 461

"I can live for a year on what they are paying me for a week." p. 316

"Everybody now talks about it's-all-in-the-mind." p. 154

"The tramp is fine just as he ought to be. Jennie Mae could probably say less.
"If possible we should have some indication as to why or what in his past life has made this boy such a monster. It would heighten his credibility." p. 199

"Let him be a monster because he wants to be a monster, not just because he is a monster. He seems to me evil but not sinful." p. 199

"...Well however you work it out, you will continue to have my limp, obfuscating and airless prayers. You are of course entirely right that the reply was inadequate and cliche-ridden. It always will be." p. 227

Topics for Discussion

Do you think that Flannery just had a delicate constitution, or that her lifestyle or psychology caused her ill health?

Which of Flannery's friends who received mail from her is your favorite? Why is this?

Who is Rayberator? Is this an inside joke?

Are you Catholic? If not, does O'Connor's description of Catholic theology interest you? If so, were the Catholic elements of her discussion meaningful to you in terms of your own religious experience? In either case, did you find it helpful?

Did the letters improve, leave neutral, or worsen your own opinion about the quality of women's colleges in the early twentieth century? Defend your answer.

Have you read any of Flannery O'Connor's published fiction? If so, have these letters changed your perception of her and her work? If not, are you more interested in her literature now that you have read The Habit of Being?

Make a list of details about the book that make it clear that this is twentieth century material.