Mystery and Manners; Occasional Prose Study Guide

Mystery and Manners; Occasional Prose by Flannery O'Connor

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Mystery and Manners; Occasional Prose by Flannery O'Connor is a collection of essays and articles written by O'Connor and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. The essays explore the popular Southern fiction writer in context with preconceived perceptions of the Southern Gothic style of writing. O'Connor also delves into the mystery of Christian writers whose beliefs are almost always in conflict with the popular mores of the day. O'Connor's strong Catholic beliefs guide her work and her view on writing in authentic truth.

The book begins with the essay, The King of the Birds, which is representative of O'Connor's essay style. As the reader will learn, O'Connor believes in writing about things and people which are familiar to her, and this piece addresses her love for collecting birds which culminates in her flock of peacocks. O'Connor not only describes the birds' physicality but also their impact on her life and on the workings of her Georgia farm. This is the only essay of O'Connor's which appears in the book.

The book then moves on to regionalism in writing, especially the Southern writer; and there are four essays included on this topic. O'Connor presents her views on the importance of regionalism in writing, especially Southern writing, and the ever-increasing lack of it in the work she sees coming out of the region. She also explains the nature of the grotesque found in her writing and the place this style has in the Southern Gothic style overall.

The book also contains three essays on the subject of writing fiction in general, short stories, and O'Connor's own work. O'Connor relates the important qualities in fiction writing and in the fiction writer and even addresses some of these points as they relate to her own work.

Because she was such a passionate writer and advocate for good fiction, O'Connor gets especially heated in two essays on teaching literature in schools, particularly eighth grade when the students are more inclined to tell the teacher what they will read instead of being guided into good literature.

O'Connor's passion for the discussion of religion digs deep into a set of four essays on the religious aspect of the Christian novelist and reader especially in the Protestant South. O'Connor's devout Catholicism guides her writing and her review of other religious writing and she instructs the reader on its authenticity and place in America.

As the book closes, the editors include O'Connor's introduction to a story written about a disfigured girl. Because this book is one of essays, most of which are extracted from speeches or papers written by O'Connor, the editors are careful to note the timing, location, and delivery of the material.

The King of the Birds

The King of the Birds Summary and Analysis

Mystery and Manners; Occasional Prose by Flannery O'Connor is a collection of essays and articles written by O'Connor and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. The essays explore the popular Southern fiction writer in context with preconceived perceptions of the Southern Gothic style of writing. O'Connor also delves into the mystery of Christian writers whose beliefs are almost always in conflict with the popular mores of the day. O'Connor's strong Catholic beliefs guide her work and her view on writing in authentic truth.

As a young girl, Flannery O'Connor first gained notoriety when a photographer from Pathe News in New York came to her Savannah home to film her chicken that could walk both forward and backward. This begins Flannery's collection of chickens which evolves into a passion that even includes making clothes for some of the birds. The drive to collect birds ends in the ultimate collection of a flock of peacocks. The first peacock ordered arrives on the train with a hen and four peabiddies. The birds show no interest in the young Flannery until she appears with food.

Over the years, Flannery's flock of peacocks expands and she never tires of watching their actions or staring at their beauty, even the hens which are not colorful like the males. Naturally, the flock of peacocks draws much attention from the people in the area around Flannery's Milledgeville, Georgia, farm. Most people appreciate the beauty and dignity of the birds but do not understand their worth. Eventually, Flannery's flock grows to 40 and they begin to destroy the flowers, vegetable plants, and fruit trees as well as bending the fences on which they perch. Flannery reaches points of frustration that the peacocks have taken over the farm but in the end knows that the birds have won.

The book begins with this essay, the only one in the book. The editors have selected this piece to exemplify O'Connor's style as this is one of her most famous pieces. It is possible that O'Connor chose to raise and then write about her peacocks because she finds beauty in them. Therefore, she finds the glorious male birds beautiful as do most people because of the spectacular plumage, but she also thinks the more nondescript female birds have their own type of beauty for their simplicity. This is fitting with her style as an author who writes about reality and redemption. Throughout her writing career, O'Connor writes about things that are familiar to her such as her beloved farm and her Southern roots, so the essay on peacocks is representative of her subject matter and style.

The Fiction Writer & His Country, Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction and The Regional Writer

The Fiction Writer & His Country, Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction and The Regional Writer Summary and Analysis

O'Connor is challenged by a Life magazine editorial claiming that America's writers do not speak for America today. The editorial states that the country is the most powerful and wealthiest nation on earth yet its novelists write as if they are headed for the poorhouse. The editorial urges more fiction that truly represents the country and the inclusion of the redeeming quality of spiritual purpose as well. '"what is most missing from our hothouse literature' is 'the joy of life itself.'" The Fiction Writer & His Country, Page 26

O'Connor ponders what this means for the fiction writer and suggests that the direction urged by the editorial would include countryside, regional characteristics, and eternal views, especially from Christian writers. The country that most writers are concerned with primarily is his immediate area complete with manners. The Southern writers would seem to have an advantage in this area although O'Connor thinks readers must be weary of what has come to be known as the "Southern School" of writing complete with all things grotesque or deformed.

Southern writers are also known to be anguished, not by the alienation from the rest of the country as some people claim, but rather because it is not alienated enough. Manners, good and bad, are important to Southern writers which is a condition that seems to have created the proliferation of writers of varying degrees of talent. O'Connor feels that the only way to escape being a regional writer is to widen the region; become an American writer.

O'Connor also questions whether the Christian writer can see a correlation between the unbridled prosperity of America and the call for more fiction to show the joy of life. The Christian writer will probably feel that he is being asked to separate mystery from manners and judgment from vision to produce fiction for the general public. Usually the writer's moral sensibilities coincide with his sense of drama and the great writers need the freedom to utilize it. Christian dogma should not be viewed as a set of rules to guide writers but as a freedom to observe and a respect for mystery.

O'Connor feels that Christian writers will best be able to discern the grotesque for which Southern writers are well known. Christian writers have innate beliefs that make some aspects of modern society repugnant and the challenge is to make these beliefs seem

distorted by readers who find them quite normal. When speaking to an audience who shares the writer's beliefs, the tone can be conversational; however, when speaking to an audience out of sync with the writer, the tone must be more violent.

O'Connor feels that those who truly speak for America today are advertising agencies because they portray the country's wealth and classless society in persistently affirmative tones.

The author claims that a writer's country is internal as well as external; the knowledge of self is also knowledge of region. In order for a writer to know himself he must also know what he lacks and must always measure himself against truth, not the other way around.

O'Connor mentions the writers of previous generations who were bound together in beliefs and style but feels that today's writer is more independent. The author also resists labeling and advises that if one is called a Southern writer he is best to rid himself of the title as soon as possible because every piece written will be judged by the Southern lifestyle. Much Southern fiction has been labeled grotesque to which O'Connor responds, "Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic." The Grotesque in Southern Fiction, Page 40

In O'Connor's terms, grotesque means that a writer has illuminated an aspect of life not common to everyday life or in the experience of an ordinary life. The fictional qualities of the grotesque style are counter to typical social patterns and lean toward those of the mysterious and the unexpected. All novelists describe reality but reality depends on the writer's perspective. The writer who believes that actions are due to economics or some other finite factor will concern himself with those things that concern man in the short term. However, the writer who believes in the mystery of life will push past the surface of man's existence to try to understand more of the eternal mysteries.

When O'Connor receives the Georgia Writers' Association Scroll for her novel, The Violent Bear It Away, she speaks to the group about the myth of the lonely writer who suffers much for his art. O'Connor feels that this perspective romanticizes the writer's life and limits it to one of uncommunicative behavior which is not the truth. Most Southern writers maintain communication within communities which is the primary reason that they can thrive. This almost eliminates the corruption by theory alone which is the problem for the isolated writer.

O'Connor warns about the mitigation of true Southern style in writing as the South is infiltrated by people from other areas. She projects that someday a reader will not be able to discern whether a piece of fiction had been written in Georgia or in Hollywood, California.

According to O'Connor, the best American fiction has always been regional, and a writer must find his location in order to do his best work. Location does not necessarily mean a geographical locale however, because much of a person's sense of place dwells inside.

Of course the language, customs, foods, and scenery are all aspects of the region, but O'Connor asserts that these manners of life must also intersect with the mysteries of life: religion, spirituality, and instinct.

The Nature and Aim of Fiction, Writing Short Stories and On Her Own Work

The Nature and Aim of Fiction, Writing Short Stories and On Her Own Work Summary and Analysis

O'Connor addresses a writing class and tells them that few people who are interested in writing are interested in writing well. The novelty of being a writer holds more appeal than the actual craft of writing. The serious writer is interested in "the habit of art" which is a certain quality of the mind in which something has inherent value. This negates all those who write with any other exterior motivations such as marketability or the need to express themselves.

In this essay, O'Connor is concerned with the art of storytelling, whether the story is a short story or a novel; all fiction is a story. O'Connor believes that a good writer must address absolutes and realities and not get consumed with abstracts and obscure sensibilities. Fiction should deal with reality which is often dirty, and a person should not enter into the craft if that is offensive to him.

A fiction writer needs to develop an anagogical vision which allows him to see various levels of reality in one scenario. The fiction writer also has to be able to enwrap the reader in the dramatic presentation of the story. Novels require more massive energy as opposed to short stories but both genres require a story where something has to happen. It is not enough to merely record perceptions or sensitivities. The astute reader wants those elements too but his primal hunger is for the reality.

O'Connor is baffled by the belief that the short story is difficult to craft because everyone has the ability to tell a story. The ability to create with words is a true gift and unfortunately the ones who do not possess the gift seem to be the ones who are most driven to do it. Those who do have the gift often flounder because it is difficult to define a story—a complete dramatic action. Stories also include personalities who are living through some state of the human condition which may or may not have the halo of the writer's moral vision.

According to O'Connor, a short story requires time and should not be entered into if the objective is to turn out fiction before it is ready or simply for monetary gain. "Being short does not mean being slight. A short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning." Writing Short Stories, Page 94

O'Connor holds the short story in high esteem which is more than she can say for the average reader. The short story writer must find the balance to appeal to this reader as well as the intelligent reader seeking a deeper experience. Each writer must remain true to his own level of understanding when he writes and amazingly fiction is then able to appeal to readers from all levels.

O'Connor comments on some of the manuscripts written by the people in the class and makes some general observations; language must be effective and memorable; local idioms and style are crucial; mystery and manners must be present; and characters must have depth and personality.

Of her own writing, O'Connor asks readers to stop trying to figure them out and to just enjoy them. She understands that students must attempt to understand significance but she does not want her work to be viewed as a problem that must be solved. O'Connor talks about one of her stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and tells the class that it has been called grotesque, but she prefers to call it literal because the characters have the edge of reality. Woven among the characters are the lines of spiritual motion which are invisible but hopefully felt by the reader.

O'Connor seems to be frustrated to have to explain the nature of writing, especially to those students looking for a formula for creating memorable work. The only real way to write short stories is simply to write them. Formulas including themes and symbols get in the way of reality from which the reader will glean his own meaning. The students are caught in a place of trying to understand from an author whose storytelling gift prevents her from delineating her own mystery. It is as O'Connor stated earlier, writing is a gift and you either have it or you don't.

No one can blame those who desperately want to write but do not have the gift because it is a primary form of communicating with the rest of the world. But, as O'Connor states, "There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds you. The great advantage of being a Southern writer is that we don't have to go anywhere to look for manners; bad or good, we've got them in abundance." Writing Short Stories, Page 103

Unfortunately, the mystery is just that; mysterious. O'Connor finds hers by drawing on experience, regionalism, and religion but it is up to the individual to access his own sources which fill in the blanks of stories that can only be written by each person.

The Teaching of Literature and Total Effect and the Eighth Grade

The Teaching of Literature and Total Effect and the Eighth Grade Summary and Analysis

The fiction writer is particularly vulnerable to public criticism because the nature of fiction deals with topics that everyone knows about and consequently considers himself an authority. Between the author and the reader lies the English teacher whose job it is to open the eyes of students and guide interpretations and possibilities of fiction. O'Connor feels that the study of novels should be a technical course addressing the love of language and its crafting into dramatic truth.

Unfortunately, many teachers do not understand how to approach literature with immature minds and choose instead to take an historic approach to the subject instead. Another method is to try to understand the psychology of the author which O'Connor feels is just an evasive technique of teachers not wanting to truly delve into the work. O'Connor admits that the teacher's role is not easy but would be better spent on fundamentals than on psychology and sociology.

According to O'Connor, fiction writers have an unhealthy attachment to the poor because the opportunities for stories are more readily available. However, even when a writer writes about the rich, he concerns himself with what wealthy people lack. The universal stories of loss and limitations are appealing to most readers and the situations including poor people can be found everywhere.

O'Connor notes instances in Georgia schools where parents object to the literature being read in schools, specifically John Steinbeck's East of Eden and John Hersey's A Bell for Adamo. O'Connor does not comment on these cases but feels that most teachers assign literature that has the best hope for retaining student interest. Instead of being told what to read, today's students are given liberal options and choose the path of least resistance. "No one asks the student if algebra pleases him or if he finds it satisfactory that some French verbs are irregular, but if he prefers Hersey to Hawthorne, his taste must prevail." Total Effect and the Eighth Grade, Page 137

O'Connor suggests that literature be taught as a subject with history which means starting with English novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries before moving on to early American writers such as Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville. It is only then that students should be allowed to read more modern literature.

Proper study of a novel should result in the student contemplating the mystery of the whole work, not just a small part. Morals or statements about life should rise up from the work, not be excavated with sharp tools. "It is the business of fiction to embody mystery

through manners, and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind." The Teaching of Literature, Page 124

The Church and the Fiction Writer and Novelist and Believer

The Church and the Fiction Writer and Novelist and Believer Summary and Analysis

O'Connor addresses the issues facing Catholic fiction writers and begins with a statement that Catholics believe in defined mysteries and cannot see straight enough to write fiction and that if there are Catholics who can see other things, they probably should not be viewing them. Some contend that Catholics use their fiction to further their proof of the supernatural and some believe this expands the Catholic writer's view, not narrows it. Some even believe that Catholics who write for non-Catholic audiences are writing for a hostile audience. O'Connor contends, "When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist." The Church and the Fiction Writer, Page 146

Part of the problem for Catholic writers is making sure that grace and faith do not become detached from his dramatic sense. According to O'Connor most Catholics separate nature and grace as much as possible and reduce their concept of the mysterious to pious cliché viewed only in the obscene or the sentimental. She also believes that much religious literature minimizes the dignity of life in the present in favor of that of the next world and that fiction should reinforce mystery by grounding it in reality.

As a novelist, O'Connor feels that her responsibility is to make everything as specific as possible and speak with his whole personality. Great fiction includes the whole range of human judgment and that includes personal religious belief. As an artist though, he is bound to project his reality in some form that the reader will identify as the human condition. O'Connor believes in the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars." Novelist and Believer, Page 161

O'Connor's God is unlimited; the one who became man and rose from the dead. Writing about man's experiences with this God is a challenge because popular religious feeling has become sentimental, if it exists at all.

To counter this, O'Connor takes care to write powerfully to shake up the reader to the power of the mysteries of her God. It is important for her to let her readers know that something powerful is going on and is not above positive distortion and exaggeration to get the reader's attention. Of course there is still the danger that the reader will see only what he believes, but the writer must continue in his efforts to penetrate the barrier of realities. O'Connor warns about the reader who intuits her work as representative of all people in a particular region or a particular region. Just because she writes about a corrupt Presbyterian minister in the South does not mean that all Presbyterian ministers

in the South are corrupt. Readers must avoid absolutes when reading fiction, particularly religious fiction.

Ultimately, O'Connor believes that readers like to read about compassion in religious stories while the author usually expounds on a flaw in a usually admirable character. If the two paths connect, then that is satisfying for both parties. The greatest dramas occur when there is either salvation or loss of a soul; so if a reader does not believe in the spirit, he will be more than a little disappointed in the work. The same goes for sin which is the bedrock of most religion. A reader's religious perspective will influence his appreciation for some fiction of this genre. However, readers do seem to like the appearance of the devil, perhaps because evil has taken shape in something easily identifiable and there is no work necessary on the part of the reader's mind or his soul.

Catholic Novelists and Their Readers and The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South

Catholic Novelists and Their Readers and The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South Summary and Analysis

O'Connor relates the story of Francis of Assisi who converted a wolf. She does not know if the wolf is actually converted or not, but in the end he is still a wolf. This moral should ring true for the Christian novelist too because no matter how much he may be improved by the Church, he is still a writer and should remain true to that purpose. In fact, instead of living with restrictions, the Church should make him a better author.

O'Connor feels that writers should heed the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas who says that art does not necessitate restrictions; that a work of art is good in itself. Most people, however, are not content with that state and must create something of utilitarian value. To O'Connor's way of thinking, art in itself glorifies God and that writers should leave evangelizing to the evangelists. The true writer is obligated only to the truth of what can happen and not necessarily what can happen to the reader or his morals.

O'Connor defines the Catholic novel as an adequate representation of reality as exhibited in the world of things and relationships. This means addressing not only good and evil but also those things that are neither. This, in turn, does not necessarily have to be a Catholic novel but one that presents the truth as Christians see it. She does not condone judging the actions of a Catholic or Christian writer whose intent is to bring a reader closer to God, but it is acceptable to judge the literary product.

She also cautions against poorly written pieces from which people are supposed to glean enlightenment. She notes the book entitled The Foundling written by Cardinal Spellman and advises that although he is not a great writer, no one should judge his intent. There are books that offer deeper and broader Christian perspectives because the true Christian novelist has a greater sense of the larger universe and is not limited only to the natural.

The Catholic novelist sometimes feels some angst when he views what he is supposed to do as a Catholic and what he is supposed to do as a novelist. Is he obligated to report what is or take a higher view and report what could be? O'Connor also feels that the rigorous Catholic education of most believers leads many outside the Church to feel that Catholics are too restrained to write creatively. This should not be the case because if anything dogma should help a person penetrate realities, and a writer needs certainties in order to write fully.

O'Connor does feel that there seems to be a preoccupation with violence and evil in the work of today's Catholic writers. "The pious argument against such novels goes something like this: if you believe in the Redemption, your ultimate vision is one of hope, so in what you see you must be true to this ultimate vision; you must pass over the evil you see and look for the good because the good is there; the good is the ultimate reality." Catholic Novelists, Page 179 She contends that a writer cannot control what he sees or doesn't see; his views are a matter of circumstances and perception style.

Part of the challenge for Catholic writers is that Catholics abide by instant answers and fiction does not provide that alacrity. Fiction creates even more mystery which will create the need to separate things such as nature from grace, reason from imagination, etc.

Catholic fiction writers live and work in three fundamental truths—the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. The secular world does not necessarily believe in these, especially sin, the value of suffering, or eternal responsibility. And because Catholic writers work in a secular world, they must work in more violence than may be comfortable in order to get their points across. As an extension of this, the Catholic writer runs the risk of corrupting those who are not capable of understanding his work. One man's vision and truth may be temptation and sin to another. O'Connor hopes that a writer avoids this by going back to the fundamentals of writing truth without indulging in sentimentality or pornography and any other excesses.

O'Connor travels widely and speaks at many conferences and she is concerned that future Catholics will have a literature understood by Catholics as well as others. She feels that a society is understood by the stories it tells and that fiction is the closest art to man's sin, suffering and hope. Catholic fiction also imitates Catholics because it has free will to work even in divine displeasure. She asserts that a truly Catholic novel has aspects of interest to the Catholic reader. Some people counter her positions and she asserts that a Catholic novel is written by a human being complete with limitations who cannot circumvent his complete personality and expecting anything less is expecting a lesser work.

In reality, a Catholic novelist trusts the fictional imagination as much as he trusts anything and almost immediately begins to rein it in before it is fully unleashed. To that end, there is a plethora of discussion on the lack of good Catholic writing in America. Typically, this criticism comes from those who could not possibly write anything, let alone a fictional piece of literature. O'Connor also warns Catholic critics to open their eyes to other aspects of fiction in addition to their faith.

Catholic writers in the South also have the burden of regionalism to overcome. Although many feel that this additional burden is too big to overcome, O'Connor, both a Catholic and a Southerner, finds benefits in her situation. "The Catholic novel can't be categorized by subject matter, but only by what it assumes about human and divine reality. It cannot see man as determined; it cannot see him as totally depraved. It will see him as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace. And it will see this grace as working through nature, but as

entirely transcending it, so that a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul. Its center of meaning will be Christ; its center of destruction will be the devil. No matter how this view of life may be fleshed out, these assumptions form its skeleton." The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South, Page 196

O'Connor also asserts that the South can be hostile to outsiders and has a fierce instinct to protect its own morals and traditions. And because the South is not as Catholic as some regions of the country such as Boston or the Midwest, the Catholic writer has a harder time finding a home in the Southern region. If the Catholic Church were more central to the entire country, the Catholic writer would meet with less resistance and find more acceptance overall. There is some benefit for the Catholic writer in the South, however, in that the South is known as the Bible Belt and people are acutely aware of faith even if it is not their own.

O'Connor also finds an arrogance among Catholics that nothing as important as Catholic literature could be harvested in the weakly Catholic South. She counters that this makes the introduction and work of Catholic writers even more important even while it incorporates the Southern style. If anything, the Protestant South is the perfect testing ground for the Catholic writer who meets zeal unlike his own and even some hostility which he must overcome. This provides the Catholic writer with tremendous opportunities to persevere and rise above the critics of all religious beliefs.

Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann

Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann Summary and Analysis

In 1960 O'Connor receives a letter from Sister Evangelist, the Sister Superior of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta. Sister Evangelist would like O'Connor's help in writing a novel about an inspirational child named Mary Ann, a deformed twelve-year-old who has lived at the home since 1949 and recently died. Mary Ann had been born with a tumor on the side of her face which left her disfigured. In spite of her physical disfigurement, Mary Ann was an absolutely delightful child who brought joy to whoever had the opportunity to meet her. Sister Evangelist would like Mary Ann's story told so that the world could see the impact that the girl had on the world.

O'Connor studies the picture of Mary Ann that Sister Evangelist had enclosed with her letter and notes that the girl can only be perceived as grotesque. The Dominican Congregation to which Sister Evangelist and the others belong had been founded by Rose Hawthorne, the daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne. O'Connor is reminded of one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories in which he tells about visiting a poorhouse and picking up a particularly offensive child simply because the child positioned himself in front of Hawthorne expecting to be picked up. Hawthorne overcomes his repugnance at the sight of the child and holds him, words which his daughter claims to be the finest he ever wrote.

O'Connor demurs from the invitation, encouraging the nuns to write the story and offering any editing help which may be necessary but honestly not expecting to hear from them again. But the nun's manuscript does arrive and although O'Connor is offended by the artlessness of the work, she is moved by the story which talks about a girl so in love with life that she lived twelve years after being given only six months to live after a cancer diagnosis. O'Connor finds that she is unable to edit out any of the details of the girl's life.

When the nuns visit O'Connor the discussion turns to the topic of the grotesque from which O'Connor gleans a new perspective. She believes that most people can look at evil straight on and can recognize it immediately. Recognizing good is another matter because it is not as easily discernible and is always a work in progress.

Although the story of Mary Ann is not included in this book, this excerpt is a preliminary to the piece, and the reader can easily understand the focus of O'Connor's message. She wants the reader to understand that there is also good in the grotesque, sometimes even more than in the "good," and that one should not look away from things that are repulsive or different because it is in these views that one is most likely to catch a glimpse of inherent goodness, possibly one's own.

Characters

Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor was a Southern writer born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1925. Throughout her relatively short life (she died at age 39 from complications of lupus), she created novels, stories, and essays about good and evil and the hope of redemption. Her characters are almost always those living on the edge of society or forgotten completely. O'Connor's writing style encompasses what is called the grotesque because she wrote about strange people in strange situations made all the more believable because they actually could have existed. O'Connor was a strong Catholic and spoke and wrote essays on the topic of the Christian and Catholic fiction writer living and working in the South. Much of her writing is faith-driven as she flawlessly tells the stories of her world with straightforward dialogue and an honest appreciation for the human condition. O'Connor had a special appreciation for nature and much of her work reflects her connection to all that is natural in the world, both physical and spiritual. O'Connor's life ended in Milledgeville, Georgia, in 1964, when most critics believe she was just hitting her stride as a major literary force in America.

Southern Writer

O'Connor states that "In the South there are more amateur authors than there are rivers and streams. It's not an activity that waits upon talent. In almost every hamlet you'll find at least one lady writing epics in Negro dialect and probably two or three old gentlemen who have impossible historical novels on the way." The Fiction Writer & His Country, Page 29

Cowering nearby are the serious Southern writers who fear that one day they will become integrated with this mix of amateurs. The true Southern writer, according to O'Connor, must utilize both manners and mystery in order to write regional work that is worthy of discerning readers. All Southerners have manners, both good and bad, and any state of manners is preferable to none at all. But the Southern writer must push past what is polite and get to the core of his reality in order to write his own truth. It is only then that mystery emerges; the mystery of weaving craft and message. There is also the mystery of the supernatural and religion which O'Connor feels cannot be separated from the writer because he is capable of seeing only that which his environment and circumstances will allow, and religion is a huge part of the Southern life.

Catholics

Catholics are members of the Roman Catholic Church based on the foundation that it is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ as handed down to Peter and the apostles. Catholics are Christians who practice the administration of sacraments in memory of Christ and in the hope of eternal life.

Christians

A Christian is a believer in Jesus Christ and follows his teachings which are represented in the religions of Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, and Nontrinitarian.

Mrs. O'Connor

Flannery's mother, Mrs. O'Connor, appears in the essay, The King of the Birds, and does not like the peacocks because they eat her flowers.

Eighth Grade Students

O'Connor addresses the issue of telling eighth grade students what they will read as opposed to asking them what they will tolerate learning.

Manichean

A Manichean is a believer in religious dualism and the freedom of the soul from matter through asceticism.

Mary Ann

Mary Ann is the twelve-year-old deformed girl who had lived at a Catholic charity home in Atlanta whose nuns had enlisted Flannery O'Connor's help in telling the girl's story.

Sister Evangelist

Sister Evangelist is the Sister Superior of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta who asks Flannery O'Connor's help in writing a story about one of the inspirational children who had lived at the home.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American author of novels and short stories who lived in New England during the early 1800s.

Objects/Places

Peacocks

Peacocks are the male peafowl easily recognizable by their ostentatious tail feathers.

The O'Connor Family Farm

The O'Connor family lived on a farm located outside Milledgeville, Georgia.

Essay

An essay is a short work of writing which typically provides the author's point of view on a stated subject.

Short Story

A short story is a fictional narrative that is shorter and more concise than a novella or novel.

Novel

A novel is a long fictional narrative.

Grotesque

The fictional qualities of the grotesque style are counter to typical social patterns and lean toward those of the mysterious and the unexpected.

Region

A region is a geographical term for a specified area of land, i.e. the Southern region.

Anagogical Vision

Anagogical vision allows a writer to see various perspectives of one image or situation.

Memoir

A memoir is a remembrance and a shortened version of a biography or autobiography.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home is located in Atlanta, Georgia, and is the home of cancer patients tended to by the Sisters of The Dominican Congregation.

Themes

Reality

O'Connor stresses throughout her essays the importance of a writer and a reader to face realities. Anything that is not reality-based will not be authentically written and therefore untrue to the author and the reader experience. She feels that a person should write about what he knows, his own reality, because when he stretches to create something out of his own experiences or circumstances, it will show negatively in the work. O'Connor is grounded in reality and tells readers that an author should not be afraid to get dusty because writing fiction is dirty work. A writer should be able to face reality and look hard at truths. This perspective is reflected in O'Connor's own writing style which can be very frank, especially for a well-mannered Southerner. O'Connor does write about her own reality much of the time and the characters in her books and stories are often times based on people she has encountered and she draws on the landscapes of rural Georgia on which her characters' stories extend. O'Connor does not shy away from topics of religion and the grotesque style of writing in the South and the reader comes to know that she was a no-nonsense person with a dry, sophisticated wit laughing at the reality of life.

Mystery and Manners

O'Connor states without apology that manners are critical to the Southern writer—any manners, good or bad. By manners, she does not necessarily mean etiquette but rather the "texture of existence that surrounds you. The great advantage of being a Southern writer is that we don't have to go anywhere to look for manners; bad or good, we've got them in abundance." Writing Short Stories, Page 103 Part of the manners of a Southern writer include the rich history, beautiful geography, and even the speech patterns of its natives. The South seems also to be imbued with a lack of embarrassment of its quirky characters, and O'Connor urges a Southern writer to draw on all his experiences—his manners—to create part of the fiction equation. The other part of the fiction dynamic is mystery which is revealed through manners. Mystery includes all the intangible elements of life—religion, the supernatural, grace, charm, beauty, death, fear, and more—which are difficult to explain because they are more readily experienced with the emotions or intuition. Mystery for the writer also enters into the fiction scope with the qualities the author brings, both learned and intuitive, such as technique, style, morals, and religion.

The Grotesque

The grotesque is a manner of creating fictional characters who are either physically repulsive or morally reprehensible, sometimes both. This style is common in Southern Gothic literature of which O'Connor is prominent. Simply stated, the grotesque

embodies and characters not observed every day and in the cases of ordinary people, never observed in their lifetimes. O'Connor also thought that the Northern reader would consider anything coming out of the South to be grotesque unless it is actually grotesque, in which case it would be called realistic. O'Connor says, "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize freaks, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South, the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. That is a large statement, and it is dangerous to make it, for almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety." The Grotesque in Southern Fiction, Page 44 The art of creating grotesque characters integrates perfectly into the Southern Gothic style of writing which embodies supernatural or unusual events while extending the plot, mostly for the purpose of illustrating morals or cultural mores.

Style

Perspective

This nonfiction book is written in the first person narrative perspective. This means that the person relating the essays is the author herself and she delivers her views and relates events according to her own perception of them. The author does not supply any insight into the motives, feelings, or actions of any other people and can only relate instances about these people from her own point of view. When there are conversations detailed, the author can simply relate what the other person says, and although the author may guess at the other person's thoughts, she cannot share them with the reader. Because the nature of the book is a nonfiction account of a person's philosophy on different topics, there is little room for any other points of view. This relaying of personal thoughts is punctuated at times by the retelling of events or incidents to add some dimension to the book, and everything is still from the author's own experiences and perspective. While this technique can be viewed as limiting, the author is able to provide much detail on her own thoughts and emotions which would not otherwise be available to the reader and is in complete alignment with the nature of the work.

Tone

The tone of the book is straightforward and simple yet written for a moderately sophisticated reader, especially one interested in the craft and dynamics of writing fiction. The only essay in the book, The King of the Birds, is lighthearted and humorous, but the tone grows increasingly more sober as the book progresses. As O'Connor puts forth her ideas on writers, especially Southern writers, her tone of voice becomes more opinionated and it is clear that she has put much thought into the topic. When the book reaches the essays on religion and writing, O'Connor is in her strongest voice yet as she attempts, almost violently sometimes, to get her points across. This is completely fitting because O'Connor believes that the Catholic writer must sometimes resort to violence in his writing in order to gain attention from uninterested or uninformed readers. By the end of the piece, when writing the introduction to A Memoir for Mary Ann, O'Connor has softened by the story of the disfigured girl who touched so many and died too soon. Overall, O'Connor's tone in these essays mirrors the tone in much of her own fiction: a hard look at reality and no fear in reporting what she sees.

Structure

The book is divided into six sections the first of which contains only one essay, The King of the Birds. This is the only one of O'Connor's essays which appears in the book. The second section addresses regionalism in writing, especially the Southern writer and there are four essays included on this topic. The third section contains three essays on the subject of writing fiction in general, short stories, and O'Connor's own work. In the

fourth section, O'Connor's essays address the teaching of literature in schools especially the eighth grade. The fifth section digs deep into the religious aspect of the Christian novelist and reader especially in the Protestant South. Finally, in the sixth section, the editors include O'Connor's introduction to a story written about a disfigured girl. Because the book is one of essays, most of which are extracted from speeches or papers written by O'Connor, the editors are careful to note the timing, location, and delivery of the material.

Quotes

"My quest, whatever it was actually for, ended with peacocks. Instinct, not knowledge, led me to them. I had never seen or heard one. Although I had a pen of pheasants and a pen of quail, a flock of turkeys, seventeen geese, a tribe of mallard ducks, three Japanese silky bantams, two Polish Crested ones, and several chickens of a cross between these last and the Rhode Island Red, I felt a lack." The King of the Birds, Page 4

"Manners are of such great consequence to the novelist that any kind will do. Bad manners are better than no manners at all, and because we are losing our customary manners, we are probably overly conscious of them; this seems to be a condition that produces writers." The Fiction Writer & His Country, Page 29

"My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. In some cases, these writers may be unconsciously infected with the Manichean spirit of the times and suffer the much-discussed disjunction between sensibility and belief, but I think that more often the reason for this attention to the perverse is the difference between their beliefs and the beliefs of their audience." The Fiction Writer & His Country, Page 33

"All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality." The Grotesque in Southern Fiction, Page 40

"Even though the writer who produces grotesque fiction may not consider his characters any more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is, his audience is going to; and it is going to ask him—or more often, tell him—why he has chosen to bring such maimed souls alive." The Grotesque in Southern Fiction, Page 43

"Technique in the minds of many is something rigid, something like a formula that you impose on the material; but in the best stories it is something organic, something that grows out of the material, and this being the case, it is different for every story of any account that has ever been written." The Nature and Aim of Fiction, Page 67

"It's always wrong of course to say that you can't do this or you can't do that in fiction. You can do anything you can get away with, but nobody has ever gotten away with much." The Nature and Aim of Fiction, Page 76

"People are always complaining that the modern novelist has no hope and that the picture he paints of the world in unbearable. The only answer to this is that people without hope do not write novels." The Nature and Aim of Fiction, Page 77

"I have very little to say about short-story writing. It's one thing to write short stories and another thing to talk about writing them, and I hope you realize that your asking me to talk about story-writing is just like asking a fish to lecture on swimming. The more stories I write, the more mysterious I find the process and the less I find myself capable of analyzing it. Before I started writing stories, I suppose I could have given you a pretty good lecture on the subject, but nothing produces silence like experience, and at this point I have very little to say about how stories are written." Writing Short Stories, Page 87

"I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." On Her Own Work, Page 118

"And if the student finds that this is not to his taste? Well, that is regrettable. Most regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed." Total Effect and the Eighth Grade, Page 140

"The very term 'Catholic novel' is, of course, suspect, and people who are conscious of its complications don't use it except in quotation marks. If I had to say what a 'Catholic novel' is, I could only say that it is one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships." Catholic Novelists and Their Readers, Page 172

"Just how can the novelist be true to time and eternity both, to what he sees and what he believes, to the relative and the absolute? And how can he do all this and be true at the same time to the art of the novel, which demands the illusion of life? Catholic Novelists and Their Readers, Page 177

"To be great storytellers, we need something to measure ourselves against, and this is what we conspicuously lack in this age. Men judge themselves now by what they find themselves doing. The Catholic has the natural law and the teachings of the Church to guide him, but for the writing of fiction, something more is necessary." The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South, Page 202

"I often find among Catholics a certain impatience with Southern literature, sometimes a fascinated impatience, but usually a definite feeling that with all the violence and grotesqueries and religious enthusiasm reflected in its fiction, the South—that is, the

rural, Protestant, Bible Belt South—is a little beyond the pale of Catholic respect, and that certainly it would be ridiculous to expect the emergence in such soil of anything like a literature inspired by Catholic belief." The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South, Page 206

"The story was as unfinished as the child's face. Both seemed to have been left, like creation on the seventh day, to be finished by others. The reader would have to make something of the story as Mary Ann had made something of her face." Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann, Page 223

Topics for Discussion

Why do you think the editors included the essay on peacocks to begin this book? Explain.

If you have read any of Flannery O'Connor's other work, does this book help explain her fiction? Why or why not?

Explain what O'Connor means by mystery and manners.

Discuss the Southern Gothic style and why O'Connor is a predominant force in the genre.

Why does O'Connor feel it is both an advantage and a disadvantage to be a Catholic writer in the Southern Bible Belt?

O'Connor has very strong feelings on what literature should be taught in schools. Do you think you would have liked to have been her student? Why or why not?

Explain how your appreciation for the craft of writing fiction has changed since reading these essays.