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**Universitat Autònoma
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**Shoot me & I learn: Redemptive Violence in the short
fiction of Flannery O'Connor**

MA Dissertation

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0. Introduction

“All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”
Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*¹

Throughout the ages, religious scholars and adherents have struggled to define the ambiguous concept of redemption and the path to achieve it. In Christian theology, redemption refers to the mystery of God’s liberation of humanity from their sins, only obtainable by reaching a state of grace. To be redeemed, a person must recognize the folly of their ways and decide to change. Achieving this state is difficult, since humans are never absolved from acting selfishly or without empathy towards others, and judging ourselves becomes one of the most difficult tasks. This existential preoccupation with redemption has been a prevalent theme throughout English literature, from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, to numerous plays by renowned playwright Shakespeare, to more modern narratives such as Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866).

In 1955, influential Southern Gothic author Flannery O'Connor published a collection of short stories called *A Good Man is Hard to Find and other stories*; in these stories, the reader is presented with a large number of characters who, in the words of Susan Castillo, are “desperately seeking redemption” (Castillo, 2004: 500). This search Castillo references is not present throughout each story; on the contrary, it gradually

¹ Sally Fitzgerald with her former husband Robert Fitzgerald, literature executor of Flannery O’Connor, compiled O’Connor’s essays and letters after O’Connor’s death and published two compilations: *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* in 1970 and *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor* in 1979. These two compilations allow the reader to get an inside perspective of the thoughts of the writer. Following other scholars, I will cite these books as MM and HB respectively.

emerges until reaching a point where the characters experience what O'Connor herself calls a "moment of grace". Born in Georgia in 1925, Flannery O'Connor's life experiences allowed her to realize that the southern United States was not "Christ-centered", as it believed itself to be, but rather "Christ-Haunted" (MM, 1970: 44). Her stories bring to life a South filled with religious overtones, churches, and self-proclaimed Christians, where religion is on everyone's lips, but not in everyone's hearts. That is why O'Connor sought to create these characters in her stories and illuminate their paths towards more sincere convictions than they previously carried in their daily lives. The inauthentic nature of these characters makes them blind and resistant to grace, and that is why their change must be "painful" as O'Connor has stated. Comprehending this bond between pain and change facilitates a deeper understanding of the presence of physical and psychological violence in most of the collection's stories. Appreciating and accepting this relationship between redemption and violence is often difficult for the reader. For this reason, in this thesis I seek to analyze O'Connor's use of violence, which represents destruction as well as redemption, alluding to a better future, in this case a more sincere, spiritual, God-centered future. Consequently, the main aim of this thesis is to examine how in O'Connor's early fiction, redemption is obtained largely thanks to a violent succession of events that are necessary for the characters to obtain their "moment of grace".

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first, *Violent & Religious Roots in America: A Historical Review*, seeks to provide a brief historical review explaining the interconnection of religion and violence in the United States from the nation's birth, to demonstrate the enduring relationship between the sacred and the violent. Furthermore, it seeks to emphasize how this connection has shaped the southern United States, where violence has been woven into their religious and social identity. This

context is necessary in order to understand how a southern Catholic author like Flannery O'Connor is so adept at capturing this significant connection between her religious beliefs and the use of violence.

From the beginning of her career, O'Connor received strong criticism for her violent and religious themes, such as from contemporary novelist and essayist Robert Owen Bowen, who said that O'Connor was "an enemy of literature and life" and that her real skill was not related to Catholicism, but was just to "tear down but never build up" (Bowen, 1961, cited in Moran, 2016: 62). For this reason, the second chapter, entitled *V j g " X k q n g p v " F t c i q p e x a m i n e s h o w t h e a u t h o r a n d h e r C r i t i c E v e w p q t* the use of violence and its connection to religion from different perspectives. Also, in this chapter, I aim to capture my position on this issue and explain more concretely how I will depict the redemptive features of violence.

The Method of Violence is the third and final chapter, centering on an analysis of seven of the ten short stories present in this collection. In this section, I have explored how redemption can be found through various methods, including a wake-up call, repentance, and death. "A Stroke of Good Fortune", "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" have not been used in this analysis since, despite showing a violent or religious aspect, the connection is not as strong as in the other stories present in this study.

In O'Connor's correspondence with Louise Abbott, a friend of adulthood, she once said: "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross" (HB, 1979: 354). For O'Connor, true religious belief will always require a layer of pain and violence, like Christ on the cross. It is not only readers who find this difficult to understand and accept, but also the characters within the stories that will be analyzed in this thesis.

1. Violent & Religious Roots in America: A Historical Review

The truth will lie only in a novel written by someone named William Faulkner. Then the sound historians will say that we should not believe the novel; we have the press, we have all the documents. In fact, however, it is only the novel that puts together all the signs.

-Rene Girard, *Violent Origins*

In 1996, Rene Girard, author of the books *Deceit, Desire & the Novel* (1961) and *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), came together along with other academics (Walter Burkert and Jonathan Z. Smith) to discuss the topic of “Violent Origins”. When talking about death and cultural formation, he made the statement found at the beginning of this chapter. This declaration referenced how news about murders, lynching, and violence in the South around the 1930s were not reflected in the press in a real and authentic way, arguing that many of the historical texts respond to the moment they have been written and to the interpretations of the time that now could have a totally new perception. However, the truth of the violent culture of this area could be reflected in novels and narratives that “puts together all the signs” (Girard, 1996: 228). Girard’s declaration ignites curiosity about the connection between Southern culture and violence, since much content of the Southern Gothic genre deals with this theme.

Although this violence is linked to specific notable events in the South, it has been a theme throughout the entire country’s history. That is why it is relevant to review how the most significant episodes in the history of the United States have resulted in a heritage of violence that has largely defined the South, as well as the identity of the country itself. The history of the United States is full of episodes of bloodshed and suffering; periods such as colonialism, revolution, slavery, and the Civil War were impactful eras that shaped the nation and its narrative. This narrative many times is covered by a blanket of justification and necessity that has been propagated over the years without a real acknowledgement of victims of its violence. As Joseph Doles states, “We Americans have

perfected the art of being both sanctimonious and deliberately indifferent to the plight of others” (Doles, 2016: 1).

The representation of this violence throughout the history of the United States is reflected in the varying manifestations of violence beyond physical aggression, encompassing concepts of exclusion, degradation, physical destruction, and social abuse. It is through this violence that the United States was conceived and raised, and the reason why so many American narratives find their voice through hostility, as Girard pointed out when talking about Faulkner; however, that can be extended to other writers such as Flannery O’Connor who will be the main focus of this study. In the case of O’Connor, it is easy to find examples of the violent components expressed above: the destruction of the farm in “A Circle in the Fire”, the exclusion of the Guizac family in “The Displaced Person”, and the one-armed Bible seller in “Good Country People” are illustrations of the broad meaning of the word violence not only in the author’s narratives but also as part of the American identity.

This violent identity that is exemplified in American narratives is a result of the history that has occurred since the birth of the country itself. Many of these historical episodes, as in many other places, have justified the use of violence as a necessary tool to fulfill their goals. This type of thinking has been recurrent throughout the history of this nation where violent patterns have been repeated on what Jon Pahl calls “innocent domination”, a concept with a sarcastic name, since it refers to acts where people forcefully take places, destroy weaker groups or minorities in order to form their settlements or to expand their ideologies (Pahl, 2010: 141).

To this concept Pahl adds a Girardian perspective, when he recognizes that this violence acquired over time has an undeniable religious dimension. Although when Girard talks about this connection, he does so in a more general way concerning human

and cultural development, while Pahl contextualizes it to the American identity. As Pahl states, “understanding myself as an “American” meant that I had inherited or assumed particular ways of thinking about violence, religion, and their [unbreakable] relationship”... “Christians in America, joined by many others have repeatedly failed to see how their actions have produced suffering and violence in the world” (Pahl, 2010: 15).

This religious origin of violence, as Girard explains, can be traced from an anthropological point of view, where sacrifices, of self or others including scapegoats, were offered to different deities or gods in the long search of common well-being, and have been found in many cultures around the world at different times. In Girard’s words, “violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred”; he even came to acknowledge that he might as well have said violence *or* sacred instead of violence *and* sacred since for him “the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process” (Girard, 1972: 31- 258). With this in mind, it is easier to understand how violence has entered different cultures and how in American culture it has been an essential element when forming its identity, an identity that has been dominant for many generations and that is the core of much American literature.

The violent history of colonialism in North America is the first episode drenched in blood that needs to be mentioned, not only because of the violence present in this time but also because most colonists were part of strict Christian groups whose ideology of righteousness was against Native American beliefs. The colonial era has often been disguised with terms such as ‘settlements’ or ‘settlers’, which obscure the reality of colonial imposition. However, the reality of this era completely separates it from these words by its explicit aims, such as: the elimination of Indigenous people, the appropriation of their land, and the eradication of their culture. The colonial period in

North America was the first event that left a legacy of violence, which continues to be held up as a necessary tool for perceived progress, following Pahl's concept of innocent domination. When discussing this subject, as Girard puts violence and religion under the same microscope, Pahl adds to this formula a third dimension of American colonialism, and expresses that "any account of American religious violence has to begin with the First Peoples of North America, The violence done to ... so many groups had (and has) explicit roots in religion" (Pahl, 2010: 14).

This threefold pattern is not exclusive to the colonial period; on the contrary, it has been present in all the relevant episodes of American history. Most of the settler groups that came to North America fled Europe when they were persecuted for their religious ideologies, and upon reaching America they became the new persecutors trying to implant their religious ideology as the only. Since these groups lived under strong religious dogmas, it was not surprising that their daily lives were influenced by the sacred doctrines they imparted. The power and influence of religion within these groups was so great that it falls into another process that Pahl calls "cultural religion", which Pahl explains happens when "religions exist to limit cultural options for people". This implies that the decisions of a culture or group have a religious bias. The problem of this bias, in the case of America, is that "instead of eliminating violence, religions have been the causes of violence in the history of the country" (Pahl, 2010: 20). This was clearly exemplified in the beginning of the Civil War, where colonial resistance was transformed into the righteous cause; that is to say, ministers from all the colonies eliminated doubts about the revolution, exalted people and used sacred *power* to justify the violent war they were about to embark on, using religion as blinders towards violence. Once acceptance of this ideology reached critical mass, violent mobs throughout the colonies were the forerunner of the war that was to come. Many violent tactics were used by both parties to

gain an advantage during the war. It is from this vicious chaos that the United States of America was born. Richard Brown sees the Fourth of July not only as the beginning of the nation, but also as the birth of a culture of violence that leaves blood-stained marks to today.² In Brown's words:

American violence owes much to the dead weight of unsolved problems from the past. The negative features of American history—abysmal relations between whites and peoples of other color and the brutal and brutalizing processes by which the frontier was extended and our economy industrialized—have long been known to us as violent chapters in the story of our development, but it has been difficult for us to accept that the grandest event in our history, the Revolution, was pursued with a civil violence that was often ignoble (Brown 1975: 42).

Both colonialism and the Revolutionary War are episodes that left lasting violent scars, and they provide important context to understand how this violent trail influenced upcoming events. Almost a hundred years after the Revolutionary War, another war took place on American soil; this time not involving foreign parties, but rather a civil war ignited by ideological differences between the North and the South, being slavery on the biggest issues. All the cruelty involved in slavery, such as death, torture, exclusion, and sexual abuse, mutated the Southern identity into one of violence. One way of understanding this violent era is through slave narratives, which describe, most often in first person, the experiences of their time as slaves, their work on plantations, their escape attempts, and their daily struggles, such as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written by Douglass himself and published in 1845, or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* published in 1861. Furthermore, the connection between religion and slavery was very wide and can be seen from different points. The first way to study this connection is to see the cruel participation of religion linked directly and individually to the masters. For example,

² This idea was already expressed in the 19th century by Frederick Douglass in his famous speech "What to the slave is the 4th of July?"

Douglass in his narrative acknowledges that being a slave to a religious master was one of the worst things that could happen to a slave. In his words:

I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists (Douglass, 2009: 82).

Moreover, this influence did not exist only individually in specific cases of some slavers, but it also became something collective where religion played a very important role in accepting this cruel situation. To understand this relationship I refer to Douglass again and what he labelled as the slaveholding religion. Pahl uses this term to refer to the existence of a cultural religion (as explained above) already innate in the South, that went from being something solely religious to having an influence on “secular affairs” allowing slaves to be used as instruments for the progress of culture (Pahl, 2010: 64), on what they called a peculiar institution. Once again, we see how the connection explained by Girard is clear in the case of America: violence and religion are undeniably connected. In this way, those involved in this violent business managed to continue under an “innocence” that protected them from any guilt and that would then be the basis for an even larger delusion in the South known as “The Lost Cause”, which I will discuss later.

When tensions began between the northern and southern parts of the United States, the coming conflict seemed inevitable, since, as Gary M. Ciuba notes, Southerners had already developed a “siege mentality” based on the ideological differences that existed, and they were only waiting for these tensions to reach their limit (Ciuba, 2011: 16). This cultural strain created an even more hostile environment than the one already existing in the South, where the ideology of hierarchy of power was accompanied by an accepted use of violence. In this time and place, as in many others, a person of color, woman, or plantation owner knew their place in society. This idea is explored by Ciuba

again, who states that “the rites of the Old South tried to express violence through an array of ordered forms” (Ciuba, 2011: 17). The Civil War brought intense questioning about these Southern patterns, leading to a war that would not only challenge Southern beliefs, but also destroy their economy, and their physical surroundings.

Following the Civil War came the difficult task of Southern reconstruction, both physically as well as morally. Thanks to the North, the South gradually managed to industrialize, and their beliefs and identity were rebuilt due to the already-present ideology of violence, which instead of disappearing became stronger. This was mainly due to the appearance of what now is called “The Lost Cause” ideology. After the war, a unanimous social nostalgia emerged for the conditions that existed before the altercation, thus creating a new identity born from the recent loss, idealizing the Southern lifestyle and its violence, as well as resisting the reconstruction proposed by the North (Schivelbush, 2000: 53). This ideology found an ally in the religious institutions of the South. Religion was used to inculcate the belief that the loss of the war was not because of Confederate ideals or military losses, but was a plan designed by God, who would later know how to handle those of the North, or as they called them “Yankees”. Confederate generals were seen as martyrs, and the Southern army was compared to the Crusades. For instance, the death of Robert E. Lee, former commander of the Confederate States Army, was used as a reason to elevate him to cult status, portraying Lee as a: “blameless Christian soldier, a paragon of manly virtue and duty” (Blight, 2001: 267).

This led to a collective silence about the atrocities committed before the Civil War, an idealization of their pre-war past and an acceptance of the victim role, giving free reign to the violence and exclusion that continued to exist in everyday Southern life. As Ciuba acknowledges, appropriating the duality of the godhead, the religion of the Lost Cause portrayed the region as sacred in its violence (Ciuba, 2007: 43). Sadly, the violence

in the south does not end there, the reconstruction process brought with it a great wave of violence. Groups like the KKK were created which have resorted to violence and intimidating acts such as the burning of crosses, to impose their criteria and oppress their victims.

The history of the South is a narrative of blood, violence, and suffering; it is difficult to imagine how a writer in this area could omit the inheritance of historical violence that has been taking place since the birth of the country. All this has contributed to the identity of the South being intertwined with a thread of violence almost impossible to break. I agree with Girard's assessment that novels are able to convey a greater truth. He mentions Faulkner whose stories encompass much of the violence of southern culture. A clear example of this is his novel *Sanctuary* (1931) where both physical and psychological violence are the central theme and the thread that drives the whole story making it not very appealing for many readers. Likewise, in *As I lay Dying* (1930) he writes "That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image"(Faulkner, 1930: 13). Yet, the idea expressed by Girard can be extended to other authors such as Flannery O'Connor, who was inspired by her predecessor Faulkner and who is also a daughter of this violent country, one that has paved the way for violence in terms of religion. I would like to end this chapter with another quote from Rene Girard, whose ideology has been portrayed in these pages: "Violence is the divine force that everyone tries to use for his own purposes and that ends by using everyone for its own" (Girard, 1972: 144).

2. The Violent Dragon in Flannery O'Connor

St Cyril of Jerusalem, in instructing catechumens, wrote: "The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon." No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell.

-Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners Occasional Prose*

"I write the way I do because I am Catholic. This is the fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement" (HB, 1979: 90). These are the words with which Flannery O'Connor often tried support herself when being judged for her *religious* and violent content. In the same year of the publication of her novel *Wise Blood*, 1952, she received harsh criticism such as that of Isaac Rosenfeld in the magazine *New Republic*, who said that O'Connor "dwelled on degeneracy in an insane world, peopled by monsters and submen".(Rosenfeld, 1952, cited in Castillo, 2004: 490). O'Connor's repeatedly admitted that her stories respond to her duty to show "Christian realism", which is why as a Catholic writer she must show the reality from her faith no matter how hard it is. She confessed this to herself, saying "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it" (HB, 1979: 100). She believed she had a mission to report the progress of "many rough beasts"(HB, 1979: 90), and through doing so, show the truth that was being lived at the time, where she believed that people had lost their connection with God, and violence was a way to bring them back. She repeatedly stated that her audiences were exactly these kinds of people who are lost from God: "My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (HB, 1979: 92).

This existing understanding of O'Connor has been studied by many critics who try to comprehend the use of violence by this writer (David Havird, 1993, Gary Ciuba,

2009, Patricia Yeats, 1996 and Claire Katz, 1974). For this reason, in these pages I will analyze how some of these critics have interpreted this element of violence and religion in O'Connor's narratives, while explaining my own position for this study.

In his study *The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion* in 1993 David Havird explains the connection of violence and religion from a patriarchal point of view, arguing that all violence is centered on what the author calls "saving rapes" (Havird, 1993: 1). He asserts that all the Christian symbols found in these stories are sexist, where the author searches to "knock these proud female characters down a notch" through assaults, such as Mrs. May (*Greenleaf*), Mrs. Turpin (*Revelation*) or Joy / Hulga Hopewell (*Good Country People*). Havird explains that in O'Connor's works, there is no divine force between God and humanity, but a divine force highlighting the fact that God is a man and these characters are women. Thus, by means of violence perpetrated by men, the God of O'Connor seeks to eliminate the strong character of these women and turn them into submissive characters.

For Havird, the violence used in O'Connor is an instrument used by religion that serves as a reminder of the role that women must play as "angels of the house" (Havird, 1993: 11). To reach this conclusion Havird alludes to the concept of the original sin remembering that it was Eva who was "the devil's getaway" (Havird, 1993: 19) thus destroying man and humanity. Consequently, since the beginning of Christianity, according to Havird, religious myths and symbols have sought to impose this idea of sin and punishment on women and that is what is seen in O'Connor's narrative.

Another interesting approach is given by Gary M. Ciuba (2009) in his book *Desire, Violence and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*, who argues that the violent content, not only in O'Connor but in other authors of the same literary genre, responds to

the sacred relationship of the scapegoats and the mimicry theory of Rene Girard. To better understand this idea, I will briefly review the relationship between these two Girardian concepts. Rene Girard's theory of imitation emphasizes the great mimetic capacity of human beings; that is, we are the most suitable species for imitation. Based on this principle, as a species we also imitate the wishes of other people creating a "mimetic relationship between the self and the other" (Ciuba, 2009: 6), and depending on how this happens, it can generate conflicts, violence, and rivalries when the expectations are not met. This not only generates a discomfort among the implicated subjects but can lengthen a collective discomfort where one of the solutions is what Girard calls the scapegoat process. This process, thanks to the cultural and social power of religion, allows societies to use victims as a sacrifice to absolve the guilt or sin of the rest of the members. Ciuba argues that O'Connor's narrative is the result of these Girardian processes, explaining that "desire may lead to violence, violence may climax in scapegoating, and scapegoating may generate the culture that disguises and defies its origins in desire" (Ciuba, 2009: 5).

Based on this idea Ciuba states that "[O'Connor's]violent characters cannot bear away", as suggested by the text of the analyzed novel *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960), and that the violence of the novel is nothing more than frustration between the characters and their reactions based on mimicry theory. The characters of this narrative view one another as obstacles trying to fulfill the same desires bringing "their own violence upon themselves" (Ciuba, 2009: 164). It is only when their mimicry desires reach their peak, that Tarwater (the protagonist) becomes a scapegoat, a "God's spokesperson" (Ciuba, 2009: 163) making him the target of "collective violence" (Ciuba, 2009: 163) to clean up the rest of the characters.

The role of religion for both Ciuba and Hivard play an important part in the use of collective violence and how it is seen in O'Connor's narratives. However, the studies of authors like Patricia Yeager on *Hunger* (1996) or Claire Katz in *Flannery O'Connor: The Opposite of Sex* (1974) contend the opposite. In Yeager's case, she admits to having been "[a]sleep when reading O'Connor's stories" (Yeager, 1996: 187), but now she has "woken up" and currently refuses to see "O'Connor's Catholicism as the pivotal focus for her grotesques and substitute, instead, a new set of connections between O'Connor's psyche and her southernness" (Yeager, 1996: 187). Like Yeager, Katz tries to prove in her analysis a more personal approach of the use of violence that does not necessarily show a clear connection to O'Connor's Catholic faith. In her words: "O'Connor unleashes a whirlwind of destructive forces more profound than her Christian theme would seem to justify", (Katz, 1977: 55). For Katz, O'Connor's use of violence is personal and allows her to "bind her to her characters in an unusually ambivalent relationship". (Katz, 1977: 57). Furthermore, she claims that O'Connor's superego seeks the humiliation of characters, as a father seeks to punish his rebellious children. In her words: "O'Connor dramatizes a psychic determinism more profound even than Freud's and constructs a literary form that allows no escape from the infantile determinations of personality" (Katz, 1977: 63). Throughout her study, Katz seeks to show how O'Connor becomes the puppeteer who abuses her characters throughout her stories. Finally, following a psychoanalytic line, Katz ends up stating that O'Connor's work is nothing more than a reflection of her own unhappy life and the lack of autonomy she suffered:

what becomes startlingly clear is that she addresses rage and contempt to characters who at least partially represent herself. She was a woman, an intellectual, a writer with meticulous concern for words, a child forced by illness to depend on her mother. Yet her fiction turns her world upside down, and these aspects of herself become the objects of her hatred (Katz, 1977: 66).

Although authors like Ciuba or Havird have attempted to find a different perspective on O'Connor's work, they have not removed the essential element of her work, that is, her Catholic faith. I argue this is because her faith is the core of her work. In her stories she tries to show a reality far removed from her Christian vision with the purpose of changing the characters towards a more spiritual path and turning them as Ciuba said in "God's spokesperson". O'Connor once admitted: "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (MM, 1970: 112). In other words, she discovered that violence is the element needed for her spiritually deficient characters to be able to find their path again.

For this analysis I have relied on Martha Nussbaum and her book *Anger and Forgiveness* published in 2016 and Marilynne Robinson and her essays on modern thought written in 1998 entitled *The Death of Adam*. Nussbaum has written on the development of anger and how it affects people, as well as the topic of forgiveness. One of her three main reports is "Anger is necessary for the protection of dignity and self-respect" (Nussbaum, 2016: 6). My main argument is based on this premise, I believe that this idea, as many other presented by Nussbaum, can be extended to the use of violence in O'Connor, since just as anger helps to protect dignity, violence in these stories helps to protect the spirit of the characters who have a lack of spirituality at the time of the stories. The violence that exists in these narratives has a purpose, it is not arbitrary and no matter how hard they may seem to the reader, there is an explanation which seeks the spiritual improvement of their characters. In the previous chapter, it was analyzed how violence and religion are united, and this link and acceptance over time has permitted its entry in religious faith as the one of Flannery O'Connor.

For this reason, unlike Yeager and Katz, I believe that O'Connor's work responds not to a personal situation of unhappiness or dissatisfaction, but to a social and cultural heritage where the mythical, the violent, and the religious have always co-existed together to form our reality. For this, I rely on Robinson, who asserts that "cultures have absorbed those irreducible truths about the harshness of life and the certainty of death into mythic or religious contexts" (Robinson, 1998 :77). This connection is present in most religions; Catholicism is one of the greatest examples, where culturally we have accepted this idea of life being shaped by the sacred, and as a result are intertwined with violence as well. Nussbaum speaks on this premise and points out that, in Judeo-Christian tradition, it is necessary to portray an angry God, so we as believers can fear him; if we don't, "that would do away with all religion" (Nussbaum, 2010: 41).

The stories of O'Connor are the result of her culturally-loaded Catholic faith, full of these moments of grace which seek to bring her spiritually distant characters closer to God, but "at considerable cost" (MM, 1970: 112). This "cost" of redemption in her stories, often represented by death, abuse, or another form of violence, is nothing more than an ancient acceptance that our earthly purpose responds to something divine, responds to Nussbaum's idea of an angry God, who will be violent if we need him to be. Robinson recognizes this when she says: "Our Civilization believed for a long time in God and the soul and sin and salvation, assuming, whatever else, that meaning had a larger frame and context than this life in this world" (Robinson, 1998: 78).

Just as Nussbaum acknowledges that "anger might be a valuable yet dangerous tool in moral life, prone to excess and error but still a source of irreplaceable contributions" (Nussbaum, 2010: 15), I argue that O'Connor uses violence such as the drowning of Harry, the abandonment of Lucynell, or the tractor accident of Mr. Guizac despite knowing that it is an excessive method, because the advantages are more significant: the

protection of the character's spiritual domain. In one of her essays called "The Fiction Writer & His Country" (1957), O'Connor writes the epithet with which I have started this chapter. Redemption is not easy, according to the Catholic faith, for we must be on a spiritual plane that allows us to reach the "Father of Souls"; however, O'Connor knows that her characters are far from spiritual; this is why before reaching God they must "pass by the dragon ... or into his jaws", regardless of the form that this dragon takes or how difficult the task may be, as the reward is greater. In each of the stories that I am about to analyze, I believe that there is a violent dragon that seeks to bring out the worst in the characters, so that later their spirits may be saved and they can walk the path to redemption.

3. The Method of Violence

3.1 Death in Christ

The creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ.

-Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*

For a Catholic writer like O'Connor, death is the closest way to the encounter with God. This we already saw in Robinson, who spoke of how the idea of death is covered by mythical and religious contexts, where we as believers have been used to accepting that our death serves to a greater purpose, a sacred one. For this reason, the characters that are not within the reach of this sacred encounter have to go through the dragon before reaching their final destination; these are the characters whose death is not in Christ. In other words, they have to redeem themselves in order to be accepted by God. It is not surprising then that in this collection of ten stories, we find ten different deaths. Among these deaths we have the grandmother of "A Good Man is Hard to Find", and little Harry / Bevel in "The River".

Throughout the entire collection, O'Connor foreshadows the separation that exists between the characters and their God in one way or another, so that gradually the reader understands the reason for the violent acts. In the case of the family in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", the story that gives the collection its name, one can see a web of violence spun among them from the beginning of the story that leaves much to think about. There is Bailey treating the grandmother (his mother) badly, the children fighting among themselves, and the mother of the children ignored and minimized to such an extent that we don't even know her name. The grandmother, who becomes the essential character in this story, can be characterized as a false Christian, a person who, despite preaching her Christianity, acts based on appearances and selfish purposes. As the journey unfolds, we

see what kind of person the grandmother is, using derogatory words like “pickaninny”, “hillbilly”, or “negro child” when referring to other people (O’Connor, 1971: 119). She is a selfish woman, concerned primarily with herself. She secretly carries her cat (which plays an important role in the accident), despite the fact that she was asked not to, and when dressing up for the trip she thinks that if she were to die people could recognize that “she was a lady” (O’Connor, 1971: 118); these examples are proof of the importance of appearances for this grandmother. From the beginning, we see how she tries to manipulate her son to change the route of their trip, saying things like “I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal [referring to the escaped convict from the Federal Pen] like that alose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did” (O’Connor, 1971: 117). This remark is important not only because we see how the grandmother seeks to get away with it and go elsewhere without caring about the interest of her family, but also because it is the clearest clue to the misfortune that is to come, since it is the grandmother who cannot respond to her consciousness when they encounter the Misfit later on.

The meeting of the Misfit and the grandmother is also surrounded by great violence, since when the grandmother realizes that the man who comes to help them because of their accident is not a good man, but rather the Misfit about whom she read in the news that morning, their luck changes. After that, it is Bailey who reproaches the grandmother for recognizing the criminal and being guilty of what was going to happen, in such a violent way that even the children are surprised, and the narrator does not find words to explain such rudeness. It is at this moment that the grandmother's dragon - the Misfit – appears, and says, “Lady ... do not be angry. Sometimes a man says things he don’t mean. I do not reckon he meant to talk to you thataway” (O’Connor, 1971: 127).

From this point onwards, the grandmother experiences the death of each of her relatives by the hands of the Misfit and his colleagues, starting with her son, who also has

a small moment of redemption thanks to this violent situation. At the time of going to what he already knows is his death, he says to his mother “I’ll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!” (O’Connor, 1971: 128). However, the climax of the story does not occur between Bailey and the grandmother, but between the grandmother and the Misfit, whom she asks, after being the last member of her family alive, to seek God, insisting on several occasions that he should pray so that he would not kill her. After this religiosity that she expresses rings false, she offers him money, to which the Misfit, by a way of mockery for her attempts, says “Lady...there was never a body that give the undertaker a tip” (O’Connor, 1971: 132). Doreen Fowler when referring to O’Connor’s characters explained how they undergone a transformation process where they “shatter[ing] the ego” (Fowler, 129: 2011). It is exactly this point of maximum violence where the grandmother knows there is nothing she can do to avoid being killed, that she “shatters her ego” and goes from falsely praying or offering money for her life, to really seeing and accepting her redemption. Consequently, she stops seeing the Misfit as someone less important than her, and she manages to see a real person behind the criminal: “She saw the man's face and she murmured, why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder” (O’Connor, 1971: 132). So once the grandmother is redeemed, she is ready to reach the “father of souls”; she has died in Christ because she has left behind her falsehood. At this point, the Misfit has nothing left to do but to finish his task, so when feeling the touch of the grandmother he “shot her three times through the chest” (O’Connor, 1971: 132). This new facet of the grandmother is not only recognized by the reader but also by the Misfit, who ends the story by saying one of the most significant phrases not only in this story but in the entire collection: “She would have been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (O’Connor, 1971: 133).

In this sentence one can see O'Connor's vision, as she seeks to lead her characters to a spiritual plane close to God. As Karen Jensen points out in her analysis of O'Connor's short story "Revelation": "violence not only represents destruction, but also construction, production, revelation" (Jensen, 2012: 125). In the case of the Grandmother is productive, now the grandmother has been protected; her spirit is ready to cross the path of the dragon. When speaking about this story, O'Connor said, "you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the [6] dead bodies" (MM, 1970: 113). If we follow O'Connor's advice and see the "action of grace" in the grandmother's soul, we must acknowledge the role of violence in how it has been achieved. I previously mentioned that O'Connor recognized that the cost of redemption is high, and in this case the cost is death itself. The Misfit managed to get the Grandmother to reach a true plane of conscience that she had not achieved before. Nussbaum speaks of this when she admits that anger manages to awaken in people deep conceptions of what is really important in life, and goes further when she admits that fear of death significantly influences the way we behave (Nussbaum, 2016: 16). If what Nussbaum says is a reflection of what happens to the grandmother, that is, this violence makes her see what really matters and changes her behavior, the Misfit is the first to realize it, and therefore admit that if this had happened repeatedly the grandmother would have been a great woman.

The grandmother's case is rooted in her own fault; that is, her own selfishness and falsehoods lead to a necessary and irrevocable violent redemption. However, in stories like "The River", death appears in a more indirect way where there is more than one person involved in the death and redemption process. The Harry / Bevel case in "The River" is, in my opinion, the most tragic and at the same time closest to this connection that exists between violence, religion, and salvation.

From the very beginning of the story, O'Connor illustrates how distant Harry's life is from God. When Mrs. Connin reproaches the father that the child is not "fixed right", the father responds "well, then for Christ's sake fix him" (O'Connor, 1971: 157). This phrase not only shows that the boy was not ready to go out with Mrs. Connin, but also shows how O'Connor foreshadows how Harry needs to be fixed in the name of Christ. The question would be: what should Harry fix? Or better yet: What does Harry need to be fixed in his life since he is only a child? The answer is found in the life that his parents lead. One must take into consideration that Harry's parents have vices and an excessive lifestyle, where most of Harry's memories are based on parties, friends of his parents, excesses, a lack of religious life, and a total neglect by his parents who have a habit of not feeding or caring for him when frequently hangover after parties; instead, "they would be out cold until one o'clock and then they would all have to go to a restaurant for lunch" (O'Connor, 1971: 171).

It is precisely from this kind of life that Harry needs to be saved, or using his own words, needs to be "healed" (O'Connor, 1971: 159). His salvation, or his path to salvation, begins the moment he decides to abandon the name given by his parents and take the name of the preacher, thus showing his first step towards God. Upon reaching the shore, Harry learns that this river is not a common one but it is the river that leads to God, a river full of suffering one that "was made to carry the sin" (O'Connor, 1971: 165), and that this "river of pain and blood" (O'Connor, 1971: 165) was capable of taking its travelers to the most important destination: The "Kingdom of Christ" (O'Connor, 1971: 165). All of this new knowledge is Harry's "revelation" that we saw previously in Jensen's idea about how violence is not only a force of destruction, but also a means by which important revelations can appear (Jensen, 2012: 125). This new understanding is consolidated with one of the most important sacraments of Catholicism, the moment of Harry's baptism.

When asked if he wants to be baptized so as to go through “the river of suffering”, Harry rightly said yes, thinking in his innocent mind that by being and staying in the river, he will no longer have to return to his parents’ apartment. To Harry's bad luck, his life does not change, and he must return to the life of his parents where the parties continue and where the only one who has changed is him. The loneliness and helplessness that Harry feels when he finds himself alone in spite of being with his parents lead him to an important decision, to return to the river so that he could get to God, since for the first time he felt that he counted. His rejection of his previous life, his life without God, is so strong that he does not want to carry anything with him because “there was nothing from there I [Harry] wanted to keep” (O’Connor, 1971: 172).

Harry's moment of grace comes right there, when he decides to leave, accepting that God’s way is violent and that the only thing he can do to get to it, is to go through this river of pain. Harry's naivety because of his age, spares him from being considered a true suicide, since more than being a suicide by drowning, it is an attempt to cleanse his sins, as the preacher said, to get to God. At the end of the narrative, we see how Harry let himself go because he understands that his salvation is on the way: “For an instant he was overcome with surprise: then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him” (O’Connor, 1971: 174). In this story there are two things that I would like to highlight: the first is how O’Connor shows the type of modern life that is led today, distanced from God and his spirituality. Once she commented that “the devil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured” (MM, 1970: 209), and I think that this story reflects this idea in the most precise way, since normally it is the parents who should be the instigators of spirituality, while here we see how they are the guilty sinners; this is the mystery that Harry has to endure and that later leads him to seek God in any way. This story reflects the aforementioned

idea about the Christian reality and how this forces O'Connor to violently show the return to Christian life.

The other point I would like to mention is based on the words of Robert Detweiler who, when talking about O'Connor's works, mentions that in them a "paradigm of human consciousness" is created (Detweiler, 1966: 236). This conscientization to which both Harry and the Grandmother reach has a spiritual nature and comes only through their violent death. It is only after this awareness that their spirit is protected and saved, it is only then that they are given the greatest contribution of all, their redemption. To better understand this idea, I rely on John Sykes's words: "Death in O'Connor is not an escape from nature, but rather a gateway into a deeper level of being, one that transcends the body" (Sykes, 2007: 40). Both the Grandmother and Harry have reached this new plane of "being" thanks not only to their deaths but to the violence that surrounded them, in other words "by violence [they] are saved" (Sykes, 2007: 42).

3.2 Grace in Remorse

In us the good is something under construction

-Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*

The way that O'Connor protects her characters is not only through their deaths, as in the previous cases that we have just analyzed. O'Connor, I argue, also sought to protect them by making them see their evil deeds, repent, and thus be able to construct a better path towards their redemption. However, the way in which she made them see is always covered by a violent mantle that responds to Nussbaum's notion that God will be violent if we need him to be. We can see this in stories like "The Life You Save May Be Your Own", "The Artificial Nigger" and "The Displaced People".

Around the 1950s, especially in the southern United States, roadside advertisements were created to educate people to drive wisely to potentially save a life, perhaps even their own³. From this idea comes the title of the story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own". This is the biggest omen, not only for this story, but for all of them in this section, where the characters can save their own lives if they are careful. In the case of this particular story, O'Connor introduces us to Mr. Shiftlet, who in her words is "of the Devil, because nothing of him resists the Devil" (MM, 1970: 367). There are several aspects that can be analyzed to understand why O'Connor considers him from "the devil"; the first is the way he talks when mother Lucynell asks him about himself, to which he responds:

Lady ... nowadays, people'll do anything anyways. I can tell you my name is Tom Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how do you know I ain't lying? How do you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry Georgia? (O'Connor, 1971: 147).

³ See repository.duke.edu/dc/outdooradvertising/BBB2576 and <https://thelifeyousave.blog/about/>

Shiftlet is not exactly a person that one should trust; he says it himself, and this should be a warning for whoever runs into him. However, for mom Lucynell this is nothing more than an opportunity to get her innocent 30-year-old mute daughter named Lucynell to get married. Both Shiftlet and mother Lucynell recognize each other's hypocrisy and falsehood and seek to take advantage of what they can offer to one another. Although at the beginning we see how mother Lucynell says that she would never let her daughter go since she is perfect, praising all her good characteristics that would make her an exemplary wife, Shiftlet manages to see through those words and "already knew what was on her mind" (O'Connor, 1971: 151). Being of the devil as O'Connor claimed, Shiftlet tries to do everything possible to escape this situation with a great advantage. Thus, not being sure that getting married is the best decision, the mother Lucynell says a few words that will create a before and after in the life of the three characters: "Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man" (O'Connor, 1971: 152). These violent words prompted Shiftlet to decide to marry, on the condition that his new mother-in-law pays for a honeymoon for the new bride and groom without her at a hotel outside the city for a weekend, and that they would use the now-fixed family car. After reaching the agreement they go straight to marry, and despite the fact that Lucynell wears a white dress with ornamental flowers on her head, Mr. Shiftlet "didn't even look at her" (O'Connor, 1971: 153). Mr. Shiftlet is now alone with Lucynell, and with the car he so longed for, and at this moment he shows himself as he truly is; his indifference towards his new wife leads him to leave her abandoned in a restaurant. This is an interesting moment, since the restaurant waiter seeing Lucynell asleep says "She looks like an angel of Gawd", which causes Shiftlet to respond "hitchhiker ... I can't wait. I go to make Tuscaloosa" (O'Connor, 1971: 155). Having O'Connor's idea that Shiftlet is of the devil, it is easy to understand how he would leave

behind an angel of God whom he does not want for company. His discomfort at what he has done begins just as he leaves Lucynell, feeling the need to pick up a child near the sidewalk who does not even ask to be taken, but who becomes the dragon that Shiftlet needs for his remorse. It is this boy who realizes what kind of person Shiftlet is, and at one point on the trip he says “You go to the devil! My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking polecat” (O’Connor, 1971: 156); following this, he opens the door and jumps out of the car at full speed, leaving Shiftlet alone.

It is thanks to this violent child that Shiftlet begins to understand his actions and begins to feel that “the rootness of the world was about to engulf him” (O’Connor, 1971: 156). It is right there when he becomes aware of his role in the rotten world; he realizes and accepts his mistakes, bad actions, and hypocrisy from the moment he arrived at the Crater house, and how he deceived both the mother and his wife. Only once he succeeds in accepting and redeeming himself can he first see heaven and ask God for something by saying his last words “Oh Lord ... Break forth and wash the slime from this earth”. Shiftlet is the slime he is talking about, he is the one who needs to be washed by God, and it is only now that he is able to come to this conclusion. Shiftlet reaches a condition that Nussbaum labels as “helplessness”, which she explains that for those who go through it, it is difficult to acknowledge and accept that life has forced them to live this situation (Nussbaum, 2016: 29). It is only through these violent and aggressive acts that he can accept this condition, and therefore O’Connor protects him from himself and leads him to what she considers to be the right path.

Another character that has a similar transformation is the protagonist Mr. Head with his grandson in the story “The Artificial Nigger”. However, this story takes place on a family plane, making it a little more difficult as a reader to accept the rudeness of it. Mr. Head is a grandfather who lives outside the city with his 10-year-old orphan grandson

named Nelson. Over the years, Mr. Head becomes aware that he is losing the power he has over his grandson as he grows older. This recognition creates in the grandfather a strange feeling of inferiority. that forces him to prove to his grandson that he is superior and that Nelson “ain’t as smart as you [Nelson] think you are” (O’Connor, 1971: 251). Grandfather’s plan was simple: take his grandson to the city and prove to him that there is nothing good about it, nor is it easy to live there, so that his grandson would agree with him, stop praising the city, and thus return calmly to his house in the countryside. The plan itself already leaves a lot to be desired, what kind of grandfather would seek to fool his little grandson? A little of the answer to this question can be found when Nussbaum admits that anger is a complex feeling, which often encompasses contradictory emotions like pain and pleasure (Nussbaum, 2016: 17). This is the case of the grandfather who, thanks to the anger he feels for the superiority that Nelson shows, throughout the narrative has these moments of dichotomy between pain and pleasure.

After the two are on the train arriving in the city, we see the first instance that Mr. Head seeks to demonstrate his superiority to Nelson; he does this by asking him to identify the man who previously boarded, to which Nelson responds that he is just a man. The grandfather, seeing that Nelson does not know what type of man he is, said “that was a nigger”, and in a mocking and sarcastic way he says to another man on the train “That’s his first nigger” (O’Connor, 1971: 255), emphasizing to Nelson how ignorant he is compared to him. Upon arrival in the city, the grandfather takes advantage of Nelson’s feeling of unease at having been overcome by his grandfather, and begins to give him random knowledge about anything, in order to show he knows enough about the city to judge it not worth living in. However, Mr. Head is not a great connoisseur of the city as he shows himself since he gets lost in the city on three different occasions, and when

confronted by Nelson, he denies that they are lost because he does not want to accept that his grandson was right.

In the middle of their visit to the city, Nelson decides to sleep leaning against the wall of a building reproaching that they are lost and that he does not want to continue walking. This angered Mr. Head, who decided to play a violent and cruel joke on him justifying it “on the grounds that it is sometimes necessary to teach a child a lesson he won’t forget, particularly when the child is always reasserting his position with some new imprudence” (O’Connor, 1971: 264). So, the grandfather waits until Nelson is about to wake up, and then hides so that he will not be there when the boy gets up. Of course this scared the boy who searches the streets for his grandfather without finding him, and when he is at the height of despair, he collides with an older woman, spilling all her groceries and injuring her ankle. Many people begin to surround Nelson waiting for someone to come and take responsibility. However, Mr. Head shows himself at that moment to be “of the devil”, as O’Connor categorized Mr. Shiftlet, since the moment Nelson sees him and “caught him around the hips and clung panting him” (O’Connor, 1971: 265), the grandfather responds to the policeman who is already there “this is not my boy, I never seen him before” (O’Connor, 1971: 265). So the grandfather continues walking, hoping that somehow Nelson can save himself from the situation he is in, and so it was; people went from being upset by the situation to having pity for the child who is obviously denied by his grandfather and the situation diffuses without further action.

Grandfather’s action towards Nelson causes the same feeling of unease that Shiftlet feels when he leaves Lucynell in the restaurant, but the way of trying to reward him for this was different. In the case of the grandfather, his feeling of pleasure has already ended and now that of pain came; pain when he sees the boy walking behind him. Even though Nelson is following him, the Grandfather knows he does not want to be near

him. Mr. Head begins to recognize the depth of his denial and acknowledge that he is lost, when he sees a passerby and cries out “Oh Gawd I’m lost! Oh help me Gawd I’m lost” (O’Connor, 1971: 267). Although this desperate call is for his physical loss in the city, it is also a cry for help towards his spiritual loss, his own wickedness, his own violence towards his grandson. It is only now that he realizes how wrong he was and how he reflects “what a man would be like without salvation” (O’Connor, 1971: 268). Thanks to the stranger’s directions, they manage to get to the station but prior to that they see a statue of an African American man in a house. This leaves both of them surprised, especially the grandfather, that he saw in the “artificial nigger” (O’Connor, 1971: 268) the suffering of black people and the oppression that they must endure in the eyes of a society that, being unable to dominate them, decides to have them as statues in their homes. He remarks, “they ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one” (O’Connor, 1971: 269). This realization can only happened now that he has accepted that he was lost and that he needs God’s help; it is only now that Mr. Head and his spirit can be saved and protected, and for the first time he “felt the action of mercy touch him ... He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man” (O’Connor, 1971:269). The type of violence used by the grandfather, and then the “reassurance” that comes from the racist statue (Castillo, 2004: 499), manage to create in the grandfather this feeling of repentance for his actions, words, and ideas; they make him realize that something is “amiss”. This same concept is expressed by Nussbaum, who explains how anger can have the consequence of provoking a feeling of consciousness that did not exist before and actually seeing through their own fragility (Nussbaum, 2016: 37).

Another character who walks a turbulent path towards redemption is Mrs. McIntyre, protagonist of the short story “A Displaced Person”, the longest in this collection. The whole story unfolds on Mrs. McIntyre’s farm, and her main interest is the

well-being of the farm and the income she can receive from it, since it is her only means of subsistence. When the Guizac family comes to the farm to work, this disturbs all the other workers, both the African Americans and Mrs. Shortley, who has worked there for years along with her husband. This family arrives thanks to the priest, who convinces Mrs. McIntyre to take them in exchange for the work they will do on the farm. It should be noted that throughout the narrative it is not possible to really see the support that McIntyre wants to give to the Displaced Person, and the fact that she welcomed them could come more from a desire to please the local priest than a sincere desire to help.

At the beginning of the Guizac family's stay, the father works honestly and diligently, and begins questioning the work of others, especially Mrs. Shortley, who feels so threatened by the foreigners that she decides to leave the farm. Later on, the Guizacs' rivalry with Mrs. McIntyre's African American workers make her question if she should continue hosting them, because she believes that her African American workers are essential for farm work: "I can't have my niggers run off" (O'Connor, 1971: 225). Beyond this, Mrs. McIntyre admits that she has no responsibility whatsoever to them and admits to the priest: "I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world" (O'Connor, 1971: 226), stressing that in reality they should not even have gotten to them to which the priest replies: "He came to redeem us" (O'Connor, 1971: 226). These words of the priest are one more way O'Connor foreshadows what is to come: Mr. Guizac will serve to redeem Mrs. McIntyre.

However, at the time these words are spoken, they have no meaning for Mrs. McIntyre, who has no other choice but to violently make the priest understand that she will terminate Mr. Guizac, and his entire family must leave. Mrs. McIntyre does not come to this realization herself; both her African American workers and Mr. Shortley, who returned to work after the unexpected death of his wife, sowed discord influencing Mrs.

McIntyre's decision. The decision to dismiss the Guizac family is the same as if Mrs. McIntyre abandoned Christ, the greatest redeemer of all, but this does not influence Mrs. McIntyre who admits "as far as I'm concerned Christ was just another DP [displaced person]" (O'Connor, 1971: 229). Recalling again O'Connor's idea that the devil is a mystery that one must endure, I think that the McIntyre's workers here are a representation of evil, not only influencing her thoughts but also complicit in the violent accident that is about to happen on the farm.

When at last Mrs. McIntyre decides to speak and dismiss the Guizac family and she no longer doubts that this is the right decision, the moment comes when there is no other alternative than a violent awakening that makes this woman rethink her actions. Mr. Guizac's death, being crushed by a driverless tractor, was a completely preventable accident; however, no one took action to avoid it, since, in one way or another, everyone preferred that Mr. Guizac was no longer there:

She remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever (O'Connor, 1971: 234).

This violent and complicit act provokes great guilt and repentance in Mrs. McIntyre for her actions, or rather, for her inaction. She tries to reimagine the incident, believing that she did yell at the family, then finally accepting that she did not. Thus, Mr. Guizac, like Jesus, becomes the redeemer of the story who sacrifices himself to redeem Mrs. McIntyre. Mr. Guizac clearly becomes one of Rene Girard's scapegoats, as discussed in the first chapter. Thanks to Mr. Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre manages to redeem herself and perceive the individual behind what she called the "displaced person"; like

the grandmother of “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, she finally sees the Guizac family as her equals.

Unlike other stories, in this one O’Connor gives us a little more information about what happens after the violent acts that her characters experience. In Mrs. McIntyre's case, the whole situation causes a nervous breakdown that damages her health. She loses her farm and her workers abandon her, which is a positive thing considering that they were part of the mystery of evil. Now she is alone, and although her health has deteriorated, her spirit has already been saved through the violent death of Mr. Guizac; she repents her actions and now she "retired to live on what she had" (O’Connor, 1971:235). In the words of Detweiler “only by allowing for the possibility of her livelihood being destroyed could she have salvaged it” (Detweiler, 1966: 244). She no longer seeks material progress; she is ready to pass the dragon whenever she has to.

These three characters pass through a chaotic path, where their actions make them worthy of violent consequences. Jensen states that “violence can trigger a change” (Jensen, 2012: 124). This is exactly what happens with these characters only something so violent attains their repentance and with it a change in their behavior. It is violence that allows Shiftlet to acknowledge his involvement in the world’s rottenness, that changes the Grandfather’s perception of the world and his grandson, and that helps Mrs. McIntyre to leave her materialistic perception and sees other people as her equals for the first time. In the words of John Sykes “For O’Connor, the violence of sin requires divine counterviolence” (Sykes, 2007: 41).

3.3 A Violent Awakening

Reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world

-Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*

The idea of “Christian reality” that has already been mentioned above is of utmost importance for writers like O'Connor, who seeks to make her characters experience as close as possible a journey full of faith. Many of O'Connor characters, like the ones we will see in this section, are far from this path and although they have not committed violent acts like those discussed above, their rudeness and stubbornness make them the perfect candidates to participate in this idea of returning to reality by means of a violent event. These characters appear in the stories “Good Country People” and “A Circle in the Fire”.

In the first story, Joy / Hulga Hopewell appears, a 32-year-old woman with a PhD, who still lives with her mother since she has an artificial leg due to a hunting accident. Hulga's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, is a hard-working, optimistic, and fervent Christian who feels sorry for her daughter, who had “never danced a step or had any normal good times”, despite being in her thirties (O'Connor, 1971: 274). Since her accident, Joy has simmered in resentment and bitterness, especially with her mother. Her name, of course, does not reflect her feelings or personality; therefore, Joy waits until she is 21 years old to legally change it to Hulga, which according to her mother is “the ugliest name in any language” (O'Connor, 1971: 274). Hulga's physical deficiency also serves as a symbol of her spiritual deficiency; these limitations hold her back and do not allow her to advance either physically or spiritually.

Life between these two women can be viewed as a complete dichotomy, where Hulga, perhaps intentionally, is everything her mother was not. The most relevant

contradiction between mother and daughter is that Hulga considers herself to be a complete unbeliever, and not only that; she mocks her mother every time she speaks of God, and prohibits the presence of a Bible in the main room of the house. The life of these two women is threatened when a man comes to their door who claims to be a Bible salesman, whom Mrs. Hopewell welcomes thinking he is “good country people” (O’Connor, 1971: 279). This Bible seller is very similar to Mr. Shiftlet, who changes the life of a mother and daughter and whose name evokes suspicion and deceit.

For Hulga, the presence of this Bible seller is nothing more than a reminder of her superiority and education in comparison to believers, reaffirming her philosophical belief that there is no God. That is why she decides to seduce the man, and then embarrass him and change his perception towards “a deeper understanding of life” since her genius can train even an “inferior mind” (O’Connor, 1971: 284). Her plan to humiliate the Christian man and lead him away from religion is exactly the kind of thinking that O’Connor condemns, and for this reason she tries to change the mentality in order to seek the good in the person. Due to Hulga’s feeling of superiority, O’Connor finds violence the only tool to change Hulga and her way of life.

When Hulga is finally alone with the Bible seller, ready to humiliate him, the roles change and it is she who is seduced by this man, who takes advantage of her obvious innocence and inexperience to make her vulnerable and then steals her leg. It is at this moment Hulga realizes that her education and her supposed superiority mean nothing, and that this uneducated man has not only debased her, but shown her that she is not as intelligent as she thought, since he had “been believing in nothing ever since I [he] was born”(O’Connor, 1971: 291). Hulga, alone in the barn, without her wooden leg, completely humiliated and unable to leave, discovers the cost that she must pay to “return to reality” as O’Connor tells us. It is now that Hulga realizes that she is not more than this

man or her mother, and this forces her to shift towards a state of humility, and perhaps take the first step toward a deep change in her spiritual journey. The state of vulnerability in which Hulga finds herself is due to violence, which, based on Nussbaum's notions about anger, sometimes seeks to restore control of what has been lost, in the case of Hulga her spiritual distancing, thus encouraging those who are deviants to return to the fold. (Nussbaum, 2016: 21).

The last story that I would like to reference goes by the name "A Circle in the Fire"; like other O'Connor stories discussed, it takes place on the farm of a woman who lives with her lonely daughter. The mother's name, Mrs. Cope, is a clear allusion to the type of life she leads, since she has to 'cope' with her rude daughter, the farm, and her workers. Mrs. Cope bears a resemblance to the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", as she has a form of religiosity tied to Southern appearances and good manners which is not exactly one close to a spiritual level. This can be seen at times like when her daughter Sally wants to violently attack Garfield, to which she responds "ladies don't beat the daylight out of people" (O'Connor, 1971: 185). As in the other stories about mothers and daughters, the lives of these two women are complicated by the interruption of strangers. In this story, three boys come to the farm out of nowhere, with the idea of staying there since one of their fathers had worked there several years ago.

Throughout the narrative we see how Mrs. Cope lives in great fear that her farm will catch fire, thus losing everything she works for daily. Mrs. Cope's fear of fire becomes a reason for quarrel and mockery between mother and daughter; when the latter felt threatened by her mother, she said things like "It looks like a fire. You better get up and smell around and see if the woods ain't on fire" (O'Connor, 1971: 176). The arrival of these three children causes Mrs. Cope to face her greatest fear. The children as intruders, like the Bible seller or Mr. Shiftlet, seek to take advantage of the situation to

emerge victorious. When Mrs. Cope is asked if they can stay over in her barn, she naively replies, “Well, I’m afraid you can’t do that, The barn’s full of hay and I’m afraid of fire from your cigarettes” (O’Connor, 1971: 182). She herself gives them the information they need to become the dragon of her story.

Her fear of fire is so deep that she has no qualms about letting itinerant youth sleep outside in a field so that she can feel calm. There are several moments between the children and Mrs. Hope that show hypocrisy on both sides. Although Mrs. Hope offers them food, she always looks for a way to let them know that it is time for them to leave her property, showing that she doesn’t really have any real interest or concern for the well-being of three pesky kids. Due to the fact that she has to “cope” with everything on her farm, she sees herself as a martyr, Robinson explains how when we label ourselves as “sufferers” it makes us less likely to acknowledge the human suffering of the rest. (Robinson, 1998: 78), this is exactly what happens with Mrs. Cope. She has no empathy towards the kids, she doesn’t see their pain. Therefore, she needs a wake-up call because of her selfishness, hypocrisy, insincere spirituality, and perception of her life and assets as more important than the lives of the three juveniles. Her violent awakening comes in the worst way that she could imagine, through a fire in her forests and a part of her property, at the hands of children who decided to burn the forests using matches to demonstrate that that place “don’t belong to nobody” (O’Connor, 1971: 192), refuting Mrs. Cope’s belief that she is the owner of the forests and the sky near her property, deciding what can and cannot be done there. The destruction of her property is the wake-up call that Mrs. Hope needs, making her feel a sense of misery that could be from “anybody, to Negro or to European or to Powell [one of the children] himself.” (O’Connor, 1971: 193). From a distance, Mrs. Cope can see the children and sees them

as “prophets” dancing in the circle of fire than an “angel had cleared for them” (O’Connor, 1971: 193).

The attention call to Mrs. Cope causes her return to this “reality” which O’Connor speaks of, where she sees others as equals, where her misery can be both hers and anyone’s, and she sees that as she lives in misery, Powell and the other two children can also suffer. In the end, Mrs. Cope views them as prophets, implying that all the destruction that she feared so much responds to something greater than her, to something sacred as if brought by an angel. It is only now that she can realize all of this, and once again O’Connor has protected Mrs. Cope’s spirit and helped her continue the right path.

Mrs. Cope, like Hulga, does not have a true spiritual attitude towards God, while Hulga manifests it with her atheism, Mrs. Hope does it with her selfishness. Susan Castillo states that for a writer like O’Connor this type of lifestyle is like “living divorced from the meaning of life itself” (Castillo, 2014: 495). It is thanks to this estrangement or divorce, as Castillo calls it, that these characters need a violent return to the reality that O’Connor considers to be the right one.

4. Conclusion and Further Research

Flannery O'Connor's oeuvre is full of grotesque characters, places, and events that at first glance could be unpleasant or depressing for readers. Any understanding of Flannery O'Connor must recognize that she is foremost a Christian writer, and her work is a reflection of her faith and her ideological position. O'Connor's desire to show Christian reality, and how modern societies live far from it, led her to use her narratives to expose the never-ending paths to redemption, regardless of the life one leads. Although there is always a way to attain this redemption, for those who have strayed far from the righteous path, it is a violent episode that breaks down the barrier between these characters and their moment of grace.

The link that exists between the sacred and the violent demonstrates in violence an effective means to protect and save those who need redemption. Within this analysis, it has been shown that how no matter what kind of human beings we are, redemption is always possible if we are willing to pay the price of achieving it, whether we are self-centered like the grandmother of "A Good Man is Hard to Find", lawless like the bible seller in "Good Country People", or heartless like Mr. Shiflet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own". This price of redemption will always be high, like the loss of material possessions, like Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" or Mrs. Cope in "A Circle of Fire", or the price can be as high as death itself, as in the case of Harry in "The River", but the reward will always be greater.

Humanity has always found answers to questions that go beyond our understanding in religion, and there is a widespread collective belief in a God who is "mysterious and demanding" (Robinson, 1998: 80). These convictions have not been abandoned, but in Robinson's words, they have "dropped out of cultural conversation" (Robinson, 1998: 80); however, their absence from the current conversation does not

invalidate their existence or acceptance. On the contrary, I have shown that throughout O'Connor's career, she sought to emphasize these ideas and show that it is precisely in the most vulnerable moments of our lives when answers are lacking that we seek answers in faith and religion. Throughout this analysis we have seen characters who lacked faith, or demonstrated a false faith based on appearances and opinions. This mysterious and demanding God, as Robinson characterizes him, seeks to change these characters and show them the way of true spirituality, even through violence when necessary. Once readers understand this violent facet of O'Connor's faith, along with its constructive qualities, they can better appreciate how the characters in this collection need to pass through the jaws of the dragon to finally reach the father of souls.

In a specific part of this analysis called *Death in Christ*, it was seen how there is a link not only between violence and redemption, but between the latter and death. I think it would be very interesting to carry out a future research that covers specifically the connection of these elements in O'Connor's entire oeuvre, both her two collections of short stories and her two novels. When talking about her work O'Connor once said "I was born Catholic and death is the brother to my imagination. I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in it or in its foreshadowings" (O'Connor, 1962 cited in Asals, 2007: 205). This statement, accompanied by this analysis, has sparked in me a new interest in the relationship between violence and death, especially on how these two flow naturally between the lives of the characters shaping their reality.

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