Flannery O'Connor's Metaphysical Humor--
Her Debt to HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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Flannery O'Connor, says Robert Fitzgerald, wrote in the genre of tragicomedy. This mode, which involves descriptions of serious loss as well as incongruities that make us laugh, dates back to Dante.[1] But it is also a modern form. O'Connor thought of herself as indebted to Southerns like Faulkner,[2] in whose stories (e.g. "Spotted Horses") innocent people are conned in ways that are at once horrifying and funny. One critic, however, Brainard Cheney, says that within the area of tragicomedy O'Connor invented a new kind of humor that he terms "metaphysical." By this he means that she took naturalistic situations, secular in their tone of satire and humor, and through surprising, even violent means, turned them into metaphysical or genuinely Christian scenes.[3] It is my contention that this kind of technique is also present, though perhaps in its infantile stages, in Mark Twain, particularly in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. I would like to look at certain parts of this novel where this kind of humor appears and then examine a group of O'Connor's stories to show how she both reflects and develops Twain's approach.

The humor in Huck Finn, of course, is various and complex. Huck's boyish language and perspective in the opening lines are hilarious. So is his separating himself from Tom's romanticism, the "A-rabs and elephants,"[4] at the end of Chapter 3. Some critics point out the cruelty in Twain's humor;[5] others say Huck Finn has a moral structure "in the best Judaeo-Christian tradition,"[6] and, in fact, that its commentary on evil resembles the patterns in Dante's Inferno.[7] All these

are important aspects of tragicomedy, but metaphysical humor is more specific than this; it involves a group of circumstances that come together at one time. There is a familiar scene, humorous and satirical, where a moral commentary on society is being made. Then something shocking happens, leaving the reader to contemplate in a mysterious and compassionate way a significant loss, because a certain connection wasn't seen, or another choice made. I am interested in situations like this in Huck Finn, and here three episodes seem to surface--the feuding Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, the maurading Duke and Dauphin, and (though in a more subtle way) Huck's tearing up his letter to Jim's owner Miss Watson. All of these are not only crucial to the novel, but they represent significant examples of metaphysical humor, and they lay the groundwork for future writers who would combine elements in the unique way I have described. I will discuss each of these episodes, along with an O'Connor story where her metaphysical humor, as well as her themes, seem very close to Twain's.

The Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons are two aristocratic families Huck meets when he comes ashore. Though gentlemanly, patriotic, and Christian, they don't seem to recognize the hypocrisy of taking "their guns along" to church, much less killing each other. The entire affair is a humorous satire on dueling and feuding in which, says Rubenstein, "the whole code of white supremacy is revealed as romantic nonsense."[8] The dramatic irony is further enhanced when Huck and Buck admire Emmeline Grangerford's spidery art and sentimental

poetry: ". . .Buck said she could rattle off poetry like nothing. She didn't ever have to stop to think" (p. 85). If all this is funny, the matter changes when Buck Grangerford, whom Huck has come to know and love as a friend, is wantonly killed in the feuding. Huck witnesses this from a tree, and he is deeply touched by the event. "I cried a little when I covered up Buck's face," he says, "for he was mighty good to me" (p. 94). Moses says the event for Huck is a traumatic shock--one from which he can never fully recover.[9] So the hypocrisy and sentimentality of these people, however humorous, only heighten Huck's loss, and with him we are left wondering what this feuding was all about, and whether these families' cultural and moral traditions have only made them more grotesque. These are metaphysical considerations that transcend the irony and satire of the immediate events.

Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the first of a group of ten stories published in 1955, contains Twain's themes of noble family traditions and sentimental life. But more importantly, it expands the technique of tragic reflection on a humorous event. In the story the grandmother brags to the grandchildren about her being courted as a maiden lady by Edgar Atkins Teagarden, but what surfaces is her interest in his Coca-cola stock. Her inane language and superior attitude also underpin her conversation with June Star when she maintains the "cute little pickanny" standing by a shack doesn't "have things like we do."[10] Sullivan says O'Connor's use of Southern dialogue augments and even sharpens

her wit.[11] Later, after being accosted by an ex-convict, the Misfit, the old lady resorts to her Christian background, telling the monster he is "one of my babies" and should "pray, pray. . ." to Jesus (p. 15). For the reader the woman is humorous, even ridiculous, for what comes through is not just her sentimentality, condescension and materialism, but her essential phoniness--she pleads less out of compassion than to save her own neck. In the end the Misfit simply kills her, calling her "a talker," and his henchman Bobby Lee adds: "She would have been a good woman. . .if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (p. 29).

O'Connor's portrayal of nobility here mirrors that of the feuding families in Huck Finn. Though she is more of a believer than Twain,[12] her humorous handling of hypocrisy and sentimentality resemble his. She says sentimentality is "an excess, a distortion of sentiment," and if used in the context of innocence, tends to become its opposite.[13] Moreover, the Misfit, one of her favorite characters,[14] in a way resembles Huck--uneducated and "evil," but extremely perceptive. The Misfit has a background rooted in much lower class experiences than the grandmother--he'd "been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth. . .seen a man burnt alive" (p. 15). He also rejects Christianity, but he knows Jesus (including the meaning of love and human equality) better than she, and her gibberish pales beside his powerful and straightforward analysis of Christ. Both authors, then, create circumstances showing the tragic consequences of blindness to hypocrisy and senti-

mentality. The reader is shocked at the end, for the grandmother gets more than she deserves, but as Montgomery points out (and it could also be said of Twain), O'Connor's comic distortions force an encounter with reality, and through violence she transforms naturalistic situations into moments of reflective consideration.[15] The notion of surprise and the suddenness of the violence are peculiar to O'Connor's endings, but here the whole framework for her tragic revelation is foreshadowed in Twain's account of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons.

Another major part of Huck Finn involves the notorious Duke and the Dauphin, who move in on the raft and world of Jim and Huck. These two are frauds, amusing but cruel as they distort Hamlet in their presentation of "The Royal Nonesuch," con the people of Pokeville with their phoney preaching, and skillfully defraud the Wilks sisters of their inheritance--Huck adding to the comedy by hiding the money in a coffin. Baldanza says these two come in a long tradition of traveling confidence men who fleece the yokels, and that they represent the apotheosis of one strain of Southwestern humor.[16] Though funny, what they have really done is ruin a profound work of art and manipulate the innocent and fragile for their own gain. In the end they are tarred and feathered, so justice is done. Ironically, however, it is now the people who humiliate these men who are cruel, and in this context Twain, through Huck, shows great sympathy for his characters--Eliot calls it "deep human pathos"[17]--however just the punish-

ment. One is left reflecting on the cruelty of the human race--a tragic note following some very hilarious episodes.

O'Connor, too, is interested in conmen and frauds, whom she distorts, she says, for an audience used to seeing them as natural.[18] In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Tom Shiftlet fakes a relationship with the deaf daughter of a widow farm lady (both named Lucynell) to take the old woman for as much as possible. Like the King and the Duke, he uses language as a major tool in his approach; he feeds old Lucynell a vast line of rhetoric on the human heart, while he turns out to be the most heartless of all, leaving young Lucynell at a local eating place and taking off with the car. He evades, says Hinden, his own sexual fear,[19] and replaces it, according to Rubin, with his materialistic ethic and bland rationalism.[20] One cannot help but chuckle at Shiftlet teaching the girl to say "Burrddt!" (p. 60), but as a potential pentecostal dove, he quickly changes into a merciless hawk. The ending, however, has a different tone, as Shiftlet feels a violent rainstorm coming on, hitting the car "like little tin-can tops," and he senses "the rottenness of the world. . .about to engulf him" as a "cloud. . .like a turnip. . .crouched behind the car" (p. 66). Miss O'Connor does not let us forget that his methods are more mechanical than human, and the storm suggests he is about to pay for them. But she, like Twain with the Duke and Dauphin, still has sympathy for this man who does not seem to realize the callousness of his ways. Hence, the reader is left to pon-

der, as with the grandmother in the opening story, the pathos that follows a humorous display of "mock innocence."[21]

One wonders what would happen if either Twain's or Miss O'Connor's characters didn't, as Rubin says, "fear the emotion of love."[22] That possibility brings us to a third kind of situation in both writers that generates metaphysical humor. In the Grangerford-Shepherdson and Duke-Dauphin cases, Huck (and the reader) stands back and contemplates something which, having grown out of comic circumstances, ends in a tragic awareness that is devastating, but about which he feels helpless. So in O'Connor's stories, there seems to be a "rottenness" about situations which leaves us outside asking: Why? Midway in Huck Finn, however, Huck makes a dramatic decision to reverse the way things are and--while comic and tragic--his actions cast a more positive light on the possibility for human love. Adams says "his human feelings" triumph over "the commercial morality, with which they are in conflict."[23] O'Connor does this, too, as in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," where a child discovers through a circus freak that the body can be a vehicle for equal and ennobling relationships. "The Artificial Nigger" also examines this theme, though in a more naturalistic setting, and I want to compare the epiphany here to the famous Chapter 31 in Twain's novel. In both cases, a comic situation is reversed, and we are left reflecting on a a small gain in the sea of human ignorance and loss.

In Chapter 31, remember, Huck stills regards Jim as a slave. Earlier, when he has to "humble himself to a nigger"

because he played a joke on Jim with a rattlesnake, he still considers Jim inferior. And later, when helping Tom free Jim, Huck regards Jim as a lesser being. On the raft at the center of the novel, however, Huck makes a decision that is different--and Geismar says this is the novel's "real ending."[24] Rather than send Jim back to Miss Watson his owner, he tears up his letter to her in favor of Jim--Trilling says their relationship has become a "primitive community. . .a community of saints."[25]--even though he thinks he will "go to hell" (p. 168). Brooks says the boy's educable "consciousness" supercedes his absolute "conscience."[26] If there is violence here, it is internal, for, as Trilling observes, Huck is deeply involved in the society he rejects.[27] It is a thoroughly human episode, for Huck, with his "uneducated" mentality, may think he is wrong, but the reader knows he is right, and that it is society that is blind and incorrigible. After one of the most profound epiphanies in all literature, we are left reflecting on the fact that Huck has really accomplished the "brotherly love" the feuding families and fake preachers only talked about. But as readers we also know that the probability of the towns along the river accepting, much less living, this kind of relationship is highly unlikely. That is tragic, and our being left with that thought generates a kind of tragic humor.

O'Connor's "Artificial Nigger" also focuses on companionship in a reflective way. Here Mr. Head takes his nephew Nelson on a trip to Atlanta to see his "first nigger" (p. 106).

They leave on a train where blacks are segregated and walk the black city streets, resembling "the endless. . .circles" (p. 120) of hell. Indeed, The Divine Comedy becomes a metaphor for the trip,[28] where the dark shades reflect various kinds of alienation--not just black from white, and white from white, but man from himself, what Carl Jung calls the split between the rational and instinctive mind in modern society.[29] This is an environment akin to Twain's along the river. The comedy is generated in part by the arrogant Mr. Head who often embarrasses his impulsive pupil, as when he tells a passerby:

> He's never seen anything before. . .Ignorant as the day he was born, but I mean for him to get his fill once and for all (p. 105).

Ironically, both will "get their fill," but the reason comes from the Huck-like "perceptive ignorance" of Nelson, who replies: "I was born here." This phrase strikes the reader as a kind of insight into the meaning of the darkness. Like Huck he simply sees the great separation between people. The imagery of the story, funny and yet sad, bears out Nelson's boyish wisdom, as when the black, underground sewer filled with rats and garbage seems to say more about people's underpinnings than about the city's physical layout.

As in Huck Finn, however, the story moves toward a dramatic, internal reversal, whereupon O'Connor creates, says Coleman, a sense of the holy, or awesome, when light shines through the darkness.[30] In the end Head and Nelson encounter a statue--the "artificial nigger" who looks down on them

both, causing a total reorganization of their thoughts. They come to realize, along with the reader, that relations between human beings, black or white, are co-extensive, involving heart as well as head, and transcend barriers of culture and tradition. Sister Jeremy says this is an instance in O'Connor when "silence speaks to the heart,"[31] for they walk out of the city, like Virgil and Dante, reflecting on their experience. As with Huck and Jim in the letter episode, there is a tragic note, for the kind of relationship they have--attained only after great struggle--is hardly true of the city, the "inferno" where color and class prevent the new oneness they have discovered in themselves and between each other.

Though a humorist in her own right, some of the roots of Miss O'Connor's genius seem to lie in Twain. Critics see a variety of types of humor in O'Connor, and (as is true of Twain) trace her use of grotesque, coupled with a compassion for her subjects, to such ancients as Dante and Chaucer,[32] though her specific connection to Twain is yet to be developed. Still, she writes about the South, as he does, capturing the natural comedy of its people's language and ways. Like him, she is a moral critic satirizing through her characters' lines, mannerisms, and preoccupations the mental prisons in which they are entrapped. All this is part of tragicomedy. To break through these mental barriers, however, violence becomes important for both writers--Gossett says it "emphasizes the urgency of choice"[33]--and here is where metaphysical humor emerges. That violence may be as external as shooting

or as internal as a drastic reorganization of thoughts, but in the end it leaves us contemplating the possibility of personal growth in the face of all the foibles of humankind.

Thematically, significant human relationships are central to both Twain's novel and O'Connor's stories, and, though she creates virtual morality plays--overdrawing her characters in the manner of cartoons[34]--both are realists who capture the loss we feel when people insist on racial, class, or other distinctions that separate us from one another. Technically, this is what metaphysical humor is about--the naturalistic scene followed by the reflection on loss. And while O'Connor is more overtly a religious writer--some call her a "Christian humanist"[35]--she is indebted to Twain, using the comic techniques of language, ironic perception, reversal of action, and epiphany to drive home her tragic vision. He certainly prepared a wide reading public by employing these techniques in an unarguably great novel that others, like O'Comnor, would use. She did invent a new type of humor, though, for her scenes are more concentrated and contained than Twain's, and she ends nearly every story with a radical transformation. Martin says Northrop Frye's "comic catharsis" which "raises sympathy and ridicule on a moral basis, but passes beyond both" applies in a unique way to O'Connor. But, as I have shown, the seeds of her artistic flowering seem to lie in great episodes of Twain's novel; for her as for so many, <u>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</u> is a seminal work in the history of American literature.

Footnotes

[1]Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), xvi.

[2]Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 45.

[3]Brainard Cheney, "Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for Her Country," Sewanee Review, 72 (Autumn 1964), 557.

[4]Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New York, W. W. Norton, 1961), p. 17. Subsequent page numbers are taken from this edition.

[5]V. S. Pritchett, "Huckleberry Finn and the Cruelty of American Humor," New Statesman and Nation (London) 22 (August 2, 1941), 113.

[6]Gilbert M. Rubenstein, "The Moral Structure of Huckleberry Finn," College English, 18 (November 1956), 73.

[7]W. R. Moses, "The Pattern of Evil in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Georgia Review, 13 (Summer 1959), 161-66.

[8]Rubenstein, p. 76.

[9]Moses, p. 164.

[10]Flannery O'Connor, A Good Man Is Hard To Find (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 13-14. All page numbers for Miss O'Connor's stories are taken from this edition.

[11]Walter Sullivan, "Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: Everything That Rises Must Converge," Hollins Critic, 2 (Sept. 1965), 2.

[12]Henry Nash Smith, "Mark Twain's Images of Hannibal: From St. Petersburg to Eseldorf," Texas Studies in English Vol. 37 (1958), 3-23. While O'Connor justifies her Christian faith in Mystery and Manners (p. 170), Smith argues Twain committed himself to Huck's, not Tom's, position that society--including its religious institutions--had corrupted The Great Civilization.

[13]O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 147-48.

[14]O'Connor, pp. 112-13.

[15]Marion Montgomery, "Flannery O'Connor's Transformation of the Sentimental," Mississippi Quarterly 25 (Winter 1971), 14.

[16]Frank Baldanza, Mark Twain: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Holt, Rinehard & Winston, 1961) p. 115.

[17]T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (London: Cresset Press, 1950), p. ix.

[18]O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 33.

[19]Josephine Hendin, The World of Flannery O'Connor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 68.

[20]Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt," in The Added Dimension, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 63, 67.

[21]O'Connor, p. 148.

[22]Rubin, p. 54.

[23]Richard P. Adams, "The Unity and Coherence of Huckleberry Finn," Tulane Studies in English, 6 (1956), 92.

[24]Maxwell Geismar, Mark Twain: An American Prophet (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), p. 102.

[25]Lionel Trilling, "The Greatness of Huckleberry Finn," in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond C. Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 313.

[26]Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, II, American Literature: The Makers and the Making (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 1282.

[27]Trilling, p. 316.

[28]Carter Martin, The True Country (Kingsport: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 148-59.

[29]Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933), p. 185.

[30]Richard Coleman, "Flannery O'Connor: A Scrutiny of Two Forms of Her Many-Leveled Art," in Phoenix, No. 1 (Fall 1967), 44.

[31]Sister Jeremy, C.S.J., "The Violent Bear It Away: A Linguistic Education," Renascence, 17 (Fall 1964), 16.

[32]Robert McCown, S.J., "Flannery O'Connor and the Reality of Sin," Catholic World, 187 (January 1959), 285, 290. McCown speaks of O'Connor's Chaucerian humor, the compassion and spiritual concern back of her grotesques. See also Gilbert H. Muller, "The City of Woe: Flannery O'Connor's Dantean Vision," Georgia Review, 23 (1969), 206.

[33]Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1965), p. 81.

[34]Webster Scott, "Flannery O'Connor: Faith's Stepchild," Nation, 13 (Sept. 1965), 143.

[35]David Eggenschwiler, The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 9-30. Eggenschwiler explains the broad and concrete basis of Miss O'Connor's Christian perspective. And Sister Rose Alice in "Flannery O'Connor: Poet to the Outcast" Renascence (Spring 1964), 126, argues "the word 'Christian' seems too limited to encompass her studies of human nature."

[36]Carter Martin, "Comedy and Humor in O'Connor's Fiction," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 4 (1975), pp. 10-11.