10 TWO CRITICAL CASEBOOKS

Edgar Allan Poe and Flannery O'Connor
The Tell-Tale Heart.

**Biography**

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was an American writer, poet, and literary critic. He is considered one of the most important American writers of the Romantic era, particularly known for his short stories. Poe's works are often characterized by their focus on themes such as guilt, fear, and the supernatural.

**The Tell-Tale Heart**

I am an old man, and no delicacy of manner could be observed in me. I led them, officers) had been deputed to search the premises. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of foul play had down to open it with a light heart,—for what had I

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all

No doubt I now grew

If you or I despise envelope the

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I

stealthily. I placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the

I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been

And still the men chatted pleasantly,

any thing was better than this agony! anything was

And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, every instant. The old man's terror

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-

I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hell-

I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes.

But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however,

**the Video**

**the Reading**

**Watch**

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle,

I tied a black shadow before him, and enveloped the

**FROM THE TERRIFYING PAGES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE!**

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the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled of him who clamored. I re-echoed—I aided—I surpassed them in volume and in of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones. When at the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior ment.

"The Amontillado!" ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonish-...
utes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miser-
corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although
of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs,
artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remem-
performances. But the fervid
tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from
It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed
into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitu-
me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length,

A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond com-
weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—the leaden, self-balanced and
and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence
staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a
the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters
I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the
studio
of his master. Much that I encountered on
all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry
force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination
strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid
as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted
There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my super-

And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon,
congratulated myself upon the success of my design.

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin;
Edgar Allan Poe on Writing

THE TALE AND ITS EFFECT 1842

Were we called upon, however, to designate that class of composition which, next to [a short lyric poem], should best fulfill the demands of high genius—should offer it the most advantageous field of exertion—we should unhesitatingly speak of the prose tale, as Mr. Hawthorne has here exemplified it. We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control. There are no external or extrinsic influences—resulting from weariness or interruption.

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

From a review of Twice-Told Tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne.
Edgar Allan Poe

ON IMAGINATION

1849

The pure Imagination chooses, from either Beauty or Deformity, only the most combinable things hitherto uncombined; the compound, as a general rule, partaking, in character, of beauty, or sublimity, in the ratio of the respective beauty or sublimity of the things combined—which are themselves still to be considered as atomic—that is to say, as previous combinations. But, as often analogously happens in physical chemistry, so not infrequently does it occur in this chemistry of the intellect, that the admixture of two elements results in a something that has nothing of the qualities of one of them, or even nothing of the qualities of either. . . . Thus, the range of Imagination is unlimited. Its materials extend throughout the universe. Even out of deformities it fabricates that Beauty which is at once its sole object and its inevitable test. But, in general, the richness or force of the matters combined; the facility for discovering combinable novelties worth combining; and, especially the absolute “chemical combination” of the completed mass—are the particulars to be regarded in our estimate of Imagination. It is this thorough harmony of an imaginative work which so often causes it to be undervalued by the thoughtless, through the character of obviousness which is superinduced. We are apt to find ourselves asking why it is that these combinations have never been imagined before.

From “Marginalia,” Southern Literary Messenger
Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or authorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, “Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?” Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone—afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

From “The Philosophy of Composition”
There are no parents in the tales of Edgar Poe, nary a Mum nor a Dad. Instead all is symbol. And what does this total repression of both sonthood and parenthood signify, but that to acknowledge such relationships is to venture into territory too dangerous, too terrifying, for specificity. Desire and hatred are alike insatiable and unallayed. But the terrible war of superego upon the id, the endless battle between conscience and impulse, the unseeping enmity of the self and its imp of the Perverse—their struggles are enacted and reenacted in Poe's work, but always in disguise.

Take "The Tell-Tale Heart," surely one of his nearly perfect tales. It's only four pages long, a triumph of the art of economy: How, then, am I mad? Hearten! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

When a narrator commences in this vein, we know him to be mad already. But we also know his author to be sane. For with such precision to portray the methodicalness of a madman is the work not of a madman but of a man who truly understands what it is to be mad. Artistic control is the warrant of auctorial sanity. It is axiomatic in the psychiatric practice of our century that self-knowledge is a necessary condition for the therapeutic process. Never using the language of the modern diagnostician—which was unavailable to him in the first place, and which in any case he didn't need—Poe demonstrates the extent of his self-knowledge in his manipulation of symbolic objects and actions toward ends which his tales embody.
Robert Louis Stevenson

COSTUME IN “THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO” 1879

[Poe] has the true story-teller’s instinct. He knows the little nothings that make stories, or mar them. He knows how to enhance the significance of any situation, and give color and life with seemingly irrelevant particulars. Thus, the whole spirit of “The Cask of Amontillado” depends on Fortunato’s carnival costume of cap and bells and motley. When Poe had once hit upon this device of dressing the victim grotesquely, he had found the key of the story; and so he sends him with uneven steps along the catacombs of the Montresors, and the last sound we hear out of the walled-up recess is the jingling of the bells upon his cap.

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) has never failed to puzzle its readers. The story is a confession of a man who committed a horrible crime half a century ago. Montresor lures Fortunato into the family vaults under the pretense that he needs Fortunato’s opinion of the newly acquired Amontillado wine. In a remote niche of the crypt, Montresor fetters Fortunato to the wall and then bricks him in. The reader is perplexed by a seeming absence of the motive for this crime. Unable to find a logical explanation of Montresor’s hatred for Fortunato, most commentators conclude that Montresor is insane. Such interpretation, however, seems to make certain details in the elaborate structure of the story unnecessary and this, in turn, goes against Poe’s approach to composition.

Although the subject matter of Poe’s story is a murder, “The Cask of Amontillado” is not a tale of detection, for there is no investigation of Montresor’s crime. The criminal himself explains how he committed the murder. Despite this explanation, “The Cask of Amontillado” is a mystery, for at its heart lies an intriguing question: “Why did he do it?” This question is different from the “Who’s done it?” of a classical mystery, as the latter presents crime as a logical puzzle solved by a detective thanks to his intellect. Nonetheless, in the absence of the figure of a detective, the central question of Poe’s story compels the reader to perform an intellectual act of detection himself. Moreover, this question requires that the reader reverse the process of solving the mystery. Whereas a detective begins his investigation with defining motives for the crime, the reader of “The Cask of Amontillado” should decipher the circumstances described by Montresor in order to determine the motive for his murder of Fortunato.

Far from being a mediocre murderer, Montresor elaborates a sophisticated philosophy of revenge: “I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong” (par.1). A successful realization of this plan is questioned in criticism. G. R. Thompson, for example, argues that Montresor has failed to accomplish a perfect murder: “Montresor, rather than having successfully taken his revenge ‘with impunity’, . . . has instead suffered a fifty-years’ ‘ravage of conscience’” (13–14). David Halliburton also gives a didactic reading of the tale: “If the walls erected by Poe’s masons (‘The Black Cat’, ‘The Cask of Amontillado’) are material, they are also existential: to take up mortar and trowel is to victimize the other, and through this process to bring about the victimization of oneself” (263). According to Thompson, Montresor’s words insinuate the opening of the story, “you, who so well know the nature of my soul,” are probably addressed to Montresor’s confessor, “for if Montresor has murdered Fortunato fifty years before, he must now be some seventy to eighty years of age” (13–14). Thompson uses the fact that Montresor’s narration is actually a confession made on his deathbed to support the argument about Montresor’s troubled conscience.

Without questioning the interpretation of Montresor’s narration as taking place at his deathbed, I would still ask if the fact of this belated confession gives us sufficient ground to assume that Montresor has suffered pangs of conscience for fifty years.

Whether Fortunato actually understands the reason behind Montresor’s terrible vengeance—namely, that he is being punished for his arrogance and for insulting someone who is equal or superior to him—does not impede a successful completion of Montresor’s plan. Montresor “punishes” Fortunato “with impunity” and escapes retribution. Moreover, in accordance with his plan, Montresor does not murder Fortunato secretly, but stages a spectacle of execution so that the victim knows who killed him. If Fortunato does not understand why Montresor has decided to kill him, he may believe Montresor is a madman. Typically, some scholars who argue that Montresor is insane turn to the last scene in the story. . . . A careful examination of Montresor’s last words, however, provides additional evidence in support of the thesis that the motive for Montresor’s murder of Fortunato has been vengeance. The very last words in the story are, “Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them.”

From “The Motive for Murder in The Cask of Amontillado”

Elena V. Baraban

THE MOTIVE FOR MURDER IN “THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO”† 2004

Without questioning the interpretation of Montresor’s laughter at taking place at his deathbed, I would still ask if the fact of this belated confession gives us sufficient ground to assume that Montresor has suffered pangs of conscience for fifty years.

Whether Fortunato actually understands the reason behind Montresor’s terrible vengeance—namely, that he is being punished for his arrogance and for insulting someone who is equal or superior to him—does not impede a successful completion of Montresor’s plan. Montresor “punishes” Fortunato “with impunity” and escapes retribution. Moreover, in accordance with his plan, Montresor does not murder Fortunato secretly, but stages a spectacle of execution so that the victim knows who killed him. If Fortunato does not understand why Montresor has decided to kill him, he may believe Montresor is a madman. Typically, some scholars who argue that Montresor is insane turn to the last scene in the story. . . . A careful examination of Montresor’s last words, however, provides additional evidence in support of the thesis that the motive for Montresor’s murder of Fortunato has been vengeance. The very last words in the story are, “Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. In pace requiescat!”

The sentence “In pace requiescat!” (“May he rest in peace”) refers to Fortunato. The phrase is used in the Requiem Mass and during Last Rites, when, having listened to a dying person’s confession, a priest forgives his/her sins. If Montresor’s narration is his last confession, he should look forward to being forgiven and to hearing “In pace requiescat!” (“May your soul rest in peace”) from his priest. Instead, Montresor maliciously subverts his role as a repentant sinner when he says “In pace requiescat!” in regard with Fortunato. Not only does he deprive the poor man of a Catholic’s right to the last confession, he is arrogant enough to abuse the formulaic expression used by priests to absolve dying sinners. The fact that Montresor uses this expression for finally pardoning Fortunato highlights his conviction that he has merely avenged himself for the wrong that Fortunato inflicted upon him fifty years ago.

From “The Motive for Murder in The Cask of Amontillado”" and "The Cask of Amontillado by Edgar Allan Poe" by Elena V. Baraban

Works Cited


† 2004


Charles Baudelaire

POE’S CHARACTERS 1856

Translated by Joan F. Mele

The characters in Poe, or rather the character in Poe, the man with extremely acute faculties, the man with relaxed nerves, the man whose patient and ardent will hurls defiance at difficulties, he whose gaze is fixed as straight as a sword on objects which increase in importance as he stares at them—this man is Poe himself. And his women, all luminous and sickly, dying of strange diseases and speaking with a voice which is like music, they too are Poe; or at least, through their strange aspirations, through their knowledge, through their incurable melancholy, they strongly share the nature of their creator. As for his ideal woman, she is revealed in different portraits scattered through his scant collection of poems, portraits, or rather ways of feeling beauty, which the temperament of the author joins together and blends in a vague but sensible unity, and in which exists perhaps more delicately than elsewhere that insatiable love of the Beautiful, which is his great title, that is to say the summation of his claims on the affection and admiration of poets.

From preface to *Histoires Extraordinaires*
James Tuttleton

POE’S PROTAGONISTS AND THE IDEAL WORLD 1998

The protagonists of Poe’s art are men of imagination, exiles from a primal Paradise, voyagers in a strange land—this disease of our material existence. They have their real being in an Ideal World marked by a Unity and Oneness occurring in some primordial far-off antiquity. Thus there is next to no social context in Poe’s tales and poems.

Although he lived at a particularly turbulent time in America—while the westering movement was afoot, immigration was constant, urbanization was dawning, abolitionism and slavery were gearing up for the Civil War—Poe was never interested in giving reportorial or journalistic accounts of the sociological features of American life. For Poe, the artistic vision that might capture an intuition of paradise was the only thing that mattered. It was his passionate means of trying to unify the fragmented world of fallen reality, to recover from the primal alienation produced by the creation itself. He therefore trafficked in the nostalgia of loss, in an ideality known only in dreams, his substitute for the horrifying actuality of the quotidian life. “Israfel,” “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “Pym,” “Annabelle Lee,” and “Lenore” all allegorize a longing for immortality, for this lost world of Ideal Existence before birth. Accompanying this nostalgia is a concomitant fear of death and annihilation, with obsessive brooding about physical and psychological decay—the grim phantasm of fear afflicting the reason and bringing it to the point of madness, a fear reflected in his characters’ preoccupation with dreams, trances, hypnosis, catalepsy, and metempsychosis. Above all, he longed for a love that survives death, bodily dissolution, and the grave. Art, whether created or appreciated, was a means of transcending the paltry circumstances of the actual and attaining the effect of an intimation of immortality.

From “Poe: The Quest For Supernal Beauty”

Since this story is a first-person narrative (it is told by a narrator from his, and only his, point of view), we have to make a decision about his reliability. (Remember, the narrator of a story is a creation of the author, NOT the author himself.) During the first passages of the story, the narrator gives us clues to his reliability. As he looks at the house he says that what he sees is more like “the after-dream of the reveler upon opium.” Later, still looking at the house, he says, “Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned . . . the building.” Taking these two statements together, the narrator seems to be dreaming more than dealing with the reality before him. By his own admission, then, his narration must be scrutinized with great care.

Additionally, as the narrator contemplates the purpose of his trip and the mystery that is before him, he says, “What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble.” Later he says, “. . . the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth.” Now, despite his admission that the mystery is beyond solution, he enters the house and attempts to solve it for the reader.

Another aspect of the narrator’s character which is cause for our concern is his shift from telling about Roderick’s madness to revealing his own madness. During their first meeting, he describes Roderick’s manner with the following words: incoherence, inconsistency, excessive nervous agitation, and “lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium.” Alone, these would not describe madness, but together they create the image of madness. Add to this Roderick’s inability to endure harsh sensations of any kind, and we have a more convincing picture of a madman.

The most compelling discussion of this madness comes in the final scene when Roderick comes to the narrator’s room. He enters the room, very agitated, and opens a window to the raging storm. As the narrator reads from the novel Mad Trist, Roderick sits sullenly in a chair looking at the door. They both hear noises outside the door and Roderick speaks, “Said I not that my senses were acute?” Roderick explains that he has heard noises from the tomb for several days because of his acute hearing, and, like the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” claims to hear Madeline’s heart beating. In one final cry, he screams, “Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!” Madeline appears when the door is blown open. She lunges toward him and they fall to the floor, dead.

In these last scenes some of Roderick’s madness is transferred to the narrator. In the beginning the narrator thinks that what he sees is a dream, yet for the first several days he is at the house, he seems sane and in control of his senses. But after Madeline is entombed, the narrator becomes more agitated, just as Roderick does, and on the evening of the “seventh or eighth day” he is so uneasy that he cannot sleep. He is nervous and bewildered but he rationalizes that this is the result of sleeping in a room with drab and gloomy furniture. As the night progresses, he loses more and more control. “An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame.” The madness ascribed to Roderick is now afflicting the narrator.

As the final scene unfolds, the narrator also claims to hear the noises from the tomb. He dismisses this since the window was still open and there was a great deal of noise coming from the storm. As he reads more of the novel Mad Trist, he stops abruptly and says, “I did actually hear . . . a low and apparently distant . . . sound.” By his own admission, the narrator reveals his own acuteness of hearing, an aspect that he uses to define madness in Roderick. Now, the narrator himself has succumbed to the same madness.

From “An Overview of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”
shape of a cow and June Star guessed a cow and John Wesley said, no, an auto-
plantation."

in the middle of it, like a small island. "Look at the graveyard!" the grandmother
said.

back to sleep.

streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on

Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline

Atlanta at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890. The grandmother

Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why

said. "You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see

his apricots out of a jar. "The children have been to Florida before," the old lady

the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and in-

a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

white face and an orange nose—clinging to his neck like a caterpillar.

around."

and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the

punished at all?"

said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy

a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I

it was I done and I ain't recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was

less sky. "Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a

a woman flogged," he said.

who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; "I even seen

hat because she was standing up looking down on him. "Do you ever pray?" she

shirt in his suitcase."

that we had on when we escaped and we're just making do until we can get better.

ers has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into

looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. "I just know you're a

his shirt and he remained perfectly still.

woods there with them?"

was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn't

no cloud neither."}

down on the ground. "Watch them children, Bobby Lee," he said. "You know they

row of strong white teeth. "God never made a finer woman than my mother and my

then covered it up again. "I would hate to have to," he said.

gun?"

had guns.

he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long

staring, his mouth partly open in a kind of loose grin. The other had on khaki pants

continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again,

painstakingly."

panel!"

found . . ."

trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll

the truth?"

dance floor and did her tap routine.

her chair. June Star said play something she could tap to so the children's mother

a dime in the machine and played "The Tennessee Waltz," and the grandmother

est limb as soon as he saw the children jump out of the car and run toward him.

"A dirt road," Bailey groaned.

"All right," Bailey said, "but get this: this is the only time we're going to stop for

Panama City."

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There

"I don't want to hold hands with him," June Star said. "He reminds me of a pig."

"Yes, thank you," the mother said faintly. Her left arm dangled helplessly and she

and moved it to her right hand. "My arm is just so."

"I believe I have injured an organ," said the grandmother, pressing her side, but

"A good man is hard to find," Red Sammy said. "Everything is getting terrible. I

"It's not far from here, I know," the grandmother said. "It wouldn't take over

twenty minutes."

"Yes, it's a beautiful day," said the grandmother. "Listen," she said, "you shouldn't

"What are you telling US what to do for?" June Star asked.

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" the grandmother said and removed a

"Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray . . ."

"Nome," he said. "It wasn't no mistake. They had the papers on me."

"Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray . . ."
a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a tele-
lens. Mrs. Turpin said, "They'd be hiding out and lying down and turning sick on you and
not stir.

She was obviously the lady's daughter because, although they didn't look anything

like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck. She heard the mother cry out and Claud
had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into
the side of the barn. It was a square of concrete as large as a small room, with a

blackened chimneys.

The girl's face was almost purple. The white-trash woman
had some very special reason for disliking her.

She had on an old felt hat of Claud's set back on her head. The other two
would be making fun of her if she didn't wear it.

She had on a yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks, both gritty-looking, and

in a gas oven.

She had read that pigs were the most intel-

lected over her windpipe. There was the beginning of an angry red

mists the sun'sreturn over the tree line. Mrs. Turpin stood at the head of the magazine

tble of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong.

art was softly playing gospel music.

ing the bed, and his expression of ferocious concentration did not change.

not stir.

reading the room for anything left. She had read that pigs were the most intel-
come to turn into their own road. Then like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent

side.

The sun was a deep yellow now like a harvest moon and was riding westward

Mrs. Turpin remained standing. The only man in the room besides Claud was a lean

would be making fun of her if she didn't wear it.

lication of herself as a wart hog from hell into his mind.

him."

"I have ears," Mary Grace said.

"I have ears," Mary Grace said.

She raised her head and stared at the wall a moment longer. Her eyes were

Mrs. Turpin could not have moved a finger. The old man who had been sitting

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a trans-

"What you got to say to me?" she asked, exactly what you would have expected her to

from the first that the child belonged with the old woman. She could tell by the way

had some very special reason for disliking her.

would I want to do than just stand around and pass the time of day," and she moved off and

The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and

The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and

with the white folks.

She had on an old felt hat of Claud's set back on her head. The other two

had on Girl Scout shoes and

made a sound, a small cry so tiny the old woman did not hear it.

with a secret life.

moans of the girl's mother, who continued to sit on the floor. The white-trash woman

She had a face that was the same color as molasses.

forefinger and thumb of each hand interlocked. Her expression of ferocious concentration did not change.

The white-trash woman

of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a trans-

I have ears," Mary Grace said.

They carried her off in an ambulance," Mrs. Turpin continued, "but before she

He was five or six, but Mrs. Turpin saw at once that no one was going to tell him

"You see that button there, boy?" Mrs. Turpin said. "You can punch that and

I have ears," Mary Grace said.

"Is that right?" the boy said agreeably, as if he had never seen the button be-

"You see that button there, boy?" Mrs. Turpin said. "You can punch that and

"You see that button there, boy?" Mrs. Turpin said. "You can punch that and

Mrs. Turpin said. "They'd be hiding out and lying down and turning sick on you and

"It never hurt anyone to smile," Mrs. Turpin said. "It just makes you feel better

"It never hurt anyone to smile," Mrs. Turpin said. "It just makes you feel better

as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a tele-

had a face that was the same color as molasses.

They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was

forefinger and thumb of each hand interlocked. Her expression of ferocious concentration did not change.

and a place on a sofa occupied by a blond child in a dirty

omewhat better, but maybe not as good as when Claud had brought

through them. She is not much better off than Mr. Turpin was when he first

radio was softly playing gospel music.

Morning, but Mrs. Turpin saw at once that this was not Claud's morning.

"We were in town at the doctor's office for where the cow kicked Mr. Turpin," said

they had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was

Mrs. Turpin could not have moved a finger. The old man who had been sitting

The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and

The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and

I have ears," Mary Grace said.

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The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and
faster until it appeared to be roaring inside him like a great generator. He flipped the
street. Parker, still barefooted, burst silently in on him at a little after three in the af-
known how to cross himself he would have done it.
it. He had to get off the tractor every now and then and untangle the baling cord or
heel. As he continued to worry over it, his eyes took on a hollow preoccupied ex-
it so much that he began to lose sleep. He was already losing flesh—Sarah Ruth just
}

...
The characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of them as all being on the verge of eternity, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him; and since to think of the human being as a story is to think of the story of a life, it is obvious that violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things, violence is literally in the story. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.

What was left would not be worth your attention. Our age not only does not have the capacity for grace equal to his, I think myself that if I took out this gesture and what she says with it, I would have no story. This story I'm going to read certainly calls up a good deal of the South's mythic background, though the modern audience takes exception. About this I can only say that there are perhaps other ways than in this story to tell a good story, and none other by which it could have been written. Belief, in my own case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate. And the heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position of all, she is the one who is going to have to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story.

Flannery O'Connor at the mother's Georgia farm where she raised her chickens. © 1990.

EXCEPT FROM “ON HER OWN WORK”

The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position of all. She is the one who is going to have to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story.

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is quite different in its spirit, in its essence from quite different. The lines of motion that interest the writer, and he knows that a taste for self-preservation can be readily combined with the missionary spirit.

I find that students are often puzzled by what she says and does here, but I think myself that if I took out this gesture and what she says with it, I would have no story. This story has been called grotesque, but I prefer to call it literal. A good story is not either, nor is it a thing. That's a child's reasoning. In this short story, he doesn't intend to divert but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is directed, he is not going to set down anything that comes into view in the story unless the interest of the writer is usually invaluable. They are lines of interest. In this story you should of course look for such things as the action of grace, the Grandmother's gesture, and not for the body dead.

I suppose the reason for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ from each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is the real social action. Much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable and totally unexpected; it would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, it would have to be one that the modern audience takes exception. About this I can only say that there are perhaps other ways than in this story to tell a good story, and none other by which it could have been written. Belief, in my own case anyway, is the engine that makes perception operate. And the heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position of all, the one who is going to have to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story.

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Flannery O’Connor

ON HER CATHOLIC FAITH 1955

I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement. However, I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, the thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It’s to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endurable; the only thing that makes the Church endurable is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems to be a fact that you suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in the stories.

From a letter (July 20, 1955) in The Habit of Being
Those writers who speak for and with their age are able to do so with a great deal more ease and grace than those who speak counter to prevailing attitudes. I once received a letter from an old lady in California who informed me that when the tired reader comes home at night, he wishes to read something that will lift up his heart. And it seems her heart had not been lifted up by anything of mine she had read. I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up.

You may say that the serious writer doesn’t have to bother about the tired reader, but he does, because they are all tired. One old lady who wants her heart lifted up wouldn’t be so bad, but you multiply her two hundred and fifty thousand times and what you get is a book club. I used to think it should be possible to write for some supposed elite, for the people who attend the universities and sometimes know how to read, but I have since found that though you may publish your stories in *Botteghe Oscure,* if they are any good at all, you are eventually going to get a letter from some old lady in California, or some inmate of the Federal Penitentiary or the state insane asylum or the local poorhouse, telling you where you have failed to meet his needs.

And his need, of course, is to be lifted up. There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. When he reads a novel, he wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to a mock damnation or a mock innocence.

I am often told that the model of balance for the novelist should be Dante, who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory, and paradise. There can be no objection to this, but also there can be no reason to assume that the result of doing it in these times will give us the balanced picture that it gave in Dante’s. Dante lived in the 13th century when that balance was achieved in the faith of his age. We live now in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself. There are ages when it is possible to woo the reader; there are others when something more drastic is necessary.

There is no literary orthodoxy that can be prescribed as settled for the fiction writer, not even that of Henry James who balanced the elements of traditional realism and romance so admirably within each of his novels. But this much can be said. The great novels we get in the future are not going to be those that the public thinks it wants, or those that critics demand. They are going to be the kind of novels that interest the novelist. And the novels that interest the novelist are those that have not already been written. They are those that put the greatest demands on him, that require him to operate at the maximum of his intelligence and his talents, and to be true to the particularities of his own vocation. The direction of many of us will be toward concentration and the distortion that is necessary to get our vision across; it will be more toward poetry than toward the traditional novel.

The problem for such a novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying, and in order not to destroy, he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work. This descent into himself will, at the same time, be a descent into his region. It will be a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision, and I feel it is a vision which we in the South must at least try to understand if we want to participate in the continuance of a vital Southern literature. I hate to think that in twenty years Southern writers too may be writing about men in grey flannel suits and may have lost their ability to see that these gentlemen are even greater freaks than what we are writing about now. I hate to think of the day when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader.

From "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction"
J.O. Tate

A GOOD SOURCE IS NOT SO HARD TO FIND
THE REAL LIFE MISFIT

Saturday Review, November 13, 1960

The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, Volume III, Autumn 1974. The headline says for us the source of a celebrated sobriquet. This newspaper reference was reprint-


EXA

The article of October 24 gives us a bit of color: "A fantastic band of high-waymen.

The first bandit to face the Visitors'd spectacles, spectacled, shrunken-cheeked highwayman. "A later article gives us, as it gave

The result of Hill's plea of guilty was perhaps not as forthright as his intention:

"Maniac, in which I see a sort of 'head-doctor.'"

"Maniac" Hill is adjudged incompetent (November 13, 1960, p. 29). As "A Good Source Is Not So Hard to Find: The Real Life Misfit" by J. O. Tate in

fear of self, I think we may also recognize here the genesis of Hiram and Bobby Lee. The diagnoses of both Yancey and Hill as mentally ill may have suggested O'Connor's Misfit's experiences with the "head-doctor." These diagnoses are not the whole story. There is always "a little lower layer." She meant

To Mock Pop Psychology by Exploiting the Original Misfit's Exploitation of a Socio-


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Louise S. Cowan

THE CHARACTER OF MRS. TURPIN IN “REVELATION” 2005

O’Connor held that serious writers cannot produce their works simply from their own ideas and conscious convictions; rather, if they are to produce anything of value, they must submit to a larger body of customs and manners of which they are a part. “As far as the creation of a body of fiction is concerned,” she writes, “the social is superior to the purely personal.” The writer whose themes are religious particularly needs a region where the themes find a response in the life of the people. “What the Southern Catholic writer is apt to find when he descends within his imagination is not Catholic life but the life of his region in which he is both native and alien.” For O’Connor, then, the South presented the region to which she could devote her genius. It was out of step with the rest of the nation, since it was still largely agrarian, retaining in the early twentieth century traces in it of an older worldview. Further, as she saw, it still had a “folk,” both white and black, who maintained an outlook fundamentally religious. It was likely to be from these groups that the prophetic figures in her fiction could emerge. In the South the general conception of man is still, O’Connor maintained, theological:

The Bible is known by the ignorant as well as the educated and it is always the mythos which the poor hold in common that is most valuable to the fiction writer. When the poor hold sacred history in common, they have ties to the universal and the holy which allows the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity.

***

“Revelation”

The short story “Revelation,” which won first prize in the 1964 O. Henry Awards, is one of O’Connor’s last-written pieces and one of her most accomplished. It is about her familiar theme of Pharisaism; and the epiphany with which it ends is no less devastating for occurring while the protagonist, Mrs. Turpin, is hosing down one of her prize hogs.

O’Connor’s favorite target is the respectable, moral person who has lived a good and sensible life. The main character in “Revelation,” Ruby Turpin, is such a figure, innocently falling into the pattern of self-satisfaction that finally assumes God himself must be impressed with her virtue. It is a mistake, however, to construe O’Connor’s keen portrayals as pitiless. Her pharisaical characters are aware of their self-love; they conduct themselves with kindness and courtesy, as good decent people should do. Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation” is such a naively self-righteous person, convinced that her righteousness makes her a special friend of Jesus. One of O’Connor’s worries about the story “Revelation,” as a matter of fact, was that people would think she was disapproving of Mrs. Turpin. “You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hog pen,” she wrote in a letter to a friend.

Ruby Turpin is one of O’Connor’s masterpieces. Essentially good-hearted, she is blind to her own pride and self-satisfaction. She passes judgment on everyone she meets, sometimes occupying herself with naming over the classes of people. “On the bottom of the heap were most colored people . . . then next to them, not above, just away from—were the white trash, then above them the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners to which she and Claud belonged.” She naively congratulates herself on having been born as who she is, a good respectable good decent people should do. Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation” is such a naively self-righteous person, convinced that her righteousness makes her a special friend of Jesus. One of O’Connor’s worries about the story “Revelation,” as a matter of fact, was that people would think she was disapproving of Mrs. Turpin. “You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hog pen,” she wrote in a letter to a friend.

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The crucial event in Ruby Turpin’s life begins in a doctor’s office. . . . She has been singled out, she knows, for a message. And, afterwards, the more she thinks about it in her isolation (for she can’t bring herself to ask her husband about it; and the black servants who work for her merely flatter her), the more the incident seems to have some sort of divine import: “The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman.” Angry, she makes her way to the hogpen; and as she is watering down a white sow she begins her questioning of God that turns into a challenge: “Go on, call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell.” And finally the blasphemous, “Who do you think you are?”

It is this direct challenge to the Almighty that produces the real revelation for Ruby Turpin. And in the vision that she receives, the question she had always stumbled over—the complexity of categorizing the classes of people—is answered, with a revelation at once grotesque and sublime.

From “Passing by the Dragon: Flannery O’Connor’s Art of Revelation”}

Readers of course do not have to be distracted by a writer’s actual speaking voice. Sometimes, as in Faulkner’s deliberately toneless reading of the Reverend Shegog’s sermon in *The Sound and the Fury*, or Eudora Welty’s much-too-fast rendition of “Why I Live at the P.O.,” hearing the author can be a disappointment. But I am happy to say that this is not the case with Flannery O’Connor. Her voice was recorded, so far as anyone knows, only once—at Vanderbilt University on April 22, 1959, when she gave a reading of her most famous shocker, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” prefacing it with a few remarks about her work. Although the recording quality is low, O’Connor’s voice in 1959 was mellow and rounded, not whiny or nasal or flat. By then she had considerable experience in lecturing and giving readings, so no doubt her poise is way greater than it could have been at Iowa or Yaddo. But I was surprised by its warmth. You hear her quiet irony, of course, especially in her introductory remarks, but also—very unexpectedly to me—a youthful spiritedness. Despite its apparent gravity, her voice conveys something close to exuberance in its relish and delight in words. She gets loud laughter in observing that the labels “degenerate” and “gothic” and “grotesque” have been inflicted on her so often she feels “like Bre’er Rabbit stuck on the Tar Baby.” Everybody knows that story. But nobody laughs when she offers the following: 

It was suggested to me that I would want to preface this reading tonight with a short statement about my philosophy of writing. Of course I don’t want to do anything of the kind. My approach to literary problems is very much like the one Dr. Johnson’s* blind housekeeper used when she poured tea for him. She put her finger inside the cup.

What could be clearer, wittier, and more self-deprecating about her craft? Leave it to O’Connor to identify herself—unobtrusively—with the blind Annie Williams, on whom Johnson took such compassion.

From “Listening to Flannery O’Connor”