

Almost as soon as Flannery O'Connor began publishing her work, many readers and critics realized that a distinctive new voice had entered the American literary dialogue. Both in her novels and in her short stories—but especially in the stories—O'Connor had an immediate and enduring impact. Her short fiction is routinely included in standard anthologies. These books often offer several stories by O'Connor, while reprinting only single stories by numerous other writers. Her continuing prominence implies that she is certainly one of the greatest writers of short fiction the United States has ever produced.

The present volume seeks to place O'Connor's short stories in a variety of contexts and to discuss them from many different points of view. The volume opens with a "lead" essay by Robert Donahoo that looks at O'Connor's stories in light of the impact of World War II and the veterans who returned from that conflict as well as from the Korean War. Donahoo's essay is then followed by a brief overview of O'Connor's life by Kelhi D. DePace, who traces the development of O'Connor's highly successful but all-too-brief career, which was cut short by a terminal illness.

These two preliminary essays are then followed by four deliberately contextual pieces. The first, by Robert C. Evans, sets O'Connor within the conservative political and cultural contexts of her times, emphasizing especially the ideas she shared with such political theorists as Russell Kirk and Brainerd Cheney. Evans is also the author of an essay surveying, in great detail, the initial critical responses to O'Connor's short fiction—responses that set the tone and laid down the main themes of much subsequent criticism. Another essay by Evans then discusses the relatively neglected topic of *form* in O'Connor's stories, focusing especially on the use of foreshadowing in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Finally, the last contextual essay compares and contrasts O'Connor's works with

those of the African American writer Alice Walker, whose interest in O'Connor began early and has lasted long.

The next section of this book offers a series of individual "critical perspectives" on O'Connor's work. This section is organized in roughly chronological order, moving in general from the beginnings to the final stages of her career. Brian Yothers' essay *does* look at one of O'Connor's final stories, but he does so by setting it within a literal-historical context largely influenced by Edgar Allan Poe and other nineteenth-century writers. David A. Davis then looks at "A Stroke of Good Fortune," one of O'Connor's earliest stories, examining the ways its references to food help illuminate the work's treatment of gender and gender's relations to the historical period that produced it.

"Good Country People," one of O'Connor's most important stories, is a main focus of Doreen Fowler's essay, which additionally examines another of O'Connor's major tales: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Adopting a more overtly religious and theoretical approach to O'Connor's stories, Fowler explores the ways O'Connor treats the issue of Christian grace in her fiction. Spiritual issues remain a concern in the next essay, in which Jimmy Dean Smith studies the ways O'Connor uses silence and silences in her religiously inflected writings, including "Good Country People," "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and "Parker's Back." In the ensuing essay, Christine Flanagan uses two stories not discussed at any length so far ("Greenleaf" and "A View of the Woods") to set O'Connor's writing and thinking within an ecological context that is also relevant to her deepest religious and spiritual concerns. Religion, and specifically evangelical Christianity, is central to the next essay, in which Michael Odom examines "A Temple of the Holy Spirit" and "Parker's Back" in light of the ways bodies are depicted in both tales.

In her discussion of the little-studied story "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" (one of O'Connor's last works), Colleen Warren draws on close study of O'Connor's manuscripts to deal with the topic of race and doubling in a work that may have been intended to be part of a third novel that O'Connor never lived to finish. Next, Aaron D.

Cobb, a trained philosopher much interested in matters of suffering, looks at the ways O'Connor's essay about a severely afflicted and terminally ill little girl help illuminate her treatment of suffering and moral responsibility in her story "The Lame Shall Enter First." Finally, the volume closes with an essay in which Robert C. Evans describes and paraphrases many of the comments O'Connor made in letters (and passages from letters) omitted from *The Habit of Being*, the massive edition of her correspondence, issued in 1979. These comments by O'Connor have never before been made available, so that the collection ends by presenting material that may shed retrospective light on much else that the volume discusses.

Many contributors to this collection of essays were selected to participate in a special summer seminar on O'Connor held in 2014 and sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Their writings are just a few examples of the ways the NEH valuably contributes to the intellectual vitality of American culture. Thanks are due to Robert Donahoo for helping to organize that institute and for encouraging so many participants to contribute to the present volume.

# O'Connor's Arabesque: The Visual Arts and the Supernatural in "Parker's Back"

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Brian Yothers

Flannery O'Connor has frequently been acknowledged as perhaps the twentieth-century's most appropriate heir to the legacy of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who developed into an art form the genre of the modern short story in nineteenth-century America. As Poe had suggested in his reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short fiction, the modern short story could be compared to the lyric poem in its virtuosity and intensity and "afford[ed] the best prose opportunity for the display of the highest talent" (Poe, "Nathaniel Hawthorne" 643). O'Connor herself sought to foster this very acknowledgment, writing at length in her essays about her admiration for Hawthorne in particular. Referencing O'Connor's use of the artistic figure of the arabesque in her late story "Parker's Back," we can see how O'Connor's work interacts with the tradition of the American short story and how her artistic and religious aspirations are interwoven explicitly in her late work.

Notably, O'Connor connected herself with Hawthorne in part through his Catholic daughter, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, who is currently under consideration for possible canonization as a Catholic saint, and who already in O'Connor's time was seen as an exemplary Catholic religious woman. In her "Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*," O'Connor reflected explicitly on both Hawthorne and his Catholic daughter. O'Connor was taken both with the saintliness of Hawthorne's daughter and with Hawthorne's own sense of sin, and she saw these two qualities as being interconnected. When she was asked to write about Mary Ann, a child brought up by nuns who was born with a tumor on her face, O'Connor turned first to Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" and then to his book *Our Old Home*, where Hawthorne recounted the story of an anonymous man who overcame the "ice in his blood" (Hawthorne qtd. in O'Connor, "Introduction" 217) to hold a sick and

impoverished child in his arms. O'Connor then produced evidence from Hawthorne's posthumously published notebooks that he was the man who had overcome the "ice in his blood" to hold the child and further revealed that this incident had been an inspiration for Rose Hawthorne Lathrop's career as a nun who cared for cancer patients and founded a Dominican congregation that was devoted to caring for such patients (O'Connor, "Introduction" 219–20). In this way, O'Connor connected her admiration for Hawthorne as a master of the short story to the ethical and religious implications of his life and work. I suggest that this blending of the religious and artistic is at work in "Parker's Back" and can be illuminated in part by the way in which O'Connor invokes the term "arabesque," an important concept for Poe and Hawthorne as the founders of the modern short story.

"Parker's Back" has most often been investigated from a theological standpoint, an approach that makes sense both with regard to O'Connor's own devout Catholic faith and with regard to the explicitly theological content of the story. Helen R. Andretta, Jordan Cofer, Michel Feith, V. Blue Lemay, Karl-Heinz Westarp, Ralph C. Wood, and Jacqueline A. Zubeck have all contributed important discussions of the theological dimensions of the story. Recently, this theological approach has been tied to aesthetic questions regarding the meaning of beauty, as Katherine LeNotre has connected the theology of "Parker's Back" with aesthetic questions using the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar's speculations on the theological significance of beauty as a jumping-off point. We might go still farther into considering the story from the vantage point of literary artistry and consider how a story like "Parker's Back" also fits into the tradition of the American short story as developed by Poe and Hawthorne. One way into an enriched understanding of how O'Connor's story fits into the larger trajectory of the short story in America is through the concept of the arabesque, a vitally important idea for Poe, to which O'Connor refers several times in the short story. We can find our way into an understanding of what the arabesque meant to the nineteenth-century short story tradition and what it may have meant to O'Connor through a reading

of the passages that mention the arabesque in O'Connor's story, a consideration of Poe's treatment of the arabesque and Hawthorne's work with models that correspond to Poe's discussion of the arabesque, and an analysis of how acknowledging the nineteenth-century idea of the arabesque can modify our reading of "Parker's Back."

### Identifying the Arabesque in "Parker's Back"

The title of the story "Parker's Back" refers to the one part of the protagonist's body that is not tattooed at the start of the story, and the story of his tattooing and his inward reaction to the artistry of the tattoos is as much a part of the plot of the story as his ill-fated and comical marriage to his wife, which organizes the surface of the plot. As O'Connor's narrator explains, Parker became obsessed with tattooing after seeing a man who was "tattooed from head to foot" at a fair (*Complete* 512). The man's body is described as a manifestation of an art form, specifically the arabesque:

Except for his loins, which were girded with a panther hide, the man's skin was patterned in what seemed from Parker's distance—he was near the back of the tent, standing on a bench—a single intricate design of brilliant color. The man, who was small and sturdy, moved about on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own. (O'Connor, *Complete* 512–13)

The man's body is described as creating an "arabesque," with the term suggesting the ability of the man's tattooing to create a single, coherent work of art out of numerous fragments. Because the man's body appears to be an arabesque (O'Connor's narrator suggests), the tattoos covering his body seem to complement each other, and Parker is taken with the confluence of the tattoos as a thing of beauty, which inspires his own impulse to become covered with tattoos.

Parker had covered very nearly his whole body with tattoos by the time the story begins, and O'Connor provides a catalogue of his tattooing:

He had a tiger and a panther on each shoulder, a cobra coiled about a torch on his chest, hawks on his thighs, Elizabeth II and Philip over where his stomach and liver were respectively. He did not care what the subject was as long as it was colorful; on his abdomen he had a few obscenities, but only because that seemed like the proper place for them. (O'Connor, *Complete* 514)

Still, Parker's amply tattooed body falls short of its goal: "the effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors, but of something haphazard and botched" (O'Connor, *Complete* 514). As a result Parker is disappointed, finding his collection of tattoos incomplete, and the narrator expresses this shortcoming specifically as a failure to attain the artistic form of the arabesque, which, as we shall see, requires a kind of artistic unity as well as a diversity that may often seem chaotic.

The third and final time that the term arabesque is mentioned in the story comes when Parker has filled in the last space on which he had not had a tattoo: his back. When Parker identifies himself to his wife by the name that he has always loathed, Obadiah, we are told that "all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (O'Connor, *Complete* 528). Parker has experienced a profound moment of conversion, and the conversion is explained in terms of his body and soul becoming a work of art that is at once diverse and coherent, full of differing colors and images, but also perfect in their arrangement.

The fact that O'Connor highlights the arabesque on three separate and crucial occasions in her story suggests that we should pay close attention to it. Parker's tattoos are clearly something more than a mere hobby to him. They provide a means of expression that is comparable to the literary art of the storyteller, in that they enable him to somehow express the ineffable. As we shall see, when O'Connor uses the term arabesque, she uses a term that connected directly to similar efforts on the part of her literary forbears, Hawthorne and Poe, to express the ineffable.

Just as much as "Parker's Back" is a comical account of a marital misunderstanding and just as much as it is a theological reflection on

the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, “Parker’s Back” is a story of a man putting the final touches on a work of art, which in this case comprises his body and soul. When the story begins, Parker has an aspiration for his tattoos, which is that they will ultimately comprise a single, complex, yet unified work of art, resembling the tattooing of the man he had seen at the carnival. The implications of this artistic accomplishment come into view when we consider what this term that O’Connor chose to employ, the “arabesque,” meant for the creation of the modern short story in the nineteenth century.

### **The Image of the Arabesque in Poe and Hawthorne**

The term arabesque functions as both a literary term and a term from the visual arts. In the visual arts, it suggests the geometric patterns and images of flowers and birds that developed in the Islamic Near East in response to Islamic proscriptions of idolatry. In the literary arts, it has become associated with romanticism and complex stories of the wondrous in part through Poe, whose major collection of short stories published in 1840 was entitled *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and this pairing of concepts, the grotesque and the arabesque, could also reasonably be applied to O’Connor’s work in general, with particular aptness to “Parker’s Back.” In his “Preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*” Poe wrote that “I am led to think that it is this prevalence of the ‘Arabesque’ in my serious tales, which has induced one or two critics to tax me, in all friendliness, with what they have been pleased to call ‘Germanism’ and gloom” (Poe, “Preface” 620–21). As the rest of the “Preface” makes clear, especially with its reference to the “terror” in his work being “not of Germany, but of the soul,” Poe uses the artistic term “arabesque” to point towards his work’s engagement with the supernatural.

As G. R. Thompson has discussed in several studies, most notably his 1989 monograph *Romantic Arabesque, Contemporary Theory, and Postmodernism*, and as Jacob Rama Berman has considered more recently, the arabesque is a central concept in Edgar Allan Poe’s theory of the short story. Although there is a tradition dating back to Arthur Hobson Quinn of associating the arabesque with Poe’s serious tales and the grotesque with his

comic tales, Thompson has demonstrated that the more likely relation between the grotesque and arabesque is that the grotesque suggests “hopeless entanglement” and “total indeterminacy,” while the arabesque suggests “orderly symmetry” and “controlled or contained indeterminacy” (*Romantic* 170). Thompson’s description of the relationship between the concepts is based on his analysis of the arabesque as a literary form modeled on the patterns woven into Persian carpets, which, in keeping with Islamic proscriptions of idolatry, avoid representing the human form and instead represent non-human forms and geometrical shapes (171–79). Thus, for Poe as a pioneering creator and theorist of the short story, the term that O’Connor uses to describe Parker’s tattooed body, the arabesque, is a concept that ties together literary art, visual art, and the supernatural.

Nathaniel Hawthorne also created a variant on the arabesque in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hester Prynne decorates, not her skin, but the letter that proclaims her identity as an adulteress with the trappings of the arabesque. In describing the letter, Hawthorne’s narrator’s depiction of the scarlet letter that Hester Prynne has woven resembles the artistry that Poe and, following him, critics like Thompson have identified in the arabesque:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it at had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in keeping with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. (Hawthorne 40)

The image here is of the decoration of the human body to create a kind of artistic transcendence: Hester’s decoration of her clothing in defiance of Puritan norms is comparable to Parker’s decoration of his body in defiance of the suspicion of the arts that his wife expresses in the story. G. R. Thompson, who has played such a central role in identifying the importance of the arabesque for Poe’s aesthetics, has likewise suggested that the arabesque as a literary form is at

the heart of Hawthorne's artistry through his use of "aesthetically framed indeterminacy," and Hester's decoration of the letter would seem to be an example of this tendency in Hawthorne's work that is embraced by O'Connor in "Parker's Back" (Thompson, *Authorial Presence* 22).

A trait that Poe and O'Connor share that parallels their use of the arabesque is their association with the grotesque, as both authors are frequently described as creating grotesque stories and characters, and both responded directly to this association with the grotesque in their criticism. As with Poe, the grotesque is more easily recognizable in O'Connor's work than the arabesque, and O'Connor often sought, in her nonfiction, to refine the ways in which the label "grotesque" was being applied to her work. In her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor specifically associated herself with Hawthorne's treatment of the matter of representation in literature, writing that "Hawthorne knew his own problems and perhaps anticipated ours when he said he did not write novels, he wrote romances" ("Grotesque" 38). She argued that the grotesque can make "alive some experience that we are not accustomed to observe every day" and that it points us "away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" ("Grotesque" 40). It thus appears that O'Connor uses the terms "grotesque" and "arabesque" in a manner similar to that which Thompson and the Poe scholars following in his wake have seen Poe using those ideas to organize his short stories.

Jacqueline A. Zubeck has recently suggested that "Parker's Back" represents a turning away from the grotesque and violent at the end of O'Connor's life, pointing out that the story was "completed nine days before Flannery O'Connor's death" and suggesting that the story provides a view of O'Connor's theological commitments undistorted by grotesquery and satire (381). It is hard to deny the truth of this argument entirely. "Parker's Back" is a distinctive story, and it is certainly much more explicit in its references to the sacramental understanding of nature and art associated with O'Connor's own Roman Catholicism than is much of her other work. And yet, humor—even violent and grotesque humor—has not

disappeared from “Parker’s Back.” Instead it has been subsumed, as Zubeck hints, into something larger: a sense of wonder and awe at the capacity of art for communicating divine power and suffering. In this sense, the grotesque serves the arabesque, and indeed they intertwine, in “Parker’s Back.”

### **Back to “Parker’s Back:” The Nineteenth-Century Arabesque in O’Connor’s Twentieth-Century Story**

So, in what sense is “Parker’s Back” an arabesque? And what does O’Connor make the idea of the arabesque communicate that is specific to her work? On one level, a tattoo that represents Christ might seem completely opposed to the anti-representational impulses that are associated with the arabesque (some of which I have discussed in a 2010 essay on Poe’s use of the arabesque), and, indeed, I would suggest that the arabesque’s Islamic proscription on the representation of the human form is not a part of O’Connor’s meaning in invoking the arabesque, even though she does invoke similar proscriptions within Protestant Christianity. On another level, the large Byzantine Christ in the middle of Parker’s back can be seen as complementing the arabesque figures that surround it, and in tandem with them, pointing towards the infinite. In this sense, the arabesque as an artistic form that suggests the infinite does become a major part of O’Connor’s artistic and theological design. By putting the image of Christ at the center of Parker’s arabesque of tattoos, O’Connor appropriates—one might even say baptizes—a form that has significant theological distinctions in its sources from her own Catholic Christianity and weaves the arabesque and the incarnation together. I would also suggest that O’Connor’s blend of humor and awe in this story resembles the particular form that the arabesque took in the nineteenth-century short story as realized by Poe and Hawthorne: at once parodic and deeply earnest, with both dimensions of the work—humor and reverence—dependent on each other.

O’Connor’s humor is at its sharpest in “Parker’s Back.” At the heart of the story is a complex theological joke about the difference between the Christian churches that value the representation of

# Chronology of Flannery O'Connor's Life\_\_\_\_\_

- 1925** Mary Flannery O'Connor is born (an only child) on March 25 in Savannah, Georgia, to Edward Francis O'Connor Jr. and Regina (Cline) O'Connor.
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- 1937** Her father develops lupus, a serious disease in which the body's immune system attacks various parts of the patient's own body.
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- 1938** Moves first to Atlanta, where her father is now employed, but then moves to Milledgeville, Georgia, a small town south of Atlanta. It was once the capital of Georgia and is the ancestral home of the family of O'Connor's mother.
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- 1939-40** While O'Connor attends high school, her father, ill with lupus, moves to Milledgeville.
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- 1941** On February 1, O'Connor's father dies of lupus.
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- 1942** Graduates from high school. Begins attending Georgia State College for Women in Milledgeville, where she eventually majors in sociology.
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- 1943-45** Actively contributes to campus publications, especially by creating humorous cartoons. Writes creatively. Graduates in the spring.
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- 1945** Begins graduate studies in journalism at the University of Iowa but soon joins the nationally respected creative writing program there, one of the first in the country. Writes short stories, intending to complete a master's thesis in creative writing.
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# Works by Flannery O'Connor

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## Short Story Collections

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find, and Other Stories* (1955)

*Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965)

## Novels

*Wise Blood* (1952)

*The Violent Bear It Away* (1960)

## Nonfiction

*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1969)

*The Presence of Grace, and Other Book Reviews* (1983)

## Letters

*The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (1979)

*Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainerd Cheneys* (1986)

## Collections

*The Complete Stories* (1971)

*Collected Works* (1988)

**Robert C. Evans** is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM), where he has taught since 1982. In 1984, he received his PhD from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a university fellowship. In later years, his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982, he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and, in 1989, was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM, he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teacher Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently, he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is one of three editors of the *Ben Jonson Journal* and is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition*.

He is the author or editor of over thirty books on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature. He is also the author of roughly three hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.