

Tamara Pospíšilová
Moments of Grace: Redemption in Flannery O'Connor's Selected Short Stories
BA Thesis
Opponent's Report

"Moments of Grace: Redemption in Flannery O'Connor's Selected Short Stories" is a well-written, clearly structured thesis that after an introduction to the life and work of Flannery O'Connor situates an interpretation of twelve of her short stories on the background of the Christian concept of grace. Tamara Pospíšilová suggests that "O'Connor, being a novelist with both Catholic and Southern upbringing, is [...] capable of transforming the abstract laws and teachings of the Church and projecting them into the unique reality of the South" (13) and that the Southern author's work advances particularly the notion of actual grace. Unlike habitual grace, which implies permanent life in accordance with God, actual grace is a moment of God's manifestation; divine, transformative intervention. The thesis argues that whereas Augustine developed primarily the notion of habitual grace, O'Connor explored the notion of actual grace. In her conception, moreover, actual grace involves pain and suffering: "O'Connor at last abandons Augustine's definition, which finds grace in love and the desire of the good, instead turning to pain, transforming it into a catalyst of Redemption; a way to recognize grace, repent for the original sin and achieve Salvation" (19). Therefore, "the author's interpretation of grace is profoundly intertwined with the suffering of her characters, accompanying each moment of grace, enabling the characters to either reject or accept the divine gift" (18). Finally, the thesis proposes that in O'Connor's fictional world, divine intervention inspires habitual grace only rarely; more often are the results uncertain or the characters remain unaffected, incapable of recognizing the moment of actual grace.

In the second half of the thesis, these arguments are illustrated on stories that range from the early and well-known works such as "The Geranium," "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" to "The River" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge." The first part briefly summarizes the stories, with the objective of identifying the moment of grace; the second, briefer part describes the effects of grace on the characters. It is argued that whereas characters such as Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" do not feel pain and therefore do not recognize actual grace, others (for example Hulga in "Good Country People") suffer but the experience of actual grace does not result in life in habitual grace. Only characters such as Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger" and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" "recognize[...] emotional and physical suffering as the only way out of that condition" (65); the grandmother therefore "realizes that Man is lost, including herself and the Misfit, she reaches her hand out to the Misfit and claims him as one of her children. This marks her acceptance of pain of grace to which one must respond with love" (65).

Overall, the thesis is clear, well-argued and supported with a good range of secondary sources. Not being a specialist in O'Connor's work, rather than disputing Pospíšilová's interpretation of the stories, could she perhaps during the defense comment on the proposed link between grace, violence, pain and suffering. In her view, can violence and pain awaken love? What kind of love? How can violent means lead to peaceful ends; does violence not produce more violence? Love emergent out of pain: is that not a rather sadomasochistic dynamics? Also, in stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find," what is the point of the grandmother supposedly acquiring habitual grace when the end is not life in God but death? In O'Connor's work, is there any place for nonviolence; may actual and habitual grace emerge in different ways? Finally, is there any recognizable gender dynamics of grace in O'Connor's stories?

Proposed grade: výborně.



Pavla Veselá, PhD.

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