

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor: The Author of Grace and Grotesque

Cheyenne Franklin

Flannery O'Connor shaped her stories around grotesque characters, disturbing settings, and brutal plots. Unlike today's classic examples of horror entertainment, O'Connor's short stories can classify as Southern Literature, Catholic Writing, as well as Horror Fiction. Can violence and distortion really have a place in art though, especially religious art? This paper studies O'Connor's reconciliation of grace and grotesque in her writing. O'Connor's personal letters and her short stories "Revelation," "Good Country People," and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" provide examples of this symbiotic relationship between grace and grotesque and evidence of O'Connor's intentional use of these seemingly distinct topics. This paper begins with a general definition of *grotesque* and progresses through O'Connor's various re-shapings of grotesqueness and its usefulness. These varied forms of deformity in O'Connor's writing lead readers through three states of mind: first entertainment, then horror, and finally a state of grace. Once O'Connor's views of grotesqueness and grace are unraveled, the two most distinguishing features of O'Connor's stories prove to be the very elements that give her stories and their meaning the enduring power that continues to touch readers today.

Flannery O'Connor: The Author of Grace and Grotesque

...love suggests tenderness, whereas grace can be violent or would have to be to compete with the kind of evil I can make concrete (Letters 373).

The American public often associates horror and mutilation with secular entertainment today. Many of those who consider themselves cultured shame films like *Friday the Thirteenth* and *Chainsaw Massacre* and strictly classify them as “horror” films, and reviewers label such grotesque entertainment as horror or perhaps suspense but rarely any other combination of genres. With this image of grotesque entertainment, it is shocking to encounter an artist like Flannery O'Connor, despite her Catholic lifestyle, surrounded her stories with grotesque characters, settings, and plots. Unlike today's classic examples of horror entertainment, O'Connor's works can fit the classifications of Southern Literature, Catholic Writing, as well as Horror Fiction. Can violence and distortion really have a place in art though, especially religious art? Once reconciled, grotesqueness and grace as the two most distinguishing features of O'Connor's stories prove to be the very elements that give her stories and their meaning the enduring power that continues to touch readers today.

Grotesque, in its original usage, was an art term which referred to a type of ancient mural painting that combined humans and animals with images of plants which “may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature” (Merriam-Webster). Similarly, O'Connor uses human and animal forms as well as images of nature in her stories, ultimately distorting each of them. O'Connor's use of the grotesque extends well beyond the word's original use, however. More recently, the public uses *grotesque* to describe the “comically or repulsively ugly or distorted” (*Oxford Dictionaries*). O'Connor uses grotesqueness in both these forms: comically to entertain and repulsively to enlighten.

O'Connor's use of grotesqueness permeates through numerous aspects of her stories. When looking for examples of O'Connor's varied use of the grotesque, "Good Country People" offers several examples. Hulga, like so many of O'Connor's characters, receives an unforgettable description. "Big spectacted" ("Good Country People" 3) Hulga is a "hulking" (2) girl with a wooden leg who, in place of walking, goes around "stumping" (3). While introducing Hulga, O'Connor uses the word *ugly* four times in two pages, describing her "remarks...so ugly," her name "the ugliest" and an "ugly sound," and her movements "ugly-sounding" (2-3). Even the character's name has been purposefully formed (by Hulga) to be grotesque: "Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language" (3). From overbearing form, to bad attitude and distasteful name, Hulga is a grotesque character.

Beyond its characters, the plot of "Good Country People" is similarly twisted. There is the memory of a child maimed in a hunting accident, not one but two characters with a fascination for Hulga's distorted handicap, and a Bible salesman who turns out to be more twisted than both the gossiping women and the nihilistic daughter. In the second to the last scene, with Hulga and Manly Pointer in the hayloft, the story leads readers to believe there will be a rape scene. With context removed, the dialog goes as follows:

Pointer: "I don't care a thing about what all you done. I just want to know if you love me or don'tcher?"

Hulga: "Yes, yes."

Pointer: Okay then," ... "Prove it." (13)

In actuality, Pointer is after Hulga's wooden leg not her virginity, but O'Connor seems to have chosen her language specifically to mislead readers. In the end, the idea of a man who deceives with the sole purpose of stealing prosthetic body parts proves more disturbing than the twisted

plot that the reader originally expects. With his unusual desire, Pointer deviates from the expected stereotypical psychopath and demonstrates a whole new level of twisted behavior.

Last, even the landscape of “Good Country People” is distorted. While Hulga and Manly Pointer are in the hayloft, there are three descriptions of the landscape seen through an opening in the barn, each description different from the last. The first, and most accurate, description paints the scene as “two pink –speckled hillsides...back against a dark ridge of woods (12). The second description comes after Pointer has removed Hulga’s glasses and is seen through her distorted vision: “She looked away from him off into the hollow sky and then down at a black ridge and then down farther into what appeared to be two green swelling lakes” (13). What to Hulga appears to be two green lakes is probably the two pink hillsides described earlier. At the end of the story, the landscape appears in yet another form, this time as a “green speckled lake.” The original description mentions nothing about a lake, and the use of “speckled” repeated from the first description, suggests that the lake is actually the “speckled hillsides.” Even nature, the antithesis of grotesque (unnatural), O’Connor finds a way to distort.

O’Connor carries these evil and grotesque landscapes throughout many of her works. Frederick Asals discusses the symbolism of O’Connor’s setting descriptions. Asals begins by pointing out the disgusting language the short story writer uses when discussing cities, including the city in “The River” which O’Connor describes as “a cluster of warts on the side of the mountain” and the city from “Everything That Rises Must Converge” which O’Connor calls “bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness” (Asals 68). As Joy-Hulga’s mother accused her daughter of doing when choosing her new name, O’Connor seems to have searched for the ugliest words with the most disturbing images to describe the cities of her fictional worlds. O’Connor, who lived in the country, might have harbored a special grudge against cities,

but she also paints the countryside as frightening “monstrosities.” Asals takes readers from O’Connor’s ugly cities to her frightening countryside, showing the author’s indiscrimination when displaying the evil of the world. Asals explains how the woods in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” becomes “an ominous and ever more animated witness to the grim actions [the murders]” (68). O’Connor describes these woods as “tall and dark and deep” and “gaped like a dark open mouth” (qtd. in Asals 68). In the end, O’Connor’s story settings are as disturbing as the “hulking” Hulga.

In his book *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser describes grotesque art as “art whose form and subject matter appear to be a part of, while contradictory to, the natural, social, or personal worlds of which we are a part.” He goes on to explain that the grotesque is related to disorder (qtd. in Yates 2). Many of O’Connor’s stories deal with the immoral ordering of society, often reordering (disordering in the eyes of the literary characters) the good, the bad, the high class, and the low “trash.” This grotesque disorder is most clear in O’Connor’s short story “Revelation.” The end of this story shows, in a heavenly vision, a reordering of classes with the “righteous” last. Despite her presence in a pig pen, this disorder is what disturbs Mrs. Turpin rather than the ironically tidy pigsty (“Revelation” 703-4).

O’Connor’s grotesque writing takes many different shapes to accomplish various goals, but these goals are only accomplished when the grotesque is combined with grace. To recognize grace in O’Connor’s stories and understand the cohabitation of grace and the grotesque in her works, it is important to first determine, as best we can, O’Connor’s definition of *grace*. First, we know from a letter she wrote to “A” that O’Connor saw grace as an experience which changes the recipient (*Letters* 275). O’Connor came from a lifetime of Catholic upbringing, and religion impacted her thinking as well as her writing. Therefore, *grace* for O’Connor was undoubtedly

related to her faith, which taught that grace “can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical” (389). According to Fr. John Hardon, Actual Grace, as taught in the Catholic Church, is a “Temporary supernatural intervention by God to enlighten the mind or strengthen the will to perform supernatural actions that lead to heaven. Actual grace is therefore a transient divine assistance to enable man to obtain, retain, or grow in supernatural grace and the life of God” (Hardon). Actual Grace in the Catholic Church is anything that changes an individual to live a more righteous lifestyle. We also know that O’Connor considered this change a painful process: “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful” (*Letters* 307). In contrast to the tender moments of grace that many religions present, O’Connor saw God as capable of working through unexpected mediums that might be considered unnatural, horrifying, or even grotesque.

Most scholars agree that moments of grace are a dependable signature of O’Connor’s writings, but where does a Catholic writer get off creating such grotesque stories? In *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor explains, “Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil...” (113). The most surprising part of O’Connor’s definition of *grace* is the violence which she claims is not just a companion of grace but actually a component of grace. Returning to the analysis of Kayser, he writes that grotesqueness has the power to give the audience feelings of “uneasiness, fear, repulsion, delight, amusement...” and can also raise “religious questions and the yearning for spiritual transformation” (qtd. in Yates 2). There are three reasons why O’Connor used grotesqueness in her works: to entertain, to horrify, and to give a greater appreciation for grace. Each of these goals serves as a stepping stone to the next goal, so that the grotesqueness guides readers in a series of steps always leading to O’Connor’s ultimate goal: to reveal the supernatural power of Grace.

The first reason for O'Connor's grotesque writing is for entertainment. In "The Comfortable Chair: Using Humor in Creative Nonfiction," Dinty W. Moore discusses humor in writing, specifically in writing that deals with typically serious subjects. He explains the importance of comic relief when discussing somber topics (Moore 122-4). In an interview, Margaret Meaders said about O'Connor's humor, "People who understand humor see it even in her most tragic stories because it is there. Her stories represent a sort of laughing at life. That's what she did with her own life. She took things very seriously but also had the light touch toward life" (qtd. in Paulson 132). Moore explains in his essay that "the line between an uncomfortable truth and a good belly laugh is remarkably thin" (Moore 124). Making a "difficult truth" a "belly laugh" is not only the result of a small difference but is often the only way to get readers to approach a difficult truth.

In his essay, Moor goes on to give a list of different formulas for incorporating humor into writing. In this list, he includes exaggeration (127). Exaggeration can be seen in O'Connor's cartoons, which display an array of characters as grotesque in their drawings as her literary characters are in their descriptions. These cartoon forms are bulky, with long and obtrusive noses, small heads, and large feet. Rarely are the characters smiling, but instead scowl with exaggerated eyebrows drawn as deep v-shapes. Even when they are smiling, these comics are frightening, as is the case with the cartoon O'Connor created for the May 30, 1944 edition of *The Colonnade* where the happy character displays an unnaturally toothy grin (*The Cartoons* 72). O'Connor's exaggerated characters, both written and etched, are a form of humorous entertainment.

A second technique presented by Moor for incorporating humor into literature is the use of irony (126). Along with exaggerated humor, there is grotesque irony in O'Connor's writings.

Many of her characters have suggestive, even disturbing names which employ the humor of irony. Among these characters are Manly Pointer, Joy-Hulga, and Mary Grace. “Manly Pointer” foreshadows the shadiness of the seemingly good country Bible salesman, “Joy-Hulga” symbolizes the character’s intentional change from innocent child to hardened woman, and “Mary Grace” is anything but merry or graceful. In addition to these characters, Gilbert H. Muller shows the continued irony in other character names:

Among the more memorable characters who are thus caricatured are Tom T. Shiftlet, the shifty and shiftless prankster in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and his prospective mother-in-law, Lucynell Crater, whose name reflects a wasteland environment; Mr. Paradise, a pig-like incarnation of the devil who, in “The River,” offers the boy Bevel the hope of false salvation; Joy Hopewell, the cynical and atheistic cripple in “Good Country People,” who by the end of the story is bereft of joy, hope, and well-being; and Haze Motes, the prototypical grotesque hero of *Wise Blood*, whose befogged vision is corrected only through the blaze of crucifixion. (Muller 10)

Ugly foreshadowing, depressing symbolism, and twisted contradictions give deeper meaning to these names so that they become a kind of dark inside joke that O’Connor shares with readers who are familiar with her ironic style. Despite topics dealing with social prejudice, death, mutilation, and even references to the Holocaust (in “The Displaced Person”), O’Connor strategically plants irony to make readers laugh even as they scold themselves for losing their serious composure. Along with her characters and landscapes, O’Connor’s humor is grotesque, leaving readers to wonder why such terrible topics are amusing.

Another place where we find O’Connor’s use of distortion for the sake of humor is in her distortion of reader expectations. In addition to the definition given earlier, the Merriam-Webster

Dictionary extends the definition of *grotesque* to include anything “departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical.” In this way, O’Connor demonstrates grotesqueness in yet another form. O’Connor takes “typical” story traits that readers might use as safe places, and she mutilates even these. In his analysis of O’Connor’s story “Revelation,” Bob Dowell describes the work as humorous and believes this humor is in this very distortion of expectations. Readers expect a vision of heaven to come in a sacred moment, but instead, it comes to Mrs. Turpin by way of a girl bordering insanity and a bunch of swine (237). Two other examples of O’Connor’s distortion of expectations appear in “The River” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Throughout wars and natural disasters, societies expect, at least in a humane setting, that women and children should survive. In the afore-mentioned stories, however, an elderly grandmother and three young children are killed. It seems the only expectation safe from O’Connor’s maiming pen is the anticipation that her characters will be plagued by violence.

If O’Connor’s reasons for including the grotesque ended with mere entertainment, it would be no different than the twenty-first century’s celebration of the violent and unnatural. O’Connor’s goal in providing amusement through distortion, however, extends beyond attracting readers and providing comic relief. In *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor writes, “our present grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity” (44). If readers are entertained, they are disgusted with themselves. If they are disturbed, they are confused. Whether they are entertained or confused, the average reader is left unsettled by the maiming, disfigurements, and unresolved endings. The second purpose O’Connor had in writing such grotesqueness was to horrify: “I am interested in making up a good case for distortion, as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see” (*Letters* 79). O’Connor recognized

numbness in the public, so she strove to shock her readers by exaggerating their gross world: “Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusion of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them” (*Mystery and Manners* 112). If the evil ways of man could be missed in the real world, O’Connor was going to make sure it could not be missed in her fictional world.

O’Connor intended for her stories to educate the public on their reality, and it was frustrating for her when this point was missed. In a letter to “A”, she writes about her exasperations:

I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call *A Good Man* brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them, and when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror. (*Letters* 90)

The real horror that O’Connor must have been thinking of was the horrors of our world. Perhaps what tired O’Connor were the readers who criticized the violence in her stories while permitting the same violence in their surroundings. Equally frustrating must have been the readers who completely missed the connection between her grotesque fictional worlds and the evil of our own world. These were readers like Vivian Mercier who wrote a review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, expressing her opinion that “...the realistic convention in which it is written jars too sharply against the basic improbability of the plot. Only if set in a dream world...could this fable remain convincing after one has put down the book” (qtd. in *Flannery O’Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction* 126). Just as irony is sometimes lost on certain individuals, some readers missed

O'Connor's real-life horror which she simply magnified in her fictional stories. There were plenty of readers, however, who did understand O'Connor's stories and the real-world application they held. Among other fan mail, O'Connor received letters written by inmates and, according to Ted R. Spivey, O'Connor believed this group of readers understood her stories better than her other free readers (Paulson 135). What was it that these readers comprehended so much better than others who were practiced in interpreting meaning? This brings us to O'Connor's third reason for including grotesqueness.

The third and final goal O'Connor had in writing grotesque stories was to bring her readers to a greater appreciation for grace. O'Connor's reasoning is summed up best in her own words when she explains that "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures." She equates these necessary exaggerations with having "to make your vision apparent by shock" when the audience is deaf and blind to faith (qtd. in Sweeny). Her characters themselves go through a violent process leading to potential grace, as is the case for the characters of "A Good Man is Hard to Find." O'Connor explains in a letter to John Hawkes the violent grace of this story:

The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him... (*Letters* 389)

The Misfit's words change the grandmother, and the reaction of the grandmother then causes a change in the Misfit, which is revealed by his remark about killing the grandmother: "It's no real pleasure in life" ("A Good Man" 689). Like O'Connor's characters, readers are also taken on a journey of grace-filled violence as they venture through each of the three phases described in this

essay. Starting with amusement from the outrageous images and ironic jokes and then progressing to horror as the outrageous evil begins to reflect reality, readers ultimately find themselves in a third metamorphosis of the mind, right where O'Connor intended to bring them. When confronted with so many disturbing exaggerations of what really exists, the only place to run to is grace. O'Connor writes about her own characters that "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (*Mystery and Manners* 112). O'Connor's goal in creating such violence was not just to reach her characters, though. She constructed violent plots to bring readers through entertainment, horror, and finally grace.

With her readers still in this third state of mind, O'Connor vanishes and leaves her audience to grapple, much like her characters, with the idea of Grace. The author of grace and grotesque never takes readers to a fourth phase to provide a final resolution of emotions. She instead leaves her stories with unresolved and ambiguous endings, leaving readers to wonder "will they accept the grace?" Returning to Muller's analysis of O'Connor's writing style, he concludes that "Miss O'Connor realized that to talk about evil and grace in the kind of world in which we live requires extraordinary techniques and effects..." (105). O'Connor wrote with a specific goal always in mind and realized that her sensitive topics of sin, distortion, and forgiveness would require careful writing. The strategy she chose was grotesqueness. O'Connor's writings form a unique, mixed genre of humor, horror, and religion. Her works have touched many generations of readers because she found a way to reconcile the contradictions of two seemingly distinct entities. O'Connor is revealed as the master of many story-telling techniques, but the style she will certainly be forever known for, and would probably be most proud of, is her unprecedented and enduring work as the author of *both* grace and grotesque.

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Abstract

Unselfing at the Point of Grace: Examining Connections Between the Ideas of Iris Murdoch and Flannery O'Connor Within Their Literature

Elizabeth Carpenter

Iris Murdoch, a self-described Atheist, and Flannery O'Connor, a devoted Catholic, appear divergent in their respective worldviews; however, upon further examination, these two share parallel views on what constitutes a bad person and how one achieves a metaphorical rebirth, exemplified by the characters in their literature. Within this paper, I will attempt to connect these authors' ideology using their literature as my primary sources. This comparison of literature illustrates the ideological connection the authors shared, despite the stigmatizing labels from which the perspectives are separately claimed. It shows the potential of a commonality among those who lack or practice religion, and it allows the literature speak for the author, rather than the author speak for the literature; the literature itself is the bridge between the two authors, who might have never been able to meet in the middle, due to their separate schools of thought.

Unselfing at the Point of Grace: Examining Connections Between the Ideas of Iris Murdoch and Flannery O'Connor Within Their Literature

What a delightful thought to bring two prominent figures in the history of literature together for a hypothetical chat and imagine their ensuing conversation. When first picturing authors Iris Murdoch and Flannery O'Connor sitting down for a cup tea, or perhaps Coca-Cola mixed with coffee for O'Connor, it is curious to speculate what subject that would leave them in agreement (Williams). Both women were actively writing at the same time, and O'Connor even wrote to a friend, "This Iris Murdoch is very good. Have you tried her?" (*Habit* 301). Irish-born Murdoch, a novelist by day and an unassuming moral philosopher by night, was a self-described Atheist. The Georgian O'Connor, who spoke with a deliciously thick Southern accent, was heavily influenced by her lifelong Catholic religion, which was reflected in her literature. Society insists that those who lie on opposite ends of one another—specifically on the topic of religion—rarely meet in the middle, but close readings of the literature of these authors dispel this notion. The source of one's morals compose one's own fabric of being, and, on the surface, these two couldn't appear more divergent; however, upon further examination, these two illustrate parallel views on what constitutes a faulty individual and how one achieves rebirth, as carried out by the characters in their literature.

It should not be anyone's intention, including my own, to force a religious agenda on the works of Murdoch, nor an atheistic agenda on O'Connor's work. Indeed, it can be stimulating to have a variety of readings on a work (i.e. a feminist or theological reading); however, it is false to assume these authors are something they simply are not. Murdoch was an atheist; O'Connor was a Catholic. Both authors; however, respected one another, whether through their literature or their religion. O'Connor said of Murdoch, "Many truths are represented by Iris Murdoch but that

her truth and her morality are superior to the teachings of the Church I disbelieve--but then what do you expect of me? (*Habit* 457).” Clearly, O’Connor respected the truths of which Murdoch spoke in their isolated state without the looming label of philosophy. Of religion, Murdoch recognized the value of certain aspects of it, admitting that, “moral life needs the aid of traditional forms of religious practice, such as meditation and prayer” (Antonaccio, Schweiker xiv). Murdoch also “protested against reductionist accounts of the human individual bequeathed by modern philosophy and modern science” and found them to leave “a far too shallow and flimsy idea of human personality” (Antonaccio 4). Murdoch realized that modern philosophy and science fall short as guidelines for humanity and did not accept them as the ultimate instructions by which to follow. I am not suggesting that the overarching branches of Murdoch’s philosophy and O’Connor’s religion are interchangeable; it is certain ideas under both umbrellas that can be compared as similar. By juxtaposing the two authors’ literature, the concepts in which they believed actually dissolve the labels of their religion, or lack thereof, and create an interpretation based on the motives of the characters.

These authors give the characters of their literature the ability to manifest these principles that influenced their work, which gives their literature a more objective source upon which to compare these concepts; these characters are not their authors, rather they are an extension of their authors. English Professor Elizabeth Dipple describes Murdoch’s novelistic characters as “standing in for her authorial point of view” (Dipple 142). As O’Connor explained to a colleague, “You have to look at a novel or story as a novel or story; as saying something about life colored by the writer, not about the writer, colored by life” (*Habit* 158). The characters these authors have created are meant to be examples of the world in the authors’ eyes not the authors themselves within the world; therefore, we can use their characters as the middlemen between

the subjective author and the objective audience as a way to compare the authors' views. Murdoch used metaphors within her philosophical writing and argued that they "can be a mode of understanding," and O'Connor's formulaic short stories are metaphors to reveal to her audience the errors of society (*Sovereignty* 91). This also suggests that O'Connor's work was "good art," according to Murdoch's definition because she wrote literature that was meant to be attainable and examined by all; it isn't just an exhibition of "personal fantasy" (*Sovereignty* 57/84). O'Connor supported this idea by writing, "You may write for the joy of it, but the act of writing is not complete in itself. It has its end in its audience. Writing is a good example of self-abandonment" (*Habit* 458). Therefore, the literature of these authors is a credible source of comparison because both women meant to, in some way, reach a multitude. However, as O'Connor argued, "Fiction doesn't lie, but it can't tell the whole truth" (*Habit* 158). We must take into account the authors' personal views, but, again, do so with examination that removes religiously and philosophically based labels that could be stigmatizing, because "an overtheorized approach stops the fluidity and multidirectional aspect of the novels at the same time as it calls attention to itself rather than to the more challenging job of trying to gather some of the salient aspects of these broadly beckoning artifacts" (Dipple 147). By combining both the characters' makeup and author's own thoughts, we can find the similarities of ideas between the two.

It is sometimes too easily accomplished to discern the antagonist from the protagonist in literature. In Murdoch's *The Green Knight*, it becomes clear throughout the novel that the character Lucas Gaffe is one who is deservedly recognized as the antagonist. Lucas, the adopted elder brother of Clement, fosters bitterness toward his younger brother, carried from his youth into adulthood. He is a "learned and clever" scholar and earns the esteem of his colleagues and

his affectionate younger brother (*Knight* 274). Lucas's education and intellect become his existence. In accordance with this, he instructs his pupil and supposed family friend, Sefton Anderson, to never marry because marriages end solitude, and "solitude is essential if real thinking is to take place" (Murdoch 274). When Lucas tries to murder Clement, he is stopped by passerby Peter Mir, who is severely injured by Lucas and later continuously confronts Lucas about the situation. Lucas's self-involved attitude, dismissive of others, is magnified during a heated exchange between Lucas and Peter in which Lucas tells him:

"I recognise no obligation to you, I have committed no crime against you, I see no reason why you should speak of forgiving me, the question simply does not arise...

I want to get on with my work and not be continually disturbed by you, and I am sure that when you have freed your mind of these fruitless obsessions you will find many attractive and valuable things to do with your life" (*Knight* 251/252).

It is clear Lucas has no level of insight into the ownership he holds in the situation; he is completely self-obsessed and cannot fathom or appreciate anyone's pain beyond his own. It is Peter who is the disturbance, not Lucas.

It is this selfish attitude displayed by Lucas that Murdoch criticizes in her *Sovereignty of Good*: "Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality, and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues" (*Sovereignty* 93). This selfless respect for reality is completely lacking in Lucas; he lives in a self-constructed egotistical reality where he and his acquired knowledge reign supreme. This vast knowledge is what Lucas surrounds himself with, like a shield, to intimidate and berate others, once telling Clement, "You are crude and naive. Can't you *think*?" (*Knight* 89). He sincerely believes his intellect makes him superior. Murdoch discusses Lucas's kind: "A serious scholar

has great merits. But a serious scholar who is also a good man knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of his life” (*Sovereignty* 94). Although Lucas’s great intelligence is a source of pride with its own merits, it cannot redeem his unvirtuous being, much like O’Connor’s Hulga.

In O’Connor’s short story, “Good Country People,” the character Hulga Hopewell, like Lucas, has a permanent chip on her shoulder: She is a “large blonde girl” with an artificial leg, who is “highly educated,” having earned a Ph.D. in philosophy (*Other Stories* 170). Because she has a “weak heart,” Hulga must remain in the countryside at her childhood home, and Hulga “made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far away from these red hills and good country people” (*Other Stories* 175). Much of Hulga’s resentment stems from being forcibly confined to a place she sees as beneath her and living with a mother she also sees as intellectually beneath her. Hulga’s perpetually cheery yet simple-minded mother Mrs. Hopewell, lives by the cliché that “good country people” are the “salt of the earth” (*Other Stories* 184). These people are foundational to society and are meant to be emulated. Mrs. Hopewell believes that the thirty-two year old Hulga is “still a child” and to Hulga’s fury, advises her that “a smile never hurt anyone” (*Other Stories* 176). Mrs. Hopewell also reads an underlined section in one of Hulga’s books, which turns out to be part of German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s *What is Metaphysics*, but she sees it as “some evil incantation in gibberish” (*Other Stories* 176/177). While Mrs. Hopewell is meant to be the opposite of her daughter, O’Connor does not portray her as the hero of this story; she is ignorant and oblivious in character, which are faults as equal as the defects found in Hulga.

It is obvious that Hulga considers herself superior to those in her surroundings, and is described as looking at “nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity” (*Other Stories*

176). There is no one within her small sphere whom Hulga believes can match her intellect. It isn't until Hulga's exchange with Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, that she realizes the error of her mentality. At first it is Hulga who seems in control as she tells Pointer, "We are all damned... but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's kind of a salvation" (*Other Stories* 191). Hulga, a nihilist, is lecturing Pointer, someone she assumes to be a similar simple-minded Christian, like her mother, about the transcendence that her lifestyle brings, as someone who possesses a superior mind. However, Pointer is not the simpleton Hulga presumes him to be; he manipulates her into taking off her artificial leg, which he then steals and leaves declaring, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (*Other Stories* 195). Hulga is now left with the realization that she is not as smart as she thought she was, and her perception of the world is too narrow. Her incapacity to see others as equal to her "proves injurious not only to others but ultimately to herself in a very tangible and direct sense, as her inability to recognize Pointer's alterity... leads to her devastating humiliation and loss" (Hubbard 61). It is not her nihilism or knowledge that make her a bad person, it is her "urge to quantify and classify other human beings and to ignore the question of being itself" (Hubbard 56); she uses her nihilism and education as blinders, mechanically and without thought, categorizing those around, instead of using these tools as the sources of clarity they are meant to be.

Both Lucas and Hulga are considered erudite, having reached considerable heights in their educational careers. This, however, is not what makes them good people, which is clearly revealed in their respective stories. These characters are unable to reconcile their acquired knowledge with something greater and more meaningful-- being a good person, who is aware of their surroundings. Lucas and Hulga do not analyze the reality in which they live and, in its

place, use their educations as constructed egocentric realities, dooming them to perpetual blindness; one may obtain extensive knowledge of the universe, but by not acknowledging the reality of the universe, one has created a counter-productive existence. For O'Connor, "purity has been overridden by pride of intellect through [Hulga's] fine education" (*Habit* 170). This purity is what leads an individual to becoming a good person. The ability to do this is what Murdoch considered "the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (*Sovereignty* 91). Lucas and Hulga have both proven the author's shared idea that education does not necessarily enlighten the individual to a thorough and necessary extent. When a person starts striving to be good, along with the enhancements their education offers, then they come closer to the concept of rebirth.

Within *The Green Knight*, several transformations of characters occur, but there is one particular metamorphosis that is significant within the realm of rebirth. Bellamy James, a central figure in the novel, decides "in the middle of life's journey to abandon the world," and in order to do this, Bellamy surrenders "temporal pleasures such as alcohol and dog-owning" (*Knight* 1/2). Letting go of these ties is crucial to Bellamy after he supposedly realizes what it is that has been out of reach for him: "Then *something*, which he felt was at last *that* for which he had been seeking, *overcame* him and he decided to 'give up the world' in the most extreme and complete manner possible by becoming a monk in an enclosed order" (*Knight* 23/24). Bellamy decides to give up the world by moving out of his flat and quitting his job as a social worker; he believes ridding himself of these things will allow something more "irrevocable" in his life-- Truth (*Knight* 24). Bellamy "is absurdly greedy for romanticized religious experience," instead of a tangible reality. (Dipple 167). Throughout the novel, Bellamy seeks the counsel of his beloved priest, Damien Butler for religious instruction, but the priest repeatedly cautions Bellamy against

his giving up so much. Bellamy then seeks the guidance of Peter Mir, who “unwillingly becomes his [new] Christ,” but once Mir dies and the priest is out of the picture, Bellamy is finally left with only himself in charge of his direction, and that is when he begins to transform (Dipple 167).

Toward the end of *The Green Knight*, Bellamy begins to reverse the decisions he’s made that he once believed would help him achieve a higher understanding of life. While he is sifting through old letters from Butler, he fully acknowledges that he can no longer rely on him for spiritual advice, and he admits to himself, “I must think of him as vanished utterly and gone forever” (*Knight* 464). Instead he thinks of Emil, a close friend, whose love he once tried to deny, and, in turn, recognizes his own love for him: “He thought, yes it is true, I love Emil, and Emil loves me, I shall get that job helping people, and we shall live together and stay together” (*Knight* 465). Rather than living in “a soothing day-dream,” which is the barren world Bellamy has constructed for himself, believing it to be a foundation for transcendence, he now decides to take real action in the world (*Sovereignty* 464). Being a social worker involves actually psychically helping people instead of reflecting on life and making vain attempts at giving up possessions. As Murdoch argues, “There is only outward activity, ergo only moral outward activity, and what we call inward activity is merely the shadow of this cast back into the mind” (*Sovereignty* 21). By taking action instead of meditating, Bellamy is, according to Murdoch, actually closer to the transcendence which he craves.

In the final pages, Bellamy completes his transformation, his unselfing. He decides to help Moy, a close family friend, get into art school, wondering if he and Emil could “adopt” her in order to be a sort of mentor (*Knight* 472). This altruistic attitude is also described by Murdoch: “Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world

in the light of a virtuous consciousness.” (*Sovereignty* 91). Bellamy is reacting to the reality before him and doing so by leaving himself out of the equation. He has unselfed himself, and consciously decided to love Emil and to love Moy for “more than a sort of personal game” (*Sovereignty* 100). This selfless love, this unselfing, is when Murdoch believes an individual experiences a rebirth, and though he may not yet be “the definition of a good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good” (*Sovereignty* 101). This is Murdoch’s point of grace.

O’Connor referred to her short story, “The Artificial Nigger,” as her “favorite” and probably the “best thing” she ever wrote, and perhaps that is because it is the short story with the most “apparent act of grace” (*Habit* 209/160). The character Mr. Head takes his ten-year-old grandson, Nelson, from their rural Georgia home to visit Nelson’s birthplace--Atlanta. It is here that Mr. Head tries “to teach [Nelson] to be a white man” (Perreault 391). Mr. Head’s racism towards blacks is obvious, and he tries to pass down his racism to Nelson, who has never seen a black person before the trip. While the two ride a train to reach Atlanta, Nelson sees his first black person, but reproaches Mr. Head because he never explained they were “tan,” not black (*Other Stories* 110). Mr. Head responds by simply calling him “ignorant” (*Other Stories* 110). This exchange indicates that although Mr. Head needs to feel like he is the superior teacher with Nelson as his pupil, Nelson is capable of critically thinking for himself and not mindlessly accepting what his grandfather says.

While in Atlanta, Mr. Head decides to teach Nelson a lesson after he falls asleep. Mr. Head wakes Nelson by kicking a trash can that causes “a hollow boom” and makes Nelson immediately awaken “without a shout” and run down the street “like a wild maddened pony” (*Other Stories* 122). Mr. Head runs after Nelson, who accidentally crashes into an elderly

woman, causing her to shout for the police. When the woman sees Mr. Head she screams, “Your boy has broken my ankle,” to which Mr. Head replies, “This is not my boy... I never seen him before” (*Other Stories* 123). After this act of denial against his own flesh and the elderly woman being “repulsed” by his denial, Mr. Head realizes the shamefulness of what he has done (*Other Stories* 123). He knows he must redeem himself in Nelson’s eyes. The two continue on and find a “plaster figure” of a negro-- an “artificial nigger” (*Other Stories* 127). While both are looking at the small statue, Mr. Head takes the opportunity to show that he is “still wise” and says, “They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one” (*Other Stories* 128). Although this remark illustrates he can’t “relinquish his [wise man] persona,” it satisfies the boy, and they leave (Strickland 458). These two events--the denial and witnessing the artificial nigger--combined form the catalyst that allows the point of grace for Mr. Head.

O’Connor discussed the “difficulty” in writing for “an audience who doesn’t recognize what grace is and don’t recognize it when they see it,” but she insisted that all her stories “are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it” (*Habit* 275). This point of grace is when a character has the opportunity to experience a purifying rebirth of character, and it is up to them if they accept this rebirth of self and recognize their faults. O’Connor sets Mr. Head in “a recognizably real world” with rampant racism (particularly at the time this story was published in 1955), and Mr. Head can either continue in his self-involved world where he is the superior race, or he can accept that the real world is full of different colors (Hawkins 21). The “differences” he sees between himself and the African-Americans dissolve and he is given a “new vision” after recognizing the reality of the world around him, accepting the rebirth (*Other Stories* 128 & *Habit* 275). The point of grace has allowed Mr. Head, like

Bellamy, to climb out of his self-made “place of illusion” into reality, transcending his selfish pleasures and acknowledging the plight of others, including his own grandson (*Sovereignty* 87).

Combining both Murdoch and O’Connor’s terms, Bellamy and Mr. Head experience points of unselfing. Bellamy transforms into someone who can “see another person as real and full and who can finally see that person without the distortions of fantasy or ulterior motive; who can that is, love someone else” (Hawkins 4). This unselfing, clearly seeing the reality of the world around him is much like Mr. Head, who comes to the realization that he has been given the chance to break away from his former superficial existence full of self-centered intolerance toward others. Both stories “share a concern with the mysterious life-transforming process of loss and discovery, of death and of the possibility of rebirth” (Hawkins 4). Bellamy and Mr. Head have separately been reborn.

Clearly both authors were striving for something transcendent beyond themselves as individuals, whether it be through philosophy or religion. Murdoch was searching for a “nonreligious transcendence” and yet her characters’ actions are similar to O’Connor’s who were influenced by her Catholicism (Hawkins 88). Each used her own writing as a way to explore these possibilities with the reader, and yet they allow their audience to form their own conclusions. Although they walked separate paths toward this goal of what makes a person good, and how a person can unself or achieve a moment of grace, their ideas created characters, who are quite similar in manifesting these concepts. As O’Connor admitted, “I am never more completely myself than when I am writing” (*Habit* 458). Her characters remain true to the principles that influenced them. And Murdoch also spoke of the intertwining of her philosophy and literature: “Yes they’re compatible. In fact, to some extent, they possibly help each other” (YouTube). It is possible that separate modes of thought produce similar ideas, perhaps at times

without each realizing it. Lucas and Hulga, walk hand-in-hand toward the opposite direction of unselfing, while Bellamy and Mr. Head have reached their points of grace. Both authors believe that a rebirth, whether by unselfing or by experiencing a moment grace, is essential to transcend one's own existence in search for something better, something that is good. What a delightful thought to imagine Murdoch and O'Connor as having reached that transcendence, somewhere, and having that chat right now.

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Abstract

Iris Murdoch and the Importance of Stepping Outside the Self

Megan Johnson

Iris Murdoch was a philosopher, essayist, and novelist who utilized her fictional works such as *The Green Knight* to artistically depict the core values of her philosophies. Murdoch's compilation of philosophical essays *The Sovereignty of Good* expounds upon her belief in the importance of unselfishness in the face of virtues and morality. Murdoch argues against Kantian philosophy which relies heavily on empirical reasoning in her essays and again as her concepts are portrayed by the characters in her novels. This essay explains both Murdoch and Kant's views on the self and morality and the role of art in portraying them. By analyzing Kantian philosophy versus Murdoch's philosophy in conjunction with support gathered from Murdoch's fiction, *The Green Knight*, her ideas encouraging unselfing habits can be utilized to establish a better grounding in morality while utilizing art as an educator.

Iris Murdoch and the Importance of Stepping Outside the Self

“How recognizable, how familiar to us is the man so beautifully portrayed...who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason” (Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts”, 78). Humankind has a natural tendency to view issues of morality, beauty, and art based on an

inward perspective. As a whole, we are an ego-centric species. Philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, throughout the centuries have promoted this predilection to rely on the self, to abolish God as an authority and place the self in his stead. Iris Murdoch was a philosopher, essayist, and novelist who died after a battle with Alzheimer's disease in England in 1999. Her celebrated works addressing moral and personal philosophies oppose these self-centric Kantian notions. As Floora Roukonen eloquently states in her essay "Good, Self, and Unselfing - Reflections on Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy", "Murdoch's objection to this picture might be put as follows: by making morality a matter of a solitary choosing will, the view neglects ordinary human moral experience and instead builds an empty abstraction which it then elevates into a "man-God", the moral super hero of modern times" (211). Murdoch's philosophy concerning the self is expressed academically in her essays and examples of her ideas are portrayed artistically by her fiction novels. In her novels, Murdoch advocates that literature can be an educator for areas of moral life while philosophy depicts complex and dry methodical explanations. Observing art and literature can help one understand moral situations and responses with the portrayal of interactions of the characters and their circumstances. This aptitude in literature is quickly found in Murdoch's 1993 novel *The Green Knight*. In the novel, Murdoch utilizes multiple genres to depict examples of the moral situations her characters find themselves in and artistically conveys her philosophy via their responses and the consequences of their actions and thoughts. *The Green Knight* presents the reader with a cast of characters who are so involved in themselves that they fail to see what is going on around them. Bellamy, the not-quite-so-pious devotee, throws away his worldly possessions in an attempt to become closer to God but instead of finding a higher spirituality, his attentions turn inward and his self-involvement prevents him from his spiritual goals. Another excellent character example is Clement, a major player in the family dynamic of

half the cast, whose preoccupations with himself and his own situation prevents him from caring for the women who are close to him, and recognizing his brother's malice. By analyzing Kantian philosophy versus Murdoch's philosophy with support gathered from Murdoch's fiction *The Green Knight*, her ideas encouraging unselfing habits can be utilized to establish a better grounding in morality while utilizing art as an educator.

In Kantian philosophy, concepts of freedom, morality, and reason are closely intertwined. According to Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, first published in 1785, people derive their motives for moral action from the empirical reasoning that precedes the decision to act. Reason is a faculty available to all humans and as a result, morality is universal as well. The universal nature of this kind of decision making is an exercise of innate freedom of choice and given logic. Kant's theory involves two kinds of reasoning: the categorical imperative, which dictates that one should act according to a universal code and perspective, and the hypothetical imperative which advocates making decisions to serve a means to an end for the individual. The morality of a decision can be judged by the amount and quality of reasoning supporting it. The categorical imperative is geared toward moral decision making based on universally accepted concepts of virtue. Much of this is reliant on the freedom of one's will, or the ability to have an autonomous will that is not governed by sentiments, emotions, or a power outside of the self, such as God or government. In "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", Murdoch addresses the portrait of the man Kant has created in his philosophy: "This man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy...The *raison d'être* of this attractive but misleading creature is... the offspring of the age of science" (78). While this philosophy has its merits, Murdoch recognizes the gap that interludes this point of Kant's exposition: humans are emotional creatures. She

recognizes “that moral philosophy needs a new and, to my mind, more realistic, less romantic, terminology if it is to rescue thought about human destiny from a scientifically minded empiricism which is not equipped to deal with the real problems” (“On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, 70). The real problem Murdoch wishes to address is the existence of concepts such as good, evil, the presence of a higher power and their inevitable interventions in life to produce different perspectives in individuals. In his review article, “Good, Evil and the Virtuous Iris Murdoch Commentary”, David Robjant supports Murdoch in her view of the Kantian loophole. He explains Murdoch’s view that “virtue is obviously quite foreign to happiness” and how she asserts an alternative to Kant’s self-centric attitude by sharing that “a key Murdoch topic is ‘the fat relentless ego’ and the means by which it may be quietened sufficiently for us to see the fact of another’s need is in itself a reason for helping them” (623). This concept suggests that Kant’s selfish imperatives that focus on an individual as his own means to an end is not the only way or even an effective way to approach a moral quandary. What she claims to be necessary is a view independent of one’s self.

The best source for finding an example of Murdoch’s philosophical assertions is her literature. Murdoch’s beliefs are prevalent in her essays as well as her novels. Ann Irvine’s 1993 review in *Library Journal* reports of Murdoch’s novel *The Green Knight*, “Murdoch is skilled at keeping the reader turning the pages while allowing the characters to discuss and experience such weighty issues as guilt and redemption, revenge and transformation, and virtue and moral perfection.” In this novel, Murdoch’s opposition to the Kantian moral philosophy can be found in the character Clement Graffe. Clement’s brother Lucas attempts to kill him but he is inadvertently saved by the selfless sacrifice of Peter Mir, who takes the blow meant for Clement. For some time after this event, Clement is troubled by the immediate disappearance of his

brother and the sudden reappearance of the allegedly dead Mir. He is driven to distraction, isolating himself from his friends and his work, until Lucas returns and they are confronted by the would-be victim of their Cain and Abel incident. While Peter Mir's selflessness and lack of affiliation with the brothers and their situation exhibits an anti-Kantian propensity to act without reasoning some benefit out of the action, Clement's reaction further demonstrates the consequences of becoming self-absorbed during a crisis demanding moral firmness. Clement's self-absorption prevents him from recognizing the malicious intentions of his brother as well as the love of his long-time confidante Louise and her children. As part of her philosophy concerning morality and the concept of good, Murdoch preaches the importance of unselfing. Murdoch asserts, "Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object." This statement outlines Clement's situation in which he cannot decipher himself, thusly cannot make solid decisions, eventually finds vision, and ultimately realizes it is the people in his life rather than himself that are important. Regarding Lucas, Clement is "continually amazed [at] the way in which he had 'taken', and now continued to 'take', the recent doings of his brother" (150). Clement relates that he has taken care of his adopted brother since they were children as if "it were somehow his duty to look after Lucas" (150). This preoccupation with his own sense of obligation and pride deluded him into accepting his brother's despotism and abuse. Clement believed that "by existing, [he had] ruined Lucas's life" (151). His feelings of guilt caused him to believe this to be just and good behavior as a brother. The resulting denial manifests as: "Clement did not want to brood upon the 'attempt on his life', after all it had not succeeded, as far as he was concerned nothing had happened, and nothing might have happened" (151). Roukonen explains how the application of Murdoch's unselfing habits would yield situational clarity for Clement: "Moral

improvement is improvement of vision: it requires close attention to what lies outside of the selfish mechanism of the human psyche... The most important and most difficult individual realities for our attention are other people” (212). Murdoch artistically emphasizes her point when one considers how much clearer a moral and just vision would be for her character if he could divorce his selfish tendencies.

Kant’s philosophy concerning art follows with Murdoch’s views of art though the results of it as a mode of education differs. Lawrence W. Hyman’s article "Art's Autonomy Is Its Morality: A Reply To Casey Haskins On Kant" from the *Journal Of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* summarizes Kant’s assertion of art, “In implying that fine art, on the other hand, is not liable to [be prescribed by the moral law merely as a means to an end], Kant seems to hint that art treats us in a way that metaphorically resembles how persons ought to treat one another: as ends in themselves.” In this way, Kant is able to preserve the autonomy, or freedom, of art while distancing it from morality. Because of the empirical nature of this thinking, art, unlike morality, is disinterested. In morality, the intention is to promote goodness or correctness as a personal means to an end, while art is a means to an end for itself and though universal, cannot be objective. While Kant declares a similarity in the concepts of beauty and morality and does not deny the importance of art, they are separated by disinterestedness. Beauty as a concept in art is an ideal and is perceived differently by individuals in different situations. In contrast to this, Murdoch sees commonality for humans in beauty. In “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts” she claims, “Beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct” (83). By putting forth the idea of human instinct, Murdoch creates common ground for people to stand on while observing the beautiful, or in this case, beautiful and good art. The disinterestedness of art also comes under scrutiny when Murdoch begins to imply that one may observe morality from

the implicit virtues imparted via good art. Her essay states, “Art is a human product and virtues as well as talents are required of the artist. The good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble; and even in non-representational art we may receive intuitions of these qualities” (84). In this manner, art acts as a moral compass for the artist and the observer. Good art opens a window to the human condition in a form that is more easily contemplated. The structure and form of the art acts as a mirror and connects observations of the world with compassion because its value and virtue transcends the selfish consciousness.

When one considers art as Murdoch does, it is inevitable that art in regard to the self is examined. Foremost, Murdoch’s essay emphasizes, “Both in its genesis and its enjoyment [art] is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession” (83). Because art emerges as a reflection of the world and human condition as a whole, it is impossible to observe and appreciate it in a selfish mode. The magic of art is that it forces contemplation of greater issues. Her devotion to art as an act of unselfing appears in her essay “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” as well. In this essay, Murdoch expands upon the universal nature of art as an educating force. She points out, “It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self” (64). By this assertion, Murdoch places pressure on the artist. She insists, “It is obvious here what the role, for the artist or spectator, is of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention. It is also clear that in moral situations a similar exactness is called for” (64). The role of the artist is only slightly more important than the role of the viewer in this respect. The artist must uphold the standards of virtue necessary to create art that is not fanciful, but comprehensively transcendent. To complete the lesson, the observer must be able to separate from selfish interest to understand how the art relates to a universal whole. Despite Kant’s

disassociation of art and morality, Murdoch explains how art can act as a moralizing agent by displaying truth. She also counters Kant's idea that different individuals cannot benefit in the same way from art when she asserts, "The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing" (64). Here the universality of art acts as a tool for unselfing and realizing the needs of others. Art comes in various forms and agents to the various peoples of the world such as in nature's beauty, fine architecture, pieces derived from material mediums, or of spiritual matters. However, without the separation of the self so as not to dilute the lesson, art cannot perform its highest function.

The Green Knight presents its audience with an example of an impeded spiritual search for morality and direction via the character Bellamy. This man has given away nearly all of his worldly possessions, including his dog, in order to step "upon the spiritual road of no return" (45). He sees this road as the most pure and holy path he can choose and along the way hopes to find solutions to his many spiritual questions: his troubled emotions of anxiety and depression, and his confusion and guilt concerning his homosexuality. The most obvious common attribute of these inquiries is their self-centric nature. Multiple situations arise in which Bellamy is unable to look outside himself. He recounts his abruptly ended love affair with another boy, Magnus, at Cambridge and then "he [connects] Harvey with Magnus because of what had happened at the bridge, which had been so entirely Bellamy's fault...Oh if only Harvey could get absolutely better!" (45) At the beginning of the novel, the young scholar Harvey takes it upon himself to cross a narrow bridge and injures his leg. Bellamy unexplainably absorbs guilt from the situation and prays, not for Harvey's sake but for the sake of his own conscience, that Harvey will make a

return to health. This is but one example of the selfish nature that pursues within him despite his supposed devotion to the spiritual road.

The failure to unself is what causes the artful and virtuous lessons of Father Damien's letters to be lost upon Bellamy. Father Damien makes many appeals to Bellamy throughout the novel about his worldly thinking and how it is preventing him from enlightenment. He tells Bellamy in one of his letters, "You are in danger of exalting a sentimental Christ...God's justice is outside our understanding and concerns Him alone. The 'darkness' you referred to earlier is, I fear, but the obscurity of the restless self" (154). Father Damien recognizes the selfish interests that are guiding Bellamy down a grave spiritual path whose magnitude and severity he fails to recognize due to self-absorption. Damien attempts to explain that the transcendent, or artistic, vision of God is beyond concerns of the human condition, but Bellamy refuses to accept that he cannot turn God inward (much like Kant would) and thus attain total comprehension. The mental distresses of anxiety and depression that plague Bellamy, as Father Damien points out, are the results of the dissatisfaction of not being able to internalize these concepts. While his intentions are misdirected, the dissatisfied self creates mental obstacles that place him even further from the truth he seeks. Murdoch describes his situation in "On 'God' and 'Good'". The essay states, "'Self-knowledge', in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion" (66). With this statement, Murdoch invalidates Bellamy's search for clarity within himself. It is a pointless exercise that will bring him no higher understanding. Bellamy requires a tool for unselfing, and again, art is ideal. Murdoch expresses, "Art presents the most comprehensible examples of the almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this and the vision of reality which comes with success" (62-63). Art recognizes Bellamy's need to look at a fantastical

reality, but good art can help him overcome this self-seeking tendency and as Murdoch goes on to say, “To silence and expel the self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands moral discipline... The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it, and not to ‘use it as magic’” (63). Reflecting on Bellamy’s unsettled situation and based upon Murdoch’s assertions of how art would be beneficial to reconciling it, it is clear that in order to understand and give justice to the spiritual message Bellamy seeks, he must make his interests unselfish and view all in a realistic manner. This will allow better vision and bring him a clarity that is not centered on his person, but the larger whole that he seeks. Thusly, in Murdoch’s novel, she makes another case for the grander purpose and uses of art to mankind from conventional art to spiritual fields.

Iris Murdoch said, “Happiness is a matter of one's most ordinary and everyday mode of consciousness being busy and lively and unconcerned with self.” Her values concerning the self are extroverted and emphasize improvement via inspection of the world and high forms of art and spirituality. These values can be found in her philosophy as well as her literature. From these works we can conclude that the man who places his reliance upon himself as the ultimate authority and reason risks always falling short of moral accuracy by distancing himself from the ordinary human condition. When he looks to himself and not humankind as a whole, he loses a greater image of the situation and circumstances. High art is a mode of stepping outside of the egoistic self and into a deeper meaning. Art educates the observer with a comprehensive view of the greatest themes in human existence. One may utilize art as a window into the realm of nature and a compass for moral direction and spiritual guidance. It is important to step outside the self to observe art’s uses because the value and virtue of the art is something greater than anything

one can comprehend while trapped inside the confines of the self. Kantian philosophy urges man to appeal to his reason when encountering a moral dilemma, but Kant failed to recognize that the empirical judgment cannot truly perceive the sentimental, moral, or spiritual nature of human life. These shortcomings are confirmed when checked against the easily relatable characters of Murdoch's fiction. Upon analyzing *The Green Knight*, the reader is indirectly advised by Murdoch's philosophy under the guise of true human interest. Characters such as Clement and Bellamy are instruments of the higher art in literature that may be used to enlighten and guide. Murdoch proves time and again that by utilizing art via her literature, the importance of unselfing behaviors in order to comprehend moral direction is better appropriated as a familiar educator and accentuates the most beneficial habits a person can develop.

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