

How Flannery O'Connor Can Heal Our Fractured Politics

In 2014, I spoke at the American Embassy in Prague at a symposium on the civil rights movement in America. I made the mistake of offering Flannery O'Connor's story "Everything that Rises Must Converge" as a reminder that we are all to blame for the mess we're in. O'Connor says of her own story, "I say a plague on everybody's house as far as the race business goes." However, the primarily Czech audience did not buy O'Connor's point of view. One young man raised his hand following my presentation and asked, "Why are Americans so obsessed with race?" I had to bite my tongue from responding, "Why are the Czechs anti-German, anti-Russian, anti-Roma, and anti-Jew?" Our inability to see our own problems is a universal failing. O'Connor can provide a balm to political and racial tensions if we humble ourselves and seek to discern her way of seeing.

[*A Political Companion to Flannery O'Connor*](#) invites O'Connor into the political arena. For most of the author's fans, this seems an unlikely pairing—politics with the dowager of Catholic and Southern letters? Many critics ostracize O'Connor from political discussions because she rarely addressed contemporary issues, only explicitly dealing with race in a few stories and always subjugating the bane of racism to the sin of pride. Yet Hank Edmondson points out in his introduction to the volume that O'Connor's insistence on grace and redemption speaks in turn to at least two themes critical to politics: one, it provides a contemporary perspective on the Aristotelian-Thomistic insistence that individual virtue precede social change... Second, O'Connor's principles speak to the twentieth-century collectivist political heresies that have brought disaster upon the world. The fundamental problems of the world must be diagnosed, in the first instance, on a

person-by-person basis. That personal reformation must be voluntary.

Edmondson's analysis explains why O'Connor's stories retain timeless importance, whereas those stories that aim directly at current events, such as Eudora Welty's "Where Is the Voice Coming From?," are rarely read today. The political is often ephemeral, while the spiritual is eternal.

The essays in *A Political Companion* attest to the necessity of reading literature to gain proper perspective regarding contemporary politics. While headlines change rapidly, the issues remain the same: pride, selfishness, and blindness to the needs of others. Stories such as O'Connor's allow readers to see through the eyes of the other, and they offer revelations about the faults in our own character. When I taught "Everything Rises" this past semester at my small Christian college, one student was changed by the story. At one point during the term, she argued that America had no class system, to which I tersely responded, "Perhaps when we cannot see a class system, it is because we are on the top of it." By the time we reached our oral final, she admitted in tears before the whole class that she was much more like the arrogant and racist Julian from O'Connor's story than she desired to admit. The revelation opened her up to examining preconceived notions about race, class, and her position in the world.

Not that O'Connor was wise beyond her time and place. As many of the essays in this new volume recognize, O'Connor had a blind spot when it came to matters of race. Although it can be argued that she was an integrationist, O'Connor defined "Southern" identity primarily in terms of "white" identity and did little to crusade in her fiction for the cause of civil rights. However, in her third unpublished novel, O'Connor did begin to approach the issue more explicitly than she had previously. In the last year of her life, O'Connor confessed to Sister Mariella Gable, "I've been writing eighteen years

and I've reached the point where I can't do again what I know I can do well, and the larger things I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing." These "larger things" seem to include a preoccupation with how to move characters from their contemplative love of God to an active love of neighbor (I've argued this thesis more fully in a chapter in the book [*Revelation and Convergence*](#)).

In her last novel in progress *Why Do the Heathen Rage?*, O'Connor follows the correspondence between a civil rights activist Oona Gibbs and a Southern white loafer Walter Tilman. The former tries to love her neighbor with good deeds, yet the reasoning and motivation behind her actions lacks the knowledge of Christ's love that O'Connor would find necessary for a good result, whereas the latter converts to Christianity early in the novel but struggles to put his faith into action. This can be seen as a picture of O'Connor struggling with how to approach her current political situation. She read theology and the Bible daily, but she could not discern the best course of action when it came to the issue of race in her local community. When Dorothy Day, the Catholic social activist, came under fire for visiting Koinonia Farm, an interracial community in Georgia, O'Connor responded both uncharitably and with admiration: "That's a mighty long way to come to get shot at." She was also open to examining her own ambivalence: "I hope that to be of two minds about some things is not to be neutral."

Perhaps O'Connor's two minds present a good model for twenty-first-century readers. As much as we like to portray ourselves as possessing the answer to correcting political ills, this certainty may be blinding us to better solutions. Through the writing of stories, O'Connor grapples with multiple sides to issues. She does not demonize one perspective in relation to another. She erases the "us" and "them" categories. If we can learn anything about politics from O'Connor's fiction, it should be the need for charity toward other points of view,

our personal tendency toward blindness, and the benefit of stories to enhance our vision.

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