

A Personal Apocalypse: Ecological Poetics in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf"

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ABSTRACT

Mrs. May, the main character in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf," undergoes a personal apocalypse. Her destiny is foreshadowed throughout the short story in her struggle with accepting ecological thinking. This paper analyses "Greenleaf" through an ecocritical perspective and focuses on O'Connor's unique employment of the trope of apocalypticism as well as nature metaphors. While previous research in O'Connor studies has delved into the theme of ecology, the concern of this paper is to discuss the author's ecological poetics, which thus far remain under-researched. Building my analysis on Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, I will argue that Mrs. May's personal apocalypse is metaphorical and expresses the theme of anthropocentrism as a cataclysmic force. My goal is to demonstrate how O'Connor's ecological poetics become evident through apocalyptic tropology and nature metaphors.

KEYWORDS

Flannery O'Connor, Paul Ricoeur, ecocriticism, metaphor, anthropocentrism

Flannery O'Connor's nature metaphors often embody an impending catastrophe awaiting at the end of her stories. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur described metaphor not as a vehicle for meaning but as meaning itself, elevating the role of metaphorical language in narrative.¹ Flannery O'Connor never had the chance to read Ricoeur's work because of her premature death at the age of thirty-nine, yet she seems to steer her narrative language into realms of what has become known as Ricoeurian poetics.² As the Southern American stresses in her abundant correspondence and essays, she wrote from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy³ and aimed to convey an eschatological message to her reader. O'Connor's nature metaphors embody a certain sense of poetic, imminent catastrophe due to the author's religious conviction to "take violent means to get [the Christian] vision across to this hostile audience."⁴ The apocalyptic as a literary trope has a necessarily corrective dimension, drawing on images of Biblical final days; in the contemporary imagination, however, it has come to represent the environmental anxiety of our age.⁵

My paper will discuss the intersection of these two concepts of the apocalyptic. I will argue that O'Connor uses nature as a figurative vehicle for her apocalyptic vision in the 1957 short story "Greenleaf." Relying on Ricoeur's theory of metaphor and ecocritical analysis, I will argue that O'Connor's apocalypse-haunted narratives can be expanded beyond the realms of traditional religious interpretation towards ecology.

1 Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 87.

2 Edward Kessler, *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of the Apocalypse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 5.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), xv.

4 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 134.

5 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 101.

The Nature Metaphor

Ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies, drawing from environmentally-orientated developments in philosophy and political theory.⁶ A writer can either “ben[d their language] toward or away from extratextual landscapes”⁷ and O'Connor incontrovertibly veered her metaphorical language towards nature. Scholars have noted how her “landscapes are so charged with vitality [...] that nature often seems to step out of its function as mere scenery and into an active role in the drama—as a living presence, a threatening participant in the action, a conspirator against the characters' safety and security.”⁸ According to Ricoeurian theory, metaphor can transcend its referential function to reality to acquire analogical meaning; it can become a “living presence” arising out of from the narrative. Such metaphor does more than convey a message—it generates new information by enhancing the visibility of established symbols, and by reinforcing the empirical division between said symbols and physical objects being described poetically.⁹ Nevertheless, this does not necessitate that the referential function of metaphor is eliminated altogether; it is merely altered by the inherent ambiguity of poetic discourse.¹⁰ For Ricoeur, like O'Connor also a Christian, this ambiguity becomes metaphysically revealing. Calling *The Bible* “a poem,” Ricoeur builds on Gottlieb Frege's theory of reference, asserting that truth claims can be uttered in poetical and metaphorical discourses, and they are not limited to strictly scientific or empirical discourses.¹¹ Metaphor therefore “attempts to evoke an experience of reality's meaning.”¹² For Ricoeur, the more poetic an utterance, the more fundamentally true it is. Similarly, O'Connor's metaphorical language aspires to revelatory purpose to communicate a “truth.”

According to O'Connor, the Christian fiction writer is “always hotly in pursuit of the real, no matter what he calls it, or what instruments he uses to get at it.”¹³ The “real” she envisions is the mystery of Catholic Grace.¹⁴ The Christian writer's belief in the supernatural “doesn't mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater.”¹⁵ In this statement, by “natural” O'Connor likely means worldly or secular, but I will indulge in the possible literal meaning of the word to take an ecological perspective. When O'Connor chooses to refer to the role of nature in literature, she uses the term “country,” explaining how the word “suggests everything from the actual countryside that the novelist describes, on to and through the peculiar characteristics of his region and his nation, and on, through, and under all of these to his true country, which the writer

6 Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction,” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xix.

7 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 33.

8 Virginia Pyron, “‘Strange Country’: The Landscape of Flannery O'Connor's Short Stories,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1983): 558.

9 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 356.

10 Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 222.

11 James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 153.

12 Erazim Kohák, *Oheň a Hvězdy: Filosofická zamýšlení nad morálním smyslem přírody* (Praha: Karolinum, 2021), 65.

13 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 171.

14 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 172.

15 O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 175.

with Christian convictions will consider to be what is eternal and absolute.”¹⁶ Critics have long noted O’Connor’s apt use of natural imagery in order to convey a spiritual message. Michael Cleary helped to inspire this type of discourse in the late 1970s by asserting that “[O’Connor’s] wilderness is both a state of mind and the literal home of religious experience.”¹⁷ Virginia Pyron notes how the landscape images in O’Connor’s work “rise and swell in harmony with the action, and at the moment of climax they subside to a dimly remembered strain.”¹⁸ Similarly, Nancy B. Sederberg deploys phenomenological theory to argue that O’Connor’s landscape “erupt[s] into meaning” and “resonate[s] with the central spiritual mystery of her fiction.”¹⁹ The form of O’Connor’s natural landscape had also been connected to the environmental ethics of Aldo Leopold²⁰ and eco-theology of the Darwinian Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.²¹ By utilizing nature as a metaphor, O’Connor’s prose articulates a certain truth about the world, and a particular perspective of the natural order.

The Apocalyptic

Among the most thorough critical considerations of O’Connor’s use of metaphor is Edward Kessler’s book *Flannery O’Connor and the Language of the Apocalypse*, which regards O’Connor as an apocalyptic poet, although one quite unlike William Blake and T.S. Eliot.²² Kessler claims that O’Connor’s signature penchant for violence presents itself not only through the narrative but above all through poetic language. Such a strategy of composition inevitably creates a sense of doom, since it is the “metaphor [...] of displacement or estrangement that make[s] way for the ‘revelation’ of a new world.”²³ Metaphors of displacement become tools for accommodating religious transcendence to the materials of prose fiction.²⁴ O’Connor’s semiotics, especially her frequent use of the phrase “as if,” serves as figurative evasion of text, disrupting its reportorial timbre to the point at which text can change the reader’s experience of the story. As described by Kessler, in O’Connor’s prose, “the story’s experience is the experience of the metaphor.”²⁵ Such a strategy serves to alienate the reader from narrative logic towards the poetics of the destruction. When O’Connor glorifies doom and the unknown, she not only underscores her stories’ grotesque features, but gives the works an unmistakably apocalyptic tone.

16 O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 27.

17 Michael Cleary, “Environmental Influences in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction,” *The Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 8 (1979): 20.

18 Pyron, “‘Strange Country’: The Landscape of Flannery O’Connor’s Short Stories,” 567.

19 Nancy B. Sederberg, “Flannery O’Connor’s Spiritual Landscape: A Dual Sense of Nothing,” *The Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 12 (1983): 17-18.

20 Timothy R. Vande Brake, “Thinking Like a Tree: The Land Ethic in O’Connor’s ‘A View of the Woods,’” *Flannery O’Connor Review* 9 (2011): 19-35.

21 Mark Graybill, “O’Connor’s Deep Ecological Vision,” *Flannery O’Connor Review* 9 (2011): 1-18.

22 Kessler, *Language of the Apocalypse*, 7.

23 Kessler, *Language of the Apocalypse*, 20.

24 Kessler, *Language of the Apocalypse*, 159.

25 Kessler, *Language of the Apocalypse*, 120-121.

Apocalyptic language reflects a doomsday narrative deeply imbedded in Judeo-Christian culture which tracks back as far as to 1200 BC and the ancient prophet Zarathustra.²⁶ Apocalypticism is described as “a genre born out of crisis” in which “violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed.”²⁷ According to rhetorician Stephen O’Leary, the portrayal of apocalypse in art is influenced by the perspective through which it is viewed, as either “comic” or “tragic.” The chosen viewpoint impacts how concepts such as time, agency, authority, and crisis are presented. Viewed through the lens of tragedy, evil is conceived in terms of guilt, redemption is achieved through victimage, and a story’s plot moves towards sacrifice—personal or *en mass*. In consideration of O’Connor’s distinct style, however, the second choice seems more fitting:

Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt but an error, its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not towards sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility.²⁸

Humor, no matter how grim and foul it may be, is an integral and easily the most distinctive part of O’Connor’s narratives, as is the portrayal of evil. O’Connor herself described her style as “comic and therefore serious.”²⁹ Her protagonists are generally contemptible, solitary kind of individuals who never fully overcome the evil that they carry within—they grapple and fumble with it instead. Tarwater’s hallucination during his deeply symbolic scorching of his homeland forest at the close of *The Violent Bear It Away* is an explicit vision of the devil. The experience fills the boy with the madman’s passion to either evangelize the world or burn it to the ground, and we see him accomplish neither. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes’ religious awakening is marked with a desire to repent so strong he stops eating and voluntarily blinds himself with lime juice, becoming a walking corpse. These characters remain lost, but for a split moment, they are illuminated by the truth, i.e., they are forced to witness their own fallibility in a dramatic and incredibly violent way. The characters’ recognition of their own error is fleeting, and the exposure of the fault has dramatic and lasting repercussions, such as arson or blindness. The result is a bleakly dark comedy—an apocalypse.

Building on O’Leary’s concept of comedic apocalypse, I suggest that the self-awareness of O’Connor’s characters grows, but ultimately dissipates, as the aim is to illuminate mystery through metaphor, not to satisfy a narrative. The short story “Greenleaf” expounds upon such a playful dynamic between the plot and the figurative. When the story’s main character Mrs. May died, she noted how “the scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.”³⁰ The beginning of this sentence gives the illusion of reportorial accuracy, yet the writer negates the declarative by figurative evasion, a nature metaphor figuring a tree line. The mention of sight is a reference to an established leitmotif, as impaired, limited, or otherwise obscured vision is a characteristic shared by a variety of O’Connor’s other characters, with many scholars in O’Connor studies commenting upon vision as a motif in her writing (e.g.,

26 Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 93.

27 Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (London: Minerva, 1997), 13-14.

28 Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 68.

29 Carter Martin, “Comedy and Humor in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction,” *The Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 4 (1975): 5.

30 Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 333.

Amper; Desmond; Hubbard).³¹ O'Connor's endings are all about seeing, glimpsing, momentarily illumination in the form of transcendence or morality. A cautionary tale writer, she never allows her characters to attain resolution. Instead, the high of realization is immediately followed by a fall, leaving O'Connor's characters and her readership in the proverbial (and sometimes literal) dark. The dramatic exposure of this illumination, together with other narrative mechanics, fits the comic frame of the apocalyptic trope as defined by O'Leary.

The apocalyptic trope has long stepped out of eschatology to be deployed in ecological and activist circles to communicate the urgency for societal and ideological change. The prominent environmental critic Lawrence Buell has argued that “[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal.”³² Are O'Connor's revelatory, poetic nature metaphors enough to couple her with the environmentalists? Several scholars such as Mark Graybill, Timothy R. Vande Brake, Doug Davis, and Jochen Achilles have considered O'Connor's from an ecocritical perspective on basis of the author's theological background. Graybill argues that O'Connor's “philosophy of humanity's relationship with the natural environment overlaps considerably with what has come to be known in the years since her death as ‘deep ecology.’”³³ He builds his case on O'Connor's affinity for the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work has been linked with the ecological cause and even hailed as “ecotheology.”³⁴ O'Connor demonstrated a profound interest in the works of Teilhard, positively regarding his “love for nature”³⁵ and calling him a “great mystic.”³⁶ It is widely recognized that the title of her renowned collection of short stories *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is derived from a quote by the French-American philosopher. Stories in the collection delve into the realms of nature, both in terms of theme and tropes, with notable examples including “Greenleaf” and “A View of the Woods.” I claim that the tropology of the apocalypse present in “Greenleaf” can be read as a manifestation of O'Connor's ecological poetics.

The Anthropocentric Conflict in “Greenleaf”

In the 1957 short story “Greenleaf,” from the posthumously published collection *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965), dairy farm owner and matriarch Mrs. May enters into a one-sided dispute over a wayward scrub bull with the Greenleaf family, her employees. The story ends with Mrs. May dying impaled on the bull's horns, having a revelation and “whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear.”³⁷ Finding mystic revelation in the story of Mrs. May's detriment,

31 Robert C. Evans, *The Critical Reception of Flannery O'Connor, 1952-2017: “Searchers and Discoverers”* (New York: Camden. House, 2018), 107, 112, 73.

32 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (London: Princeton University Press), 285.

33 Graybill, “O'Connor's Deep Ecological Vision,” 1.

34 King, Ursula. *Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions: Spirituality and Mysticism in an Evolutionary World* (Paulin Press: New York, 2011), 14.

35 O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 388.

36 O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 430.

37 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 334.

George Piggford claims that Mrs. May "undergoes somewhat ironized version of the dark night [of the soul]."³⁸ Farrell O'Gorman similarly characterizes "Greenleaf" as a story portraying a "contact with infinite mystery,"³⁹ and in line with this notion Joseph Zornado observes how violence in the short story is deployed as "prelude to moments of unknowing."⁴⁰ Finally, Denise Askin, using Paul Ricoeur's terminology, discusses the "excess of signification" in "Greenleaf" that serves O'Connor's broader anagogical objectives.⁴¹ Edward Kessler even summarizes the story with a quote from Ricoeur: "Everything takes place as if logical absurdity had replaced analogy in the explanation of metaphor."⁴² Kessler, despite noting the importance of place and landscape in O'Connor's fiction,⁴³ never makes the leap to ecology. While Graybill⁴⁴ and Vande Brake⁴⁵ in their ecocritical analyses make this connection, their research is mostly concerned with demonstrating the ecological philosophy in O'Connor's prose. Based on previous observations, I will now argue for an ecological perception of the apocalyptic trope by analyzing the anthropocentric conflict in the short story.

Mrs. Day's doom is foreshadowed in the story's opening, when the bull that will eventually take her life stands under her window "like some patient god come down to woo her."⁴⁶ Critics have likened the scrub bull to a Christ-like figure⁴⁷ or other god-incarnate, considering the short story from the perspective of Eastern⁴⁸ or Greek⁴⁹ mythology. What is crucial for an ecological interpretation is the very fact that it is a non-human animal that wears "a wreath across his horns"⁵⁰ like a "prickly crown"⁵¹ to represent the messenger of a higher truth. This narrative choice opens the story up to an anthropocentrism-sensitive reading.

The story opens with Mrs. May's half-dreaming, listening to the bull milling away at a bush under her window. Her dreams echo in apocalyptic cadence as she listens to the bull's chewing "as if something were eating one wall of the house."⁵² The use of "as if," as observed by Kessler a frequent semiotic choice for O'Connor, creates a sense of displacement in the metaphor. The figure expands further in Mrs. May's deeply symbolic dream. In her semiconscious state, she grows sure that:

38 George Piggford, "Mrs. May's Dark Night in Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf,'" *Christianity and Literature* 65, no. 4 (2016): 398.

39 Farrell O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 127.

40 Joseph Zornado, "A Becoming Habit: Flannery O'Connor's Fiction of Unknowing," *Religion and Literature* 29, no. 2 (1997): 29.

41 Denise Askin, "Anagogical Vision and Comedic Form in Flannery O'Connor: The Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," *Renascence* 57 (2004): 59.

42 Kessler, *Language of Apocalypse*, 119.

43 Kessler, *Language of Apocalypse*, 28.

44 Graybill, "O'Connor's Deep Ecological Vision," 1-18.

45 Vande Brake, "Thinking like a Tree: The Land Ethics in O'Connor's 'A View of the Woods,'" 19-32.

46 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 311.

47 Piggford, "Mrs. May's Dark Night in Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf,'" 402.

48 Frederick Asals, "The Mythic Dimensions of Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 5 (1968): 319.

49 John C. Shields, "Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf' and the Myth of Europa and the Bull," *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (1981): 412.

50 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 311.

51 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 312.

52 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 311.

Whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs, on and on, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place.⁵³

The choice of language here creates a sense of doom and foreshadows conflict. The lengthiness of the sentence generates a feeling of urgency and anxiety, and the frantic tempo is further accelerated by repetition of the words “eating,” “house,” “on and on,” and finally, “Greenleafs.” Mrs. May feels threatened and, again employing the language of displacement, “*as if* she were on trial for her life, facing a jury of Greenleafs.”⁵⁴ [italics mine] The phrase creates both metaphor and tension in the text. Her anxiety of being “as if on trial” emerges in spite of Mrs. May’s better judgement. “As if” adds uncertainty to the utterance, it speaks of Mrs. May’s internal conflict. It represents “an interaction of meanings: the *as* of direct analogy with the indefinite, conditional *if*.”⁵⁵ Mrs. May can subconsciously sense that her world, “her place” is in danger, but rationally she does not acknowledge any threat.

In my reading, this pressing threat stands for ecological collapse. The irrational fear of being “eaten” by the bull is an absorption metaphor with a strong ecological undercurrent, recalling the image of Earth as Gaia. James Lovelock’s hypothesis about Earth being like an organism capable of reacting organically to stimuli and able to sustain the environment necessary for its own survival, creates a notion of a world where humans are an inessential part of a larger natural order.⁵⁶ Just like some organs and functions in a complex organism are necessary for its survival, some are not—and humans for Earth, says Lovelock, are the latter.⁵⁷ In the Gaia theory, the Earth is capable of metabolizing the climate crisis, but in a process that would likely cause our kind to cease to exist. Mrs. May’s building anxiety can be interpreted as prophetic from ecological standpoint. Her unease embodies the knowledge that if mankind continues to treat nature the way it does, its doom is inevitable.

Mrs. May’s life purpose is constructed around ownership, which the ecocritical reader will recognize as an anthropocentric value, and it is evident from the possessive choice of narrative language. It is “her place,” her “house,” “her boys”⁵⁸ that are endangered, and she had not employed but “had had Mr. Greenleaf”⁵⁹ as a worker at her farm. When she hears one of her sons joke about marrying—marriage as a symbol of merging and establishing ownership—“some nice lady like Mrs. Greenleaf,” she rushes to the lawyer to change her will, so her sons cannot “marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything.”⁶⁰ Since she is the landowner, the idea of being part of the

53 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 311-312.

54 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 324.

55 Kessler, *Language of Apocalypse*, 57.

56 Erazim Kohák, *Zelená Svatozář: Kapitoly z ekologické etiky* (Praha: SLON, 1998), 127.

57 Kohák, *Zelená Svatozář*, 128.

58 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 312.

59 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 313.

60 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 315.

land, part of an ecosystem, denies a central belief about the purpose of her existence since she has built her worth on proprietorship.

Her anthropocentric conviction manifests via her fear of death and her dread that "neither of [her sons] cared what happened on the place."⁶¹ She snarls at them over the breakfast table: "When I die I don't know what's going to become of you,"⁶² signaling not only judgment to her sons, but also her own existential dread, projected onto the artificial value of leaving behind a heritage—her desire to rule over the farmland. After her son replies sarcastically, she looks through the window "into a scene of indistinct grays and greens. She stretche[s] her face and neck muscles and dr[aws] in a long breath *but the scene in front of her flowe[s] together anyway* into a watery gray mass."⁶³ [italics mine] Here, the absorption metaphor is enriched by an image of merging, of unifying. It attempts to vocalize the same internal conflict: Mrs. May is afraid to see herself as a part of the land she owns. It is the ecological order that she is battling against as she thinks: "Everything is against you, [...] the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you."⁶⁴ The sense of nearing danger signifies an eventual apocalypse—not of the world at large but of Mrs. May's own anthropocentric conviction, an attitude which can be interchanged with themes recognized by earlier critics such as "dark night of the soul" and "moments of unknowing" that lead to spiritual awakening.

The Greenleaf family poses the most monumental threat to Mrs. May's anthropocentrism, a conflict that is fittingly reflected in the short story's title. In Mrs. May's dream, the Greenleafs are saved from doomsday "on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place." The island can be understood as an orientational metaphor, a type of figure which is organized through systems of concepts and relationships among them: "orientation in space: up-down, inside-out, front-back, towards-away, deep-shallow, central-peripheral," since "they have their basis in our physical and cultural experience."⁶⁵ Importantly, orientational metaphors are vehicles for value, e.g. the term "up" carries a mostly positive connotation whereas "down" is negative (cheer *up*, don't be *down*). An island creates an image of a separate entity standing high above surrounding water, symbolizing a safe haven from the forces that are about to devour Mrs. May. Since the Greenleaf island is imagined "in the middle of what had been her place," we can assume that what Mrs. May fears is giving up her way of life for the Greenleaf way. "And in twenty years' Mrs. May aske[s] her sons], 'do you know what those people will be? *Society*,' she sa[ys] blackly."⁶⁶ The threat that Mrs. May feels is the collapse of a certain value hierarchy, one in which mankind resides on the top.

The Greenleafs stand for the opposite of Mrs. May's anthropocentrism—an ecological view, which can be observed in how the various members of the family treat and are likened to nature. Mrs. Greenleaf is the most obviously earthy character in the short story, described as a "large and

61 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 314.

62 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 321.

63 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 321.

64 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 321.

65 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metafory, kterými žijeme* (Brno: Host, 2002), 26.

66 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 318.

loose”⁶⁷ woman with eyes “the color of two field peas”⁶⁸ who performs “prayer healing” for a living. When Mrs. May comes across Mrs. Greenleaf in a forest, the latter looks like “a human mound, her legs and arms spread out *as if* she were trying to wrap them around the earth,”⁶⁹ [italics mine] about to go “sleep in the dirt.”⁷⁰ Mrs. Greenleaf’s “loose” and “mound” form refers to her being part of the land’s soil, shifting and abundant. The “as if” solidifies the metaphor of woman as Earth, but at the same time successfully communicates Mrs. May’s skepticism about Mrs. Greenleaf’s actions. Furthermore, Mrs. May enjoys disregarding accomplishments of the other woman’s children by thinking: “Well, no matter how far they go, they *came* from that.”⁷¹ Mrs. May’s contempt for Mrs. Greenleaf can be read as metaphor for disdain for Earth, i.e. for the idea that humans, too, came from the depths of the Earth and remain a part of it. Regardless of how much Mrs. May attempts to dismiss Mrs. Greenleaf, she fears her. She recognizes a remote intelligence in the praying woman. Mrs. Greenleaf is given the role of knowledge-bearer when she is likened to a snake. Upon seeing her praying horizontally in the woods, Mrs. May “raise[s the stick she carried in case she sees a snake] off the ground as if she were not sure what she wanted to strike with it.”⁷²

Mrs. Greenleaf is not the only Greenleaf that Mrs. May regards through Biblical imagery, as the property owner compares Mr. Greenleaf to “the devil himself.”⁷³ The character of Mr. Greenleaf is introduced in extremely poetic, mysterious language, as “he never appeared to come directly forward;” instead he “walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle,”⁷⁴ with face “shaped like a rough chalice” and his “build insignificant.”⁷⁵ The man’s material form is as precarious as his wife’s, but instead of being directly compared to the Earth, O’Connor employs more orientational metaphors to communicate Mr. Greenleaf’s own ecological awareness. “Perimeter of [a] circle” evokes an image of the center-periphery dichotomy, and “chalice,” a traditionally circle-rimmed object, enriches the metaphor by adding the three-dimensional element of depth. By saying Mr. Greenleaf “walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle,” the author positions the character on the outskirts of the natural order—recalling a Deleuzian idea of periphery that is in perpetual motion—ejecting humans from a “central” position in nature presupposed by anthropocentrism. In the past, Mr. Greenleaf’s chalice-shaped face had been a reason to interpret him as a “potential vessel for Christ in the form of the Precious Blood,”⁷⁶ reminiscent of the Christian religious service, but it can also be viewed in broader terms with an emphasis on the spatiality of this sacral object. By creating the sense of both periphery and depth in the character of Mr. Greenleaf, O’Connor establishes mystery and power play in the short story, foreshadowing Mrs. May’s eventual demise.

67 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 315.

68 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 316.

69 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 317.

70 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 316.

71 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 317.

72 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 317.

73 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 328.

74 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 313.

75 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 314.

76 Piggford, “Mrs. May’s Dark Night in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Greenleaf,’” 403.

Mrs. May is convinced of her superiority to the Greenleafs, and it is this belief that is negated in the short story. The woman believes she can “read [Mr. Greenleaf’s] face the way real country people read the sunrise and sunset,”⁷⁷ which is the reason she eventually must, in a true O’Connorian fashion, die—not to be punished, but in order to *see* the truth. When the “scrub-human”⁷⁸ Greenleafs boys don’t pick up their bull from her property, Mrs. May arranges for their father to kill the animal. Towards the end of the short story, the unifying circle metaphor is figured in the natural world. After Mrs. May voices her decision to have the bull put down, “[t]he sky [is] crossed with thin red and purple bars and behind them the sun [is] moving down slowly as if it were descending a ladder”⁷⁹ and eventually “disappeared behind the tree line.”⁸⁰ The sky and the sun present a unifying image, and the personification of the sun “descending a ladder” recalls the second coming of Christ in eschatology. The metaphor seems to communicate a clear message, but “as if” once again disrupts it, representative of Mrs. May’s reason which continues to deny the inevitable. The push-and-pull between the metaphor and the reportorial third person omniscient narration (which mirrors Mrs. May’s thoughts) is also evident from the battle of the conscious and the subconscious in Mrs. May’s dream of that very night, during which she hears:

[a] sound as if some large stone were grinding a hole on the outside wall of her brain. She was walking on the inside, over a succession of beautiful rolling hills, planting her stick in front of each step. She became aware after a time that *the noise was the sun trying to burn through the tree line* and she stopped to watch, *safe in the knowledge* that it couldn’t, that it had to sink the way it always did *outside of her property*. When she first stopped it was a swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with her hand over her mouth and the same noise, diminished but distinct, in her ear. It was the bull munching under her window.⁸¹

Truth is the “large stone” that grinds a hole in her brain; it is the “swollen red ball” of the sun which is “like a bullet” that is looming in disregard to Mrs. May’s convictions. Mrs. May lives in an illusion of security, “safe in the knowledge” that the destructive, fireball sun won’t touch “her property;” cannot endanger her way of life, and that her anthropocentric worldview has no consequences. As those who deny the imminent crisis of the environment, she is lying to herself.

The Ecological Poetics of “Greenleaf”

Towards the end of the short story, the narrative is taken over by the figurative, and the reader’s experience of the story turns into the experience of metaphor. The sun, the tree line, the bull, the noise drilling its way into Mrs. May’s brain are all images used to create a complex metaphor of displacement, a foreshadowing of a shifting worldview. Whereas the scrub bull, the sun and the sky stand for the illumination that causes the imminent end to Mrs. May’s world, I interpret the tree

77 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 319.

78 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 317.

79 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 328.

80 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 329.

81 O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 329. Italics added.

line as the horizon of Mrs. May's awareness. The tree line metaphor can be considered as essential for an ecological understanding of the short story as a space from which the subconscious speaks, a place of transcendence towards a new self profoundly connected to its surroundings.

The confrontation in "Greenleaf" may also be seen to be enacted via gender symbolism. In the final pages of the short story when Mrs. May faces the bull, the animal "emerge[s] from the tree line" to bury his horns in her chest "like a wild tormented lover."⁸² I believe, however, it is imperative to refrain from succumbing to the allure of gender dichotomy in reading this passage. The function of the sexually suggestive language is to further the metaphor of the breakdown of Mrs. May's reason, but the heavy symbolism (penetration by horns, a phallic symbol; the bull as a "lover") engages the story with the gender discourse. David Havird has analyzed the sexist and patriarchal undertones that arise from the bull vs. woman metaphor and surmises that Mrs. May "surrender[s] her pride, which has been masculine in its figuration, to Christ and that the dramatization of this abasement take form of sexual submission."⁸³ While Havird's criticism of the cruelty of patriarchal religion is justified, ecocritical perspective allows the possibility to extend his analysis of the metaphor beyond a gender dichotomy towards a more dialectic understanding.

In his paper, Havird argues that patriarchal religions like Christianity typically depict God as male.⁸⁴ In Havird's interpretation of the story, Mrs. May faces dire consequences for being a woman who adopts masculine attributes such as pride and ownership of land. Havird observes that Mrs. May's pride exhibits a masculine quality, yet in my ecological interpretation, this self-importance is connected to anthropocentrism. Ecofeminist Val Plumwood explains that androcentrism and anthropocentrism stem from the same root. Plumwood asserts that "western culture is androcentric," "anthro[po]centric" and "reason-centred, where reason is treated, as in the rationalist tradition, as the characteristic which is common to the privileged."⁸⁵ The centrist rhetoric in modern liberation theory serves to illuminate "a common [...] structure underlying a number of different forms of oppression."⁸⁶ Mrs. May's haughtiness stems from her material possessions, specifically the farmland that she anthropocentrically views as nothing more than a resource for human exploitation—an object to be utilised until it is wholly spent. Her reason is both masculine and human centered. According to ecofeminism, masculinity has historically come to be associated with culture, rationality, and knowledge; it is a notion steeped in the tradition Cartesian reasoning.⁸⁷ I suggest that Mrs. May's rationale is not in opposition with Mrs. May's own gender identity as a woman, as Harvid purports, but that it is a manifestation of a dominant worldview narrative.

Havird claims that O'Connor, who followed the patriarchal religion of Christianity, punishes Mrs. May for taking on masculine qualities despite being a woman, for "being female while God is

82 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 333.

83 David Havird, "The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1993): 15.

84 Havird, "The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion," 15.

85 Val Plumwood, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics," *Ethics and the Environment* 1, no. 2 (1996): 134.

86 Plumwood, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics," 120.

87 Zuzana Kiczková, *Príroda, vzor žen!*? (Bratislava: Aspekt, 1998), 20.

male.”⁸⁸ However, if we interpret the bull scene through an ecocritical lens, we will see her fate is not a punishment at all. Instead, in her last moments, Mrs. May undergoes redemption in a move that unfolds in an extreme and dramatic manner through her own a personal apocalypse. In this conclusion, Mrs. May gains an ability to perceive and understand her world. The bull, symbolizing masculinity, is not representation of an external force, but an embodiment of Mrs. May's own nature-governing ambitions. Her worldview materializes in the form of the bull, a creature which forcefully clashes with Mrs. May, seeking to dismantle the very aspects of herself that it represents.

The ending of the short story showcases an interplay of masculine and feminine, reason and emotion, consciousness and the unconscious, that intertwines within Mrs. May. From this fusion, a profound and new comprehension of the world emerges. In the story, the bull—a representation of the masculine principle as well as of her pride—starts towards Mrs. May “from the tree line.”⁸⁹ In my ecological interpretation, the “tree line” represents the threshold of Mrs. May's consciousness, the realm of her subconscious. This evocative image of the “tree line” resurfaces repeatedly in the final paragraphs of the short story, bearing profound metaphorical significance. In the tree line, we witness a distinct manifestation of O'Connor's ecological poetics in imagery that transcends a mere topographical essence, becoming a symbolic juncture in which opposing forces converge and understanding comes forth.

The bull “emerge[s] from the tree line” like “a black shadow,” a Jungian reference, and starts towards Mrs. May in “a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again” to unite with her in “the green arena” of the meadow.⁹⁰ Fear eludes Mrs. May, as she witnesses forces clash within herself and she assumes the role of a detached observer. She stares at the “violent black streak [...] as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what [the bull's] intension was.”⁹¹ Mrs. May's personal apocalypse unfolds not with the culmination of dread that the reader anticipates throughout the story, but rather with a profound sense of estrangement that comes with transcendence. In the short story's final moments, the poetic language completely overshadows the reportorial narrative: “the tree line [is] a dark wound in a world that [is] nothing but sky,” “gaping” behind Mr. Greenleaf as he is seen in Mrs. May's last moments, “approaching [her] on the outside of some invisible circle.”⁹² The tree line is likened to a gaping wound, as, finally, the line of Mrs. May's horizon of consciousness is torn down and through the pain of an ego lost illumination rushes in. She has walked on the outskirts of an invisible circle her entire life, a state which it took death for her to notice.

Conclusion

O'Connor's ecological poetics manifest via apocalyptic tropology and her construction of nature metaphors and imagery. Mrs. May becomes illuminated through catastrophe, a personal apocalypse,

88 Havird, “The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion,” 15.

89 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 333.

90 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 333.

91 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 333.

92 O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 334.

and her transformation is conveyed through nature metaphors with a Ricoeurian revelatory purpose. Viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, Mrs. May's pride and possessiveness can be seen to embody the destructive power of anthropocentrism, a force which artificially severs her connection from the rest of reality. This conflict is ultimately resolved in the form of a bull violently barging through "the tree line"—a metaphor for the horizon of Mrs. May's consciousness, for her anthropocentric worldview. In death Mrs. May finally comes to see herself as an inherent part of a world devoid of any hierarchical divisions. Like the Greenleafs, she also dwells on the periphery of an "invisible circle," but her life was one spent in denial of her place within it.

Her error of judgement is not punished, but corrected, since the bull, the means of her demise and representation of her misconception, emerges from her proverbial subconscious, cementing the story's conflict as internal. This suggests that deep down, Mrs. May possessed an awareness of the flaws in her anthropocentric outlook. Her fear of the Greenleafs was indeed justified, as they embraced a life she was both too proud and too afraid to embrace herself. The truth caught her off guard, and it was only in the midst of her dramatic demise that she finally underwent a transformative shift to become attuned to the world around her.

Mrs. May was exposed to the fallibility of her convictions in her final moment of illumination, bending to the lowly animal as if to a lover. Metaphors of displacement become a primary device of performing Mrs. May's journey, as these figures embody the battle of truth and misguided reason. From an ecocritical perspective, Mrs. May's personal apocalypse came about in order for her to transcend her anthropocentrism. It played out thematically through her conflict with the Greenleafs, and metaphorically via her dreams, the bull, and other natural elements. The apocalyptic trope is present both in the narrative in the form of error, recognition, and exposure of fallibility, as well as in the form of violent, revelatory nature metaphors.

The short story "Greenleaf" is a mature work by O'Connor, and it demonstrates how the author's narrative is taken over by poetic metaphor in moments of apocalyptic climax. O'Connor's frequent use of nature metaphors and natural imagery facilitate an ecologically sensitive reading, but what truly opens up her fiction to ecology is the transcendental ambitions of her narratives. In trying to make her readers glimpse the truths of Christianity, her poetic attention to the "country," nature, and the Southern region, steers the stories' focus towards a larger cosmology in which the reader's ecological consciousness may be awakened.

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