

O' Connor's Letters: A Thematic Study

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Abstract : Mary Flannery O'Connor's letters constitute an expression of her theological and philosophical concepts, literary discussions, social comments and personal beliefs. The letters lend an opportunity to study and survey the congruence between her work and where-about. In a sense, her letters to her dear ones or to people who corresponded with her on the subject of her works or their own works or any other issues reveal her literary sensibility. The letters as an open medium express her identity and outlook.

Keywords: *identity, literary discussions, outlook, personal beliefs, philosophical concepts, social comments, Theological concepts*

Mary Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), the most hermetic writer of American literature is also a versatile artist in letter writing. Her letters are an expression of her theological and philosophical concepts, literary discussions, social comments and personal beliefs. Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's chief biographer entitles the volume of her letters, *The Habit of Being*. "In her introduction to the book Fitzgerald notes that the title is her extension of the Thomistic idea of habits of mind or qualities of the intellect, an idea to which O'Connor referred constantly." (Harold Fickett & Douglas R. Gilbert 90) "It contains O'Connor's letters starting with her graduation in 1948 from the University of Iowa's School for Writers till her last days in 1964. The letters which she wrote during her stay in Iowa have not been considered in this collection since most of them addressed to her mother were purely personal without any literary content." (Sally Fitzgerald Introduction) The letters lend an opportunity to study and survey the congruence between her work and where-about. In a sense, her letters to her dear ones or to those who corresponded with her on the subject of her works or their own works or any other issues, reveal her literary sensibility. The letters are an open medium express her identity and outlook. She says, "I write the way I do because I am a Catholic....peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness..." (942)

O'Connor wants to have an encompassing outlook than being secluded in rural South and so moves to Yaddo, in New York but Lupus Erythematosus, gives a twist to her life as well as to her career. As a result she is forced to move to her mother's farmhouse at Andalusia. Her letters tell that her life is a victory over her personal limitations. It is truly a triumph of ingenuity. Though she is incapacitated by Lupus and is forced to limit her physical activities, the intensity of her imaginative perception is not slowed down. In one of her letters she asserts, "The stories are, by now, much better travelled than I am..." (1021) Faith, writing and life are intertwined in the case of O'Connor and they bring about an artistic completion. Her anxiety and grief over her health declining make her ask for healing prayers but her profound faith helps her to step forward. The prayer to St. Raphael gives her sufficient strength. She is very optimistic of her intellectual capacity though pessimistic of her physique. She writes in one of her letters, "In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies." (997)

Though she considers her personal life outwardly uneventful, a conspicuous and highly developed inner life is comprehensible in her letters. She has never complained about her physical disability but accepts it as a part of human suffering. It does not diminish her sense of humour. Her way of answering irrational questions is really sensible. Her answers to a Professor of English about her writing and to a student about the black hat are instances to be noted. In one of her casual letters to Sally and Fitzgerald, she writes about her mother's milkman who addresses even the cows as 'HE' as he doesn't like to be surrounded by females. She sportively laughs at her being on the crutches with which in her old age she will be charging people from her wheel chair or she will put a steel plate on it.

Her letters show the passionate side of her life, her farmhouse, the animals she has raised, her loving mother and the visitors who spend a good time with her. It is a source of association between her fictional characters and her everyday inhabitants. Without any inhibition, she shares the origin and advancement of her writings with the people intimate to her. She writes according to the interests of the addressees. She never hesitates to express her views whoever may be the person or whatever may be the subject matter. The letters

between late 1948 and early 1950s seem to be simple, but later on, they become more analytical and theme-oriented.

The Habit of Being speaks of the superlative place she has given to the people around her. She makes her afternoons busy with reading, writing and receiving visitors. She replies at length and at the earliest with utmost clarity and straightforwardness. To avoid repetition she always keeps a copy of her writings with her. She finds pleasure in giving suggestions to her literary friends. It is not limited to the writings they send to her for correction, but she proposes the methodology and approach they have to follow in their writing. She suggests to Cecil Dawkins: "...if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."(1043)

In her early letters she is seen as a desperate beginner struggling for publication. Her clarity of thought and composure are revealed in her letters. She says that she works all the time but she is helpless in working under pressure or for the satisfaction of others. Moreover, she is a slow worker, but systematic and disciplined. Her creative capacity or pace is only about two pages a day. She often drops what she has jotted initially, but she is confident that they are also worthy as they help in her later writings. A strict routine of sitting in front of the type writer after breakfast until lunch without a distraction is her manner of working. Whether something is produced out of these two hours is inconsiderable to her. It is really amazing to hear from her that she likes her stories much better than anybody else and reads them repeatedly and laughs and gets embarrassed when she remembers that she is the one who has written them.

Though her letters are mostly formal in content, the manner of expression is so casual that the maturity and confidence of a writer are immediately noticeable in them. The freedom of a writer is what she demands. She is not willing to change her ideas for better circulation and clearly mentions the path in which she is treading. It is not a common path but a path of oddity. She is constructive to criticism but doesn't allow criticism to change her path or style of writing. Her question to Selby, "Is Rinehart interested in publishing this kind of novel?"(881), unequivocally tells that she is aware of the oddity of her novel but not willing to move away from her style. In a letter to Paul Engle, she comments that Rinehart is looking for a conventional novel and the fault lies with the views of the editorial board, but not in the novel. She continues, "I was amiable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I was trying to do"(882) She is bold enough to correct her correspondents if she feels they are wrong. At the same time she humours them and promotes them.

Though formal content dominates her letters, they are filled with the farce of country talk in a colloquial tone. The letter may be formal or casual, it does not spare O'Connor's chicken yard and she takes the privilege of appreciating her birds. A peacock which eats hot cigarette, a black swan with one eye, a wingless chicken and the brown ducks with blue wing bars are well-known. It is noted in one of her occasional proses, *The King of the Birds*, that at the age of five she is filmed with a pet bantam hen and that turns her mild interest in chicken into a passion and she starts collecting more and more chicken having exceptional features. She longs for a chicken with three legs or three wings, but she comes across nothing of that kind. This sort of wild and eccentric imagination seems to have helped her in her literary endeavour.

In her letters, O'Connor writes about her impression of other writers and their influence on her. In her letter of 3 March 1954 to Ben Griffith, she praises Hawthorne but criticizes his books. She admires H.M. Mc. Luhan's piece in the Southern Vanguard as a good one since it helps a Canadian to throw a sharper light on the things in the South. She even has marked the sentence in her copy: "Formality becomes a condition of survival."(924) She remarks, "The formality that is left in the South now is quite dead."(924) She audaciously comments that she has heard many people saying that Warren tries to do too much. But those people haven't done as much as Warren. She appreciates John Hawk for his wonderful imaginative energy. "The more fantastic the action, the more precise the writing and this is the way it ought to be", she remarks.(1075) She cannot withstand the writings of Henry James since she feels something is happening to her, a sort of in-depth inexplicable feeling. Her reading of Henry James helps her to have a touching faith. She is not definite about her interest in his writings, but she likes Conrad. The discussion throws light on her extensive reading. One of the addressees, mentioned as 'A' by O'Connor has sent her books regularly from Atlanta Public Library.

In one of her letters she clarifies to Helen Greene, "Kafka was mentioned in connection with the book in the matter of technique."(897) She even mentions, "My philosophical notions don't derive from Kierkegaard but from St. Thomas Aquinas."(897) To Ashley Brown she writes, "You only need to read a little Kafka to become a bolder writer and I am sure reading the little bit I have done that for me."(911) She appreciates the writings of Robie Macauley and adds, "I merely enjoys, I does not analyze."(900) In another letter she suggests, "The meaning of a story should go on expanding for the reader the more he thinks about it, but the meaning cannot be captured in an interpretation."(1149) She adds, "Too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it."(1149)

She is a good cartoonist and in one of her letters she has mentioned, "She (her mother) prefers me painting to me writings."(897) To the surprise of her readers, her contribution to the college newspaper in Milledgeville's Georgia State College for Women is not as a writer but as a cartoonist. Her cartoons done mostly in pen, ink and linoleum present caricatures that are related mainly to the social, political and academic

life of the college campus during 1940's. Though she does not use any visual reference, her figures maintain a consistent style.

O'Connor's varied circle of friends reflects her different facets. Her responses as an author, a teacher, a colleague, a critic and a close family member tell of her different capacities. Her letters express her wild interpretations of her stories where the teacher in her answers candidly and interestingly the queries posed by the students after reading her stories or hearing her public readings. She is very much mindful of her views and is well aware how her views differ from those of others. She knows how to make her stand clear and inarguable and speaks directly to her colleagues about her feelings and works. Letters to Robert Lowell and John Hawkes illustrate her strategic dealings. On the other side, in one of her letters to John Lynch, she displays a different tone. She makes it clear to him that she never believes that being a Catholic limits the freedom of a writer. She writes, "I feel myself that being a Catholic has saved me a couple of thousand years in learning to write." (966) One of her letters to Helen Green winds up with a line, "I never seem to see the people I would really like to see." (897) It expresses the nature of intimacy that she maintains. Letters to Sally and Fitzgerald are more casual than to others. They discuss a good deal of personal matters but the prominent part of the discussion is always on her writings and readings only.

The bond between her mother, Regina, and herself is expressed in many of her letters. In her letters she presents her mother as a strong and self-sufficient woman who has badly struggled for a sick husband and is struggling for a sick daughter, but competent enough to manage her family and business. She cares for her sick daughter, handles Negroes in the farm, raises a herd of cattle and entertains visitors to their satisfaction. O'Connor reveals that the reason for her being a short story writer is that her mother can read a story in one sitting. Her mother's literary attachment and her readings are also discussed with the same priority. Even socio-political changes are discussed earnestly. The temptation of dairy workers to move on to Chicago when they save money, is a social scenario of her time which she brings into her novel, *Wise Blood*. "All the rich widows in M'ville are voting for Nixon," she says, "fearing lest Kennedy give their money to the niggers." (1135) The economic uncertainty of a writer is also discussed with the frankness of a friend in her letter to Cecil Dawkins on 8 November 1960.

Letters to 'A' are more philosophical and sometimes above the comprehensive level of a common brain. O'Connor says that an individual in the church, no matter how worthless he is, is still a part of the body of Christ and a participator in the promised redemption and there is no proof to show for this, but it is a matter of faith. When she asks herself how she knows it, the answer is that like Peter she just believes. All that she can say about her love of God is only a request to help her. She says that she cannot understand her work or motivations. She believes it as a gift, but the direction it has taken, has been due to the church in her. She accepts that the church is larger than human understanding and adds that if one thinks of these doctrines in this sense, one will find them less arbitrary. She compares a person's relation with church to marriage and which is the beginning, not the end, of the struggle to make love work. Another letter to 'A' reveals that she cannot accept anyone outside the circle of religion. Byron Reece is a victim. She tells 'A', "If you live today you breathe in nihilism." (949)

She is pragmatic in discussing human approach to grace. She once writes to 'A' who is a convert to Catholicism and raises doubts often: "Some people when they lose their faith in Christ substitute a swollen faith in themselves. I think you are too honest for that, that you never had much faith in yourself in the first place and that now that you don't believe in Christ, you will believe even less in yourself; which in itself is regrettable. But let me tell you this: faith comes and goes. It rises and falls like the tides of an invisible ocean." (1153)

'A' comments that in O'Connor's stories there is love between man and God, but never between people. But she justifies it citing Grand-mother and Misfit from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and Rayber and Bishop from *The Violent Bear It Away*, respectively. She says that Rayber's love for Bishop is the purest love. She strongly believes that she belongs to an age of challenge in which people are inattentive towards truth. In one of the letters she advises Cecil not to mix up "thought- knowledge" with "felt - knowledge." (1174)

She compares herself with many of her characters. As remarked by one of her characters, if one knows what he is, he can reach anywhere. This applies to the life of O'Connor. She has the habit of finding herself. She says that her disposition is a combination of Nelson and Hulga. She considers Hulga to be her heroine. She compares herself to Enoch but not to gorilla since she responds positively like Enoch, but not like gorilla which is reluctant. As Enoch believes in his wise blood, she also believes in herself and considers that whatever she knows is always right. So, she feels that everything in her work is right.

According to her, those who read *Wise Blood* think that she is a nihilist but she wants to create the impression in her television interview with Harvey Breit that she is a Thomist Georgia author, but an admirer of Dr. Frank Crane, a protestant Theologian who says, "Know the truth and the truth shall make you free". (934-935) The first chapter of her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* in the "New World Writing" with the title 'You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead' is mentioned in one of her letters. (934) She says that it is the way she feels every time when she gets to work on it. She tells 'A' that *The Violent Bear It Away* is less funny, but adds that if it is funny, its tone may have changed. She says, "The modern reader will identify himself with the

school teacher, but it is the old man who speaks for her.”(1108) According to George Clay, *Good Country People* is a successful story but *Wise Blood* is boring and infuriates him because Hazel Motes is not human enough to sustain his interest. He thinks *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, and *A Circle in the Fire* are marred by the religious references that don't fit in. *Artificial Nigger* is her favourite, but she accepts the complaint of Mr. Ransom that *The Artificial Nigger* is flat and has no beautiful sentence in it. But what she wants to speak about is the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering. The background of *A Temple of the Holy Ghost* is from her own childhood recollections. She tells Robert Giroux that *Good Country People* is reviewed by many and is appreciated. She feels it will set the whole collection of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* on its feet. In one of her letters to Ben Griffith, she quotes the words of Mrs. Tate: “The Bible salesman” (*Good Country People*) “was a super Hazel Motes, one with all his evil potentialities realized.”(941) She even appreciates Ben Griffith for liking the stories of children, *The River* and *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, which have theological truths beyond their understanding. In a letter she mentions that *Stroke of Good Fortune* is originally intended to be a part of *Wise Blood*. She changes the end of *A View of the Woods*, so that the old man gets more time to realize what he has done. She herself justifies the completeness of her stories because she sees everything as beginning with the original sin, taking in the redemption and reckoning on a final judgment.

Not only her writings, but also her readings are discussed in the letters. To Ben Griffith she recommends *The Lament* by Chekov and *War* by Luigi Pirandello, since these stories help her in developing her writing. The quality of a resourceful critic is found in her literary discussions. But the intellect of a writer overrules her criticism. Her clarity in visualization and the way she transforms her vision into expression are admirable. She uses worldly elements to explain the mystery of God. She tells Griffith that Joyce uses the image of ‘snow’ repeatedly in his story, *The Dead*. But Chekov makes everything work; the air, the light, the cold, the dirt and so on. She wants to tell Griffith that he doesn't need to tell her readers that the coloured man in his story is about forty five; instead he has to paint him there with words, so the reader will know it. That is the technique she applies in her stories. It is notable that her literary quotient exceeds her age and the maturity and the consciousness of her role as a writer and critic are predominant everywhere.

With the same spirit, she reads all the letters she receives and takes the content seriously. After following the review of an unknown reader, she reads the book which is mentioned in that. She feels sorry sometimes that many of her readers are not worth mentioning and shares their views of her writings which do not mean what she actually meant. At the same time she is grateful to the people who have provided stepping stones to her. Mrs. Tate is mentioned in many of her letters.

O'Connor finds delight in reading comments on her. On the next day of her speech in Macon, it is announced in the newspaper that she is ‘a writer of the realistic school’(932). She will not be satisfied with one's opinion, hence she confirms it through many sources. In a letter to Sally and Fitzgerald she shares that her meet in Macon Writer's Club has made her realize her potential in intellectual discussion and her mother appreciates that it has helped her to come out from her narrow outlook. In her letter to Erik Langkjaer she reveals her craze for publicity, but she laments, “Everybody here shakes my hand but nobody reads my stories.” (936)

Her maturity in intellectual discussions is laudable. She says that purity is not mere innocence and she doesn't think that babies and idiots possess it. She believes purity comes only with grace. According to her, anyone who thinks he is pure is surely not. She tells Cecil Dawkins, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”(1084) In a letter to Dr. Spivey, she clarifies that “grace is a free gift of God,” but to receive it, one has to “practise self-denial.”(1098) She tells Cecil that if there is a scientific explanation for these supernatural doctrines, one will accept them. Even if these do not constitute religion, still one will accept them if they are a part of knowledge or hypothesis. All around us today, she reinforces that, one will find people accepting ‘religion’ that has been rid of its religious elements. To her, there is no substitute for faith. In her opinion, sin is not in eating meat, but it is in refusing the penance. She dares to stress, “Sin is sin whether it is committed by Pope, bishops, priests or lay people.”(1103) She feels that the religion of the South is a “do-it-yourself” type and as a Catholic she finds it painful as well as humorous.

There is a change in her tone from rudeness to an air of superiority as she matures in writing. Her personal and professional growth gives an ease to her in discussing and clarifying the doubts of her colleagues and friends regarding faith, religion and church. She says that if there is any absurdity, it may be in her views, not in the institution or in what she stands for. She reiterates, “The Church does not demand any sacrifice out of proportion to what she gives.”(928) To her, “Faith is a gift, but the will has a great deal to do with it.”(1153) On another occasion she says that even in the life of a Christian, “faith rises and falls like the tides of an invisible sea.”(1165) She observes that religious sense seems to be out of the modern people in the kind of society we have been living in since the 18th c. They have been seeking substitutes for religion. She says that this is not an age of great Catholic Theology and insists: “What St. Thomas did for the new learning of the 13th century we are in bad need of someone to do for the 20th.”(1082) She sounds optimistic when she says that life is not a tragedy, but it is the will of God which is inexplicable. She advocates praying instead of grieving for any loss.

She openly admits that she has not read the best writers and has not been influenced by them. The only good thing she did was that she read in her childhood Greek and Roman myths. Later, what she has read is the works of Edgar Allan Poe. She started reading and writing seriously when she had gone to Graduate School. Though she has read Kafka, Faulkner, Joyce and many others, she is influenced only by Conrad. She has read almost all his writings. She admires *Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Poets* but *The Humerous Tales* of Edgar Allan Poe has influenced her the most.

She says that fiction writers' moral sense must coincide with their dramatic sense. She observes that writings of Celine feel life at a moral depth. In another situation she mentions the greatest gift of a writer as patience. "To know oneself, is to know one's region To know oneself is above all to know what one lacks."(977) She advises not to do anything in which one is not interested.

Though her mother criticises her for speaking like a nigger, she takes pride in introducing her as a Southerner. She complains that Southern people cannot know the literature of the South unless they go to the North and she is worried that one from the North doesn't know the Southern literature. She shares the plight of Negroes in her letter to Erik Langkjaer. She laments that two text books about Negroes are banned in Georgia. She expresses concern about the pressure on church and its after-effects.

In her literary discussions she openly attacks the writers and at times gives hasty judgments. In one of her letters to 'A', she says, Nelson Algren's writings are lumpish, even before she reads them. In her next letter, after reading a few pages, she says that the book is spoiled by sentimentalism and over indulgence. She justifies her view from her own life and her own style of writing. She says that Mrs. Tate is her mentor in such matters. In O'Connor's view no American can write about the poor the way a European can. According to her, to have sympathy for any character one has to put a good deal of oneself in that character. How much one reveals oneself in writing is a question for O'Connor. She contradicts what she has heard about Katherine Anne Porter's style of writing stories in her head before she puts them down in writing. She thinks that it is not possible to do so. She will always have an idea and that idea will be developed.

Fiction represents life, she believes, and the fiction writer has to use as many aspects of life as possible in order to make his total picture convincing. She observes that when a competent writer writes something of a bad taste, he must have a reason for that, but a reader may not always see the reason. Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery. O'Connor says: "Art is not anything that goes on "among" people It is something that one experiences alone."(988)

As her health is deteriorating, she feels that she cannot think much of anything, but her contact with Miss 'A' makes her think of St. Thomas or Aristotle. She believes that man is created in the image and likeness of God. When she speaks of herself, her tone becomes pessimistic. She believes in the purgatory and says that there is a berth reserved for her. The title "YOU CAN'T BE POORER THAN DEAD", which she has given to the first chapter of *The Violent Bear It Away* for the publication in the "New World Writing", sounds miserable. During his meeting with O'Connor, Robert Coles recollects her observation, "The large human drama in which all of us have our parts to play".(Robert Coles Introduction) In his introduction to "Flannery O'Connor's South", he has written the following statement: "Her bitterly vivid portrayals of the evil creatures in us are meant to shake from us a bit of the vanity and conceit that are, of course, inevitable companions of each human being; no matter the person's skin, colour, occupation, sex, religious creed." (Robert Coles, Introduction) *The Habit of Being* deserves acknowledgment as it is not a mere leisure time communication but speaks of the intellectual depth of a Catholic Southern writer. Once again Robert Coles is to be quoted, "She knew in her heart how wretched and stunned various people could be in her native land. But her eyes scanned the sky in pursuit of God's judgment.....". (Robert Coles Introduction) It is absolutely true what Sally Fitzgerald has said in the introduction of *Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being* that reading through her letters gives the feeling of her presence. It is apt to conclude this paper by repeating what she has said of herself: "I write what I can and accept what I write.(959) Thus Flannery O'Connor in his letters has expressed her theological, philosophical, literary, social and personal ideas and beliefs freely without inhibition.

NOTES

- [1]. Mary Flannery O' Connor (1925-1964) – An American Catholic Writer born in Savannah, Georgia. Here after referred to O'Connor.
- [2]. Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a German Jewish novelist and short story writer of the twentieth century
- [3]. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author who is considered to be the first Existentialist Philosopher
- [4]. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was an Italian Dominican Friar and Catholic Priest. He was an influential philosopher, theologian and jurist in the tradition of scholasticism.
- [5]. Peter was one of the first followers of Jesus Christ.
- [6]. Nelson is the protagonist in O'Connor's short story, *The Artificial Nigger*
- [7]. Hulga is the physically challenged heroine in O' Connor's short story, *Good Country People*

- [8]. Enoch is the antagonist in O'Connor's novel, *Wise Blood*

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