

Flannery O'Connor: Primitive Mystic  
Mythopoeic Backgrounds of A CIRCLE IN THE FIRE

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Twenty years after her death in 1964 Flannery O'Connor remains one of the great religious writers of modern times. This is ironic because she doesn't fit nicely into traditional categories of morality and belief. Still, her stories continue to unnerve believer and non-believer alike as they strike deeply into the moral conscience of contemporary society. Perhaps one of the most fascinating ways in which O'Connor does this--and one that remains largely undeveloped--is by engaging primitive thought as a source of her modern commentary. I want to examine one of her stories, "A Circle in the Fire," in which her dependence on the habits and thinking of the ancient savage is particularly evident. She does this by paralleling a collection of ancient rites and beliefs, James Frazer's The New Golden Bough; then by rooting in primitive psychology the epiphany of her central character; and finally by employing, as does the primitive mind itself, certain poetic images in which to couch the paradoxes surrounding her main theme and action.

It is important to note initially that "A Circle in the Fire" appears in O'Connor's collection A Good Man Is Hard To Find (1955) following a story entitled "Artificial Nigger." This story takes place in the city and involves a parallel to Dante's Inferno, where a man and his nephew journey to Atlanta (a mythic hell) and emerge like Virgil and Dante archetypally reborn, that is, sharing a kind of brotherhood neither had ever known. By contrast, "A Circle in the Fire" takes place in the country, where a woman and her daughter

live on a farm (a mythic paradise) and, because the woman refuses the invitation to communal love offered by three boys from the city, the farm becomes her own kind of hell--a virtual reversal, therefore, of the mental pattern (archetype) in "Artificial Nigger." There are those who deny that O'Connor was ever concerned with mythic parallels or archetypal patterns,<sup>1</sup> and I do not want to overemphasize either area, except to note that there are ancient patterns of action underpinning her fiction, and her characters do go through significant mental struggles that may be universal. Moreover, these parallels and mental patterns are handled in mythopoeic ways that are in themselves primitive. It is my contention that O'Connor's return to primitive contexts and to ancient ways of perceiving the world, together with her genius for poetic images to express her vision, give her fiction special depth and power that she then centers on modern preoccupations that cripple us mentally and morally.

"A Circle in the Fire," then, takes place on a farm where a landlady, Mrs. Cope, lives with her twelve-year-old granddaughter Sally Virginia, a hired couple Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard, and several Negro farm hands. Actually, this simple rural setting might be Andalusia, O'Connor's home where she lived with her own mother. Details like the porch of the house, the rolling hills surrounding the farm yard, and the gray building for the blacks are similar in both cases.<sup>2</sup> Like the city of Atlanta in "Artificial Nigger," however, which O'Connor turns into mythic inferno, the farm inhabited

by Mrs. Cope becomes something larger than it initially appears. Miss O'Connor herself says that in contrast to the naturalists she uses setting as an element that guarantees respect for mystery and the unexpected. She says region for her becomes a location where "time and place and eternity somehow meet."<sup>3</sup> Her thinking here is not inconsistent with a primitive view of reality, the view recorded by Frazer, and it is to his work that I now want to call attention as a form of mythic parallel for O'Connor's story.

The New Golden Bough is a collection of ancient rites and beliefs, parts of which O'Connor seems to have selected and synthesized in her story as a background for her action, much as The Inferno provides a backdrop for "Artificial Nigger." T. S. Eliot, of course, popularized the use of Frazer's work in The Waste Land, and O'Connor's sensibilities are known to be close to Eliot's.<sup>4</sup> One part of The New Golden Bough includes awesome and yet frightening descriptions of the outdoors. Primitive man lived in the mysterious atmosphere of the forest with which he associated a universal power outside himself called "mana."<sup>5</sup> The awareness of this power appears in Frazer's work when Nemi searches for the bough he hopes to pluck from a tree guarded by a priest, or King of the Woods:

It is a sombre picture, set to melancholy music, the background of the forest showing black and jagged against a lowering and stormy sky, the sighing of the wind in the branches, the rustle of withered leaves under foot, the lapping of cold water upon the shore, and in the foreground, pacing to and fro, a dark figure with a glitter of steel at the shoulder whenever the pale moon, riding clear of the cloud-rack, peers at him through the matted bough.<sup>6</sup>

In a special sense this picture is alive, for the woods take on a mysterious personality. The "sighing" and "lapping" suggest a human presence, while the "black and jagged" trees create a fearful air. Behind or within the forest, the moon acts as a kind of superhuman power, as though peering through a mask. So, built into the description of this natural scene is an animism, where the sky and water and trees appear to possess a magical power capable, perhaps, of blessing or destruction.

In O'Connor's story the woods also becomes a major focus of attention. Mrs. Cope not only owns the farm, but likes to rule it, together with everybody on it. Indeed, in this woman's attitude toward her property and the people on it O'Connor seems to represent a radical fault at the heart of civilized living. Then three young boys from the city unexpectedly visit the farm. Young Sally is mystified by them and Mrs. Pritchard loves to tell foreboding stories that seem to include them. But Mrs. Cope deeply resents their presence on her land. Ironically, what the city boys bring to the farm--and they are as demonic as they are angelic--is a spirit of primitive life, with all its uncontrollable elements. The evils of the city they come from might explain their dark side, but their goodness is harder to imagine; one of them used to work on the farm, however, and perhaps unconsciously what they seek is a communion with nature and others--something Wheelwright says belongs to the essence of ancient tribal living<sup>7</sup>--that they associate with rural

life. At any rate, their ways are foreign to Mrs. Cope, for as a modern woman who dominates her land and the people on it, she has somehow lost touch (as I will explain later) with two primitive points of contact--one outside and one deep within herself.

It is in portraying the strange attitudes of all the characters toward nature, however, that O'Connor introduces the awesome and yet frightening qualities with which Frazer envelops Nemi's journey to fetch the golden bough. When Sally Virginia, for instance, first looks at the trees surrounding the farm, she notices that "the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall, trying to break through."<sup>8</sup> There is a sense of mystery here that is curiously upsetting. When Powell, the boys' leader, sits down and his eyes make "a circle of the place" (129-130), he seems to sense a magical power about the woods. Stephens sees in Powell's gaze "just the right degree of ominousness, of mysterious threat."<sup>9</sup> Even Mrs. Cope is not completely oblivious to mysterious forces identified with the woods, for at one time she sees the sun "swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net of ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods" (135). This description is not unlike Frazer's, for the color and position of the sun make the setting highly mysterious, the net-like and ragged aspect of the cloud give it a fearful air, and the fact that the sun threatens to break through, like Frazer's moon peering through the matted bough, adds to the scene at

least the suggestion of an awesome power beyond.

Another aspect of The New Golden Bough is the notion of divinity. Frazer says one of the principal objects of divine power for the ancient savage was the sun. The Greeks, for instance, dedicated a chariot and four horses to the sun as their chief deity.<sup>10</sup> In "A Circle in the Fire" we saw how the sun, "swollen and flame-colored," seemed on the brink of breaking into the physical, and perhaps mental, world of Mrs. Cope. Burns sees the sun spots on Powell's glasses (145) as an indication of divine blessing on his actions in the forest.<sup>11</sup> The ancients also associated divine power with plants and animals. The Corn-Spirit was a divine force connected with that plant, though it also took the form of an animal, usually a bull or a horse. Cretans looked at Dionysus as the deity of corn, or agriculture. At the feast of this god, however, people tore a live bull to pieces with their teeth and roamed through the woods with frantic shouts.<sup>12</sup> So in primitive thinking the sun, as well as animals like the bull and the horse, was a source of divine presence, and through ritual actions ancient peoples dramatized their respect for this divinity they found to be essentially beyond their control. Wheelwright says in this way they intensified their continuity with nature and the mysterious creative force behind it.<sup>13</sup>

In O'Connor's story the key animals are the horse and the bull. The smallest of the three boys says to Mrs. Cope about Powell (whose father once worked for this lady): "all

the time we been knowing him he's been telling us about this here place. Said it was everything here. Said it was horses here" (130). Mrs. Cope tells the boys not to ride the horses or they will get hurt, but they ride them anyway, and though there is a vileness to their actions, they unleash on the farm a primitive effort at unity with nature that Mrs. Cope cannot grasp. In one of the most humorous, though mean, episodes, the boys let out a bull, which infuriates Mrs. Cope, for it ambles leisurely after her with four geese at its heels. If we can assume that for O'Connor the bull is connected to the divinity, then in a comic way this event suggests the lady is being pursued by a divine spirit she refuses to acknowledge. In "Greenleaf" Mrs. May is actually struck through by a such a bull. The boys' whooping and dancing in "A Circle in the Fire" as they appear and disappear in the woods in the manner of the rites described by Frazer shows that it is clearly O'Connor's intention to connect the boys' relation to the horses and bull with primitive ritual. Mrs. Pritchard sees the boys' ways as "signs and omens," though Mrs. Cope insists that Mrs. Pritchard's imaginings are "figments of imagination" (142). For us, however, Mrs. Pritchard's view is another indication of the ancient, ceremonial nature of the boys' actions, as though they were driving out evil spirits--in this case, the spirit of Mrs. Cope.

A third primitive element Frazer recounts is that of ceremonies dealing with fire itself. He speaks of May-Fires, for instance, where children were found "leaping over embers"



in order to "drive out witches."<sup>14</sup> Sometimes animals were driven over embers--"first the pigs, next the cows, and last of all the horses." At other times ashes from Need-Fires were "strewn in fields" in order to "protect the crops against vermin."<sup>15</sup> Bonfires, torches, discs, and rolling wheels were also used to promote, among other things, "fecundity."<sup>16</sup> In these examples fire is obviously related to the other aspects of primitivism we have discussed--the mysterious force behind nature, for instance, and those animals in which the deity was thought to abide. And in these cases the fire in Frazer's account is in the context of a ritual, including violent gestures and sounds, such as leaping, running, shouting. Considered as a whole, then, the ancient fire ceremonies were a means of controlling evil and promoting new life. Wheelwright finds the fires in Frazer more a magical means of exorcism than of worship that promotes unity with nature,<sup>17</sup> but in O'Connor both elements are undoubtedly present.

O'Connor's story, of course, is built around the notion of fire. Fire is Mrs. Cope's greatest fear. Sally Virginia teases her mother by calling out "It looks like fire" (126). The clairvoyant Mrs. Pritchard looks down the road as if she sees "these fine hills flattened [by fire] to nothing" (129). The three boys then become instruments of the fire. When riding and running in the woods they drop cigarette butts along the way. Finally, they set fire to the farm, an event we witness through the eyes of young Sally Virginia:

She watched with a dazed stare as they stopped and collected all the matches they had between them and began to set the brush on fire. They began to whoop and holler and beat their hands over their mouths and in a few seconds there was a narrow line of fire widening between her and them. While she watched, it reached up from the brush, snatching and biting at the lowest branches of the trees. The wind carried rags of it higher and the boys disappeared shrieking behind it (145).

The sounds and gestures of the boys again remind us of primitive ceremonies, though this time the context is the the ancient fire rites described by Frazer.

Later, the boys' "shrieks of joy" (146) are heard from the circle of trees, and the author compares the event to the dance of the three young men in the fiery furnace in "The Book of Daniel" This allusion, as Martin notes, is a sign that the boys do not worship the golden image of the farm as Mrs. Cope conceives it, just as the boys in "Daniel" do not bow down before the idols of Nabuchadonator.<sup>18</sup> The boys, however, are not symbols of goodness as in "Daniel." Rather, though they have the vision of primitive community Mrs. Cope lacks, and in Wheelwright's thinking would joyfully return to the "womb of reality" (a continuity and oneness with nature),<sup>19</sup> they are still themselves demonic--as is indicated by their "vicious laugh" and "calculated meanness" (142). One must remember that they are still boys and perhaps not as conscious of the total meaning of their actions as they are the immediate end for which they act. What they do through the fire, then, suggests a kind of cleansing, in the same way an ancient rite, itself a violent and frightening event, was meant to clear the atmosphere of evil and

perhaps bring new life or vision into the world.

If "A Circle in the Fire" looks back to ancient rites and beliefs for its theme and action, it also involves on the psychological level a discovery about unity with nature and with others--a mental and emotional identity the primitive savage took for granted. I mentioned that in "Artificial Nigger" the two major characters move from a hellish situation in the city to a quiet discovery about mystic brotherhood. In "A Circle in the Fire" a single character moves from a false sense of security about her rural paradise to a hellish realization about the lack of genuine community on the farm. Mrs. McIntyre, in a racial-international context in "The Displaced Person," comes to a similar discovery on her farm. For Miss O'Connor this is not so much a matter of Christian dogma as it is insight into modern living. Wheelwright says that modern man is closer to Descartes than he is to primitive thinking because he tends to divide reality up between "ego and its objects" and in the process loses the primitive sense of wholeness, mystery and transcendence.<sup>20</sup> Psychologically, O'Connor's story is about a mental movement from the Cartesian view to the primitive view--a process that involves the peculiar mental perspectives of most of the characters in the story.

Mrs. Cope is O'Connor's most obvious example of the Cartesian bifurcation. "This is my place" (137), she tells the boys in a smug manner that betrays her spiritual separation from her environment. She often thanks God for

her rich timberland, but even as she prays she "shook her head as if it might be a burden she was trying to shake off her back" (128). Smith says O'Connor is primitive because she believes in the divine origin of the unconscious,<sup>21</sup> and here Mrs. Cope's deeper self seems to be telling her (and us) something important about, not the land, but her attitude toward it. Indeed, this lady's lack of a primitive outlook comes through the many ways O'Connor comments on her inner and outer worlds. That Mrs. Cope works with the "weeds and nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (125) again reveals an internal uneasiness about her external environment. In a larger sense this strange unrest comes even through the weather, as ". . . when the seasons changed she seemed almost frightened at her good fortune in escaping whatever it was that pursued her" (142). Mrs. Cope might think she is secure: "we have everything" (127), she says; and that she relates well to others: she is proud of the way she "handled" (141) Mrs. Pritchard's mind; and that she is in tune with nature: "Get up and look at the sunset, it's gorgeous" (127) she commands young Sally. But what surfaces is her materialism and need to manipulate. She lacks what Wheelwright calls in primitive psychology vital contact with the spiritual world within and beyond oneself.<sup>22</sup>

Quite the opposite of the modern mind of Mrs. Cope is the primitive or mythic mind. Such a mind, says Bidney, is not abstract, but is a product of spontaneous emotions and feelings about nature. Here truth is subjective, psycho-

logical, and expressed in images and symbols.<sup>23</sup> In "Circle" Mrs. Pritchard is a foil for Mrs. Cope because she thinks in images that reveal deep feelings about the way the farm is run. When Mrs. Pritchard talks about "that woman that had that baby in the iron lung" (125), she is not just making conversation, but may be saying something about her landlady's managerial way of raising Sally Virginia--to say nothing of the way Mrs. Cope "handled" everybody, including the boys (cf. 138). The boys, of course, are continually expressing their feelings in graphic images that elude Mrs. Cope. One of them dramatizes all the boys' feelings about her cosmic possessiveness when he says humorously: ". . .can't no airplane go over here without she says so" (138). But perhaps the most telling image comes from the little boy who says that Powell "locked his little brother in a box and set it on fire" (135). Mrs. Cope says that Powell would not do that, but she misses the mythic or primitive implication, which has to do with how deeply they feel about this lady's attitude toward the farm. In one sense, what the boys do with her whole Cartesian approach is to put it in a box, so to speak, and burn it in the end.

By contrast, the boys are representatives of the primitive sense of unity Mrs. Cope lacks. It is ironic that they come from the city and yet represent the primitive view we ordinarily associate with the country. It is also ironic that, though deliberately mean themselves, they become instruments to drive out evil spirits. I will discuss these

apparent contradictions later, but the boys truly are O'Connor's main vehicle of primitivism, and they do this largely through their emphasis, not on the impersonal and manipulative qualities we find in Mrs. Cope, but on the personal and playful attitudes that are indigenous to primitive community. A key section of the story is their conversation about horses, where they call each by name. "Said it was one name Gene" (131), the one says of Powell. Later, Powell tells Mrs. Cope, "I remember," he says, "it was one name Gene and it was one name George" (133). This humanizing scene really embodies their overriding image of the farm and the reason they return to it. Mrs. Cope tells them not to ride the horses or go into the forest. They do both, bounding and dashing through the trees. Carl Jung says that children lack the ego-consciousness of adults; for them play belongs to the unconscious mind, to the heart rather than the head. Through play they become instinctively one with their environment and with one another.<sup>24</sup> This is the case with the boys, whose playful jumping, shouting, and dancing complement their concern for the personal, and dramatize the primitive oneness they so desperately seek.

Perhaps no character better represents the struggle between the two mental outlooks--the Cartesian and the primitive--than does young Sally, for she is really caught between Mrs. Cope and the boys. She is angry when the boys classify her as "another woman" (136) on the place, and when asked about them she "gripped both hands together and

made a contorted face as if she were strangling someone" (138). On the other hand, as if to separate herself from the women, she puts on overalls, and when her mother calls her an idiot, the little girl responds "let me be. . .I ain't you" (143). On a deep level Sally seems drawn to the boys, though she still doesn't know how to relate to them. Sometimes children express their ambivalence in fantasies,<sup>25</sup> and maybe this is why Sally goes to the woods, tells the trees to "line up," and then beats them "black and blue" (143). Unknown to herself, she is attracted to the boys in a sadistic way. What is most revealing, however, is that subconsciously she identifies the woods with the boys (and the whole primitive context they bring to life) rather than with her mother who actually owns them.

The ending of the story, like so many of O'Connor's endings, is not dogmatic or evangelistic, but apocalyptic-- a violent but revelatory event in which a person is left pondering in a mysteriously reflective way. Such is the case with Mrs. Cope. Miss O'Connor seems to assume that this lady is capable of change, for early in the story her black eyes "seemed to be enlarging all the time behind her glasses as if she were continually being astonished" (125). At one time her eyes threaten to enlarge until they "turn her wrongside out" (127)--an image that seems to indicate that Mrs. Cope needs transformation. Moreover, we are told through the eyes of Sally at the end that Mrs. Cope's face is filled with "new misery" as the fire consumes her farm.

Her condition is similar to another of O'Connor's characters, Tom Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (a title, by the way, that fits both stories), as he drives to Mobile trying to evade a rainstorm. He needs the purifying rain, much as Mrs. Cope needs the purgative fire. If Mrs. Cope is in pain, however, it is because she mistook as paradisiacal her Cartesian view of the farm and missed the primitive mythic outlook voiced by Mrs. Pritchard and the boys--and O'Connor herself whose narrative images constantly point to a sense of wholeness and transcendence the modern mind too often resists.

Those mythopoeic images, of course, are not only basic to O'Connor's style, but they underpin her thematic parallel to ancient primitive rites as well as the psychological movement in the story from Descartes to primitivism. Douglas stresses the fact that primitive life, because it involves tensions, ironies, and paradoxes, demands poetry for its expression.<sup>26</sup> I want to look first at the tensions and contradictions in O'Connor, then at the peculiar poetic way she handles them. According to Wheelwright, the ancient attitude toward nature involves a tension between naive trust and watchfulness. The former gives a feeling of being at home, of togetherness. The latter conveys another sensation, that of readiness to encounter the strange or unpredictable. This double attitude, in turn, includes the emotions of wonder and terror, which together produce a kind of awe.<sup>27</sup> It is this complex primitive tension that O'Connor captures in the peculiar images and rhythms of "A Circle in the Fire." To explore this phe-



nomenon I want to treat first the beauty of the farm, which Miss O'Connor then undercuts with images of terror and wonder. Then, since so much of primitivism is related to perception, I will examine the eye imagery through which O'Connor would have us "see through" Mrs. Cope's Cartesian view to the paradox of wonder and terror. Finally, I will look at such simple elements as food and water, typical O'Connor images through which she reveals the alienation of modern man expressed in Mrs. Cope's view, which is then juxtaposed with the mystic unity represented by the boys.

First, the beauty of the farm. The story begins with a peaceful black and white silhouette of the trees set against the sky. Then, at different times during the story the characters call attention to the land and its apparently harmonizing effect. Mrs. Cope speaks of her "rich pastures and hills heavy with timber" (127-28). Powell examines the pastures which "rolled away on either side until they met the first line of woods" (130). The child, upon seeing Powell bathing in the woods, thinks the trees must have looked "like green waterfalls" (144) through his wet glasses. When the sun appears in the story it sets on the tree line (cf. 135), like the sun at the end of "A Temple of Holy Ghost," with all its connotations of unity and harmony. And toward the end of "A Circle in the Fire" the line of trees appears as "granite blue," while "the wind had risen overnight and the sun had come up a pale gold" (142). The very rhythms and tone of these natural images actually help create for the reader a

sense of harmony with nature and invite what Wheelwright calls "naive trustfulness." The fact that O'Connor uses the words "wall," "fortress," and "granite" in connection with the line of trees suggests in a poetic way feelings of strength and protection the woods provided for the primitive savage.

At the same time, O'Connor undercuts this beautiful picture with images, gestures, sounds--immediate qualities Chase says the ancient savage identified with mana power<sup>29</sup>--that give the farm a foreboding air while inviting, again, terror and wonder. The sky, for instance, appears to be trying to "push through the fortress," the sun to "burn through" into the woods. At times Mrs. Cope thinks the grass itself is evil, and that the timberland, beautiful as it seems, is a "burden" to be shaken. Deep down this lady feels something is pursuing her (cf. 142) that the reader instinctively connects to the land, or at least to the land as she sees it. Mrs. Pritchard, of course, is a kind of natural figure of wonder and terror. Her presence on the farm seems innocent enough, and there is a simple quality to her stories. Still, this woman has a strange "taste for blood" (141) and there are decadent aspects about her, such as her "four abcess teeth." It is details like these that lead Farnham to conclude that O'Connor's talent was at its best when giving life to the ugly.<sup>29</sup> As for Mrs. Pritchard's stories, they always have that twist of horror, as her telling of the man whose wife "was poisoned by a child she had adopted out of pure kindness" (141). The reader is tempted

to relate such a story to the story of which it is a part, for it seems to suggest that young Sally--or the boys themselves, for that matter--may undo the family from within.

There is also something frightening in the ways of the boys, however young and playful they appear. The small boy, for example, has a destroyer on his shirt "broken in the middle and seemed on the point of going under" (129) that hints at what the boys will eventually do to the farm. When Mrs. Cope brings the boys crackers, a gesture of kindness, one of them spits in her path so that she stops "as if a snake had been slung in her path" (132). Moreover, the boy's laughter, though playful, appears to Mrs. Pritchard as "full of calculated meanness" (142). And when the child sees Powell in the woods he seems to her to look straight ahead "like a ghost sprung upright in his coffin" (144). Images, gestures, and sounds like these give a dark and foreboding note to the otherwise paradisaical setting of the farm. Poetically speaking, they produce, through the combination of terror and wonder, awe in the mind of the reader as they provide what Chase calls "a theatre of preternatural forces" on the farm.<sup>30</sup>

The place of eye imagery in the story is also of great mythopoeic importance to O'Connor. Mrs. Cope's eyes are continually enlarging. When the big boy confronts her we are told "He couldn't see the way her eyes enlarged but he could take note of the significant silence" (137). Here we surmise that something is happening deep within this lady. In the

end her eyes do turn "wrongsideout" (cf. 127) as she experiences the fire necessary to (in old Tarwater's words in The Violent Bear It Away) "BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN." Mrs. Pritchard is a special kind of seer, for her stories reveal the tragic side of Mrs. Cope. The one to whose eyes O'Connor attributes the most awesome qualities, however, is Powell. Like the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Powell has silver-rimmed spectacles which connect him poetically with both the Misfit's evil nature and his acute perceptiveness. Standing before Mrs. Cope, Powell "fixed her with his stare" (131). This stare, as well as the boys' "penetrating stares" (121), seems to expose Mrs. Cope's myopia. That his white face "seemed to confront but not actually see her" (137) suggests he sees beyond her physical self. The child, one remembers, imagines seeing through Powell's glasses "green waterfalls." The association of this boy's eyes with the beautiful waterfall, as well as with the sun, the ancient mark of divinity--which like the boys "seemed to be trying to set everything in sight on fire" (136)--appears to connect the boy's leader with a mystically enhancing, if not divine, view of the woods that Mrs. Cope simply does not see.

But Powell is not innocent, any more than Mrs. Cope. When his eyes, for instance, "confront" but do not "see" her (137), he appears to show the same impersonality the boys detest in the old landlady. And when Powell "fixed her with his stare but didn't say anything" (131) after she warns them about riding unshod horses, he seems to lack

any feeling at all for this lady. The same is true when the boys coldly reject Mrs. Cope's effort to feed them after she naively surmises: "They were staring because they were hungry" (131). One senses in the overall story, however, a larger, more compassionate, view of characters like Mrs. Cope, one that deals, according to Jacobson, with a sense of mystery, with tragedy not separated from comedy, with violence as an underlying condition of human life, with mercy as it applies even to the most grotesque.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Powell himself may see in this larger way. At one time, for example, his eyes survey "the whole place in one encircling stare" (132). This visual gesture is poetically connected through the word "circle" to the final circle of fire with all its beauty and horror. What the reader sees apocalyptically at the end is that both Mrs. Cope and the boys have a stake in the fire, which, as Hyman observes, is a fire of renewal, for it purges and sweetens in the manner of Greek tragedy.<sup>32</sup>

A final view of "A Circle in the Fire" must include O'Connor's use of food and water. This story might be compared to The Violent Bear It Away where, as Trowbridge indicates, Tarwater must go through ordeal by water and trial by fire before his hidden hunger is in some way satisfied. In this novel Rayber, like Mrs. Cope, fails to see the implication of the symbolic loaf, just as Tarwater, like the boys in "A Circle in the Fire," is unaware of the reasons behind its attraction.<sup>33</sup> When the boys first arrive on the farm, Mrs. Cope senses in the poor children's

stares that they are hungry. That this hunger is no mere physical craving, however, is indicated by Miss O'Connor when the old lady begins to feel they were "used to being hungry," that their hunger was "no business of hers" (131), and even later that theirs was a "hardened hunger" (137). A meal, of course, might be the means of satisfying the hunger by promoting primitive unity. Mrs. Cope's attitude, however, is hardly communal. "I'm sure they'll go when I feed them" (132) she tells Mrs. Pritchard. Significantly, when she does bring the crackers, the little boy spits in her path.

In the presence of Mrs. Cope, therefore, the boys do not eat but only "played with" (134) their food. They also ask for water, but Mrs. Cope, still trying to get at their hunger, offers them cold guinea and sandwiches, items which they reject with "Dog wouldn't eat one of them" (135). One boy does bite into the sandwich, however, but with this O'Connor tells us "they had lost all taste for food" (136). Here, then, the food and water seem to convey a deep spiritual craving equivalent to young Tarwater's in The Violent Bear It Away, but because Mrs. Cope's motives are selfish rather than communal, it is frustrated and can only bring further separation. When the boys go to the woods, away from Mrs. Cope, the situation changes. Now the child observes the boys not only running naked in the forest, but "squatting under the water tower, eating something out of a craker box" (139) and then "washing in the cow trough" (144). The implication

here is that through eating and drinking, as through their running and jumping, they are at one with nature and with each other. Mrs. Cope, of course, cannot understand this identity and her reaction to the whole situation is defensive: ". . .no wonder they aren't hunger--they have that suitcase half full of food" (226).

The relation of the suitcase to the food is also relevant to O'Connor's mythopoeic texture. In fact, the author often merges three kind of images--those of the suitcase, those of eating and drinking, and those of different kinds of animals. First, the suitcase. When the boys come to the farm they bring a "pig-shaped valise" (129). When they leave the last time for the woods where they start the fire the author tells us that Powell "picked up the suitcase. . . and entered the woods" (145). As with young Bevel in "The River" or the boy who jumps from Shiftlet's car in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the suitcase in this story is connected symbolically with some kind of fundamental decision. Mrs. Cope cannot make such a total movement toward the woods and the primitive community the boys share as they eat from the suitcase in the woods. She can only sit "with the black suitcase" (134) as the boys bound into the forest. In fact, her not being able to act in this way triggers the boys' decisive movement with the valise to set fire to the woods.

It is the animal images, however, that seem to tie the boy's eating and drinking into a kind of total poetic vision. Cassirer contends that the mythical mind does not distinguish

animals from men, but unites them in one magical complex,<sup>34</sup> and in "Circle" this is exactly the case. A pig, for instance, is associated with the suitcase, a dog with the conversation about the cold guinea, a cow with the water trough, though none of these animals, unlike the horses, actually exists. Together these "mythical beasts" unite the eating/drinking episodes into one mysterious whole. This larger vision must include both Mrs. Cope's materialistic view as well as the boys' more mystical view of reality. In this sense, eating and drinking as a manifestation of mystic brotherhood is at best partial. In fact, it is never really accomplished on the farm, though the boys seem to envision a potential for it that the landlady completely misses. Hence, the fire at the end is an overpowering shock to Mrs. Cope and her view of the woods, as well as a sign of purgation--the primitive notion that fire helps control evil and promote new life. Indeed, part of the final apocalyptic vision is that within the fire the boys' cries continue as "wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace" (141). As in The Violent Bear It Away, this fire, says Muller, calls for "purification."<sup>35</sup> The reader, if not Mrs. Cope, sees this as a painful necessity for bridging the gap between the lady's view of the world and the boys', if one is to come closer to the togetherness hinted at by the three young men dancing in the fiery furnace.

O'Connor's skill as a religious writer, then, is as skillful as it is unorthodox. She never lets her reader



retreat into a safe position, so as to make "the other" the culprit. If one lives in the modern world that person is susceptible to O'Connor's penetrating moral critique. To this end she reaches into the habits and thought patterns of primitive man, in this case to Frazer's catalog of rites and beliefs, so that her own characters may seem abnormally bizarre and uncivilized in their behavior, but are really quite normal if seen in the context of the concerns and habits of ancient peoples. Ironically, it is the modern individual who now looks out of place. For O'Connor this juxtaposition of mentalities sets up a psychological track, one that moves from what I have called a Cartesian preoccupation with things--objects, land, people devoid of connections that give them spirit--to a sense of communion with other people and the whole natural environment. Because of the ironies and paradoxes, however, that a primitive or mythic view involves, O'Connor resorts to a style that is inherently poetic, indeed mythopoeic, because it embeds in graphic images not only the primitive parallels beneath her rural scene and the movement toward the mythic perspective itself, but the realization that the achievement of wholeness (within oneself or in relation to nature or others) is always incomplete. That realization is both insightful and disturbing, for it enables us to see that evil is something we have created along with our very culture, and similarly that goodness is a process that comes only when we are willing to take part--to dance together--in the painful fire of renewal.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Melvin J. Friedman, "Flannery O'Connor: Christian Allegorist," Critique, 10, No. 2 (1968), 69-80.

<sup>2</sup>Josephine Hendin, The World of Flannery O'Connor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 8. The farm that Hendin describes is located outside Milledgeville, Georgia.

<sup>3</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp. 40, 41, 59.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction" in Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), xxvii.

<sup>5</sup>Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), II, 185.

<sup>6</sup>Sir James George Frazer, The New Golden Bough (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Philip Wheelwright, "Poetry, Myth, and Reality," in The Modern Critical Spectrum, ed. Gerald J. Goldberg and Nancy M. Goldberg (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 310.

<sup>8</sup>Flannery O'Connor, A Good Man Is Hard To Find (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 126. Subsequent page numbers are taken from this edition.

<sup>9</sup>Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 180.

<sup>10</sup>Frazer, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup>Stuart Burns, "'Torn by the Lord's Eye': Flannery O'Connor's Use of Sun Imagery," Twentieth Century Literature, 13 (Oct. 1967), 160.

<sup>12</sup>Frazer, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup>Philip Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), p. 161.

<sup>14</sup>Frazer, p. 356

<sup>15</sup>Frazer, p. 364.

<sup>16</sup>Frazer, p. 366.

- <sup>17</sup>Wheelwright, p. 159.
- <sup>18</sup>Carter Martin, The True Country (Kingsport: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1968), p. 37.
- <sup>19</sup>Wheelwright, p. 161.
- <sup>20</sup>Wheelwright, "Poetry, Myth, and Reality," pp. 308-310.
- <sup>21</sup>J. Oates Smith, "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," Thought, 41 (Spring 1966), 551, 559.
- <sup>22</sup>Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain, p. 174.
- <sup>23</sup>David Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism, and Truth," in Myth and Literature, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 9-11.
- <sup>24</sup>Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933), p. 183.
- <sup>25</sup>Arthur T. Jersild, Child Psychology (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 217.
- <sup>26</sup>Wallace Douglas, "The Meaning of 'Myth' in Modern Criticism," in Myth and Literature, p. 127.
- <sup>27</sup>Wheelwright, p. 163
- <sup>28</sup>Richard Chase, "Notes on the Study of Myth," in Myth and Literature, pp. 70-71.
- <sup>29</sup>James Farnham, "The Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor," America, 13 May 1961, p. 277.
- <sup>30</sup>Chase, p. 73.
- <sup>31</sup>Josephine Jacobson, "A Catholic Quartet, Christian Scholar, 47 (Summer 1964), 152.
- <sup>32</sup>Stanley Hyman, Flannery O'Connor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1966), p. 36.
- <sup>33</sup>Clinton Trowbridge, "The Symbolic Vision of Flannery O'Connor: Patterns of Imagery in The Violent Bear It Away," Sewanee Review, 76 (Spring 1968), 312-313.
- <sup>34</sup>Cassirer, 181, 195.
- <sup>35</sup>Gilbert H. Muller, Nightmares and Visions (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 22.