

ARTS & LETTERS

gent, William Merritt Chase, Mary Cassatt, and others corresponded to tensions in U.S. society at the time, argues Novak. Industrialization and new technology were changing the landscape. Nature required curatorship; the Yellowstone (1872) and Yosemite (1890) national parks were established. U.S. artists no longer merely copied nature, but neither did they "fracture" it with the extreme broken strokes of their French mentors. They used their new, assertive styles to "solidify" nature on their canvasses and to preserve it.

Violence and Laughter

"Crippled Laughter: Toward an Understanding of Flannery O'Connor" by Clara Claiborne Park, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1982), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

A self-righteous atheist flirts with a Bible salesman, who returns her interest by stealing her artificial leg. An old woman feels an instant of pity for the madman who has just murdered her family; he responds by shooting her in the chest. "Most people think of [my] stories as hard, hopeless, brutal," wrote author Flannery O'Connor, a prolific writer despite her own long struggle with a crippling, incurable disease. "I read them over and over and laugh and laugh."

Few readers have drawn much cheer from the grotesqueness and violence of O'Connor's fiction. O'Connor, as a result, felt compelled to write countless letters and essays trying to explain herself—explanations that her stories should have made unnecessary, argues Park, professor of English at Williams College. Why did her fiction fail? Part of the problem lay in her devotion to both Catholicism and literary modernism. Adhering to a contemporary literary style, she crafted her fiction with understatement and objectivity, letting the stories speak for themselves through subtle, nearly opaque symbolism. But, argues Park, the aesthetic rules "elicited from Joyce and James were not adequate to carry a burden of conviction more like Dostoevski's."

Violence and suffering, in O'Connor's view, were necessary to communicate her Christian vision to an unbelieving audience. "To the hard of hearing you shout," she wrote, "and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

In her private life, as her letters reveal, O'Connor had learned how suffering could teach Christian love, humility—even good humor. Yet in her fiction she could "take her ugly characters up to the moment of grace" through violence, but no further. Her stories end without the clear affirmation of Christianity that she sought to inspire. The reason, says Park, lay in O'Connor's private fear of sentimentality—of pity. "Within pity," she observed, "lay self-pity, everywhere in ambush."

Toward the end of her life, O'Connor seemed ready to make room in her art for compassion. "I have got to the point now," she wrote, "where I keep thinking more and more about the presentation of love and charity." She died, says Park, too soon to accomplish it.