

TEMPORALITY AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN  
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S TALES

Marita Nadal  
*University of Zaragoza*  
mnadal@unizar.es

This paper explores the relationship of time to narrative structure and to an ethical dimension of the literary experience in Flannery O'Connor's tales, drawing on G. S. Morson's notions of foreshadowing, backshadowing and sideshadowing and on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. It is my contention that O'Connor's tales, despite their realism 'of distances' and hyperbolic features, do not abolish the essential openness of time: in fact, the tales incorporate a surprising variety of temporal devices through which a peculiar spectrum ranging from inevitability to contingency, from closure to aperture, and from fate to providence may be observed. The following analysis discusses this progression, focusing on a selection of tales that can be taken as models for the rest.

Keywords: foreshadowing; backshadowing; sideshadowing; chronotope; temporality; eventness; closure; contingency; fate; providence; ethics

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TEMPORALIDAD Y ESTRUCTURA NARRATIVA EN LOS CUENTOS DE  
FLANNERY O'CONNOR

*Partiendo de las nociones de foreshadowing, backshadowing, sideshadowing (Morson) y del concepto de cronotopo (Bakhtin), este artículo analiza la relación entre el tiempo, la estructura narrativa y la dimensión ética de la experiencia en los cuentos de Flannery O'Connor. El análisis refleja que los relatos de O'Connor, pese a su realismo 'de distancias' y rasgos hiperbólicos, no anulan el carácter abierto del tiempo, sino que incorporan una sorprendente diversidad de recursos temporales que permiten descubrir una temporalidad de amplio espectro, que se extiende desde la inevitabilidad hasta la contingencia, desde el final cerrado hasta el abierto, desde el destino hasta la providencia. El artículo estudia esa progresión, centrándose en una selección de cuentos que pueden tomarse como modelos para el resto.*

*Palabras clave: foreshadowing; backshadowing; sideshadowing; cronotopo; temporalidad; contingencia; destino; providencia; ética*

Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery.  
Flannery O'Connor

In *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994) Gary Saul Morson analyses the relationship of time to narrative structure and to an ethical dimension of the literary experience. Morson argues that the way we understand narrative events is often at odds with the *eventful* and open nature of daily life. Thus, most narratives are developed through 'foreshadowing' and 'backshadowing', which, even if not explicitly used, are implicitly present by virtue of the plot's reliance on structure and closure: in a well-constructed story everything points to the ending, to the pattern that will eventually be revealed, which tends to reduce the multiplicity of possibilities at each moment. However, Morson argues, narrative works can also convey narrative openness through the device of 'sideshadowing', which offers an alternative to prevailing deterministic, closed views of time. Whereas foreshadowing projects onto the present a shadow from the future, and backshadowing is foreshadowing after the fact, sideshadowing projects – from the 'side' – the shadow of an alternative present. It allows us to see what might have been and therefore changes our view of what is.<sup>1</sup>

To a great extent, Morson's analysis draws on Bakhtin's work, especially his concept of the chronotope, "a unit of *narrative* analysis" (Holquist 1990: 110, emphasis in original) which assumes that there are always a multiplicity of temporalities to consider, and that narrative forms constitute artistic models of time. Bakhtin defines the chronotope "(literally, 'time space') as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1981: 84) and "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (1981: 250). Each narrative genre has its own way of understanding time, a specific 'density and concreteness'. In each genre, time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981: 84). Significantly, the chronotope combines spatial and temporal factors with an evaluation of their meaning, as Holquist has observed: "time and space are never merely temporal or spatial, but *axiological* as well (i.e. they also have *values* attached to them)" (1990: 152, emphasis in original). Thus, the chronotope transcends the boundaries of fiction, involving also the perspective of the reader, both in time and space.

Taking Morson's essay and Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope as the main points of reference, this paper explores the relationship between temporality and narrative structure in O'Connor's tales, as well as the diverse implications of this interaction. While Bakhtin tended to associate each narrative genre with a kind of chronotope, my use of it is much more specific, since the aim of this study is to distinguish different models of time within a single narrative mode by just one author. It is worth noting that although Morson employs the term chronotope frequently, he is mainly concerned with time and temporality, rather than with space; in contrast, this analysis will include some references to the *topos* aspect of the notion. On the other hand, although Morson focuses on unambiguously realistic novels, which are the most appropriate texts for this kind of analysis, I attempt to demonstrate that his method proves useful to analyse

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O'Connor's stories, because despite their brevity and equivocal realism, they are rich enough to convey the variety of devices discussed in *Narrative and Freedom*, including their different approaches to sideshadowing.<sup>2</sup> As is well-known, O'Connor's fiction deviates from conventional realism: critics describe this characteristic as "anti-realistic impulse" (Hawkes 1986: 15), "forced realism" (Skei 2006: 139), or even relate her work to magical realism (O'Gorman 2004: 213-14), whereas she defines it as a realism "of distances" (O'Connor 1970: 179): it "lean[s] away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" (40). Significantly, O'Connor used to express her allegiance to Hawthorne, who wrote romances, rather than novels, and tales rather than short stories.<sup>3</sup>

O'Connor is considered a visionary writer and also 'a comedian of genius' who recurrently resorts to distortion and excess – what is also called the grotesque – to convey her Catholic faith. It is a fact, though, that the terrors of the New Age have turned our lives more grotesque and her fiction more relevant, as Bloom (2002: 575) has noted. Her tales, "wild", "violent and comic" in her own words (O'Connor 1970: 43), portray a variety of characters who frequently get involved in unexpected, extreme situations and become the victims of an implacable fate, which on many occasions implies violence and death. As she explains, violence in her fiction "is never an end in itself" but a means that prepares the characters "to accept their moment of grace" (1970: 112-13) and an instrument to awaken the reader "to known but ignored truths" (O'Connor 1987: 89). O'Connor is well aware of the centrality of death in her work, the recurrence of which contributes to increasing the sense of closure and inevitability of her tales: "death has always been brother to my imagination. I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in it or in its *foreshadowings*" (1987: 107, my emphasis).

In any case, O'Connor's narrative technique is more complex than it might seem at first sight: her vision is conveyed "by showing, not by saying" (O'Connor 1970: 98), which problematizes the interpretation of her fiction and contributes to questioning the orthodoxy of her apparent Roman Catholic message. Her tales possess a highly elaborate structure which closely follows Poe's notion of 'unity of effect' as well as reflecting the New Critics' aesthetic tenets that O'Connor absorbed at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.<sup>4</sup> No doubt, the skilful design of her stories evokes Cleanth Brooks's conception of the literary text as a well-wrought urn, a self-enclosed space of

<sup>2</sup> Since Morson is mainly concerned with the exploration of sideshadowing, he focuses his study on Russian realist novels, especially those of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Recurrently, he draws from Bakhtin, who, as he quotes, "discovered the genre he regarded as having the richest and most convincing sense of time: the novel (by which he meant not all prose fiction but works resembling such realist masterpieces as *Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch* and *Eugénie Grandet*)" (1994: 88).

<sup>3</sup> In *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, she remarks: "I write 'tales' in the sense Hawthorne wrote tales – though I hope with less reliance on allegory. I'm interested in the old Adam" (1987: 98). Cf. also *Mystery and Manners*, where she discusses Hawthorne in connection with "the modern romance tradition" in which she places her fiction (1970: 38-39).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Poe's words in 'Reviews of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*': "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design" (1985: 1427). O'Connor herself has pointed out the special influence of Poe on her work above other writers: "But always the largest thing that looms up is *The Humerous* [sic] *Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*" (1988: 98-99).

exquisite finish. Therefore, one might deduce that this self-conscious pattern that in many cases incorporates death as a *dénouement* could only result in the portrayal of life not as an open process but as a finished product. However, it is my contention that O'Connor's stories, despite their meticulous 'pre-established design', the use and abuse of foreshadowing and backshadowing, do not abolish the essential openness of time, but, in their exploration of mystery, offer a variety of conceptions of temporality, compatible with freedom.<sup>5</sup> In fact, O'Connor's tales incorporate a surprising variety of temporal devices through which a peculiar spectrum ranging from closure to aperture, and from fate to providence, can be observed. My analysis will follow this progression, focusing on a selection of representative tales that can be taken as models for the rest.

Perhaps it is inevitable (pun intended) to start this analysis with the story that opened and gave title to O'Connor's first volume of tales, and is also one of her best: 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' (1953). In it, a family of six members, grandmother included, leaves Atlanta for a short trip in Florida, but never reach their destination. On their way, they have a car accident and as a result encounter the Misfit, a dangerous criminal escaped from the Federal Pen, who kills them one by one. Only the cat, taken by the grandmother without her son's knowledge, and partly responsible for the accident, survives the killing. This tale, both violent and comic, is a brilliant example of inevitability and 'pre-established design'; however, it also conveys responsibility and the possibility of choice. As a carefully designed work, the first paragraph of the story encapsulates the subject of the text: it stresses the grandmother's will against that of the rest of the family about the following day's trip, and includes her warning to her son Bailey about the Misfit. If the reader keeps the title of the story in mind, by the end of this first paragraph s/he will know in advance that the meeting with the criminal is going to take place, and that something terrible is going to happen: "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did" (1990: 117).

No doubt, these first lines constitute a clear example of what Morson calls 'foreshadowing', that is, a projection onto the present of a shadow from the future. According to him, we speak of foreshadowing when only the reader is aware of it; if it is recognized as a sign by the character, "he will have discovered an omen" (1994: 63). In this case, the category of omen remains questionable, since, as the narrator notes, the grandmother quotes the newspaper's information because she "didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind" (1990: 117). While foreshadowing projects onto the present a shadow from the future, backshadowing approaches the past "as having contained signs pointing to what happened later"; it incorporates "the added knowledge that only a future perspective could provide" and "turns the past into a well-plotted story". Morson adds: "Everything conspires to produce the outcome we know;

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<sup>5</sup> In 'An Interview with Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren' on literary writing, O'Connor proves to be particularly aware of these devices. In her laconic and ironic style, she sums up her narrative technique: "When you write the thing through once, you find out what the end is. Then you can go back to the first chapter and put in a lot of those foreshadowings" (O'Connor 1987: 23).

loose ends, which intimate other possibilities, are drastically reduced or entirely eliminated in backshadowing narrative. ... *He should have known*: this is the essential trope of backshadowing" (1994: 234-36, emphasis in original). In this tale, both foreshadowings and backshadowings interact, increasing the atmosphere of tension and imminent catastrophe; for instance, the narrator's words about the grandmother's clothes ("In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady", 1990: 118), about Bailey (such as "trips made him nervous", 121) or Bailey's warning to the family when he agrees to leave the main road to visit the plantation house ("All right", Bailey said, "but get this: this is the only time we're going to stop for anything like this. This is the one and only time", 124) are examples of backshadowing or even of foreshadowing, because their anticipatory nature does operate before the reader reaches the end of the text. Minor examples of foreshadowing/backshadowing are the allusion to the "five or six graves" (119) the family can see from the car at the beginning of their journey, and, at the end, the description of the Misfit's car as a "hearse-like automobile" (126). No doubt, the grandmother's dialogue with Red Sam, the bartender, during a break in the journey, constitutes the clearest foreshadowing in the text, since, in its concern with criminality and the Misfit, it foregrounds the central topic of the story. When Red Sam observes "A good man is hard to find" (122), he not only echoes the tale's title, but also anticipates the family's encounter with the Misfit. In turn, the grandmother's words to Red Sam, "you're a good man" (122) constitute a backshadowing of similar phrases addressed by her to the Misfit three times at the end of the story (127-28).

To a great extent, the text's building of tension is linked to the successive anxieties or vague omens of the grandmother (afraid of meeting the Misfit, of leaving the cat at home, of the patrolmen by the road, of having an accident with the car); however, her anticipation of danger cannot do anything to prevent it: it only foreshadows its realization. Despite the comic style, this sensation of inevitability brings to mind the oppressive world of Greek tragedies, as O'Connor noted: "this story [...] should elicit from you a degree of pity and terror, even though its way of being serious is a comic one. [...] like the Greeks you should know what is going to happen in this story so that any element of suspense in it will be transferred from its surface to its interior" (1970: 108-09). No doubt, O'Connor means by *its interior* the ethical dimension of the story, which reaches its climax in the dialogue between the grandmother and the Misfit and results in her final revelation, at the imminence of her death. As the author explains: "while predictable, predetermined actions have a comic interest for me, it is *the free act*, the acceptance of grace particularly, that I always have my eye on as the thing which will make the story work". In this tale, "it is the Grandmother's recognition that the Misfit is one of her children" (O'Connor 1970:115-16, my emphasis).

For Morson, the ethical dimension of narrative has to do with the possibility of choice, which he relates to Bakhtin's concept of *eventness*: "For there to be eventness, there must be alternatives. Eventful events are performed in a world in which there are multiple possibilities, in which some things that could happen do not" (Morson 1994: 22). In this tale, fatalism is omnipresent, and, needless to say, the plot does not convey *multiple possibilities*; in fact, it is designed to cancel them. Nevertheless, as Bakhtin argues, "all of our choices, however prosaic", have "a measure of eventness" (Morson 1994: 22), and, as we can see, some measure of eventness is preserved in 'A Good

Man...’ through apparently prosaic, insignificant choices which, interestingly, result in disaster: thus, at the beginning, the grandchildren suggest to the grandmother the possibility of her staying at home, but she refuses. The day of the journey, it is her choice to secretly take the cat, which provokes the accident, and her idea to deviate from the main road to visit an old plantation, which results in the encounter with the Misfit. Finally, she becomes responsible for the massacre, when, childishly and proudly she reveals the Misfit’s identity with a triumphant air: “You are the Misfit! ... I recognized you at once!”. As the Misfit notes, “it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of reckernized me” (1990: 127), a humorous reply that ironically insists on the inevitability that pervades the tale.<sup>6</sup>

In any case, what makes the tale particularly fascinating is the variety of values associated with its chronotope, which go beyond the formal network of omens, foreshadowings and backshadowings that pervade the text. Thus, it is worth pointing out that although the reader realizes the grandmother’s possibility of choice and thence her responsibility, her religious epiphany and the action of grace may pass unnoticed or misunderstood in a dénouement dominated by the fundamentalism and nihilism of the Misfit and their frantic dialogue. As I have noted elsewhere, ‘A Good Man...’ is a powerful example of “ethical unreadability” (Nadal 2007): it is only O’Connor’s discussion of the tale’s ending that makes explicit the text’s intended but unclear message. On the other hand, the passing of time has modified and added significance to the interpretation of the text, as the notion of the chronotope implies (Bakhtin 1981: 254). Thus, in our “new Age of Terror” (Bloom 2002: 575) characterized by global terrorism and a variety of fundamentalisms, the plot of this tale has become more realistic and less grotesque than it was when the story was first published. Last but not least, we should pay attention to a minor chronotope embedded in the main one that plays a central role in the tragic ending: the old plantation and its house, provided with a secret panel which does not exist and which the grandmother fabricates to fantasize about the past and attract the children’s attention. It is precisely the grandmother’s desire to return to the past – in part an unreal past – that provokes the car accident, and in consequence, the encounter with the Misfit. Interestingly, she is the only character in the story that represents the traditional South and the nostalgia for it, which O’Connor recurrently undermines.

Following the progression from fatality to sideshadowing, we can observe that O’Connor sometimes combines temporality tending toward closure with temporality tending toward openness, that is, she plays with ‘coincidence’, which links different causal lines, the interaction of which has fateful results, what Morson calls *fateful coincidence* or *vortex time*: “Vortex time and sideshadowing work in opposite ways. If in sideshadowing apparently simple events ramify into multiple futures, in vortex time an apparent diversity of causes all converge on a single catastrophe” (Morson 1994: 163). This is what happens in ‘The Comforts of Home’ (1960) and ‘Everything that Rises Must Converge’ (1961), a story that has usually attracted the critics’ attention because of

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<sup>6</sup> ‘A Circle in the Fire’ (1954) and ‘Greenleaf’ (1956) are stories that closely follow the pattern of ‘A Good Man...’. Both make repeated use of foreshadowing and backshadowing, including omens and hints. Similarly, the anticipation of impending catastrophe (the devastating fire in the former) or of the fatal encounter with the bull (‘Greenleaf’) do not exclude individual responsibility.

its racial concerns. The first paragraph of the tale encapsulates its most important issues: class, race, Southern ladyhood, the uneasy relationship between the two protagonists – Julian and his mother – and the excess of weight and blood pressure of the latter; surprisingly, this diversity of causes “all converge on a single catastrophe”, as Morson puts it and the tale’s title might suggest. No doubt, the mother’s high blood pressure is a foreshadowing of danger, but her death at the end of the story appears as the result of a fatal combination of factors rather than just a problem of physical health.

The most important factor in this combination is Julian’s contemptuous attitude towards his mother, whom he despises because she lives attached to the ways and manners of a South that has ceased to exist. That is why he is determined from beginning to end “to teach her a lesson” (1990: 413), a recurrent statement that functions both as foreshadowing (a kind of threat for the mother) and also as backshadowing, because the dénouement discloses that he is the real recipient of the lesson. On the other hand, his disposition, full of aggressiveness against his mother, obliquely foreshadows the violent ending of the tale: “There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit” (409); “he could with pleasure have slapped her” (414). However, the element that triggers the catastrophe is the hat, identical to that of Julian’s mother, that a black woman is wearing on the integrated bus. This fateful coincidence, typical of ‘vortex time’ surprises both character and reader: “He could not believe that *Fate* had thrust upon his mother such a lesson” (416, my emphasis). For the mother, the hat provides a touch of class, whereas for Julian, despite his words of approval, it is “hideous” and “atrocious” (405-06). On the other hand, Julian’s interest in starting a conversation with a black man only to shock his mother is another factor – in this case not accidental, but deliberate – to take into account. Finally, the condescending attitude of Julian’s mother towards the black woman’s little boy arouses the violent reaction of the black woman and provokes the catastrophe: once off the bus, she strikes Julian’s mother a blow that leaves her sitting on the sidewalk. While Julian keeps reproaching his mother instead of offering help, she lies dying on the pavement, the victim of a fatal stroke. In the light of the tale’s dénouement, the story’s title acquires a fuller significance, because it evokes not only the convergence of hats and the condition of blacks in the South (cf. Julian’s mother’s words: “[Blacks] should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” 408) but also Julian’s contempt, the black woman’s rage (which foreshadows her violent reaction: “The woman was rumbling like a volcano about to become active”, 416), Julian’s mother’s blood pressure, and the coincidence of factors that defines Morson’s concept of vortex time.<sup>7</sup>

As in ‘A Good Man...’, the protagonist’s responsibility in the course of events is more than clear, but the values related to the plot are again divergent. While for O’Connor the convergence/coincidence of hats was supposed to suggest the rise of blacks in American society in the light of Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of the

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, we can discover many other backshadowings, which range from the prophetic remark of the shop assistant: “with that hat, you won’t meet yourself coming and going” (407) – and which Julian’s mother repeats to convince herself of the good buy – to Julian’s visualization of a scene in which his mother would ask him to get off the bus and “he would look at her as at a stranger who had rashly addressed him” (413). This is what happens at the end of the story, but in reverse, when Julian’s mother no longer recognizes him, and instead keeps asking for her “Grandpa” or “Caroline”, her old black nurse (420).

Omega Point – according to which humankind evolves towards a supreme consciousness that finds its convergence in Christ – the dénouement of the story foregrounds hostility and divergence.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Kreyling, who has recently analysed the tale against the background of the cold-war period, remarks: “The clear theme is that, in the sphere of American race relations at least, nothing but animosity rises and the convergence of human interests is the last item on anyone’s agenda” (2006: 16). Interestingly, this text can also be approached as the clash of two chronotopes, that of the Old South, represented by Julian’s mother, and the New South, embodied by Julian and the black woman. Whereas the former is classist and somehow racist, and recalls with nostalgia her childhood years on the family’s decayed plantation, Julian’s bitterness reflects a society in transition between segregation and civil rights, in which his family has lost the privileged status it once enjoyed (his great-grandfather had been a former governor of the state).

The next stage on the path towards sideshadowing is exemplified by ‘The Enduring Chill’ (1958), which contrasts the main character’s fatalism with the openness suggested by the plot. Thus, the sense of inevitability originates in the self-indulgent and self-destructive personality of the protagonist, Asbury. A failed writer living in New York, he returns to his mother and the South to await his death because he suffers from a mysterious fever, but mainly because, as a nihilist, he contemplates his death “as a gift from life” and “his greatest triumph” (1990: 370). Narcissistic and the victim of his obsessions and omens about his imminent end, he recalls the protagonist of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, a character that Morson discusses to exemplify the contrast between the author’s vision and his character: “Anna imagines fate and tragedy where Tolstoy gives us causes and conditions largely outside her notice” (Morson 1994: 77). In both works, the narrative develops an oppressive atmosphere of foreshadowing that reaches the reader as well. Thus, Asbury’s mind is only filled with forebodings of death: “He had felt the end coming on for nearly four months” (358); “Mother, ... I AM going to die” (372); “I’m dying” (376); “He was convinced that the end was approaching, that it would be today” (377). Asbury’s fixation with death is so great that it ends up reflected in his physical appearance, to the point that the country physician, summoned by Asbury’s mother against his will, remarks: “I don’t know when I’ve seen anybody your age look as sorry as you do. What you been doing to yourself?” (366). However, all these premonitions of death prove to be false foreshadowings, since in the end, the doctor discovers that the fever had been caused by Asbury’s drinking unpasteurized milk on the family farm. As Morson puts it, “Sideshadows lurk in the deepest foreshadows” (1994: 166). Thus, the enduring chill of the title, which Asbury had envisioned for his mother when reading his will, was intended for himself.

Although O’Connor’s main concern in the story is the portrayal of Asbury’s spiritual awakening, the tale raises other issues that the passing of time has foregrounded. For instance, the conceited attitude of the protagonist towards his

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<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the title of the tale (which also provided the title to O’Connor’s second collection of stories) is a quotation from Teilhard de Chardin’s explanation of the Omega Point: “Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. *For everything that rises must converge*” (Whitt 1997: 111, emphasis in original).



mother's black employees brings to mind controversial tales concerned with race like 'Everything that Rises...' or 'The Artificial Nigger' (see below) and recent approaches to O'Connor's ideology, some of which not only emphasize her cultural conservatism but even suggest that she was a "closet racist" who had a "distaste for Negroes" and a "propensity for repeating racist jokes" (Wood 1994: 90, 94).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, O'Connor's dismissive treatment of the novel *Gone with the Wind* in 'The Enduring Chill' is now open to a different scrutiny: while in O'Connor's time that novel was absent from the literary canon, its popularity has enormously increased with the passing of time, so that our contemporary evaluation of this tale is affected by these changes, as Bakhtin had anticipated.<sup>10</sup>

As 'The Enduring Chill' suggests, 'the structuring impulse' of the plot may depend on one of the central characters, rather than on an externally imposed design. Just as Morson quotes Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as an example of the protagonist's 'plotting' of her own fate, whereas the world is "fundamentally innocent of both [closure and structure]" (1994: 79-80), some characters in O'Connor's tales prove to be the real plotters of the story, becoming sometimes the victims of their own devious plans. Apart from being a skilful narrative device, this feature is also a way to convey narrative freedom, since it shows that events ultimately take place as a consequence of the character's deliberate choice.<sup>11</sup> While Asbury represents the figure of the passive and fatalistic plotter, the protagonists of 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own' (1953) and 'Good Country People' (1955) epitomize that of the active, self-confident and even devilish plotter: they are sure of their powers and determined to change the course of events. Needless to say, this variation constitutes a further step from inevitability to sideshadowing.

'The Life You Save May Be Your Own' is a good example of the plotting of two characters. As in 'Good Country People', an old woman and her daughter Lucynell Crater receive the visit of a tramp, Mr. Shiftlet. Although the daughter is a retarded girl and the visitor a complete stranger, the mother plots their marrying, for she is "ravenous for a son-in-law" (1990: 150) and wants a handyman for her run-down place. Shiftlet agrees to the marriage proposal but abandons Lucynell some hours after the wedding, taking with him the Craters' car he had been so interested in repairing. After leaving his bride asleep in a bar, Shiftlet drives on towards Mobile, taking as a passenger a boy with a suitcase standing by the road. Like the Bible salesman in 'Good Country People', this visitor shows signs of unreliability, but the mother is not aware of them; for her, Shiftlet is "no one to be afraid of" (145), an estimation that ironically, foreshadows the opposite. This tale does not convey any sense of fatalism or even of closure. In contrast, it portrays the world as full of 'eventness' and alternatives, where life is seen as an open, unfinished process, and the protagonists – rather than fate or the

<sup>9</sup> For further commentary on O'Connor and race, see Alice Walker (1984), Sarah Gordon (2000), Katherine Hemple Prown (2001) and Gretchen Dobrott Bernard (2004).

<sup>10</sup> As Helen Taylor (2001: 28) argues, Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936) – made into a successful film by David O. Selznick in 1939 – is probably the most popular work of art of the twentieth century and an international symbol of American Southernness.

<sup>11</sup> Morson observes that this device may not always succeed, since the reader tends to displace "the locus of structuring to the wrong agent", i.e. the author, who is, obviously, the ultimate agent (1994: 80-81).

writer's pre-established design – dominate the course of events. In fact, O'Connor confessed that she "did have some trouble with the end of that story" and that only "that little boy is what makes the story work". Interestingly, O'Connor described her own role in the writing of this story as that of recipient, rather than agent of the plot: "Of course, I don't know how you get those things. I just waited for it" (O'Connor 1987: 34).<sup>12</sup> It is true that the boy completes the story in the sense that he stands for the agent of grace through whom Shiftlet can discover his own corrupt nature; however, Shiftlet's final statement ("Oh Lord ... Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!", 1990: 156) remains utterly ironic and ambiguous, since there is no way to ascertain whether these words are the expression of his illumination through the boy – the effect of grace – or simply constitute an angry exclamation at the boy's insults.

The impression of life as an unfinished process, of something in progress without a preordained destination is emphasized by the open structure of the plot and by the figure of Shiftlet himself: just as the pattern of the tale evokes the episodic nature of picaresque narratives, Shiftlet's name, his description of himself as a "drifting man" (152), and his life on the road (on foot, then by car, finally racing into *Mobile* – my emphasis) portrayed as a series of events that are not necessarily the expected outcome of previous ones – all this exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of *eventness*. In Morson's words: "Above all, the eventful event must produce something genuinely new, something beyond a predictable consequence of earlier events. If eventness is real, no knowledge of the past, no matter how comprehensive, would be sufficient for making a perfectly reliable prediction of the future". Thus, we can conclude that eventness ('surprisingness') is the organizing impulse in both of these stories, since it involves not only the characters but also the reader and even the author herself, to some extent (Morson 1994: 22). In the chapter devoted to the study of indeterminism, Morson focuses on Bakhtin's concept of *poliphony*, which the latter associates, more than with a mere plurality of voices, with the characters' capacity of surprising the author: "Poliphony, then, is above all a *theory of the creative process*. .... When a work is created poliphonically, the eventness it conveys partakes of the real eventness happening during the creative process, when the characters surprise the author" (Morson's italics, 1994: 98). Although Bakhtin's analysis of poliphony mainly applies to the novel, and in particular to Dostoevsky as the inventor of the poliphonic novel, the characteristics of 'The Life You Save...' and its creative process recall Bakhtin's definition. No doubt, Bakhtin's paraphrase of Dostoevsky's 'central belief' inherent in poliphony also applies to O'Connor's tale: "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future" (Morson 1994: 93).

Significantly, these two tales are based on popular literary models: both follow the trickster plot common to American narrative; besides, the travelling salesman as freak is

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<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor alludes to her problems with this tale: "I have been working on it two months & it's cold as a fish to me. I don't know the front from the back" (1988: 47). It is worth adding that O'Connor sold the rights of this tale to a TV channel, and wisely anticipated that the ending would be changed. In a letter to Betty Hester, she humorously remarks: "Mr. Shiftlet and the idiot daughter will no doubt go off in a Chrysler and live happily ever after. Anyway, on account of this, I am buying my mother a new refrigerator. While they make hash out of my story, she and me will make ice in the new refrigerator" (1988: 174).

a recurrent figure in the history of Southern literature, as Richard Gray (2000: 407-08) has noted.<sup>13</sup> Their plots, which undermine Southern features such as honour, hospitality and respectability, evoke Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), in which the humorous style and picaresque episodes do not diminish the intensity of the writer's critical vision or the sordidness, hypocrisy and materialism of the South portrayed. Although, as in the other tales discussed, O'Connor's main intention was a religious one, the values conveyed by these texts go beyond this concern. In fact, her revisionist and iconoclastic impulse anticipates recent trends in Southern writing, so this is one of the reasons why her literary prestige is much greater now than when she first published her work.<sup>14</sup>

In his analysis of sideshadowing, Morson focuses on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and concludes that in this novel the author avoids closure, using a new device in its place, which Morson calls *aperture*: "Aperture encourages us to read with such expectations of open and unending futurity so that we become practiced in assessing events forever free of foreshadowing, closure, and final signification. ... Development itself – that is what aperture is designed to convey" (Morson 1994: 171). Although the length and scope of Tolstoy's novel has very little in common with the brevity and compression of O'Connor's tales, there is at least one tale in her collection that fully evokes the sense of progression, incompleteness and lack of closure that Tolstoy explored: 'Parker's Back' (1965). In it, O'Connor brilliantly combines this technique of aperture with a highly elaborate design and her concern with the character's encounter with grace; in that sense, there is some degree of 'final signification'. To begin with, the author establishes a witty pun and link between the story's title and its central character and subject, which in turn points to the defining structure of aperture: unending progression. Thus, Parker, the protagonist, keeps coming back to Sarah Ruth – before and after their marriage – and to new tattoos as a way to alleviate his "chronic and latent" dissatisfaction, which sometimes becomes "acute" and "rage[s] in him" (1990: 514). Therefore, it is both structurally and symbolically appropriate that this recurrent return should culminate and be embodied in an impressive tattoo on Parker's back. However, despite this crucial tattoo of a "Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes" (522), O'Connor does not make use of a final ending; she just resorts to minor landmarks interspersed within the text. In keeping with Morson's contention, a "work that employs aperture renounces the privilege of an ending. It invites us instead to form a relative closure at several points" (1994: 170).

Thus, 'Parker's Back' is structured around a series of phases or landmarks in the life of the protagonist: the first occurs when he is fourteen and sees a man in a fair, "tattooed from head to foot" and Parker is "filled with emotion" (1990: 512-13). The second turning point in his life takes place when his mother drags him off to a religious revival with her; when he sees "the big lighted church" he escapes and the next day "he lied about his age and joined the navy" (513). During his travels around the world, he keeps collecting new tattoos. The following phase starts with his unsatisfactory, stormy relationship with the ugly and fanatical Sarah Ruth, which continues into their

<sup>13</sup> The travelling stranger in 'Good Country People' is a Bible salesman: he is not only a hypocrite, but an embodiment of atheism, fetishism and perversion.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, see Nadal (2008), where I discuss O'Connor's stories in the light of present-day Southern writing.

marriage and her pregnancy. Marriage makes him “gloomier than ever” and new tattoos are his only relief (518). The fourth climax in the story – which evokes a biblical epiphany – involves the crashing of Parker’s tractor into a tree and its bursting into flames: “GOD ABOVE”, he yells (520), and rushes to the city to get a religious tattoo, knowing “that there had been a great change in his life ... and that there was nothing he could do about it” (520-21). After having the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ drawn on his back and getting drunk, Parker experiences another revelation that seems to clarify both his past and his future:

The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything. Throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, often afraid, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him – in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth. The thought of her brought him slowly to his feet. She would know what he had to do. She would clear up the rest of it, and she would at least be pleased. It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her. ... His head was almost clear of liquor and he observed that his dissatisfaction was gone, but he felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night. (527)

No doubt, this epiphany could have put an end to the story, since it gives meaning to the protagonist’s past and illuminates his future, establishing through the religious tattoo a clear link between the fundamentalist Sarah Ruth, his restless, searching life, and the mystery of grace. However, the tale renounces the privilege of an ending, depicting life and its characters as part of a continuum, a process that never ends. Thus, the narrator continues the narrative, describing Parker’s return to Sarah Ruth – Parker’s back yet again – and his disappointment with her violent reaction, which in fact is just a replica of previous ones: rather than being pleased at the sight of the new tattoo, she accuses him of idolatry and begins to strike him furiously with the broom, her weapon of choice since their first encounter. “Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree!”, she exclaims. After a cruel beating, Parker leaves the house and takes refuge precisely under a tree, where he is watched by his angry wife, “crying like a baby” (530). As Gerlach has pointed out in his structural analysis of the American short story, this tale “leaves as a residue an internal openness” and “seems to slip ... beyond the geometry of the telling to a mystery” (1985: 124).<sup>15</sup> Apart from the growing dissatisfaction of the individual in the modern world and the evident proliferation of tattoos in daily life and popular culture, which the plot of the tale anticipates, its religious aspects have also acquired a deeper significance with the passing of time. Thus, while O’Connor’s impulse for the writing of this text was the belief that “the spirit moveth where it listeth” (1988: 593), in accordance with the Gospel of St. John (3: 7-9), and was pleased to hear from Caroline Gordon that she had succeeded in dramatizing “that heresy which denies Our Lord corporeal substance” (Giroux 1990: xv), the contemporary reader can draw a parallel between the violent, fundamentalist and

<sup>15</sup> I agree with Sarah Gordon that the phrase *crying like a baby* “contains perhaps the most important words in the story”, because of its suggestion of “spiritual rebirth” and of “Parker’s need for spiritual guidance and teaching” (2000: 250). However, the phrase is too subtle and oblique to provide a sense of closure, which the tale’s structure circumvents.

ruthless Sarah Ruth and the Taliban rulers in Afghanistan, who in 2001 ordered the destruction of two giant Buddhas carved into a cliff, regarded as idols incompatible with Sharia law.

Whereas 'Parker's Back' exemplifies openness and unfinalizability because it portrays events as part of a continuum – like life and history – other tales point to openness and freedom in a more indirect way: through responsibility and regret. Morson discusses William James's essay 'The Dilemma of Determinism', in which James invites us to accept the indeterministic view. If you believe in determinism, the sentiment of regret becomes "an absurdity, for regret makes no sense if things could not have been otherwise" (1994: 85).<sup>16</sup> As we have seen before, 'Everything that Rises Must Converge' is a good example of this: at the end of the story, Julian realizes his cruelty and the reader leaves him about to enter "the world of guilt and sorrow" (1990: 420).<sup>17</sup> In the same essay, William James suggests that open time (sideshadowing) may share the world with providence. He argues that, perhaps, God allows for people to choose and does not know their choices in advance: the world he has created offers more possibilities than actualities. However, "on contingent circumstances, he is also ready to offer slight, undetected pushes in the right direction by performing miracles so small that they do not come to light" (Morson 1994: 168): in that way, God would guide the world in beneficial ways. The work of providence is beautifully reflected in 'Revelation' (1964) and 'The Artificial Nigger' (1955), significantly O'Connor's favourite story. In this tale, Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, quarrel and get lost in Atlanta, a city they are visiting on a one-day trip. To make matters worse, Mr. Head denies Nelson when the latter is in danger. Surprisingly, their reconciliation is by way of an 'artificial nigger', an ornamental statue they discover in a white neighbourhood: "They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (1990: 269). As O'Connor states in *Mystery and Manners*, the black figure becomes the agent of revelation: it reunites both characters and represents "the working of grace" (1970: 115).

Appropriately, O'Connor opens the story with a poetic and symbolic paragraph that, very subtly, contributes to foreshadowing the work of providence: "the miraculous moonlight" (1990: 249), reflected in the mirror of the room, evokes the supernatural, dream-like atmosphere inherent in Hawthorne's concept of romance, in which "the moonbeams" and "the looking-glass" are the central symbols (1977: 66). In keeping

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Morson observes the importance of moral choice/responsibility for Bakhtin, who wanted to describe a world in which moral choice would be real, emphasizing "that responsibility requires an indeterministic world, a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene" (1994: 86-87).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also 'The Lame Shall Enter First' (1962) and 'The Displaced Person' (1954), which also explore responsibility, guilt and regret. In contrast, 'A View of the Woods' (1957) – "a sublimely ugly tale", as Bloom observes (2001: 53) – lacks regret, but foregrounds choice, responsibility, guilt and evil with special intensity: the plot shows clearly that the death of the two protagonists at the end (the grandfather kills the granddaughter in a fight and then dies of a heart attack) is the logical consequence of their calculating, stubborn wills, rather than the effect of vortex time. In an indirect way, the ending emphasizes contingency as well, since the confrontation might have gone either way.

with this elaborate and transcendental opening, the story comes to its end with a new allusion to the moon, which “restored to its full splendor” (269), enhances the effect of grace and beauty (backshadowing), contributing also to the text’s sense of narrative closure.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, this tale has some points in common with ‘A Good Man...’: although the latter highlights fate, and the former, providence, both show a carefully built structure, and share the chronotope of the road and that of meeting, which are connected by a “close link”, as Bakhtin notes (1981: 98). The motif of meeting “fulfills architectonic functions”, since it can serve, for instance, as the dénouement of the plot (Bakhtin 1981: 98), as happens in these tales. However, as he remarks, encounters have “different nuances”, since they “may be desirable or undesirable, joyful or sad, sometimes terrifying [...] the entire fate of a man may depend on them” (1981: 98-99). Thus, these two tales brilliantly exemplify the opposite effects of the combination of both chronotopes, and these chronotopes, in turn, constitute the basis of the tales’ narrative structure. As in ‘A Good Man...’, temporality has affected the values of ‘The Artificial Nigger’ in a way that O’Connor could not have anticipated: just as the issue of race has become increasingly foregrounded and opened to debate in recent criticism of O’Connor’s fiction, ‘The Artificial Nigger’ has become her most controversial text. Whereas Toni Morrison, among other critics, admires the strategies employed by O’Connor to portray the “connection between God’s grace and Africanist ‘othering’” (1993: 13-14) “in that brilliant story” (68), it is also evident that in years pervaded by a global wave of political correctness, the term *nigger* has become a taboo word which might sound even more offensive when coming from a white Southerner. No wonder, then, that the tale has been removed from the reading list of some American academic programmes as a racist text, as Oates (1999: 343) has noted.

As this analysis has pointed out, temporality functions in a two-fold dimension, since it has to do not only with narrative structure and the artistic unity that the chronotopes create but also with the reader’s evaluation of their meaning, which results in an ongoing interaction between literature and life that alters and diversifies the significance of the text. As Bakhtin notes, “this process of exchange is itself chronotopic: it occurs first and foremost in the historically developing social world, but without ever losing contact with changing historical space” (1981: 254). Therefore, as he concludes, we could even speak of “a special *creative* chronotope inside which this exchange between work and life occurs, and which constitutes the distinctive life of the work” (1981: 254, emphasis in the original). In that sense we can conclude that the temporality of O’Connor’s tales will remain open and in progress, since it will always be perceived in the context of the reader’s chronotope. On the other hand, the analysis of O’Connor’s stories has pointed out that each of the tales has its own way of understanding time, and that all the chronotopes in them allow for some measure of temporal openness and, therefore, choice and personal responsibility. Despite the “*already written* quality” of literary works, which inevitably implies a “sense of destiny” (Morson 1994: 113, emphasis in original), the “more drastic procedures” (O’Connor 1970: 70) that the short story requires, and O’Connor’s hyperbolic realism ‘of

<sup>18</sup> In her analysis of ‘The Artificial Nigger’, Oates emphasizes its engaging quality, “its dramatic momentum”, which goes beyond the interest of its Christian subtext. Among O’Connor’s work, Oates finds the story “memorable” “for its portrayal of comic yet sympathetic characters and for the *unexpected ‘mercy’ of its conclusion*” (1999: 343, my italics)

distances', these tales, in different degrees, manage to convey the sense of unactualized possibilities. Thus, we have observed a significant gradation in the treatment of temporality: whereas 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' epitomizes inevitability, fatalism and narrative closure, and its suggestion of alternatives is particularly weak, 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own' and 'Parker's Back', placed at the opposite end of the spectrum, exemplify the sense of life in process, multiple possibilities and aperture, that is, sideshadowing. While in the first tales discussed, fate, 'vortex time' and the author's control seem to dwarf the autonomy of the characters, other tales portray a progression in which the figure of the fatalistic protagonist gives way to that of the self-confident plotter, to the point that the author's role appears reduced to that of observer, who can even be surprised by the characters' initiatives. Finally, tales like 'The Artificial Nigger' and 'Revelation' show that the beneficent action of providence can also convey narrative closure, maintaining open the sense of freedom and eventness.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, it is worth adding that O'Connor's handling of temporality evokes the diverse techniques used by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in their portrayal of sideshadowing: according to Morson (1994: 12), both Russian writers offer the most sophisticated cases of this device. Interestingly, both Dostoevsky and O'Connor emphasize choice and responsibility by focusing on crises and extreme situations that reveal their reliance on closure and vortex time. In contrast to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy prefers to foreground the contingency of events, showing – through aperture or the mistaken fatalism of the protagonist – that every moment matters and that real time is an ongoing process, devices that some of O'Connor's stories explore – perhaps surprisingly. Therefore, her tales prove to be *chronotopically* diverse, since they not only evoke Dostoevsky's tormented world of responsibility and guilt – as critics have recurrently pointed out –<sup>20</sup> but also rewrite Tolstoy's more unobtrusive devices, especially the description of gradual, contingent small changes and the sense of unfinalizability and progression inherent in real time. No doubt, these characteristics could account for the peculiar diversity of O'Connor's tales as pointed out by her critics: whereas the devices of inevitability and vortex time are linked to the portrayal of violence, death and extreme situations and suggest a "fierce, combative, revolutionary" imagination, an "apocalyptic religious experience" (Oates 1986: 46, 539) together with a sadistic impulse, O'Connor's exploration of contingency, life in process and aperture is related to the description of gradual changes and to the idea that every moment matters, which reflects an emphasis on the concrete and particular and a realism of the "here and now" (O'Gorman 2004:

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<sup>19</sup> Since there are no deaths at the end of some tales analysed – something unusual in this writer – it might be argued that in O'Connor, the sense of alternatives, openness and freedom is related to this absence. However, some of her stories manage to convey contingency and indeterminacy despite their closed structure and inclusion of death in the plot. This is what happens in 'A Late Encounter with the Enemy' and 'Judgement Day': in spite of the 'timely' death of their central characters, the dénouement is seen as the natural and logical outcome of the characters' inappropriate actions, not as the effect of fate or vortex time.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Oates (1986) and Srigley (2004). On the other hand, O'Connor herself alludes recurrently in her letters to her reading of Dostoevsky (O'Connor 1988).

6), also categorized as “neorealist fiction” (Bradbury 1988: 1139-40).<sup>21</sup> In the end, it might well be that the equivocal character of the temporality of O’Connor’s tales, its seductive elusiveness, has to do with the strange combination of a great concern with time<sup>22</sup> – which includes mastery of its three *shadows* – and the ultimate desire to transcend it. In her own words: “The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location” (O’Connor 1970: 59).

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<sup>21</sup> This sadistic impulse has been pointed out by a variety of O’Connor’s critics, among them John Hawkes (1986), Harold Bloom (1986, 2001, 2002), Joyce Carol Oates (1986, 2003) and Katherine Hemple Prown (2001).

<sup>22</sup> This concern was also present in O’Connor’s daily life, as she reflects in her letters: “I myself am afflicted with time” (1988: 91); “time is very dangerous without a rigid routine” (465).



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Marita Nadal is a senior lecturer at the Department of English and German Philology of the University of Zaragoza, where she currently teaches American Literature. A BA in *Geography and History*, she graduated with honours in *English Philology* and obtained her PhD in 1990 (University of Zaragoza). Currently, her main fields of research are Gothic fiction, and modern and contemporary US literature. Recent publications include articles on Edgar Allan Poe (*Mississippi Quarterly*) Joyce Carol Oates (*Mississippi Quarterly*) and Flannery O'Connor (*Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*).

Address: Dpto. de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, C/ Pedro Cerbuna 12, 50009 Zaragoza. Tfno: 976 761538. Fax: 976 761519.