

Flannery O'Connor and The Peacock

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Among the many fascinating tales and lore of the peacock which P. Thankappan Nair includes in his article "The Peacock Cult in Asia" is the following quotation:

It is an unfortunate tendency of the English mind to seize what seems to it grotesque or ungainly in an unfamiliar object; thus the elephant and the peacock have become almost impossible in English poetry because the one is associated with lumbering heaviness and the other with absurd strutting. The tendency of the Hindu mind on the other hand is to seize on what is pleasing and beautiful in all things and turn to see charm where the English mind sees a deformity and to extract poetry and grace from the ugly.¹

Such a decisive description of two ways of looking at things, of the combination of grotesqueness and humor, of the potentiality of beauty in ugliness, aptly applies to the subject matter and the technique of Flannery O'Connor's fiction.

Through her assortment of unpalatable characters and violent actions, O'Connor tries to show grace at work in the world. According to her beliefs Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, has shown that God so loved the world that He became man Himself. Yet this God is not accepted by men, so they have to be shocked into a recognition of their need for Him and the salvation He offers. Though these themes run throughout her essays and stories, in "The Displaced Person" she beauti-

1. Sri Aurobindo as quoted in "The Peacock Cult in Asia," *Asian Folklore Studies*, 33 No. 2 (1974), 135. Subsequent references to Nair will be made in the text. In the preparation of this article I am indebted to Fr. Julius Abri, S.V.D., librarian of Shingenkai Shingakko Toshokan, for furnishing Jewish and early Christian sources; to Fr. Matthias Eder, S.V.D., editor of *Asian Folklore Studies*, for his comments and access to the Nair article; and to Francis Britto, S.J. and Valentine De Souza, S.J., who at the start of the search provided basic local information.

fully illustrates her point by employing the peacock as a “spiritual test”² and as a correlative of the displaced person who in his goodness is rejected and killed as Christ was. O’Connor’s well crafted use of the peacock as a symbol can be better appreciated if it is seen in the context of the two views so sharply depicted by Sri Aurobindo.

A review of the habits of the peacock, beliefs of the people, and the aura of sacredness attached to the peacock in India, involves language and ideas which easily fit into Flannery O’Connor’s personal observations of the peacock and her religious beliefs about God’s ways of revealing Himself to man. For example, Nair describes the display of the peacock’s tail which is so arranged that the head becomes the focal point amidst the varicolored design. O’Connor in “The Displaced Person” gives a similar picture of the peacock in which “Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head.”³ As I have noted elsewhere, O’Connor connects this awesome pose with the Catholic veneration of the Eucharist placed in a monstrance.⁴

Several times Nair mentions that the peacock’s dance foreshadows relief from the hot season by the cooling monsoon rains (pp. 102, 138, 144, 151). Thus the peacock becomes a friend of those in need (p. 135), quenches the thirst of love (p. 144), and according to the *Kavipriya* of Keshav Das gives notice of the union of heaven and earth in the rain, a kind of sharing of two natures: “The peacocks with their shrill cries announce the matings of earth and sky” (p. 148). Like a prophet the peacock foretells future events and warns against the presence of evil by being quick to notice snakes and tigers (p. 153). In Catholic devotions Christ is honored under the symbol of the Sacred Heart, refuge of those who labor and are weary. A similar devotional expression can be found in the following almost prayer-like address to the peacock:

When oppressed by the scorching sun, people hanker after your voice. As you are always of a courteous nature, you send your note to please those who are oppressed as a matter of obligation. In response to your note, the clouds shower rains. You have great affection and love towards the people. This may be the reason why you do not fly up in the air, but always prefer to remain on the ground. (p. 143)

2. Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Flannery O’Connor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 18.

3. *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 226. This edition, CS, will be used for all of her short stories.

4. Cf. “Apologia for the Imagination: Flannery O’Connor’s ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost,’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (Spring 1974), 149.

With this kind of language the peacock becomes more of a religious symbol.

Indeed among the Dravidians the peacock is considered sacred (p. 158). It is the vehicle (the animal a god uses to ride or sit upon) of "Subramania, the supreme god of the Dravidians of Tamil Nadu" (p. 112). As a decoration it is a support of temple lamps; its feathers are sacred temple objects (pp. 149, 109). Related to these ritual uses are a number of folk beliefs and customs which call to mind the Catholic doctrine concerning the effects of Holy Communion (cleansing from sin and the power of Satan, union with Christ, and pledge of immortality). Not only can the peacock's feathers frighten away demons (p. 161), but they can work cures, especially in regard to snake bites (p. 109). The peacock eats almost anything, even reptiles; as the vehicle of Subramania, it is pictured with a serpent in its claws (p. 162). The natural enmity of peacock and serpent, of good and evil,⁵ is more fully related by M'Clintock and Strong:

They run with great swiftness, and where they are serpents do not abound, as they devour the young with great avidity, and it is said, attack with spirit even the *cobra de capello* when grown to considerable size, arresting its progress and confusing it by the rapidity and variety of their evolutions around it, till exhausted with fatigue, it is struck on the head and despatched.⁶

The Indians thought that the peacock was the food of princes (p. 113) and that it was an effective antidote (p. 114), besides having the power of making a person young and immortal (p. 111). The Romans ate the peacock and had the notion that its meat was incorruptible. St. Augustine draws upon this Roman belief to explain why the peacock is a fitting symbol of the Resurrection.⁷

In Indian art the peacock occurs in scenes of "love, rain, and separation" (p. 147). It is the companion of the lover and beloved (p. 138) and is a substitute for the lover in his absence, representing the hope and promise of his return (p. 147). As a vehicle the peacock can represent the glory of the sun (p. 119). These instances are not far removed from Christ portrayed in the Transfiguration (Matt. 17, 1-8) or returning as He promised at the Second Coming (Matt. 24, 27-31). (The priest in "The Displaced Person" is reminded of these two Christian beliefs when

5. Cf. Gertrude Jobs, *Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols* (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1962), pp. 213, 1247.

6. John M'Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (1877; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1969), VII, 854.

7. M'Clintock, VII, 855.

he sees the peacock's display.)

The review, during these pages, of the peacock lore of India with asides about Christian similarities is not meant to suggest a direct link between Hindu and Christian symbolism, but to show the possibilities of the symbol. It lays the foundation for O'Connor's unorthodox (from the general English literary tradition) development of the peacock as a symbol of Christ.

In her essay "The King of the Birds" Flannery O'Connor was not unaware of the peacock's classical associations with the Greek goddess Hera and her Roman counterpart Juno. With her characteristic humor she writes: "I knew that the peacock had been the bird of Hera, the wife of Zeus, but since that time it had probably come down in the world—the Florida *Market Bulletin* advertized three-year-old peafowl at sixty-five dollars a pair."⁸ According to the stories, Hera, goddess of wives and protectress of marriage, sent hundred-eyed Argus to watch over Io, mistress of Zeus. Zeus, who had changed Io into a heifer, sent Hermes to kill the many-eyed cowhand. After his death, Hera put the eyes of Argus into the tail of the peacock, a bird sacred to her and symbolic of her jealous pride.⁹ The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds that "Argus with his countless eyes originally denoted the starry heavens."¹⁰ O'Connor borrows this star image for *The Violent Bear It Away*. After young Tarwater murdered his cousin, he re-enacted the scene in his dream, even to the detail of the watchful sky: "The sky was dotted with fixed tranquil eyes like the spread tail of some celestial night bird."¹¹

Brewer gives a slightly different version of the Argus legend. His account emphasizes the searching eyes. When Osiris, King of Egypt, went to war, he left the queen in charge, with Argus as the chief adviser. However Argus with his one hundred spies soon imprisoned the queen and took control of the country. After his defeat by Mercury (Hermes), Juno (Hera) turned Argus into a peacock and put his spies as eyes into his tail. In this context Brewer says that the peacock's feather is unlucky;

8. *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), pp. 4–5. Subsequent references to this book, identified by the letter "M", will be made in the text.

9. Cf. Nair, p. 105; *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Sir Paul Harvey, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946, 1960), p. 367; *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, 1910), II, 483 and XIII, 306–307.

10. II, 483.

11. *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), p. 216.

it is an "emblem of an Evil Eye, or an ever-vigilant traitor."¹²

Thus, already in connection with the Greek and Roman deities, the peacock had picked up an unsavory reputation. The tradition of vanity can be traced back to Aristotle: "Some animals are jealous and vain like the peacock."¹³ This seems to be the outlook adopted by the English, nevertheless for some centuries the bird retained enough of its glory to serve the symbolic needs of the early Christians.

Perhaps part of the reason for the Christians' favorable response to the peacock can be found in the Jewish custom of using this bird to decorate their synagogues and their graves.¹⁴ The design was a cup (with birds feeding from it or grapes) between peacocks. The Christians, according to Goodenough, continued the Jewish practice of lighting a lamp by the graves and using the peacock as a sign of immortality.¹⁵ Instead of the menorah, however, the peacocks flanked a cross or a tree of life. Consequently, on Christian sacred vessels the peacock would not only express immortality but would also be a sign of the Eucharist which is to ensure everlasting life (John 6, 54). An illustration in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* shows lamps from the catacombs. On one of the lamps there is a peacock drinking from a two-handled cup. In the caption the peacock is said to be a symbol of the soul.¹⁶

The fact that the peacock sheds its colorful feathers in late fall and then regains them in spring as if brought back to life, is like a resurrection.¹⁷ Another symbolism arises from the custom of raising peacocks to grace royal gardens; by extension it becomes a symbol of the heavenly gardens, of Paradise.¹⁸ Because of this relation to Paradise the peacock is

12. E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (New York: Cassell, 1898), p. 953.

13. M'Clintock, VII, 854.

14. That the peacock was brought into Palestine at the time of Solomon seems doubtful. The word, which in I Kings 10,22 and II Chr. 9,21 was occasionally translated as "peacocks," should be read as "monkeys." Cf. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), III, 707.

15. Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period, Vol. IV: The Problem of Method./Symbols from Jewish Cult*, Bollingen Series, No. 27 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), pp. 44, 45.

16. Also in relation to the Christian's soul, Sr. Joselyn, drawing from medieval bestiaries, says that the shrill cry of the peacock is like "the call of the Christian in fear of losing grace in the darkness of life . . ." "Thematic Centers in 'The Displaced Person,'" *SSF*, I (1964) in *Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Robert E. Reiter (St. Louis: B. Herder Book, Co., n.d.), p. 88.

17. Cf. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), III, 422; M'Clintock, VII, 854-855.

18. Steir, following Lothar, stresses in fact that in the catacombs the

an appropriate decoration in baptistries.¹⁹ Baptism initiates the Christian into the life of grace which, if followed, leads to everlasting life. Depending upon the situation, i.e., whether it is primarily linked with a grave or with a baptistry, with a garden setting or with a chalice and/or grapes, the peacock takes on various symbolic meanings, all however related to the bestowal of grace and subsequently eternal life.

These various images of the peacock persisted until the early Middle Ages. From that time on the peacock seems to have become a more profane symbol. Especially in English literature, as a glance at the *Oxford Dictionary* will show, the peacock connotes pride or pretension. The oath, "By the peacock" contains some vestiges of the sacred, and the story told about King George III, who was instructed by his minister to end every sentence with the word "peacock" pronounced silently, salvages a link with royalty.²⁰ But the array of authors who maintain a "having-come-down-in-the-world" view of the peacock is imposing. To quote a few from the *Oxford Dictionary*: Chaucer: "As any peacock he was proud and gay." Stevenson: "Happy and proud like a peacock on a rail." Ruskin: "You working men have been crowing and peacocking at such a rate lately." George Eliot: "How came he to have such a nice-stepping long-necked peacock for his daughter?" Davies: "Take heed of overweening, and compare Thy peacock's feet with thy gay peacock's train." Hence the two proverbs Tilley records: "As proud as a Peacock" and "The Peacock has fair feathers but foul feet."²¹

Flannery O'Connor particularly enjoyed the latter contrast. She tells of people who are "congenitally unable to appreciate the sight of a peacock" (M, p. 10). One telephone lineman, after waiting over fifteen minutes to see the performance, was about to leave when suddenly the tail spread in magnificence. His reply was: "Never saw such long ugly legs . . . I bet that rascal could outrun a bus" (M, p. 12).

peacock is a symbol of paradise rather than of the resurrection as such. *Paulys Realencyclopaedie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft: Petros bis Philon* (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmueller, 1938), p. 1420; *Der Kleine Pauly* (Muenchen: Alfred Druckenmueller, 1972), IV, 679. Jungmann is more moderate and allows both: "Der Pfau sollte nicht nur Sinnbild der Auferstehung und Unsterblichkeit . . . sondern auch der Taufgnade and Paradiesesfreude werden." Josef Jungmann, *Symbolik der Katholischen Kirche* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1960), p. 85.

19. Cf. Dorothea Forstner, *Die Welt der Symbole*, 2nd ed. (Muenchen: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1967), p. 251.

20. Brewer, p. 953.

21. Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of The Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), p. 528.

Benjamin Franklin has written about a friend who had a handsome and a deformed leg. If someone would pay too much attention to his crippled leg, the man felt that such a person would tend to take a dim view of life. If the person would talk only about the bad leg and not notice the good one at all, Franklin's friend would not associate with such an ill-disposed character again.²² A similar psychology seems to lie behind O'Connor's use of the peacock: is the Divine beauty or only the profane ugliness seen? The peacock itself, she notices, turns its back to show its "underwear" as if it were equally proud of both views. The "underwear" is a dull, stiff tail which supports the long, more flexible, brilliant feathers. Without the dull feathers, the fine display of radiating suns would not be able to rise, hence these cooperative efforts are a good example of the Incarnation, of the Divine Glory needing the material to manifest itself.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* gives two more peacock-related expressions, both in reference to the weather. "March comes in with adder heads, and goes out with peacock tails."²³ That pleasant application however is countered by: "When the peacock loudly bawls, soon we'll have both rain and squalls."²⁴

The dichotomy which Sri Aurobindo pointed out between the English and Indian view of the peacock is seen not only in the weather proverbs just quoted but also in the poems of the Irishman William Butler Yeats. When the setting is Indian, the peacock retains its associations with the divine and with love and beauty. In "The Indian Upon God" different plants and animals think of God according to their own image and experience. The peacock says "'Who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers gay,/He is a monstrous peacock, and He waveth all the night/His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light.'"²⁵ In another poem while the Indian speaks his love, the peacock is present providing for Yeats an atmosphere of peace, but it is also fully in accord with the Indian art conventions mentioned in Nair. "The island dreams under the dawn/And great boughs drop tranquility;/ The peahens dance on a smooth lawn. . ."²⁶

22. "The Handsome and Deformed Leg," in *Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Frank Luther Mott and Chester E. Jorgenson (New York: American Book Co., 1936), p. 432.

23. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, rev. F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 510.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 616.

25. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: MacMillan, 1961), p. 15.

26. "The Indian to His Love," p. 15.

On the other hand the European setting of *Meditations in Time of War* includes the peacock as part of the destruction of riches ("Ancestral Houses") and the impending chaos ("My Table": "... it seemed/Juno's peacock screamed").²⁷ John Unterecker finds in the first version of *A Vision* a reference that helps explain Yeats's use of the peacock in "My Table": "Describing that time when the millennium approaches, Yeats comments: 'The loss of control over thought comes toward the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation, the scream of Juno's peacock.'"²⁸ As a sign of the irrational force of revelation Flannery O'Connor would feel quite comfortable with this use of the peacock. In *The Violent Bear It Away* the main conflict in the story is between the irrational belief of Old Mason Tarwater and the rational psychology of his nephew, Rayber, each trying to win over the mind of the young boy, Francis Tarwater.

A combination of pride and the superior position of the artist (as opposed to commercial success) appear in "The Peacock," a companion poem to "The Witch."²⁹ Riches and desolation mean nothing to the artist who "has made a great peacock/With the pride of his eye."³⁰ Whether he lives or dies does not matter, for even if he dies "His ghost will be gay/Adding feather to feather/For the pride of his eye."³¹ A more outright symbol of pride occurs in "The Friends of His Youth." The narrator recalls his friend, Peter, a successful man who "Shrieks, 'I am King of the Peacocks,'" but he has to laugh at this fellow who only "shrieks from pride."³²

It is this symbol of pride which seems to prevail in the English language. In ordinary speech the peacock is primarily a figure of vanity. For instance Sean O'Casey joins the common assumptions with classical allusions in his popular play *Juno and The Paycock*. Juno, a hard-working woman, is constantly watching her husband to keep him from his lazy friends. Throughout the play Juno refers to her husband as "'struttin' about the town like a paycock.'"³³ The stage directions for Captain Boyle's entrance note: "His walk is a slow, consequential strut. His clothes

27. Yeats, p. 228.

28. John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), p. 179.

29. Cf. Unterecker, p. 124; B. L. Reid, *William Butler Yeats: The Lyric of Tragedy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 103.

30. Yeats, p. 135.

31. Yeats, p. 136.

32. Yeats, p. 253.

33. *Collected Plays* (London: MacMillan, 1949), I, 4.

are dingy, and he wears a faded seaman's-cap with a glazed peak."³⁴ When there is the prospect of an inheritance, the Captain borrows on credit to deck out himself and the house in fine quality goods. As soon as their hopes are shattered, the neighbors come to collect their debts because as one says: " 'You're not goin' to be swankin' it like a paycock with Maisie Madigan's money—I'll pull some o' th' gorgeous feathers out o' your tail!' "³⁵ And she walks off with the record player to the pawn shop. Mrs. Boyle at first looks down upon Mrs. Tancred for not raising her family properly. By the end of the play Mrs. Boyle has been greatly chastened, so that upon hearing the news of her son Johnny's death, she purposely mourns with the words she had heard Mrs. Tancred cry. In this play peacock and proud ways are synonymous.

The troubles of the Boyle family are an example of the saying that "Pride goes before disaster, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16, 18). Similarly a more sinister superstition among the English relates the presence of peacock feathers to an impending disaster. Elworthy in a discussion of the Evil Eye writes that the peacock, the symbol of jealous Juno, is considered to be a "potent mischief maker." He goes on to say that "Many well-educated people in England and elsewhere are shocked if peacocks' feathers are put up as ornaments, or even if they are brought into a house; death or at least some evil is believed to be the consequence."³⁶ The Radfords are a little more specific about the misfortune: "Some disaster will befall the owner, or the daughter of the house will not marry."³⁷

Michael Steig takes up the superstition recorded by the Radfords and applies it very interestingly to Cruikshank's illustrations in *Oliver Twist*. In *Nicholas Nickleby* and *David Copperfield* Phiz had introduced peacock feathers to illustrate "situations where the idea of misfortune is clearly applicable, sometimes allied to the theme of pride."³⁸ From these examples and from Cruikshank's own earlier work, Steig argues that there must have been an established convention regarding the presence of peacock feathers in Victorian illustrations. The picture entitled "Oliver recovering from the fever" (Ch. 12) contrasts the painting of the Good Samaritan (the help Oliver received) with the peacock feathers (the

34. O'Casey, p. 10.

35. O'Casey, p. 71.

36. Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912, 1967), V, 610a.

37. E. and M. A. Radford, *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions*, rev. Christina Hole (London: Hutchinson, 1961), p. 260.

38. "Cruikshank's Peacock Feathers in *Oliver Twist*," *Ariel*, 4 (1973), 50.

future kidnapping). A difficulty surrounds the illustration for the final chapter because the text indicates no threatening danger. Steig feels that perhaps the picture is a comment by Cruikshank implying that the happy ending will not last very long. The illustration itself did not last very long since it was replaced after some copies of the book had been printed. He concludes that the persistence of the superstition was behind the change.

English proverbs, popular notions, and conventions of art generally focus on the foul feet of the peacock, while the evidence from Nair shows the Indian tradition concentrating on the spreading tail feathers. Into the English context comes Flannery O'Connor with her beloved peacocks. In "The King of the Birds" she repeatedly mentions the ugly and nuisance-making aspects of the bird. However, as with her characters, she "extracts grace from the ugly" and turns the peacock back into something wonderful. Even on the occasions when she brings them into her stories mainly for decoration or in some relation to the pride of man, she maintains an aura of their regal if not always other-worldly symbolism.

For example the peacocks tattooed on Parker's knees form a pair, guarding the Tree of Life as it were. Eventually Parker fills the empty space on his back with the face of Christ, made stern by a pair of "all-demanding eyes."³⁹ Hulga, the proud, crippled philosopher in "Good Country People," is as "sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away."⁴⁰ In *The Violent Bear It Away*, besides the allusion to the Argus myth, there is the child-preacher's sermon in which the world's vain notions of a powerful messiah are described. In contrast to the poor babe of Bethlehem, the world imagined that a much more dazzling figure would be their king. "The world thought, a golden fleece will do for His bed. Silver and gold and peacock tails, a thousand suns in a peacock's tail will do for His sash."⁴¹ Here peacock feathers fashioned into apparel for the nobility,⁴² the splendid sight of the spreading tail, and the "proud as a peacock" proverb all contribute to this graphic image of man's yearning for power, riches, and vainglory. Finally, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" Lucynell, a girlish thirty-year-old deaf and dumb

39. "Parker's Back," CS, pp. 523, 522.

40. CS, p. 288.

41. O'Connor, p. 131.

42. Cf. R. Turner Wilcox, *The Dictionary of Costume* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1969), p. 262.

woman, is said to look like "an angel of Gawd." What so impressed her admirers were her hair and her half-shut sleeping eyes. Earlier they had been described as: "She had long pink-gold hair and eyes as blue as a peacock's neck."⁴³

The most impressive use of the peacock in her stories is found in the 1955 version of "The Displaced Person." Roy R. Male has written about the significant changes that took place between the original publication of the story in the Fall 1954 issue of *Sewanee Review* and the version which appeared in the 1955 collection of short stories entitled *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.⁴⁴ Most noticeably the second version is much longer and the peacock has been added. Male shows how the second story is greatly improved in terms of technique: the opening paragraph, point of view, clearer recognition of the displaced person as one who also displaces, and finally a tightening of the relationship of Mrs. Shortley to the "terrible accident" by having her tell Mr. Shortley of the Pole's plans. I would like to stress the importance of the peacock and point out several other changes which O'Connor made as a result of its appearance.

The change starts immediately, right at the opening lines. The earlier story begins: "Mrs. Shortley stood on a small prominence to the left of the pump house." This is appropriate enough, since the figure of Mrs. Shortley dominates the action and the story ends at the time of her death. In the 1955 version, like Enoch in *Wise Blood* who disappears once his function is over, or like the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" who gives way to the more sobering Misfit, Mrs. Shortley dies at the end of part one, leaving Mrs. McIntyre to take her stand alone. Hence the second story opens: "The peacock was following Mrs. Shortley up the road to the hill where she meant to stand. Moving one behind the other, they looked like a complete procession" (p. 194). Mrs. Shortley's point of view is still maintained, however it is softened by the presence of the peacock who will remain to the end of the story. Upon a re-reading we notice hints of the peacock's special significance in such phrases as "they looked like a complete procession." Some type of solemn or religious ritual is taking place. Later the peacock is described "as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all" (p. 198). Like a prophet he appears "as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see" (p. 194). Despite

43. CS, pp. 154, 146.

44. "The Two Versions of 'The Displaced Person,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 7 (Summer 1970), 450-457.

these unusual manifestations Mrs. Shortley takes no notice of the peacock even when it is in front of her:

Then she stood a while longer, reflecting, her unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock's tail. He had jumped into the tree and his tail hung in front of her, full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second's light and salmon-colored in the next. She might have been looking at a map of the universe but she didn't notice it any more than she did the spots of sky that cracked the dull green of the tree. (p. 200)

Mrs. Shortley has her own notions of religion and of how God has to make Himself known to her. She wants to control grace and events, therefore anything so unpredictable as the grace of God revealing itself through people and history is alien to her character. When she dies though, she has no choice but to accept the humiliating spectacle of having her body contorted and grappling for the arms and legs of others. Dying, she resembles the heaps of dead people in the concentration camps for which she had blamed and despised the "Europeans." The vision she had, brought on by her first heart attack, foretold the manner of her own death, and what is more important asked the basic question: "'Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of the hand. Who will remain whole?'" (p. 210). Who has complete integrity? Who is without sin? Her manner of death attests that ultimately she also, because she is a human being, is related to that horror of human evil.

How the characters relate to the peacock then is an indication of how they will respond to the displaced person, to the priest, and finally to God.⁴⁵ The displaced person does not fit into the Southern way of life; the Misfit said of Christ: "'Jesus thown everything off balance.'"⁴⁶ Mrs. McIntyre in anger and exasperation tells the priest: "'He's extra and he's upset the balance around here'" (p. 231). And, "'As far as I am concerned . . . Christ was just another D. P.'" (p. 229). The priest brings the European family to Mrs. McIntyre, moreover he pays more attention to the peacocks than anyone else to the extent of seeing them as emblems of religious truths. Thus in O'Connor's set of religious equations, the Pole, the priest, the peacock, and Christ belong to a cluster of attitudes and ways of acting which could be classified as a non-rational, religious view of the world in contrast to the outlook of the pragmatic Mrs. McIntyre and the self-sufficient Mrs. Shortley.

As a result, in the revised version there are more detailed descrip-

45. Cf. Sr. Joselyn, pp. 84-86.

46. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," p. 231.

tions and references to the members of this group. The priest's ecstatic expressions of delight and attention paid to the turkeys on Mrs. McIntyre's farm are now transferred to the peacocks (p. 211). Nevertheless the priest continues to notice the turkeys and to collect their feathers along with the peacocks' (p. 209).

In the revision Mrs. Shortley reacts strongly when the Pole kisses Mrs. McIntyre's hand (pp. 195, 197). This unexpected mannerism and sign of respect is unacceptable to Mrs. Shortley who is not used to it. The kiss is one way of showing the increased opposition between Mrs. Shortley and the D. P. There is also Mrs. McIntyre's criticism of her hired help which heightens the antagonism between Mrs. Shortley and the Pole whom she sees as a threat to her husband's job. Furthermore Mrs. Shortley is suspicious of the priest who had made the arrangements for Mr. Guizac and who seems to be plotting for Mrs. McIntyre's conversion in order to get her money. She cannot understand the priest's delight in the peacock: " 'Nothing but a peachicken,' " she says (p. 198).

Another addition is Mrs. McIntyre's first husband, the Judge. Although he is introduced in part one, he comes much more to Mrs. McIntyre's mind in part two. There his office is represented as a sacred space with his safe in the middle of an old-fashioned desk like a tabernacle. These specific religious references are undoubtedly meant to carry over to the Judge's care for his peacocks. Mrs. McIntyre though is willing to let them die out because they do not produce anything worthwhile. They are only " 'another mouth to feed' " (p. 198).

Part two shows more clearly Mrs. McIntyre's attitudes and sense of values. In her quiet moments she thinks about her various husbands, the Negroes, the hired help that have come and gone, and especially about Mr. Guizac and the difference he has made on her farm. However once she learns of Guizac's plan to bring his cousin from Europe to marry the young Negro, she becomes furiously angry and wants him to give up his idea. In this section the peacock is a companion to the old Negro who walks around with an ear of corn in his back pocket. On one occasion he begins talking to the bird detailing its demise from the days of the Judge.

In part three the grand descriptions of the bird and the priest's interest grow almost in proportion to Mrs. McIntyre's dissatisfaction with the displaced person. As much as she tries to register her complaints with the priest, he continues with his religious instructions or he makes short comments ignoring her arguments and looking for the peacocks and turkeys. The following quotation shows the power of the peacock upon

the imagination, its religious symbolism according to the priest, and the way Christ and the displaced person are intertwined in the conversation:

The priest let his eyes wander toward the birds. They had reached the middle of the lawn. The cock stopped suddenly and curving his neck backwards, he raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. Mrs. McIntyre wondered where she had ever seen such an idiotic old man. "Christ will come like that!" he said in a loud gay voice and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping.

Mrs. McIntyre's face assumed a set puritanical expression and she reddened. Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother. "It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go," she said. "I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world."

The old man didn't seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail. "The Transfiguration," he murmured.

She had no idea what he was talking about. "Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place," she said, giving him a hard look.

The cock lowered his tail and began to pick grass.

"He didn't have to come in the first place," she repeated, emphasizing each word.

The old man smiled absently. "He came to redeem us," he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go. (p. 226)

Since the priest won't tell the Polish family to leave nor find them them a place elsewhere, Mrs. McIntyre is determined to fire the Guizacs herself. On the day she goes out to the barnyard to release the Pole, she finds him repairing the small tractor. While he is stretched out under it, Mr. Shortley backs out the large tractor and parks it in line with the other one. Hence it seems to be more than just an accident that when the brake slips, the tractor moves toward the unsuspecting Guizac. His Negro helper jumps out of the way and all three—Sulk, Mr. Shortley, and Mrs. McIntyre—watch, their eyes meeting in a "look that froze them in collusion forever" (p. 234). Mr. Guizac's back is broken and he dies shortly afterwards. One by one the guilty leave until there is only Mrs. McIntyre with a farm she can no longer tend to. In rejecting the displaced person who failed to act according to their prejudices, Mrs. McIntyre was rejecting Christ in her fellow men.⁴⁷

Even though Flannery O'Connor gave a lavish and extended treatment of the peacock in "The Displaced Person," she was not finished with her favorite bird. Just as "The Fiction Writer and The Church" clarifies

47. Cf. Sr. Joselyn who quotes Matt. 25, 35-46, p. 84; Dorothy Walters, *Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Twayne Publishing, Co., 1973), p. 121: "... the whites' betrayal of the blacks reflects the larger betrayal of Christ by all humanity."

the major concerns in her fiction, so does "The King of the Birds" provide a commentary on "The Displaced Person" by showing the peacock's potential religious symbolism and especially by presenting the different reactions the peacock causes just as Christ's coming into the world does.

The essay moves along with wit, giving an account of her life with the peacocks. Her love for the exceptional one made her and a pet chicken that walked backwards the subject of a Pathe News picture when she was five years old. She began raising many birds but still she "felt a lack" (M, p. 4). This relates to what she says in "Novelist and Believer," namely that the novelist writes "about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness" (M, p. 167). She hints further at her religious themes when she remarks that "instinct" led her to the peacocks and that these birds had once been associated with Hera. The peacock makes up for what is missing in her poultry raising just as God is to satisfy the deeper longings within man. In a relationship almost like that of a creature toward its creator, she describes herself as still in awe of them and at their service.

She itemizes its roosting habits, what it eats, and its proud ways. Even when young it struts as if it had its tail; later when there is a tail, the peacock acts "as though he designed it himself" (M, p. 8). She points out its ugliness and sees how ridiculous it often looks. She notices that some people cannot appreciate the bird unless they know what it is good for. The reactions range from non-appreciation, to surprise, to a recognition: "'Churren, . . . that's the king of the birds'" (M, p. 13).

As the essay progresses, other traits of the bird are mentioned. They are "curious inspectors" (M, p. 12). "Brisk air goes at once to the peafowl's head and inclines him to be sportive" (M, p. 14). As if she were indicating the peacock's symbolic connection with the Tree of Life and Axis of the World, she writes: "He appears to receive through his feet some shock from the center of the earth, which travels upward through him and is released" (M, pp. 14-15). For her the cries were "like a cheer for an invisible parade" (M, p. 15). Further religious significance lies in the "seven or eight screams in succession" which are rendered "as if this message were the one on earth which most urgently needed to be heard" (M, p. 15). At other times the peacock's prophet-like voice calling in the wilderness takes on a cry for help as if waking from "violent dreams" (M, p. 16).

Flannery O'Connor ends this personal history of peacock raising with a dream of her own. She sees herself as a peacock on a table about to

be eaten and she wakes up crying for help. Then she hears the “chorus of jubilation.” Dorothy Walters comments on this scene and relates the underlying Eucharistic sacrifice to the artist’s conception of a heavenly given talent and to the self-sacrifice needed to fulfill the responsibilities which come with such a calling.⁴⁸

From an ordinary tailless bird, through the “fair feathers but foul feet” stage, to a symbol of Christ, Flannery O’Connor is an intimate of the peacock. Although the peacock throughout centuries and across cultures has furnished many symbols, she draws from her daily experiences an appreciation of both sides of the peacock’s tail, emphasizing in accordance with her themes the religious symbolization. Her preference in pets, her characterizations, and her religious beliefs, all make use of an outlook which can see the deeper presence of the truly beautiful in what seems to be outwardly ugly.

Sometimes Flannery O’Connor turns readers away bewildered by her violence and seemingly hostile attitude toward life. Perhaps in her writing she is like the peacock who does not present its glory when the observer wants it, nor, even when it spreads its tail, immediately display the “best” side. What the viewer has to accept first is the peacock’s rear:

When the peacock has presented his back, the spectator will usually begin to walk around him to get a front view; but the peacock will continue to turn so that no front view is possible. The thing to do then is to stand still and wait until it pleases him to turn. When it suits him, the peacock will face you. Then you will see in a green-bronze arch around him a galaxy of gazing, haloed suns. (M, pp. 9–10).

To seek out and demand the beautiful directly (or the happy or the edifying) does not bring results from Flannery O’Connor either. Like the peacock she continues to present her awkward characters in their fundamental weakness and need of salvation. In “The King of the Birds” and especially in “The Displaced Person” however, her own affection for the peacock led her to face her readers and create a moving and deeply-rooted religious symbol in spite of a prevailing contrary tradition.

48. Walters, p. 15