

Christian Concerns in the Poems of Emily Dickinson and Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor

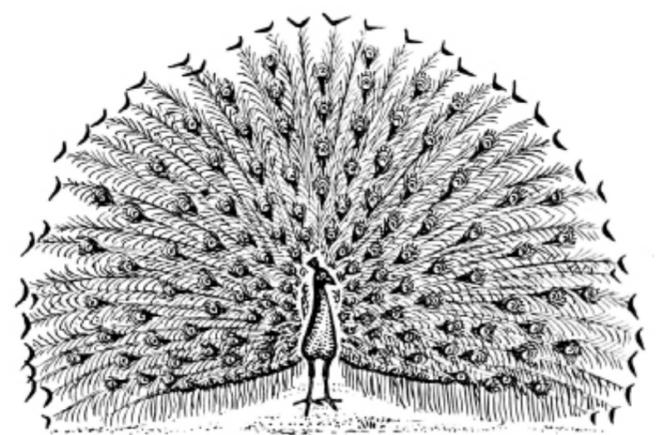
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In my proposed thesis, I am interested in considering Christian themes in the poems of Emily Dickinson and the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. I was first drawn to Dickinson's works during the course Whitman and Dickinson in Spring 2010, where I was moved by her honest discussion of religious faith, doubt, and exclusion. O'Connor, whose stories I only began to read in earnest this past summer, unsettled me with her unsentimental exploration of the dire consequences of "sins of the mind." Although I saw their concerns and approaches as being different, I found myself increasingly desirous to look at them side-by-side, as two women, relative outliers in their respective Christian traditions, who were seeking authentic answers to their questions of faith.

In terms of Emily Dickinson, her understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and the afterlife are of interest to me. God is depicted in many of her works as a distant, irrelevant, or unfeeling figure: her poems do not reflect a lack of belief in God, but, rather, a questioning of His benevolent interest in her life. Dickinson seemed to feel a consistent conflict between being a follower of Christ and her love of being in the World, and I'm curious about this conflict in light of

religious writings such as the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians and her inherited Calvinist faith, which would have confirmed Christian and worldly pursuits to be by their very nature at odds with one another. I furthermore am intrigued by the eschatological questions offered in her poems and letters, with her youthful fear of Hell transitioning in her mid-20's into ever more ambivalent concerns about the afterlife being stifling and dull. What I am most eager to pursue, though, is the issue of spiritual starvation and consumption in her poems. Dickinson was never to receive full church membership, and her painful exclusion from religious life and Eucharistic ritual is captured in poems such as "Victory comes late -" and "I had been hungry, all the Years -". These poems find her adopting various personae, including a starving sparrow neglected by God or a Lazarian beggar unable to reach the Feast of the Lamb even on tiptoe; and during rare poetic moments where she is sated, Dickinson finds the fullness surprisingly repugnant. Nonetheless, in spite of many theological uncertainties, I would contend that Dickinson never fully abandons seeking spiritual communion, even when it requires finding alternative forms, such as through Nature or poetry.

With respect to Flannery O'Connor, I am curious about the perspective on Jesus Christ reflected in a number of her stories - namely, of Jesus as purveyor of justice. Christ is unquestionably viewed within her works as the source of all salvation, but O'Connor does not shy away from examining as well his



role as heavenly judge. However, I am particularly interested in O'Connor's works as expressions of her understanding of how to live in the world. O'Connor's characters tend to be intelligent, respected, seemingly righteous people, if from humble circumstances, innocent of more "overt" sins. Nonetheless, they are almost uniformly guilty of "sins of the mind," such as pride, self-justification, and hypocrisy, and O'Connor's stories view such sins as the gravest of all, resulting in appalling consequences. Even in a story such as "The lame Shall Enter First," which concludes with a son committing the mortal sin of suicide, this "sin of the body" is secondary to, and arguably shown to be a consequence of, the greater sin of a father's self-involvement. Interestingly, education and worldly success in her works often inspire only self-delusion and amorality, more blameworthy in these works than the acts of foolish but kind-hearted characters. I find this especially intriguing in light of the Catholic Church's legacy of intellectual thought, and O'Connor's own education and accomplishments.

