Two Essays by Flannery O’Connor

an exercise in close reading

read along and mark up your book as we go!
“There are ages when it is possible to woo the reader; there are others when something more drastic is necessary” (Grotesque 820).

Flannery O’Connor
A Couple Useful Definitions

- **mystery** (807): that which humanity may intuit but cannot fully comprehend, particularly the Divine

- **manichaeism** (809): a gnostic system of belief which positions light (associated w/ spirit) and dark (i.e. matter) against one another
“The Church and the Fiction Writer” (1957)
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Acts of Faith: Differing Approaches to the Sordid Side of Reality

Romans 14:1-4 / “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master[a] that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (ESV).
Acts of Faith: Differing Approaches to the Sordid Side of Reality

“*To look at the worst will be for him [the artist] no more than an act of trust in God; but what is one thing for the writer may be another for the reader.* What leads the writer to his salvation may lead the reader into sin, and the Catholic writer who looks at this possibly directly looks the Medusa in the face and is turned to stone” (Church 809-10).

“*The business of protecting souls from dangerous literature belongs properly to the Church*” (Church 810).
Acts of Faith: Differing Approaches to the Sordid Side of Reality

“If we intend to encourage Catholic fiction writers [. . .] this requires [. . .] a body of Catholic readers who are equipped to recognize something in fiction besides passages that they consider obscene. It is popular to suppose that anyone who can read the telephone book can read a short story or a novel, and it is more than usual to find the attitude among Catholics that since we possess the Truth in the Church, we can use this Truth directly as an instrument of judgment on any discipline at any time without regard for the nature of that discipline itself. Catholic readers are constantly being offended and scandalized by novels that they don’t have the fundamental equipment to read in the first place, and often these are works that are permeated with a Christian spirit” (Church 811 mid-bot).
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“It is when the individual’s faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life, and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the sense of the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost” (Church 811-12).
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"For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, an organ which eventually involves the whole personality and as much of the world as can be got into it" (Church 811-12).

"If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is. An affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God" (Church 811).
“Many well-grounded complaints have been made about religious literature on the score that it tends to minimize the importance and dignity of life here and now in favor of life in the next world or in favor of the miraculous manifestation of grace. When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality. If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly and his sense of mystery and his acceptance of it will be increased. (Church 809-10).
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“If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letters-to-the-editor [ . . . ], he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene. [ . . . ]” (Church 809).
The Consequences of Separating (Human) Nature and Grace

“He forgets that **sentimentality** is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence and that **innocence whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite. We lost our innocence in the Fall and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ’s death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite. **Pornography**, on the other hand, is essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its hard purposes and so far disconnects it from its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake” (Church 809).
“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1960; 1965)
“I think that every writer when he speaks of his own approach to fiction hopes to show that, in some crucial and deep sense, he is a realist [...]” (Grotesque 813).

“[T]he realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality” (Grotesque 815).

Flannery O’Connor
Five Types of Realism

- **realism**: realism of fact; the typical & normal (814)
- **the sentimental**: easy endings / resolutions; human weakness is excused (817)
- **naturalism**: natural, often tragic evolutionary forces control human destiny (813)
- **the romance**: extraordinary and eccentric; “dark and divisive” (814-15, 818)
- **the grotesque**: a “realism of distances” connecting the natural to the divine (816-19, 820-21); requires distortion
Realism

- realism: a 19th-century art movement concerned with the quotidian (the everyday)—the representative & recognizable

- “The social sciences have cast a dreary blight on the public approach to fiction. [...] Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelist only means to some deeper end. [...] Along with this usually goes a great interest in and a thorough treatment of the sexual aspects of their characters' existence” (Grotesque 814).
the sentimental: literature that resolves problems too easily, providing simple, sweet endings to challenging situations

“[I]n this country, the general reader has managed to connect the grotesque with the sentimental, for whenever he speaks of it favorably, he seems to associate it with the writer’s compassion. It’s considered an absolute necessity these days for writers to have compassion. [. . .] It is a quality which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is always safe for anybody to use. Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human. The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything” (Grotesque 817).
“There is something in us, as story-tellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. When he reads a novel, he wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to a mock damnation or a mock innocence” (Grotesque 820).

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naturalism: a late-nineteenth century artistic movement shaped by social Darwinism—by the assumption that life is marked by competition for limited resources, and that it often ends in tragedy.

“[T]he popular spirit of each succeeding age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man. If the novelist is in tune with this spirit, if he believes that actions are predetermined by psychic make-up or the economic situation or some other determinable factor, then he will be concerned above all with an accurate reproduction of the things that most immediately concern man, with the natural forces that he feels control his destiny. Such a writer may produce a great tragic naturalism [...].” (Grotesque (815).
The Romance

- the romance: narration willing to incorporate atypical behavioral and emotional extremes, sometimes incl. supernatural elements

- “[Nathaniel] Hawthorne knew his own problem and perhaps anticipated ours when he said he did not write novels, he wrote romances. [. . .] The writer who writes within what might be called the modern romance tradition may not be writing novels which in all respects partake of a novelistic orthodoxy; but as long as these works have vitality, as long as they present something that is alive, however eccentric its life may seem to the general reader, then they have to be dealt with; and they have to be dealt with on their own terms” (Grotesque (814-15)).
“The Southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets. When Hawthorne said that he wrote romances, he was attempting, in effect, to keep for fiction some of its freedom from social determinisms and to steer it in the direction of poetry. I think this tradition of the dark and divisive romance-novel has combined with the comic grotesque tradition and with the lessons all writers have learned from the naturalists, to preserve our Southern literature for at least a little while […]” (Grotesque 818).

Flannery O’Connor
The Grotesque

the way of distortion: “We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters in these novels are alive in spite of these things. They have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected (Grotesque 815).
a realist of distances: “Fiction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses [. . .] [T]he kind of writer I am describing will use the concrete in a more drastic way. [. . .] Henry James said that in his fiction, he did things in the way that took the most doing. I think the writer of grotesque fiction does them in the way that takes the least, because in his work distances are so great. He’s looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees. [. . .] the look of this fiction is going to be wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine. Even though this writer who produces grotesque fiction may not consider his characters any more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is, his audience is going to [. . .]” (Grotesque 816).
The Grotesque

the limits of mystery: “what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. [...] for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where the adequate motivation and the adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don’t understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not” (Grotesque 815).
“The problem for such a novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying, and in order not to destroy, he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work” (Grotesque 821).

Flannery O’Connor
In one or two paragraphs, classify one of your favorite novels or films as: 1) realistic, 2) sentimental, 3) naturalistic, 4) romantic, or 5) grotesque

Be sure to open with a debatable thesis statement, and then provide specific, concrete evidence to support your central claim.