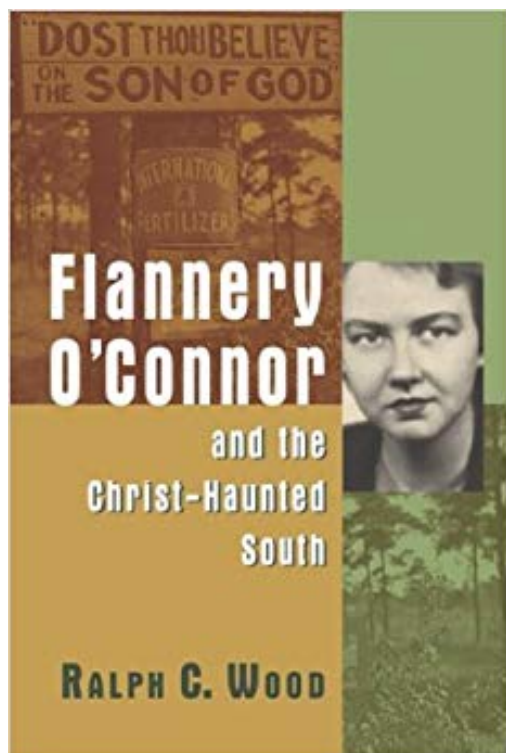


## Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South by Ralph C. Wood



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Flannery O'Connor was only the second twentieth-century writer (after William Faulkner) to have her work collected for the Library of America, the definitive edition of American authors. Forty years after her death, O'Connor's fiction still retains its original power and pertinence. For those who know nothing of O'Connor and her work, this new study by Ralph C. Wood offers one of the finest introductions available. For those looking to deepen their appreciation of this literary icon, it breaks important new ground. Unique to Wood's approach is his concern to show how O'Connor's stories, novels, and essays impinge on America's cultural and ecclesial condition. He uses O'Connor's work as a window onto its own regional and religious ethos. Indeed, he argues here that O'Connor's fiction has lasting, even universal, significance precisely because it is rooted in the confessional witness of her Roman Catholicism and in the Christ-haunted character of the American South. These are some of the engaging moral and religious questions that Wood explores: the role of religious fundamentalism in American culture and in relation to both Protestant liberalism and Roman Catholicism; the practice of racial slavery and its continuing legacy in the literature and religion of the South; the debate over Southern identity, especially whether it is a culture rooted in ancient or modern values; the place of preaching and the sacraments in secular society and dying Christendom; and the lure of nihilism in contemporary American culture.



## Reviews of the **Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South** by Ralph C. Wood

Kikora

I discovered Flannery O'Connor when some of the writers at the Catholic Writer's Guild told me that if I want to be a really good writer, O'Connor's works are writings with which I should become familiar. The first O'Connor story I read was A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND and I simply did not "get it." This is because in order to understand O'Connor, one must look under the story to see the symbols and themes that she presented. O'Connor was a gifted writer (and I imagine a very interesting woman to know and have as a friend) but for the uninitiated or those who do not understand how to get the meat out of such writing, she can be very difficult to understand.

It wasn't until I read THE ARTIFICIAL N\*\*\*R (Amazon considers this title to be pornographic, so I can't spell out the word) that it "clicked" for me and I got what she was attempting to portray. O'Connor shows us moments of God's grace hidden in ordinary and mundane events of life in a time and region which truly was "Christ-haunted."

Raph Wood's work here is beautiful in that it opens O'Connor's work like a rose blooming. There is a real fragrance of grace which is easy to miss (I certainly did) that Wood presents to the reader. The book is a little daunting because Wood writes on a level with O'Connor's work, which means that if you are going to sit down and study this book, you are going to have to take it slowly and meditatively. The reward for such study, however, is worth the effort.

I highly recommend this book if you want to more deeply understand the sometimes violent beauty of O'Connor's writing.

Scoreboard Bleeding

This book is must reading for coming to terms with the thought and sensitivities (if that is the right word) of Flannery O'Connor. For that purpose--just outstanding. However, Wood is an utter master in placing O'Connor's writing in the context of larger cultural, historical, literary--and, above all--theological concerns. This is a first-class theological book, thinking through the writings of Flannery O'Connor. I have taught Church History and theology for over 40 years. This book ranks with the very best!

Mardin

Ralph Wood is a solid theologian with a superb literary view. This compilation of his essays on O'Connor's novels is a result of his great theological learning and a long reflection of the Southern Christian writer's works. I enjoy RW's writing style and his theological reading of O'Connor, which uncover a deeper level of the incredibly Christian and conscientious American literature.

Ceroelyu

I ordered this book because Amazon lets you read a page of it and I was immediately hooked. It seems to be a collection of essays, despite lines like "this chapter will attempt to show", and the essays and what they attempt to show vary greatly. I'm not sure who the audience is for this book, because it arguably belongs to the genre of literary criticism, usually aimed at a small and like-minded readership. There are quite a few books about Flannery O'Connor like that.

But this one is different for a few reasons. Lit crit books hardly ever make definite conclusions, at best advancing one of a number of competing theories, drawing it out or justifying it from the text, and supporting it with analysis and commentary.

In Wood's book, O'Connor plays the supporting role for his own theories, sometimes taking center stage and sometimes appearing only marginally. Wood also closes each chapter with an overkill of summing up, forcing the salient texts to his own conclusions (which makes me think the chapters were essays). These seem to me like typically Baptist views, although he makes O'Connor as a Catholic support them.

That would be grounds for me to dismiss the book were that all there was to it. However, Wood masterfully considers O'Connor in relation to her own "true country" of the South, immersing readers in the social milieu in which she wrote. He goes further, tracing the impact of the civil religion of the 'fifties, the odd-duck compromise that drained Protestant and Catholic theology alike, and which O'Connor detested. Like so many writers versed in that era, however, he assumes he can merely refer to Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr and everyone will know what he means. Thus he never introduces his sources, merely dragging in the big guns to support his ideas.

As two other books have tried to show, this won't fly. The author of *Jesus in America* shows that civil religion, with its well-intentioned mantra of "deeds not creeds" was so all-encompassing that lay theology books (so called) were best-sellers, whether yea or nay. In *The Goodly Word*, Ellwood Johnson shows how Puritan ideas and language from Colonial times on became enshrined in increasingly secular literature. Some sense of this process, and its offspring, 'fifties civil religion, is necessary to enlighten Wood's many asides and attributions.

That process reached a peak in the 1920s when H.L. Mencken made the derisive comment that if you threw an egg off a bus you would hit a fundamentalist. His open criticisms of the South, as Wood shows, led to the formation of the Southern Agrarian writers group. Wood tackles the thorny problem of the South--its historical racialism, but he also shows why O'Connor did not adopt the tactics of the Northern attackers, afraid that "the South's few virtues would be destroyed along with its many vices."

O'Connor also found herself at odds with the liberal Catholic version of civil religion, as in her famous comment on the Eucharist: "if it's a symbol, then the hell with it." As Wood sympathetically explains O'Connor's sacramental view, I have no problem understanding why O'Connor was a Catholic. My only question is why Wood isn't one.

Harley Quinn

Ralph Wood takes great care when titling his work. His titles are the most unique ones that I've ever seen. The content of his work, this one and *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth* to name two are thought-provoking, and spot-on. Careful reading of his material will enlarge your understanding of the Christian's responsibility to the Arts.

Clandratha

This book is both an insightful exploration of O'Connor's dynamic Christian parables as well as an inspirational compilation of Christ-centered homilies. Christ, the South, and O'Connor are a holy trinity better appreciated by reading this book.

Fordregelv

Excellent book. Author has a long history of studying O'Connor and is friendly to her point of view and religious orientation, even though his are not the same.

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