



Jimmy Dean Smith

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## Poison: Flannery O'Connor's Habit of Moviegoing

### Abstract

*The American novelist and short story writer Flannery O'Connor felt divinely chosen in her vocation from an early age. However, like more than sixty percent of the American population in the 1940s, she had a moviegoing habit that lured her away from practicing her art. With the recent release of archival materials, we are able to see how frequently O'Connor wrestles with addiction to film, as well as how little effect her performative dislike of cinema had. In the end, cinema—Gone With the Wind, Mighty Joe Young, Till the End of Time—informs her fiction, no matter how strong her protests that movies are low and anti-art.*

On February 6, 1941, the students of Peabody High School in Milledgeville, Georgia, saw Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) at the nearby Campus Theater ("Students"). Among that year's Peabodites was fifteen-year-old Mary Flannery O'Connor, who would soon drop her first name and become one of the United States' greatest writers, publishing two novels and two collections of short stories that are by turns hilarious and terrifying—and never less than morally rigorous. A devout Catholic and an intellectual devoted to upending mid-century bourgeois complacency, O'Connor noted that the strongest polemical tool of her fiction was "shock": "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*Collected Works* 806). Although O'Connor's Southern gothic fiction has been adapted to film several times, most notably John Huston's *Wise Blood* (1977), O'Connor's own professed beliefs about cinema derive from her apparent conviction that, for the most part, film is incapable of "shouting" and "startling." At the same time, however, in her teens and young adulthood O'Connor often visited movie theaters in the college towns she lived in. Her mixed feelings about moviegoing, which have begun to appear as archival materials emerge from embargo, constitute a complex, nigh inarticulable, relationship with Golden

Age cinema. That field trip to the Campus Theater, an entertainment O'Connor was forced to enjoy, must have been agonizing to the fifteen-year-old.

"For the twenty-five years following [its] premiere," writes O'Connor's biographer Brad Gooch, "*Gone With the Wind* remained a running joke in O'Connor's life and work" (69). In adulthood, O'Connor swiped at Margaret Mitchell in short stories like "The Partridge Festival" (CW 776) and "The Enduring Chill" (CW 560) in which genteel Georgians, of O'Connor's own social class, cite *Gone with the Wind* as a "good book," the kind authors ought to write instead of literary fiction that doesn't sell. "Put the war in [your novel]," one bourgeois mother tells her author son: "That always makes a long book" (CW 660). She does not have to add that the neighbors understand, even revere, novels about the war, but not those about social issues or matters of spiritual importance. The title story of O'Connor's first collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, features a purposefully bad *GWtW* joke (CW 139), and both it and the title story of her second collection, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, satirize the plantation myth exemplified in Mitchell and Fleming (CW 143; 487-88). But O'Connor's most sustained engagement with *Gone with the Wind* was not with the novel, but with the 1939 film that epitomizes Golden Age Hollywood, the one Peabody School valo-





rized with a two-day field trip.

Most prominently, in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” O’Connor uses the December 15, 1939 Atlanta premiere of the film to deconstruct the mendacity, vulgarity, and outright stupidity of Lost Cause mythology (CW 254-256). The film stalked her personal life, too. There was a “family rumor ... that the ... Tarleton twins owed their name” to O’Connor relatives (Gooch 67-8). As a graduate student at the University of Iowa in 1945, O’Connor was amused—and appalled—to meet a classmate who claimed that scenes from *GwtW* had been “took,” or filmed, in the house O’Connor lived in throughout high school and college: “I assured her to the contrary, lest it get out that I was the niece of Scarlot [sic] O’Hara” (DR 35, editorial note in original), delivering a portmanteau that comments on the uber-belle’s questionable character. The too-muchness of *Gone with the Wind* might have appalled (and amused) O’Connor. To say, as Brad Gooch does, that the “hoopla ... merely irked” the young

Georgian fails to register the intensity of her antipathy to it and other ultra-popular vehicles of mass culture (67). “It is ... difficult,” she later wrote, “to reconcile the South’s instinct to preserve [its] identity with [its] equal instinct to fall eager victim to every poisonous breath from Hollywood” (CW 856). She arrived at this public stance—movies equal “poison”—as a teenager, even while she frequented the picture show.

With the exception of 1930, the percentage of American attending movies each week reached its zenith in the mid-1940s (Pautz). Like many in the nineteen-forties, O’Connor had the Hollywood habit, attending screenings with casual frequency. Unlike most habitual moviegoers, however, in adolescence she had already developed a self-image of high seriousness, recognizing herself “as a dedicated young artist, committed to her work and God above all else” (Bosco 66). Thus, she reflexively set her artistic-and-spiritual self apart from the mainstream tastes of her time, place, and class, following movie nights with what usually seems to be expressions of shame or disgust, casually reviling herself for “falling eager victim” to Hollywood: “I should know better than to go to the picture show” (“HM,” 74). One may read O’Connor’s purported dislike for Hollywood literally, as an early critic does regarding *Gone With the Wind*: “[S]he effectively employed the novel and the movie,” writes J.O. Tate, “as sentimentalities, false images, misrepresentations, and bad taste” (“On Flannery O’Connor,” 34). Her literary “exploration of worthless products, false ideals, and empty lives,” writes Tate, regularly focuses on “commercial film,” citing *GWTW* and *Mighty Joe Young*, “a miserable film released in 1949” as examples of “dreck” (“Uses,” 20-1). In the ensuing fifty years, O’Connor’s critics have grown less likely than Tate to ascribe elitist scornfulness to the writer, but O’Connor still claimed repeatedly to regret the time-wasting, soul-consuming addiction of the moviegoing habit. In retrospect, her repudiation of Hollywood product comes off almost as a performance of theorized snobishness. As revealed in recently released archival documents (letters, journals, cartoons) to which Tate and myriad other early critics had no access, while O’Connor may have appeared to disdain “Hollywood at its worst” (“Uses,” 20), while she was able (that is, before lupus affected her mobility and thus her ability to get to the picture show) she regularly consumed an awful lot of it.

“Yielded to the temptation of paying a nightly visit au cinema—not worth it,” wrote O’Connor on 20 January 1944 (70). She was eighteen, then a junior at Georgia State College for Women, and already aware



Figure 1. An original screening of *Gone with the Wind*.



Figure 2. Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O’Hara, expressing her own “antipathy” in *Gone with the Wind*.

of the hopes and burdens she embodied as an artist (“Am I just a brainy kid or am I a clever individual with refined, cultured, super-sophisticated artistic potentialities?” [68]). She lived at home in Milledgeville in a house then known as the Cline Mansion; Cline was her mother’s birth name, and the residents of the mansion were Mary Flannery’s aunts. At the time, Milledgeville was a “sleepy community at the dead center of Georgia, with barely six thousand residents” (Gooch 52), but for the students of Georgia College, “the four-block strip of downtown Milledgeville had its draws [including] two movie theaters, the Campus and the Co-ed” (Gooch 89). These theaters would have been especially popular during the forties, when pleasure seeking soldiers from nearby military installations filled Milledgeville (Gooch 98). “As the area’s premier movie house, the Campus generally showed Hollywood’s latest and best releases,” writes a local historian. “During its early years, the theatre changed its movies as many as three or four times a week”, while “the Co-ed tended to get second-rate fare or second runs of films that had already been shown at the Campus” (Jackson); a hint that O’Connor might not be exaggerating when claiming “nightly” moviegoing. From 29 December 1943 to the following 6 February, O’Connor kept a journal in an old-fashioned notebook she titled “Higher Mathematics.” In it, she interrogates her own (at that point still theoretical) career as a writer, despairing comically but repeatedly of her laziness (“My greatest trouble in marketing a manuscript comes in the fact that I never send it off” [73]). While the young O’Connor often adopts a breezy tone in such pronouncements, the casual humor disguises a real existential fear. Sloth is not the only personal and spiritual shortcoming she recognizes: “I cherish a healthy respect for the avoidance of the seven deadly sins, but I fear a few of them are overtaking me” (71), reprehending the persistent temptations placed before her that take time and energy away from the artistic gifts God has given the devout Catholic teen.

While sloth and gluttony are foremost among these, there is also moviegoing. Without naming any of the films she saw, in “Higher Mathematics,” O’Connor thrice writes about “going to the picture show,” in each case regretting that decision: “Succumbed to cinema again” (73); “I should know better than to go to the picture show. I have outgrown them—particularly at night” (74); and “Yielded to the temptation of paying a nightly visit au cinema—not worth it” (70). The language—*succumbed*, *yielded to the temptation*—is that of theology. If, as Flannery O’Connor would shortly thereafter assert, she “want[ed] to be the best artist it

is possible for me to be, under God” (PJ 29) and that “God has given me everything, all the tools, ... a good brain to use them with” (PJ 31), finally allowing her to be “the instrument for [God’s] story” (PJ 11), then the picture shows drawing her away from the typewriter—“nightly”—are like the Devil tempting Christ in the wilderness. She cannot do God’s work when she is giving into Hollywood frivolity, even though the temptation is almost overwhelming. Even if she is fated to live many years, she does not have time to waste.

Her language—again, succumbed and temptation—is likewise that of addiction. In a scene from her first novel, *Wise Blood*, O’Connor seems to recall the junkie-like shame and thrill of submitting to cinema. In letters to friends, O’Connor notes that she and the novel’s halfwit second lead, Enoch Emory, are psychic twins (CW 970, 1000), suggesting that his struggles with the addictive habit of moviegoing resemble hers. “Helpless to resist the appeal of a movie poster” (Bacon, “Fondness” 31), Enoch Emory comically but pathetically struggles with the lowdown temptations of cinema:

He ... stopped in front of a movie house where there was a large illustration of a monster stuffing a young woman into an incinerator. ... I ain't going in no picture show. ... I'm going home. I ain't going to wait around in no picture show. I ain't got the money to buy a ticket. ... I ain't even going to count thisyer change. It ain't but forty-three cent here, he said, that ain't enough. A sign said the price of a ticket for adults was forty-five cents, balcony, thirty-five. I ain't going to sit in no balcony, he said, buying a thirty-five cent ticket. (CW 78)

Enoch sets out good reasons not to go to the movies, but cannot convince himself to resist temptation. Ultimately, Enoch firmly tells himself, “I ain’t going in,” but “[t]wo doors flew open and he found himself moving down a long red foyer and then up a darker tunnel and then up a higher, still darker tunnel” (78-79). With a subtle shift of perspective, then, O’Connor specifies that Enoch no longer has even the illusion of autonomy. Instead, he “finds himself” performing an action over which he has no control, like an addict surrendering. After sitting through a tawdry triple-feature, which he does not enjoy, Enoch staggers out of the cinema to collapse against a building, a tableau vivant of junkie self-reproach.

One addiction a young O’Connor feared giving into was, to use the title of one of her stories, “the comforts of home.” God does not want her to surrender her talents to middle class values—or, to put it more agnostically, O’Connor does not intend to demean



her abilities by settling for a mundane life. Young and curmudgeonly, in “Higher Mathematics” O’Connor inclines to regard her genteel home with an intellectual’s disdain, so that she thinks of the bourgeois film habit, although she obviously adores it, as beneath her conception of who she is and can become. A few years earlier, H.L. Mencken had asserted that the “ideas in [film are] simply the common and familiar ideas of the inferior nine-tenths of mankind” (290). A similar perception informs the cinephile O’Connor’s adolescent self-disgust: if she likes the same things her middle-class family and friends like, then movies must be “hollow and obvious” (Mencken 290). As a teenaged anti-bourgeois *artiste* in training, she must resist the commonplace mid-century addiction to Hollywood product. If around sixty percent of the population goes to movies weekly (Pautz), then cinema is surely a low habit to feed. In her cartoons for the Georgia College newspaper, O’Connor even attempts to put a satirical distance between herself and the habit of moviegoing, depicting a student who, having failed to make the Dean’s List, will not be allowed to attend movies at night (*Cartoons* 39). (O’Connor herself failed to make the list because of a poor grade in a writing course [Gooch 93].)

However detrimental a diet of nightly cinema might have seemed to a teenaged O’Connor, it is not one she gave up when, at twenty, she left Milledgeville for graduate studies at the University of Iowa. This was the first time O’Connor lived away from her mother, but they were never out of touch. From 1945 to 1947, excepting winter and summer breaks, she and Regina Cline O’Connor wrote to each other almost every day. We do not have the mother’s letters, but Flannery’s—short, uneventful, usually humorless—seem to belie a claim O’Connor makes in “Higher Mathematics”: “My epistolary powers enthrall me” (71). While the hilarious, profound, and brave letters in earlier collections—*The Habit of Being* (1979) and *Collected Works* (1988)—are indeed enthralling, those in the recently released *Dear Regina: Flannery O’Connor’s Letters from Iowa* (2022) are mundane instead. These letters form one side of a kitchen table chat between parent and child, offering O’Connor little range for humor and profundity (For the latter, she availed herself of a contemporaneous notebook published as *A Prayer Journal* in 2013.) For the most part, Flannery tells Regina how her day went, and her plans for tomorrow. Among other quotidian details, the letters reveal that O’Connor continued yielding to the temptation of cinema. With the arch-bourgeois Regina Cline O’Connor as putative audience, O’Connor regularly dismisses Golden

Age cinema as trash. Perhaps she is simply stating her opinions about the films that played in Iowa City, but there is also a distinct possibility that O’Connor takes pains to scoff at the preferred art of her mother’s social class.

She notes seeing a variety of films, some that would eventually be considered classics: *Conflict* (1945) (18); *Anchors Aweigh* (1945)(22); *Junior Miss* (1945)(31-2); *Guest Wife* (1945)(38); *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945)(40); *Over 21* (1945)(49); *Week-End at the Waldorf* (1945)(58); *What Next, Corporal Hargrove* (1945)(71); *The Bells of St. Mary’s* (1945)(78); *Spellbound* (1945)(86); *The Lost Weekend* (1945)(95); *Dragonwyck* (1946)(114); *Tomorrow Is Forever* (1946)(117-8); *Adventure* (1945)(120); *Whistle Stop* (1946)(124); *Till the End of Time* (1946)(146); *Anna and the King of Siam* (1946)(156); *The Green Years* (1946) (172); *The Stone Flower* (1946)(204); *Henry V* (1944)(211); *The Egg and I* (1947)(230); and *Dear Ruth* (1947)(240). O’Connor has little to say about these films, which is regrettable, albeit understandable, given the mundane nature of this epistolary conversation. In many cases, one strongly wishes that O’Connor had more to say. As an aficionado of poultry since early childhood (“When I was five, ... I began to collect chickens. What had been only a mild interest became a passion, a quest. I had to have more and more chickens” [CW 832]), O’Connor would have been well prepared to critique Fred MacMurray and Claudette Colbert’s back-to-the-land chicken farming in *The Egg and I*.



Figure 3. A film still from *The Egg and I* (1947).

She does not follow up on seeing *Spellbound*, a missed opportunity for one great Catholic artist to comment on another. On other occasions, her brief comments suggest the O’Connors’ everyday table talk back in Milledgeville might have included movies. Thus, after dismissing *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, O’Connor goes on to write that, “It certainly glamourized the good nuns.

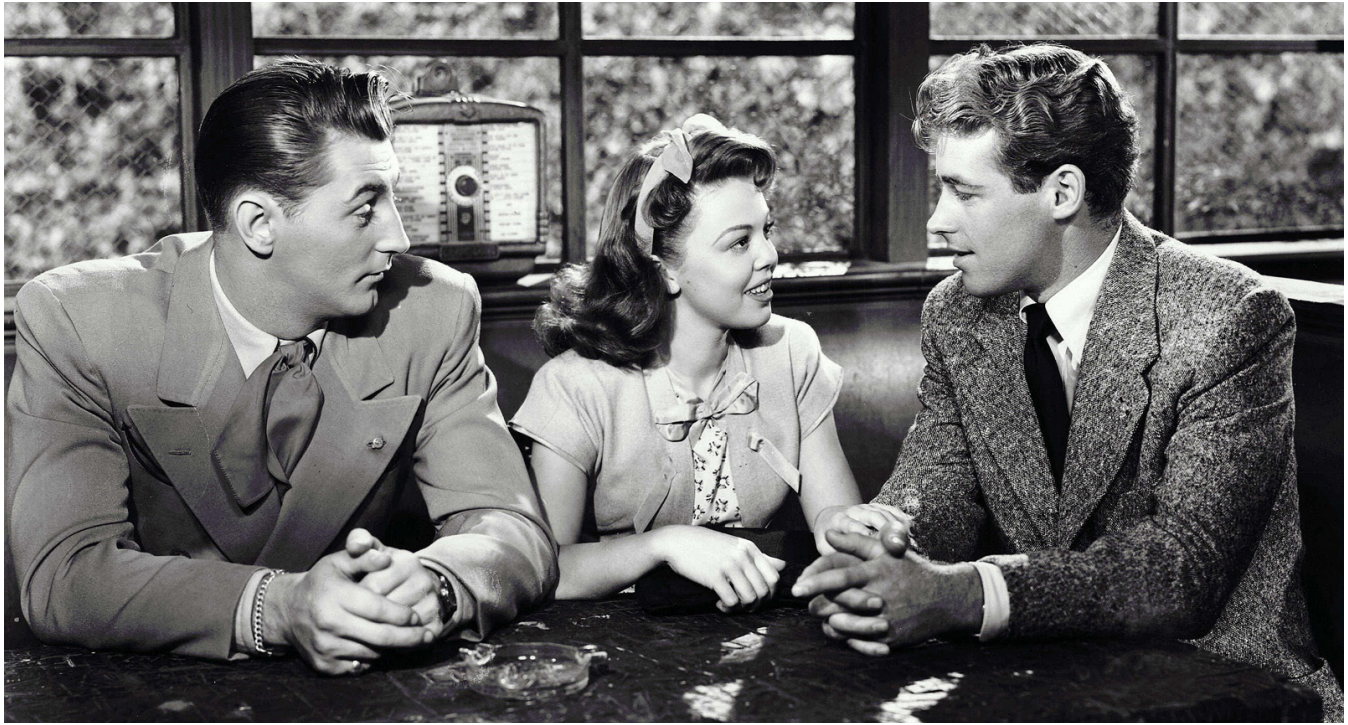


Figure 4. *Till the End of Time* (1946), O'Connor's hidden inspiration for *Wise Blood*.

You ought to see it for curiosity's sake" (78). Along with a passing reference to a newly announced stage version of *The Song of Bernadette*, O'Connor's recommendation suggests that the family took perverse interest in "religious fluff spewed out by a motion picture industry eager to cater to Catholic taste" (Smith 1). She also asks that, when it gets to Milledgeville, Regina recommend *The Lost Weekend* to "Aunt Mary [because] anyone with her alcoholic tendencies should be sobered by it" (103). O'Connor conditionally approves *Anchors Aweigh*, stating that it was "pretty good for a musical" (22), thus suggesting that Regina would already know what she usually thought of song-and-dance. (In *Wise Blood*, which she began writing at Iowa, she writes, "[Enoch] didn't like any picture shows but colored musical ones" [CW 78-9].) O'Connor reserves what might be her greatest praise ("very good indeed" [31]), for the mostly forgotten *Junior Miss*, George Seaton's 1945 adaptation of stories published in *The New Yorker* by Sally Benson, whose autobiographical stories had been made into *Meet Me in St. Louis* one year earlier. Along with *Week-End at the Waldorf* and, for that matter, *Anchors Aweigh*, *Junior Miss* can be read as a training film for O'Connor, whose plans ultimately were to move to New York and write, plans that fell short with the onset of lupus and the necessity of returning to the comforts of home.

Perhaps the most regrettably truncated review is for *Till the End of Time*. In an essay for *Approaches*

to *Teaching the Works of Flannery O'Connor*, Jon Lance Bacon describes an assignment he gives his own students. As Bacon notes, "[b]efore the [Second World War] had even ended, studios began developing films about returning servicemen" and "whether the veteran would find his place" in the postwar social order ("Interdisciplinary" 101). *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) is, Bacon acknowledges, "the most acclaimed ... most famous" of such films, but his assignment instead requires the students in his O'Connor course to compare *Wise Blood* with *Till the End of Time*. In his essay, published in 2019, Bacon does not elucidate why he has his students focus on Edward Dmytryk's relatively obscure film instead of William Wyler's classic. Given the constraints under which O'Connor scholars often handle archival materials, however, Bacon perhaps could not explain his pedagogical decision. The Iowa letters, embargoed in 2019, would not be published for another three years. With their publication, it is now demonstrable that O'Connor had viewed *Till the End of Time* only a few weeks before she began imagining Hazel Motes, the nihilistic veteran/antihero of *Wise Blood*. (A later-arriving classic film about a returning veteran is John Huston's *Wise Blood* (1979). When we first see Hazel Motes, the discharged soldier is still in uniform). Bacon's ostensible purpose is to supply his students with the socio-historical context of a "more than a little disorienting" novel that "features a superabundance of shocking actions, from murder to



self-mutilation" (100). Through the film, Bacon seeks to inform his class of "the literal situation in which [Hazel Motes] finds himself at the beginning of the narrative," situating O'Connor's "jarring" Christian novel in a realistic setting (100). On the other hand, Bacon's complimentary report of his students' insights (101-4) allows him to make explicit connections to *Till the End of Time*, three years before he himself would himself have been able to justify that comparison (that is, rather than to *The Best Years of Our Lives*) under the legal and ethical terms of the O'Connor archives. With the official release of the Iowa letters, O'Connor's own moviegoing habit may at last be explicitly connected to work that, she asserted, God had chosen her to do.

One day after seeing *Till the End of Time*, O'Connor judged the film "certainly lousy" (DR 146). Monica Carol Miller notes, "Flannery's apparent enjoyment of what might now be referred to as 'hate-watching' movies. ... Most of them she dismissed with a disdainful 'It was punk' or 'It was gruesome'" (xvi-xvii). Boiled down to exclamations of disgust, an element of self-reproach familiar from "Higher Mathematics" returns. The part of O'Connor that makes her seek out movies is not the "brainy kid." She knows that movies will disappoint and repulse her, but seeks them out anyway—or, having decided that the moviegoing habit is a banal sign of conformity, she performs disappointment and repulsion. Early in the Iowa letters, O'Connor writes that she and her roommate "wasted our money on the picture show last night, as it wasn't any good" (36); the grad student's dismissal mirroring the fifteen-year-old's objection to Hollywood's temptations. Devoted to frugality, O'Connor continues "wasting money" on movies while at Iowa. More consequentially, she also continues wasting a more precious resource: her time. As a teen, O'Connor counted a day joyful when she could "writ[e] all day" (HM 72). She was a happy amateur, and writing time appeared on its own schedule. In the professional writing program at Iowa, however, O'Connor codified a professional's lifelong routine: "write a certain number of hours a day at a given time regularly and without interruption" (DR 85). Given self-imposed constraints on time, it would not be surprising for O'Connor to deny herself movies among other "desires of the flesh" (PJ 23). But, fortunately, she did not. No matter that, as an uncomfortably typical midcentury moviegoer and hyper-serious instrument of God's will, she felt that she must cast cinema as "poison" or frame it as addiction, the movies gave her something to uplift. J.O. Tate dismisses Hollywood movies as "a mother lode of vulgarity ... hardly worth mentioning" ("Uses"

20), but O'Connor's "uses of banality" are profoundly transformative. "Oh, Lord," she wrote in September 1947, "make me a mystic" (PJ 38). In *Wise Blood*, Enoch beats up a man promoting a movie and steals his gorilla suit. "[B]urning with the intensest kind of happiness," he buries his human clothes ("a symbol ... of burying his former self" [III]) and dons the costume (III). Thus transformed, he sees the mundane world through the gorilla's "celluloid" eyes (CW 102).

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Figure 5. A photo of Flannery O'Connor.