

## Essay: Organizational Structures of Flannery O'Connor's Works

Flannery O'Connor claims that she does not begin writing her stories with an exact knowledge of who or what will appear in her stories. Rather, the stories tend to grow as she writes them. She claims, however, that they are "under control throughout the writing" (426). Is it possible to write solid, cohesive stories and essays without formally outlining beforehand the various elements that will be used? Do O'Connor's stories hold together as a unit or do they betray her unstructured story-writing process?

An analysis of her stories show that she indeed must have some innate sense of organization. In the short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor uses a basic structure of chronological order. The story unfolds on an hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute basis. Within this framework, the chronological evolution of events unfold around one key character, the grandmother.

The story opens with the grandmother and ends with the grandmother. Events are told by their relationship in some way with the grandmother. Initially, some elements and events appear to be somewhat random and without a particular direction. However, to see the overall organization of the elements, it's necessary for a complete reading of the story in order to connect them all together. It is, then, only at the end that the reader can see how they all eventually fit together.

At the beginning of the story, the grandmother refers to a newspaper article about an escaped convict, The Misfit. She uses it to persuade her son to change his mind about taking the family on a trip to Florida. The mention of The Misfit here appears to be nothing more than a clue to reveal an aspect in the grandmother's personality. However, The Misfit is, in fact, a crucial element of the story; but the reader isn't aware of this until much later in the story.

After the family leaves for their trip, they stop at a restaurant called Red Sammy's. The ensuing encounter with Red Sammy and his wife appear, again, to be no more than an opportunity to reveal more about the bratty kids and the shallowness of the grandmother. During the "ain't it awful" conversation between the grandmother and Red Sammy, the title of the story appears through a comment made by Red Sammy. It seems to be just a typical, all-inclusive type of comment two strangers tend to make when they're trying to solve the world's problems. The significance of the comment isn't revealed until close to the end of the story. At that same time, the reader realizes that Red Sammy and his wife are also part of the tragedy that faces the grandmother and her family.

One of the biggest surprises O'Connor produces, is the cat. Earlier, unknown to the family, the grandmother smuggles the cat into the car, hiding it in a basket. This looks like a small and excusable deception committed by her, and the reader's attention is drawn no further to it. However, during the trip the cat accidentally causes Bailey to lose control of the car. The car then crashes down the hillside, leaving the family stranded. The cat's reappearance at this point is probably just as surprising to the reader as it is to the driver.

Eventually, the reader learns that each element and event come together at the end, inextricably intertwined. O'Connor introduces the various elements into the story in a manner similar to a well-composed symphony. The story opens with a theme and sub-theme: The grandmother and The Misfit, and the bratty kids. As the story develops, these initial themes are expanded with more talk about The Misfit, more incidences about the bratty kids, and more insights about the grandmother. In addition, other sub-themes are introduced: Red Sammy and his wife, the monkey, and the car accident. Then the story ends with the major theme that was introduced at the beginning: The grandmother and The Misfit. But O'Connor also adds to this her moral lesson; her spiritual message. It is this spiritual message that everything ultimately points to, like the long body of a pencil coming to a sharp point at the end.

So, despite the fact that she does not formally outline her story or know at the beginning who or what will actually appear as the story unfolds, it is a well-constructed and cohesive unit. All of the elements relate to each other in some way. There aren't any trails that go nowhere.

My own writing evolves in a similar fashion, particularly my poetry. I begin to write a poem only because there is a germ of an idea that demands closer inspection. Before the first word hits the paper, most of the time I have no idea what the result or outcome will be. I simply put down on paper a phrase or idea that has been rattling around in my head. After that, I start pulling out the rest of whatever seems stuck to it.

I've written over 200 poems and have never sketched out the initial idea through to the ultimate conclusion prior to writing the poem. Some poems seem to write themselves and I simply serve as their vehicle. To these poems, I usually make very few changes—if any. Of the others, however, most go through minor to major re-writes (and probably still need it!). Some just never seem to go anywhere at all, and they merely die at the end of my pencil.

Even though my poetry is created "organically" and grows-as-it-goes, my essay writing is a little more structured. However, I stop short of creating a full-blown outline. This is because I have found that the paper goes through many revisions and re-writes regardless if I made an outline or not. And, if I made one, the end result bears little resemblance to the original outline.

For me, the outline is too restricting. It stifles the creative juices and I feel confined. Before the actual writing process, I can't know all of the elements and how they'll relate, except in a vague way. I lay out these vague relationships, but I can't call them an outline. Many elements that I include in my papers come to me naturally as I write. Often, I begin to see the subject from a different perspective and I'll proceed in a different direction from which I originally intended. Many ideas come from the stimulus of introspection while searching for the right words as I write. This can't happen in an outline.

However, this is not to say that I approach writing an essay with only a blank sheet of paper and a freshly sharpened pencil either. I do have a semi-formal (informal?) process. If the essay is on a topic that requires no research, (such as this one), then I jot down ideas on paper, or 3x5 cards. I formulate a thesis statement, keep the ideas on the table in front of me, and begin writing. I don't ever remember having trouble going from the thesis statement into the body. The biggest problem is formulating the thesis. Once that's done, the writing begins and moves along. If necessary, I'll even reformulate the thesis and re-write the paper accordingly.

Once the paper is written, I often reorganize sections—a cut-and-paste operation. I move paragraphs or sentences around that don't seem to fit where they occur. And I add and delete. I like having the time to write a paper over five or six times, or even more. I need to detach myself from it for a day or two (if possible) and look at it again in a fresh light. In this way, I can tell more clearly if the ideas flow or make sense. If I get too close to a paper, that is, if I'm rushed and don't get away from it for at least a day or two, it is almost always choppy and fragmented.

A paper that requires research I prepare with more formal structuring than I do with simple essays. I do attempt to prepare an outline, but I've found I usually don't follow it. All the research information is written onto 3x5 cards and carefully annotated. As I analyze the research, a natural order seems to emerge which rarely coincides with my outline.

For me, the most crucial thing to keep essays and research papers cohesive is to constantly refer to the thesis and make sure everything relates to it in some way. The second most important thing is to write down all ideas, regardless of how far-fetched they might seem. Many of the ideas I write down are never included in the essay, but they can stimulate new ideas.

The downside is that I'm a slow writer. I need to analyze before, during, and after I write. I don't marry myself to a strict point of view or idea. I like to allow for new thoughts to come through, even if it means that I must completely revamp the paper and thesis or start over. This can be extremely frustrating,

though, if I have severe time constraints. But my quest is for truth and knowledge. These, unfortunately, don't follow time lines very well.

The most curious thing I find about writing, whether it be letters, poetry, essays, or research papers, is that I have a distinct internal feeling as to whether the work is well structured or not. If the work is not put together well or flowing, I have a messy, scattered feeling inside, which feels tight and anxious. However, when the work is clear, concise, and well-balanced, I feel a release and a smooth satisfying sensation. It's not easy to describe these feelings, but I've learned to trust them and respond to the written work accordingly.

I'm also a painter and paint mostly abstract compositions. My friends have asked me how do I know when a painting is finished. I can only answer that it's a feeling inside the body that tells me; it's an intangible sense of balance. It's nothing intellectual because my paintings come only from an emotional part of me. Even though most of what I write about seems to be more intellectual than emotional, I suspect that the creative core that propels me to write comes from an emotional well. I feel what I write as well as think it. Knowing that O'Connor writes because of her strong spiritual beliefs, I believe that when she writes, her sense of organization also lies in her emotions.