AboutUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

ContactUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

EditorialBoard: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

The Christ Figure in *La malasangre* by Griselda Gambaro and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Connor

April Vázquez
University of Delaware.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14109160

Article History: Submitted-16/08/2024, Revised-13/10/2024, Accepted-18/10/2024, Published-31/10/2024.

Abstract:

Southern Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor and Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro both employed shocking acts of violence in their work in order to startle audiences into recognizing universal truths. In her 1982 play *La malasangre*, Gambaro explored the dynamics of fascism, misogyny, and the abuse of power through the lens of one family during the Rosista period of 1840s Buenos Aires. While the cultural milieu of the play is apparently secular, Gambaro utilizes a Christ figure in the character of the young hunchbacked tutor Rafael Sánchez. The events in the plot follow the pattern of Christ's Passion, with Rafael stripped, beaten, mocked, and ultimately killed. In contrast, O'Connor's 1955 short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" employs a distorted Christ figure in Tom Shiftlet, a one-armed drifter whose actions embody a dark parody of the narrative of Christ's ministry. Not only does Shiftlet not save anyone else, the story ends with a foreshadowing of his own impending judgment, demonstrating the inverse truth of the title—the life he did not save was his own.

Keywords: Christ figure, Griselda Gambaro, *La malasangre,* Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own".

Southern Catholic short story writer and novelist Flannery O'Connor and Argentine playwright and novelist Griselda Gambaro wrote under vastly different circumstances and for radically different audiences. The first was a regional American writer of the 1950s and 60s whose primary theme was human salvation on a cosmic scale, the second an exiled Latin American playwright whose literary output across four decades was rooted in the here-and-now of power

politics in her native land. Notwithstanding these differing literary purposes, there are marked similarities in the two women's work. Each drew upon a deeply Roman Catholic social context and a grotesque national literary tradition, with O'Connor's work falling within the Southern gothic heritage of Poe and Faulkner and Gambaro's belonging to the Theater of the Grotesque genre that had made its way to Argentina from the Italian stage. The Theater of the Grotesque evolved from Pirandello's concept of *umorismo*, "the painful laugh that accompanies a tragic sense of bewilderment in the face of a cruel and incongruous life" (Longman 1-2), and both writers explore the effects of a brutally violent or tragic event on a character. Gambaro's plays feature humiliation, torture, and murder—sometimes in an interactive format in which the audience invades the performance space. For Gambaro, this provided a way for "the audience, which has lost its capacity to see reality—an audience to whom war means nothing, for whom the dead are merely numbers, statistics—to see again" (Pollitzer 105). Flannery O'Connor explained her use of violence in remarkably similar terms:

> The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make them appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures. (*Mystery and Manners* 33-34)

Working within this framework of employing the grotesque to shock an audience into recognizing fundamental truths, both writers place exaggerated characters in contact with malignant or absurd forces that impel them toward tragedy, epiphany, or both at once. In her 1982 play *La malasangre*, Gambaro employs a clear Christ figure in the hunchbacked young tutor Rafael Sánchez. Following the pattern of Christ's Passion, Rafael is stripped, flogged, mocked, and killed. However, his death serves a redemptive purpose for Dolores, who is afterward inspired to resist the atrocities committed by both her father and the state behind him—the oppressive Rosista regime of the 1840s that Gambaro used as a parallel to her own time. O'Connor presents her own deformed Christ figure in the 1955 short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." The actions of the one-armed drifter Tom Shiftlet, who abandons a mentally disabled woman in a roadside diner, serve

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

as an inversion of Christ's historical ministry, making Shiftlet a perverse distortion of the typical Christ figure in literature.

According to Robert Detweiler's delineation of the Christ figure, this character is not meant so much to embody the attributes of the historical Christ as to reimagine him as an archetype or symbol, a Christ of fiction rather than faith. While there are multiple possibilities regarding the points of correlation between the character and Christ, a frequent correspondence is the character's willingness to sacrifice himself for others:

> The Christ symbol concentrates upon the central significance of Christ for the Christian faith—his redemptive role—transferred to the secular realm. In American fiction a variety of Christ figures possess that symbolic meaning: through suffering or even death they sacrifice themselves for an ideal. Their redemptive role lends to the story an optimism otherwise lacking and serves as a testimony to a faith in man's heroic potential where other values have disappeared. (Detweiler 116-117)

Such is the case for Rafael. Just as he had set Dolores apart in life, the young man distinguishes her with his death, giving Dolores the strength to resist the authoritarian cruelty of both her household and her government. The play's optimism is tempered by the ostensible victory of the forces of subjugation and tyranny, but Dolores' final declaration, "¡Ya no tengo miedo! ¡Soy libre!"/"I'm no longer afraid! I'm free!" (122) nevertheless sounds a note of hope absent in much of Gambaro's dramaturgy.

The reader's first indication that the tutor will function as a Christ figure in the play is the name Gambaro gives him: Rafael Sánchez. Not only is he one of only two characters to be given a surname, but both of his names are imbued with religious significance. Rafael is an archangel associated with healing; in the Book of Tobit, he cures the eponymous protagonist of his blindness. *Sánchez* derives from the medieval *Sancho*, meaning "sanctified" (Powell). In this play, names matter. The Spanish word *dolores* means "sufferings" or "afflictions." Much is made of the fact that Dolores' name is synonymous with her destiny, and two of the characters are designated with scathing irony: the malignant Benigno and the odious Juan Pedro de los Campos Dorados (of the Golden Fields). Accordingly, the connotations of Rafael's name are meant to give readers an indication of both his role in the play and his personal character.

In terms of the latter, Rafael exemplifies the tenets of the Christian faith throughout the play. In the face of multiple attacks from Benigno and his henchman Fermín, the tutor

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

demonstrates a quiet dignity that sustains him and which calls to mind Christ's dealings with authority figures like Herod and Pilate. When Benigno orders Rafael to show him his hunchback, the tutor responds with subdued defiance: "No soy una curiosidad"/"I'm not a curiosity" (63). He persists admirably in trying to teach the intractable Dolores, and he initially rejects her romantic advances, retorting, "¡(Hay) defectuosos que por suerte no se enamoran de las imbéciles!"/"There are defective people who fortunately do not fall in love with imbeciles!" (75). Nevertheless, when Fermín jeers that "la señorita" believes that the heads of savages should not be cut off because she's too good to stomach such retribution," Rafael defends Dolores. He tells the ruthless Fermín, "La señorita cree que es justicia. Dios perdonará a los débiles"/"The young miss believes it's justice. God will forgive the weak" (74). Rafael's promise of God's forgiveness for those who dare not openly defy totalitarian forces is the only mention of the Deity in the work, and it echoes the teachings of the historical Christ. The line would have had particular resonance in early-1980s Buenos Aires before an audience whose resistance to the ruling party could result in torture and death—so much resonance that, the week of the premiere of one of Gambaro's plays in downtown Buenos Aires the previous year, paramilitary police firebombed the theater in the middle of the night and burned it to the ground (Taylor 167).

There are a number of small details in the play that, taken together, indicate the author's intention to cast Rafael as a Christ figure. The young man's role as an educator is not unlike Jesus' among his followers, who called him Teacher. Rafael teaches Latin, the language of conquered Judea, and references the historical context of Christ: "Los latinos decían que el nombre es el destino"/"The Romans said that one's name was his destiny" (104). In the tutor's first exchange with Benigno at the beginning of the play, when the latter asks about his hump, "Is it bone?" Rafael answers, "Bone and flesh" (65), a response that calls to mind the insistence in Christian scripture and rite on the physical body of Christ. Even after the resurrection, Jesus appears to his followers not in an ethereal, insubstantial form but in the flesh. Dolores' accusation that her mother is dirty inside—an observation that demonstrates Rafael's influence—is reminiscent of Christ's allegorical description of religious leaders as white-washed tombs. Even the melon that Fermín pulls from his sack—with a hand bloodied by rotten meat he bought at the butcher shop to scare Dolores—suggests the head of Christ's precursor, John the Baptist.

A final detail that indicates Rafael's role as a Christ figure in the play is the couple's planned escape to "the other side of the river" (113). In Christian theology, crossing the River

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Jordan—as the Israelites did, into the Promised Land—is a metaphorical way to express going to Heaven (Adkins). On the other side of the river, the couple imagines, their home will be furnished entirely in white, a color that takes on a double significance in the play. Not only does white—the color of catechumens dressed for baptism—contrast with the sanguinary décor and tactics of the Rosista party, but in Gambaro's Buenos Aires, it would also have connoted the purity of the quest of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. These women, who gathered downtown weekly to protest against the government, carried photographs and wore white head scarves embroidered with the names of their missing children (Chasteen 295-296)—a fraction of the 30,000 people "disappeared" by the regime (Jehenson 87). Like *los desaparecidos*, Rafael will end up "dressed" in red: slain by Fermín at Benigno's command (Landini).

Rafael's trajectory in the plot follows the pattern of Christ's Passion. He is betrayed by Dolores' mother—someone from within his inner circle, who seemed sympathetic to his cause. He is condemned by a figure who, like Pontius Pilate, represents the power of state-sanctioned violence. As Rafael remarks to Dolores, it isn't only her father he fears but "the city behind" her father (113). Benigno is an extension of the military regime, an entity as brutal and capricious as himself, just as Pilate represented the full force of Rome, right down to the same blood-red accoutrements. Rafael is stripped—forced by Benigno to remove his shirt and expose his hump—as Christ was stripped of his robes, for which the soldiers cast lots. He is flogged—beaten by Fermín, who takes special care to hit him where it hurts most—as Christ was scourged at the pillar. Rafael's humiliation at being forced to dance wildly around the room with Fermín is reminiscent of the mockery Jesus experienced at the hands of both Jews and Romans, culminating in his crowning with thorns. Finally, Rafael is killed—not beheaded, however, as was typical under Juan Manuel de Rosas' rule. His body, in one piece, is returned to Dolores at the end of the play in both an echo of the scriptural prophecy that not a bone in the Messiah's body would be broken and an allusion to the women who would prepare Christ's body for burial after his death. It was also a reference to the many thousands of Gambaro's compatriots who would not be afforded even this small grace—because the bodies of their loved ones lay in mass burial pits or at the bottom of the sea. The author's tribute to Argentina's *desaparecidos* is sealed by Dolores' contemptuous expression of gratitude for Rafael's lifeless body (Magnarelli 7).

Rafael's role as a Christ figure is perhaps most profoundly fulfilled at the end of the play, when he quite literally puts his head in Dolores' hands, a demonstration of his resignation to

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

whatever fate may befall him (Magnarelli 22); as the penultimate scene ends, "Dolores extiende la mano hacia el rostro de Rafael. La deja inmóvil en el aire. Rafael se inclina y apoya su rostro en la mano"/"Dolores extends her hand toward Rafael's face. She holds it immobile in the air. Rafael bows and lets his head rest in her hand" (115). This self-sacrifice reaches its culmination when Rafael's death inspires Dolores to resist her sadistic father and, by extension, the entire Rosista regime. Like Christ's disciples in the Gospels, Dolores goes from misunderstanding and mediocrity to a full determination to resist evil. For the first time in her life, she realizes that neither Benigno nor anyone else can control her: "¡Ya no ordena nada! ¡En mí y conmigo, nadie ordena nada! ¡Ya no hay ningún más allá para tener miedo!"/"You no longer give the orders! For me and with me, nobody orders anything! There's nothing left to fear!" (122). It is this prospect of personal liberation, and its implications for Gambaro's original audience, that enables the play to imbue the hopeless situation of Argentina's Dirty War with a kind of Sisyphean hope—an optimism that extends beyond the play's setting and imparts a universal message. In the face of absurdity, Gambaro seems to urge from between the lines of the work, we can—and we must—summon the will to resist.

Griselda Gambaro insists on Rafael's outer deformity as an inverse representation of his inner rectitude. As Dolores says, "Ahora comprendo.... lo derecho puede ser torcido, y lo giboso, plano como un campo dorado"/"Now I understand… the straight can be crooked, and the hunchbacked, as smooth as a golden field" (111). On the prospect of having children with Rafael, she tells him, "Serán hermosos. Seguro. Como vos, tan derecho adentro, tan bien construido"/"They will be beautiful. Certain. Like you, so straight inside, so well-formed" (114). Flannery O'Connor, however, employs deformity to a very different purpose in her work. Much has been written about her use of physical deformity to demonstrate moral depravity. Afflictions as diverse as a missing arm, a heart condition, a club foot, hermaphroditism, a wooden leg, self-inflicted blindness, stroke, and brucellosis all serve as representations of spiritual degeneracy and, at times, opportunities for redemption in her short stories. But I would argue that to characterize O'Connor's use of deformity as simply a blanket physical manifestation of moral corruption is to miss the nuance in her application of the technique. In fact, the author does not apply the symbolism of deformity in a uniform way, painting all afflicted characters with the same broad brush. Instead, she utilizes specific types of deformity to demonstrate individual characters' places on a spiritual continuum. Much like J.D. Salinger in his depiction of the seven Glass siblings,

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

O'Connor shows characters at various stages of spiritual development, people whose specific deformities point to the state of their individual souls. Joy/Hulga Hopewell from "Good Country People," for example, is a nihilist whose wooden leg points to the dead, unfeeling part of her soul. The leg is bound in a heavy material, an image that "brings to mind a death shroud" (Nowak). Joy/Hulga also suffers from an unspecified heart condition that corresponds to her sense of superiority to everyone in her immediate environment. She seems incapable of love, even for the mother who bore her—"heart condition," indeed. Rufus Johnson from "The Lame Shall Enter First" is at the other end of the spiritual spectrum, a would-be prophet who firmly believes in the existence of supernatural Good and Evil. He has as yet rejected God, but he recognizes the makings of a preacher within him, and his club foot, as a "palpable expression (of the Fall)," (Asals 117) indicates both the state of his soul and the need for his vocation. Like the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Rufus is capable of grasping spiritual insights that elude others even as he gives himself up for morally lost.

What, then, of Tom Shiftlet's missing arm?

Ragen argues that O'Connor uses the missing limb to designate a character who is neither new nor innocent, in marked contrast to the New Adam of the Gospels. In fact, Shiftlet may have lost his arm while serving in the military, and if so, he was acting against the express command of Christ. While O'Connor doesn't specify whether or not he truly lost his arm in combat, she does take the opportunity to make a wry joke in Shiftlet's declaration that "he had fought and bled in the Arm Service of his country" (159). The missing arm may also point to Tom Shiftlet's fundamental flaw, which is related less to his creed than to its execution: like Rufus Johnson, he believes in evil, but unlike him, Shiftlet exempts himself from his own judgment. His is an error of perspective; if he could *shift* his viewpoint to encompass his own sin and act accordingly, the possibility of his redemption would exist.

Like Gambaro's characterization of Rafael in *La malasangre*, the composite that the reader forms of Tom Shiftlet makes clear that O'Connor intentionally echoes the Gospels in her narrative. Lucynell Crater's first view of Shiftlet shows him swinging "both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross" (156-157). His list of former occupations (gospel singer, foreman on the railroad, assistant in an undertaking parlor, radio broadcaster, and visitor to foreign lands) reads like a catalogue of "burlesque disguises for a messianic role" (Griffiths)—and, beyond all this, he's a carpenter. When Shiftlet

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

succeeds in getting the car running again, he wears "an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead" (162). The character is not only himself associated with the embodiment of the Holy Spirit—"The daughter…watched him with a cautious sly look as if he were a bird that had come up very close" (157)—but he also teaches the young woman, who because of her disability has never learned to speak, to say *bird*. Even the lighting of his cigarette conjures up an image of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: "He held the burning match as if he were studying the mystery of flame while it traveled dangerously toward his skin" (158). Griffiths gives a neat summary of several of the Christian correspondences of the narrative: "…the messiah comes in character as the friendless, homeless man to a desolate country and an empty people (as the name Crater suggests)… sheds his blood (for the marriage license) to satisfy the law, and carries away the innocent soul whom he teaches to pray for the Paraclete."

Like Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, Shiftlet's story begins with a temptation. Almost the first thing he notices upon his arrival at the Crater farm is the shed from which the rusted back of an automobile is visible. The difference is that Mr. Shiftlet makes no attempt to resist the temptation. As he introduces himself, he's looking at the tires; as Mrs. Crater introduces herself, he's wondering what make and year the car is; while Mrs. Crater cajoles him to marry her daughter, his eye is trained on the automobile bumper glittering in the distance. Some critics of O'Connor's work have written about Shiftlet's corruption by Mrs. Crater, but this focus on the car from the beginning demonstrates that Mr. Shiftlet has brought his evil with him. The old woman's declaration that she wouldn't give up her daughter for "a casket of jewels" (160) only reinforces the connotations of death and defilement associated with Shiftlet. In an example of the kind of brilliant wordplay that characterizes her writing, O'Connor has Mr. Shiftlet himself elucidate his role as both Christ figure and anti-Christ. He repeatedly insists that the best way he can describe himself is as a man. "I'm a man; but listen lady," he says, pausing and making his tone more ominous, "What is a man?" (158). Later, trumpeting his skills as a handyman, he asserts, "there ain't a broken thing on this plantation that I couldn't fix for you, one-arm jackleg or not. I'm a man," he said with sullen dignity, "even if I ain't a whole one" (160). Shiftlet's insistence that he's a man has echoes of Christ's messianic title "Son of Man" while simultaneously emphasizing that Tom Shiftlet is *only* a man—and as such marred by the Original Sin that twists his self-proclaimed "moral intelligence" (160) into mere self-interest and results in a heinous betrayal of trust.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Just as Griselda Gambaro draws on specific events in the Passion of Christ in *La malasangre*, O'Connor references moments in the ministry of Christ, presenting them in distortions not unlike the visual style of El Greco, to whom her work has been compared (Sonheim). Indeed, from the moment the suggestion of marriage is made, a chain of events is put in place that represents an inversion of the Gospel narrative, a kind of literary Black Mass in which each element carries the suggestion of the original that it perverts. It begins when Shiftlet resolves to marry Mrs. Crater's daughter and, in the darkness of the front porch, his "smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire" (163).

From here the dark parody of the Biblical narrative plays out in the key events of the story's plot. The raising of the dead, an act demonstrating the compassion and beneficence of Christ, is transformed into an expression of crass materialism; "the dead" that has "been raised" is a broken-down Ford that Mr. Shiftlet covets from the moment he sees it. The sacrament of marriage, always evocative of Christ's mystical union with his bride, the church, is degraded to "just something a woman in an office did, nothing but paper work" (164), as Shiftlet afterward complains. The Eucharistic sustenance that Christ promised his followers is here replaced by the plate of ham and grits that Shiftlet buys at the roadside diner where he abandons the sleeping Lucynell, still in her white wedding dress. The diner, called the Hot Spot, suggests the Harrowing of Hell, but rather than a site of liberation, it's the place where Shiftlet commits his reprehensible betrayal. Finally, the hitchhiker that Shiftlet picks up on the road after leaving the diner acts as a reverse John the Baptist, a prophet who appears not at the beginning but at the end, and who offers not salvation but condemnation. "You go to the devil!" (166), he shouts before jumping from the car into a ditch.

O'Connor defined the devil as "an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy" (*Mystery and Manners* 168), a fitting description not only of Tom Shiftlet but of every O'Connor antagonist. In a metaphysical economy in which "greater love hath no man" than sacrifice for one's fellow creatures, Shiftlet is not merely a pseudo-Christ, as some have suggested, but an anti-Christ. The culmination of the inverse Biblical narrative in the story comes when he issues a prayer antithetical in nature to everything Christ taught. In contrast with Christ on the cross or Saint Stephen at his martyrdom, Shiftlet does not implore forgiveness for his brethren. When he invokes the name of God at all, it is to pray for their condemnation: "Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!" (167).

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

But the story does not end there. The approaching turnip-shaped storm cloud portends divine retribution not for those whom Tom Shiftlet has condemned but for Shiftlet himself:

> The turnip continued slowly to descend. After a few minutes there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car. Very quickly he stepped on the gas and with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower into Mobile. (167)

"His stump," a description used for the first time, represents Shiftlet's stunted ethics; indeed, his very insistence on his "moral intelligence" only makes him the more culpable. His attempt to outrun judgment is met with the "guffawing" sound of thunder from above. It is worth noting that O'Connor often imbues aspects of nature with cosmological significance. In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the sun is converted into a "huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood" (258). In "Greenleaf," the sun beats down on Mrs. May's head "like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" (333), seeming to confirm her assessment that "Everything is against you… the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you" (330) and vaguely foreshadowing her violent end, gored by a bull. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the road that the doomed family travels on becomes more and more treacherous as they draw nearer to the site of their mass murder: "The dirt road was hilly and there were sudden washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments. All at once they would be on a hill, looking down over the blue tops of trees for miles around" (137). Here the gray turnip cloud is reminiscent of the cloud that envelopes the summit of Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus upon God's descent to the mountaintop. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel describe visions of the glory of God in cloud form. Jesus' ascension was through the clouds, and his return to Earth is predicted in the Book of Luke "in a cloud with power and great glory" (21:27). Early in the story, when Mrs. Crater gives Shiftlet permission to sleep in the car, he responds, "Why listen, lady, the monks of old slept in their coffins!" (160). Aside from the author's acerbic irony in the old woman's rejoinder—"They wasn't as advanced as we are"—his words prove portentous; the car is the literal vehicle of his downfall.

The ministry of Jesus hinges on the teaching that love for one's neighbor reveals one's love for God: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). The younger Lucynell Crater is the quintessential "least of these"—disabled, innocent, pure, vulnerable—a point which is driven home in the young man behind the counter at the Hot Spot's assessment of her as "an angel of Gawd" (165). Christ was not an

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

evangelist; almost without exception, he ministered to those who already believed, showing them a better way to live their faith. His particular disgust was reserved for religious hypocrites. Fitting then, that in a final inversion of the Biblical narrative, the story ends rather than beginning with a kind of baptism, and that the rain carries a connotation of Flood-like vengeance. Like the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the terrified Asbury Fox in "The Enduring Chill," Tom Shiftlet's reckoning will literally come from above. In a complete reversal of Christ's self-sacrifice and eventual ascent into Glory, Shiftlet will meet an ignominious end, the result of his own selfishness and cruelty.

In her consideration of Griselda Gambaro's body of work, Ana Sánchez Acevedo comments, "(su) mirada ética—inquisitiva y áspera, fuertemente cuestionadora—forja y transita sus textos no a través de interpelaciones abstractas, vuelos metafísicos o inmersiones psicológicas, sino desde las propias interacciones humanas, constituitivas del tejido social"/ (her) ethical gaze—inquisitive and sharp, firmly questioning—forges and traverses her texts not by means of abstract interpolations, metaphysical flights, or psychological immersions, but from human interactions themselves, constituting the fabric of society" (160). Her statement is equally applicable to the writing of Flannery O'Connor. Ultimately, it is Tom Shiftlet's inability to interact with others with decency and humaneness that condemns him, just as it is Rafael's transcendence of his absurd and cruel circumstances by means of decency and humaneness that makes possible Dolores' redemption through him. The life Tom Shiftlet might have saved is his own—a fact as plain as the roadside signs passes as he speeds toward Mobile, thinking, ironically, of how "a man with a car had a responsibility to others" (166). O'Connor's dark parody of the narrative of Christ's ministry end with Shiftlet not saving anyone else but facing his own impending judgment, demonstrating the inverse truth of the title—the life he didn't save was his own.

In contrast, the life Rafael saves is Dolores'—a paradoxical conception of salvation best expressed in Luke 17:33: "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." One can't help but think of that great practitioner of Christ's teachings, Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "They may torture my body, break my bones, even kill me. Then they will have my dead body, but not my obedience" (*Mahatma Gandhi*). Rafael never capitulates to Benigno's inhumanity. He maintains his dignity—symbolized by his intact body at the end of the play—and, most importantly, he represents a transcendence that will come to full fruition in Dolores' resistance, just as Gambaro herself planted the seed of covert resistance in the hearts of her audience.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Though Griselda Gambaro and Flannery O'Connor employed violence and the grotesque in different ways and for different purposes, each wrote with the urgency of a vocation. The Christ figures who appear in these works are part of that mission. Gambaro once remarked that "with age, I've become less cruel to my characters. I show them more mercy" (Pollitzer 105). Perhaps this is the result of social progress in Argentina over the decades of her career, but the fact that a character like Rafael exists in a play written at the height of the Dirty War may also indicate an inherent optimism on the author's part. Flannery O'Connor, in contrast, insisted that "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (*Mystery and Manner*s 112). One can't help but wonder if O'Connor, had she lived, could ever have shown the same mercy as Gambaro to her own characters. In this reader's opinion, Tom Shiftlet rather suggests she would not.

Works Cited:

Adkins, Eugene. "What Does the Phrase 'Cross the Jordan River' Mean to a Christian?" *Keltonburg Preacher*, 3 de octubre de 2015, https://keltonburgpreacher.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/ what-does-the-phrase-cross-the-jordan-river-mean-to-a-christian/. Accessed 9 July 2020.

Asals, Frederick. "Flannery O'Connor's 'The Lame Shall Enter First.'" *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1970, pp. 103-120.

Chasteen, John Charles. *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Detweiler, Robert. "Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction." *The Christian Scholar*, vol. 47, no. 2, 1964, pp. 111-124.

Duba, Arlo D. "Caught up in a Cloud: Rescuing the Ascension Story from Familiarity." Reformed Worship: Resources for Planning and Leading Worship, no. 55. https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2000/caught-cloud-rescuing-ascension-story-familiarity. Accessed 30 July 2020.

Eisner, Peter. "The Catholic Church and Argentina." *Los Angeles Times*, 17 March 2013, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/la-xpm-2013-mar-17-la-oe-eisner-pope-and-argentinas-

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

dirty-war-20130317-story.html. Accessed 15 July 2020.

Gambaro, Griselda. *La malasangre y otras obras de teatro*. Primera edición, Buenos Aires, Santillana Argentina, 2014.

Griffiths, Albert J. "Flannery O'Connor's Salvation Road." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1966. https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/life-you-save-may-be-your-own. Accessed 11 July 2020.

Landini, María Belén. "*La malasangre* y el gran círculo de la violencia." *Palos y Piedras*, Edición 4, Centro Cultural de la Cooperación Floreal Gorini, https://www.centrocultural.coop/revista/4/la-malasangre-y-el-gran-circulo-de-la- violencia. Accessed 7 July 2020.

Longman, Stanley V. "The Theatre of the Grotesque." *Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association: Minneapolis, Minnesota; August of 1974*.

Magnarelli, Sharon. "Authoring the Scene, Playing the Role: Mothers and Daughters in Griselda Gambaro's *La malasangre*." *Latin American Theatre Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1994, pp. 5-27.

Mahatma Gandhi. goodreads. https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/56607-they-may-torture-my-body-break-my-bones-even-kill. Accessed 11 July 2020.

Nowak, Katarzyna. "The Distorted Body." *Comforts of Home*. The Flannery O'Connor Repository. http://www.flanneryoconnor.org/kndistorted.html. Accessed 15 July 2020.

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, edited by Robert Fitzgerald and Sally Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.

Pollitzer, Joanne. "Griselda Gambaro's 'Theatre of Violence.'" *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2004, pp. 103-105.

Ragen, Brian Abel. "The Automobile and the American Adam." *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus: Innocence, Guilt, and Conversion in Flannery O'Connor*, Loyola University Press, 1989. https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/life-you-save-may-be-your-own. Accessed 11 July 2020.

Sánchez Acevedo, Ana. "El misterio de dar: solidaridad, miseria y poder en la obra de Griselda Gambaro." *Les Ateliers du SAL*, no 1-2, 2012, pp. 159-172.

Sonheim, Amy. "Visions of Glory by O'Connor and El Greco." *English Studies*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1-13.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Taylor, Diana. "Theater and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1990, pp. 165-182.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030