

## Denouement

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In the short story *Revelation*, Flannery O'Connor gives us "Mrs. Turpin," a character who reflects the author's dim view of "sinful human pride." Mrs. Turpin displays a self-satisfied arrogance, a blindness to her own spiritual ignorance, and in the end she's punished for it, stripped clean of her superior attitude. In O'Connor's ruthless catholic cosmology, that's exactly as it should be.

It's obvious from the outset that Mrs. Turpin is a snob without equal, all the more so because she doesn't realize it. A "very large" woman "with little bright black eyes," she arrives at a doctor's waiting room with her nondescript husband Claud ("a man accustomed to doing what she told him to"). Sizing up the seating situation, she takes instant offense to the poor white boy sprawled on a sofa, heedless of the possibility that she might wish to sit there, and silently rebukes his "white trash" mother for failing to instill the child with proper manners. She complains to herself about the smallness of the waiting room, the table cluttered with "limp-looking magazines" and an overflowing, untended ashtray. If *she* had anything to do with running the place, things would not be so lax.

As she eases herself into a vacant chair, Mrs. Turpin catches the eye of a pleasant, stylish-looking lady sitting nearby, someone she considers an equal and worth conversing with, and remarks with studied self-deprecation, "I wish I could reduce." When the other lady rejoins "Oh, *you* aren't fat," as if both belonged to a mutual-admiration society that admits very few, Mrs. Turpin's vanity is satisfied, as expected.

Although Mrs. Turpin knows nothing about what it means to be a poor black Southerner in the middle to latter half of the twentieth century, that fact does not constrain her from offering learned opinions about what kind of people they are. "It's no use in having more than you can handle yourself with help like it is," she says to the stylish lady. "We found enough niggers to pick our cotton this year but Claud he has to go after them and take them home again in the evening. They can't walk that half a mile. No they can't. I'll tell you. I sure am tired of buttering up niggers, but you got to love em if you want em to work for you." She explains how she greets the blacks when they come to work each morning, provides ice-water for them to drink during the day, and vigorously waves them goodbye every night. She views her black farm hands as children lacking any real dignity or intelligence, and herself as an overindulgent mother hen.

The good Mrs. Turpin is not adverse to issuing similar value judgements in relation to members of her own race (only to herself, of course; to do so out loud wouldn't be Christian). She regards the uncouth poor white mother and her son with thinly veiled contempt: "She could tell by the way they sat -- kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up. (The) lank-faced woman was certainly the child's mother. She had on a yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks, both gritty-looking, and the rims of her lips were stained with snuff. Her dirty yellow hair was tied behind with a little piece of red paper ribbon. Worse than niggers any day, Mrs. Turpin thought. There was nothing you could tell her about people like them that she didn't know already. And it was not just that they didn't have anything. Because if you gave them everything, in two weeks it would all be broken or filthy or they would have chopped it up for lightwood. She knew all this from her own experience. Help them you must, but help them you couldn't. "

So secure is she of her relative superiority to those she looks down upon, and so sure that she would always retain her "natural goodness," Mrs. Turpin even entertains the idea that if God gave

her but two choices, to be born "white trash" or "nigger," she could handle being black. Not a trashy one, mind you, but a "neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black." She sees an angry, ugly girl of eighteen or so reading a book, her face rubbed raw with acne. Mrs. Turpin pities her, but then rejoices in the happy knowledge that God had *not* made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! *She's* been blessed with a good disposition. "He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. 'Jesus, thank you!' she said. 'Thank you thank you thank you!'"

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin would loll away the moments before sleep categorizing different classes of people. On the bottom were the coloreds -- though not the kind she would have been -- and then only slightly to one side of them, the white trash. Above them, a good three or four times removed, would be herself and Claud. But at some point the "complexity" of her calculations would befuddle her. Weren't there some colored folks who were rich and respectable to boot? She could never reconcile the inconsistency of this fact, and it was here that she usually fell asleep, unable to carry her classifications any further.

Despite her high self-regard, Mrs. Turpin becomes increasingly and uncomfortably aware that the ugly girl with the acned face, "eyes fixed like two drills," is staring directly at her. The girl's expression is one of contempt mixed with something stronger -- hatred. More, she seems to recognize Mrs. Turpin in some deep and undeniable way, "as if the girl had known her all her life." Mrs. Turpin is perplexed by this. The ugly girl makes faces at her, smirks at her, though clearly she's the stylish woman's daughter, by the looks of her. Why would she behave so rudely to Mrs. Turpin, who has displayed nothing but impeccable social decorum since her arrival at the doctor's office, engaging in pleasant conversation with everyone present (even the white-trash!). Yet with each pause in the conversation the ugly girl -- who's name is Mary Grace -- appears to grow more agitated, more censorious. Her eyes are dark and narrow. Unnerved, Mrs. Turpin continues her conversation with the stylish woman, who's plainly embarrassed by her daughter's discourteous behavior.

Just as the two women finish verbally wringing their hands at Mary Grace's insolence, and just after Mrs. Turpin has experienced another "Thank you Jesus!" epiphany (this time, unfortunately, aloud), a book comes careening toward her. It strikes her smartly over the left eye as the frenzied girl comes crashing across the table at her. After a few chaotic moments she is subdued by the doctor and his nurse. The girl's eyes, Mrs. Turpin noticed as she looked directly into them for the first time, were somehow lighter, almost relieved. Now she was wholly certain the girl knew her, knew her *soul*. Beseeking the attacker, Mrs. Turpin waits for a reply, "as if for revelation." The steady, whispered response: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Mrs. Turpin slumps back in her chair, the smug self-image she's enjoyed for forty-seven years seriously damaged, possibly beyond repair.

In the aftermath of the incident, Mrs. Turpin begins to show her true colors, the ones that have been there all along, invisible beneath the gaudy facade of piety and graciousness that she's passed off to others as a personality. Initially she behaves like a petulant little girl: " 'I am not,' she said tearfully, 'a wart hog. From hell.' " She is indignant that it was she, and only she, who was singled out for indictment ("a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman"), even though there were filthy, stupid white-trash in the very same doctor's office who plainly deserved it more. What had she done? Nothing! Hoping to restore equanimity by bringing her Negro workers their ice-water, she attempts to elicit some sympathy by relating what happened. Yet their concern is feigned, their flattery hollow. Knowing this only adds to Mrs. Turpin's rage and she curses "the niggers" silently, berating their intelligence. She is unable to extract her usual pleasure from patronizing them, the pretense of genuinely caring for their welfare exposed as the sham it always was.

Her wrath steadily growing, Mrs. Turpin makes her way to the farm's pig-pen, grabbing a hose and exclaiming fiercely, "what do you send me a message like that for?" The "you" she addresses is God. "Why me?" she protests, "how am I a hog?" Gripping the hose she rants that if He

had wanted her to be trash, He should have *made* her trash, and in best petty tyrant style, "blindly pointed a stream of water in and out of the eye of an old sow whose outraged squeal she did not hear." It's too late for Him to make her a nigger, she opines viciously, but she could certainly act like one. Enraged and now completely out of control, she continues her hysterical monologue. "Go on," she yelled, "call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and a bottom!" All semblance of a "good disposition," needless to say, has evaporated. Gathering her fury for the last time, she hurls one last mighty invective: "*Who do you think you are?*" she shrieks.

And then, as the sun goes down all about her, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of

"... a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and God's given wit to use it right.

"She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

"She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead..."

In the span of a few hours Mrs. Turpin learned some valuable, humiliating lessons. She learned that contrary to her own illusions, she was not the superior, sweet-tempered Christian woman she fancied herself. Despite the elaborate act, and despite the obvious fact that she *believed* in it, the ugly girl in the doctor's office had known her for what she really was. She was, in short, a self-righteous, sanctimonious cow -- "petty bourgeois" incarnate. She got precisely what she deserved, of course, but I also think she received a good deal more. Her experience and her vision illustrate that social position, hard work, and "doing good for others" do not, ultimately, guarantee a

place at the right hand of the Lord. Perhaps it doesn't even matter if our virtuous acts are authentically altruistic; maybe only God is qualified to judge our worthiness. O'Connor seems to intimate as much.

Although Mrs. Turpin has suffered much at the hands of her creator, O'Connor allows her a tiny parting gift, and it's a beauty: the "small, unblinking eyes, fixed on what lay ahead." In one short sentence Flannery endows her charge with the ability to persist and therefore provides at least the possibility for change -- and hence, real spiritual growth. Absent wings and a choir, that's not a bad deal. As infinitely fallible, vulnerable human beings, this is the bargain we all must make. Pride takes many forms, and if it does indeed goeth before a fall (as is surely the case), then the experience can be instructive. When our pride takes a beating, we can either fold up our tent and go home or stick around and see how it all turns out -- fully aware and accepting of our limitations, our nakedness.

Painting a positive picture of Mrs. Turpin's possible spiritual development, one might find her agreeing at some later date with the lines Anthony Hopkins renders as C.S. Lewis in the film *Shadowlands*. He was not speaking specifically about God or pride but he might as well have been. "Experience is a brutal teacher," he says, "but you learn. By god, *you learn.*"