**The Life You Save May Be Your Own**

**Flannery O'Connor**

**Author Biography**

Flannery O'Connor’s parents had an effect on their only daughter in ways that were both fruitful and tragic. O’Connor was born in 1925 to a prominent Georgia family of devout Roman Catholics—an anomaly in the largely Protestant South. This intensely religious milieu played a major role in O’Connor’s evolution as a writer. She attended schools in Savannah and Milledgeville and confronted tragedy at age fifteen when her father died of lupus, a degenerative disease which attacks the body’s vital organs. O’Connor later entered Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College), majored in social sciences, and spent her spare time writing and drawing for student publications. She began writing and publishing short fiction in earnest when she entered the graduate writing program at Iowa State University, which she completed in 1947.

O’Connor started work on her first novel, *Wise Blood*, while living at a writer’s colony in upstate New York. She later lived in New York City and Connecticut with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, fellow Catholics who shared many of O’Connor’s literary interests and who later wrote about her. This rather artistic lifestyle came to an abrupt end when, at age twenty-five, O’Connor herself suffered an attack of lupus. She moved back to Georgia to live with her mother on a dairy farm and continued to write, publishing *Wise Blood* in 1952, the story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in 1955, and a second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in 1960. Her most famous stories, “‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find’” (1953) and “‘The Life You Save May Be Your Own,’” were both written during this period. She received numerous awards, grants, and citations for her work.

Despite persistent health complications, O’Connor continued to write fiction and nonfiction, displaying a sharp wit and penchant for self-mockery. She spent her final years being cared for by her mother and hired helpers, who likely resembled many of the impoverished characters that appear regularly in her fiction. O’Connor also enjoyed painting and raising exotic birds, motifs that are evident in her writing. She finally succumbed to lupus in August 1964 at age 39. *Flannery O’Connor: The Complete Short Stories* was published in 1971 and won the National Book Award. With two novels and thirty-one stories to her credit, O’Connor remains one of the most important short fiction writers of the twentieth century.

Like much of Flannery O’Connor’s short fiction, “‘The Life You Save May Be Your Own’” is set in the American South and contains characters whose most notable feature seems to be their ordinariness. Through imagery, dialogue, and moments of revelation, O’Connor explores the themes of morality and religion, both frequent concerns in her work. The story evoked critical praise upon its publication in the *Kenyon Review* in the spring of 1953. Within the sparse, apparently simple plot of the story, O’Connor constructs a world torn between renewal and emptiness, natural beauty and crass materialism, compassion and cruelty. In the end, O’Connor’s protagonist must choose between these extremes and attempt to experience the grace of God’s love.

Flannery O’Connor was in many ways fated to write the sort of Southern Gothic fiction she did. O’Connor was a deeply religious Catholic who lived in the overwhelmingly Protestant American South. This gave her an outsider’s perspective, and that was darkened still further by her personal tragedies. Her father died of lupus when she was 15, and because the disease is inherited, O’Connor grew into maturity knowing that she too was likely to develop the illness, as indeed she did. O’Connor died from complications related to lupus when she was only 39. The knowledge of her impending death and its unfairness along with the paradox of her faith in a loving god allowed O’Connor to create dark, complex fiction marked by desperate, brooding characters.

**Essential Facts**

1. When she was a little girl, O’Connor trained a chicken to walk backwards and became a bit of a celebrity as a result. O’Connor showed her sense of humor when she said, “That was the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. It’s all been downhill from there.”

2. Religion was deeply important to O’Connor. Even though she had poor health, she went to Rome to visit the Pope and often lectured on religion.

3. O’Connor attended the Iowa Writers Workshop while earning her MFA. The collection of stories she wrote for her thesis won the Rinehart–Iowa Fiction award.

4. While her illness limited what she could do physically later in life, O’Connor still managed to keep in touch with many people via letters. She maintained extensive correspondence with other writers and wrote one friend a letter every week.

5. Each year, the University of Georgia honors O’Connor by giving The Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction.