How Not to Chase a Turkey: Flannery O'Connor and Self-Centered Ambition

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Many authors have written beautiful, captivating prose, filling their stories with lush sensory detail and creative, twisting plots. It is rarer, but even more enjoyable, to find literature that reveals some element of the human condition, which leaves readers with an idea to reflect on long after we turn the final page. Flannery O’Connor’s short stories fit that description. The Catholic woman from Georgia, who died tragically young at age thirty-nine, created characters whose emotions, motives, and experiences always cause me to reflect on my own affections and actions. One theme exposed by many of O’Connor’s works is the danger of self-centered ambition.

A Prize Worth Pursuing?

In one such story, she describes a boy rushing through the thick underbrush and tall trees of an Appalachian forest. After catching sight of an injured turkey during a morning ramble in the woods, young Ruller decided to chase it, a choice that takes him across hedges, hills, fences, and roads. Many times the eleven-year-old believes he has the bird cornered, only for it to wobble away ahead of him again. Finally, when Ruller is ready to abandon his quest, with his shirt torn, his forehead knotted after crashing into a tree, and his lungs desperately short of air, he catches sight of “a pile of ruffled bronze with a red head lying limp along the ground.” The turkey gave up the struggle for life and perished, leaving the boy victorious.
While Flannery O’Connor’s account of this breathless pursuit makes for exciting reading, the author is more concerned with her subject’s thoughts than with his movements. Few of us, perhaps, would try to track down a wild turkey if we encountered one outdoors. I have had the pleasure of crossing paths with the large, colorful birds in several forests, but the urge to run after them never seized me yet. Why does young Ruller take up the hunt? He has a vision of himself carrying the turkey home, receiving lavish attention and praise because he conquered the beast. When he first charges after the turkey, the lad imagines his family “all screaming, ‘Look at Ruller with that wild turkey!’” Later, after he runs into a tree, the bruised youth imagines his father saying “Man! That’s a bird if ever I saw one!”, which sustains his determination to capture the fleeing fowl. Finally, when he hesitates to drag the dead creature away, the boy thinks of how his family will see him if he returns with a catch: “Ruller gets our turkeys for us.” That idea of the praise and attention he will receive leads the impulsive eleven-year-old to grab the carcass, concluding that the turkey’s providential death will bring about his own elevation. As the boy snatches it up and heads for home, he dreams of his family’s awe-struck admiration at his triumph.

**Glimpses of Self-Centered Ambition**

Ruller is not the only character in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction who hungers for other people’s recognition and respect. Her short stories exhibit a crowd of characters motivated by the self-centered ambition to be somebody or to be the center of attention, a need that is not limited to young boys. In “The Geranium,” an elderly man who moves from the South to New York City to live with his daughter recalls life in Georgia. Old Dudley remembers that he liked to catch fish and share them with his fellow boarding-house lodgers, a group of elderly ladies who would say “it took a man to get those fish.” Dudley would announce his return and loudly toss down the fish, causing the women to praise him as “the man in the house.”

Another story, “Good Country People,” tells of a woman named Joy whose extensive education isolates her in her thirties from her rural family. When a Bible salesman comes to the farmhouse door, he dotes on Joy,
complimenting and questioning the irritable recluse in ways that her moth-
er has long since given up. Joy’s icy exterior melts when she muses “that
she would run away with” the young man, imagining herself as his true
love, the center of his world. That vain dream leaves Joy vulnerable when
the Bible salesman displays his true character as a cynical thief.

Like Ruller, Old Dudley and Joy reveal the influence of self-centered
ambition in our personal, private life. We want to be loved, which can lead
us to fantasize about how important we are to our friends and family. We
long for the people around us to see that we are unique, excellent, and
praiseworthy. As a result, Ruller tears through the woods at a feverish pace,
focusing on the turkey as the key to achieving his self-centered ambition:
becoming the focal point of his family’s adoration. Sadly, the young boy’s
wishful thinking draws him away from home, the best place to develop
truly loving relationships with his parents. Old Dudley’s and Joy’s imagi-
nations also cause them to ignore the people who truly care for them - his
daughter and her mother.

Flannery O’Connor’s short stories further portray self-centered am-
bition rearing its head in characters’ public interactions with strangers.
“Enoch and the Gorilla” takes readers inside the mind of a young man
who, living alone in Atlanta, “wanted to become something.” Enoch’s
desire to “better his condition” takes physical shape when he sees chil-
dren lined up to meet a movie star, who turns out to be a man wearing
a plastic suit to play a gorilla. Enoch’s vision of his own potential exalta-
tion becomes clear: “He wanted, some day, to see a line of people waiting
to shake his hand.” The young man’s self-centered ambition pushes him
down a brutal path toward his goal, as Enoch ultimately kills the actor and
steals his gorilla suit.

Enoch is not the only example of O’Connor’s characters yearning
for the attention of a crowd. “A Late Encounter With the Enemy” intro-
duces George Sash, a bitter, senile old man who pretends to be a veteran
of a long-distant war so that he is honored in local parades. The elderly
George “liked to sit on any stage,” even if it means deceiving the audience
by wearing a false uniform. As his body fails and his relationship with his
granddaughter withers, “General” Sash continues to crave applause and the spotlight, oblivious to his life’s moral and physical wreckage. Enoch and George’s ambitions for attention, like those of Ruller, Joy, and Old Dudley, cut them off from other people, yielding disappointment and danger rather than delight.

**Self-Centered Ambition in Scripture: Simon the Sorcerer**

O’Connor’s stories may cause readers to laugh at her characters’ inflated egos and poor choices, but the vivid Biblical treatment of self-centered ambition in Acts 8 requires that we pause and search our own hearts. When Philip, one of the Apostles spreading the good news of Jesus Christ’s ministry and resurrection, reached Samaria, a major city north of Jerusalem, he encountered a man named Simon. This man’s practice of sorcery “amazed” audiences and enabled him to boast “that he was someone great.” Despite Simon’s pride, Luke recounts that the sorcerer believed and was baptized when Philip preached the Gospel. Nevertheless, after the apostles Peter and John arrived to pray for the believers in Samaria, Simon revealed the weakness of his faith. Like O’Connor’s characters, the Samaritan’s self-centered ambition surged, leading him to picture himself back in the center of a crowd. In Acts 8:19, Simon offered the Apostles money to give him the ability to send the Holy Spirit into people by touching them, a public ministry that, if brought from imagination into reality, would restore his fame and public power. Simon sought to make God’s gift an instrument for his own glorification, leading Peter to rebuke him severely and demand that the sorcerer “repent of this wickedness.”

Simon’s disastrous attempt to restore his celebrity is not the only Biblical reminder that believers should be wary of the self-centered ambition that threatens to sweep us away with fantasies of our own importance and opportunities. When Eve ate the forbidden fruit in Eden, she believed that it was “desirable for gaining wisdom,” indicating that she took the fruit after imagining what it could do for her. She disobeyed the Lord as part of a self-centered pursuit of her own ambitions. Paul addressed the temptation toward self-centered ambition in Romans 12:3 when he instructed believers “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,
but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” A humble assessment of ourselves can keep us from pursuing the dangerous, ridiculous follies that O’Connor’s characters display as they chase a turkey, covet the spotlight, or steal a gorilla suit, poisoning their relationships in the process.

Ironically, the yearning for praise that led young Ruller to hunt down his turkey also causes him to lose it. On his way home, the boy stops to show his catch off to a group of lads who respond by seizing the prize for themselves. O’Connor concludes her story with Ruller running back to his family, “certain that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch.” Just like Simon the sorcerer, and any of us who surrender our choices to egotistical visions of attention and celebrity, Ruller discovered that self-centered ambition leaves its victims with empty hands and hollow hearts.