

# Creating Characters

**FLANNERY O'CONNOR** CREATED CHARACTERS YOU'LL NEVER FORGET. **LC** REVEALS THE TECHNIQUES SHE USED TO EVOKE PECULIAR PERSONALITIES, AND SHOWS YOU HOW TO USE THEM TO CRAFT COMPELLING CHARACTERS OF YOUR OWN.

## Who Was Flannery O'Connor?



Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, the only child of a Catholic family. When she was 12, she moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, where her grandfather was mayor. Despite their prominence, the Catholic O'Connors were outsiders in the

Protestant South, and much of O'Connor's fiction later dealt with religious tension.

At the age of 21, O'Connor published her first short story, and went on to write 31 short stories and two novels. Her career was cut short by an attack of lupus, which killed her at the age of 39. Her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, was published in 1955, while her second, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, was published posthumously in 1965.

Despite the brevity of her career, Flannery O'Connor is considered the master of the short story. Her subtle characterizations and command of dialect draw readers into the world of the South with its racial and religious conflicts. While her affinity for the grotesque led some to call her work Southern Gothic, O'Connor disliked being labeled a "Southern" author. She considered herself, simply, a writer.

## How to create characters

>>READ THE EXCERPT ONCE THROUGH WITHOUT READING THE NOTES.

>>READ IT A SECOND TIME, WITH THE NOTES.

>>IMAGINE YOUR OWN CHARACTERS.

>>USE THE NOTES AND WRITING PROMPTS AT THE END TO CREATE THEM.

1. O'Connor introduces the character without a name but gives the reader important details about his looks and his occupation. The word 'hatless' describes both appearance and social class—he is poor, probably from the country.

2. O'Connor reveals details about the boy's appearance gradually. The judgments about the boy's socks and his hair indicate that we are inside Mrs. Hopewell's head.

He was a tall gaunt hatless youth who had called yesterday to sell them a Bible. He had appeared at the door, carrying a large black suitcase that weighted him so heavily on one side that he had to brace himself against the door facing. He seemed on the point of collapse but he said in a cheerful voice. "Good morning, Mrs. Cedars!" and set the suitcase down on the mat. He was not a bad-looking young man though he had on a bright blue suit and yellow socks that were not pulled up far enough. He had prominent face bones and a streak of sticky-looking brown hair falling across his forehead.

"I'm Mrs. Hopewell," she said.

"Oh!" he said, pretending to look puzzled but with his eyes sparkling, "I saw it said 'The Cedars' on the mailbox so I thought you was Mrs. Cedars!" and he burst out in a pleasant laugh. He picked up the satchel and under cover of a pant, he fell forward into her hall. It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it. "Mrs. Hopewell!" he said and grabbed her hand. "I hope you are well!" and he laughed again and then all at once his face sobered completely. He paused and gave her a straight earnest look and said, "Lady, I've come to speak of serious things."

3. By calling the woman by the name of her farm, the salesman provokes her to correct him. O'Connor uses the word "pretended" to indicate that he's being manipulative.

4. O'Connor shows how the salesman uses his suitcase as a pretext to move inside the house without asking permission. The verbs "fell" and "jerking" make the action vivid.

5. So far, everything the salesman has said ends in an exclamation point. He is trying hard to be pleasant and cheerful, but does not seem wholly sincere.

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"GOOD COUNTRY  
PEOPLE" FROM THE  
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“Well, come in,” she muttered, none too pleased because her dinner was almost ready. He came into the parlor and sat down on the edge of a straight chair and put the suitcase between his feet and glanced around the room as if he were sizing her up by it. Her silver gleamed on the two sideboards; she decided he had never been in a room as elegant as this.

*6. O'Connor sets up the tension between Mrs. Hopewell and the Bible salesman—she thinks that she is above him and he plays to her vanity by acting dumb.*

## Create your own compelling characters

USE THESE PROMPTS TO BEGIN A GREAT STORY

- 1** Note #1 shows you how to introduce a character effectively by mixing physical description with contextual details.
- 2** Note #2 reminds you to spread out your descriptive sentences so that the action of the story can pull the reader forward.
- 3** Review note #3. If a character is not trustworthy, warn your reader early on.
- 4** Note #4 shows how the right verbs make your character's actions spring to life. Choose strong, clear verbs.
- 5** Review note #5. The way a character speaks is just as important as what he says. Punctuation and word choice work together to create tone.
- 6** Note #6 relates to point of view. Decide who is narrating and let her description of events reveal her personality.
- 7** Stories happen when characters interact. Put two characters in a situation together and let the plot unfold from there . . . .