WHITE BLESSINGS & BLACK LUCK

By Ron Kenner

Flannery O'Connor's *Revelation* and Ralph Ellison's *King of the Bingo Game* are both skillful, convincing and emotionally gripping tales about two "chosen" people—each of whom goes mad. Essentially O'Connor's protagonist goes mad because she loses her sense of order; Ellison's because he thinks he's found his. One loses a comfortable certitude—a vision; another finds a comforting, delusional vision.

Both characters alternate their moods between compelling blind faith and agonizing doubt—the one eventually losing her mind as her blessings change to curses; the other as his luck and chance change to fate, and finally to ill fate. O'Connor's protagonist has been 'chosen' and defeated by God. Ellison's by 'the system.'

Given these loose plots, one wonders if the seeds of the two short stories developed and blossomed more-or-less as they did simply because:

1) Each story was cultivated by a capable, professional writer, with both typically employing common writing techniques such as those laid down centuries ago by Aristotle.

2) Or one can wonder whether, instead, each seed might have developed into a completely different *kind* of story—that is, if cultivated in the *style* of yet another professional writer; that is, if Ellison had written *Revelation* and O'Connor had written *King of the Bingo Game*.

So which is capability and which experience? Which is personality? Which is professionalism and which is style?

Style, even defined as the unique personality of the writer on paper—beyond meeting the requirements of what's *in style*—is obviously a loose term. Rather than

discover a meaning one almost needs to build a reasonable definition for oneself. Perhaps we need to study or reflect on a number of works by any particular writer or artist until the pattern grows clear.

Yet allowing we wish to link *pattern* with style, even this can prove difficult. One can easily recognize, say, another Keene painting with those popular big lonely eyes, or another Van Gogh painting, the paint so think it still hasn't dried; yet it's not always so easy to recognize a new Picasso. That's partly because Picasso, even moreso than Hemingway, helped to set the style, or a whole series of styles.

Yet while Picasso periods changed was there not something *uniquely* Picasso that continued through all of them? Is there not something uniquely inherent in an author's style, something that stands out even beyond the use of favored words and favored techniques, beyond the choice of genre—whether in fantasy, science fiction, surrealistic, realistic, picaresque, romantic, naturalistic or some other recognizable mode?

One can clearly recognize such writing styles as those developed consciously by the likes of Ring Lardner, Ray Bradbury, Carson McCullers, Thorne Smith, Franz Kafka or a Hemingway (if there weren't so many Hemingway copies). There's also a wide span of excellent works—such as O'Connor's *Revelation* and Ellison's *King of the Bing Game*—not so easily distinguishable by style: works which, no matter how outstanding, simply don't jump off every page, or even every chapter, to announce the author.

Sometimes it's easier to see the distinction in the movies. Gregory Peck and John Wayne had style, but so, too, did Alec Guiness, whether in the Guiness character assassinating relatives in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* or as a by-the-book captured officer in *Bridge on the River Kwai*. In the most flattering sense, Guiness had plenty of style; as do O'Connor and Ellison whose signatures, though not overt, are somewhere to be found on every page or in every story.

A look at contrasts and similarities of the two short stories as O'Connor and Ellison developed them might help sharpen the focus on some hazy connections between style, structure and orientation of the writer's work; and

this in turn might help clarify some wispy distinctions between professionalism and style.

As *Revelation* begins, an elderly and absurdly 'respectable' Southern farm wife, a covertly bigoted white woman, Mrs. Turpin, maintains her sense of status by shunning the open race hatred of another woman whom she sees as "white trash." About the same time, while waiting for her husband in a doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin exchanges pleasantries with another woman of "lower" class, and then becomes involved in communication with the woman's daughter, a young college student, in a clash of generations. The tone of the author's sympathy and sarcasm toward both Mrs. Turpin and the young girl seems balanced, in tact. The girl, disgusted by the superficial "pleasantries" and the covert racism, finally curses and even bites Mrs. Turpin. Mrs. Turpin, on the surface naively unaware of her own failings and of any role she may have played in the clash, is shocked by the girl's violent behavior.

In the stylistic treatment of Mrs. Turpin and the girl, with both taking on symbolic significance as types, and in the author's orientation, one senses some influence by Faulkner. O'Connor undoubtedly shares Faulkner's disdain of old dogmatic and "virtuous" but hypocritical values; his disdain of the lack of civility and of the crassness of the younger, new generation, the generation reacting to the dying aristocracy with all its 'virtue' and 'honor' and middle-class Southern aristocratic mentality.

In the doctor's office Mrs. Turpin reflects on her life in which, at least until being attacked and cursed by the young girl, everything seems to have been in its proper place. White is right, except for 'white trash', and the righteous not only go to heaven but are first in line. People like that young girl certainly ought to take their place far behind her, Mrs. Turpin decides. And yet the girl, a horrible-looking student with a face "blue with acne," is seen only from the perspective of Mrs. Turpin; and the reader might wonder if the girl is really so ugly and antagonistic or if, perhaps, like Turgenev's Bazarov in the generation clash of *Fathers and Sons*, this seemingly ugly girl is forced into rudeness as the only means of counteracting and dealing with a phony and sickening civility. One can guess that Miss O'Connor saw all of this as

clearly as she saw Faulkner’s, and probably her own, criticisms of the new generation.

We ought to ask how did Miss O’Connor’s own position and orientation toward that new generation, knowingly or unknowingly, affect the *style* of writing in the story. It seems worth emphasizing that what’s relevant is not the author’s outlook but how the author’s outlook affects the story. What’s significant here is not the technique as the professional writer is trained to use action verbs and to write with clarity, but the *style,* including that almost imperceptible touch of sympathy or sprinkling of sarcasm that help to set the tone or mood. Thus from the conflicting perceptions of a complex woman may come a certain vagueness; perhaps, too, a splash of irony that also shades or shapes the style.

In *Revelation*, as with the author’s handling of the girl, the style seems to reveal itself in the author’s unstated yet somehow visible attitude. Perhaps, however, the treatment of the girl is not a matter of style or of the author’s attitude but more or less what the story *had to be*, given the plot, a professional writer, and a story seen from the perspective of a Mrs. Turpin. Even so we can guess that Ralph Ellison, writing in *his* style, might somehow have handled things differently.

As the *King of the Bingo Game* begins, the protagonist, hungry even for peanuts, waits in a theatre for the bingo game to start. He is not so old as Mrs. Turpin who clashed with the young girl, and his clash is not between old and young but between winners and losers; and he reflects on his life—the life of a poor *Car’lina* black—in which, unlike Mrs. Turpin’s ordered view of the world everything seems to him out of place, disordered.

The success lines and the lines of action of the two stories differ. Mrs. Turpin moves along almost in a horizontal line from the time of her certitude until the threatening curse, when the young girl bites her and screams: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog”—and then, soon after, Mrs. Turpin goes almost straight *downhill* in horrifying disillusionment. As she recalls being cursed by the rude girl, we see her crying out to God: “What do you send me a message like that for? . . . How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?”

Compare this to the surrealism and line of action in Ellison's *King of the Bingo Game.* Here the protagonist, at first unlucky, takes faith, wavers, rides his hopes *upward* to initial success as he wins the first part of the bingo game. Then, because he *has* to win, he grows *certain* of his fate. The wheel, which dictates his number, becomes God. Then, by controlling the wheel, *he* becomes God. From the protagonist's view it seems it's working. The success line, the line of hope, rises higher, the action speeding up appropriately (as might be expected of any professional writer as the story reaches its peak points). But, of course, the protagonist in the bingo game can't control the wheel and so he collapses in madness, back to his bad luck.

One need go no further than observe that the protagonist is *unnamed* to see the orientation of Ralph Ellison, author of *The Invisible Man*—an orientation which, applied consistently, seems integral to the style, to what is unique about the writer; if not in awareness, then in priorities.

The Invisible Man, written by Ellison in 1947, has, in retrospect, been called surprising prophetic of the violent sixties and seventies. Prophetic, that is, of the black insurrections and fires that during this period, especially during the Vietnam years, would eventually gut most every major city in America. Yet prophecy, by its most common definition, implies some special, almost mystical talent as if conjuring up a vision or a divining of sorts. And Ellison, to predict what was coming, thought he had only to see what *was*; and that this he could do not *with* a vision but by stripping away the veils—until, from his own perspective, he could see not only the black cores of decaying cities but something disintegrating in the white suburbs (or in the North, where the bingo player goes) until he could see not only the "civil tongues" in the race relations of the North but something smoldering beneath . . . until he could see not only the hopes of the black man but "the hopes shot down."

The style often emerges more clearly as one studies an author's ouvre, the larger body of one's work. Thus in contrast to Flannery O'Connor's story about finding order in visions, *The Invisible Man*, like the *King of the Bingo Game,* is a story about people gone mad with visions: a blindfolded (or curiously educated) black man; a blind

commencement speaker; a one-eyed Jack; a girl (with visions of a giant phallus for every black man) seeking to be raped by a black man; a Ras the Destroyer blind with rage; and a junk man, a dealer in narcotics, selling escapist visions. The novel, while complex and surrealistic, is remarkably clear, seeking to shed light not by prophecy but by cutting through the standard myopia and stripping away or exploding the visions.

And so, suggestive of Ellison's style, the *King of the Bingo Game*, too, goes mad with his vision.

Both Ellison and O'Connor are clearly professional authors, and the lines of action of both stories are clearly consistent with the best advice of the how-to-write writers. Any number of techniques and action lines might be used by the same writer, seemingly the most professional technique being the one that fits the subject best. Yet there is consistency—in the choice or preference of the technique and story structure employed—that reveals the style. Thus it seems not entirely professional *or* accidental that Miss O'Connor should select an action line in which Mrs. Turpin seems to *fall* from the clouds in a clear drop. Nor does it seem solely professional or accidental that Ralph Ellison should write about a protagonist in a bingo game who had to *rise* from the bottom before he could even worry about falling. My own guess is that in both instances the *style* is showing.

Admittedly the very nature of these two stories, of their plots, seems to at least partly dictate the "choice" of techniques employed: the tone, the mood, the selection of point of view, the reader's increased awareness over that of the protagonist, and any other ingredients which combine into the author's style. Yet though such 'dictating' may partly preclude style, it also seems, traveling full circle, that the writer's consistently applied orientation and choices may actually dictate the very plot of the story.

Looking at *Revelation,* it appears natural enough for Miss O'Connor, a Roman Catholic until her death, to have concerned herself with order. If the choice and tendency of ideas remain unaffected by the orientation, the outlook may yet influence the style of writing in *orderly* fashion. Even, less consciously, perhaps, with a guilty self-deprecation translating itself into the story as Miss O'Connor puts some of her own intellectual qualities into that obnoxious young girl; and it would be natural enough,

too, to leave us with an ending that, while slapping 'visions' and dogmatism on the wrist, yet leaves us with the idea of the self-destructive danger of doubt. This is not at all to question the story's brilliance, the author's integrity, or even her right to make a value judgment. Miss O'Connor was too capable and professional a writer to be reduced to simply a propagandist.

Theories don't always come out the same in practice, no matter how consistent the author's attitudes out of print. Bertold Brecht, seeking to put into practice his famous theory of the "alienation effect" in the theatre—so that the viewer might not identify with the protagonist and instead see things from his *own* point of view—rewrote the ending of *Mother Courage* several times to make his heroine less sympathetic and to break the identification, to give the viewer that more objective perspective. Yet *Mother Courage* remains one of the most sympathetic and touching characters in all of modern drama.

Tolstoy, presumably intending to build in Christian propaganda, rewrote segments of Anna Karanina, the adultress, to make her less sympathetic, for moralistic purposes. But the writer in Tolstoy—the genius of Tolstoy, the style of Tolstoy—gave us another kind of Anna Karanina until we are moved to tears by a sense of pathos rather than merely to moral condemnation from a more simplistic sense of evil. Dostoyevsky's Christian moralism and orientation, too, seems completely overshadowed by his genius. Thus, though presumptious to attribute style to orientation, it seems similarly myopic to ignore the orientation.

Looking at the two stories by O'Connor and Ellison there are a number of similarities beyond both characters alternating their moods between blind faith and doubt, between security and insecurity. In both works the high drama occurs internally, not in the physical action but through the minds and ideas of the character. The emphasis is on the internal, with the external action described exclusively from the point of view of each protagonist. Each story, seen from this restricted view, follows Aristotelian tradition with emphasis placed upon the usual ingredients: discovery, recognition, conflict, action.

Each of the two stories by O'Connor and Ellison deals with a protagonist from the South, tells us something of

regional social structures and, beyond that, focuses on circumstances of more universal concern. Each story is tightly written, compact, seemingly without an extraneous word. Each story is dramatic, moving, well-structured with orderliness slid in surreptitiously underneath and with apparent spontaneity on top; though never straying, as might, say, Tolstoy or Stendhal, from the overall dramatic aim. Of course in a short story there is little room for less than essential speculations or for straying from the point. Clearly, much of this is owing not only to the logical dictates, to professionalism, to strong capabilities, to hard work—but also to similar choices of style.

Nonetheless if we were to read the two stories by Ellison and O'Connor without bylines, it'd be clear they came from different writers. The difference is in the style. In each of these two expertly written tales the style, *the way* of writing, fits like a glove over *what it is* that's written about. These are virtuoso performances; each glove seemingly fitting so skin-tight that on reading either story it soon seems doubtful that there could even be a glove, a style. Maybe it's all skill. Or maybe both stories wrote themselves since it seems natural enough that a well-fed white should start out blessed and that a hungry black should start out unlucky.

So how important could the *style* be if the glove is simply tailored to fit the logical dictates? How does the writer *add* his or her own unique contribution of style, that something new and distinct, if he or she can only shape or wrap according to the package, the subject? If style is form—presentation—as distinct from content, then is it simply a presentable wrapping, something that just goes *around* the package, follows the contours of some product or is it perhaps something that merely covers the stor loosely the way a shoe box holds shoes. Or does the style, *itself*, shape the content. Maybe then it's *all* glove. After all, does the analogy really hold up. Normally if you take away a glove you've got a hand. But if you take away the style, what have you got?

Is there no difference between the soap opera of a Tolstoy and the soap opera on daytime TV? What else but form, as distinct from content, distinguishes a pile of bricks from a building.

That the style, as form, is commonly seen in Western culture as more important than the content may be seen in

some articles so well written—in such highly polished form—that we lose sight of the content and sometimes fail to recognize that quite possibly nothing is being said. When applying for a job, for example, the *content* of one's actual experience and capabilities may be less relevant than if the resume was—or was not—typed up in acceptable resume style with the correct font on the proper bond paper. Is this *all* there is to style? Here more likely we have neither loose brick nor structured building but the façade of a building with a stylish paint job. But what seems impressive about O'Connor's and Ellison's stories is that neither is a façade. Each is put together as a well-structured building. Each has solid material, taken from real life beyond the author's subjective world. And yet each reveals the author's unique personal style, the style inherent in the architectural design and structure; not merely in the paint job.

All writers are liars in the sense of not telling the whole truth; they are middlemen, too, taking things in and dishing some of them out. Looking at both O'Connor and Ellison it seems somehow insufficient to give too much emphasis to technical distinctions, particularly so where each style shows itself as more of a piece, as part of the writer's personality itself, as compared to more "developed" styles or to solely putting up a solid professional building with doors and windows and action verbs.

There are numerous instances where brilliant minds have failed to come up with marketable stories because of poor style and technique; as though seeking to build, say, a mansion but without doors and windows; as though without understanding not of the scope or material but of the carpentry involved. By contrast, many clever writers with little to say have developed their own styles and professional techniques, putting doors and windows and chimneys and action verbs (or putting the beginning in the middle to move the action up front) onto cheap shacks and selling them.

Ellison's novel, The Invisible Man, is commonly acknowledged as one of the most important of the mid-century novels. And so it seems almost moot to discuss how fully these authors meet professional requirements, to seek to measure their styles this way. Both authors write with great clarity, with body, with specifics. Both even

write convincingly in colloquial language. Miss O'Connor seems to write more scenically and, though not as heavily gothic as usual, shows greater irony and humor in *Revelation*. In the *King of the Bingo Game* the story suggests more influence by Hemingway—"The smell of the peanuts stabbed him like a knife…." Yet there's still that line to distinguish—between the logical dictates of most any strong writer and between that element of style unique to the particular writer. And it seems also there's something beyond the technique and even beyond the discursive language itself that works to shape the style.

Looking at the commonality of these two writers it seems that both benefit by Aristotelian techniques and that both go beyond this. Perhaps such an orientation translates itself into their styles and into the styles of our best writers. Compared to Plato, Aristotle brings us from the forest to the trees, from the abstract and the general to the tangible and the particular, to the *sensible* world; Aristotle gives us not a world of shadowy images seen as poor imitations of the absolute ideal realities, as Plato would suggest, but from that cold world of untested thought (perhaps of visions) we come to a warmer, more secure world of things we can see, experience, and feel. The protagonists, themselves, may be visionaries, before or after; but with Flannery O'Connor we have a "plastic fern in a gold pot" or a woman with "snuff-stained lips" or a girl's face "blue with acne"; and with Ralph Ellison we sense how "the pomade on the man's hair made him feel faint."

With both authors we have an Aristotelian world which, commonly and professionally, in the theatre and in literature, gives us the more dramatic close-up, a piece of something we might identify with or understand; something we can hang onto at a time when whirl is king, when the epic big picture has turned largely to lies. And so the forest, or the earth, which we can no longer grasp, is no longer the center of the universe. Now it's the individual—zoomed in on in dramatic close-up—who's at the center, and thus we, the observers, can get to the center vicariously.

The writer who has something to say, who is concerned with the "big picture," too, usually is interested in ideas and ideals, symbolic significance beyond the particular unique personal event. The more typical reader

turns his attention to action, and meaningful communication often passes only along a thin slit of the spectrum of noise. Going beyond Aristotle, it seems, too, part of the style of both O'Connor and Ellison to give us not only bite-sized experience but to seek to universalize these experiences; to give us some of the madness and the forest of Plato as well as the control and the trees of Aristotle.

With Miss O'Connor there is at times something almost marvelously out of control; as though she pulled the words from some strange vision herself as her protagonist, her creation, envisions on the march those "battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and leaping like frogs."

And so, commendably, there's something not only of the concrete but of the abstract—a dream made tangible—something of the style, perhaps, that we can't easily put our fingers on—and shouldn't be able to—but that determines what kind of "middle-men" these writers are, what they select and what they use and how they use it and pass it on. Maybe, in looking for examples from O'Connor and Ellison, we can find something of the style of each in the way they bring alive another's vision of madness.

In the *Revelation*:

"A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as 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 leaping like frogs. And bringing up the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself . . . had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . They were marching behind the others…."

And madness comes in the crumbling of a comfortable vision. Mrs. Turpin lost her place in line.

Yet in *King of the Bingo Game:*

"…And now he was down, seeing a foot coming down, crushing his wrist cruelly, down, as he saw the wheel whirling serenely above.

"I can't give it up," he screamed.

Then, quietly, in a confidential tone, “Boys, I really can’t give it up.”

And madness comes as the bingo player *finds* his vision, his place, with his finger on the button; and all he has to do to stay on top is to keep his finger there.

But how long can you keep a finger on the button? And what a *style* of horror.

There is brilliance in both stories, the *styles* seeming to reach beyond the stories into the author’s personalities themselves.

There’s still more to seek out in describing an author’s enigmatic though strangely ubiquitous style. And as the style’s behind the story, no doubt there’s something behind the style; something that went into the makeup of the author. So perhaps, indeed, it’s part of the style itself of an intelligent Southern middle-class white woman to write about blessings and curses. And part of the style of a Southern black, who has traveled North, to write about bad luck and hopes, about visions and hopes shot down.

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