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FLANNERY O'CONNOR

1925-1964

GROWING UP IN SAVANNAH

Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925. She was born at St. Joseph's Hospital in Savannah, Georgia. Her parents were Regina and Edward O'Connor. Flannery had a wealthy cousin named Katie Semmes. Katie's Father was Captain John Flannery. He left Katie one million dollars when he died. Cousin Katie helped Flannery's parents buy a house at 207 Charlton Street on Lafayette Square.

Flannery and her family were Irish Catholic. There were lots of Irish-Catholic families living in her neighborhood. The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist was right across from Flannery's house. Flannery's Catholic faith was very important to her.

Flannery was an only child. She got lots of attention and love from her mother, father, and extended family. Flannery had a unique personality and interesting hobbies. One of her hobbies was raising birds. She taught one of her chickens to walk backward! When she was five years old, a news company filmed Flannery's backward-walking chicken.

Flannery liked to read, write, and draw when she was a girl. She often wrote stories and drew illustrations about a family of ducks that traveled the world. She also wrote funny descriptions of her family members. Not everyone was happy with the way she described them. Her father thought they were wonderful. He had the descriptions printed in a book. Flannery's father loved her very much and enjoyed her stories and drawings.

During play dates, Flannery would make her friends read her stories out loud. She also liked listening to the radio program *Let's Pretend* with her friends and cousins on Saturday mornings. Mostly, Flannery liked to spend time alone reading, writing, and drawing.

Flannery attended private Catholic schools when she lived in Savannah. She could walk to her first school. When she attended school a mile away, her mother drove her in Cousin Katie's electric car.

In 1929, the **stock market** crashed and a period of history called the **Great Depression** began. During the Great Depression many people lost their jobs and their investments. Flannery's father was a real estate agent. Most people could not afford to buy homes and property during the Great Depression. Flannery's father had to find a new way to make money. In 1938, he got a job with the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) in Atlanta. Flannery was thirteen years old. The FHA was one of many federal agencies created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. These agencies are known as "alphabet agencies" because they were called by their initials.



Photograph of a man driving the Edison Electric Illuminating Company Car, 1935. From the Foltz Photography Studio photographs, MS 1360.



Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home in Savannah. Visit www.flanneryoconnorhome.org for more information.

VOCABULARY

Stock market – people can invest in companies on the stock market by buying shares. People buy, trade, and sell these shares on the stock market. Shares go up and down in value.

Great Depression – The Great Depression was a worldwide economic depression that started with the stock market crash in 1929. Lots of people lost their jobs and homes.

LIVING IN MILLEDGEVILLE

For one school year, Flannery lived in Atlanta with her mother and father. Flannery had lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins nearby but she did not like her new school.

While they lived in Atlanta, Flannery's father started to get very sick. He had a disease called **systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)**. Flannery was diagnosed with the same disease as an adult.

Flannery and her mother Regina moved to Milledgeville in the fall of 1940. Flannery's father joined them soon after that. He had gotten too sick to work. On February 1, 1941, Flannery's father died. She was fifteen years old. Flannery and her mother continued to live with family in Milledgeville. Flannery raised birds again and started sewing outfits for them. Flannery also continued to draw and write. She became the art editor for her high school paper.

In 1942, Flannery enrolled at Georgia State College for Women in Milledgeville. While Flannery was in college, the United States was fighting in World War II. The women attending her college helped in the war effort by rationing items and volunteering. Her campus was also a training place for the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). Flannery kept writing and drawing cartoons. She became the art director of her college's newspaper. She was feature editor of the college yearbook. She was also the editor and chief of the college's literary magazine.



Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville. Photo by Sophia Sineath

BECOMING A WRITER

In 1945, Flannery graduated from college. She got a scholarship to go to graduate school at the State University of Iowa. She was accepted into the Iowa Writer's Workshop program. She learned a lot about writing fiction. She also met other writers. She graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts in 1947.

Flannery was accepted into an artists' colony named Yaddo in Saratoga, New York. Yaddo was a place for writers, poets, artists, and musicians. The artists were given a free place to stay while they worked on their art. After leaving Yaddo, Flannery stayed with a family named the Fitzgeralds. The Fitzgeralds lived in Connecticut. Flannery woke up early every day to go to **Mass**. After **Mass**, she wrote for four hours, and then babysat.

In 1950, Flannery started to get sick. She started showing symptoms of **systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)**. Flannery moved back to Milledgeville in 1951. She lived with her mother at Andalusia, their family dairy farm. In 1952 her first novel *Wise Blood* was published.

Flannery started raising birds again. She had geese, ducks, and chickens. Her favorite birds were peafowls. Male peafowl are called peacocks. She also liked to paint and write letters to her friends. Even though she was very sick, Flannery worked hard on her novels and short stories.

Flannery died at Baldwin County Hospital on August 3, 1964. She was thirty-nine years old. Before she died, Flannery published two novels and two collections of short stories. Today, her novels and short stories are very popular.

VOCABULARY

Mass – The Roman Catholic religious ceremony. Members of the Roman Catholic faith take Holy Communion during Mass.

Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) - a disease that makes the immune system attack healthy tissues. It can cause painful problems in the skin, joints, kidneys, brain, and other organs.



FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S BIRDS

Flannery O'Connor loved birds. She started raising chickens as a little girl. When she was five years old, she had a chicken that could walk backward. A news film company heard about the backward-walking chicken and came to Savannah to film it.

As an adult, Flannery liked to raise different kinds of birds. She had chickens, geese, ducks, quail, pheasants, and peacocks. Her favorite birds were peacocks. When she lived on her family's dairy farm in Milledgeville, she had over 40 peacocks!

Flannery could be called an aviculturist. An aviculturist breeds and takes care of birds. Learn more about the birds Flannery loved.

CHICKENS

"I could sew in a fashion and I began to make clothes for chickens. A gray bantam named Colonel Eggbert wore a white piqué coat with a lace collar and two buttons in the back." Flannery O'Connor "Living with a Peacock" *Holiday*, September 1961.

The scientific name of a chicken is *Gallus gallus domesticus*. Chickens are domesticated birds. Domesticated animals are different from wild animals because they are raised by humans. Chickens are raised for their meat and eggs. Male chickens are called roosters. Female chickens are called hens. Southerners sometimes call chickens "yardbirds."

Chickens cannot fly, but they do run and flap their wings. Chickens live together in groups called flocks. Chickens eat small seeds, herbs and leaves, insects and even small mammals.



Photo by Alex Sineath, at the Yellow River Game Ranch

DUCKS

There are wild and domesticated ducks. Domesticated ducks are kept by humans as a hobby or for their meat, eggs, and feathers. Flannery kept mallard ducks. Hunting wild ducks is a popular past time in the United States. The scientific name of a mallard duck is *Anas platyrhynchos*. Baby ducks are called ducklings.

Ducks are aquatic birds. Aquatic birds live on or around water. Ducks dive their heads into the water to search for food. Ducks eat fish, plants, insects, amphibians, and mollusks. Once a year, ducks shed old worn feathers and grow new strong feathers. This process is called molting.

In her high school home economics class, Flannery sewed an entire outfit for a duck. She brought one of her ducks to school to model the outfit. Once, Flannery hid three ducklings in her luggage on a plane ride from Savannah to Connecticut. The ducklings were a gift to her friend's children.



Photo by Alex Sineath, at Noah's Ark Animal Sanctuary

GEESE

There are wild and domesticated geese. Geese are kept by humans as a hobby or for their meat, eggs, and down feathers. The scientific name for domesticated geese is *Anser anser domesticus*. Baby geese are known as goslings. Male geese are called ganders. A group of geese on the ground are called a gaggle. Geese live for a long time compared to other birds. Geese live on average from 20 to 30 years. Archeologists think that geese were kept by Egyptians 4,000 years ago!

Geese can be very aggressive. People have even used them as guard animals. They have very strong wings that they flap loudly when they are upset. They also make a hissing noise to scare other animals.



Photo by Alex Sineath at Exit 98 off I-16

PEAFOWL



Photo by Alex Sineath, at Hollywild Animal Park

“I intend to stand firm and let the peacocks multiply, for I am sure that, in the end, the last word will be theirs.” Flannery O’Connor “Living with a Peacock” *Holiday*, September 1961.

Only male peafowl are actually called peacocks. A female peafowl is called a peahen. Baby peafowl are called peachicks. The scientific name for peafowl is *Pavo Cristatus*. Peafowl usually live around 20 years. They eat insects, plants, and seeds. Peafowl can fly but they spend most of their time on the ground. At night they fly up into trees to roost.

Flannery’s mother Regina did not like that the peafowl ate her flowers! Flannery’s uncle got very upset when the peafowl ate the figs off his fig trees.

Peahens are much smaller than peacocks and are not as colorful. Peacocks are known for the long beautiful feathers covering their tails. Peacocks can display their feathers like a fan. Peacock feathers have a pattern called the eyespot on them. Peacocks have from 100 to 150 individual tail feathers.

A group of peafowl is called a party. Flannery had a very large party of over 40 birds. It probably got very loud at Andalusia. Peafowl make a loud screeching call.

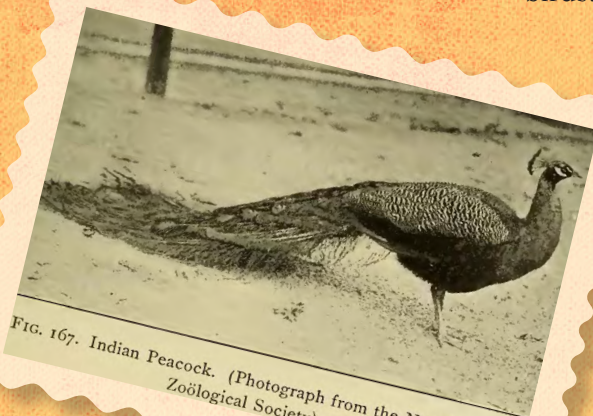


FIG. 167. Indian Peacock. (Photograph from the New York Zoological Society)

FLANNERY'S ROOM

This is a picture of Flannery O'Connor's room at Andalusia. Andalusia is the name of the family dairy farm in Milledgeville. Flannery moved to Andalusia to live with her mother after she was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Andalusia farm is now taken care of by The Flannery O'Connor-Andalusia Foundation. The Foundation keeps Flannery's room looking like it did when she was alive. People who visit Andalusia can see where Flannery wrote for four hours every morning.

What can we learn from looking at Flannery's room? What items in the room tell us about her life? What items in the room tell us about her personality?

What about your room? Are there items in your room that show your personality? Flannery wrote books in her room? What hobbies and activities do you work on in your room? Do you practice a musical instrument? Do you beat high scores on video games? In the blank box, draw a picture of your room. Circle and explain the items that are important to you. If you don't like to draw, you can write a description of your room and the items in it.



Flannery O'Connor's room at Andalusia.
Photo by Sophia Sineath



A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners, intended for drawing or writing a description of the student's room.

THE HABITS OF A SUCCESSFUL WRITER

From the time she was a girl Flannery liked to read and write. She had natural talent as a writer. Even when you have talent, writing is hard work! Flannery had several habits that made her a successful writer.

1. **Read!** As a young girl and adult Flannery was always reading something.
2. **Schedule!** Flannery wrote every morning at the same time.
3. **Share!** Flannery shared her writing with friends and colleagues. She edited her writing based on their advice.
4. **Keep Trying!** It took Flannery lots of tries to get her writing published. She kept trying no matter how many times she was told no.



Flannery O'Connor Room at the Georgia State College & University museum

WHAT DID FLANNERY WRITE?

Wise Blood, 1952
The Violent Bear It Away, 1960
A Good Man Is Hard to Find, 1955
Everything That Rises Must Converge, 1965
The Complete Stories, 1971

WHAT DID FLANNERY READ?

Here are some of the books Flannery read as a young woman.

Little Men by Louise May Alcott
In her copy of *Little Men*, Flannery wrote "First Rate. Splendid."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.
Flannery did not like this book. She thought it was too scary. Inside her copy, Flannery wrote "Awful. I wouldn't read this book."

The Book of Knowledge Children's Encyclopedia
Flannery loved to explore a set of Children's Encyclopedias called *The Book of Knowledge*. In a letter to one of her friends Flannery said "The only good things I read when I was a child were the Greek and Roman myths which I got out of a set of child's encyclopedia called *The Book of Knowledge*."
Letter to Betty Hester on August 28, 1955. *O'Connor: Collected Works*. Edited by Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Library of America, 1988.

Humorous Tales by Edgar Allen Poe
Flannery's family had a collection of poems and stories written by Edgar Allen Poe. His stories were humorous and dark.



LEARN MORE ABOUT

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Vist Flannery O'Connor's Featured Historical Figure resources on the Georgia Historical Society website www.georgiahistory.com. Click on the LEARN page to find Explore Georgia History. From there you can access all the Featured Historical Figures resources.

BOOKS

- Asals, Frederick. *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007 (2ed.).
Feeley, Kathleen. *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
Gooch, Brad. *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2009.
Gordon, Sarah (et. al.). *A Literary Guide to Flannery O'Connor's Georgia*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

WEBSITES

- Andalusia Farm – Home of Flannery O'Connor: andalusiafarm.org
Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home: flanneryoconnorhome.org
"Flannery O'Connor 1925-1964." New Georgia Encyclopedia: georgiaencyclopedia.org

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