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Study on the Flannery O'Connor's Most Famous Stories

Talwar Ramkrishna Hanumant, Research Scholar, Department of English, SunRise University, Alwar, Rajasthan (India)
Dr. Ashok Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of English, SunRise University, Alwar, Rajasthan (India)
E-mail: krishna1444@gmail.com

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor (March 25, 1925 – August 3, 1964) is uncharacteristic of her age. In writing about the pervasive disbelief in the Christian mysteries during modern times, O'Connor seems better suited to the Middle Ages in her rather old-fashioned and conventional Catholic and Christian conviction that the central issue in human existence is salvation through Christ. Perhaps the recognition that such conviction in the postmodern world is rapidly fading and may soon be lost makes O'Connor's concerns for the spiritual realm, what she called the "added dimension" in her essay entitled "The Church and the Fiction Writer," more attractive for a dubious audience.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor's, Stories, Christian mysteries.

Introduction: The child is a long-standing image in literature, which dates as far back as the Old Testament of the Bible. Children are most often represented in one of three manners in literature: purely good or evil, a combination of both good and evil tendencies, or as ambiguous, or difficult to classify as either good or evil. In her book, Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture, Sociologist Ellen Pifer notes that even in contemporary culture children are presented as either evil or innocent, and are rarely presented as anything in between. Pifer maintains:

Any individual who works with the fiction of Flannery O'Connor for any length of time cannot help but be impressed by the high degree of mastery she displays in her production of what must ultimately be considered a type of religious propaganda. In story after story, she brings her characters to a moment when it is no longer possible for them to continue in their accustomed manner. The proud are repeatedly humbled, the ignorant are repeatedly enlightened, the wise are repeatedly shown that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God," and the materialists are repeatedly forced to recognize that the treasures of this world are theirs to possess for a short time only. Most frequently, as we have seen in the stories, the characters gain their new awareness as a result of having undergone an epiphanal experience.

In many of the stories, the epiphanal moment is accompanied by violence and destruction. In ten of the nineteen stories which appear in her two short-story collections, the death of one or more of the characters is used to produce the epiphany. This reinforces O'Connor's comment, "I'm a born Catholic and death has always been a brother to my imagination. I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in it or in its foreshadowings." In the remaining stories, the character's epiphany is produced by the destruction of a beloved possession or by the rending of an intellectual veil which has protected the character from the knowledge of his true ignorance.

Closely connected with the theme of hubris is the enactment of God's grace (or Christian salvation). In an essay entitled "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," O'Connor states that her stories are about "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" and points out that the most significant part of her stories is the "moment" or "action of grace," when the protagonist is confronted with her own humanity and offered, through an ironic agent of God (an outsider) and, usually through violence, one last chance at salvation. O'Connor's protagonists think so highly of themselves that they are unable to recognize their own fallenness because of Original Sin, so the characters typically are brought to an awareness of their humanity (and their sinfulness) through violent confrontations with outsider figures.

The Geranium

O'Connor's tendency to repeat her basic themes with variations from story to story eliminates the possibility that anyone who is familiar with a number of her works is apt to misread them even though she frequently relies on a rather personal system of symbolism and color imagery to conceal them from the casual reader. That she does so is not unusual given her view of literature.

In "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," she argues "that for the fiction writer himself, symbols are something he uses as a matter of course." She goes on to argue that they have an essential place in the literal level of the story but that they also lead the reader to greater depths of meaning: "The fact that these meanings are there makes the book significant. The reader may not see them but they have their effect on him nonetheless. This is the way the modern novelist sinks, or hides, his theme."

O'Connor's tendency to conceal or "sink" her major themes may, in part, be explained by the attitude which she takes toward her audience. It is this same attitude which may well explain her tendency to deal with grotesque figures. In "The Fiction Writer & His Country," she comments, "The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these distortions appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural." She also suggests that an audience which holds views in harmony with those of the author will not need to be violently awakened, but if the audience does not hold similar views, "you have to make your vision apparent by shock — to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

O'Connor's six earliest stories first appeared in her thesis at the University of Iowa. The most memorable in terms of O'Connor's later themes are "The Geranium," her first published story, and "The Turkey." "The Geranium," an early version of O'Connor's last story, "Judgement Day," deals with the experience of a southerner living in the North. In the story, an old man is treated as an equal by a black man in his apartment building but longs to return home to the South. More modernist in its pessimistic outlook than the later, more characteristic (and religious) O'Connor works, "The Geranium" shows the effects of fading southern idealism and resembles O'Connor's later stories concerned with home and displacement— other central themes of her fiction.

The Turkey

"The Turkey" describes an encounter between a young boy named Ruller and a turkey. Receiving little recognition from home, Ruller manages to capture the turkey, only to be outwitted by a leathery confidence woman, a forerunner of O'Connor's later outsider figures. Thematically, the story concerns the initiation of Ruller into adult consciousness and paves the way for O'Connor's later concern with theological issues. Ruller, who resembles the prophetlike figures of the novels and several stories, blames God for allowing him to catch the turkey and then taking it away from him.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find

The story is about a grandmother, her son named Bailey, Bailey's wife, and the couple's three children, named June Star, John Wesley, and simply 'the baby'. The family are going on holiday to Florida. At the beginning of the story, the grandmother points out to her son that a notorious criminal, known as the Misfit, is on the loose and she doesn't think they should be going on vacation to Florida when the Misfit is rumoured to be heading there.

On their way to their destination, the grandmother tells the children a story of how she was courted by a wealthy man who used to leave her a watermelon every day with his initials, E. A. T., inscribed in it. However, one day a black boy saw the word 'EAT' on the watermelon and ate it. This story amuses the children.

The family then stop off for lunch a barbecue diner, The Tower, run by a man named Red Sammy, who talks to the grandmother about the Misfit. It is Red Sammy who remarks, 'A good man is hard to find', in reference to the dangerous convict on the loose.

Another car approaches them. It contains three men, one of whom the grandmother recognises as the notorious Misfit. He seems familiar to her, as though she has known him for years.

When she blurts out that she recognises him, the Misfit tells them that it would have been better if she hadn't recognised him. He talks to the grandmother while his two accomplices lead Bailey into the woods and shoot him. They then do the same with Bailey's wife and the children. The

grandmother tries to flatter the Misfit into sparing her life, telling him that she knows he's a good man, but to no avail.

A man named Bailey gets his family ready for a vacation to Florida from their home in Georgia. His mother, referred to only as "the grandmother," doesn't want to go to Florida and insists they go to East Tennessee. She brings up a story about an escaped convict known as the Misfit, who is believed to be traveling towards Florida, but the rest of the family ignore her. The grandmother insists on wearing a fine dress on the car trip and sits in the back seat. She claims the dress is in case she dies on the trip, so people will recognize her as a proper Southern lady.

As they travel, the grandmother tells the family about various places in Georgia as they pass them, but her son and his wife and their three kids ignore her. The grandchildren have nothing nice to say about either Georgia or Florida, prompting the grandmother to berate them and exclaim that children used to be more respectful in her time. As they pass a shack, she sees a naked black child and finds the image amusing. She continues to tell them stories as they drive, mentioning an old suitor of hers who went on to own stock in Coca-Cola. The family stops to eat at the Tower Restaurant where the owner, Red Sammy Butts, wins over the grandmother with his charm while simultaneously berating his own wife. The rest of the family, however, does not enjoy the restaurant and finds it very rundown and does not enjoy the meal.

When they resume their trip, the grandmother mistakenly remembers a plantation she wants to see and sends Bailey down the wrong road. The car flips and lands in a ditch. While no one is seriously hurt, the grandmother sees three strange men who witnessed the accident. She recognizes one of them as the Misfit.

The Misfit has his companions take the other family members into the woods to shoot and kill them. The grandmother begs for her life, telling the Misfit that the two of them can pray. She touches his shoulder and tells him he is one of her own children.

The Misfit shoots the grandmother and kills her. His companions return from murdering the rest of the family, but the Misfit feels no joy in what they've done.

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

Another important story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," portrays a drifter named Tom T. Shiftlet, a one-armed man who covets the automobile of a widow named Lucynell Crater and marries her daughter, a deaf-mute, in order to obtain it. He tells the mother that he is a man with "a moral intelligence." Shiftlet, who is searching for some explanation for the mystery of human existence, which he cannot quite comprehend, reveals himself to be just the opposite: one with amoral intelligence. An outsider figure who becomes the story's protagonist, Shiftlet leaves his wife, also named Lucynell, at a roadside restaurant, picks up a hitchhiker, and flies away to Mobile as a thunderstorm approaches. The story's epiphany concerns the irony that Shiftlet considers the hitchhiker a "slime from this earth," when in reality it is Shiftlet who fits this description. In rejecting his wife, he rejects God's grace and, the story suggests, his mother's valuation of Christianity.

The Artificial Nigger

The next major tale, "The Artificial Nigger," is one of O'Connor's most important and complex. It has been subjected to many interpretations, including the suggestion by some critics that it contains no moment of grace on the part of Mr. Head and Nelson, the two main characters. The most Dantesque of all O'Connor stories, "The Artificial Nigger" concerns a journey to the city (hell), where Nelson is to be introduced to his first black person. As O'Connor ridicules the bigotry of the countrified Mr. Head and his grandson, she also moves toward the theological and philosophical. When Nelson gets lost in the black section of Atlanta, he identifies with a big black woman and, comparable to Saint Peter's denial of Christ, Mr. Head denies that he knows him. Nevertheless, they are reunited when they see a statue of an African American, which represents the redemptive quality of suffering and as a result serves to bring about a moment of grace in the racist Mr. Head. The difficulty of this story, other than the possibility that some may

see it as racist itself, is that O'Connor's narrative is so ironic that critics are unsure whether to read the story's epiphany as a serious religious conversion or to assume that Mr. Head is still as arrogant and bigoted as ever. Of all O'Connor's stories—with the possible exceptions of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and "Good Country People"—"The Artificial Nigger" most exemplifies the influence of the humor of the Old Southwest, a tradition that included authors such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson Jones Hooper, and George Washington Harris. In "The Artificial Nigger," the familiar motif of the country bumpkin going to the city, which is prevalent in southwestern humor in particular and folk tradition in general, is used.

Good Country People

"Good Country People," which is frequently anthologized, concerns another major target of O'Connor's satirical fictions: the contemporary intellectual. O'Connor criticizes modern individuals who are educated and who believe that they are capable of achieving their own salvation through the pursuit of human knowledge. Hulga Hopewell, a doctor in philosophy and an atheistic existentialist, resides with her mother, a banal woman who cannot comprehend the complexity of her daughter, because Hulga has a weak heart and has had an accident that caused her to lose one leg. Believing herself to be of superior intellect, Hulga agrees to go on a picnic with a young Bible salesman and country bumpkin named Manley Pointer, hoping that she can seduce him, her intellectual inferior. Ironically, he is a confidence man with a peculiar affection for the grotesque comparable to characters in the humor of the Old Southwest. As he is about to seduce Hulga, he speeds away with her wooden leg and informs her, "I been believing in nothing since I was born," shattering Hulga's illusion that she is sophisticated and intelligent and that her atheism makes her special. As the story ends, Hulga is prepared for a spiritual recognition that her belief system is as weak and hollow as the wooden leg on which she has based her entire existence. Pointer, whose capacity for evil has been underestimated by the logical positivist Mrs. Hopewell but not by her neighbor Mrs. Freeman, crosses "the speckled lake" in an ironic allusion to Christ's walking on water.

Revelation

O'Connor's last three stories, according to most critics, ended her career at the height of her powers. "Revelation," one of the greatest pieces of short fiction in American literature, is O'Connor's most complete statement concerning the plight of the oppressed. Although her fiction often uses outsiders, she seldom directly comments on her sympathies with them, but through Ruby Turpin's confrontation with the fat girl "blue with acne," who is named Mary Grace, O'Connor is able to demonstrate that in God's Kingdom the last shall be first. Mary Grace calls Mrs. Turpin, who prides herself on being an outstanding Christian lady, a "wart hog from hell," a phrase that Mrs. Turpin cannot get out of her mind. Later, Mrs. Turpin goes to "hose down" her hogs, symbols of unclean spirits, and has a vision of the oppressed souls entering heaven ahead of herself and her husband (Claud). Critical disagreement has centered largely on whether Mrs. Turpin is redeemed after her vision or whether she remains the same arrogant, self-righteous, bigoted woman she has been all of her life.

Parker's Back

"Parker's Back" is one of the most mysterious of O'Connor's stories. Obadiah Elihue Parker, a nonbeliever, marries Sarah Ruth, a fundamentalist bent on saving her husband's soul. After a mysterious accident in which he hits a tree, Parker gradually experiences religious conversion and, though tattooed all over the front of his body, is drawn to having a Byzantine tattoo of Christ placed on his back, thinking that his wife will be pleased. She is not, however, accusing him instead of idolatry. In reality, she is the heretic, for she is incapable of recognizing that Christ was both human and divine. Beating welts into her husband's back, Sarah Ruth fails to recognize the mystical connection between the suffering of her husband and that of the crucified Christ. By this point in her career, O'Connor was using unusual symbols to convey her sense of the mystery of God's redemptive power.

Judgement Day

O'Connor's last completed story, "Judgement Day," is a revised version of her first published story, "The Geranium." The central character, a displaced southerner living with his daughter in New York City, wishes to return home to die. Tanner, while an old and somewhat bigoted man, remembers fondly his relationship with a black man and hopes to befriend a black tenant in his daughter's apartment building. This story concerns Tanner's inability to recognize differences in southern and northern attitudes toward race, and, as with earlier O'Connor stories, "home" has more than a literal meaning (a spiritual destiny or heaven). Unlike almost all other O'Connor works, this story portrays racial relations as based on mutual respect. Also, Tanner, while attacked violently by the black tenant, is portrayed as a genuine believer and is sent to his eternal resting place (heaven), the destiny of a Christian. By the end of her life, O'Connor considered a return to a heavenly home much more significant than any other subject.

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