Study on Analysis of Flannery O'Connor's Stories

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Abstract: 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.

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Introduction:

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.

Although O'Connor completed thirty-one short stories and two novels, she is best remembered for nearly a dozen works of short fiction. These major stories may be classified as typical O'Connor short stories for a number of reasons. Each story concerns a proud protagonist, usually a woman, who considers herself beyond reproach and is boastful about her own abilities, her Christian goodness, and her property and possessions. Each central character has hidden fears that are brought to surface through an outsider figure, who serves as a catalyst to initiate a change in the protagonist's perception. O'Connor's primary theme, from her earliest to her last stories, is hubris—that is, overweening pride and arrogance—and the characters' arrogance very often takes on a spiritual dimension.

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 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 first collection of O'Connor's fiction, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, consists mostly of previously published short stories and a short novella, The Displaced Person. The title story, which may be O'Connor's most famous, deals with a Georgia family on its way to Florida for vacation. As the story opens, the main character, the grandmother, tries to persuade her son, Bailey, to go to east Tennessee because she has just read about an escaped convict, The Misfit, who is heading to Florida. The next day, the family, including the nondescript mother, a baby, the other children, John Wesley and June Star, and Pitty Sing, the grandmother's cat, journeys to Florida. They stop at Red Sammy's Famous Barbeque, where the proprietor discusses his views of the changing times, saying "A good man is hard to find" to the grandmother, who has similar views.

The seemingly comic events of the day turn to disaster as the grandmother, upsetting the cat, causes a car wreck, and The Misfit and two men arrive on the scene. The grandmother recognizes The Misfit, and as a result, brings about the death of the entire family. Before she dies, however, the grandmother, who has been portrayed as a self-centered, judgmental, self-righteous, and hypocritical Protestant, sees the humanity of The Misfit and calls him "one of my babies." This section of the story represents what O'Connor calls "the action or moment of grace" in her fiction. Thematically, the story concerns religious hypocrisy, faith and doubt, and social and spiritual arrogance. The Misfit, who strikes comparison with Hazel Motes of Wise Blood (1952), is a "prophet gone wrong" (from "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable"), tormented by doubt over whether Christ was who he said he was.

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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