Some Aspects of the Grotesque in the Short Fiction of Flannery O’Connor

Keywords

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Abstract

Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955) helped to cement her reputation as one of the central figures in mid-century American literature. Essential to this success is O’Connor’s filtering of the American South through her own involute system of Catholic values, which expresses itself through the gothic and grotesque facets of her writing. To fully appreciate the complexity of her approach, we must carefully examine O’Connor’s characters and observe the interplay between their relationship to themselves, to the world around them, and to God. This approach inevitably leads us back to the author herself, and suggests we examine O’Connor’s relationship to her characters in terms of autobiographical expression. In doing so, we find O’Connor self-aware enough to use autobiographical elements in ways that prove misleading to the critic, and ultimately prioritises the morality of her storytelling over all else. Given this, we are forced to look at O’Connor’s use of the grotesque in more broadly symbolic terms and to integrate her technique with the Catholic morality espoused in these stories, as well as recognising her intent to impart this system of morality to her reader through subversive, gothic means.
“Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical”


The function of the grotesque in the short fiction of Flannery O’Connor is often to challenge the preconceptions of both her characters and her readers. This operates on a psychological level of self-perception, and on a societal level, as well as on a broader theological level. Throughout the collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, O’Connor adopts the typical arc of comedy to violently insert grotesquery into the lives of heretofore seemingly well-adjusted characters. In doing so, O’Connor brings these characters to the brink of absolute mental and emotional collapse and, in her eyes, this opens them up to the grace of God. On a meta-level, O’Connor uses the comic arc of her narrative to push her readers along a similar trajectory, to move them from being “all eyes and no understanding” (“The Displaced Person” 205), towards a more Catholic outlook.

Before we look at these mechanics in any great detail, it is helpful to first understand the distinction between physical deformity and spiritual deformity in O’Connor’s work. “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” and “Good Country People” both provide good examples of how these qualities differ and converge. In “The Life You Save” the physical deformity of one-armed drifter Mr. Shiflet immediately suggests him as an intrusive threat to the apparent domestic bliss of Mrs. Crater and her mentally impaired daughter Lucynell. The “crooked cross” (146) Shiflet forms as he lifts his arms readily demonstrates the difference between his grotesque appearance and the idealised image of Christianity. As the story progresses we see that this physical deformity reflects a deeper spiritual deformity in Shiflet’s character. He
presents himself as a benevolent vagabond through “cynical pet phases” (Giannone 56) in order to conceal his underlying materialist desires. Yet further beneath this materialism is a base yearning for spiritual satisfaction, as expressed by Shiftlet’s idealised image of his mother, “a angel of Gawd” [sic] (156). Preston M. Browning, Jr. points out that “Shiftlet is a victim of his own rhetoric. The person he cons most consistently is himself” (60), which for Richard Giannone, “block[s] him from finding the courage to alleviate [his] suffering” (56). Fundamentally, for O’Connor Shiftlet is “of the devil because nothing in him resists the devil” (Habit 367).

While Shiftlet’s outer grotesquery does in fact reflect his inner character, the figures of Mrs. Crater and her daughter show that this physical signposting is not something to be relied upon. While Mrs. Crater’s middle class, WASP appearance initially seems to designate her as the most conventional and moral character in the story, her actions reveal otherwise. Crater attempts to deceive Shiftlet into marrying her daughter in order to have him work on her house; furthermore she is willing to place the vulnerable Lucynell in the hands of an untrustworthy stranger to achieve her selfish goal. Conversely, despite her outwardly grotesque appearance, Lucynell is proven to be an innocent in the true Christian sense. The gas station attendant sees past the grotesque façade and understands that she is the real “angel of Gawd” (154) that Shiftlet desires. However, Shiftlet’s underpinning materialism prevents him from seeing anything but the surface, thus shielding him from his own salvation.

If “The Life You Save” suggests that appearances can be deceiving, “Good Country People” takes that idiom as subject matter. With the story’s central figure of Hulga, O’Connor presents us with a character who seeks to match her internal psychology with the physical grotesqueness that has been imposed on her by an early childhood hunting accident. Hulga “cultivates her ugliness” (Eggenschwiler 53) partly in response to the suffocating “flaccid optimism” (Browning 42) of her mother, and this struggle is summed up in the
designation of Hulga’s name. As we will see, self-christening is a motif in O’Connor’s stories; here Hulga chooses her knowingly unappealing name for the express purpose of distancing herself from her platitudinous birth name, “Joy”. In the denouement of the story, Hulga comes undone when a bible salesman whom she had presumed the picture of innocence and virtue turns out to be exactly the kind of immoral nihilist Hulga aspires to be. That she is shocked by this revelation exposes the depth of Hulga’s self-denial. In the end all she can do is cry out for the help of “a perfect Christian” (“Good Country People” 290), exposing her as the same kind of “pious atheist” (Habit 86) as Wise Blood’s Hazel Motes. For Browning this encounter constitutes “the exposure of a facile, superficial, and finally sentimental nihilism as it meets head-on a nihilism which, while entirely nonintellectual, is nonetheless real and implacable” (51). Hulga’s preoccupation with surface appearance, with seeming has blinded her from the more immediate and threatening reality of being. Her folly is exactly the trap that O’Connor tempts her reader with again and again- to assume one’s superiority on the basis of appearances.

Thus far we have seen O’Connor’s apparent distaste for spiritual grotesquery: hypocrisy, self-denial, and above all the sin of pride (“the worst one”, as she suggests in “The River” [243]). But the purpose of O’Connor’s stories is rarely exclusively punitive. Rather, O’Connor strips away these qualities from her characters in an effort to offer them redemption. Her miniature romance, “The Artificial Nigger” illustrates this well, as the character of Mr. Head embodies all of the undesirable traits mentioned above. The story opens by chronicling Head’s inflated sense of self-worth; his hanging trousers have “an almost noble air” (249), he possesses “strong will and character” (249), and his appearance distinguishes him as “one of the great guides of men” (250). The reader is quickly disabused of this illusion when Head embarks on a day-trip to the city with his nephew, his intent being to teach the young boy a lesson about the evils of urban living. Naturally, Head is revealed to
know as little about city life as his ward, and the two quickly lose their way in the Dantean labyrinth of a city. At a key point Nelson, the nephew, is tricked by Head into thinking he has been abandoned. In his terror Nelson runs into an old woman, injuring her. When Head arrives he is asked if they are related and, though their similar appearance renders this obvious to everyone, he flatly denies it. This denial of his own likeness is in effect a denial of self, evoking Peter’s denial of Christ, and in doing so O’Connor explicitly ties her theological concerns to her psychological concerns.

The couple’s sense of loss moves from the physical world to the spiritual; they are lost to themselves, to each other, and to God. Head begins “to feel the depth of his denial” (266) and, having stripped them of their egotism through despair, O’Connor offers the Heads a moment of spontaneous redemption. The pair come across a lawn jockey and this grotesque caricature of Southern black servitude unites the two in the depth of their ignorance and their “common defeat” (269). With its contorted and weathered features giving it an expression of forced misery rather than the intended joy, this statue suggests for O’Connor “the redemptive quality of the Negro’s suffering for us all” (Habit 78), a symbol that “screams out the tragedy of the South” (Habit 101). This symbolic interpretation lends a crucifix-like quality to the statue and allows it to take on a similar function to the “River of Blood” in “The River” (165), which washes away the many sins of man. That this grotesque symbol has offered redemption to the Heads is illustrated in the closing paragraphs, as they return home and Mr. Head feels “the action of mercy touch him” (269), bringing about a profound spiritual epiphany that is at once within him and yet beyond his full reckoning.

The redemptive quality of the grotesque is again explored in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”, a story which, for O’Connor, “revolves around what is purity” (Habit 117). In the story’s central passage, two teenage girls recount the experience of seeing a hermaphrodite at a freak show for the benefit of their relatively innocent younger cousin. Instead of falling into
the obvious role of grotesque clown, in the child’s naïve mind the hermaphrodite becomes a figure of pathos, humanity, and true Christian charity. In the girls’ story the hermaphrodite preaches that “God made me thisaway” (245), and that one must “make the best of it” (245), which in the child’s mind is transformed into the image of a sermon, whose lesson is “You are God’s temple” (246). The essential idea being challenged here is that if man is made in the image of God, then man is God-like, man is perfect. O’Connor’s story suggests that she believes this to be true, except on a spiritual level rather than a physical one. Giannone points out that “the convent girls equate prettiness with human wholeness, but the double-sexed performer reveals that no physical condition impedes the Spirit’s entry. Abnormality, on the contrary, is the absence of spirit; that is the true grotesque” (79). The physical grotesquery of the hermaphrodite presents us with “a radical deviation from all conventional ideas of beauty that brings the norm itself into question” (Kessler 103). As David Eggenschwiler suggests, this asks us to understand that “although man is a temple of the Holy Ghost, he certainly is grotesque” (21), and to finally “accept man in his fallen state without scorn or arrogance” (22). Ultimately, for O’Connor the purity at the heart of this story is an “acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances” (Habit 124), and this acceptance necessitates a clear understanding of our own inherently grotesque nature.

Given this call for self-evaluation and acceptance of one’s own grotesquery, it is perhaps tempting to infer an element of autobiography in O’Connor’s work. Hulga in “Good Country People” is the most obvious starting point: both Hulga and O’Connor are highly educated women living secluded lives with their mothers due to medical conditions. Even Hulga’s name change uncannily reflects O’Connor’s own change from her Christian name “Mary”, to her middle-name, “Flannery”. This motif of finding oneself through rechristening crops up repeatedly in A Good Man, be it Hulga-Joy, the child Bevel in “The River”, or the antagonists Manley Pointer and the Misfit (“Good Country People” and “A Good Man is
Hard to Find”, respectively. Moreover, peafowl were a long-term passion of O’Connor’s and feature prominently in both “The Life You Save May Be You Own” and “The Displaced Person”, with characters’ treatment of these animals often reflecting their own moral compasses. In fact, there’s reason to believe that in the latter story Mr. Shortley’s somewhat grotesque habit of eating cigarettes originated from a trick learned by a peachicken of O’Connor’s (Habit 67-68).

However, given O’Connor’s short life and limited published work, it is impossible for these inferences to amount to much more than idle speculation. That elements of her work are self-reflective is something that O’Connor concedes to, but only up to a point. She admits that Hulga is like her, but counters that “So is Nelson [“The Artificial Nigger”], so is Haze, so is Enoch [both Wise Blood]” (Habit 170) and suggests her disposition is “a combination of Nelson’s and Hulga’s” (Habit 101). O’Connor maintains that the writer “distorts herself to make a better story so you can’t judge her by the story” (Habit 158), that “Fiction doesn’t lie, but it can’t tell the whole truth” (Habit 158). Perhaps it is best to follow O’Connor’s advice that one cannot “read the author by the story. You may but you shouldn’t” (Habit 170).

Of course, one feature of O’Connor’s life that leaves an unequivocal mark on her fiction is her devout Catholicism. Ideas of faith, grace, and the redemptive power of the sacraments (particularly penance) are omnipresent in O’Connor’s work, and these elements often fuel the grotesquery that befalls her characters. The story which deals most explicitly with Catholicism is “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”. As Eggenschwiler points out, this story pre-empts some of the above “ingenious attempts to outwit the fiction writer for the sake of critical insight” (20), noting “It is a bit disheartening to sneak around the back of an author’s mind to discover how she really feels about things, only to find her there already, not only aware of what she is doing but totally in control of it” (20). O’Connor is self-aware enough to
make use of autobiographical elements in ways that prove misleading to the myopic critic, while still ensuring her stories retain a great sense of her own peculiar idiosyncrasies.

The reason “A Temple” resonates so closely with O’Connor’s authorial voice is largely due to both the writer and the reader’s identification with the central child character in her role as naïve inquisitor. As we have seen, the child’s innocence transforms the inherently grotesque potential of the hermaphrodite into one of profound spirituality. Edward Kessler notes, “The child’s evolving consciousness mirrors the writer’s own”, in the sense that the story’s moral feels exploratory, rather than strictly didactic. This technique of naïve inquisition through a child surrogate is repeated in “The River”, “The Artificial Nigger” and “A Circle in the Fire”. In all these cases childhood innocence is used to amplify the gothic and grotesque qualities of O’Connor’s writing: in “The River” the pen of pigs, in “The Artificial Nigger” the unknown black “other” and the sprawling cityscape, and in “A Circle” the unknown masculine and poverty-stricken “other”.

There is only one quality as inescapable as Catholicism in O’Connor’s work, and that is the American South. In particular, the social structure of mid-century southern America permeates O’Connor’s work, especially with respect to issues of class and race. “The Displaced Person”, “A Circle in the Fire”, “The River”, and “Good Country People” all prominently feature various forms of class-based master-servant relationships between two women. In all except “The River”, this consists of a widowed or divorced landowner and the wife of the man she has employed to tend her land. Generally, the narrative follows the perspective of the landowner who observes the habits of the working class to be somehow distasteful or grotesque; in “The Displaced Person” it is Mr. Shortley’s smoking; in “A Circle”, Mrs. Pritchard’s pessimism; and in “Good Country People” the medical maladies of Mrs. Freeman’s daughters. This relationship is then complicated by the entrance of a third, even poorer social group. The grotesqueness of this destitute group is exaggerated still
further, such as Manley Pointer’s apparent pathetic simplicity or Powell’s roving eye, along with a general sense of malnourishment, uncleanliness, and a lack of education. In all these cases the “servant” character sees the immediate threat that this upset of social order poses in a way that the landowner is too naively sympathetic to understand. In “A Circle” and “Good Country People”, this results in an attack on the ruling class. However, in “The Displaced Person”, it is the other classes’ attack on the intruder that becomes their own undoing. Browning observes that the eponymous Polish emigrant “dies because he threatens to subvert the pattern of race relations in a land whose ways he does not understand” (41).

In comparison to Southern class structure, issues of race play a somewhat periphery role in A Good Man. Regarding the black characters in “The Displaced Person”, O’Connor admits that “I can only see them from the outside. I wouldn’t have the courage […] to go inside their heads” (Habit 159). However, in “The Artificial Nigger”, O’Connor finds a way to use this racially limited perspective to her advantage. For Mr. Head and Nelson, blackness represents the absolute limits of their parochial knowledge, the last black person having been run out of their county twelve years ago. For Nelson, this unknown “other” takes on an even deeper significance, with Giannone noting that “Nigger for the boy means the power Mr. Head holds over him that the boy must overcome” (90). Nelson is presented with the chance to do just this when he and his uncle get lost in the black part of town and he must ask a woman for help. Not only is this woman representative of Nelson’s racial ignorance, for the motherless boy she also represents a lost sense of maternity and an outlet for his burgeoning sexuality, as evidenced by his desire to “feel her breath on his face” and “look down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter” (262). According to O’Connor, she “meant for her in an almost physical way to suggest the mystery of existence to him” (Habit 78). This racial tension is also played out in a series of scenes where first Mr. Head humiliates a black waiter in the dining car in front of the white diners, then the Heads are made fun of by the
black woman that catches Nelson’s attention, and finally the two are reunited by the
grotesque smile and immortalised suffering of the lawn jockey. This series of ironic reversals
serves to first expose the couple’s ignorant pride, and then strip them of it. Finally, they are
offered a sense of redemption, through transference of their guilt to a totemic inanimate
object.

As we have seen, issues of empathy are central to O’Connor’s rendering of the
grotesque. In this manner, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” centres on a climactic moment of
absolute compassion. The Grandmother and the Misfit are both spiritual grotesques in their
own capacity. Her inanity matches his insanity, or as Giannone suggests, “Her trite pieties are
as much an evasion of her real self as is the Misfit’s cruelty” (52). And yet, at a moment of
complete hopelessness and despair, the Grandmother sees through the surface cruelty of the
Misfit, to the suffering child underneath. She reaches out to touch him, exclaiming “Why
you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (132). For Browning, the
Grandmother in this moment “recognises briefly and dimly that she and the Misfit are bound
together by the mystery of life and death, a mystery which, until this moment of extremity,
she has been able to ignore” (57). The Misfit recoils “as if a snake had bitten him” (132) and
shoots her dead. The abrupt and grotesque violence of this action leads Giannone to suggest
“The challenge to the reader is to find the secret action that fits the butchering of the Misfit
into the scheme of grace” (52). However, the moment of grace is encapsulated in the
Grandmother’s subtle act of compassion. That her corpse is left “smiling up at the cloudless
sky” (132) brings to mind the grotesque smile of the lawn jockey, and the Grandmother’s
lifeless body takes on a similar symbolic role, with her suffering offering redemption to not
only the Misfit, but all mankind.

Though she disparaged the use of the word (“a word that sounds good in anybody’s
mouth and which no book jacket can do without” [“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in
Southern Fiction” 43]), compassion is the essential counterbalance to O’Connor’s use of the grotesque. She claims that the author of grotesque fiction seeks to connect a point “in the concrete” and another “not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees” (“Some Aspects” 42). This other, invisible, point takes on the form of the unknown in her fiction, whether it be ignorance of other social classes and races, or denial of self and spirituality. To bridge this gap, an act of compassion is essential whether it be in the form of divine grace, or simple human kindness. Ultimately, this requires us to first recognise and then excise the spiritual grotesquery within ourselves. Like the novelist, O’Connor asks her reader to “descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work” (“Some Aspects” 50) and, through the medium of the inanimate page, offers him salvation in return for his penance.
Works Cited


