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Eudora Welty

Modernity and the Changing American South: Alienation in Selected Fiction by

Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor are two Southern writers who, through their fiction as well as their personal essays, posit themselves both within and beyond the confines of the Southern American cultural milieu. It is crucial to recognize the social context which formed Welty and O'Connor and which emanates from their fiction, without relegating their work to mere social commentary, as it tackles issues that stem beyond their localized geographic landscape. Both authors expressed a sense of trepidation towards the responsibility of reflecting Southern life in their fiction and, as a result, have been criticized for writing in an insular fashion, neglecting the pressing social concerns of the South. Historian Richard H. King rebukes Welty for demonstrating little interest in "the larger cultural, racial, and political themes"¹, an understandable assessment to make, given that much of Welty's work centers on relationships and the subjectivity of the human experience – themes that are more universal than quintessentially Southern in nature. Similarly, Jan Gretlund comments on the tendency of critics to hone in on the theological nature of O'Connor's life and work, rendering it mutually exclusive from sociopolitical criticism: "The sociopolitical subtexts of Flannery O'Connor's short stories are often either not recognized, just ignored, or eclipsed by the powerful, often violent, ever-present and decidedly religious plot text."²

¹ Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980): 8-9.

² Jan Nordby Gretlund, "Architexture in Short Stories by Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty," *The Art of Brevity*, ed. Per Winter, Jakob Lothe, Hans H. Skei, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011): 151.

One of the possible reasons for such a dismissal of sociopolitical issues in the works of O'Connor and Welty lies in the conscious efforts of both authors to preserve their work within the realm of the literary and not to use their fiction as a mouthpiece for political reform. Susan Edmunds, in her essay on racial integration in O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, comments on O'Connor's social awareness as being present, albeit subservient to her theological mission as a Catholic and a writer. Edmunds states that

O'Connor went public with her belief that the Negro should have "his rights." But she also refrained from standing in judgment of the white South and called for charity and forbearance at a time when integrationists across the nation were demanding justice and immediate legal reform. Furthermore, throughout her career, O'Connor flatly refused to use her fiction to promote specific reform agendas, preferring to explore in her writing the abiding mystery of God's creation.³

O'Connor makes her priorities and intentions as a writer apparent, emphasizing the difference between social consciousness and political activism. Similarly, Welty was aware and also highly explicit in regards to this distinction, made evident in her essay entitled "Must the Novelist Crusade?" in which she concisely differentiates between the (good) novelist and the crusader. In her essay, Welty deems those who insist on the fiction writer's obligation to overtly voice his or her political concerns as misguided, stating that people often conflate journalists and speech givers with novelists.⁴ Not only does Welty consider the novelist as separate in his vocation and craft from the political activist, she condemns novelists who utilize their craft to exercise some form of political didacticism, stating that "the zeal to reform, which quite properly inspires the editorial, has never done fiction much good."⁵ In the same sense that O'Connor "does not preach; she tells stories,"⁶ Welty refuses to align her fiction with that of moralizing, political activism.

³ Susan Edmunds, "Through a Glass Darkly: Visions of Integrated Community in Flannery O'Connor's 'Wise Blood,'" *Contemporary Literature* 37.4 (Winter, 1996): 560.

⁴ Eudora Welty, "Must the Novelist Crusade?" *The Eye of the Story* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 147.

⁵ Welty, *The Eye of the Story* 148.

⁶ Thelma Shinn, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," *Contemporary Literature* 9.1 (1968): 65.

However, although both Welty and O'Connor chose not to affiliate their work with that of the artistically stigmatized political "crusader," they both recognized the importance of their sociopolitical climate in that it contributed to their formation as individuals and was subsequently mirrored onto their fiction. In her essay "Place in Fiction," Welty emphasizes the importance of place for a writer and his work, in that "place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view"⁷. Inextricably linking the author to the place from which he writes stems beyond the author's ties to a geographic location; rather, it encompasses the people and events that are connected to that place, recognizing the author as the sum of his experiences.

O'Connor, in her essays, makes often use of the word "bound" when describing the writer's relation to place, indicating that the author's roots are not merely reflected in his writing, but that he is limited by them, stating that the novelist "has to stay within the concrete possibilities of culture. He is bound by his particular past and by those institutions and traditions that this past has left to his society."⁸ O'Connor views the Southern writer in particular as being bound by these limitations, as she regards the "energy of the south"⁹ as being an exceptionally strong force for the Southern writer in the formation of his work. Attempting to ignore or purposefully omit a character's sociocultural background would then be to deny him a formative part of his identity, or in O'Connor's words, "you can't cut characters off from their society and say much about them as individuals."¹⁰

This statement of O'Connor's holds true perhaps more than she herself was willing to admit. O'Connor was adamant and instructive in the way her fiction was to be interpreted, and

⁷ Welty, *The Eye of the Story* 117.

⁸ Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969) 155.

⁹ Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," *Stories and Occasional Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1988) 857.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 104.

the social, political and historical reality of her fiction was often eclipsed by O'Connor herself in favor of her powerful theological vision and willingness to communicate it – though both aspects of her work are equally deserving of attention.

The purpose of this thesis will be to examine Welty and O'Connor in the role of social critic, as their attention to detail and astute observations present in their fiction offer a critical survey of their cultural landscape. In their lifetimes, both writers honed their craft by writing fiction and essays. However, it is also worth noting that Welty and O'Connor branched out of their celebrated field and engaged in other artistic disciplines as well, such as drawing in O'Connor's case, and photography in Welty's. In her years as a student, O'Connor developed a penchant for drawing and cartooning – a craft which was not merely an after-school hobby, but which exhibited much of the sardonic humor and grotesque imagery which would later pervade her stories.¹¹ O'Connor posited campus life and student politics at the center of her cartoons, depicting these issues in the recognizably satiric and ironic light that permeates her fiction. Tom Heintjes, in his piece on O'Connor's cartoon work, stated that “The self-important and pompous were frequent targets in her cartoons, as were crowd-followers and conformists.”¹² O'Connor's years as a burgeoning cartoonist can thus be recognized in that they enriched her craft as a prose writer, allowing her to produce fiction which was vivid and cartoon-like while retaining the same sense of disillusionment and lampooning of the status quo as the cartoons of her college years.

Similarly, Welty's passion for photography also reveals a great deal about her fiction in terms of subject matter, composition and attention to detail. Danièle Pitavy-Souques, in her piece on Welty's photographic and literary work, describes Welty's experience with the New

¹¹ A collection of Flannery O'Connor's cartoons was published in 2012 by the Fantagraphics publishing house.

¹² Tom Heintjes, “Flannery O'Connor: Cartoonist,” *Hogan's Alley*, June 27, 2014 <<http://cartoonician.com/flannery-oconnor-cartoonist/>> 14 May 2015.

York art scene, which opened her up to the rising popularity of new artistic trends and mediums: “her appreciation of the new experimental trends in the more popular art of photography, an art whose official and private developments as a recorder of people, landscapes, and events had flowered brilliantly in America since the end of the nineteenth century.”¹³ Welty’s own photographic work was by no means, especially in the 1930s, de rigueur. In choosing African Americans as the subjects of her work, Welty did not capture reality as most white Southerners experienced it, but instead reminded them of a reality that they had perhaps suppressed or ignored. Pitavy-Souques addresses Welty’s desire to manipulate and subvert traditional social roles by giving a voice to those otherwise ignored: “Her aim, it seems now, was to make the invisible visible, to bring front stage those who had been taken for granted as part of the Southern background for a century, and thus to give the African American community its rightful identity on the Southern scene.”¹⁴ Negating the concept of the outsider and challenging traditional notions of Southern identity by including those who have been traditionally defined by their incompatibility with the Southern community, is something which dominates Welty’s photography and fiction alike. Both Welty and O’Connor thus harboured a hyper-awareness of their cultural climate, one which was visually exhibited in their artistic endeavors and which would later be translated into the form of fiction, where their artistic eye and literary flair would merge.

As mentioned above, Welty’s apprehension towards her identity as a prototypical Southern writer can be accounted for due to her dissatisfaction with the exclusionary and segregating social practices of the South, where the white majority’s definition of Southernness differed from Welty’s own. O’Connor was also reacting to a clash of values, as the South as she had known it was undergoing change, causing her to question the validity of

¹³ Danièle Pitavy-Souques, “The Fictional Eye’: Eudora Welty’s Retranslation of the South,” *South Atlantic Review* 65.4 (2000): 91.

¹⁴ Pitavy-Souques 99.

characterizations of the “South” and the “Southern writer.” Nicholas Crawford identifies the social landscape of the South in the 1950s in that “Flannery O'Connor's South was a world on the edge of transition. O'Connor wrote at a time of cultural crisis. The civil rights movement loomed large and many of the behavioral codes of the South were being challenged from within and without.”¹⁵ Welty was perhaps even more aware of the effects of this transition, as being sixteen years O'Connor's senior, Welty had witnessed the devastating socioeconomic impact of the Great Depression as well as the economic boom and social mobility that arose out of America's victory in the Second World War. O'Connor's assertion that “the South is struggling to retain her identity against great odds”¹⁶ paints a picture of the South that is actively trying to isolate itself from the rest of the country and uphold its traditions in the face of looming changes such as civil reform and cultural homogenization. O'Connor and Welty's fiction thus engages with the typically “Southern” qualities that find themselves under threat and the reactionary efforts of locals to uphold these values in the face of social and political change.

One of the goals of this thesis, and the focus of the following two chapters, will be to examine the South through selected works of Welty and O'Connor as actively alienating racial and ethnic minorities in an effort to protect and preserve its values and traditions; as well as observing how the two writers approach the age of modernity as facilitating the erosion of said traditions. Chapter 2 will explore the South's alienating tendency towards those deemed as “other,” and how this practice is presented, parodied, and subverted in selected fiction by the two authors. The first part of the chapter focuses primarily on O'Connor's “The Displaced Person” and Welty's “June Recital,” both of which feature close-knit Southern communities infiltrated by a foreigner. These two stories offer a sardonic

¹⁵ Nicholas Crawford, “An Africanist Impasse: Race, Return, and Revelation in the Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor,” *South Atlantic Review* 68.2 (2003): 9.

¹⁶ O'Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 861.

portrayal of Southern xenophobia, exploring the community's adherence to stereotypes and proclivity towards gossip, as members of the community intentionally and unabashedly alienate those who they perceive to be outsiders. The practices of stereotyping, gossiping and storytelling will then be analyzed as reflecting a general social anxiety where outsiders are feared for their power to disrupt and delineate local traditions and practices. Othering is thus viewed as a control mechanism, allowing the community to maintain its rigid hierarchical structure via social persecution.

The second part of the chapter will focus on African Americans as the targets of sociopolitical othering. Both "The Displaced Person" and "June Recital" treat their European outsiders as being subversive to their system of beliefs, especially so when they refuse to acknowledge and support the racial hierarchy so long engrained in Southern tradition. Throughout the works of O'Connor and Welty, the white American South is often observed in its treatment of the African American people – both in historic and contemporized terms. The South is described as being at once haunted and plagued by a sordid history of maltreatment against African Americans and as being willfully isolated from them in the present – both physically by way of segregation, and psychologically in their refusal to recognize them as fellow humans and countrymen. This section of the thesis will focus primarily on Welty's "A Worn Path" and O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger," and how both stories tackle the issues of objectification and othering, as the stories' black characters are defined and perceived by the white community based on falsities and misguided constructs. O'Connor and Welty both expose and subvert these racist stereotypes by giving their black characters a voice and identity that challenges the white community's assumptions and expectations. Furthermore, this section will look at Susan Edmund's essay on racial integration in O'Connor's work as it tackles the reality of miscegenation in the American South and how the presence of a mixed

race population problematizes the demarcation between black and white, thus destabilizing the race-centred hierarchy.

The changing racial makeup of the population signifies the ushering in of a new age, one which would pose as a threat to the traditional values of the South. The last part of this chapter addresses such changes, as identified by Charles P. Roland in his assessment of the South's incipient reinvention after the Civil War: "Their New South was a South said to be refashioned in the likeness of the victorious North: a South of industry, commerce, and hustle."¹⁷ O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Welty's "Livvie" consider how the post-war economic boom affected the African-American population, exploring consumer culture as a system which is by definition inclusive and undiscerning, even to a historically disenfranchised people.

The aim of the following chapter will be to address the heightened validity of Roland's statement as it applies to 20th century America, where capitalism was acknowledged not only as an economic system but as an embraced ideology – one that would compromise the long-engrained religious values of the South. The first section of Chapter 3 will focus on O'Connor's assessment of the modern age of individualism and consumerism as functioning in direct opposition to the Christian faith, resulting in what she dubs as a society that is "Christ haunted" – that is, a world where Christianity is present, albeit as a vacuous shell of its former self, rendering people alienated from God and their own spirituality. What O'Connor and Welty touch upon in their fiction is not only man's spiritual alienation in the age of modernity, but the role of consumerism as supplanting spirituality as the predominant ideology of the era. This chapter will examine a selection of short stories by Welty, primarily "Death of a Traveling Salesman" and "Petrified Man" and O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, as

¹⁷ Charles P. Roland, "The Ever-Vanishing South," *The Journal of Southern History* 48.1 (1982): 4.

attesting to the rise of consumerism in the 20th century and the social as well as spiritual implications of this paradigm shift. Baudrillard's seminal work *The Consumer Society* will serve as the primary theoretical frame of reference for this chapter, as Baudrillard's intentional conflation of religion and consumerism reinforces the notion of capitalism as the new, de facto religion of America, including its Southern states. The chapter will observe O'Connor and Welty's characters in their religious adherence to consumerism as well as their subsequent commodification of religion, as capitalism does not simply eclipse Christianity but rather exploits it for its profit potential. O'Connor and Welty's fiction thus traces the South's collective adoption of capitalism as a stand-in form of spirituality, where Protestantism and its socially accepted denominations function more as a hallmark of Southern identity, enforced by locals as a means of readily identifying and excluding outsiders. Both consumerism and religion are thus exposed as systems which do not only facilitate social and spiritual alienation, but which are innately premised on exclusivity. Focusing primarily on O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Welty's "June Recital," this section follows the characters of Welty and O'Connor's fiction as they express feelings of suspicion and mistrust towards their fellow citizens, rendering them alienated both by their faith and culture.

The aim of Chapter 4 shall be to analyze Welty and O'Connor's usage of alienation as both a consequence of socially divisive practices and as an intentional literary device. The chapter will observe certain distancing narrative strategies, as O'Connor and Welty's characters are often described as experiencing projections of reality by way of mirrors, telescopes and character doubling. The usage of alienation will be observed in its function as a polarizing strategy: on the one hand, certain characters are alienated to the extent that they are out of touch with reality, relegated to a fantasy world, such as the narrators in Welty's "June Recital" and "Piece of News"; on the other hand, this alienating technique is also

employed by Welty and O'Connor as a means of providing clarity and perspective for their characters and readers alike.

The final portion of this chapter will examine Welty and O'Connor's dissatisfaction with modernity as an alienating culture in its celebration of superficiality and appearances, necessitating the need to look beyond surface reality. Both authors admonish complacency and the blind acceptance of the status quo, calling for the subversion of these values by way of negation, destruction, and violence. O'Connor's protagonist in *Wise Blood* can thus be considered a proponent for the art of negation, as he blasphemes, denounces, destroys and murders his way through the novel, in the same way that Miss Eckhart of "June Recital" inflicts destruction upon her community both socially, in her refusal to adopt the town's traditions, and literally when she sets fire to her house. The two authors thus react to the pervasive state of individual and social alienation as spurred by modernity, by exposing what they perceive to be faulty social structures through subversion, destruction and violence.

Apart from admonishing passivity and complacency, O'Connor and Welty are also critical of the modern age in its overreliance on and faith in empirical knowledge. The two writers thus centre much of their work on the concept of mystery – O'Connor on the mystery of God's grace and Welty on the more existential mystery of human existence. Whether it is in theological or existential terms, the fiction of both authors exhibits an awareness that human beings are limited in their understanding of the universe. It is through their deliberate use of distancing and alienating techniques that Welty and O'Connor make the reader aware of these limitations, as through the satirical treatment of their characters, they display the folly of man's faith in his own (imperfect) knowledge. What is more, Welty and O'Connor observe modernity and the rise of capitalism in America as facilitating man's alienation from himself, his community and God, deploring consumerism for promoting a culture of superficiality and

unwarranted entitlement. Alienation thus percolates throughout the fiction of Welty and O'Connor in the form of narrative strategy and motif, and is also explored by both authors as a polarizing state of being in the age of modernity in a Southern as well as broader American context.

Welty and O'Connor explore the universal theme of alienation as symptomatic of modern man's existential plight, and as social critics they examine alienation on a cultural level, observing a region that strives to isolate and distinguish itself from the rest of the nation. Their fiction maps, questions and re-examines static definitions of the South, negotiating the region's traditional and rigid values with the changing sociopolitical landscape, painting a portrait of the South that prides itself on its absolute distinctiveness despite evidence of cultural homogenization. Welty and O'Connor thus contest the notion of the South as an ideological stronghold in the 20th century, as the reality of shifting social and racially-determined structures, industrialization and commercialization impede on the agrarian, religious and socially fixed values of Southern communities.

The two writers thus challenge the very definition of the "Southern writer," in that their literary endeavours tackle concerns of a universal nature that extend beyond specifically "Southern" issues, allotting them a literary relevance that surpasses that of local colour. However, in doing so, they do not avoid or neglect local and regional issues, but rather employ an investigative eye, refusing to accept ready-made, traditional definitions of Southernness, choosing instead to re-contextualize the South in the face of modernity.

Chapter 2: An Alienating South: Ethnic and Racial Othering

As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis, both Welty and O'Connor spoke of a certain "energy of the South" or Southern distinctiveness which would set the region apart from the rest of the nation. This chapter shall observe how the insular tendencies of the South operate as a means of preserving Southern culture, focusing on Welty and O'Connor's depiction of Southern communities in terms of their hostility towards outsiders. The scope of the word outsider will serve as an umbrella term for ethnic and racial minorities alike, as both communities face rejection and exclusion by their host towns. The aim of the chapter will be to examine the function of the alienating practices of stereotyping, gossiping and physical and social exclusion as power strategies meant to retain and reaffirm the community's hierarchical social system. Furthermore, the chapter will analyze how Welty and O'Connor subvert the definition of the outsider by dismantling stereotypes and power relations, thereby challenging the South's cultural cachet.

The first section of the chapter shall focus on Welty's "June Recital" and O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" and the treatment of foreign internationals as pitted against the values and customs of small-town Southern communities. Critic Lewis A. Lawson characterizes the South as retaining a "provincial, insular, conservative culture"¹⁸ – an assessment which O'Connor echoes in her essay, stating that "the South is traditionally hostile to outsiders."¹⁹ This is particularly so, not only as it pertains to American outsiders in the South (O'Connor alludes to outsiders from Chicago and New Jersey, for example), but in relation to immigrants in the United States. Charles Roland ascribes the South's closed-off nature to its lack of ethnic

¹⁸ Lewis A. Lawson, "The Grotesque in Recent Southern Fiction," *Patterns of Commitment in American Literature*, ed. by Marston LaFrance (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967) 175.

¹⁹ O'Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 856.

diversity, observing that “Having received little of the vast stream of European immigration that poured into the country during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the present century, the South lacks the so-called ‘ethnic mix’ that makes up the rest of the nation.”²⁰ At any rate, outsiders from Chicago and Germany alike are unequivocally refused total acceptance from the Southern communities they inhabit as

The outsider never truly belongs to the place he has come to live. He or she is not a “native,” and although such a person may have been born only a few miles down the road from a community or family in question, there is a cultural gulf that cannot be crossed by years of residence or even by marriage.²¹

This cultural gulf is central to both “The Displaced Person” and “June Recital,” where the small-town and small-minded characters of rural Georgia and the fictional Morgana, Mississippi can be observed in their vehement expulsion of otherness. Firstly, “The Displaced Person” features Mr. Guizac and his family, having immigrated to America from Poland and settling on a farm run by the business-minded Mrs. McIntyre. Before Mr. Guizac is even introduced by name, he is branded by the narrator as the Displaced Person, establishing his outsider status from the onset of his arrival. The fixity of his position as an outsider is made clear by Mrs. McIntyre, whose disavowal of Mr. Guizac is reiterated in that “He doesn't fit in. I have to have somebody who fits in.”²²

The character of Miss Eckhart in Welty's “June Recital” is also the target of the community's xenophobic anxieties, hailing from Germany, she is constantly described by the story's characters in terms of her foreign and peculiar nature, her manners being dubbed as “all very unfamiliar.”²³ What is more, Miss Eckhart is labeled as an outsider to a greater extent than Mr. Guizac, as Mr. Guizac and his family, despite their foreign heritage, comply

²⁰ Roland 17.

²¹ Lucinda H. MacKethan, “To See Things in Their Time: The Act of Focus in Eudora Welty's Fiction,” *American Literature* 50.2 (1978): 260.

²² Flannery O'Connor, “The Displaced Person,” *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (Berkeley: Harcourt, 1977) 138.

²³ Eudora Welty, “June Recital,” *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (Berkeley: Harcourt, 2001) 464.

with the conventional family structure. Miss Eckhart, on the other hand, an unmarried, single woman, disavows her expected position as wife and mother. Bessie Chronaki, in her essay entitled “Welty’s Theory of Place and Human Relationships,” articulates how Welty’s portrayal of the South is one which ostracizes women who neglect their prescribed roles:

The "loner" in Welty's relational-oriented South often appears as a misfit or failure. The metaphor in terms of which the failure of a woman is frequently expressed is that of "the old maid"-the woman not only alone but also alienated because she is alone and, always, somehow, displaced.²⁴

As a German immigrant and old maid, Ms. Eckhart is thus rendered doubly alienated from the town of Morgana.

One of the ways in which the Southern characters in “June Recital” and “The Displaced Person” affirm the otherness of non-locals is through the act of stereotyping. In “The Displaced Person,” the aptly named Mrs. Shortley exhibits her short-sighted nature when referring to the Polish family; she makes sweeping generalizations in her conflation of Poles and Germans, claiming “It ain't a great deal of difference in them two kinds,”²⁵ an ironic statement given that the story takes place after the events of the Second World War. Mrs. Shortley goes on to display her ignorance, asking such questions as “You reckon they'll know what colors even is?”²⁶ and correlating the concepts of foreign with primitive in her assertion that “Over here it's more advanced than where they come from.”²⁷ Similarly, the characters in “June Recital” admonish Ms. Eckhart for her barbaric ways, claiming that she eats pig’s brains, once again reinforcing the stereotype of the primitive and barbaric foreigner.

The fact that this information about Miss Eckhart is not stated explicitly by the narrator but is intentionally mediated through a local townsman (“it was known from Mr.

²⁴ Bessie Chronaki, “Eudora Welty's Theory of Place and Human Relationships,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43.2 (1978): 40.

²⁵ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 140.

²⁶ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 115.

²⁷ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 117.

Wiley Bowles, the grocer²⁸), indicates that the extent of the community's knowledge of its outsiders remains largely in the realm of conjecture, that is, obtained via gossip and storytelling. Just as subjecting non-natives to crude, generalizing stereotypes "reduces them to the status of the other to insure the unity of communal self,"²⁹ storytelling and gossip are also employed as a means of promoting us-versus-them xenophobia. Mrs. Shortley describes the Guizacs not only as being different from Americans, but as posing as a direct threat, in that they "could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place. If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?"³⁰ The community's hostility towards outsiders arises out of the fear of what is perceived to be a threat to the local customs and way of life. However, what the community members are most threatened by is not what they know about the displaced people, but rather what they do not know. The tendency of the community to spread gossip and fabricate stories about outsiders serves as a means of defining what they perceive as unknown and foreign, in that if they can define it, they can also control it.

In Welty's "June Recital," Miss Eckhart is presented as a mysterious character, with little being made explicitly known about her. For this reason, she is made the primary target of the town's gossip in Morgana, as in order to eliminate the threat of the unknown; the town subjects her to their assumptions, thereby familiarizing her. The community muses over matters such as Miss Eckhart's childhood and her love affair with a shoe salesman. They even speculate about the death of her mother:

Then stories began to be told of what Miss Eckhart had really done to her old mother. People said the old mother had been in pain for years, and nobody was told...they say that during the war, when Miss Eckhart lost pupils and they did not have very much to eat, she would give her mother paregoric to make sure she slept all night and not wake

²⁸ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 491.

²⁹ Donaldson 493.

³⁰ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 115.

the street with noise or complaint, for fear still more pupils would be taken away. Some people said Miss Eckhart killed her mother with opium.³¹

The characters in “June Recital” and “The Displaced Person” propel rumours about outsiders which reinforce the community’s xenophobia towards them, solidifying the belief that foreigners are dangerous and violent and thus a physical and ideological threat to the community.

These communities employ objectifying strategies for the purpose of scapegoating outsiders, denigrating them in order to reaffirm the majority’s superior position. Donaldson comments on Miss Eckhart’s role in Morgana, in that her position as a member of the community or even individual is diminished as she is relegated to being a mere character in the stories fabricated about her: “As an outsider, then, Miss Eckhart is regarded as an object-lesson by the community of tellers, and because she becomes the topic of so many stories, her humanity as a subject in her own right is overwhelmed by the layers of tales that envelop her.”³² Similarly, in “The Displaced Person,” Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre call the Guizacs the Gobblehooks behind their backs, symbolically stripping them of their identity by refusing to call them by their proper name.

O’Connor brings the Southern community’s rejection of outsiders full circle in her description of Mr. Guizac’s ultimate demise, which suggests that his death was an intentional act of expulsion from the community and not merely an accident. Mrs. McIntyre recounts how the tractor that Mr. Shortley had left running³³ made its way towards Mr. Guizac, and describes the moment that the bystanders shared in the seconds leading up to Mr. Guizac’s death:

³¹ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 494.

³² Donaldson 493.

³³ Mr. Shortley is described as “having braked it on a slight incline”

Later she remembered [...] that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone.³⁴

O'Connor thus implicates all three characters in his death, serving as a testament to the community's literal and symbolic rejection of Mr. Guizac's otherness. Miss Eckhart in "June Recital" faces a similar fate, as she attempts to burn her house down and is, as a result, deemed insane by the community and taken away to an asylum in Jackson. Donaldson analyzes this resolution as "Such an end confirms the unity of the community—a unity maintained by the diminishment and even expulsion of difference."³⁵ The grim fates of Mr. Guizac and Miss Eckhart thus reaffirm the insular nature of the Southern communities they inhabit, and the inability to break down the metaphorical walls put up by its members.

One of the main points of contention for the town of Morgana and even more so Mrs. McIntyre's farm is the unwillingness of the European outsiders to acknowledge the South's race-centred class structure. In "June Recital," there is frequent mention of the fact that Miss Eckhart did not have a black woman in her employ to cook or clean for her: "she and her mother had no Negro and didn't use Miss Snowdie's."³⁶ This further reaffirms Miss Eckhart's otherness, as she refuses to engage in the standard practices of the community, thereby rejecting their rigid social divide.

Mr. Guizac in "The Displaced Person" also refuses to participate in the community's racial discrimination as he shakes hands with the farm's black workers "like he didn't know the difference, like he might have been as black as them."³⁷ Mr. Guizac's ultimate sin against the community lies in his effort to arrange a marriage between his cousin and one of the farm's black workers in order to rescue her from the detention camp in which she had been

³⁴ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 145.

³⁵ Donaldson 494.

³⁶ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 464.

³⁷ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 123.

for three years, stating that she “no care he black.”³⁸ These circumstances are of no interest to Mrs. McIntyre, whose socially coded disapprobation of interracial marriage eclipses the reality of the war crimes being committed overseas. Mrs. McIntyre’s initial acceptance of Mr. Guizac as a profit-generating employee dissipates as soon as he expresses his disavowal for the South’s racial order, serving as the impetus for her assertion that “he doesn’t fit in” and her subsequent effort to fire him. Mr. Guizac is thus alienated and expelled from the community not only because of his own otherness, but due to his refusal to engage in the South’s long-standing rejection of another alienated community, i.e. the African American population.

The subservient position of the black workers in the “The Displaced Person” is constantly being made apparent in the white characters’ use of the word “nigger” – a term that is derogatory as it is used by whites to establish their own racial superiority, rehashing the doctrine of Antebellum America that blacks are not only inferior to whites, but that they are not fully human, thereby justifying their maltreatment.

This enforcement of racial hierarchy is further explored, contested and subverted in O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* and “The Artificial Nigger” and Welty’s “A Worn Path.” Nicholas Crawford, in his essay on Flannery O’Connor’s treatment of race in “The Artificial Nigger,” aptly identifies the subtext of O’Connor’s short story as that of a “racial and historical anxiety.”³⁹ One can readily identify African Americans as the big other in the story, as the majority of the plot centers on Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson and their preoccupation with African Americans. Prior to making their trip to the big city, which Mr. Head deplors for being “full of niggers,”⁴⁰ he and his grandson bicker over whether or not Nelson has ever

³⁸ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 137.

³⁹ Crawford 7.

⁴⁰ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 61.

seen a person of color and if he would be able to recognize one. The two talk about African Americans as if they were animals in a zoo, with Mr. Head observing that “they rope them off”⁴¹ when observing a black man eating in a closed-off section of the train’s dining car.

Welty’s “A Worn Path” also examines the issue of othering with respect to the African American community, as the story’s protagonist, an elderly African American woman named Phoenix, serves as a receptacle of the white characters’ assumptions of her based on her race. The old woman comes across a hunter on her trek to town, who brazenly subjects her to his own racially biased script: “I know you old colored people! Wouldn’t miss going to town to see Santa Claus!”⁴² What is more, the old woman’s race and class mark her as underprivileged by the story’s white characters: the hunter states that he would give her a dime if he could and the attendant at the doctor’s office assesses Phoenix as being a charity case from the moment she walks in the door – gestures which, according to Elaine Orr, suggest an instinctive conflation between blackness and poverty.⁴³ Phoenix is thus subjected to and defined by racially charged myths and stereotypes, a practice which John Hardy addresses in his essay on black characters in Welty’s fiction: “The habit of mythologizing the lives of Negroes... is one of the best established and most effective methods that the white man has devised for denying them full status in his cultural community.”⁴⁴ White members of the community are thusly presented as alienated from the black population, as the majority of their knowledge of African American culture and people stems from stories generated and kept alive by the white community rather than from actual contact. What is more, this rift

⁴¹ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 64.

⁴² Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 241.

⁴³ Elaine Orr, “Unsettling Every Definition of Otherness: Another Reading of Eudora Welty’s ‘A Worn Path,’” *South Atlantic Review* 57.2 (May, 1992): 67.

⁴⁴ John Edward Hardy, “Eudora Welty’s Negroes,” *Images of the Negro in American Literature*, ed. Seymour Gross and John Edward Hardy (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1966) 226.

between the two communities is kept intentionally intact by the white population as a means of preserving the racial hierarchy, perpetuating this state of mutual alienation.

The white Southern communities presented in O'Connor and Welty's fiction deny the black population their humanity and individuality, as blacks are relegated to amalgamating stereotypes and myths, operating as symbols rather than human beings. Phoenix in "A Worn Path" however, is not merely a passive recipient of these stereotypes and generalizing assumptions, as "her presence challenges that community's 'readings' of her"⁴⁵ in a manner which is subtle and subversive. Instead of directly confronting or correcting the hunter, who claims to know the purpose of the woman's trip, Phoenix manipulates the situation to her advantage by distracting the hunter and picking up a nickel she had seen fall from his pocket. In doing so, Phoenix contests the hunter's assessment of her as a frail, helpless woman, and exposes a side of herself that only the reader is made aware of. Phoenix continues to manipulate the community's readings of her when she stops a woman on the street and asks her to tie her shoelace for her. The woman calls Phoenix "grandma" and ties up her shoelace while Phoenix flatters her for being "a nice lady"⁴⁶ – a seemingly innocuous picture on the surface, although the earlier scene involving Phoenix stealthily picking up the hunter's nickel suggests that she did not genuinely need help tying her shoelace, and instead carefully orchestrated a scenario in which a white woman would bend down on her knees for her. This scene functions as a direct reversal of the image of the African American shoe shiner, down on his knees polishing the white man's shoes. In this moment, Phoenix subverts the historically enforced roles of master and servant, and assumes an unconventional position of power.

⁴⁵ Orr 61.

⁴⁶ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 244.

What is so “challenging” and disruptive about Phoenix’s presence in the story is akin to the presence of Mr. Guizac and Miss Eckhart, in that Phoenix defies the community’s preconceived notions of her and evokes a sense of anxiety in the other characters as she refuses to provide them with the answers they require. Throughout the story, Phoenix deflects questions about herself and her grandson, replying with rhetorical questions or willfully ignoring what is being asked of her. Elaine Orr analyzes Phoenix’s disruption of expected communication practices:

Phoenix refuses to answer in the way that the attendant requires. Even when the nurse, who “knows” Phoenix, enters the story, Phoenix does not comply with the script the nurse supplies. She is still silent, though finally she does “remember” her purpose. Still, the slippage between the nurse’s prescriptive view and Phoenix’s deviant silence provokes us into thought. Such fictional play reevaluates the traditional procedures of communication—here between a white woman and a black woman, where the black participant is expected simply to say “yes”—and releases us from established patterns.⁴⁷

In refusing to provide satisfying answers and perform in an expected manner, Phoenix is engaging in a veiled form of power play between the white characters and herself, challenging their position of authority.

O’Connor similarly addresses the issue of racially charged, discursive power play through the interactions between her black and white characters. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Moats obsessively attempts to engage a black porter on the train, claiming that they are from the same hometown and that he knows him and his family, stating that the porter’s father was dead and that “he got the cholera from a Pig.”⁴⁸ Not only is Haze racist and offensive in his claims, he assumes greater control and authority over the porter’s identity than the porter himself. The porter, however, contests Haze’s efforts to stake claim over his identity, and

⁴⁷ Orr 67.

⁴⁸ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952) 12.

adamantly refuses this misdirected assessment of him. Susan Edmunds comments on the significance of the porter's refusal to participate in this exchange:

A second generation railroad man from Chicago, the porter is free to refuse the mask of subservient acquiescence that Haze fully expects him to display. Dignified and resolute in his dismissal of the life story Haze would assign to him, he has the power and the will to say no to a white man.⁴⁹

Both Phoenix and the porter refuse the scripts that had been given to them by the white community and take steps to reclaim their identity on their own terms.

O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" similarly explores and subverts the racially defined dynamic between the story's black and white characters, challenging the historically and socially set hierarchy premised on black subservience. The racist sentiments of Mr. Head and his grandson are ironically offset by the black characters who turn the tables by subjecting the white characters to an unaccustomed form of objectification and othering: the porter on the train shoos away Mr. Head and Nelson "with an airy wave of the arm as if he were brushing aside flies"⁵⁰ and in the black part of town "Black eyes in black faces were watching them from every direction"⁵¹ – creating a shift of perspective, in which the white characters are positioned as the "others." The role reversal is made apparent, as "the Negroes who were passing, going about their business just as if they had been white, except that most of them stopped and eyed Mr. Head and Nelson."⁵²

The black characters in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and "The Artificial Nigger" as well as Welty's "A Worn Path" thus subvert the practice of racial othering, as they dispel amalgamating stereotypes and generalizations, challenging the backbone of historically established race relations. These works bring Welty's photographs of the black community

⁴⁹ Edmunds 580.

⁵⁰ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 64.

⁵¹ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 67.

⁵² O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 69.

into literary fruition, as, much like Welty's photographic work, they acknowledge African Americans as individuals outside of the white, mythologizing narrative. Just as Welty's photographs shine a light on a community that was, especially in her time, not awarded any substantial recognition or exposure, the fiction of the two writers grants their black characters the space traditionally occupied by whites. Not only do O'Connor and Welty mock the racist tendencies of their provincial, white characters, they reject the objectifying lens through which the African community is traditionally viewed in the South, offering up their black characters as individuals and not merely imposing others.

O'Connor and Welty contest the notions of otherness as adopted by Southern communities, and as caricatured in their fiction, confronting both their white characters and readers with the commonality of the human experience that extends beyond race. This confrontation is made possible in "Artificial Nigger," as Mr. Head and Nelson come face to face with a figurine of a black lawn jockey: "They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat."⁵³ W.F. Monroe analyzes this scene in terms of its historical and Christian implications, treating O'Connor's use of the "artificial nigger" as a multifaceted symbol:

Symbols, with more power and affect than propositions, can often move an audience, readers, people, to feel a shared insufficiency, a common alienation from each other, from God. I am sure that O'Connor wants us, as we imagine the artificial Negro—a modern "cruciform" to be sure—to recognize that we too are implicated in both political and theological Sin.⁵⁴

The black statue and its "wild look of misery"⁵⁵ forces the grandfather and grandson to acknowledge the misery and suffering of the African American people. Their "common

⁵³ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 73.

⁵⁴ W.F. Monroe, "Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Icon: 'The Artificial Nigger,'" *South Central Review* 1.4 (1998): 74.

⁵⁵ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 73.

defeat” thus implicates them in their country’s injustice in the form of slavery in the same way that Christianity implicates all men in original sin. In this brief moment, their alienation from their African American countrymen is dissipated, or in Monroe’s words: “Nelson, too, relinquishes his false ‘dignity’ and incipient racism when he stands with his grandfather before the statue of the suffering Negro. For the misery that they see embodied in the artificial Negro is their own misery, and the face that they see there is a face which they both share.”⁵⁶

A similar form of symbolic racial assimilation takes place in *Wise Blood*, as Hazel Moats peers at a mummified dark-skinned dwarf in a glass case and observes the dwarf and his own reflection simultaneously. Edmunds comments on the profound implications of this scene:

The white male protagonist, Hazel Motes, repeatedly peers into mirrors which defy the divided and divisive social spaces they reflect. In these scenes, yellow or dark faces [...] replace or merge with Haze's own face in the mirror. Within the mirror's supplementary field of vision, O'Connor sets mysterious images of racial [...] mixing which radically reconstruct Haze's notions of family, community, and selfhood.⁵⁷

This gesture of racial unity and integration functions not only on a personal, symbolic level for Hazel Moats, but is rather indicative of a broader social reality wherein the black-white racial divide is complicated due to the emerging presence of an ethnically ambiguous population. Such racial ambiguity permeates O’Connor’s work as the black porter on the train is described as having a “round yellow bald head”⁵⁸, and the mummy in the museum is of “a dried yellow colour.”⁵⁹

This ambiguity is significant in that it threatens the rampant practices of racism and othering, as those who were historically deemed inferior due to their ethnic makeup can no longer be readily identified solely based on skin color. The car salesman’s description of a

⁵⁶ Monroe 8.

⁵⁷ Edmunds 562.

⁵⁸ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 5.

⁵⁹ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 74.

black worker in Detroit who is “almost as light as you or me”⁶⁰ in *Wise Blood* is a sentiment which triggers Nelson’s anxiety in “The Artificial Nigger” when he sees a “coffee-colored” man on the train and does not identify him as being black when prompted by his grandfather, retorting: “‘You said they were black,’ he said in an angry voice. ‘You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don’t tell me right?’”⁶¹ The same fear of destabilized racial othering is also present in “The Displaced Person,” where Mr. Shortley articulates how embedded the us-versus-them mentality is in his value system, stating “if I was going to travel again, it would be to either China or Africa. You go to either of them two places and you can tell right away what the difference is between you and them.”⁶² Mr. Shortley exhibits his dependence on visible racial cues to differentiate himself from those who are ethnically diverse, as he inhabits a world where ethnic communities are segregated and persecuted on the basis of physical race markers.

The flawed nature of Mr. Shortley’s viewpoint, aside from its inherently racist and xenophobic character, is that his iteration of white superiority fails to acknowledge the presence of America’s interracial population, the result of which is a country whose ethnic make-up is no longer easily demarcated in terms of black and white. Susan Edmunds comments on the irony behind the efforts of white racists to preserve racial purity noting that:

During an era in which white supremacists justified Jim Crow on the grounds that strict racial segregation was necessary to prevent widespread miscegenation, O’Connor portrays a world in which African Americans are already visibly related by blood to the white characters who shun them. In this context, the segregated men’s toilet becomes doubly absurd: it excludes a population that has already abandoned the region, and it guards against interracial unions whose prevalence is everywhere in evidence.⁶³

Miscegenation is no longer a threat to white supremacists but a reality, problematizing the segregating practices, which rely on clear racial demarcation. The changing racial makeup of

⁶⁰ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 53.

⁶¹ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 64.

⁶² O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 144.

⁶³ Edmunds 567.

America, including the South, thus poses as a threat to the hierarchical values which are premised on a racially segregated class system, resulting in a nation whose values challenge or conflict with its contemporaneous reality.

Jenn Williamson acknowledges this tension and accounts for the paradigm shift that took place in the South on several fronts after the Civil War and Reconstruction, noting that “the loss—or dramatic alteration—of racial, economic, and political social structures in the South has left behind an ideological framework that contrasts with contemporary life.”⁶⁴ – A sentiment which is affirmed by critic William Van O’Connor, who spoke of the post-Reconstruction South as harboring an ideologically conflicted culture, as “people were living with a code that was no longer applicable, and this meant a detachment from reality and a loss of vitality.”⁶⁵ This anxiety is one which would be carried over by many generations, as much like William O’Connor, Flannery O’Connor was also aware of the identity crisis that the South was experiencing in her time, stating that “The South is struggling mightily to retain her identity against great odds and without knowing always, I believe, quite in what her identity lies.”⁶⁶

Although O’Connor viewed the South as being an ideological stronghold, she also recognized the momentous changes that followed both the Civil War and World Wars and the rise of the entire country’s technocratic and capitalist drive as operating against the traditional, agrarian values of the South. Charles P. Roland questions the South’s ability to retain its culture and identity in light of the aforementioned changes, commenting on the

⁶⁴ Jenn Williamson, “Traumatic Recurrences in White Southern Literature: O’Connor’s ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’ and Welty’s ‘Clytie’” *Women’s Studies* 38.7 (2009): 749.

⁶⁵ William Van O’Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois P, 1962) 6.

⁶⁶ O’Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 861.

“disappearance of regional distinctiveness: the growing resemblance of the region to the rest of the nation: the merging of the South into the American mainstream.”⁶⁷

O’Connor viewed America’s emergence as a capitalist superpower as one of the primary threats to the South’s distinctive identity, citing the financially-driven ethos of the American Dream as permeating the entire nation, including the South: “It is more difficult to reconcile the South’s instinct to preserve her identity with her equal instinct to fall eager victim to every poisonous breath from Hollywood or Madison Avenue.”⁶⁸

It is also necessary to recognize the implications of capitalism’s influence on Southern culture in its contribution to the delineation of traditional social structures. The African American community, who had been historically forced into servitude by the white ruling class, found themselves in a position where the consumerist ideology allowed them a certain mobility that their previously assigned roles as servants or slaves had not. The effect of America’s industrial surge on the African American population can be observed in *Wise Blood*, as the town of Taulkenheim appears to be entirely devoid of black citizens – affirmed by the car salesman who tells Hazel that “All the niggers are living in Detroit now, putting cars together.”⁶⁹ Susan Edmunds alludes to the rapidly changing racial makeup of the South as being partly symptomatic of the country’s economic boom, referring to the “great migration” in direct correlation to the rise of consumer culture, stating: “industrial job openings in the urban North during and after World War I offered African Americans a way to escape the inveterate poverty and racist terrorism of the sharecropping South.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Roland 3.

⁶⁸ O’Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 856.

⁶⁹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 53.

⁷⁰ Edmunds 15.

What is more, O'Connor's grandiose description of the "coffee colored man" on the train in "The Artificial Nigger" reflects the socioeconomic shift of the African American population not only as a part of the industry-centred labour force, but also recognizes the black community as an active part of the consumer class. The man on the train is described as wearing a light suit with a satin tie, a ruby pin and a sapphire ring – items which are meant to exude wealth and a certain social status. The man's apparent loftiness functions in direct contrast to the town's black neighborhood, which is described as shabby and decrepit, marking the neighbourhood in a way that Nelson and Mr. Head are accustomed to, in their conflation of blackness and destitution. Nelson's inability to recognize the man's race can thus be accounted for due to the fact that the "colored man" was not as markedly colored as Nelson had expected, nor did he resemble the stereotype of the underprivileged, poor Negro. The man's mixed skin tone and lofty appearance challenge not only the stereotypes made about the black community, but also problematize the practice of othering, as without obvious markers of race and class difference, the demarcation between "us and them" becomes more and more tenuous.

Eudora Welty also explores the role of capitalism in race-based social mobility in her short story "Livvie," which transposes the financial incentive of the American Dream onto the African American community. The story features the character of Solomon, an African American who is described by the narrator as being dignified "for he was a colored man that owned his land."⁷¹ Similarly to the coffee-colored man on the train in "The Artificial Nigger," Solomon is described as having a majestic and lavish air about him, sleeping on a throne-like bed, and living in a house which is furnished in excess – a testament to his financial prosperity. Daniele Pitavy-Souques comments on Solomon's acquisition of capital in that his wealth grants him the power and authority that colored people had historically been denied,

⁷¹ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 370.

noting that “Solomon thus appears as the man who emulates the white model once he has acquired property.”⁷² Solomon exerts control over his property, his workers and his young wife; though it is evident that he himself is controlled by his obsession with his wealth and property, compulsively clinging to his silver watch until his last few moments on earth. The narrator expresses Solomon’s excessive preoccupation with his own iteration of the American Dream, lamenting:

He had built a lonely house, the way he would make a cage, but it grew to be the same with him as a great monumental pyramid and sometimes in his absorption of getting it erected he was like the builder-slaves of Egypt who forgot or never knew the origin and meaning of the thing to which they gave all their strength of their bodies and used up all their days.⁷³

Solomon’s worker, who his wife Livvie runs into, also proves eager to define himself based on his appearance, giving off the impression of a well-dressed, well-to-do man from the city, aptly introducing himself as “Cash.” Livvie, however, is soon able to place him, as she has the realization that: “Cash was a field hand. He was a transformed field hand. Cash belonged to Solomon. But he stepped out of his overalls into this.”⁷⁴ Here, Welty offers up the sentiment that the capitalist framework provides African Americans with a certain social mobility that was not present in the rigid class system of the Antebellum South.

Both Welty and O’Connor thus exhibit an awareness of the changing social climate in the South sparked by the rise of capitalism in terms of racial othering and discrimination. Although many of their white characters harbour discriminatory and xenophobic sentiments, their efforts to define themselves against their perceived differences from the African American community become problematized: firstly due to the presence of an emerging multiracial population, which destabilizes the polarizing division of black and white, and

⁷² Pitavy-Souques 97.

⁷³ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 386.

⁷⁴ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 384.

secondly due to the economic implication of the black population into the capitalist model. Although this did not by any means generate equality, as segregating practices were still in place in terms of commercial, industrial and residential segregation, it offered up the potential of a certain degree of class fluidity in the sense that (the appearance of) status, class and prestige can be purchased regardless of one's background.

Welty's exploration of the consumerist model in "Livvie" however, also functions as an indictment of the so-called American Dream, as the dying Solomon ponders over the meaning of his obsession with material wealth, accumulation and possession before finally deciding to release himself from his earthly pleasures, letting go of his silver watch before dying. The character of Cash, who by some critics is viewed as Solomon's younger double, reads as a slightly more sinister figure, described as possibly having stolen money from Solomon⁷⁵ and his purportedly romantic gesture at the story's closing comes off as menacing instead, as he "seized her deftly as a long black cat and dragged her hanging by the waist..."⁷⁶ Livvie's treatment in the story by both Solomon and Cash renders her a dehumanized object, taken advantage of by those who have become morally bankrupt in their desire for wealth and success.

The following chapter examines how Welty and O'Connor address the new age of consumerism as promoting a culture of superficiality and excessive individualism, exposing the farcical nature of the American Dream and those who flagrantly endorse it. Furthermore, the chapter shall observe the impact of commercialization on traditional Southern life, and to what extent the provincial, Protestant ethos of the South holds up in the wake of cultural homogenization and an ever-growing capitalist philosophy.

⁷⁵ A speculation made by Livvie regarding his formal attire which he could not have been able to afford himself as a field hand (Welty, 384)

⁷⁶ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 388.

Chapter 3: Commodity Culture and the Americanization of the South

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Flannery O'Connor chided the rise of America as a capitalist superpower for operating in direct opposition to the ideological values of the South. She found the credo of consumer culture to be "poisonous" and corrupting, primarily due to what she perceived as the eradication of spirituality in favour of affluence and hedonism. O'Connor's view of 20th century America was one where spirituality was no longer a vital aspect of daily life, an issue which scholar and writer Ted Spivey recounts in his tête-à-tête with O'Connor, stating "We were friends who both had serious doubts concerning religion itself as a force in the world, one that had largely been put aside by modern humanity."⁷⁷

This sentiment is affirmed in O'Connor's own essay, where she defines religious adherence in the South as a lingering relic of the past rather than a genuine practice, claiming that "the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted."⁷⁸ The term "Christ-haunted" is poignant in that it articulates O'Connor's own critique more astutely than her often tossed about reiterations of Nietzsche's sweeping statement "God is Dead." (Spivey similarly prefers the term "eclipse of God" when discussing the spiritually stilted condition of the modern man.) O'Connor's term "Christ-haunted" is fitting in that it recognizes the impact of Christianity on the formation of American (and to a greater degree Southern) culture, rendering religion present in a historical context though tenuous in contemporary practice – an assessment made explicitly by O'Connor in her essay "Novelist and Believer" where she states "The Judeo-Christian tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties

⁷⁷ Ted Spivey, *Flannery O'Connor: The Woman, the Thinker, the Visionary* (Mercer University Press: Macon, 1995) 17.

⁷⁸ O'Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 861.

which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. It has formed the shape of our secularism; it had formed even the shape of modern atheism.”⁷⁹

Wise Blood operates as the textual embodiment of O’Connor’s notion of a Christ-haunted South, as simply the word “Jesus” percolates throughout the entire novel, from highway billboards that say “Jesus Saves” to the blind preacher who exclaims “You can’t run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact.”⁸⁰ The word “Jesus” is used as a cry for help but also as a curse word, and the existence of Jesus Christ is avowed and disputed in equal measure throughout the book.

The constant repetition and overuse of the word “Jesus” or “Christ” within the text desensitizes the reader to these utterances, rendering them a blasé addition to the contemporary vernacular, stripped of its intended sanctity. This is accounted for in O’Connor’s essay “Novelist and Believer,” as she articulates the concomitant absence and presence of religion in the age of modernity, stating that “We live in an unbelieving age but one which is markedly and lopsidedly spiritual.”⁸¹ Here, O’Connor comments on the current state of Christianity as present in society, albeit as a superficial, vacuous shell of its former self. She defines her contemporary audience in that their “religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental.”⁸²

The decorative role of religion in Southern society is illustrated by Mrs. Shortley in the “Displaced Person,” who assesses the importance of religion in her daily life in that “For people like herself, for people of gumption, it was a social occasion providing the opportunity to sing”⁸³ – relegating religious activity to the status of social custom rather than spiritual

⁷⁹ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 155.

⁸⁰ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 37.

⁸¹ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 159.

⁸² O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 161.

⁸³ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 121.

endeavour. Similarly, Haze in *Wise Blood* prizes his Bible not as something which he engages in or places faith in, but in that “he kept the Bible because it had come from home.”⁸⁴

O’Connor’s portrayal of religion in the 20th century as a watered down, cultural artefact substantiates her definition of modern man as being spiritually alienated from God. O’Connor’s term “Christ-haunted South” thus negotiates the interplay of old and new social structures, as Christianity remains imbedded in the linguistic framework of Southern communities, despite the region’s secularized leanings. The focus of this chapter shall be to examine the relationship between the dissipating role of religion in the South and the rise of consumer culture, in that the latter is perceived by both Welty and O’Connor as a growing ideology – not only in economic terms, but in that in many ways it supplants Christianity as the new religion. The social and spiritual implications of this paradigm shift will be explored in relation to the fiction of both writers, as they posit their characters in a world of excessive individualism, narcissism and commodification, rendering them isolated from God, others, and themselves; as well as from their own traditional, Southern values. This chapter will thereby attest to, on the basis of Baudrillard’s ruminations on capitalism, the ideological amalgamation of the American South with the rest of the nation, as Welty and O’Connor’s Southern characters embrace the consumerist ethos that is not prototypically Southern, but American in nature.

Susan Edmunds sheds light on the success of the capitalist model among certain social groups in the United States in that it offered them the promise of equality and freedom in a pragmatic manner which seemed more readily available and attainable than those of the Church, stating:

⁸⁴ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 17.

the expanding Fordist economy and its accompanying culture of consumption spoke directly to disfranchised Americans' longings for freedom and equality in the early decades of this century. The power of such an address was increased by the failure of the church and democratic state to adequately address such longings themselves.⁸⁵

The validity of this statement can be observed vis-à-vis Welty's "Livvie," as discussed in the previous chapter, in that the perceived freedom of the story's black characters from oppression operates in tandem with their financial independence and consumer power.

Edmunds' statement, however, can be applied in equal measure on a more global level, across all social classes and not only to the country's poor, ethnic population. Jean Baudrillard, in his work *The Consumer Society*, delves into the perceived synonymy between capitalism and liberty as it applies across all racial and ethnic groups: "It is nonetheless true that, from the point of view of the consumer's own satisfaction, there is no basis on which to decide what is 'factitious' and what is not. The enjoyment of TV or of a second home is experienced as 'true' freedom."⁸⁶ Although the capitalist model enforces a very polarizing social hierarchy, each social class is described as perceiving freedom in the form of obtained commodities – the working-class man and the wealthy socialite, though on different spectrums of the capitalist ladder, both share the same consumer ideology which promises freedom in the form of materialism. Whereas religion offers an esoterically defined freedom in the form of spirituality, consumerism offers up an enticing pretence of freedom in the form of purchasable, tangible goods and services, where one's perceived freedom can be measured in commodities.

Baudrillard defines the capitalist model thusly: "Consumption is an active, collective behaviour: it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. It is a whole system of values,

⁸⁵ Edmunds 571.

⁸⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Sage: London, 1998) 81.

with all that expression implies in terms of group integration and social control functions.”⁸⁷ Coupled with his description of enormous, over-stocked supermarkets and department stores, quipping “These are our Valleys of Canaan where, in place of milk and honey, streams of neon flow down over ketchup and plastic,”⁸⁸ consumerism comes to be described not only as the newly instated ideology but as the new predominant religion, as he makes often use of biblical allusions in his explications of commodity culture. In O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, Hazel Moats’ first impression of Taulkenheim after stepping off of the train to a great extent exemplifies Baudrillard’s portrait of a neon Mecca, as he observes his surroundings: “he began to see signs and lights. Peanuts, Western Union, Ajax, Taxi, Hotel, Candy. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically.”⁸⁹

The image of this commercial cityscape is made complete with the novel’s characters, namely Enoch Emery, who very much operates as a product of his society, serving as the poster child of the self-indulgent consumer. His daily activities, which include spying on women by the pool, drinking milkshakes and going to the zoo, are adhered to with a ritualistic diligence. The narrator describes Enoch’s penchant for visiting supermarkets as a part of his daily ritual: “He had a fondness for Supermarkets; it was his custom to spend an hour or so in one every afternoon after he left the city park, browsing around among canned goods and reading cereal stories.”⁹⁰ The supermarket thus serves as an updated library of sorts for Enoch, as the actual library or place of learning is traded in for the market place, and literature is discarded in favour of entertaining advertorials.

Enoch’s ritualistic yet non-religious cycle of daily activities is made complete and satirized by his visit to the museum. He is incapable of pronouncing the word correctly,

⁸⁷ Baudrillard 78.

⁸⁸ Baudrillard 26.

⁸⁹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 20.

⁹⁰ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 97.

reading it as it is graphically engraved on the building (mvsevm) as “Muvseevum,” and shivers after saying it aloud, alluding to the enigmatic nature of the vowel-less, Hebraic word for God- YHW – the pronunciation of which varies, and according to certain adherers of the faith is sacred and thus ineffable. Enoch’s treatment of the museum as sacrosanct continues once he is inside, as he “stood looking down with his neck thrust forward and his hands clutched together”, assuming prayer posture and talking in a “church whisper.”⁹¹ The religious treatment of the secular institution comes full force with Enoch’s ritual of visiting the museum to see a mummified dwarf, recognized by Ronald Emerick in that “Enoch approaches the godlike mummy each day like a worshipper in a grotesque religious rite.”⁹²

Enoch’s misguided and perverse form of spirituality renders him one of O’Connor’s prototypes of the modern and spirituality alienated man, constantly searching for something that he is incapable of attaining or even grasping: “there is another type of modern man who can neither believe nor contain himself in unbelief and who searches desperately, feeling about in all experience for the lost God.”⁹³ The fact that Enoch’s way of life mimics that of religious servitude can then be seen as a subconscious attempt at attaining a level of spirituality, though his faith is comically misplaced in his adherence to self-gratification and consumerism, producing a state of alienation and not the sense of community or belonging that he seeks throughout the novel. Enoch pursues the friendship of Hazel Moats, the attention of a waitress, and a sense of comradeship with a man in a gorilla costume, only to repeatedly face rejection. When Enoch kills the popular gorilla man in a fit of jealousy and assumes his identity, he is not welcomed with the same warmth and friendliness that the man had received, and instead causes those who meet him to run screaming in terror, thereby reaffirming his perpetual alienation from humanity.

⁹¹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 74.

⁹² Ronald Emerick, “Wise Blood: O’Connor’s Romance of Alienation,” *Literature and Belief* 12 (1992): 277.

⁹³ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 159.

A similar fate is experienced by Mrs. McIntyre in O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," who, by virtue of her overtly ceremonious adherence to capitalism, finds herself isolated and alone when her employees leave her and she is forced to sell her livestock due to her dwindling health. Mrs. McIntyre is the widow of a judge whom she had married "because of his money but there had been another reason that she would not admit then, even to herself: she had liked him."⁹⁴ Here, the cliché narrative of a woman marrying for money and not love is mocked in suggesting that it would have been taboo to admit she had married for motives other than financial ones. An account of her late husband's office which is described as being "quiet as a chapel" and with a safe "set like a tabernacle in the center of it" elucidates an explicit conflation of commerce and religiosity, affirmed by Mrs. McIntyre who possesses a shrine-like reverence for this room, as "It was a kind of memorial to him, sacred because he had conducted his business here."⁹⁵

The religious rhetoric applied to matters of business and the idolization of capital is analyzed by Baudrillard in the connection between financial gain and morality and how consumerism is accepted as a form of spirituality in modern society. He states that, within this system, the accumulation of material wealth serves as a barometer of one's adherence to the social and thereby moral code: "This is to some degree what we see among the lower and middle classes, where 'proving oneself by objects'--salvation by consumption --in its endless process of moral demonstration, battles despairingly to attain a status of personal grace, of god-giveness and predestination."⁹⁶ The ideology associated with the accrue-ment of commodities is made evident by Haze in his adherence to car ownership as the ultimate form of righteousness, proclaiming that "nobody with a good car needs to be justified."⁹⁷ He makes

⁹⁴ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 133.

⁹⁵ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 135.

⁹⁶ Baudrillard 60.

⁹⁷ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 85.

a painstaking effort to convince himself throughout the novel that his car *is* a good car and that it will get him “anywhere he wants to go.”⁹⁸

Steve Pinkerton, in his essay on *Wise Blood*, considers the car’s mobility as an indicator of the consumer’s individual liberty, noting that it functions as a literal and metaphorical facilitator of rootlessness:

From a materialist, secular standpoint, this car is all he needs. But it is not difficult to see in this a broader indictment of American society’s lust for mobility and its material stand-ins for a notion of home—all of which can be read anagogically as evidence of the nation’s spiritual homelessness.⁹⁹

This claim also finds its validation in Welty’s “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” as R. J. Bowman, a traveling shoe salesman, is uprooted both physically and socially in that his transient lifestyle renders him isolated from others. As Bowman drives by passersby in his car, he receives “the stares of these distant people, which followed him like a wall, impenetrable, behind which they turned back after he had passed.”¹⁰⁰ The physical distance between Bowman in his car and those outside is manifested in his difficulty to connect with others as well as his own humanity. When his car ends up in a ravine and he is forced to seek help from a farm couple, it becomes clear that after fourteen years as a salesman, he has become entirely consumed by his profession, spewing sales pitches to his uninterested hosts in an effort to break the silence. Unmarried, childless and ill, Bowman is confronted with his own loneliness, but is crippled by his inability to communicate it to others, feeling “ashamed and exhausted”¹⁰¹ in his attempt to form a connection with another human being that extends beyond that of a financial transaction.

⁹⁸ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 96.

⁹⁹ Steve Pinkerton, “Profaning the American Religion: Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*,” *Studies in the Novel* 43:4 (2011): 454.

¹⁰⁰ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 202.

¹⁰¹ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 210.

Bowman's inability to connect with his own humanity can be analyzed in his shame and embarrassment in veering from the consumerist script he had been given. Baudrillard accounts for the rigidity of the capitalist code in that "One of the strongest proofs that the principle and finality of consumption is not enjoyment or pleasure is that that is now something which is forced upon us, something institutionalized, not as a right or a pleasure, but as the duty of the citizen."¹⁰² When Bowman offers to pay the family for their hospitality, they refuse, stating that "We don't take money for such."¹⁰³ The couple's refusal to accept Bowman's money, a denial of Bowman's entire value system premised on a monetary exchange for goods and services, is later rectified by Bowman when he leaves their household in the middle of the night: "On some impulse he put all the money from his billfold under its fluted glass base, almost ostentatiously. Ashamed, shrugging a little, and then shivering, he took his bags and went out."¹⁰⁴ Welty's careful diction indicates that this gesture was not an act of generosity or even charity, but rather a flashy display of Bowman's wealth and perhaps a sense of shame at his unwavering devotion to the capitalist dynamic.

Enoch, who throughout *Wise Blood* acts as an unwitting proponent of consumerism, finds himself in an unusual situation when he challenges his participatory role in the capitalist system, noting that "the first thing he found himself doing that was not normal was saving his pay,"¹⁰⁵ serving as a testament to the notion that consumption is celebrated whereas thriftiness is considered un-American and thereby abnormal. Haze's relationship towards consumption undergoes a more drastic shift, as having lost his car, he no longer clings to material possessions, literally disposing of his wealth instead. When his landlady finds money in his

¹⁰² Baudrillard 80.

¹⁰³ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 212.

¹⁰⁴ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 217.

¹⁰⁵ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 97.

waste basket, he replies with “It was left over. I didn’t need it.”¹⁰⁶ Although in certain specific cultural contexts this response would be perceived as pragmatic and sensible,¹⁰⁷ Haze’s landlady deems his actions insane. Pinkerton goes on to examine Haze’s actions as sinful in that they violate the ideological tenets of capitalism, asserting that “such willful disposal of legal tender is a capital crime in more ways than one, a virtually inexplicable sacrilege against capital itself.”¹⁰⁸

While Pinkerton’s essay details the sacralisation of commerce, it also focuses on the “commercialized sacred”¹⁰⁹ in O’Connor’s fiction, as her depiction of the modern world is one where everything is commoditized, including religion. Not only does Enoch approach secular, capitalist culture with religiosity, he also limits spirituality to a crude form of materialism when he steals the mummified dwarf from the museum, an act which Pinkerton recognizes as being “dictated by the logic of the marketplace, that Hazel’s ‘new jesus’ must be an actual object, obtainable by purchase or theft.”¹¹⁰ When Enoch comes home with the “new jesus,” he places it in the tabernacle-like cupboard he had prepared and waits in anticipation for something “supreme” to happen: “He pictured himself, after it was over, as an entirely new man, with an even better personality than he had now.”¹¹¹ Enoch expects the same instant gratification from the mummified dwarf as he does from all of the other commodities he consumes, and is surprised and angered when his misguided efforts fail to garner any results. Enoch’s folly lies in his application of the consumerist drive of desire and

¹⁰⁶ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 166.

¹⁰⁷ Baudrillard refers to the Australian Sahlin tribe, who, due to their nomadic nature, never amass many possessions and consume everything immediately, circumventing the notion of waste that the capitalist market operates around. (*The Consumer Society*, 67)

¹⁰⁸ Pinkerton 463.

¹⁰⁹ Pinkerton 456.

¹¹⁰ Pinkerton 459.

¹¹¹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 130.

possession to spirituality, as he “strips the mummy of whatever mystery it holds by means of stealing and possessing it.”¹¹²

The figure of Hoover Shoats, who later renames himself as Onnie Jay Holy, serves as the novel’s literal spokesperson for commoditized religion, as he founds his own ministry, The Holy Church of Christ Without Christ – a cheap marketing ploy and offshoot of Haze’s Church Without Christ. Onnie Jay threatens to “run Haze out of business,”¹¹³ treating their ministries as competing businesses rather than religions. Unlike Haze, who does not require monetary payment for membership, insisting that one cannot know the truth for money,¹¹⁴ Onnie Jay Holy’s Church costs one dollar to join, and also garners a significantly larger following due to his ability to mass-market his church to the willing public, who he lures in with vague and empty claims of “unlocking the sweetness inside of them.”¹¹⁵ Onnie Jay Holy is a self-proclaimed “preacher and radio star” and thus highly attuned to the workings of effective marketing, claiming “it don’t make any difference how many Christs you add to the name if you don’t add none to the meaning,”¹¹⁶ negating the importance of substance and content in favour of saleability. Onnie Jay Holy thus exploits religion by using it to appeal to the public’s consumer instinct, as they respond to the contrivance of the transactional exchange.

The efficiency of Onnie Jay Holy’s marketing tactics cater to what O’Connor believes to be modern man’s ultimate form of narcissism. In her essay “Novelist and Believer,” O’Connor assesses the modern non-believer in failing to recognize a greater power than himself, stating “he has become his own ultimate concern.”¹¹⁷ The tendency of modern man

¹¹² Pinkerton 459.

¹¹³ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 121.

¹¹⁴ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 116.

¹¹⁵ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 116.

¹¹⁶ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 119.

¹¹⁷ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 159.

to look inward rather than outward for authority is capitalized on by Onnie Jay Holy, as he tells his audience that “You don’t have to believe nothing you don’t understand and approve of. If you don’t understand it, it ain’t true, and that’s all there is to it.”¹¹⁸ Pinkerton assesses Hoover Shoat’s rhetoric as pandering to the American brand of hyper-individualism, stating that “he highlights the market’s efforts to replace the person of religious faith with a self-sufficient, self-determining subject—one who places his or her faith in the self, or rather in an idea of the self as constructed by advertising and by consumerist ideology more generally.”¹¹⁹ The brand of religion that Onnie Jay Holy is selling is one where the consumer is expected to be served rather than be in servitude to a higher authority, speaking to the capitalist credo of narcissism and entitlement.

Mrs. Flood, Haze’s landlady, is possessed of the same air of self-importance, as she feels that her contribution to the welfare system as a taxpayer warrants her a sense of entitlement: “She felt justified in getting anything at all back that she could, money or anything else, as if she had once owned the earth and had been dispossessed of it.”¹²⁰ Hoover Shoat’s pitch feeds off of this very sense of entitlement that Mrs. Flood assumes she deserves, addressing his audience by reaffirming their right to happiness and “sweetness” (provided that their membership fee is paid). As is the case with Mrs. Flood, the congregation’s entitlement is contingent on the expenditure of capital, as by participating in the capitalist ceremony of exchange, the church members can rightfully lay claim to their reward.

Baudrillard addresses the consumerist tendency of exploiting abstract notions such as love, freedom, or happiness, and reducing them to marketable and purchasable commodities. He comments on the fungibility of happiness within the consumer code, stating:

¹¹⁸ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 115.

¹¹⁹ Pinkerton 457.

¹²⁰ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 162.

It has to be a well-being measurable in terms of objects and signs; it has to be 'comfort.' [...] Happiness as total or inner enjoyment -- that happiness independent of the signs which could manifest it to others and to those around us, the happiness which has no need of evidence -- is therefore excluded from the outset from the consumer ideal in which happiness [...] must, accordingly, always signify with 'regard' to visible criteria.¹²¹

One of the primary sites for exhibiting happiness is identified by Baudrillard as the human body, which is “to be mined in order to extract from it the visible signs of happiness, health, beauty,”¹²² crediting it for being “simply the finest of these psychically possessed, manipulated and consumed objects.”¹²³ The modern conception of the human (primarily female) body as artifice rather than natural form is exploded and mocked by Welty in the short story “Petrified Man,” as the majority of the story’s action takes place in a beauty parlor - a secular temple of beautification.

However, the desired effect of beauty, glamour and youth comes at a price – both financial and physical, as the beauty parlor patrons submit themselves to choking, yanking and frying in the name of narcissism. A striking parallel can be observed between Hazel Motes’ extreme asceticism – putting rocks and glass in his shoes and blinding himself – and the willful acceptance of “beauty is pain” in “Petrified Man”; though Hazel inflicts pain upon himself as a means of transcending his earthly presence, while the beauty parlor patrons endure pain in an attempt to perfect and deify their earthly bodies, reinforcing the notion that “the body has today become an object of salvation. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul.”¹²⁴

Wise Blood’s Lilly Sabbath – the promiscuous daughter of the fake blind preacher – in an attempt to seduce Hazel, offers up her body as the pathway to salvation, cooing “I can save

¹²¹ Baudrillard 49.

¹²² Baudrillard 131.

¹²³ Baudrillard 131.

¹²⁴ Baudrillard 129.

you...I got a church in my heart where Jesus is King.”¹²⁵ It is Leora Watts, however, who poses as the epitome of bodily salvation within the consumer code, as through prostitution she “mines” her body, extracting capital in exchange for her sexuality. Welty’s salon ladies and O’Connor’s prostitute gives rise to Baudrillard’s comments on the cyclical function of the body in the capitalist system, in that the body is at once a commoditized object requiring expenditure, and a profit-generating commodity: “the representation of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object). In both cases, it is important that, far from the body being denied or left out of account, there is deliberate investment in it (in the two senses, economic and psychical, of the term).”¹²⁶ The body is thus relegated to its “use-value”¹²⁷ within the consumer code, a value which defines not only the body but the individual as a whole.

This sentiment is crudely elucidated in “Petriified Man,” when a five-hundred dollar reward for a man wanted for raping four women leads to statements such as “I guess those women didn’t have the faintest notion at the time they’d be worth a hundred an’ twenty-five bucks apiece some day...”¹²⁸ Individual worth can then be calculated like any other commodity according to market value, as is exhibited in the opening scene of *Wise Blood*, when Mrs. Hitchcock is resolved to reading the price tag attached to Haze’s suit: “The suit had cost him \$11.98. She felt that that placed him and looked at his face again as if she were fortified against it now.”¹²⁹ The assessment of substance by way of appearance percolates throughout the novel as people try to “place” Haze, telling him he looks like a preacher and dubbing his hat a “Jesus-seeing hat”¹³⁰, and when he tries to reinvent himself by buying a new hat, he finds that “it looked just as fierce as the other one had.”¹³¹ While Haze’s choice of

¹²⁵ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 91.

¹²⁶ Baudrillard 129.

¹²⁷ Baudrillard 132.

¹²⁸ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 58.

¹²⁹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 5.

¹³⁰ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 45.

¹³¹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 84.

accoutrements seems to dictate and forecast his progression into a preacher figure, many of the other characters' appearances operate as a façade, used to manipulate and deceive those around them: the virginally-named Lilly is in reality the promiscuous daughter of Asa Hawkes – the fake blind man who pretended to blind himself in the name of the Lord; Enoch attempts to shed his own identity by transforming himself with a gorilla suit, and Hoover Shoats plays the character of Onnie Jay Holy, a marketing gimmick in the guise of a preacher. O'Connor thus mocks image-obsessed consumer culture in its over-reliance on external cues, exposing the ease with which people's perceptions can be manipulated. Through their fiction, O'Connor and Welty explore the pitfalls of modernity, as the human body is deified as the ultimate, exploitable commodity. Consumer culture thus relegates human value to market value and people, in turn, market themselves, diminishing their value to that of their appearance.

While O'Connor speaks primarily about the spiritual alienation that is proliferated by image-obsessed consumer culture, Baudrillard comments on the social alienation that is not only present but embedded in the very structure of capitalism. Haze's glorification of his car in that "it ain't been built by a bunch of foreigners or niggers or one-arm men"¹³² serves as a reminder that the capitalist framework is premised on social hierarchy, citing "the need of the inegalitarian social order -- the social structure of privilege."¹³³ These class divisions must continuously be reaffirmed, as the affluence of one social class is contingent on the relative poverty of another. Baudrillard comments on the marketing strategy of tapping into prestige-centred anxiety, stating:

The strategic value of advertising--and also its trick --is precisely this: that it targets everyone in their relation to others, in their hankerings after reified social prestige. It is never addressed to a lone individual, but is aimed at human beings in their differential

¹³² O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 96.

¹³³ Baudrillard 53.

relations and, even when it seems to tap into their `deep' motivations, it always does so in spectacular fashion. That is to say, it always calls in their friends and relations, the group, and society, all hierarchically ordered within the process of reading and interpretation, the process of `setting-off' or `showing-off' [faire-valoir] which it sets in train.¹³⁴

O'Connor portrays the lure of exclusivity in *Wise Blood*, as Haze recounts an episode from his youth when his father took him to a carnival:

There was one tent that cost more money a little off to one side. A dried-up man with a horn voice was barking it. He didn't say what was inside. He said it was so SINSational that it would cost any man that wanted to see it thirty-five cents, and it was so Exclusive, only fifteen could get in at a time.¹³⁵

The appeal here is largely premised on the concept of exclusion, of gaining access to something that others are not entitled to. Onnie Jay Holy's pitch is similarly based on exclusivity, on the promise that the members of his church will be among the elite, claiming that his church is "up-to-date! When you're in this church you can know that there's nothing or nobody ahead of you."¹³⁶ This preoccupation with being up-to-date and ahead of the times can be seen as a by-product of industrialization, as consumers are urged to constantly update and upgrade, lest they become obsolete.

Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person" parrots this notion of obsolescence with respect to religion, claiming that people from Europe "have never advanced or reformed. They got the same religion as a thousand years ago."¹³⁷ The tragic fate and ostracization of Miss Eckhart in Welty's "June Recital" can then also be accounted for due to her adherence to Lutheranism, a "foreign"¹³⁸ religion, as Missy Spights recounts that "if Miss Eckhart had belonged to a church that had ever been heard of, and the ladies would have had something to

¹³⁴ Baudrillard 64.

¹³⁵ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 45.

¹³⁶ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 115-116.

¹³⁷ O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 123.

¹³⁸ Despite the existence of Lutheran churches at the time, The American Lutheran Church was not formed until 1960, 11 years after "June Recital" had been published

invite her long to...”¹³⁹ This religious xenophobia is similarly reflected in *Wise Blood*, as the Southern community exhibits a flagrant distrust towards any foreign or specifically non-Protestant denominations. Haze, for example, is only admitted access to the blind preacher’s house after assuring the landlady that his church is Protestant and not foreign¹⁴⁰ Onnie Jay Holy also makes sure to advertise his church in keeping with Southern tradition, assuring his congregation that “you can rely on it that it’s nothing foreign connected with it.”¹⁴¹ The marketing prompts of superiority and prestige are not exclusive to consumer culture alone, as one’s affiliation with a particular church is not only indicative of his/her social standing, but also serves as grounds for exclusion and othering.

The socially divisive culture of modernity is reprimanded by O’Connor and Welty in that it breeds alienation which is further spurred by jealousy and suspicion. Mrs. Shortley in “The Displaced Person” articulates her suspicion towards Mrs. McInyre, stating that “she had begun to act like somebody who was getting rich secretly”¹⁴², and Mrs. Flood in *Wise Blood* becomes consumed with the notion that she had somehow been cheated by Haze¹⁴³ (an ironic reversal given her plan to commit Haze to an insane asylum and rob him of his pension.) Leota exhibits enviousness of epic proportions in “Petrified Man,” as the story’s most grave injustice, according to Leota, is not the rape of four women, but rather the fact that she was not the one to reap the five-hundred dollar reward. Leota’s pettiness serves as a reflection of a society, which is out of touch and alienated from its own humanity due to an excessive preoccupation with wealth and deification of capital.

The above-cited works of Welty and O’Connor reflect a culture prone to alienating practices, including that of extreme religious conservatism – the nature of which is the

¹³⁹ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 496.

¹⁴⁰ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 80.

¹⁴¹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 115.

¹⁴² O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 124.

¹⁴³ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 176.

byproduct of longstanding racial and ethnic xenophobia, as locals express trepidation towards “foreign religions,” maintaining the notion that certain (domesticated) religions are better than others. What O’Connor elucidates in her fiction and essays is that Southern Protestantism has not lost its integrity due to the presence of foreign spiritual impulses but rather due to the growth of American secular and capitalist culture. The result is a region which is “Christ-haunted,” as remnants of Christianity are present in the people’s vernacular and social customs, though these old traditional structures operate more as an accepted marker of Southern identity than an affirmation of religious sentiment. In their fiction, Welty and O’Connor paint a portrait of a society where spirituality and virtuosity are but purchasable commodities, rendering the Southern communities dictated by the marketplace mentality along with the rest of the nation.

Chapter 4: Alienation, Negation and Destruction

While O'Connor and Welty were highly attuned to the onus of the "Southern writer" to depict Southern life (and as was mentioned in Chapter 1, they acknowledged the importance of place as an inherent and formative component of the fiction writer's craft), both authors maintained that writing about a specific community or society was not to be a limitation but rather a gateway to exploring the human condition. O'Connor articulates this very sentiment in her essay, stating that "The energy of the South is so strong in him (the Southern writer) that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged, and it is when it is a true engagement that its meaning will lead outward to universal human interest."¹⁴⁴

While the previous two chapters delved into the issue of alienation from a predominantly Southern point of view, examining the region's insular nature and desire to isolate itself from the rest of the nation; this chapter shall examine the theme of alienation in broader terms, identifying the issue of existential alienation in modernity, for O'Connor spoke not only of the Southern man's alienation from God, but of the "modern man."

Furthermore, this chapter will consider how O'Connor and Welty entertain the notion that a state of alienation and intentionally imposed distance may facilitate the discovery of certain truths and allow one to gain a greater sense of perspective. What is more, both authors attempt to gain perspective in image-obsessed, modern society by dismantling the superficial trappings of American culture. They do so by constantly questioning the validity of modern values in the form of irony, subversion, negation and destruction. O'Connor and Welty's enigmatic fiction however, does not provide clear-cut answers, but rather forces the reader to come to terms with the mystery of human existence and the limited capacity of the human

¹⁴⁴ O'Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 856-857.

mind – suggesting that the folly of complacency and thoughtlessness is akin to that of placing one’s faith entirely in his own presumed intellect.

Harriet Pollack comments on the use and function of alienation in Welty’s work, citing the influence of photography on her fiction, as her characters are viewed from a distance¹⁴⁵ via an external and detached point of view, and are also described in their mediated participation in reality: the narrator in “A Memory” looks out at the world by making “small frames with her fingers,”¹⁴⁶ mimicking the projection of a camera lens; similarly, Loch in “June Recital” perceives the world as a projection through his telescope, and experiences a sense of delight in being at once removed and included in the experiences of others, as “For while the invaders did not see him, he saw them, both with the naked eye and through his telescope; and each day he kept them to himself, they were his.”¹⁴⁷ O’Connor also makes use of distancing devices in her fiction which can be observed, for example, in her usage of mirrors. There are several instances in *Wise Blood* where Haze views both himself and others through reflections – Leora Watts is projected as a distorted figure in the reflection of a mirror, and Haze’s face merges with others in the reflective glass case in the museum – offering up an alternative or distorted picture of reality.

The distortion motif permeates the works of both authors, with several of Welty’s protagonists living in distorted, alternate realities of their own fabrication, as their imaginations facilitate the creation of a barrier between the physical world and their fantasy world. The narrator in “A Memory” obsesses over an unrequited love of whom she knew virtually nothing about, exhibiting the power of the human imagination as she preoccupies herself with an idea of her love interest that she has concocted in her mind. Her fantasy proves

¹⁴⁵ Harriet Pollack, “Photographic Convention and Story Composition: Eudora Welty’s Uses of Detail, Plot, Genre, and Expectation from ‘A Worn Path’ through ‘The Bride of the Innisfallen,’” *South Central Review* 14.2 (1997): 22.

¹⁴⁶ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 133.

¹⁴⁷ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 178.

to be so potent that it impedes on her perception of reality, blurring the line between fact and fiction: “I still could not care to say which was more real- the dream I could make blossom at will, or the sight of the bathers. I am presenting them, you see, only as simultaneous.”¹⁴⁸

Similarly, in “A Piece of News,” Ruby Fisher reads that “Mrs. Ruby Fisher had the misfortune of being shot in the leg by her husband this week.”¹⁴⁹ Even though the article is not about her, it plants a seed in Ruby’s mind, which takes on a life of its own. She becomes preoccupied and paranoid, transposing the stranger’s story onto herself.

While the above-mentioned characters are unwillingly alienated from reality, proving at times to be more detached and unaware of their own lives than the stories’ narrators, Welty and O’Connor themselves seemed to pride themselves in their own alienated, outsider status; as it afforded them an appropriate level of detachment when observing the communities they wrote about. Ted Spivey discusses how O’Connor managed to maintain a certain critical distance towards her environment, dubbing her an “outsider in the ruling white class structure”¹⁵⁰ in that she saw many shortcomings in the rigid hierarchical system that she was born into. However, O’Connor was also something of an outsider amongst her fellow social critics, as she disagreed with the utopianism of secular intellectuals.¹⁵¹

Spivey also delves into the theological backbone of O’Connor’s work in relation to the tenuous dichotomy of Catholicism and Protestantism in the South - an issue which O’Connor herself addressed both in her fiction and essays. As a Catholic writing in the Protestant South, O’Connor found herself in a unique position, in that she bemoaned the state of Protestantism in modern society while simultaneously reprimanding Catholic novelists in failing to address

¹⁴⁸ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 77.

¹⁴⁹ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 13.

¹⁵⁰ Spivey 7.

¹⁵¹ Spivey 8.

religious concerns on a level that is both theological and literary.¹⁵² In failing to wholly identify and comply with the social and theological leanings of her society, O'Connor managed to retain an outsider position from the inside - an invaluable asset to her astute observations and social criticism.

Welty also wrote with an outsider's perspective, one, which was determined geographically as well as ideologically. Danièle Pitavy-Souques comments on the influence of Welty's background on her relationship to the South and as reflected in her fiction, stating:

In subtle ways, and often where least expected, Welty reexamines stereotypes, subverts authority-that is, the traditional discourse about the South-and displays the paradoxical independence of mind of the foreigner (of the stranger, rather, since though she was born in Jackson her parents were not from the Deep South). She writes as if she had had to learn the South as a new language and was thus freer to put things in different places and to avoid preconception.¹⁵³

The relative outsider status of both authors thus offers them a privileged perspective on the communities they write about, as they are privy to their culture but not overly entrenched in it and are at a certain remove from their communities though not entirely alienated.

Bess Chronaki explores the way in which Welty's own detached approach to Southern culture seeps into her fiction, detailing Welty's paradoxical use of obstruction in that it is employed as a means of illuminating truths and exposing hidden realities:

It can be said of Eudora Welty, too, as she had said of Virginia Woolf, that sometimes her stories "come to us once removed - seen in a mirror," even with a deliberate artificiality imposed on them. This treatment, however, "is given to a view of life which may well be too intense for us not to watch it through a remove of some kind." Welty explains: "Obliquity gives its own dimension to objects in view," and manifests "the complicated vision which wants to look at truth."¹⁵⁴

Axel Nissen contextualizes the above quotation in relation to Welty's use of distancing via omniscient narration in "A Piece of News," stating:

¹⁵² O'Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 854.

¹⁵³ Pitavy-Souques 93.

¹⁵⁴ Chronaki 36.

We have seen it on the spatial plane, where the narrator is an "invisible witness" who keeps her physical distance. We have seen it even more clearly on the linguistic plane, where we have the opportunity to distinguish the narrator's estranged, indirect voice from Ruby's plain, homegrown idiom, before the two merge.¹⁵⁵

The narrator not only mediates the events of the story, but does so at a distance which allots for an interpretation that is not jaded by Ruby's own paranoia. While Ruby entertains her morbid fantasy when her husband comes home, darting away from him in fear like a cat, the narrator offsets the menacing portrait Ruby paints of her husband when observations are made such as "he stood there with a stunned, yet rather good-humored look of delay and patience in his face."¹⁵⁶ The narrator's removed position thus allows the reader to interpret the story's events in a manner which does not solely rely on Ruby's fantastical musings.

O'Connor's method of distancing is carried out by way of character mirroring, as by presenting her characters with an externalized version of themselves, she offers them the chance to see themselves in a new light. Nelson and Mr. Head's confrontation with the statue in "Artificial Nigger" thus serves as a cataclysmic moment for the two, as it confronts them with a commonality that they had until that point willfully rejected and ignored. W.F. Monroe comments on the deliberate use of associative signification between the statue and its audience, stating:

Lest there be any mistake, O'Connor informs us that "it was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old" and then describes Mr. Head as looking "like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man" [...] The artifact is not alien, and in some profound if mysterious way they see the resemblance: ultimately, it is this seeing, this realization, that unites them.¹⁵⁷

It is paradoxically not through their confrontation with the town's black community that incites this revelation, but rather the presence of an inanimate object.

¹⁵⁵ Axel Nissen, "Making the Jump": Eudora Welty and the Ethics of Narrative," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 35 (Autumn 2000): 66.

¹⁵⁶ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 37.

¹⁵⁷ Monroe 70.

A more blatant form of doubling takes place in *Wise Blood*, as Hoover Shoats employs a man named Solace Layfield to serve as his mascot, dressing him up to look like Haze and dubbing him the “True Prophet.” Haze immediately identifies with his body double upon laying eyes on him: “He was so struck with how gaunt and thin he looked in the illusion that he stopped preaching. He had never pictured himself that way before.”¹⁵⁸ Haze’s identification with the “bleak figure” parallels his own grandfather’s identification with Haze, as he “had a particular disrespect for him because his own face was repeated almost exactly in the child’s and seemed to mock him.”¹⁵⁹ It is these characters’ projections of themselves onto other people that instigates a sense of self-recognition and awareness, as by approaching themselves at a greater remove they gain a broader sense of perspective regarding their own sense of self.

O’Connor and Welty offer up a critique of those too entrenched in their own personal fantasies and cultural values to see things clearly, and do so in the context of modern, consumer society, where the dogmatic adherence to superficiality breeds a culture of placated escapism and unwavering acceptance of outward appearances. O’Connor laments that “For the last few centuries we have lives in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface.”¹⁶⁰ Welty, in her essay “On Writing,” necessitates the need to look beyond readily available appearances, using a Chinese lamp as a metaphor: “...the little lamp whose lighting showed its secret and with that spread enchantment. The outside is painted with a scene, which is one thing; then, when the lamp is lighted, through the porcelain sides a new picture comes out through the old, and they are seen as one.”¹⁶¹ A correlation between Welty’s lamp metaphor and Susan Sontag’s

¹⁵⁸ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 126.

¹⁵⁹ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 14.

¹⁶⁰ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 157.

¹⁶¹ Welty, *The Eye of the Story* 119-120.

ruminations on photography can be made, as Sontag puts forth that photography “prompts us to think-or rather ‘intuit-what is beyond [the surface], what the reality must be if [the surface] looks this way.”¹⁶² Both Welty’s fiction and her photography serve as a testament to her refusal to accept surface reality at face value, as she rejects appearance-based stereotypes and clichés in an attempt to unmask and decode the physical world as it is presented to us. Welty thus strives to change the conversation in her photographic and literary work, giving a voice to members of society who had been cast off and othered by their respective communities, calling for the need to re-examine and shake up the passive acceptance of society’s values.

O’Connor similarly admonishes conformism and the blind acceptance of the status quo in matters secular and theological alike. Pinkerton addresses O’Connor’s critique of the modern debasement of spirituality in terms that transcend the Protestant versus Catholic opposition, stating that “What O’Connor disliked was the notion of unthinking religious acceptance, regardless of denomination.”¹⁶³ O’Connor’s modus operandi is flagrantly presented in *Wise Blood*, offering up a description of windshield wipers “that made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in church.”¹⁶⁴ As a fervent adherer to the Catholic faith, O’Connor welcomed religious criticism as necessary rather than deterring, viewing atheism not as a threat to believers but as something which forces religious communities to re-examine and affirm their beliefs: “These unbelieving searchers have their effect upon those of us who do believe. We begin to examine our own religious notions, to sound them for genuineness, to purify them in the heat of our unbelieving neighbor’s anguish.”¹⁶⁵

The presence of Hazel Moats in *Wise Blood* serves as a testament to O’Connor’s above statement, as he operates as a turbulent proponent of negation, profaning his way

¹⁶² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973) 23.

¹⁶³ Pinkerton 457.

¹⁶⁴ O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 55.

¹⁶⁵ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 160.

through the novel, calling Jesus a liar and invalidating Christian notions of sin and redemption in his areligious sermons. Haze's claim that "the only way to the truth is blasphemy"¹⁶⁶ targets the commoditized version of Christianity, tarnished by the likes of men such as Hoover Shoats, whose self-serving manipulation of religion is reprimanded by Hazel as being untrue.¹⁶⁷ Pinkerton affirms O'Connor's subversive use of blasphemy in that Haze's profanity functions as more of a protest against the status quo than a genuine form of atheism: "Although O'Connor clearly intends us to question Hazel's atheology, I think we are also meant to recognize its integrity in refusing all the polluted varieties of religious experience to which Hazel has been exposed."¹⁶⁸ Haze thus denounces modern man's corrupt appropriation of Christianity, as even the word "Jesus" has been reprehensibly sullied, rendering it commonplace and devoid of the sanctity it was once meant to signify, necessitating the need for its destruction. Haze himself seems to exhibit an awareness that his blasphemy is of a more tenuous nature than that of sheer nihilism, as he tells a gas station attendant that "he had only a few days ago believed in blasphemy as the way to salvation, but that you couldn't even believe in that because then you were believing in something to blasphemize."¹⁶⁹ Haze's fervent negation serves more as a "way of affirming belief"¹⁷⁰ rather than a refutation of it, as even through the course of his blasphemous quest, Haze draws from the linguistic and ideological framework of Christianity, referring to his endgame as that of "salvation." Haze's profanation thus operates as an indictment of the modern state of the religious spirit while simultaneously reaffirming his own spirituality.

The treatment of destruction and violence has a similar function in the fiction of both O'Connor and Welty, as its purpose is not gratuitous but rather symbolic in that it is

¹⁶⁶ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 111.

¹⁶⁷ O'Connor *Wise Blood* 114.

¹⁶⁸ Pinkerton 456.

¹⁶⁹ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 148.

¹⁷⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932) 56.

employed as a vehicle for expressing ideological opposition. Haze in *Wise Blood* thus engages in a form of destruction that is both verbal and physical, making blasphemy and violence integral elements in his quest for truth. When Haze sees Lilly Sabbath cradling the “new jesus,” he hurls it against the wall and throws the remains out of a window –a gesture which Pinkerton describes as “a pointed act of iconoclasm, a sacrilege perpetrated against a vacuously sacralized religion of commodity worship and playacting, a religion divorced from ultimate reality and thus condemned to act out false versions of it.”¹⁷¹

Furthermore, Hoover Shoat’s True Prophet-for-hire functions as the living embodiment of commodity worship and falsification, and is faced with the same violent rejection as the mummified dwarf. Haze vies to expose and destroy the “True Prophet’s” façade when he forces him to strip away his clothes, only to run him over moments later. Naked and on the verge of dying, the man begins to confess his sins to Haze, rendering him physically and emotionally exposed, unburdened from the trappings of his false identity. Haze completes his cycle of destruction when he identifies with his profitable double in that he, too, is “not clean,”¹⁷² and in order to purify himself spiritually, defiles his own body by engaging in ascetic behavior which escalates to Haze blinding himself, leading to his eventual death.

Miss Eckhart in “June Recital” also turns to violence in protest of her unforgiving situation. Unable to find her place in the isolating community of Morgana, Miss Eckhart rejects and is rejected by the people and their culture in her failure to acknowledge and participate in their traditions. Her ultimate rejection of the community that wronged her culminates when she attempts to set fire to her house, an act which renders her insane in the eyes of the community – much like how Haze’s escalating asceticism gives his landlady cause to believe that he is mentally unstable. Miss Eckhart’s destructive outburst can be analyzed as

¹⁷¹ Pinkerton 460.

¹⁷² O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 170.

an attempt to purify with fire, just as Haze attempts to cleanse himself of the impurities found within himself and his society via self-immolation. Welty and O'Connor employ various degrees and forms violence and destruction – from subversive and subtle to brutal and merciless – to shake up the rigidity of Southern tradition as well as the capitalist ideology as a whole. Claire Katz poignantly elucidates O'Connor's use of violence in her fiction, stating: "This violence, however, is conventionally justified as a rhetoric necessitated by the modern secular temper, by the insentience of a society whose plastic surface has smoothed over and accommodated the most grotesque characteristics."¹⁷³ – a statement which can be applied to both authors in their use of violence as a symbolic form of dissent.

O'Connor's conception of modern man as having supplanted spirituality with materialism and God with himself results in the extinction of the religious believer and the birth of man whose faith is placed in his epistemic convictions. Modern man is thus equally reprimanded for being an unthinking conformist and an entitled, deluded rationalist. The fittingly named Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger" is targeted by O'Connor in her satiric treatment of man's over-reliance on rationalism, exposing the folly of those who exude an unjustified sense of confidence in their narrow-minded perception of the world. O'Connor undermines Mr. Head's power of deduction when a weighing machine erroneously produces a ticket that sets his grandson's weight at 98 pounds and Mr. Head concedes that "the machine had probably printed the number upside down, meaning the 9 for a 6."¹⁷⁴ Having taken pleasure in playing the part of the sanctimonious mentor, Mr. Head finally falls victim to his own inadequacy when he and his grandson get lost. His conceit of imparting wisdom onto his grandson is thus thwarted as Nelson suddenly realizes that his grandfather's narrow world-

¹⁷³ Claire Katz, "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision," *American Literature* 46.1 (1974): 55.

¹⁷⁴ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 66.

view and faulty rationalism fall short when it comes to navigating the real world (literally and metaphorically speaking.)

The presence of the artificial Negro as a “modern cruciform,”¹⁷⁵ one which would confront the grandfather and grandson and “dissolve their differences like an action of mercy,”¹⁷⁶ is finally stripped of its mystery and sanctity when Mr. Head ruminates on his revelation with an unwavering sense of entitlement. Within the scope of his short reverie, Mr. Head explains the workings of God in a crude demonstration of his self-assuredness, repeating the phrase “I understand...”¹⁷⁷ Monroe comments on Mr. Head’s negation of God’s grace through his rationalistic explication of it, stating:

He has clearly processed his epiphany into something less mysterious; the sacramental action of grace has again been transformed into a static knowledge of what God’s grace is and how it works. More importantly, Mr. Head now sees that God’s grace has gone its work, once and for all, on him: “He now felt ready to enter the gates of Paradise.” By making Mr. Head’s knowledge seem static, pat, and even hackneyed, O’Connor is able to suggest that the sure knowledge that one is saved may be as treacherous as other kinds of static knowledge.¹⁷⁸

Not only does he believe that he has grasped the mystery of God, he reaffirms his own self-professed authority when he judges himself “with the thoroughness of God.”¹⁷⁹ Mr. Head thus epitomizes O’Connor’s and Baudrillard’s conception of the modern man as fueled by his narcissism and entitlement, purporting himself as the ultimate authority. The portrait of 20th century America that is painted here is then one where the mystery of human existence is nullified in man’s compulsion to rationalize and exercise control.

In this respect, Hazel Moats can be regarded as O’Connor’s response to the over-reliance on rationalization in the modern age, as his presence serves as a testament to the

¹⁷⁵ Monroe 74.

¹⁷⁶ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 73.

¹⁷⁷ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 74.

¹⁷⁸ Monroe 75-76.

¹⁷⁹ O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* 74.

ineffability of the mystery of Christ. Although the people he meets try to compartmentalize him and “place him” on the basis of his marketplace value, he possesses an impenetrable quality that confronts his cohabitants with their own limited understanding of existence. The opening and closing scenes of the novel encapsulate the enigma of Haze’s character, as Mrs. Hitchcock and Mrs. Flood stare deep into his eyes in an attempt to penetrate his existence, but are instead confounded by Haze’s “uncommon depth”¹⁸⁰ – a depth which they can neither reach nor comprehend.

Man’s limited understanding of the human experience is not only present but is in large part central to Welty’s work as well. Although Welty’s iteration of mystery in her fiction is more ontological than theological in nature, Welty, like O’Connor, elucidates the inherent mystery of human existence that cannot be made empirically known to man. Ruth Vande Kieft comments on the enigmatic quality of Welty’s work in that:

The term "mystery" has here to do with the enigma of man's being, of life and death--man's relation to the universe; what is secret, concealed, inviolable in any human being, resulting in distance or separation between human beings; the puzzles and difficulties we have about our own feelings, our meaning, and our identity.¹⁸¹

Welty’s deliberate and self-aware use of external narration in “A Piece of News” at once creates a sense of distance between Ruby and the narrator, while portraying the narrator as someone who is aware of the restrictions imposed on him/her as a result of this distance.

The narrator’s limitations are implied in the diction, as much of what the narrator surmises about Ruby is decidedly offered up as speculation. Observations such as “was that what she was saying over and over, like a song?”, “she must have been lonesome” and “she seemed to be hiding”¹⁸² reinstate the narrator’s position as an external observer with restricted insight into the mind of the character. Nissen addresses the narrator’s decidedly speculative

¹⁸⁰ Pinkerton 453.

¹⁸¹ Ruth M. Vande Kieft, “The Mysteries of Eudora Welty,” *The Twayne Authors Series* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987) 2.

¹⁸² Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 12.

phrasing in that “We may call these operators 'words of estrangement'. What these words of estrangement imply is that the narrator does not know if her conjectures are correct. They are connotators of restricted knowledge.”¹⁸³

Furthermore, the narrator and protagonist of “A Memory” professes not only her passion for her childhood sweetheart but her “obsession with notions about concealment.”¹⁸⁴ Whether she is watching the family on the beach or reminiscing about her love interest, she exhibits a profound sense of trepidation and desire to have the mysteries of life revealed to her. Just like the narrator in “A Piece of News” fills the void of concealment with speculation, the narrator in “A Memory” would “from the smallest gesture, wrest what was to her a communication or a presentiment.”¹⁸⁵ Harriet Pollack articulates the tension between the innate mystery of human nature and the desire to understand it, as presented in Welty’s fiction: “These characters are rarely known in any simplifying sense. The effect suggests the difficulty of knowing others, while stimulating reveries give a speculative substance to unknowable mystery.”¹⁸⁶ The narrators in the above-mentioned short stories, much like Mrs. Flood and Mrs. Hitchcock in *Wise Blood*, are at once perturbed and intrigued by the mystery of the human experience, the inscrutability of which is elucidated by the two authors.

O’Connor and Welty portray modern man as alienated from himself, from others and from his spirituality, while artificially constructing and imposing a sense of alienation onto their work, employing distance both as a necessary tool and consequence. Welty and O’Connor’s use of third person, omniscient narration, obstruction, destruction, and violence can be recognized as introspective devices, where surface reality is not accepted at face value

¹⁸³ Nissen 58.

¹⁸⁴ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 133.

¹⁸⁵ Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* 133.

¹⁸⁶ Pollack 17.

but is rather re-examined and turned inside out, or as O'Connor says: "This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 162.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The concept of alienation pervades the fiction of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor in terms that are of an existential or theological nature, but are also culturally specific in an American and also distinctively Southern context. This quotation from O'Connor's essay "Novelist and Believer" encapsulates the multifaceted portrayal of alienation that both she and Welty share: "The novelist writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated."¹⁸⁸ O'Connor's loaded usage of the term "mystery" harkens to the ever-present mystery of God's grace, one that is also mirrored in Welty's work, albeit in more existential terms regarding the enigmatic workings of the universe.

What is more, the explication of the term mystery in the above citation takes on a more time-sensitive, sociocultural relevance, as O'Connor (and Welty's) concern for the "mystery of incompleteness" and the "particular tragedy of our own times" alludes to a state of incompleteness which is the by-product of modern civilization. The sense of alienation that O'Connor and Welty present through their characters is one which is in large part spurred by the rise of capitalism in America in the first half of the 20th century. This relationship between the ubiquitous presence of consumer culture and the status of the individual as alienated from the world around him is explicated by O'Connor in that man "has become his own ultimate concern"¹⁸⁹ – a claim that is elaborated on by Baudrillard in his ruminations on commodity culture as an ideological system which not only disposes of an other-worldly authority in favour of individual self-righteousness, but which is premised on the radicalization of social hierarchy and the commodification of self-worth.

¹⁸⁸ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 167.

¹⁸⁹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 159.

What is more, the portrait of the modern individual as living a life of isolation is explored by Welty and O'Connor in a specifically Southern context, as man is described not only as being inadvertently alienated by the larger, ideological system at play, but by his own insular culture. The fiction of Welty and O'Connor delves into the conception of the South as culturally distinct from the rest of the nation and the communal effort made on the part of Southerners to preserve the South's identity by isolating itself from elements that are deemed "foreign" and "threatening" to the culture and traditions of these communities. Welty and O'Connor's outsiders – displaced people, immigrants, non-Southerners, African Americans – are depicted as being ostracized from the Southern communities they inhabit, being made aware of their inherent and irrevocable otherness. This sense of otherness is continuously reinforced by the local Southern communities by way of their flagrant xenophobia and racism, the ignorance of which is mocked and satirized by the two authors. The sardonic treatment of the isolated, Southern communities and their over-reliance on amalgamating stereotypes is brought into fruition through the authors' subversion of these stereotypes, at once exposing the folly of the narrow-minded community members and destabilizing the very definition of otherness.

It is worth noting that while O'Connor satirizes the provincial and ignorant Southerner, she does not condemn the South for being too insular, but rather maintains that Southern identity is under threat in failing to isolate itself:

The anguish that most of us have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out, not only of our many sins but of our few virtues.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Roland 19.

What O'Connor conjures up here is the status of the South within a broader, American context, posing the question to what extent the South has managed to retain its culture and identity in the face of a turbulent and politically destabilizing history, coupled with the urge to conform to the rest of the country.

Welty delves into the issue of what exactly makes up the South's identity, specifically pertaining to how the South is viewed by the rest of the country, stating: "We in the South are a hated people these days; we were hated first for actual and particular reasons, and now we may be hated still in some vast unparticularized way."¹⁹¹ What O'Connor calls South's "enduring qualities"¹⁹² thus applies in equal proportion to the resilience of the so-called Southern spirit and to the South's past as an eternal marker of its culture. Charles Roland retains a conception of Southernness that is unwavering despite the reality of the South's changing landscape: "At the time of World War II the South had already experienced more than three centuries of change, some of it of the most radical nature imaginable, without losing its regional distinctiveness."¹⁹³

The issue that needs to be addressed is then how exactly does one reconcile the South as being subjected to a constant state of flux – economic, political and social alike – with its ability to retain historically set ideologies and values, and to what extent these values actually operate in tandem with the contemporary social landscape of the South. Roland explicates the doublethink involved in accepting the South as both isolated and integrated, stating that:

It is not, however, in economic, political, or racial affairs (at least not in official racial affairs) that the endurance of the South as a distinctive region is most pronounced. Rather, it is in the subtler areas of the mind and spirit, and even of the senses, of the eye,

¹⁹¹ Welty, *Eye of the Story* 155.

¹⁹² O'Connor, *Stories and Occasional Prose* 861.

¹⁹³ Roland 5.

ear, tongue, and palate, that the South continues to affirm its differentness most effectively.¹⁹⁴

What Welty and O'Connor trace through their fiction is how their Southern characters navigate the modern world with a distinctly traditional, Southern set of values, and how this ideology is continuously challenged in the wake of opposing ideological forces. The fiction of both authors thus holds a mirror up to a culture that struggles to exercise a system of beliefs and values, which fail to reflect the changing sociopolitical landscape, resulting in an adherence to a social code, which scarcely reflects reality.

One such instance of the incongruence between static ideology and social fluidity can be observed in the tenuous nature of race relations spurred by the Civil War and further complicated well into the 20th century. The historically premised, uncontested subservience of African Americans to the white ruling class is problematized firstly by the diversification and changing racial makeup of America, including the South. The ideological implications of miscegenation are divulged in O'Connor's work, as the ubiquitous presence of light-skinned African Americans destabilizes rigid segregating practices, which rely on visible racial markers. A profound sense of irony is presented in those characters who berate the African American community even though they cannot identify its members.

Secondly, the rise of America as a capitalist superpower contributes to an incipient shift in the socioeconomic status of the African American community, as they are suddenly implicated in America's ideological and economic system in a way that is more participatory than coerced; that is to say, there is a certain socioeconomic mobility at play that expressly opposes that of the rigidity of the Antebellum South. Welty traverses this issue in her short fiction as she challenges the master/slave dynamic and those who adhere to it. Miss Eckhart in "June Recital" rejects this dynamic and longstanding Southern tradition by not having a black

¹⁹⁴Roland 8-9.

servant in her employ – a decision which baffles the community. O’Connor also portrays the black community as branching out of domesticated servitude, suggesting a fluidity that is geographic and social, as they are no longer confined to a plantation but working as porters on trains and migrating North to work in car factories. However, it is Welty who perhaps most radically subverts this racial hierarchy in her work “Livvie,” portraying African Americans as inhabiting spaces traditionally occupied by the white population. The character of Solomon finds himself in a position of power, exhibiting the socioeconomic markers of status and wealth – a more than unlikely scenario at the time of the story’s publication. Rather than being dismissed as idealistic or utopian, Welty’s depiction of Solomon forecasts the significant paradigm shift that America would later undergo, as recounted by Roland:

Southern blacks in 1940 were rigidly segregated from whites, except as menials, both by law and custom, and, with minor exceptions, the blacks were systematically excluded from voting or holding public office. By 1980, as the result of massive federal intervention and black protest demonstrations, southern institutions, at least officially, were thoroughly desegregated and southern blacks were voting by the millions. Thousands of them held public office, including a few in the United States Congress and the mayoral positions of such prominent southern metropolises as Richmond, Atlanta, Birmingham, and New Orleans. A southern Rip Van Winkle, awakening after thirty years, would not believe his eyes.¹⁹⁵

Roland’s caveat in the phrasing “at least officially,” when speaking of efforts leading up to and following the civil rights movements, captures the tension between the changing sociopolitical status of the African American and the resistance with which such a change is met, resulting in an attempt to reinstate – if not politically then socially –race-based hierarchical structures.

The rise of capitalism in the South did not only impact the politics behind race relations, but also one of the defining hallmarks of the American South – religion.

O’Connor’s scathing criticism of the state of Christianity in America as devoid of genuine

¹⁹⁵ Roland 5.

“religious feeling” produces a conflicted image of the Bible Belt as simultaneously adopting the newly founded religion of consumption along with the rest of the country, while retaining an outward display of prototypically Southern Protestant indoctrination. O’Connor’s dubbing of the South as “Christ-haunted” speaks to her perception of the South as claiming to adhere to practices which it has long abandoned in favor of a nation-wide trend towards secularization. Religion’s purpose and importance thus rests predominantly on the fact that it defines and differentiates the South from the rest of the country – a function, which surpasses that of genuine faith and conviction.

Lastly, the image of the idyllic, rural South is one which both authors lament as vanishing due to the rise of industrialization and the re-branding of the South as a culture of “industry, commerce, and hustle.”¹⁹⁶ O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person” paints a crude and cynical image of modern farm life, as Mrs. McIntyre appears to be fully engaged with the capitalist credo, often treating her employees like machines in a factory. Moreover, Mrs. McIntyre ends up going out of business, her employees abandon her, seeking work elsewhere, and she can no longer turn a profit, attesting to the dwindling state of the agricultural South. Welty’s “Death of a Travelling Salesman” can be analyzed in that it functions as a type of ode to the idyllic rural South of the past, as Bowman becomes ensnared with the modest yet harmonious and fulfilled lives of the farm couple – a life which is too far-gone for him now that he has spent his life dedicated to his job as a salesman. In trying and failing to reconnect with this pastoral past, Bowman embodies the modern Southern man as one who is hurled into a world of industry and commerce though is still plagued by a vision of an idyllic, rural South. Roland reaffirms the intensity of this transition as it would appear decades after both “The Displaced Person” and “Death of a Travelling Salesman” were written, stating: “In 1940 the region was predominantly rural and agricultural; by 1981 it was heavily industrialized,

¹⁹⁶ Roland 4.

and less than 5 percent of the total population actually made their living on farms.”¹⁹⁷ Welty and O’Connor’s astute critique not only serves to reveal the condition of their times, but also fittingly predicts the evolution of the South, despite its efforts to prevent cultural homogenization.

Welty and O’Connor’s fiction as well as essays raise the question of what actually defines the South, since the term “Southern” is so often applied to the two authors when their work is being discussed, often to their dismay. O’Connor reacts to people’s criticism of her portrayal of the South, rebutting: “as a novelist I’ve never wanted to characterize the typical South or typical Protestantism.”¹⁹⁸ Welty also admonishes the pigeonholing of Southern writers, questioning the use of the term “regional” as categorizing an author’s work: “‘Regional’ is an outsider’s term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life.”¹⁹⁹ Both authors seem to be reacting to a certain implied responsibility of the Southern author to not only portray Southern life but to portray it well.

This obligation proves problematic for Welty and O’Connor as their work extends beyond mere social criticism in its taking on of the universal and existential concerns of human and spiritual alienation. Furthermore, the pressure to correctly portray the South suggests that such a homogenous definition of the South even exists. O’Connor, however, contests amalgamating definitions of the South and Southern life noting that “the South and the religion found there are extremely fluid.”²⁰⁰ It is this very fluidity, which Welty and O’Connor trace in their fiction, as they examine the changing landscape of their region as pitted against an ever-present desire to retain traditional values by intentionally alienating

¹⁹⁷ Roland 5.

¹⁹⁸ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 164.

¹⁹⁹ Welty, *Eye of the Story* 132.

²⁰⁰ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 164.

itself from outsiders. The two authors thus present a region, which at once strives to isolate itself culturally and sociopolitically from the rest of the nation in an attempt to preserve its identity, though it finds itself more and more subsumed by the American mainstream. Welty and O'Connor both participate in a retranslation of the South in that through their fiction they contextualize the traditional ethos of the South in light of both regional and national developments, portraying the region as an ideological stronghold that is disengaged with contemporaneous reality, fostering an outdated social code that is incongruous with change.

Welty and O'Connor's critique of the South and American society, however, is not intended to reform their readers, but rather to offer up a portrayal of the 20th century South through a discerning lens – that is, not to accept ready-made definitions of Southern culture, but instead to strive to re-contextualize traditional Southern values in light of social and political change. While neither Welty nor O'Connor attempt to preach or moralize, both authors aim to shake their readers out of complacency, calling for greater introspection and the necessity to question social, political and spiritual ideologies alike.

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