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Flannery O'Connor as Satirical Priest

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Permission

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I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Defining Southern Literature

“Tell about the South.
What is like there?
What do they do there?
Why do they live there?
Why do they live at all?”¹

When dealing with the phenomenon of Southern Literature in America it is never without complication to define such a broad term. In its most general term, Southern writing can concern “the South, or Southerners experience elsewhere, but it can also include a Southerners writing on a non-Southern topic from a non-Southern view”² Nevertheless, it would be limiting to focus purely on the geographical character of the literature that has a unique position in American literary history.

Thus with the previous regional character of southern literature a question arises: What are the particular features of this literature to define it particularly to be labeled as Southern? Among the characteristic features of southern literature, we recognize “agricultural tradition, existence of an oral story-telling tradition, tense relationships between blacks and whites, presence of black and southern dialects, strange concepts of God and responsibility to family, home and religion and finally an all-penetrating grotesque.”³ Besides, there is another important aspect of Southern literature, namely its connection with history. History is, in the south, never the past; it is still interconnected with the present. As William Faulkner, the writer who revolutionized the South and became one of the most influential figures for almost every writer there once proposed: “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.”⁴

Southern literature as regional literature also keeps several characteristic traits from the perspective of the American north. The Northerners create a preconceived image of Southern literature which, according to Hugh Holman, is based on:

¹ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 142.

² Veronica Makowsky, “What is Southern Literature?” *The Walker Percy Project*, 1996
< <http://www.ibiblio.org/wpercy/makowsky.html> >

³ Martin Procházka et al., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum, 2007) 227

⁴ Justin Quinn (ed.), Martin Procházka et al., *Lectures on American Literature* (Praha: Karolinum, 2011) 228.

the Gothic, reveling deliciously and lasciviously in its horrors, the historical, restoring past glories now gone with the wind, the idealized and the sentimental, so sickly sweet that one feels as though as they had swallowed Love Story, the grotesque, depraved, and deformed.⁵

Thus, as a result, southern writers became recognized under the unflattering label the school of southern degeneracy which was later changed to southern grotesque. However, grotesque as a solitary aspect of southern humor is not the only thing that represents southern humor as such. Holman claims that comic dimension as such has been left unrecognized: “for the last hundred and fifty years the comic has been a major, though often ignored, segment of the southern literary imagination.”⁶

At first glance, the comic element in its general meaning- to provoke laughter, somehow this does not fit into a region burdened by military and economic defeat, marked by slavery and exploitation. In other words, where can we find comic in an area which is often connected with deprivation and loss? Nonetheless, this assumption may lead to a false and distorted image of the development of the comic in the South. Holman explains that to understand the comic in the works of contemporary southern literature “it is necessary to see it as a continuation of traditional comic writing in the region, even though the South has frequently been viewed as an arena exclusively dedicated to tragedy.”⁷

Thus the evolution of humor according to the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* can be divided into roughly four historical periods. “The first period of years 1830-1860 can be named as the era of the humorist of the Old Southwest.”⁸ This era marked the establishment of the comic stereotypes that last in the South more or less up to the present. The main literary character used to be frontiersman, a literary ancestor of the redneck-hillbilly. Writers who belong to the group of the humorists of the Old Southwest, including writers such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, George Washington Harris and Thomas Bangs Thorpe used comic primarily as a means to overcome the hardships and depravities of life on the frontier. Humor was primary used as an escape from harsh conditions: “Under the almost savage conditions of a wild, new land, laughter was one of the means by which the frontiersman could for a time forget his hardship, preserve his courage, and retain his humanity.”⁹ Next, there was the

⁵ C.Hugh Holman, “Detached Laughter in the South” in *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) 88.

⁶ Holman, 88.

⁷ Holman, 88.

⁸ Wilson Charles Reagan, William Ferris eds. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) web.
<<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/humor.html>>

⁹ Henning Cohen, *Humor of the Old Southwest* (Athens: the University of Georgia Press, 1964) xxxviii.

period from 1860 to 1925 which introduced more local color to the humor of the South. A major figure of this time was certainly Mark Twain who was classified as a literary comedian and local colorist. The third period, also called the Golden Age of Southern writing, or alternatively Southern Renaissance, which lasted from 1920 till 1945 produced writers led by William Faulkner, who started to combine serious literary purposes with profoundly comic elements. In contrast to the humorists of the nineteenth century, the comic dimension later shifted its subject matter. Whereas the comic (humor) in the nineteenth century was primarily supposed to be funny, in the twentieth century it became much more complicated and serious. This serious humor was rather a complementary element to show: “the realist’s way of dealing with the unbearable or intolerable aspects of life without shifting into the tradition of the Gothic or tragic.”¹⁰ It is not a depiction of funny fellows who are untouchable and fearless despite their tragic situation, it is more of a “realistic portrayal of people seen in terms of their weaknesses and limitations, particularly if one wants to portray their twisted selves without converting them into creatures of horror.”¹¹ Moreover, as the *Encyclopedia of Southern Literature* describes, this period was not only the golden age for literature, it was in general the golden age of American comedy, articles, movies and comic cartoons started to appear frequently in the media. One of the most influential media was the prestigious magazine *The New Yorker*. There were many authors and artists who contributed to the magazine; however one who has to be mentioned is namely George Price. This famous cartoonist helped to “establish the look of *The New Yorker* in the early years” and “his eccentric comic visions and habits of distinctly odd characters were staples of *The New Yorker* for nearly sixty years.”¹² George Price became a very significant inspiration for the author who is the focus of this thesis, Flannery O’Connor.

1.2 Flannery O’Connor Background and Context

Born in 1925 in a Roman Catholic family in Savannah, Georgia Flannery O’Connor experienced a connection to her region from early years, and later on, when she was diagnosed with disseminated lupus which bound her to the South till the end of her life. Nevertheless, she viewed her bond with the South positively, especially in connection with her being a devout Catholic: “There are certain conditions necessary for the emergence of Catholic literature which are found nowhere else in this country in such abundance as in the

¹⁰ Holman, 91.

¹¹ Holman, 91.

¹² Glenn Collins, “George Price, 93, Cartoonist of Oddities Dies,” *New York Times* 14 Jan. 1995, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/14/obituaries/george-price-93-cartoonist-of-oddities-dies.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>

South”¹³ she remarked, “and I look forward with considerable relish to the day when we are going to have to enlarge our notions about the Catholic novel to include some pretty odd Southern specimens.”¹⁴ However, her primary concern was not about the South as such. In her lecture about “Some aspects of the Grotesque in southern fiction” she herself proclaimed that she has “always been tempted to say that she is not a southern writer but a writer who happened to be southerner.”¹⁵ Above all, she was primarily a writer with Christian preoccupations. Born in a state largely inhabited by Protestants, it was particularly they who provided her with “a perfect materia poetica.”¹⁶ She did not try to hide admiration especially for Protestant fundamentalists who were, by the era of O’Connor’s writing, formally dismissed; they were regarded as “mean-spirited, closed-minded folks who bludgeon their enemies with their Bible.”¹⁷ Actually, when her first novel *Wise Blood* appeared Southerners “[...]disliked it for what they saw as a mockery of themselves and of Protestantism.”¹⁸ Early critics saw her attitude towards fundamentalism in the same way; “early reviewers of her work, secular and Catholics alike, read her fictional portraits of religious fanatics as a satirical attack on fundamentalism.”¹⁹ However, quite contrary, Flannery O’Connor saw fundamentalism as the only corrective means of today’s Godless world. Her writing was, for her, a Christian vocation through which she must “reflect the broken condition of mankind and the devil by which we are possessed.”²⁰ As a woman of faith who saw the “religious void, a cultural abyss, a moral nothingness” Flannery O’Connor saw the world as a place “that is still troubled, and though it knows it not, seeking salvation.”²¹ Despite her deep Catholic faith O’Connor is widely popular among Christian and non-Christian readers respectively. It is probably because of her universal message concerning humanity as such, she reveals human mystery to everyone who wants and who is able to see.

Significantly Flannery O’Connor was also as a visually gifted artist who started her career as a cartoonist. In fact, O’Connor’s first publications of any kind were her cartoons that appeared in Peabody High School’s *Peabody Palladium*. Later on she continued in *The*

¹³ Paul Elie, “What Flannery Knew: Catholic Writing for a Critical Age.” *Commonweal* 135.20 (21 Nov. 2008) 13.

¹⁴ Elie, 13.

¹⁵ Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in the Southern Fiction” Lecture 1960, 10.March 2012.Web. <http://blackmarketkidneys.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/some_aspects_of_the_grotesque_in_southern_literature.mp3>

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views: Flannery O’Connor* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 9.

¹⁷ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) 14.

¹⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *Three* (New York: Signet Books, 1983) xiv.

¹⁹ Wood, 33.

²⁰ Flannery O’Connor, xxi.

²¹ Holman, 90.

Collonade; a magazine of Georgia State College for Women. Indeed O'Connor's very close friend Robert Fitzgerald claims George Price as being an inspiration for her: "Price's cartoons are indeed strikingly similar to O'Connor's not only in style of drawing but in certain basic attitudes towards life as well."²² Similar to George Price, Flannery O'Connor liked to capture the oddities in society where she lived in her cartoons. Her figures are caricatures of the people that surrounded her. These figures are often distorted, fat and skinny; noses are pulled out to sharp points beyond the rest of the face.

The humor of Flannery O'Connor is also similar to Price's as it "thrives on the incongruity of the pretense and actuality, with a pointed satire of human foibles."²³ It was exactly in these cartoons where she developed her talent for poignant, slapstick humor along with its satirical character that had later confused many critics and readers. Although O'Connor's humor is funny in its own peculiar way and her characters are in their very existence laughable, she tries to include also something more in her stories. As she specified in an interview for Atlanta newspaper: "Mine is a comic art, but that does not detract from its seriousness."²⁴

1.3 Aims and Structure of the Thesis

O'Connor's peculiar mixing of humor and theological morals will be the main focus of this thesis. The primary focus will be on her short stories, namely "Good Country People," "The Partridge Festival," "The Enduring Chill" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." These short stories will be discussed along with O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood*. This selection was chosen particularly because they contain typical characters that occur in the world of Flannery O'Connor. I shall classify and discuss these characters in both O'Connor's comical and religious vision respectively. The first chapter introduces Flannery O'Connor in the context of Southern literature and the unique character of her prose in relation to her Christian faith. The second chapter will investigate and discuss the similarity between Flannery O'Connor's use of humor and Henri Bergson's theory of humor as the means of social correction. The main focus of the third chapter will be an analysis of the would-be nihilists Joy-Hulga from "Good Country People" and Hazel Motes from "Wise Blood" and their relevance to Bergson's comic figure. These characters will also be discussed in the sense of O'Connor's satirical portrayal of modern nihilism. Chapter four considers another set of

²² Robert Fitzgerald, *Introduction to Everything that Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1965) xii.

²³ Orvell 53.

²⁴ Rosemary M. Magee ed. *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* (US: University Press of Mississippi, 1987) back cover

characters that are ruthlessly satirized, the so-called “anxious intellectuals” Ashbury Fox from “The Enduring Chill” and the character of Calhoun from “The Partridge Festival.” Chapter five concerns characters that provide a revelation to these *self-absorbed poseurs*, these are the characters that represent real evil that encounter real innocence. Manley Pointer as a frequent figure of false prophet from “The Good Country People” and Mr. Shiftlet as a fake Christ-figure from “The Life that You Save May Be Your Own” will be discussed here. Finally, chapter six will provide a conclusion and further directions for study.

Chapter 2 Henri Bergson and Flannery O'Connor

2.1 The Superiority theory of humor

A broader and more flexible definition of humor defines it as “a playful recognition, enjoyment or creation of incongruity or the ability to make other people smile or laugh.”²⁵ In this sense, the so-called ability can also be identified as a certain stimulus that causes a reaction which can range from a mere smile to laughter. However, what can be defined as stimulus? How can we identify the quality that is ascribed to a thing making it appear as comical? Aaron Smuts quite importantly notes: “Almost every major figure in the history of philosophy has proposed a theory, but after 2500 years of discussion there has been little consensus about what constitutes humor.”²⁶ In connection with this he adds, “Scope and significance of the study of humor is reflected in the interdisciplinary nature of the field, which draws insights from philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, film, and literature.”²⁷ It is precisely the interdisciplinary character of humor that does not allow us to formulate one exact definition that would clearly and completely define it. Nevertheless, philosophers and scholars who discuss humor in their works focus on various aspects which humor, as such, has. According to these aspects or perspectives theories humor can be roughly classified into three categories. These categories, according to D.H. Monro, who established the classification, are: “superiority theories, incongruity theories and relief theories.”²⁸

From the formerly mentioned theories, superiority theory will be discussed in this chapter in particular since unlike the other ones it focuses on the social aspect of humor. Superiority theory as one of the oldest theories of humor can be partly found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* where he defines the comic as “not vituperative but ludicrous.”²⁹ Ludicrous is further characterized by him as “failing or a piece of ugliness which causes no pain of destruction.”³⁰ However, Aristotle’s contribution to superiority theory is only marginal since he focuses rather on the general idea of comic than on the role of the humor. In fact, the very originator of superiority theory is the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In his key study *Human Nature* he refers

²⁵ Christopher Peterson, Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

²⁶ Aaron Smuts, “Humor” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, web 20.Apr. 2006. 4.Apr. 2012
<www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>

²⁷ Aaron Smuts, “Humor” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, web 20.Apr. 2006. 4.Apr. 2012
<www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>

²⁸ D.H. Monro, “Theories of Humor” *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, web 4.Apr.2012
<<https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/monro.html>>

²⁹ L.J. Potts, *Aristotle and the Art of Fiction: “The Poetics”* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968) 21.

³⁰ L.J. Potts, 22.

to laughter as “nothing else but sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”³¹ Thus laughter according to Hobbes has a condescending character; we virtually laugh at everything that is in some way beneath us. In the same vein, Monro further explains, “We laugh at the misfortunes or infirmities of others, at our own past follies, provided that we are conscious of having now surmounted them, and also at unexpected successes of our own.”³²

Another important figure whose study on the meaning of comic is often connected with the superiority theory is the French philosopher, the 1927 Nobel Prize winner, Henri Bergson. Henri Bergson’s important study, an essay called *Laughter*, however sets him apart from the general notion of superiority theory of humor. Bergson’s humor is not alienating; it does not stand apart from society. Bergson explains that if we want to understand humor, we must “put it back into its natural environment, which is society. Laughter must have a social signification.”³³ Moreover, Bergson also prescribes a strictly human character to it:

[The] comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression.³⁴

A further distinction between Bergson’s theory and superiority theory is the role of the individual and his laughter. Whereas in superiority theory an individual stands above those ridiculed and he or she is, in a sense isolated, from them, Bergson claims that “intelligence must remain in touch with other intelligences. You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group.”³⁵

Bergson later defines the relationship between the individual, society and life:

What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to

³¹ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005) 38.

³² Monro, “Theories of Humor” *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, web 4.Apr.2012

³³ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008) 12.

³⁴ Bergson, 10.

³⁵ Bergson, 11.

enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. Tension and elasticity are two forces, mutually complementary, which brings life into play.³⁶

Consequently, according to Bergson if we are lacking these abilities, we will become a target of society's laughter: "Society will be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, because these are, in short, signs of an eccentricity."³⁷ In other words, an individual who is unable to identify with the requirements of society and is perceived as a deviant becomes laughable. Society's primary role is via the medium of laughter to help the individual to realize his misfit role. Again, there is another difference between Bergson and the superiority theory of humor. He sees the role of laughter not only in the sphere of aesthetics alone, but also as a kind of "social gesture which pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement."³⁸ By laughter, society aims to correct an individual, remove certain rigidity or "something mechanical encrusted upon the living."³⁹ This mechanical element in a living organism is a consequence of the body "became rigid like a machine."⁴⁰

2.2 Flannery O'Connor and Henri Bergson

Humor has a very important role in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. When surveying the different critical approaches to O'Connor's work, Brian Abel Ragen closes his essay with a lament on how sense of humor, as a major narrative trait in the work of Flannery O'Connor, has been overlooked:

The great body of criticism that has appeared since O'Connor's death affirms the variety of lights in which her works must be viewed. Her works demand philosophical, theological, and psychological analysis, as well as purely literary study. Finally, and unfortunately, her critics find little to say about the comedy in O'Connor's works. Humor as much as the anagogical dimension, is the hallmark of O'Connor's work.⁴¹

Indeed O'Connor's comic vision has been analyzed from various perspectives: theological, regional, grotesque, but the special quality of her humor is still a debatable question. In

³⁶ Bergson, 16.

³⁷ Bergson, 17.

³⁸ Bergson, 17.

³⁹ Bergson, 29.

⁴⁰ Bergson, 29.

⁴¹ Brian Abel Ragen. "Grace and Grotesques: Recent Books on Flannery O'Connor." *Papers on Language and Literature* 27.3 (1991): 397.

particular the peculiar character of her humor makes her different from her fellow Southern writers. Denise T. Askin speaks about the duality in O'Connor's humor as follows:

On the one hand, O'Connor uses comedy as an artistic strategy to dispatch moral tyranny and complacency, and to embody the sacred through a kind of faithful profanation. But, like Mark Twain, she is also employing in comedy an eminently rational form to purge a contemporary art corrupted by the demon of sentimentality.⁴²

Quite rightly, we do not find any trace of sentimentality in her fiction; she shows us characters that are essentially laughable peopling her world with tricksters, fools, as well as stubborn, proud and self-absorbed people. She is merciless to them, laughs at them and reading her stories we laugh with her. However, we do not laugh because these characters are only being laughable. As Hsiu-chih Tsai explains: "Her laughter demands the reader attention and participation."⁴³ Thus, our laughter is also a bitter laughter of self-recognition since through the characters of Flannery O'Connor we perceive our own folly and vices. In other words, as Dorothy Walters quite pointedly notes: "Our initial reaction may be a superior grin at the spectacle of a world teeming with inanity. But through our laughter we are involved, and we are led to reflect upon our most serious questions touching the human experience."⁴⁴ Hence, just like Henri Bergson, Flannery O'Connor sees the role of humor not only in the aesthetic sphere, but also in a social sphere, more importantly, its corrective role in the social sphere. What is more, the previously mentioned need for a reaction brings us to the other literary genre that connects Bergson's theory of humor and O'Connor's use of humor. Satire is often mentioned in connection with her works, since like O'Connor's comic vision, satire also causes a reaction in the audience. In other words, satire always focuses on the dark side of humor, its primary use is to reveal and discredit human folly.

The inclination to satire formed Flannery O'Connor from an early age. Brad Gooch in his biography of O'Connor explains: "Rather than writing about a family of ducks, [she] wrote about the members of her own family. Relying on her talent for mocking adults, she created a little collection of vignettes entitled "*My Relatives*" [sic] which her thrilled father helped her have typed and bound."⁴⁵ Even as a ten-year old girl, she had a watchful and critical eye

⁴² Denise T. Askin. "Anagogical Vision and Comedic Form in Flannery O'Connor's: The Reasonable Use of Unreasonable." *Renascence* 57.1 (2004) 47.

⁴³ Hsiu-chih Tsai, "Disrupted Narratives: O'Connor's Feminine Grotesque" *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30.1 (July 2004) 42.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Walters, *Flannery O'Connor*. (Boston: Twayne, 1973) 25.

⁴⁵ Brad Gooch, *A Life of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007) 35.

for her family members and her mother Regina Cline once remarked: “No one was spared.”⁴⁶ During her high school and college years she favored another medium for her critical eye and she became a very talented cartoonist. She started to publish her comics to the school magazines and journals and soon became campus cartoonist in Georgia State College for Women. Here she again expressed her satirical preference, instead of an idealistic portrayal of the campus life, she focused on; “packs of stray dogs, boards patching holes in the muddy lawn, glaring nighttime spotlights.”⁴⁷ Hence, sentimentalism and idealization were far away from her scope of interest. Rather than covering, O’Connor wants us to see what she sees and tells us the truth directly into our faces. In the same manner Ralph Wood claims: “Not for nothing was O’Connor a satirist and satire is indisputably a reforming art. A satirist seeks to deflate pretenders and poseurs, to prick the bubble of all things falsely inflated, to name the illness that makes us sick unto death.”⁴⁸ However, her satirical vision is rather more theological than ethical.

As a devout Catholic, O’Connor saw what was happening with the South in the fifties and quite reasonably she joined the liberal critique of the rising American materialism. The *tranquilizing fifties*, as they are typically called, ushered in era of stability, conservatism and consumerism. Ralph Wood explains why she disapproved of these shifts in American society:

She saw that once the American virtues of self-reliance and hard-work and self-discipline are abstracted from their particular historical communities, their particular narrative traditions, their particular religious practices, they do worse than fail: they succeed as the false god of civil religion, the deity to which the churches must bow down in obeisance.⁴⁹

As a Catholic writer she, however, decided not to preach or be sentimental. Her readers must be “forced or shocked and/or amused into accepting the validity of religious states”⁵⁰ that were immensely important for her. Hence, “those characters who represented for her a modern, cosmopolitan, secular, Northern-oriented consciousness, were subjected to a ruthless

⁴⁶ Gooch, 35.

⁴⁷ Gooch, 81.

⁴⁸ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) 8.

⁴⁹ Wood, 22.

⁵⁰ Harold Bloom ed. *Modern Critical Views: Flannery O’Connor* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1994) 22.

satire.”⁵¹ The following chapter will thus focus on these characters that are typical and ruthlessly satirized in O’Connor’s fiction. The would-be nihilist Joy-Hulga and Haze Motes will be analyzed in connection to Bergson’s idea of comic figure as well as in terms of secular nihilism.

⁵¹ Sacvan Bercovitch ed., *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 347.

Chapter 3 Hulga and Hazel: The would-be nihilists

3.1 Flannery O'Connor and wingless chickens

“My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for”⁵² wrote Flannery O'Connor in one of the letters to her very close friend Betty Hester. Indeed, living in the times when Nietzsche's famous nihilistic proclamation “God is dead” became commonplace in the modern secular environment it was “a religious void, a cultural abyss, a moral nothingness” that O'Connor perceived. The world after the two world wars, the Hiroshima bombing, the Soviet Gulags and the Nazi concentration camps became very skeptical and the question “How could God have ignored this?” appeared more and more frequently. Certainly, the philosophy that “seeks to dispense with God and traditional values in favor of a brave new world led by those audacious enough to wield their restless ‘will to power’ ”⁵³ came to be a great justification for the elimination of something which was then perceived as unwanted, unneeded and almost useless. Nevertheless, Flannery O'Connor as an avowed believer, unashamed to speak of her faith saw this flirting with nihilism as a very dangerous game. Although, sharing the same worldview with Friedrich Nietzsche on “the modern age is populated by last men, individuals without faith vision, purpose or valor,”⁵⁴ unlike Nietzsche, O'Connor did not find the answer in God's denial. Instead, she advocated exactly the opposite solution, to find a way back to God. Hence, if we want to succeed, we must recognize “need for God and operative principle of God's dealings with man, grace. When grace is absent, the vacuum is filled with evil.”⁵⁵ What is more, O'Connor was not only concerned with the impact of nihilism on society, the danger is even greater considering the individual who is subverted with “a plague of overwhelming human pride unchecked by self-knowledge and by attempt to live life according to empty theoretical abstractions at the expense of common sense.”⁵⁶ Yet, exactly this overwhelming and foolish pride threatens the two most famous O'Connor's nihilists, Hulga-Joy Hopewell and Hazel Motes. O'Connor in a sense portrays them as typical Bergson's comic characters that need to be humiliated by means of reader's laughter. Only by almost evil laughter are they able to gain the shock of self-recognition and thus to correct their manners. Hence, the

⁵² Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993) 154.

⁵³ Henry T. Edmondson III., *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism* (Lexington Books, Lanham: Maryland, 2005) xi.

⁵⁴ Edmondson, xii.

⁵⁵ Edmondson, xii.

⁵⁶ Edmondson, xii.

aim of this chapter is to expand on Bergson's theory of comic character in the light of O'Connor's satire of nihilism.

3.2 Hulga's blissful ignorance

Meeting Joy Hopewell the main protagonist of "Good Country People" we may initially quite mistakenly assume that she is just another Southern belle, living in an exquisite mansion, wearing a nice dress and having a lot of male suitors who admire her for her beauty and sweet-sounding name. Soon, however, this assumption is proved totally wrong. Instead of a joyous Southern belle, the character is a "large, hulking, bloated and rude"⁵⁷ person with a wooden leg. And instead of being dressed nicely, she wears "a six-year old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it." (CS 276) Her relationship towards opposite sex is also very soon put on the right track: "She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity." (CS 276) Moreover, Joy feels the disconnectedness with her native region as well. Having studied philosophy up North she would rather be "far from these red hills and good country people; [...] in a university lecturing to people who knew what was she talking about," (CS 276) however having been diagnosed a serious heart condition that does not allow her to leave this despised region full of simpletons, she has to accept her misfit role. Nevertheless, she breaks away from at least one aspect of being a Southerner; she alters her typically Southern name Joy to Hulga. This step is postulated as "her highest creative act." (CS 276) By the substitution of her Southern name Hulga also seeks to escape from her mother who is evidently very authoritative and who still perceives her as a little girl: "Mrs. Hopewell thought of her as a child though she was thirty-two years old and highly educated." (CS 276) Despite the fact that Joy-Hulga seems to pose as an intellectually superior figure who is very haughty with her mother, Hulga, in fact, rebels against her mother in order to gain her acceptance. She stomps around the house like a teenage girl who wants to be taken as she is.

Taking her as she is, we recognize Joy-Hulga as a figure possessing one of the typical vices of O'Connor's characters, the syndrome of extreme, almost mindless self-pride. As Frederic Asals explains: "O'Connor's people are among the least introspective in the modern fiction, with minds at once so unaware and so absurdly assured that they have refused to acknowledge any deeper self."⁵⁸ This characterization returns to Henri Bergson who recognizes the comic as it embodies itself in a rigid absentminded person. Bergson speaks of the comic person as being unconscious; "he becomes invisible to himself while remaining

⁵⁷ Flanery O'Connor *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971) 274.

⁵⁸ Frederic Asals, *The Double. Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986) 93-109.

visible to all the world.”⁵⁹ However, Joy-Hulga’s invisibility towards herself is firstly unknown, we view her only as a bitter intellectual who feels like a displaced person in the world of good country people. In the beginning there are Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell are the targets of the humor. Mrs. Hopewell who “had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people’s in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack” (CS 272) is clearly a laughable figure. Next there is Mrs. Freeman who says: “Well, other people have their opinions too” (CS 273) while in fact parroting the opinions of Mrs. Hopewell during their conversations. However, the fact that Hulga is only a pretender is firstly foreshadowed in her furious reaction towards her mother during meal. Intending to impress her mother and Mrs. Freeman with her modern nihilistic worldview, Hulga unconsciously entangles herself in her own knowledge: “Woman! do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God! Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!” (CS 276) In this misquotation from Malebranche O’Connor cleverly reveals Joy’s self-delusion. Nicolas Malebranche, as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* states, believed that

The real nature of the external world must be found in ideas. Now in accordance with Descartes’ divorce of mind and matter, matter cannot act on mind; and mind cannot produce its own ideas, for they are spiritual beings whose creation requires a greater power even than the creation of things material. Therefore we see all things in God.⁶⁰

Thus, indeed Malebranche’s argument that we are not our own light is correct because when we look at ourselves we do not see our own light; it is His light that we see ourselves in: “certainty of the external world depends upon God’s revelation.” All in all, Joy-Hulga’s interpretation is practically misunderstood. Clearly, according to her nihilistic view “we are not own light” means exactly the opposite that Malebranche meant: that there is nothing in us and we are in a sense the embodiment of *nothing*. Perhaps not accidentally, O’Connor inserts the word “God” at the end of Hulga’s utterance, which practically in Hulga’s speech means only the outcry of her indignation. However, in fact, God is the answer for Nicolas Malebranche.

As the story develops, we learn more of Hulga’s nihilism. In the scene when Mrs. Hopewell once curiously opens her daughter’s book, she finds a passage underlined with a blue pencil that worked on her like “some evil incantation in gibberish, “We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.” (CS 277) Traditionally, by highlighting some passages in a text

⁵⁹ Henri Bergson, Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008) 15.

⁶⁰ James Bridge, “Nicolas Malebranche“ *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol 9. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09568a.htm>>.

we try to learn them, memorize them since they represent useful knowledge for us. Similarly, Hulga despite boastfully claiming that she believes in nothing is only a passive receiver, she only learns herself how to be a nihilist without experiencing it. Joy-Hulga strongly assured, like Ivan Karamazov that “If there is no God everything is permitted” falls for this modern intellectual worldview as easily as she does for a young Bible salesman Manley Pointer.

Interestingly enough, when Manley Pointer appears, he is also dressed in blue which is the color of Hulga’s underlined passage from Heidegger. In addition, his last name is Pointer, which suggests that similarly to Hulga, who by using the blue color wanted to point something out, Pointer will also “point something out” to her later. Joy’s mother receives him firstly rather tentatively, but after some time when he assures her that he is “real simple and just a country boy” (CS 278) she claims that “good country people are the salt of the earth.” (CS 279) Immediately, she invites him for a dinner since she recognizes that he has the same heart condition as Hulga which makes him a perfect match for her daughter: “He and Joy had the same condition! She knew that her eyes were filling with tears but she collected herself quickly.” (CS 279) Joy-Hulga is firstly completely ignorant of Manley Pointer, she tells her mother to “get rid of the salt of the earth” referring to him. However, after the dinner when Manley is ostensibly trying to flirt with her Joy-Hulga sees him off and Manley continues in his enticement and confides in her: “I’m not like these people that a serious thought don’t ever enter their heads.” (CS 283) In the meantime he brilliantly proposes his secret evil plan to seduce her and invites her to the picnic in the woods. The woods, as we know from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s stories and the Puritan tradition, symbolize the place of sin and evil. Hence, here again we see O’Connor foreshadowing of the future action. As for Joy-Hulga O’Connor explains: “She (Hulga) is full of contempt for the Bible salesman until she finds he is full of contempt for her.”⁶¹ Shamelessly assured of her intellectual superiority and modern nihilistic thinking Hulga decides to seduce him in spite of everything: in spite of her unattractiveness, in spite of the fact that the boy is religious. Nevertheless, the act of seduction for Hulga, means not only a physical seduction, but primarily an intellectual seduction. By means of her sexuality she hopes to teach Manley, she can be his redeemer she can liberate him from his useless religion because he will not need it in the godless world anyway: “She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.” (CS 284) Nevertheless, Hulga receives a shock of recognition. The scene of seduction firstly appears to be going according to Hulga’s plan, she sees this innocent child: “His breath was clear and sweet like a child’s” (CS 287) but

⁶¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969) 50.

soon the story's tone shifts from the trust and innocence to panic and alarm when firstly Manley takes off her glasses and finally runs off with her wooden leg and leaves her screaming. After this most memorable scene in O'Connor's fiction we can initially ask: Why did not he run off with her glasses? Hulga's wooden leg besides being another souvenir for Manley, symbolizes something more than artificial limb. Going back to the beginning of the story, O'Connor refers to Hulga's being sensitive about her leg "as a peacock about his tail" (CS 288) in addition she goes even further to equate it to Hulga's soul "she took care of it as someone else would of his soul." (CS 288) Thus on Manley vicious proposal to remove it she reacts rather tentatively but perceiving him as innocent child, she gradually falls under his absolute control. Manley strategically taking off her glasses firstly and then her artificial leg makes her hopelessly reliant on him. O'Connor perfectly captured this fact by the description of Hulga's eyes:

The boy gave her a long penetrating look. [...] There was nothing about her face or her round freezing-blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her, but she felt as if her heart stopped and left her mind to pump up her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with the real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond the wisdom, had touched the truth about her. When after a minute she said in a hoarse high voice, 'All right,' it was like surrendering to him completely. (CS 288)

In this sense again, we can identify the artificial leg as Hulga's soul, her true inner-self since Manley touched the "truth about her." When Manley refuses to put it back there is not only the danger that she loses her leg as such but that she loses her inner-self, hence her soul to him. The seduction scene finally provides the true display of Bergson's inflexibility in Hulga, so deeply self-absorbed she is unable to recognize Manley's trick. Thus, when Hulga sees Manley, who at the end of the story resembles a bizarre Christ walking on water: "his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" (CS 291) running off, she is finally able to admit that she was wrong, through Manley almost evil laughter she is provided the moment of epiphany. We are laughing with Manley about Hulga's naivety however at the same time there is something bitter in our laugh since Manley touched also the truth about us. We can easily imagine ourselves in Hulga's place as the story ends. Who laughs the best is then Miss O'Connor who showed us the naked truth that evil indeed exists and is able to defeat everyone no matter how many PhD degrees they have.

3.3 Hazel Motes: Christian malgré-lui

The character which is an example of extreme nihilism and which is also possibly one of

O'Connor's most tragic figures at the same time is certainly Hazel Motes from her debut novel *Wise Blood*.

Hazel Motes together with Hulga from previously discussed short story "Good Country People" can be both considered in terms of their nihilistic views on the world. However, in comparison to Joy-Hulga, Hazel's nihilism is not a mere fashionable term. His nihilism stems from the deep sense of betrayal by God.

Initially we learn from Hazel's childhood memories revealed in the first chapter that he paradoxically wanted to become a preacher. Following the steps of his grandfather who had been "a circuit preacher, a waspish old man who had ridden over three countries with Jesus in his head like a stinger"⁶² he was already determined to choose preaching as his vocation. However, at the age of eighteen everything changes and he has to accept other vocation. His recruitment into a military service which he perceives "as a trick to lead him into temptation"⁶³ has already decided his destiny. Nevertheless, Hazel despite this temptation is resolute about protecting his faith and pure soul:

He meant to tell anyone in the army who invited him for a sin that he is from Eastrod, Tennessee, and that he meant to get back there and stay back there, that he was going to be a preacher of the gospel and that he wasn't going to have his soul damned by the government or by any foreign place it sent him to. (*Three* 11)

When we encounter Hazel after his four years of military service for the first time we sense a transformation in him. Although he does not directly describe any mental traumas or horrors that he may have experienced, he speaks about a certain feeling of abandonment. Just like the young men during the war, he was also taken from home by the army "he was sent halfway around the world and they forgot him." (*Three* 11) Besides, it is also unknown whether he was seriously wounded, Hazel only mentions shrapnel in his chest (important place), though, the description seems very allegorical: "he felt it still in there, rusted and poisoning him." (*Three* 11) Although the narrator is not directly speaking about Hazel's transformation these are the first instances of the fact that something certainly must have happened with him. After his arrival home, Hazel suddenly realizes that everything that has been here before is gone; all members of his family are either dead or moved from Eastrod to another town. The emptiness of the family house hits him dramatically: "He didn't realize at once that it was only a shell, that there was nothing here but the skeleton of a house." (*Three* 12) Seeing this emptiness, Hazel feels that there is no use in preaching since there is nobody, nobody who

⁶² Flannery O'Connor, *Three* (New York: New American Library, 1964) 9.

⁶³ Flannery O'Connor, *Three* (New York: New American Library, 1964) 10.

would be interested in his gospel. Hence, Hazel suddenly realizes that all that he had tried to preserve is gone. Bitterly disillusioned Hazel now feels more secure in his theory that it is actually better “to be converted to nothing instead of to evil” (*Three* 11) he is leaving Jesus behind since he left him behind too.

Hazel by escaping from Jesus is at the same time escaping from his true identity as a preacher. On his way to Eastrod he changes his uniform for “a blue suit and a dark hat” (*Three* 12) as to demonstrate his new identity, however his hat ironically reminds Mrs. Hitchcock “a hat that an elderly country preacher would wear.”(*Three* 3) The fact that he is seriously determined to do what he has planned is visible in the conversation with Mrs. Hitchcock on the train to Taulkinham where he declares that he is “going to do some things he has never done before” (*Three* 5) Hazel is determined to completely erase Jesus “a wild ragged figure moved from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (*Three* 10) controlling him; yet Jesus is still beside him. Hazel is only a puppet in His hands as we can notice in the dialogue with the porter where Hazel looked as if “he were held by a rope caught in the middle of his back and attached to the train ceiling.”(*Three* 5) Here for the first time we can also identify Bergson’s notion of rigidity. Bergson connects these puppet-like movements with the manifestation of a character’s rigidity. Later he adds that this rigidity in character also initially leaves us emotionally indifferent but finally provokes nothing but laughter.

Seeing that people on the train are indeed indifferent to his actions, for example in the scene when he asks Mrs. Hitchcock whether she believes that she was redeemed and she answers only with cliché that “life was an inspiration” (*Three* 6) does not only captures the reaction to Hazel rigid behavior but it is also profoundly funny, since the dialogue is based on the two different perspectives these character have:

Mrs. Hitchcock said well that time flies. She said she hadn’t seen her sister’s children in five years and she didn’t know if she’d know them if she saw them. There were three of them, Roy, Bubber, and John Wesley (perhaps Flannery O’Connor’s allusion to three religious philosophers: Édouard Le Roy, Martin Buber and John Wesley?) John Wesley was six years old and he had written her a letter, dear Mammadolland her husband Papadoll...

“I reckon you think you been redeemed,” he said.

Mrs. Hitchcock snatched at her collar.

“I reckon you been redeemed,” he repeated.

She blushed. After a second she said yes, life was an inspiration and then she said she was hungry and asked him if he didn’t want to go into the diner. (*Three* 6)

Hazel then starts boasting about his blasphemy and disbelief in Jesus which in fact appears

rather childish after a while: “Do you think I believe in Jesus? Well, I wouldn’t even if He existed. Even if He was on this train.” (*Three* 7)

Nevertheless, quite paradoxically when Hazel wakes up from a nightmare the first name he calls is “Jesus” and chapter one ends with porter’s comment on Hazel’s nightmare: “Jesus been a long time gone” (*Three* 13) which foreshadows the atmosphere in the city of Taulkinham.

When Hazel arrives to Taulkinham he appears very determined to firstly remove his carnal purity hence, he seeks out the services of prostitute Leona Watts whose address he finds in a toilet. On the road to her his dialogue with the taxi driver is again comic in the sense of Hazel’s predictable, repetitive insistence that he is not a preacher when apparently everyone around him is able to see that he *already* is one:

You look like a preacher,” the driver said. “That hat looks like a preacher’s hat.”

“It ain’t,” Haze said, and leaned forward and gripped the back of the front seat. “It’s just a hat.” [...]

“It ain’t only the hat,” the driver said. “It’s a look in your face somewheres.”

“Listen,” Haze said, tilting the hat over one eye, “I’m not a preacher.”

“I understand,” the driver said. “It ain’t anybody perfect on this green earth of God’s, preachers nor nobody else. And you can tell people better how terrible sin is if you know from your own experience.” (*Three* 15)

However, his initial interest in sin via carnal pleasure with Leona Watts is not lasting long enough for him. He thus starts searching for a spiritual sinning which would give him a greater pleasure. Ralph Wood in the similar manner notes that: “Since carnal indulgence cannot satisfy Motes’s Augustinian restlessness, he resorts to blasphemy, denying all promise of transcendent transformation.”⁶⁴ As a result, during his second day in Taulkinham he meets a blind street preacher named Asa Hawks accompanied by his daughter Sabbath Lily mingling with the crowd that is watching the presentation on a miraculous potato peeler. Hazel reacting furiously when Sabbath Lily passes him the leaflet titled *Jesus Calls You* and he tears it into little pieces. After the incident he continues to follow the couple because he seems almost mesmerized by the old preacher. Hazel feels that he must ostensibly prove him that he does not believe in Jesus. When they finally meet face to face, Asa immediately recognizes Hazel’s identity as a preacher noting that “Some preacher has left his mark on him.” (*Three* 27) Hazel is afraid, since Asa is the first person who is not indifferent to his

⁶⁴ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) 168.

words, Hazel, however again uses his ready-made formulas about his disbelief: “I don’t believe in sin, take your hand off me! Nothing matters that Jesus don’t exist.” (*Three* 27) When Hazel denies the fact that he followed Asa Hawks: “I wouldn’t follow a blind fool like that. My Jesus”(*Three* 28) his justification creates a dramatic irony since we already know that he is following Jesus, despite the fact that he claims to be a non-believer, he is indeed a believer just like Asa seems to be but Hazel is not prepared to face it.

After his unsuccessful attempts to negate all the traditions of gospel and obsessively boasting about his nihilism, Hazel decides that he has to establish a gospel through which he can preach his truth. As a result, he decides to establish his own “Church Without Christ.” Strongly convinced that he also must spread his thoughts throughout the whole country he buys himself a car. The “rat-colored Essex” plays an important role in the story, as Ralph Wood explains:

This broken down car serves as the single sacrament of his nihilistic religion, the true viaticum for escaping everything that would lay claim on him. As Motes’s only sacred space, the car serves as both pulpit and residence, enabling him to incarnate his message in life of perpetual isolation and vagabondage.⁶⁵

In one sense we can say that Essex is Hazel’s new Jesus, in every occasion he finds time to praise the car, he puts it on the pedestal when he famously announces: “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified.” (*Three* 58)

Similar to Hulga, Hazel’s arrogance consists of “his assertion that he can believe in nothing and still avoid evil.”⁶⁶ Just as Hulga who takes Manley Pointer’s innocence for granted Hazel ridicules the people of Taulkinham for their belief in Jesus. However, just like Hulga, Hazel suffers from what Bergson named as “a special lack of adaptability to society”⁶⁷ he ironically does not see that the people of Taulkinham are not believers anymore. He is “the philosopher in the ivory tower”⁶⁸ who is unable to see that the church altars are already substituted by the altars with potato peelers, the preachers now rather beg than preach. In his preaching truth and isolating himself from the society the people reveal his unsociability and he must be humiliated by their laughter, since according to Bergson “in laughter we always

⁶⁵ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) 168-169.

⁶⁶ Edmondson, 36.

⁶⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, Cloudesely Breton, Fred Rothwell eds. (Rockville, MD: Manor Art, 2008) 65.

⁶⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, Cloudesely Breton, Fred Rothwell eds. (Rockville, MD: Manor Art, 2008) 66.

find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed.”⁶⁹

Hazel first encounter with his deception is in his seduction of Asa Hawks’ daughter Sabbath Lily. However, just like Hulga falls for Manley’s simulated simplicity Hazel is utterly wrong about Lily’s innocence. Lily’s name should represent Christian chastity and purity. In addition, lily as a flower is also associated with Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, it is only a trick since she is the one who wants to seduce Hazel. Thus, their roles become inverted. Hazel initially being enchanted by her pure and innocent appearance is determined to seduce her in the name of his nihilism and thus, just like Hulga, to liberate Lily from her presumed naivety: “He wanted someone he could teach something to and he took it for granted that the blind man’s child, since she was so homely, would also be innocent.” (*Three* 57) Interestingly enough, the scene of seduction again occurs in the woods. While Hazel is talking about serious religion matters, Sabbath Lily is suggestively talking about her favor of dirty roads:

“How did he come to believe?” Haze asked. What changed him into a preacher for Jesus?”

“I do like a dirt road,” she said, “particularly when it’s hilly like this one here. Why don’t we get out and sit under a tree where we could get better acquainted?” (*Three* 62)

Nevertheless, the role of Sabbath Lily is more important than this, she is actually the first person who reveals Hazel’s true identity to him. In the chapter eleven he says to him: “I seen you wouldn’t never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus!” (*Three* 96)

A crucial awakening for Haze in fact happens when his beloved Essex is destructed. In chapter thirteen when Hazel futilely presumes that by killing of his doppelganger, Solace Layfield and symbolically his own conscience he finally regains the feeling that there is no more escape from Him. Jesus will eventually hunt him down: “He had the sense that the road was really slipping back under him.”(*Three* 106) Later, he is stopped by the patrolman, then Hazel asks him why and the patrolman very calmly answers: “I just don’t like your face.” (*Three* 107) He tells him to drive his car up to the top of the hill, since he “will be better to see thatway.” (*Three* 107) Next, he orders him to get out of the car and then pushes Hazel’s car down the embankment. Just like Hulga, Hazel is taken the deformed part of his soul, Hazel in a wreckage of his car he sees the nothing he believes in “the idea of nothing becomes

⁶⁹ Bergson, 66.

a felt experience of emptiness.”⁷⁰ This is also Hazel’s long-awaited sign from God that he was seeking since his boyhood. Nevertheless he understands that he is not able to follow Him in this Godless society. Hazel’s only way of reconciliation with God is via his self-blinding, since paradoxically only in his blindness he is able to see what others cannot see. Thus Hazel is not a typical comic figure which has to be corrected by our laughter he is also a tragic figure for which we feel a strange mixture of sympathy and understatement in the end.

⁷⁰ Richard Giannone, *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.) 9.

Chapter 4 Would-be Intellectuals: Calhoun and Asbury Fox

4.1. Flannery O'Connor's Modern Intellectuals

One of the recurring and frequently criticized character types in O'Connor's fiction are her intellectuals or rather pseudo-intellectuals. These characters, as Tara Powell explains, "are portraying what the author saw as the pitfalls of an intellectual life untempered by spiritual humility."⁷¹ Generally, according to Powell we can identify three distinct pseudo-intellectual types that appear in O'Connor's world with each of them "representing a different potential pitfall of intellectual life."⁷² Firstly, there are the so-called "student intellectuals" whose education made them ignorant to "the religious mystery central to O'Connor's fiction."⁷³ Secondly, there are "the Educationists" who, unlike the former students, are able to recognize mystery. However, they "believe one's great dignity is the ability to eradicate it."⁷⁴ Thirdly, there are "the educated thinkers who attempt to experience, even shape mystical reality through their intellect."⁷⁵ This type of character is labeled as "the artist- intellectual". These characters are not only the targets of her critique but also the focus of O'Connor's laughter since they "misapprehend reality as the consequence of their limited definitions of themselves as intellectuals."⁷⁶ Nevertheless, their limitation is not visible to others since they try to protect it by creating a bubble in which they pose as intellectually superior individuals who look down on everyone who does not maintain the same "uncommitted attitude toward the world."⁷⁷ Two characters analyzed in this chapter have the syndrome of pseudo-intellectualism too. Shamelessly assured of their superiority, they vigorously antagonize the values and traditions of the society which they view as presumably unprogressive in order to reveal the truth. However, the ones who are finally exposed are not the members of the despicable society but quite ironically those who aimed to expose the truth to them. Hence, this chapter will look closely at Calhoun from "The Partridge Festival" and Asbury from "The Enduring Chill" as typical examples of pseudo-intellectuals on their journey from self-deception.

⁷¹ Tara Powell, *The Intellectual in the Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, (USA: Louisiana State University Press, 2012) 20.

⁷² Tara Powell, *The Intellectual in the Twentieth Century Southern Literature*, (USA: Louisiana State University Press, 2012) 20.

⁷³ Powell, 20.

⁷⁴ Powell, 20.

⁷⁵ Powell, 20.

⁷⁶ Powell, 20.

⁷⁷ Preston M. Browning, *Flannery O'Connor*, (Illinois, Southern Illinois University Press, 1974) 104.

4.2 Calhoun and “The Partridge Festival”

“The Partridge Festival” introduces a similar character as to Hulga from “Good Country People”; a young cynical and bitter Northern-oriented boy, the student-intellectual Calhoun who, from the start, disconnects himself from the small-minded and simple people of Partridge. He mercilessly labels the townspeople “idiots” and “caricatures.” Nevertheless, when Calhoun eventually arrives in Partridge in order to visit his great-aunts, they indeed appear as caricatures: “They were box-jawed ladies who looked like George Washington with his wooden teeth in. They wore black suits with large jabots and had dead-white hair pulled back.”⁷⁸ In addition, the appearance and shape of the azalea blossoms on their terrace also creates an image of a long-forgotten place without order. It almost seems as if Calhoun has entered into the middle of the wilderness: “Instead of a decent lawn, the old ladies had three terraces crammed with red and white azaleas, beginning at the sidewalk and running back to the very edge of their imposing unpainted house.” (CS 421)

Calhoun’s interest is in fact, not focused on the annual azalea festival as his great-aunts presume but he is rather curious about the Singleton incident which as he reveals to us “had captured his imagination.”(CS 421) Ten days before the festival begins, the mentally ill deviant Singleton murdered six citizens of Partridge in cold blood. Singleton intended the act of murder as his revenge since he was imprisoned for not buying the festival badge. The jail was an “outdoor privy” (CS 422) where he was imprisoned together with a “goat that had been convicted previously for the same offence.” (CS 422) Calhoun, being officially a salesman but fancies a career of a writer, hopes to start his career with a literary account of this event. However, unlike the rest of the Partridge citizens who consider the Singleton event as an “unfortunate incident” (CS 422) for both the festival and town, Calhoun views Singleton as a heroic figure; he admires him as a non-conformist who was finally able to stand up against the materialistic society that only “prostitutes azaleas.” (CS 434) Singleton, as Calhoun assumes is not inherently mad; he “becomes maddened finally by the madness around him.” (CS 423) Calhoun supposes that Singleton was punished because he was different from the rest of the society: “He never conformed. He was not like the rest of us here.” (CS 423) Calhoun’s great-aunt however judges Singleton’s otherness from the point of social control, his deviation must be punished in order to protect the rest, since he never conformed he must be educated how to conform or become completely isolated. In contrast, Calhoun sees Singleton’s deviation as beneficial for the society, he managed to show the true

⁷⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971) 421.

corrupted face of Partridge, yet he was punished. However, Calhoun does not admire the mass murderer only because he has been brave enough to antagonize the people of Partridge. He also, perhaps more importantly admires Singleton because he represents antipode to Calhoun's father who was a famous salesperson, "the most forward-looking merchant Partridge ever had." (CS 423) Hence, by showing compassion with the mass murderer, Calhoun tries to deny his inherent nature, his own kin, his predisposition to be a salesman, thus his own-self. Singleton becomes a scapegoat for his guilt of "doubleness" as a writer and as a salesman. Moreover, Calhoun is not only compassionate about Singleton, he even seeks to identify with him. At the moment he sees Singleton's picture in the newspapers, he focuses on the psychological similitude between them: "Though his eyes were not mismatched, the shape of his face was like Singleton's; but the real likeness between them was interior." (CS 423)

Calhoun so vigorously tries to deceive himself about his false identity that he ironically fails to perceive what others already see, he cannot escape his true nature since he already has it, he has already *become* someone like his father. His great-aunt remarks: "As you get older, you'll look more and more like your father. You have his ruddy complexion and much the same expression."(CS 423) In Bergson's term, Calhoun is a typical comic character, he is ignorant of himself, however others already see who he himself is, he further compares it to "wearing the ring of Gyges, with reverse effect, the comic person becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world."⁷⁹

In addition, Bruce Gentry notes that although Calhoun fancies himself an artist his talents do not match with his inherent nature "his commercial activity is in fact a clear indication that Calhoun longs to be a part of the community, he tells himself that his earnings allow him to be an individualistic rebel-figure, but he knows he does the selling only because he likes it."⁸⁰ Calhoun already consciously knows that he is predestined to become a salesman but he chooses to ignore the call of his vocation. The consequence of this stubborn ignorance is already foreshadowed in the scene when he again imagines the picture of Singleton's face: "the face began to burn in his imagination like a dark reproachful liberating star."(CS 425) After a conversation with his great-aunts, Calhoun, determined to start writing his exposé about Singleton, is walking through the streets of Partridge in order to interview people about the incident. However, the problem with Calhoun, in fact, is that since he obsessively idolizes Singleton he is unable to see the truth about him which *they* see, that Singleton is really mad.

⁷⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Minor, 2008) 15.

⁸⁰ Marshall Bruce Gentry, *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986) 70.

The comic characterization of Calhoun is even more emphasized when he is leading the dialogues with townspeople. In them, as Miles Orvell explains, “O’Connor effectively uses contrasting speech patterns to deflate Calhoun’s overblown rhetoric”⁸¹ The two extremely different perspectives create a comic effect for example in the scene with the boy in the drugstore:

“That’s the man that’s having his funeral to himself,” the boy said reverently.

“The five that were supposed to get shot had theirs yesterday. One big one. But he didn’t die in time for it.”

“They have innocent as well as guilty blood on their hands,” Calhoun said and glared at the boy.

“It wasn’t no they,” the boy said. “One man done it all. A man named Singleton. He was bats.”

“Singleton was only the instrument,” Calhoun said. “Partridge itself is guilty.”

The boy was looking at him as if he were mad. “Partridge can’t shoot nobody,” he said in a high exasperated voice. (CS 426-427)

The boy apparently does not recognize Calhoun’s paraphrasing of Pilate’s final words before Jesus’ crucifixion: “I’m innocent of the blood of this just person, see ye to it.” (King James version, Matthew 27:24) and unconsciously denies Calhoun’s impersonation of the townspeople into the figure of Pilate.

“An effect of something mechanical upon the living” as Bergson calls it, can be identified in Calhoun’s behavior. However, firstly is available only to the reader. Nevertheless, Calhoun’s insistence and automatic argument about Singleton as a heroic figure becomes topical, the townspeople also reveal his rigid behavior, the point of view shifts and it is Calhoun who becomes laughable. Now, the object of laughter is Calhoun himself. We see this shift in the scene when Calhoun meets two high school girls whose “giggles followed him until he was past the courthouse and onto the block behind it.” (CS 429)

When Calhoun returns frustrated from the townspeople’s lack of understanding back to his great-aunts’ house he encounters Mary-Elisabeth here. Her “round face was still childish behind her glasses.”(CS 433) From the start Calhoun deeply despises her, labeling her as “retarded” although his great- aunts have called her “a great scholar.” (CS 433) However, when he learns that Mary-Elisabeth also feels revulsion towards the townspeople and The Partridge azalea festival as well, he includes her in the investigation of Singleton’s case.

⁸¹ Miles Orvell, *Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O’Connor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972) 48.

Although Calhoun changes his opinion about Mary Elisabeth, he still considers his writing as more important than Mary-Elisabeth's non-fiction since "the novelist is not interested in narrow abstractions- particularly when they are obvious." (CS 435) Soon their argument about whose form is more appropriate to fit the story of Singleton brings a great challenge for both of them; they provoke each other to visit Singleton in person at Quincy hospital. After they arrange it, Calhoun, although inwardly believing that the encounter with the murderer would be "a torturing experience" (CS 437), still falsely hopes that the meeting with Singleton would eventually erase his unwanted identity as a salesman: "The sight of Singleton in his misery might cause him suffering sufficient to raise him once and for all from his commercial instincts." (CS 437)

At the same time, Calhoun sees Mary-Elisabeth as she really is for the first time, however ironically he is ironically unable to recognize himself in her light as well: "She had that particular repulsive fanaticism peculiar to smart children- all brain and no emotion." (CS 437) Thus, we already know the reason why his journey is inevitable. It is only through this journey, that Calhoun must finally understand that he is just like Mary-Elisabeth, "the young man with all brain; a head detached from the body of the world"⁸² It is a symbolic journey into Calhoun's self-revelation. He is aware of his self-deceit but he is afraid to admit it; even his "desire to write a novel had gone down overnight like a defective tire" (CS 437)

When Mary-Elisabeth and Calhoun arrive at Quincy state hospital the institution symbolically resembles hell. Mary-Elisabeth, seeing the entrance, mumbles a quote from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a passage from *Inferno*: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." (CS 439) Calhoun is also aware of his moment of revelation for the first time here: "He sat for ten minutes with his eyes closed, knowing that a revelation was near and trying to prepare himself for it." (CS 440)

The visit finally reveals the true nature of Singleton. Firstly as Mary-Elisabeth and Calhoun are waiting for him in the waiting room, they hear "a steady monotonous cursing with a machine-like regularity" (CS 442) when they realize that the cursing machine is Singleton himself. When Singleton finally appears, his appearance, particularly his eyes having a "slight reptilian quality" (CS 442) also resemble the traditional symbol of the devil, a serpent. Calhoun and Mary-Elisabeth are actually pleased to see Singleton as "their kin." However, the visit suddenly changes into a nasty surprise for both of them. Mary-Elisabeth is nearly assaulted by Singleton after he exposes himself to her and makes obscene gestures.

⁸² Anthony Di Renzo, *Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993) 183.

Both are terrified and flee from the hospital immediately. Ironically, Calhoun and Mary-Elisabeth had driven all this way to understand what all Partridge already knows, that Singleton is really mentally deranged. Later, when Calhoun finally sees his face's reflection in Mary-Elisabeth's glasses he sees "the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival." (CS 444) Hence, quite ironically, Calhoun who had hoped to write an exposé on the hypocrisy of the townspeople has finally revealed his own.

4.2. Asbury Fox and his "Enduring Chill"

Asbury Fox, another "intellectual offspring with a swollen ego"⁸³ is, like Hulga, forced to return to his small hometown of Timberboro since he has a serious health condition. Consequently, not only because of his poor health, but primarily his financial hardship is a nail in the coffin of his bohemian and intellectual living in New York. In addition, Asbury assumes that his health condition is in such a serious state that he is going to die soon. However, already conciliated with this idea, he thinks of his death in Timberboro as an embarrassing fact: "He had become entirely accustomed to the thought of death, but he had not become accustomed to the thought of death *here*."⁸⁴ Already assured that he is going to die and also disheartened that his artistic talent will never flourish since his mother has never provided particular support and appraisal he burns all his artistic efforts. Nevertheless, before he leaves, he writes an accusation letter to his mother which "filled two notebooks" (CS 364) where he blames his mother for literally suffocating his desire for an artistic career: "I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can't create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. Why didn't you kill that too? Woman, why did you pinion me?" (CS 364) Asbury then compares himself to "a caged bird" (CS 346) denied its freedom. As a form of punishment, Asbury plans to reveal this letter to his mother at the moment of his death. Supposedly, the letter should leave her an "enduring chill" (CS 365) which enables her to see herself as "she was." (CS 365) Asbury perceives his mother as a burden for him, as a person with whom he does not want to be associated or compared to. Unlike his mother with a "literal mind", he knows better what real life is about.

Hence, Asbury, in everything he does, antagonizes his mother. However, by doing everything to spite her, Asbury in fact antagonizes his true image. Mrs. Fox is very aware of his taking pleasure in wallowing in self-pity, she understands Asbury in terms of Bergson's

⁸³ Dorothy Walters, *Flannery O'Connor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1973) 26.

⁸⁴ Flannery O'Connor *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971) 358.

inflexibility: “When people think they are smart- even when they are smart- there is nothing anybody else can say to make them see things straight.”(CS 361) Unlike Asbury who perceives himself as a failed artist his mother imagines him as having “an artistic temperament” (CS 361) and optimistically assures him that when his condition improves “it would be nice if you wrote a book about down there. We need another good book like *Gone With the Wind*” (CS 370)

In the character of Asbury Fox, O’ Connor again, as in the portrayal of Calhoun, uses the ironic double view, how the character perceives himself and how he really is. Asbury labels himself as a fallen artist however, his closest connection with art was his part-time work at the bookshop. As his condition is not improving, Asbury’s alarmed mother is determined to call Dr. Block, a physician who will take “a personal interest” (CS 359) in Asbury. Nevertheless, Asbury, the still intellectually superior New Yorker, is opposed to his mother’s idea since he assumes that Dr. Block is an amateur: “Don’t you know they have better doctors in New York?” (CS 359)

The very choice of the name “Block” is not a matter of coincidence. It can be possibly derived from the verb “to block”, which means to hinder in progress just like Doctor Block who is “blocked” in this end of the world and does not have any idea of the right treatment for Asbury. Even the description of Dr. Block is disagreeable; he appears like an ass when Asbury sees him: “he looked at the asinine face from what seemed the bottom of a black hole. The doctor peered closer, wiggling his ears.” (CS 366) As Dr. Block starts enquiring after Asbury’s health problems, Asbury frustratingly reacts that what is wrong with him is “way beyond you.” (CS 367) Asbury’s favorite argument “it is way beyond you” makes him comic in Bergson’s sense, just like Hulga’s belief in nothing or Calhoun’s stubborn insistence on the heroic status of mass murderer; his behavior is deviant, mechanical and thus it has to be encountered with the social gesture of laughter in order to be corrected.

While Asbury becomes more and more bitter every day, his mother is absolutely helpless. She sincerely wishes to provide him an intellectual companion but the only one who she can think of is her daughter Mary-George to whom Asbury refuses to talk. Eventually, Asbury asks for a priest, preferably Jesuit, again he does so since “nothing would irritate his mother so much.”(CS 371) Remembering the positive encounter with a Jesuit priest named Ignatius Vogle who appealed to him as “a man of the world” (CS 360) in New York he hopes to meet someone who would be able to discuss “something besides the weather.” (CS 371) However, to his disappointment, Father Finn is obviously disinterested in Asbury’s deep intellectual debate about James Joyce and the myth of the dying god and is rather concerned with

Asbury's knowledge of catechism, again as in "The Partridge Festival", the dialogue creates a comic effect due to the discrepancy in registers between these two;

"There's no one here an intelligent person I can talk to. I wonder what you think of James Joyce, Father?"

"Joyce? Joyce who?" asked the priest.

"James Joyce," Asbury laughed.

"I haven't met him," he said. "Now. Do you say your morning and night prayers?" (CS 375)

In addition, Inger Thornquist also explains that in this dialogue with Father Finn, Flannery O'Connor "satirized Catholic clergy and nuns as alienated from contemporary problems in their neo-scholastic world."⁸⁵ Nevertheless, however ignorant Father Finn may be, and how amusing the conversation is, there is an important message Father Finn delivers to Asbury: "The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are- a lazy ignorant conceited youth!" (CS 377)

Indeed, The Holy Ghost is the central image of the story. The symbol of the Holy Ghost as a bird, dove is taken from Matthew 3:13-17 where "the Holy Spirit descends upon the Lord Jesus Christ in the form of dove at His baptism." The dove is, in theology, described as a bird which reveals the gentle, yet powerful workings of the Holy Spirit. Through the gentle workings of the Holy Spirit, God points out our failures and navigates us in the right direction. However, Asbury tries to ignore it. He is unable to see that the Holy Spirit is everywhere around him. Firstly, the Holy Ghost is foreshadowed in the Jesuit priest in New York, Ignatius Vogle, whose surname reminds us of a similarly sounding German word *vogel* which in English means a bird. Secondly, Asbury sees "a small, walled Guernsey which was watching him steadily as if she sensed some bond between them." (CS 362) Later, his encounter with the image of a bird is in his room in Timberboro where he sees a leak that "had made a fierce bird with spread wings. It had icicle crosswise in its beak and there were smaller icicles depending from its wings and tail." (CS 365)

Almost certain that he has to die with a significant moment in his mind, he calls for two black workers on his mother's farm with whom he felt communion during the summer while he persuaded them to drink unpasteurized milk with him, however just like then, now again they are puzzled and do not understand Asbury's intentions. The scene is also filled with irony. Asbury, hoping for a feeling of solidarity and communion with the two blacks

⁸⁵ Inger Thornquist, "Flannery O'Connor's View of Alienation from Sacramental Faith within Catholicism" *Magistra* 6.2 (2000), 46.

“preparing himself for the encounter as a religious man might prepare himself for the last sacrament” (CS 379), he ends up disillusioned:

“I’ m dying,” he said

Both their grins became gelid. “You looks fine,” Randall said.

I’m going to die,” Asbury repeated. Then, with relief, he remembered that they were going to smoke together. He reached for the package on the table and held it out to Randall, forgetting to shake out the cigarettes.

The Negro took the package and put it in his pocket. “I thank you,” he said. “I certainly do precheate it.”

Asbury stared as if he had forgotten again. After a second, he became aware that the other Negro’s face had turned infinitely sad; then he realized that it was not sad but sullen. He fumbled in the drawer of the table and pulled out an unopened package and thrust it at Morgan.

“I thanks you, all Mist Asbury,” Morgan said, brightening. “You certly does look well.”

When Asbury is absolutely certain that he is going to die, Dr. Block appears with a message that he is not going to die, he has only undulant fever that he must have caught from drinking the unpasteurized milk that he drank at his mother’s farm, despite the fact that the Negroes told him that his mother had not allowed them to do that. Although it is a serious disease, it is not a fatal one. Thus as R. H Birkmeyer explains: “Asbury’s misguided vision and intentions are shockingly revealed in all their ugliness.”⁸⁶ Now he has to face an even more terrible fact than that he is not going to die here, he is going to live here. Moreover, the final irony of Asbury is that although he has planned to teach his mother a lesson, the final lesson which has to be taught has to be taught by him instead.

Even though that these stories do not end traditionally with a conversion of the main characters, both of them are finally facing their true selves. As Flannery O’Connor once noted: “self-knowledge, I suppose has to be the first step in conversion.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Robert H. Birkmeyer, *The Art and Vision of Flannery O’ Connor* (USA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 83.

⁸⁷ Flannery O’ Connor, *The Habit of Being*, Sally Fitzgerald ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 299.

Chapter 5: Manley Pointer and Tom T. Shiftlet: Good Country People?

5.1 The Real, Simple Manley Pointer

The last chapter of the thesis will discuss two characters from the opposite side of the spectrum of O'Connor's stories. The false Bible salesman Manley Pointer together with the automobile lover Tom T. Shiftlet are O'Connor's devil's associates masked under the faces of friendly and trustworthy strangers. From the point of southern literary character genesis, these friendly strangers are O'Connor's variation on traditional character of the carpetbagger. As *The Companion to Southern Literature* explains: "Carpetbaggers were originally people from the North, official members of governmental and humanitarian support who came to the South after The Civil War to restore the country and offer genuine help. However, before their arrival the South was also an attractive place for corrupt would-be carpetbaggers, self-serving opportunists and con-artists who moved into defeated and dysfunctional South to seek their own profit in the first place. Therefore, Southern citizens became suspicious of both groups since they were not able to recognize their true motivation." In other words, they were not certain whether they really came to offer helping hand or they came only to make profit from the Southern defeat. Although many individual carpetbaggers assimilated with Southerners, the negative stereotypical image of "the dastardly interloper who exploited his southern hosts"⁸⁸ was dominant in the Southern mentality of the era. In addition, R. Bruce Bickley explains that the "assorted wheeler-dealers, con-artists and drifters from outside the region continue to infiltrate southern writing on into the later twentieth century, as if to remind that no region is free from the effects of the manipulation, exploitation, and outright moral brigandage."⁸⁹

In "Good Country People" a seemingly simple and innocent Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, one day also appears on Mrs. Hopewell's farm to show Hulga that her assumption about the South as a region where only simple and harmless "good country people" live is false. From the first moment when Manley appears at the door, we are given a hint of pretention in his character. As the narrator notes, when Manley mistakenly addresses Mrs. Hopewell as Mrs. Cedars, he is only "pretending to look puzzled."⁹⁰ He straightforwardly addresses Mrs. Hopewell as "a good woman" (CS 278) since his friends "have told" (CS 278)

⁸⁸ Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Iardwick MacKethan, Todd W. Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (United States of America: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 127.

⁸⁹ Flora et al. 127.

⁹⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971) 277.

him even though, ironically, Manley has not heard of Mrs. Hopewell before, since he addressed her as Mrs. Cedars. The comic effect of their dialogue mirrors many of O'Connor's dialogues caused by the different registers the characters use. Moreover, the dialogue is rather hollow with both characters exchanging only clichés. On one hand, there is Manley who pretends to be a simple country boy selling the Bible and, on the other hand, the intellectually superior Mrs. Hopewell who thinks that she knows these simple country people well and actually pretends that she approves their simplicity:

“Well lady, I’ll tell you the truth—not many people want to buy one nowadays and besides, I know I’m real simple. I don’t know how to say a thing but to say it. I’m just a country boy.” He glanced up into her unfriendly face. “People like you don’t like to fool with country people like me!”

“Why!” she cried, “good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing it, it takes all kinds to make the world go round. That’s life.”

“You said a mouthful,” he said.

“Why, I think there aren’t enough good country people in the world!” she said, stirred.

“I think that’s what’s wrong with it!” (CS 278-279)

This dialogue, based also on mutual deception, also foreshadows “the later game of seduction between Manley and Hulga, and in each instance, the deception extends to both sides.”⁹¹ Hulga, similar to her mother, also believes that she knows “good country people” and by planning to seduce Manley she hopes to teach him, as Dorothy Walters notes: “she intends to play the intellectual Eve to untouched Adam.”⁹² However, when she discovers that Manley is not that innocent and shows her that he is already corrupt and his hollow Bible is, in fact, as hollow as his clichés, Hulga for the first time faces her naivety when she asks Manley in bewilderment: “You’re a Christian! You’re a fine Christian!” Manley answers in an indignant tone; “I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!” and Hulga perhaps for the first time realizes that “pure evil persists in the world in all its vulgar attributes, whether we know it or not.” (CS 290)

Hence, however hypocritical and cruel Manley Pointer is, in Bergson’s terms he reveals Hulga’s blindness to herself. His theft of Hulga’s artificial leg is an action which is inevitable since with it Manley also robs her of her delusion of superiority. It is his evil laughter at the

⁹¹ Dorothy Walters, *Flannery O’Connor* (Boston: Twayne, 1973) 65.

⁹² Walters 66.

end that shows Hulga how naïve and inexperienced she was. “She mocks the world,” but quite ironically “the devil mocks her misguided philosophy.”⁹³

5.2. Mr. Shiftlet: A Man with a Moral Intelligence

Like Manley Pointer, the main character of “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” Mr. Tom T. Shiftlet belongs to the category of friendly strangers and seemingly simple good country people. Again, as with Manley Pointer, O’Connor uses the technique of discrepancy to show who the character seems to be and who he really is. When Mr. Shiftlet first turns up we are not able to see anything else in him than what Mrs. Crater can see: “Although the old woman lived in this desolate spot with her only daughter and she had never seen Mr. Shiftlet before, she could tell, even from a distance, that he was a tramp and no one to be afraid of.”(CS 145) When he moves closer, his figure, indeed in the sunset, makes the shape of a cross: “The tramp stood looking at her and didn’t answer. He turned his back up and faced the sunset. He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross.”(CS 146) In addition, when Mr. Shiftlet talks about his occupation as a carpenter, it instantly draws a parallel to Jesus, who was also a carpenter. Thus, from the perspective of Mrs. Crater, Tom T. Shiftlet is surrounded by Christian symbols as a man with an undoubtably Christian identity. She, similarly to Mrs. Hopewell, who sees Manley as a perfect match for Hulga, sees Mr. Shiftlet as a good country boy who would be an ideal and reliable husband for her mentally challenged daughter Lucynell, although she claims, ironically, that she “[...]would give her up for nothing on earth. I wouldn’t give her up for a casket of jewels.” (CS 149) However, when we, together with Mrs. Crater, are prepared for his Christian identity at the moment when he introduces himself as Tom T. Shiftlet from Tarwater, Tennessee, he also tells Mrs. Crater that his name could just as easily be Aaron Sparks who comes from Singleberry, Georgia or George Speeds from Lucy, Alabama or Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi and speculates about the fact that he may be lying as well. Later, he concludes his speculation that the best answer he could give is that he is “a man.” However, he again repeats his speculation about the definition of a man and why he was made. This second speculation of Mr. Shiftlet gives us a clue that he is not stable with his identity and there is something shady about his character. The second clue is given to us in his surname; Shiftlet may correspond to his shifty character.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Crater’s does not pay attention to these hints, she is also unaware that Mr. Shiftlet ignores all her questions addressed to him. She is left in her self-satisfying

⁹³ Richard Giannone, *Flannery O’Connor: The Hermit Novelist* (United States of America: The Board of Trustees of University of Illinois, 2000) 84.

ignorance and all she is interested in is whether “a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house.” (CS 148) Again, as a result, their dialogues create a comic effect since the perspectives of both characters are strikingly different. A typical example can be found in the dialogue when Mr. Shiftlet speaks about the monks:

“I told you you could hang around and work for food,” she said, “if you don’t mind sleeping in that car yonder.”

“Why listen lady,” he said with a grin of delight, “the monks of old slept in their coffins!”

“They wasn’t as advanced as we are,” the old woman said. (CS 149)

However, the truth about Mr. Shiftlet which Mrs. Crater cannot see is that, since he came to her farm, he is not interested in anything else than Mrs. Crater’s shabby car. Just like Manley Pointer who cleverly manipulates Hulga into removing her artificial leg and then runs away with it, Tom. T. Shiftlet, through his smooth talking and hard work, finally gets the prize which is ironically not Lucynell, as Mrs. Crater assumes, but the old car. However, the old woman is so focused on her own interests that she ignores the fact that every conversation about Mr. Shiftlet’s marriage to Lucynell includes a reference to the car:

“If it was ever a man wanted to take her away, I would say, “No man on earth is going to take that sweet girl of mine away from me!” but if he was to say, “Lady, I don’t want to take her away, I want her right here,” I would say, “Mister, I don’t blame you none. I wouldn’t pass up a chance to live in a permanent place and get the sweetest girl in the world myself. You aint’t no fool,” I would say.”

“How old is she?” Mr. Shiftlet asked casually.

Fifteen, sixteen,” the old woman said. The girl was nearly thirty but because of her innocence it was impossible to guess.

“It would be a good idea to paint it too,” Mr. Shiftlet remarked.

“You don’t want it to rust out.” (CS 151)

Finally, when Mrs. Crater agrees to pay even to paint the old car, Mr. Shiftlet’s smile “stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire” (CS 152) and he immediately knows that his plan is almost completed. After the marriage in “the Ordinary office” Mr. Shiftlet’s evil side is finally revealed. He leaves his newlywed wife in The Hot Spot Bistro and tells the boy behind the counter that she is only a “hitchhiker.” This act, therefore, not only reveals the nature of Mr. Shiftlet’s shifty ability to manipulate and deceive others, but more importantly, it shows how a man with “a moral intelligence” (CS 149) fails to see his own deception. The irony of this character, like many of O’Connor’s, characters dwells in the fact that he, together

with other similar characters who “though they come from a religious tradition that emphasizes moral agency and decries the secularism of the age, are themselves deeply flawed.”⁹⁴ Paradoxically he is very true in his observations about the world around him but he cannot apprehend them since he is as “rotten” as the world that he judges. He, as he claims, sees that the trouble with the world is that “nobody cared, or stopped and took any trouble.”(CS 150) He also says that “he never would be able to teach Lucynell to say a word if he hadn’t cared and stopped long enough.” (CS 150) now he does not seem to stop and think about the consequences of his action “He drove very fast because he wanted to make Mobile by nightfall. [...] Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: Drive carefully. The life that you save may be your own.” (CS 154-155)

When he picks up a hitchhiker, since he feels depressed alone and also since “he felt that a man with a car had a responsibility to others” (CS 155), this narrator’s remark is, of course, another pure irony on Mr. Shiftlet’s self-righteousness. What is more, Mr. Shiftlet even dares, after the immoral treatment of the old woman’s daughter, to speak about the importance of the mother-child bond since he assumes that the boy is running away from somewhere:

“It’s nothing so sweet,” Mr. Shiftlet continued, as a boy’s mother. She taught him his first prayers at her knee, she give him love when no other would, she told him what was right and what wasn’t, and she seen that he done the right thing. Son,” he said, I never rued a day in my life like the one when I left that old mother of mine.” (CS 155)

He victoriously concludes his homage that his mother was “an angel of Gawd” (CS 156) and the young hitchhiker cuts him short with a violent almost slap-in-his-face reaction: “You go to the devil! My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!” (CS 156) The young hitchhiker, similarly to Manley Pointer, seems to be Bergson’s revelator of Mr. Shiftlet’s rigidity, his fake notion of his self-righteousness, he finally drops the veil and we laugh at Mr. Shiftlet’s hypocrisy and self-ignorance.

Nevertheless, Mr. Shiftlet, as Flannery O’Connor wrote in a letter to John Hawkes “[...] is of the Devil because nothing in him resists the Devil.”⁹⁵ Hence, this lack of resistance causes him to ignore the moment of grace, he is not willing to correct his manners. Instead, he blames everything on the “rotteness of the world” and the story concludes with his ironic prayer where he prays to the Lord to “Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!” and after this he “raced the galloping shower into Mobile.” (CS 156)

⁹⁴ Farrell O’Gorman, *Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* (United States of America: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 182.

⁹⁵ Flannery O’Connor, Sally Fitzgerald ed. *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971) 367.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

“Her stories are sharp and dramatic. Each of them leaves a nasty taste in the reader’s mouth. This nastiness however is not gratuitous on the author’s part. On the contrary, it is clear that Miss O’Connor regards human life as mean and brutish and that she makes this judgment from an orthodox Christian point of view but one does not have to believe in original sin to be affected by the stories.”⁹⁶

Granville Hicks perhaps like no one else could have found better expression of the feeling we get when reading Flannery O’Connor’s fiction. Her unwelcoming world is peopled with characters that are self-contained, ignorant, and stubborn individuals who bring about their own downfall. Our initial reaction when we encounter with them is nothing else but laughter. Indeed their actions directly invite us to laugh, however behind our laughter there is still this grim realization that we share a lot with these people. Thus who laughs the most is Flannery O’Connor.

What O’Connor valued most was truth. Truth which is often uncomfortable, shocking and revealing but it has to be finally shown. As she once noted:

The writer whose vocation is fiction sees his obligation as being to the truth of what can happen in life, and not to the reader-not to the reader’s taste, not to the reader’s happiness, not even to the reader’s morals. The Catholic novelist doesn’t have to be a saint, he doesn’t even have to be Catholic; he unfortunately, have to be a novelist.⁹⁷

As we already noticed from the previous chapters Flannery O’Connor indeed was not a saintly person. Although she was a deeply religious woman she was certainly no sympathetic Christian lady. Indeed she did not want to be perceived as a mere direct interpreter of Christian humanism, she was striving to do it with own talent. Hence Flannery O’Connor chose the way of “abusive social laughter”⁹⁸ which was exactly in the opposition to over sentimentality and nihilism in the modern world. From her detached standpoint she thus sees others as utter fools as they accept these false truths. In the same vein Ralph Wood explains: “She became our great satiric master of the grotesque, not in order to flee from the truth, but to limit it more precisely.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Flannery O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find: Ten Memorable Stories* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), back cover

⁹⁷ Cynthia Seel, *Ritual Performance in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2001), 46.

⁹⁸ Mark Boren, “Flannery O’Connor, Laughter, and the Word Made Flesh” *Studies in American Fiction* 26.1 (1998) 115.

⁹⁹ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ- haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004) 27.

Northrop Frye in his “Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire” draws the difference between those two by defining satire as “militant irony.”¹⁰⁰ This description certainly corresponds with the role of humor as weapon in O’Connor’s fiction since she desperately sensed that there is no other means to make us see what we are unable to see:

“The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs as you do, you can relax and use normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock-to hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”¹⁰¹

In addition, this way of humiliation towards the self-understanding, as this thesis has attempted to discuss, also connects Flannery O’Connor to Henri Bergson. Henri Bergson in his philosophy also considers the social function of the humor. His definition of a comic figure is primarily connected with its relationship and engagement with society. The typical laughable trait of comic character in Bergson’s terms is “a certain mechanical inelasticity.”¹⁰² This mechanical inelasticity is the effect of the individual’s inability to adapt to the society which requires of each of us to pay “constant alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation.”¹⁰³ Considering the characters of Flannery O’Connor how often do we perceive that the characters themselves are just blind? They very often just simply refuse to pay attention to what is happening around them. As Dorothy Walters notes: “Caught in the vise of self-hood, they are flat rather than rounded, so wedged in a mold of self that actions seem predetermined, response totally predictable.”¹⁰⁴ In order to fix their manners they must encounter with our laugh, since only after laughter they can see again.

Nevertheless, the use of Bergson’s humor becomes even more sophisticated in Miss O’Connor world. She is not only directly pointing at the evils and absurdities of her fictional characters who are devisers of their own ultimate failure. Her ultimate and greatest skill is through laughter makes us see like we are not able to see ourselves. Mark G. Edelstein concludes that “O’Connor is successful as a satirist because she does surprise us consistently

¹⁰⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1990) 223.

¹⁰¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Three* (New York: New American Library, 1964) xxi.

¹⁰² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Cloudesely Brereton, Fred Rothwell eds. (Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008) 13.

¹⁰³ Bergson 16.

¹⁰⁴ Dorothy Walters, *Flannery O’Connor* (Boston, Twayne, 1973) 27.

by the very peculiarity of her characters. She does not try to show man his own face but the face of a stranger, a comic and grotesque face that bears a disturbing resemblance to his own.”¹⁰⁵ It is even not important if we share her religious view or not. Her characters reflect the very state of a modern man. Thus every reader of Flannery O’Connor is like her chicken going backwards, she makes us going backwards in order to see where we are really heading to.

¹⁰⁵ Mark G. Edlestein, “Flannery O’Connor and the Problem of Modern Satire” *Studies in Short Fiction* 12.2 (Spring 1975) 144.

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Summary

Although her literary career was short, Flannery O'Connor made a great impression with her peculiar characters which are probably the most unsympathetic ones in the world of fiction. These self-indulged, ignorant individuals remain in our minds long after we have finished our reading. This fact perhaps results from the notion that Flannery O'Connor herself did not have sympathy for them either. Despite her deeply religious point of view, her characters are not treated in the light of assumed Christian humanism. On the contrary, at the end they are facing violent deaths, they are robbed of their artificial limbs and every time when it is possible they are in the centre of her scornful satirical and acid humor. This thesis aims to discuss the specific role of the last mentioned phenomenon and that is O'Connor's acid and satirical humor which interwoven with religious concerns plays a specific role in her fiction. The primary aim of the first chapter is the introduction of the tradition of Southern literature and contextualization of Flannery O'Connor unique place within the Southern literary canon. The first chapter, in addition, discusses the role, history and use of humor in Southern literature. Chapter two then shifts the focus on the special quality of O'Connor's humor in particular; moreover it also discusses her humor in connection with Henri Bergson's superiority theory of humor since they both recognize the role of humor as a socially formative phenomenon. The next chapter will consider Miss O'Connor's attitude towards nihilism. Later in the chapter O'Connor's use of comic elements and their semblance to Bergson's theory will be illustrated on the characters of would-be nihilists Hulga Hopewell and Hazel Motes. Chapter four will again consider the relation between O'Connor's characters of pseudo-intellectuals Asbury Fox and Calhoun and comic characters in Bergson's theory of humor. The characters from the opposite side of O'Connor's spectrum, the representatives of real evil Manley Pointer and Tom T. Shiftlet are discussed in the chapter five. These are not primarily discussed in relation to Bergson's theory since they are the ones who expose these self-indulgent and ignorant characters for what they really are. Though, evil they know what really matters and understand the truth in their own ways. The final chapter of this thesis provides the summary stressing the unique skill of O'Connor via humor to capture the universal and uncomfortable state of the modern man.

Key Words

- Flannery O'Connor
- Henri Bergson
- Theories of humor
- Laughter
- Southern literature
- Superiority theory
- Satire
- Irony
- Ralph C. Wood
- Hugh C. Holman
- Religion
- Morals
- Nihilism

Resumé

Aj napriek svojej pomerne krátkej kariére, Flannery O'Connorová svojimi dielami vzbudila nemalý ohlas. Jej zvláštne postavy, ktoré sa aj dnes dajú hodnotiť asi ako najmenej sympatické postavy literárneho sveta vôbec, postavy ignorantov zameraných a sústredených len na svoju vlastnú osobu nám zvláštnym spôsobom ostávajú v pamäti ešte dlho potom, čo ich fiktívne osudy dočítame. Vysvetlenie tohto javu môžeme hľadať aj v skutočnosti, že samotná Flannery O'Connorová s nimi nemala príliš mnoho súcitu. Aj napriek tomu, že sa otvorene hlásila ku svojej katolíckej identite, osudy jej postáv príliš nevyznievajú v súlade s ideami kresťanského humanizmu. Práve naopak, mnoho z nich záverom čelí násilnej smrti, sú okradnutí o svoje umelé končatiny a kedykoľvek, keď je to možné O'Connorová svoje postavy vystavuje ostrej satire a drsnému humoru. Nasledujúca práca sa sústreďí práve na tento už zmienený drsný a uštipačný humor, ktorý autorka vo svojich dielach mieša s moralistickým kázaním. Cieľom prvej kapitoly je uviesť samotnú autorku do širšieho kontextu južanskej literatúry a taktiež zaradiť charakter a užitie jej humoru do komplexnejšej tradície humoru v južanskej literatúre. Druhá kapitola bližšie určuje špecifickosť humoru Flannery O'Connorovej a zároveň poukazuje na určitú podobnosť s teóriou humoru vo filozofii Henriho Bergsona, ktorý podobne ako O'Connorová videl úlohu humoru ako primárny prostriedok udržania spoločenskej rovnováhy. Ďalšia kapitola následne uvádza do kontextu autorkin postoj k nihilizmu modernej doby a analyzuje jedny z typických postáv v dielach Flannery O'Connorovej, takzvaných pseudo-nihilistov. Hulga a Hazel Motes sú okrem svojho pseudo-nihilizmu veľmi podobní predstaviteľom Bergsonovskej charakteristike komickej postavy, ktorá sa taktiež objavuje v tejto kapitole. Štvrtá kapitola sa znova pokúša identifikovať typické rysy Bergsonovej teórie humoru v postavách obľúbených pseudo-intelektuálov, ktorí sa pomerne často vyskytujú v dielach O'Connorovej. Ako typických predstaviteľov táto kapitola uvádza Asburyho Foxa a Calhouna. Analýza postáv z opačného spektra autorkinej typológie tvorí piatu kapitolu. Tieto postavy nie sú veľmi diskutované z hľadiska svojej komickosti ako skôr z hľadiska, ktoré poukazuje na ich schopnosť odhaliť ostatným postavám-ignorantom ich pravú podstatu. Aj napriek tomu, že sú spojenci zla, dokážu identifikovať, čo je dôležité a taktiež poznajú svoju pravdu. Záverečná kapitola zhrňuje predložené poznatky a zdôrazňuje unikátny talent Flannery O'Connorovej tak verne zobrazit' súčasný znepokojujúci stav moderného človeka.

Kľúčové slová

- Flannery O'Connorová
- Henri Bergson
- Teória humoru
- Smiech
- Južanská literatúra
- Teória superiority
- Satira
- Irónia
- Ralph C. Wood
- Hugh C. Holman
- Náboženstvo
- Mravy
- Nihilizmus