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Interactions between Character and Author

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Abstract:

Flannery O'Connor associated herself with the literary theory of New Criticism. Considering her inclusion of autobiographical elements in her work, she can neither be considered a New Critic, nor can her works be read as totally separate from their author. O'Connor includes religion, place, isolation, and romance from her personal life into her short stories and novels. Based on the extent to which she reflects herself into her stories, a reader cannot fully comprehend O'Connor's purpose and drive without an understanding of her life. Furthermore, O'Connor herself increasingly stepped forward to give explanations and interpretations when she perceived her stories to be misunderstood. It proves impossible to fully appreciate O'Connor's work without taking into account her life and her intentions.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, Catholicism, southern literature, isolated author, autobiography

Flannery O'Connor, early in her career, worked to separate herself from her writings. In her essay "The Teaching of Literature," O'Connor implies that a literary work must be considered its own entity. She states "a work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on the paper" (O'Connor 126). She deliberately avoided giving explanations of her work in order to allow her audience the chance to interpret the works on their own (McGill 33). Nevertheless, as time passed and misunderstanding of her works continued, she increasingly stepped in to clarify her authorial intent (33). O'Connor's intentions for her writing grew clearer as time passed due to the inclusion of autobiographical elements—religion, place, isolation, and romance—and to her eventual willingness to clarify her stories; therefore, she can not be considered compliant to the ideals of New Criticism.

To begin, one way in which O'Connor puts herself into her stories is through her view of religion. In spite of growing up in the Protestant South, she remained a devout Catholic her entire life. Speaking of her, biographer Terry Teachout states "O'Connor's religious beliefs were central to her art. She was a 'cradle Catholic,' one of the very few novelists of her generation to have been born into the church rather than converting to Catholocism as an adult, and she appears never to have weathered any crisis of faith" (Teachout 56). Such strong convictions not only would have inevitably leaked into her writings, but O'Connor deliberately includes them in order to cry repentance to a fallen world.

Religious themes permeate O'Connor's stories. She yearned to impact the literary world with her talent and hard work, however, and not tailor her fictions toward a niche of Catholic readers (O'Connor 146). Thus, she avoids overtly religious discussion and explains her reasons behind this decision. "The Catholic who does not write for a limited circle of fellow Catholics will in all probability consider that, since this is his vision, he is writing for a hostile audience, and he will be more than ever concerned to have his work stand on its own feet and be complete and self-sufficient and impregnable in its own right" (O'Connor 146). O'Connor considers herself both a Catholic and a writer. To be true to both identities, she permitted them to influence each other, but not to corrupt each other. She refused to allow the importance of her religious message to replace the quality of her writing. Conversely, she adamantly shared her beliefs in spite of an increasingly skeptical and morally subjective world (Tuttle 1097).

The most glaring example of religion in O'Connor's short stories is her treatment of grace. In one letter, O'Connor explains her view as such, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful" (O'Connor 307). O'Connor views grace as God's merciful and divine intervention in human lives. This intervention will then, hopefully, change the mortal into becoming a better, more spiritually aware human being. Regrettably, this grace is not always desired or easily attained. She often places the revelation, or realization of this intervention, as the climax in her stories. In order to access this grace, the characters in O'Connor's fictions must pass through physical distress and suffering. For example, in "Revelation," Mrs. Turpin has a book thrown at her face, and she later experiences a visionary moment of understanding in a pigsty. The story "Greenleaf" concludes with the protagonist, Mrs. May, realizing and regretting the error of her unfaithful life as she is gored by a bull. Young Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" learns that he must live with a chronic illness, and this unexpected reality comes as he envisions an icy and piercing dove of the Holy Ghost descending over his bed.

Each story cited above, and other stories written by O'Connor, includes the seemingly contrasting elements of grace and pain. In the dictionary, words listed with grace include: elegance, pleasing, favor, goodwill, mercy, and pardon (Grace 1). This is not a vocabulary normally fit for blood or gore. However, in her short stories, in order to be awoken from their sinful nature, characters must be jolted with a recognition of the divine. God's grace will eventually save Mrs. Turpin as she repents of her judgmental attitudes; His grace allows Mrs. May to repent in the last seconds of her life; grace spares Asbury of a premature death and gives him an opportunity to change his sinful ways. Modern students may read O'Connor's works and be repulsed by the physical calamities that she decides to include within her stories. Nonetheless, her juxtaposition of physical pain with redeeming grace proves consistent with a Christian mindset.

Christianity states that humans are constantly sinning and thereby in a constant need for repentance. Fortunately, God also uses these trials and temptations to strengthen and ennoble humanity. "I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me" (KJV Phl 4:13). As a person recognizes their dependence on Christ's grace, they can improve. It then follows that the best way for a person to become humble enough to accept the offered grace would be through physical suffering or trial. Physical pain reminds the reader of her mortality and encourages her to reach out to whatever divinity in which she believes. It provides an effective connection between author, reader, and God. The extent of this suffering ranges everywhere from simple emotions, such as confusion or sorrow, to violent death.

The physical pain included in O'Connor's stories may, at first glance, seem like gratuitous violence. Although, based on the knowledge that she practiced Catholicism, a reader can interpret this pain not merely as a gimmick for shock value but rather as serving a higher purpose. It adds a dramatic flair to both interest the reader and, more importantly, enlighten him. O'Connor showcases in this way her ability to remain true to Catholicism and to her writing prowess.

In addition to including her religious beliefs in her work, Flannery O'Connor used a Southern setting to backdrop her stories (Nesbitt 1). She spent her childhood and nearly her entire adult life in the Protestant South, so her understanding of southern slang, spirituality, and customs were drilled into her very being (1). Thus, the references to southern culture in her stories and novels come from personal experience. The analysis of place in O'Connor's literature has been so extensively studied, that one critic remarks that it "is anything but revolutionary" (1).

Flannery O'Connor also includes solitary characters, isolation, and displacement in many stories (Nisly 1). She includes characters that are alone, whether physically or emotionally, and explores this effect on their personae (1). Religiously, O'Connor would

have opposed any person's attempt to cut themselves off from their fellow man or even from God. An increased obsession with the self results in pride, one of the seven deadly sins according to the Catholic Church (McGill32). From the widowed Mrs. May of *Greenleaf* to the bickering, disconnected couple in *Parker's Back*, the reader senses the loneliness woven through many stories. Yet this element may be attributed more to O'Connor's personal experience than to a lesson she wishes to teach (Bosco 294).

From 1951 until her passing in 1964, Flannery O'Connor lived at her mother's farm in Milledgeville, Georgia (Gordon 2). Due to her battle with Lupus, she decided to stay home rather than risk worsening her condition (2). Before this, she had traveled to Iowa to study and experienced all the signs of a promising career (1). Fortunately, O'Connor pursued her passion and maintained contact with the outside literary world instead of surrendering herself to her woes (McGill 40). Tragically, this experience prevented her from establishing deep personal relationships, as she rarely left home.

After studying religion, place, and isolation in O'Connor's stories, the inclusion of her own personal romance in her fictions should not surprise any literary critic. The supreme example of O'Connor's personal life mixing with her writing comes in the story "Good Country People." O'Connor writes of a protagonist named Hulga (Bosco 283). A college graduate, Hulga lives with her mother on the Southern family farm because she uses a prosthetic leg. Hulga receives visits from a charming young man with whom she falls in love. Unfortunately, her love is unrequited and the man abandons her to her disillusionment and despair (284).

In reference to this story, O'Connor states "What would you make out about me just from reading 'Good Country People'? Plenty, but not the whole story" (1). Typical of O'Connor, she attempts to distance herself from her work in order to prevent tainting its perception by her audience. On the other hand, the similarities between author and character are striking and abundant. The educated female protagonist, the southern setting, the homebound circumstances, and even the disappointing lover all reflect factual pieces of O'Connor's life.

Mark Bosco, literary critic, discusses these pieces in his essay titled "Consenting to Love: Autobiographical Roots of 'Good Country People.'" He outlines the many instances of either direct or suspiciously close connections between Hulga and O'Connor. He arrives at the conclusion that "though it would be wrong to argue from the evidence that 'Good Country People' is simply autobiography, writing the story clearly served as a creative channel for O'Connor to come to terms with these decisive moments in her inner life" (293). O'Connor herself eventually faced this reality rather uncomfortably when she was confronted by the man upon whom the story's antagonist is based (293). She admitted to basing certain circumstances on their relationship but denied any feelings of resentment or betrayal (294).

In her effort to portray the truth O'Connor included much of her own version of reality. The majority of her characters face isolation, just as she felt cut off from the outside world, and specifically Hulga in "Good Country People" experiences what O'Connor also experienced. The best explanation for this phenomenon of characters reflecting their author is addressed by O'Connor herself. "When such a writer has a freak for his hero, he is not simply showing us what we are, but what we have been and what we could become. His prophet-freak is an image of himself" (O'Connor 117-8). She admits here that the connection between an author and her work may prove stronger than the author would care to admit. Following this logic, how could an author include any sort of message or moral or even a simple theme without tainting the work itself with personal bias? She could not.

Unless a writer were to begin without any sort of agenda or any memory of any experience, she will draw upon those experiences; she will tailor the story to fit her agenda. Authors hoping to impact or influence will inevitably leak parts of themselves into the work.

This leakage, however, should not be seen as an infection or corruption of the work. Rather, readers must accept this bias to be as crucial to the work as grammar, punctuation, or vocabulary. An audience without any background on O'Connor may read and enjoy her stories; however, they will not be capable of fully appreciating their context or message.

Unless O'Connor's life is used to understand her novels, readers are forced to look through the lens of their own experiences and opinions in order to interpret. This neither should be seen as a corruption of the work. Humanity longs to comprehend and to explain, and the basic way to do so is by asking ourselves "What is this? Have I seen this before?". The common reader does this in the easiest way by putting literature into terms of himself or someone else—not into a vacuum, a space void of preconceived ideas or feelings.

The acceptance of this idea proves difficult once it is understood that O'Connor associated herself with the theory of New Criticism (Fodor 1-2). An author, with much of herself included into her stories, decided to support a theory that attempts to ignore the author entirely. The popularity of the group during her university studies could have influenced her, but she also might have simply been attracted to the idea of being considered a separate entity from her work (1). As mentioned before, O'Connor spoke to this point several times throughout her career. Yet, as time went on, O'Connor grew less hesitant to interpret those stories (McGill 33). Assuming she truly supported New Criticism, she never would have stepped forward to provide explanations concerning her work. It completely contradicts the New Critics' theory.

To illustrate, suppose an English speaking American enters a Chinese movie theater where they project films in only Mandarin. There are no translators; they have no subtitles. This person could theoretically enjoy the movie and could even become an expert on the technicalities of the special effects or the quality of the camera. This person could not, however, claim to understand the purpose of the film. Similarly, New Critics might understand the mechanics of Flannery O'Connor's writing, but they cannot draw reliable conclusions. This anonymous film goer, in order to make sense of the film, would either have to understand Mandarin or mentally substitute their own pretend dialogue. Thus, to feel that a work serves a larger purpose or conveys a message, readers must study it in relation to the author or through their own personal life.

In a study of the use of place in Flannery O'Connor's writing, one critic points out that "reading these stories alongside her letters and lectures, we can see that O'Connor not only comments on place, but that she stands on and defends particular ground herself. And expanding our reading to include her critics, we begin to see positions being established that monitor and limit our reading of her, thus legitimating particular critical approaches" (Nesbitt 1). She argues that not only did O'Connor purposefully include elements of her life into her stories, but that she defends this inclusion. Thus, certain critical theories apply better than others in order to analyze O'Connor's fictions (1). To contradict O'Connor's own sincere interpretation of her work would be as ridiculous as to challenge a painter on whether he had painted a horse or an apple. If the evidence reasonably supports the author, the author's interpretation must stand.

Robert McGill explores this concept in his essay titled "The Life You Write May Be Your Own: Epistolary Autobiography and the Reluctant Resurrection of Flannery O'Connor" (McGill 31). He examines O'Connor's short stories, novels, essays, and personal letters in order to understand her connection with her work. McGill finds that although she attempts to associate herself as a New Critic, O'Connor could not restrain herself from correcting the misinterpretation of her works:

> In her opinion there were still right and wrong ways to read her stories, and since so few people seemed to read them rightly, she frequently felt obliged to correct them. A sense of this grudging obligation to reveal herself is evident in

> letters written in 1962 when her first novel, Wise Blood, was being reprinted. She declares repeatedly that she is neither willing nor able to write a preface for the edition; nevertheless, she eventually produced one. (33)

McGill points out that she did maintain distance for a time, as New Critics do. Yet the frustration of misinterpretation mounted and O'Connor changed her stance. The motivation behind her initial rejection of authorial interpretation could be based, as she states in "The Teaching of Literature", on her attempt to let her work "stand on its own feet" (Fodor 256). O'Connor faithfully wrote according to her Catholic beliefs, but she also religiously avoided writing only to Catholics.

In sum, Flannery O'Connor includes belief, setting, and situation based upon her own life. The attempt to erase O'Connor completely from a study of her works would provide, perhaps not inaccurate, but an incomplete version of the truth. As O'Connor herself so eloquently writes in the case of her first novel, "Wise Blood was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence" (McGill 33). In other words, a person either unaware of O'Connor's Christianity or devoid of religious belief would be unable to interpret her work. A person hoping to not only enjoy O'Connor's fiction but also to understand it would necessarily need an understanding of O'Connor herself. She can neither be seen as a New Critic nor be analyzed using the theory.

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