Model Student
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Flannery O'Connor's Depiction of the Changing South

Flannery O'Connor's religious views are widely recognized. Like Dostoevsky's, her faith was of a traditional orthodox nature. Also like him, the details of her religiosity are of minor importance compared to her utilization of it in intense fiction that was highly critical of her society. As a southern Catholic, she found her environment to be lacking much both spiritually and socially, as her stories "A Good Man is Hard to Find", "Greenleaf," and "Everything that Rises Must Converge" each illuminate in their own way. In these stories, O'Connor depicts people struggling to live in a South which has changed too rapidly for them to keep pace.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the character known simply as "the grandmother" and the deranged killer who calls himself "The Misfit" operate almost as two sides of the same coin: both find themselves unable to adjust to a world which no longer has any use for them. In this story, the grandmother and her family meet The Misfit—and their untimely end—while on a road trip to Florida. The grandmother in the story comes across as a former southern belle who clings desperately to her old ways in the face of their and her increasing obsolescence. She lives with her son and his family, and is a constant burden on them. She insists on appearing to be "a lady", casually describes a black child as a "pickaninny" (1346), and relates to her grandchildren a romanticized vision of her past that ultimately misleads the family to their collective doom. She rails against "the way things [are] now," but doesn't bother attempting to comprehend the social causes of negative developments, choosing instead to blame it on American financial assistance

to Europe (1349). She attaches the utmost importance to her lineage, as demonstrated when she takes pride in the size of her grandfather's plantation, and when she attempts in vain to flatter The Misfit: “I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!” (1352) This fails, of course, because The Misfit has been so debased as to be beyond such appeals to his character.

The Misfit could be seen as a distorted version of the Southern Gentleman. He resembles such a figure in his speech and manners, but the psychological and theological dilemma he describes is far more modern, and may result from the disorientation of a man of his old-fashioned disposition being forced to live in a world where such a nature is no longer welcome. The intellectual pretensions common to the southern gentleman type are present in him, and he uses them to rationalize murder with a fatalistic air reminiscent of how a southern gentleman might have rationalized the plantation system that granted him his status:

> “If [Jesus] did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow [sic] away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can- by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.”(1356)

It is worth noting, however, that when The Misfit removes his glasses the “scholarly look” (1351) that the grandmother had seen in him disappears, revealing eyes that are “red-rimmed, pale, and defenseless-looking” (1356). This suggests that his entire persona is merely a facade that serves to mask his inner emptiness. In the modern world where the truth of Christianity is no longer readily apparent, many of those who would have based their lives around its rituals are left floundering, desperate for meaning in life and potentially releasing their frustration in

violence when they fail to find it.

"Greenleaf" focuses on a class struggle between a haughty farm owner and her simple but willful employee. Mrs. May feels a sense of entitlement due to the hardship she has had to endure, and she resents those who do have not been forced to adopt her hard work ethic. This includes her employee Mr. Greenleaf, his family, and her own adult unmarried sons. Her son Scofield is an amoral salesman of cheap insurance. Wesley is a sickly and deeply cynical college professor. Both of them reject her, with Wesley going so far as to say (to Scofield, but directed to Mrs. May) "Neither you nor me is her boy" (1369). Still, she "remains foremost a Southern mother. She feels a duty to her sons and takes whatever treatment they have to offer," (Whitt 1387) failing to see that the lifestyle she so prides herself on has led to this dissociation.

She is less tolerant of Mr. Greenleaf. Margaret Early Whitt explains in her essay, "Understanding Flannery O'Connor," that "because of the rigid class structure that so permeated the South of O'Connor's day, the upper-class land-owning Mrs. May has to endure the comeuppance from a lower class that refuses to adhere to old rules" (1388). Throughout her essay Whitt analyzes the many rules that O'Connor represents. These old rules include a view of religion as foremost a social construct, as well as technological limitations. Greenleaf's twin sons, O.T. and E.T., own their own house and farm near her, which they have outfitted with a new steel dairy mill. Mrs. May resents them both because she believes their success to be undeserved, and because she feels they owe her for "all the nice little things [she] did for them" (1370) as children. The presence of the Greenleaf boys' scrub bull is as a perpetual agent of change around which the action revolves. The conflicts it creates allow the reader to see the flaws in Mrs. May's thinking that are not apparent to her until the bull brings about her violent

end.

The sophistication evident in O'Connor's characterizations extends to her treatment of black characters. As Alice Walker points out in her essay, “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor”:

> That she retained a certain distance from the inner workings of her black characters seems to me all to her credit, since, by deliberately limiting her treatment of them to cover their observable demeanor and actions, she leaves them free, in the reader's imagination, to inhabit another landscape, another life, than the one she creates for them. (52)

O'Connor made no pretense to fully understanding the experience of blacks in the south, and in keeping a respectful distance she avoids displays of the “superior racial patience” that the black characters of other white southern writers including Faulkner tended to unconvincingly exhibit (Walker 52). She was fittingly as modern in her approach to black characters as she was in understanding the schizophrenic state of the New South, placing her ahead of other Southern writers who were still “obsessed with a racial past that would not let them go” (Walker 51).

While O'Connor was clearly conscious of the racial and cultural divide, where it was relevant she used it to enrich her characters rather than wholly define them. It seems easy now to condemn those who resisted integration, but, as Julian of “Everything that Rises Must Converge” discovers too late, outright condemnation is an impediment to understanding and forgiveness. Julian berates his mother for her racial intolerance throughout the story. When his mother is hit at story’s end by the purse of a black woman to whose son she patronizingly offers a penny, his first instinct is to mock her:

> “Don't think that was just an uppity Negro woman. That was the whole colored race which

> will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure, it looked better on her than it did on you." (419)

But when it becomes apparent that she has suffered some serious damage, likely a stroke, "the tide of darkness [seems] to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow" (420). It is the potentially redemptive elements of such tragedies that O'Connor is most interested in. In "Everything that Rises Must Converge" she examines the deeply rooted beliefs and spiritual vacuity that informed the prejudices of the many like Julian's mother who stubbornly attempted to live in the past. At the same time, she mocks the hypocrisy of those like Julian who would preach of racial equality while treating blacks as merely the means to an end—that is, the fulfillment of their own self-satisfaction. Their punishment is exceedingly harsh, but within it is the element of a new realization.

The extent of the critical focus on the role of Flannery O'Connor's Catholicism tends to overshadow her function as a social critic. She was a brilliant observer and chronicler of turbulent times in her region. If her religion was the driving force in motivating her writing, it was at least not her sole subject. The nature of O'Connor's approach to those aspects of her stories which could be called peripheral to her main points is nonetheless deserving of attention.