

“Them There Sort”: The Disabled in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor

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ABSTRACT: Critics regularly see Flannery O’Connor as an exemplar of the Southern Grotesque, like William Faulkner. Certainly her figures of the disabled fit into this paradigm of political and social commentary. Nevertheless, their meaning is not exhausted by this. The theological symbolism, which O’Connor specifically endorsed, does not exhaust the meaning in her use of disabled characters. They are not allegorical figures. She writes quite intentionally in the mode of realism. Her disabled characters are human beings as fully in need of redemption as those with wider ranges of capability, and especially in her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. She presents that full humanity as a rebuke to the utilitarianism that is philosophically foundational to a culture that devalues the lives of people with disabilities.

THERE ARE MANY DISABLED PEOPLE in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, like blind Haze Motes in *Wise Blood*, the one-legged Hulga in “Good Country People,” or the vicious delinquent Rufus Johnson, who flourishes his crutches in “The Lame Shall Enter First.” In giving us these characters, Flannery O’Connor does not write sensitive portrayals propagandizing against what these days is called able-ism. She treats the disabled unsentimentally, to say the least. In her books they match or exceed the viciousness of her characters with whole and healthy bodies. Critics quite reasonably take these figures as symbolic, even as “allegory embodying a moral point of view.”¹ However, her realist mode of expression implies

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¹ Delma Eugene Presley, “The Moral Function of Distortion in Southern Gro-

something more complex. As Debra Romanick Baldwin says, with a “physicality as an antidote to both the solipsistic intellectualism and superficial materialism of modern culture..., she appeals to the vivid sensations of sin in order to jar her readers into a deeper encounter with reality.”²

Baldwin says that O’Connor “goes against the grain of contemporary sensitivity, of ‘political correctness’ towards physical disabilities,” and unashamedly uses disabled bodies as symbols. Unquestionably symbolism with allegorical elements inhabits the stories. Some of the symbolism is political and social, having to do with the state of the American South during the middle of the twentieth century – for instance, the withered limbs of General Sash in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.” Some is religious, informed by O’Connor’s philosophically engaged Catholicism. Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* is both literally deaf and symbolically deaf to the Gospel preached by Old Tarwater. O’Connor herself interprets one-legged Hulga bluntly: “A maimed soul is a maimed soul.”³ Her disabled characters have the human dignity of being able to sin. Yet O’Connor reminds her readers that she also presents goodness in the physically distorted. Of goodness she comments, rather grimly: “Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque.”⁴

Indeed O’Connor’s symbolic intention is curiously expressed. Her stylistic choices are deliberate and rooted in philosophical purpose. The genres of fantasy and science fiction were not in O’Connor’s milieu considered serious literary vehicles, but it was not uncommon in the middle of the twentieth century to write in absurdist modes, or a stream-of-consciousness style. Even allegory was moderately respectable in religious writers such as C.S. Lewis. All of these modes are more friendly to pure symbolism than the realist paradigm that O’Connor chose for her work. Instead of pure symbol, or psychological interiority represented by symbol, she gives us things that are also signs – things that we can encounter in our everyday world where our own moral choices are made.

tesque,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 37/2 (May 1972): 41.

² Debra Romanick Baldwin, “Augustinian Physicality and the Rhetoric of the Grotesque in the Art of Flannery O’Connor” in *Augustine and Literature*, ed. Robert P. Kennedy, Kim Paffenroth, and John Doody (New York NY: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 302.

³ Baldwin, p. 312.

⁴ Quoted in Baldwin, p. 314.

For an indictment of the incoherency of the intellectual landscape of her time, O'Connor could have found models in Samuel Beckett's attack on narrative and character coherence, the *Molloy* trilogy, or in the absurdist drama of Edward Albee. In Latin America, political satire was beginning to take the shape of fantastical narratives with symbolic wonders unmoored from ordinary life, a technique now called "magic realism." There was even a literary movement, to which her name is often attached, called the Southern Gothic, whose social critique was presumed to be as angst-ridden as that of the absurdists among the northern and European literati.⁵

The Southern Grotesque writers include (besides O'Connor) such figures as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner, the most important of them.⁶ Faulkner's stylistic project involved stream-of-consciousness technique that purposefully made it difficult for readers to distinguish events from hallucinations, fantasies, and self-deceptions in accounts presented by his characters. This technique garnered much praise for attacking the psychological diseases of O'Connor's time and place. In Faulkner's classic *As I Lay Dying*, for instance, readers can slowly piece together a picture of how Anse Bundren does serious damage to his children in every way, out of his loyalty to the stinking corpse of a woman who was vicious and faithless during her life. Readers hear the confused, obsessive thoughts of each character as one is lamed, another driven mad, and the others abused and cheated in their common quest to honor the dead thing. Faulkner's political indictment of Southern obsessions is obviously close to the surface. The horrifying, disintegrating Confederacy, despite being dead, controls the lives of the men, and she was never very good in the first place.

O'Connor's social commentary appears less allegorically in sullen but watchful African-American characters, and her white characters' pathetic assertions of their ancestral aristocratic dignity or intellectual sophistication.⁷ She skewers patronizing attitudes that emerge into sensitivity about race or

⁵ Presley, p. 37.

⁶ Presley, p. 45.

⁷ Her "integrationist" views were still controversial in the late 1950s and early 1960s. See Susan Edmunds, "Through a Glass Darkly: Visions of Integrated Community in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*," *Contemporary Literature* 37/4 (Winter 1996): 559-60, 582-83. Edmunds's argument about mirrors providing hidden symbols of racial and gender equality I do not find persuasive, but her historical research is sound.

disabilities in a way that is in the end what we would call “virtue-signaling” – a caressing of one’s own sweet and nobly sympathetic ego. Most often, O’Connor is targeting the “Modern Manichee,” a person whose pride creates two intimately linked forms of engagement with the body: “the sentimental and the obscene.” She adds, “[T]he similarity between the two forms escapes him.”⁸ O’Connor admired John Henry Newman and appears to have internalized his observation about “the natural effect of pain upon the mind.”⁹ He wrote, “[L]et it be well understood that it has no sanctifying influence in itself. Bad men are made worse by it. This should be borne in mind, lest we deceive ourselves.”¹⁰

O’Connor’s characters with disabilities are at least as ornery as anybody else in her stories. In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” the one-armed Mr. Shiftlet marries and abandons brain-damaged Lucynell in order to steal her mother’s car. One-legged Hulga plots to create emotional havoc in the Bible salesman in “Good Country People” – not to punish his dishonesty or perversity, but to indulge her spite about the religion that she assumes he is preaching. In fact his particular brand of perversion isn’t sexual at all, and he is as much an atheist as Hulga. When he steals her wooden leg without even letting her seduce him, she is no more morally justified than he is. Disaster stalks self-congratulatory do-gooders like Thomas’s mother in “The Comforts of Home” or Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” who think they can fix the corruption of chosen evil by granting the sinners some material advantages and indulging what are presumed to be their virtuous wishes.

As she points out in her essay, “Novelist and Believer,” the distorted religiosity of her characters is not a rejection of religion any more than her characters’ crippled limbs constitute O’Connor’s rejection of legs and feet. She is commenting on the delusions of those who think themselves whole and well-adjusted. Behind her disabled religious characters is often the indictment Jesus made: “If you were blind you would have no guilt; but now that you say ‘We see,’ your guilt remains” (John 9:41). Her crippled figures display in large letters, they shout, the moral state to which her audience is oblivious.

⁸ Quoted in Baldwin, p. 305.

⁹ Arthur F. Kinney, *Flannery O’Connor’s Library: Resources of Being* (Athens GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 64-66.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, “Bodily Suffering,” *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 3 (London UK: Longmans Green, 1907), pp. 143-44. Accessed at newmanreader.org/.

O'Connor's disabled characters are not merely symbolic structures meant to communicate, like little billboards. Accessible to readers far more than Faulkner's characters, they are roundly human sinners in need of redemption. Rufus Johnson knows he is doing evil, and so does Hulga. General Sash is too sunk in senility to care about sin, but readers see pretty fully the slough of vanity and impotent lust into which the old man has sunk himself. Both the political and the religious imagery in O'Connor's fiction come close at times to being allegorical, but they do not step over that line, stylistically. Instead she chooses a spare selection of concrete detail to guide her readers. This is not reportage, but the rhetorical strategy of realism: namely, choosing to create a very concrete world in order to form readers' reactions. O'Connor joked about the way that critics understood her realism: "I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic."¹¹ The world in which her characters live is meant to look like a seedy neighborhood of the country we ourselves inhabit. The circus hermaphrodite in the story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is grotesque, but hermaphrodites exist and circuses still exist (despite the shutdown of Barnum and Bailey, leaving so much of the populace to satisfy themselves with bread and Youtube).

O'Connor's fiction attends to the ugly aspects of the physicality of ordinary existence. Jane Austen's airy aristocrats may faint, but they never throw up, or limp, or blubber due to a mental incapacity for speech. O'Connor's characters do, in uncomfortably vivid scenes. She indulges in such uncomfortable observations with a reason. She means her readers to recognize that the world inhabited by these characters is the readers' own, the culture is their own, and the twisted philosophies that drive the vicious behaviors are their own. She is a poet of the body, and she thinks we disregard the reality before our senses all too often for the sake of egotism. We must not, as a critic has pointed out, "disdain the concrete and literal meaning of the text," but rather in "justice to the physical universe" seek "the embodied particular."¹²

The most significant of O'Connor's disabled characters is the one whose redemption is the driving motive in her best novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*.

¹¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York NY: Noonday Press, Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1969), p. 40.

¹² Baldwin, pp. 306, 309, 307.

In that book, readers encounter in the people most like themselves the characters whose morals they ought to recognize as grotesque. There she rebukes the philosophical aberrations of a utilitarian, hedonistic culture by presenting ferocious prophets upholding the human dignity of a ridiculous, inarticulate boy whom we would delicately call “mentally disabled.” O’Connor creates two characters who believe themselves prophets of God. They call the boy an idiot and respect his need for salvation. In keeping with her devotion to the “sanctity of the physical world,” O’Connor presents her prophets with gritty attention to their low habits and untidy lifestyles.¹³ Intense in their concrete engagement with the flesh, and transcendent in their recognition of truth, the backwater prophets understand the nature of good far better than their refined despisers, who consider the disabled child a blight upon their own pretty existence.

The great matter of contention in the novel is whether Young Tarwater is obliged to baptize his severely retarded cousin Bishop against the wishes of the boy’s father Rayber. Sentimentalists like Rayber, who want to manipulate and shape human nature, see no need for redemption for such a person as Bishop. His own father classifies Bishop as subhuman. O’Connor demonstrates that sentimentality about the perfectibility of human existence and the hatred of the disabled are intimately linked.

The story is not pretty. Old Tarwater lives by means of his whiskey still and carries a burden of obligation to be a prophet of the Lord. He evangelized his nephew Rayber. The young man rejected Old Tarwater’s religion and encouraged his sister to reject restrictive Christian sexual norms. Pregnant and abandoned, she died in a car wreck, but the baby was saved. Rayber is taking care of the baby when Old Tarwater baptizes and, as Rayber recalls, kidnaps him “to raise into a prophet to burn my eyes clean.” Rayber’s later marriage produced the idiot son Bishop, whom Old Tarwater seeks to baptize. Rayber refuses: “You could slosh water on him for the rest of his life and he’d still be an idiot. Five years old for all eternity, useless forever.” Old Tarwater holds firm to his conviction: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord even an idiot.” He speculates that the child was made disabled to save him from the empty philosophy and pride of Rayber.

Seven years later Rayber’s orphan nephew, calling himself Tarwater, is fourteen and rebellious. When Old Tarwater dies, the teenager disobeys the old

¹³ Baldwin, p. 303.

man's last wishes, leaving him unburied, and seeks out Rayber. Nevertheless, Tarwater is haunted by Old Tarwater's prophecy that he has been chosen to baptize Bishop. Young Tarwater is repulsed and ashamed at seeing the disabled child, but he is almost equally repulsed at uncle Rayber's bleak existentialist worldview. Rayber takes the two boys to a fishing resort to try to distract Young Tarwater from spiritual concerns and make him "normal."

Rayber's vision of normalcy becomes clear when the man admits to young Tarwater that he tried to drown Bishop once but found himself unable to follow through with his ideas about human worth. Tarwater asks if Bishop has been baptized. "I may not have the guts to drown him," Rayber replies, "but I have the guts to maintain my self-respect and not to perform futile rites over him.... I am born once and no more. What I can see and do for myself and my fellowman in this life is all of my portion and I'm content with it" (172). Rayber goes on to tell Tarwater that he has to get rid of his obsession about baptizing Bishop. This "obsession" is, of course, an acknowledgment of Bishop's full humanity.

Tarwater absorbs Rayber's saying and decides to put into action his uncle's explicit conviction that people are only worthwhile if they are useful and normal. Imitating his uncle but with more effect, Young Tarwater murders Bishop. While drowning him, Young Tarwater finds himself speaking the formula of baptism. He is shocked at himself. The use of these words is not for him ironic, and he never tries to persuade himself so. He realizes that he has fulfilled his mission unwillingly, spilling the words "on accident." Fleeing the scene, he falls in with a pedophile who rapes him, making Young Tarwater useful for his own pleasure. Returning to the farm, he finds his neighbors have fulfilled Old Tarwater's dying wish and buried him. Defeated, Young Tarwater abandons his rebellion and turns back to go to the city, having accepted his role as evangelist and prophet.

Two significant scenes occur in the lodge where Rayber has taken the boys just before Young Tarwater drowns Bishop. The first is when the three check into the lodge. Rayber has taken the suitcases upstairs, leaving the boys in the lobby with the receptionist. Bishop startles Tarwater by touching him:

He snatched his touched hand up and jammed it in his pocket. "Leave off!" he said in a high voice. "Git away and quit bothering me!"

"Mind how you talk to one of them there, you boy!" the woman hissed.

He looked at her as if it were the first time she had spoken to him. "Them there what?" he murmured.

“Them there kind,” she said, looking at him fiercely as though he had profaned the holy. (155)

What “kind” is he? Free indirect discourse shows that the receptionist thinks of Bishop as an “afflicted child.” He is a suffering human being, even if he does not understand his own suffering. As a suffering human being, he is holy. She does not think that she can fix him. Affliction has its own dignity and should call forth not contempt but respect. It does not do so in all quarters.

In the cafe at the lodge, some teenagers are dancing. Bishop enjoys watching them and bellows at them when they sit down. Bishop is ugly, unable to speak, and absurdly dressed. O’Connor doesn’t spare us the sight:

He had on a black cowboy hat and a pair of short khaki pants that were too tight for even his narrow hips and a yellow t-shirt that had not been washed any time lately. Both his brown hightop shoes were untied. The upper part of him looked like an old man and the lower part like a child. (154-55)

Rayber’s thoughts are shown to us, and they reveal to readers why he was unable to drown Bishop. When confronted by the hostility of the hedonistic teens, he actually does desire to protect his son, despite his own utilitarian philosophical position. We see it after the dancers have noticed Bishop:

An angry silence fell over them. Their look was shocked and affronted as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before they were allowed to see it. With pleasure Rayber could have dashed across the room and swung his lifted chair in their faces. (190)

He doesn’t, and the revelers offended by an imperfect human leave in disgust. As O’Connor observes in an essay, “We are now living in an age which doubts both fact and value.”¹⁴ Rayber does have within him the recognition of the fact that his son is as human as he is and of the child’s value as a person worthy of love. This seems to him insufficiently modern, so he sets himself to doubt it. He spouts his self-righteous self-deception to Tarwater. Disastrously, Tarwater acts upon it. Only by his own suffering is the boy broken away from the contempt that Rayber has taught him, as part of the “advanced” culture of achievement with which Rayber wants to replace the religious demands

¹⁴ *Mystery and Manners*, p. 117.

represented by Old Tarwater. Those demands include respect for suffering human beings.

The failure to respect the disabled even in speech leads directly to murder. The real defect is in Rayber's mind and the evil inculturation that he foists upon his backwoods nephew. It looks attractive; it involves advanced technology, beautiful people like the teenage dancers, and public respect such as Rayber gains by publishing a scornful article about Old Tarwater in "some teacher's magazine." But it is false, and it is ultimately destructive. Bishop's mind is clearly defective, but that deficiency is nothing compared to the evil in the cold utilitarian culture to which Rayber pays such desperate homage in his attempt to escape the obligations of love.

Young Tarwater is "mean," as the receptionist says. Nevertheless, he is aware of the transcendent and finally agrees to serve it. We are shocked into respect for his recognition of the full humanity of the cousin he despises. The effect of the book is to show the majesty and power of a culture that acknowledges transcendent truth and meaning, and the folly of rebellion against it. As Baldwin says of Augustine, "Thus the grotesque here acts as a blessing as well as a curse, a cure as well as an affliction."¹⁵ Bound up in the supernatural vision of the Tarwaters is a rebuke to the arrogant, gnostic intellectualism that is blind to its own grotesquerie and that dares not see the full moral dignity of imperfect persons.

¹⁵ Baldwin, p. 320.