

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S UNCANNY VISION OF RACE AND RACE
RELATIONS

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RELATIONS

A Thesis

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Abstract
of
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Flannery O'Connor's short fiction overflows with race-related themes. The southern racial hierarchy clashes with integration and multiculturalism in her fiction. Critical response to these themes has been divided. Some critics, like Melvin G. Williams, assail O'Connor for being racist and unqualified to examine such issues. Others hail O'Connor's visionary style that unsettles the reader.

The wide-ranging response to O'Connor's race-related themes is perhaps due to the southern writer's style. In her essay "Flannery O'Connor and the Aesthetics of Torture," critic Patricia Yaeger notes that the southern writer "uses the predicaments of her characters to ask, 'What happens when the values supporting southern bodies collapse under contradictory codes?'" Many of O'Connor's characters experience a sense of Freudian uncanny, a feeling of home/unhomely. They must reflect on the assumptions and misconceptions that they have regarding race. Further, those who read O'Connor's fiction experience a sense of the uncanny. They too must examine how they define race, particularly when O'Connor deliberately omits the race of some of her characters, so readers must construct race—and recognize that they too are beholden to preconceived notions of ethnicity.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor's creative work occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, a tumultuous time in race-relations in America; the era included a litany of highs and lows in the arena of race. In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first black man to play Major League Baseball when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson's arrival marked the first step toward integration in baseball and American sports. Robinson's athletic ability usurped that of his white counterparts, and baseball experts took note. Robinson earned the Rookie of the Year honors at the conclusion of the 1947 season, and in 1949, he earned the Most Valuable Player award. Robinson's baseball acumen did not deter some Americans—ranging from fellow baseball players to the average Joe—from emotionally and, at times, violently expressing their opinion about his color, according to sportswriter Larry Schwartz's article "Jackie changed the face of sports." "Robinson was the target of racial epithets and flying cleats, of hate letters and death threats, of pitchers throwing at his head and legs, and catchers spitting on his shoes," Schwartz wrote.

If there was ever any doubt that racial integration did not result automatically in racial harmony, the Emmett Till incident in 1955 confirmed that race relations in America remained inherently strained. Till, a 14-year-old black boy, was kidnapped in Mississippi, mutilated and killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Till's body

was so badly disfigured that pictures of his corpse incited horror from those who saw it¹ (Adams). Till's alleged killers were acquitted despite overwhelming evidence that they committed the act of brutality; the all-white jury deliberated for about an hour before rendering the not-guilty verdict.

A much less brutal but equally significant event in race relations occurred 10 years later in Alabama. Rosa Parks thrust the issue of race into the national spotlight when she refused to relinquish her seat to a white person on a public bus. The black community—roused to action by Parks' act of civil disobedience—boycotted buses in Montgomery; about a year later, the public transportation system was integrated.

If her short stories are any indication, Flannery O'Connor paid close attention to the social, legal and economic transformations of her time. Several of O'Connor's short stories reflect the times in which she lived by emphasizing race-related themes. In her short stories, "The Geranium" and "Judgment Day," the main characters are displaced southerners who must circumnavigate northern cities where integration occurs. The setting of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" occurs on a bus in the south; much of the story's tension occurs because the bus is integrated, and the social dynamics are substantially different than just a few months prior. From the title alone, O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger" screams for a dialogue on race. In the story, a man

¹ I viewed one of the images of Till's face. His visage is so deformed that his nose is hard to find.

brings his grandson to the city, where “niggers”² reside; the journey is particularly exciting for the boy since he has never before seen a black person.

Race relations remained an issue at the forefront of O’Connor’s consciousness outside of her writing, too. She acknowledged the divide between the black caricature found in literature and the reality of southern blacks, a far more complex subject than how they were depicted in apocryphal accounts penned by white southerners (Walters 134). O’Connor also asserted that the old manners of the south had to change in order for racial harmony—or at least racial tolerance—to occur (135).

While O’Connor remains a widely hailed writer who undoubtedly left her mark on the American literary landscape, critics sometimes overlook her themes of race and race relations and focus more on religious and spiritual themes. Some critics also seem bothered by O’Connor’s more controversial comments regarding race relations, particularly when she expressed apprehension about the U.S. federal government *enforcing* integration. In the paper “Racial Integration in a Disintegrating Society: O’Connor and European Catholic Thought,” Henry M.W. Russell wrote that O’Connor’s stance “outside the Civil Rights Movement has caused many of her admirers to feel a certain amount of pain.”

Perhaps that pain might have led O’Connor enthusiasts to steer clear of O’Connor’s themes of race and race relations. Many other writers have received far more recognition regarding race-related themes than O’Connor. John Howard Griffin—a white

² At times in this paper, I must utilize this repulsive term to explain how characters and/or *other* individuals define African Americans or black people. To clearly differentiate my views from others, I will place quotation marks around this word.

author from Texas who transformed himself into a black man (through pharmacological and cosmetic means) and immersed himself in the deep south—gained immense fame after he published articles that recounted his experiences as a “black man.” His journalistic reflections revealed that, in America, “The Negro is treated not even as a second-class citizen, but as a tenth-class one” (Griffin 45). The response to Griffin’s story was immediate. Griffin found himself in the public eye in 1959, responding to queries from *Time* magazine and appearing on a half-dozen television shows, including *The Mike Wallace Show* (145-150). In addition to the media circus in which Griffin found himself immersed, he also found himself a target for those who opposed the “reality” of what Griffin witnessed: he was hanged in effigy in his hometown and received repeated death threats (150-155). Granted, Griffin’s decision to “transform” into a dark-skinned man seemed a precursor to gonzo journalism more than it might be viewed as literature. Still, the immediate and mammoth response to Griffin’s story perhaps showed the extent to which America wanted a thoughtful and in-depth discourse on race.

Nobel Laureate William Faulkner, one of O’Connor’s literary contemporaries, also gained recognition for his work on race and race relations (among other things). In the introduction to *Faulkner in America*, a compilation of essays and reflections on the impact Faulkner’s works had, literary critic Joseph Uργο writes, “Faulkner’s identification as an American writer cannot be explored without unearthing every ghost and demon that we associate with the nation—racial chaos (to use his phrase), power relations that define the limits of democracy, class division, hereditary privilege, the problematic right to be left alone—it all comes crashing through the gates with Faulkner

in America” (*Faulkner in America* xiii). In addition to the “racial chaos” that Urgo cites, issues of power relations, class divisions and hereditary privilege all reflect back to how America has defined, currently defines and perhaps will define race. Granted, Urgo is praising Faulkner for *more* than merely his examination of race and race relations. Still, Faulkner’s examination of race has gained widespread admiration despite some inflammatory personal statements that he supposedly made.

In 1956, amid the Civil Rights movement, Faulkner expressed great concern about federal involvement in the south’s race issues. Allegedly, he said that, if the government went too far, “I’d fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes” (qtd. in Urgo xiii). Faulkner denied making the aforementioned statement; however, critics seem to agree that such an assertion adhered to his philosophical stance on civil rights.

The accolades that accompanied both Faulkner and Griffin are warranted. Both men initiated a dialogue on race and race relations. While O’Connor was hardly as accessible as other writers (due to her illness and inherent shyness), it seems interesting that many critics focus more on her spirituality than her themes of race and race relations—even though O’Connor penned a story entitled “The Artificial Nigger.”

O’Connor’s literary approach might help explain why her themes of race are not highly valued among some critics. O’Connor did not focus on “white” America and its unjust treatment of “blacks” as some of Faulkner’s plots did. Some of Faulkner’s work vividly depicts violence that white America showers on its black brethren; further, some of his black characters are the protagonists, agreeable characters to which readers can

relate. In short, Faulkner's racial themes chastise the status quo. O'Connor's work rarely generates sympathetic characters or obvious analogies to the injustices in America.

Critic Josephine Hendin perhaps best explains the difference between O'Connor's fiction and that of Faulkner in her book, *The World of Flannery O'Connor*. While Faulkner's writing emphasizes man's mythologizing himself and, in turn, generates scenes and stories that appear larger than life, O'Connor creates "a world without myths. Even ultimate acts have no power to suggest that feeling of meaning, that sense of overpowering significance that legends are made of" (132). Faulkner's style forces readers to recognize the significance of his stories; conversely, O'Connor's style generates climactic moments in her fiction that feel—at least to some readers—anticlimactic.

The contrast in style is best shown through example. In Faulkner's novel *Light in August* the protagonist, Joe Christmas, is a man whose race is ambiguous because he is of mixed heritage. Christmas is a protagonist with whom readers can sympathize, and he meets a brutal and disfiguring end at the hands of a sadistic, racist antagonist. Christmas's murder is an epic tragedy, and readers can't help but wonder about the machinations of an American society that not only *allows* such an event but perhaps cultivates it. Christmas' name itself lends readers to compare him to his namesake. Readers view him as Christ, a sacrificial lamb who must suffer in order for society to move forward.

The fortunes of O'Connor's characters simply do not resonate as strongly for readers. When O'Connor's characters meet their end, "a framework of meaning, if it exists at all, has receded into so remote a distance that it provides no scale of value,"

Hendin writes (133). O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" serves as an excellent example of Hendin's theory. In the story, a mother and son ride in an integrated bus. The mother, Mrs. Chestny abhors having to share a bus with blacks³. The son, Julian, seems much more accepting of integration. At first glance, Julian's "choice" to accept integration might be viewed as an optimistic and uplifting act; he is raging against the southern status quo, and he could initially be viewed as altruistic in nature. When Julian boards the bus, his true feelings become clear. His interests are less about equality among blacks and whites and more about painting his mother as ignorant. When Julian sits on the bus, he deliberately sits down by a black man "in reparation as it were for his mother's sins" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 409). Julian's approval of racial integration—a seemingly altruistic stance—suddenly becomes a vindictive, almost malicious act. Julian objectifies the black man, treats him as nothing more than a tool that will ignite his mother's ire. He even pretends that he smokes and asks the black man for a light in a feeble attempt to generate conversation. When the black man hands him matches, Julian is without cigarettes and he must sheepishly hand back the proffered items (413). Julian's support of integration loses significance; readers no longer view him as a hero but rather as a feeble, petulant boy who wants to punish his mother.

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" is not the only story in which O'Connor portrays characters in an ambiguous moralistic light. Many of the "white" characters O'Connor developed had no compunction about describing their darker counterparts as "niggers" (8, 543). While O'Connor's characters are believable and altogether genuine,

³ I will expand on the definition of "white" and "black" in terms of ethnicity shortly.

such nuances of character were not smiled upon in a time when any such revelation—no matter how true—provided fodder for those who opposed the civil rights movement.

In many ways, this paper utilizes Hendin's theory as a springboard to examine why so many O'Connor readers seem to have an ambivalent response to her work. A close textual analysis of O'Connor's stories provides insight into how critics and readers respond to her examination of race-related themes. Repeatedly, O'Connor's stories reject the rudimentary ways that southern laws of her time defined race. Her prose repeatedly assails the simplistic way that Jim Crow generated a binary black and white definition of race. In addition, her stories question the southern social codes of her time, codes that called for a limited form of integration and a tacitly accepted hierarchy of race, a hierarchy that placed whites firmly above blacks, both socially and economically.

To emphasize the humanity and uniqueness of her characters, O'Connor sometimes utilizes ambiguous and contradictory social markers when describing her characters' appearance. In essence, she forces *readers* to define some of her characters' ethnicity. When readers are given this power, they become unsettled, unsure of how they *should* define race.

Finally, O'Connor's fiction generates a complex psychological response from readers. Readers dislike the characters they see and want these characters to experience some form of justice or, in more prosaic terms, comeuppance. When her characters are ethnically depicted in ambiguous or contradictory terms characters, readers must grapple with their own preconceived notions regarding race. O'Connor's audience experiences the Freudian sense of the "uncanny" when reading her work; they feel responsible for the

violent and, at times, deadly ends that her characters experience. Further, their preconceived notions of race generate another form of uncanny. Readers must acknowledge their own biases and opinions on race—biases and opinions that perhaps reflect a simplistic and inchoate way of marking people in racial terms.

The analysis will include the following O'Connor short stories, "The Geranium," "The Artificial Nigger," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Judgment Day," and "Revelation." In addition to heavily referencing Edward Said, Stanley Fish and Sigmund Freud, the analysis will draw from a litany of other authors to help clarify O'Connor's purpose when she examines race and race relations in her fiction. Finally, when describing different races, the analysis sometimes utilizes the most rudimentary of terms when describing ethnicity: "black" and "white." The terms will be based on southern laws of the late 1800s and early 1900s, an American was viewed as black "as long as the eighth great-grandparent was a 'Negro'" (Novkov par 8). The binary terminology is a starting point to help readers understand how O'Connor's fiction has moved beyond the binary legal definition of race that helped define the pre-civil rights south.

Chapter 2

O'CONNOR, THE RULING CLASS, AND IMPERIALISM

A few of Flannery O'Connor's personal statements serve as exhibit A for those who don't consider her mindset worthy of examining race relations. One of O'Connor's most widely discussed comments about race relations involved her feelings on integration. Henry Russell recapitulates O'Connor's statement in his essay "Racial Integration in a Disintegrating Society: O'Connor and European Catholic Thought." O'Connor was, in her own words, "an integrationist by conviction, but a segregationist by sensibility," Russell notes. Even critics that clearly were O'Connor enthusiasts acknowledge that statements that she made about blacks proved problematic. Russell sheepishly admits that her words were "a judgment, and a rather arbitrary one, on the material being of black folk, even though she realized that these judgments contradicted what she believed spiritually" (par. 14).

Some literary critics view O'Connor's fiction as an extension of the most inflammatory comments that she made about blacks, race relations and integration. Brad Gooch, who chronicled her life in *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*, notes that her personal correspondence helped fuel the belief that she was bigoted. When she wrote to her friend Maryat Lee, O'Connor seemed to relish the role of redneck, according to Gooch. "Flannery slipped into her role too easily, her mask fitting disconcertingly well. She turned out to be a connoisseur of racial jokes, regaling Maryat with offensive punch lines" (335). O'Connor's redneck persona just might reflect O'Connor's "segregationist

sensibilities.” However, her “integrationist convictions” undoubtedly colored her work, too.

O’Connor recognized that a serious race-relations problem existed in America. And if she was guilty of stereotyping and simplifying the average black individual, the society in which she lived was just as guilty:

It requires considerable grace for two races to live together, particularly when the population is divided about fifty-fifty between them and when they have our particular history. It can’t be done without a code of manners based on mutual charity. I remember a sentence from an essay of Marshall McLuhan’s. I forget the exact words but the gist of it was, as I recollect it, that after the Civil War, formality became a condition of survival. This doesn’t seem to me any less true today. Formality preserves that individual privacy which everybody needs and, in these times, is always in danger of losing. It’s particularly necessary to have in order to protect the rights of both races. When you have a code of manners based on charity, then when the charity fails—as it is going to do constantly—you’ve got those manners there to preserve each race from small intrusions upon the other. The uneducated Southern Negro is not the clown he’s made out to be. He’s a man of very elaborate manners and great formality which he uses superbly for his own protection to insure his own privacy. All this may not be ideal, but the Southerner has enough sense not to ask for the ideal but only for the possible, the workable. The South has survived in the past because its manners, however lopsided or inadequate they may have been, provided enough social discipline to hold us together and give us an identity. Now those old manners are obsolete, but the new manners will have to be based on what was best in the old ones—in their real basis of charity and necessity. In practice, the Southerner seldom underestimates his own capacity for evil. For the rest of the country, the race problem is settled when the Negro has his rights, but for the Southerner, whether he’s white or colored, that’s only the beginning. The South has to evolve a way of life in which the two races can live together with mutual forbearance (*sic*). You don’t form a committee to do this or pass a resolution; both races have to work it out the hard way. (qtd. in Walters 134-135)

O’Connor conceded that blacks and whites all had to “work it out the hard way” (qtd. in Getz 195). One “hard” part of improving race relations involved altering the very social manners upon which the south was built. The old ways—the southern hierarchy that comingled race and economics—needed to change, she asserted. The way blacks and

whites perceived one another needed to evolve beyond the stereotypical. She admitted that the south—which she was a part of—had simplified the black man as a proverbial clown, perhaps not an ideal approach, but one that allowed a flawed society to function. But, such change involved a difficult and sometimes painful process of altering the widely accepted social norms of her time. Clearly, the old southern code was in need of transformation. When O'Connor declared the old southern manners "obsolete," "inadequate" and "lopsided," it was quite a condemnation of the old southern ways.

As much as O'Connor reflected on the issue of race, as evinced by the above quote, her opinions must be viewed from the standpoint from which they came: the side of the white ruling class. O'Connor was a white woman, a woman who remained entrenched in the upper echelons of the southern hierarchy, and her place atop the hierarchy altered the way in which she viewed race. O'Connor's South was a direct result of colonialism; although America's true "taming of the natives" involved the marginalization and extermination of Native Americans, the slave trade—which brought thousands of slaves from Africa to the south—was a significant consequence of colonialist practices, according to University of California, Davis history professor Steven Deyle ("America's Economic Roots Are in Our Domestic Slave Trade"). In America, circa 1950, Southerners believed that blacks were morally and intellectually inferior, and their place at the bottom of the southern hierarchy was warranted. How could O'Connor, a member of the hierarchical pinnacle, separate herself from this mindset?

All artists are products of their time and place in history. Renowned literary and cultural critic Edward Said extended the widely accepted idea that one's place in a society—ethnically, nationalistically and economically—influences authorial perceptions. Wrote Said, “There were native people to be dominated, variously exterminated, variously dislodged; and then, as the republic increased in age and hemispheric power, there were distant lands to be designated vital to American interests” (*Culture and Imperialism* 8). For Said, a certain level of reflection regarding past (both individually and nationalistically) needs to take place:

We must take stock of the nostalgia for empire, as well as the anger and resentment it provokes in those who were ruled, and we must try to look carefully and integrally at the culture that nurtured the sentiment, rationale, and above all the imagination of empire. And we must also try to grasp the hegemony of the imperial ideology, which by the end of the nineteenth century had become completely embedded in the affairs of cultures whose less regrettable features we still celebrate. (*Culture and Imperialism* 12)

In essence, Said warned that history rests in the eye of the beholder. While it would be easy to view history as fact, as reality, we must be able to recognize that history can be written from more than one perspective. O'Connor detractors note that her fiction further condemns her as a talking head in support of “nostalgia for empire.” Author Melvin G. Williams' essay “Black and White: A Study in Flannery O'Connor's Characters” believes her fiction is nothing more than a reflection of her socio-economic background. He argues that the “black characters are only ‘issues’ instead of people for O'Connor. They never change, never are explored on more than a superficial level” (130). Williams assails O'Connor for using black characters more as props than well-developed characters. Her stories are “not about [blacks] as principal characters, and they never do

more than provide a surface against which the primary white figures can rebound” (130). In essence, Williams asserts that black characters in O’Connor’s fiction serve as a foil to the white protagonists on which O’Connor focuses. “Nostalgia for empire” undoubtedly informs O’Connor’s opinions.

Interestingly, O’Connor herself was aware of her sociological positioning. This level of self-awareness influenced her approach to fiction. I imagine that if O’Connor had read any of Edward Said’s theories, she’d respond in blunt fashion: “Well, *of course* I have nostalgia for empire,” she might say. “How else would you expect me to examine race relations—from the perspective of a *toad*?” Hypothetical comments aside, O’Connor seemed exceedingly aware of the biases that she brought to the table. And, in her fiction, O’Connor attempted to temper her nostalgia, perhaps by incorporating some of her “integrationist convictions.”

O’Connor’s consciousness of “nostalgia” informed her fiction and influenced how she broached themes of race and race relations. First, she generated fictional situations where integration and miscegenation abounded. These situations showed the disparity between southern *laws*, which forbade the aforementioned practices, and southern *manners*, manners O’Connor herself described as obsolete and inadequate (Walters 135). Also, she created characters with ambiguous ethnicity. This “negative capability”—as John Keats called it—allowed her to renounce the mantle of expert and force readers to define character race for themselves. This tool will be examined in more depth in chapter four.

In addition to negative capability and a critique of southern race laws, O'Connor made additional creative decisions in an attempt to offset her nostalgia for empire. She avoided writing from black characters' perspectives when at all possible. O'Connor deliberately gave "black" characters secondary roles in her fiction. She remained hesitant to write about black characters in depth because she did not want to poison their characterization with her stilted perspective. Early in her career O'Connor wrote the short story "Wildcat" from the perspective of a black man. The story was left unpublished until six years after O'Connor's death (Dunleavy 193-94). In the later stages of her life, O'Connor acknowledged that she "did not feel competent to create the subjective reality of black characters or to use their dialogue as a chief means of forwarding plot"; instead, O'Connor chose to create black characters who were seen "from the outside" (qtd. in Dunleavy 193).

O'Connor's apprehension about placing black characters' internal mindset at the forefront of her stories is telling. She further entrenches herself in the nostalgia for empire by marginalizing the subjugated group. However, she implicitly acknowledges how much her personal experiences influenced the way she viewed race. O'Connor's work reflects a heightened awareness of her place in the southern hierarchy. She seemed to know that her perspective, her experiences as a white affluent woman, had shaped her opinions and beliefs. Thus, instead of depicting black characters, providing an alternative perspective from which to view the southern hierarchy, she uses her work to question the status quo. While O'Connor emphasized and focused on white protagonists, these characters can hardly be viewed as laudable. Oftentimes, O'Connor's white characters

are as much antiheroes as they are heroes in the gothic tales that she weaves. O'Connor generates flawed characters, none of which would be considered purveyors of ultimate knowledge.

One example of a flawed white protagonist occurs in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In the story, the grandmother ignores a black child's abject poverty and marvels at how cute a naked destitute black boy looks (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 119). This protagonist is also ready to allow her entire family to die so long as she is able to procure her own release from the clutches of a cold-blooded killer. As the killer's henchmen methodically march the grandmother's son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren into the woods to be shot, she attempts to reason with the murderer, saying, "You wouldn't kill a lady, would you?" (127). Another example of a flawed character that represents the ruling class occurs in her short story "The Artificial Nigger." Mr. Head is a bumbling fool, a man who tries to teach his grandson a litany of lessons during their visit to the city. Instead he finds himself both physically and morally lost in the city (266). Interestingly, O'Connor's decision to include the term "nigger" in her title generated some concern among her contemporaries. The concern, and O'Connor's reaction, perhaps best reflects the difficulties that O'Connor encountered when addressing issues of race. Poet John Crowe Ransom—one of Flannery's contemporaries—felt the story, and particularly the title, had a "racist ring" (Gooch 253). O'Connor felt differently. "The story as a whole is much more damaging to white folk's sensibilities than to black," she reportedly told Ransom (qtd. in Gooch 253).

While O'Connor was aware that she could not extricate herself from her sociological roots, she took pains to separate herself from the characters that she created. Oftentimes her narratives distance themselves from the characters in her fiction. In the essay "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision," critic Claire Katz notes that the average O'Connor narrative contains an "ambivalent relationship" to the characters (57). While her characters might view a black person as a "nigger," O'Connor's prose emphasizes that *her characters* utilize these derogatory terms and not the narrator. A perfect example of this occurs in O'Connor's short story "The Geranium." The story is recounted through the eyes of Old Dudley, an aging white man from the south. He has moved in with his daughter who lives in New York City. Throughout the story, readers enter Dudley's mind, and his views on blacks are clear. He believes that whites are superior. He always thinks of blacks as "niggers" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 9). When the narrative extricates itself from Dudley's thoughts, however, O'Connor replaces the offensive term with "Negro." O'Connor's first published short story is representative of her narrative approach throughout her career. Similar terminology shifts occur in "The Artificial Nigger" and "Judgment Day" (249-270, 531-550). In each of these instances, O'Connor shows awareness of her characters and the biases that they have by utilizing the term "nigger." The decision to narrate the story with an alternative lexicon when describing characters' race represents a clear choice to separate narrative from characters. In an effort to maintain narrative distance, she leaves the ethical and racial judgments to her characters, and to her characters alone. In many ways, O'Connor's creative decisions

shed more light on her comment that she was “an integrationist by conviction but a segregationist by sensibility.”

Chapter 3

O'CONNOR, RACE AND THE SOUTHERN HIERARCHY

Born in Savannah, Georgia in 1925, Flannery O'Connor lived the supermajority of her life in the Georgia. At the age of 12, she moved with her family to the more rural Millidgeville. Only after completing her undergraduate degree at Georgia State College for Women in 1945 did she briefly foray out of the south. In 1950 the onset of lupus forced O'Connor's return to Millidgeville (Getz 1-5). Her return to the south, though under tragic circumstances, seemed appropriate. Biographer Lorine Getz noted that, even when O'Connor was in New York, Connecticut and Europe, "spiritually and emotionally she was never very many miles from her Georgia roots" (5). Immersing herself in the ways and manners of the south appealed to O'Connor, and she compared her connection to Georgia with Faulkner's relationship with Oxford, Mississippi and Eudora Welty's ties to Jackson, Mississippi (6-7).

The region in which Flannery O'Connor lived underwent historic changes in her lifetime. A shift in federal law transformed race relations south of the Mason-Dixon line. The United States Supreme Court rejected the concept of separate but equal in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and suddenly a region that had known nothing but various forms of segregation was forced to integrate. Suddenly southern mores were being challenged, and, in the wake of federally mandated law, forced into submission.

The generation previous to O'Connor's lived by significantly different laws and beliefs regarding race and race relations. Segregation gained legal footing in the 1896

Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the ruling that determined segregation was constitutional since blacks could enjoy “equal but separate” accommodations (Konvitz 425). *Plessy v. Ferguson* served as a defining moment in American ideology on race; it, in essence, argued that blacks were “inferior and subject to a subordinate position” in the country (Chesteen 285). African Americans, the Supreme Court insisted, could do anything their lighter-skinned brethren could do—eat at a restaurant, attend public schools, and drink from drinking fountains—so long as their actions were performed outside of the realm of “white America” (285). The federal ruling generated a domino effect, causing southern states to piggyback on the national legal precedent. Segregation, which had been tacitly accepted as the rule of the land (both in the south and in some northern settings), suddenly could be supported through the judicial system. The Supreme Court decision generated a spate of Jim Crow laws that “became a common section of the legal codes of Southern states” (284). These laws tacitly implied that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites.

These segregation laws depended in large part on the definition of black. What many people might not know is how ambiguous the legal definition of “black” was during O’Connor’s time. Southerners and northerners alike knew that race mixing between whites and blacks had occurred throughout the days of slavery. However, laws had to define race in binary terms: one was either black or white. Historian Michelle Brattain discusses myth versus reality of race in American in her essay “Miscegenation and Competing Definitions of Race in Twentieth Century Louisiana.” The antebellum south was a place where “racial lines were more fluid and southern society accepted—or

at least expected—interracial sex” (Brattain par. 1). Race mixing proved so prevalent in the south that a running joke wended its way across New Orleans in the early- to mid-1900s: “You can take a bowl of rice and feed all the people of pure-white blood in the city” (par. 2). This joke about lack of pure lineage could persist, so long as the population tacitly overlooked mixed-race relationships that continued through the 20th century (pars. 2-5). The reality of miscegenation—combined with the laws calling for segregation—caused states to generate their own definitions of race, and those definitions varied widely. In legal history, “there is no consistency in the definitions [of ethnicity]; not even the Supreme Court has achieved consistency in this regard,” wrote historian Milton Konvitz (426). In some states, anyone known as having even a “trace of Negro blood in his veins — no matter how far back it was acquired” was deemed black (426). When the Supreme Court upheld segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, they *specifically* avoided defining race, perhaps aware that they could not adequately do so, though *Plessy* was defined as “black” by the state of Louisiana because he owned a grandparent of black origin (428).

All this changed in 1954 when the United States Supreme Court ruled that schools were required to integrate. Flannery O’Connor was 29 at the time. As her southern society experienced discomfort as it transformed from a hierarchical color-coded society to an allegedly colorblind society, O’Connor herself experienced a great deal of unease as she watched the evolution. Some of her life experiences reflected the painful transition between mores of the old south and a rapidly integrating society. While in Iowa as a student, O’Connor befriended a black graduate student despite “warnings from her

mother that interracial friendships were dangerous” (Gooch 132). After hearing a bus driver in Iowa slur blacks and suggest they sit in the back of the bus, O’Connor wrote to a friend in 1957 to tell her that such crass bigotry caused her to become an integrationist (132). O’Connor’s discomfort did not merely involve the old southern ways and new laws and perceptions about race relations. Some uncomfortable situations arose when the southern perspective confronted the northern perspective. O’Connor engaged in a written tête-à-tête with her northern friend Maryat Lee regarding race relations, integrationist laws and southern manners (335).

O’Connor’s fiction reflects the level of discomfort that she endured as she watched the south transform. She seemingly projects her uneasiness onto the page when her characters struggle to adapt to the changing landscape of race relations. Often, O’Connor’s characters acknowledge (sometimes inadvertently) the inconsistencies in the ways that law defined race. Her stories accentuate the difference between *laws* (and corresponding beliefs) regarding race and race relations and the *realities* of how blacks and whites interacted. Further, she depicts several scenes where neither the law nor southern manners are adequate for either black or white characters. In essence O’Connor’s fiction peels away all the layers of safety that her characters and readers—black or white, northerner or southerner—cling to when examining race and race relations.

In “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” her main characters, Mrs. Chestny and her son Julian, spend almost the entire story in a bus that, due to federally mandated laws, allows blacks and whites be integrated. The pair overtly bicker about how blacks

and whites should interact in their ever-changing society; integration repulses Mrs. Chestny; Julian appears to champion integration, but it remains unclear whether Julian views blacks as equals or merely wants to disagree with his mother (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 406-413).

During the conversation with her son, Mrs. Chestny inadvertently points out the disparity between laws that define race and the realities of a south where miscegenation abounds. She begins her comments by embracing the binary laws of the south. She suggests that segregation should exist, and blacks “should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (408). In the next breath, Chestny acknowledges miscegenation: “The ones I feel sorry for ... are the ones that are half white. They’re tragic” (408). In her mind, multicultural individuals—who in those days would be considered black by state law—were the most tragic of people. Clearly, Mrs. Chestny should seemingly place (or segregate) these “tragic” individuals on the “black” side of the fence. But Mrs. Chestny’s very words belie the way the law operates; for, according to law, “half white” individuals didn’t exist. O’Connor’s choice of terms in this case seems to be a deliberate attempt to jar readers. Readers must recognize the disingenuousness of miscegenation laws. Of course, the very title, “Everything That Rises Must Converge” also seems to be a play on the issue of miscegenation. O’Connor’s title references Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French philosopher who believed that to improve spiritually, humankind had to come together in a nonviolent manner to grow as a community (Desmond 39). This spiritual growth involved all people and, inherently, individuals denied this evolution, O’Connor said (39-40).

“Everything That Rises Must Converge” is not the only story in which O’Connor accentuates the disparity between race laws and social realities of the south. In “The Artificial Nigger,” O’Connor shows how racial definition is far more complex than the laws of the day. In the story, Mr. Head brings his grandson, Nelson, to the city to see his first “nigger.” Yet, when a “huge, coffee-colored man” walks by him, Nelson is unaware that this man is, as his grandfather asserts, a “nigger” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 254). Mr. Head mocks the boy by questioning whether he knows “what kind of man” he has just seen (255). After Nelson unsuccessfully guesses that the man is old and fat, the grandfather reveals that the man was a “nigger.” Nelson is angry with his grandfather for quizzing him; also, he is angry because his grandfather’s definition of a “nigger” is incorrect. “‘You said they were black,’ he [Nelson] said in an angry voice. ‘You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don’t tell me right?’” (255). O’Connor points out that definitions of race transcend the binary legal definitions; If this “black” man’s appearance is any indication, laws that forbade mixed-race relations were broken.

More significantly, Mr. Head *defines* the coffee-colored man’s ethnicity. As a white man, Head, per southern law, has been given the ability to define others. Of note is how the definitions of ethnicity follow the accepted social hierarchy of the south. The “tan” man has no say about his race. He is defined by others. Nelson, a white child, suggests that the man is “tan.” Although a white male, Nelson’s age lowers him on the southern social strata. Only Mr. Head, the patriarchal white man can define ethnicity, both for himself and others. The very act of defining race connects back to the story’s

title: “The Artificial Nigger.” The title itself notes how race—whether black as defined by law or “nigger” as defined by society—is a construct that is developed by those in power.

Nelson, of course, wants to think that he knows more than his grandfather, and suggests that, since he was born in the city, he *has* seen a “nigger” before, probably when he was an infant. Mr. Head responds: ““A six-month old child don’t know a nigger from anyone else”” (252). Head intends his statement to be castigation of a precocious boy; the southern hierarchy must be inculcated by the previous generation. The statement also reflects the ambiguity of how people define race. Defining a black person or a “nigger” must be a learned experience. In this particular story, Mr. Head plays the role of erudite instructor; Nelson is the student, devoid of wisdom and thirsty to drink in the elixir of knowledge. Being shown his ignorance frustrates Nelson, and at first the boy directs his anger toward his grandfather. When Mr. Head dismisses the boy’s rage as a form of ignorance, Nelson redirects his fury toward the black man. “Nelson turned backward again and looked where the Negro had disappeared. He felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them” (255-256). In this instance, Nelson learns how to define a “nigger,” and the construct of race—through tacitly accepted laws and social etiquette—is complete. The southern ethnic hierarchy has been passed from the old generation to the new. Gone are the nuances of how a “tan” or “coffee-colored” man could be black and, therefore, a “nigger.” Instead, Mr. Head has successfully passed on southern code to his grandson.

Further, he regains his footing as the top of the hierarchy since, theoretically, he is smarter than Nelson for spotting a “nigger.” Mr. *Head* lives up to his name as he finds himself at the apex of the southern hierarchy. In turn, Nelson accepts his position as the subservient grandson after the racial naming incident. No longer does he question his grandfather’s words; Nelson’s boasts disappear. Instead, the boy grows more reliant on Mr. Head: “the old man would be his only support in the strange place they were approaching. He would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever lost from his grandfather” (257). The helpless 10-year-old is a far cry from the confident boy who, only hours before, questioned whether his grandfather would be ignorant of the city since he had not been there in so many years (250).

In addition to undermining the legal, binary definition of race, O’Connor’s fiction examines and critiques the commonly accepted southern code of her time, a code that acknowledged that laws regarding race and reality did not necessarily correspond. Flannery O’Connor’s first and last published short stories—“The Geranium” and “Judgment Day,” respectively—reveal that black/white relationships are much different than what southern laws called for. In both stories, O’Connor incorporates discomfort and unease in her protagonists, arguably extensions of her own experiences. In the stories, the legal concept of segregation is turned on its ear when the main characters show virtually no apprehension about interacting with blacks—so long as blacks assume an inferior social and economic position.

Janet Egleston Dunleavy’s essay “A Particular History: Black and White in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction” notes how O’Connor’s fiction focuses on the southern

code where different races were “traditionally segregated in its institutions yet integrated in its daily life” (186). This code, according to Dunleavy, allowed for integration under certain circumstances. Above all, the code called for an awareness of one’s standing in the southern social structure. Blacks and whites could integrate so long as certain rules were followed. Blacks needed to know their place, and remain in deference to whites, both socially and economically. Writes Dunleavy, “[Mixed-race] companionship not only is permitted but sanctioned by Southern tradition. The white man respects the black man’s appropriate areas of expertise; they concern such matters as where the fish are biting, where the birds are roosting. In return, following the code of manners to which they both subscribe, the black man *exhibits appropriate awe* of the white man’s knowledge of the inner workings of guns and the inner streets of Atlanta” (191, emphasis mine). White southerners recognized black people’s knowledge of the land; conversely whites viewed blacks as intellectually incapable and/or inferior to whites on non-agricultural issues. The alleged intellectual disparity led to the economic hierarchy of the south, Dunleavy posits; whites parlayed this alleged gap in intellect into an economic disparity. Since blacks were “inferior,” they could not possibly perform jobs that required a modicum of intelligence.

In O’Connor’s fiction, the southern code shows signs of fallibility in an ever-evolving world. In “The Geranium,” Old Dudley lives in New York City with his daughter. His daughter—adhering to her southern manners as a good child—brings her aging father up north to live with her and her family. Old Dudley is appropriately named. He is elderly, and he has reservations about living in such a foreign environment. The

story begins with Dudley reflecting on his decision to go north with his daughter. Thinks Dudley, “If she’d just have let him alone—let him stay where he was back home and not be so taken up with her damn duty” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 4).

Dudley hates almost everything in New York, and the close proximity to people of various ethnicities unsettles him. He abhors the subway where “People boiled out of trains and up steps and over into the streets. They rolled off the street and down steps and into trains—black and white and yellow all mixed up like vegetables in soup” (7). He dislikes that he lives in an apartment “in a row of buildings all alike, all blackened-red and gray with rasp-mouthed people hanging out their windows looking at other windows and other people just like them looking back” (6). Dudley’s equilibrium is further compromised when a black man moves into the apartment adjacent him.

But the issue to Dudley is not the close proximity to a black man. When Dudley initially mistakes the black man for a servant, he is eager to befriend the man. So long as the black man is a social and economic inferior, Old Dudley is at ease. Says Dudley, “I think I’ll go over and see what day he gets off. Maybe I can convince him he likes to fish” (8).

Only when Dudley realizes that the black man is on equal economic and social footing does his friendly demeanor change. He chastises his daughter for her living arrangements. “You ain’t been raised to live tight with niggers that think they’re just as good as you, and you think I’d go messin’ around with one er that kind! If you think I want anything to do with them, you’re crazy,” exclaims Dudley (9).

Here, the southern code overshadows segregation laws. When Dudley tells his daughter that she is not to live with blacks, the issue is not segregation. Proximity to blacks is irrelevant to Dudley, a man who only a few months earlier—in the south—lived in the same building as Rabie and Lutish, a black husband and wife duo that catered to the needs of the boarding house inhabitants. What bothers Dudley so much is the black man's *mindset*, a mindset that contradicts the Southern code. Dudley assails his daughter for living near a black man who *considers* himself an equal. If the black man had been a servant, Dudley would have had no reservations about fishing with him, talking to him, condescendingly "befriending" him. However, as soon as the Dudley learns that the black man's economic and social standing are equal to his, to his daughter's, then his opinion shifts decidedly.

Dudley's past underlines how integration with blacks is not the issue. Prior to moving north, he lived in a boarding house with Lutish and Rabie (4). In reality, Dudley's economic standing while living in the south probably isn't much better than the servants with whom he interacted. Part of the reason he moves north with his daughter is his compromised economic situation, one that forces him to get by on odd jobs and a sparse pension (4). Still, while Dudley lives in the south, the *illusion* of hierarchy remains intact. His purpose at the boarding house is unequivocal in Dudley's mind: "He protected the old ladies. He was the man in the house and he did the things a man in the house was supposed to do" (5). Dudley's spatial placement in the boarding house represents Dudley's perceived position in the southern hierarchy, too; he lives on the top floor. Conversely, the two black servants live in the basement.

Never mind that Dudley's economic situation mimics that of Lutish and Rabie; never mind that Dudley— living amid a boarding house filled with women—reflected an incredibly compromised social standing. Thanks to Rabie, Dudley can convince himself that he remains atop the hierarchical pyramid. Dudley, in essence, orders Rabie around. Rabie, being black, has to adhere to Dudley's requests. Possum hunting serves as a perfect example of Rabie acquiescing to the requests of Dudley who "liked to get away from the ladies once in a while and hunting was a good excuse" (5). Old Dudley could coerce Rabie to abandon other activities and go 'possum hunting with him at will.

In New York City, the social setting affords Dudley no illusions about where he stands in the social or economic hierarchies. The black man who lives next door is an equal. Unlike Dudley's alpha-male role in the southern boarding house, he has no such responsibilities in New York City. Also, the fact that the black man lives on the same floor—representative of the equal economic and social footing he shares with Dudley—underlines the altered circumstances in which Dudley lives.

Unsurprisingly, the southern code is untenable in the north. Dudley repeatedly attempts to revive the old hierarchy, the old southern code of manners, as he navigates the north. Dudley imagines that he will serve as the intellectual superior to Rabie when he returns to the south. He will condescendingly tell Rabie that New York is "just like any other city and cities ain't all that complicated" (6). While he wanders the hallways of his daughter's apartment building he imagines himself outdoors, hunting with Rabie. Dudley, possibly subconsciously, wants to project the southern code onto his new northern environment and view the indoor hallways—hallways that he must share with blacks and

yellows and browns—as a form of outdoors where the code he learned would make these interactions acceptable. Such reveries are short lived; Dudley’s black neighbor witnesses him in the hallways holding an imaginary shotgun in his arms.

O’Connor’s description of the black man hints that the southern code can’t be easily reclaimed: “‘What are you hunting, old-timer?’ the Negro asks in a voice that sounded like a nigger’s laugh and a white man’s sneer” (12). Shocked, Dudley slips and falls down three steps. As the narration intimates, Dudley cannot decode the black man’s intentions. If he were in the south, where southern mores remained intact, the man would be laughing a “nigger’s laugh” and, perhaps, imparting knowledge about the outdoors, a knowledge balanced against his intellectual inferiority. Here in the north, however, the southern code is irrelevant. Thus, Dudley also sees a sneering white man; the black man’s knowledge might not be limited to the outdoors; it could also be a level of intellect extends *beyond* what the code calls for. “The Geranium” shows how Old Dudley must abandon the southern code when in the world of the north, a world where he must live as an equal to blacks socially and economically.

O’Connor’s depiction of the southern code’s demise isn’t limited to the union side of the Mason-Dixon line. The short story “Judgment Day,” a revised version of “The Geranium,” points out how the southern code has failed in the post-bellum south, too. The story, published in 1964, after O’Connor’s death, portrays a different kind of protagonist. Tanner is quite wily despite owning a weaker physical appearance than Old Dudley. The protagonist suffers a stroke and relies unequivocally on his daughter when he lives in her New York City apartment. Like Dudley, Tanner rues the day he left the

south and plans to return, as readers learn in the story's first line: "Tanner was conserving all his strength for the trip home. He meant to walk as far as he could get and trust to the Almighty to get him the rest of the way" (531). He is so intent on escaping the north that he is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. "During the night the train would start South, and the next day or the morning after, dead or alive, he would be home. Dead or alive. It was being there that mattered; the dead or alive did not" (532).

Given Tanner's insistence on escaping the north to "retreat" to the south, one would assume that Tanner's hope is to return to a place where the southern code is alive and well. However, the south to which Tanner hopes to return is also a place where the southern code is no longer viable.

In his younger years, Tanner utilizes southern hierarchy to his benefit. When needed, Tanner serves as arbiter of racial definitions. While working as a foreman in a lumberyard, Tanner notices a large black man loitering about the place. Concerned the loiterer's antics will somehow, through osmosis, infiltrate his crew of black workers, Tanner approaches the large, burly man. Initially, Tanner considers calling the man "nigger," immediately defining the man's race and, in turn, placing him at the bottom of the southern hierarchy (538). For fear of the loiterer turning violent, Tanner withholds the racial slur. Instead, he takes hold of glasses that the black man has carved out of the tree and urges the other to wear them. When the black man dons the makeshift glasses, Tanner asks him what he sees:

"See a man."

"What kind of a man?"

"See the man make theseyer glasses."

"Is he white or black?"

“He white!” the Negro said as if only at that moment was his vision sufficiently improved to detect it. “Yessuh, he white!” he said.
 “Well, you treat him like he was white,” Tanner said. (539)

The implication is clear: Tanner, who is of the ruling white class, helps Coleman “see” his place in the social order. Tanner forces Coleman to define him in racial terms. In doing so, Coleman must also define himself racially: an inferior to the white Tanner. Based on these racial constructs, Coleman cedes control to Tanner. Initially, Coleman does not “see” race—either in himself or Tanner—nor does he see his place in the social order. In fact, moments before he dons the glasses, Coleman considers a far more violent response to Tanner. Coleman “might have taken the glasses and crushed them in his hand or grabbed the knife and turned it on [Tanner]” (538). Once he wears the glasses—and sees through the lenses of the white dominance—Coleman is reminded of his place in the southern hierarchy.

As the years progress and Tanner grows older, his very relationship with Coleman transforms. Tanner squats on land with Coleman, an act that runs counter to both southern laws and manners regarding integration. Writes critic Egleson Dunleavy,

Tanner and Coleman (a black man) have abandoned the code that governs Old Dudley and Rabie’s relationship in favor of a different Darwinian set of values: they have experienced the struggle for existence; they have joined forces to survive. Indeed, when their relationship was established long ago, it was not in accordance with Old South hierarchies. (191)

When Tanner was younger, he was the one who could define race—both his own and Coleman’s. However, as the south transforms, Tanner—perhaps representative of the south as a whole—loses his power to define ethnicity. The codes and conduct of the old southern hierarchy are disintegrating; the seemingly obvious definitions of race begin to

fall apart, too. Tanner finds himself squatting on land owned by another. The owner, Dr. Foley, is multiracial: “He was only part black. The rest was Indian and white” (535). In this instance, the narrator breaks free of the legalistic definitions of race. For in the legal definitions one cannot be “part white”; one was either black *or* white. Despite the narration’s description of this man, Tanner quickly designates him as a “nigger,” a black man whom he holds in low regard. The problem for Tanner is that Dr. Foley owns the land on which he lives. Tanner quickly realizes that he “ain’t got a thing to hold up to him but the skin you come in, and that’s no more use to you now than what a snake would shed. You don’t have a chance with the government against you” (535). Tanner’s thoughts are telling on several levels. First, Tanner’s definition of race contradicts the narrator’s more complex explanation of the doctor’s heritage. Second, Tanner realizes that racial constructs that southern society embraced just a generation ago are crumbling. Unlike the time when he served as foreman of a lumberyard, when the idea of financial control (through a job) could assist him when he confronts Coleman, Tanner has nothing to lord over Dr. Foley.

The tables, in fact, have been turned. Dr. Foley lords over Tanner. Dr. Foley accurately warns Tanner that soon “white folks IS going to be working for the colored” (540). Suddenly, Tanner is placed in the lower echelon of the southern hierarchy, a place usually reserved for blacks. Foley stands atop virtually all blacks in the area, and it is clear that he exerts his power over them: “He was everything to the niggers—druggist and undertaker and general counsel and real estate man and sometimes he got the evil eye off them and sometimes he put it on” (535).

Tanner chooses to abandon his shack and follow his daughter up to New York City. However, when Tanner reflects back on the conversation he had with Foley, he realizes that he would have preferred to have remained in the south and been part of the new order, a hierarchy that depended less on color and more on ability and money. Thinks Tanner, “He would have run the still for the nigger. He would have been a nigger’s white nigger any day” (540). The very term “white nigger” is contradictory in nature given the southern legal and social code. The very terminology that Tanner uses reflects the breakdown of simplistic, binary definitions of race, and the ruling class’s ability to manipulate those definitions. Thus, Tanner’s name might be altogether appropriate. Tanner is, in southern code and conduct, white. However, southern code and calls for “niggers” to remain in the lower end of the social and economic hierarchy. Therefore, given his situation, he is much “tanner” than the more common racial construction of “white male.”

Unsurprisingly, Tanner does not fare well in the north. Much more savvy than his earlier counterpart, Old Dudley, Tanner immediately realizes that the black man in the next apartment has rented the place for himself. Immediately, he imagines himself manipulating and lording over his neighbor. But his efforts to engage the black man are futile. After an initial failed attempt, when the black man ignores Tanner’s greetings completely, Tanner wonders (perhaps due to denial) whether the man is “deaf and dumb” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 544). After another failed attempt to engage the man and “show him his brains didn’t have a chance” (536) against Tanner’s mind, the old southern man suffers a near-death experience.

Tanner calls the man “preacher” even though his dark-skinned counterpart had angrily rebuffed the sobriquet a day earlier. The neighbor’s response is quick and violent.

The Negro stopped and gripped the banister rail. A tremor racked him from his head to his crotch. Then he began to come forward slowly. When he was close enough he lunged and grasped Tanner by both shoulders. “I don’t take no crap” he whispered, “off no wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you.” (545)

The black man then shoves Tanner through his daughter’s apartment door, sending the old man sprawling against the ground. At that moment, Tanner decides he will return to the south.

The south, though, offers him no more codes to which he can adhere. Unlike Old Dudley, who can embrace a modicum of southern codes, Tanner has none. His abandonment of the southern code is what led him to New York City. When his daughter goes down south to view her father’s situation, she is appalled, not so much by the dingy shack in which he lives, but because of whom he lives with: a black man “curled up on a pallet asleep at the foot of Tanner’s bed, a stinking skin full of bones, arranged in what seemed vaguely human form” (534). The daughter chastises Tanner for choosing such an ignominious living arrangement: ““If you don’t have any pride I have and I know my duty and I was raised to do it. My mother raised me to do it if you didn’t. She was from plain people but not the kind that likes to settle in with niggers”” (534).

This moment in the story is telling on many levels. First, it shows the daughter’s *awareness* of the old southern code. In essence, she knows that living with a black person is unacceptable in the south. The daughter’s words are hypocritical, though, since in the north, she herself lives in integrated housing. What is most interesting is the change

O'Connor makes from her original story, "The Geranium." In the first version, it is Old Dudley, the oldest generation, who chastises his daughter for leaving the south and abandoning the codes of race relations. In "Judgment Day," it is the daughter who admonishes Tanner for living with a black man. O'Connor appears to be acknowledging that the old southern code is untenable both in the south and the north.

Tanner appears more cognizant of the southern code's demise. Granted, Tanner initially gets Coleman to work for him, thanks to his ability to manage and "handle" blacks (536). But when they live together, they are equals, and Tanner recognizes this. The pair exchanges postcards as soon as Tanner arrives in New York City (542). Also, Coleman is a man who deserves the truth. Unlike Old Dudley, who imagined boasting to his black friend Rabie about how New York was just another city, Tanner wants to warn Coleman about the horrors of urban life. Tanner envisions bringing his friend north as a form of warning: "I come to show you it was no kind of place. Now you know you were well off where you were" (541). Finally, Tanner ultimately decides that Coleman—and not his daughter—is the best person to care for him after his death. After the protagonist suffers a debilitating stroke, he formulates a plot to escape New York City, and Coleman figures heavily in his plans. In the event of his death, Tanner wants Coleman to take charge:

He had written a note and pinned it in his pocket. IF FOUND DEAD SHIP EXPRESS COLLECT TO PARRUM, CORINTH, GEORGIA. Under this he had continued, COLEMAN SELL MY BELONGINGS AND PAY THE FREIGHT ON ME & THE UNDERTAKER. ANYTHING LEFT OVER YOU CAN KEEP (531).

Tanner's trust of Coleman is significant. It shows how Tanner and Coleman's relationship transcends the southern hierarchy. Also, it offers insights into Tanner's mistrust of his daughter. Tanner's alienation toward his daughter offers yet another crack in the southern code, a code built on the foundation of family ties.

Another of O'Connor's stories points out how the code was also becoming outdated in the south. In "Revelation" an old, large southern woman, Mrs. Turpin, reflects on the southern code of manners while sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Her rumination occurs when she and her husband have nowhere to sit due to a collapse of southern manners.

In Mrs. Turpin's mind, a mother of a young child disrupts the southern code. Mrs. Turpin notices that "there was one vacant chair and a place on the sofa occupied by a blond child in a dirty blue romper who should have been told to move over and make room for the lady. He was five or six, but Mrs. Turpin saw at once that no one was going to tell him to move over" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 488). To Mrs. Turpin, the boy's mother violates the code by not instructing her filthy son to move over. The family was "white trash" that would "sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up" (49). Their clothes bore prints that resembled the chicken feed sacks the Turpins kept in their pump house, and the entire family—the child, the mother and the old woman—owned a gritty look, in Mrs. Turpin's mind (490-91). These people, according to Turpin, were "worse than niggers any day" (490).

Mrs. Turpin passes judgment on everyone else in the waiting room. She befriends a woman who is *clearly* a lady: the lady suggests that the dirty blond boy should move

and tells Mrs. Turpin that she is not fat (489). Turpin takes pity on an ugly teenage girl whose scowl makes her actions as ugly as her face (490). The whole scene causes Mrs. Turpin to examine the southern social hierarchy. The code and its accompanying hierarchy enjoined to it are in some ways clear to Turpin:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kid she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claude belonged. Above she and Claude were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 491).

Here O'Connor's character outlines the social and economic strata of the south. Mrs. Turpin seamlessly incorporates southern manners and finances as part of the hierarchy, too. Based on the criteria of manners, wealth and race, Mrs. Turpin has little problem passing judgment on those in the waiting room. The poor family with no manners—with the mother who didn't instruct her dirty blond boy to stand up for a lady—inhabits the lowest rung of the southern social ladder. The well-to-do lady is several rungs above the others.

But even in her seemingly clear-cut perception of southern society, Mrs. Turpin encounters problems. White trash share the same tier as “colored people.” Whether they lack the social grace or finances to rise above blacks is irrelevant; perhaps the point, in Mrs. Turpin's mind, is that the white trash who inhabit the waiting room should not be there. But be there they are. Their very existence unsettles Mrs. Turpin, and she imagines having to choose between being a “nigger” and white trash, if god gave her such a choice: “She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would

have been no use and finally she would have said, ‘All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one.’ And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (491). Mrs. Turpin’s imagination implies a discrepancy in her hierarchy. In essence blacks stood *above* some whites in her hierarchy. If forced to, she would rather be black than “white trash.”

This contradiction is the first clue that her hierarchy is problematic. Mrs. Turpin’s self-formed southern framework falls apart further when she reflects on the nuances of it, as she often does in bed before falling asleep:

Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven. (491-92)

Mrs. Turpin is incapable of adequately organizing the southern hierarchy in her mind. The criteria of race, economics and manners for generating the social pecking order contradict one another. In her pre-slumber vision, she imagines all the classes together in a march toward death. Even amid the vivid scene of a communal boxcar, Mrs. Turpin cannot reach any sort of conclusion on an adequate way to properly separate the southern social strata. While Mrs. Turpin appears incapable of understanding social hierarchy, O’Connor herself appears to be making a statement about racial or ethnic superiority, and

the genocidal results of such thinking. The imagery of the boxcar and a gas oven appears directly connected to the Holocaust, when Nazi Germany sent Jews to their deaths.

Despite O'Connor's apparent editorial, Mrs. Turpin remains beholden to the southern code. While in the doctor's waiting room, she chats with the proper lady and discusses how, though she is "tired of buttering up niggers," (494) she does so in order to keep them working at her hog farm. When a black boy enters the waiting room to deliver some supplies to the doctor's office, the conversation between him and Mrs. Turpin sticks to the script of southern manners. The boy waits for the secretary to arrive. While waiting Mrs. Turpin points out a button that would summon the secretary. "Is that right?" the boy said agreeably, as if he had never seen the button before. He leaned to the right and put his finger on it" (495). The brief interaction represents a moment where southern manners work seamlessly. The boy, who has clearly delivered supplies before, knows that the button exists. Still, he is cordial and deferential to Mrs. Turpin. He offers mock surprise and presses the button; he expresses appreciation for Mrs. Turpin's suggestion (regardless of how disingenuous his appreciation is) and follows her instructions by pressing the button. Both Turpin and the boy play their roles to perfection. In this case, the ambiguities of social strata and economic differences do not encroach. Here, in this moment, the cordial manners of the south are adequate for both Mrs. Turpin and the delivery boy.

While the code serves its purpose in this particular case, it proves woefully inadequate when polite manners of those in the waiting room break under the heavy weight of differing opinions. The ugly teenage girl who has been eyeing Mrs. Turpin

throughout—no doubt judging Mrs. Turpin as mercilessly as Mrs. Turpin has been judging her—can no longer hold back her atavistic anger. When Mrs. Turpin praises Jesus for “making everything the way it is” (499) the ugly girl attacks. Mrs. Turpin never sees the book coming, and by the time she realizes what has happened, the ugly girl is strangling her (499). A nurse and the mother pull the ugly girl off of Mrs. Turpin. Even after such a frightful experience, Mrs. Turpin immediately reverts back to the southerly manners she knows. She dusts herself off and looks at the ugly girl:

She leaned forward until she was looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. “What you got to say to me?” she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation. The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s. “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,” she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target. (500)

Mrs. Turpin speaks to the girl in the hopes of recovering a modicum of the old southern manners. An uncanny sense of familiarity envelops Mrs. Turpin when she speaks to the pinned-down girl. Mrs. Turpin hopes—even as the girl is on her back, held down by doctors, soon to receive a syringe full of sedatives—that the girl will offer an apology. The apology would signal that all was well, that southerly manners, the fleeting southern hierarchy that Mrs. Turpin so fiercely needs, has remained intact. Instead, the girl condemns Turpin as a hellbound warthog.

The condemnation is a kind of revelation to Mrs. Turpin. She realizes that the southern code, the social rules of engagement of her time, are obsolete as is the southern

hierarchy that Mrs. Turpin has earlier tried so hard to properly organize in her mind's eye. No amount of syrupy kindness can mask her judgment on others.

The revelation generates an immediate shift in Mrs. Turpin's manners. When the doctor tries to tend to her bumps and bruises, she brusquely dismisses him. "'Lea' me be,' she said thickly and shook him, off" (501). Most importantly, Mrs. Turpin's habit of passing harsh judgment on others abates. While she is incapable of withholding judgment on others, her focus of evaluation shifts. She begins to reflect on herself:

"I am not," she said tearfully, 'a wart hog. From Hell.' But the denial had no force. The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. (502)

Her self-reflection continues through the day; she sits in bed and stares at the ceiling for hours. Her level of introspection continues as she imagines defending her decency against "invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong" (503). Mrs. Turpin undeniably views her attackers as incorrect. However, her opinion is significantly softened when considering those who disagree with her. Judgment passed on her is not unwarranted but rather "reasonable-seeming." Earlier in the day, she had lorded over those who sat in a waiting room, standing over a space that was "inadequate and ridiculous" (488).

Further evidence of change occurs when she greets the blacks that work for her and Claud. Mrs. Turpin recounts her harrowing experience in the doctor's office, including the ugly girl's wart hog remark. When one black woman insists that Mrs.

Turpin is the “the sweetest white lady I know” (505), Mrs. Turpin’s demeanor shifts to anger. “Idiots! Mrs. Turpin growled to herself. You could never say anything intelligent to a nigger. You could talk at them but not with them” (505). Her rage focuses on the black women. However, it is interesting to note the social dynamics that has transpired *prior* to Mrs. Turpin belittling blacks. She has approached these women in the hopes of having a thoughtful, genuine conversation. Mrs. Turpin wants these women to abandon southern manners and be honest and forthright in their responses. Here, Mrs. Turpin wants these women to relinquish their role in both the code and hierarchy.

Unsurprisingly, the black women have no other recourse but to adhere to the southern code. They respond in platitudes and false anger. Here, the southern code, the southern hierarchy, has failed. The blacks that work for her are incapable of genuine communication because of the code, because of the hierarchy. The code has failed Mrs. Turpin, too. The code does not allow the black workers to speak to Mrs. Turpin on a human level, what our protagonist so desperate needs at this juncture. The black workers must remain embedded in their stultifying economic and social cocoon; an opportunity for genuine human contact has been lost.

Through her protagonist, O’Connor points out the limitations of the southern code: chances for genuine human contact are dashed. According to Dunleavy, Mrs. Turpin consciously “perceived that the obsolescence of the old code was everywhere evident” (200). Further, she seemed aware that a new set of southern manners was in order. Whether the fictional character Mrs. Turpin was consciously aware or not, O’Connor’s tale undoubtedly casts a dark shadow on the old manners.

O'Connor's theme of an obsolete hierarchy and code becomes even more obvious at the story's close. The emotional Turpin has a vision that might help her see the folly of the code and its related hierarchy. Mrs. Turpin daydreams of a litany of souls on their way to heaven: "There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like Claud and herself, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right" (508). The southern hierarchy that Mrs. Turpin tried so hard to order is irrelevant. Change is the new order of the day.

Chapter 4

THE UNCANNY, READER RESPONSE AND AMBIGUOUS ETHNICITY

Flannery O'Connor's characters are never simple, and are almost always difficult to like. A perfect example of an unlikeable character is the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Not long ago, I taught a literature course (at Cosumnes River College in Sacramento) in which students read the aforementioned story. Student aversion to the grandmother was global. The wide-ranging dislike of the character was of no surprise. The extent of the students' dislike, however, caught me off guard. Many expressed satisfaction regarding the conclusion of the story, when "the Misfit," an escaped convict, shoots the grandmother dead. This ignominious end was the grandmother's just desert, students said. One student said that he felt a sense of relief when the grandmother died because he wouldn't have to hear her annoying, selfish and ignorant voice any longer.

My students' reactions are representative of reader response to O'Connor's work. Her stories provoke an atavistic sense of indignation from the audience. Ultimately, the psychological impact that O'Connor's stories have on her readers might explain why readers are less inclined to recognize and acknowledge the depth to which O'Connor examines social ills in her stories.

Before delving into reader response in Flannery O'Connor's fiction—and its implications related to race and race relations—one must first examine the psychology of O'Connor's characters. At this juncture, it is necessary to stray temporarily from issues of race and look predominantly at characters' mindsets. Ultimately, I will connect character and reader psychology and revisit the themes of race and race relations.

“A Good Man is Hard to Find,” O’Connor’s widely hailed short story published in 1952, is an appropriate starting point when examining character psychology. The story, according to O’Connor, is about an old woman attempting to overcome her inadequacies through a single, transcendent moment of grace. The story begins innocuously enough: a family is going on vacation. The grandmother, the matriarch of the family, wants to alter the family plans; she would prefer to visit Tennessee rather than Florida. She urges the family—her son Bailey; his wife; and their three children, June Star, John Wesley and an infant—to avoid Florida because a dangerous escaped convict named the Misfit is reportedly loose. The family ignores the grandmother’s protestations and heads to Florida (with the grandmother in tow).

Along the way, the grandmother convinces the family to visit an old plantation, a destination the grandmother remembers fondly from her childhood. To reach the plantation, the journey strays onto a dirt road; unexpectedly, the car crashes. No one is seriously hurt, save for the mother who has a broken shoulder. The grandmother herself wishes that she had been more seriously hurt; moments before the accident, she realizes that she might have incorrectly recalled the plantation’s location, and her pride is substantially wounded. The situation turns from bad to worse when three oddly clothed men visit the accident scene. The men have guns, and before any meaningful conversation can occur, the grandmother blurts out ““You’re the Misfit!”” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 127). Immediately, the Misfit replies, ““It would have been better for all of you ... if you hadn’t of reckernized me”” (127). The Misfit’s minions then march members of the grandmother’s family into the woods, methodically killing them,

one by one. All the while, the grandmother speaks to the Misfit, seemingly more focused on her own life than the lives of her family. She begs for her life as her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren are executed. In a moment of confusion and dizziness, the grandmother reaches for the Misfit, claiming him as one of her children. The Misfit shoots her dead, and determines that the grandmother might have been a decent person “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (133).

When the grandmother reaches out to the Misfit, she appears to experience a Freudian “uncanny” moment. For Freud, the uncanny is not merely an experience that resides in the “realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (Freud 123). Instead, Freud’s uncanny—or unhomely, derived from the German word “unheimlich”—is “a species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (124). “Uncanny” involves a form of fright that relates to past events or experiences that have been repressed and/or forgotten.

Writes Freud, “The word Heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two set of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other — The one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden” (132). The grandmother is very much in familiar and comfortable territory throughout “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” She is comfortable in her skin; throughout the story, the grandmother never reflects on her actions; conversely readers might view some of her actions and words as moral transgressions. The grandmother has no compunction about trying to alter the family vacation at the last minute to get what she wants, and when her family members are executed, she unapologetically barter for her own life.

Only in the story's conclusion—when she encounters the Misfit—does the grandmother experience the uncanny. The depth of the grandmother's uncanny experience is significant. For, if the grandmother truly is, as Freud says, exorcising beliefs embraced during childhood, she could very well believe that she has *caused* the encounter with the Misfit. For, as children, we believe that *thinking* something can cause it to happen. Thus, when a child wishes for a parent's death (perhaps in a moment of rage or frustration), he experiences panic, panic that his wish will come true. Freud himself noted instances of the uncanny in some patients who felt that their thoughts or words caused an event of calamity (146). Similarly, the grandmother, during her uncanny moment, might believe that her false premonition about the misfit *causes* the encounter. Says the grandmother to her son prior to the trip, "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did'" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 117).

In Freud's definition of "uncanny" he posits that such a feeling occurs in conjunction with a doppelganger, a fellow individual that generates upheaval in the other:

This relationship is intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other — what we would call telepathy — so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience. Moreover, a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. (Freud 141-142)

The doppelganger serves as an "object of terror" (143) to the other.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother's doppelganger is The Misfit. The grandmother recognizes similarities between her and the Misfit when she reaches out and says, "Why, you're one of my own children" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 132).

In essence, she is saying that they are of the same family. For the grandmother, lineage equates to being a good person. When the Misfit has his rifle in hand, and the grandmother barter for her life, she barks out, “ ‘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’ ” (127). Her doppelganger has the same blood that she does, stems from the same fine lineage. No doubt, the grandmother considers herself to be from uncommonly good blood, too. She points out the family cemetery to the others as they embark on their journey and notes how the plantation is “Gone like the wind” (120). The grandmother and the Misfit also share a problematic memory. The Misfit can’t remember what act resulted in his incarceration. Says he: “I never was a bad boy that I remember of ... but somewhere along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary” (130). The Misfit reflects on what he has forgotten, but can’t recall what evil he performed. “I forgot what I done, lady. I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain’t recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was coming to me, but it never come” (130).

Similarly, the grandmother has trouble recalling the past. She initially believes that the old plantation that she so adored could be found on the dirt road she sent her family. Only moments before the car crash does she realize that she might have been mistaken (124).

While the grandmother’s sense of uncanny isn’t directly connected to race or race relations, other O’Connor characters experience the uncanny in ways that relate directly to issues of race. More specifically, the uncanny connects back to preconceived notions

regarding race and race relations, preconceived notions that reside in the unconscious. The uncanny occurs in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” when Mrs. Chestny attempts to give a penny to a little black boy. However, the boy’s mother reacts angrily and violently to Mrs. Chestny’s proffered gift:

The huge woman turned and for a moment stood, her shoulders lifted and her face frozen with frustrated rage, and stared at Julian’s mother. Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much. Julian saw the black fist swing out with the red pocketbook. He shut his eyes and cringed as he heard the woman shout, “He don’t take nobody’s pennies. (418)

The incident paralyzes Mrs. Chestny: her face is expressionless; she has trouble moving from her sitting position, and she is almost incapable of speech (418, 419). She is performing a familiar task, offering a gift to a black boy. However, the reaction she receives is unexpected. She is in familiar, yet unfamiliar territory. The “unfamiliar” or uncanny involves the black woman’s violence.

Here, the uncanny connects to the issue of race. Mrs. Chestny has repressed the violence that has accompanied the subjugation of blacks in the south. As she has grown out of her childhood, Mrs. Chestny has been able to romanticize the past, view the southern hierarchy as a positive for both blacks and whites. When the uncanny moment occurs, the black woman who attacks Mrs. Chestny serves as the doppelganger. Both women are large, don ridiculous hats and carry themselves with dignity (414-416). The similarities between the two are so obvious that Julian tells his mother that she’s *with* her doppelganger: “‘Don’t think that was just an uppity Negro woman,’ he said. ‘That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double’” (419).

Mrs. Chestny's doppelganger, a black woman, reflects the racial focus of the *unheimlich* moment. First, Mrs. Chestny must revisit repressed memories of the violence related to the southern code. Chestny clearly has "nostalgia for empire," as Edward Said would say. The uncanny moment forces Mrs. Chestny to acknowledge some of the less pleasant realities of race relations in the south: segregation, oppression, lynchings. Also, Mrs. Chestny's doppelganger is a *black* woman. Initially, when Mrs. Chestny sees the black woman, she dismisses their similarities by dehumanizing her darker opposite. She looked upon the woman as if she were a "monkey that had stolen her hat" (416). When the black woman takes on the role of doppelganger, Mrs. Chestny must not only accept the woman as a human being, she must recognize her as a reflection of herself. Mrs. Chestny, in a moment of realization—a horrible realization for her— sees the perniciousness of the old southern code that oppressed blacks through marginalization, fear and violence. Ultimately, the uncanny moment is too much for Chestny to bear; she appears to suffer a stroke at the story's close.

Mrs. Chestny's uncanny moment results in her apparent demise; however, the uncanny is not always a precursor to death in O'Connor's fiction. Sometimes it can be a learning experience for characters. In "The Artificial Nigger," Nelson, the young boy who visits the city experiences a frightening, unhomely experience. His grandfather loses his way and the pair wanders into the black section of town. Mr. Head is too proud to ask for directions from a black person, so Nelson approaches a woman. "He saw a large colored woman leaning in a doorway that opened onto the sidewalk. Her hair stood straight out from her head for about four inches all around and she was resting on bare

brown feet that turned pink at the sides” (261). The black woman makes fun of Nelson, yet the boy is drawn to her. “He stood drinking in every detail of her ... He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before” (262). In this instance, Nelson’s uncanny occurs because he is in a scary situation. He is lost and needs maternal comfort, an undoubtedly familiar experience from his past. However, in this case, the maternal comfort is from a black woman, not his mother. His instincts are to rush to a motherly figure, yet his youth has been spent avoiding blacks.

In this case, the doppelganger is not another human, but an inanimate object that arrives subsequently in the story: Nelson’s twin is a wooden Negro, an “artificial nigger” located in front of a store. The facsimile is “about Nelson’s size” and had “a wild look of misery” (268). The hollow, inhuman description fits Nelson perfectly. O’Connor describes Nelson’s eyes as “triumphantly cold. There was no light in them, no feeling, no interest. He was merely there, a small figure waiting. Home was nothing to him” (268). Here, the theme of race accompanies the uncanny. Both Nelson and his doppelganger are constructs, creations of their society. Mr. Head has molded Nelson just as Southern society has constructed the “artificial nigger” doppelganger, and Nelson is aware of his grandfather’s heavy hand.

At the story’s conclusion, Nelson no longer reveres his grandfather as the great purveyor of knowledge. He has realized that Mr. Head’s definition of a “nigger” is problematic, and he does not know as much about the city as he had initially claimed. His

grandfather, Nelson realizes for the first time, is flawed. The last image readers have is of Nelson watching his grandfather with “a mixture of fatigue and suspicion” (270). The grandfather’s goal was to teach his grandson a moral lesson so he would never leave home again, a home devoid of blacks. However, readers have hope that, although Nelson vows never to return to the city, he will perhaps be willing to stray beyond the confines of his grandfather’s world view. Perhaps Nelson will abandon his grandfather’s hovel and venture out beyond the parameters of previous generations, both physically and philosophically.

Often, when characters unexpectedly encounter repressed memories, readers experience deep-seated emotions, too. I would posit that those who *read* O’Connor also experience the uncanny. Critic Patricia Yaeger, in her essay, “Flannery O’Connor and the Aesthetics of Torture,” explores reader response that is both unsettling and frightening. Many of O’Connor’s characters generate a visceral reader response, Yaeger asserts. “O’Connor’s stories not only arouse anxiety in the reader about bodily integrity and consistency, they also arouse a terror about what the body can do—and wants to do and sometimes does—to other bodies” (193). But Yaeger posits that readers realize that their own bodies—their own desires—can be disturbing; she predicts the reaction of readers when she notes that they “take pleasure at the prospect of dismantling these [fictitious] bodies” in O’Connor’s fiction (202). Readers disapprove of the grandmother; when she dies, they experience a sadistic pleasure. The Misfit does exactly what some readers want to do: end the grandmother’s life, and, in turn, what she represents. Writes Yaeger:

O’Connor is most interested in the grotesque as hybrid form: as an unstable forum in which the self comes apart. O’Connor uses the predicaments of her characters

to ask, What happens when the values supporting southern bodies collapse under contradictory codes, that when they are disturbed or interrupted, the bodies they support fall apart. (201)

Although Yaeger does not overtly recognize Freud, his influence on her work is undeniable. Readers dislike the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” and wish ill of her—just as my students did in the literature course. Because they are harking back to their childhood, they unconsciously believe that they are *causing* the grandmother’s death. As noted before, readers seem to feel a sense of justice or closure when the Misfit shoots and kills the grandmother. But readers are not *supposed* to enjoy these primal urges, and thus, they encounter the uncanny. Critic Claire Katz asserts that the only connection readers have with the characters is the aversion to violence. Even though we have dislike for these characters—and even though we laugh at them when some minor setbacks befall them—we should not yearn for their demise. Thus, Katz asserts, readers are forced into uncanny situations:

Violent confrontations arouse dread and anxiety even under the surveillance of wit. Indeed, wit itself originates in what was once feared but is now mastered; and security from danger, both internal and external, is a precondition of comic enjoyment. Yet O’Connor undermines the reader’s sense of security, undermines comic elements by making the familiar world strange, by weakening our sense of reality through the distorting lens of an imagery that evokes archaic fears. (59)

When reading “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the audience wants the characters to experience some sort of retribution for their behavior. Thus, when the family goes on vacation, readers want some form of reprisal. However, when the Misfit chooses the reprisal to be an ugly death, readers are placed in an uncanny moment. We too are forced to wonder whether our thoughts, our want for negative repercussions, have caused the death of the characters. Here, readers are now in the position of wanting justice, but

getting a kind they did not bargain for. Surely, readers feel a contradictory home/not home psychological experience. Here, perhaps the audience grapples with their own issues of conscience, must wonder—like the grandmother did—whether we are as disingenuous as O’Connor’s characters.

Readers find their doppelganger in the Misfit. Like the average reader, it is the Misfit who exacts punishment on the grandmother. He *is* the readership. This Freudian relationship between reader and Misfit might explain why some critics call the Misfit the true protagonist of the story.

Now, the time comes to return to the topic of race and race relations. One reason that readers dislike the grandmother is because she represents everything that is “bad” about the south. The grandmother epitomizes the old values of the southern hierarchy in which race played a considerable role—and this no doubt alienates contemporary readers further when they pass judgment on her. Yaeger asserts that readers can’t help but see the grandmother as representative of the old southern code: “Southern literary bodies are grotesque because their authors know that bodies cannot be thought of separate from the racist and sexist institutions that surround them” (184-185). Thus, it is altogether appropriate for readers to feel a level of disgust toward the grandmother. Who wouldn’t want the grandmother to gain a level of self reflection? She adheres to “the worst southern norms” (202).

Throughout the story, the grandmother adheres herself to the south of old, the south of slavery. When her grandson, John Wesley, calls Tennessee a “hillbilly dumping ground,” (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 119) the grandmother can’t hold her tongue.

Back in her day, says the old woman, ““children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then”” (119). The very term “native state” takes on larger meaning that merely the state in which one is born. In essence, the grandmother is implying that the south—back in the days of slavery— was her native state. The old southern hierarchy worked because people—and children— accepted the natural order of the southern hierarchy.

When the grandmother uses the phrase “native state” she is also embracing both legal and social codes that called for segregation. As noted earlier, in O’Connor’s lifetime, a litany of Jim Crow laws inundated the southern legal landscape (Chesteen 284). The laws fed off the hierarchy of race and privilege. Southern lawmakers generated regulations “made from the standpoint of the white person who seeks to avoid contact with a person who *he* considers to be a Negro, without regard to what the latter may have to say about the matter” (Konvitz 426, emphasis his). Thus, for the grandmother, a black person’s “native state” would be one of deference, one where abject poverty would be no reason to complain. Further, they would be merely a part of the landscape, not so much *inhabiting* the south as much as they served as props for whites.

The grandmother’s views on the past are inextricably linked to her views on blacks—before the civil war when plantations were everywhere, slavery was legal and blacks were not considered human (426-7). In essence, the old woman has romanticized the role of blacks in southern society and views them as objects—not people—embedded in the countryside. The grandmother’s objectification of blacks occurs when the family drives past a poor black boy; the grandmother announces, ““Oh look at the cute little

pickaninny!’ ... ‘Wouldn’t that make a picture now?’” (119). The grandmother views the little boy as a part, a single segment of a painting; his existence is framed (both literally and figuratively) by how the grandmother perceives him. Her granddaughter’s response exemplifies the different ways the two generations view the little boy. June Star, concerned about the boy as a human being, notes that he isn’t wearing any pants. The grandmother quickly responds by objectifying the child again: “He probably didn’t have any,’ the grandmother explained. ‘Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do. If I could paint, I’d paint that picture,’ she said” (119). To the grandmother, this black boy is adhering to his “native state.” He is poor, too poor to own clothing. He is not worthy of being considered human. Instead, he is but a piece in a picture that the grandmother would paint.

Readers seem aware—either consciously or unconsciously—that the grandmother represents the bigotry of the old southern hierarchy. Many readers seemed to connect the grandmother to the least savory parts of the southern code. This reader awareness of racist institutions shows an increased awareness of what Edward Said calls “nostalgia for empire.” Perhaps readers are unlike the grandmother, who romanticizes the past. Instead they have a heightened awareness of slavery, of colonialism. Perhaps readers have what O’Connor herself had: a *cognizance* of empire. O’Connor knew that she represented the ruling class of the south; she felt awkward crafting a short story from the perspective of a black person. O’Connor might want her readers to have a heightened awareness of empire. Clearly, she didn’t want northerners to think that they were white knights riding in to save blacks from the evil southern hierarchy, as Mrs. Chestny’s son thought he was

doing in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” Her depiction of Mrs. Chestny’s son, a cruel, vindictive young man, shows that his seemingly selfless views on race relations aren’t necessarily altruistic. And northerners seemed to want to abdicate their role in colonialist practices, if O’Connor’s correspondence with many of them indicates (O’Connor, *Mystery & Manners* 55-58).

O’Connor seems to want her readers to reflect on their own preconceived notions of race, race relations and how they fit into their society. She wants readers to have a cognizance of empire. To push readers to a heightened level of empire awareness, O’Connor utilizes ambiguity when defining her characters’ ethnicity. John Keats described this approach as “negative capability” the ability to deal in uncertainties (Harmon & Holmon 334). Keats coined this term when describing Shakespeare’s ability to develop characters whose motives, thoughts and emotions remained open to interpretation (334). For O’Connor, ambiguity occurs in several of her characters’ racial construct. At times O’Connor fails to mention race at all, leaving readers to define a character’s ethnicity based purely on speculation. Most importantly, the choices that readers make can have significant impact on the way her stories can be interpreted.

Stanley Fish’s reader response theory provides a clear theoretical basis for O’Connor’s approach to the theme of race. For Fish, authorial intent is far less important than how readers *interpret* what the text is about. Writes Fish, “Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but ... it is a matter of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there. Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode [texts]; they make them” (327). Fish’s

theory asserts that all interpretation is based on preconceived notions, and those notions are limited to the experiences that readers have had. Writes Fish, “The mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are *already* embedded. These institutions precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make” (331-32).

One instance when O’Connor cedes authorial power and pushes readers to define ethnicity occurs in the short story “The Geranium.” To recapitulate the plot, Old Dudley is a southerner who moves to New York City after falling on hard times. Dudley finds the north burdensome; the manners that he learned in the south do not serve him well here, and the new codes that allow blacks to live alongside whites trouble him. He daydreams about the southern code and racial hierarchy that he left.

The most significant symbol, representing the southern code that Dudley so desires, is a geranium that a fellow apartment dweller leaves out on a windowsill. The geranium is representative of the social, economic and racial hierarchy that Dudley yearns for:

There were plenty of geraniums at home, better-looking geraniums. Ours are sho nuff geraniums, Old Dudley thought, not any er this pale pink business with green, paper bows. The geranium they [the neighbors] would put in the window reminded him of the Grisby boy at home who had polio and had to be wheeled out every morning and left in the sun to blink. (O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* 3)

Unsurprisingly, the geraniums that he recalls from his native south look better than the one that he encounters in the “squalid” conditions of his daughter’s apartment complex. Like the flower, the hierarchy that Old Dudley yearns for is much more appealing in his native south. In New York City, the flower is “pale pink,” a washed out color that is not

as attractive. Dudley envisions the same geranium as a flower “worth looking at” in the south, if given adequate care and nurturing (3).

Old Dudley’s yearning for the southern code and hierarchy is short-lived. He soon learns that the old rules are gone, and he can never again return to the world where he roosts atop the social and racial pyramid. While in New York, he is overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of New York, repulsed by subway where people of all ilk collide, and embarrassed by a black man who can freely laugh at him. When Dudley sits back in his chair and looks for the geranium in the windowsill across the way, he suffers one last affront: the flower is gone and in its place is a man. The geranium has fallen off the sill and crashed into the alleyway below. “Old Dudley looked back at the man. It was supposed to be the geranium. The geranium belonged there, not the man” (13). The neighbor who owns the geranium is a significant departure from the flower. The symbol of southern code and hierarchy rests six stories down, smashed on the alleyway ground (14). In its place sits a man, a destroyer of the old southern code.

The neighbor’s existence is of utmost significance to the story, yet little is revealed about this man other than the undershirt he wears and the gum he chews. Now, instead of one of O’Connor’s *characters* defining the man’s race, it is up to readers to define the man’s race for themselves. In all likelihood, readers inherently view the man as “white,” if Stanley Fish’s reader response theory is any indication. Reader response is based in dominant social institutions; thus readers might automatically revert to their biases — what they see and know— to define this character. As Fish notes, “some institutions or forms of life are so widely lived in that for a great many people the

meanings they enable seem ‘naturally’ available and it takes a special effort to see that they are the products of circumstance” (309). Applying Said’s theory of the empire myth—or at least “cognizance of empire”—to Fish’s concepts, it would make sense to assume that the destroyer of the geranium is white. For, according to Said, whites are, according to the empire myth, the rulers of the western world, rulers who are by right in need of inculcating and lording over their darker-skinned brethren. Thus, readers will automatically assume the man is white.

Yet, the man’s ethnicity is not altogether omitted in O’Connor’s text. The building in which Old Dudley lives is “blackened-red and gray with rasp-mouth people hanging out their windows looking at other windows and *other people just like them* looking back” (6, emphasis mine). Readers have already learned that New York City is a place where all races are brought together, “all mixed up like vegetables in a soup” (7). People leer out of the windows to see others who look just like themselves. Yet, we have already been told that people of all colors inhabit these buildings. If this man is representative of those who live in the buildings, he is not one single ethnicity; he is a mixture, multi-ethnic.

Here, readers must acknowledge how they define ethnicity—must acknowledge their own biases and deep-seated interpretations on race. Perhaps readers’ “cognizance of empire” pushes readers toward an uncanny experience when they conclude “The Geranium.” According to Said and Fish, individuals inherently rely on deep-seated childhood beliefs when constructing what they would consider to be truths about ethnicity. Readers who have “cognizance of empire” would conclude that the man is

white. But residents who inhabit the New York City buildings are decidedly not white. O'Connor might want readers to go beyond mere "cognizance of empire"; she might want readers to consider their own relationship to empire when they define race, when they sneer at the likes of Old Dudley or the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." She wants her readers to feel uncomfortable.

Readers themselves might encounter uncanny midway through "A Good Man is Hard to Find" when a character's race is deliberately ambiguous. In this instance, the ambiguity of a characters' race forces readers to construct race based on their past experiences. Red Sammy's name alone raises questions about his heritage. Sammy's appearance, as described by O'Connor, offers no clue to his ethnicity. Again, she utilizes synecdoche and metonymy. He is fat; he wears trousers that "reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt" (O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* 121). At one point, when chatting with the grandmother, Sammy appears hot and "wiped his sweating red face with a gray handkerchief" (122). As Yaeger notes, the colors in this scene seem slightly off. Sammy could be hot; he is initially introduced as tinkering underneath the hood of a car; thus, his red face might be a result of the heat, a white face ravaged by the warmth of work and weather. Still, his visage might be darker than the average white individual. Perhaps the red face is a reflection of his heritage, a heritage that is not from the pure blood of plantation owners; the reader cannot be certain of Sammy's color.

To further complicate matters, Red Sammy's wife is of dark skin. She is "a tall, burnt-brown woman with hair and eyes lighter than her skin" (121). Once again

O'Connor employs ambiguity to force readers into making a decision on the characters' race. Literary theorist Stanley Fish notes that all reader response is entrenched in some concrete social order. Writes Fish, "Meanings come already calculated, because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms. That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but social" (318). The ambiguity of Sammy's color, the seeming "blackness" of his wife, and their interactions with the seemingly "white" family undermine several preconceived legal norms of the south. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," miscegenation, integration or a combination of both occurs. Once again, readers are forced to reflect on their own definitions of race (simplifying, colorizing ethnicity) and race relations (southern codes that forbade miscegenation) and come to grips with the contradictory data presented by O'Connor.

O'Connor's fiction acknowledges the flaws of the south she lived in. But she also wanted her readers to reflect back on themselves and recognize that, in addition to recognizing the contradictions, ambiguities and assumptions of social order and laws; we must recognize these very traits within ourselves.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

In today's world, the United States government defines ethnicity much differently than it did a generation ago, during O'Connor's time. No longer is the definition of race relegated to binary "black" and "white" terms. In 2000, the United States Census Bureau allowed respondents to designate themselves as having more than one ethnicity, the first time the bureau allowed multiple ethnicities to be recognized for a single individual, according to the United States' census bureau web publication "Racial and Ethnic Classification used on 2000 and Beyond." Furthermore, the government acknowledged that some ethnic categories were, perhaps, excessively broad; the term "Asian," for example, encompassed a litany of heritages including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (1). Clearly, America has a heightened "cognizance of empire," if these changes are any indication.

Recognition of the complexity of ethnic identity has occurred at a macrocosmic level, too. Several individuals viewed their ethnicity in complex or multiracial terms. Golf professional Tiger Woods, whose father is black and whose mother is of mixed ethnicity, recognizes all aspects of his heritage when he calls himself "Cablinasian": Ca for Caucasian (white), bl for black in for Indian, and Asian for Thai and Chinese" (Disconsiglio 1).

But to say that America is far from moving past its preconceived notions about ethnicity would be incredibly naïve. Our Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama

is routinely referred to as the “first black president of the United States.” And it is true that his heritage—the son of an African father and a white woman—is inherently unlike the lily-white Caucasian heritage of past presidents. President Obama openly accepts the mantle of being “the first black President of the United States”; however, he also acknowledges his multicultural background, and the difficulties he has had trying to reconcile his ethnic identity that straddles the line of the “dominant culture” and the subjugated minority. Wrote Obama in his memoir “Dreams From My Father”:

We, the half-breeds and the college-degreed, take a survey of the situation and think to ourselves, Why should we get in with the losers if we don't have to? We become only so grateful to lose ourselves in the crowd, America's happy, faceless marketplace; and we're never so outraged as when a cabbie drives past us or the woman in the elevator clutches purse, not so much because we're bothered by the fact that such indignities are what less fortunate coloreds have to put up with every single day of their lives—although that's what we tell ourselves—but because we're wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and speak impeccable English and yet have somehow been mistaken for an ordinary nigger. Don't you know who I am? I'm an individual! (100)

For public consumption—as President of the United States—Obama openly accepts the mantle of “first black president.” But Obama's personal awareness of his heritage, of his ethnicity—and how it fits into our society—is far more thoughtful. Also significant is what Obama seems to be saying about the average individual: we are happy to overlook how we perceive ourselves; we would prefer to assimilate and ignore the nuances of race.

Throughout his memoir, Obama is far less judgmental of others regarding how they define ethnicity. Instead he reflects on his *own* identity and how his experiences and heritage influence his perception of the society in which we live. Clearly, President Obama has a cognizance of empire.

Now, a half century after the Civil Rights movement that O'Connor herself witnessed, readers seem to react to her work with unease, an unease based in the uncanny. Perhaps when they read O'Connor they experience a heightened cognizance of empire. They realize that, when they quickly define race of characters, or wish ill of a character who is nostalgic for empire, that they too must part of a hierarchical matrix of mores that continue to weave threads that are difficult to untangle. We are all guilty of simplifying ethnicity; we are all guilty of denying miscegenation, denying the complexities of race and race relations. And that is why, when we are feeling a bit too sure of ourselves, a bit too secure in the way we view race and race relations, we should sit down, read Flannery O'Connor, and experience an unsettling, wonderful feeling of being a bit less sure of ourselves, our society and our certitudes.

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