

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "DEMONS": INTENTIONALITY AND LITERARY
MEANING IN "THE ARTIFICIAL NIGGER"

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(Resumen)

El presente trabajo busca demostrar cómo la presencia de tres "demonios" a los que se enfrenta la autora funcionan para ampliar la significación literaria en el cuento "The Artificial Nigger" de Flannery O'Connor. El primer "demonio" que se comenta es el de su público literario, los intelectuales liberales del norte de los Estados Unidos. El público se convierte en "demonio" literario por su incomprensión y/o hostilidad hacia la visión teológica autora. El segundo "demonio" se puede ver en el lado demoníaco de la naturaleza humana, en el cual se percibe la presencia de Satanás. El tercer "demonio" al cual se enfrenta la autora es el del significado literario per se. La ficción utiliza para la representación convenciones discursivas, convenciones que, oblicuamente, comentan la naturaleza de la propia representación. O'Connor, consciente de la compleja relación entre lector, autor y narrador, se da cuenta que no es práctico ni deseable quitarle la ambigüedad al discurso, con el resultado que este último "demonio" se quedara libre en "The Artificial Nigger."

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Flannery O'Connor has by now been critically acclaimed as one of the foremost American short story writers of this century. Such acclaim may appear surprising given that early responses to her work were marked by perplexity, incomprehension and even distaste as the unsuspecting reader came up against the disturbing repercussions of her tense fictional constructs. Then again, perhaps an initial void of incomprehension is a sure sign of later critical appreciation. Whatever the reasons for her work's academic acceptance--and they are sure to be complex and contradictory--, the processes of literary classification and canonization have set about taming the startling effects of her fiction by slotting her work into a series of critical pigeon-holes, aided and abetted at times by her own critical remarks. Several avenues into her work have been opened up by the growing corpus of O'Connor criticism. Given her Southern provenance, reflected in her fictional settings and thematics, she naturally forms part of the fecund group of writers from the American South. More specifically, her violent thematics leads to her inclusion within a literary-historical chimera of doubtful critical value called Southern Gothic (along with Faulkner, Truman Capote, and Carson McCullers, a writer she particularly disliked). As a woman writer, the feminist approach seems a convenient inroad to her fiction, though she disarmingly claimed to "never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine."(176)¹ As a socially-isolated physical invalid,

1. *The Habit of Being*, hereafter cited as *HB*. This downplaying of sexual difference has an equivalent in "The Artificial Nigger", the story analysed in greater depth further on,

cared for by a strong-willed mother, she came in line for psychoanalytical analyses whose more reductive examples she attempted to put off through her tenacious critical comments and the seemingly parodic exaggeration of her work's psychological themes within the fiction itself. Most importantly for a main trend in O'Connor criticism, as a devout Roman Catholic in an eminently Protestant region, thinking through her religious concerns with a thoroughness akin to the inarticulate prophetic zeal of many of her characters, her fiction has invited the theological studies which abound among both the early and more recent responses to her work.² But, above all, O'Connor was a writer of fiction with a true craftsman's allegiance to the demands of fiction itself, eschewing pat categorizations and smug readerly expectations by using harsh effects to convey a harsh content without unduly straining the reader's credulity.

The question of the reader was of paramount importance for Flannery O'Connor. She was aware of the fundamentalism inherent in her theological vision, her "solid belief in all the Christian dogmas" (*HB*, 147), and the literary strategies used to convey this vision would prove to be obstacles for her cultivated audience of Northern liberal-intellectuals and virtually insurmountable barriers to any "average" reader that might happen to pass her way. This secular audience became for her a sort of literary "demon" with which she struggled, wary of its incomprehension, hostility or its potentially more damaging "misconstrual" of her fiction. Her essays and public talks collected in the volume entitled *Mystery and Manners* evidence the attempt to curb her readers' response and compensate for the attractions the "lunatic fringe" (*HB*, 82) found in her work.³

The notion of "misconstrual" reveals the ambiguities of O'Connor's enterprise, the difficulties she found in accommodating authorial intention and reader response. As she herself would say: "I've really been battling this problem all my writing days" (*HB*, 554). The fear of misconstrual or misinterpretation, however, should not be taken as a defence, by means of the negation of alternative interpretations, of a unitary meaning for her fiction, a meaning which could then be borne out by O'Connor's authorial proclamations, religious beliefs and intentionalist statements. O'Connor herself, true to the New Critical temperament of the 50's and 60's (Caroline Gordon, writer and wife

in the imbuing of racial distinctions with a supposedly wider spiritual context. My analysis works with the notion that the religious concern fails to do away with sexual and racial difference, indeed depends for its force on the violent ambiguity of the sociocultural attitudes to sex and race.

2. For a good example of the religious-apocalyptic current in O'Connor criticism, see Robert Fitzgerald's defence of her stories' transcendental concerns in "The Countryside and The True Country", in *Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. Where he affirms that they are more or less concerned with explicitly stating "that estrangement from Christian plenitude is estrangement from the true country of man" (30).

3. *Mystery and Manners*, hereafter cited as *MM*.

of the prominent New Critic Allen Tate, was her occasional literary mentor), asserted the primacy of narrative exigencies over her religious concerns and supported the "intentionalist fallacy" thesis.⁴ In her critical writings she espoused an operative notion of literary meaning: the work itself is the best evidence of authorial intentionality and so no extra-literary statements are necessary. The story as a complete dramatic action fuses meaning, character and event into an inseparable whole which may be informed by the writer's particular beliefs but in no way predetermined by them: "Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing" (*MM*, 91). She cultivated authorial impersonality and even insisted on the fiction writer's "fine grain of stupidity" (*HB*, 149), that artistic short-sightedness which allows the writer to perceive only dimly what he or she is doing: "the writer doesn't have to understand, only produce" (*HB*, 180). Indeed, O'Connor's letters often endorse this critical openness; she accepts informed readers' interpretations as illuminating insights into her work, discusses her stories frankly with them and confesses that rereadings of her own work uncover new layers of meaning for her.

Nevertheless, O'Connor's intense personal frame of reference could also at times obstruct this permeability to interpretive variation. Together with her more programmatic essays and the intentionalist remarks in her letters, she felt compelled to add a brief introductory note to the second edition of her novel, *Wise Blood*, in which she made her intentions clearer, apologetically stating her reasons for this violation of New critical doctrine in a letter to her publisher: "I would just like to prevent some of the far-out interpretations" (*HB*, 473). These "wilder" interpretations must have seemed inevitable given the demanding and superficially simplistic nature of her fictional commitments: "One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead" (*HB*, 92).

Anxious to transmit at least an inkling of this personal vision to her readers, O'Connor's repertoire of rhetorical strategies such as analogy, allusion, symbolism,

4. "Actually, a work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on paper, and the more complete the work, the less important it is who wrote it or why. If you're studying literature, the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life." (*MM* 126). This is obviously not a radical dismissal of authorial intention for intentionality remains an operative notion within the text itself, albeit in the impersonal mode favoured by the New Critics. On these grounds, authors can be berated - or berate themselves as O'Connor at times does in her correspondence - for not adequately embodying their intentions in their fictional constructs, though the fiction itself is supposedly the only valid evidence for this charge. For an analysis and critique of the New Critics' use of the notion of intentionality see Paul de Man, "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism", *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1983, 20-35.

grotesque distortion, violent juxtapositions and other estranging devices would have to be finely tuned in order to avoid the temptation of blatant intentionalist declarations, a sure sign of a faulty narrative according to the prevailing critical precepts of her day. Throughout her work the demands of fiction are usually stricter than those of the Church though sometimes its more extreme effects are not far from caricature (for example, her portrayal of "intellectuals" such as Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" or Rayber in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* with which she herself was uncomfortable). At times, the unbending harshness of that "ultimate reality" which O'Connor attempted to dramatize in her fiction would prove to be a stumbling block for many of her readers.

The reason for this bafflement is, perhaps, to be found in her fiction's uncompromising engagement with the darker, "demonic" side of human nature. Of Satan's, the fallen angel's, literal existence she was in no doubt and quite dogmatically sensed his presence in human interaction in a way which led novelist John Hawkes to brand her an unwitting member of the Devil's party.⁵ Embodied in her work, the demonic and the divine (the existence of which can only be accepted figuratively by the agnostic reader through a Coleridgean willing suspension of disbelief) enter into a violent dialectical relationship culminating in a usually unwilling protagonist's enforced passage through an epiphanic crisis-point or "moment of grace" in which he or she ponders the confines of his or her "true country".⁶ This moment of radical self-awareness is usually ushered in by violence of a most graphic and incongruous kind: murder, suicide, sodomy, arson and a host of minor offences. Thus, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", the grandmother only experiences this insight after her entire family

5. The sense of Hawkes' argument is that the use of evil as a means of attaining grace, the fact that the Devil himself may be the agent through whom this effect is achieved, may become an all-pervading rhetorical strategy in which the voice of the Devil and the authorial or narrator's voice are one and the same. Ultimately, Hawkes identifies the "diabolical" with the defamiliarizing creative impulse itself. On this aspect, see Preston M. Browning, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor and the Demonic", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19.1 (1973): 29-41. O'Connor said of her work that "my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil", quoted in Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor's Company of Southerners Or, 'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology", *A Gallery of Southerners*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982, 117.

6. For O'Connor, the "true country" was the Christian realm of the "eternal and absolute" but this transcendent reality had to be evoked dramatically through precise characterization and concrete setting. This contemporary anagogical vision, termed by her a "realism of distances", which pretended to yoke together the local or particular and the universal or absolute, made use of violent effects and grotesque situations to communicate itself, however successfully, to her basically agnostic audience. See her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country" and other critical statements in *MM*.

has been wiped out by a psychopath called "The Misfit"; Julian, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge", enters "the world of guilt and sorrow" (23) only after his mother has died of a stroke before his unseeing, self-centred gaze; and, in "Greenleaf", Mrs. May must be gored by a bull in a scene full of sexual undertones in order to be granted a spiritual vision whose light, rather intriguingly, she finds "unbearable" (52).⁷ Throughout O'Connor's fiction we can trace a compulsion to make this literal "devil" literary and so make his usually unacknowledged presence palatable, perhaps even credible, to her other "demon", her secular audience.

O'Connor's endeavours to construct through her fiction a bridge between these two "demons" and the subsequent ambiguities and discrepancies that arise in the passage from authorial intention to narrative realization have a sequel in the critical response to her fiction. Criticism of the O'Connor canon, as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. has pointed out, has tended to divide into two camps: one evincing a thematic, the other a more strictly formalist orientation. The thematic critics apply her absolutist religious positions to her work with varying degrees of subtlety, searching for "the religious authenticity of her fiction."⁸ These thematic interpretations, however are heavily dependent on O'Connor's professed beliefs and intentions and thus this sort of criticism "sidesteps or obscures so much that is central to her literary art", in Rubin's words (116); that is, it tends to obviate the figuration involved in the literary representation of a fictional world. Significantly, the critical confusion which O'Connor's early work aroused underwent wholesale revision with the publication in 1957 of her first critical essay, "The Fiction Writer and His Country", an explicitly Christian defence of her work. As Carol Shloss underlines, with this essay the "tenor of critical response" changed "dramatically" (13) focussing on a religious thematics which had remained obscure until then.

This intentionalist "trap", then, should be avoided by concentrating on those other resonances which Flannery O'Connor's "demon" carries, echoes and connotations which reverberate despite the intended religious dimension. This religious dimension, however, should not be removed from "its artistic relationship to the formal complexity of the fiction" (Rubin 133). As an element within a fictional work, this dimension is also fictional in the sense that it functions as a "thematic device for focussing a set of attitudes, secular rather than religious, toward the nature of man in human time and in society" (Rubin 127-128). A look at the fictional articulation of these sociocultural "attitudes" in one particular story, "The Artificial Nigger", will reveal that the spiritual

7. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find & Other Stories*, and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, for the title story and "Greenleaf" are hereafter cited in the text as *GMHF* and *ETRC* respectively.

8. For a selection of excerpts from representative works of O'Connor criticism see Suzanne Morrow Paulson. *Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1988, 151-223.

implications do not exhaust the story's meaning, a meaning which goes "on expanding for the reader the more he thinks about it" (*HB* 437).

"The Artificial Nigger" relates the story of a trip to the city, generally a site of spiritual sterility and almost Babylonian corruption in O'Connor's work, by two country bumpkins, not quite "poor white trash" but definitely emblematic of rural ingenuity and innocence. Mr. Head envisages the trip as a moral initiation for his self-asserting grandson, Nelson, despite the fact that he himself has only made the voyage twice and that Nelson proudly claims for himself the privilege of being city-born. Pride, that favoured "original sin" of O'Connor's fiction, is overflowing in Mr. Head's envisioned picture of himself as the experienced leader of the uninitiated (his very name functions here in near-caricaturesque mode to undermine his arrogant self-sufficiency and imperviousness to moral and emotional "mystery"). Yet all his vaunted moral authority vanishes when in one blind, terror-stricken moment he denies his patently undeniable kinship with his own grandson on account of a negligible street incident. Thereafter the journey motif fulfils the Dantean undertones it had started out with, the moral lesson is reversed and both grandfather and grandson need to reestablish their relationship by overcoming the betrayal through an act of redemptive mercy, symbolically triggered by the negro statue of the story's title. The cleanly-wrought tripartite structure resorts to a conventional plot-line of an initial situation lacking harmony in some way, a disruption or violation of that situation which reveals its contradictions and a final realignment of the balance. Something has been learnt by the protagonists in the process and the final situation now includes that which the first lacked or was defective in. Or so it should. Flannery O'Connor commented on this story in the following terms:

I have often had the experience of finding myself not as adequate to the situation as I thought I would be, but there turned out to be a great deal more to ["The Artificial Nigger"] than just that. And there is nothing that screams out the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls "nigger statuary". And then there's Peter's denial. They all go together in that one. (*HB* 101)

What is revealing about this self-commentary is that the "added dimension" of spiritual implication is not described as the fundamental theme of the story. The biblical analogy is fused with socio-historical and racial considerations, as well as an unspecified "great deal more", to produce a fictional story whose different levels of meaning are asserted to "all go together". It is perhaps this formal well-roundedness and thematic coherence which has led most critics, spurred on by the writer's own self-admiring remarks, to confirm the story's privileged status amongst its other, perhaps more rhetorically strained companions. Carol Shloss regards it as one of O'Connor's "most engaging narratives", one which works "on the analogical as well as the literal level" and suggests it does so because the omniscient narrator authoritatively guides the reader through the story's revelatory moments, avoiding "heavy ambiguities" and leaving nothing open to inference (118-123). For Frederick Asals, it is "a polished and

accomplished story" and he locates its uniqueness within the O'Connor canon in the fact that it successfully merges the dualities of "the reductive movement toward unmasking and the pain of awareness" and "the redemptive movement toward abnegation and atonement" (79-92). Without denying the reconciliatory gestures which the story enacts and which an audience bred on New Critical doctrine will eagerly actualize, one is tempted to delve into those underlit areas which O'Connor's own remarks and the story itself graze: the conflictive spheres of racial attitudes, sexuality (particularly the figure of maternity and the threat of feminine seduction) and unconscious or irrational impulses underlying human personality. Though this O'Connor story is admittedly not as unsettling in these aspects as others, the trace of their presence does suggest that the discriminating reader may turn up "a great deal more" by pulling at these loose ends.

It is interesting to note that even in the case of such an exquisitely crafted story as "The Artificial Nigger", Flannery O'Connor was concerned to make explicit her intentions to her correspondents. In her letters she refers to Mr. Head's psychical transformation by the act of mercy at the end of the story and explains how all his personal attributes have been "ordered to a new vision" (*HB* 275). Obviously, for the agnostic or unbelieving reader, the problem lies in delimiting the exact range of this "new vision". The story's final paragraphs are crucial in this respect for in them, as O'Connor herself commented, she has virtually taken Mr. Head "from the Garden of Eden to the Gates of Paradise" (*HB* 78). The omniscient narrator is in full control of these closing paragraphs, apparently eliminating any ironic distance that might remain between character and narrator by forcefully adopting and sanctioning Mr. Head's subjective viewpoint. The narrator proceeds to spell out the exact nature of Mr. Head's redemption by mercy despite the fact that Mr. Head himself "knew that there were no words in the world that could name it" (*GMHF* 128). Lines such as "He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children" (129) are almost pure commentary on the narrator's part. By the time we reach the last sentence of this penultimate paragraph--"He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise"--narration has fully switched to exegesis. At least one critic believes that the epiphany is achieved too self-evidently in this case. For Louise Y. Gossett these final paragraphs betray their narrative context by slipping into direct "telling": "the fiction lapses into preaching" (96).

Whether or not we feel we are being preached at by the narrator and despite the muted reconciliation and character-transformation which has taken place, we should be wary of attributing to this epiphanic moment too great a power. Both the opening and final scenes are set in the faerie-like atmosphere of moonlight, as opposed to the noonday crisis-point, that moment under the sun's "dull dry light" when "everything

looked like exactly what it was" (121).⁹ It is true that the connotations of the moon-imagery have altered in some degree in the final section, mainly due to a downplaying of the ironic distancing that was present in the opening description of Mr. Head. There Mr. Head's comic self-aggrandizement leads him to envisage the moon as a servant, called upon by the "great man" to "cast a dignifying light on everything" (102). Yet the moon's face is "a grave one", the narrator delicately adds, and, in anticipation of the character deflation Mr. Head will undergo, it contemplates "itself with the look of a young man who sees his old age before him" (102). The hyperbolic comparison with the moral guides of classical Virgil and biblical Raphael is undermined by the actual description of Mr. Head, one bordering on the grotesque: "He had a long tube-like face with a long rounded open jaw and a long depressed nose" (103). This physically ironic counterpoint is reiterated throughout the story at different levels: in the constitutional similarity between grandfather and grandson ("...they looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age...", 105), in the weighing machine ticket's message ("You are upright and brave and all your friends admire you", 115), in Mr. Head's description as "an old monkey" (121) just after he has accused Nelson of "grinning like a chim-pan-zee" (120) at a huge black woman, and so on. Perhaps irony is nowhere so apparent as in Mr. Head's last reported thought before falling asleep again after his midnight reverie: "He fell asleep thinking how the boy would at last find out that he was not as smart as he thought he was" (104). The possible confusion as regards the pronominal referents, whether the "he" effectively refers to Nelson or whether it is an ironic backlash on Mr. Head himself, seals the effect.

Turning to the final scene, we find the moon closing off this transformative cycle. The diffident "half of the moon" which had popped into the room with Mr. Head's "permission" (102), now floods "the clearing with light", at last "restored to its full splendor" (128). Frederick Asals has analysed the use of light imagery as a symbolic accompaniment to the trials Mr. Head and Nelson suffer and concludes that it figuratively conveys the depth of their moral journey.¹⁰ At the end, the moon is no longer seen reflected in a mirror but shines down on the Heads protectingly. To the silvery atmosphere of Mr. Head's fantasizing "a fresh black light" has now been added, a silver-black spectrum which Asals associates with "the transfigured image of pain and death, of the suffering, passion, and abasement that has been associated with the blacks of the city and, through their encounter with the statue, in a measure with the Heads

9. For O'Connor's use of light imagery, see Stuart L. Burns, "'Torn By the Lord's Eye': Flannery O'Connor's Use of Sun Imagery", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 13.3/4 (1967): 154-166.

10. "Sun and moon, then, define the literal and symbolic perspectives of the story, (...) Mr. Head's pilgrimage from complacent self-inflation to the emptiness of his "true depravity" to intimation of paradise is rendered imagistically in his movement from the illusions of the mirrored moon to the reductive sun of the barren actual to the moon purged, as it were, by contact with the sun." (Asals, 84).

themselves" (Asals 83). We shall return to the racial element contained in these remarks but first we should point out some of the ambiguities latent in this final scene.

From the very beginning, the story's main conflict has been presented dramatically in terms of the generational opposition between grandfather and grandson. As we have seen, however, the opposition is diluted by the physical and temperamental similarities between the two, a fact which is emphasized by the transformation effected by the statue: "Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man" (127). Furthermore, Nelson's dependence on his grandfather is asserted on the train even before they reach the city, a fact to which, crucially, Mr. Head remains oblivious: "He realized 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" (112). It is this obliviousness, this lack of a reciprocal affection for the boy at an important moment, that will lead to the denial of Nelson after the boy, panic-stricken at the thought of having lost his grandfather, runs into and knocks over an elderly shopper. From then on, Mr. Head finds himself metaphorically "wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before" (125). We must recall that Nelson was "the only dark spot in the room" in the opening scene, asleep in the pallet "underneath the shadow of the window" (103), and thus removed from Mr. Head's moonlit fantasy. Nelson's intractability, heightened by his grandfather's betrayal, is as much a moral purgative for Mr. Head as it will be a vengeful obstacle to be overcome by himself. The statue starts off this regenerative process by "dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (128), but in this postlapsarian world Edenic bliss is not to be gained in absolute terms. In a closing short paragraph that presents the boy's point of view, Nelson composes "his expression under the shadow of his hat brim" and watches his grandfather "with a mixture of fatigue and suspicion" (129). The lingering doubt--worldly knowledge, we might say--remains and even the grateful vow never to return to the city does not dispel it.

The ecstatic celestial vision of Mr. Head does not eliminate this disquieting hint of unresolved tension. Indeed, it seems a trademark of Flannery O'Connor's fiction that the final vision is never presented in reassuring terms. The extremity of her characters' obsessive natures forestalls such a conclusion. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find", the Misfit, after rejecting the grandmother's offered kinship, ends this murderous, religiously-charged episode with a laconic "It's no real pleasure in life" (*GMHF* 29); Mrs. McIntyre, in "The Displaced Person", is reduced to a blind, paralytic wreck, "displaced" into "some foreign country" by her guilty implication in the Polish refugee's death (*GMHF* 250); and Ruby, in "A Stroke of Good Fortune", is left facing up to an unwanted pregnancy as if it were a prison sentence, the "Good Fortune" baby lying menacingly "out nowhere, resting and waiting, with plenty of time" (*GMHF* 84). The harshness of the stories' resolutions is perhaps to be expected given the implacability of O'Connor's theological vision, a world where a usually avenging Christ purifies through fire rather than assuages with a benign tolerance. But the demands of a more down-to-earth realism explain the reversion to Nelson's suspicion-haunted perspective in the final paragraph of "The Artificial Nigger" for it casts a shadow over

Mr. Head's projected heavenly paradise. After all, this paradise is not realizable here under the heavens and it can only be simulated behind "the protecting walls of a garden" (128), consciously cut off from the rampant "evil", however we may wish to define that evil, of contemporary society. The frozen landscape of the Heads' retreat reveals itself as especially brittle in this light. The train may seem "a frightened serpent" to the Heads' alleviated minds but it will continue to perforate repeatedly their "artificial" garden of Eden.

Without expanding on the sexual connotations which the train as satanic serpent might suggest, it is nevertheless apparent that what is missing in this edenic vision is the slightest tinge of sensuality. The sensual innocence we might associate with Paradise is completely obliterated by the story's exploitation of the heat/cold polarity. If Nelson's "frozen vision" of his grandfather's denial is eventually melted away by mercy's "hot grasp" (125) and if the elegant suburban houses in Atlanta seem "partially submerged icebergs", at the end we come upon a frozen purity where warmth might have been expected. (In another of O'Connor's stories, aptly entitled "The Enduring Chill", this selfsame polarity is used to suggest the numbing starkness of the revelatory moment: "But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend" (*ETRCM* 114). Yet, in "The Artificial Nigger", an episode of an undeniably sensual nature occurs during the Heads' blundering peregrination through the city's socially stratified suburbs. Nelson is entranced by the sight of a large black woman, an obvious Earth Mother figure, whose dress shows "her exact shape" (118). We are confronted with a moment of mysterious recognition, just as Mr. Head's pained self-recognition will take place under a sun which reveals everything "exactly" as it is. It seems evident that a glimpse of some sensual or sexual mystery, understood in the widest possible sense, is being afforded to Nelson. Here are O'Connor's brief comments:

I meant for her in an almost physical way to suggest the mystery of existence to him--he not only has never seen a nigger but he didn't know any women and I felt that such a black mountain of maternity would give him the required shock to start those black forms moving up from his unconscious. (*HB* 78)

These "black forms" are difficult to define for they encompass a wide area of irrational or non-rational experience, an area which is not solely psychological in O'Connor's fiction but which includes those, for her, deeper spiritual mysteries she was trying to dramatize. However, the merging of the religious and the psychological is a difficult balance to maintain, especially when audience response in our secular age will inevitably tilt it to one side. The story starts and finishes in darkness, a darkness infiltrated tellingly by the moon's "shades of silver" and "fresh black light". Mr. Head's explanation of the city sewerage system with its "endless pitchblack tunnels" firmly connects it in Nelson's mind with his conception of hell (115-116). Blackness, however, is soon linked to interior states of mind, as Asals points out (89-90). The same tunnel imagery is employed to embody this interiorisation of what the Heads--their family

name is comically suggestive here--consider purely external threats. As Nelson gazes "paralyzed" at the black woman, he feels "as if he were reeling down through a pitch black tunnel" (119). The weighing machine ticket had warned him to "beware of dark women" but, considering the error it made in Mr. Head's case--he is certainly not "upright and brave" (119)--, perhaps we should read this cryptic message in an inverse sense. The maternal figure of the black woman would then come to represent what Nelson conspicuously lacks: a mother. (We first find Nelson sleeping in the classic foetal position: "Nelson was hunched over on his side, his knees under his chin and his heels under his bottom", 103). The black woman's voice is like "a cool spray" for Nelson and he fervently desires her sexual-maternal embrace: "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" (119). This desire is left unfulfilled and the frozen eden of the Heads' secluded habitat postpones it indefinitely. It is the absence of this sensual warmth which adds to the ambiguities of the story's close. We can find close parallels in other stories (for example, "Greenleaf", "Good Country People", "The Comforts of Home") where what Louise Westling calls "unresolved sexual tension" leaves "a profound residue of anxiety in the reader's mind"(144).¹¹

As far as Nelson is concerned, the residues of the encounter with this earthy figure are reflected unconsciously in the shape of "vague noises and black forms moving up from some dark part of him into the light" (121) as he dozes on the sidewalk just before his grandfather's cruel denial. After the denial, the light and tunnel imagery is used to convey the psychological processes of shame and desperation on Mr. Head's part and vengeance and outrage on Nelson's. The street becomes "a hollow tunnel" (123) for Mr. Head, "a black strange place" (125) with no respectable end in sight and with Nelson's eyes, "like pitchfork prongs" (124), stoking his shame from behind. Redemption and reconciliation are not far away, however, as "from some remote place inside himself" Nelson senses "a black mysterious form" reaching up to dissolve the "frozen vision" of his grandfather's treachery (125).

But perhaps "redemption" is too religiously charged a term to apply to an anticipatory image at this stage of the narrative. Despite O'Connor's avowed protest that "the meaning of a piece of fiction only begins where everything psychological and sociological has been explained" (*HB* 300), the textual evidence is as yet too flimsy to support a reductively theological reading of the narrative. This is not to deny the

11. Flannery O'Connor confessed to a correspondent that sexuality as a category was lacking in her fiction but defended her symbolic use of sexual motifs by subsuming sexuality within the "sacred". She adds revealingly: "My inability to handle it so far in fiction may be purely personal, as my upbringing has smacked a little of Jansenism even if my convictions do not. But there is also the fact that it being for me the center of life and most holy, I should keep my hands off it until I feel that what I can do with it will be right, which is to say, given." (*HB* 117)

religious themes that O'Connor's fictions obviously connote but neither should we allow this "anagogical" level to swamp other layers of meaning which the writer herself acknowledged as being present in her work.¹² Whether this level becomes predominant or not in an interpretation depends on the rhetorical closure achieved by each story, some leaning toward a compatibility of the allegorico-religious reading with other levels of meaning (for example, "Revelation" or "The River"), others straining this spiritual straightjacket ("The Displaced Person", "Everything That Rises Must Converge") and thus revealing the discursive obstacles which Flannery O'Connor, like any other writer, had to struggle with. In "The Artificial Nigger", by the time blackness and mystery have been concentrated in the weathered statue, the embodiment and the catalyst of the "action of mercy" which will reunite the Heads, we are unwilling to discard the symbolic burden that these motifs have picked up along the narrative way in favour of the spiritual ramifications of the last paragraphs. These meanings work together, perhaps even against each other, and, as O'Connor would say, "keep expanding" so as to enrich the significance of the story for the reader.

In this light, the use of the black "Earth Mother" figure and the "nigger statuary" are similar in some respects, both as concerns the writer's intended spiritual implications and the wider import we may attach to them. O'Connor's comments on the black woman's role are narratively enacted in the shape of Nelson's mute entreaty that his grandfather explain to him the "mystery of existence" (128). That this "mystery of existence" should be equated with a particular Christian viewpoint is not at all self-evident throughout the story. In this respect, one can perhaps question the aptness of such a symbolically overdetermined figure for intentionally conveying a precise "message". As Hortence Spillers makes clear, the black matron fulfils a complex role within Southern fiction, even accounting for the topicality which surrounds her representation. She effectively occupies "a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth" (65). These "confounded identities", whether of a sexual, racial, mythological or psychological character, cannot be simply peeled away from this figure's "tremendous bosom" in favour of a determinate spiritual interpretation. The dark seductress shares the same figurative space as the "mountain" of maternity, spiritual awe goes along with wonder at her sheer materiality. The spiritual is taken along with the non-spiritual and runs the risk of being engulfed in the process.

One of the narrative means employed to avoid this, together with the explicitness of Mr. Head's final vision, is the symbolic figure of the "artificial nigger" itself. Reiterating the figurative complexity of the black matron, it is intentionally loaded by O'Connor in order to suggest "the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (*HB* 78). The statue's "wild look of misery" (127) becomes a mirror-image for

12. "What personal problems are worked out in stories must be unconscious. My preoccupations are technical. (...). Perhaps you are able to see things in these stories that I can't see because if I did see I would be too frightened to write them." (*HB* 149)

the Heads who are brought together "in their common defeat" (128) by that utterly incommensurable defeat which the Negro has suffered, converted now into "some monument to another's victory" (128). But what about this defeated Negro? What is it in his look that provokes such a climactic response on the part of these two poor whites? O'Connor once remarked that "in Southern literature the Negro, without losing his individuality, is a figure for our darker selves, our shadow side" (quoted in Asals, 86). The more we examine this quotation the more revealing does it become. In the first place, we may question its central proposition: does not figurality, the standing in for something else, always imply a certain loss of individuality, of identity, on the part of the subject used for the figurative representation? We might affirm that figurality, if it does not completely obliterate the Negro's individuality, may at least dilute or distort it. Secondly, the use of the Negro as a symbol for (white) man's "shadow side", the sphere of the irrational, signals the symbolic appropriation the black subject has undergone. Bereft of an autonomous subjectivity, this appropriation nevertheless ironically points to the centrality of the Negro within this spiritual-psychological conception of "man". The symbolization process places him in that unspecified locus which, both for O'Connor's fiction and Freudian theory, designates that which is most basic and essential, that irrational core which lacks the comforting constraints of conventional subjecthood. For O'Connor this area is "a tide of darkness" or, alternately, a "light unbearable", a place where "even their virtues were being burned away" from those entering this mysterious beyond (*ETRC* 23, 52, 218).

An object-lesson in racial classification is considered by Mr. Head to be one of the primordial motives for the trip to the city and he goes to great lengths in order to instill in Nelson's mind the intimate connection between the blacks and the city. Indeed, the correct identification of a "nigger" is converted by Mr. Head into a sign of intellectual and experiential maturity. Once on the train Nelson fails this first test rather forebodingly but his failure, while anticipating his later encounters with these "darker selves", seems to cast more light on the predominant sociocultural categories which the story, through the Heads, subsumes than on the difficulties of the moral journey that his grandfather has mapped out haphazardly for him. That the moral and the cultural should merge so "that Nelson cannot finally resist the "nigger" within himself" is a rhetorical ploy which downplays the racial question to such an extent that Frederick Asals can go on to comment: "O'Connor makes no pretence of exploring racial relationships here", though he adds: "the use of conventional southern attitudes is essential to the shaping of [the] tale"(85-87). These attitudes are especially evident in the comical question-and-answer sequence which follows the appearance on the train of the "huge coffee-colored man" (109). In response to his grandfather's persistent questioning, Nelson first defines him as "a man", then more and more uncertainly as a "fat man" and an "old man", before his grandfather triumphantly proclaims: "That was a nigger" (110).

This exercise in racial classification is later subject to severe revision as the "black forms" come to trouble the Heads' circumspect wanderings. The blacks of the city take on the role of symbolic correlatives of the uncharted areas of the Heads' vital

experience yet the black/white dichotomy, despite being shaken, is still steadfastly adhered to by Mr. Head when the pair return with relief to their rural sanctuary where, in Mr. Head's words, "There hasn't been a nigger (...) since we run that one out twelve years ago" (105). A comic statement in its context but revelatory of the tale's deeper ambiguities. A figure which has been significantly invested by the story to carry out a crucial symbolic role is missing at the end. It is, after all, a touch of realistic detail for we cannot expect the Heads' rigid racial code to have been torn asunder by their urban trials. They can barely articulate this unlooked-for experience--what articulation there is on Mr. Head's part is couched in terms of cultural cliché, whether racial or religious--and yet this experience is centred on the "nigger", a figure whose presence becomes indispensable within this social framework.

A brief comparison with some other O'Connor stories will perhaps make the importance of this black presence clearer. In "The Displaced Person", the Polish war refugee, Mr. Guizac, incarnating an ambiguous Christ-figure, first transfers his refugee status onto the dairyhands, the Shortleys, through an unconscious mixture of quiet workmanship and social naivety, and then brings about a more radical displacement in Mrs. McIntyre's psyche. However, this crisis point is only reached after the Pole has dared to tamper unwittingly with the South's racial code by proposing to marry off a cousin with Sulk, a black farmhand. Significantly, the Shortleys had been the first to clear out in the face of the immigrant's efficiency, not the blacks, and Mrs. McIntyre underlines the latter's necessity by exclaiming to the uncomprehending Pole: "I cannot run this place without my niggers. I can run it without you but not without them" (*GMHF* 235).

Throughout O'Connor's fiction blacks, despite the often comic shiftlessness with which they are portrayed, are ever-present on the margins. Only rarely is he given full weight within the narrative and, on these occasions (for example, "The Artificial Nigger"), his importance to the white protagonist's self-identity becomes paramount. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge", O'Connor attempted to fuse the then contemporaneous problem of racial integration with her own concerns for spiritual convergence, an integration in transcendental terms. Here the black/white polarities show their intimate bonds through the juxtaposed figures of Julian's mother and the sullen black woman on board the integrated bus, brought together in Julian's eyes by their two identical hats and equated in the reader's eyes by their two ineffectually rebellious sons. The black woman explodes in rage at Julian's mother's condescension and strikes her with her bulging pocketbook, a blow which together with Julian's goading remarks provokes a fatal stroke. A "tide of darkness" engulfs Julian as he finally becomes aware of his true dependence on his narrow-minded mother but the tension-filled figure of the black woman remains as a stalking presence on the fringes of this "world of guilt and sorrow".¹³

13. The difficulties of literary "convergence" are perhaps revealed by O'Connor's defensive remarks on her use of the race issue in this particular story: "The topical is

The diminutive figure of the "artificial nigger" encapsulates most of these themes. It is a monument to the black race's subjection which, in turn, is made to reflect the spiritual abjection of the Heads. The moral circumstances of the Heads and this representative figure are supposedly self-identical but through the parallelism we gain an insight into the social necessity of this forlorn caricature, emblematically placed on the brick fence of one of the "big white houses" (126) in an affluent neighbourhood. In this regard, Mr. Head himself laconically utters a crucial statement, comical in tone yet contextually important, for it reveals that dark underside which props up these "partially submerged icebergs" of houses: "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one" (128). The self-sufficiency of this all-white neighbourhood is belied by one small statue. Economic and racial domination reveal their foundations in exploitation and injustice in this "monument" as Mr. Head inadvertently construes its necessary presence in light of its referent's absence.

We have here neatly dramatized the whole problem of figurative representation which Flannery O'Connor assiduously confronted. The "artificial nigger", as statue, is a cliché-ridden representation whose obviousness is given figurative weight in order to point to that anagogical level of meaning where the spiritual is supposed to reside. But the cliché can also give way to other forms of interpretation when the narrative's drift encourages such a response. This is inevitable given the public nature of representation, fictional or otherwise, a process where dispersal is an ever-present danger (or welcome side-effect). Just as the statue represents something which is absent, so does fiction referentialize that which must be empirically absent for it to exist as fiction. But as it does so, it also escapes the curtailment in meaning which referentiality imposes on non-literary utterances. Fiction's internalization of language's referential dimension effectively cuts fiction off from the disambiguating purposes of external reference, whether reference to an empirical reality or to authorial intentions, while at the same time calling attention to the nature of literary representation. The discursive formation of a world is what is at stake in all language-games, fiction included, and it is the ambiguities in the Heads' own particular world-view and their difficulties in articulating a new one which "The Artificial Nigger" traces. This applies equally to the relationship between author, narration and reader. The discursive complexities which the process of narration encounters cannot be fully disambiguated by the author. In any case, it is the reader who will actualize or not an interpretation according to the particular reading strategy that he adopts. The statue is thus a tragic reminder of racial subjection, a spiritual pointer or a mere lawn ornament. Alternatively, it must be all three, and perhaps more, for its functionality within a fictional framework to have any lasting relevance. In a sense, fiction depends on ambiguity or on non-literality. Fiction is of the nature of a "statue", if we divest this term of its static connotations, for it is both "artificial", in that it is conventionally constructed, and it is a representation; more

poison. I got away with it in "Everything That Rises" but only because I say a plague on everybody's house as far as the race business goes" (HB 537).

precisely, it utilizes discursive conventions for the sake of representation and, in the process, comments obliquely on the nature of representation itself. Reductive interpretations, whether theological or psychological, mythic or sociological, may have a pragmatic value but fiction, as Flannery O'Connor knew so well, overrides them constantly.

Thus, a third metaphorical "demon" is added to our list: that of literary meaning itself. In her battle against naive interpretative reductiveness Flannery O'Connor may have fallen prey at times to her own peculiar brand of reductionism but, in the main, she was willing to let this "demon", at least, run wild. Indeed, as a conscientious writer of fiction, she had no choice, for the domestication of literary meaning is the death of literature itself. "The Artificial Nigger" is one of many O'Connor stories which bear this "demonic" stamp (in all three figurative senses of the term as employed here). Its success lies in the "expansion of meaning" it provokes in the reader upon attentive reflection and renewed readings. Rereading is a sure sign of a fiction's literary worth. In this respect, Flannery O'Connor's work amply repays the effort.

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