ABERRATIONS, INSTABILITIES AND MYTHOCLASM IN THE TALES OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR[1]

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Abstract

Taking as a point of departure concepts introduced by contemporary critics of the South, such as "Southern aberrations," "Southern self-fashioning," "instabilities," and "mythoclasm," this paper analyses Flannery O'Connor's tales and their peculiar role within the history of Southern writing. The author argues that despite O'Connor's alleged conservatism, her tales undermine traditional categories related to the South and anticipate later tendencies. Thus, although O'Connor's fiction incorporates the most distinctive elements of traditional Southern literature —humor, the grotesque, violence, religion, race and racism— and some of her views may evoke the white and male aesthetic of the Fugitives/Agrarians, the iconoclastic treatment of these elements prefigures the revisionist impulse of present-day Southern writing, suggesting the turn of Southern literature to parody and postsouthernness.

Key words: Southern writing, tradition, myth, mythoclasm, aberrance, instability, religion, violence, class, race, parody, simulation.

Resumen

Tomando como punto de partida conceptos utilizados por críticos de la literatura y cultura del Sur de los EEUU, tales como "Southern aberrations," "Southern self-fashioning," "instabilities" y "mythoclasm," este artículo analiza los cuentos de Flannery O'Connor y su peculiar papel en la historia de la literatura sureña. La autora señala que pese al supuesto conservadurismo de O'Connor, sus relatos subvierten las categorías tradicionales asociadas al Sur y anticipan tendencias surgidas posteriormente. Aunque la ficción de O'Connor incluye los elementos más representativos de la literatura sureña tradicional —el humor, lo grotesco, la violencia, la religión, la raza y el racismo— y algunos de sus rasgos pueden evocar la estética masculina y blanca de los Fugitives/Agrarians, el tratamiento iconoclasta de estos elementos es precursor del impulso revisionista y desmitificador de los escritores sureños contemporáneos, y anuncia el giro de la literatura del Sur hacia la parodia y la identidad postsureña.

Palabras clave: escritura sureña norteamericana, tradición, mito, "mitoclasma", aberración, inestabilidad, religión, violencia, clase, raza, parodia, simulaciones.

In "The South of the Mind," Southern critic Diane Roberts points out that white Americans, faced with the loss of their social and political hegemony, have

singled out the 1880's, World War II, and the 1950's as times of special virtue. Significantly, in those years there was a "top-down power structure, a decorum in which gender and race roles [were] obviously and concretely assigned." The South, she argues, remains the champion in its determination to glamorize the past, even if that past has implied exploitation and abuse (368). However, these characteristics do not apply to Flannery O'Connor, a Georgian writer of the 1950's, who neither glamorizes the past nor reflects any social harmony in her treatment of her contemporary Southern characters. In fact, her fiction undermines traditional categories related to the South and anticipates later tendencies, as will be discussed.

Richard Gray argues that "all Southern writing is aberrant," and some writers, like O'Connor, "have had aberrance as its fundamental subject and strategy" (407). In fact, part of her aberrance consists in her two-fold divergence from both Southern and non-Southern writing. No doubt O'Connor's fiction could be taken as a peculiar example of what Gray calls "Southern self-fashioning" (xiii), which in her case implies both the rejection or distortion of traditional clichés and the foregrounding of elements usually discarded. Gray pays attention to the instabilities frequently found in Southern writing: in his view, they are typical of a culture that "perceives itself as marginalized" (x). Similarly, Susan Castillo points out that "the grotesque/gothic is an aesthetic based on instability," so "the reconciliation of possibilities [...] is a contingent and fleeting one at best" (488). Together with Gray's, this reflection —which Castillo inserts at the beginning of her essay "Flannery O'Connor"— is an appropriate starting point for the present analysis: as we shall see, O'Connor's tales offer diverse examples of such instabilities; her handling of them, though, proves to be rather more complex than what generalizations about the grotesque —used and abused to describe O'Connor's fiction— appear to suggest.

Whereas traditionally the South "has been notorious for mythologizing itself," as Applewhite writes (Crowther 65), in "Writing in the South Now" Matthew Guinn notes that "'declaring war' on community and myth" has become "one of the defining approaches to postmodern Southern writing." In his view, contemporary Southern literature coheres around two approaches: a revival of literary naturalism, and also "an iconoclastic spirit" —what he calls "mythoclasm"— which "seeks to undermine the South's received notions of community and tradition." In short, the defining trends in contemporary Southern fiction are "the effort to break from tradition" and the "revisionist spirit" that usually accompanies this impulse (571-74). Significantly, these features, which are central in present-day writers such as Harry Crews and Cormac MacCarthy, are anticipated in O'Connor's work, even if in a different way. In this regard, the remark made by Fred Hobson—a prestigious critic of the South— is quite relevant: "many Southern writers now operate not under the shadow of Faulkner but under that of O'Connor and Welty" (73).

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In order to analyse these characteristics, I will focus on a selection of O'Connor's tales which, in my view, convey the sense of mythoclasm —the dismantling of Southern clichés— and in a sense the critical, revisionist spirit that Guinn discusses. A powerful tale that incorporates these elements is "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953), which opens her first collection of stories and also gives title to the volume. In it, a family of six members, grandmother included, leaves Atlanta for a short trip in Florida, but they never reach their destination. On their way, they meet the Misfit, a dangerous criminal escaped from the Federal Pen, who kills them one by one. Only the cat, taken by the grandmother without her son's knowledge, and partly responsible for the accident, survives the killing. Apart from its ethical focus on the final dialogue between the grandmother and the Misfit, who becomes the agent of grace through which the former experiences her epiphany, the story explores a variety of Southern conventions in a comic but critical light.

Thus, the members of this family have nothing to do with our image of a traditional Southern family: the children's mother, whose looks and behaviour suggest a negligible or even stupid character, is not even appropriate to stand for the parody of the Southern Belle or Lady; similarly, Bailey, the father, boring and weak, has nothing to do with the Southern gentleman. The children seem more dynamic and witty, but they are certainly impolite, impudent and quarrelsome. Only the grandmother, through her clothes, conventional good manners, and her idealization of the past, looks like a would-be Southern lady: she is the only character in the story that represents the traditional South and the nostalgia for it, which O'Connor undermines. Significantly, the old woman proves to be selfish, hypocritical and vain. In turn, the children convey the idea of mythoclasm that the very plot of the story foregrounds. In his insolent style, the boy remarks: "Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground [...] and Georgia is a lousy state too" (119), statements that only the grandmother censures.

In an indirect way, the narrative discloses that it is precisely the desire to return to the past —in part an unreal past— that provokes the car accident, and in consequence, the encounter with the Misfit: we should recall that the grandmother suggests visiting an old plantation and its house, provided with a secret panel which does not exist and which she fabricates to attract the children's attention. Her answer to the grandson's question about the whereabouts of another plantation is worth quoting: "Gone with the Wind," she says, an evocative phrase which goes beyond the connotations of its popular intertext[2] and highlights O'Connor's iconoclastic impulse. Significantly, the historical and mythic past evoked is unrecoverable, but its literary and cinematographic reflections persist and can proliferate endlessly. The grandmother's use of this witty quotation points to O'Connor's early awareness of the South's growing fascination with images of itself, a tendency associated

[2] As Helen Taylor (28) argues, Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936)— made into a successful film by David O. Selznick in 1939— is probably the most popular work of art of the twentieth century and an international symbol of American Southernness.

with the postmodern condition and which present-day Southern culture epitomizes, as some critics of the South have pointed out (cf. among others, Kreyling 1998). Taking as a point of reference Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983), Scott Romine argues in "Where Is Southern Literature" that the South will never cease to exist, since it will keep reinventing itself: "the identitarian South may inflect representation long after the material South has retired into memory" (42). As we shall see, O'Connor continues to explore this issue in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," a tale that, interestingly, was published in the same year as "A Good Man..."

In this tale, O'Connor parodies Southern overemphasis on ancestry and good manners through the grandmother's words to the Misfit: in order to save her life, she resorts to clichés such as "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" or "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). As could be expected, the lady's politeness and her flattering remarks prove both ridiculous and useless in such tragic circumstances. It is worth pointing out that this passage of the story foregrounds two distinctive and persistent Southern features, religion and violence, which O'Connor tackles in a really "aberrant" manner: the formulaic and superficial religious attitude of the grandmother contrasts with the fundamentalist-nihilist one of the Misfit, who despite (or because of) his radical Christian concerns, ends up killing the five members of the family. John Lowe's view of the postmodern South endorses O'Connor's unsentimental and unglamorous depiction of it in "A Good Man...": "the South still seems haunted by the gothic ghosts of its past, and religion's sway is as strong as ever, despite the development of a new southern hedonism" (1996: 4). Curiously, Lowe's reflection ties in with O'Connor's insightful words about the same subject: "in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. [...] while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (Fitzgerald 44).

Although O'Connor asserts that in her tales violence has a religious aim —it prepares her characters "to accept their moment of grace"— and that in this story we "should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" (Fitzgerald 112-13), it can't be denied that an apocalyptic plot like that of "A Good Man..." and a serial killer like the Misfit have more to do with the features of present-day fiction and film than with traditional Southern writing or a moralistic kind of art. As Harold Bloom has recently remarked, O'Connor "might have rejoiced at our discomfort with the authentic New Age of Islamic fundamentalist terror. As our lives perforce turn more grotesque, her fiction is likely to seem even more relevant" (575). Finally, it is worth noting that the grandmother's dialogue with the Misfit not only conveys religious and metaphysical issues, but also exemplifies in a tragicomic way the Southern penchant for talking: the frantic and repetitive discourse of the grandmother —no doubt intended to postpone or even escape death— results in the Misfit's sudden shots and in the comment of Bobby Lee (one of the latter's subordinates), which, ironically, seems to suggest that her punishment was deserved: "She was a talker, wasn't she?" (133).

Although O'Connor's stories are mainly concerned with the present, there is one tale that focuses on two of the topics obliquely raised in "A Good Man...": "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" (1953). This story casts a backward glance at the "defin-

ing moment" of Southern history —the Civil War— and foregrounds the spread of replicas and simulations in contemporary culture.[3] The narrative conveys the message that many Southerners have a distorted and idealized image of the Civil War and its significance. Ironically, the protagonist, a one-hundred-and-four-year-old man who fought in that war, does not remember the war at all. As the narrator remarks, "[t]he past and the future were the same thing to him, one forgotten and the other not remembered" (139). Although he "had probably been a foot soldier" (135), and his name was George Poker Sash, publicly "[h]e was introduced as General Tennessee Flintrock Sash of the Confederacy" while confidentially the grandaughter explained that "he had only been a major" (137), variations which, though in a comic vein, emphasize the appropriation and manipulation of history.

Curiously, the only thing that this General recalls with clarity and delight is the Atlanta première of a Civil War film (most likely *Gone with the Wind*) twelve years before at which he was dressed up in the general's uniform for the first time, surrounded by "beautiful guls" (136) from California and exhibited on stage as a relic from the past. Since then, his granddaughter has continued these exhibitions, displaying the General at the Capitol City Museum on Confederate Memorial Day, or taking him to old plantation houses "to lend atmosphere to the scene" during the spring season (139). While the grandfather seems satisfied with this newly acquired identity, which places him at the centre of "parades with floats full of Miss Americas and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products" (134), the granddaughter intends to preserve him as a symbol of "the old traditions" —"Dignity! Honor! Courage!"— and of her superiority over "all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living" (135). Obviously, such inversion of roles duplicates the aberrance implicit in this approach to the past, which culminates in a fittingly grotesque dénouement when the General, dressed up in a replica of the Confederacy uniform, dies discreetly onstage during the granddaughter's college graduation ceremony. The story ends with the old man, now a corpse, in the wheelchair carried by his great-great nephew, waiting "in the long line at the Coca-Cola machine" (144). As the narrative suggests, the historical past has been forgotten (by the General), manipulated (by the grandaughter), or ignored (by his careless great-great nephew), and it is only accessible through the distorting images of popular culture and contemporary simulacra, which have come to replace the real significance of a lost war. Interestingtly, the youngest member of the family is more

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[3] In "Distmantling the Monolith," Barbara Ladd highlights the persistent, distorting and determining influence of the Civil War in the history of the South and on the nationalistic ideology of Southerners: "Most would argue that the Civil War was (and still is) the defining moment for the South as a discrete entity; that the South prior to the Civil War is the South only to the extent that it is developing the economy, the politics, and the ideology that would lead to secession and the Civil War; that the South following the Civil War is the South to the extent that the Civil War determines its economies, its politics, and its ideology; that the South today is and the South in the future will continue to be the South to the extent that the Civil War remains a defining event in its history and continues (however obliquely) to shape its economy, its politics, and its ideology" (53-54).

interested in Coca-Cola —probably the most powerful symbol of contemporary Southern economic success— than in the mythic grandeur and glory of the Old South, of which his ancestor is only a simulation.

In a grotesque but relevant fashion, "Good Country People" (1955) undermines traditional clichés related to the South and portrays a variety of aberrant characters and situations. The protagonist, a pretentious thirty-two-year-old woman with a wooden leg and a Ph.D. in Philosophy, insists on her nihilism and decides to have her beautiful name of Joy changed to Hulga "on the basis of its ugly sound" (275) and in order to shock her mother as well. But despite her nihilism, and in accordance with Southern tradition, she still believes in the goodness of country people, as her simple mother does. Therefore, when a Bible salesman visits them, Hulga decides to seduce him in order to demonstrate her superiority, taking for granted that he is "just good country people" (290). As the dénouement discloses, the Bible salesman proves to be a cheat and a fraud: after stealing Hulga's glasses and wooden leg, he leaves her stranded —literally disabled— and psychologically raped. And contrary to Hulga's assumptions, his suitcase does not contain bibles, but whiskey, prophylactics, and a pack of cards.

Thus, the tale is iconoclastic in all senses: its plot questions not only the goodness of strangers, as the tale's title highlights, but specially the traditional religiousness of the South, a region popularly known as "the Bible-belt." Both Hulga and the Bible seller are atheists, and although Hulga's mother does not seem to be one, she lies to the salesman when she tells him that she keeps her Bible by her bedside. "This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere" (278), the narrator explains. In this ironic and critical fashion, O'Connor foreshadows the declining relevance of the Bible in the South, something that for Jack Butler "has been the single most important change in southern culture." "[W]e're losing our *own* myth," he concludes (37).

On the other hand, the character of Hulga can be taken as a parodic reversal of the prototypical Southern Belle: she does not represent beauty, but ugliness; not femininity, but deliberate masculine looks. And what is more, she lacks the spiritual values associated with Southern white women: innocence, purity, and religious beliefs. Ironically, what Hulga and the other characters in the story symbolize is prejudice and pride, Southern features as well, but here portrayed in a negative light. In fact, these tales undermine a variety of Southern traditional values. We could quote, for instance, the words of a patriotic Southerner, James Henry Hammond, who in 1845 referred to the South as a land "whose men are proverbially brave, intellectual and hospitable, and whose women are unaffectedly chaste, devoted to domestic life, and happy in it" (Roberts 366). Needless to say, many of O'Connor's characters are good examples of the opposite. We could point out that the travelling salesman as freak is a recurrent figure in the history of Southern humour, as Richard Gray notes; what is iconoclastic, in my view, is O'Connor's handling of it: her choice of a Bible seller as embodiment of atheism, fetishism and perversion.[4]

[4] Gray mentions this recurrent type in his discussion of Hickum Looney (407-08), a character in Harry Crews's novel *The Mulching of America* (1995).

Somehow or other, all the characters in this tale could be taken as different instances of aberration: we may recall Mrs. Freeman, Hulga's mother's employee, an intriguing character who prefigures the crookedness of the Bible salesman: like him, she is fascinated by Hulga's wooden leg, has "a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children" and is particularly attracted by "lingering or incurable" diseases (275). Interestingly, Mrs. Hopewell (Hulga's mother) liked telling people "that Mrs. Freeman was a *lady* and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet" (272). As the narrator explains, the reason for keeping the Freemans employed "was that they were not trash. They were good country people" (272). No doubt, these statements foreground and revise the traditional importance of class in the South and the overemphasis on manners, which recalls the grandmother's classist pretensions and her flattering words to the Misfit in "A Good Man..."

In contrast to Hulga, Mrs. Freeman's daughters evoke contemporary, working-class versions of the Belle, since, as Humphries has noted (127-28), there are variants corresponding to different socioeconomic levels. Whereas Hulga is masculine and intellectual, Glynese and Carramae —Glycerin and Caramel in Hulga's words— epitomize physicality and stereotypical femininity. As the narrator puts it: "Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant. She could not keep anything on her stomach. Every morning Mrs. Freeman told Mrs. Hopewell how many times she had vomited since the last report" (272). Whether these recurrent distortions point to (self) hatred of the female body (Reesman 47), O'Connor's assumption of a mysoginist aesthetic (Prown 2001), or a decidedly iconoclastic impulse, O'Connor's characters deviate from traditional portrayals, and appear to us aberrant but realistic.

Like "A Good Man...," "Good Country People" pokes fun at the Southern emphasis on talking and storytelling through the silly conversations between Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell, whose clichés, however, make reference to the peculiarities of these eccentric characters. We may recall phrases like "Everybody is different" or "It takes all kinds to make the world," which form part of Hulga's daily diet (273). On the other hand, the characteristics of the Hopewell household are noteworthy: while traditionally the South was the region of close-knit and extended families,[5] O'Connor portrays a longtime divorced woman whose only relative is a daughter who despises her mother, and who, if not for her heart condition, "would be far from these red hills and good country people" (276).

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953) narrates a situation that resembles that of "Good Country People" in several ways. Here, apart from insist-

[5] In "Recent and Contemporary Women Writers in the South," Sharon Monteith quotes from Mary Lee Settle's *Choices* (1995), in which a character remarks: "A Southerner without a family is like a loose marble." However, as Monteith adds, "in contemporary Southern fiction the emphasis is on alternative 'family' units" (540).

ing on male and female hypocrisy, O'Connor undermines Southern features such as honour, hospitality and respectability. We find again a travelling stranger, who like the Bible salesman, proves to be a corrupt hypocrite, and a widow who, like Hulga, tries to take advantage of the apparently inoffensive visitor. The widow arranges his marriage to her retarded daughter, because she is "ravenous for a son-in-law" (150) and needs a handyman for her run-down place. It is no wonder, then, that the stranger, Mr. Shiflet, should abandon the bride some hours after the wedding, taking with him the widow's car he had been so interested in repairing. Rather than idealize the South, this story emphasizes its less glorious and darker aspects. Significantly, the literary tradition that the narrative brings to mind is that of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), in which the humorous style and picaresque episodes do not diminish the intensity of Twain's critical view or the sordidness, hypocrisy and materialism of the South portrayed.

When exploring the topic of family ties, and contrary to assumptions about the harmony or at least close-knit nature of Southern families, O'Connor's tales foreground the conflicts between its members, their isolation, or even the violence that guides their relationships. Apart from cases like those mentioned before, which describe the tensions between a widowed mother and a grown-up daughter or son, "A View of the Woods" (1957) revises this Southern cliché with particular incisiveness.[6] The tale describes the literally aberrant relationships between the members of a rural family, which the narrator introduces as a pack of idiots. The exceptions to this mental condition are the grandfather and his nine-year-old granddaughter, Mary Fortune, who is regularly beaten by her father just because she is smart and the grandfather's favourite. The conflict originates in the grandfather's determination to sell his land by lots, in the name of progress, though by doing so he also wants to spite his resident son-in-law, Pitts. Although Mary Fortune does not oppose the grandfather's plan, she objects to the selling of the lot in front of their house because, as she tells him, that lawn is the place where they all play, the lot where her daddy grazes his calves, and above all, because they "won't be able to see the woods across the road" (342). Finally, this radical disagreement results in a violent fight that ends with the grandfather killing the girl, followed by his death from a heart attack.

This excess of domestic violence could be analysed in the light of O'Connor's religious objectives: her obsessive desire to awake readers into Christian grace by means of extreme situations and shocking characters. In her own interpretation of the tale, the woods "are a Christ symbol" (Fitzgerald 189-190). However, this reading does not cancel the relevance of her critical view of the South in which patriarchal abuse, violence, vindictive spirit, destructive pride, lack of education and culture have been endemic factors that have contributed to perpetuating its traditional

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[6] Just as "Good Country People" epitomizes the tensions between a widowed mother and a grown-up daughter, "The Enduring Chill," "The Comforts of Home" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" explore the dramatic relationships between widowed mother and adult son.

marginality. Even if O'Connor conceived this tale allegorically, as "a little morality play" (Fitzgerald 186), the variety of issues raised by the plot transcends her religious intentions. For example, just as Mary Fortune's objections to the urbanization of the landscape anticipate worldwide ecological concerns, the desire to preserve a rural environment may bring to mind the conservative ideology of the Fugitives/Agrarians as expressed in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930): as is well known, in this declaration of principles, the authors strongly defend the agrarian basis of the South and its culture, opposing the advance of industrialization and "progress." No doubt, this ambivalence exemplifies the instabilities conveyed by O'Connor's fiction, which are usually more complex than those traditionally explored in Southern writing or the aesthetics of the grotesque.

Race has been and still is a central issue in Southern society and culture. O'Connor's tales, written in a period of transition between segregation and civil rights, offer a realistic and unsentimental portrayal of blacks that is poles apart from the black stereotypes traditionally found in Southern writing. The plot of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961), for instance, focuses on the clash between the old and the new South through the uneasy relationship between a widow and her grown-up son. While the mother recalls with nostalgia her childhood on the family's decayed plantation, her hypocritical and ungrateful son, Julian, refuses to admit the obvious advantages of that privileged style of life as compared to their present reduced economic status and is determined to "teach [his mother] a lesson" (414).

Ironically, and as usual in O'Connor's stories, the arrogant character will not teach a lesson to anybody, but will learn one himself. In this case, it is the hat that the mother hesitates about wearing that sets the learning in motion. She is thinking about returning the hat because she finds it too expensive, but her son insists on her keeping it, though he thinks it is "hideous" and "atrocious" (405, 406). On the bus downtown, mother and son mingle with black people and show their different attitudes —in both cases ridiculous— to the new norms against segregation. Whereas Julian tries to start a conversation with a black man only to shock his mother, she adopts a condescending attitude toward a little black boy, "because she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children" (415). In turn, Julian discovers with delight that the little boy's mother's hat is identical to his mother's: "He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson" (416). However, the greatest lesson takes place when, off the bus, Julian's mother tries to give the little black boy a penny: in reply, the black woman strikes her a blow that leaves her sitting on the sidewalk. Her fall, followed by Julian's humiliating and reprimanding words, results in her death.

While Julian reminds her mother that "the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn" (419), she dies asking for "Home," and for Grandpa and Caroline, her nurse, "to come get me" (420). Significantly, both the plot of the tale and the protagonists' final words revise the concerns of traditional Southern writing (home, the family, the pervasiveness of the past) that were immortalized in famous literary phrases such as Thomas Wolfe's "You can't go home again" or William Faulkner's "The past is never dead. It's not even

past."[7] However, O'Connor sounds less solemn and more radical than her literary ancestors in her view of the South. Thus, "Everything That Rises..." critiques the Southern obsession with the past, undermines the nostalgia for it, and portrays the dangerous consequences of this self-destructive attitude. In many aspects —good manners, ladylike behaviour, racist traces, a222nd nostalgia for the past— Julian's mother is a replica of the grandmother in "A Good Man...."[8] Although the narrative focuses on the white characters —Julian's evil and guilt and his mother's obsolete racism and classism— the portrayal of a lower or lower-middle class black woman as a victimizer of an elderly white woman —a would-be lady whose grandfather had been a former governor of the state— is a clear example of O'Connor's iconoclasm.

Somehow, the tale's title encapsulates the instabilities of the plot, which as noted in the previous story, go beyond O'Connor's religious intentions: while the convergence/coincidence of hats was supposed to suggest the rise of blacks in American society in the light of Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the Omega Point —according to which humankind evolves towards a supreme consciousness that finds its convergence in Christ— the dénouement of the tale foregrounds hostility and divergence.[9] Kreyling, who has recently analysed this tale against the background of the cold-war period, remarks: "By the end of the story, the writing is on the wall: Do not rock the boat; neither progress nor improvement is attainable in the human sphere; only the deluded try. [...]. The clear theme is that, in the sphere of American race relations at least, nothing but animosity rises and the convergence of human interests is the last item on anyone's agenda" ("Good" 14, 16).

In a different way, "The Artificial Nigger" (1955)—O'Connor's favourite tale— also exemplifies the instabilities inherent in O'Connor's fiction. In contrast to the previous story, the tone is not of rage, but of sympathy and understanding: all the characters, black and white, are depicted with benevolence and even tenderness. The tale, which can be read as a religious parable, narrates a series of humorous anecdotes with realism and irony. Thus, the plot describes the adventures of a back-country grandfather, Mr. Head, and his insolent ten-year-old grandson Nelson on their one-day trip to Atlanta, where they quarrel, get lost, and show their fear of and fascination with blacks. Surprisingly, they are at last reconciled by way of an artificial nigger, an ornamental statue they dis-

[7] Cf. Thomas Wolfe's posthumous novel *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (1951).

[8] In his portrait of the South, Hal Crowther observes: "most Southern literature has been rooted in such a profound, clinging, pervasive nostalgia that it's hard for us to imagine what could have been written without it" (65). Nostalgia is a function "not only of culture, but of aging," he adds, a characteristic which both the grandmother and Julian's mother clearly reflect.

[9] Significantly, the title of the tale (which gave title to O'Connor's second collection of stories) is a quotation from Teilhard de Chardin's explanation of the Omega Point: "Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. *For everything that rises must converge*" (111).

cover in a white neighbourhood, which in O'Connor's words represents "the working of grace" (Fitzgerald 115).

Although she explains in a letter that through this figure she wanted to suggest "the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (Fitzgerald 78), her treatment of this effigy and of black characters in general has raised more controversy than she probably intended. Thus, some critics not only have pointed out the racism of the tale's white characters, but also have objected to the othering and objectification of the black ones —both a source of fear and an instrument of redemption— and to the cultural conservatism of O'Connor, supposedly a "closet racist," who had a "distaste for Negroes" and a "propensity for repeating racist jokes" (Wood 90, 94). In contrast, other critics —some of them African-American— have approached the tale in a positive light, admiring the way in which O'Connor handles the plot and solves the dénouement. For instance, Toni Morrison derides "powerful literary critics in the United States" for seeing "no connection between God's grace and Africanist 'othering' in Flannery O'Connor," and highlights the strategies employed in order to expose "Mr. Head's triumphantly racist views in that brilliant story" (13-14, 68). In turn, Alice Walker values O'Connor's narrative detachment and the fact that the narrators of her stories have no access to the black characters' minds. Walker concludes that "*essential* O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture" (Walker's emphasis, 53).

In any case, it is the title of the story —and the recurrent use of the word "nigger"— that best conveys the instabilities of the plot: it is worth recalling that the first editor of the tale, John Crowe Ransom, foreseeing adverse criticism, suggested changing the title, but O'Connor categorically refused. Interestingly, her decision to keep it unaltered has contributed to intensifying the ongoing debate about this text. The controversy provoked is too complex to be resolved in a few lines: nevertheless, it seems clear that even if we take for granted O'Connor's social conservatism, neither her unbending stand against Ransom —an influential member of the Fugitive/Agrarian movement— nor the story's plot suggest a conformist attitude or a traditional kind of text; on the contrary, it is O'Connor's complex narrative technique—which deftly combines touches of situation-comedy, allegorical elements, a controversial symbol, a religious epiphany and an equivocal narrative voice— as well as the title, that originate the "instabilities" and ambiguities associated with the interpretation and historical reception of this tale.[10]

[10] For further commentary on race and "The Artificial Nigger," cf. Sarah Gordon's "Communities; The Historic, the Orthodox, the Intimate," *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination* (2000) and Katherine Hemple Prown's "The Dixie Limited," *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship* (2001). Cf. also Joyce Carol Oates's brief discussion of "The Artificial Nigger" in her volume of essays *Where I've Been, and Where I'm Going* (1999). Apart from highlighting the brilliance of the text, Oates refers to the racial issue in a footnote. In her view, the word "nigger" "would appear to have been a usage common to [O'Connor], as to her fellow Caucasian Georgians." However, with the passing of time, this word "has become so

Thus, in different ways, O'Connor's tales anticipate characteristic features of present-day Southern writing, suggesting also what Kreyling calls "[t]he turn of southern literature into parody and postsouthernness" (*Inventing* 148). Despite O'Connor's alleged conservatism, her stories provide varied and recurrent instances of mythoclasm and transgressiveness, and as a whole constitute a unique example of Southern aberration and "self-fashioning." Thus, although her tales include the most typical elements of Southern narrative —humour, sense of place, the past, violence, religion, race— her iconoclastic treatment of them defies categorization and complicates the instabilities traditionally associated with Southern culture and the grotesque. Her break from tradition and revisionist impulse have proved to be a point of reference for later Southern writers, so that, even if we have ceased to believe in the reality of the South—forever vanishing, always in the making— we can conclude that O'Connor's prophetic genius succeeded in fashioning her own.

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highly charged with political significance that any work of art containing it, especially by a white Southerner, is unwittingly abrasive, even provocative." Oates concludes the note with the significant information that there is at least "one distinguished American university in which a large-enrollment literature class petitioned successfully to have "The Artificial Nigger" removed from its syllabus as a racist text" (343).

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