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Flannery O'Monsters

And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

—Friedrich Nietzsche (Westfall 241)

The most startling definition of *monster* I have encountered belongs to Mandy-Suzanne Wong: “It’s what people say when they can’t think of any way to describe [something] that stands a chance of being accurate” (6). Yet there are many other qualities of monsters, such as duality—a monster is never whole, but discrete pieces that have been lurching together haphazardly; the most iconic example of this is Frankenstein’s monster, assembled out of bits of corpses and animated with a sacrosanct, unmentionable power. No less worthy as examples, however, are the strange characters of Flannery O’Connor’s short stories—contradictory beasts whose struggles seem both to pull them towards and away from O’Connor’s central Grace. Robert Y. Drake Jr. puts into words why her monsters are so powerful: “Her distortions are always functional, serving to embody outwardly the inner horror of sin which is her principal concern” (qtd. in Snow 287). When O’Connor juxtaposes characters’ separate dimensions in the same way that horror writers juxtapose those same dimensions of characters like Dracula or Frankenstein, she reveals a deeper truth about them. Three of these characters stand out as particularly worth of analysis: Hulga Freeman and Manley Pointer of “Good Country People,” and O.E. Parker of “Parker’s Back.” These characters all have in common the lies they do not

recognize about themselves, the internal tensions that are pulling them apart, tensions which O'Connor uses to reflect humanity's inner turmoil.

Before we begin, we should first take a moment to define *monster*. Dr. Wong's quote in the above paragraph is from a recent anthology on Hannibal Lecter, one of the most iconic monsters of our era, from whom we can presumably learn a lot about the nature of monsters in general. In another essay in this collection, "Hello, Dr. Lecter," Joseph Westfall talks about the archetypal Devil figure in literature, which may be pertinent to our discussion of monsters in O'Connor's works. Westfall argues that the Devil is "the mirror in which we see our darkest desires reflected, the tincture of evil (and sometimes more than a tincture) in every soul" (xix). The Devil uses this intimate knowledge of our hidden desires to manipulate us into doing evil "not by corrupting us exactly, but by something far more destructive: by pointing us out to ourselves" (xix). That O'Connor herself seems interested in the sway of evil is the first reason for including this analysis. The second, more nebulous reason, is that this whole issue of monsterdom in a way revolves around the evil inside us fighting against the good, the grotesque against the beautiful.

A *monster*, then, is a sort of paradoxical walking mirror. There's more nuance than that, I admit, but it's the easiest way to sum it up. Perhaps the concept will become clearer if we look at another example, one closer to the analysis at hand. For this, we turn Ollye Tine Snow's essay on the function of the grotesque in O'Connor's works. Framing her argument in terms of genrefication and Gothic fiction, Snow uses the word *grotesque* similarly to how I use *monster*, to refer to those who, because of their abnormalities, repulse and fascinate us:

As supposedly dedicated servants of a Supreme Authority, these characters turn into grotesques because their values are the reverse of what is expected of them.

Their deeds are evil, their thoughts are selfish, and their advice is usually guided by some ulterior motive. They preach self-abnegation; yet their own creed defies any authority except self. As protagonists of evil, these figures bring destruction, which is the main representation of evil in Miss O'Connor's scheme of values. But the destructive evil seems to come through them from another force - perhaps fate, certainly a great Unknown, of which all Gothic writers seem to be aware.

(291)

The parallels between the terms are clear—internal tensions and the struggle of good and evil are the linking factors. Snow takes her argument a step further, however, in talking of “a great Unknown,” which is implicit in my own argument, though I would perhaps frame it as Satanic in origin (at least when discussing O’Connor’s works, but not Gothic literature as a whole). I use this passage to reconcile my terminology with the terminology others have used before me and also to bring to our attention the fact that monsterdom is not a snipe hunt, but central to our understanding of O’Connor’s texts.

Taking “Parker’s Back” as our first example, we can see exactly how this monsterdom plays into O’Connor’s literary world. This tale overtly brings up questions of the grotesque and the beautiful and, as André Bleikasten points out, “belongs with O’Connor’s most explicitly religious stories” (9). Because “Parker’s Back” is among O’Connor’s “most explicitly religious stories,” we can assume that it will deal most explicitly with issues of morality and therefore be firm ground to start on.

Another reason for beginning with “Parker’s Back” is that the image of tattoos blending together reifies our theme—Parker has covered himself, head to toe, in tattoos, tattoos that are *supposed* to jive together to create “one intricate arabesque of colors,” but instead end up looking

like “something haphazard and botched” (514). Parker’s skin is cacophonous, made up of both serpents and eagles (513, 514), which Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* categorizes, respectively, as symbols of “chaos, the formless, the unmanifested,” (55) and, due to their association with the sky, the “high, eternal, powerful” (119).¹ The contrast between the eagle and the serpent represents the conflict within Parker himself: “It was as if...the serpents...and the eagles...had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare” (514). What makes Parker’s internal tensions even more tragic is the fact “the only reason he worked at all was to pay for more tattoos” (513); in other words, Parker dedicates his whole working existence to accumulating tattoos. That which gives his life purpose simultaneously destroys it.

We might conceive that he does this because he thinks them beautiful: “Parker had never felt...the least motion of wonder in himself” before he discovers the mystery of tattoos (513). Yet on his own skin, these wondrous things appear withered, ugly; but are the tattoos truly ugly, or can Parker just not enjoy them because of some mental block? Given O’Connor’s penchant for writing about characters in need of Grace, the mental-block interpretation makes more sense. Moreover, getting new tattoos tends to make him forget his dissatisfaction, at least for a little bit (514). While Sarah Ruth does object to his tattoos, the narrator makes snide comments that undermine her reliability— “If she had had better sense, [she] could have enjoyed a tattoo on his back” (518). Though this may just be a case of free-indirect speech, it seems realistic to say that Parker’s tattoos are, on some level, aesthetically pleasing.

The battle between the grotesque and the beautiful is apparent, but just as we think we’ve figured out O’Connor’s equation, she throws a spanner in the works: the Christ tattoo. David R. Mayer notes that “the imagery of putting on Christ is not exactly new” (125), originating in the

¹ Eliade further writes in *Shamanism*, matter-of-fact, “Birds are psychopomps” (98), the vehicles on which souls ascend to Heaven. Birds (and bird tattoos) do not just provide a symbolic link with the Divine, then, but also a metaphysical passage to Heaven.

Pauline epistles and explicitly paralleling with Baptism, the metaphorical “putting on” of Christ. Parker gets the Christ tattoo immediately after the mandatory (for O’Connor) violent incident of the tractor exploding, leading us to believe that this is the work of Grace—yet if it is, if Parker so readily accepts Grace, then why does the story end as it does, with Parker “leaning against the tree, crying like a baby” (530)? The answer lies in the fact that Parker does not recognize the nature of the Grace he’s presented with: when one of his barfly buddies accuses him of converting, asking, “What’d you do it for?” (527), Parker guardedly responds, “For laughs” (527). The tragedy of “Parker’s Back” is that Grace, rather than uniting Parker’s gestalt body, merely becomes another part of the tapestry—we can alternatively parse the title as, “Parker’s [come] back,” that is, to his heathen ways. Even though he recognizes the power of the tattoo, he refuses to accept it other than as a transaction—a (misaimed) gesture of goodwill towards Sarah Ruth. We can imagine, after the story ends, that Parker and Sarah Ruth continue living as they have been, albeit with a more strained relationship; or, perhaps, Parker simply runs off again, ignoring the power of the Christ-eyes (527).

In “Good Country People,” O’Connor approaches the monstrous differently from in “Parker’s Back.” Rather than having the concept contained within one character, she gives us the mirroring figures of Manley Pointer and Hulga/Joy Freeman: Manley acts like “good country people,” selling Bibles door-to-door, though underneath he is a godless scoundrel; Hulga is a professed atheist, refusing to let her mother even keep a Bible in the living room (278), yet she is profoundly attracted to Manley’s apparent innocence, supposedly to corrupt him, though we wonder if there’s more to it than that.

The fact that Hulga is both Hulga and Joy speaks mountains about her duality—O’Connor even combines the names at one point, “Hulga-Joy” (275)—she has distanced herself

from her Christian name and taken on a second identity. Notice that I say *distanced*, not *rejected*—Hulga is truly only Hulga to herself, Joy to everyone else; and the fact that she still lives with her mother (if only for health reasons) lets us know that she hasn't shunned her former identity entirely. Furthermore, she has not changed her surname, Hopewell; or if she has, O'Connor doesn't think to tell us. (Significantly, Hope is one of the Seven Virtues within Catholicism; we would think that the highly educated Hulga would distance herself from this part of her name too.)

Hulga chooses her new name solely to react against her given name: "She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness struck her.... One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga" (275). Hulga, rather than being grotesque or monstrous by nature, squeezes herself into the role, stereotypes herself, as if her physical disability and intellectual rejection of Christian means she has certain shoes to fill. In fact, she *acts* like a monster more than she is one—she "stump[s] into the kitchen in the morning," making an ugly sound, not because she can't help it, but because she enjoys getting a rise out of her mother (275).

And get a rise out of her mother Hulga does, but with an unforeseen consequence: as mentioned earlier, Mrs. Freeman latches onto Hulga's name and onto her artificial leg, though not because she cares for Hulga:

Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities.... Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had

been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago. (275)

Mrs. Freeman fetishizes Hulga, unnerving her, but, in reality, is what she does much different from what Hulga does herself? Mrs. Freeman relishes using Hulga's name—but so does Hulga herself, “see[ing] it as the highest creative act” (275). While “Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point” (271), Hulga stubbornly denies the vestiges of her life as Joy as well as denies Manley's true nature until it's too late— “Aren't you...aren't you just good country people?” (290). Hulga, too, refers to people with unwanted names, calling Mrs. Freeman's children “Glycerin and Caramel” (272). These habits further reveal the tensions within Hulga—rather than protesting herself, she protests those elements of herself that she sees in others. Perhaps this self-hatred explains why she fixates on Manley Pointer, her alleged mirror; he is the seeming innocence of her lost youth.

O'Connor incarnates Manley's entire character in a single image, the two Bibles in the suitcase at the end of the story, one the unaltered Word, the other hollowed out to carry a flask and a stack of playing cards with risqué photos on the back of them (287, 290). The way O'Connor reveals this to us, and Hulga, matters greatly: early on in the story, she tells us only of the true Bible, specifically with the line, “It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking [Manley] after it” (277); O'Connor overtly symbolizes (so we think) that the Word leads Manley. Then, like a sucker punch, she follows up when we least expect with the hollow Bible, and we see the fullness of Manley's image—he *seems* like he lives by the Gospel, but in reality he lives by his own base pleasures.

Yet we would do well to entertain still the idea that Manley, in a roundabout way, *is* somehow living by the Gospel, or at least by some heavenly impulse. Not only have we already

seen O.E. Parker inadvertently fall into faith (at least for a while)—“The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed” (O’Connor, “Parker’s Back,” 527)—but the list of examples of pagans doing the will of God is long indeed: were not the Pharisees fulfilling God’s will when they condemned Christ to death?

We also have to wonder about the timing of what I have referred to as O’Connor’s sucker punch—O’Connor is a master of comedic timing, yet there is an awful long time for the punchline in this, undermining its success and, perhaps, its legitimacy. After Hulga calls out Manley’s hypocrisy, saying, “You’re a perfect Christian!” (290), he reacts with *anger*, speaking “in a lofty indignant tone” (290). Why does Manley react angrily to this? We might imagine derision from Manley, though perhaps O’Connor means this with *lofty*, but anger, especially the indignant kind—*indignant* carrying the connotation that injustice has been committed—seems out-of-place. As does his inability to let it go: he goes on about his nihilism for a solid paragraph; then, right before he leaves, announces, “I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (291). We can explain how he reacts in two ways. First, maybe he still has some lingering allegiance to whatever creed his family follows. Second, and more likely, maybe he is in denial.

The greatest evidence for the denial hypothesis is what Manley says in the aforementioned paragraph about his nihilism, “I know where I’m going!” (290). But does he? Remember that O’Connor tells us earlier, “It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking [Manley] after it” (277), calling into question how much of his path he walks by his own volition. Which is it, *does* he know where’s going, or is he just being pulled along for the ride? In a contest between words and deeds, we would invariably pick deeds—and what Manley says doesn’t line up with what he actually does, consciously or unconsciously.

Still, his situation, as well as Hulga's, doesn't quite line up with Parker's; where Parker seems at least on some level conscious of conversion, revealed in his observation that Christ's eyes are "to be obeyed" (O'Connor, "Parker's Back," 527), Manley and Hulga never have this moment of clarity. Hulga in particular is oblivious: were she aware of the implications of what she says at the end, she would not say it. Manley is a little tougher to pigeonhole, but O'Connor never explicitly states that he's in tune with his spirituality; in fact, Manley's statement, "I been believing in nothing ever since I was born," sounds as if Manley is admitting that he's numb to his spiritual self, wouldn't be aware of it regardless of where he's at. Selling Bibles and stealing limbs isn't the most Christ-like behavior, we can all agree on that, but there's a chewy caramel (and glycerin) center of faith somewhere deep inside Manley.

Thus far, we have seen how the tensions within these characters pull them in contradictory directions. But what does this *mean* for how we read O'Connor? Jill P. Baumgaertner observes that "sight and insight are intimately connected metaphors in O'Connor's stories.... At key moments... O'Connor clicks the camera and catches a strange picture.... pictorial representations of scriptural truth" (20). Monsters in of themselves are sights; according to the *OED*, the word ultimately derives from Latin *monere*, "I warn," cognate with our verb *monitor*: we monitor that which warrants watch. Baumgaertner acknowledges that O'Connor paints landscapes of scriptural truths, but she doesn't tune in to O'Connor's marvelous portraits—or perhaps still-lives?—that show the struggle inside all of us. In my epitaph, Nietzsche says, "And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you." (Westfall 241). While O'Connor would probably hate the parallel, there does seem to be one between her words and Nietzsche's: by showing us these complex, piecemeal characters, by

making us contemplate their conflicting motivations, O'Connor is showing the internal contradictions within us ourselves.

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