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Truer than Fiction: Flannery O'Connor's Fictional Fathers

In 1929, an unknown photographer took a picture of four-year-old Mary Flannery O'Connor sitting on the right knee of her handsome father, Edward Francis O'Connor. The girl, dressed in cap and smock while holding a teddy bear, is looking over her left shoulder into the eyes of her father who is looking back at her with tremendous affection. This picture illustrates the unmistakably close bond between a father and his daughter. Flannery, the only child of Edward and Regina O'Connor¹, captured her father's heart as he did hers. In an undated essay found in O'Connor's manuscripts and letters, Sally Fitzgerald, a dear friend from Flannery O'Connor's adulthood, describes Edward and Flannery's relationship asserting that "perhaps he was her best friend." Biographer Brad Gooch, author of *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*, describes this relationship further:

His pride in [Flannery] could amount to infatuation...A coconspirator in her world of childhood fantasy, wishing sometimes to be a writer himself, he slipped her notes signed "King of Siam." In their games, she dubbed herself "Lord Flannery O'Connor." She would hide little poems or drawings under his breakfast plate, or tuck them into his napkin for him to discover when he sat down at the kitchen table. He liked to fold up these tokens of affection, stick them in his wallet, and show them off to friends during the day. (27)

Edward O'Connor not only loved his daughter, but he also engaged in Flannery's mischief and encouraged her creativity. By supporting young Flannery's desires to create, Edward gave his daughter freedom to develop into the celebrated author whom we still read and study today. Given this portrait of a loving and supportive father, I find it perplexing that O'Connor fills her stories with fathers who portray the opposite. O'Connor's fictional fathers, when they *are* included in the story, are controlling, harsh, and malicious—the complete opposite of Edward O'Connor. Why would O'Connor create fathers whose image so intensely contrast to that of her own supportive, gentle, and loving father? A short answer would be that O'Connor's fiction and her personal life are totally unrelated, and I should not attempt to connect them. This is actually how O'Connor answers the question. She writes, "A work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on paper...the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life" (*Mystery and Manners* 126). But with all due respect to Flannery O'Connor, I believe there might be a more nuanced answer to this question than even the author's. My purpose in this paper is to examine O'Connor's fictional fathers in her short stories, "The Artificial N" and "The Comforts of Home," and her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, and attempt to explain the contradiction that arises when comparing her real father to her fictional fathers.

To begin, I must first note how O'Connor often glosses over the father in her fiction, often leaving him as a distant image that does not play an important role. In "Good Country People," the Hopewell family is fatherless. Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell are alone in the house, Mrs. Hopewell having "divorced her husband long ago" (*The Complete Stories*² 274). Mrs. Hopewell runs the farm by herself, never again mentioning Hulga's father. Similarly, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Ms. Lucynell Crater lives by herself with her daughter of

the same name, never mentioning a husband, her daughter's father. But she IS "ravenous for a son-in-law" (CS 150). In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May runs a dairy farm that she inherited from her late husband while she looks after her two grown sons who live with her. Of this family O'Connor writes, "The late Mr. May, a business man, had bought the place when land was down, and when he died it was all he had to leave her. The boys had not been happy to move to the country to a broken-down farm, but there was nothing else for her to do" (CS 327). The absent father also appears in "Everything that Rises Must Converge," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and multiple other works by O'Connor. More often than not, the father plays a passive or empty role in the story. But when O'Connor chooses to include a more noticeable father, she creates him to be flawed and fractured man. This type of father often appears with a son, and the father-son relationships are as broken as the men are.

The broken father figure in "The Artificial N---," Mr. Head, guides Nelson from their home in the country to Atlanta in order to prove his points that both Atlanta and blacks are bad, only to get them both physically, mentally, and emotionally lost. This story—littered with racism, betrayal, and control—highlights one of Flannery O'Connor's defective families. In "The Artificial N---," Nelson's biological father is never mentioned, and after Nelson's mother dies, his grandfather is left to play the role of the boy's father. This relationship appears to be centered on Mr. Head's domination of Nelson, attempting to prove that he is, in fact, the "head" of the family. He wishes to assert his authority over Nelson's views of Atlanta and of blacks—coercing wants Nelson to believe that the city is evil and blacks are inferior.

O'Connor sets the tone for Mr. Head's coercion in the opening of the story when she discusses Mr. Head's plans for the day. She writes, "Mr. Head lay back down, feeling entirely confident that he could carry out the moral mission of the coming day. He meant to be up before

Nelson and to have the breakfast cooking by the time he awakened. The boy was always irked when Mr. Head was the first up” (260). Not only does Mr. Head have a “moral mission” to accomplish with his grandson, but he also desires to wake up before the boy in order to assert his dominance. Once their journey begins, Mr. Head’s tyranny only grows. On the train into Atlanta, Nelson encounters his first African American man. In almost a perverse catechism Mr. Head’s shapes Nelson’s with questions:

“What was that?” he asked.

“A man,” the boy said and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted.

“What kind of man?” Mr. Head persisted, his voice expressionless.

“A fat man,” Nelson said. He was beginning to feel that he had better be cautious.

“You don’t know what kind?” Mr. Head said in a final tone.

“An old man,” the boy said and had a sudden foreboding that he was not going to enjoy the day.

“That was a nigger,” Mr. Head said and sat back.

Nelson jumped up on the seat and stood looking backward to the end of the car but the Negro had gone.

“I’d of thought you’d know a nigger since you seen so many when you was in the city on your first visit,” Mr. Head continued. “That’s his first nigger,” he said to the man across the aisle. (CS 264-65)

When Nelson sees the well-dressed passenger, he does not notice his race. But Mr. Head attempts to shape the boy’s thoughts so that he no longer sees a “man” but only color. He imposes his views on Nelson, convinced that his beliefs should also be his grandson’s.

In “Constructing Black Sons: William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” and Flannery O’Connor’s “The Artificial N---,”” Jennie Joiner poses an explanation for Mr. Head’s imposing his views on Nelson, stating that Mr. Head, like Abner Snopes, encourages Nelson to be racist because he fears his masculinity is challenged by Nelson’s ignorance to racial divides:

By teaching their sons to be men in the racially charged environment of the South, both Snopes and Mr. Head also seek, in a self-reflexive manner, to identify and to define their own masculinity—a move that necessarily truncates their sons’ development. Both Snopes and Mr. Head see their southern masculine identities slipping away as the constructed binaries of black and white dissolve and begin to smudge. (31)

If Mr. Head cannot feel superior to a well-dressed man because of his race, what is keeping him from being the lowest person on the social ladder? Because of this fear of inferiority, Mr. Head pressures Nelson to adopt his racist views, a behavior he repeats when the two reach Atlanta.

Mr. Head and Nelson argue the whole story about whether Atlanta is good or bad—Nelson believes the city is impressive while Mr. Head vehemently prefers the country. In the middle of their quarrel, the two end up lost in a segregated neighborhood where Nelson asks a “large colored woman” with a “tremendous bosom” for help (*CS* 271). Nelson is in awe of the woman—experiencing a sort of attraction paired with utter wonder—and Mr. Head is furious that the boy finds the stranger welcoming. He mocks Nelson for liking the woman, making the boy sullen. On their way back to the train station, Nelson, defiant, decides he has to rest. Mr. Head, attempting to prove a point (and attempting to reassert his dominance), tricks Nelson while he is sleeping, waking him abruptly and causing the child to knock over and hurt an old woman. Desperate, Nelson looks up to his grandfather for help, but Mr. Head denies him saying to the

old woman, “This is not my boy. I never seen him before” (CS 274). Mr. Head loses control, so he scorns his only living relative, denying his grandson as Peter denied Christ.

Although Thomas in O’Connor’s “The Comforts of Home” is a grown man and Nelson is a child, he experiences the same type of violent control from his father that Nelson experiences with his grandfather. Thomas’s father is a ghostly presence in the young man’s mind who coerces Thomas to act against his mother. At the age of thirty-five, Thomas has his comfortable life disrupted by a nineteen-year-old Star Drake, a “nimpermaniac” whom his mother takes in (CS 385). After multiple failed attempts at getting his mother to evict the girl and one failed attempt to frame the girl for theft, Thomas gives in to the inner voice of his rough, deceased father and kills his mother with the gun he inherited from his dad.

Unhappy that his mother has allowed the nymphomaniac to live in their house, Thomas does not know how to deal with the situation. O’Connor writes, “It was at these times that Thomas truly mourned the death of his father though he had not been able to endure him in life” (CS 387). In “Cold Comfort: Parents and Children in the Work of Flannery O’Connor,” Helen Garson writes, “Feeling threatened to the core of his being, Thomas begins to sense the constant taunting presence of his dead, violent, and explosive father. The father’s physical power and force are referred to both specifically and obliquely in ways that outline Thomas’s own lack of these.” When Thomas loses his control, Garson argues that his father’s control rises. I agree with this and believe that, further, once Thomas allows the ghost of his father to haunt his judgement, he welcomes the rough dominance that prompts him take violent action. Thomas is, in a sense, submitting to his father’s control because he does not want to deal with the situation on his own. George Murphy and Caroline Cherry believe that Thomas is having an internal struggle for jurisdiction over his own mind:

Thomas is pulled in yet another emotional direction, for the image of his dead father, a shrewd, hard-dealing businessman, has “taken up a squatting position in his mind” where, “wasp-like,” he keeps urging him to dominate the situation and eject the disruptive “nimpermaniac” from the house. Thus, Thomas is torn between the impulse to abandon himself to the force of unconscious feelings, to tame or ameliorate them as his mother is attempting, or, like his father, to deny or dominate them. (“Flanner O’Connor and the Integration of Personality”)

Thomas is not able to think or act for himself; he is simply a puppet in his father’s hands. But, as Frederick Asals argues, Thomas accepts passivity by allowing his father to be the puppet-master:

With the failure of his mother to sustain the cherished order of his life, the image of the father he had hated ironically surfaces to advise Thomas of the means to its restoration. As he falls increasingly under the influence of this paternal “voice,” it becomes evident that Thomas has refused the challenge of self-realization which [Star Drake] presents; he has merely substituted domination by the father for attachment to the mother. (“The Double in Flannery O’Connor’s Stories”)

Thomas succumbs to his father’s voice, disregarding that this results in the loss of his own. I agree with Asals that Thomas accepts his father’s domination. He does not even attempt to resist; he simply parrots what his father tells him to do. As a result, his father takes advantage of Thomas’s passivity in order to force his agenda on the world post-mortem. When the ghost says, “Call the sheriff,” Thomas says, “Call the sheriff” (CW 394). When the ghost says “Idiot! Go plant it in her pocketbook,” Thomas plants the gun in Star’s pocketbook (CW 402). When the father says, “Fire!” Thomas fires (CW 403). The ghost forcefully directs Thomas’s actions, giving him no freedom to choose how to handle his mother and Star Drake. Once again,

O'Connor creates a father who asserts his violent control over his child. And she does this again in her second and final novel.

In *The Violent Bear it Away*, young Francis Tarwater³ is switched between being exploited by his great uncle, Mason Tarwater⁴, who believes that he is a prophet from god, and his uncle, George Rayber, who tries his hardest to squelch the old man's beliefs and voice. Each of these father figures determine to indoctrinate the young boy in opposing worldviews. As O'Connor writes, "The old man, who said he was a prophet, had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it" (*The Violent Bear It Away*⁵ 5). Old Tarwater brainwashes the boy to believe what he believes, not giving young Tarwater the freedom to choose. He keeps the boy secluded from civilization in a shack that, in order to reach it, one must go down "a narrow corrugated road sunk between deep red embankments," walk down a "four or five" mile road, and then cross "a stretch through the woods" and a field (VBA 183). By keeping the boy as isolated from civility as possible, old Tarwater is able to indoctrinate young Tarwater into his twisted belief system. Francis Tarwater has no choice but to respect his great-uncle because he fathers the boy, giving him fried meat every morning for breakfast. And, although old Tarwater is dead when the story begins, young Tarwater's problems with being controlled do not end. O'Connor writes, "His uncle had taught him Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden... Besides giving him a good education, he had rescued him from his only other connection, old Tarwater's nephew, a schoolteacher who had no child at the time and wanted this one of his sister's to raise according to his own ideas" (VBA 4). Once the old man is dead, Tarwater must answer to his equally as controlling uncle, George Rayber.

Rayber, an intellectual schoolteacher, was also exploited by Mason Tarwater. “[Mason] had kidnapped [Rayber] when the child was seven and had taken him to the backwoods and baptized him and instructed him in the facts of his Redemption” (*VBA* 7). Rayber was rescued from the old man by his father, and he grew up with a sour taste in his mouth for Mason Tarwater. Rayber believes it is his duty to save young Tarwater from his great-uncle’s schemes, so when the boy comes to his house following the old man’s death, Rayber takes advantage of him by bribing. He gives Tarwater new clothes, feeds him good food, and even takes him on a fishing trip. He sees Tarwater as “a monumental job of reconstruction,” and wishes to educate the boy and prove to him that civilized life is better than life in the shack (*VBA* 97). He continues to push his beliefs on the boy until Tarwater finally runs away and goes back to the clearing in the woods. The boy is never given the opportunity to learn about and find true salvation from God because he is attacked at every side by his fundamentalist great uncle and liberal uncle. He is constantly being grabbed, indoctrinated, turned upside down, and indoctrinated again by these two men, creating a violent confusion in the boy’s mind about what he should believe. The two fathers in *The Violent Bear It Away* give young Tarwater no freedom to be who he wants to be, which is strange because Flannery O’Connor dedicated the novel to her own father, Edward Francis O’Connor.

Because Flannery O’Connor dedicates this novel that focuses primarily on violent fathers to her gentle father, there has to be more to the proverbial story. Some may argue that there was more to Edward O’Connor than the kind and gentle picture of him we see 87 years later. Some might make the connection that since Edward O’Connor died from Lupus when Flannery was fifteen (Gooch 69), she omits fathers from her fiction and her personal conversations because he grew to not matter much to her. It is true that Edward O’Connor is only indexed in her personal

correspondence six times, while her mother is listed more than one hundred times. But it is also true that, when O'Connor does discuss her father, she still uses the most endearing terms. In a letter to "A" on 11 Feb 56, O'Connor compares her loving relationship with God to her loving relationship with her father. She writes, "I've never spent much time over the bride-bridegroom analogy. For me, perhaps because it began for me in the beginning, it's been more father and child" (*The Habit of Being*⁶ 136). By saying that "it began for me in the beginning," O'Connor communicates that her father gave her an earthly picture of what God is like when she was just a child. In another letter to "A" on 28 July 56, O'Connor, now thirty-one, sees her having become an author as pleasing to her father. She says, "Whatever I do in the way of writing makes me extra happy in the thought that it is a fulfillment of what he wanted to do himself" (*HOB* 167-8). Because her correspondence illustrates that O'Connor still had the deep love and affection for her father in adulthood as she did in her childhood, the disconnect between the picture of Edward O'Connor and Flannery's portrait of fictional fathers still begs understanding.

Perhaps the explanation can be found in Flannery O'Connor's use of violence, for when O'Connor's grotesque portraits feel disconnected from reality, she links them back to reality through violence. On the use of violence with mean characters, O'Connor writes, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work" (*Mystery and Manners*⁷ 112). Further, she writes, "It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (*MM* 113). In other words, to discuss something she finds important, O'Connor exaggerates by showing the opposite of what she wants to communicate in order to get her callous readers' attention. If we apply O'Connor's purpose of using violence in her portrayal of fathers, then it is easier to understand why she wrote such violent and mean fathers

into her fiction. She tells the stories of fathers⁸ who generally take care of their sons in every aspect—providing food, shelter, safety—but they deny their progeny freedom to choose what they believe and freedom to express who they are. In contrast, Edward O’Connor not only provided for Flannery, but he also gave her one of the most valuable things a father can give to a child—freedom. He encouraged her to express herself, to be creative. Consequently, she flourished. In this sense, O’Connor’s fictional fathers are not meant to criticize her real father. They are meant to identify and celebrate good fathers by appalling readers with the opposite. Flannery O’Connor loved her father, Edward Francis O’Connor, and he loved her. This is not made evident through her fiction, but I suppose she did that on purpose. O’Connor simply left traces of her father throughout her fiction that only she knew existed. All we can do is research, explore, and assume what we believe to be true. Violent, mean, harsh, and unsympathetic fathers may shock and appall us, but they certainly get our attention. They remind us of the good father figures that we have in our lives, and I think that’s what Flannery would have wanted.

¹ This is not stated explicitly in Gooch’s biography, but it is understood.

² Cited henceforth as *CS*.

³ Referred to as “young Tarwater” or “Tarwater” for the remainder of the paper.

⁴ Will be called “old Tarwater” or “the great-uncle” for the rest of the paper.

⁵ Hereafter cited as *VBA*.

⁶ Following citations will be *HOB*.

⁷ Cited henceforth as *MM*.

⁸ What each of these flawed and fractured fathers has in common is that they all seek to control their sons, forcing their personal views and beliefs. The men provide for their sons—they give them food, shelter, and care—but they also practice the emotional abuse of denying their sons

freedom. Mr. Head, Thomas's father, Marion Tarwater, and George Rayber do not appear to be malicious men. In fact, they each appear to assert their views on their sons due to the fact that they sincerely believe that what they believe will be the most beneficial to their son. Mr. Head, ignorant about race, believes Nelson will be better off if he looks down upon black men and women. Thomas's father believes that Thomas will not be happy if he is forced to live passively with Sarah Ham in his home. Marion Tarwater believes he is doing the right thing by indoctrinating Francis into this skewed religious beliefs. Conversely, George Rayber believes he is saving the boy from these skewed beliefs. Their actions may lead readers to believe that they are evil; but, judging by their ability to perform fatherly duties, they meet the mark. Their greatest flaw is that they are deceived, by popular standards, in what they believe to be right and good. Unfortunately, the avenue in which they deliver their beliefs to their sons is control, coercion, and domination, which denies the sons their freedom to choose what they believe.

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