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Senior Lit. Seminar

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“Unsex Me Here”: A Queer Reading of Faith in O’Connor

Sex scenes are rarely, if ever, about sex. From a dramatic standpoint, this just makes sense—why waste precious minutes of your audience’s attention when you’re just going to get them hot and bothered with nowhere to go? Rather, we might say sex scenes are about establishing relationships between characters; depending on the artistry of the creator, they might even do more than that, functioning as a way to push the central conflict forward. Further, if these sex scenes can push the conflict forward, then there’s no reason they can’t push the theme forward—that is, as a metaphor for those thematic concepts.ⁱ A metaphor is a powerful tool, one that lets us explore our ideas without making them wholly explicit, especially within the realm of fiction, where arguments can be hidden behind the text. A figurative approach to sex allows us to see it not as a theme in itself, but rather as a tool to understand power and social networks. As such, this framework is particularly relevant to any reading of Flannery O’Connor that seeks to understand her views of sex and sexuality, especially how they relate to her ideas about the marriage of mystery and mannersⁱⁱ—that is, the complexities of faith and the outward manifestations of those complexities; as James Joyce, with whom O’Connor shared many affinities, put it, “In the particular is contained the universal” (qtd. in Robinson 90). In the particular of sex, we see contained O’Connor’s ideas of what makes up human identity and how we can relate faith to patriarchy. By using a queer reading, that is, by reading gender as

performance and deconstructing the gender binary in O'Connor's fiction, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of these texts.

Though Flannery never married and for the most part never had any extensive romantic relationships outside of a fling with Erik Langkjaer, she was far from a cloistered nun, as attested by her stories, which feature such topics as prostitution, nymphomania, hermaphroditism, and same-gender sexual violence. In *A Prayer Journal*, which she kept during her years at the University of Iowa, she writes of ordinary human struggles with temptation:

My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well have not made me. And the feeling I egg up writing here lasts approximately a half hour and seems a sham. I don't want any of this artificial superficial feeling stimulated by the choir. Today I have proved myself a glutton—for Scotch oatmeal cookies and erotic thought. There is nothing left to say of me. (40)

Of interest to us is that O'Connor couches her erotic thought within the terms not of lechery or lust, but gluttony, pointing towards a holistic view of human sexuality—in other words, that sexual foibles should not be considered qualitatively different from other earthly transgressions. Interestingly, this assumption is often central in theological defenses of queer orientations and identities—that is, we cannot reject the so-called sexually deviant while at the same time permitting abuse and adultery in heteronormative contexts: *Love the sinner, hate the sin*.

We see a similar relationship within O'Connor's personal life, particularly the deep, though undoubtedly platonic, friendships that O'Connor had with the homosexual Betty Hester, also known as "A." in the correspondence published in *Habit of Being*, and the bisexual playwright Maryat Lee, both of whom felt unreciprocated attraction to O'Connor. In his 2009 biography of O'Connor, Brad Gooch cites correspondence between Hester and novelist Greg

Johnson when describing the “crush” Hester had on O’Connor, though he adds Hester’s words of caution: ““Speculating about [Flannery’s] sexual feelings in print would no doubt have been extremely distasteful to her”” (282-83). Gooch also details some of the letters between Hester and O’Connor herself, in which O’Connor said after Hester revealed her past romantic encounters with women, “I don’t believe the fundamental nature [of sexual orientation] changes but that it’s put to a different use when a conversion occurs and of course it requires vigilance to put it to its proper use” (282). In other words, faith doesn’t change your sexuality, but it does change your relationship to your sexuality.

Maryat Lee’s love for O’Connor was more directly stated, though she did not express it until she was on the other side of the world: “Oh Flannery, I love you too. Did you know that? I almost said it when we were standing by a fence.... What would you have done if I had come up with it? Gone flippity flapping away on your crutches I bet” (293). O’Connor took the news with feigned misunderstanding; in a 9 June 1957 response to Maryat, she compares the love Maryat had for her to “grace and...the blood of Christ,” in an attempt to desexualize it, to which Maryat wrote back on 24 June, “You say my love is a grace and the blood of Christ. Maybe it is. But of more moment, it is me, my blood and flesh, my heart full.” This exchange was more damaging to Maryat, who became incommunicado with O’Connor for almost a year, up until she returned to Milledgeville to visit her brother the following April. O’Connor, on the other hand, stuck by her friend to the bitter end; in fact, the last letter O’Connor ever wrote, hours before she went into her final coma, was to Maryat.

Any discussion of sex we have in O’Connor must first begin with the most explicitly queer of O’Connor’s stories, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” which centers around a hermaphroditic preacher who is compared with the Holy Spirit—a radical departure from

traditional western and patriarchal ideals of a male-coded deity, though this implication was probably not the goal of the typically apolitical O'Connor. Besides the presence of the hermaphrodite, the narrative deals heavily with sex through the binary opposition of the child—a pre-pubescent, sexless individual who finds herself consumed with the intellectual, and who cannot imagine the concept of being both male and female without having two heads, even after she learns that “it pulled up its dress and showed [the cousins]” (*The Complete Stories*ⁱⁱⁱ 245)—and her sexually awakened cousins, who view themselves in terms of procreation metaphors as “Temple 1 and Temple 2,” and begin their sentences, “You know this boy I know well one time he...” (CS 236). While these connections might lead us (naively) to believe that O'Connor is forging a link between sexual innocence and spiritual fullness, the hermaphrodite's comment that they are “a Temple of the Holy Ghost” (CS 247), combined with their sexualized existence, leads us to conclude that in O'Connor's story, the sexual and the spiritual are not opposing, but rather complementing, forces. As James W. Horton argues, “The hermaphrodite is no symbol of the superiority of spirit over the baseness of the body. The hermaphrodite redeems the bodily state, redeems the object *as* object^{iv} and body, and not as ephemeralized metaphor for spirit” (31). In other words, the hermaphrodite fulfills O'Connor's idea of mystery and manners working in unison to arrive at truth; that is, the image of the hermaphrodite *embodies* the mystery of the spirit—or rather, the *Holy Spirit*—in ways that cannot be arrived at alone through simple theological arguments.

Now that we have examined events from both O'Connor's personal life as well as her fiction in order to form a framework for understanding O'Connor's other stories, we should turn to the main focus of this inquiry: “The Comforts of Home” and “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” which have more in common with each other than just their rhyming titles. In fact,

we might view these two stories, respectively the fifth story in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) and the third story in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955), O'Connor's last and first collections, as sorts of mirrors of one another: While both deal with spiritually innocent but socially ostracized young women (Lucynell Crater and Sarah Ham) who face off with morally bankrupt older men (Mr. Shiftlet and Thomas), the roles are in a way reversed—Mr. Shiftlet is clearly the invader in “Life,” whereas Sarah Ham is painted as the menacing outsider in “Comforts,” at least from Thomas's distorted perspective.

This mirroring in itself is a way of distorting perception, not necessarily to obscure the truth, but again, to get at the truth in a way not possible within the simplistic framework of a mere essay; that is, the mirroring illuminates by exaggerating the differences, re: O'Connor idea of “the realist of difference” (*MM* 44) Ruthan Knechel Johansen explains this dynamic better than I can, by putting it in dialectic terms, stating that “the capacity for negation is important to Flannery O'Connor's works because that capacity makes it possible to ‘see through,’ to move beyond the surfaces and closer to the essences of mystery that O'Connor found present in objects and experiences” (119).^v We can apply this methodology directly to our queer reading, since both this kind of dialectical methodology and queer theory rely on this negation, or flipping, of opposites, “The Negation of the Negation.” In other words, by playing these stories off each other, by using them to negate one another, we arrive parallel at the truth.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of these two tales, we should note that in contrast with the ungendered—or even nonbinary—coding of spiritual innocence in “Temple,” in these two stories, innocence, associated with the childlike Lucynell and Sarah Ham,^{vii} has a distinctly feminine element to it. Femininity as virtue seems to be more common in O'Connor's fiction than what we see in “Temple,” at least in the stories that deal explicitly with gendered

relationships, such as “Good Country People,” in which the apostate Hulga unwittingly finds herself the victim of her own naiveté, though we should recognize this interpretation as highly contentious, and especially avoid conflating naiveté with innocence. This dynamic doesn’t hold true for O’Connor’s final story, “Parker’s Back,” however, where O.E. Parker, a rambunctious tattoo fiend, fills the shoes of the spiritual savant, the wise fool, a figure much like our heroines, but especially Sarah Ham’s, in that each of them—while seemingly immoral or amoral—has analogical significance in interpreting salvation.

Though “Parker’s Back” would then point us towards the idea of spiritual innocence as ungendered, not in the same sense as in “Temple,” but more as in without regard to gender, we can resolve these tensions by positing innocence not as a function of gender, but *freakishness*. These characters in question all are missing pieces, Lucynell her voice, Sarah Ham her social status and sanity, Parker his arabesque, and Hulga her leg, and these missing pieces and their physical manifestations cause society to push them into the margins. These missing pieces make them freaks, or grotesques, a phrase more commonly used in association with gothic literature.

Yet if we return to the idea of allegory, or metaphor, we realize that these meanings are the results of specificity—we can call O’Connor’s characters freaks due to “missing pieces,” but we still have to define what specificity those missing pieces are grounded in. For the context of this essay, and the stories we wish to examine, we might say that freakishness is grounded in the specificities of gender, especially gender nonconformance—the hermaphrodite cannot fulfill performative gender roles because they fall outside the binary, Lucynell cannot reach sexual maturity due to the infantilization of her disabilities, and Sarah Ham cannot be a proper lady while she still carries the stigma of her nymphomania and looseness.

When we first meet Lucynell, she is simply introduced as “the daughter” in the first line of the text (CS 145), but we later get more details about her after the narrator tells us more about Mr. Shiftlet, whose “figure formed a crooked cross” (CS 146), bringing into mind associations with the Son, Christ—we contrast son and daughter, specifically Shiftlet’s image on an incomplete son, missing an arm and therefore unable to complete his typological role as a Christ figure, broken. This sense of incompleteness carries over to his opposite, Lucynell, by a metonymy of the son/daughter connection, as well as by the way that Lucynell “watched, her head thrust forward and her fat helpless hands hanging at her wrists” (CS 146) also seems to vaguely represent a cross, at least in its focus—cf., the stigmata.

The text also indicates Lucynell’s mental immaturity by the way that she silently gobbles up the gum Shiftlet gives her, though this visualization is much clearer in the otherwise deeply flawed Schlitz Playhouse of the Stars teledrama of the story, where Lucynell is transformed into an innocent Disney princess type, complete with billowing locks reaching down past her shoulders and frumpy pre-ball dress, holding her mother’s hand as the action begins. Around the 2:20 mark, she unwraps the gum and eyes it up with sheer joy, turning to her mother for clarification, unsure if she can eat candy from strangers. She puts it in her mouth and chews unceremoniously, her facial motions exaggerated. Indeed, Lucynell acts so simple that Mrs. Crater can easily pass her off as fifteen or sixteen, when in reality “the girl was nearly thirty but because of her innocence it was impossible to tell” (CS 151).

The contrasts between Lucynell and Mr. Shiftlet also involve not only this element of infantilization, but also how Shiftlet describes and sees himself. While talking himself up to Mrs. Crater, Shiftlet goes into a deep discussion of manhood: “Lady...people don’t care how they lie. Maybe the best I can tell you is, I’m a man; but listen lady...what is a man?” (CS 148) He

answers his own question through a convoluted rant about his life story, but the main point he gets to is, “There’s some men that some things mean more to them than money” (CS 148). We could read this as a renunciation of Shiftlet’s own manhood, since he spends almost the entire story playing a long con against the Crater family; or, more likely, we could see it as an affirmation, though indirect, of Shiftlet’s own peculiar brand of masculinity, which cares less about money and more about freedom—freedom represented by the automobile Shiftlet can’t keep his eyes off while at the farm. Mr. Shiftlet doesn’t seem the type to insult himself, even in order to get what he wants; it takes a certain kind of ego to steal a car and leave your deaf wife in a diner in the middle of nowhere. This distortion of the masculine ideal in turn creates a distortion of the feminine ideal; if broken Mr. Shiftlet can represent masculinity, then broken Lucynell can represent femininity, at least within the context of this story—O’Connor in effect rewrites gender roles, positioning them so the unlikeliest characters become universalities, and the character most free of sexuality becomes the most feminine.

In “The Comforts of Home,” O’Connor approaches this theme of inversion from a vastly different angle by framing the action within the context of patriarchal violence: Thomas, urged on by his father’s ghost, attempts to murder a woman he finds sexually degenerate and ends up murdering his own mother instead. The patriarchal vision of “The Comforts” is much clearer when we look at earlier versions of the work, where significant changes took place. The absence of both a significant presence for Thomas’ father in these earlier drafts as well as the renaming of the police chief to Sheriff Farebrother in the final published story seems to point to a specifically patriarchal frame of reference; Thomas is being judged not by his own moral standards, but rather by the standards of the specifically male community. The change from *chief* to *sheriff* also indicates this to an extent, since *sheriff* has connotations associated with the lawless west and

typically male-coded vigilantism—what Thomas does is not based on any sense of the law, but rather a set of social mores that Sarah Ham has transgressed. In fact, O'Connor heavily hints at this transgression in an earlier draft:

What [Thomas] was actually set against was unclear to him, for he was used enough to his mother making a fool of herself. There could be no temptation to him in the person of Sarah Ham, who revolted him completely, but his momentary contact with the girl had caused some mysterious disturbance in his being. He felt something very like anticipated terror, as if he had seen a tornado pass a hundred yards away and had an intimation that it would turn again and recross its path and destroy him. (17-18)

What O'Connor describes here is akin to repulsion and desire mixed together, a kind of trash-fire love story—while Thomas is on some level disgusted by Sarah Ham, he feels a primal attraction to her as a force of nature, a tornado. This desire is threatening to Thomas, as it is outside of his control; consequently, he does what he can to bring it back *into* his control by imposing societal (and patriarchal) controls on the tumultuous Sarah Ham via the male-coded law, in the figure of Farebrother.

Making these patriarchal mechanisms even more explicit, O'Connor also mentions in this earlier draft that, “Each day [Thomas’s] mother had tried again to find a place where [Sarah Ham] could stay, a family who would take her, but if the girl’s reputation did not deter them, the look of her did. *It was a look of bold independence, the independence of those who long to be oppressed*” (19). In other words, Thomas’s repulsion of Sarah Ham is a result of her tempestuous nature, and more importantly, an expression of Thomas’s desire for domination—he has to be master of the house, just as throughout the story he has to live up to his father’s memory. Yet we

cannot read this drive to dominate without sexual dimensions, given the sexual advances Sarah Ham makes on Thomas, including when she comes to his room in the middle of the night completely naked (CS 384-85), but also because of the climactic scene of the action: Thomas, having recovered the phallic gun that Sarah Ham had stolen from him, puts it in her yonic handbag, then when she spots him in the act, tries to use the phallus to destroy her, though his mother gets in the way. Therefore, we can see the *mechanisms* of domination (if not the domination itself) as male-coded, a patriarchal self-defense mechanism that acts to suppress female individualism.

Ironically, while this drive for dominance is male-coded, the actual independence that comes with that dominance is unique to Sarah Ham, as seen in the above quotations, and so we might say that here O'Connor suggests that independence is a somewhat female quality, or at the very least, that independence is a quality that is frightful in women, one that is freakish, much like Lucynell's disabilities are. But at the same time, we see the same process with Sarah Ham, where the very things that make her unladylike are also those key to the perception of the feminine in this story—what makes Sarah Ham feminine is this story is that she rejects the value placed upon her by the patriarchy, and the ways that her sexual energy manifests as a storm metaphor. In other words, if we consider the difference that sets apart male and female, and that which sets apart Sarah Ham from Thomas, the two collapse into each other—independence *should* be male, and the male Thomas *should* be independent, but that is not so; dependence *should* be female, and the female Sarah *should* be dependent, but that is not so; in the end, the two distinctions are one and the same.

To relate this back to “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” as we saw earlier, in “A Temple,” O'Connor combines a form of sexual grotesque with spiritual maturity in the image of the

hermaphrodite, and likewise in “The Life” and “The Comforts” she creates such disparities, linking the freakish Lucynell and Sarah Ham with the idea of fulfilment of the feminine ideal. Yet the difference between Lucynell and Sarah Ham and the hermaphrodite is not all that great—all three cannot live up to gendered ideals because of the deformities that society sees in them, whether they be physical or mental. In other words, while the hermaphrodite fulfills spirituality, the other two fulfill femininity. Yet are the two so different? In a 1955 letter to Hester, O’Connor wrote:

Of course I do not connect the Church exclusively with the Patriarchal Ideal. The death of such would not be the death of the Church, which is only now a seed and a Divine one. The things that you think she will be added to, will be added to her.

In the end we visualize the same thing but I see it as happening through Christ and his Church.

In the femininity of Lucynell and Sarah Ham, we see a rejection of the Patriarchal Ideal, just as the hermaphrodite’s mere existence is a rejection of that Patriarchal Ideal. In both cases, O’Connor is moving towards an ideal where religion doesn’t happen in these strict gendered terms. Women can be prophets too, as we see with Ruby Turpin and Mrs. Shortley, and historically in figures like Joan of Arc. In O’Connor’s fiction, the Holy Spirit is an equal opportunity employer.

Notes

ⁱ As J. Robert helpfully reminds us, O'Connor "had little quarrel with allegory. She disliked it only when it reduced characters to abstractions because she believed that good fiction is scrupulously attentive to particular characters in specific settings" (84).

ⁱⁱ I use this term "mystery and manners" in the sense outlined by O'Connor in "The Fiction Writer and His Country," from O'Connor nonfiction collection *Mystery and Manners (MM)*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hereafter abbreviated as *CS*.

^{iv} Horton uses the phrases "object" and "subject" in his paper to refer to the process of perception—that is, wherein the subject is perceiver and object is perceived—not for any sort of relativism.

^v Though I describe Johansen's methodology as dialectic, it is worth noting that her approach, with its focus on Trickster imagery, is closer to archetypal criticism than to Marxism, though there is certainly some overlap.

^{vii} O'Connor, in a letter to John Hawkes, says that "Sarah Ham is like Enoch and Bishop—the innocent character, always unpredictable and for whom the intelligent characters are in some measure responsible (responsible in the sense of looking after them). I am much interested in this sort of innocent person who sets the havoc in motion..." (*Habit of Being* 434).

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