

5-11-2017

Jerry-Rigged Salvation

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Recommended Citation

Sivils, John, "Jerry-Rigged Salvation" (2017). *English Class Publications*. 36.
http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications/36

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May 12, 2017

Jerry-Rigged Salvation

The reader of Flannery O'Connor's 1949 novel *Wise Blood* is just as shocked as its protagonist Hazel Motes when a patrolman pushes Haze's Essex off a thirty foot cliff. Haze's reaction to the ordeal is stranger still as Haze stares into the empty space of "the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond" to the "blank grey sky" (*Wise Blood* 211), before blinding himself. O'Connor's fiction abounds with moments of shock such as this, but this event differs from other jarring encounters because the violence is focused on an object rather than a person. Although the destruction of a car is not as disturbing to the reader as the murder of the vacationing family in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" or the goring of Mrs. May by a bull in "Greenleaf," this moment, and other moments like it, are central to the recurring theme of many of O'Connor's short stories: how to live life without belief in a divine purpose. O'Connor states in her essay "On Her Own Work" that "what makes a story work, what makes it hold up as a story. . .is probably some action. . .on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (*Mystery and Manners* 111). For a character to be able to act on that level, the objects and characters which they are acting upon must have some anagogical or parabolic meaning. For example, when Manley Pointer steals Hulga's artificial leg, which must certainly be the "totally unexpected" action that O'Connor uses to "[make] contact with mystery," then her leg must have a purpose beyond propping up Hulga; likewise, the Essex of Hazel Motes and the Ford of Tom Shiftlet must each be more to both men than simply automobiles.

In her essay "Writing Short Stories," O'Connor herself admits that inanimate objects in her stories can accumulate anagogical meaning—that is, they are not strict symbols with one stable, clear meaning, nor are they allegories for other entities or ideas; rather, they are focal points that

O'Connor uses to bridge the material world to the spiritual. O'Connor states that "[i]n good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself" (*Mystery and Manners* 98). We see this in "Good Country People," where Hulga Hopewell makes sure no one can ignore her artificial leg by "[stumping] into the kitchen in the morning" (*Complete Stories* 275), often with "about twice the noise that [is] necessary" (282). Her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, merely sees this as another way that Hulga seeks to annoy her. In light of what we know about O'Connor's own statements on the wooden leg, the leg resonates with meaning; therefore, all actions performed to or with the leg are likely to reveal this anagogical meaning or build upon it.

By stomping around on her wooden leg, Hulga draws attention to it not only to acknowledge her difference herself, but also to force others to see her wooden leg for what it is: as a cheap coverup that helps people ignore the void. Laura Behling points out in her essay "The Necessity of Disability in 'Good Country People' and 'The Lame Shall Enter First'" that "artificial limbs are often dressed up by their wearers' prosthetic legs and with a shoe on the foot, or covered by a trouser leg or skirt. . .to hide the leg so that the disability is not visibly present" (90). With this in mind, it must not be merely the noise of Hulga's stomping that agitates Mrs. Hopewell, who is very concerned with appearances, wishing that Hulga would smile more and have better posture so that she would not seem so ugly. She wishes for these things not just because she wants Hulga to seem pretty, but because she wants Hulga to have the appearance of good country people even though she seems to have lost this trait when she obtained her doctorate in philosophy. Mrs. Hopewell already knows that Hulga believes strange things that Mrs. Hopewell does not understand, as we see when Mrs. Hopewell peruses one of Hulga's books and reads a highlighted excerpt about science; but if Hulga had all the physical traits of good country people, then perhaps she could mask the strangeness of her intellect.

O'Connor sheds light on just how strange Hulga's intellectualism is by stating that "[s]he believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing." Hulga's leg, which O'Connor reveals is "part of

the girl's personality," corresponds to Hulga's spiritual character not because it is a spiritual crutch, but because it represents Hulga's substitute for her own spiritual paucity (*Mystery and Manners* 99). Hulga's embrace of nihilism corresponds to her rejection of Christianity. She lost her divine purpose just like she lost her leg, and put another belief there not just because she needed propping up, but also because no one, not even she, could stand the sight of nothing where there should be something.

O'Connor does not give her readers a road map to each of her short stories; however, her insight to this story can apply to other stories where characters face similar conflicts. A comparison of Hulga to one-armed Tom Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" will show that O'Connor uses a similar theme—a missing limb—to magnetize an inanimate object to attract meaning. Instead of a missing limb, the meaning-gathering object in this story is a 1929 Ford.

A reader first encountering Shiftlet will agree with Lucynell Crater's assumption that "he [is] a tramp and no one to be afraid of," especially since Shiftlet is missing an arm (*Complete Stories* 145). Shiftlet examines everything around him—the view of the sunset, "the pump near the corner of the house and the big fig tree that three or four chickens were preparing to roost in" before spotting behind Mrs. Lucynell Crater's shed "the square rusted back of an automobile" (146). The tramp does not give the old lady his full attention until he has had a chance to size up the old car, a full eleven paragraphs after he first walks onto her farm.

O'Connor presents Shiftlet as the solution to all of Mrs. Crater's problems, a carpenter who can not only "[patch] the front and back steps, [build] a new hog pen, [restore] a fence" (*Complete Stories* 150) and even mend her deaf-mute daughter by teaching her how to speak, but also fix a car that "'ain't run in fifteen year'" (146). At Lucynell's offer, Shiftlet agrees to stay on the farm to fix things up in exchange for food. Within a week, he has already made several noticeable improvements to the farm, including teaching a word to Mrs. Crater's daughter, Lucynell Crater, "who was completely deaf and had never said a word in her life," but these man-made miracles are

only a prelude to Shiftlet's vow "to make the automobile run" (150).

Instead of keeping Shiftlet stable, the Ford keeps him moving. Like Hulga Hopewell, who draws attention to her prosthetic leg by stumping around on it, Tom Shiftlet draws attention to his missing arm by doing so much handy work around the farm. He is able to fix more objects around the property than either of the able-bodied Craters. Mrs. Crater and Lucynell cannot ignore the carpenter's noisy work, and neither can the reader. Considering Shiftlet's claim that "[he's] a man" and "there ain't a broken thing on this plantation that [he] couldn't fix for you, one-arm jackleg or not," we can conclude that Shiftlet's constant movement as he works is equivalent to Hulga's stomping on her fake leg (*Complete Stories* 149). Unlike Hulga Hopewell, Shiftlet's object that rectifies his physical—and, as we learn, his spiritual—disability is a car. Even after Shiftlet marries and abandons Lucynell Crater in a diner, he sets his path toward Mobile. O'Connor uses this pun to show that Shiftlet, whom we knew to be a wanderer from his name, is more focused on mobility than on stability as his method of filling his own void. Unlike Hulga, who settled on her belief in nothing as her solid rock, Shiftlet has not reached the point of belief in nothing, as we see in his cries to God at the end of the story. Instead, he must move to escape the inevitable judgment he knows awaits a wretch like him. Luckily for Shiftlet, the Ford protects him from the "fantastic raindrops" of a mighty thunderstorm, which O'Connor hints is God answering Shiftlet's plea to "wash the slime from this earth" just a few lines earlier, as Shiftlet "[races] the galloping shower into Mobile" (156). The Ford becomes Shiftlet's armored substitute for mobility and manhood.

While O'Connor imbues wooden legs and 1929 Fords with meaning for crippled characters, these magnetized objects are not exclusive to the disabled. In fact, by understanding how these objects allow us to explore the condition of the crippled, we are also able to understand the characters in O'Connor's stories who appear physically whole. To this end, Laura Behling states in her essay "The Necessity of Disability in 'Good Country People' and 'The Lime Shall Enter

First" for *The Flannery O'Connor Review*, "Hulga Hopewell serves as the mirror that the

other characters, corporeally intact, hold themselves up against," showing that the study of O'Connor's disabled relates to the study of her whole-bodied characters (89). I propose expanding Behling's established premise to include another story, *Wise Blood*.

In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes first encounters the Essex shortly after he arrives in Taulkinham. While staying with Mrs. Watts, Hazel wakes one morning with "only one thought in his mind: he [is] going to buy a car," which is a strange desire for Haze, who "had never thought before of buying a car; he had never even wanted one before" (*Wise Blood* 63). In short order, he finds himself downtown hunting used car lots for a fifty-dollar car, which leads him to the Essex. Although it is in terrible condition—one door being held on by a rope and a plank of wood taking the place of the back seat—Haze quickly decides that the Essex is "the car he [is] going to buy" (65). After a test drive, Haze purchases the car, declaring that he "'wanted this car mostly to be a house for [him]'" since he "'ain't got any place to be'" (69). Haze takes to the highway in his Essex, driving fast but heading nowhere.

Even in this first episode with the car, O'Connor begins to tie the vehicle to Haze's philosophy of Nothing as Haze begins to feel that "everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing" (70). The Essex putters to a stop in the middle of the road, leaving Haze to ponder a sign painted on a large rock by the road condemning the "BLASPHEMER AND WHOREMONGER" and proclaiming Jesus's power to save (71). When a truck driver pulls over to ask Haze to "get [his] goddamn outhouse off the middle of the road," Haze proclaims that "[he doesn't] have to run from anything because [he doesn't] believe in anything" and that "'Jesus is a trick on n-----s'" (72). Clearly, Haze rejects the dogma of Christianity, asserting instead that there is nothing to believe in. To him, the idea that Jesus saves is ludicrous not necessarily just because Jesus is powerless, but also because there cannot be danger in something as immaterial and abstract as sin. The Essex, however, is neither immaterial nor abstract. It can physically move Haze out of bad places to wherever he wants to be, progress that is literal and measurable.

The car's power to move Haze reflects, by analogy, man's perceived independence. For example, Shiftlet believes that "a man with a car [has] a responsibility to others," as if his car not only saves him but gives him the power to save (*Complete Stories* 155). Likewise, Haze considers his car a house, and proclaims that "[n]obody with a good car needs to be justified," showing that he believes his Essex is a source of independence, if not salvation (*Wise Blood* 109). In his essay for *The Flannery O'Connor Review*, "Grace in the Machine: Technology and Transfiguration in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction," Doug Davis notes that "O'Connor uses the iconic American technology of the automobile as a symbol of false freedom and attacks the American myth of the self-created man through how her characters find and lose their cars" (30). Shiftlet only gets his Ford by stealing it from the Craters. Little is self-made about Shiftlet's acquisition of the car, so he is not as independent as he wants to be. Haze undoubtedly sees his car as a doorway to freedom as Shiftlet did, supporting Davis's notion of the car as representative of Emersonian self-reliance in an American man.

After his conversation with a truck driver, Haze pivots suddenly, heading back to the zoo to visit Enoch Emery, one of Haze's few acquaintances in Taulkinham. Although this is only an intermediary stop for Haze, who is really looking for a blind preacher and a girl he had encountered in the streets earlier, O'Connor presents a counterpoint to Haze's nihilism in Enoch's post-work ritual, which Enoch insists Haze be a part of.

Although Enoch does not have a physical deformity, as Hulga and Shiftlet do, we can certainly tell that Enoch has some sort of deformity in his character. He cannot connect with human beings, a deficiency which keeps him from making friends and ultimately leads to his decision to don a gorilla suit and forsake the streets of Taulkinham to join the animals of the woods. In applying Behling's concept of the disabled being a mirror for the whole-bodied, we inevitably compare Haze and Enoch—specifically, in this case, comparing their individual styles of worship.

Unlike Haze's aimless and spontaneous trip down the highway, Enoch's expression of his

own religion is very structured. Daily, Emery's routine is sacrosanct. He begins by spying on women as they swim and tan at the city pool. Next, makes his way to a hot dog stand to flirt with the waitress and enjoy a chocolate malted milkshake. Enoch's last stop before he goes to the museum—his own temple of worship—is to observe the animals at the zoo. Enoch religiously follows this routine like a Levite preparing himself to enter the holy of holies.

While Enoch ceremoniously builds up to his eccentric religious experience, perhaps a parody of the strict tradition of O'Connor's own Catholic faith, Haze only drives around Taulkinham to prepare to preach his nihilistic gospel in front of a movie theater, the "Church Without Christ." Hazel's language parodies religious talk almost word for word. He pitches his Church Without Christ as a place where "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" and "the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption" (*Wise Blood* 101). By asserting that there was no Redemption, Haze blasphemes the idea that the human race is depraved and sinful. O'Connor shows how Haze glorifies the Essex as his object of faith by having him "[climb] up on the nose of it" to use the car as his pulpit (100). Where Enoch parodies the traditions of Catholic worship, Haze parodies the method of Protestant street preachers.

Haze further differentiates from Enoch's ceremonies in his system of belief by preaching that the Church Without Christ does not have a church building because "there's no reason to have a set place to do it in" if you don't believe in Christ (*Wise Blood* 102). In contrast, Enoch holds the museum where his idol of worship remains in high regard, even speaking in a "church whisper" while he's there (94). In light of this, Enoch appears to mirror Hulga Hopewell in seeking stability despite the void, while Haze seeks to escape the void through driving straight into it in the manner of Tom Shiftlet.

The reader doesn't fully understand the importance of these objects until someone violates them. Hulga herself doesn't feel that anyone understands her and her leg until Manley Pointer, an innocent Bible salesman, admits that Hulga "ain't like anybody else" because of her wooden leg

(*Complete Stories* 288), a fact that "[touches] the truth about her" (289). For once, someone sees her incomplete as she is and does not try to cover up this fact. O'Connor writes that Hulga's experience was "like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in [Pointer's]," which mirrors the philosophy of the Christian baptism (289). Pointer seems to represent "real innocence," as if he were pure as Christ. Hulga's belief in nothing had never moved her as this encounter with Pointer did, showing the impact of Pointer's ostensible acceptance of her emptiness; however, Pointer violates Hulga's admittance of her emptiness by revealing that he is not Christian at all and stealing her leg, leaving her to consider the futility of Nothing as a savior—or a cheap wooden substitute.

With all of the ways O'Connor treats objects in these stories, the destruction of Haze's car and his decision to blind himself become less mysterious. The car is everything to him—his mobility, his pulpit, and even his home. When Haze loses his car in the novel and stares into the endless void over the cliff, he is experiencing the same wake-up call that Hulga experiences when she faces her inner emptiness represented by her missing leg. Without the distraction of the car, Haze must face his nihilism head on.

Haze spends much of *Wise Blood* fascinated with a blind street preacher named Asa Hawks, who tells Haze that he blinded himself to "justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him" (*Wise Blood* 108). After grilling Asa's daughter, Sabbath Lily, about how Asa was before his salvation, Haze eventually learns that Hawks has not actually blinded himself with lime, having lost his nerve during his performance. This cements Haze's belief in the futility of Jesus to get him anywhere, further building up in Haze's mind the power of the car. So, after Haze loses the car, the anagogical impact is that Haze loses the power he had as a self-made, independent, free man.

The 1979 movie adaptation of *Wise Blood* nuances the destruction of the Essex by having it plunge into a pond at the bottom of a hill. As in a baptism, Haze has his own death-to-life experience by losing his independence and blinding himself in exactly the same manner attempted by Asa Hawks. Haze, Shiftlet, and Hulga had all never fully healed from their physical or spiritual

wounds. When Shiftlet fixes the Ford, it is not a new car; it is the same car with a few new parts and a fresh coat of paint. Likewise, Haze, Shiftlet, and Hulga all jerry rig their own answers to the mystery of life's purpose, and only when they stop relying on these objects for their independence, mobility, and even salvation are they able to heal and actually have a meaningful encounter with the Divine mystery of life.

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