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All Men Created Equal: Flannery O'Connor Responds Communism

From her mother's farm, Andalusia in Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery O'Connor found her writing inspiration by observing the ways of the South. Naturally, a pervasive motif in her works is racism. For instance, in "Revelation" Ruby Turpin spends a good portion of the short story thanking God that she is neither white trash nor black. In her essay "Aligning the Psychological with the Theological: Doubling and Race in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Doreen Fowler points out that "[Ruby's] insistence on setting racial boundaries has been an attempt to distinguish a white, superior identity" (81), equality with African Americans being Ruby Turpin's ultimate fear. Similarly, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian's mother is appalled when an African American woman wears the same hat she does. Her greatest fear occurs when that woman steps onto the bus and they sit facing one another wearing the same hat. The racist fear of equality has existed in the South since before the Civil War, however this fear was not as dominant in the public spectrum after the War until O'Connor's lifetime. In light of the Cold War and the spread of Communism during the 1940s-1950s, white southerners especially reverted back to the antebellum mindset in order to defend their superiority over blacks. In fact, O'Connor's works in this time period have a heightened intensity of racial conflict as compared, for example, to Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* in the 1960s. Her three short stories, "Judgement Day,"¹ "The Displaced Person," and "The Artificial N.," use violent means to illustrate the fear whites had of equality with blacks that saturated the 1950s

South as a result of Communism. I argue that in light of Communism spreading overseas, O'Connor's writings demonstrate an increase in racist behavior as an attempt to maintain antebellum superior ways.

In order to fully comprehend Flannery O'Connor's writings, we must examine them in the decades in which she wrote, the 1940s-1950s, a time when the United States experienced the beginning of social upheaval due to the political spectrum of the world. Specifically, this was the age of the Cold War, which was an ideological warfare between Communist Russia and capitalist America. Communism is based on Marxist theory; at its center, Marxism relies on the belief in total equality for civilians, or an entirely classless society (Bressler 166). Marxist thinkers focus on how power is distributed throughout societies and they do so by "examining all aspects of our daily activities within our own culture" (Bressler 176). As a result of Marxist belief, communist practices became extremely dominant in the world during O'Connor's lifetime, and because of its promotion of equality, led to a lot of fear manifesting itself in the United States along with other western cultures. In response to the threat to capitalism that Communism presented, U.S. citizens declared to fully devote themselves to embody the opposite of everything Communism represents. As a result, historians have noted how the South in particular embraced old antebellum notions specifically regarding whites supremacy in order to affirm that the U.S. embodied entirely different ideologies from the USSR (Dr. Motl Interview). Along with the Marxist threat, the 1950s brought about the first signs of the Civil Rights Movement, which inspired Southern whites to reemphasize the notion that blacks were "simpletons" (Dr. Motl Interview). O'Connor writes her powerful short stories in light of this double threat of Communism and Civil Rights to the fragile power structure in the South, the fiction modeling just how desperate southern whites could be to maintain their superiority.²

In O'Connor's final short story "Judgement Day," the main character, Tanner, represents the old white fear of economic equality. "Judgement Day" follows the last days of Tanner's life after his daughter forced him to move from Georgia to New York City so she could take care of him. Within the first couple of pages, we are told that Tanner was once "somebody when he was somebody. He never worked for nobody in his life but himself and had people-- other people-- working for him" (*The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* 532).³ In other words, Tanner once had African Americans working under his supervision. The story continues with Tanner's flashbacks of his life in Georgia, where he had one worker, named Coleman, with whom he bonded closely. Tanner is simply a white southern man who possesses a confidence and superiority over African Americans. However, to Tanner's surprise, an African American man moves into the apartment next door with his white girlfriend. Because of Tanner's southern heritage, Tanner assumes this man is a preacher from South Alabama; however, when Tanner cannot accept that the man is actually an actor, the actor violently attacks Tanner, sending him into further defiance about his equal status to the black man. In the end, Tanner experiences his own "judgement day" and in his final moments, he is stuck in the stair banister, discovered by the black actor and his girlfriend cackling at him.

Tanner is only used to seeing African Americans work in lower class jobs. While reflecting on his younger days as a man in charge, O'Connor writes, "He was known to have a way with niggers. There was an art to handling them. The secret of handling a nigger was to show him his brains didn't have a chance against yours" (*CS* 536). This mindset that African Americans are inherently lesser than whites inhibits Tanner from accepting his new neighbor's profession. Throughout his entire life, he has only known a society that limited African Americans to work in menial and lower paying jobs. As a result of the shock of meeting a black

man who was more economically well off than he, Tanner determines to maintain his superiority even when his daughter warns him that “They ain’t the same around here and I don’t want any trouble with niggers, you hear me? If you have to live next to them, just you mind your business and they’ll mind theirs,” to which Tanner arrogantly thinks, “He was willing to bet the nigger would like to talk to someone who understood him” (CS 543). Earlier in the short story, Tanner’s daughter displays racist tendencies herself. She maintains her superior attitude by simply denying African Americans her recognition of their social or economic status. Tanner, on the other hand, is so fearful of equality that he chooses to deny his black neighbor his right to hold any occupation that is contrary to his antebellum Southern worldview.

Tanner’s faith in capitalism is robbed when he is forced to face the truth that a black man can work in any job a white man can. Tanner spends his final moments staring into the eyes of the actor, solidifying his ultimate fear that blacks are indeed equal to whites. Before he dies, “the two faces, the black one and the pale one, appeared to be wavering” before one another, wavering on their pre-conceived notions about each other (CS 549). In an age of threatened ideologies, Tanner represents racism in the South; he cannot accept equality with a black man because to do so is to lose his identity. The black actor does not represent communism, but he does represent how transformative O’Connor’s era was to the changing dynamics of global powers and relationships between Americans themselves. In response to Communism taking off across the world, Tanner denies his mind any expansion to new ideals. Tanner refuses to accept anything other than his antebellum ideals in order to maintain his superior, capitalist friendly perception of his world.

Similar to Tanner, Mrs. McIntyre is another O’Connor character who refuses to accept economic equality. In “The Displaced Person,” Mrs. McIntyre resorts to silently witnessing

murder in order to maintain racial separation. “The Displaced Person” centers on Mrs. McIntyre’s struggle to keep her farm afloat with two African American men working for her, a “white trash” family called the Shortleys, and a Polish family called the Guizacs. As soon as the Guizacs- the immigrated family- arrive, tension flares on the farm. At first, Mrs. McIntyre is pleased with Mr. Guizac’s strong work ethic, but as soon as she realizes he has offered his white niece’s hand in marriage to her black worker Sulk, she is immediately repulsed. Rather than following through on her plan to fire Mr. Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre continues to let her imagination believe that Mr. Guizac is out to destroy her entire farm. As tension continues to grow on the farm, Mrs. McIntyre sits idly by until finally, she stares on in horror as a tractor rolls over Mr. Guizac, killing him.

Mr. Guizac represents the world changing around Mrs. McIntyre since he, similar to Communist ideals, believes in the equality of humankind based on hard work. Because of Mr. Guizac’s hard work ethic and his eastern European origin, Mr. Shortley feels threatened by him. Mrs. McIntyre is repulsed by Mr. Guizac only after he promises to marry his white niece to her African American worker, essentially elevating her employee to her same status. In her essay “Miscegenation and Communism in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘The Displaced Person,’” writer Virginia Grant explains “The idea of interracial marriage is an impossibility for Mrs. McIntyre, and the fact that a foreigner brings it with him to Cold-War-fearful mid-century America links his ideas, which are essentially integrationist ideas, to his foreignness” (22). Unlike her other short stories, “The Displaced Person” shows equality threatened by a fellow white man, not by African Americans themselves. Mr. Guizac is the central character in this threat to white supremacy because he is an immigrant from an exotic place where his beliefs “never have advanced or reformed” (CS 206). In reality, Sulk would never dream of marrying a white woman

because he is well aware of the economic and social divide that exists between whites and blacks. Mr. Guizac thinking this marriage is acceptable “makes evident not only his ignorance to mid-century southern codes that governed race relations, but also his own inclinations about racism. Just as he treats black workers no differently from himself upon meeting them, he also views interracial marriage in the same way he views intra-racial marriage” (Grant 21). Mrs. McIntyre cannot comprehend a world where she is equal to African Americans in any way, nor can she comprehend a fellow white man seeing nothing wrong with inequality.

I am not suggesting that O'Connor purposefully wrote Mr. Guizac as a communist, only that Mr. Guizac's inability to see the threat that interracial marriage proposes reflects the equality communism promotes. Similar to the Communist fear Russia caused during the 1950s, Mr. Guizac's ignorance of the South's balanced race relations arguably led to his murder. Mrs. McIntyre did not plan his death, but her prejudice displays itself by watching silently as Mr. Shortley watches the tractor run over Mr. Guizac. She kept her worldview intact by allowing her horror over racial miscegenation to drive her actions. She exclaims, “You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger! What kind of a monster are you!” (CS 222). Similar to Tanner in “Judgement Day,” Mrs. McIntyre cannot allow equality to become a reality. Both Tanner and Mrs. McIntyre are threatened by the agency African Americans are demonstrating in these short stories. As a result of this threat, they resort to drastic measures to protect their superiority.

In perhaps her most controversial story, “The Artificial N.” Flannery O'Connor once again emphasizes white southerners' irrational fear of racial equality, yet shows her readers a character who is truly guilty of an atrocious sin. In this story, Mr. Head takes his grandson, Nelson, on a day trip into the great city of Atlanta, Georgia. Throughout the entire story, Mr.

Head aspires to teach Nelson two concepts: inferiority to his grandfather, but superiority to African Americans. To their dismay, the two become lost in a black neighborhood once in Atlanta, but eventually find their way out. After Nelson lies down to nap briefly, he wakes up to discover that Mr. Head is nowhere to be seen. As Nelson sprints off in an effort to find his grandfather, he accidentally collides into an older white woman, knocking her down. Rather than defending Nelson to the woman and her friends, Mr. Head shocks everyone around by denying any relation to Nelson. In the end, Mr. Head feels the weight of his sin as he and Nelson stand staring at a statue of an artificial n-, looking miserable. In this final scene, the reader knows that Mr. Head is experiencing mercy for the first time, as well as realizing his similarity to the artificial black statue.

Mr. Head and Nelson are from the country. When they take the trip into the city, they are representative of the Old South that was dominated by agriculture, plantations, etc. In the city, they are confronted with the New South where African Americans can live independently in their own neighborhoods. When the two are first heading to Atlanta on the train, Nelson does not recognize that the “coffee-colored” man who past them was, in the words of Mr. Head, “his first nigger” (CS 255). After realizing that this man was one who his grandfather hated, Nelson “hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them” (CS 255-256). Mr. Head is older than Nelson, so it is his obligation as his guardian to instruct him in the proper ways of the South. In her article “Deconstructing Racial Difference: O’Connor’s ‘The Artificial N.’,” scholar Doreen Fowler points out “Mr. Head’s superiority, O’Connor reveals, exists only in his head” (23). When the pair becomes lost in the black neighborhood, Mr. Head is so disturbed because his antebellum presumptions deny black men

and women the economic stability to live in their own neighborhood. His old southern beliefs refuse to accept the new South's identity of economic independence.

Mr. Head is disturbed by the day because he has repeatedly been faced with communist practices: equality in the workforce. Finally, after refusing to claim Nelson as his own grandson, "Mr. Head began to feel the depth of his denial" (CS 266). As the two walk towards the black statue, Mr. Head's belief in his worldview's dominance quickly shatters around him. Mr. Head has spent the entire story attempting to keep his place at the top of the social and economic ladder. However, he realizes after his mistake that he is not as innocent, or as superior, as he believed himself to be earlier. When they finally reached the statue, O'Connor illustrates their response:

The two of them stood there with their necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost exactly the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets...They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. (CS 268-269)

Mr. Head and Nelson gazing at this statue is the culmination of all that this story represents. It is by this statue that Mr. Head is struck with his similarities to those he has spent his entire life denying any similarity. This artificial statue encompasses not only the misery the black race has experienced in America, but also similarities. "The statue identifies similarities and connections whereas culture ordains difference and discrimination, and, in this way, this image of the racial other, like O'Connor's title, exposes the lie of racial difference" (Fowler 28). Mr. Head realizes his similarities to African Americans while realizing the possibility of equal economic status.

As Mr. Head comes face to face with his greatest fear, Nelson finally understands his grandfather's thinking. O'Connor concludes the short story with Nelson exclaiming, "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!" (CS 270). Though irrational, I believe Nelson comes to support antebellum perceptions. He desires to return to his southern farm, which symbolizes the Old South's economic system that was built on slave labor. Both Mr. Head and Nelson experience a change in worldview. Mr. Head experiences mercy for the first time, and arguably finally grasps that his fear of equality is absurd. Nelson, on the other hand, experiences a shift from an innocent perception to the world to a southern tainted view.

As a native Southerner, Flannery O'Connor was well acquainted with the Southern identity. She wrote about what she observed in her day-to-day life for all of her work. In an acceptance speech titled "The Regional Writer," O'Connor explains, "An identity is not to be found on the surface... It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. It lies very deep" (*Mystery and Manners* 58).⁴ O'Connor's explanation of what creates an identity describes her characters' actions to defend their deep-rooted southern heritage. Tanner, Mrs. McIntyre, and Mr. Head are all relatable, realistic characters, regardless of the heinous things they do. These characters, like O'Connor, grew up in the South. They lived in a world that is seemingly frozen in time. O'Connor lived nearly eighty years after the Civil War, however she was still able to understand what the town was like before the War because Milledgeville refused to move on. From her mother's farm Andalusia, to the courthouse, to the gas station, to the library, everything in her hometown screams the Old South. Even today in 2017, I was stunned to find how much modernity had not touched the heart of Milledgeville. Antebellum architecture with the tall white

pillars in front with porches around the house appeared at nearly every corner, reminding its residents daily of its history.

In a letter written to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald on May 7, 1953, O'Connor responds to a Catholic woman handing out food to the homeless that she concludes, "Charity was not understandable," (*The Habit of Being* 58)⁵. Later in 1957, she writes that her thoughts on a utopian community being shot at is "ugly and uncharitable" (*HOB* 218). In these two letters, she clearly indicates she is against communal living, essentially Communism. Because of her southern upbringing, she has been consistently surrounded by the symbol of a southern plantation as a way to make money. She understands Southerners' irrational thought that the way to make money directly connects to the Old South's economic basis. Communist practices threatened to destroy the South's economic foundation and therefore promote equality between African Americans and whites. Flanner O'Connor's racist characters portray deeply rooted southern beliefs as well as the fear of economic equality that permeated the 1950s South. O'Connor herself believed that "fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things" (*MM* 93). Her short stories reveal to us the reality of the South in an age where its very basis was threatened at every turn. To this day, her characters and themes continue to resonate so deeply with her readers because she writes about reality, regardless of how painful it is to read about our own fears and shortcomings. Today, we are no longer fearful of Communist practices, but claim to strive for equality. O'Connor's stories remind us how easily the goal of equality can be thwarted and how important it is to be aware of any threats.

¹ When referencing her short story “Judgement Day” I will be spelling the word judgment in the same way O’Connor spelled it for continuity.

² It is impossible to say every white southerner held such strong racist beliefs, however just enough held such views to allow generalization regarding this idea to be accepted within the historical community.

³ *The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor* hereafter cited as CS.

⁴ Hereafter cited as *MM*.

⁵ Hereafter cited as *HOB*.

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