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Money Buys Happiness: A Psychoanalytic Reading of O'Connor

In the year 1946 when Flannery O'Connor was about twenty-one years old, she and her mother Regina signed a document emancipating Flannery from her mother's care so that she could attend the creative writing program at the University of Iowa (Release of Guardianship). In this determined show of independence, Flannery chose to move away from her mother and take responsibility for herself. However, this responsibility became too much for O'Connor to handle when she was diagnosed with lupus shortly after her twenty-sixth birthday. She was forced to move back in with her mother in Milledgeville and relinquish a great deal of the control that she had when she lived alone. Reading in a psychoanalytic context, I see O'Connor writing many characters who lose their self agency, as she did, desiring to unconsciously foist their responsibilities onto a caregiver; rather than voicing their desire, however, the characters project their wishes onto the process of making and saving money. According to psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, such displacement of direct desires can be explained by the way O'Connor's characters push their wants to the side in favor of a symbolic desire.

Before delving into this psychoanalytic reading of O'Connor's works, I will outline a basic working knowledge of the branch of psychoanalysis known as Lacanianism¹. Whereas Freudian psychoanalysis analyzes sexual desire, Lacanianism focuses on the general desire of characters and authors. Like Freud, Lacan translates physical and psychological human traits into a symbolic model. Lacan's Model of the Human Psyche breaks human development into three orders. The imaginary order begins at birth and contains a person's desires and wishes. It is also

the time when all of a person's needs and wants are taken care of by the mother. Within the imaginary order is the mirror stage, which occurs when a person becomes self aware. During the mirror stage, a person also becomes aware of a phenomenon that Lacan called the objet petit a, which translates to "the little object" (Bressler 134). Lacan says that the little object is something that is desired but not present at all times, such as "eliminating bodily wastes, our mother's voice and breasts, and our own speech sounds" (Bressler 134). Later in life, other things or feelings will come along and symbolically take the place of the original little object. The longing for the little object translates into a sense of lack that stays with a person into the subsequent orders. In the analysis of O'Connor's works and in Lacanianism, the imaginary order is the most important of the three orders.

Lacan's second order is the symbolic order. It is in the symbolic order that the loving relationship with the mother is replaced by the dominance of the father, who represents compliance with acceptable social behavior. The father threatens symbolic castration if the child does not comply with gender norms. For the female, the main focus of my essay, the symbolic castration occurs when she attempts to reunite with her mother, but the father intervenes by reminding her of the phallus, the symbol of power that she can never have (Bressler 135).

Lacan's final order is the real order, which symbolically represents every part of the physical world that can never be part of a person. The real order is filled with "countless objet petit a, objects that continually function for us as symbols of primordial lack" (Bressler 136). Most people never find themselves in the real order, but Lacan theorized that pieces of it can be glimpsed in literature, a theory that will be important when discussing O'Connor toward my essay's end. To summarize, the Lacanian branch of psychoanalysis states that numerous

unreachable unattainable things from childhood lead to a lifelong feeling that something is missing.

Now, how might Lacanianism help us understand the grown women characters in O'Connor's short stories? It is fair to say that Flannery O'Connor's fictional women were no southern belles. Much to the author's annoyance, she was often contrasted with Margaret Mitchell, author of the wildly popular *Gone with the Wind*. O'Connor scholar Brad Gooch implies that Regina Cline O'Connor was a source of inspiration for a character in "The Enduring Chill" who says "We need another good book like *Gone with the Wind*. . . . Put the war in it. . . . That always makes a long book" (qtd. Gooch 69). Rather than conforming to this pressure to write the next Scarlett O'Hara, O'Connor chose to write her own form of broken female. A common type of female that O'Connor wrote about was the widow. Examples include Mrs. McIntyre from "The Displaced Person" and Mrs. May from "Greenleaf." Both widows have been left as the matriarch of the family, forced to survive without assistance. Additionally, both widows become the sole proprietors of the family business, which the women thrive under. Finally, each of the women could be described as miserly, holding money above all other things. As misers, the women desire the dollar, which I argue is the main little object in their lives.

In "The Displaced Person," miserly widow Mrs. McIntyre's penny pinching ways can be seen in how she handles the people who work for her on her farm, including the African-American workers, the Shortleys, and the Guizacs. By watching the way she takes control of their lives, Mrs. McIntyre could be considered a metaphorical mother to this hodgepodge group of employees. In fact, according to writer Peter Smith, Mrs. McIntyre "holds the example of Mr. Guizac up to her other workers in order to create a kind of sibling rivalry among her employees to spur productivity" (38). Mrs. McIntyre often sings Guizac's praises and complains about Mr.

Shortley in front of Mrs. Shortley, who further aggravates the rivalry. In this “why-can’t-you-be-more-like-your-brother” scenario that Mrs. McIntyre provokes between her “children,” her goal is to have her workers save or make her as much money as possible (Smith 38). She is delighted by the fact that Mr. Guizac is so handy that “he could save her twenty dollars a month on repair bills alone” (*The Complete Stories*ⁱⁱ 201). His economy, combined with his clean habit of not smoking, are what make Mrs. McIntyre come so close to firing the Shortleys. Throughout the entire story, it is money, or the lack thereof, that drives Mrs. McIntyre.

Mrs. McIntyre’s obsession with money began after the death of her husband, the Judge. At one point in the story, Mrs. McIntyre says “Ever since the Judge died...I’ve barely been making ends meet...” (CS 203). One can assume from this that Mrs. McIntyre was not always so money minded. Before her husband’s death, she didn’t have to pinch pennies. Her behavior suggests that she longs for her former carelessness. When she finds the work of the Shortleys and then Mr. Guizac to be unacceptable, Mrs. McIntyre speaks about firing them a great deal, but can never bring herself to actually let the families go. She allows the Shortleys to leave of their own accord rather than fire them herself. Later, Mrs. McIntyre allows gravity and bad luck to get rid of Mr. Guizac. This shows that while Mrs. McIntyre does indeed run daily operations on the farm, she has trepidations about being responsible for her hired help. A phrase that Mrs. McIntyre uses multiple times over the course of the story is “I am not responsible for the world’s misery” (CS 223). Her actions make it clear that Mrs. McIntyre would rather place difficult burdens onto others than take them on herself. My assumption is that this main character in “The Displaced Person” had misplaced her desire for someone else to be in charge of her responsibilities onto her desire for money. In this situation, money is the little object that symbolizes Mrs. McIntyre’s suppressed desire for a caregiver in Lacan’s imaginary order.

For Mrs. McIntyre, the caregiver she longs for is her husband. When not preoccupied with the lives of her charges, Mrs. McIntyre spends a lot of time bemoaning the loss of her husband and the angel statue that once guarded his grave. Only the angel's toes remain at the Judge's resting place, as the rest of the statue was stolen by one of the families that preceded the Shortleys and Guizacs. As scholar Loxley Nichols points out, Mrs. McIntyre has a great deal of characteristics in common with the angel statue, and she has left the Judge's office exactly as it was when he died (54). Speaking to the idea of the statue, I believe that the displacement of the statue is a metaphor of the forced separation of Mrs. McIntyre from her husband which occurred at his death. McIntyre claims that she "had never been able to afford to have it replaced" (CS 221). If money is indeed the little object for Mrs. McIntyre, then it would make sense that she is obsessed with the idea of getting enough money so that she can replace the statue. That way, she will be able to be "reunited" with her husband once more in the form of the angel. Similarly, refusing to change the Judge's office is another way Mrs. McIntyre is unconsciously searching for a caregiver. Leaving the room empty could suggest that Mrs. McIntyre wishes for someone else to literally and figuratively fill the office and the responsibilities that go with it. After the Judge's death, Mrs. McIntyre had two more husbands, neither of whom lasted very long. Neither was able to satisfy her need for a caregiver. Taking other husbands could be another way for Mrs. McIntyre to try to fill the void that the Judge left. It is worth pointing out that Mrs. McIntyre does indeed get what she wants at the end of the story. She is left physically and mentally unable to take care of the farm after the death of Mr. Guizac, therefore the farm is sold off. Mrs. McIntyre is finally free from her responsibilities. Being rid of the farm and having to live under the care of a nurse, Mrs. McIntyre fills the void left from the imaginary order,

however she does not enter the real order because her happy ending is dashed by the overwhelming guilt from allowing Mr. Guizac's death.

Mrs. May, the main character in "Greenleaf," is a concerned mother turned miserly widow. Like Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. May is a widow who is left in charge of the family farm and who is burdened by her economic standing. Unlike Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. May has two grown sons, but neither contributes to the upkeep of the farm. Also unlike Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. May does not long for a husband to take the place of caregiver. In fact, Mr. May is only mentioned once in the story. O'Connor writes,

She was a country woman only by persuasion. 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. She had the timber on the place cut and with the proceeds had set herself up in the dairy business. . . . (319)

From this short passage, readers can conclude that Mr. May was irresponsible and impulsive while Mrs. May was hard working and fiscally responsible. Mr. May was an office worker who decided to spend most of his money on a farm that he never learned how to run. Mrs. May, on the other hand, learned to take what she had and turn it into a profit. Where Mr. May gave only debt to those he left behind, Mrs. May creates a successful business venture which she plans to leave to her sons, and no one else.

While Mrs. May's money-wise behavior was able to pull her family out of potential poverty, her behavior becomes erratic later in life. One day while commiserating over her sons' laziness, Mrs. May whispers to herself, "I work and slave, I struggle and sweat to keep this place for them and soon as I'm dead, they'll marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything" (CS

315). The farm has taken a great deal of her time, effort, and money over the years, and she tries to control what will happen to it after her demise, hoping to maintain her “wealth” even after she is no longer able to enjoy it. Mrs. May goes so far as to change her will so that her sons can’t pass on the responsibility of taking care of the farm to their wives. In a way, Mrs. May is trying to insure that only her sons take care of her farm (and her money) after her death, thus cementing money as the little object.

I have a difficult time believing that Mrs. May longs to be reunited with her husband in the same way that Mrs. McIntyre does. As I mentioned earlier, Mr. May is only brought up once in the entire story, and the remembrance from his wife is less than warm. Rather, I have come to the conclusion that Mrs. May wants her sons to be her caregivers and that her avarice has symbolically taken the place of their missing affection. Scholar A. R. Coulthard writes that Mrs. May’s frustration over the scrub bull that destroys her yard has more to do with the fact that “white trash [such as the Greenleafsⁱⁱⁱ] flourish while decent people like herself must struggle to survive” (90). In other words, Mrs. May is comparing the agricultural indifference of her own sons with the prowess of the Greenleaf boys, who have built a large, thriving business. One day, after one of her own sons says he “wouldn’t milk a cow” to save Mrs. May’s life, she goes so far as to say of the Greenleaf men “O.T. and E.T. are fine boys...They ought to have been my sons” (CS 321). By thinking about how different her life would be with better children, Mrs. May is imagining life in Lacan’s imaginary order, where she is taken care of by someone else. With the Greenleaf’s natural talent for farm work, Mrs. May could have been living easily with her imaginary sons rather than having to deal with the responsibilities of running her farm without help. At the end of her story, Mrs. May accidentally succeeds in giving over the burden of the farm to her sons, because whether or not they want it, they are now stuck with it. Mrs. May can’t take

care of the farm if she's dead, nor can she enter the real order. This miserly widows actions lead me to believe that Mrs. May replaces her desire to be taken care of with her constant worrying about her family money and estate.

At first, readers may find the similarities between Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May to be a coincidence; however, further research unearths a pattern that I find significant. In his article "How Wide Did "The Heathen" Range?" Stuart L. Burns speculates about Flannery O'Connor's unfinished novel^{iv} *Why Do the Heathen Rage?*. While looking into O'Connor's heavily marked up manuscript, Burns found that Flannery would often use single characters she had created for her novels as inspiration for her short stories that she would publish while the novel was in progress (33). Because of Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May's similarities, Burns and I speculate that Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May have been based upon one source of inspiration. Other characters that Burns suggests fit this mold are Mrs. Cope from "A Circle in the Fire" and Mrs. Hopewell from "Good Country People" (35). Mrs. Cope is a widowed farm owner who has trouble disciplining the children that come on to her property. Mrs. Hopewell is also a widowed farm owner who has a daughter with one leg, and that daughter has no interest at all in "normal girl things." I am also under the impression that Lucy Nel Crater Sr. from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" could fit this O'Connor archetype. She lives alone on a farm with her mentally disabled daughter, and is tight with the jar of cash she keeps in her house. These single women are all similar in that they are widows who own farm land, have issues with their children (biological or otherwise), and are tight-fisted with money.

While Burns comes to the conclusion that all of these characters were inspired by the matriarch in the underdeveloped *Why Do the Heathen Rage?*, I look through a psychoanalytic lens and see inspiration for characters like Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May coming from a source

much closer to O'Connor: her mother Regina. Beginning with the obvious, Regina Cline O'Connor was widowed in the year 1941 when her husband and Flannery's father Edward died of lupus, the same disease that would claim Flannery's life (Gooch 69). The death of her husband would have been difficult for Regina because she was well into her forties at the time, past the age when she could easily find a potential new suitor. During her husband's illness and death, Regina was running the dairy farm at Andalusia almost single handedly. With medical bills piling up and only the income from the farm to support her family, it is a reasonable assumption that Regina was concerned with her financial situation. Research from the Emory University archives supports this conclusion. Regina O'Connor was a meticulous note taker. Many of her old contracts and receipts, as well as a detailed list of expenses, have been saved and archived (Handwritten notes). Her record keeping abilities lead me to believe that Regina, like Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May, was skilled in her role as head of the household, as well as money conscious. In Gooch's biography, the author quotes a friend who goes so far as to say that Regina was "very oriented towards making money," indicating that money making was her main goal (279). Finally, like the characters in Flannery's short stories, Regina had a difficult time caring for her child. Flannery's lupus accrued expensive medicines and frequent doctor visits. While the family was never financially incapable of meeting Flannery's medical needs,^v the constant need to monitor her adult daughter was likely a strain on Regina, strengthening her likeness to Flannery's characters.

When writing characters like her mother who wished to cast their burdens on someone else, Flannery, possibly, was expressing her wish that her mother would give some of her responsibilities back. It's possible that O'Connor also felt a lack, just like the characters she wrote about, however, her lack was agency. After having lived on her own in Iowa and later in

the writers' community Yaddo, and with her friends the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut, Flannery could have understandably been upset about having to move back home. By no means am I insinuating that Regina O'Connor was a bad mother, rather situations such as when she tells Flannery that she would prefer her daughter to paint instead of write or exclaiming "Oh, you've gotten fat" after being away from Flannery for a few days at most make me believe that Regina could be overbearing (*Habit of Being* 35-38). This idea seems to fit more with Mrs. May who wants desperately for her sons to learn to take care of themselves. No matter O'Connor's reasoning for writing Mrs. May and Mrs. McIntyre type characters, I find it arguable that the widows have some ties to Regina, and at least somewhat mirror either Regina's or her daughter's wish to return to the imaginary order.

To close this essay, I end with a quote from one of O'Connor's many public speaking arrangements: "Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelist only means to some deeper end" (*Mystery and Manners* 38). While O'Connor was not fond of critics who chose to focus on the psychological aspects of literature, it is true that psychology is an integral part of humanity. This ever present psychology is why I chose to use a psychoanalytic lens to better understand how O'Connor's characters use money to mask their desire for relief from responsibility. When writing her short stories, Flannery's focus was not on her character's misplaced desires, but on what those desires relayed about them. If nothing else, understanding the hidden desires of these characters makes them more sympathetic to readers. At one time or another, most people have wanted to pass on their burdens to someone else. O'Connor takes this need and puts it into flawed individuals to show readers that even the most unlikeable characters can have a common thread of sympathy.

End Notes

- i. For more in depth information, see *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* by Jacques Lacan.
- ii. Abbreviated from now on as CS
- iii. Section in brackets was added by me.
- iv. In the collection at George College Library.
- v. As evidenced by the family trip to the Holy Land.

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