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English 874

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Flannery O'Connor and the Coen Brothers: The Southern Gothic Connection

REFLECTION

I certainly didn't choose the easy path when I decided on the Master of Liberal Studies Program from Fort Hays State University, but in retrospect, it was the right one for me. While my colleagues were bored listening to peers gripe about the politics in their districts and busy recycling their undergrad papers for their master program, I got to learn a wealth of new information from a variety of subjects and enjoy some of my favorite English classes. After comparing notes with my friends, I know that I worked the hardest and got the most from my education at FHSU. One of my goals was to enter a program from which I could benefit intellectually and utilize professionally; I am sure that I have accomplished that already. For my Culminating Experience project, I will depend on the knowledge gained from four classes: Dr. Marvin's IDS 802--Ways of Knowing in Comparative Perspective, Dr. Morin's IDS 804--Information Literacy, Dr. Leuschner's English 601--Film and Literature, and English 812--Studies in Literature: Theory and Application with Dr. Cummins.

While working on my project, I have used many concepts from Dr. Marvin's IDS 802--Ways of Knowing in Comparative Perspective. In the literature lecture from Dr. Edwards, he stated that the nature of literature "is an experience, a way of knowing so that the imaginative experience of a literature work will involve as in a complex engagement, or entanglement, of our feelings and of our mind, as well...as an insight into the way things are...[with an] awareness of the human condition." This rings so true with my findings on Flannery O'Connor. Her literature is an experience with such great detail that the reader could actually be in the story walking along with the characters. She has a

way of engaging the reader to the point of laughter, tears, or nausea and that is what makes her work so compelling. Life doesn't always have a happy ending and neither do O'Connor's stories. She captures the reality of the human condition and exposes the darker side of human nature. The Misfit, from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is the best example of this in O'Connor's canon. On one hand, the reader can experience the horror of impending doom orchestrated by the Misfit, and on the other contemplate his religious theories. Therefore, two ways of knowing literature, through emotions and contemplations, is a prominent component of this project.

Another subject from IDS 802 that is laced throughout O'Connor's work is religion. Dr. Faber did a great job in preparing me with the background necessary to tackle her theological concepts. Since she was a devout Catholic, Christianity is in every story, one way or another. Dr. Faber discussed how we know about God in four ways: "the nature of God, relationship to man, God's will/plan, and revelation." Although I can't quite yet apply all of these to O'Connor's work, this information helps me to process her affinity of grace and free will, also her appreciation of the forces of evil. These concepts are always battling with evil inevitably ending up the victor. One of the things that I like about her is her almost sneaky approach to religion: "Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence" (Schleifer 166). Rather than browbeating the reader with Christian lessons, O'Connor typically demonstrates what can happen, through her protagonists, if a person chooses to follow a path without faith. Moreover, the reader may think about God when presented with evil characters like the Misfit ("A Good Man Is Hard to Find") and Manley Pointer ("Good Country People"). The Misfit justifies his actions by telling a story about Jesus:

If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness....(O'Connor, *A Good Man* 22)

This rationalization comes before he kills the grandmother and it clarifies to the reader the path he has chosen. O'Connor is sharing a Sunday school lesson in her own way: Choose the right path when living life; follow God's path and in so doing one will not be like this evil manifestation (the Misfit). At the end of the story, I reflected on the atrocity of senseless killing and how this actually happens in the real world. It also makes me wonder how can God let this happen to innocent people? O'Connor is effective in her storytelling because regardless of one's religious stance, the reader is left thinking about God and perhaps that was one of her goals as a writer.

The final subject that served as a great review was philosophy. I dropped out of my undergrad philosophy class and now I wish that I could have hung in there. Nevertheless, I find that what Dr. Drabkin covered in the lecture isn't too far removed from some of the concepts that I'm learning from Flannery O'Connor's work. The Hegelian objection/reply method of generating philosophical conversation is not only effective in the classroom (it's more like playing devil's advocate for me), but it is also a good approach to research. Questions about Southern Gothic or O'Connor often lead to more questions and would take the project in a different direction. In the classroom, this method inspires students to think of things they wouldn't have on their own and also draws in other students to participate in the conversation.

Another concept that I found in my IDS 802 notes had to do with Nihilism and that is connected to one of O'Connor's characters in "Good Country People," Joy/Hulga Hopewell. She has her doctorate in philosophy and is a self-proclaimed Nihilist with an artificial leg. This philosophy of nothing matters and there is no point to life (symbolic to his name perhaps?) works for Hulga until her wits go up against the (charlatan) Bible salesman, Manley Pointer. It is only after he plays her for a fool that she wants something to matter in her life. She wants to believe that he is "'just good country people'" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 203), but as he makes off with her leg, he replies "'you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!'" (205). Ironically, Manley Pointer is the true Nihilist.

As far as Dr. Morin's IDS 804 Information Literacy, it is the basis of every skill needed to get through this course of study. Even my rudimentary computer skills improved because of this class. The two concepts I will use from this course in my project deals with research and making a good argument. As far as research, I learned the Boolean searching method and that helped me to narrow down searches online. Also, I learned about search engines and other than Google and Yahoo, I could try: AlltheWeb, Alta Vista, Lycos, MSN Search, and Teoma. I developed my skills with maneuvering through the Dayton Metro Library and Forsyth Library online databases. Furthermore, I learned how to evaluate the credibility of websites (I have used this a number of times in the classroom already and it really helps me show my students why something isn't a credible source) that I may use for my project. For example: Does it contain errors? Is there an author and is she credible? Is it up-to-date? What can be traced to the domain name and homepage? What can be learned from the URL? Are the links credible? The exercise of validating a website was invaluable and I go through the same process to this day.

Another concept from Dr. Morin's course has to do with making a good argument. Not only is this skill essential when one gets married, but also when writing papers. I have an adequate background in speech, debate, and writing, but there is always room for improvement. The text from which we worked is called *Making Argument Work*, by C.B. Crawford, and it definitely reinforces the power of critical thinking and scrutinized words. I can use this information in my project, in the classroom, and in daily life. An effective argument has been thought about from more than just my original point-of-view. It should be contemplated through multiple perspectives in order to prepare for any worthy counterargument. This approach should not only bring about the desired change, but also make me be a more well-rounded person.

When writing an essay, I try to prove that my argument is sound by supplying as much evidence as my research allows. Right now, I haven't quite narrowed down my argument, but I'm getting there.

I began with an interest in Southern Gothic literature, moved on to a particular writer of this genre, Flannery O'Connor, and now my focus rests with a specific aspect of her writing--the grotesque. Ultimately, I want to find what I would consider O'Connor's grotesque in modern comedic film. The power of my words will convince others to see this resemblance between literature and film.

In the fall of 2009, I learned quite a bit from Dr. Leuschner's English 601--Film and Literature course. Although I may not work with film adaptations, I can still use what I learned for film, in general. I learned the proper terminology and how to apply it to film. I also improved my critical analysis skills in literature and film. Through researching a specific film, I gained the essential tools for the latter part of my project which deals with the grotesque in modern comedic film.

Since this was my first film class of any kind, it was necessary to learn some of the basic terminology. For my project I will most likely be using terms like camera angle, framing, shot, composition, and possibly transition, continuity and fade. The best term out of the whole experience is *mise en scene*. I hope I am able to apply this to at least one film because it encompasses every element of a particular frame. There is much to learn from technically analyzing the director's choices and I'm hoping some of those match up with my ideas.

We covered *many* works in Dr. Leuschner's class and the practice of evaluating literature and film will be helpful for my culminating experience. I have never had the opportunity to investigate so many versions of the same original work and that was a new way to learn about some classics, as well. For example, I read *Pride and Prejudice* before and this time when I read it, as a more experienced reader, I enjoyed it and thought it fun to look at so many different versions of it. Not only did we examine three *P&P* films, but we also read *Bridget Jones's Diary* and worked with that film, as well. The exercise of comparing the multiple adaptations has created a keen sense of vision in me. Even though I may not be working with adaptations for my project, the training I received in this class will help me maintain those evaluating skills when I look for the grotesque in the films for my project.

The final concept I will use from Film Adaptation has to do with "efficient and productive research skills." I did my review portfolio on *Blade Runner* and my research came from the Forsyth Library databases, Dayton Metro Library, Wright State University, and Westerville City Library. I even worked the microfilm in the basement of the magazine archives like it was 1982! I really learned how to dig and ask for help, very nicely, from the wonderful librarians of Ohio and Kansas. Furthermore, I will be using Movie Review Query Engine and The Internet Movie Database for my film critiques because those produced good results for *Blade Runner* and I think they will be as useful for my current project.

Finally, in the spring of 2010, I took English 812--Studies in Literature: Theory and Application with Dr. Cummins. This class was a real eye-opener because I never knew that some of the methods that I used in class with literature actually have specific names. Reader response, New Criticism, Deconstruction, feminist, Marxist, and ecocriticism, just to name a few, are approaches to literature that I was using, in some form, without knowing their proper backgrounds. Since I have properly learned about these criticisms, I can apply them in a better manner. As far as Flannery O'Connor, her work can be criticized from multiple perspectives, and indeed it has. The New Critics seem to like her work and the religious criticisms are innumerable for obvious reasons. I hope that I will be able to come up with some new observations and insights.

When working with an author, this class taught me to always consider biographical criticism first. There is typically going to be some sort of connection between author and work in order to create that sense of realism in fiction. It seems that good authors face great hardships and Flannery O'Connor was no exception. On one hand, she was well-educated and recognized for her talent, but on the other, she was very ill at a young age and had to go back to live with her mother instead of living the carefree life of a successful young woman. From what I gather, she never even had a serious boyfriend, but the man that she thought she was steady with (Erik Langkjaer) didn't see the relationship like that at all

(Bosco 5). There are many similarities between Flannery and Erik (the somewhat boyfriend) and Hulga and Manley from "Good Country People." The fact that O'Connor tried to deny that Manley was Erik (6) seems like she was trying to save face. The hurt is quite clear in the story and is so tangible it had to come from her reality. It's no wonder that her faith pervades her writing, it was her one true love. A man could move away from her and her body could simply give up, but God never let her down. Biographical criticism is so insightful that I will go to it directly from now on when studying literature.

The discussion board forums and paper assignments helped me to practice applying what I learned from the reading material, specifically Steven Lynn's *Texts and Contexts* and Deborah Appleman's *Critical Encounters in High School English*. Now, when I read or watch a film, not only am I jumping into someone else's world, but I can critically sort the information that I take in to the different theories about which I learned. These texts have exercises and examples that I can use for my project and classroom. Moreover, I think that the critical casebook was an appropriate warm-up for the tasks at hand this semester.

Thus far, reflecting upon my graduate education, I am quite pleased. I feel like I am getting my money's worth. I've learned how to be a better teacher, writer, and person, in general. I've been challenged, tested, baffled and enlightened. This project wraps up my learning like a hot burrito and is truly a culminating experience.

ABSTRACT

High school English literature textbooks do not contain enough material about Southern Gothic literature. Through research, reading, and writing, it would be easy for a teacher to create a substantial unit on this subgenre that would enable American Literature students to reflect upon its three key components: the sublime, grotesque, and dark comedy. Once background knowledge is established, connections can be made to demonstrate how Southern Gothic literature can be linked to modern film. The resemblance of Flannery O'Connor's work to the Coen brothers' film *Raising Arizona* can provide a relevant example of the moral plight of human beings as expressed in two mediums. Both artists use the sublime, grotesque, and dark comedy to convey a similar message to their audiences that students may find beneficiary.

RESEARCH ESSAY

I developed a recent affinity for Southern Gothic writing while teaching junior English this past year. Of course, our textbook doesn't come close to doing this genre justice with a few paragraphs of description following a few pages of American Gothic information. I wanted to do some research on the Southern Gothic in order to create an engaging unit rather than simply reading a few stories and moving on. Linking what they already know about European and American Gothic to Southern Gothic seemed like a good place to start. Once students understood enough of this background information, it made sense to bring it closer to their lives. I thought that if I could make some sort of current connection for them that they may at least hesitate before they moan and ask, "Why do we have to read this stuff? How does this relate to my life?" By showing students that there is a resemblance between literature and film, I could indirectly answer their questions. Because of Flannery O'Connor's expert blend of the grotesque and comedy, I immediately began to think of the films directed by the Coen brothers, namely *Raising Arizona*. These popular directors are renowned for their brow-raising, dark humor and use of grotesque characters. Getting to their work, through O'Connor, would be a selling point for all. O'Connor and the Coen brothers' work allows students the opportunity to discuss the lessons of morally deformed characters and examine character development in two different mediums.

Flannery O'Connor and the Coen brothers use certain features of the Southern Gothic in similar ways. Both integrate sublime settings, grotesque characters, and dark comedy into their art to illustrate how men and women must face and accept humility as a necessary step in their growth toward understanding what it means to be part of a larger universe. Their sense of the sublime is very similar. For instance, O'Connor uses rivers, woods, and sewer systems to convey to her audience the necessity of having God in one's life. Cathleen Falsani claims that the Coen brothers use "long, empty roads or sweeping shots of tall trees or skyscrapers, symbolizing, perhaps, the horizontal relationship between

one human being and another, and the vertical relationship between humans and the Divine" (18).

Also, O'Connor and the Coen brothers show a flare for grotesque characters that are deeply flawed, morally contemplative, and endearing. The reader/viewer identifies with these characters because of their imperfections, and cheers them on in their struggles to see the light. These artists also have a penchant for comedy that can be subtle, ironic, macabre, or slapstick. With practice finding these characteristics in O'Connor's work, students should easily be able to watch *Raising Arizona*, or any other Coen brothers' film, and be able to discuss the film in a similar fashion. If students can recognize and discuss Southern Gothic qualities in literature *and* film, then they should have a good grasp of the genre and be able to make more connections on their own.

It's easy to see the connections between Gothic and Southern Gothic. When one considers the settings of Gothic fiction, typically what comes to mind are dilapidated castles lit by lightning or surrounded by fog, or perhaps even the vast cold wastelands of the arctic. The Gothic sublime is symbolic of the fear and uncertainty of the unknown. The sublime of the Southern Gothic in Flannery O'Connor's stories can be anything from boundless woods and peacock covered farms, to muddy rivers, the open road in a storm, and the city's sewage system. These disparate settings are connected because of their "vast emptiness...[which instills] feelings of awe, terror, and fear" (Raiger 3). There is a fine-tuned attention to nature, or surroundings, that typically foreshadows some form of doom for one, or more characters. The milieu can even develop its own personality; for example, Flannery O'Connor's woods seem to devour people in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find:" "the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth" (14). The woods represent death because the Misfit (an escaped convict and killer) has his sidekicks take their victims into the woods to be shot. After two killings, the protagonist "could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath" (18). The scenery seems to evolve with the slow demise of the family.

Another landscape with an attitude is found in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." While

driving down an empty stretch of road, Mr. Shiftlet is chased by a storm that wants to consume him because he represents "the rottenness of the world [which] was about to engulf him" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 66). He abandons his idiot wife and one can't get more rotten than that. He basically swaps her for a car which becomes "his moral coffin" (Currie 134). The weather mocks Mr. Shiftlet with "a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops..." (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 66) because when he implores God to "wash the slime from this earth," it's apparent that God plans to do just that by pelting *him* with a rain storm.

Also, the awe of the sublime is clear in "The River." Although little four-year-old Bevel is baptized in the river on the previous day, he goes back to find "the Kingdom of Christ in the river." The river is his salvation, both spiritually and literally. Not only is he going to heaven, but in so doing he will escape growing up in a house filled with partying drunks. Bevel is eager to leave his world in exchange for, "the waiting current [that] caught him like a long gentle hand...and he knew he was getting somewhere, all his fury and his fear left him" (49). Bevel is swept away by the river to enter his Kingdom of Christ.

The sublime can even be present in an animal. For instance, in "The Displaced Person," the peacock symbolizes one of Mrs. Shortley's fears. She ignores the beauty of the animal like she wants to ignore the "Negroes," the Guizacs, and every other displaced person:

her unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock's tail...full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun...She might have been looking at a map of the universe but she didn't notice it any more than she did the spots of sky that cracked the dull green of the tree...She was seeing...them pushing their way into new places over here and herself...telling the Negroes that they would have to find another place. (215)

She is afraid that people beneath her will take over her world and she would much rather do away with all of them.

Finally, O'Connor's sublime is also represented by a sewer system. In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head uses Atlanta's sewers to intimidate his grandson Nelson because it is "an image of sublimity in its dark and destructive aspect, is a metaphor for the mechanics of sin in Mr. Head's mind, where once a man falls, he is taken into the depths of hell without light, never to return" (Raiger 6-7). Mr. Head wants to take away Nelson's pride in his birthplace by describing the ugly underbelly of the city and how it "was full of rats and how a man could slide into it and be sucked along down endless pitchblack tunnels...and never be heard from again" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 117). Nelson only suffers very short-term effects from this description and quickly problem solves by suggesting the avoidance of the sewage holes. No matter what form O'Connor's sublime takes, it is powerful and its connection to God is evident.

Where Gothic literature features supernatural characters, Southern Gothic places grotesque characters at center-stage. The term grotesque, in general, is "characterized by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions to the point of absurdity, ugliness, or caricature" (Evans 76). More specifically, O'Connor's grotesque characters are: twisted and deformed by pride; bizarre, extreme foils; and have destructive obsessions because, as Robert C Evans states, she "wants to shock us into realizing the shortcomings of our lives so that we can begin to appreciate something higher, better, and more holy" (77). O'Connor's goal is quite clear in every one of her stories.

The first grotesque form is the character misshapen by pride. O'Connor's "is the shape of the soul, seen as an action with moral significance...[it] is sin reduced to its essential form in pride..." (Raiger 9). Mrs. McIntyre's pride and sense of superiority allows for the displaced person, Mr. Guizac, to be killed while two others are just as guilty, Mr. Shortley and Sulk. These three sinners, through agreeing looks, allow a tractor to run over Mr. Guizac. Mrs. McIntyre could have saved her soul by simply shouting out to him or shaking her head "No" to the other two. Instead she chooses the

convenience of his death, rather than firing him and asking him to leave. Justly, Mr. Shortley finds work elsewhere and Sulk travels south leaving Mrs. McIntyre with a nervous breakdown and run-down farm. Who knows if she ever finds salvation because she can't see or speak anymore and her only visitor is the priest who never fails to feed the peacocks first.

Another example of grotesque pride is in "The Artificial Nigger" with a grandfather, Mr. Head, and grandson, Nelson. It is on a trip to the big city where "The day will unfold to Mr. Head the spiritual reality which silvers all of life: the mercy of God. That same reality will also be grasped--in a measure suited to his capacity--by the boy. But each must be readied; each must be purged of his pride" (Feeley 121). Mr. Head wants to teach Nelson a lesson about the dangers of the city so he hides while Nelson naps. When he wakes up, he is in such a state of panic by being abandoned that he runs over an old lady, hurting her ankle (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 124-5). At this point, Nelson's pride vanishes when he is surrounded by an angry crowd of women. Mr. Head's pride disappears because of the reaction of the crowd when he denies that Nelson is his: "The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him" (126). Guilt and shame sets in when Mr. Head realizes the significance of what he has done to Nelson. Mr. Head is the only family Nelson has in the world and when Mr. Head rejects Nelson in his time of desperate need, it is the most despicable act the grandfather has ever committed in Nelson's eyes. They have both been stripped of their pride and feel miserably when mercy comes in the shape of "the artificial nigger." The statue not only represents the misery of the "Negro mystery," but also the united misery of the man and the child in their shared experience. Just as the statue can be perceived as young or old, the couple is an "ancient child and...a miniature old man" (130). Mercy, through the artificial nigger, allows the two the opportunity to not only return to their comfortable relationship, but also return to the safety of the country.

Another form of Flannery O'Connor's grotesque takes the shape of foil characters. These

characters are opposites of one another to show their extreme qualities. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the mother and daughter, both named Lucynell Crater (perhaps to draw attention to their dissimilarities), are polar opposites. The mother is conniving and the daughter is simple. Mrs. Crater is a large, toothless woman who looks "as if she were the owner of the sun" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 52). She is savvy enough to barter her daughter and \$17.50 for an old, non-functional car. She thinks she is getting a son-in-law, but he is forever the cruel tramp who will dump Lucynell the first chance he gets. Lucynell, the daughter, is a beautiful idiot who has never said a word until a stranger, Mr. Shiftlet, teaches her how to say bird. Her disabilities reduce her to the crudest actions which minimize her human qualities. She is the type of grotesque that deals with "absorbing the human to the level of animals and things...[and can] suggest the radical warping of the human by the numinous, the twisted deformity of the otherworldly" (Asals 93). She is the perfect blend of animal and angel. Lucynell's actions are animalistic because she is deaf and dumb, and she has never been taught how to function at a higher level. She communicates by stamping her feet, pointing and whimpering. She is described as youthful (even though she is almost thirty) and innocent with "long pink-gold hair" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 64). She "Looks like a baby doll" (63) on the day she gets married and when she is abandoned, asleep, in the diner, the serving boy calls her "an angel of Gawd" (64). Lucynell is depicted as an animal, a doll, and an angel, not a woman.

Destructive obsessions also plague grotesque characters. In Gothic literature, Frankenstein is obsessed with reanimating the dead and Dracula is obsessed with his next feeding of B positive; however, Southern Gothic characters' obsessions are a bit more mild. O'Connor's characters typically have obsessions that pertain to family or community. For example, Mrs. Freeman, who is considered to be Hulga's foil according to Kathleen Feeley (25), in "Good Country People," has a bizarre obsession "of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable" and she loves to hear Hulga's story about her blown-off leg (O'Connor, *A Good*

Man 183). One of Mrs. Freeman's favorite pastimes is discussing how many times her pregnant teenage daughter has vomited since the last time she spoke with Mrs. Hopewell. Mrs. Freeman serves as an excellent example of comic relief in an otherwise heavy story.

Another obsessed character is Mrs. Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." She is besieged with finding a husband for her disabled, "nearly thirty" -year-old daughter. Mrs. Crater seems willing to take Mr. Shiftlet at face value because she is "ravenous for a son-in-law" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 57). She only sees his handiness around the farm and tolerance with Lucynell; she fails to notice the sly, covetous looks he steals at the old Ford and she doesn't become suspicious as to why it takes so much bargaining to put her daughter into Mr. Shiftlet's arms. If she wouldn't have been so blinded by her own desire, perhaps she would have seen the tramp for what he really is--a selfish nomad who owes allegiance to no one but himself. In the end, she loses her daughter and Lucynell is left in the hands of strangers with no way of getting back to her safe, comfortable world, and her mama.

The final component to Southern Gothic has no predecessor in Gothic literature--comedy. Flannery O'Connor is an expert at inserting humor throughout her dark tales. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the children, John Wesley and June Star, are hilarious. They are brutally honest and extremely obnoxious. John Wesley says that "'Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground'" and June Star says, when asked to hold hands with a killer, "'I don't want to hold hands with him...He reminds me of a pig'" (4, 20). Another child brings humor that is socially unacceptable now, but permissible in the fifties of the South. In "The Artificial Nigger," Nelson (age ten), when asked to describe a type of man on a train, says everything but what his grandfather expects him to and then justifies his description in a fantastic way:

"What was that?"

"A man,"

"What kind of man?"

"A fat man,"

"You don't know what kind?"

"An old man,"

"That was a nigger,

"You said they were black...You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don't tell me right?" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 112)

Without this type of playful humor, the criticism of racism in "The Artificial Nigger" would be more hateful and less thought-provoking instead. In the conversation shared between these two characters, the irony foregrounded is that race is a socially constructed category artificially based on skin color. There is no way to "tell" the child "right" because there are so many variations of skin color for everyone. The dark humor in O'Connor's stories create a unique balance of how anyone can look at life in general: living life is a serious matter, so laugh all you can.

Thus far, I've discussed a couple of ways Gothic literature has changed into Southern Gothic. The sublime changed from the creepy and unfathomable to the wide-open wonders and fears of nature and cities. Also, I've shared details about the grotesque and O'Connor's use of grotesque characters who are: deformed by pride, have strange foils, or have a twisted obsession. Now, I want to take an in-depth look at two of Flannery O'Connor's most criticized pieces: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People."

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor's grotesque lies in the contradictory characteristics of the grandmother and the Misfit. Right off the bat, the reader detects the childish selfishness of the grandmother when the narrator mentions that she "didn't want to go to Florida" (1). The reader can almost picture the elderly woman stomping her foot. Furthermore, she harasses her son in attempts to have her way and manipulates him by mentioning that there is a killer on the loose, the Misfit, and he is headed toward Florida; "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that alose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did" (1). When that doesn't work she tries another approach, but still uses the children. She says that since they have been to Florida before, they should go to Tennessee this time to broaden the kids' horizons (2). O'Connor's humor sneaks into the plot when

instead of the grandmother refusing to go on the trip, she is the first one packed and sitting in the car to go *and* she is going to take notes on the mileage, too.

Another example of this selfishness appears along the way when the grandmother wants to visit an old plantation she recalls from her past, but she knows Bailey (her son) won't go just for her so she winds up John Wesley and June Star with stories of secret panels and lost silver in the plantation house. The backseat turns into a thrashing mob and just as Bailey is about to lose his mind, the grandmother chimes in with, "It would be very educational for them" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 10). She doesn't stop until she gets what she wants.

On the other hand, the grandmother is preoccupied with being the proper Southern lady when, in truth, she is far from it. The grandmother believes that if she looks like a lady and tells everyone she is a lady...she is one; however, her actions reveal otherwise. She is very mindful of her appearance, therefore she wears, "white cotton gloves...a navy blue straw sailor hat...a dress...[and] a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (3). Also, she shares a story with John Wesley and June Star about her courting days when she was a "maiden lady." Although June Star seems nonplussed with the grandmother's tale, John Wesley is seized by the giggles (5-6). Her appearance and stories aren't even enough to convince the children that she is a lady. It is the contradicting characteristics of the grandmother that make her grotesque; she is both a child and a senior citizen, and a hypocritical lady wannabe.

It is when the grandmother meets the Misfit that her opposing characteristics, child and (attempted) lady, juxtapose. Much like a child, she speaks without thinking and when she is reprimanded, she cries. She can't stop and consider the danger she puts her family, and herself, in when she blurts out that she recognizes the Misfit (14-15). The grandmother tries to convince the Misfit that he is a better man than he is and, like the child, believes that if she repeats herself then that will make it true. He will be this better person and let her go. When that fails she resorts to that

longed-for Southern lady tactic; if the Misfit will not be a good man then perhaps he will develop a conscience and not kill a lady;"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 15). As if to kill a lady is the same as killing a small bit of that old Southern tradition. O'Connor returns the grandmother to that childlike innocence in her death pose, "her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (22).

The Misfit also plays dual roles, which is part of his grotesqueness; he is both a polite, "scholarly looking" Southern man, and a heartless killer. The Misfit speaks to the family with a collected, mannerly charm. He even apologizes for his appearance and looks embarrassed because he's not wearing a shirt in front of the ladies (17). Instead of shooting them outright after the grandmother recognizes him, he kindly asks them, a couple at a time, to walk into the woods with his fellow killers (Hiram and Bobby Lee) like they are simply going to have a pleasant conversation about the weather. The charade continues after everyone hears the two pistol shots and Bobby Lee gives the Misfit Bailey's shirt. He asks the mother if she and June Star would join the others in the woods, then has Hiram help her and Bobby Lee is supposed to hold the child's hand (20). All the while the Misfit is exterminating the family, he has a polite, revealing conversation with the grandmother. Suzanne Paulson suggests that they are not that dissimilar; "The Misfit represents the grandmother's willfulness magnified to the most extreme degree possible" (87). If the reader dons the religious lenses, in the eyes of God, a sin is a sin, therefore, the grandmother acknowledges her kinship with the Misfit.

The grotesque manifests, again, in the Misfit, because of his rejection of Christ. When the grandmother asks him why he won't pray, he responds "I don't want no hep...I'm doing all right by myself" (19). He denies the necessity of faith and even compares his hardships to those of Jesus. The reader doesn't know what to believe because one minute he declares that his punishments didn't fit his crimes, and the next, that a psychiatrist said that he killed his own father. The Misfit is a "hypocritical liar who has no faith in a moral purpose in the universe...his conscience has been seared and his vision

warped by his hedonistic atheism" argues J.A. Bryant (305). The Misfit's flimsy justification of his way of living rests in whether or not Jesus raised the dead with a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't philosophy. Also, his "living life the best way you can" obviously centers around killing people in order to get what he wants. Although he may be a flat character at first glance, O'Connor had something else in mind, depending on how the reader sees him. He could be anything from "a Jesus figure...an embodiment of evil...a lapsed idealist" to a "tragic figure...an agent of God [or] a Hamlet..." (Doxey 202). This story is a great example of how Flannery O'Connor combines her writing skill and Christian faith. One reader may take the Misfit for a philosophically likable Devil, and another may take him for a socially twisted Jesus.

Since this is a Flannery O'Connor story, the other aspect to the grotesque has to do with the characters' relationship with God. Every one of her works focus on a person's moment of grace. O'Connor wants her characters to come face-to-face with their moral failings and see the light. The grandmother doesn't even mention God until she realizes that the Misfit is going to kill her. In fact, up to this point, she is "oblivious to God...[she] is so completely a part of the physical world that...[she] simply cannot comprehend the spiritual world..." (Shinn 62). Out of sheer desperation, she implores the Misfit to pray and says that Jesus will help him (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 19). She even says, "'Jesus. Jesus,' meaning Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing" (20). This type of grotesque is rooted in the grandmother's hypocrisy. It's as if she only uses God under duress and that's not being a good Christian lady. Her soul is submerged in desperation, hypocrisy, and selfishness. It is after she sees the Misfit as an emotional human and she learns a bit about the reason why he is the way he is that she has her moment of grace, "When the grandmother... touches the Misfit...she loses her artificiality and realizes that she and the Misfit are spiritual kin" (Clark 68). Unfortunately, her touch causes the Misfit to put three bullets in her chest because "the literal depiction of an action of grace [causes] the inevitable satanic reaction to it." Grace is short-

lived; nevertheless, it is enough for O'Connor to call the grandmother the heroine of the story (Bryant 151-2).

Flannery O'Connor's other praised story which is immersed in the grotesque is "Good Country People." It not only embodies the aforementioned Southern Gothic qualities, but it also reveals unfortunate autobiographical likenesses.

"Good Country People" is steeped with the grotesque. Joy Hopewell (who is pretty much the antithesis of her given name) is both physically and spiritually un-whole. Her leg was shot off at age ten in a hunting accident and the reader senses that she has been a real piece of work ever since. As a thirty-two year old woman, still living at home, she clomps around the house with a vengeance wearing a wooden leg. Laura L. Behling believes there is a strategic purpose for Joy's handicap and harsh personality:

[she] needs to be unattractively angry...and physically un-whole, in order for the true ugliness in the story to emerge from those characters who are, in fact, physically whole....it is not the disabled character who is ugly, literally or metaphorically, but it is in the surrounding whole-bodied characters where ugliness resides. (88-9)

While this may be so, O'Connor doesn't hesitate to make Joy extremely unattractive through her over-use of the word "ugly." Some form of this word is used seven times where Joy is concerned. It is almost as if O'Connor wants to stress Joy's physical shortcomings, like the wooden leg isn't enough. One on hand, the reader is prepared to dislike Joy, and on the other, her humor and gullibility makes her endearing. It's rather like thinking a spitting cobra is cute. When her own mother describes her as "bloated, rude, and squint-eyed...whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 184, 179-80), it's no wonder why Joy has a chip on her shoulder. The reader can appreciate Joy because of some of the things she says and does, if not for physical appearance. She verbally attacks Mrs. Hopewell and calls her on her pretentiousness, "Woman! do you

ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 184). Of course Mrs. Hopewell has no idea what Joy means. When the Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, overstays his welcome, Joy tells her mother to "Get rid of the salt of the earth...and lets eat" (188). Finally, the reader must laugh when Joy applies "Vapex" on her collar, because she doesn't have perfume, when she goes to meet Manley (196). Joy/Hulga may not be a beautiful woman, but O'Connor does a great job in making the reader feel for her plight. It makes sense that Joy would change her name to Hulga which is not only meant to sound "mechanical...[like] 'the broad blank hull of a battleship'" (Behling 90), but is also "an anagram of the word 'laugh'" (Edmondson III 72).

The strongest argument for Joy's grotesqueness is how she feels about her wooden leg. Sheldon Currie states that "the leg becomes her center and she its satellite" (135). She has an awestruck, loving relationship with a piece of wood that serves as a large portion of her identity and independence. Any time Manley mentions her leg, she reacts dramatically with anger or shock. When she must prove her "love" for him by showing where it "joins on," she is completely flabbergasted and seriously contemplates whether, or not, she will do so because "No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 201). There is nothing else that Manley could ask for that would be more sacred to Hulga than her wooden leg. The reason why critics call this a seduction scene, when there is no sex involved, is because the leg means more than her virginity, when she gives in to him, it is "like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his" (202). Therefore, when he steals her leg, in essence, he is stealing her very life.

Hulga's spiritual grotesqueness resides in her thinking she knows everything because she believes in nothing, otherwise known as nihilism. Her philosophical brilliance is also her spiritual naiveté. Similar to O'Connor's other works, is the belief that the "impulse toward secular autonomy, the smug confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts, that she sets out to destroy,

through an act of violence so intense that the character is rendered helpless, a passive victim of a superior power" (Katz 54-5). Hulga must be stripped down to nothing if she is going to have her moment of grace. This "superior power," the diabolical Manley Pointer, takes her trust, beliefs, independence, glasses, and wooden leg to render her "helpless, a passive victim." She can't fight, physically or verbally; all she can bring herself to say is the same thing she has heard her mother say, "like a child seeking comfort, in a state of emotional distress " (Harris 60): "aren't you just good country people?" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 203). Ironically, Hulga is reduced to that part of her mother for which she previously felt utter contempt. She becomes susceptible to the "sentimental set of values which she so criticized in her mother and Mrs. Freeman, making her complicit in her own betrayal..." (Gleeson-White 4). It is only when she is left, with the nothing on which she bases her whole belief system, in the hayloft that she may be able to redeem herself by beginning to have faith in Jesus Christ. Only then can Hulga Hopewell be spiritually whole: "Her experience with him [Manley] in the barn...points Hulga to God and away from nihilism by causing her to experience a kind of conversion with the ideals bound to betray her" (Pietka 1). Unfortunately, Hulga has to learn her lesson the hard way.

With a name like Manley Pointer, it is simply too easy to note the grotesque. He represents evil through the guise of a sweet Bible salesman. He is a master deceiver with ulterior motives that reach a new level of low. Even though Hulga is blindsided, O'Connor sufficiently drops clues along the way so at least the reader is prepared for Manley's big reveal in the barn. He is "pretending...under cover of a pant...[and] glanced around the room as if he were sizing her [Mrs. Hopewell] up by it" (*A Good Man* 186-7). He is so cunning that when his poor-country-boy-just-doing-God's-work ploy doesn't pan out, he immediately switches to his spurious heart condition (189). He knows exactly what to say to Hulga, as well, and using her own mother against her, sweet talks her into seclusion. Manley serves as a distortion of Mrs. Hopewell because "he consciously recycles the very kinds of phrases the mother

would use from her repertoire of clichés...as a strategy to manipulate the daughter's emotions." Hulga is drawn to Manley Pointer because of "the bond she has forged across generations with her mother" (Harris 61). Along with this psychological tactic, he uses his charm and body language to lure Hulga into his trap. When they walk out together right away he starts with, "You're a brave [referring to her wooden leg] sweet little thing and I liked you the minute I seen you walk in the door" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 194-5). Then, when he asks her to meet him on the following day for a "picnic," he both physically and verbally asks her to meet him with a "dying look as if he felt his insides about to drop out of him. He had even seemed to sway slightly toward her" (195). His acting job is so credible that the reader can picture him as a hypnotizing snake. He seems overjoyed to discover that Hulga isn't saved and "senses an unspoken kinship between her exotic beliefs and his own charlatanism" (Bosco 1). As it turns out, they are quite different from one another.

Once Manley has Hulga, alone, in the hayloft, his true colors emerge. He can drop the innocent Bible salesman act and reveal his motivation for his interest in Hulga...the wooden leg. He cons her into showing him how to take it off, he pockets her glasses, and when he takes her leg, the seduction is over. His "Bible" is as phony as he is and it is loaded with the same material that preoccupies the mind of the real Manley Pointer: booze, pornographic cards, and condoms (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 203). When he realizes that she isn't actually what he thought she was and she just wants her leg back, he drops all pretenses. Manley Pointer sets the record straight and lets her know just how foolish she really is; "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (205). Paradoxically, while Hulga thinks she believes in nothing, she really does and Manley pretends to be a Christian, but has always believed in nothing: "Pointer represents the essence of nihilism itself, a concentrated and rarefied sample of the philosophy made incarnate" (Edmonson III 64). O'Connor cleverly demonstrates what can happen to a person when she lives her life without faith. Ironically, Manley Pointer "dismisses her with the same kind of contempt she herself has so often shown to others" (Evans 80). In

the end, Manley leaves Hulga, in the barn, with a taste of her own medicine, and then some.

Another way to evaluate "Good Country People" is to look at it from a biographical perspective. The mother/daughter relationship, the physical handicap, the interest in education/reading/philosophy, and the relationships with men are a few areas that connect this story to Flannery O'Connor. Even Betty Hester (known as "A" in O'Connor's published letters) read it as autobiographical (Elie 269). She knew O'Connor quite well through a prolific correspondence that began while Flannery lived on the farm, Andalusia, with her mother Regina. This relationship was very special because O'Connor believed that Hester was the first person to truly understand that Flannery's stories were "'about God,'" not senseless brutality (Gooch 267). Also, Flannery and Betty had much in common: they shared a resemblance to one another, both lived in Georgia, had a similar living arrangement (Betty lived with an elderly aunt), and they both loved to read and share their ideas on a diverse variety of topics. Betty Hester was considered to be O'Connor's "disciple, ...pupil, and...friend" (271). If anyone knew Flannery O'Connor, Betty Hester did.

Although O'Connor didn't have a bad relationship with her mother, it did seem strained perhaps because Regina wanted her to be "the perfect Southern-style little girl" (27). Apparently, Mrs. O'Connor's dreams for her child were never to be realized because, much later on, in a letter from Robert Lowell to Elizabeth Bishop (friends of O'Connor's), he wrote that O'Connor's mother, Regina, was "A small, managing indomitable mother...more or less detesting Flannery's work...[and] wishing she would marry..." (317). This isn't a far stretch from the strained relationship between Mrs. Hopewell and Joy. Mrs. Hopewell always thinks of her daughter as a child with numerous imperfections: Joy is unattractive, has no chance with boys, and views her education as a waste (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 184-5). I think that, at least at some point in time, Flannery wanted to shout at her mother, "Woman...Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!" (184).

Hulga's handicap was a big part of her life and even though O'Connor tried to minimize hers, it

was obvious that being on crutches was unsettling. Hulga had twelve years to adjust to her wooden leg and would "stump" about the house when "she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it...because it was ugly-sounding" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 183). It's almost like she is trying to make a statement by publicly announcing herself through her wooden leg, or this may just be her mother's perception. O'Connor writes about her struggles with her crutches in letters to A., "I am learning to walk on crutches and I feel like a large stiff anthropoid ape" (956) and in another she calls herself pathetic because a stranger felt pity for her and made a bit fuss in an elevator. There is a biblical reference about John at the gate and how "the lame shall enter first" and O'Connor never misses a chance at humor because her response to A. is as follows: "This may be because the lame will be able to knock everybody else aside with their crutches" (969). I get the feeling that humor helped her overcome many obstacles. She even makes a personal connection to Hulga in another letter to A., "Hulga...would be a projection of myself..." (959). One final tie to their disability has to do with if they were physically fit, they both probably wouldn't have stayed on the farm with their mothers; "Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 184). Hulga might have been a philosophy professor and O'Connor could have traveled more, lecturing in different cities, or living in New York. Fortunately, O'Connor came to realize that home was the best place for her to write.

O'Connor and Hulga share a few interests in the scholarly world, as well. They were both well-educated. Hulga has a Ph. D in philosophy and, as an undergrad, Flannery enjoyed heated discussions with her philosophy professor, Dr. Beiswanger, at Georgia State College for Women. With her religious background and prior philosophical studies, she was the first in the classroom (8:00 A.M.), took copious notes, and was always ready to give Dr. Beiswanger "a hard time" (Gooch 114). O'Connor and Hulga shared the love of reading, as well. From a very young age, Mary (Flannery) was a voracious reader. While other children her age were outside playing in parks, little Mary was

pstairs reading; she even joined a book club at age twelve (Gooch 47). She continued to be an avid reader and had many written discussions over books with Miss A. (Betty Hester). Hulga spend most of her day reading philosophy books, which no one else could stand, or understand. Hulga might as well have been reading works of the devil by the way Mrs. Hopewell reacts to the fraction she reads, "She shut the book quickly and went out of the room as if she were having a chill" (O'Connor, *A Good Man* 185). There is little hope of engaging discussions in that house; reading must be Hulga's escape.

The last tie between Flannery O'Connor and Hulga has to do with their fruitless relationships with men. It's pretty clear that Hulga's ability to "smell their stupidity" (185) has something to do with the reason why she is thirty-two and has never been kissed until Manley Pointer. The only things that come from this tragic relationship is a broken heart, a stolen wooden leg, and a religious slap in the face. Flannery O'Connor's luck with men wasn't that different. She dated a handsome Marine named John Sullivan until he was transferred, and as if that wasn't sad enough, he wrote to tell her he was joining the priesthood (Elie 136). Next, she fell in love with Robert Lowell who was continuously "walking the line between holiness and madness." Eventually, he lost his balance and his mind saying he was a prophet and Flannery a saint (172, 175). When he finally came back around, he married Elizabeth Hardwick and the three of them remained friends for years.

Finally, "'Good Country People' is in part a creative response to her pain and distress following [Erik] Langkjaer's departure from America and her life" (Bosco 1). There are several factors that connect "GCP" to this relationship: both Erik and Manley were traveling salesmen and rather homeless. Also, they both used a type of phony Bible (Erik's was a work folder and Manley's held his vices). Furthermore, the men dated (so to speak) women and left them heartbroken. Finally, in reality and the story there is a very detailed kiss that leaves much to be desired (4). It's not the stuff of romance novels and I think it played out better on Flannery's side than Erik's, but this is indicative of their relationship, as well. She thought more of it than he did and when he moved to Denmark, and married another, it

had to be devastating for Flannery. When one reflects on all of these sad relationships, it's easy to see why she distorts reality into the grotesque. Perhaps writing "GCP" was therapeutic for O'Connor because it allowed her the opportunity to express just how much Erik hurt her when she never would have done so verbally.

I have established some background information on the origins of the Southern Gothic and how Flannery O'Connor presents her style of the grotesque. Now, I want to show how some of these characteristics share a resemblance to that of modern comedic film. I have chosen the film *Raising Arizona*, by the Coen brothers not only because this film has a Southern Gothic feel to it, but also because the characters in this film struggle with morality in a similar fashion to O'Connor's. It is through the use of the grotesque that characters are expected to make egregious mistakes and express themselves in a way that reveals the brutal truth. Flannery O'Connor and the Coen brothers offer their audiences a similar message: No matter how distorted life becomes, it is never too late to face up to personal failings and try to rectify the mistakes made.

The Coen brothers' *Raising Arizona* (1987) has several characteristics in common with Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic. First, is the love of the sublime with the setting out in the middle of the dry, barren desert. When Edwina (Ed) and H.I. get married, they live the first few months in total bliss. They sit outside of their trailer in lounge chairs holding hands and watching the glorious sun set. They call it "the salad days" because their love for one another is bountiful; however, the salad days are short-lived when Ed learns she is as barren as the terrain in which they live. The desolate, boundless lands that surround them begin to represent the sorrow of infertility.

Another great sublime shot is reminiscent of a classic Gothic setting. It is a dark and stormy night, with penitentiary lights flashing like lightning in the background, when the Snopes brothers (escaping convicts) "emerge, birthlike, from a hole in the middle of the field, covered in muck and screaming" (Falsani 39). Much like Mr. Head's interpretation of the sewers in "The Artificial Nigger," t

he viewer can imagine that these brothers must be the excrement from the bowels of hell.

In another location that is a split scene, part with the Snopes brothers, which isn't sublime, just noteworthy, and the other part with Lennard Smalls (the biker from hell), as the brothers are applying copious amounts of Royal Crown Pomade in a gas station restroom, the reflection in the mirror shows a door with spray-painted letters on it. One may not think too much about these letters until Smalls is about to break that same door down and it becomes a straight-on camera shot. The word on the door is P.O.E, possibly for the famous Gothic writer Edgar Allan Poe, and that just so happens to be one of O'Connor's influences and perhaps it one of the Coen brothers', as well.

Other than location and the sublime, the characters of *Raising Arizona* resemble O'Connor's, too, by portraying the grotesque as weird doubles with moral failings and obsessions. Ed and H.I. are foil characters with Ed being not only a fine, upstanding citizen, but also an officer of the law, while H.I. is a criminal with a rap sheet a mile long for repeatedly robbing corner markets (without bullets because he "doesn't want to hurt anyone"). In fact, they meet and fall in love because she repeatedly takes his mugshot each time he gets arrested. After they wed, Ed learns that she is barren and this fact spurs her obsession to have a child, one way or another. This obsession consumes her and after they exhaust the legal route by trying to adopt, which is impossible with H.I.'s "checkered past," they turn to the morally repugnant means of kidnapping. Similar to the Gothic and Southern Gothic trait of obsessed protagonists, the obsession distorts her true self, or distorts to *reveal* her true self, and she goes to extreme measures to have what she desires. Ed makes H.I. abduct a toddler, expects him to change instantly into a responsible father, and lies to everyone about the baby's origin. It is only when the baby is stolen from *them*, Ed realizes that they are no better than the second pair of kidnappers (the Snopes brothers). She recognizes that the heartache she is feeling can't be as great as that of the mother's when she realized that her son was taken. Ed wants to set things straight and stop being so selfish. She calls her relationship with H.I. "a fool's paradise" and declares that they are no good for

one another. Her new desire is to return the baby and move on with her life, alone.

H.I. is an irresponsible pushover who tries to please everyone. He can't keep a job or resist resorting to his old ways. When his friends (the Snopes brothers) drop by after breaking out of jail, it only takes a few minutes of peer pressure before H.I. agrees to rob a bank with them. It's too easy for him to be led astray and that is his undoing. It takes the physical battle with Lennard Smalls to knock some sense into him. H.I.'s moment of grace occurs when Ed and he return the baby to the father. When they are caught in the act of admiring the baby in the nursery, they confess their crime and the father shows them mercy by not calling the police. He also gives the sage advice to the couple to stay together and to keep trying to have their own baby. In that moment, H.I. experiences grace: he realizes his moral failing, drops his pride, and takes responsibility for his actions.

Also, H.I. resembles the Misfit, from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and Mrs. Shortley, from "The Displaced Person," as a profit figure because he has visions. Also, through H.I.'s eyes, the viewer can see that "They seem to carry an invisible burden and...remind us that we all bear some heavy responsibility whose nature we have forgotten" (O'Connor, "Catholic" 860). The stress of that responsibility, whether it's being an appropriate citizen or a good husband and father, manifests itself in his dreams. He foretells of the "biker of the apocalypse" and has a vision of his future life with Ed. He sees the future of the baby they stole and when the two of them are really old, their large family rushes in to see them and they have what looks like Thanksgiving dinner together. Also, similar to the Misfit being a magnification of the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Lennard Smalls is questioned to be "a real person or simply the imaginary projection of Hi's very fears and self-doubts" (Falsani 46). They both break the law, want the baby, and, curiously enough, have the same tattoo.

Lennard Smalls, the "warthog from hell," is a grotesque character because of his cartoonishly contradicting qualities. One part of him is the big, dirty, cigar-smoking killer on a motorcycle and the other part is the child who was abandoned by his mother and sold on the black market for \$30,000. He

keeps his baby booties tied to his waist and he has a skull tattoo that reads "Mama Didn't Love Me." He can catch a fly with his bare hands and just about vanish into thin air. He leaves a path of destruction, but when he gets blown up by a grenade and his baby booties hit the pavement, the viewer hears a baby screaming. Even though he is the villain that must be vanquished, the viewer is still compelled to sympathize with him because of his background.

The last resemblance has to do with the film's fine examples of comedy. Considering the whole film is hilarious, I will only mention a few. After "the pizzazz has gone out of their lives," there are a couple of individual camera shots of Ed and H.I. where they don't move and the viewer only hears H.I.'s narration. He has stopped shaving and he stares at himself in the mirror with flattened hair and a glazed-over zombie look in his eyes. Ed's camera shot is angled from the corner of the ceiling in their bedroom and the effect is great because the viewer can see the messy room and Ed sits on the corner of the bed wearing one work shoe and one house slipper. The position of her arms seem oddly placed and when I think about it, I wonder if both shots were meant to symbolize bloodletting. H.I. could slit his throat with a razor blade and Ed has her wrists on her thighs and in that up position, one could imagine the blood flowing down. That is brilliant, macabre humor, if that's the case.

Another great example of comedy is when H.I. goes in the nursery to select one of the Arizona Quints. The music changes into classic horror which reflects how H.I. must feel with the task at hand. He sweats profusely and comically high-step tip-toes back and forth chasing babies and panicking. The nursery itself is funny because all five of the babies are left there surrounded by balloons and in a crib that they could easily fall out of while the parents are leisurely reading downstairs. What parents can sit and read when they are responsible for *five* babies?

The Snopes brothers contribute to the comedy, as well. Gale and Evelle play off of each other like a philosophical combination of Lloyd and Harry, from *Dumb & Dumber*, and Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum from *Alice in Wonderland*. They repeatedly forget little Nathan Jr. and when they realize

what they have done, they look at one another and scream uproariously. They rob a bank with the baby in his car seat and the bank bag sets off blue dye in the car. In the end, they literally crawl back into the hole from whence they came; the world is too much for them to handle and they return to the safety of the womb (prison), again. It's great physical comedy and if the viewer doesn't laugh through most of the fun, he must take life too seriously. In general, *Raising Arizona* is a wonderful blend of realistic heartache and knee-slapping good times that superbly demonstrates how the Coens create a moral order to their worlds (Falsani 17).

The lesson that I have learned through researching and writing this paper is going to be invaluable in the classroom. It is quite similar to Flannery O'Connor's belief that we are all some form of the grotesque. We all have "invisible burdens" and "heavy responsibilities," at some point in time, that can distort and twist us. Can we learn and grow as human beings despite, or because of, these burdens and responsibilities? Or will we distort so far we won't even recognize ourselves? These are the types of questions that my students may benefit from pondering. Southern Gothic literature has a lot to offer students and by connecting two mediums, literature and film, with the same message, kids stand a better chance of grasping the content whether they prefer O'Connor *or* the Coen brothers. If neither are to their liking, share Flannery O'Connor's opinion on the matter:

The high school English teacher will be fulfilling his responsibility if he furnishes the student a guided opportunity, through the best writing of the past, to come, in time, to an understanding of the best writing of the present. He will teach literature, not social studies or little lessons in democracy or the customs of many lands. And if the student finds that this is not to his taste?

Well, that is regrettable. Most regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed.

("Fiction" 852)

As a teacher, it is my duty to expose the best material to my students. My knowledge and experience makes me the expert in the room. It is the student who is being shaped, and it is his or her intellectual

preferences that are being developed for the future. That is the answer to the question, "Why do we have to read this stuff?"

REACTION

I will most definitely use what I have gained from my Culminating Experience paper. So often, as a teacher, I have wished to have the time and resources to research a favorite topic in English; this course gave me that opportunity. I have learned a great deal personally and professionally; however, there is still much more to learn about Southern Gothic literature. I hope to branch out to other authors in this genre and investigate their possible connections to film, as well.

On a personal level, I have discovered a new, favorite author in Flannery O'Connor. She really was quite an exceptional woman, one considered to be cutting edge in her day. It was her love for farm fowl, which began at a young age, that initially intrigued me. A part of my life was spent growing up on a farm, as well, and I can relate to enjoying the fan of pretty peacock feathers. What strikes me about her writing is her ability to tell a simple tale that can be analyzed from so many angles. O'Connor's attention to detail draws the reader in and before one knows it, the shock of a literary lifetime occurs. She has the ability to make the reader laugh on one page, and on the next shouts of "No!" can be heard. The way she uses brutality, deception, and sorrow to express her religious beliefs is both confounding and enlightening. I have only read six short stories in her collection of fiction and I know this doesn't even scratch the surface of what I can learn when I read more.

Also, this course reminds me how important it is to have good help when undertaking a paper of this magnitude. At the beginning of the semester, I was quite overwhelmed with this daunting task, but with the guidance of my professor, Dr. Hutchison, and the diligence of the Forsyth librarians, the massive research paper became manageable, and even at times enjoyable. I can't say enough about Dr. Hutchison's knowledge, patience, and availability. No matter how many times I called her or how many emails I sent her, she always responded in a cheerful and prompt manner. I will keep her positive attitude in mind when my students try my patience.

Professionally, I've developed a unit that I am very excited to share with my junior English

class. I will be able to make a smooth transition from Gothic to Southern Gothic literature. Students will easily grasp concepts that are already familiar to them. They will know about sublime settings; therefore, they will be ready to discuss how this characteristic evolves from Gothic to Southern Gothic literature. I may begin by using excerpts from concrete examples as a comparison: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" could go up against Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Students will see the change between these two landscapes: dark and creepy compared to light and deceptive. Then, they will be ready to find the sublime on their own.

The next step in this unit is from the supernatural of the Gothic to the grotesque of Southern Gothic. I like to review the characteristics of the commonly known Frankenstein's creature and Dracula in order to establish a familiarity with the supernatural. We could point out the supernatural in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," and gradually turn the discussion towards the grotesque. I would point out how grotesque protagonists are typically: morally deformed (and in some cases physically, too), weird doubles, and/or obsessed. The perfect story for this section is O'Connor's "Good Country People" because it contains characters who have one, if not more, of these traits.

Comedy would be the last component to the discussion of the Southern Gothic. The subjectivity of humor might make this part difficult, but I think the best story to tackle this obstacle is O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hare to Find." There is the physical comedy of the children, John Westley and June Star, to which students can relate. Then, the Misfit and the grandmother offer a kind of ironic humor that may be subtle, but no less effective. Later, the lesson on comedy would continue when the students watch the film *Raising Arizona* (1987), by the Coen brothers.

Once everyone has a good foundation in the Southern Gothic, I would ask my students what they know about the Coen brothers' films and which ones they've seen. I would introduce *Raising Arizona* and ask them, while viewing the film, to keep watch for the three aforementioned traits. I would divide the class into three groups and each group would be responsible for taking notes on one

specific trait: sublime, grotesque, or comedy. After viewing the film the students would share their findings and demonstrate applying what they've learned thus far. Then I would ask for any similarities that they've noticed from O'Connor's work to the film.

The next logical step would involve more student autonomy. If we were using Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, I would allow students to choose their groups and the story they wish to analyze, as long as it wasn't one we had already discussed. Part one of this assignment would pertain to the investigation of the story as far as the sublime, grotesque, and comedy. Part two would extend outside the classroom because each group would have to choose a different Coen brothers film with which to find resemblances. I would narrow down their choices to: *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and *Burn After Reading*. Also, I would allow students to consult my copy of Cathleen Falsani's *The Dude Abides* because it provides many insights into the moral plight of these films' characters. Ultimately, I'd like to be presented with the groups' discoveries through an in-class Power Point show which incorporates speaking, writing and film clips. If they can properly achieve this task, they will have a good grasp of the Southern Gothic, Flannery O'Connor, and the Coen brothers' films. They may also realize that they enjoy working with one another, literature, film, and technology.

Another aspect that is worthy to ponder with students is O'Connor's tendency to use religion in her stories. As a public high school teacher, I don't often have the opportunity to discuss faith in class. I would love to hear my students' opinions on the brutality for salvation controversy. For example, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is it really necessary for a whole family to be murdered for the grandmother to have her second of grace before death? Another debate could result from "The River;" Does Bevel have to drown himself in order to get to the Kingdom of Christ? I know my students will become most excitable when asked about this material and I can't wait to hear what they have to say.

This unit will also allow me to appropriately use film in the classroom. Ted Hollop, principal of

Xenia High School, frowns upon showing films at the high school; but when they are used as teaching tools, instead of an irrelevant waste of time, what is the problem? A film can be used as a visual tool to reinforce the teaching of literature in the English classroom. It can also be used in comparative studies when students read novels, then watch a film based off of that novel. Similar to Dr. Leuschner's English 601 course, Film & Literature, at FHSU, students can even compare multiple versions of the same film title and discuss the elements of fiction and film. Film is definitely worthwhile to use in the classroom because everyone has a different way of learning best and film incorporates: dialogue, music, images, transitions, narration, movement, different camera perspectives, and sound effects (just to name a few).

In the future, I would like to continue my research on Southern Gothic literature. I want to read all of O'Connor's other works, especially her novel *Wise Blood* because I can't wait to meet the character Hazel Motes, about whom I have read so much in my research. Reading the works of other Southern Gothic writers would be the next step: Erskine Caldwell, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote most likely.

I have thoroughly enjoyed this course and have been challenged on a completely different level. It has armed me with new material and knowledge; therefore, I can face my juniors with a Cheshire Cat grin on my face when I return to work in May. I am excited to expose them to O'Connor's work and perhaps, even if just a few, some will like her work as much as I do.

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