
The Political Economy of Flannery O'Connor

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Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor would strike economists as someone engaged in a positive, rather than normative, examination of human nature. She observes the conditions arising from systemic racism, xenophobia, and inequality of opportunity in America's post-World War II South, vividly illustrating the material and intellectual impoverishment that follow when humans act within the logic of that social order. Her stories demonstrate a coherence in society resulting from rational "human action, but not human design" (Ferguson [1767] 1996, 187): her characters reject cooperation with others, even when the benefits of cooperating are clearly demonstrated, just so that they can maintain the rigid racial and class hierarchy in which they have been raised, but the outcome is financial and spiritual suffering.

Though her stories are set more than half a century ago, they remain relevant to our time as records of the conditions from which our current culture arises but also as illustrations of the evils brought about by prejudices we have not yet entirely put behind us: de facto segregation (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2015), fewer educational and employment opportunities for the poor and/or black (Chetty et al. 2014; Chetty et al. forthcoming), and lingering disparities in health (*Communities in Action* 2017) and wealth (Thompson and Suarez 2019). O'Connor leaves her readers to decide how best to move forward, but she makes it clear that clinging to the old ways leads only to our physical and metaphysical peril.

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Flannery O'Connor's Cold War South

Considered an “elder statesman” of literature as a thirty-something (Gooch 2009, 352) and eulogized by a *New York Times* obituary as “one of the nation’s most promising writers” (*New York Times* 1964), Flannery O’Connor was a four-time National Book Award nominee and received the honor posthumously for her collection *Complete Stories*. O’Connor’s Southern Gothic “grotesque” characters and the brutal ends they meet are generally interpreted as violating “our notions of reality by combining the dissimilar elements of horror and humor” to illustrate “an individual’s or a society’s distortion, that is, its distance from some ideal state” (Reesman 1996, 41, 40).

O’Connor, however, insisted her characters were true to life: “Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (O’Connor 1957, 40). The climactic violence of her tales is necessary, she believed, to shock and humble her protagonists into epiphanies about their fallible nature and lead them toward God: “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that nothing else will work” (O’Connor 1957, 96).

If spiritual insights were O’Connor’s primary purpose for writing, her stories also provide commentary on the mundane: how racism and bigotry inhibit prosperity, discourage geographic mobility in search of education and work, and stilt the imagination. Though her stories unfold against the backdrop of the post-World War II South, they remain relevant to our times: if fear of the other guides us, material and intellectual impoverishment will result.

Born in Savannah in 1925, O’Connor, an only child, moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, with her parents shortly before her father’s death from lupus in 1941. Her mother ran a dairy farm, and, aside from a few years at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and in Connecticut, O’Connor resided at the farm until she, too, died from lupus at age thirty-nine in 1964 (O’Connor 1979, 3–4).

As a writer and devout Catholic “who managed to get to church at seven o’clock most weekday mornings, on crutches” (Gooch 2009, 356), she reveals in her letters a tension between her intellectual life and the necessity of earning an income. However, a symbiosis was also at work: sales of her fiction (O’Connor 1979, 9, 14–18, 326, 411), literary grants and prizes (48, 192, 318), and speaking fees (316, 412) helped pay for everything from a new refrigerator (175) to the exotic birds she raised (45, 447, 456).

In an early letter, O’Connor pitched herself to an agent: “I am writing to you . . . because I am being impressed just now with the money I am not making” (O’Connor 1979, 5). As the years passed, she noted the heavy burden involved in running a farm and being a landlord (329, 406), while also paying for her lupus treatments (233, 586). She remained conflicted, even in her final months of life, about publishing a story in a prestigious literary journal as opposed to maximizing profit: “I could get \$1500 for it from *Esquire* but I emulate my better characters and feel like Mr. Shiftlet that there should be some folks that some things mean more to them than money” (O’Connor

1979, 563). O'Connor was laughing at herself: in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1955), Shiftlet marries a disabled girl and abandons her, absconding with their wedding money, though he insists he has "moral intelligence" (O'Connor 1971, 149).

This personal ambivalence about money—the sense that although one must have it, it should not be the sole end of any activity—is further complicated by O'Connor's acknowledgment that payment for her work is directly linked to her sense of self-worth and her ability to create: "I can't write much more without money and [a publisher] won't give me any money because they can't see what the finished book will be. . . . If they don't feel I am worth giving more money to and leaving alone, then they should let me go" (O'Connor 1979, 13–14). Money, in other words, pays the bills, but it also imparts a sense of dignity and frees the intellect.

O'Connor's characters—rural or small-town southerners, many of them women like O'Connor's mother running farms on their own (Gooch 2009, 279, 342)—struggle to find meaning in their work and lives. They are bogged down in the details of holding onto their land, hiring reliable help, and/or coping with personal illness or disability. As O'Connor pushed her characters toward reckonings with divinity, she also commented on how they made their livings, revealing the complexity of her views on material prosperity and how one might attain it against the backdrop of a segregated, agrarian, post-World War II South.

An Economist's Reading of O'Connor

"Revelation" and "The Displaced Person"

In "Revelation" (1965) and "The Displaced Person" (1955), O'Connor examines bigotry and mistrust between employers and their employees and the resultant impoverishment on both sides.

In "Revelation," which won the O. Henry Award in 1965 (Gooch 2009, 366), Mrs. Turpin spells out the social hierarchy that many of O'Connor's white characters wish to maintain:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people . . . next to them . . . were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud [her husband] belonged. Above she and Claud were the people with a lot of money. . . . But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (O'Connor 1971, 491)¹

1. All quotations from O'Connor's short stories in this essay come from *The Complete Stories* (O'Connor 1971). Subsequent references give page numbers only.

After Mrs. Turpin states her bigoted beliefs in a waiting room, a college student tosses the text *Human Development* at her and attacks her. The girl tells Mrs. Turpin, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.” Mrs. Turpin inwardly rages at being “singled out . . . though there was trash in the room” (499–500, 502), insisting to God that she is charitable, clean, and hard-working, just as He meant her to be. She denies that class distinctions can be erased, even by God: “Put that bottom rail on top. There’ll still be a top and bottom! . . . Who do you think you are?” (507).

Determined to maintain her sense of status, Mrs. Turpin ignores the costs. The Turpins keep their farming operation small because “it’s no use in having more than you can handle yourself with help like it is. We found enough niggers to pick our cotton this year but . . . I sure am tired of buttering [them] up.” She touts the paucity of the Turpins’ farming operation—“a couple acres of cotton and a few hogs and chickens and just enough white-face [cows] that Claud can look after them himself” (494, 493)—as a virtue: they are self-sufficient.

But if the Turpins are not “trash,” they are certainly not prospering in their “small yellow frame house,” with Claud’s leg ulcered from a cow’s kick (502, 489) because he does all the livestock care. Their unwillingness to hire regular help keeps them subsistence farmers and the value of their land untapped. Any potential employees remain destitute, too, without vehicles to get to work and usually the oldest, “almost toothless” blacks (494, 503).

However, a “visionary light settled in [Mrs. Turpin’s] eyes.” She perceives a streak of color from the setting sun as a “vast swinging bridge” extending to heaven, with souls of all classes on it. At the “end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.” They march proudly, but she can see “by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away” (508).

Mrs. Turpin’s belief that God concerns himself with social classes, making one person “high society . . . and svelte-like,” another “white-trash or ugly,” according to whim or worth (491, 497), is shattered by this “celestial vision of racial convergence—a transposing of Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech” (Gooch 2009, 355). It is unclear, though, whether Mrs. Turpin will reform her thinking or stubbornly maintain the status quo as she stares “unblinkingly at what lay ahead” (508–9).

This story’s compelling tragedy lies in the juxtaposition of Mrs. Turpin’s inflexible racist hierarchy against the daily struggles she endures running a small farm. A remedy for her ill fortune is staring her in the face, but she is unable to perceive that her racism is holding her back. As readers, we are repelled by Mrs. Turpin’s bigotry, but we also feel her isolation, sensing the pathological extreme of her intolerance and the resultant temporal and eternal doom.

Through the lens of political economy, “Revelation” is an allegory on the necessity of tolerance, a defining feature of classical liberalism.² Intolerance toward others is often a bad business strategy (Cowen 2019), leading to lower levels of productivity and profitability; again and again, we see profit-maximizing businesses such as Disney and Apple being early pathbreakers on margins of tolerance such as equal pay and support for diversity. For their bottom line and their shareholders, tolerance pays, and the benefits of this increased tolerance extend to society more generally, leading to higher levels of trust, economic freedom, and prosperity (Florida 2010).

Yet though “Revelation” illustrates the perils of intolerance, O’Connor suggests no remedy. She also fails to offer a contrasting example in which tolerance leads to greater happiness and material abundance. Mrs. Turpin’s attacker is the only character to directly question Mrs. Turpin’s beliefs and, though college educated, is “ugly,” lit with “a peculiar . . . unnatural light,” and sent to the hospital, tranquilized, after attempting to strangle Mrs. Turpin (498, 490, 492, 501). If a better life via tolerance is within Mrs. Turpin’s reach, only this girl with her inept rage and the reader recognize it; Mrs. Turpin is unable to abstract from concerns about social class.

Therein lies a metaphor for the difficulty the layperson has in putting conscientious action above the embedded circumstances of time, place, and history. Mrs. Turpin acts rationally in the sense of making decisions consistent with her views, but her inability to put bigotry aside, for either financial or spiritual benefits, indicts her logic. O’Connor invokes God as ultimate arbiter and reveals the radiance of an afterlife in which intolerance is burned away, but “Revelation” offers no guidance for attaining a more immediate tolerance.

In “The Displaced Person,” O’Connor presents a vision of the darkest ends of intolerance: the violence and destruction resulting from viewing anyone as less than human. Like Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. McIntyre runs her dead husband’s farm, dislikes “trash,” and berates her black employees, Astor and Sulk, as “worthless” and “foolish” (203, 215). The two men, along with the Shortleys, a tenant family, believe themselves underpaid, so Sulk steals turkeys from the farm, and Mr. Shortley runs a still on the side, distracting him from his work (202, 204). Mrs. McIntyre bemoans her lot, pointing out that she can’t afford to remodel her house and that her employees “came from nowhere and were going nowhere [and] didn’t want anything but an automobile.” She believes people “who looked rich were the poorest of all because they had the most to keep up” (229–30).

Seeking extra help, she hires Mr. Guizac, a Polish World War II refugee, through the intermediary of a priest (195). Mr. Guizac speaks little English but is “an expert mechanic, a carpenter, and a mason . . . thrifty and energetic . . . could work milking

2. In the words of Ludwig von Mises, “Liberalism proclaims tolerance for every religious faith and every metaphysical belief, not out of indifference for these ‘higher’ things, but from the conviction that the assurance of peace within society must take precedence over everything and everyone” ([1927] 2010, 55–56).

machines and he was scrupulously clean.” Mrs. McIntyre declares that “getting him was the best day’s work she had ever done,” and she begins “to act like somebody who was getting rich secretly” (201, 208).

Mrs. McIntyre’s belief she has been “saved” (203) by Guizac’s efficiency, however, is poisoned by Mrs. Shortley, who thinks “there ought to be a law against” immigrants: “every time Mr. Guizac smiled, Europe stretched out . . . mysterious and evil, the devil’s experiment station” (205). Mrs. Shortley also turns Astor and Sulk against Guizac, suggesting refugees will replace them (199, 206). Like Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. Shortley has a vision, but hers is hellish: “fiery wheels with fierce darks eyes in them.” She prophesies, “The children of the wicked nations will be butchered,” and convinces Mr. Shortley they must leave the farm before he has been replaced by Guizac (210, 212).

With the Shortleys gone, Mrs. McIntyre again counts Mr. Guizac her “miracle.” But she reverts to thinking that employees are all the same and that she has spent twenty years “being beaten and done in” when she discovers Mr. Guizac has offered his cousin, a refugee, as a wife for Sulk if Sulk will pay for her passage from Europe (219–20). Pitying herself—“there was nobody poorer in the world”—Mrs. McIntyre calls Guizac a “monster” and Sulk “half-witted” and “thieving,” and she berates Guizac for ignorance about American culture and for ingratitude toward her (221–24).

Despite overwhelming evidence of Mr. Guizac’s economic contributions to her farm, Mrs. McIntyre cannot overcome her fear of his otherness. When Mr. Shortley returns for a job, telling Mrs. McIntyre his wife had a stroke due to Guizac’s devilry and comparing him to the enemy Shortley fought in World War I—“I figure that Pole killed her”—she listens (227–28, 232). She becomes determined to fire Guizac, imagining he is trying to take her place on the farm and so dismissing the priest’s attempt to appeal to her Christian compassion: “Christ was just another D.P. [displaced person]” (231, 229).

Mr. Shortley, who “hated to see a woman done in by a foreigner” and opines “there’d be a heap less trouble if everybody only knew his own language” (230, 233), has a more violent revenge in mind. He parks a tractor uphill of Guizac and allows it to roll over him. Mrs. McIntyre witnesses the incident but doesn’t shout a warning to Guizac, her eyes meeting Sulk’s and Mr. Shortley’s “in one look that froze them in collusion” (234). Watching Guizac’s family grieve, Mrs. McIntyre comes to realize she may be the displaced person in an ever-changing world, feeling she is in a “foreign country where [the Guizacs] are natives” (234).

Her revelation, though, comes too late for Mrs. McIntyre and her employees. Xenophobia has ended her climb toward prosperity; she develops a “nervous affliction,” gives up farming, and is left with “what she had” (235). Shortley and Sulk leave town, Astor cannot work alone (235), and the Guizac family is without paternal support. Mrs. McIntyre can give no reason for her revulsion toward Guizac except he didn’t fit in, was “extra,” “didn’t have to come in the first place.” As the priest points out, he may have come to redeem us (226), but Mrs. McIntyre’s fear distorts that vision of grace.

Intolerance is, again, at the core of this story, along with an unwillingness to grapple with disruptive economic and operational circumstances. O'Connor's portrait of human agency stifled by social rituals harkens back to Greek tragedies, Steinbeck characters, and Kafka's *The Trial*: entrenched in a system of xenophobia, racism, and inequality of opportunity, Mrs. McIntyre acts out of habitual hatred, even as she acknowledges the benefits of casting old ways aside. O'Connor shines only the slimmest ray of hope—if it can be called that—into the story's grim end: Mrs. McIntyre's prejudice cost Mr. Guizac his life, but it also cost her own as her farm and health fail, and she is left with only “a colored woman to wait on her” and the priest, whose wisdom she rejected, to “sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church” (235). If there is no movement toward tolerance in this tale, there is justice: Mrs. McIntyre finds herself a displaced person, damned for her part in a murder and doomed to live out her days surrounded by “the other.”

As in “Revelation,” O'Connor offers no remedy for widespread bigotry in “The Displaced Person.” Standard prescriptions by economists, such as economic growth and higher levels of education, go unmentioned. After all, Mrs. McIntyre is the most affluent of the story's characters but remains as entrenched in prejudice as the poorest among them. And when the locals are faced with proof that immigrants are bright and hard-working, their fears shift from refugees looking for handouts to refugees taking their jobs; determined to hate, they will find justification even in the presence of contradictory knowledge. “The Displaced Person” prompts readers to conclude, as many economists do when analyzing decades of failed policy reforms, that trust, tolerance, and openness require years of cultivation and may be spurred but not wholly accomplished by official policies. Cultural change takes decades, if not centuries (Williamson 2000).

“The Artificial Nigger” and “You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead”

In both “The Artificial Nigger” (1955) and “You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead” (1955), older men raise boys in states of poverty that disallow the illusion that they rank above anyone except, they believe, with respect to race and a moral purity resulting from living in rural isolation, apart from the city's material decadence and mixing of races. The older men are determined to teach their wards to avoid city influences, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Mr. Head, protagonist of “The Artificial Nigger,” and his grandson, Nelson, live in a shack ninety minutes from a train junction marked only by a switch box (250, 252). On a trip to Atlanta, they examine the train's bathroom as a curiosity and carry biscuits and sardines for lunch; when they lose their bag, they go all day without anything but water from a hose (256, 252, 266). Nelson is “unaccustomed” to wearing shoes, and the two shrink and tremble before middle-class women and men (261, 265, 267).

Yet Mr. Head has undertaken the visit, the third in his life and the first Nelson will recall, as a “moral mission” to ensure that Nelson’s pride in his birthplace is destroyed and that he will be “content to stay at home the rest of his life.” Mr. Head’s criticism of the city comes back to race: black people live there. And the contrast is stark for him because no blacks have lived in their rural county “since we run [the last one] one out twelve years ago” (250–52).

O’Connor presents racism as learned. Even Mr. Head, consummate bigot, admits, “A six-month-old child don’t know a nigger from anybody else” (252). When Nelson first encounters a black man, he sees him only as “a man . . . fat . . . [and] old.” Mr. Head taunts his ignorance, and the boy snarls, “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?” (255).

But Nelson is a quick study, feeling the black man walked past just to “make a fool of [Nelson,] and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate” (255–56). As he tries to navigate strange settings and city etiquette, Nelson realizes he is completely dependent on his grandfather (257, 262), and his trust prompts him to rely on all of Mr. Head’s claims, from where they must exit the train to how to view black people.

Nelson does not immediately give up his romantic view of the city, though: the temptations of commerce sway him as they walk the streets and stop before each store, and when a black woman offers them directions and calls Nelson “Sugarpie,” he has a sudden desire to be held by her (259, 262). But Mr. Head won’t enter any businesses, and he claims a person could disappear into a sewer there, linking the city “with the entrance to hell” (259). He hides when Nelson dozes after they sit to rest, intending to underscore for Nelson the city’s terrors.

However, when Nelson panics on waking alone and runs into a lady, it is Mr. Head who is afraid. The woman threatens to call the police and force him to pay for her injury, so he denies his relationship to Nelson (264–65). Nelson follows his grandfather when Mr. Head walks off but won’t look at him, and Mr. Head begins to imagine “a long old age without respect and an end that would be welcome because it would be the end” (267). There is no point to life, for Mr. Head, unless he can feel superior to someone.

“Like a cry out of the gathering dusk,” though, Mr. Head notes a statue of a black man in a yard and is reminded of his membership in the ruling class, which can afford to raise such a “monument to [their own] victory.” Though he and Nelson stand before the statue in “common defeat,” impoverished and unable to navigate the affluent world of the city, Mr. Head is still able to dismiss even white city dwellers as depraved and decadent: “They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one” (269). Nelson accepts his grandfather’s certitude with a nod and asks to go home, vowing never to return to the city. Thus, another generation is committed to poverty through refusal to interact with anyone who looks or thinks differently.

“The Artificial Nigger” is both a period piece and a description of our own time. The effects of the “culture of poverty” (Banfield 1970) and broken race relations remain central to understanding contemporary society. Though President Lyndon B.

Johnson's War on Poverty quickly followed O'Connor's story, readers more than half a century later can recognize the world described in "The Artificial Nigger": urban cities remain largely segregated (Schuetz et al. 2018); black unemployment remains relatively high and household wealth relatively low (Pew Research Center 2016); household incomes for many blacks in the lower and middle classes have been largely stagnant; some white Americans still hold prejudicial beliefs toward other races (Green 2019); and fear of immigrants remains strong in many parts of the country, with survey responses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 pointing to 41 percent of Americans thinking we have enough immigrants and 34 percent saying we have too many (Pew Research 2019). O'Connor offered no solutions for the racism and poverty she so vividly described in 1955, but this failure serves as a reminder that there are no easy solutions—certainly not in a short story but also, as we know from the past decades, not via government programs either (Budget Committee 2014).

We might even take Nelson and Mr. Head's journey as an allegory for our own journeys. We step outside our small spheres of experience with certain—possibly good—intentions but quickly find society's seeming chaos frightening. We tire and retreat to the dim comfort of our own neighborhoods, "treetops fencing [them] like the protecting walls of a garden," sure we are saved merely for feeling "agony" and offering it up to God (O'Connor 1971, 269) or, in our times, offering the judgment of our fellow humans via social media virtue signaling.

In "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," Tarwater is raised by a great-uncle. The two share a relationship similar to that of Mr. Head and Nelson: the tyrannical father figure preaches intolerance throughout Tarwater's childhood in a "shack" "not simply off the dirt road but off the wagon track and footpath" and filled with "sacks of feed and mash . . . scrap metal, wood shavings, old rope" (294–95). Tarwater even flashes back to a childhood trip to the city much like Nelson's: at first, Tarwater was excited by the city's bustle, but his great-uncle soured his day and, in an echo of Mr. Head, snapped, "Just remember . . . that you never liked it when you were here." Like Nelson, Tarwater thought he would be lost without his great-uncle's guidance (300–302).

In the story's present, though, Tarwater is fourteen, and his great-uncle has just died. Tarwater spends the morning attempting to dig a grave and give the old man the burial he desired, not the cremation he dreaded (295). As the morning drags on, though, a "stranger's voice" questions the old man's anti-intellectualism and its focus on Tarwater's uncle, a teacher in the city who tried to raise Tarwater before his great-uncle took him (293). The voice tells Tarwater his great-uncle was crazy to have taken him as a baby to the woods; Tarwater was nothing but a vassal to fulfill his great-uncle's wishes, and now he's been left alone "with just as much light as that dwarf sun wants to let in" (304–6). Tarwater compares his material and intellectual impoverishment to the life he could have enjoyed if he had been raised by his more affluent and educated uncle, and the voice tells him the old man was a "stone before your door and the Lord has rolled it away" (307).

Tarwater suspects the voice is his own, “as if, as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance” (303). After passing out drunk at his uncle’s still, he wakes to feel the sky is falling in on him (308): his world is collapsing as he questions the foundations of his knowledge. Tarwater lights his great uncle’s shack on fire, assuming his corpse is inside, then runs to the highway, pursued by his uncle’s gaze, “two bulging silver eyes that grew in immense astonishment in the center of the fire” (308).

A salesman gives Tarwater a ride, telling him love is “the only policy” (309). The salesman’s brand of love is false, though: pretending to care about his customers’ families in order to convince them to buy his products but relieved when their loved ones die because each death means “one less to remember” (309). Tarwater, perhaps acknowledging his great-uncle’s love was also phony, agrees that we owe the dead nothing, but he panics as the car approaches what appears to be a fire lighting the sky ahead, screaming that they are returning to where they came from, the burning shack. The salesman tells him it is the city’s glow and asks what is wrong with Tarwater. The boy replies he was asleep and is just waking up (310): he is attempting to throw off his great-uncle’s intellectual shackles, but it will require a lifetime of battling his origins.

As in the previous stories, there are no heroes here. Tarwater’s intellectual growth and escape from sinister influences—namely, his great-uncle and the salesman—are long-term and remote possibilities. O’Connor suggests some hope exists because Tarwater is young and, for the moment, headed in the right direction. However, he is the product of not only his great-uncle but also the society that produced his great-uncle, the do-gooder uncle who relinquished him because it was easier than fighting for Tarwater’s material and mental well-being, and the salesman who has twisted “love” into a marketing strategy. If Tarwater’s situation suggests optimism because we leave him at a moment when he desires more than the ignorance in which he has been raised, we must remind ourselves that the majority of O’Connor’s story serves to exhibit the depth of the darkness and neglect he must escape.

Viewed through the lens of rational choice, Tarwater is most likely to revert to what he knows. Formal education and worldly experience require an effort, especially when starting at a point of naïveté similar to Tarwater’s, and this leads people to the “logic” of maintaining their level of ignorance (Downs 1957), as O’Connor illustrates with Tarwater’s great-uncle and, in the previous stories, with Nelson, Mr. Head, Mrs. McIntyre and her American employees, and the Turpins.

“The Enduring Chill”

The difficulty of altering prejudices ingrained by the surrounding culture is central again in “The Enduring Chill” (1958), with a twist: Asbury, an aspiring writer, believes he has escaped his upbringing. Like Tarwater and Nelson, Asbury grew up near a “collapsing country junction,” a “single block of one-story brick and wooden shacks” (357–58),

and was exposed to the South's systemic racism. His mother believes her black employees' only interest is "in doing as little as they could" and looking out for themselves (361, 368). His father, who died when Asbury was young, was a lawyer, businessman, and politician with an eighth-grade education; Asbury imagines him with a "dirty finger in every pie" and is "appalled by [the] stupidity" of the old letters he had received from him (361, 364).

But, unlike Tarwater and Nelson, Asbury also spent years away from his childhood home, attending college and living in New York City (361–62). His flight was made possible by his parents' affluence, which soars beyond that of the Turpins and Mrs. McIntyre. His mother runs a dairy and lives in a "two-story farmhouse with a wide porch and pleasant columns" on a hill overlooking several pastures (362, 368).

On a visit home prior to the story's present, Asbury hoped to write a play about black men and so spent time with his mother's employees, Morgan and Randall. Asbury grew impatient with their reticence, though, thinking they had "lost all their initiative," and so he attempted a "forced integration" (Gooch 2009, 294) by cajoling them to smoke with him in the milking house, though they warned him it was not allowed. When they shared a cigarette, Asbury felt a moment of "communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing." After the creamery rejected the milk for smelling of tobacco and his mother was angry, as Morgan and Randall predicted, Asbury tried to connect with the two men by breaking another of his mother's rules, drinking fresh milk. The men refused, and Asbury grew irritated, calling Morgan "boy" and acting as if sharing a cup of milk is revolutionary: "The world is changing. There's no reason I shouldn't drink after you or you after me!" After overhearing Morgan and Randall saying he shouldn't talk "so ugly" about his mother and should have been beaten more as a child, Asbury returned to New York (368–70).

At age twenty-five, Asbury returns home ill enough to anticipate death (363, 358), a homecoming mirroring O'Connor's own return to the South due to illness (Gooch 2009, 189). Home to die, Asbury seeks "some last culminating experience." He has Morgan and Randall summoned to his bedside to "smoke together one last time." The men pocket Asbury's cigarettes but insist he looks fine, though they will not make eye contact with him and seem nervous when his mother leaves the room, as if she is "their last protection." Morgan suggests a home remedy he uses, but Randall points out that Asbury will not take what they take, and Asbury yells for his mother to escort them out, realizing nothing significant will happen before he dies (378–80).

Asbury yearns to free himself of his parents' small-mindedness and blames his mother's parenting for his inability to create compelling art: "I came [to New York City] to escape the slave's atmosphere of home . . . to liberate my imagination. . . . It was incapable of flight. It was some bird you had domesticated." Asbury acknowledges his mother never "forced her way on him"—it had been "the air he breathed in and when at last he had found other air, he couldn't survive in it" (364–65).

Thinking his mother unaware of reality, his small-town doctor "asinine," the local priest a "fool," Morgan and Randall lacking in "initiative," and himself as having "failed

his god, Art,” Asbury feels there is no place for him and anticipates a romantic death (357, 366, 376, 368, 373). So he despairs when diagnosed with a chronic illness, undulant fever, from drinking the unpasteurized milk Morgan and Randall warned him not to touch (381). Asbury will linger, unproductive and isolated, repelled by his mother’s style of racism but unable to purge its vestiges from his system.

Even given his advantages—affluence, education, experience living in other parts of the country—Asbury merely trades the overt racism of his hometown’s citizens for a more veiled racial condescension. Black people are instruments for Asbury: models for characters in his writing, mere players in his real-life attempt at enlightenment, means to a transcendent connection before death. In pursuing his own ends, Asbury insults and uses Morgan and Randall even as he disdains his mother’s dismissive attitude toward the men. Asbury’s intention to be a “better” man follows his own logic, but his behavior reveals him as lacking empathy for “the other.”

With this story, O’Connor drives home the point made in the stories discussed earlier: there is no simple solution to culturally embedded prejudice. Neither money nor education nor geographic relocation can work a complete transformation on an individual when his origin and surroundings continually reinforce old habits of behavior. And if an Asbury cannot rise above his upbringing, what chance does a Tarwater or a Nelson, a Mrs. Turpin or a Mrs. McIntyre have?

O’Connor’s views on prejudice are consistent with economists’ findings: prejudice is tough to overcome because even though it may have deleterious effects on an individual, the act of exiting from a prejudicial group feels insurmountable (i.e., too costly) for most individual group members. Her best characters are trapped by the logic of collective action (Olson 1971), like peer pressure on teenagers and club memberships, and her uglier characters are not even close to thinking about escaping their own personal hells. America and in particular O’Connor’s Deep South have enjoyed significant improvements in attitudes toward others over the past fifty years, but the march of progress is slow, due in part to the collective-action problems vividly illustrated in O’Connor’s characters.

Conclusion

Like Asbury, O’Connor wavered between an open-mindedness born of her education and her Christian principles, on the one hand, and the bigotry risen from her upbringing, on the other. She expressed acceptance when two friends separately confessed to being lesbian or bisexual, but she criticized openly sexual, especially homosexual, writing (Gooch 2009, 281–82, 293, 319). She supported Adlai Stevenson’s and John F. Kennedy’s candidacies for president, even knowing southerners feared their stances on civil rights (Gooch 2009, 244, 331–32). She poked fun at the ignorance of the KKK, warned visitors about her mother’s bigotry, and supported the changes coming about in the early 1960s as a result of the civil rights movement (Gooch 2009, 282–83, 332, 337). But O’Connor nevertheless used the vocabulary of white southerners of her time,

was “patronizing” toward black people, and declined to host the black writer James Baldwin at her mother’s home (Gooch 2009, 334–35).

O’Connor’s “complex ambivalence” was symptomatic of her time, and it placed limits on her writing. For example, she chose not to write from the perspective of black characters, arguing she could not understand them as she understood white people (Gooch 2009, 332, 243, 336). Furthermore, most of her black characters are servile—in terms of both her employment of them in her stories and their role as “facilitators” of white characters’ “access to the holy” (Armstrong 2001–2, 80): the mute statue of a black man in “The Artificial Nigger” is the catalyst for Mr. Head’s rapprochement with Nelson, and Morgan and Randall’s refusal to engage Asbury in a meaningful way in his last conversation with them leads him to a lonely despair, which causes him to turn to God.

O’Connor’s stories, although limited by her times and her own flawed framework, nonetheless “posit racism as a sin—a mark of moral shortcomings and narrow-mindedness” (Armstrong 2001–2, 77). And her condemnation of racism is similar to her criticisms of bigotry toward the poor, the less educated, and immigrants: narrow-mindedness will be reconciled with our maker, but there is little to expect from man qua man.

Though O’Connor believed death would erase the differences between us, she also commented on her here and now, “skewering her white characters’ racial views” (Armstrong 2001–2, 77). Time and again, she demonstrated the spiritual, physical, and financial suffering that prejudice causes on an individual basis, and she viewed the “local as a portal to the universal” (Gooch 2009, 287). If the Turpins, Mrs. McIntyre, Nelson and Mr. Head, Tarwater, Asbury, and the people with whom their lives interlock suffer for their bigotry, so, too, a society suffers when it fails to grant rights equally to all, closes its borders, and dismisses the chaotic but creative powers of cities and educational institutions.

O’Connor’s lessons lie not in showing us how things could be but in illustrating how things were, how they too often still are, how very gradually we change as a culture, and the resultant human suffering. We are left, like her characters, to cling to the ugly past or crawl and scratch our way a bit more quickly toward tolerance.

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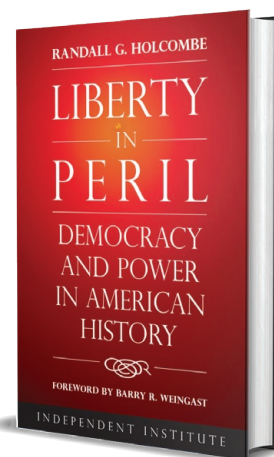
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