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Satire of the Antebellum Plantation Myth in Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person"

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor satirizes the antebellum plantation myth which includes: the white aristocratic gentleman farmer, a kind and benevolent master; his dutiful loving wife; pleasant and genial black slaves, contentedly and peacefully serving their masters. This myth indeed is paradise. Instead O'Connor presents in "A Displaced Person" as the plantation master, a triad of personalities: a deceased scoundrel judge; the miserly, penny-pinching Mrs. McIntyre; and the guileless, industrious Mr. Guizac. The pleasant and genial black slaves are replaced by the indolent characters of Astor and Sulk. The fruitful paradise is exchanged for a decaying plantation, occupied by refugees and haunted by memories of the Holocaust and concentration camps.

Key words: plantation myth, O'Connor's irony, decaying paradise

Flannery O'Connor uses the plantation myth indirectly in several of her stories, such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "A View of the Woods," and more directly in "The Displaced Person" and "Greenleaf." By using the plantation myth as a focus for her moral voice, O'Connor capitalizes on Southern history and legends which have endured from colonial times. Early Southern writers such as Robert Beverley and William Byrd of

Westover were among the first to generate idyllic notions of plantation life. In his 1705 History and State of Virginia Beverley describes Virginia as an abundant paradise of fish, game, flowers, fields, and rivers. Ignoring the concrete details of plantation life, Beverley presents plantation society as Eden. Lewis Simpson observes in The Dispossessed Garden that "in Beverley's poetic evocation we have the origin of the plantation in the literary imagination as the fruition of the errand into paradise" (16-17).

In his histories, diaries, and journals, William Byrd¹ extends and enhances Beverley's Edenic notions of Virginia and its plantation society. Byrd's writings provide mythic images of daily plantation life: 1) the white aristocratic gentleman farmer, well-educated, who rules the plantation as a kind, benevolent master; 2) his loving wife, mother to his children, gentle manager of domestic affairs, and hostess for society's gracious gatherings; 3) pleasant and genial black slaves, contentedly and peacefully serving their masters -- all living in comfort and harmony. Byrd envisioned plantation society, as did Beverley, as the Promised Land, the New Canaan. By the time Byrd was writing, however, slavery had become an intrinsic economic necessity for plantation life. Although he feared the increasing evils of slavery, he incorporated "out of stock images familiar to the colonial mind . . . an image of the slave society" (20) that was peace-filled and comfortable and that had become a necessary part of the patriarchal garden and plantation life. Simpson describes the plantation myth¹ that became a legendary part of American writing: "The glimpse of a planter like a Beverley or a Byrd seated pleasantly amid the honeysuckle and the hummingbirds in that faraway summer, foreshadows the evocation in literary imagining of a pastoral plantation situated in a timeless 'Old South,' a secure world redeemed from the ravages of history, a place of pastoral independence and pastoral permanence. To the incomplete scene we have only to add the plantation mansion and the planter, who has in hand a well-worn copy of Virgil, and within a supervisory distance a group of Negro slaves amiably at work in a tobacco field" (17). It is this myth that Flannery O'Connor has used so aptly in her fictional work.

Most of her life, Flannery O'Connor lived in Georgia, the heart of the plantation South. Raised with stories about the grandeur of a by-gone era, O'Connor viewed her current-day, decayed reality without nostalgia for a fictionalized and fabled past. Readers were not pleased with her vision. She often wrote about her frustrations as a Southern writer:

If you are a Southern writer, that label, and all the misconceptions that go with it, is pasted on you at once, and you are left to get it off as best you can. I have found that no matter for what purpose peculiar to your special dramatic needs

you use the Southern scene, you are still thought by the general reader to be writing about the South and are judged by the fidelity your fiction has to typical Southern life. I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs" (Mystery 37-38).

Flannery was convinced that "typical" Southerners understood the reality "that we have had our Fall, we have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations" (59). Based on that reality, she structures one of her best and most frequently anthologized story around the legendary images of plantation life; through "The Displaced Person" she mimics and subverts the fabled plantation myths and presents for the modern world her "inburnt knowledge of human limitations" and her special dramatic use of the Southern scene.

O'Connor uses "The Displaced Person" to subvert the Edenic notions of genteel patriarchal rule, hierarchal and harmonious class distinctions, and the delights of a fruitful and abundant garden plantation. She replaces the liberal-minded, well-educated gentleman farmer, holding his copy of Virgil, with a triad of personalities: the deceased, scoundrel Judge; the miserly, penny-pinching Mrs. McIntyre; and the guileless, industrious Mr. Guizac. These characters, along with the "white trash" Shortleys, the shiftless, lazy blacks, Astor and Sulk," and the naive priest, Father Flynn, parody the hierarchical, harmonious class distinctions. The fruitful paradise is exchanged for a decaying plantation, occupied by refugees and haunted by memories of the Holocaust and concentration camps.

In order to expose and to parody the image of the genteel farmer, O'Connor places the original plantation patriarch, the Judge, now deceased, as a specter over the fifty-acre farm. Mrs. McIntyre, having married the seventy-five-year old Judge at age thirty, thought she would soon be a wealthy widow. However, the Judge has left her, in addition to her "reverent" unrealistic memories, a deteriorating house, fifty unproductive acres of land, a roll top desk, a black mechanical chair, useless bank books and ledgers, and a hideous stone angel guarding his grave. The current owner, manager, and "patriarchal" plantation figure is Mrs. McIntyre, who has "buried one husband and divorced two" (197). Knowing little about managing a successful farm, she laments "'I've been running this place for thirty years . . . and always just barely making it'" (203) because for years she has relied on "sorry people. Poor white trash and² [blacks]" (202). Her limited education consists of one-sided conversations with the priest who alternates between admiring Mrs. McIntyre's peacocks and instructing her about the doctrines of the

Catholic Church. With subtle irony O'Connor rounds out her parody of the Southern gentleman farmer through her portrait of Guizac.³ Instead of investing the plantation's genteel patriarch (or matriarch) with successful organizational and management skills, O'Connor relies on the industrious, resourceful, and competent "displaced" Polish refugee. Guizac is the "Savior" who utilizes all the farm equipment carefully and efficiently; his practical education is sound and useful. His cultural understandings of the Southern way of life and its taboos are non-existent; he knows nothing about racial distinctions. His naivete ultimately causes his accidental, but preventable death. By using Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre, and the Judge, O'Connor effectively parodies the gentleman farmer myth and its accompanying notions of wealth, education, and gentility by surrounding the image in death and destruction and by inverting the reader's understandings of success, power, and patriarchal rule.

Besides the gentleman farmer image, the plantation myth also contains images of a fruitful and productive land. O'Connor replaces the fruitful, productive land with a deteriorating and deforested fifty-acre farm, a mortgaged house, and a furtively concealed whiskey still. The only remote images of paradise reside in the beautiful, but useless peacock Mrs. McIntyre retains "out of superstitious fear of annoying the judge in his grave" (218). Nor does this mythical paradise provide shelter for a loving and harmonious family and workers. Rather the declining farm harbors a widow who is pitiful and weak-willed; white trash workers whose primary occupation is running the covert whiskey still, and Negroes who have watched the white trash come and go. Intruding into this "paradise" are the Guizacs, the displaced refugees from Poland. They do not bring with them the delicate sounds of hummingbirds and the fragrance of honeysuckle, but rather they conjure up remembrances of the Holocaust, of a room "piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing" (196). O'Connor has transformed the mythical paradise into a decaying farm encircled by death.

In addition to the images of a gentleman farmer and his idyllic land holdings, the plantation myth relies on the reader's understanding of Southern racial and class distinctions and separations. The paradox lies not in the separations and distinctions, but rather in the harmonious, pleasant living for all members of the plantation society which supposedly results from amicable division and separation. O'Connor herself posits an interesting observation on racial harmony in an interview with Ross Mullins. She suggests that "It requires considerable grace for two races to live together, particularly when the population

is divided about 50-50 between them and when they have our particular history. It can't be done without a code of manners based on mutual charity

For the rest of the country, the race problem is settled when the Negro has his rights, but for the Southerner, whether he's white or colored, that's only the beginning. The South has to evolve a way of life in which the two races can live together with mutual forbearance" (*Mystery* 233-34). O'Connor assaults the notions of harmonious living and mutual forbearance in "A Displaced Person" using the ironic narrator and Mrs. Shortley in Part I and the ironic narrator and Mrs. McIntyre in Parts II and III.

The ironic narrator initially identifies Mrs. Shortley as "the giant wife of the countryside" (194) and somewhat later as "white trash." Based on her erroneous sense of shared understanding and camaraderie with Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. Shortley habitually evaluates and announces class distinctions and separations. Knowing that Mrs. McIntyre belongs to the "better" class of whites, Mrs. Shortley places herself and her family in the same category because she "knew that if Mrs. McIntyre had considered her trash, they couldn't have talked about trashy people together. Neither of them approved of trash" (203). Additionally, she believes that she and Mrs. McIntyre are separated from the white Polish refugees, the Guizacs, because they "had been calling them the Gobblehooks all week while they got ready for them" (196). Because of the southern code, Mrs. Shortley knows any white person is "superior" to any black person, but she again alludes to her role as confidante when she tells her husband that Mrs. McIntyre called Astor and Sulk "shiftless" (199). In part I O'Connor's ironies are amusingly evident through her detached narrator's observations and in her focus on Mrs. Shortley whose perceptions about racial and class distinctions attest only to her delusions and prejudice.⁴

In parts II and III O'Connor exposes more clearly the deep-seated Southern belief in racial distinction and separation. Through Mrs. McIntyre the reader comes to understand that although Mr. Guizac has single-handedly made the farm productive and profitable, he is on a par with the white trash Shortleys. Mrs. McIntyre remembers "Of all the families she had, the Shortleys were the best if you didn't count the Displaced Person" (219). And now that the Shortleys were gone "she was satisfied with the D.P." (215). Her conversations with the black workers, Astor and Sulk, reveal her innate ante-bellum sense of master and servant: "What you colored people don't realize is that I'm the one who holds all the strings together. . You're all dependent on me" (217). When Guizac violates the Southern code of black/white separation by wanting his white cousin to marry Sulk, Mrs. McIntyre considers him a monster, worse than her black servants, and prepares to fire

him: "Mr. Guizac . . . I cannot run this place without [Astor and Sulk]. I can run it without you but not without them" (223). Mrs. McIntyre is absolutely dependent for her sense of superiority on the Southern code of black/white separation and total complicity on the part of all black and white members of society; no one may deviate from its unwritten rules.

Having established the strength of the Southern code, O'Connor swiftly and surely undercuts its position by juxtaposing the real issues of human survival in the Nazi concentration camps against Mrs. McIntyre's belief in racial separation and racial purity. Mr. Guizac says about his cousin: "She no care black . . . she in camp three year" (223); Mrs. McIntyre lamely responds, "I am not responsible for the world's misery" (223).

O'Connor's final commentary on racial distinction occurs at Mr. Guizac's death. Mrs. McIntyre "felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone" (234). In this frozen tableau of death, O'Connor raises Guizac to the position of martyr-savior and renders equal in murder and guilt the failing white aristocrat, Mrs. McIntyre, the white trash, Mr. Shortley, and the poor black worker, Astor.

In her story "The Displaced Person" O'Connor has relied on the reader's recall of nostalgic pastoral images -- the plantation as Eden; the educated, gentleman farmer and his loving family; productive, fertile land; and amicable slaves, happily serving their masters -- in order to subvert the plantation myth. She has altered the myth by foregrounding the reality of an unproductive farm, owned by a poor widow, who barely lives above the survival level, and who is reluctantly served by indolent, thieving black workers. Ultimately the hard-working, displaced Poles bring to the plantation not only the specter of death as Holocaust survivors, but worse, they attempt to destroy the Southern way of life by challenging its racial boundaries. O'Connor succeeds in subverting the Southern plantation myth by converting the wistful, nostalgic remembrances into painful, substantive reality.

NOTES

⁰ All references to Flannery O'Connor's stories are from The Collected Works, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

¹ Lewis Simpson addresses in The Dispossessed Garden, the more complex issue of black slavery as it was incorporated into early writings about Southern plantation society. In his chapter "Gardens of the Covenant and of the

Chattel” he explains the ambivalence of those who tried to gloss over the evils of slavery, such as Beverly and Byrd.

²Dorothy Walters says in her study of Flannery O’Connor, that O’Connor simply saw the “Black man as a familiar feature of the Southern landscape and a commonplace element in Southern white experience. . . [therefore] typical Southern attitudes are revealed in casual comments” (117) made by other characters about black people.

³Miles Orvell states that “The Displaced Person” has a central dramatic image of intrusion by an alien figure who disturbs the settled life of the protagonist. Because of the intruder the character is given the opportunity to change.

⁴Robert Coles in his chapter “The Social Scene” from Flannery O’Connor’s South, describes the social and economic classes in O’Connor’s works as: white failing aristocracy, middle class whites, poor white trash, and poor blacks. His description of O’Connor’s black characters as underdogs in society: . . .”there is no fancy mental work on their part. . . They come up with no clever rationalizations; no outbursts of anger, envy, resentment. . . [what is seen is] the resignation of those who are at the bottom.” (22)

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