

Reading Place in and Around Flannery O'Connor's Texts

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TO CLAIM THAT FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S work can be examined in terms of place is anything but revolutionary. O'Connor's critics have always been interested in seeing her placed within a region and in understanding how the "context" of her life in the South informed her writing. From early commentary to that written recently, this interest emerges in articles (many of which are unreservedly sentimental) about her home town of Milledgeville, her family farm (Andalusia), and, most especially, her famed peacocks. Sarah Gordon, in her article, "Milledgeville: The Perils of Place as Text," writes about some of O'Connor's critics—Arthur Kinney, Barbara McKenzie and Michael Pearson—who have sought greater insight into the author and her works through pilgrimages to Georgia. As the title of her article suggests, Gordon considers this a dangerous business.

I both agree and disagree with Gordon. I agree with her suspicion of assumptions that are made on the basis of visiting a writer's homeplace or region, and I disagree with her reluctance to recognize a text built on the notion of place. I think that, by necessity, we construct texts based on place. And I hold that any gainful reading of O'Connor requires that we expand our notion of "place" beyond the physical to acknowledge the ways in which the author addresses (and is addressed by) the concept herself. Place becomes a metaphor for position, particularly in the three stories I will examine here, "The Displaced Person," "The Artificial Nigger," and "Everything that Rises Must Converge." Reading these stories alongside her letters and lectures, we can see that O'Connor not only comments on place, but that she stands on and defends particular ground herself. And expanding our reading to include her critics, we begin to see positions being established that monitor and limit our reading of her, thus legitimating particular critical approaches.

On picking up *Habit of Being* (O'Connor's published letters), *Mystery and Manners* (her public speeches/lectures and other occasional prose) or any one of the now hundreds of writings about her, we see immediately two of the more obvious components of her place. O'Connor was a Catholic and a Southerner. But we also see that she was a writer with very definite ideas of what writing is and should be. The aforementioned hundreds of writings about her, along with our immediate expectation of her name in anthologies, tell us she has found firm footing in the canon. And in spite of our two decades of fondly envisioning the sexless O'Connor with her peculiar yen for peafowl, we have at last discovered that she was a woman. Still, many critics have difficulty coming to terms with the part of her place that comes readily to mind when we read her work: her place as a white Georgia writer in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1975, Alice Walker published *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and in this book was included a frequently quoted essay called "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor." The premise of this essay is that Walker, having learned that she and O'Connor had lived close to one another on the same Georgia road, has returned with her mother to Milledgeville to see both houses. The essay is an examination of Walker's waxing and waning esteem for O'Connor, an intricate treatment of her shifting sense of O'Connor as a Southern writer, like herself. And not like herself. By the end of the essay, Walker comes to understand much more about O'Connor's place than she set out to know. Her essay culminates in a merging of physical place with another kind of position entirely. Walker writes, "I think: it all comes down to houses. To how people live. There are rich people who own houses to live in and poor people who do not...". "For a long time," she says, "I will feel Faulkner's house, O'Connor's house, crushing me" (Walker 80). That place so easily becomes multidimensional in this way is precisely the reason why O'Connor's work deserves further consideration in these terms.

I. Reading God into Place: O'Connor and Her Critics
O'Connor criticism, like any critical discussion, is focused

in large part on persistent debates about what her fiction is really “about.” On first contact with O’Connor’s work, readers not familiar with the most prominent voices in this debate might consider that the stories can be read as critiques of Southern culture and arrogance, or as explorations of human violence and cruelty. These readers might also consider (for various reasons) that O’Connor’s emphasis on social struggle is terribly important. They might appreciate how she presents these issues of social struggle in admirable intricacy, dramatizing them through the actions of white Southern characters whom she doesn’t romanticize (who are in fact fairly detestable across the board). And they might notice that O’Connor pulls this off using an eerie and self-reflexive wit, as well as a relentless violence that is at times terrifying and difficult to explain.

Such readings of O’Connor’s work might seem reasonable enough, but it is important to understand that they are “misreadings” (or at least only partial readings), according to the author herself and many of her critics. In a letter to Shirley Abbott, O’Connor writes,

Many of my ardent admirers would be roundly shocked and disturbed if they realized that everything I believe is thoroughly moral, thoroughly Catholic, and that it is these beliefs that give my work its chief characteristics. (*Habit* 147-8)

I suspect that most people, on first reading O’Connor’s work, are the very admirers she envisioned. Who would assume that the stories are “about” faith, or grace, or redemption? These same readers are perhaps embarrassed, after reading some of the criticism, to acknowledge what they have missed in the stories. They are drawn to a certain pattern emerging in O’Connor, a “religious maneuver” described aptly by Frederick Crews as, “a humbling of secular egoism to make way for a sudden infusion of God’s grace” (49). O’Connor believed that the least common denominator of human experience is “human limitation” (*Mystery* 131), and that we must all recognize this fact, taking into account “mystery” (what cannot be known or altered by human intellectual endeavor).

But this theological reading is not equally comfortable for everyone. My own reading of O’Connor became greatly

complicated as soon as the Sign of the Cross began imposing itself on every page I read, and I began asking questions: What is the agent of redemptive grace? Who is redeemed and why? Why is O'Connor using such violent means of "redemption"? In short, the theological framework made me suspicious of the narrative action, and suddenly what had been, for me, random dark comedies, open to critique of their cruelty, became allegories of redemption, in which resolutions are sanctioned by divine authority. What I had identified as the theme of "ev'body gets their comeuppance" in O'Connor's narratives metamorphosed into one of "everybody who holds herself separate (from God and other humans) gets trampled by a bull or has her prosthetic leg stolen." This was discomfoting (as O'Connor meant it to be, of course).

The official word on O'Connor has traditionally been that the stories *must* be read within this theological framework. The author herself was highly prescriptive of readings of her work, and throughout her letters and the essays in *Mystery and Manners*, she is forever correcting interpretations, ones that ignore or miss the spiritual significance she herself appended. Until recently, most of O'Connor's critics have been vigilant in defending the interpretation(s) that she sanctioned. For example, James Napier, in an article scolding Paul Nisly's interpretation of "The Artificial Nigger," uses O'Connor's then recently published letters as a way to correct Nisly's misreading, claiming that the author's comments on her story "reinforce rather than challenge what is by now fairly broad agreement that the 'literal' meaning of the ending is not erroneous" (88). He follows this with a disclaimer which says that this does not, of course, "rule out other readings" (Napier 88), but it is clear that he is using O'Connor's official word to authorize the commonly accepted interpretation. This critical maneuver has successfully managed to bind O'Connor criticism for many years. Like so many other writers who are prolific in their private and public (non-fictional) writings, O'Connor provided her readers with guidelines, with rules regulating interpretation. With a few notable exceptions, these rules have not been broken in O'Connor criticism until recently, since the great temptation is to take

the author at her word.

The problem, predictably enough, is that her word is often inconsistent. But these very inconsistencies are what make a study of her place so compelling. For instance, as prescriptive as O'Connor was on the reading of her work, she also warned against "read[ing] a story from what you get out of a letter" or "read[ing] the author by the story" (*Habit* 170). This becomes a crucial point to consider when we come up against what is perhaps the central conflict between O'Connor's public and private writings, the problem of her elusive position on racial and social matters ("racial" and "social" being two terms which she and her critics often collapse into one another).

In 1976 and 1978 (respectively), Melvin Williams and Claire Kahane criticized O'Connor for the ways in which she uses black characters and racial issues in two-dimensional ways to bring about the development and redemption of her white characters. In so doing, they were anticipating what Toni Morrison would explore more fully over a decade later: that we need to give some attention to the way that the African-American experience is used by white authors to "[provide] opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, and to speculate on fate and destiny" (53). But critical response to Williams's and Kahane's statements on race was, in several instances, negative. In 1989, well after the publication of *Habit of Being* and the accompanying dubious light that some of the letters shed on O'Connor's racial sympathies, D. Dean Shackleford set out to defend O'Connor against Williams's and Kahane's "accusations." He begins his article with a loaded sentence: "Is Flannery O'Connor a racist?" (79). The rhetoric of much O'Connor criticism (particularly in the 1980s) sounds like this. It attempts to set up a defense against anyone who might want to approach her with expectations of Southern writers' position(s) on race, often sounding almost baffled by the suggestion that the topic would even be broached.

The irony of all of this is that Williams and Kahane were clearly not interested in whether or not O'Connor was a "racist." What they were engaged in was less a matter of name-calling than one of questioning the ways that

race functions in her fiction. I am interested in what I consider to be an extension of their question: How does O'Connor make use of race/differentiation as a way of dramatizing her characters' attempts at establishing a separate and privileged place for themselves, and how does she, in turn, establish and maintain her own place by the ways in which she writes about race/differentiation, both publicly and privately?

What makes this question difficult to approach is the body of criticism (and O'Connor's official word on the matter) which says her work cannot be read as social (racial) narrative. Many of her critics make this claim to different degrees. There are those who, point blank, say that the stories are not about race. Alice Walker, in the essay discussed above, writes, "But *essential* O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture" (77). Walker does not deny that O'Connor's work treats matters of race. Rather, she simply refers back to the author's thoughts on her own writing, for O'Connor herself would have nothing to do with "social" matters. A sociology student for a short while in college, she rejected the social sciences, saying, "The only thing that kept me from being a social-scientist was the grace of God and the fact that I couldn't remember the stuff but a few days after reading it" (*Habit* 98). She disdained the making of statements and the discussion of "issues" in fiction, what she considered (ironically) an "orthodoxy" imposed on the novel by critics based on social concerns and a tendency to make the novelist "the handmaid of his age" (*Mystery* 46). She held that "...a literature which mirrors society would be no fit guide for it" (*Mystery* 46). In short, fiction for O'Connor has a didactic role, one which it cannot fulfill if it treats what she calls the "topical" (the social) rather than the universal (the theological). It is little wonder that we hear critics talking about race/differentiation in O'Connor only in terms of "larger spiritual issues" (Shackleford 85). For example, John Desmond, in commenting on "Everything that Rises Must Converge," discusses the clash between the black and white women on the bus as "racial manifestations [which] are the terms of deeper spiritual conflict"

(40). This is what Walker means when she says that the narratives aren't about race. If they are "about" anything at all, she says, they are about prophecy, revelation, and grace (Walker 77).

Most critics, then, as they discuss the social and theological levels in O'Connor (if they acknowledge the social level at all) see no contradiction between the two ways of reading the narratives.¹ Following O'Connor's lead, when she says that the Church is what makes the modern world endurable (*Habit* 90), Shackleford says that O'Connor's concern is "for the salvation of the human race—red, yellow, black, and white. Without this salvation, social values are meaningless" (89). And Jan Nordby Gretlund, in an article on O'Connor's "social sensibility," writes,

There is no conflict between the social and the Christian concerns; on the contrary it is her Christian faith that makes O'Connor, who obviously loves her neighbor, observe and describe social problems and conflicts. (198)

Though some might question whether O'Connor "obviously loves her neighbor," Gretlund's description here does seem to convey O'Connor's own understanding of the workings of grace and social justice. Like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who was a substantial influence on her later theological position, she believed that true harmony between human beings could be achieved only by establishing harmony with God. Teilhard, according to Patricia Maida, considers the action of grace to be "an illuminating force operative on the minds of men" which brings about "the communication of love between God and man" and by extension, convergence, the harmony of human beings (553). Maida points out that O'Connor does not fully share Teilhard's optimism, his belief that "love will unite all individuals in the harmony of their humanity to produce a renewal of the natural order" (553). She notes the difference between this optimism and O'Connor's sense of the difference between "what man has the potential to become and what he actually achieves" (Maida 553). But O'Connor does structure her stories in such a way that her characters, attempting to disconnect themselves from their shared human history (which is shared also with Christ,

¹ For a recent perspective on the consistency of O'Connor's theological and social concerns, see Russell.

through his Incarnation as man), are brought to convergence through an action of grace that shows them their basic experience of human limitation.

² For more on O'Connor's use of the "Other," see Mellard and, more recently, Fowler.

On the basis of this understanding of O'Connor's theology, several conclusions can be drawn. First, it can be argued that she is establishing God as the only true Other,² with humans sharing a basic and undeniable sameness. Second, it is clear that she understands her stories to be using racial/social issues to dramatize this "larger" issue of estrangement from God. And on the basis of this second point, it seems that if it is true that the theological level of these stories is of greater importance than the social level, they are really stories about offenses made against God *before* they are stories about offenses made against others (often "Others"). This is where I see the problem in the relationship between O'Connor's theology and her social sensibility. If I share her theological position, then I have no reason to want to challenge her on these points. I will simply agree that a better relationship with God, a participation in the Unity of Being, will eventually bring about social justice. But if my faith (or non-faith) offers me another spiritual framework, or more to the point, if my "place" causes me to see matters of social inequality as being more immediate than all of this, I am likely to criticize O'Connor for her tendency to offer faith as the remedy for social injustice. The real problem at hand here, then, is that the theological reading of O'Connor tends to gloss over and explain away other readings. A striking example of this is Ralph Wood's recent article about O'Connor and race in which he voices a need to read O'Connor as a Christian, but finds himself challenged in this endeavor by newly discovered letters from O'Connor to Maryat Lee, which contain "declarations about blacks that would alarm even the most ardent O'Connor enthusiasts" (90). In response to this challenge, Wood decides that he will first supply his own *definitions* of racism (both political and theological) and then on the basis of these, absolve O'Connor of any responsibility for racist thinking. His argument on the theological level boils down to this: O'Connor believes that

...all people are created in the image of God, that

all races have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, that we are therefore brothers and sisters saved not by our own righteousness but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Wood 92)

Racism rejects this "doctrine." Therefore, O'Connor cannot be a racist.

The irony of this is that Wood begins by bringing up an excellent point. "The word *racism*," he writes, "has become a code word for silencing genuine debate...." (Wood 92). But in addressing this problem by laying out his own definitions of racism, he himself avoids participating in the "debate," which seems that it should be about how racial issues *are indeed* addressed in O'Connor's work. By thus begging the question, Wood silences any discussion that would view O'Connor's position on race as being anything other than monolithic. In so doing, he defends his own position as O'Connor's most recognized critic from the theological standpoint, and he attempts, inadvertently or intentionally, to exercise discursive control over the directions in which O'Connor criticism might move.

However, in the past six or seven years, O'Connor's critics³ have begun to explore the very dissonance I notice between her theological position and her social sensibility. Frederick Crews, for instance, in his borderline scathing treatment of O'Connor and her critics, writes, "Even the Christians among us, I should think, must feel the shortcomings of a perspective that narrows all social problems to the abiding question of whether an individual can believe that Jesus died for his sake" (53). In trying to work through and around this problem, O'Connor criticism has begun to do what the author asked it to avoid: looking at the social implications of her work *before* the theological ones. Patricia Yaeger, in her treatment of the Southern grotesque, speaks of going "beyond theology" when looking at O'Connor's texts, to examine "what kind of history-making [they] represent" (186). She thus reverses the usual rhetoric of O'Connor criticism. Yaeger suggests that the critics have too often explained away the cruelty in O'Connor's stories, converting the "sadism" into "an old and comfortable theology" (191). The questions she poses,

³ Most notably, Crews, Yaeger, Bacon, Kreyling's *New Essays on Wise Blood* (1995), and Rath and Shaw's *Flannery O'Connor: New Perspectives* (1996).

then, are these: “What happens when we read otherwise? What happens to O’Connor’s stories when we wake up the personal and political terrors of her texts?” (Yaeger 187). Jon Lance Bacon, in his study of O’Connor and Cold War Culture, asks a similar question: Can we read O’Connor’s narratives as revealing (purposely or not) Southern whites’ struggle to defend the position that segregation affords them? And can we read O’Connor herself as an author attempting to maintain a position?⁴

⁴Will Brantley, in his 1996 *Contemporary Literature* review of Bacon’s book, praises the author’s reading of O’Connor as a “dissenter” during the Cold War years, but also questions his avoidance of “the very real degree of conformity” which animated O’Connor’s “world-view” (135).

These questions point to the claim that I would like to make: We can (and should) read O’Connor’s stories as social narratives, among other things. In her essay, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Martín Alcoff points to the significant body of recent theory which argues that “the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer, can never again, be sustained” (102). Instead of attempting to maintain this neutrality, Alcoff says, it is more productive to examine how the positions of the speaker (and the listener) in discourse contribute to “the meaning and truth of what is said” (102). She invokes Michel Foucault’s term “rituals of speaking” to denote “discursive practices of speaking or writing that involve not only the text or utterance but also their position within a social space that includes the persons involved in, acting upon, and/or affected by the words” (102).

O’Connor’s texts can be readily and productively read through these ideas. As much as the author might protest to the contrary, there is a reason why, in many instances, she chooses issues of race and class to dramatize the theological action she had in mind. She had a keen understanding, as a white Southern woman, of the complexities of her side of these issues, particularly of white fear of social displacement. There is much to be learned from reading O’Connor’s texts in this way, and by calling into question the theological framework she imposes on these ideas. By elaborating so eloquently on the social issues of her time, and by simultaneously and stubbornly insisting that her texts are about theology before they are about the social, O’Connor exposes her own position both as a Catholic and as a white woman of relative privilege who has no real investment in change in the post-World War II South. If

we problematize O'Connor's theological position, not allowing it to distract us fully from the social situations her stories treat, we begin to question terms like "mystery," "grace," and "redemption." We can start to look closely at how her stories treat the establishment and maintenance of place, including her understanding and use of the Other and of the possibilities of social change. Combining O'Connor's fictional accounts of these issues with the personal accounts to be found in her letters and lectures, we begin to see that she not only explores and criticizes the holding of "positions," but that she herself speaks from and defends such a position.

II. In Defense of Place: "The Displaced Person"

O'Connor was highly interested in the idea of "place," both in the sense of identity with physical situation and in the sense of discursive position. She says that the Catholic writer, for instance, must "[describe] truthfully what he sees from where he is" if he is to reveal mysteries (*Mystery* 150). It is important to understand that for O'Connor, "place" refers to spiritual (and/or social) position at the same time that it refers to region or physical location.

In the prose pieces collected in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor concerns herself with this multiplicity of identity in terms of place. With titles like "The Church and the Fiction Writer," "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," "Southern Fiction," and "The Regional Writer," these essays reveal the two identities she is most concerned with. Contrary to everything our secular reason might try to tell us, O'Connor tells us that Catholicism and Southernness are not limiting forces on the writing of fiction, but broadening ones. Of Catholicism, she writes,

The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. But this should enlarge, not narrow, his field of vision. (*Mystery* 146)

Likewise, being a Southerner affords the writer this expanding sense of mystery:

When Walker Percy won the National Book Award,

newsmen asked him why there were so many good Southern writers and he said, "Because we lost the War." He didn't mean by that simply that a lost war makes good subject matter. What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country. (*Mystery* 58-9)

O'Connor will always claim that we are broadened *by* our sense of our own limitations. Her use of Percy's reference to "the War" and its parallel with "the Fall" is perhaps questionable to today's secular, liberal reader, but O'Connor is by no means unique among Southerners (either in her own day or today) in her tendency to think of the South and its losses in this way. She often articulated this romanticized view of the South's suffering, almost always associating it with an opportunity for thinking in a different way, a way that takes into account mystery. She called the region "a society that has some real extension outside of the mind" (*Habit* 493).

O'Connor was also critical of the South, referring to it as "the land of sin and guilt" (*Habit* 475), and, in her fiction, portraying Southern culture (particularly Protestantism) in a none-too-favorable light. Robert Coles calls O'Connor's view of the South "both protective and critical" (45). If we look at the letters in particular, we will find that she is often critical when writing to other Southerners, but protective when she is writing to people outside the South, people she fears might mistake her criticisms for justifications of their own overly simplified understanding of Southern culture. Perhaps the most straightforward example of this fear in her writings is her indictment of Eudora Welty for having written a strongly anti-racist story called "Where Is the Voice Coming From?":

You are right about the Welty story. It's the kind of story that the more you think about it the less satisfactory it gets. What I hate most is its being in the *New Yorker* and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over the typical life of the dear

old dirty Southland. (*Habit* 537)

O'Connor is here clearly uneasy with (or perhaps resentful of) Welty's representation of Southern culture. She resembles her critics (who are baffled by those who would approach O'Connor with questions about race) in her fear that the outsiders (Yankees) might generalize and simplify matters of race relation in the South on the basis of Welty's story.

O'Connor's tendency to critique the South is subordinate to her loyal adherence to its rules and practices. Often quoted is her statement in response to Maryat Lee's offer to arrange a meeting for her with James Baldwin in the South:

No, I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on—it's only fair. Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia. I have read one of his stories and it is a good one. (*Habit* 329)

It is easy to overlook what is probably the critical phrase here: "the society I feed on." O'Connor is no doubt wholly uncourageous in her unwillingness to meet Baldwin on Southern soil (even though she admits to liking his work). But it is interesting that she feels herself bound to conform to the practices of her region by virtue of inheritance and a parasitic relationship with the South as provider. I look at O'Connor's statement here in several ways. First, I see it as a ridiculous justification for her own discomfort at the idea of meeting Baldwin, one that makes segregation almost analogous to tax payment as a practice essential to belonging to a place. Second, trying to assume her own point of view, I see O'Connor accepting her "place," accepting the fact that she was born in the South, writes about the South, and must therefore acknowledge her designated position as a white Southern woman. Finally, and most importantly, I see her wording her statement as if it is beyond her power to meet with Baldwin in Georgia, as if she cannot escape the position in which she has been "placed." By acting as if this position is essential and man-

dated, she avoids addressing the possibility that she could *choose* to meet Baldwin in Georgia, that she *chooses* not to, and that by so *choosing*, she maintains and defends her position as a white Southern woman writer.

An interesting contrast with this element of O'Connor's thinking on place is that which can be examined in "The Displaced Person," a story dealing almost entirely with this idea of construction of place or position. In the story, Mr. Guizac, a refugee (displaced person) from Poland comes with his family to work on Mrs. McIntyre's farm. There are four other farm hands at the place when the Guizacs arrive, two black ones (Astor and Sulk) and two white ones (Mr. and Mrs. Shortley). The first part of the story focuses on Mrs. Shortley's reaction to the arrival of these "outsiders." Mr. Guizac instantly poses a threat to Mrs. Shortley, first because he represents the horrors of Europe and the concentration camps, and second, because he is a diligent worker (much more diligent than her husband, the narrator leads us to believe). Unwilling to acknowledge this threat to herself, she redirects it toward the black workers.

"All you colored people better look out," she said. "You know how much you can get for a mule."

"Nothing, no indeed," the old man said, "not one thing."

"Before it was a tractor," she said, "it could be a mule. And before it was a Displaced Person, it could be a nigger. The time is going to come," she prophesied, "when it won't be no more occasion to speak of a nigger."

The old man laughed politely. "Yes, indeed," he said. "Ha ha."

The young one didn't say anything. He only looked sullen but when she had gone into the house, he said, "Big Belly act like she know everything."

"Never mind," the old man said, "your place too low for anybody to dispute with you for it."
(*Complete* 205-6)

Astor ("the old man") wisely observes that the two of them have nothing to fear. Their places are secure precisely because they are so undesirable, and because (as Mrs. Shortley

points out), “You can always tell a nigger what to do and stand by until he does it” (*Complete* 208). The balance on the farm is sustained because all players work within their expected roles.

Mrs. Shortley, on the other hand, senses that this balance is being upset by Mr. Guizac, and despite her repeated attempts to act as if it is the black workers who are in danger of losing their “places” (jobs), she begins to feel the need to reaffirm her status (“place”) as Mrs. McIntyre’s confidante and peer. In conversation with Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre mentions how dependable Mr. Guizac is compared to all the “sorry people” she has had working on her farm in the past. Mrs. Shortley immediately begins to try to determine whether or not she and her husband rank among the “sorry people.”

Mrs. Shortley could listen to this with composure 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. (*Complete* 202–3)

Reifying and bolstering her place by way of differentiation, Mrs. Shortley is able to continue her project of self-deception with regard to the stability of her own position.

Soon afterwards, Mrs. Shortley overhears Mrs. McIntyre saying that it is Mr. Shortley, not the black workers, whom she intends to fire. The Shortleys pack and leave before they are given this news officially, now themselves playing the roles of displaced persons. At the end of Part I, Mrs. Shortley dies suddenly of a stroke, “[seeming] to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country” (*Complete* 214).

At the beginning of Part II of the story, the farm has regained its balance after the Shortleys’ departure. Where Part I focused on Mrs. Shortley’s fear of displacement, Part II now shows us that of Mrs. McIntyre. Mrs. McIntyre is well pleased with Mr. Guizac’s performance on the farm until she learns that he plans to marry off his young white cousin, who has been in a Polish work camp for three years, to Sulk, the younger black farm hand. Horrified by this suggestion of this highest of Southern taboos, “miscegenation,” Mrs. McIntyre forbids Mr. Guizac to carry through

with his plan, asserting, “This is my place...I say who will come here and who won’t” (*Complete* 223). Mr. Guizac returns to work, and Mrs. McIntyre stands where she is, watching him, and (without his hearing) says, “You’re just like all the rest of them...only smart and thrifty and energetic but so am I. And this is my place” (*Complete* 224). O’Connor artfully phrases these declarations of “place” in such a way that they sound less and less convincing each time they are declared.

Finally, in Part III, the tension and fear on the farm come to a head. Mr. Guizac, once considered by Mrs. McIntyre to be her “savior,” is now “extra.” By the end of the story, Mr. Guizac has been killed in a tractor accident, set up by Mr. Shortley (who has come back to the farm) and passively allowed by Sulk and Mrs. McIntyre. At the moment of the accident, the eyes of all three conspirators “come together in one look that [freezes] them in collusion forever” (234). When the ambulance comes for Mr. Guizac’s body, Mrs. McIntyre looks on, feeling like “she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger...” (*Complete* 235).

Far from returning everyone to their initial places, Mr. Guizac’s death brings about a more thorough displacement for them all. Sulk, Astor and Mr. Shortley leave the farm; Mrs. McIntyre remains, having lost her health, with only the old priest (who brought Mr. Guizac to the farm in the first place) to keep her company with his “doctrines of the Church” (*Complete* 235). O’Connor explains what she considers to be the redemptive action in the story.

The displaced person did accomplish a kind of redemption in that he destroyed the place, which was evil, and set Mrs. McIntyre on the road to a new kind of suffering, not Purgatory as St. Catherine would conceive it (realization) but Purgatory at least as a beginning of the suffering. (*Habit* 118)

In this letter, she goes on to say that she did not adequately show this redemption in the story, and that it is therefore a failure to some extent. But where the statement of redemption may have failed in “The Displaced Person,” the

treatment of social order thrives, as O'Connor points out with remarkable detail and complexity the tenuousness of social place and the need to maintain that place by way of differentiation.

Punning on "place" throughout the story, O'Connor reconfigures the word so that it can hold various meanings. It can stand for physical place, as when Astor questions Mrs. Shortley's definition of displaced persons as those who "ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go." Astor counters with, "It seem like they here, though...If they here, they somewhere" (*Complete* 199). A second use of the word, already demonstrated above, defines place as "job," a work position to be held. In a third sense, place can stand for social position/power, as when Mrs. McIntyre tells Mrs. Shortley, "And all I've got is the dirt under my feet!" and Mrs. Shortley thinks to herself, "You hire and fire..." (*Complete* 203). Finally, "place" (predictably enough) has a spiritual level, on which people can recognize their "true country"—which O'Connor considers to be "what is eternal and absolute" (*Mystery* 27)—by way of understanding their limitations.

In this story, it is Mr. Guizac who brings all the other central characters to a recognition of these limitations. With his hard work, his "dirty and all-knowing and unreformed" language, and his complete disregard for the purity of white Southern womanhood, Mr. Guizac poses a threat that causes everyone to call into question the position he or she inhabits. Despite their attempts to hold positions built on declarations of difference, the characters are brought from what John Desmond calls their "false, detached 'place[s]' of immunity" (40) to convergence, to a knowledge of sameness.

III. The Dilemma of Sameness and Other in O'Connor: "The Artificial Nigger"

Time and again O'Connor's stories teach us the lesson to be learned in "The Displaced Person": that claiming a place for oneself in this world on the basis of difference is futile. All of her characters who attempt this, trying to disengage themselves from others, are thwarted, brought to conver-

gence by the action of the narrative. They are made to recognize their fundamental sameness.

But it is interesting to compare O'Connor's condemnation of differentiation in her fiction with the less formal (certainly less public) statements she makes on race and social position in her letters and lectures. Sometimes her private ramblings seem directly in line with her fictional purpose, as when she writes to about a nurse who cared for her in the hospital.

One of my nurses was a dead ringer for Mrs. Turpin [the central character in "Revelation"].... She told me all the time what a good nurse she was. Her favorite grammatical construction was "it were." She said she treated everybody alike whether it were a person with money or a black nigger. She told me all about the low life in Wilkinson County. I seldom know in any given circumstances whether the Lord is giving me a reward or a punishment. She didn't know she was funny and it was agony to laugh and I reckon she increased my pain about 100%. (*Habit* 569)

But because O'Connor was always laughing at people's limited ways of thinking, because she was always both opinionated and judgmental, she was also constantly making the kinds of distinctions for which her characters are punished. To read *Mystery and Manners* and *Habit of Being* is to get a fairly solid idea of what O'Connor is not: she is not a Yankee; she is not a Protestant; she wants nothing to do with "liberals," and she is not like the people who work on her mother's farm, either the white workers who "look like they've been joined up with the human race for only a couple of months now" (*Habit* 54) or the niggers/Negroes/colored people (all terms O'Connor uses abundantly throughout her letters), Shot, Jack and Louise, about whom she often tells stories. These real figures in O'Connor's life (and others she concocted) seem to have provided her with much entertainment, as well as great fodder for her work. O'Connor's fiction is filled with characters who are, very obviously, quite different from herself. Difference is played out at its extreme in O'Connor's use of the grotesque, her inclusion of "freaks" of many varieties (from hermaphro-

dities to “nimpermaniacs” to mummies) as “[figures] for our essential displacement” (*Mystery* 45). But there are other Others used in her fiction, ones whom she would not have called “freaks,” but who were certainly intended to be different from herself (and from the central characters of her stories). Among these Others rank O’Connor’s black characters, who (like freaks) often embody “mystery” and serve as the agents of grace in the narratives.

O’Connor’s use of her black characters in this way does not have to be problematic. After all, the black characters are often placed in privileged positions in terms of the narrative action, from which they (in the earlier stories) supply simple wisdom and (in the later stories) respond to bigotry with an anger and violence that brings about the “redemption” of other, erring (white) characters. But there are some interesting implications to O’Connor’s positing black characters as embodiments of mystery or agents of redemptive grace. To whom, for instance, are these characters and what they represent “mysterious”? If mystery is that which is unknown or unknowable, and her black characters are positioned in such a way that they represent or call to mind mystery, then who is, by implication, the knower? Who, then, is “unknowable” and separate (Other)? And who is always “redeemed” in the stories? The black characters, as they act as catalysts *for* the redemption of white characters, seem to hold O’Connor’s favor in these stories, not needing such redemption themselves.⁵ But her choice to make them catalysts, and not central figures in the stories, has been the topic of debate.

The story most often discussed in this debate is “The Artificial Nigger.” In this story, the two central characters, Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, take a trip to the big city. This trip, which Mr. Head calls a “moral mission” is really the culmination of a long-standing grudge, for Mr. Head is trying to prove to Nelson that the city holds no charm, no real appeal, so that the boy will want to “stay at home for the rest of his life” (*Complete* 251). Grandfather and grandson are engaged in a battle of wills, and at the center of this battle is the issue of knowledge. Both want to claim knowledge of the city, Mr. Head because he has been there two times before and Nelson because he con-

⁵ Ralph Wood comments on the seemingly “fair” treatment the author gives her black characters: “I can think, in fact, of only four blacks who come under O’Connor’s authorial censure, whereas all of her white characters receive severe condemnation for their sins” (109).

siders this his second trip (having been born there). As they prepare for the trip, their argument hinges on whether or not Nelson will recognize a “nigger” when he sees one. “Place” becomes in this story, then, not just a distinction between city and country but also the position of power that one can establish through knowledge of (among other things) racial difference. Mr. Head uses his own ability to make this differentiation as a means of wielding power over Nelson, who claims that he “probably saw lots of niggers” when he lived in the city before. Mr. Head, unwittingly suggesting a theory of race as construct, retorts, “A six-month-old child don’t know a nigger from anybody else” (*Complete* 252).

On the train, on their way into the city, Nelson proves his grandfather’s theory to be true. Drawing Nelson’s attention to a black steward in their car, Mr. Head asks him, “What was that?”

“A man,” the boy said and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted. “What kind of a man?” Mr. Head persisted, his voice expressionless.

“A fat man,” Nelson said. He was beginning to feel that he had better be cautious. (*Complete* 255)

When Nelson learns that the “man” was in fact a “nigger,” he becomes angry and embarrassed, emotion he converts into resentment of the black man.

Nelson turned backward again and looked where the Negro had disappeared. He felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them. (*Complete* 256)

In the city, though, the knowledge which has granted Mr. Head the upper hand escapes him. Lost in a black neighborhood, the two are forced to ask directions of a black woman. The narrator describes Nelson’s perception of the woman.

He stood drinking in every detail of her. His eyes traveled up from her great knees to her forehead and then made a triangular path from the glisten-

ing sweat on her neck down and across her tremendous bosom and over her bare arm back to where her fingers lay hidden in her hair. He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel. (*Complete* 262)

O'Connor comments on this scene in a letter written to Ben Griffith in 1955.

You may be right that Nelson's reaction to the colored woman is too pronounced, but I meant for her in an almost physical way to suggest the mystery of existence to him—he not only has never seen a nigger but he didn't know any women and I felt that such a black mountain of maternity would give him the required shock to start those black forms moving up from his unconscious. (*Habit* 78)

This passage from O'Connor's letters, alongside the excerpt from the story, points directly to one of the elements of the controversy surrounding this story: that of representation of "blackness." It is difficult to guess what O'Connor means by "black forms," but in association with the character of the black woman, one could only imagine that she means to suggest a traditional (religious/allegorical or psychological) interpretation of "darkness." Blackness in the story serves a purpose that Lucinda MacKethan calls "expos[ing] white southerners to their own dark selves" (30). The implications of such a remark need no extensive explanation; nor do the implications (discussed above) of associating this black character with "the mystery of existence." These ideas of "mystery" and "darkness"/"blackness" both serve to place this and other black characters in the role of Other in O'Connor's fiction.

Claire Kahane and Melvin Williams, mentioned above, were among the first to discuss this problem of representation in O'Connor's work. Williams and Kahane each point to what the latter aptly calls the artificiality of O'Connor's

⁶ Doreen Fowler argues that O'Connor uses this notion of "artificiality" to "deconstruct the myth of white male superiority": "[O'Connor] reveals that the difference between white and black is a matter of language and social construction, that the racial other on whose otherness white male superiority depends is not other but the same, and that the boundaries that divide white from black must be continuously and strenuously reinforced culturally, because, without this cultural reinforcement, they collapse back into one another and form one whole, one humanity" (22).

⁷ Lucinda MacKethan elaborates on this idea of O'Connor's black characters' "redemptive agency," pointing out its "ambiguous relation to racial difference and the convenience—what Morrison calls the 'economy'—of stereotype" (39). But she also claims that O'Connor understands and incorporates this ambiguity into her fiction, and this I find to be altogether debatable.

Perhaps O'Connor understood that she was

representation of blacks.⁶ Williams argues that "Black characters are for the most part only 'issues' instead of people for O'Connor. They never change, never are explored on more than a superficial level" (130). O'Connor recognizes this shortcoming in her work (though surely she did not think of it in those terms), "I can only see [colored people] from the outside. I wouldn't have the courage of Miss Shirley Ann Grau to go inside their heads" (*Habit* 159). Interestingly, Alice Walker praises O'Connor for taking this approach, saying that the distance she holds from her black characters allows them to be free from the "landscape" that could have been created for them. She writes,

This is a kind of grace many writers do not have when dealing with representatives of an oppressed people within a story, and their insistence on knowing everything, on being God, in fact, has burdened us with more stereotypes than we can ever hope to shed. (Walker 76)

But others have claimed that stereotypes are precisely what O'Connor hands us. (The portrayal of the black woman above—as sultry, oversexed mammy—is certainly a fine example.) Melvin Williams says that the problem goes beyond stereotyping, though, to O'Connor's use of black characters in "functional roles, [in which they] illuminate her white characters while not revealing themselves" (132). Black characters, he writes, are used as "catalysts only to precipitate a white reaction" (Williams 132).⁷ Dean Shackleford argues that this use of black characters as "outsiders" is not problematic, that all of O'Connor's characters are in essence "outsiders," and that these particular outsiders (freaks and other "minorities," to use his term) are used "to initiate a response from her central characters and to effect some change, albeit minor, in their perceptions" (79). Consciously or unconsciously, Shackleford has used the very language that makes this issue worthy of consideration: "central," "outsider" and "minorities." That black characters for O'Connor are simply "outsiders" serving to define and change "central" characters is precisely the point Williams makes.

The final scene of "The Artificial Nigger" is perhaps the best example of the phenomenon Williams describes.

By this point in the story, Mr. Head has so thoroughly alienated himself from Nelson (by getting them lost and, at one point in the story, denying his relation to his grandson) that the boy refuses to drink from the same water fountain as his grandfather. Here again, O'Connor uses a well-known association with blackness to point out a segregation of sorts between Mr. Head and Nelson. What reinstates the bond between the two at the story's conclusion is yet another image of blackness: the "artificial nigger" of the story's title. The plaster lawn statue provides Mr. Head an opportunity to say something to Nelson. He exclaims, "An artificial nigger!" and the boy repeats the exclamation, "in Mr. Head's exact tone" (*Complete* 268). The two continue to stand looking at the statue.

They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some *monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat*. They could both feel it *dissolving their differences like an action of mercy*. Mr. Head had never known before what mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now. He looked at Nelson and understood that he must say something to the child to show that he was still wise and in the look the boy returned he saw a hungry need for that assurance. Nelson's eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence. Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement and heard himself say, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one." (*Complete* 269, emphasis mine)

With this, the two characters begin their journey home, Mr. Head contemplating the "act of mercy" that has "covered up his pride like a flame and consumed it," and Nelson commenting, "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!" (*Complete* 270)

It is this final scene that has been central to the controversy surrounding the story in terms of race. O'Connor's own comments on the story serve, as usual, to fuel this controversy. O'Connor writes, "What I had in mind to suggest with the "artificial nigger" was the redemptive qual-

exploiting black stereotypes in a way that was, ultimately, subversive. But regardless of this possibility, her association of "blackness" with "darkness" and "mystery" still posits black characters in the position of the Other in ways that are worth examining.

ity of the Negro's suffering for us all" (*Habit* 78). Taken without this comment from O'Connor, the symbol of the artificial nigger could be read (as perhaps Williams reads it) as a reflection and agent of change for Mr. Head and Nelson. But read with the comment, the symbol seems to go beyond this, to expose a desire on O'Connor's part to appropriate black suffering for white redemption. Claire Kahane has criticized her on this point, saying that to make the American black experience "the condition of Everyman," to say "We are all niggers," is to avoid "the potentially explosive social consequences of black rage and white guilt" in favor of "an equality of human helplessness" (Kahane 184). In this case, O'Connor's theological position suggests a universalization that serves her own white, Catholic sensibility, allowing her to claim once again that we are all "the same" in our limitations. Kahane, at the end of her article, argues that O'Connor's vision was "more closely bound up with the biases of her time and place than most critics would readily admit," and that her theology (what Kahane calls "her fantasies of obliteration") serve not only to cover up but to fuel those biases (198).

The theology also distracts us from the real issue of redemption in the story. Some critics (including Deanna Ludwin and Frederick Asals) ask how Mr. Head and Nelson have really been changed. "How have their attitudes toward blacks been altered?" Asals asks (91). I argue that their attitudes toward blacks haven't changed at all; that it is, rather, their attitudes toward *themselves* which have changed. They have perhaps come to recognize their own essential and shared "blackness," but recognizing that seems to do little to effect change outside their own minds. When Mr. Head realizes his limitation, as when Nelson realizes he has been "duped" by the black man on the train, he seeks to assert his position even more insistently by way of differentiation, saying, "They ain't got enough real ones here." The narrator indicates that neither Mr. Head nor Nelson is completely confident in this assertion, but neither of them articulates any sort of lack of confidence in his position. It is perhaps understood between them that something has changed, but they do not have to recognize it aloud. And in fact, Nelson's proclamation that he is glad

he has seen the city once but will never go back indicates that they may never again have to recognize this change. They can keep themselves separate from the city, from blackness, and from their own humiliation, secure in their “place” in the country. Nothing really has to change.

IV. O'Connor and Social Change: “Everything that Rises Must Converge”

The question of change, as it lies unanswered at the end of “The Artificial Nigger,” is crucial to an exploration of O'Connor's place in terms of social sensibility. As interested as she was in how people are “placed” socially (at least insofar as that social placement suggests a theological dimension), she was notably less interested in actual social change. Many critics have commented on how O'Connor seems to have been all but completely unsympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement, even though it is clear that many of the stories in her second volume (*Everything That Rises Must Converge*) are informed and animated by the movement. From referring to the Catholic Church's interest in matters of race as “yapping about racial justice” (*Habit* 499) in 1962, to saying in 1964 that she prefers Martin Luther King (even though he isn't “the ages [sic] great saint”) to the “philosophising prophesying pontificating” kind of Negro like Baldwin (*Complete* 1208), O'Connor expresses a range of positions on civil rights. Sometimes it seems that she was completely uninterested in the movement. Sometimes it seems that she felt (like most Southern whites at that time) somewhat threatened by it. Sometimes she even suggests that she is an integrationist, upset about injustices she witnesses. But always she approaches Civil Rights with reservation, for it seems that her idea of social change had little to do with radical politics, revolution, or action of any kind. In a letter written to Janet McKane in 1963, O'Connor discusses a recent event having to do with local black integration efforts.

One item on their list was to integrate the library. It turns out the library has been integrated for a year and they didn't know it. Nine Negroes had cards. That's the way things have to be done around here—completely without publicity. Then there is

no trouble. I hope the rest of it can be taken care of as well as the library did it, but I have my doubts about it. We shall see. (*Habit* 542)

This statement is fairly typical of O'Connor's sentiments. In most of her writings, she does indeed reveal anti-segregationist sympathies, but only insofar as she doesn't see herself supporting injustice. We have to acknowledge, though, that she did think social change had to come about quietly, with no "trouble," and that this belief not only expresses what would now be considered an extraordinary naivete on her part with regard to the idea of change, but also attempts to conceal a defense of place.⁸ In an interview with C. Ross Mullins in 1963, O'Connor describes race relations in the South as being dependent upon "a code of manners based on mutual charity" (*Mystery* 233). She writes,

When you have a code of manners based on charity, then when the charity fails—as it is going to do constantly—you've got those manners there to preserve each race from small intrusions on each other. (*Mystery* 233–4)

Furthermore, she suggests that the South has always demonstrated and valued these manners, which "however lopsided or inadequate they may have been, provided enough social discipline to hold *us* together and give *us* an identity" (*Mystery* 234, emphasis mine). The problems here, obviously, are that first, O'Connor hearkens to a time when there was one Southern (black and white) identity; and that second, she assumes that the "manners" have worked for everyone adequately, if not equally. She realizes that things are changing, saying that the "new manners will have to be based on what was best in the old ones—in their real basis of charity and necessity" (*Mystery* 234). The word "charity" in this discussion is perplexing as well, in that it calls to mind power relations in which certain people are in need of charity and others are in the position to give it. But what is interesting about her use of the word "charity" is that she speaks of "mutual charity." She seems to recognize that, along with the changing face of the Southern social scene, the politics of "charity" will themselves be altered. White people may be in a position to need such

⁸ Both Ralph Wood and (more recently) Henry M. W. Russell explain O'Connor's "gradualist" approach to black civil rights in terms of her Catholic faith, pointing out that she "did not trust a social conscience divorced from Christian principles" (Russell 37). Wood goes on to suggest briefly that "the fear of moral presumption can lead to moral inertia," and that it is fortunate that the Civil Rights Movement did not pursue the gradualist solution that O'Connor had in mind. However, both of these writers (Wood and Russell) ultimately consider the author's religious convictions to be an adequate and satisfying answer to the question of her inactivity and inconsistency where social (racial) matters are concerned.

charity themselves now.

Many of the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, published posthumously, engage this issue of manners and social change. Perhaps the one that does this most thoroughly is the title story of the volume, which O'Connor considered her one formal "statement" on the race issue.

As in "The Artificial Nigger," place in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is determined by a kind of knowledge. In this case, though, it is not so much a knowledge of Other as one of self. In the story, Julian (a liberal) is accompanying his mother (an old-fashioned bigot) on her bus ride to her exercise class, because "[s]he would not ride the buses at night by herself since they had been integrated" (*Complete* 405). Julian's mother contends that "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere," to which he replies, "Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are" (*Complete* 407). This idea of "knowing who one is," given the changing social struggle, is the central tension of the story, and the different memories and interactions (interactions with black passengers on the bus, in particular) brought into the narrative serve to call the two main characters' knowledge into question at all times.

The tension finally reaches a summit at the point when Julian's mother, having flirted with a little black boy throughout the bus ride, offers him a "bright new penny" as they get off the bus. The little boy's mother strikes Julian's mother with her pocketbook, shouting, "He don't take nobody's pennies!" (*Complete* 418). Julian, who had tried to prevent his mother from offering the penny, immediately castigates her after this happens, telling her, "You got exactly what you deserved...the old world is gone," and (ultimately), "You aren't who you think you are" (*Complete* 418-19). But when his mother suffers a stroke and dies as a result of the blow she has received, it is (ironically) Julian who is revealed to be self-deceived with regard to his identity. Where he wanted to disengage himself as fully as possible from his mother and her values at the beginning of the story, he wants nothing more than to have her back at the end.

In the same letter that scolds Eudora Welty for her treatment of the “topical” in her fiction, O’Connor absolves herself from the same wrongdoing, saying that she “got away with it in ‘Everything that Rises Must Converge’ but only because [she said] a plague on everybody’s house as far as the race business goes” (*Habit* 537). This is an oft-quoted passage, and many critics seem to be content with the comment it makes about the story. But others have been troubled by what O’Connor says here. It seems that to universalize a problem like this, to say that the race issue is one in which all parties (bigot, angry black woman, and liberal) are equally culpable and punishable, is to simplify the matter shockingly. Indeed, the worth of the story seems to be that it doesn’t let anybody off easily, that it doesn’t try to reduce race struggles to their basic, surface, political appearances. However, there are some problems with the fact that the story doesn’t privilege any particular position, but rather chooses to attack all such positions. The problem inherent here is one that is clearly expressed in Irving Howe’s 1965 review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. About the title story, Howe comments that “Everything becomes subject to ironic discount except the principle of irony itself” (qtd. in Johnson 17). Johnson elaborates on Howe’s point:

Howe, then, would not agree with O’Connor’s own defense of her story and its all-around condemnation of the characters as an excuse for her use of the topical: it is a strategy of avoidance, not engagement, and it is a strategy that does not question its own ideology. (17)

This does indeed seem to be the problem with O’Connor’s broad, sweeping indictment of all who are interested in or resistant to the issues of racial justice. In condemning all, O’Connor attempts to establish her own place outside the issues her story addresses. She sees herself as a person who can comment on racial problems “objectively” without acknowledging that she, as a white Southern woman, has a huge investment in these issues where her own place is concerned.

Furthermore, her condemnation suggests a striking pessimism on her part in terms of what she considered to be

the actual possibilities of active, conscious social change. Ralph Wood comments (rightly, I think) that “the problem with O’Connor’s cultural conservatism is that it is sometimes clearer about what it opposes than what it proposes” (103). It is true that O’Connor was not really one for “supporting” much of anything (except, of course, Catholic doctrine). She was certainly not in support of Julian’s approach to social change, the “liberal approach,” which is

that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own efforts. Therefore, evil in this light is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc. and all mysteries will eventually be cleared up. (*Habit* 302-3).

As such a person, the liberal ignores the workings of mystery, and instead relies on his or her own knowledge and power to perfect humanity.⁹ The great irony in this is that in warning us against seeking this perfection, she also appears to be suggesting that we can make no efforts to move toward that ideal without flying in the face of God. Again, theology gets in the way of (rather than supports) social justice. And this is still the major problem with O’Connor’s thinking on race and faith. In saying that we must wait for God to perfect and “fix” humanity, O’Connor ignores the suffering of the present and fails to recognize that her theological position is made easier to hold by the fact that in her social, racial, and discursive position she does not suffer in this way.

⁹ D. Dean Shackleford comments on the way that O’Connor’s stories “suggest that social oppression and other earthly issues take second place to the individual’s willingness to surrender himself, his feelings of rejection, and his pain to God” (80).

V. Conclusion

O’Connor considered “The Artificial Nigger” one of her best stories. In a letter to Father John McCown, she writes that she likes it so much “because there is a great deal more in it” than she herself understood (*Habit* 140). It is rare for her to admit that there was any level on which she did not understand her own writing (or herself) fully, and this is an interesting passage for that reason. Ted Spivey, a correspondent of O’Connor’s, comments on her work in a similar way, arguing against critics like Sally Fitzgerald who would like to envision “one true likeness of O’Connor.”

No one likeness of any writer exists, no matter

how good her letters were. There is much that she spoke in conversation to me and to others that does not appear in her letters. There is much in her fiction that is unlike anything she ever wrote, spoke, or even understood. (Spivey 275)

What Spivey says here is important not only because it challenges us not to demand consistency of O'Connor, but also because it calls to mind how many components there are to a person's position. In this paper, I have not hoped to define what O'Connor's one, fixed position is (on race or anything else). I have, rather, been concerned with the places she seems to occupy at different points, and the play of different ideas that make up that changing position.

O'Connor's stories indicate the degree to which the idea of place as "position" intrigued her. Her critics have always appreciated her for this reason. But what has repeatedly been swept under the carpet is the matter of O'Connor's own placement in the larger discourse on race. To read her in this light, even now, is to risk being misunderstood as attempting to demonize the author unnecessarily or to accuse her of racist thinking. O'Connor's examination of the intricacies of social, racial, and spiritual "placement" in her day is arguably the most enriching element of her fiction, but it does not absolve her from being the focus of the same type of examination. Indeed, it draws attention to the *need* for such scholarship. If we are to fully and honestly appreciate the work of Flannery O'Connor, we must not continue assuming that her theological position (or any of the other "places" she inhabited) granted her an autonomous and transcendent discursive position outside the fictional world she constructs.

Henry M.W. Russell remarks insightfully that "The academy's desire for a racially edifying novelist whose sensibilities always match her opinions and beliefs may prove to be as elusive and naive as the 1950s desire for an 'edifying' Catholic novelist, a desire that O'Connor mightily resisted" (40). Indeed, if we are hoping for this kind of consistency in reading O'Connor, we are likely to be greatly disappointed. But it seems that most of her most "ardent admirers" (to use her own term) in recent years are not

trying to demand such consistency as much as they are finding a way to appreciate the *inconsistency* that so often presents itself. They are doing this, not in an attempt to point out the hypocrisy or the racism inherent in O'Connor's work,¹⁰ but in an effort to see her as placed within the mire of racial, social, and spiritual upheaval about which she speaks so powerfully.

¹⁰ What Russell refers to as "McCarthyite irresponsibility" (43).

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