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«FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FRACTURED FAMILIES: MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN CONFLICT»

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The mother/daughter theme, so present in contemporary fiction, can be traced back to the Greek myth of Persephone and her mother Demeter (650 BC). Stories of loss of motherhood and maternal/filial transformation are found throughout the history of literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, women Modernist writers brought the portrayal of relationships between women into the foreground, thus investing this theme with a new significance. As a result, the mother/daughter plot became essential to many of these authors' works. Changes in the organization of women's productive lives offered them new perspectives, allowing them to redefine the maternal,[1] and the domestic became artistic as women writers began to focus on their own experiences, told through their own voices (Gubar 299).

In Flannery O'Connor's short fiction, this theme is recurrent. In 1966, two years after the author's death from lupus erythematosus, Stanley Edgar Hyman referred to her unique portrayal of the mother/daughter dyad as «the duo of practical mother and dreamy daughter on a dairy farm» (30). In fact, in the writer's depiction of these fictional families, it is difficult for the reader to overlook the allusions to her imposed retirement to «Andalusia,» her mother's farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. Readers familiar with her written correspondence and her biography will find that many elements

[1] Due to successive wars, women had been left in charge of small plantations or farms while trying simultaneously to raise their children, thus assuming both male and female roles whose boundaries were clearly defined by a patriarchal society. Women who had been restricted to a private sphere during the Victorian period were moving into the public sphere, and this gave way to an increasing feeling of anxiety over gender roles. When husbands returned from the war, claiming the reinstatement of their position, many women found it difficult to return to their previous roles of submissive wives and child-bearers. In fact, within a period of 80 years, southern women had been forced to shift back and forth between the roles of head of family and Southern Lady on three occasions (Hanson 205; Verderome 143).

coincide. O'Connor's widowed mother, Regina O'Connor, ran her farm with the help of tenant workers, while her daughter wrote. Although O'Connor does not single out a Regina prototype in her fiction, parallels can be easily traced. Her fictional farm widows, like Regina, are concerned with appearances, hard work, common sense and being lady-like (Nichols 27). Several of her stories share these features, and in one of them, «Good Country People,» biographical coincidences are remarkable.

Strangely, and despite the predominance of this theme in the United States from post-World-War-I years on, southern literature rarely confronts the mother/daughter theme until the 1970s. O'Connor could be considered an exception, for she is perhaps the pre-1970 author who directs her attention towards this subject most insistently (Bennett 186). Today in contemporary literature, this has become a central theme in women's fiction. Feminist movements have contributed greatly to its consolidation by encouraging women to give their own versions as mothers and daughters (Beilke 152); Amy Tan's *The Good Luck Club* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are just two examples which immediately come to mind. Koppelman goes as far to say that nowadays, «Women who write fiction write stories about mothers and daughters» (xv). The short-story form is particularly suited to this theme because of its immediacy and condensed imagery (Nice 5). However, in the South of the 1950s, the treatment of this theme was still at an experimental stage, and as a result, O'Connor is seen by some as the precursor to contemporary female authors in her scrutiny of the traditional southern mother at odds with her modern, intelligent daughter (Bennett 186).

In O'Connor's stories, we are therefore presented with mothers and daughters who are prisoners of a manipulative, destructive relationship. This dysfunctionality stunts any emotional growth, any possibility of daughter or mother fully reaching maturity. As the father figure is not present, there is neither a mediator to ensure the daughter's separation from her mother nor a companion to share the burden of running a farm (Lebeck 124). This lack of balance gives way to a practical, self-centered mother, obsessed with being successful in her venture. She sees success as that defined by the southern male. In this patriarchal society, a woman assuming a masculine role lived by the values which corresponded to this role. In O'Connor's social context, assertiveness, independence, objectivity and rationality are «masculine» qualities, while dependency, emotion and subjectivity are seen as «feminine» characteristics and held in contempt (Nice 5). Thus, O'Connor's farm mothers adopt masculine values in order to succeed, pushing their feminine «weaknesses» aside, and in the process, alienating themselves from their children, who are victims, in a sense, of male ethics.

To understand how O'Connor's mothers fail, we must examine the meaning of the term «motherhood» itself and consider the concept within a mother/daughter framework. The uniqueness of the bond that exists between the two is undeniable. Adrienne Rich writes that this bond is a result of the victimization suffered by both (245). Mothers have accepted the limitations imposed upon them by a patriarchal society which requires them to define themselves through maternity, a human activity which has simultaneously been sanctified and socially devalued (De la Concha 148). The allocation of childrearing responsibilities to women both debilitates them –depriving them of any real power base– and supports male domination in the society and in the family (Polatnick 33-37). They perpetuate this role in their daughters, providing them with the very same mothering

capacities. Thus, and as Nancy Chodorow points out, daughter and mother identify with one another in their shared feminine inferiority (7, 113). This closeness can give way to a variety of contradictory emotions: hostility and resentment often coexist with mutual support and dependence (Fox-Genovese xvi). However, in O'Connor's female characters, seldom do we observe a concurrence of these elements. It appears that there is an absence of female bonding in her stories, an act which, according to Chodorow, should have taken place during the child's pre-oedipal stage (108), and whose absence may help us to understand why her women characters treat each other as they do.

Sara Ruddick asserts that motherhood implies protecting one's child from danger, fostering his/her growth, encouraging change and helping him/her to meet the demands of society by producing an acceptable adult (215). However, there is an essential element missing from this allegation: gender. For it is not the same to mother a boy as it is to mother a girl. The former is taught to be independent and to cut loose from his mother's power, while the daughter is not. Fox-Genovese argues that there is a lot of truth to the popular saying: «Your son is your son till he gets him a wife, your daughter is your daughter for the rest of your life» (xv). However, this adage, while it may reassure mothers, does not take into account the daughter's point of view. When bringing up a girl, the concept of being an «acceptable adult» necessarily implies colluding with patriarchy, thus stifling autonomy and selfhood. Women, according to Hirsch, essentially lie to their daughters, avoiding the truth about their own experience of bondage (165). In any case, the mother is often confronted with a difficult dilemma: she must decide whether to pass on her knowledge of socializing and nurturing or to encourage her daughter to confront masculine values in order to live a more fulfilling life as a woman. Many modern mothers try to do both, and it is likely that one of the reasons for women's feelings of frustration and anxiety today resides precisely in the difficult communion between such antagonistic points of view.

Thus, we should examine what is to be expected in a healthy mother/daughter relationship, bearing in mind the complexity of the context in which it evolves. Returning to the story of Persephone and Demeter, we can observe the various stages that a mother/daughter relationship undergoes until both women reach maturity. As children, girls grow up with a feeling of oneness and identification with their mother. However, as they reach adolescence, a need for separateness increases. In order to help their daughters reach adulthood, mothers must relinquish control, which is not always easy. The mother's new challenge is to try to find the happy medium between overprotection and maternal deprivation by balancing what Chodorow refers to as «feminine connection» and «masculine separation» (Forbes 140).

When Persephone is abducted by Hades, Demeter grieves her loss so intensely that her husband, Zeus, decides to intervene; thus, he acts as the mediator that Lebeck refers to (124). When Demeter is finally reunited with Persephone, she realizes that her sexuality has been awakened and that she will have to share her daughter with Hades. The acknowledgement that she and her offspring are no longer one helps both women to move on to another stage of womanhood, in which each will be a separate entity while still sharing common bonds (Bassoff 17-21). Thus, adolescence is a crucial period in both daughter and mother's lives in which maternal love –which is never static– is transformed. In a healthy mother/daughter relationship, both women

emerge from the experience with new knowledge about themselves. If the mother has supported her daughter's need for self-definition, her maternal power will diminish, but her daughter will have a greater capacity to confront life on her own. The mother, in turn, will be able to devote her energy to new enterprises (Bassoff 9, 12).

However, when we turn to O'Connor's fictional mothers, we will find that they indulge but do not nurture, collude with patriarchy but do not compensate this collusion with affection or mutual support. Hence, within the theoretical framework we have just reviewed, they do not seem to fit in. Her women characters appear, indeed, to be victims of the southern code, but they do not manifest the bond which Rich claims is a product of this victimization (245). Since this tie has not been developed, they become locked in a feeling of ambivalence which denies any spiritual or emotional growth (Kuykendall 265). Estrangement, therefore, brings their relationship to a stalemate. O'Connor's women characters are thus suspended in a permanent state of non-communication. Daughters clearly perceive this deficiency, and react aggressively by treating their mothers with resentment, contempt and even hatred, for «There is no indifference or cruelty we can tolerate less than the indifference or cruelty of our mothers» (Rich 232). Her mothers respond with one of their most outstanding traits: denial.

These mothers are not provoked by their daughters' verbal attacks, nor do they bother to think about why their relationship is not working, believing themselves free of all guilt since they are faithfully complying with the southern code. Their discourse is riddled with one cliché after another: «It takes all kinds to make the world,» «nothing is perfect,» and «other people have their opinions too» (*Complete* 272-273). Other mothers thank the Lord for the good things in life, no matter how grim things get. They «are imprisoned within their own egocentric worlds, and the narrow boundaries of their self-imposed prisons are mapped out by their own inane utterances» (Portch 135). Misbehaved children, on the other hand, are simply ignored; no disciplinary measures are taken, no limits established. The more O'Connor's fictional daughters vie for attention, the less attention they get. The reader must be careful not to mistake the ladylike behavior of O'Connor's mothers for respect and affection towards their daughters. Although daughters are often cruel and verbally abusive to their mothers, the mothers' denial of their predicament is just as reprehensible.

The bottom line is that both mother and daughter are rivals, each trying to exercise her power over the other. Babinec reminds us that this is normal in a mother/daughter relationship (17). Mothers will forever try to teach their daughters to fit in by making them conform to their own values; this is logical, as they know no others. During adolescence, when a girl approaches womanhood, a struggle for power between the two, brought on by conflicting values, is a necessary stage in the development process (Bennett 188). However, O'Connor takes this confrontation to extremes. It is common for an adolescent to feel resentment towards her mother, but the display of contempt between mothers and daughters in her fiction is so acute that it seems doubtful that any positive evolution will take place. Chodorow's assertion that women who grow up in matriarchal settings are less likely to reject the feminine role (184) seems to confirm the developmental standstill that O'Connor's fictional women have reached. O'Connor's daughters may fight vehemently against what is expected of them, but finally they comply, or at least resign themselves, to the dictates of the «Southern Way.»

The degree of transformation and reconciliation between family members is slight in O'Connor's short stories, and even harder to perceive in O'Connor's mother/daughter tales. Her women characters are locked in a cyclical pattern of abusiveness which offers little chance for escape. The possibility of reaching a reconciliatory stage seems unlikely. Both women are stubbornly fixed in their antagonistic roles, each unwilling to yield to the other's demands. Daughters dress like tomboys to humiliate their mothers in public. Mothers exalt tenant farmers' teen daughters when they get unexpectedly pregnant and have to marry. In their struggle for power, mother and daughter are so obsessed with asserting themselves that neither considers the possibility of sharing the other's values.

The behavior of O'Connor's fictional mothers can be justified, in part, if we keep their socio-historical context in mind. Mothers, in general, will inevitably strive to impose their knowledge upon their daughters –in a healthy mother/daughter relationship this imposition is conceived as a way of protecting children from danger (Ruddick 215). However, one is skeptical of the mothers' purpose in her fiction since they are presented as superficial, hypocritical women. Even so, and although it is difficult to sympathize with these characters, we can attempt to understand their attitude towards motherhood by contextualizing it.

The daughters of these stories give the impression of being entirely out-of-line, at least initially. Although their sarcasm and wit attract the reader, their behavior is no less startling. Why do they react so vehemently to their mothers' criticism? We have seen that one of the characteristics of O'Connor's narrative is her use of exaggeration. These young women are physically unattractive and often suffer from some type of disablement. They are mentally disabled, have bad eyesight, or are one-legged, and have no choice but to depend on their mothers. Several of the daughters in these stories are clever, and pride themselves on their ability to outsmart their mothers. However, the latter do not value their daughters' intellect. In fact, they are ashamed that they have not been able to produce an acceptable community member.

O'Connor's fictional mothers always have the upper hand, as they have the whole of southern society backing them. This self-assurance manifests itself in a righteous, smug attitude towards their offspring. The former feel wronged, and therefore, victims of their idiosyncrasies. Their peculiar daughters –thought to be self-parodies of O'Connor herself (Wood 101)– put a strain on their social standing. Every time they look at each other, the mother is reminded of her failure, for in a patriarchal society, women measure their success through their children's success (Beringer 134). They cannot understand why their daughters are so intent on rebelling against them when they have been provided for, and consequently, they project their disappointment on them. It is precisely this attitude of complacency mixed with reproach which sets their children off. The daughters' only defense mechanism resides in the manifestation of anger, sometimes rage. The greater the feeling of helplessness, the greater the frustration and contempt. And while the mothers seem resigned to accept this situation, the daughters do not. The latter fight desperately for recognition and respect, although little progress will be made, as they are all caught up in a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape.

We have no way of knowing how much resentment O'Connor felt towards her mother. Through her letters, we might deduce that as an intelligent, educated woman

brought up among female relatives who doted on her as a child, she was able to control her feelings of frustration at having to be practically house-ridden and dependent on another person. In her letters, she often expresses her gratitude towards her mother, who essentially made it possible for her daughter to fully dedicate her life to writing. Regina was her contact with Milledgeville society and greatly responsible for the acceptance and respect that the community members showed Flannery. She was a go-between who conquered the difficult task of making her peculiar daughter fit in. Thanks to Regina's constant intervention in her daughter's social life –she scheduled visits, graciously declined invitations, and protected her daughter from intruders– O'Connor was able to live a comfortable, sociable life in rural Georgia and was grateful to her mother for accomplishing this feat.

Vivien Nice writes that ambivalence is a central theme in mother/daughter relationships and that it is a feeling that should not be denied (11). Surely Flannery, like any other daughter, fought for as much independence as her illness would permit. We learn from her letters that Regina did, on occasion, overstep her boundaries:

> My parent took advantage of my absence to clean up my room and install revolting ruffled curtains. I can't put the dust back but I have ultimated that the curtains have got to go, lest they ruin my prose. She looks forward to any departure of mine as an opportunity to ravage my room and it always looks shaken when I return to it. (*Habit* 215)

When O'Connor wrote this letter she was thirty-one years old and had been living with her mother at «Andalusia» for seven years. Her words manifest a frustration that she must have felt when Regina violated her privacy and tried to add a «feminine touch» to her daughter's space. Vivien Nice argues that resentment and love can exist side-by-side, especially during a woman's developmental stage (11). O'Connor, unfortunately, was in a static state of development. In a healthy mother/daughter relationship, reconciliation comes when a daughter is able to see her mother as a woman (230). O'Connor may have never reached this reconciliatory stage because her illness dictated that she forever be dependent on her mother. She, like many of her characters,was trapped in a developmental stage, unable to move forward to full maturity. In exchange for her mother's care and affection, she was obliged to partially sacrifice what Julia Kristeva refers to as the necessary process of «abjection» –the establishment of boundaries which retain a sense of difference from the mother (Oliver 3)– to acknowledge, and to a large degree yield to her mother's power over her.

Why speculate on the nature of O'Connor's relationship with her mother? Delving into the intimacy of their private lives may seem irreverent and unnecessary. If there were not such a disparity between her private and public manifestations, possibly her correspondence would be less significant. However, the controlled, loving and tolerant daughter of her letters strongly contrasts with her violent, visceral fictional daughters. Furthermore, there are so many coincidental elements between her fictional representations and her life that one cannot help but give credit to critical literature that concludes that O'Connor's peculiar depiction of family relationships may have been

either a redeeming process for her or a way of coping with a difficult and complex home scenario (Westling, *Sacred* 173; Beringer 133; Hendin 152).

Nevertheless, O'Connor's fictional mothers should not be seen as heartless predators. Although not easily likeable –O'Connor's characters rarely are– they and their children are victims of circumstance. Neither Regina nor the mothers in this collection can be fully blamed for their fractured families. In the past, women have been considered primarily responsible for children's psychological stress. Within the commonly applied Freudian, patriarchal framework, the mother figure has become a handy tool used to explain child behavior. In the first half of the twentieth century, little attention was paid to the effect that motherhood might have had on the mother herself:

> Freud did not discuss the mother's representations of the mother-child interaction, nor analyze the psychic consequences of mothering for the woman... North American culture has been able cleverly to use the theory of the child's «good» and «bad» mothers developed by analysts following Freud, to construct representations whose purpose is to manipulate women in, or out of, the work-force, in accordance with capitalism's needs. (Kaplan qtd. in Ozieblo 14)

In her treatment of mothers and daughters, one thing can be said in favor of O'Connor –she portrays both with equal harshness and disdain. All of her characters are guilty of something– generally pride, or one of its derivatives. There are no «good» mothers, but neither are there «good» daughters. All will be touched by a transcendental moment of grace –usually delivered by a male figure who acts as a catalyst– and all will be given the opportunity to learn from this experience.

Recent critical approaches have centered on the debate of whether or not O'Connor wrote from a feminist perspective and how her treatment of the women characters in her stories should be assessed. Her ambivalence towards the mother/daughter theme and her own personal experience make it difficult to reach any clear conclusions on this subject. On one hand, her women are defying southern tradition by assuming male roles. Indeed, they overcome the challenge of running a farm, but as mothers, they fail miserably in story after story. They are «successful in agrobusiness but incapable of imparting to their children either the importance of that ethic, a sense of reverence for the land on which their fortunes and opportunities depend, or a nurturing atmosphere of love and spiritual guidance» (Beringer 125). Westling claims that, ultimately, O'Connor was not a feminist, basing her conclusion on the final outcome of her stories («Flannery» 517).

For while it is true that O'Connor allows her female protagonists to defy male ethics, we see that they will eventually be punished for daring to do so. By the end of her stories, she has subdued and repressed them, restoring the balance in a world dominated by masculine values (Westling, *Sacred* 174). Her women clearly do not transgress the boundaries of gender. They are humiliated by the «Divine Masculine Authority» who seems to punish them for daring to deny their femininity (Westling, *Sacred* 173).

Hence, O'Connor's ambivalence towards mother/daughter relationships resides in their seemingly contradictory behavior in her stories. Her matriarchs are both

strong and selfish. They are victims of the southern code, yet they are not powerless. They believe in God, but their faith is superficial. They do everything required of good Christians with a complete mastery of southern manners but are neither ready nor willing to contemplate the mysteries of life, so essential to the understanding of human existence. O'Connor gives them the power to take one step forward, only to push them two steps back. Nevertheless, if we keep her socio-historical context in mind, we see that she is representing what she believed to be the southern reality. She does not write with the purpose of denouncing, but to portray her surroundings as she understands them. Bennett points out that writers like Welty and McCullers, while considered to be more committed to the feminist cause, omit the mother figure altogether, perhaps so as not to confront this issue (188). O'Connor may have never been able to resolve her contradictory feelings about mother and daughter ties, but at least she addressed them. Writing about these fractured families may have even served as a redemptive or cleansing process for her, as Westling suggests (*Sacred* 173).

If we are to accept the common claim that autobiographical elements are present in many of her stories, we will find the emotional tension between her characters disturbing. Why is there such a disparity between what we read in her letters and what she represents in her fiction? Her art seems to compromise her private life. If Hulga of «Good Country People» clearly exhibits matrophobic tendencies towards her mother, and O'Connor acknowledges certain similarities between herself and this character,[2] should we presume that she felt this way about Regina? Magistrale justifies her characters' behavior entirely by appealing to her purpose –that family disaffection is a metaphor used to describe the alienation of mankind from God (112). This critic denies any possible parallelisms between Regina and O'Connor's fictional mothers. He argues that her characters are portrayed as such because they form part of a divine scheme to bring the protagonist to a vision of deeper insight and clarity (114).

However, and as we have seen, many other critics refuse to accept a religious interpretation as the sole justification of her fiction. A lack of consistency between private correspondence and public fiction confuses, and may even frustrate scholars, but it is understandable given O'Connor's circumstances. She portrays family dysfunctionality so clearly that we might presume that she recognizes her own ambivalence through her characters. Moreover, the direct confrontation with the mother/daughter theme is an indication of being in good mental health (Nice 11). By addressing her predicament, she comes to terms with it.

Those admirers of O'Connor's fiction who take the time to read her correspondence will inevitably ask themselves what the author truly thought about the responsibilities of motherhood and to what extent her life is reflected in her fiction. Most critics highlight the importance of her letters.[3] Surely, readers who limit their knowledge of O'Connor to her fiction are only getting one side of the story. If we are not aware of the disparity

[2] In 1956 O'Connor wrote the following words to a friend: «Fiction doesn't lie, but it can't tell the whole truth. What would you make out about me just from reading 'Good Country People'? Plenty, but not the whole story».

[3] While one critic suggests reading first her letters and then her stories, another proposes a simultaneous reading of correspondence and fiction. Clara Claiborne Park even argues that her letters should be read in lieu of her narrative work (Gordon 226).

between her public manifestations and her private disclosures, we will never ask ourselves *why* this is so. Her contradictions, therefore, encourage us to take a closer look at her art and to consider the complexity of her narrative.

Up to now, we have considered the mother/daughter relationship on a literal plane: fractured families in mutual conflict within the framework of southern tradition. However, O'Connor's fiction can and should be contemplated from another deeper and more universal plane as well, for this was her intention: «The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes as much of the mystery of life as possible» (*Mystery* 98). The merging of both literal and metaphorical interpretations will bring us closer to understanding her fiction, since it is generally believed that one reading without the other leads to unbalanced conclusions (Westling, *Sacred* 149; McFarland 76).

Beringer advocates a parallelism between the author's child/parent fictional relationships and the way man relates to God. In O'Connor's narrative, a family's dysfunctionality coincides with its members' inability to embrace the divine –failed relationships indicate poverty of soul (26). Furthermore, these ties are intertwined. In stories where there is a hint of familial bonding, O'Connor's characters appear to open themselves spiritually, for with the acceptance of the nuclear family comes a gradual acceptance of the family of man (112-113). Thus, the literal and the transcendental go hand-in-hand in these stories, lending themselves to several interpretations. On the spiritual plane, mothers and daughters interact as they do to exemplify humanity's alienation from God. O'Connor agreed that their behavior was intentionally exaggerated and often grotesque so that the reader would clearly understand their plight: «... to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large, startling figures» (*Mystery* 34). Her primary intention was to call the readers' attention to her characters' weaknesses, which are our own, as well.

McFarland has also given this double-plane theme a great deal of consideration. Ironically, one of the stories of O'Connor's third collection is entitled, «The Comforts of Home.» «Comfort» is precisely what is lacking in her stories, for she not only alludes to family conflicts but to the concept of «home» itself (76). According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, «home» is «the social unit formed by a family living together.» «[T]o be at home» is «to be in harmony with the surroundings» (defs. 2; 2). In O'Connor's stories, the characters live neither as a unit nor in harmony and physical homelessness points to spiritual homelessness which is a consequence of the denial of spiritual reality (McFarland 76).

The fact that some of O'Connor's fictional family members evolve to a certain extent, both on the home and spiritual fronts, lends credibility to her assertions. Her protagonists undergo no transformations until halfway through her stories. Generally, a «home» becomes more of a «home» when self-awareness takes place. A moment of grace is usually presented through a male catalyst that sets the spiritual wheels in motion. Mothers and daughters are submitted and humiliated by this atypical prophet (Westling, «Flannery» 520), and in this state, bonds of mutual support and dependence are formed. The purpose of this catalyst is to momentarily strip her fictional family members of their self-sufficiency so as to open their hearts and minds to more significant relationships with both their family and God. However, in most of her stories, it is not clear that her protagonists have been significantly transformed.

Indeed, the degree of transformation of her characters is directly proportionate to the level of bonding between family members. It is interesting to note that the story which portrays the strongest familial bond involves a grandfather and his grandson («The Artificial Nigger»). In contrast, in O'Connor's mother/daughter farm tales, her fictional women make very little spiritual progress, and thus, only a slight degree of reconciliation can be observed between them. The standstill that they have reached is a result of insufficient bonding with each other and with God.

On this second plane of interpretation, O'Connor uses her protagonists as tools to get her point across. Consequently, as they experience the moment of grace, they move towards self-realization. Two-dimensional characters are given the opportunity –which they often do not fully take advantage of– to become three-dimensional. This spiritual transformation is not immediate in the majority of her protagonists, nor is it guaranteed. However, by the time the story ends, the author has at least insinuated to her readers that perhaps, just perhaps, it has taken or will take place.

If one wants to approach O'Connor's fiction conscientiously, one must surrender to her ambivalence. In a sense, one must be willing to consider both the South and the divine through her eyes. In order to do this, many things should be taken into account: social and historical contexts, O'Connor's own personal plight, and her doctrine. Then we will ask ourselves if she wrote in order to put forth her theological proposals or as a means of cleansing and redeeming herself. Or perhaps her mothers and daughters are a reflection of her own impotence and anger at not being able to fully reconcile with her mother as a result of her illness, and she coped by venting her frustration through her fiction.

O'Connor once wrote of her condition, «The disease is of no consequence to my writing, since for that I use my head and not my feet» (qtd. in Lawson 249). However, signs of the consequences of lupus erythematosus can be seen in both her fiction and her life.[4] Readers will appreciate O'Connor's fiction more fully if they consider the possibility that neither her correspondence nor her fiction is what it appears to be at first glance. Her tales of unhealthy families certainly lend themselves to an entertaining, literal reading, for they are told by a master storyteller. But her fiction gains its full value when studied conscientiously, in all of its complexity.

If we bear in mind the nature of a mother/daughter relationship and its increased complexity as the daughter approaches adolescence, we will be able to contrast it with comments that O'Connor made about her mother and how her fictional women interrelate. By doing so, it will be easier to identify coincidences and divergences. We may discover when reading her stories that her mother/daughter relationships are not as horrible as they seem; we must bear in mind that O'Connor is presenting her readers with miniature portraits of specific and critical moments in the long, dynamic process of a woman's evolution towards adulthood. We, as readers, have missed the essential, pre-oedipal stage of these pre-pubescent girls and are only provided with the family ruins. There is no doubt that O'Connor's mothers are responsible for their family's

[4] The Lupus Foundation of America defines the illness in an informative brochure: «Lupus is a chronic (long-lasting) auto-immune disease where the immune system, for unknown reasons, becomes hyperactive and attacks normal tissue. This attack results in inflammation and brings about symptoms» (3).

present state. They fail in the sense that they are not prepared or able to be both the nurturing, «connecting» mother and the mediating, «separating» father. But they should be given due credit, nevertheless, for successfully playing the masculine role assigned to them. They are struggling to keep their farm, which diverts their attention from the responsibilities of mothering. O'Connor, however, seems to take for granted the effort that these mothers have made to stay financially afloat, chastising them for focusing more on the material than on the spiritual. Thus, both mothers and daughters are victimized, and the possibility of either spiritual or emotional becomes ultimately remote.

This victimization of female characters in O'Connor's short stories, along with the dysfunctionality of her fictional families may very well be the basis for a lingering feeling of confusion after reading her short fiction. Her own public manifestations regarding the harsh and unrelenting treatment of her primarily female protagonists do not seem to fully justify her approach. And while O'Connor's religious framework must always be acknowledged, further sources for her unique portrayal of the single mother and only child dyad should be accounted for.

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