

Courtney Morrison

Dr. Reichert

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Flannery O'Connor's Stereotypical South

Flannery O'Connor was born and raised in the South. In fact, she is from Savannah, Georgia. Not only is this the town where my family lives, but Georgia in general is a state that is in many ways stereotypically Southern. This heritage that she has provides her with an excellent background from which to draw when she writes and is something that I, as a Southerner, can identify with. She has had first hand accounts of many things she writes about, which makes her stories authentic. O'Connor draws from her experience as a Southerner to make commentary on the naivete of Southerners in her short story, "Good Country People."

The name of this story has a Southern connotation and tells us a good deal about the story. First of all, we can derived the setting from the title. The title, "Good Country People," tells us that the story is based in the South, because that is typically where we think of country people living. This title also supports a stereotype of Southern people. That is that they are all kind people, unknowing of worldly things. They are all just genuine, small town people, but as we see, and the characters learn throughout the course of the story, what appears to be true on the surface, in not always.

As the story progresses we see this idea become better iterated. Josephine Hendin points out that in O'Connor's stories she "will often begin with an abstraction or metaphor that becomes more and more concrete as she continues" (276). This is seen in "Good Country People" from the beginning we see that they are simple people, but by the end we know they are truly naive

and do not understand the evil world around them. They can not comprehend anything outside of their small realm.

O'Connor uses foreshadowing when she discusses Mrs. Hopewell's favorite sayings. Two of these are "nothing is perfect" and "that is life!" (2429). At the end of the story we see that even the young bible salesman is corrupt. As ironic as an evil bible salesman is we see that he is the only one that seems to realize that nothing is perfect and evil things are just part of life. Mrs. Hopewell may say these things, but she does not truly understand them. Mrs. Hopewell and the rest of the characters are just "good country people" and do not recognize evil.

Even Joy-Hulga, who is educated and believes she is superior to everyone around her, has a difficult time comprehending being taken advantage of by the seemingly innocent bible salesman, Manly Pointer. When he takes her prosthetic leg, Joy-Hulga is shocked and angry. She says, "you're a Christian! You're a fine Christian!" (2441). She never suspected him of being capable of doing anything evil. She was easily tricked, because despite her education, she is still just a small town girl.

Joy-Hulga appears to know more than she does simply on the basis that she is more educated than the people around her, yet, even she can not fully comprehend the evil that exists in the world. Joy-Hulga may agree with Mrs. Hopewell's sayings, but she too does not understand them. Also, it is a Southern thing for children to return as adults to where they were raised. Joy-Hulga is educated, but has failed to truly venture out on her own and make a life for herself. She uses her knowledge as a form of escapism, but will never escape her surroundings.

The character who is taken the most advantage of is Joy-Hulga. When she is asked out by Manly Pointer she devises a plan to seduce him because he is simple. She imagines that she gives Manly Pointer "a deeper understanding of life" (2437). This proves that Joy-Hulga

believes she is superior to the people she is surrounded by, but because of Manly Pointer's endorsement of evil and its existence in the world, he has the deeper understanding of life that Joy-Hulga desires. Joy-Hulga misjudges Pointer when "she decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence" (2440). She ends up being taken for the fool, because like her mom she was raised to just accept people, and regardless of her education and what she thinks she knows, this is what she does. She is the simple, good country person.

This general acceptance of what we are told is not just a Southern phenomenon though. People all around the world believe lies and half-truths solely because that is what they are expected to do. We are not supposed to question authority, (parents, teachers, world leaders) because they are supposed to know what they are doing. If we question what they are saying it is seen as being disrespectful.

We see the full extent of Joy-Hulga's naivete when she pleads to Pointer, "'aren't you...aren't you just good country people?'" He replies, "'yeah...but it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day in the week'"(2440). This displays that Pointer is the only one in the story who actually has a real understanding of how the world works. People do not always practice what they preach (to be cliché).

O'Connor describes Mrs. Hopewell's attitude towards people like her tenants, the Freemans, saying, "[Mrs. Hopewell] realized that nothing is perfect and that in the Freemans she had good country people and that if, in this day and age, you get good country people, you had better hang on to them" (2439). This description makes it sound like Mrs. Hopewell has had a bad experience with people before, but she really has not. She just accepts everyone, undiscerning of their bad qualities and only seeing the good.

I thought it to be general consensus that we are supposed to be careful with whom we associate. We are generally taught not to discriminate, but I can not imagine just accepting people as they come without trying to delve further into their lives. It is sad and scary that Mrs. Hopewell is like this and even more so that she has raised her daughter the same way. Of course, we are products of our surroundings so Joy-Hulga does not have much control over this aspect of her life. It is sad though that she does not recognize what is happening so she could change it before something bad happens.

The last two paragraphs of the story display the true lack of worldly knowledge that Mrs. Hopewell has. This comes after Manly Pointer has managed to con Joy-Hulga into taking off her prosthetic leg and is now running away. "Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday," Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He must have been selling them to the Negroes back in there. He is so simple," she said, "but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple" (2441). It is evident now how Mrs. Hopewell just takes things as she sees them. This man is posing as a Bible salesman, but is really a con artist, and she has no idea. The final lines of the story are Mrs. Freeman saying, "some can't be that simple, I know I never could" (2441).

We hear stories all the time of people being deceived, but I am not sure anyone could ever fathom something like this truly happening. In every story where someone gets caught doing something weird, there is always a person who can say, "I knew there was something strange about him." Although, in this story, no one seems to pick up on the fact that Manly Pointer is not at all a bible salesman, but an atheistic con artist.

Many critics call O'Connor's work grotesque because of the seemingly awful things she writes about, but she is really just writing the truth in a blown-out-of-proportion style. Literary

critic David Eggenchwiler says, "I believe [O'Connor} sought more than worldly knowledge, not by knowing the world badly but by knowing it well, by seeing more of it than we usually permit ourselves to see" (378). This is true on the level of the characters in the story, and on the level of the reader. The characters in the story do not allow themselves to see the truth in the world. They prefer to live their small town lives unconcerned with what goes on in the rest of world. On the level of the reader, we usually do not want to see the bad things that go on in the world around us. What we do see we want to forget immediately.

A topic viewed as being grotesque in "Good Country People" is the atheistic attitudes of Joy-Hulga and Manly Pointer. They are comfortable in their belief in nothing and it disturbs readers. This idea of no religion is not something that originated in the South, and the belief in nothing is difficult for many to comprehend. Mark G. Edelstein argues that this is not grotesque because, "if God does not exist, then there is nothing perverse about man's rejection of God" (381). This helps to explain why Joy-Hulga and Pointer can be so confident in their rejection of God; because He has never existed to them.

The reality of it all is that all of the characters in this story, with the exception of Manly Pointer, are good country people, and they just assume everyone else is as well. Manly Pointer may be a country man, but he is not a good country person as the other characters assume he is. His knowledge of evil throughout the world is what makes him the more intelligent character. O'Connor is making a point about Southerners and how we may think we have one up on the rest of the world, but really we are just living with blinders on.

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