Disrupted Narratives: O’Connor’s Feminine Grotesque

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Abstract
Flannery O’Connor’s stories are noted for their narrative conflicts between the narrators’ interpretation of events and the characters’ recognition of the final violent stroke of life. Critics frequently refer to this kind of conflict as damaging to O’Connor’s narratives. This paper nonetheless provides an alternative reading by taking the narrative conflict as a sign of O’Connor’s narrative strategy. My argument is that through the narrative function of the grotesque, O’Connor creates in her narratives the comic effects generated from narrative contradictions and incongruities. Through the usage of contradictory value judgments, O’Connor implies rebellious laughter as a challenge to dominant cultural codes and narrative traditions. Combined with the comic function of the grotesque, O’Connor’s narrative conflicts inspire in its reader various shades of laughter.

Keywords
Flannery O’Connor, grotesque, narrative conflict, narrator, laughter, incongruity, freakishness, comic, the feminine

The form of tension we have been exploring—between comic perception and melodramatic plotting, ironic voice and violent action, the release of laughter and the constraint of fear—seems to return us inescapably to that center of the incongruous, the grotesque.
—Frederick Asals

I. “Sweet” Nothings

In a letter of 2 December 1955 to her editor, Flannery O’Connor related briefly an incident that annoyed her during her lecture tour of a Southern town. She was greeted
by several elder Southern women after a talk. One of these women congratulated her, saying, “That was such a nice dispensation you gave us, honey.” Another woman soon followed, asking, “What’s wrong with your leg, sugar?”

O’Connor, of course, did not feel comfortable in face of these “greetings.” She concluded her narration of this incident by making fun of herself in a twisted way: “I’ll be real glad when I get too old for them to sugar me” (Letters 120).

Certainly it was not these women’s curiosity about her leg, but the way they addressed her that brought forth the comic side of the incident. It was the strangeness and the “freakish” style of her crippled leg, as an exhibit rather than as a part of a human body, that attracted attention. What truly incurred O’Connor’s displeasure and stimulated her sense of humor in this narrative was the common hailing that Southern people use for women: “honey” and “sugar.” As O’Connor diverted her reader’s attention from the women’s curiosity about her leg, first, to the ludicrousness and the absurdity of the hailing, and then, to her discontent with being hailed like that, she successfully attained her goal with a sense of humor. She adroitly pointed out the source of her annoyance, namely that she too was part of the South and its social and cultural milieu. Moreover, she countered the social “sugaring” by sneakily entering its inner space and attacking it from within. She did so gracefully, shrugging off the episode with a comic remark.

The situation that trapped O’Connor was ironic. As the women used sugaring words in addressing O’Connor, they had no idea that this hailing plays a secret function in belittling a woman. These women, probably intending to show their concern about O’Connor, unwittingly reinforced the cultural code that renders all women passive objects awaiting love and protection. The “freakish” leg that crippled O’Connor physically became, in a sense, contagious. Symbolically everyone was trapped; both O’Connor and the ladies were “crippled” by this “sugaring” hailing: O’Connor was “crippled” by the conversation that “sugared” her and the ladies were “crippled” by the sexist tradition of the American South. The everyday hailing that situates women as “sweet,” helpless children, is the very demon of the conversation that triggered O’Connor’s resentment. Yet instead of flying into a temper, O’Connor transformed the awkward conversation into a comic joke that points to the “freakish-

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1 O’Connor was forced to leave her intellectual friends in Connecticut (the Robert Fitzgerald family) to go back home to Georgia for good and live with her mother on an isolated farm, because she was seriously ill with disseminated lupus erythematosus, a disease which took her father’s life. Though under strict medical and chemical treatments, her illness consumed her health fast, and she had to rely on crutches to walk in public places.
ness” of this gendered hailing and women’s frequent lack of awareness of the sexist language they use. She expressed her sense of frustration in a comic way by looking at the incident from another perspective. In spite of a painful confrontation with her illness, O’Connor was able to laugh at the scene—and at her cultural situation—in a comic remark in her letter.

In writing her stories, O’Connor employed the same narrative tactic and the similar kind of sarcastic humor. She usually provided a taken-for-granted answer first and then attacked it with a sense of humor. What troubled O’Connor through her writing career was the issue of being constantly perceived by her reader as a woman and a writer of the South. Once again, we are reminded of her encounter with the women at her speech. The uncomfortable situation of being petted, infantilized, not being allowed to be a “grown-up,” is an important issue for O’Connor in her work. Yet O’Connor’s resolution is usually graceful and dexterous: a tactful, feminine reading that circumvents and undermines a situation with a sense of humor. O’Connor slyly complained about and retorted wittily to the concept of “Southern lady”—a heritage which has been preserved for too long by most Southerners.

This present paper argues that the “sugaring” scenes in O’Connor’s writings usually nourish a rebellious intent that questions and laughs at the domineering power and its fear of woman’s independence. Instead of directly addressing the issue and challenging the dominant power, O’Connor chose to hide rebellious thoughts behind her willful characters. While allowing cruel narrators to punish defiant (female) protagonists mercilessly and justify themselves with the righteousness of patriarchal rules, she arranged a kind of laughter behind the scene. Critics often associated the incongruence or conflict between what the narrators suggest and what the narratives actually reveal to the reader in O’Connor’s stories with the grotesque narrative strategy, arguing that “freakishness” is nothing but a stylistic feature that contributes to O’Connor’s reputation as a Southern grotesque writer. Such a conclusion ignores that, as a trickster, O’Connor usually complicated and enriched her narrative with a voice that questions and mocks. The following discussion attempts to excavate this voice, mostly through an analysis of the narrative conflicts in O’Connor’s stories. To me, embedded in O’Connor’s narrative grotesque is a feminine voice, which challenges the (male) narrator, at the same time adding a grain of wry and/or bitter humor to the texts.

II. Patriarchal Sugaring
Everyday hailing, produced out of a larger language system, is full of cultural significance and ideological implication, as Louis Althusser reminded us in his description of how ideology functions. According to Althusser, ideology operates not by teaching but through a certain kind of hailing:

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (48)

Through hailing, ideology “recruits” individuals into an identity formation process. It is always in the hailing that the individual becomes a subject “believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e., recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing” (49). This understanding propels us to read the “sugaring” in O’Connor’s stories not as a harmless hailing. “Sugaring” features a violent strategy with which the larger language system attempts to tame, to incorporate women into its symbolic mechanisms.

In “Greenleaf,” a “sugaring” hail occurs when Mrs. May’s son Wesley expresses his hatred toward his mother for her dominance over the household and his life. He lashes out at her: “You ought to start praying, Sweetheart” (319). Having nowhere to vent his sense of frustration, Wesley employs this “sugaring” hailing to reclaim his status and dignity in a family controlled by his mother. Yet, rather than giving in to taunts or teasing, Mrs. May keeps reminding her two sons of the sufferings and hardship she has been through, thus keeping the sons in a place subordinate to hers:

“I am the only adult on this place,” she said [...]. “Do you see how it’s going to be when I die and you boys have to handle him [Mr. Greenleaf]?” she began. “Do you see why he didn’t know whose bull that was? Because it was theirs. Do you see what I have to put up with? Do you see that if I hadn’t kept my foot on his neck all these years, you boys might be milking cows every morning at four o’clock?” (320-21)
Her insistence on the importance of herself challenges the narrator’s and her two sons’ understanding of the social codes. However, she lacks the real power to change anything. Her two adult sons keep trying to recruit her into the Southern female community. The narrator of the story also reminds us that “justice” will be done eventually, which, as we shall see, is illustrated by Mrs. May’s eventual submission to the hailing of the patriarchal, her “return” to the “embrace” of the Greenleaf bull at the end of the story.

While laughing together with O’Connor at the concept of the “sweet” and the “sugaring” that in effect constitutes her real-life experiences, we witness here the concurrence of two pairs of incongruities: the first between the freakish and the reality, and the second between the affected “sugaring” of someone and the violent nature of “hailing.” When surveying the different critical approaches to O’Connor’s narratives, Brian Abel Ragen concluded with a lament that most critics do not pay adequate attention to how the sense of humor, as a major narrative characteristic, functions in O’Connor’s works:

The great body of criticism that has appeared since O’Connor’s death affirms the variety of lights in which her works must be viewed [...]. Her works demand philosophical, theological, and psychological analysis, as well as purely literary study. They require this level of critical response [...] because a great mind has carefully ordered the disparate elements in her work for the reader to find. Finally, and unfortunately, her critics find little to say about the comedy in O’Connor’s works. Humor is even harder to write about than are the motions of grace, but humor, as much as the anagogical dimension, is the hallmark of O’Connor’s work. (397)

Because of her love of the grotesque and mocking humor, O’Connor left her reader a

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2 In *An Anatomy of Humor*, while analyzing why people laugh, Arthur Asa Berger pointed out that compared to other explanations, the most important and widely accepted explanation of humor is probably “the incongruity theory of humor.” According to Berger, all humor involves some kind of a difference between what one expects and what one gets. The term “incongruity” has many different meanings—inconsistent, not harmonious, lacking propriety and not conforming, so there are a number of possibilities hidden in the term. Incongruity theories involve the intellect, though they may not seem to at first sight—for we have to recognize an incongruity before we can laugh at one (though this recognition process takes place very quickly and is probably done subconsciously). (3)

3 See, for example, the depiction of Mrs. May’s freakish “iron hand” alongside the cartoon-like comparison of her “dangling blue-veined little hand” to “the head of a broken lily” in “Greenleaf.” See my discussion in section 3.
great abundance of grotesque narratives full of comic incongruities. However, though most critics credited O’Connor with her unique narrating skills, most ignored her feminine laughter, the rebellious sign by which O’Connor differentiated her voice from the narrators in her stories.

In fact, those unable to detect O’Connor’s trickery and the possible intention behind it tended to attribute her narrative incongruities and freakish grotesquery to her religious background. O’Connor has long been understood as a religious enthusiast in the guise of a writer. Critics justified their interpretation by referring to O’Connor’s “authentic” explanation about the very significance of her narratives with respect to the religious “moments of grace” as the critical turning point for her characters in suffering (*Mystery and Manners* 112). Her remarks have been frequently alluded to by critics in their affirmation of the religious significance of her grotesque narratives. For instance, Asals saw “the idea of tension at the core of the religious dimension of O’Connor’s work” (Ragen 388). He observed:

> The form of tension we have been exploring—between comic perception and melodramatic plotting, ironic voice and violent action, the release of laughter and the constraint of fear—seems to return us inescapably to that center of the incongruous, the grotesque. It is little wonder that O’Connor happily accepted that term as descriptive of her fiction, for the grotesque is precisely the mode that achieves its effect not by reconciling conflicting forms and responses, but by holding them in insoluble suspension: its very nature is to be not simply comic or frightening, but both simultaneously, at once ludicrous and terrifying. (140-41)

Another example is C. Hugh Holman, who interpreted the distanced narrator and the cruel deprivations of the characters as the representation of O’Connor’s religious disposition: “She was a Catholic writer in a Protestant world, and she saw the writing of fiction as a Christian vocation,” and therefore, “[w]hat gives distance and comic perspective to her view of the world is fundamentally a religious distancing, resulting from her confidence of her own salvation in a world of those futilely seeking surety” (98).

In this paper, I nonetheless would like to point out that the sense of humor that lingers everywhere in O’Connor’s works is never a pure product of religious beliefs.

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4 About the religious significance of O’Connor’s narratives, see also Ruthann Knechel Johansen.
O’Connor’s sense of humor, taken traditionally as characteristic of the grotesque writing, is to me an indication of the feminine ruse, a trick that O’Connor the writer/trickster plays on her narrator.⁵ O’Connor’s resistance to the “sugaring” of the patriarchal, usually disguised as sarcastic humor in the narrative, is an example, which casts into relief O’Connor’s struggles in her predicament as a writer and a Southern woman whose poor health prevented her from traveling far from home. The very experience of being a woman confined physically and spiritually in the patriarchal South inspired O’Connor to depict the grotesque and generate her mocking, feminine laughter. I read the mocking laughter typical of O’Connor’s stories as the sign of the writer/trickster’s critique of patriarchy. What is unspoken and unnamable is insidiously recorded within the grotesque scenes: described in disguise and secretly inscribed as the mystic code in the narrative. Even when her female characters gradually step down the road of punishment and the raging narrator assures us of their inescapable downfall, O’Connor as the writer/trickster hides her mocking laughter, waiting for an appropriate chance to reveal to her reader the hidden meaning of her narratives.

With the implicit layers of significance lie hidden in the subversive comic traits of the grotesque, O’Connor’s craftiness reveals its power. Like a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, she employed subversive methods to imply different messages while pretending to obey (in the writer/trickster’s case—to “witness”) the dominant, patriarchal viewpoint of the narrator. The narrator is contented with the final judgment and punishment of the defiant women/daughters; however, the writer/trickster’s laughter is never on the same level. The writer/trickster might seem to stand together with the narrator. In fact she mourns—albeit secretly—for the suffering of the female characters. The unnamable, which can neither be fully expressed nor completely exhausted of its implications, is now given a new form. This is how the grotesque as a strategy functions in O’Connor’s narratives: it serves as the signifier referring to the incomplete and the unexhausted, the ever-churning volition of the restless inquiries that mocks and rebels against the slashing voice of the narrator. Where language stops, the grotesque moves on:

Grotesques have no consistent properties other than their own grotesqueness, and that they do not manifest predictable behavior. The word designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of lan-

⁵ About the idea of “feminine,” see note 6.
guage. It accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted; it is a defense against silence when other words have failed. (Harpham 3-4)

What is not said cannot be said directly, for it is beyond language, so it disguises itself under the veil of the laughter that mocks at itself. Using the grotesque as a shield, O’Connor as the writer/trickster laughs at the narrator and brings in her special kind of humor. She even provides comic scenes in stories full of violence. Indeed, her laughter demands the reader’s attention and participation. In the following section, I argue that O’Connor used the narrative technique of the grotesque to undertake a feminine reading/critique of the male dominant socio-cultural context.

III. O’Connor’s Feminine Poaching

O’Connor’s narratives are widely known for the juxtaposition of contradictions—the vibrant tension of the characters and the relentless judgment of the narrator—with a sudden stroke of grotesque violence at the end of the story. The incongruities revealed in O’Connor’s grotesque narratives are indicators of the discrepancies of the various categories of social relations and, therefore, of the hidden signs of the social norms which govern the characters, the narrators, the writer/trickster, and even the reader. By putting incongruous parts adjacent to each other, O’Connor dexterously posited various conflicting stances in her grotesque narrative, allowing the creation of meaning in various shades. This use of the narrative space, as a place of hide-and-seek where conflicting stances meet and dwell, stitches together incongruities in the narrative textuality. It is a “poaching” into the other’s place, the narrator’s place. Narratologically speaking, the writer/trickster is presenting a certain kind of resistance through the narrative conflicts and grotesque incongruities. She takes advantage of the narrative space to question the narrator’s authority within the narrator’s territory. The narrative conflicts thus provide the space for O’Connor to perform her writer/trickster’s practice of resistance.

Just as the de Certeaurian tactic operates in the space of the other, the “feminine” poaching of O’Connor’s writer/trickster takes place in the narrative—the narrator’s
place—occasionally and opportunistically when the grotesque makes its appearance.\(^6\) I am here also appropriating Julia Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic sign flow and her distinction between the feminine sign flow and the space of masculine regulation to my study of O’Connor’s short stories. According to Kristeva, the semiotic sign flow belongs to the category of the feminine, whereas the symbolic, the rigid regulations of a place or a society, is the domain of the masculine. By intruding into the area of regulation and narrative conventions, this tactical strategy, this wandering and flowing power of the feminine, brings in ambiguity, challenges the role of the narrator, and insinuates the possibility of laughter derived from the quite contradictory understandings of the narrative.

My argument is that there are two kinds of laughter arising from the narrative conflicts in O’Connor’s stories: one is woven in the grotesque narrative, and the other emerges from the reading process as the narrative conflicts evolve. The grotesque incongruities and narrative conflicts are narrative techniques that exhibit the power of the feminine. Adopting these techniques, the writer/trickster poaches in the masculine space of the narrator by diversifying the narrative significance.

Most of the time, the grotesque is created through various layers of contradictory juxtapositions. In “Greenleaf,” every time Mrs. May boasts of her “iron hand” in running the farm successfully, her hand is grabbed by Scofield, who yells, “Look at Mamma’s iron hand!” He holds it up so as to exhibit her proud “iron hand” as nothing more than a “delicate blue-veined little hand [...] dangl[ing] from her wrist like the head of a broken lily” (322). Yet be it an “iron hand” or a “delicate blue-veined little hand,” Mrs. May manages her farm with this hand and she is proud of it. A widow from the city with two young kids, she knows too well that in “go[ing], practically penniless and with no experience, out to a rundown farm and mak[ing] a success of it,” she has to suffer all possible obstacles in the face of adversity: “Everything is against you [...] the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you. They’re all in league against you. There’s nothing for it but an iron hand!” (321).

Although acknowledging her sacrifices, her adult sons tease and mock her “iron

\(^6\) By defining O’Connor’s strategy as feminine, I want to bestow on it the significance of the possible tactical usages of the feminine space where the flow of the feminine power is emphasized. As a secret, hidden power flow, textual femininity can never be pinned down, and this is how it obtains power while generating ambiguity and incongruity to create a space of its own—a feminine space. The practice of the invisible, the appropriation of other’s space, and the tactical use of every available opportunity in search of a play with the foundations of the controlling power together generate the ruses and rhetoric of this feminine flow. This is what I would define as the place of the feminine, the unnamable, and the subversive.
hand.” But no matter what Mrs. May uses her hand to control her sons, as well as everything on the farm, in a way quite contrary to the traditional Southern concept and expectations of a lady. Another incongruity the story introduces is that, in their late thirties, Wesley and Scofield are still treated like small children by their mother. Every morning, Mrs. May sits at the morning table with them “to see that they [have] what they [want]” (314). She even intervenes into their future marriages, worrying that their wives may waste away her property:

And at this Scofield would yodel and say, “Why Mamma, I’m not going to marry until you’re dead and gone and then I’m going to marry me some nice fat farm girl that can take over this place!” [...] Finally she [Mrs. May] had whispered, “I work and slave, I struggle and sweat to keep this place for them and soon as I’m dead, they’ll marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything [...]” She had made up her mind at that moment to change her will. The next day she had gone to her lawyer and had had the property entailed so that if they married, they could not leave it to their wives. (315)

On the one hand, only by laughing at the freakishness of Mrs. May’s “tool” and “method” of management and control can Wesley and Scofield get even with her. On the other hand, however, no matter how hard Mrs. May tries to stand on her own feet and take care of the farm and household, she is mocked by her sons—not because she cannot shoulder up her responsibilities well, but because she has assumed more power than is supposed to belong to a woman:7

“They didn’t come because I’m a woman,” she said. “You can get away with anything when you’re dealing with a woman. If there were a man running this place [...]”

Quick as a snake striking Mr. Greenleaf said, “You got two boys. They

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7 In her discussion of O’Conner’s stories, Louise Westling referred to Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s study of the historical reality behind O’Connor’s female characters:

Southern legal traditions made it difficult for women to control property in the nineteenth century, and widows who attempted to manage their own affairs were regarded as arrogant. The carnage of the Civil War produced many widows who had to support their families alone through the terrible decades of Reconstruction. Although most succeeded, they did so in a hostile masculine business and legal environment where “the widow had to struggle keenly against the presumption that she would be the loser in any sort of transaction.” (Westling 145-46)
Mrs. May’s strong “controlling” hand is here deemed as weak and fragile simply because it belongs to a woman. No less ironically, though the two boys are good at nothing more than teasing their mother, they are considered the “men” in their family, powerful and respectable enough to protect their mother. Here, whom/what does O’Connor (want her reader to) laugh at? Mrs. May with the incongruent “iron hand” and “delicate blue-veined little hand,” the two sons who are supposed to be manly but are actually incapable of doing anything, or the stupid patriarchal viewpoint, illustrated in Mr. Greenleaf’s comment, which insists that a man is stronger than a woman?

Unlike Mrs. May, who fights hard to preserve her success and self-esteem despite the fragility and weakness cultural forces impose upon her, Hulga-Joy, another freakish character in “Good Country People,” reacts to the male-dominant culture in a quite different way. She shows her resentment toward the socio-cultural context by taking every chance to demonstrate her “ugliness”—a performance that flies in the face of the assumed behavior of a Southern lady. Thirty-two-year-old Hulga-Joy has only one leg (the other was shot off in a hunting accident when she was ten) and wears “a six-year-old skirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it” (276). She has a Ph.D. degree in philosophy, claims to believe in nothing, and thus stands against anything her mother believes in. The first step she takes to “uglify” herself is to change her name from Joy to Hulga—the ugliest name she could think of. Every time Mrs. Hopewell thinks of the name, “she thought of the broad blank hull of a battleship” (274).

Hulga-Joy’s freakish rebellion develops throughout the story into a combination of grotesqueries. She is “bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (276). When she tells her mother that if it were not for her bad health, she would be in a university lecturing to people, Mrs. Hopewell soon gets the picture: Hulga-Joy, “look[ing] like a scarecrow and lectur[ing] to more of the same” (276). For Hulga-Joy, however, becoming ugly is a performance art out of her “mean-spirited perversity.” By emphasizing and acting out the ugliness, Hulga-Joy expresses her resistance to the Southern expectations for a lady, making her performance of ugliness an exercise of the debunking power.8

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8 Will there be any painless narrative on “the ugly”? The traditional understanding of the comic emphasizes the distance that the author preserves from getting involved in emotional events. Peter L. Berger yet questioned this concept in his discussion of Aristotle’s remarks on comedy in Poetics. While speaking about comedy, Aristotle pointed out that the Ridiculous, as “a species of the Ugly,” is an element of comedy, for it is “a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain” (18). Berger
In “Good Country People,” the laughter comes mainly from two related sources: first, the common-sense sayings of the country people; second, an ironic rebellion against these common-sense sayings. Mrs. Hopewell and her confidante and helper, Mrs. Freeman, frequently express themselves in common-sense sayings—“Nothing is perfect,” “Everybody is different,” and “It takes all kinds to make the world.” These sayings, though employed by Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman to demonstrate their worldly sophistication, are in a sense the deteriorated, deformed counterparts to the “hailing” of the social norms. Hulga-Joy, of course, despises these commonplaces:

Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings. Another was: that is life! And still another, the most important, was: well, other people have their opinions too. She would make these statements, usually at the table, in a tone of gentle insistence as if no one held them but her, and the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it. (273)

The comic sense of the story is thus derived from Hulga-Joy’s ironic surrender of her “freakishness” (both her artificial leg and her self-pride in committing herself to nothing) to the Bible salesman Manley Pointer, a fraud and a sadist. By leaving Hulga-Joy abused high up in the barn, the narrator seems to draw a moral lesson to warn the reader about the danger of self-pride. Intriguingly, though the other female characters in this story, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman for example, also demonstrate a kind of self-pride, they do not receive any punishment or fierce comments from the narrator. I think this is because fundamentally they do not defy the socio-cultural norms. Similarly, proud of his shrewd cunning and trickery, Manly Pointer can walk away from his evil doings easily because he pretends to obey and follow the conventions of Southern society. Pointer even becomes the tool of the narrator to teach a lesson to the
proud Hulga-Joy. To the narrator, it seems that even Pointer’s fake benevolent intentions and hypocritical behavior are more acceptable to the symbolic “hailing” than Hulga-Joy’s self-made philosophy of ugliness. Hulga-Joy becomes the only one punished in the story because of her apparent resistance to the “normal,” self-negating norms of Southern womanhood. Here is the narrative conflict in “Good Country People”: the narrator exposes Hulga-Joy’s foible and punishes her ruthlessly but the writer/trickster is nonetheless more ambivalent toward Hulga-Joy. Arousing her reader’s sympathy with the abused Hulga-Joy, the story as a whole urges us to query into the “norms” and the idea of “goodness” the general public buys into.

In fact, though Mrs. Hopewell is confident in her own ability to always come up with a good saying, one she believes will solve any problem or answer any question, her oversimplification of reality results in a doubletalk, and her commonplaces mask her self-indulgence in social norms. When Manly Pointer suggests that she probably won’t do any business with him because he is a country boy, Mrs. Hopewell immediately assures him that “good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go ’round. That’s life!” Pointer here sees through the doubletalk: “You said a mouthful” (279).

With her bulging figure and blank face, Hulga-Joy constantly shows her resentment against her mother’s platitudinous mindset. It is when she falls back into the traps that she has criticized most severely that she is seduced by the salesman. She finds out too late that this seemingly “good country person” actually carries with him a pack of smutty playing cards, a pocket flask of whiskey, and a package of contraceptives stored in a hollowed-out Bible. She lashes out at him toward the end of the story: “You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all—say one thing and do another. You’re a perfect Christian, you’re [...]” (290). Pointer then voices the narrator’s point of view: “You just a while ago said you didn’t believe in nothing. I thought you [were] some girl! I hope you don’t think that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!” (290). Hulga-Joy has her comeuppance because she is too confident of her opinion that Manly Pointer is one of those rare “good country people.” Wanting a disciple, Hulga-Joy dreams of seducing Pointer: she makes the mistake in forgetting that Pointer is just one of the (imperfect) common country people.

The scene of disillusionment in “Good Country People” is full of irony and grotesqueries, particularly at the moment when Pointer persuades Hulga-Joy to show him her wooden leg:
The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump. The boy’s face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, “Now show me how to take it off and on.” (289)

The ugliness and the freakishness of the wooden leg are here presented incongruously alongside Pointer’s joy of discovery. After playing with Hulga-Joy’s wooden leg by taking it off and putting it on several times, he takes it as a souvenir: “I’ve gotten a lot of interesting things. One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way. And you needn’t to think you’ll catch me because Pointer ain’t really my name.” When Hulga-Joy is left sitting on the straw in the barn without her leg, Pointer fires a final shot: “Hulga, you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (291).

As demonstrated here, O’Connor’s stories feature cruel endings where her narrators usually reaffirm their value judgments by giving their rebellious female characters a hard lesson. The narrator in “Good Country People” proves his righteousness by leaving Hulga-Joy raped high up in the far-away barn, her wooden leg stolen. The narrator in “Greenleaf,” furthermore, mocks Mrs. May before he has her gored to death by a stray bull. In the beginning, the bull is described as a lover that comes under the window in the deep of the night to woo his love. The bull appears under Mrs. May’s bedroom window, “chewing steadily, with a hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns” (311). However, the bull is not a gentle lover, nor is the lady a young belle. His song of devouring preys wakes up Mrs. May from her beauty sleep: “Green rubber curlers sprouted neatly over her forehead and her face beneath them was smooth as concrete with an egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept” (311). When they meet again, the grotesque garden scene becomes the site of violence:

The bull, his head lowered, was racing toward her. She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief. She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. (333)
The self-sufficient Mrs. May finally dies a freakish death that combines violence and resignation, shock and the uncanny. Also a widow struggling in an uncaring society to raise her son, Mrs. Chestny in “Everything that Rises Must Converge” receives no better ending. While trying to give a little black boy a penny, she is attacked by the boy’s mother. This huge black woman, wearing the same kind of “hideous” hat Mrs. Chestny wears, “seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much,” swinging out her fist with a red pocketbook at Mrs. Chestny’s head (418). Fearing attacks from blacks, Mrs. Chestny has refrained herself from going to town alone at night; it is therefore ironic that she still ends up dying under a black woman’s stroke. In addition, although her son Julian is at her side at her death, he is no better than Mrs. May’s two ungrateful sons. Throughout the story he expresses disrespect toward his mother, showing little appreciation for her sacrifice. As with Mrs. May’s two sons, Julian hates his mother’s control over him and her nagging about her sacrifices for him, such as “[h]er teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened” (411). Julian “could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought she had won” (411). Even his hailing of “Darling, sweetheart” to his mother at the moment of her death serves not so much to acknowledge Mrs. Chestny as his mother as to restore Mrs. Chestny to her role as a woman of passivity, a “sugared” woman desired and controlled by patriarchal rules.

O’Connor’s narratives as such are torn between their creation of the seemingly strong-willed and self-sufficient female characters and their incongruous endings of having these women fall victim to a world of cruelty. In explaining these disrupted narratives, critics tend to lean upon religious teachings, arguing that these female characters deserve their punishment because of the foibles in their personality. John G. Parks, for instance, following the traditional critical interpretation, comments that “O’Connor’s enemy is the Prometheanism of the modern world—the arrogance of the intellect, the pride of self-sufficiency, its vaunted unbelief, the numbness of respectability” (121). This kind of interpretation, however, confuses the narrator’s fierce stance toward these female characters with O’Connor’s own. O’Connor’s narrators judge female characters relentlessly, but her stories arouse more than just mocking laughter at these women’s pride and culpability. Pride, the very element that O’Connor’s narrators would like to eliminate from female characters, can nevertheless be understood as a badge a self-made woman wears after surviving through the hardships in a male-dominated world. Again, the reader is left with the question of whom/what is laughed
at: the victimized women or the society that imposes stupid, in effect incongruous, violence upon the women who actually deserve better treatments?

With little surprise, O’Connor’s “freakish” characters and the grotesque description of their lives were not likable to some Southern readers.9 On the surface of her narratives, O’Connor seems to be merciless. She brings to the force the constraining living world, depriving her characters of any opportunity to survive with their due glory in a world of male domination. Read from another perspective, however, it is possible that these female characters have to suffer the hard stroke of reality and the narrator’s vindictive judgment first and then win over the reader’s sympathy and even respect. Here are the dual value judgments, the narrative conflicts, and the two kinds of laughter in O’Connor’s stories: the narrator’s sardonic laughter and the reader’s more sophisticated response. In O’Connor’s stories, the comic effect that arouses laughter in the reading process is never as simple as a snapshot, nor is it merely a reaction to a moment. It is the result of cunning verbal puns, sarcastic expressions, or incongruities in understanding. Only in a subtle reading and interpretation of the narratives can the laughter of understanding emerge.

IV. The Power of the Grotesque

The grotesque, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham pointed out, stands between two categories, and communicates between two realms separate from each other in the human understanding: “They [grotesqueries] stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles” (3). It is this ambiguous power of the grotesque, the special mix of contradictions, that preserves the uprooting power of O’Connor’s nar-

9 O’Connor’s mother is a case in point. O’Connor wrote in a letter about her mother’s response to her work:

The other day she asked me why I didn’t try to write something that people like instead of the kind of thing I do write. Do you think, she said, that you are really using the talent God gave you when you don’t write something that a lot, a LOT, of people like? This always leaves me shaking and speechless, raises my blood pressure 140 degrees, etc. All I can ever say is, if you have to ask, you’ll never know. (Letters 326)

Mrs. O’Connor’s judgment and her treatment of her daughter as a “child,” not as a “grown-up,” made O’Connor angry and speechless, unable to produce any direct answer to her mother’s question.
ratives. The uniqueness of O’Connor’s grotesqueries lies in their subversive power that moves beyond ordinary incongruities. Besides juxtaposing contradictions and incongruities in the grotesque scene and thus creating a comic effect, O’Connor as the writer/trickster laughs at what the grotesque reveals, and proceeds secretly to further laugh at the narrator’s final judgment and interpretation of the pseudo-romantic garden scene. O’Connor’s grotesqueries reveal more than just two obviously inconsistent properties, object matters, or situations. Her work goes beyond the surface of each narrative. The story subverts the dominant concept and laughs at the narrator.

Emphasizing “a co-presence of the ludicrous with the monstrous, the disgusting or the horrifying,” Wolfgang Kayser in The Grotesque in Art and Literature summarized the functions of the grotesque by referring to Friedrich Schlegel’s concept in Athenäum: “Grotesqueness is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying” (Thomson 16). In fact, the grotesque that brings forth the characteristic concomitance of horror and the comic in O’Connor’s stories obtains its striking effects by juxtaposing the unthinkable with the thinkable while always leaving space for further reflection. And this special space should be approached with a perspective other than the traditional, author-oriented, or religious viewpoints. Juxtaposition, as the elementary feature of the grotesque that O’Connor adopted as her main narrative strategy, creates an “other” space, an “other” aspect and an alternative interpretation for the unnoticed, the hidden and the unnamable. As a woman and a writer of the South, O’Connor’s grotesque narrative secretly preserves this “other” space that resists the all-encompassing power of a strictly patriarchal society.

Certainly, when pursuing the possible signification of O’Connor’s narratives in respect to the comic function of the grotesque, it is necessary to take into account another issue—the effect that O’Connor’s identity as a Southern woman writer might have on her narratives’ signifying process. Sarah Gordon believed that the creation of fierce narrators in O’Connor’s can be attributed to O’Connor’s own writing situation:

10 Philip Thomson pointed out that “[d]espite some notable, but isolated, attempts in the nineteenth century to define the nature of the grotesque,” Kayser’s work on grotesque as the object of aesthetic analysis is the first book of its kind: “it was not until the appearance in 1957 of the book by the late German critic Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature, that the grotesque became the object of considerable aesthetic analysis and critical evaluation” (11). According to Thomson, Kayser’s concept of the grotesque is partly derived from Athenäum, where the German novelist Jean Paul’s (Friedrich Richter) idea of a type of humor “which is painful, awesome, which knows of evil and the abyss” is included (11).
“It is her way of allying herself with patriarchal authority and power [...;] we must remember that she writes out of a closed system, a closed worldview, whether we like that fact or not” (45). According to her, it is due to “O’Connor’s embrace of the power and authority of the patriarchal tradition” (47) that her narrator is so fierce and relentless towards the woman characters that strongly demonstrate their sense of self-independence. And if the cruel narrators are the products of the Southern patriarchal tradition, O’Connor’s female characters then “reflect their author’s subversion of the ideal of the docile, submissive ‘Lady,’” and “[m]oreover, in countering the ideal of the pretty, sweet, docile female, O’Connor is in a significant way freeing herself, perhaps in the only way her situation allowed” (Gordon 13-14). These female characters, in a word, “derive in some measure from O’Connor’s rebellion against southern expectations of female propriety” (Gordon 47). While allying her narrators with the male tradition and patriarchal norms, O’Connor also created many memorable female characters who rebel against the norms so as to subvert the idealized image of the docile, submissive “lady.” Her stories in this sense are not short of narrative subversive power.

More importantly, O’Connor’s narratives open up different readings. No matter whom/what the writer/trickster laughs at, the reader is brought face to face with contradictory judgments and ambiguous feelings implicit in the narratives. Even when it seems that O’Connor laughs at her characters, there is still an undercurrent in the flow of the narrative. The ridiculed women, Mrs. May with her “iron hand,” Mrs. Chestny with the “hideous” hat, the ugly Hulga-Joy with her wooden leg, are all too severely punished that they usually arouse strong sympathy from the reader. In addition to producing a sarcastic laughter, the narrative may also generate a laughter of understanding—a recognition of the causes of the female characters’ victimization, a realization of the confinement imposed on women in the male-dominated reality, and possibly an identification with O’Connor’s critical attitude toward the patriarchal “hailing” that strives to recruit Southern women to a state where they are protected like helpless children.

If the comic’s “social usefulness lies in its debunking power” (Berger 24), then, in O’Connor’s short stories, the comic brings forth the laughter that challenges the social norms and exposes the mutilating power of the fierce narrator, who tries hard in ordaining “arrangements” for those “unfaithful” daughters of the South. As Parks points out, O’Connor’s powerless characters have a chance of playing a joke on their own lives. “This is a kind of ‘heroic powerlessness,’” Parks says, “O’Connor’s modern men and women must lose their self-reliance before they can gain true self-knowledge [...].
These are great comic moments which seek to scour the reader’s sensibilities with a redemptive laughter” (121).

Like her female characters, O’Connor kept challenging and questioning the dominant opinions shown on the surface of her narratives. If she could not freely make fun of the “monologic” narrator, as some critics have noted (Brinkmeyer 1989), she was nevertheless successful in arranging narrative conflicts to provide chances for rebellious Southern women to question and bitterly laugh at the “hailing” of the patriarchy. Both O’Connor and her characters resorted to the power of words to resist and deconstruct the interpellation of the cultural codes and the dominant narratives. By creating disrupted narratives, O’Connor highlighted a laughter that discovers the discrepancies between reality and belief, that sneaks beneath the patriarchal narrating voice and male dominance of the social norms, and that leaves its trace by laughing first at the “disobedient” women and then, at the patriarchal concepts lurking behind the narrator’s interpretation. O’Connor’s is an ambiguous laughter that both exhilarates and slashes.

Works Cited

11 Following Saul Bellow’s statement that “powerlessness appears to force people to have recourse to words,” Parks observed that words are usually used and celebrated to demonstrate the power of the powerless. This is the “heroic powerlessness” that the weak and the powerless adopt to question the arrangement of God Almighty. Parks referred to the story of Job to illustrate the tactical use of this verbal power by the weak and the powerless:
This is a comedy in the tradition of Job, who, daring cosmic iconoclasm, refusing pat and pious answers, demands of God an answer to the question of gratuitous suffering. In his poverty, weakness, and solitude, all Job has left is words and the courage to put the universe on trial. This is a kind of “heroic powerlessness” that is celebrated in a number of novels published since the Second World War. (118-19)


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