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Yassamine Benembark

# The Female Grotesque in Southern Literature

Dissertation directed by Dr. Elizabeth Mullen

Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines

Département d'Anglais

M1 Textes, Images, Langues Étrangères

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## **Abbreviations**

*MM - Mystery and Manners*

*HB - Habits of Being*

*CS - Flannery O'Connor The Complete Stories*

# Introduction

Leslie Fiedler has described American literature as “a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (*Love and Death*, 29). More precisely, the literature of the so-called Southern Renaissance that has become associated with the grotesque. Southern writers and the South must be approached with skepticism, since the region has always been involved with complex problems. The reader expects to find some characteristics or elements of Southern writing, amongst them: ‘the grotesque’. The term first appeared in literature in the 1600s, particularly in French literature, and strengthened the term’s relation to the physical body. Therefore, the grotesque genre has come to be used as a general adjective for the odd, mysterious, magnificent, incredible, ugly, incongruous, nasty or disgusting since at least the 18th century. The grotesque is used to describe weird shapes and distorted forms, and involves a sense of uncomfortable bizarreness as well as pity. It waver from the uncanny to the comic, the absurd to the unnatural, and the satirical to the horrific. Therefore, many scholars have come to the conclusion that the term ‘grotesque’ is very hard and challenging to define, because it transgresses and challenges what is considered normal, stable and connected. It involves the presence of deformed characters or twisting events.

Some scholars and critics have noted that the grotesque spread in Southern fiction as a sign of an era of turmoil and transgression. A time when the South started to understand itself in terms of cultural and political difference. The Southern genre, therefore, outlines not only differences in conventions and forms, but differences in the way that groups within the same geographical place experience history. In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser argues that “it is an attempt to invoke and subdue the domenic aspect of the world. According to him, “ the grotesque is an expression of the estranged or alienated world. The familiar is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange, be it comic, terrifying or both.” (Qtd in *Nouvelle du Sud*, 93)

As postwar Southern writers, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers' fiction must be read in light of the South's tragic history. Southerners viewed their region as a Garden of Eden, with them as the protectors. The popular image of the Old South, is derived with its Southern belles, hospitable landowners, Southern gentility, leisureliness, religion, and immovable social classes. While an urban world was growing in the North; where hard work led to social, economical, and cultural advancement. The South kept its emphasis on agrarianism, stability, religious fervor, and family values, until the Civil War put an end to the Pastoral dream and ushered in an identity crisis that bolstered the literature of the Southern

Renaissance. Following the Second World War, the South saw a period of industrial and economic prosperity, which resulted in the establishment of urban areas. However, industrialization was seen as a threat to the South's sense of order, as something that would eventually corrupt its agrarian culture and drive them out of it. Conflicts between the old and new world orders spawned a new set of myths, which clashed with reality.

American women emerged as a major form of social reform. They played a fundamental role in the initiation of social movements and the passing of legislation. At that time, a number of spontaneous social movements flourished, and women took control of their destiny. This power of self determination gave strength to the spreading wave of feminism. The century also saw people organizing and working for change in the social order; this included the emergence of different social movements, amongst them the women's rights movement. In fact, women writers have played a great deal in American culture, especially in literature throughout the 20th Century. For instance, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers were engaged in the politics of dissent. They have been writing about the American female experience in the United States, focusing on women's rights, social inequalities, and class relations. Indeed, during the 1950s, the struggle against racism and segregation entered the mainstream of American life. Despite the fact that Feminism and women's Rights Movements started way before the 20th century, the South still endured, decades later, gender issues.

Women were linked by gender but still divided by class conflict, and sexual politics. This issue is depicted by both of these writers, who question this moral superiority and division. Indeed, the raucous women in their fiction challenge idealized and oppressive visions of Southern womanhood. Patricia Yeager quotes in her book *Dirt and Desire*, Thomas Daniel Young. He notes that "This second generation of Southern writers is defined by negation; they are not concerned with world sweeping topics such as the meaning of

history but with the shallower of modernism: with existentialism and the death of God, with trying to find their place in an apparently meaningless and absurd universe.” Young goes on associating Southern “grotesquerie” with the development in the thirties and forties of “a disturbing picture of society whose citizens had lost all their respect of traditions, rituals, rites, and ceremonies.” (96 - 7)

A new image of womanhood appeared during 20th century America, and it started to influence popular perceptions and understandings of women's position in society. Referred to as a suffragette, a progressive reformer, a college girl, a bicyclist, a flapper, a working-class militan... come to symbolize the New Woman, a phrase that encompasses contemporary conceptions of femininity. The century was marked by the emergence of feminism and the movement for women's suffrage, as well as the rise of consumerism, popular culture, and freer expressions of sexuality. Indeed, the feminism movement has always been a cultural phenomenon that has been fueled by the arts. Moreover, the century saw some of the most significant advances in the feminist movement, due in large part to the many prominent feminist authors of the era. Their words encouraged and increased awareness of the world's struggle for women. However, even in the postbellum South, the image of the Southern belle and lady dominated all notions of white Southern womanhood and femininity despite the shifting status of women in the 1940s and 1950s.

Furthermore, religion is an important factor which maps out the possible causes of the abundance of the grotesque in the South. The region is the most religious, but also the most conservative part of the country. A region where the bible is still interpreted literally, and where the majority of its population identifies as protestants and declares their belief in the existence of the devil. In fact, the grotesque is a sign of spiritual incompleteness of human misery without god, as it figures some kind of lack. In O'Connor's fiction, the mystery is based on religion, however, she insists on the fact that “the writer, in order to use his eyes freely, he must disconnect them from the eyes of the church. ... Unfortunately, to disconnect faith from vision is to do violence to the whole personality, and the whole personality participates in the act of writing.” (*MM*, 180-1) Indeed, a literary creation starts with the writer's vision, and the several ways they choose to see life. According to Flannery O'Connor, the writer of the grotesque realizes and believes in the existence of the mysterious or the metaphysical. Therefore, the writer would recognize the birth of the undefinable, of faith and the mysteries of creation.



Furthermore, the female characters of her fiction are usually not accepted on behalf of society, they are neither likable nor pretty, and they have to go through major procedures for creating a place for themselves within society. Despite the fact that religion is at the core of her fiction, her stories do not preach. Instead, they often depict troubled or flawed characters experiencing moments of grace and responding in unpredictable ways. She shed a light on the human condition on a global scale, and her most frequent setting is her surroundings; in the protestant South. She sets realistic images of gruesome and surreal characters committing violent acts towards other people. Therefore, she disturbs and shocks her readers through her characters' extreme actions.

On the other hand, Carson McCullers shares Bakhtin's preoccupation with the body in her accounts of illness, death, deformity, disability, odd physical impulses and even strange gender configurations. In his interpretation of the grotesque, Bakhtin emphasizes corporality, especially corporal contortion. To him, the body is a body of excess, and therefore, it questions boundaries and tidy categories. It is a body of transition that is constantly in a process of reformation. Indeed, Bakhtin celebrates the strange body as it is a site of production: "The grotesque [...] discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. (*Rabelais*, 48) His subversive representation of the grotesque helps to emphasize the overlooked features of her fiction: sexual and gender anomaly, resistance and defiance.

McCullers' fiction is limited to the level of the wonder of the individual and the family, from personal crisis to love relationships. She explores the identity of women in the conservative patriarchal South. Her fiction focuses on female characters who resist the Southern lady ideal, which creates a negative, unproductive perspective on the world and human activity. Moreover, her fiction was written in the 1940s and 1950s, a time of tension between changing women's status and the Southern ideal of womanhood, between an increasing liberalism on the one side and segregation and repressive gender roles on the other. A situation which accentuates the fact that the female body has become such a problematic site in Southern culture and politics. Anne Goodwyn Jones stresses the importance of the female body in southern culture, she writes:

The body of the privileged white woman was revered as a marble statue, a Grecian urn, a human body that by nature resembled the finest productions of masculine art. As such, it needed protection from vandals. ... [F]or white men, this image implied the purity of blood and thus of white patriarchal lineage: white supremacy as well as the male line of succession and inheritance were

guaranteed by her chastity and desirelessness. . . . Dividing women into categories? black and white, lady and woman? was one way to maintain a sense of control. . . . The white woman's fragility further guaranteed her distance from earthy interests and gave the man an opportunity to construct his own manhood in protecting her. (*The work of Gender* 49-50)

In this case, moving away from the feminine ideal turns a female body into an androgynous, barren one, similar to the kind of hideous body we see in the literature of McCullers, and O'Connor.

The fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers address issues of gender roles that are defined by the ideals of the American South, which are: devotion to one's community, devotion to one's family, and devotion to God. This research project will focus on how the struggle of gender norms within society captures the essence and the evolution of Southern women's writers' voices, in questioning this moral superiority and division that has plagued the South. Besides, the grotesque explores the boundaries of human existence, it outlines not only differences in conventions and forms, but differences in the way that groups of people and individuals within the same geographical place deal with each other. The Southern genre, therefore, challenges the established notion of beauty and order by relying on exaggeration and distortion as the burdensome models of femininity which can be distinguished in the bodies of women in McCullers' and O'Connor's fiction.

Flannery O'Connor's and Carson McCullers' short stories that will be studied feature women as protagonists and antagonists whose traditional roles are broken. In their fiction women are usually independent, however, they tend to lose every time in the struggle they embark on. Men on the other hand are disruptive and are as absurd as women, and all can be pointed at as 'grotesque.' For instance O'Connor states in *Mystery and Manners*: "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize them." (44) Flannery O'Connor deals with her characters on a secular level, as they live in a region with distinctive class structure, as well as a significant religious and moral dimension.

## **PART I - Subverting Societal and Gender Norms Through Grotesque Characters.**

### **A. The parental dysfunctional relationships in Flannery O'Connor's fiction.**

The grotesque characters are considered as a convention because of the whole deformed, unforgettable individuals in Southern fiction. They produce in the reader both empathy and disgust. They are characterized by ludicrous or incongruous distortion in their appearance or manners. Indeed, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers put a huge emphasis on the deformed, disfigured or even the social outcast characters. In O'Connor's fiction the characters are delusional or even damaged; she uses grotesque events and dark humor to reveal the moral shortcomings and problems within society. In her fiction, every single character lives a moment of grace, and a moment of choosing to do what is right, however, it is a path towards nothingness, as it always results in violence.

*The Comforts of Home* by Flannery O'Connor, is one of many stories the author writes about the complexities of an adult character living with a parent, a situation similar to her condition. In their willful assertion of the self, the protagonist, whether parent or rebellious child, is, in the end, almost defeated or completely destroyed. On this stage, the fact that their opponents are often physically defeated makes no difference; as their frustration also leads to failure; a failure they blame the stifling parents of the hostile society for. Moreover, in many of O'Connor stories, she depicts men's inability to maintain conventional manhood values. The men lack leadership, do not protect or care for their families, lack all forms of chivalry, and lose their sense of priority as they devote themselves to jobs, occupations, or social and political agendas at the detriment of their families.

The reader meets a widowed mother who never stops taking care of her 'intellectual', ungrateful adult son. Until the day she brings home a young woman named Sarah Ham (who calls herself Star Drake) to live with them despite her son's objections. An act that will create various conflicts between the son and his mother.

Thomas is a thirty five year old historian, he is dependent on his mother and makes no contribution to the house. Thomas loves his mother, and despite the fact that he is unable to discuss all of his desires with her, they get along fine. He can accept her lack of understanding only because she is proud of him and loves his work. According to O'Connor,

Thomas inherited the best qualities of his parents; he has his father's logic but not his ruthlessness, and his mother's goodness but not his desire to seek it out.

Moreover, though Thomas appears to be content with his life, he is frequently confronted by the shadowy figure of his deceased father, who would expect more from him. His father was deceitful and willing to do whatever he thought was necessary to achieve his goal. Nobody walked over him because he was assertive with people. This traditional view of masculinity follows Thomas in his interactions with his mother and in his dealings with Sarah's threat to their relationship.

O'Connor uses many different ironic devices, as the use of ironic juxtapositions, pairing opposites together, often found within her use of ironic naming, especially since "for O'Connor, names in fiction are sacramental" (Ferguson, 109) The title of the short story alludes to one of Thomas' mother's perceived blessings which Sara Ham does not have. In fact, despite the excessive love his mother feels for him, she still brings a troubled young woman to their home. The reader and Thomas feel a sort of rejection from the mother towards her son, as if all the love she has for him, has been transferred to the girl whom she considers as her own child. Thomas cannot endure the goodness his mother sees in people, indeed, unlike him, she is good and wants to do good around her, a behavior that makes her admirable. However, the mother, as well as her son are both very judgmental in different ways; Thomas<sup>1</sup> reaches for the bad in people and his mother for the good in them, a characteristic that tells the readers more about them than about Sarah who is supposed to be a bad person.

According to Thomas, Christian history recommends moderation in goodness which is more likely to generate moderation in evil. His logic does not hold up, because evil does not develop from goodness, and it is not logical to presume that more charity will produce more evil than less. The old woman is reminding her son that morality and compassion exceed his need for comfort and security, but when she says "I keep thinking it might be you" "If it were you, how do you think I'd feel if nobody took you in? What if you were a nimpermaniac and not a brilliant smart person and you did what you couldn't help," (392) shows that she unconsciously acknowledges that Thomas and Sarah are more alike than he cares to admit.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas means "twin," and there are many doublings in the main character's story; gradually, his mother associates him with Sarah in her conversations, telling him that he could be her.

Thomas's relationship with Sarah<sup>2</sup> is also interesting, as she calls Thomas's manhood into question. Despite the sexual overtones in some of their interactions. Sarah's sensual glances, her advances toward him in the car, and other flirtations clearly irritate him. However, when Thomas puts the gun in Sarah's purse, the narrator is giving a description of a suggestive sexual contact "He grabbed the red pocketbook. It had a skin-like feel to his touch and as it opened, he caught an unmistakable odor of the girl. Wincing, he thrust in the gun and then drew back. His face burned an ugly dull red." (CS 408-9) O'Connor uses the gun as a phallic symbol and this can suggest that Thomas is suppressing his own sexual desire towards Sarah. Moreover, a Freudian reading of the scene would demonstrate Thomas finally asserting his manhood. The issue of Thomas' manhood is also raised in the context of action versus language, which is a recurring theme in O'Connor's work. Thomas is in full charge as he writes his history papers and essays, and his eloquence is difficult to match. However, as he attempts to describe Sarah to the sheriff, he stumbles and repeats himself, making it difficult for the sheriff to grasp what he is trying to say.

Flannery O'Connor is a humorist who insists on the double vision and the interpretation of the opposites. She celebrates her characters as much as she embarrasses them. According to Anthony Di Renzo in his book *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, the complexity of O'Connor's characterization makes her work provocative and unsettling. It overturns whatever first impressions we may have of her grotesques and forces us to reevaluate our judgments. He goes on mentioning the Italian novelist Luigi Pirandello, saying that "we [readers] initially laugh because we feel superior to a comic character, but closer scrutiny radically undercuts our snide superiority." (Di Renzo,105) Indeed, the use of comic dialogues and the description of comic effects are crucial in the development of O'Connor's characters. It can be seen in Thomas's attitude with his mother: "Thomas put the chair on the floor in front of her and sat down on it. He leaned forward as if he were about to explain something to a defective child." (391) and even during the discussion they entertained: "His mother's eyes, intimate but untouchable, were the blue of great distances after sunset. "Nimpermaniac," she murmured. "Nymphomaniac," he said fiercely. She doesn't need to supply you with any fancy names... slowly turning to the girl" (391-92) O'Connor challenges and encourages in her lectures and essays for a reading in emphasizing the comic aspects of her fiction, since the religious and violent aspects are the only ones that are being noticed by the readers.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah's given name, Ham, and her chosen nickname, "Star," both imply how much she enjoys performing and how much she wants people to like and look at her.

Flannery O'Connor lived with her mother for the majority of her lifetime; she was dependent on her since she made many decisions for her. This shows the strong and influential female characters in her stories. Indeed, despite Thomas' mother acknowledging the evil in her house, and the corrupting influence of her husband's ghost on her son. The mother's emotions are strong and intimate, making them unique. However, ironically, they are also indiscriminate and almost uncaring. She loves Sarah Ham because she needs love, not because the girl is worthy of love or because loving her will benefit the old lady. The mother's eyes are described as "intimate but untouchable," (391) a phrase that highlights the odd juxtaposition of attitudes. It also describes the Christian God's paradoxical nature, by reflecting his morality; to save the filthy girl, she literally sacrifices her life. The old lady does not hesitate to protect Sarah when she is about to get shot by her son, she throws herself between the two of them to prevent the gun from going off. The old lady can be characterized as an unpleasant mother and a naive, confused sentimentalist in many ways, but she is also a lady of the purest inherent virtue. Sarah Ham and Thomas are both enraged that the mother bestows so much love on them, and they feel insulted and threatened since their fragile independence is threatened.

When society (represented by Sarah), intrudes and threatens the safe cocoon, the part of Thomas' personality that is like his father's triumphs. In other words, if Thomas had grown up without his mother's strong influence, he would have been more like his father. Sarah not only disrupts the comfort of Thomas and his mother at home, but she also disrupts the comfort of home in the social order of the community. The reader then begins to see some of the tension that comes across in O'Connor's female characters, as Melissa Simpson notes, O'Connor doesn't depict "traditional sentimentalized" Southern women. "Instead, her stories contain many 'real' women who, like her mother, had no husband or other significant man in their lives, so they were forced to survive in a 'man's world'...At the same time, many of them defend the Southern hierarchy because they were fairly high up in it (or aspire to be), and they act the part of Southern lady in many ways" (82-83).

O'Connor usually looks at the conflict between two generations of the same family with the problem of the notion of teaching or giving a lesson. Sharing their knowledge is not their purpose, what they want is to put themselves forward to show that they are right no matter the situation. But at the end, it is the giver who finds himself at the position of the receptor. According to Patricia Yeager, "Children play a double role in southern women's writing. Marginal to mainstream culture but caught up in its process of indoctrination." She

adds that “the child may question her society’s values and provide a narrative space for challenging its beliefs.” (136)

*The Lame Shall Enter First* is a short story by Flannery O'Connor presented from the perspective of Sheppard, a man unable to understand his son Norton's grief over his mother's death a year ago. Sheppard does not believe in God or heaven, and his rational outlook on life leaves Norton unable to comprehend his mother's death and the void it has left in his life. The man believes instead that the most important good in life is to help others. Therefore, he fosters Rufus Johnson, a fourteen-year-old boy who believes wholeheartedly in good and evil, particularly in Satan's power. An essential ironic fact that will eventually help Sheppard realize his son's need for affection and attention.

The main conflict of the short story *The Lame Shall Enter First* is reflected to be a universal aspect of human psychology; interpersonal power dynamics. Sheppard equates intelligence with faith in terms of what has the power to control and guide one’s life, in fact, it is obvious that he does not believe in the bible since he says that he is too intelligent to believe in it. However, despite his atheism, Sheppard believes in goodness, he assumes that by providing care, compassion, food, books and a new telescope will make Rufus a perfect citizen whose attitude would be admirable. He believes that doing good deeds for others outside the family would fill the void that is left inside of it. Yet, Norton's great suffering is misunderstood by him, and he believes his son is selfish. Instead, he turns to Rufus Johnson, whom he sees as a bright adolescent in need of assistance. This is true, however, like Star Drake in *The Comforts of Home*, often the assistance required exceeds the abilities of the individual willing to provide it.

However, on the other hand, Rufus, who claims to be religious, has an abominable attitude towards others. Despite his religious beliefs, he finds no objection in bullying Norton, in going through the child’s dead mother’s furniture which is the most egregious act of all. He uses the dead mother’s comb to sweep his hair in “Hitler fashion” (CS 460). He even puts her corset around his waist and jumps up and down “making the metal supporters dance.” (CS 461) The more we advance in the reading of the story, the more we realize that the father's misguided behavior becomes more apparent. Norton, for example, hides in the closet, but his father does not notice or sympathize with his son's fear of Johnson's unexpected presence in their home. Norton is forced to make the delinquent outsider not just a houseguest but a member of the family, as he calls him son. Even after Norton informs his father that this boy has run through his dead mother's belongings which is a great act of disrespect, Sheppard still welcomes Johnson with open arms and offers him a home.

Instead of being on his son's side, he wants to give him a lesson and teach him what responsibility and generosity are. This is ironic because he is neglecting his role as a father which lead to his son's suicide. Sheppard also wants to give a lesson to Rufus after the teenager commits a crime and is arrested, a lesson he does not put into practice: "The night in jail would not hurt him and the experience would teach him that he could treat with impunity someone who had shown him nothing but kindness." (CS 470) Sheppard's work with Rufus Johnson causes him to become just as arrogant as Norton. He is obsessed with turning the boy's life around by emphasizing the teen's high Intelligence. He believes that if Johnson is intelligent, he will be able to influence his son. He believes that by appealing to the boy's intelligence and showing him care and concern, he can effect improvement in his life. The tale is ironic, as it shows that Sheppard is completely wrong; at the end, it is Rufus who gives a lesson to the man who welcomed him, and it is also Rufus who encourages Norton to seek spirituality.

Rufus teaches Norton what Sheppard can not because he lacks faith: he does not believe that there is a devil and a Jesus. Sheppard states many times that Rufus's obstinacy would not prevent him from saving him. He keeps promising to save the child. Rufus understands that only faith in Jesus will save him and not the man who thinks he is Jesus by wanting to save everyone. In terms of what has the power to influence and direct one's life, one can notice Sheppard's obsession towards Rufus's shoe for his club-foot. Rufus's deformity clearly causes discomfort for Sheppard, and assumes that Johnson's attitude is due to his deformity, and is willing to "save him." Flannery O'Connor wants her fiction, her characters as well as her readers to have a moral dimension. For instance, it is by assimilating the son to an object - the shoe, and replacing him by another child, that he is driven to suicide. Death leads to an opening of a new world, since we are told that "He had launched his flight into space" (CS 487), however Sheppard's world suddenly takes a symbolic end, he loses both of the children, and realizes that it is too late to assume his father's role. In fact, at the end, if Sheppard remains alone is because in some way he denies the existence of his son Norton by replacing him with a crippled child he wants to help.

. Family relationships are often characterized by a fight for power, in which the parent can claim simply by remaining present, and with the child being autonomous, is forced to set himself free. Indeed, this kind of turnout is frequent in Flannery O'Connor's fiction: the person who thought of giving a life lesson becomes the one who faces a tragic end. The short story's conflict is universal, and not necessarily because of its social and historical context; as



religious beliefs and values, moreover, the consequences of misfortune are considered as universal experiences that are not influenced by one's background.

Both men in *The Comforts of Home* and *The Lame Shall Enter First* focus on their rigid intellectualism, and expose themselves to the irrational sources their minds dismiss. Thomas insists on logic with his mother, and his psyche's disturbance drives him into shooting her. As well as Sheppard who also insists on logic with his son, and his absence drives the child to commit suicide. Their intellectualism, therefore, is presented as a fragile cover for an acknowledged selfishness, whose consequences erupt violently. Violent twisting events are very common in O'Connor's fiction. According to her it is the best way for her reader to understand the hidden meaning of her stories. In her essay *The Fiction Writer and His Country*, she notes "When you can assume that your audience hold the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figure." (MM, 34)

## **B. Historical Birth of a New South: Modernity and Trauma**

In the years following World War II, security and insecurity became politicized terms, especially in relation to National Security. This implies that any discussion in the presence of security and insecurity in literature must be set against the context of political debates.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction does not have any direct relevance to the Cold War and its political issues of defence. Yet, in their existential and theological dimensions, security and insecurity structure her work. At first glance, her fictional work appears to contradict Cold War liberals' insistence on rejecting the ideal of protection as rationality in order to protect America from the threat of communism, especially Stalinism. Indeed, this viewpoint has been taken up by several scholars, as they have asserted that she was fundamentally opposed to Cold War liberal politics as well as the fear of foreign invasion.

O'Connor is identified as a Southerner and a Catholic, both of which contributed to her self-perception as an outsider in conventional political debate. Therefore, she is not considered as a political writer, as she only feeds her stories from her native region: Georgia and its local people during the 1950s and early 1960s, exposing their traditions, societal issues, and even language. Her dealing with the traditional social structure demonstrates that it was a major concern to her. She studies social class structure and exposes racial issues people were facing at the time, as well as the ethnic minorities that were rejected by the South. She uses damaged and delusional characters, grotesque events and dark humor to reveal the moral shortcomings and problems with society. Indeed, she views violence and security from a different facet than anticommunist liberals of the time, and this distinction is apparent precisely because she writes fiction rather than political theories or literary criticism.

O'Connor's works make reference to the Southern Renaissance, a literary and cultural movement that spanned the 1920s and 1940s and fused a modernist aesthetic with a nationalist, anti-industrial social vision. She discusses the conflict between modern capitalism and the ostensibly oppressive racial system of the agrarian South, but in a satirical tone.

Her short story, *The Displaced Person*<sup>3</sup> presents a clash in history, a break of a static social order of the American South during the years following World War II. An order that is the product of a historical development which gave the South a stronger identity, more than other regions. Her short story presents a threat to the local, rural order by the farm workers. This disruption connects the economic and racial orders in the same way that the Southern Agrarians' vision unites the two. It is important to note that the inhabitants of the Southern states have been conscious and aware of the situation of the region, as they have always been very hegemonic over the South and its culture. "Southern self-consciousness," writes Sheldon Hackney,

was created to protect a peculiar institution from threats originating outside the region. Consequently, the southern identity has been linked from the first to a siege mentality. Though southerners have many other identities, they are likely to be most conscious of being southerners when they are defending their region against attack from outside forces...(924)

Because of the introduction of foreignness to a distinctly undemocratic and hierarchical space, *The Displaced Person* is one of O'Connor's many stories that are set in a farm that is structured around the master-servant relationship that allows her to address issues of democracy in a new way. The short story calls attention to the theme of displacement, social order and racism. Indeed, the formation of insider and outsider groups is accentuated by the coming of immigrant foreigners, Mr. Guizac and his family. They are considered as displaced people because they ran away from Post-World War II Poland, and they have come to work on Mrs. McIntyre's farm. Thomas Schaub remarks that "though [O'Connor] viewed her fiction as a dramatic reprimand to liberal assumptions, the revisionist liberalism of the postwar era was in many respects speaking her language." (*American Fiction*, 124) *The Displaced Person* shows the fundamental political insecurity that, at first glance, would seem to mark the antithesis to citizenship in democratic America.

Indeed, the form of American democracy in relation to diversity is one of the issues at stake in this story. The Polish left a newly free and communist country, the war had ruined their economy and businesses, most of them did not speak English and were Roman Catholics. But the biggest issue is that they were accused of taking jobs that would have been

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<sup>3</sup> According to Cambridge Dictionary, a displaced person is someone who has been forced to leave their home, especially because of war or a natural disaster.  
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/displaced-person> seen in April 26, 2021

filled by the native residents. In fact, the short story is connected to the problem of economic insecurity under Capitalism, especially job insecurity. Indeed, after the arrival of the Polish, the other workers who work for Mrs. McIntyre started to feel threatened by Mr. Guizac who might cost them their jobs. Mrs. Shortley, in particular, has a sneaking suspicion that her husband will be the first to be fired, and her suspicions are heightened by the grotesque vision she sees: "She was seeing the ten million billion of them pushing their way into new places over here and herself, a giant angel with wings as wide as a house, telling the Negroes that they would have to find another place." (CS 210- 211) Mr. Guizac, according to Mrs. Shortley's terrifying dreams, would destroy the farm. For her, Mr. Guizac is inextricably linked to newsreel footage of piled-up, disjointed corpses from a concentration camp. Despite the fact that the arrival of the Polish family threatens her, she attempts to pass on her terror to the two black farm workers, Astor and Sulk. But at the end, it is her husband who gets fired, and while leaving the farm, Mrs. Shortley gets a stroke.

Mrs. McIntyre, on the other hand, is willing to consider the foreigner if his knowledge is beneficial to her business. Until the story approaches a moment of social and political change, ethnicity, class and the bizarre habitus of Jim Crow explode with premonitions of change when the Guizacs moved to Mrs. McIntyre's farm, and these changes are mediated by monstrous events. The story approaches a moment of domestic and political change, when Mr. Guizac crosses the line of a racial taboo; he arranges for his white cousin, who has just spent three years in a concentration camp, to marry Sulk, a black worker. The situation is serious, however, O'Connor treats it comically, it becomes a sort of Polish Joke, Mrs. McIntyre keeps yelling, while Mr. Guizac, uncomprehending, nods, smiles and answers "Ya." (CS 234) In fact, the displaced person is unable to make a distinction between whites and blacks: while kissing Mrs. McIntyre's hand upon welcoming her (which she promptly wipes), he shakes the hands of the African American workers "like he didn't know the difference, like he might have been as black as them." (218) The indignation at Guizac's seemingly harmless plan for racial integration is palpable, but his ethnic transgression is counterbalanced by the reaffirmation of economic boundaries. Mrs. McIntyre therefore accuses the foreigner not of being different, but of being just like the other white workers. "They're all the same. It's always been like this." (CS 231) But the fact that she admits that she can run the farm without Mr. Guizac but not without her black workers, makes them appear as the South's inherent quality and as an integral part of the land. This makes little sense in terms of labor market theory, but that is precisely the point: black labor must be inefficient and uneconomical. It ensures the South's status as Capitalism's agrarian other by rejecting Capitalism's logic. As a result, we can see how O'Connor's narrative elucidates the racial-economic foundations of the Southern Agrarian ideal.

Mrs. McIntyre, who wants a companion on the farm, casts her white employee Mrs. Shortley as a racial equal, whom she calls 'good country people', through the names she chooses for the other workers (her black staff) as "niggers" in the presence of Mrs. Shortley and Astor, but while speaking to Mr. Guizac and his colleagues, she switches to "Negros."

Mrs. McIntyre and Mr.s Shortley share a knowledge of local linguistic nuances. Similarly, Mrs. McIntyre joins her in referring to the Pole as "Gobblehook" in private conversations, a kind of a joke between them, but when he is present, she calls him by his proper name, Guizac. These vocabulary changes highlight how the sharing of clichés and jokes often creates insider and outsider communities, with those with social influence excluding those without it. Just like Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman in *Good Country People*, they use similar clichés during their breakfast discussions despite their socio-economic differences. Their ritualized exchange demonstrates the intimacy and the bond they have built over the years. Just Like Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. McIntyre is in a position to determine who is trash and who is not, and she puts Mrs. Shortley in a better category than the one of 'trash'. Therefore, Mrs. Shortley intentionally separates herself from her own class, including her husband, in order to align herself with her employer. As Sarah Gleeson White states " It is in "The Displaced Person" that we find the values of "Good Country People" and Southern womanhood troublingly entangled with hierarchies of class and race." (53) She goes on to add that "Class is an important element in images and discourses about the southern lady." That Mrs. Shortley must be able to distinguish herself from "trash," and to make sure others do likewise, in order to count herself a lady." (54)

According to O'Connor, Southern womanhood, and the ideals that support it, are directly implicated in damaging class and racial/ethnic hierarchies and inequality. Therefore, women played significant roles, voluntarily or otherwise in a culture that produces brutality and violence. Indeed, when Mr. Guizac is killed by the tractor, the reader realizes how important social order is. Despite the fact that Mrs McIntyre, Mr Shortley, and Sulk are all witnesses to the accident, none of them alarm Mr. Guizac about the approaching tractor. For their own purposes and in an attempt to restore social order on the estate, each one of them remains silent. Mrs McIntyre feels displaced as she observes Mr Guizac's wife and children kneeling by his body as Father Flynn administers the last rites: "she felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance." (CS 245) The reader also learns that Mr Shortley leaves the farm later that day to search for employment elsewhere, while Sulk relocates to the Southern part of the state.

### C. Crossing gender boundaries in Carson McCullers' fiction

In her essay *The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing*, Carson McCullers wrote: “Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes ... Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about—people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love—their spiritual isolation” ( 174)

Carson McCullers addresses the question of identity. Her fiction offers important insights regarding gender, sexual relations, and their interaction with the self, society and nature. She challenges the notion of normality within the form of identity construction. Indeed, many of her female characters identify themselves as freaks because of their inability to perform expected gender roles, or successfully do not have the required accoutrements with femininity. Many critics have associated her fiction to her personal life, and it suggests a biographical reading of it. Indeed, McCullers shares many common points with her characters, as she uses music allusion in many of her short stories. In her short stories *Wunderkind* and *Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland* both of the main protagonists, who happened to be women, are successful musicians. In the 1962 essay, *The Sad Sweet Music of Carson McCullers*, Barbara Nauer Folk asserts that “[m]usical allusions of one kind or another are to be found in almost all McCullers’s stories, music serving now as architectural framework, again as extended correlative, often and regularly as minor symbol” (202)

McCullers’s vision, in relation to the Southern grotesque can be presented as an allegory of existential anguish, meaning, the difficulty of the construction of an identity. This can be seen in her first short story “*Wunderkind*.” The main protagonist, Frances, is a teen piano prodigy, who has been told all her life that she is exceptional in what she does. However, after being forced to the point of mental and emotional exhaustion by her mentor, she discovers she lacks the talent to pursue her dream of being a concert pianist and abandons her lessons and music altogether. The short story denounces the coming to terms of one’s abilities after years of practice and hard work. Indeed, it stresses many autobiographical

elements, since Carson McCullers herself wished to be a concert pianist as a child and learned the instrument under Mary Tucker's tutorship. The talented pianist grew to admire the Tuckers, especially Mary. McCullers decided to join the Juilliard School of Music on Tucker's recommendation and was admitted into the prestigious institution. Virginia Spencer Carr observes:

Carson Smith's union with Mary Tucker was a bond entered into with her whole spirit, and for the next four year her piano teacher was the fulcrum of her physical and psychic existence. ... From Mary Tucker, Carson craved not only enormous technical training to help launch her as a musician, but also a demonstrable love. She could never articulate such feelings for her teacher, however, whose firm demeanor and demanding standards and discipline in music unwittingly created a barrier between them. (*The Lonely Hunter*, 26 - 27)

McCullers felt devastated and abandoned by her beloved teacher, when the Tuckers moved and McCullers changed her path towards literature. Carr notes, "Restrained almost to the point of coldness, neither sought solace nor offered balm to the other's psychic wounds. Neither woman allowed the other to know how deeply she had been hurt." (35-36)

In her short story *Wunderkind*, Margaret B. McDowell rightly asserts that McCullers "illustrates the writer's use of his or her experience, modulated and transformed." (27) The teenage protagonist, Frances, a young pianist, struggles to live up to the label of child prodigy and, as a result, abandons music entirely. Frances, like young McCullers, aspires to be a concert pianist, and she trains with Mr. Bilderbach, her piano teacher. She attends lessons twice a week and studies for long hours per day since the age of twelve, sacrificing childlike playtime and the company of other children. Francis becomes very close with Mr. Bilderbach and his wife. As a childless couple, they treat her as one of their own, allowing her to eat with them and sleep at their house.

The story, told mainly in flashbacks, shows Frances' serious identity crisis, as she realizes she is no longer Bilderbach's Wunderkind. When she enters his home for her final lesson, she attempts to build up her confidence by reciting to herself, "A good lesson—a good lesson—like it used to be" (31). Filled with stress and anxiety that she no longer personifies a Wunderkind, she constantly asserts to herself that she is still the person she once believed she was: a brilliant pianist. Frances is perplexed by her musical difficulties. She realizes it began "four months ago" (35), but she doesn't understand how or why she can't play with the zeal

Bilderbach demands. Finally, she blames her age: “adolescence, she thought” (35). Frances is attempting to maintain her identity as a Wunderkind, a form of selfhood bestowed upon her by her mentor. No matter how hard she tries, Francis ends up by losing her identity, what she believed to be her true self “I don't know why, but I just can't—can't any more,” (37) she says. And in her traumatized state, she flees, she leaps from his house, grabbing her music and satchel, but “turn[s] in the wrong direction, and hurrie[s] down the street that had become confused with noise and bicycles and the games of other children.” (37) In his study, Robert Phillips interprets Frances in terms of the grotesque, meaning as a freak. To him, she may have good technique on the piano, but she lacks inner passion, which is crucial, it is a necessary component of a true artist. He claims “Outside she is all glitter; inside she knows she is empty,” (175).

Robert Phillips declares that, while being the most well known of her stories, “Wunderkind” does not represent her best effort. (175) This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the author wrote the story when she was fifteen-year-old, the same age as Frances in the story, and published it when she was only nineteen years old. Despite the simplicity of the short story, it is still filled with discomfort. Where the coming of age and the discovery of an inner self are the main focus. In fact any person of any age who reads it, can identify themselves with the troubled young musician, and notice the difficulty the shift from childhood to adulthood can cause. The young girl suddenly starts to develop feelings she does not understand regarding her teacher, and the narrator’s description starts to emphasise a complication in Frances’s feelings.

One can notice the sexual attraction she is feeling, an attraction she clearly does not understand, since her body is in the liminal state between childhood and adulthood: “His deep voice sounded as though it had been straying inside her for a long time. She wanted to reach out and touch his muscle-flexed finger that pointed out the phrases, wanted to feel the gleaming gold band ring and the strong hairy back of his hand.” (33) Her confusion is exacerbated because she also loves him as a second father. The girl’s attitude towards her repressed feelings are characterized by confusion, doubt, and escapism. She chooses to run away from the house without any explanation than to face them, and her action shows how vulnerable and innocent she is. Moreover, in such stories, the sexual attraction for teenage heroines implies domination by men, and it is that loss of autonomy that they fear. Alice Hall Petry declares that “The powerful sexual dimension of the piano music leads to the complex central motif of the story: Bildreback and Frances respond to each other not just as teacher and student, and not just as father and daughter, but virtually as lover and beloved.” (Para. 5)



McCullers examines sexism and gender inequality through Bilderbach's character. . He addresses his other prodigy, a fourteen-year-old violinist Heime Israelsky, as "Master Israelsky" (32), but he prefers to address Frances as Bienchen, which means "little bee." This discrepancy in naming the two young people shows that Bilderbach places a higher importance on Heime's talent than on Frances'. Furthermore, when Frances makes "enormous" mistakes while playing the piano, Bilderbach insults her intellect by saying, " I know it must be terrible. Carrying all the time a head that thick. Poor Bienchen. --" (32) She is no longer able to order herself to play. Frances' skill and ambition to be an artist, crumbles when she learns that her gender will most likely throw her chances for success in the world of art.

The surrounding environment also plays a major role. In the South during the thirties, a time when the concept of separate spheres remained ingrained in American culture, men benefited from great advantages regarding their rights, and they associated sexual initiations with the acquisition of power, whereas, for women, sexual intercourses entails a loss of individual choice. As Savigneau notes: "Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature." (62) Moreover, in the short story, the young pianist is only surrounded by men, and she is expected to perform the music composed by men the way they did. Therefore, her teacher will always find mistakes in her interpretation and performance because she is handicapped by her gender. The only other female character in the story is Anna, Mr. Bilderbach's wife. the reader learns that she once was a "*lieder* singer" in Germany (33) which means that she possesses musical talent, however, we are told that she does not sing anymore "she said it was her throat." (33) The reader considers this statement an excuse rather than an actual sore. Since women were required to provide a home for their husbands, Anna was likely forced to give up her musical career when she married. She now spends her time in the kitchen or "all her time in their bed upstairs, reading magazines or just looking with a half-smile at nothing." (33) McCullers' use of two main Modernist themes; the quest for authentic identity and the fulfillment of a life's purpose, makes her place within American Modernism writers evident.

Carson McCullers limits her fiction to the level of the individual, the family, and the personal crisis they face. *A Domestic Dilemma* for instance, depicts a family both torn apart because of daily yet not common issues, but still feel compassion, love and loyalty for one another. Martin, a loving father and husband, must face his family issues; his wife has

drinking problems because she can not get used to the new environment they live in, and her husband finds himself helpless in order to make her feel better. The realism of the story is remarkable, as many families find themselves torn apart facing difficult dilemmas. The reader notices the detachment and loneliness the characters suffer from, and it is Emily's alcoholism that causes it.

Alcoholism is caused, in this case, by the stress an urban lifestyle can cause on a woman who was raised in an emotionally supportive Southern town. Her social isolation is slowly destroying her. Although, the cause of her alcoholism is not the central point of the plot. In McCullers's literature, depression occurs in all sorts of social situations. Her characters are affected by society without facing it, unlike Flannery O'Connor's, whose characters suffer from deep consequences from their acts regarding society, whether it be a member of the family or an outsider. Emily's social isolation is similar to Frances's musical genius, or Mr Ferris's incapacity for stability in *The Sejourner*.

Even the case in *A Domestic Dilemma* echoes the author's personal life. She encountered both the role of Emily, that is the person who is desperately in need of love and companionship, and the role of Martin, the helpless lover of the disabled person. Martin has qualities that are usually ascribed to women; he is gentle, patient, he has intuition, and his love is unselfish. However, Martin's love for his wife cannot save her from her unhappiness. It is usually the act of love in McCullers's fiction, not the comfort of being loved, that has the power to transform the lover. McCullers' blurring of gender roles is striking, and it can be seen in almost all of her work. She was probably not motivated by feminist revolt against stereotyped sex roles, for example; Miss Amelia in *The Ballad of The Sad Café* was masculine.

Carson McCullers' work posts a new understanding of sexuality and gender relations. She herself explored gender and sexual identity in her own life: she considered herself an "invert" and felt that she was "born a man" (Carr, *Lonely Hunter* 39, 167, 156). Instead, she projected in her fiction, her feelings, emotions and own personality. If her male characters act as women, and vice versa is because she loved both men and women.

Joan Scott is an American historian who studies French history. In 1986, she published an article entitled *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*.<sup>4</sup> In it, Scott argues that the concept of gender is only useful to talk about the social construction of the

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<sup>4</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no.5 (1986): 1053-75

differences between the sexes; it can also be used as a way of “signifying relationships of power.”<sup>5</sup> According to Scott, using “gender” to say that one is going to study women was a first step but masculine and feminine experiences are not absolutely separate; they shape one another because they are caught in relationships of power. Therefore, Scott argues in favor of historical research that takes women’s experience into account while studying how these relationships of power are constructed, how they are built and how they shape definitions of feminine and masculine. She also suggests that the concept of gender can renew traditional approaches and methods in history. Studying gender does not only mean studying the family on the domestic sphere. Scott affirms that gender can be useful to understand relationships of power in general.

The experience and position of women in the United States in the 20th century varied tremendously across time, but also depending on their race, class and sexual orientation. McCullers, in her fiction, does not separate her female and male characters, but rather puts them in an equal position, rather socially or emotionally. However, women are only treated fairly in the sense that they are treated similarly to men. Women are denied equality because they are not the same as men, because they are different. According to the difference model, fundamental equality between the sexes necessitates the consideration of difference. Emily from *A Domestic Dilemma* may be considered as her husband’s equal, only because she acts like men, she does not respect the traditional gender roles.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

## **PART II - The Grotesque Female Body**

### **A. Fundamental disability and inadequacy of the body as means of exploring identity**

The grotesque is an aesthetic mode that mainly affects the body and the psyche. The physical deformation points to the damaging of existence, the exploitation and abuse of the Southern psyche, for example. Moreover, the grotesquely deformed bodies challenge the fixed system of physical harmony, and reintroduce a new movement in the perception of reality. In Southern fiction, the physically deformed and the mentally disturbed characters arouse both feelings of fear and repulsion. They are overweight, suffer from heart attacks, strokes, and have missing limbs.

In Southern culture, the grotesque body is considered as a way of powerful expression of Southern racial and gender politics. In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yeager focused on the grotesque bodies as a “useful figure of thought for presenting a set of problems plaguing the South.” (25) According to her; “ it offers among other advantages, a way of previewing what is known but not thought - a set of acknowledged coordinates.” (25) The grotesque with its mode of exaggeration requires a representational strategy with “the volume turned up,” (10) to use Yeager’s expression. The grotesque embodies this necessity and its corollary: the dispossession and the inability to express oneself: it becomes body talk in a culture which has erected its policing and silencing into a system. Yeager poses Southern grotesque bodies as “emblems of the region’s incarcerating ideologies of race, class, and gender, and the inevitable disruption and eventual dissolution of those ideologies” (*Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* 13).

Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, *Rabelais and His World* presents a grotesque theory that creates an affirmative view of humanity through its critique on manners or culture. His theory is based on a folk humor tradition that dates back to Middle Ages carnival celebrations, which enabled individuals to shed their official and social personae in order to perceive the world in its laughing aspect. Many critics have pointed out that there is a strong conceptual bond in Bakhtin between laughter and the motif... of Christian love, or *agape*.” (Coates, 134) This bond expresses itself in relation to fear. According to Bakhtin, “Fear is the extreme expression of narrow minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter.” (*Rabelais* 54) Whereas laughter “liberates from the fear that developed in man during

thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.” (*Rabelais* 105) Therefore, O’Connor’s use of the grotesque and humorous imagery in relation to Bakhtin’s theory, illustrates the incompleteness of human knowledge and the interconnectedness and divinity of the physical world. It also encourages a carnivalesque atmosphere that simultaneously alleviates anxiety while also generating an openness to others and to the physical world.

In the past, as in ancient Greece for instance, people used to laugh at a deformed person with less restraint as we do today. Lee Byron Jennings explain it in his work *The Ludicrous Demon*, as he states:

The sight of a radically deformed person calls forth a peculiar kind of fear; it is not a rational fear inspired by the presence of a real danger, but something more profound and more primitive than the fear of wild beasts or strangers. It is the same fear that we experience in a nightmare upon imagining that we are being pursued by a bogey or demon. But the sight of a deformed person also arouses another feeling, almost as primitive, but more closely bound to conscious, reflective processes; namely, the feeling of amusement. This tendency is quite in contrast to our humane feelings toward the person and our sympathy for his handicap; but it is basic, and we can often sense its presence beneath, and prior to, more "civilized" attitudes. The comic urge involved here has little to do with it, ... it rather approaches the coarse laughter aroused by the vulgar, bestial, and cruel and the guilty pleasure with which morbid or obscene things may sometimes be regarded. An element of wonderment at the unheard-of may also enter the picture; but the outstanding feature is a feeling of sovereignty over the object; we regard it from a superior position and with an amused contempt at its ridiculousness. (11)

The grotesque focuses on the human body, and all the ways that it can be distorted or exaggerated. Its characters appear as physically deformed figures, they are expected to be crippled, in order to increase the possibilities in confronting the strangeness of the South's brand of savagery. In fact, Southern women writers as Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers do not miss a chance to use these grotesque characters to map an array of social crises. O’Connor herself expressed in her letters and essays her desire to use the grotesque to shock her readers into a realization of the true nature of their world and of themselves. She is also known for her distinctive humor. In fact, her humor is dependent upon her grotesque

imagery, it derives from the obvious gap between her characters' conception of themselves and her description of them, and its focus is the prideful nature of human beings. Indeed, O'Connor uses irony to ultimately comment on the risks of making false assumptions of others based on their differences, whether regarding work, religious beliefs, or false sense of authority.

In his interpretation of the grotesque, Bakhtin emphasizes corporality, especially corporal contortion. According to him, the body is a body of excess. Therefore, it questions boundaries and tidy categories. Bakhtin celebrates the strange body as it is a site of production: "the grotesque [...] discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life." (48) O'Connor's method of the grotesque can be found in her ironically titled short story *Good Country People* in the characterisation of Joy/Hulga. As a person who is missing one leg, Joy/ Hulga physically carries the stigma of abnormality, metaphorically embodying the "sins" of the world with her. Indeed, her disability is necessary to expose imperfection and inhumanity. Beyond the physical affliction of the artificial leg, Joy/ Hulga also suffers from a heart condition and poor eyesight, symbolizing her emotional, intellectual and spiritual deficiencies. She is portrayed as an arrogant, cantankerous, morally insidious, and most importantly, as an intentionally "Ugly" character, not only because of her missing limb, but also because of her spirit. In her commitment to "Ugliness" she changes her name from Joy to Hulga, a name she feels suits her and the physical disfigurement that had come to define, in her subconscious, who and what she was. She chose the ugliest name she could think of. The name change tends to increase the absurdity and grotesqueness of the story. When Joy changes her name to Hulga, she feels that it reflects more her personality and her unattractive prosthetic leg, but for the reader, this new name changes the tone of O'Connor's work.

While Hulga is a learned woman with a doctorate in philosophy. She relies on the fact that beliefs and values are baseless, and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is not a lack of faith but a faith in the lack of anything. Her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, disapproves of her daughter's intellectualism, because as a practicing Christian, she rejects Hulga's nihilism<sup>6</sup> as it goes against her own beliefs, but also because in the 1950s, society's attitude toward women in college was sexist: college was first and foremost a great place for a woman to find a husband. According to an American Experience program titled "*The Pill*" on PBS.org, "the

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<sup>6</sup> According to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Nihilism is the assumption that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true Nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties and no purpose other than perhaps, an impulse to destruction. (Para, 1)

dominant theme promoted in the culture and media at the time was that a husband was far more important for a young woman than a college degree.” Women were expected to get married right out of high school or at least during college, and if they failed to do so by their mid-twenties, they were considered old maids.<sup>7</sup>

Hulga claims to want to be ugly and to reject everything. Yet, she does take this loving pair of her artificial leg. Indeed, the “nothing” that Hulga is devotedly worshipping is her lack of leg and lack of faith, which are replaced by artificial ones; an artificial leg and an artificial belief. She embraces the philosophy of Nihilism which holds that all beliefs and values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated; life is without purpose, and nothing matters because in the end, there will only be nothing. However, she treats her leg and “took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her eyes turned away,”(CS, 297) it increases Hulga’s logical response to the tragic event she underwent. At times, the loss of a faith tends to be caused by a horrible event. In this case, Hulga has replaced any faith she may have once had in God or a higher power with a faith in empirical (measurable and provable) knowledge, and she does so the moment her leg was shot off at age ten.

As mentioned before, the new name changes the tone of O’Connor’s work. She creates a character; Joy, who chooses to call herself Hulga. Consequently, the choice of the name “Hulga” is an intelligible one, because the loss of the leg and its replacement with an artificial one, represents a rebirth, just as the loss of her old identity that was replaced by a new name. Ruth M. Holsen suggests that Joy’s decision to call herself “Hulga” is inspired. “Hulga” derives from the Norse word “Heilgar,” meaning “holy”, or the “holy one.” She goes on to say that “Hulga has in a way saved herself by seeing through to nothingness - no wonder she feels the fitness of a name that means holy”. (59)

It is no coincidence that the etymology of the word “grotesque” can be traced to the Italian “grotto,” meaning that which is hidden below ground. Flannery O’Connor ironically portrays the conflicting nature of the characters of Southern society. Despite the fact that they belong to the chaste part of it, some characters have misleading and contradictory appearances. In fact, the relationship between ugliness and Hulga’s missing leg is demonstrated by Mrs. Freeman’s fascination with the artificial limb, as well as other ailing physical details. The narrator explains that Mrs. Freeman:

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<sup>7</sup> Mrs. America: Women's Roles in the 1950s. FROM THE COLLECTION: WOMEN IN AMERICAN HISTORY <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-mrs-america-womens-roles-1950s/?Author=Gaby%20Skok&Preview=true> ,accessed on 15/03/2021

Had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago. (CS, 284)

O'Connor describes a culture that bestows false knowledge or status on its members. Indeed, Mrs. Freeman can be depicted as a character who enjoys seeking pleasure from others' weaknesses and sufferings. She is very hypocritical; everything she says or observes is just a projection of what she is. All of her acts and statements portray a spiritual wilderness in modern society.

O'Connor begins the short story with a mechanical and materialistic description of Mrs. Freeman. She is compared to "heavy truck" followed by three expressions: "forward and reverse for her human dealing and neutral when she is alone." (CS, 280) The mechanistic description serves as a duality of all the main characters as each one of them has a different 'mechanical' approach in dealing with the world, hence the use of the truck metaphor. Indeed, The grotesqueness of the character of Mrs. Freeman appears in the combination with the human and the mechanical, but more importantly the fact that she freely chooses to behave and act as a machine.

Much of the description of both Mrs. Freeman and Joy/Hulga is focalized through Mrs. Hopewell, which leads readers to know far more about her own mind than either of these characters. Mrs. Hopewell believes her daughter's physical disability puts her at a disadvantage, even though her Phd in philosophy proves her incredible intellectual capacity and potential. She views her daughter as "a child because it tore her heart to think of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times." (CS, 283). Yet Mrs. Hopewell fails to live up to her own image of herself, a point that Joy/Hulga makes over the dinner table when she yells, "Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not?" (CS, 258)



The short story contains many dichotomies: decent country people and white trash; educated and uneducated people; believers in God and nonbelievers. Even if they are unsophisticated, the good country people believe in God and hard work. They are responsible and strive to treat people with respect. As Mrs. Hopewell puts it, they are the salt of the earth because they keep businesses and farms running. There are a lot of them, and they do not cause any harm to society. Hopewell makes it clear early on what her outlook on life is. After the omniscient narrator mentions the manner in which the Freemans were employed, readers are able to delve further into the divorced woman's thoughts.

Mrs. Hopewell believes in clichés like "nothing is perfect," "that is life," and "other people have their opinions too" (CS, 281). Given that these were stated directly after Mrs. Freeman's shortcomings, it is safe to assume that Mrs. Hopewell employs these clichés in a positive way. In short, she wants nothing from the world to challenge her essentially naive beliefs. The concept of 'good country people' is a prime example of this deceit.

Mrs. Hopewell has a particular fondness in her heart for good country people like the Freemans. Indeed, her conventional worldview is founded on a simplistic perception of herself at the top, and the groups "beneath" her as being made up on one hand, of 'good people'; who are rural, hardworking and honest. And on the other hand, the 'white trash' untrustworthy people, whom she claims live a filthy life. White trash are not exactly defined in the story telling, but there is an assumption that they do not like to work, since Mrs. Hopewell's former employees, whom she referred to as "white trash," stayed for less than a year. She believes she can easily differentiate between these groups, which of course, reinforces her own confidence regarding her superiority. In fact, when Manley Pointer shows up at her door, she lets him stay for two hours because he assumes that he may not be good enough to converse with her, that she is more intelligent and sophisticated, he also appeals to her sympathy by describing himself as "just a country boy." (CS, 287) Unlike Hulga, she cannot be deliberately mean to anyone, and invites him for dinner.

Mrs. Hopewell confuses Manley Pointer for being a good country person. Just like her daughter, she is initially unconvinced by his attempts to seduce her into purchasing one of his bibles, fearing her daughter's reaction. Interestingly, she decides to lie to him by telling him that she keeps it by her bedside instead of the parlor, when in fact, it is in the attic, an inconvenient place to keep it. Once again we can think of the relationship of a parent with his child and the impact they have on each other; Mrs. Hopewell, just like Hulga, may have not

read the bible in a very long time, since she keeps it in the attic, in addition to the fact that her daughter imposes her nihilism. Despite her assumption of being a believer, the reader can clearly see the great impact Hulga has on her mother.

However, Manley Pointer is clearly not a good country person, nor does he seem to be white trash. Like so many of O'Connor's devil figures, he turns out to be an evil force that emerges almost out of nowhere, before retreating intact and returning to the nowhere from which he came. Unlike Mrs. Freeman, who believes that Manley Pointer is one of those who can never be innocent and simple, Mrs. Hopewell believes the exact opposite, just like Hulga, she is blinded by the goodness and simplicity she sees in his false personality.

Mrs. Hopewell looks down at others, she contradicts herself by saying “everybody is different,” (CS, 282) and can't bear her daughter's or Manly's differences. Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell have no idea at the end of the story that Manly has stolen Hulga's leg and ran away with it, duping them all with his Bible salesman speech and seductive country boy charm. Since Mrs. Hopewell considers herself more grounded and more superior, never admitting to be wrong, resulting in her living in the illusion she considers reality, a fact she shares with her daughter. The story ends on a humorous and ironic note, in keeping with the story's grotesque, absurd, paradoxical nature, with Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell chatting about how “[Manly] was so simple” and “Some can't be that simple, I know I never could.” (CS, 300)

Flannery O'Connor stresses corporality throughout her work. Her emphasis on the body, on its needs and vulnerabilities, undermines all forms of pride and abstraction in her characters. Indeed, as a Catholic writer, she seeks to expose through her fiction a spiritual reality; the outcast, who is mocked by disability or “freakishness,” is the redemptive figure that will transform the reader's soul. This transformation rests on the recognition of the spiritual brokenness that the figure causes the readers to recognise in themselves. Hulga Hopewell needs to be unattractively angry, and she needs to be physically un-whole, in order for the true ugliness in the story to emerge from those characters who are physically complete.

Hulga's loss of faith following a tragic event contrasts sharply with the character of Manley Pointer who claims not to be raised on the basis of any specific belief from the beginning. He confesses that “[he has] been believing in nothing ever since [he] was born.” (CS, 299) His belief in the purposelessness of life and the power of nothingness has turned

him into a corrupt, empty human being. This confirms the Bakhtinian reversal of hierarchies: Hulga's intellectual superiority is brought "down to earth", while the simple-mindedness of Pointer is revealed as wisdom. (CS, 81)

Flannery O'Connor is using Manley Pointer to expose the devil that possesses the non-believer, and characterizing Hulga as the outcast who is always recognized by her disability, and who will be the redemptive figure. Hulga thinks she can seduce Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman, by removing her leg. The removal at that moment means more than her lack of mobility, it also represents her lack of spirituality, she has been fooled and left helpless. She thinks she is entering this communion with somebody who is just like her, therefore, we realize that she does not really believe in nothing, but he does. Earlier in the short story, she has professed atheism, but in the Bible salesman she encounters real evil. As the story goes on, the wooden leg keeps accumulating meaning, and the reader learns how the girl, her mother and the country people feel about her leg; all in different ways. When the bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that Manley Pointer took a part of the girl's personality and of her soul. In doing so, Manley Pointer will ensure that Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman will not overlook the missing piece of Hulga's humanity. By stealing the leg, he opens the door to nothingness they have been resilient to face.

The characters' deformity and deficiency brings us closer to them, it makes them who they are and are not considered any less human. O'Connor's grotesque aims to force the reader to embrace their own brokenness, both real and potential. Flannery O'Connor admits the distortion of her characters, but is reluctant to admit that they are more 'freakish' than the ordinary fallen man. According to her, distortion is necessary to make her vision alive for the readers. Therefore, Hulga's disability serves as a mirror to the other characters. The complete bodies are just more problematic and chaotic than the disabled one. Mrs. Freeman and Hulga willfully sacrifice their God-given potential for freedom and flexibility, choosing instead to adopt rigid, inflexible postures in their thinking, and treatment of others. Usually, the mechanical inflexibility O'Connor describes is deeply grounded in her characters' pride, arrogance, and self-centeredness. As Alan Spiegel notes in his work, *A Theory of the grotesque in Southern fiction* "Whether the grotesque appears as a physical cripple or a mental cripple, he succeeds as a literary creation because his deformity never exceeds his humanity; that is, if we find him meaningful, his deformity will not separate him from us, but rather will bring him closer to us."(Spiegel 428-429) His theory explains why at the end we feel sorry for Hulga.

## **B. The burden and the restriction of femininity in Carson McCullers' and Flannery O'Connor's fiction**

In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yeager explores the way Southern women writers ground their fiction in the grotesque body as a means of contesting the rigid, conformist boundaries of Southern society. Yeager shows how this use of the grotesque sheds light on systemic crises within each heroine's social milieu. (Yeager 126-127). The grotesque as prism through which to examine social tensions is also particularly effective in the work of Carson McCullers.

Throughout her life, Carson McCullers remained a Southern woman whose imagination came into collision with society's expectations. She could not envision acceptance of womanhood, because she never found it herself, therefore she explored gender and sexual identity in her own life. Her bisexuality and her feeling of being emotionally and intellectually estranged from society, makes her feel that it could not accommodate her. Indeed, McCullers' sexual ambivalence and identification with the masculine influences her portrayal of the rejection of the feminine leads is demonstrated in the characters of *The Ballad of The Sad Café*. The novella serves as a laboratory for the hierarchical structure of heterosexuality where, as Catharine McKinnon observes: "Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women." (6) Moreover, the twisted and unfortunate fate that haunted the lives of her fictional characters resembles the author's life. Indeed, Carson McCullers' abandonment by her husband Reeves and his love affair with their bestfriend David Diamond echoes Amelia's fate; she is abandoned by Cousin Lymon whom she excessively loves, in favor of Marvin Macy. Moreover, according to Carr, Cousin Lymon owes his creation to an actual hunchback whom McCullers saw in a stand street bar that she frequented in Brooklyn Heights when she lived at 7 Middagh street, near the old Brooklyn Naval Yard (Carr, 55-56)

The novella portrays a strange love triangle in rural Georgia, between a strong and tall woman named Miss Amelia, a hunchback called Cousin Lymon and Amelia's ex-husband Marvin Macy who happens to be a convict. Miss Amelia is a gigantic woman, both physically and energetically, but her height has made her both awkward and lonely. She

dedicates her life to her father, and when he dies, she takes over his business; the town's general store. One day, a hunchback named Cousin Lymon arrives in town and claims kinship with Miss Amelia. The hunchback brings many changes in Miss Amelia's personality and femininity but also in her business, as he creates a new tradition in which the townsfolk come together for food and fellowship. Miss Amelia develops amorous feelings for the hunchback over time. The townsfolk are taken aback by this, though they recollect that the woman has a weird history with men. She was once married for only ten days to a convict, Marvin Macy, who got imprisoned after going back to his old violent habits. Marvin arrives to town after his release and swears to destroy his ex-wife's life, just as she has damaged his. When he discovers that Cousin Lymon admires him, he seizes the opportunity to use the man to break Miss Amelia's heart. Surprisingly, Cousin Lymon falls madly in love with her, therefore Macy takes a great advantage of it. The divorced couple fight in a destructive but indecisive manner, until Cousin Lymon pounces on Miss Amelia and breaks her heart. Before anyone knows what has happened, she is battered. Victorious, the two men ransack the café, steal everything she owns and leave town together.

The South is known for being a region where race has been at the heart of aesthetic practice. However, the grotesque is handled differently by African American and white writers, as they have different approaches regarding the genre. Yeager suggests that "white writers investigate half glimpsed, invisible ideologies of whiteness using metaphors of grotesqueness that differ from the grotesque valences of African American fiction." (30) In fact, Carson McCullers as a white writer does not denounce or present the racial issues the South was facing at that time, her main theme is women's struggle regarding their femininity. On the other hand black writers explore in their literature how the South has been shaped by African Americans and all the injustices they have been living and facing all along. In addition to that, they use the idea of enormous size or strength, known as gigantism. The South is unequal for both the African American and white culture since they both exhibit different degrees of feminist awareness and share the same anxieties. For instance, Carson McCullers uses as well in her story *The Ballad of the Sad Café* an enormous woman character "to fend off the fragrance of the shrinking magnolia." (Yeager, 141)

Miss Amelia Evans, the main protagonist, is a woman whose physical appearance and behavior do not correspond to conventional femininity. Defying all psychological and social norms of womanhood, she is built like a man "somewhat queer of face," (6) with a height "not natural for a woman." (6) Indeed, she does not have the looks a 'woman' is supposed to have. The narrator does not fail to describe her using the standards of the dominant culture:

a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed. There were those who would have courted her, but Miss Amelia cared nothing for the love of men and was a solitary person (2)

The grotesque body plays a huge role in dismantling the social hierarchy: “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed” (Bakhtin, 317). The monstrous body's endless property is what puts societal hierarchies to the strain. Social traditions are immutable systems that refuse or are incapable of evolving and changing. Indeed, the giant body has always been the object of social discipline. This discipline can take the shape of a freak show or another type of societal showcase, and it is heavily laced with McCullers' giantesses' nightmare. Her female protagonists, for instance Miss Amelia, are constantly afraid of becoming freaks, however, this anxiety does not stop them from pursuing their own free identities.

Moreover, Yeager goes on to say that Amelia's body records a larger struggle in which Southern women subject to “higher” laws, that the gargantuan woman becomes a political intensifier for mapping the giantism of Southern social derangements. She adds that white women writers do more than protest the burden of ladyhood. Their grotesque heroines help bring the hardest facts of Southern sexism into focus. (128) Carson McCullers has a remarkable awareness of the grotesque impact on women and their roles in Southern society. The grotesque plays an important role in her works because it shapes characters' perceptions of themselves, their lives, and their place in society on an individual level. She exposes how the grotesque disturbs the political world and demands attention through her female characters. As Yeager points out, “Southern women writers use the grotesque to map an array of social crises; the open, wounded, bleeding, excessive, corpulent, maimed, idiotic, or gargantuan body becomes the sign of a permanent emergency within the body politic” (222). Bringing attention to this crisis gives women a sense of agency in society. This grotesqueness cannot be ignored, as a result, these female characters must be seen and heard.

In addition to her physical appearance, her personality traits conform to traditional patterns of masculinity. In a community where women are associated with weakness and passivity, and are not allowed any prominent role, Miss Amelia is distinguished in performing activities that traditionally belong to men. She is characterized as the person who has the strongest personality and as the richest person from her rural community; she treats

everyone in a bad way, and never misses a chance to take advantage of people. Due to her strong character, her wealth and reputation, she enjoys the unusual privileges of making society adjust to her, and not the opposite. Amelia Evans is to the eyes of the Southern community, a threat to images of the delicate, petite lady.

Carolyn Heilbrun points out the qualities historically associated with men and women: “According to conventional view, ‘masculine’ equals forceful, competent, competitive, controlling, vigorous, unsentimental, and occasionally violent; ‘feminine’ equals tender, genteel, intuitive rather than rational, passive, unaggressive, readily given to submission. The ‘masculine’ individual is popularly seen as the maker, the ‘female’ the nourisher. Qualities which the Victorians considered admirable in men they thought perverted in women...” (xiv). Indeed, in the history of women, the 20th century was a time of enormous changes and challenges. However, their economic history demonstrates how gender has inscribed a lasting inequality in the structure of American labour. In fact, even if they were able to get employed, they were not paid at the same rate as men, even if they were doing the same work. The condition of the working-class women was at that time very complex and serious; they faced hostility from men who felt threatened by the loss of their authority at work or in their homes. Consequently, the female gender is closely identified with biological dimensions of vulnerabilities. Femaleness was associated with shame and power came from not being a woman. The appropriation of masculine authority and identification with men, then appears to be the only way out of the oppressive position reserved for women in the Southern setting, because masculinity promises freedom, power, and status. Miss Amelia's "masculinity" expresses her ambition of independence, the sole alternative to the Southern community's limitations on women. McCullers does not miss a chance to draw Miss Amelia's power from not being considered as a woman, whether regarding her physical appearance or her labor abilities. The author also contradicts the traditional male values. Men are supposed to be powerful and dominant, yet in her work, despite the fact that they are convicts and are manipulative, they still have feminine qualities; they are gentle, beloved and easily acquire feelings, which are considered exclusively feminine.

*The Ballad of The Sad Café* portrays an invasion of heterosexual patterns and search of self identification. Miss Amelia rejects every feminine side of her personality and every characteristic that would be attributed to a woman. Except her attitude when she treats children, she expresses maternal concern with them, and is gentle in her treatment:

Miss Amelia received sick people, for she enjoyed doctoring and did a great deal of it[...] could not be given to small children, as they caused bad convulsions; for them she had an entirely separate draught, gentler and sweet-flavored. Yes in all, she was considered a good doctor. (7)

Miss Amilia applies her own secret remedies to cure sickness with an enviable success and for free, which makes her more popular than the local doctor. However, when it comes to female complaints, she is helpless and incapable of suggesting any cure:

If a patient came with a female complaint she could do nothing. Indeed at the mere mention of the words her face would slowly darken with shame, and she would stand there craning her neck against the collar of her shirt, or rubbing her swamp boots together, for all the world like a great, shamed, dumb-tongued child. But in other matters people trusted her. (7)

The consequence of Miss Amelia debilitating masculinity can be seen in her inability to assist with something as normal and innocent as a female complaint; which we suppose is the menstruation cycle. The shame that she feels when she hears about any feminine problem is undoubtedly accompanied by a sense of self-hatred, because at her best efforts, she is physically not a man and must deal with these issues herself. The shame she feels makes her aware of her sex and its vulnerability, and her excessively masculine thinking makes her weight even more unpleasant. Indeed, Miss Amelia's inability to balance her masculine and feminine characteristics alienates her from herself, and causes her work to be shattered. The outcome of this internal conflict results in shame for her own leadership, rejection of the self, and the failure to fulfill all of her responsibilities as a doctor.

Moreover, these feelings of embarrassed confusion reveal her attempt to reject and expel what threatens her: femininity. She clearly feels that femininity invades her, she seeks to assert that she is part of the male world by touching her masculine apparel, craning her neck against her shirt or rubbing her swamp boots together, as if to convince herself that femininity does not exist. Miss Amelia suffers from an inability to identify with femininity from which she has been excluded. Left motherless at birth, Amelia was raised by her solitary and possessive father, which of course had an impact regarding her personal and sexual development, as she was left without a female role model, therefore, she imitated her father's activities and commercial abilities, which are considered powerful skills in the South. Consequently, her identification with the masculine is as absolute as her willful ignorance of female sexuality.



In her reluctance to acknowledge the diminished status of a woman, Miss Amelia's rejection of traditional conceptions of womanhood is apparent as she chooses not to consummate her marriage to Marvin Macy, the dandy of the town. During the twentieth century, being a woman was an issue because they were considered as vulnerable and submissive, especially a married woman; she had to adjust to her husband's needs and desires. Therefore, Amelia's refusal to commit to any sexual and penetrating act, is simply because she refuses to be vulnerable. Her relationship with her husband is kept at arm's length because of her desperate need to be the dominating one in whatever circumstance.

Marvin Macy is portrayed by the narrator as a good looking, archetypal overly-manly man:

A tall man, with dark curly hair, and slow moving, deep-blue eyes. His lips were red and he smiled lazy, half-mouthed smile of the baggart. The man wore a red shirt and a wide belt of tooled leather; he carried a tin suitcase and a guitar. (20)

Throughout the story, McCullers casts his masculinity in his evil attitude, as he is violent and viciously lustful: he enjoys mutilating animals for entertainment and to carry a preserved ear from a man he murdered in a razor fight. His relationships are also exploitative, as it is stated, he happens to be attractive and admired by a number of women whom he constantly shame and degrade. Furthermore, the satanic is suggested by his red shirt, the fact that he never sweats, and that he ruined the tenderest young girls of the region. However, the greatest irony of all is that he has fallen for a "manly" woman. The reason of his attraction to Amelia is never revealed, although his dominant behavior suggests that it may be the challenge of conquering the town's most powerful woman. For Marvin, possessing Amelia would be the peak of power and masculinity. Despite his portrayal as a hyper-masculine southern cowboy, his falling for her is therefore deemed as the welcome opportunity for her to become "feminized" by subjection to male power. Indeed, when Miss Amelia marries him, the whole town is relieved, expecting marriage to soften her character and physique. (13)

However, Miss Amelia is incapable of playing a role that implies weakness or submission. She rejects heterosexual relations and the traditional mode of living that accompanies them. Accepting the feminine part in her marriage would have meant renouncing the masculine sources of her strength. Unlike men, who consider adulthood as a form of emancipation, women in the South must recognize that adulthood usually entails

male possession. She shatters her identity, and becomes dependent on her husband. Therefore, the attempt of love making clearly represents an insult to her pride, but also an insult to Marvin's masculine pride, since he sees through a humiliation, an act which leaves Amelia victorious. In a very interesting reading of the novella, Charles Hannon claims that:

American women of the 1940s might have identified with Amelia, whose professional success during the absence of her husband Marvin Macy corresponded with the developing myth of their wartime fortune. But Amelia's refusal to submit to her husband after his return contradicted both the promise and the premise of postwar household consumerism displayed in other wartime fiction, and in the product advertisements and wartime announcements that appeared on the same pages of the August 1943 *Harper's Bazaar* as Carson McCullers's "The Ballad of the Sad Café." (97)

Miss Amelia chooses instead the hunchback Lymon, whom she can safely love without worrying about physical possession or threat of domination on his part. Contrary to Marvin Macy, he comes to represent no threat to her power or her self esteem. With him she can release her affection and compassion. However, she never truly emotionally connects with him, preferring instead to purchase his affection and devotion with treats and trinkets, which she does to a certain extent: "She spoiled him to a point beyond reason, but nothing seemed to strengthen him; food only made his hump grow larger while the rest of him remained weakly and deformed" (10)

Yet, this love and affection she has for him creates a partial "feminization" in her; she starts wearing a red dress every Sunday, even her manners start to change; her efforts to maintain her masculinity seem no longer necessary. Cousin Lymon is an outgoing person, and since Miss Amelia's will is to please the hunchback, the country store is then transformed into a café where the members of the community find in it a feeling of fellowship that didn't exist before. Carson McCullers seems to imply in this patriarchal society that an intimate (sexual) relationship between a woman and a man, in which both parties will preserve their autonomy, is only possible if the control of the man is reduced. For this reason, the second 'partner' of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, is physically and mentally miniaturized, and the affair between them makes gender differences even more opaque. Critic Joseph R. Millichap has aptly described Lymon as "a man loved without sex, a child acquired without pain, and a companion" whom Amelia found "more acceptable than a husband or a child." (334 - 335)

After the return of Marvin Macy from prison, “she put aside her overalls and always wore the red dress she had before this time reserved for Sundays, funerals, and sessions of the court.” (23) This move is intended to demoralize and humiliate Marvin Macy by showing him her femininity, a femininity that he has never been able to command. As Sarah Gleeson-White states, “It is, ironically, her femininity that is a mask to be worn or taken off at will” (72). Since Miss Amelia's femininity is only a mask, her flaunting fails to elicit a response from the returned Macy because the femininity she conjures up is deceptive and based exclusively on Macy's dominance. Amelia's looks and personality took another turn; the more feminized she becomes, the more vulnerable and exposed she is to male vengeance. Indeed, the return of Marvin Macy into town becomes a threat to her power, Miss Amelia's attempts to remain independent are brought back as she starts a (gender) war. She fights out of love for Lymon and hate for the man who dared to try to possess her sexuality, and who is now turning Lymon away from her. Amelia is not defeated by masculine potency, or by the social environment which has never subjugated her, but rather by Lymon's betrayal and deceit. The heterosexualization of their relationship does not come about through simple gender reversal. Amelia is the lover, and cousin Lymon the beloved; one is doing the pursuing and the other is the pursued. Lymon's feminization and Amelia's masculinization seem to go center to their respective empowerment and disempowerment: it is Lymon, the beloved who controls this relationship. Indeed, he never feels for her the way she feels for him, and the fact that he never invested as much as her in their relationship, gave him a decisive advantage. Amelia therefore becomes the victim of her own destiny.

Cousin Lymon, unlike Macy, does not represent a threat to Amelia's authority or sense of self: he is a malformed man whose distorted and infantile form shows his masculine weakness. His appearance meets the characteristics of a lady-petite. As opposed to Amelia, he is captivated by Macy's brutal masculine strength, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note: “the no-man Lymon, who as the fake thing recognizes the real thing, weds himself to the he-man Marvin.” (150) Indeed, after being rejected by Amelia, Marvin has buried his love for her deep in himself, and the only feelings that remain are hatred and a desire for revenge. Macy saw Cousin Lymon's behavior towards him as a chance to accomplish his desire for destruction; Cousin Lymon falls in love with Macy after being bewitched by the stories he tells him of the time he has spent in prison and all the places he has been. Therefore, Macy used him as an instrument for his revenge. However, it is not Marvin's anger that destroys Miss Amelia, but Lymon's betrayal; he manipulates her into agreeing to let Macy move in with them, only to maintain a sort of relationship with the hunchback. However, the situation finally leads to a physical fight between Marvin and Amelia, which,

when Cousin Lymon comes to Marvin's rescue, breaks Amelia's will and Marvin defeats her. The two men attack her home, steal everything she owns, and flee town together, leaving her helpless. In the end, she is left alone alienated from both the masculine and the feminine world, she undergoes a major physical transformation, as “ [She] let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning gray. Her face lengthened and the great muscles of her body shank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy.” (30) At last, she fits the role of ‘the old maid’ that the town can finally relate to. Moreover, her isolation inside her house reflects her condition of prisoner and victim of restricted gender roles. At the end, Miss Amelia pays for her defiance with the grotesqueness and destruction at the hands of two cruel and malicious men.

Westling notes in his work *Carson McCullers' Tomboys* that *The Ballad of The Sad Café* “ is a nightmare vision of the tomboy grown up, without any concessions to the social demands for sexual conformity”(345) Carson McCullers seems to question the assumptions underlying Southern culture, that there are two genders, two sexes and two sexualities, and that they are all fixed and unchanging. All the three main characters are depicted as if they were not living in a world where sexual and gender roles were dramatically polarized. Indeed, gender relatively makes it possible for new entities to emerge against or in the absence of existing conventions: all three subjectivities are unfixed and mutable. All of them question the ruling ideology, produce new figures and involve transgressions and extensions of categories. In addition to that, subjectivity is a shifting-moving mechanism, where gender roles differ in terms of what is inscribed by discourse. They change positions and roles over and over again, as if identities were entirely fluid and relative. Such critical posturing reveals the issue Amelia provides; a definitional ambiguity that prompts to place McCullers' characters contradictions within the grotesque genre. In fact, Amelia is considered grotesque by most critics because she defies expectations by displaying a weird mix of sex and gender characteristics.

The reader can notice the duality between Miss Amelia Evans in *The Ballad of The Sad Café* and Joy/ Hulga in *Good Country People*. Indeed, both of these women characters share a common point; masculinity and a defense mechanism. O'Connor gives a masculine description of Hulga, as a girl who has “square and rigid-shoulder[s].” (CS, 282) Moreover, her wooden leg, ugly clothes and contemptuous behavior abandon every feminine aspect of her being, as O'Connor puts it “ [She] has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it.” (CS, 281) Unlike Miss Amelia Evans, Joy/ Hulga is still very vulnerable despite the

masculine description we are provided. Her vulnerability is caused by her health issues; her wooden leg, her heart condition and her vision problem. Still, it does not prevent her from fighting the patriarchal authority and power that are asserted by men. Indeed, she is incapable of interacting with men on an emotional level, “she looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity.” (CS, 285) This is ironic, since she is stupid as well when it comes to love.

Hulga makes her match and attraction to the Bible Salesman, Mainely Pointer, very odd and ironic. Until we learn her real intentions; she is clearly blinded by her misconceptions, thinking that Manley is vulnerable, innocent and that she can fool him by seducing him. Hulga is not in the pursuit of love, far from it. Her own purpose is to make out a proof; that her textbook nihilism is superior to his faith. While Manley kisses her, she seems completely static, as if her mind is in complete control of her body. However, as long as they keep kissing, this action becomes a sort of mediation when the brain stops any intellectual activity, separates itself from the body that will be open to welcome the surrounding and corporal senses. In the grotesque, the physical always defeats the mental, which shocks and delights the reader. Its characters are always rudely reminded of their bodies through seduction or dismemberment for instance. Hulga seems to be unexpectedly aroused, she experiences her body in a new way: “Her brain seemed to have stopped altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at.” (CS, 298) She feels “as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood.” (CS, 297) She falls into a parody of the maternal role, as she calls him her baby.

Hulga’s rendez-vous at the hayloft takes a turn the reader was not ready to face; the table is turned, the seducer becomes seduced, Manley Pointer is shown in his true nature, and Hulga becomes suddenly innocent. However, Manley’s desire for intimacy is not solely sexual. Instead, he wants Hulga to show him where the wooden leg joins, how it can be taken off and put back. when he suddenly steals it, the artificial leg, at that moment becomes a token of virginity, and token of soul. Hulga exposes the femininity she hardly was hiding. As soon as she was taken out of her comfort zone, her intellectual pretense disintegrates into docile femininity. In the end, she is left in the hayloft helpless to wonder about her real nature.

Hulga lacks charm and beauty to seduce Manley Pointer, but her self-confidence and intelligence (at least as she views it) will be enough to fool him because he is nothing more

than a stupid salesman in her eyes. However, at the end, it is Hulga who is duped by Manley, and it is a surprise for the reader that intelligence is no match for his abilities: to trick and manipulate Hulga, and force her to rely on him because of her physical disabilities. Likewise, despite Miss Amelia's physical strength, she also has been fooled by Cousin Lymon. The reader can notice that in spite of his physical handicap, he is very intelligent. Just as Manley, he succeeds in tricking and manipulating Amelia, forcing her as well to rely on him as he becomes an essential and vital person in her life; whether sentimentally speaking or regarding her business. And at the end both of these male characters steal and ruin the great possessions and flee away: Manley steals Hulga's artificial leg which represents more than a limb and Cousin Lymon breaks Miss Amelia's heart, and steals all of her possessions. Indeed, neither intelligence or physical strength is in their advantage. Consequently, the reader directly realizes how superficial Hulga's intelligence and Amelia's physical strength are, comprehending that these characteristics can easily be taken away from them, and that both intelligence and physical strength must go together as two characteristics within one person: Hulga, because of her artificial leg lacks physical strength, and Miss Amelia, despite her physical strength, she is not an intelligent person.

Anthony Di Renzo notes that if Carson McCullers has written *Good Country People*, she would have made Hulga tragic, a victim of circumstances and of her superior intelligence and sensibility, which have no outlet on Mrs. Hopewell's farm; but according to him, O'Connor insists on Hulga's ridiculousness. (*American Gargoyles*, 74)

### **Part III - A search for connection**

#### **A. The misled humanity and its redemption in Flannery O'Connor's fiction.**

The two Georgian authors, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers never met, and they probably would not have liked each other. In fact, Flannery O'Connor wrote in a letter to Jane McKane: "I dislike intensely the work of Carson McCullers..." (*HB*, 550) She also mentions McCullers in an unpublished letter quoted by Kathleen Feeley in *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*, stating, "I'm sure we would have nothing to say to each other." (21) For her part, McCullers was certain that Flannery O'Connor was indebted to her. Somewhat smugly, she told her cousin that her own fiction had been a school from which O'Connor had "learned her lesson well." (Carr, 443) The two authors have often been compared in their use of grotesque characters. However, their purpose in using them is different. On the one hand, Flannery O'Connor recognizes their absurdity and shortcomings: she uses them to demonstrate spiritual depravity and the human need for redemption through Christ, and presents the hope that Christian redemption offers. On the other hand, Carson McCullers presents her characters sympathetically: she uses these grotesque characters to convey the horror of human isolation, the need of fulfillment through love, and convey hopelessness. Even if both authors were born and raised in the same state, and shared a literary interest at about the same time, the literary differences still remained.

O'Connor's Catholicism was absolutely essential in shaping the development of her writing. She saw good fiction as stories that tell the truth. Indeed, she was a realist, and what she portrayed was in keeping with the horror she saw in contemporary life, an unprecedented age in its apostasy and blind to any positive presence of God's grace within the human and natural orders. She notes that the purpose of the Catholic fiction is to expose the truth as "Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by." (*MM* 172 - 173) However, she did not believe in the necessity of writing about Christians; in fact many of her characters do not want to be Christians, and would not call themselves Christians. O'Connor's stories are placed almost entirely in an environment calculated to create strong theological colorations that represent her own experience and her own spiritual standing. She saw her world as a world that had turned away from the spiritual, a world that became sociological, and found the use of violence necessary to make her audience understand that there are other dimensions to life; beyond science and sociology. In contrast to Modernist denial of the

possibility of a mysterious solution that comes from outside humanity, a solution that is God's. They believe instead that humans can solve their own problems. O'Connor wrote in a letter:

The notion of the perfectibility of man came about at the time of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. . . . The Liberal approach is that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own efforts. Therefore, evil in this light is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc... and all mysteries will eventually be cleared up. Judgment is out of place because man is not responsible. (*HB*, 302–3)

Yet, O'Connor adds that "there are degrees of adherence to this, all sorts of mixtures, but it is the direction the modern heads toward. Some syntax. ..." (303) This demonstrates that we cannot make individuals do something they do not want to do. One of the features of modernism is that it defies existing religious beliefs and practices.

Flannery O'Connor believed that religious faith shapes an artistic vision. Indeed, she is famous for including religious elements into the content of good literary work. Her art effectively embraces the aggression of violence by treating it as a force of redemption. In fact, many of the circumstances become a paradigm of human consciousness, and the assumption of the individual's responsibility to find grace. O'Connor believed that her art and faith were invariably interlaced and hoped that "the resonances of the anagogical will be available to the good reader" (Asals, 77).

In O'Connor's fiction, the protagonist usually encounters guilt and attempts to get rid of it. Her secular characters come to recognize God's grace, in the moment of their destruction. Yet, the irony is that most of her subjects are freaks, nymphomaniacs, criminals, blind prophets and all kinds of grotesques not often associated with the "Christian" notion of purity. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that Flannery O'Connor does not use the Biblical source in its original context and period, rather, she establishes the biblical narratives into contemporary settings, capturing both the grotesqueness of humanity and the harshness of life in the twentieth-century South. According to her, the writer who calls himself a Christian, must see through two pairs of eyes, his own and those of the church:

It would be foolish to say there is no conflict between those two sets of eyes. There is a conflict, and it is a conflict which we escape at our peril, one which cannot be settled beforehand by theory or fiat or faith. We think that faith



entitles us to avoid it, when in fact, faith prompts us to begin it, and to continue it until, like Jacob we are marked... . The tensions of being a Catholic novelist are probably never balanced for the writer until the Church becomes so much a part of his personality that he can forget about her - in the same sense that when he writes, he forgets about himself. (*MM* 180)

O'Connor has acknowledged the difficulty of writing religious fiction for a large secular audience. She declares that the intelligent readers are not believers, that they read about priests out of curiosity, and that they have a hard time comprehending the religious characters. The Catholic reader, on the other hand, is so focused on finding anything that meets his needs and portrays him in the best possible light, and if anything does not do so, will be considered questionable. She recognizes that she is unable to represent the universe in predictable slices for philosophical and theological reasons. For this reason, her challenge is an aesthetic one; her aim, she believes, is to alert modern audiences to the transcendent reality which manifests the material world.

The principles O'Connor applies for her fiction echoes similar circumstances in her own life, for example, at the death of her father, she remarked in one of her letters that: "The reality of death has come upon us and a consciousness of the power of God has broken our complacency like a bullet in the side."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the disabled and disfigured characters echo her failing body. Her body was disintegrating, because of her illness she was becoming more and more trapped in it, and probably considered herself grotesque.

Just as O'Connor's Catholicism lends context to her writing, she does her upbringing in the South at this particular time, a period when one way of life was dying and another one was trying to emerge. She states:

Approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. (*MM* 44 - 45)

Flannery O'Connor portrays a modern society in which the characters' actions and attitudes are equivalent to those of the real world. The proper title of the story *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*, which also entitles the collection of the short stories, may suggest the author's interest

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.catholic365.com/article/12177/flannery-oconnor-and-the-power-of-god.html> seen on 4 - 04- 2021

in unveiling human nature, related to the dichotomous vision of good and evil. Man's primal nature of goodness and innocence was replaced by a complex one, which has been a source of consternation for humans throughout history. As a result of man's disobedience, the universe reserved for him represents his fallacies. Therefore, the dichotomous opposition to the notion of goodness was introduced: evil. However, despite the coexistence of good and evil, the author introduces in her narrative the notion of a redemptive force that she refers to as the moment of grace.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction resonates with death and the disappearance of human life. But the actual historical period O'Connor lived in was also a period of death and violence. The South was on the edge of Civil War over the ending of segregation, but also the looming nuclear destruction of the Cold War. In addition to the Second World War she had lived through. O'Connor explains that the point of death "is the most significant position life offers Christians" (MM 110). Death is, without a doubt, the most ironic aspect of life, because everyone is destined to die, although no one is ready for it. In fact, the heroine of the short story, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, the grandmother, as any other human being, wishes to see this moment postponed indefinitely. After witnessing the extermination of her whole family, only this act of extreme violence serves to bring about her confrontation with reality. As death comes as a messenger of the power of God, the sudden death of her whole family, made her heart and mind recognize what is truly and ultimately important in life.

Frederick Asals notices that *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, " contains O'Connor's funniest and most hardboiled narration; but its balefulness and wild humor are qualified by a strange beauty, an odd tenderness." (135) He goes on adding that "O'Connor creates hearty guffaws and cries of horror, then turns those cries and guffaws into gasps of awe, tears of compassion." (135) Indeed, the short story is probably her best known, it is the most frequently anthologized. The story sets up a family of five, plus a grandmother and her secretly stowed cat setting out for a car vacation to Florida: a trip the grandmother does not want to make. She would rather go to east Tennessee, and stops at nothing to manipulate her son Bailey. The vacation goes horribly wrong after a car accident. The grandmother's unexpected recognition of the criminal named the Misfit shows O'Connor's mastery of comedy and foreshadowing. The short story begins with the grandmother warning: "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it," (130) which is exactly what she does, leading her child and grandchildren to their own violent demise. They also pass by a small graveyard "with five or six graves" (132) which are appropriate for Bailey, his wife, his three children and the grandmother. All of this foreshadows the worst,

but the most revealing moment occurs when Bailey wrecks the car while his children proclaim, "We've had an ACCIDENT!"(137). This is exactly the event for which the grandmother had been planning. All of these foreshadowings push the reader to agree with Hawkins' conclusion that "It seems, in fact, as if [the grandmother and the Misfit] were meant to meet, as if they had to." (*The Language of Grace* 40)

The grandmother's behavior as well as her family's are considered normal by social trends, they represent the daily attitude of a common Southern middle class family. The children fight, disobey, demand, play, and argue with one another, as well as with the Grandmother, who uses whatever means she has to get what she wants. The description of the mother by O'Connor as a submissive figure is quite comic, "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears," (CS, 130) and the father Bailey, is described as a quiet, passive man without authority. Moreover, it is important to note that O'Connor gives a great importance to the names she chooses for characters, because her selection of names establish their own significance in the story. In fact we notice that the father and his two older children are the only characters who are named; June Starr and John Wesley.<sup>9</sup> The old lady is simply referred to as the grandmother, and the wife as the children's mother.

Even if the story starts with a humorous description of the family, with a domineering grandmother, unruly children, frustrated parents and a stowaway cat; it does not take long for the events to take a tragic turn. When they find themselves in a car accident, the family hopes for a rescue. The car that stops, however, contains three convicts: the Misfit, Bobby Lee and Hiram who have been freed from prison, and who promptly killed the family. In his work, *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque*, Muller suggests that the quest takes place when the "absurd family trip...devolves into a violent encounter with destiny and the forces of evil" (53) Indeed, all the characters will be obliged to face the religious mystery that they ignore throughout the story.

The grandmother represents the stereotypical 'Southern woman'; a Christian, domineering mother who is often hypocritical, flawed, and annoying. In fact, neither her son, Bailey nor his wife answer her when she talks to them, we also learn through June Starr that the grandmother has to go everywhere the family goes. This demonstrates O'Connor's great emphasis on parental relationships, but especially on oppressive mothers. The grandmother likes the idea of being a good person, but only when others are watching her. Even though

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<sup>9</sup> Although not a Biblical reference, the name John Wesley is a historical allusion to the Christian theologian, leader of a revival movement known as Methodism.

she attempts to project an air of respectability and of goodness by taking care of her looks; we learn that she is dressed quite formally as if going to church, because “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady,” (CS, 131) her actions show the exact opposite. To her, being a lady is linked to the past, in fact, she still possesses the mind and the way of thinking as well as the traditional ideals ladies must have in the Old South. For her, being a lady depends on your blood and the family in which you were born. The irony is that she is unpleasant to the members of her family but gets along with Red Sammy, a complete stranger. Ralph C. Wood asserts in his work *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, that the Grandmother’s sense of self-assurance “is so complete that she believes that she can manage not only her own life, but her family’s as well” (39). Indeed, she is so self-assured, she believes that flattering the Misfit and telling him that he is a good man will save everyone. And when flattering does not work, she suddenly uses religion, telling him “If you would pray, Jesus would help you.” (143) And again, when faith is not on her advantage, she starts denying it, and begins rejecting Christ in order to save her life, saying “Maybe [Jesus] didn’t raise the dead.” (145) The reader finally sees the real nature of the grandmother, as Kilcourse puts it: “[She is] a proper lady who would gladly reduce Christian faith to sociology or culture or personality development if, in doing so, she could save her own life.” (38) The entire scene is very darkly comic, we cannot help but be amused by the grandmother’s behavior, even if the reality of the situation is horrifying.

Only violence brings the grandmother’s confrontation with reality. She knows she is doomed, and has nothing to gain by reaching out to the Misfit. The act of touching him demonstrates that she is not thinking of herself anymore, but rather of the Misfit’s pain and despair. Her compassion creates a shift in perception. She feels connected to him, and a moment of confusion is created when she calls him one of her babies and one of her children. She feels connected to him, saying “You’re one of my babies.” (145) In this instant, she responds for the first time out of compassion and kindness.

Accepting aggression, violence and criminality on behalf of the grandmother as social rights entails a confusion and manipulation of social, natural law as well as court order, because every criminal act must be punished by law. Instead of being shocked and panicking she shows compassion and kindness towards the Misfit. Indeed, from a Christian point of view, the grandmother suddenly represents the church, and not the social order she is supposed to follow. The church she represents is supposed to be the heaven for the helpless, the protector of the defenseless, and the source of hope, goodness and kindness. When she

touches him, this act breaks all the isolation and alienation the Misfit was facing, so he shoots her because what she does, does not fit into his belief.

The image of the grandmother's dead body, with her legs crossed under her like a child's, represents an innocent and harmless being. Throughout the short story, O'Connor keeps emphasizing the fact that there is nothing in the sky but blue. And when the grandmother dies, she is presented as "half sat half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky." (145) One may suggest that O'Connor is drawing a baptism image, as when one goes into the water to be baptised, the body is in a position half in and half out of the water, and their gaze is directed to the sky where there is only blue. Moreover, it is important to note that Blue is a significant color in Christianity, with deep spiritual significance that highlights many qualities of the Blessed Mother. It's a holy color, one that reminds us of Mary's devotion and privileged role in salvation history. In addition, Red is the color of blood, hence it is associated with Christ's crucifixion.

If the grandmother becomes a Christ figure symbol of forgiveness, then the Misfit can be interpreted as what Di Renzo calls "an existential hero: a metaphysical rebel in the tradition of Albert Camus; a philosophical immoralist, beyond good and evil." (Di Renzo 153) Moreover, he is religiously the most interesting figure in this story. There is a sense in which he is the only real and morally serious character, he can be considered as a fundamentalist nihilist; he understands the ultimate issue and what is at stake and despite it, he has made his decision. The misfit knows that the ultimate alternative is not science and religion but nihilism. Despite the fact that all gospels claim Christ's resurrection, he is still unable to believe in such a phenomenon, because he has never witnessed anything like it, he explains: "Crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a stire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what is was you done and just be punished for it." (143) His attitude can be related to the philosophical view called Determinism. Determinism is commonly thought to preclude free will since it implies that humans are unable to act differently than they do. Indeed, to the Misfit there is no free will, this is the way he was made by God, he was created to kill people. Yet, he is grim about his personality, if he only believed in violence, we would not see all this anger coming out of him. He is mad because he feels he has been tricked and that the rules don't make sense. Therefore he does not understand the logic of punishment and the reason behind it having to 'fit the crime.' He is scandalized by the supernatural, he is outraged at what he knows the choice to be; Jesus was either God incarnate or a total fraud. The Misfit's spiritual dilemma

stems from his inability to trust in resurrection, which serves as the trigger for his criminality. Susan Srigley, in a sense, rightly classifies the Misfit when she states that his “outward violence is a sign of the refusal to accept a divinely ordered world” (102).

Nevertheless, the short story can be read as a re-writing of Christ’s encounter with the rich young ruler<sup>10</sup>, with the Misfit playing the role of the ruler. The parallel between O’Connor’s misfit and the story of the rich young ruler, emphasizes her method of biblical recapitulation. O’Connor has the Misfit directly allude to the story she is retelling, as he explains to the grandmother, “If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him,” (144) echoing Jesus’ command to “*sell all you possess and give to the poor...and come, follow Me*” (Mk, 10:21). The Misfit, a criminal serial killer, serves ironically as the story’s major biblical allusion. Therefore, the interaction gives a new theological dimension to the story. In essays on her own writing O’Connor calls the Misfit “A Prophet freak.” Those “prophet freaks,” she wrote, “seem to carry an invisible burden and to fix us with eyes that remind us that we all bear some heavy responsibility whose nature we have forgotten. They see what we do not. They are prophetic figures, the result of outrage and not of geniality.” (Qtd in Miles Orvell, 41)

Because he no longer believes in remorse, the Misfit's misery has been resolved into a belief in nothingness, not by a leap of faith. He is able to murder an entire family without remorse because he has lost faith in everything. This crime can also be seen as the gratuitous act of the existentialist. Existentialism<sup>11</sup> introduces the concept of being a "free agent" in terms of deciding one's own development by acts of free will and self-judgment. Existentialist ideals are represented by the Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's short story *A Good Man is Hard to Find* who lives by his own system of belief and understanding of morality, which affects his choices, attitudes, and perspectives in life. The Misfit's own morality is defined solely by his perception of what is right, not by what is socially accepted as right. His acts are driven by what feels right. Even if he thinks that it is his duty to murder, he still takes full responsibility for it.

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<sup>10</sup>As He was setting out on a journey a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, Do not Murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.” And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. (Mk. 10:17–22)

<sup>11</sup> Existentialism is the idea that the world and everything within it has no meaning or purpose. There is no such thing as God. The existentialist can not pass any judgment on the universe without betraying their own values.

When the Misfit's father says of the Misfit, "It's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latter. He's going to be into everything." (141) His prophecy that the Misfit would "be into everything" is true, since in the narrative he describes how he "was a gospel singer for a while... been in the arms service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twice married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet... even seen a woman flogged." (142) The way the Misfit sees his life experience is existentialist, as life and death, crime and punishment, and good and evil, he gains nothing from them except experience. He is not embracing chaos, he just sees it as the only path, because everything that is based around the idea of institutional stability has not worked.

He categorizes people into two groups: those who spend their whole lives on the surface and those whose intellectual perception continuously drives them toward a deeper understanding. As in his response to the grandmother's self-serving claim that he is a good man, he states: "'Nome, I ain't a good man.' The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, 'but I ain't the worst in the world neither.'" (141) The Misfit can be considered as a Relativist<sup>12</sup> He is rejecting a binary and the world's view, he also does not want to assign a value to his attitude.

The Misfit reaches a moment of crisis; he recognizes that the world is irrational, morally absurd and that life is meaningless, and is looking for an explanation for his behavior. The reader realizes that he is more of a victim of predominant Existentialist thinking, which is a parent of Nihilism, than being a deliberate existentialist. He is frustrated and is searching for understanding. He responds to life by committing to reason and balance. Unlike religion, Existentialism does not impose any rules, and not being able to question them. In fact, regarding Jesus' claim about raising the dead, we are told "'I wish I had of been there', [the Misfit] said, hitting the ground with his fist... 'If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now.'" (145) The Misfit is searching for the fit, just like the reader he does not understand or know why he acts this way, why he kills people. Therefore, the anger that is coming from him is the thirst for knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> A Relativist is a person who believes that truth, right, and wrong can only be judged in the context of other things, and that nothing can be true or right in every circumstance. Therefore, the Misfit does not want his actions to be judged as good or bad.

Up until then, his criminality was the result of ignorance, which always been threatened by his restless mind, and in order to illustrate the slavery of the restless mind, O'Connor uses the analogy of being in a prison cell: " Turn to the right, it was a wall... turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down, it was a floor." (142) Ignorance is always subjective, and it is always followed by a sense of contentment. As the saying goes "Ignorance is bliss." However, the truth can never be fully grasped, and it continues to elude people as most of them struggle with elusive fundamentals in their lives. Therefore, O'Connor's point of view is existential because it insists on the fact that the world is irrational and morally absurd.

However, according to the philosopher Gary Cox, "Existentialism is all about freedom. At the heart of freedom is choice and at the heart of choice is action. Action, then, is at the heart of existentialism, just as it is at the heart of human existence." (Cox 5) Insofar, as the Misfit has a complete freedom of choice, he chooses to be a criminal, he chooses to kill an entire family instead of escaping what is pursuing him. And yet, he remains trapped even if he is using his freedom of choice, he is not free, he would still be the lord of nothing. Instead, he complains about the suffering injustice and divine determination causes to him, and still he does not want any divine help. Such inconsistencies are logically unsolvable, but they are psychologically compatible in the demonic man's odd attitudes. Yet, ironically, the murder of the grandmother serves as a spiritual transformation for himself and for the old lady. He realizes the emptiness of sin as a potential prophet, as O'Connor points out:

I don't want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture like mustard-seed, will grow to be a great cow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. (MM 112-113)

Moreover, there is a telling contrast between the killer haunted by the person of Christ and the grandmother who in a desperate moment discards Christ to stay alive. The desperate moment to O'Connor is always revelatory, "with the serious writer," she says "violence is never an end in itself, it is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (Asals, A good man 59), and violence can also serve as a precondition for grace, "in my story," she writes:

I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is



something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (Asals, 59)

The fact that the grandmother was shot three<sup>13</sup> times, reinforces the idea that the point of faith is not to achieve balance in this world.

There is a sense in which the story ends, in the way the reader knew it would. But what we do not expect and what the misfit himself clearly does not expect, was to make himself vulnerable to the grandmother; to express his own desire for faith and his despair in the fact of its absence, and what the lack of has done to him. We did not expect the grandmother to recognize the Misfit's wounded humanity and to respond with the tenderness of a mother's love. And that revelation, the moment of seeing him in essence and responding appropriately makes him lash out in violence. He feels attacked by this expression of love towards him and kills her in response to it.

O'Connor's resistance to the happy ending lies in her particular and unique employment of the satirical grotesque. Her work manages the truly extraordinary feat of being both theologically serious and satirically cutting. Then the combination produces realism that refuses to let the reader get away with self-deception. The grandmother is babbling on about the weather, good people and on how one ought not to shoot a lady, although the Misfit meditates on the meaning of Christ raising the dead while holding a gun on her head. To O'Connor, the grotesque breaks rules, especially conventional rules, so to her, the humor is appropriate because the grotesque is a commentary on not only man's presumption, but also of his sheer folly in trying to live on any terms other than God's. Besides, as Di Renzo notes "The grotesqueness of O'Connor's cartoon saints express a respect, not a disdain, for human complexity." (Di Renzo 162)

According to O'Connor, the South is a place of uncertain Christianity. Her stories depict a country flooded with churches and self-declared Christians, where religion is everywhere but hardly practiced in its purest form. She found that readers who identified themselves first and foremost as Catholics proved to be just as unreliable as those who claimed no faith at all: she asserted that the Catholic reader "is so busy looking for something that fits his needs, and shows him in the best possible light, that he will find suspect anything

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<sup>13</sup> Number three is a very religious number for Catholics, for example, it represents the Holy Trinity, the three patriarchs before the flood. It is also the number of eternal life, as Jesus was resurrected after three days of being dead.

that doesn't serve such purposes" (Mystery 182). Indeed, this Christian land becomes a land of hypocrisy, where people aspire for respectability, disregard Biblical values, and only behave as "Christ followers" when it benefits them. As a devout Catholic, O'Connor aspires to write about the need for salvation and God's grace in an unorthodox way, through the personal shortcomings of her characters. Moreover, she admits in one of her letters that she makes the majority of her characters suffer, especially her beloved ones: "It has always been necessary to me to throw the weight of circumstances against the character I favor. The friend of God suffer, etc." (HB 120 - 121)

Her short story *Greenleaf*, presents a landowner, Mrs. May, described as an old, bitter, and selfish woman, who talks down to and thinks badly of everyone, even her own sons; Scofield and Wesley. She constantly compares her family to the Greenleaf's, the farm tenants whom she sees as inferior and white trash. In this short story, O'Connor presents a confrontation between Mrs. May and a bull that belongs to the Greenleaf sons to show her destruction, and give the story a deeper meaning of God's Grace.

O'Connor admires strong women who run farms, but she portrays them as territorial, proud, opinionated, judgmental, and lacking in compassion in many of her stories. Like Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People," Mrs. May runs a farm by herself, and possesses all of these flaws.

The short story starts with Mrs. May having a nightmare of a bull chewing the grass outside her window. She is having a dream of awareness "that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place... and would continue [eating] through the house, eating her and the boys... until nothing was left but the Greenleafs." (320) And that everything that she has is at risk threatened by an undefined force which she believes is maliciously watching her from just beyond her sphere of consciousness, and against which, in her dream, no insurance protection exists.

Mrs. May's religious beliefs demonstrate her vain and materialistic personality, especially regarding insurance; all she is obsessed about is to purchase it to safeguard her property and protect her earthly possessions. Because to her, no matter what sort of disaster may occur, her identity will be 'saved' through a sort of redemption. According to her, if she protects her materialistic possessions, she will eventually be protected and saved in the afterlife. Moreover, insurance may also represent an unconscious effort to escape the mysterious force that worries her, when she senses Mrs. Greenleaf's prayer of healing. In fact, she realises that the mystery she relates to the Greenleafs, is the real threat to her

spiritual being. Mrs. May has once again, an unreasonable, almost instinctive fear of an unidentified power that she believes is maliciously watching her from a perspective just outside her realm of consciousness. Furthermore, the ironic statement of her respecting religion, although not believing any of it is true reveals that she is not a good Christian woman, which condemns her shallow self-sufficiency and limited self-vision.

The world of O'Connor's fiction according to Asals is "a world of pain dominated by the crucified, not the resurrected Christ, given over to sharp suffering and sudden death." (Asals 202) The interpretations of Flannery O'Connor's "Greenleaf" have been incomplete, providing both observations and perplexing ambiguities about the story's symbolic structure. The short story begins with Mrs May, waking up in the middle of the night to find a bull tearing at her hedge. Many elements indicate that the bull is symbolically divine. Flannery O'Connor, being a strong committed Catholic, makes the reader see the image of Christ in the bull through its description "with a hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns." (320) Furthermore, the narrator tells that the bull appears to be wearing a crown, which might be a crown of thorns "the bull lowered his head and shook it and the wreath slipped down to the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown." (321) In his work *The Mythic Dimension of Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf'*, Asals notes that the bull's symbolism is analysed in terms of "all of those divine animals of primitive eastern myth, the bulls sacred India, Osiris, Dionysus, Mithra, Carriers of the divine energy, often avatars of the Gods themselves, mysterious sources of both animal and vegetative fertility." (Asals, 317) The bull is like God calling to her and she is the sinner rejecting him. He is persistent in his pursuit of Mrs. May, but she is constantly trying to get rid of him. The climax of this story leads to a vague perception of the bull's significance, as well as the bull's goring of Mrs. May and Mrs. May's whispering into the dead bull's ear. According to Leon V. Driskell, O'Connor has "imbued the bull in her story with both pagan and Christian significance" as the bull "is the symbol of man's fear of carnality" and "is associated also with the suffering Christ." (125)

When the reader imagines Mrs. May's face expression when the bull gores her, we may associate her to a gargoyle. The existence of gargoyles goes back to pre-Christianity. They are usually placed on Cathedrals because it represented the manifestation of their faith, as they were supposed to ward off evil spirits with their grotesqueness. A great number of gargoyles possess gaping mouths, and this is the exact image we get of Mrs. May before her death. The reader imagines her with her mouth wide open caused by the shock and the pain she is feeling at the moment the bull gores her. Indeed, the act of pulling the mouth open is a threatening action which reminds us that we are vulnerable to forces greater than ourselves.

Another symbol is the sun; through the whole story Mrs. May seems to be confronting it, or shutting herself off its blindness. In mythology, the sun is the enabler of life, and of rebirth. It is a symbol of fertility. In one of Mrs. May's dreams "The sun [was] trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn't, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property." (337) Mrs. May is in search of the meaning of life, a woman who is constantly avoiding any contact with the sun, which may be interpreted as her avoidance of religion and faith. Therefore, the sun symbolizes the providential grace.

In O'Connor's fiction, readers only remember freaks, and violence. Yet, there are saints, who are difficult to recognize only because of our oblique vision. O'Connor knew that: "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket when of course it is the cross." (HB 354). Mrs. Greenleaf is an interesting character to consider. As opposed to Mrs. May, who is presented as "a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true." Mrs. Greenleaf believes in religion, and prays in a particular way, in a cruciform, with her face laying down in the mud and her arms crossed out, which she calls "prayer healings." (324) She prays for everyone; she cuts morbid stories from the newspaper, stories about "women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorces of movie stars." (324) During her prayer, she sways back and forth on her hands and knees until devotion sends her back in the dirt with her heart being ready to be broken. Then she lies with "her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth." (325) The position shows a posture of birth giving which suggests that her heart and body are life giving because of the pain she embraces. Mrs. Greenleaf is characterized as a truly maternal character, as she not only bears two sons and five daughters<sup>14</sup>, but she also feels love and compassion for all the bereft children of God.

Mrs. Greenleaf is experiencing an unseen reality, she sees the persecution Mrs. May does not see. As O'Connor says "you will have found Jesus when you are more concerned about other people's sufferings than your own."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, suffering is a key theme in the Bible. Some people suffer from divine punishment, some because of their fate, and some to save others. Mrs. Greenleaf is willing to suffer for others is a way Mrs. May and even the

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<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Greenleaf has seven children, and the number seven is very important as it suggests completion, fulfillment and accomplishment. It is known as the perfect number.

<sup>15</sup> <https://cct.biola.edu/jessica-hooten-wilson-flannery-oconnor/> seen 05-04-2021

reader does not understand, because, in reality no one is willing to suffer for other people. Mrs. Greenleaf believes that people are spiritually separated from God, and lack in belief. Her shouting, then acts as a conduct for the suffering of our time. She prays with raw abandon, and tries to love as Jesus loved by hurling herself deep into his misery, because only Christ has suffered for people; both physically and emotionally. And when Mrs. Greenleaf cries “Jesus stab me in the heart,” (325) it may be interpreted as she is feeling the same suffering that Jesus has endured for his people. As he suffered the greatest injustice of all when he died for sinners.

In his work *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor*, Melvin J. Friedman notes that “‘Greenleaf’ affords a very natural bridge between the two collections of Flannery O’Connor’s stories. The ingredients of revivalism and violence are a functional part of the narrative.... The story moves slowly until the very end when it erupts in sudden and unexpected violence.” (18) Mrs. Greenleaf portrays a shock to the non-believer. the shock in the case of Mrs. May lasts longer and goes deeper. the first shock is a social jolt which happens when the Greenleafs have arrived as tenants on the place fifteen years ago, the second one is when Mrs. May stumbles upon Mrs. Greenleaf during her loud prayer healing, then, when Mr.s May remarks that Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf “had aged hardly at all” (327), and finally, when she sees the bull running towards her and feeling incapable of making any more, and incapable of any reaction, until she is stabbed with the horns. The use of the bull horns produces a shock that is alienated with the representation of the word and spirit of God as a sword.

In fact, the final scene when Mrs. May is stabbed in the heart by the bull’s horns, parallels Mrs. Greenleaf’s ‘healing prayers’ when she cries “Jesus, stab me in the heart!” (325) Mrs. May experiences what Mrs. Greenleaf feels during her own method of prayers and devotion, as Mrs. May’s faith has been limited to the respect of religion, and not in its belief. To her, the church is only a place where her sons could go and meet nice girls. Moreover, there is a sexual symbolism in the fact that it is a bull that gores Mrs. May, considering the fact that even cows have thorns. There is no coincidence in O’Connor’s choice of using a bull goring Mrs. May instead of a cow, since fertility was a central theme in Pagan’s faith, and these fertility symbols were not excluded from the Cathedral walls

However, the story’s ending is unclear, as the reader does not know if Mrs. May accepted the act of violence that took her life as a revelation, and if she found Grace. Yet, the narrator says that “she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but

who finds the light unbearable.” (342) Just as her name suggests, Mrs. May is a person of possibilities. At the end, she may or may not have been redeemed by the flash of light, her whispering to the bull’s rear could be words of acceptance, complaints, or a prayer. She may have come to realize that her way of life (materialism and social status) is not the way that will lead to God. Therefore, her mysterious whisper can be interpreted as a Christian salvation.

The ending favors the grotesque, as it turns on a simple but rather dreadful stroke of irony; Mrs. May is the only character, who during the whole story wants the bull to be shot, yet, she ends up being killed by it. In addition, many critics have noted that if the grandmother from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* lived, she might have become Mrs. Greenleaf. And that her salvation would have led to a love of neighbor that would have allowed her to suffer and to put others first. O’Connor’s aim is to challenge her readers to see the world through spiritual eyes.

## **B. The aesthetic of pain and isolation in Carson McCullers’ fiction**

The isolation of the individual from the rest of society is common in American Literature. Writers have used it in such a consistent and clear way that it became a reflection of a basic experience of life. Moreover, in the second half of the twentieth century, the work of writers in their treatment of isolation as a literary theme has become much more intense. Isolation in their work does not imply a simple physical separation from society, It is a more severe form of loneliness, since it entails the paradoxical situation of a person who is spiritually alone in a world of other lonely and isolated individuals. In his article “Carson McCullers: The Aesthetic of Pain,” critic Louis D. Rubin Jr. characterizes McCullers’s work in the following terms:

McCullers fiction, I believe, has at its center a fundamental premise: which is that solitude—loneliness—is a human constant, and cannot possibly be alleviated for very long at a time. But there is no philosophical acceptance of that condition, and none of the joy in it that one finds in, say, Thomas Wolfe or even Hemingway. The Solitude is inevitable, and it is always painful. Thus life is a matter of living in pain, and art is the portrayal of anguish. (115)

These stories that surround them look at the consequences of a society's communal ties breaking down. About the hero of Southern literature Robert S. Philips points out about the withdrawal of individuals that:

[It] results in a state of personal dissociation with society, a state of gnawing loneliness. Frequently frustrated in love, the hero either lives out his days in a terrible isolation or becomes in one way or another sexually perverted. It results in the search for a sexless, dim ideal, a manifestation of the hero's avoidance and fear of reality. (Philips, 61)

Consequently, even though they can live in a social order, the spiritually alienated people are unable to communicate or find satisfactory social release. Isolation does not imply a simple physical separation from society, nor does it entail the cynical expatriate's or the disgruntled socialist's angry estrangement. It is a more severe form of alienation, because it involves the paradoxical situation of an individual who is spiritually alone in a society full of other people who likewise suffer from loneliness. Indeed, McCullers uses loneliness in a very unique way; she writes on the sense of spiritual solitude that a person experiences when they are unable to fully express themselves.

Carson McCullers' imagination derives its peculiar force from a transcendental idea of spiritual loneliness. Indeed, she had an appetite for viewing and identifying the aspects of human life, as well as the precision with which she was able to produce so many sharply alienated characters. In her fiction, she celebrates the lonely, the outcast and the frail children of the earth, whose actions serve only to intensify their solitude. Her devotion to spiritual alienation results, as she says, from her own philosophy and personal experience. In a comment on her writing, she explained that her efforts at fiction start from a desire to relate to the reader, what she believes to be the universal implication of her own experience. She states: "the themes the artist chooses are deeply personal. I suppose that my central theme is the theme of isolation. Certainly, I have always felt alone." (*A Personal Preface*, viii)

The spiritually isolated individuals McCullers describes, are facing a great struggle to change their condition. Some of them make unsuccessful attempts to communicate with others in society, like the old man in her short story, *A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* who yearns for communication. Despite its short length, there is something unique about the characters' configuration and the theme of the story. The short story is set in a café, where a 12-year-old paperboy comes in for a cup of coffee, but is greeted by an older man who is drinking a beer. The old man declares his love for the boy, whom he has never met before, and then tells him

about his tragic marriage. He also claims to have devised a "science" for teaching himself how to comprehend love. The young boy does not know what to think of him and the other customers keep laughing at him. The early morning cafe, the exchange between the young boy and the old man, the cynical and sarcastic observer, the silent chorus of men in the background - all of these elements point to a classic short story setting. The story's emphasis on isolation and the challenge of loving is also outstanding.

*A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* clearly depicts a struggle with isolation, it also deals more philosophically and perhaps more ironically with the art of loving. The old man is described as having a tense face, and his eyes are bright with impatient urgency, and the fact that each of his sentences end with a question, emphasising on his spiritual and mental isolation, in addition to his struggle with communication. Moreover, as the old man is about to deliver his message, the soldier gets up and leaves. When he is about to explain it, the spinners go. Leo keeps interrupting him, punctuating his monologue with vulgar intrusions. And even if the young boy is bored and scared, and wonders if the old man is drunk, he remains by his side listening to him until the end. Even if he is bored, it is clear that the young paperboy is eager to learn and know more from the old man about love.

Love is clearly a force capable of overcoming terrible loneliness, however, in McCullers' short stories, it fails for many characters. Oliver Evans points out that Carson McCullers sees love as the ideal form of communication, and the failure of it results in spiritual isolation. (Evans, 298) Indeed, after his wife left him, and being deprived of love, the old man starts to consider objects and sensations as a reminder of his love " a sudden piece of glass on a sidewalk. Or a nickel tune in a music box. A shadow on a wall at night. And I would remember." (McCullers, 56) Indeed, the old man disconnects himself from any thought regarding her, and created a defence mechanism which directly isolates him from the rest of the world. In fact, when he thinks of the woman he once called his wife, he cannot remember the original feeling he had for her, which is love. However, when he sees the simple things of everyday life; such as glass on a sidewalk, or a shadow on a wall, he instantly thinks of her. The woman he loved was called Dodo, after an extinct bird species. Love, just like the bird, has gone extinct and has to be replaced by the science of love. the old man explains the importance of his ability to love universally:

For six years now I have gone around by myself and built up my science.  
And now I am a master. Son. I can love anything. No longer do I have to  
think about it even. I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in  
me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet a traveler on the road. Everything,



Son. And anybody. All stranger and all loved! Do you realize what a science like mine can mean? (McCullers, 57)

The old man, confident in his research, is unaffected by the hostility of the other customers of the café, because he has attained a personal sense of love and unity with the whole universe. The wanderer (the old man) solemnly explains that one must practice the art of loving by starting with small or inanimate things - a tree, a rock, and a cloud, and graduate from one thing to another. Love is associated with identification with the other. Its goal is to dissolve the barriers that divide us and swallow up the other. However, it is more complicated when it comes to people because, in the case of the old man, he loved his wife and believed that she loved him because he provided anything she needed. He loved her expecting to be loved in return. Indeed, individuals who have been unsuccessful in their aim to establish a satisfying mutual love relationship, find themselves in a state of loneliness and also withdraw themselves from the rest of the world. There is no longer any hope, as the heart is condemned to a life of futility and loneliness. Just like no one can experience the pain we feel inside of us, it is the same for love: no one can experience others' feelings. What is meant is that the fact that love is a joint experience between two persons, it does not mean that it is a similar one to the two people involved. Indeed, despite the fact that McCullers never let any of her characters have the answers, the old man still thinks he understands what love is, however, he has got to be wrong. At the end, it will be a false epiphany, which will increase his loneliness.

The old man appears as a kind of prophet disguised, with a message to deliver about love and the spirit of wonder, as a substitute for love. As a result, each person appears to be alone, people who remain imprisoned in their own mutual world are separated by a barrier. Despite the fact that Leo and his companions seem to be in cahoots, all of these customers seem isolated in their own way, with no exchange of thoughts or feelings. Moreover, in spite of the failure to achieve satisfactory love often results in loneliness, a number of characters, for instance, the interaction between the old man and the young paper boy, bring out a glimmer of hope that suggests the possibility of overcoming spiritual alienation and eventually becoming an integral part of society.

In her work, McCullers discusses self-inflicted isolation, but she focuses more on isolation as a means of sequestration - closing oneself from society. She even writes about these themes in one of her essays "Loneliness... An American Malady," she declares:

The sense of moral isolation is intolerable to us. ... The loneliness of Americans does not have its source of in xenophobia; as a nation, we are

outgoing people, reaching always for immediate contact, further experience. But we tend to seek out things as individuals, alone. The European secure in his family ties the rigid class loyalties, knows little of moral loneliness that is native to us Americans. (*The Mortgaged Heart*, 260)

In the short story *The Sojourner*; John Ferris is clearly another character who stands apart from everyone else, remaining lonely even in the midst of the crowd of people. The short story represents the difficulty of confronting interpretation of McCullers' fiction within the scope of Southern tradition. The main protagonist represents a generic American rather than a Southerner. Ferris, or the Sojourner as he prefers to be called; meaning a person who stays only temporarily, seems uncomfortable in the world as a whole, hardly communicating with others, so he spends much of his time in his own mental world. In fact, early in the story, his half awake, half asleep dreams in addition to the implication is that he is not certain how he got to his hotel room in New York, symbolize the fact that he is disconnected from real life:

Sometimes in this semi-consciousness he sojourned again in Paris, or war German rubble, or Swiss skiing and a snow hotel. Sometimes, also, in a fallow Georgia field at hunting dawn. Rome it was this morning in the yearless region of dreams. (McCullers, 44)

From his dream it is clear that he has been all over the world. In fact, dreams are inaccessible dimensions of our personality which indirectly erupt into our consciousness. They are messages from a latent and conflicted part of ourselves. Even at a time of rest he is disturbed. In fact, he seems to be driving from one place to another, from one failed relationship to another, which makes him one of life's perpetual wanderers, "But at first, after the divorce, the loss had almost destroyed him. Then after the anodyne of time, he had loved again, and then again." (McCullers, 45) He is incapable of settling down in any place for an extended period of time, he only becomes aware of the passing of time when he returns to Georgia to attend his father's funeral, another person he has left behind and hasn't seen in a long time. This tragic event made him rethink his habit of abandoning people: "The shock of death had made him aware of youth already passed. His hair was receding and the veins in his now naked temples were pulsing and prominent and his body was spare except for an incipient belly bulge." (McCullers, 44)

Moreover, in an interview for television, McCullers stated that "there is a kind of allegory between - a kind of symbolism rather... of man's isolation to each other and the terrible need to try and communicate, and not to be able to communicate." (qtd. in Savigneau,

306) Indeed, when John sees his ex-wife in the streets of New York while returning to Paris, he is taken back by a sudden emotion and “quiver of heart” (McCullers, 44) which overpower him at the sight of Elizabeth. He initially intends to speak with her, but ends up following her without speaking or announcing his presence. In fact, even if the reason of their divorce is not mentioned in the story, the reader may presume that their marriage led to a divorce because he failed to connect with her. Margaret B. McDowell asserts that McCullers “returns repeatedly to discussion[s] of her central themes—frustration when love is not available, the universality of isolation, the relationship between ‘moral isolation’ and evil, and love either as a cure for loneliness or as an intensifier of loneliness.” (McDowell, 28) When John visits his ex-wife’s new family for an early dinner, that family stands for what he might have had, if the love they once shared was as similar as the one Elizabeth shared with her new husband. Even if John nurtures the idea of himself as an outsider and a sojourner, he still has found feelings stirred in him by his exposure to the family that might have been his: "Ferri suddenly felt himself a spectator--an interloper. . . . Why had he come? He suffered. His own life seemed so solitary." (McCullers, 46) McCullers deepens Ferris' understanding of his need for commitment and dependency. In fact, he is acutely aware of the emptiness of his life, he lies to Elizabeth, when he tells her that he and Jeanine will probably marry soon and that he takes Jeanine's son Valentin to the gardens on a regular basis, when, in reality, Jeanine is still married, and Ferris had taken Valentin to the gardens only once. The last scene demonstrates the fact that John had managed to escape his life of empty experience and that he is willing to settle down with Jeanine and her son, and experience real love, and emotional stability. His happiness, though, is brief. For a short instant, he tells Valentin their program, including the puppet show he refused to go to during their outing. Valentin tells him "The guignonol is now closed," (McCullers, 49) and the narrator comments:

Again, the terror, the acknowledgment of wasted years and death. Valentin, responsive and confident, still nestled in his arms. His cheek touched the soft cheek and felt the brush of the delicate eyelashes. With inner desperation he pressed the child close -- as though an emotion as protean as his love could dominate the pulse of time. (McCullers, 49)

Because of their failure in love, spiritual isolation remains the lot of many characters in McCullers’ fiction. Considering their failed marriage, the old man from the short story *A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*, as well as John Ferris from *The Sojourner*, choose to reject the bond of love and remain in solitude. They find themselves trapped in their lost love, and their complete inability to love someone else. Moreover, when the ideal form of communication fails for them, the individual must seek another means of overcoming spiritual isolation.

McCullers' and O'Connor's protagonists do not fit in the standards of American normalcy, as they face a great struggle with their identity. However, their isolation and loneliness is differently approached by the two Georgian writers. Usually McCullers' isolation is an exaggeration of situations the audience may have experienced themselves; such as a consequence of an unhappy marriage, failed romantic relationships, and an alienation from the social world. On the other hand, since O'Connor's stories focus on faith, social interactions and the disparity between social classes, her characters are rarely trapped in a bleak lifestyle as McCullers'. Moreover, the religious aspects of Flannery O'Connor's fiction are not straightforward; most of her protagonists appear usually by the end of the story as pseudo prophets who end up reaching grace. Yet, there are moments of the same vulnerability, isolation and dependence in O'Connor's work that is outstanding in the work of McCullers. As Josephine Hendin remarks in her book *The World of Flannery O'Connor*; "O'Connor would use the trappings of Southern life, but make them explode in unexpected directions." (Hendin, 131) These "unexpected directions" stand for the plot twists McCullers is known for.

Even if O'Connor is famously known for the themes of redemption and grace in her literary works, they can also be read as Hendin puts it in her discussion of O'Connor: "not for the dogma it illustrates but for the themes it suggests." (17) She also adds that "[her] own feelings is that O'Connor never merely wrote about redemption, but that the very act of writing was itself a redemptive process for her. It may have been the only, and perhaps unconscious way she would express all the contradictions within her." (17)

## Conclusion

Theoretical studies of Southern literature have grown in popularity in recent decades. Many of the studies look at how Southern authors depict in their work women's rights, racial inequity, class relations, and other injustices. Indeed, many Southern female writers among them Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers have come along to challenge the patriarchal order. And one of the most effective and unique tactics used by the Southern female writers is the implementation of the grotesque. In this Master's thesis, I have attempted to give McCullers' and O'Connor's fiction a kind of genealogy, historical and political context. Through the use of this genre, the woman breaks the bars that entrap her on top of the pedestal to find a place in society that is separate from the traditional ideals that men share. Flannery O'Connor, for instance attacks man's spiritual indifference, as she portrays the modern man as a grotesque figure.

The position of McCullers' and O'Connor's ugly women not only testify their terrible fate as inheritors of an unworkable ideal, but they also highlight the role of Southern women in the region's tragic story. In fact, to answer the question of why the grotesque is so prevalent in Southern fiction appears to be in the region's uniqueness, which has been brought about by its historical factors as the confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, to its economic circumstances and racial conflicts which led to the increasing of violence in general. Therefore the South has become a ground for the grotesque. Indeed, the South is portrayed as a hideous region, and Southern writers have done nothing to refute scholars' grotesque label.

In the early twentieth century, Southern authors present a literary genre that focuses on the American South's queer, deformed, and grotesque society. As a manner of representing the grotesque; as economically divided South, the authors use images of disability, gender bending, and intersexuality. Sarah Evans notes that: [women's] autonomy was not economic, as with domestic, clerical or factory workers, but in the context of highschools and colleges." (139) Indeed, educated women succeeded in creating a movement and imposing their voice in writing about topics that characterize the South. Both writers criticize the image of Southern womanhood, their involvement with class distinctions, gender relations and their oppressions. Both of these bright and ambiguous authors demonstrate a kind of tempered rebellion during a time when intelligence and career ambitions were not considered respectable traits for

women in the South, allowing them to vent their frustrations. But it's their shared contempt for the Southern Lady figure that's more crucial. Both considered the ideal of the white Southern Lady as a fundamental hindrance to women's independence and equality, as demonstrated by their personal rebellions against it, and much more so by the characters they have created.

While the Bakhtinian grotesque “liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying: it takes away all fears is therefore gay and bright,” (*Rabelais* 47) McCullers’ grotesque world is often perilous, since it affects life’s awful substance. Her grotesque face social persecutions and marginalization. Grotesque figures on the other hand, might serve as a biting critique of the culture and the society that forbids them. The author also associates an anxiety to her texts, which is related to the creation of identity, and is central to the interpretation of the genre. This anxiety represents a tension between the teenager’s promise of social demands for conformity, between the male body and its feminization, and between femininity and masculinity. Moreover, despite the fact that McCullers’ grotesque characters are socially and culturally marginalized, they mischievously break the basic and fragile distinctions between normal and abnormal, queer and straight. The author also uses the grotesque to convey her view on love, using both themes of spiritual isolation and unrequited love. However, the only positive aspect of her views on love is that no one is too odd to be the object of someone’s affection.

Flannery O’Connor on the other hand, “prefers to call her work “grotesque,” meaning that she does not write in a naturalistic vein but uses distortion to make what is not readily observable more observable.” (*Conversations*, 42) Indeed, as a Catholic writer, she preserves a unique kind of treatment for her female characters, especially those who assume a masculine way of thinking and behavior, and those who need God’s saving grace. O’Connor has very little patience for her characters, especially her women characters who are unaware of their true position within the world, and their position in relation to God. O’Connor’s concern about writing Christian fiction led her to acknowledge that her primary challenge will be getting the Christian vision over to an audience for whom it has no significance. Indeed, her aim is to open people's eyes and shock them into recognition, just as she does with her characters. Violence in her fiction is never used as anything other than a logical extension of the story’s action; it is never employed only for its own purpose. For example, in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, the death of the grandmother and her being violently shot three times is symbolically employed to symbolize her likely redemption. Furthermore, In her fiction, the proud are continually humbled, the ignorants are repeatedly enlightened, the materialists are frequently obliged to acknowledge that the world’s treasures are only theirs to

possess for only a limited period. In fact, O'Connor's characters are described with such accuracy that they become completely realistic, even when they act in the most ridiculous of ways. Their behavior is consistent with what one would expect from them.

Both McCullers' and O'Connor's fiction feature lonely females who defy the Southern Lady ideal by being tomboys or deliberately rude. Both authors create characters who mock the ideal by using the grotesque, either through parody or through gender shift. Susan V. Donaldson links the employment of the grotesque with gender role issues, proposing that "the particular propensity of modern southern writers to evoke the gothic, the macabre, and the grotesque might very well have a good deal to do with regional anxiety about rapidly changing gender roles in the first half of the twentieth century." (2) However, despite their growing interest in examining gender issues, few critics regard them as feminists. The fact that the majority of their female characters submit to male authority in some way or another is frequently cited as proof of their lack of feminist vision. However, it must be clear that the direct textual study reveals that both authors mock the Southern Lady, and any misogyny in their writing reflects a realistic depiction of the culture and society in which their characters live. It is also important to note that part of what is satirized in both authors' portrayals of the Southern Lady ideal is the Southern Lady's acceptance and approval of the Old South's misogynous society. Indeed, both McCullers and O'Connor believed that many young women in the South were dissatisfied with the restrictive expectations placed on them, and that many saw the ideal of the Southern Lady as a grotesque representation of actual womanhood, even if they weren't sure what constituted real womanhood.

Even though McCullers and O'Connor were certainly not feminist authors, in the way current culture would define such. Their female characters still resist the stereotypical feminine gender role in trying to demonstrate their intelligence, independence, ambitions and desires. The authors strive to convey their own individuality rather than a sociopolitical objective. In addition, according to the information on their lives, it is clear that both O'Connor and McCullers considered the emblem of the Southern Lady as a barrier to their own ambitions. Both perceived it as the polar opposite of themselves and fought it. While neither McCullers nor O'Connor knew exactly what should replace the Southern Lady ideal, they both understood that it was necessary to deconstruct it in order to make room for a new method of defining gender roles.

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