

Flannery O'Connor's Gothic Art

ART GOTHIQUE DE FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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Abstract: Flannery O'Connor's works are enchanted with bloody violence, gloomy religion, typical southern settings together with groups of freakish, demonic people. It is generally hold that there are Gothic elements in her works. This article attempts to analyze her special Gothic art instead of Rural Gothic or Southern Gothic and generalizes O'Connor's heritage and development of the Gothic tradition. O'Connor breaks away from the southern tradition and provokes the postmodern gothic as the means to reveal the alienation of modern people and society.

Key words: Flannery O'Connor, Gothic, violence, comedy, postmodernism

Résumé: Les oeuvres de Flannery O'Connor sont enchantées par la violence sanglante, la religion morne, le contexte typiquement méridional et des groupes de personnes démoniaques et bizarres. Il est généralement admis qu'il existe des éléments gothiques dans ses oeuvres. Cet essai tente d'analyser son art gothique spécial au lieu de l'art gothique rural ou méridional, et généraliser l'héritage et le développement de O'Connor sur la tradition gothique. O'Connor brise la tradition méridionale et provoque le gothique postmoderne qui peut servir d'outil de révéler l'aliénation de l'homme et la société modernes.

Mots-Clés: Flannery O'Connor, gothique, violence, comédie, postmodernisme

According to *Oxford Literary Terms* "Gothic novel or Gothic romance, a story of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy old castle or monastery. (Baldick, 1996:92) The grotesque is frequently found as an accompanying or subsidiary feature to such literary forms as the Gothic and the Fantastic. It may be characterized as a deformation of the real-life, with verisimilitude yielding to caricature, often of human features, and of plant and animal forms. The term 'a grotesque' may also be applied to a combination of the comic and the serious may be realized, often satirically, in the form of unexpected transitions: from forced elevated rhetoric to abrupt comic denouement.

1. GOTHIC

Gothic art, here, refers to Flannery O'Connor's craftsmanship on novel &fiction &short story writings, which includes some Gothic elements (violent depiction, supernatural haunting, horror, terror etc.) and the Grotesque(combination of comedy and violence). She wrote horrifying stories, depicted gruesome backgrounds, created weird atmosphere, and drew deformed and metamorphic characters with Gothic skills. The violence description was prevailing in her literary works to achieve shocking effect. These freakish people tried to pursuit the spiritual satisfaction

through the extremely terrible violent acts. Those acts revealed the twisted human nature. Therefore her works are with distinctively religious color. The grotesques are actually the realization of the amplification of spiritual emptiness and distortion, which was veiled by social violence and bizarre acts. (Wang Songlin , 2001 : 307).The readers will be shocked to think about the morale value underneath the story. The contemporary modern world is gradually losing the morels, which were highly worshiped by the old South, while the new morels are not built up. "Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction." (MM, 73) Maybe the readers would feel indifferent about the decaying society, yet they must be taken apathy by the amplification of violence by Flannery O'Connor. Furthermore, the gifted southern female writer was extremely fond of depicting freakish characters.

Miss O'Connor adopted grotesque to form her Gothic Art. She identifies three items, any of which could constitute "grotesqueness" in fiction: an uncommon experience, the use of "mystery", or characters with and invisible burden. We might list immediately examples or characters for each, respectively: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"; "A View of the Woods", in which Mr. Fortune after looking out at the woods and staring "as if for a prolonged instant he

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were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held here in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before”(CS, 892); and Tarwater in “*The Violent Bear It Away*”. If such characters as Tarwater do come about from novelist’s prophetic vision, what do such novelists consider as prophecy? O’Connor defines prophecy as “a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meanings and thus of seeing far things close up”. Her definition recalls the image of a telescope, which she uses as symbol in *The Lame Shall Enter First*. Prophecy, then, involves seeing, seeing not just the part but also the whole; and if novelists have a conception of the whole, they will be able to recognize the grotesque, which is part of the whole. Grotesque is an art that unconsciously mingled and interfused human, animal, vegetable, and mineral in eerie and nightmarish fashion. With the development of society and ideology especially the concept as “the God is dead”, the grotesque is repeatedly associated with gross unnatural distortion and calls to mind the fearful, the unearthly, the nightmarish, and the demonic. In such a climate, the grotesque mode and many features of the gothic novel become more serviceable and more relevant as a means of representing the “dark side” of human nature.

2. O’CONNOR’S GOTHIC ART

O’Connor’s Gothic art which mainly embodied in the following aspects: the subjects and theme, the character, description of violence, mystery and illusion.

2.1 Subjects and theme— familial love

The identification of O’Connor’s central theme “might be said to be ‘gain’, or the possibility of gain. Familial love pervades most of O’Connor’s stories in a negative way. That is, the absence of familial love or familial love misdirected focuses our attention on the shortcomings of her main characters. The family is usually considered a stable unit, which used to wear a warm and gentle veil Flannery O’Connor tried to destroy it –the assumption is that if the family cannot offer security, nothing can. In the modern decaying world, even the traditional family could not provide shelf for those distorted, alienated, lonely soul. Everybody cares only he himself. Narcissism is a prevailing symptom for modern people. And narcissism causes the destruction. The parent usually loves himself more than his child; the child hates the power of the parent and at the same time he wants it for himself. Scarcely did we find “togetherness.” O’Connor often uses a symbolic family. The reason is clear: the real family is so confusing, so shattered, that the parent or child flees from it. They searched for surrogate-figures, but the narcissistic circle asserts itself, and the same kind of needless destruction follows. Family types recur:

there are the ineffectual child, the evil parent, and occasionally good parent. Parent and child are frequently stunted by their dependence (willing or unwilling) on self-love; they never grow up. Flannery O’Connor is concerned with family relationship and the terror they inspire. In *Wise Blood* Hazel Motes’ mother believes strongly in Jesus, she does not see that her lack of maternal love is responsible for her son’s rebellious nature.

The same kind of monstrous family is evident in Miss O’Connor’s stories. Usually the parent imposes his strength in a fierce. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* the Grandmother’s self-centeredness inhibits her son to such an extent that he obeys all of her whims. Unlike the Grandmother, the parents in *The River* are skeletons. They did exist in the story, but never did something directly. They don’t even have the strength to take care of their son. Because Miss O’Connor offers no solution to family strife, it produces that shudder at the “edge of being,” when the microcosm breaks down: nothing is left; no one can help.

2.2 Freakish character

Concerned with the character, Flannery O’Connor created a series of demonic, freakish people. Distortion is evident in Physical description. Many of the protagonists in Miss O’Connor’s works suffered more or less physical disability or flaws. They may be siren-likely ugly; may be life-threatened by chronic disease. She is dramatizing in their outward and tangible forms human limitations. Her characters are not complete persons, who did not enjoy wholeness. They lack of passion, love, confidence, self-knowledge-at least one of the attributes which could enable them to be whole. That Rufus Johnson has a club foot or that Hulga has a wooden leg, per se, is not the point at all. In fact, O’Connor uses those physical limitations as symbols of bigger limitations-Rufus meanness, Sheppard’s club soul, and Hulga’s wooden soul.

O’Connor ‘s procession of unsavory characters “conjures up,” in her own words, “an image of Gothic monstrosities” and “the idea of a preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque” (MM, 28). Overwhelmed by O’Connor’s misfits and eccentrics, some readers might plausibly wonder, what is the meaning of these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloister of American literature? Others might feel better off reading from sideshow posters than from such bizarre fiction. O’Connor’s outrageous comic technique-her unusual metaphors, her violent slapstick, her penchant for distorting the human figure-has called down righteous indignation on her head.

2.3 Mysteries and allusions

Supernatural things served as mysterious magic power in Flannery O’Connor’s works. By this young Tarwater

realized his call as prophet. Miss O'Connor creates the presence of the supernatural, of mysterious force beyond the daylight self, in pig and sunset. *Revelation* begins with Mrs. Turpin's confrontation with a Wellesley student in a doctor's office, yet it ends with her own uncouthness-her own rural sensibility –miraculously transformed in the presence of a secret life. The life is Mrs. Turpin's life, but dark, unknown, strange; it is the life revealed in the college girl's fierce remark: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (CS, 500). It is the inhuman life of wart hogs from hell that, liberalized, leads strangely to Mrs. Turpin's vision of heaven. Mrs. Turpin "faces" herself with the hog. She sees her own secret life in the elemental life of her farm and discovers. The family members have close relationship with supernatural things. Actually transcendence plays very important role in Miss. O'Connor's works. Supernatural things usually haunt human beings. What is powerful in O'Connor is her ability to create the presence of Christ and grace felt through and beyond the world of nature. How she does this is the problem and the secret of her art, and it is an art that is Gothic and that depends, fully, on its situation on one of the frontiers of our culture.

Allusions usually took the forms of imprisonment which is typical image for the American modern Gothic. However different forms of imprisonment were widely used in Miss O'Connor's fictions. The train which Hazel Motes took heading for Taulkham is just like a coffin. While Hazel Motes' mother's coffin and her funeral ceremony were repeated again and again. Even his mother's wardrobe was described as a coffin. "To make an example from my own book, *Wise Blood*, the hero's rat-colored automobile is his pulpit and his coffin as well as something he thinks of as a means of escape." (MM, 72) Furthermore, even the City of Taulkham, Hazel Motes arrived was like a box. There are a lot of images of imprisonment in this novel, such as train,

toilet, coffin, the box-like two-stored building, the cage in the Zoo and so on and so forth. It symbolizes the moral desert for the modern people. Humans are encaged in the materialized world. (Zhou Xin,2001:9)

3. POSTMODERN SATIRIC & COMIC GOTHIC

Flannery O'Connor's brought her career to a stunning climax at a rather comfortable interregnum in American letters. The modernism were gone, with their tidily finished, nearly patterned, and mythically ordered texts. Surprisingly she predicted some elements of postmodernistic novels. Postmodernity could be found in her literary works. She produced an inward writing, personal fiction that accommodated the rough edges of the psyche and of human time, which climbed to the height of prosperity. It is the most appropriate expression for the prevailing anxiety and skepticism in America. She also sidestepped that increasing concern with a technological world and its dehumanizing consequences which was to haunt the careers of Pynchon, Robert Coover and their contemporaries which including Flannery O'Connor. Post-modernistic novel is a term related to modernistic novel and realistic novel, thus we can only learn and grasp its true meaning in comparison. Realism puts emphasis on WHAT; modernism puts emphasis on HOW; while postmodernism puts emphasis on WITING itself. Besides, the most important characteristics of post-modernistic novel are uncertainty, multiplicity, language experiment and language games.

We can clearly see the differences between modern fiction and post-modern fiction from this following form.

Modernistic novel & story	Post-modernistic novel & story
Innovation about the inner form of fiction	Doubt about the form of fiction itself
Emphasizes technique. Situation .Structure. Language	Confuse the distinction between styles and destroy the cannon of narration
Elite literature, pure literature	No distinction
Free usage of Mel monologue and free association	Pasture, picaresque and montage

Indeed Postmodernity did emerge in her literary works. The characteristic feature has come into being: uncertainty, emphasizing writing itself and multiplicity.

Gothic relates to a style of fiction that emphasizes the grotesque, mysterious, and desolate. Taking Flannery O'Connor's Gothic art into consideration, postmodernism will be emerged by means of neglecting high and low cultures. She clearly sensed the existence of prevailing public culture. Flannery O'Connor dissolved the distinction between high and low culture. She paid no attention to the forms of her novels and short stories. According to the doctrines about postmodernism, we get the understanding stance that

the most distinctive difference between a modern novelist and a postmodern novelist is that the modern one still placed himself among the protagonist he predicted. Although the writer did not involved in the story, but his values still revealed in his work. Throughout her work, the stand for her to judge right and false, good and evil existing potentially. Unconsciously the modern writer placed himself as elite above those he severely criticized. Flannery O'Connor was bearing totally different attitude. She seldom mentioned her family history. History and origin completely lost their meanings in Flannery O'Connor's literary creation. It is just like her protagonists in the

Gothic novels and short stories. No one knows where they came from, where they would go, only knows now they are in a farm or an apartment, or etc. While the farm was without concrete location. Moreover, Flannery O'Connor was totally out of the story she depicted. The boundary for the modern writers has been over passed; she was not the elite among them any more. Yet so frequently has recent literary work been associated with experimentation and novelty that it has been given a niche of it's own and designated rather grandly as "postmodern fiction".

We as members of the contemporary modern world are not yet reduced to apathy, and therefore we still react to violence violently. Only if the potential readers feel disgusted or react violently to the violence or freaks in O'Connor's fictions, then the author's aim was totally achieved. New American Gothic is in the mainstream of American fiction. It is primarily concerned with love, knowing "that there can be no terror without the hope for love and love's defeat" (MM 87,) which can accounts for Flannery O'Connor's depiction that deep and warm relationship between the family members has

been demolished and human beings self-centered and arrogant. The world is full of violence while the common people showed indifference to the whole things. Flannery O'Connor wanted to evoke the people by coarse and sharp cry through violence.

Then many people would like asking O'Connor question as "why you used so many gothic art to create the horrifying or shocking effect?" Once O'Connor answered this question by a simile "if we talk to a likely deaf, we should shout to make him hear; if we show a picture to a likely blind, we should draw the picture as large as possible." It is easy to catch the point that her aim for using gothic art is to shock the public who ignore the dark things of the contemporary society and even take the bad as good. People who read her story will be shocked and then will think about something or judge who is right and who is wrong. The hermit female author deeply concerned about the people who has nothing to do with her. A woman declared a war against the degrading and decaying modern world, which wouldn't be indifferent of the judgment of evil and good and show no difference to devil things.

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