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


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 pursue 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 mores, which were highly worshiped by the old South, while the new mores 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 it for a prolonged instant he

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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 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.

2.2 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.

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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 Taulkingham, 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 engaged 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.

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

REFERENCES


