

The Mother's Condescension and the Daughter's Innocence: The Mother-Child Family Stories of Flannery O'Connor

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In a letter dated 24 August 1956, to “a young Atlanta woman she has never met” (1248) referred to as “A,” Flannery O'Connor herself expounds about Joy/Hulga, the well-known character with a wooden leg in her short story, “Good Country People” (1955). She writes:

She is full of contempt for the Bible salesman until she finds he is full of contempt for her. Nothing “comes to flower” here except her realization in the end that she ain't so smart. It's not said that she has never had any faith but it is implied that her fine education has got rid of it for her, that purity has been over-ridden by pride of intellect through her fine education. (O'Connor 999-1000)

Following the canon of parent-child relationships in O'Connor's stories, Joy/Hulga thinks she is incompatible with her mother, Mrs. Hopewell. However, the feeling of contempt which O'Connor indicates in the letter is based on Joy/Hulga's mother's criteria for evaluating people which only works within Mrs. Hopewell's domain. Thus when Joy/Hulga confronts the rascally Bible salesman away from her mother's protection, she is deceived by him and her innocence is revealed.

In three short stories contained in Flannery O'Connor's short story collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955), three mother-daughter families are victimized by vagrant rascally male characters and the daughters are particularly traumatized by them. Although each mother-daughter pair has a different context for their relationship, they share some traits in common. Mrs. Crater and her daughter who shares her name, Lucynell, in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” Mrs. Cope and Sally Virginia in “A Circle in the Fire,” and Mrs. Hopewell and her erudite daughter

Joy/Hulga in “Good Country People,” are all fatherless families and the mothers take the initiatives in their homes. In particular, Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Hopewell operate their farms and direct their workers as employers. Because they manage their lives successfully without their husbands, the three mothers think that they can deal with their problems constructively.

However they cannot easily handle the evil men who come to bring misfortune to the families from the outside world. Claire Kahane writes, “Typically widows determined to make circumstances fit their needs, they are repeatedly revealed to lack the power they think they have” (127). The mothers take it for granted that they can control the strange visitors just like they control almost everyone and everything on their land with much condescension. Therefore their condescending way of understanding is the very thing that limits their view of life, and can be a major factor of their suffering brought by the outsiders.

Simultaneously, the daughters’ innocence is also the reason for each story’s tragic ending. Lucynell Crater and the other two daughters, Sally Virginia and Joy/Hulga, can be thought of as diametrically opposed characters. Because of her congenital disability, Lucynell Crater cannot live without her mother’s care, and as Mrs. Crater repeatedly emphasizes, Lucynell’s innocence is revealed in the story. Contrary to Lucynell, Sally Virginia and Joy/Hulga think they are incompatible with their mothers and strongly resist them. They are so conceited that they think they are more sophisticated than their mothers. However, against their will, the truth is that they are not particularly different from Lucynell who has been strongly protected by her mother because they have lived under their mothers’ protection. When they face the evil men out of the range of their mothers’ eyes, their innocence is exposed and they experience a dreadful fear that they have never felt before.

These mothers’ condescension and daughters’ innocence are fostered inside their homes, which represent a narrow view of the world, and this point of view is guarded and maintained by the mothers. The mothers establish their own logic to see the world, and based on that logic, they keep the discipline of their homes. Since they see things one-sidedly, they cannot spot hypocritical language nor can they perceive the true nature of evil men from the outside world where their logic is not understood. In this paper, I

explain the three mothers' logic and also reveal the influences of that logic upon their daughters who have been brought up in their closed homes.

To analyze the mothers' logic from the text, we must understand that they have a similar class consciousness. Mrs. Hopewell, the mother of Joy/Hulga in "Good Country People," divides human beings into at least three categories. She uses the phrases "good country people" and "white trash" to distinguish others around her, and she thinks she occupies a superior position compared to these people. Therefore, her class consciousness is a three-layer structure. Of course, the first class where she puts herself is on top, the next class is "good country people," and the bottom is "white trash."

Both "good country people" and "white trash" are not explicitly defined in the story, though we can estimate what kind of people they are from Mrs. Hopewell's statements. She classifies Manley Pointer and her employees, the Freemans as "good country people." She says, "[Manley Pointer] bored me to death but he was so sincere and genuine I couldn't be rude to him. He was just good country people, you know . . . just the salt of the earth" (274). At the end of the story, she also states, "He was so simple . . . but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple" (283). From what she says, we surmise that she considers "good country people" to be completely harmless, simple, and polite figures; however, she also thinks they are uneducated, nondescript, and boring people. Mrs. Hopewell talks as if she understands everything about Manley Pointer and people like him. She thinks that she should be nice to them and practices this by being gentle toward Manley Pointer. However, her kindness is superficial and she actually treats them with contempt. She believes that she is superior to them and thinks she can cleverly deal with them.

Mrs. Hopewell behaves towards her employee Mrs. Freeman, "the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth" (264), in the same way as she treats the suspicious boy. O'Connor writes, "[Mrs. Hopewell] made up her mind beforehand exactly how she would handle the woman. . . . Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack" (264). Mrs. Hopewell is confident enough that she thinks she can well manage this woman who is thought to be troublesome. With lavish praise, she cleverly dodges Mrs. Freeman's boasting about her daughters, Glynese and Caramae, while we cannot tell

what she is thinking about them deep inside. Mrs. Hopewell explains that the Freemans “were not trash” (264) and were good country people” (264). For her, controllable employees who basically work sincerely for her are good people compare to “white trash” like the previous tenant families who were intractably bad for her.

In “A Circle in the Fire,” Mrs. Cope, the mother of Sally Virginia, does not refer to her class consciousness in particular phrases like Mrs. Hopewell does. However, it is clear that Mrs. Cope has a similar class consciousness to Mrs. Hopewell, and can be identified with her. We do not know whether Mrs. Cope has Mrs. Hopewell’s three-layer structure of class feeling, but she definitely feels superiority towards other people, such as her employees, Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard, and the blacks; poor Europeans; and the three runaway boys: Powell Boyd, Garfield Smith, and W. T. Harper.

She characterizes the blacks who work under her as “destructive and impersonal as the nut grass” (233) and thinks that “they don’t have the responsibility” (234). It is clear that Mrs. Cope discriminates against blacks and she does not even hide her annoyance toward them. Although Mrs. Cope inwardly has contempt for Mrs. Pritchard and the delinquent boys who are of low social standing compared with her, she is superficially kind to them. Therefore, similar to Mrs. Hopewell’s idea of “good country people,” predictably Mrs. Cope also thinks Mrs. Pritchard and the boys are non-harmful, controllable, and stupid white people.

Mrs. Cope always tells other people how important it is to thank God about their possessions. She admonishes Mrs. Pritchard to do so: “Every day you should say a prayer of thanksgiving. Do you do that?” (234). Looking out over her extensive property she also says, “Every day I say a prayer of thanksgiving . . . Think of all we have. Lord, . . . we have everything” (234). Apparently her statements show she has faith in God, though her words reflect her condescending attitude. She can say these things because she has considerable wealth which most of people do not have. Therefore, for people like Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Cope’s statements are annoying. So when Mrs. Cope tells Mrs. Pritchard, “I can always find something to be thankful for,” (234) Mrs. Pritchard replies, “I reckon *you* can” (234) with evident sarcasm.

Moreover, identical to Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Cope overestimates her own ability to manage the land and the people who work under her. She believes she can well cope

with any troubles that are brought to her property and retain the estate. She says, "I have the best kept place in the county and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it. . . .I don't let anything get ahead of me and I'm not always looking for trouble. I take it as it comes" (235). Her overconfidence seals her eyes and she cannot figure out the harmfulness of the three delinquent boys, having no doubt that she can handle them. She sees the situation which is brought about by the three boys as somehow optimistic, not hearing Mrs. Pritchard's warning.

Unlike Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Cope who manage their vast lands competently by hiring some employees, Mrs. Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" certainly has property, though she does not have hired help nor is her house as well kept. Furthermore, Mrs. Crater tries to deceive Tom T. Shiftlet, the one-armed tramp-like stranger who appears at her house from nowhere, while Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Cope are undoubtedly proud of themselves and believe they are virtuous and honorable when dealing with others. Mrs. Crater thinks that the stranger is a suitable partner for her poor child so she plans their marriage by offering him something in exchange for her.

It seems that Mrs. Crater's social standing is lower than that of Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Cope; also, she is not as sophisticated a woman. Thus it is hard to equate Mrs. Crater with those two mothers. However, Mrs. Crater obviously takes a condescending attitude toward the male character like the other mothers and intends to victimize Mr. Shiftlet because "she was ravenous for a son-in-law" (177). Mrs. Crater is so impudently confident that she thinks she is superior to the man and can easily manipulate him, not understanding Mr. Shiftlet is also trying to deceive her and steal her dead husband's car. Therefore, Mrs. Crater allows, without a trace of fear, the vagrant man, to stay on her land.

When Mrs. Crater importunately persuades Mr. Shiftlet to marry her child, she uses cruel language to tell him about his position. She says, "Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man" (179). From here, it is certain that Mrs. Crater despises people like Mr. Shiftlet and she thinks she is superior to them. For her, it is incomprehensible that Mr. Shiftlet hesitates to accept her satisfactory offer, an offer she thinks he probably will never again have in his life. So, she loses her patience and openly shows her real spiteful feelings. We cannot say

that Mrs. Crater has exactly the same class consciousness as Mrs. Hopewell or Mrs. Cope, but she also attends to the male stranger with a condescending demeanor.

Two daughters, Joy/Hulga and Sally Virginia rebel against their mothers' logic of dealing with others and want to extricate themselves from their mothers' domination. They insist on their independence and reject their mothers, and intend to stand against the evil characters by themselves. However, in fact they have lived under their mother's protection and unconsciously inherit their mothers' class consciousness, so when they confront evils outside of their mothers' safeguard, tragedy happens.

Like her mother, undoubtedly Joy/Hulga believes that Manley Pointer is "good country people": innocent and uneducated. She decides to seduce the boy and guide him to a "deeper understanding of life" (276). Because she is highly educated, she is obsessed with the idea that she understands the truth of life. Joy/Hulga believes herself superior to Manley Pointer and thinks that she can easily manipulate the boy and change him into a wise man. She says, "True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind" (276). Even when they kiss for the first time, her mind is clear and she looks at their situation objectively. She mocks him for innocently being deceived by her and at the same time she has pity on him.

However, their positions are reversed after they go into the barn. Even after Manley Pointer learns Joy/Hulga's true age, he says he loves her and wants Joy/Hulga to show him the joint of her artificial leg as proof of her love for him. O'Connor explains how precious Joy/Hulga thinks her artificial leg is. O'Connor writes, "No one ever touched it but her" (281) and "[s]he took care of it as someone else would his soul" (281). For Joy/Hulga exposing her artificial leg to others is equal to revealing her soul to them. So first, she refuses to do so. But when she hears the boy says that he thinks the artificial leg is what makes Joy/Hulga special, she is moved and feels that the boy "had touched the truth about her" (281) and decides to show it to him. O'Connor writes, "it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously in his" (281). Joy/Hulga completely trusts in Manley Pointer and purely feels love for him. She is now seduced by the boy. Joy/Hulga imagines a life with him in which he takes care of her artificial leg. And she cannot think as composedly as she could before the boy kissed her.

When the boy takes out a small bottle of whisky and vulgar things from the Bible which is hollow inside, Joy/Hulga perplexedly asks him, “aren’t you just good country people?” (282). Following Mrs. Hopewell’s class consciousness, Joy/Hulga classifies Manley Pointer as “good country people” so that she cannot figure out his evilness. The boy snatched her artificial leg and leaves Joy/Hulga in the loft. Before he runs away, he says:

One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way. And you needn’t to think you’ll catch me because Pointer ain’t really my name. I use different name at every house I call at and don’t stay nowhere long. And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga, . . . you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born! (283)

Joy/Hulga realizes that the boy is an experienced charlatan who takes advantage of her. Her past superiority is overturned and she realizes that she is exactly the kind of innocent person who she holds in contempt.

Mrs. Cope’s daughter, Sally Virginia Cope is twelve years old, a plump girl with a pale face and braces on her teeth. Like Mrs. Hopewell’s daughter, Joy/Hulga in “Good Country People”, Sally takes a defiant attitude towards her mother. Sally is disgusted with her mother’s overconfidence and obtrusiveness, so she makes unkind remarks to Mrs. Cope such as “It looks like a fire. You better get up and smell around and see if the woods ain’t on fire” (233), knowing that this is what her mother is most afraid of. Even though Sally is mean to Mrs. Cope and resists her, she identifies with Mrs. Cope. When three runaway boys suddenly appear on the family farm, Sally shares the same concern with her mother, worrying about how the farm may be destroyed by them.

Unlike Mrs. Cope who attends to the visitors in a very pleasant way as a sensible person, Sally directly expresses her violent hatred for the boys who invade her family’s property. She “suddenly stuck her head far out the window and said, ‘Uggggghrrhh,’ in a loud voice, crossing her eyes and hanging her tongue out as far as possible as if she were going to vomit”(241-242). The action which Sally takes against the boys reflects her strong hostility towards them. Dorothy Walters declares, “The child regards the boys as

pure evil" (69). While Mrs. Cope sees the situation which is brought about by the boys as somehow optimistic, Sally instinctively perceives the evilness of the boys.

Sally is smarter than her mother because she realizes the harmfulness of the three delinquent boys. However just like her mother, Sally has plenty of confidence so she believes she can easily kick the boys off of her property. She continually announces how much better she could handle those boys than Mrs. Cope though the adults do not take her seriously and Mrs. Cope wants to keep her daughter away from the boys.

At the end of the story, Sally ultimately dresses like a cowboy, hanging two pistols around her waist to expel the harmful boys who are probably hiding in the woods. Mrs. Cope looks at her daughter helplessly, and heaps some sarcastic remarks upon Sally who cries, "Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain't you" (248). This complaint of Sally's shows her strong refusal to equate herself with Mrs. Cope. However, Sally's simplistic idea of believing she can defeat the enemy by wearing men's clothes is similar to Mrs. Cope's way in which she underrates the boys.

Though Sally enthusiastically goes into the woods to fight with the harmful boys, when she hears their talking, and sees the fire burning the woods, she is stricken by a "new unplaced misery" (250) and realizes her ineffectuality. Sally sees the same misery on her mother's face after she escapes from the woods and stands by her mother while she desperately watches the woods burning: "It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself" (250-251). Now Sally understands that the initial feeling which she has in the woods is the common to all people. Sally comprehends how powerless human beings are in the face of such a difficult predicament.

Lucynell Crater, Mrs. Crater's disabled daughter who is completely deaf, does not exactly comprehend what is going on around her. Lucynell is fidgety and so childish that she acts as her emotion orders. So she suddenly cries, jumps and stamps her feet and also takes odd posture such as "sitting cross legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands" (178). As a result of this, she looks much younger so Mrs. Crater explains Lucynell is fifteen or sixteen though her true age is nearly thirty. Lucynell does not seem to understand that her mother is engaged in bargaining with Mr. Shiftlet, the vagrant,

about her marriage to him. She is unable to make such decisions by herself. Lucynell's life is in her mother's hands and after the marriage, her life is in Shiftlet's hands. Therefore the story ends with the shocking betrayal of Shiftlet in which Lucynell is deserted at a diner while she is sleeping.

Louise Westling suggests that Lucynell is a "strange and distorted symbol of spiritual innocence" (513) that her "speechless imbecility is perhaps the reason for her sweet nature, whereas intelligence is a curse on the other daughters" (513). Different from Joy/Hulga and Sally Virginia, we cannot know what Lucynell thinks about the things around her from the text. Perhaps she does not think while Joy/Hulga or Sally Virginia always thinks in a cynical way. Lucynell's character contrasts to that of other daughters who scathingly criticize others with a superior attitude, since she is a pliable and sweet girl just helplessly at her mother or Shiftlet's mercy.

However, simultaneously Joy/Hulga and Sally Virginia are not remarkably different from Lucynell in the terms of their innocence. They are completely powerless when they face the evil male character by themselves just like Lucynell is. Their overweening pride only holds water inside their homes. Joy/Hulga and Sally Virginia misunderstand themselves and overestimate their own ability though their past values are collapsed and the unexpected incidents make them acknowledge their weakness.

Flannery O'Connor repeatedly used the same plot of the mother-daughter family who are threatened by the external male character. As many people indicate, the motif of mother and daughter reflects the writer's real life. Most of her lifetime, O'Connor lived with her mother in Georgia, caring for a small farm. She was an intellectual woman who received a good education like some of her characters do. Therefore, it is natural to think that O'Connor mirrored herself in the character of daughters in her story. Westling suggests, "[O'Connor] scorned conventional Southern standards of feminine charm, quietly insisting on her own kind of individuality" (521).

However, the issue we really have to take up here is not about the resemblance of O'Connor and her characters, but what she tries to tell readers by using the same kind of plot again and again. In all of these stories, deceived mothers and daughters are lost in various respects. Joy/Hulga loses her precious artificial leg which refers to her deeper mind and concurrently she loses her absolute self-confident based on supremacy. Since

the three delinquent boys appear, Mrs. Cope and Sally Virginia lose their calm life and ultimately they lose the woods that belong to them. Needless to say, Lucynell, the daughter herself, gets lost and Mrs. Crater loses her sweet daughter. Every daughter or mother loses the things they cherish and they are feebly exposed before the irresistible force.

O'Connor frequently says in her essays and her lectures that her central purpose of writing is to display God's mystery. The image of mothers and daughters who become helpless corresponds to the image of powerless people in front of God. Reiterating the plot in her works, O'Connor discloses the evilness of sanctimonious people. She insinuates that contemporary people who are separated from God do not realize their lives are sinful, and they nullify God's benedictions. Therefore through the sensational tragic ending, O'Connor intends to give awareness to people.

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