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BLACK AND WHITE: A STUDY IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S CHARACTERS

To argue that Flannery O’Connor is a white author writing about white characters would seem to be only partially true to most readers who know her work. To be sure she is a white author, but many Black characters appear in her stories, from the two boys in the barn in “The Enduring Chill” to the well-dressed man with his newspaper and the mother and her son on the bus in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.”

Granted, Black figures appear in her fiction. But are the stories about them in the same way they are about whites? I think it can be argued that Black characters are for the most part only “issues” instead of people for O’Connor. They never change, never are explored on more than a superficial level.

In four of the nine stories in Everything That Rises Must Converge, Blacks play extremely small roles, ranging from what could be termed local color appearances that scarcely affect the tissue of the story to casual references in which individuals do not appear at all.

In “Parker’s Back,” for instance, the single reference to Blacks is the threat by the woman whom Parker works for that “a fourteen-year-old colored boy could do as well” (196). And in “The Lame Shall Enter First” the only Black character is Leona, “the colored girl” who works for Shepard as a cook. Aside from the narrator’s typically grotesque physical description, that “she was a tall light-yellow girl with a mouth like a large rose that had darkened and wilted” (140), she exists only as an opportunity to reveal Rufus Johnson’s ugly character when he demands to “see what all you got besides a nigger” (140). And what else do they have? “A pink-tiled bathroom.” To the success of the story the Black cook is no more valuable than the pink bathroom.

No Blacks appear at all in “The Comforts of Home,” either as characters or in comments by the whites in the story. And in “A View of the Woods” Blacks scarcely matter at all. There is one reference to hiding money in a mattress “like an old nigger woman” (73) would do, plus an explanation that Tilman’s dance hall was divided into two sections, “Colored and White, each with its private nickelodeon” (77). But the single Black character who appears is again used for rural Southern atmosphere rather than for anything more significant. “A Negro boy, drinking a purple drink,” the narrator observes, “was sitting on the ground with his back against the sweating ice cooler” (77). That Tilman addresses him as “boy” or that he replies in dialect that “a stout chile . . . gone off in a truck with a white man” (77) is only barely functional in advancing the plot. These incidents add nothing to either characterization or theme.

In the five stories that remain, Blacks play somewhat greater roles, but clearly the stories are not about them as principal characters, and they never do more than provide a surface against which the primary white figures can rebound.

Only one Black character actually appears in “Green-leaf,” and he is especially minor. We see him only in the narrator’s description that he is “a light yellow boy dressed in the cast-off army clothes of the Greenleaf twins.” Aside from that description we learn little more than the opinions of others in the story toward either him in particular or towards Blacks in general. Mrs. May thinks he is stupid, asking if he can remember to give a message to his boss. And even after his sullen reply that “I’ll remember it if I don’t forget it” (58), she writes the message down on the back of an envelope anyway.

Other references to Blacks are few. There is the first reaction of Mrs. May that the scraggy bull on her property was a “nigger’s bull” (45), and her son Scofield’s thought that “Mammy don’t like to hear me say it but I’m the best nigger-insurance salesman in this county” (48). But clearly the story is not about Blacks in any significant way. They are little more than the local color that belongs on a Southern farm, adding realism with a phrase or two of dialect.

Is “The Enduring Chill” any different? Certainly there are more references to Blacks here, beginning with Asbury’s plan to write a “play about Negroes” and his sister’s observation that “he had said he wanted to work in the dairy and find out what their interests were,” adding, “Their interests were in doing as little as they could get by with” (91). But does the story continue on to offer anything to disprove the girl’s stereotype? Is the reader ever allowed to find out “what their interests are” in any serious way?

Asbury does go to see the two Black boys in the barn, but he goes more to upset his mother than to learn anything himself. After all, he had thought on returning home only a few days earlier that “his mother, at the age of sixty, was going to be introduced to reality and he supposed that if the experience didn’t kill her, it would assist her in the process of growing up” (87). He does talk to the boys though, does share cigarettes with them, and even naively supposes that his rapport with them has created “one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing” (98).

Yet can O’Connor have been using her narrator in a straightforward way when she writes these lines? Asbury continues to see himself as superior to the boys and does not hesitate to use them again as a weapon against his mother when he calls them to his bedside for another “communion” experience. When
they speak only foolish flattery—‘Yessuh, you looks fine’ (107)—they have been sold short as individuals. We can expect to find them later in the barn, still regarded as inferiors by all of the household, ignored by the doctor and the priest, and in general not important enough for either the other characters or the reader to wonder if they have moral problems of their own.

By the end of the story Asbury will have to learn to live with the Holy Ghost. But the Blacks will just have to live with the cows. And we don’t even stop to say ‘too bad.’

In each of the stories so far Blacks could as easily have been any other minority group that O’Connor’s proud whites could have disparaged, if the setting had been anywhere other than the South. That they are Black is merely a regional convenience which allows the author to be economical in her narration, for Black stereotypes are not only present in her characters’ minds, they are as well known to the reader.

It is such stereotypes that offer the basis for the pharisaism of ‘Revelation.’ Mrs. Turpin’s reference to poor whites as ‘worse than niggers any day’ (169) gets the story started, and then in her fantasy of having to choose between a creation as Black or as white trash she imagines herself as pleading, “Please, Jesus, please, just let me wait until there’s another place available” (170). Other whites offer their own observations: the ‘pleasant lady’ just ‘couldn’t do without’ her ‘colored friends’; the ‘white-trash woman’ wants ‘to send all them niggers back to Africa . . . where they came from in the first place’; and Mrs. Turpin declares that they’re going to ‘go to New York and marry white folks and improve their color’ (174).

But what of the Blacks who actually appear in the story? The ‘colored boy’ who comes into the doctor’s office does no more than deliver cold drinks, ‘two large red and white paper cups’ on a tray, and when he leaves with his tip he is only the spur to discussion of Blacks in general. About himself as an individual nothing more is said.

The only other Blacks mentioned are ‘the hands’ who are brought home in the pick-up truck, and it appears that their praise of Mrs. Turpin is going to be on a par with that of the boys from the barn who tell Asbury (in ‘The Enduring Chill’) how fine he looks in his sick bed. But their surface horror at Mrs. Turpin’s office does no more than deliver cold drinks, ‘two large red and white paper cups’ on a tray, and when he leaves with his tip he is only the spur to discussion of Blacks in general. About himself as an individual nothing more is said.

At first their response is straight flattery: ‘I never knewed no sweeter white lady.’ But when the old Black woman adds, ‘That’s the truth before Jesus,’ and the others chime in, ‘Jesus is satisfied with her’ (183), even Mrs. Turpin grows to herself that they are ‘Idiots!’ (183).

But aside from their value as ironic flatterers—an irony, we should emphasize, that they seem wholly unaware of—they are as unimportant to the story as they are to Mrs. Turpin. She needs ‘farm hands’ and O’Connor needs an opportunity to comment obliquely on the spiritual poverty of her central white character.

But never are the Blacks portrayed as individuals who think, who change, or who need the grace of God. Only Mrs. Turpin, a white woman, hears shouts of ‘hallelujah’ at the end. The Blacks have just gone home to supper.

The four Blacks in ‘Judgement Day’ do have greater roles. Coleman lies on the floor of the shack; Foley speaks of the day when whites will work for Blacks; and the Black actor and his wife move into the apartment next door in New York City. But in spite of their importance to the plot, they are not involved in the central conflicts within either Tanner or his daughter.

‘It takes brains to work a nigger’ (208), Tanner tells his daughter. But the first view we see of Coleman, the man who ‘works’ with Tanner, is a static one. ‘When Coleman was young, he had looked like a bear; now that he was old he looked like a monkey’ (210). In fact, it is as likely that Tanner will work for a Black man as that Coleman will work for him. ‘He would have been a nigger’s nigger any day’ (216), he thinks when Foley threatens to move him from the land.

But this Deep South background is only a preface to the central action of the story in New York where Tanner confronts his new Black neighbors, the ‘Negro actor’ and his wife. ‘I was getting along with niggers before you were born’ (218), Tanner tells his daughter, and soon he sets out to demonstrate the fruits of his experience. But to what end? His first attempt brings verbal abuse: ‘I’m not from South Alabama. I’m from New York City. And I’m not no preacher! I’m an actor’ (219). And only a couple of paragraphs later his next ‘Good evening, Preacher’ try at conversation brings an even more thunderous response. ‘I’m not no preacher! I’m not even no Christian. I don’t believe that crap. There ain’t no Jesus and there ain’t no God.’ To punctuate the conversation, moreover, the Black man assaults him so severely that ‘for days his tongue appeared to be frozen in his mouth’ (220). No wonder when he falls on the staircase and cries out, ‘Hep me up, Preacher,’ the Black man pushes his head through the spokes of the bannister and leaves him to die.

What becomes of the Blacks in the story? Presumably Coleman is still at home in Alabama where the Black doctor keeps buying up land, and the Black couple in the ‘hutch’ next to Tanner’s daughter are still as haughty and violent as ever. But the concluding focus of the story does not include any of them. We find ourselves thinking instead of the ironic comment that Tanner’s daughter is resting better at night and that ‘her good looks have mostly returned’ since having exhumed her father’s body to send it south for burial as he had wished.

In ‘Everything That Rises’ Julian is seen on two different levels—the superior way he sees himself and the critical way we see him. This is probably best portrayed in his insistence that he is not dependent on his mother, in contrast to his weak cry for ‘Mother,’ then ‘Mama,’ at the end of the story. His mother is also complex and moves from the blindly patronizing figure who recalls fondly the ‘dear old darky who was my nurse’ (32) from her childhood and who gives
money to a Black child, to a tragic figure whose innocent blue eyes change to "a bruised purple" (39).

But Julian and his mother are white. What have Blacks had to do with their story? Consider them in the order in which they appear in the story.

The well-dressed Black man with the newspaper is first. We feel that Julian is abusing him by sitting in the next seat in order to irk his mother—"in reparation as it were for his mother's sins," he thinks—and by stupidly asking for a match even though he has no cigarette to light with it and is forbidden to smoke on the bus anyway. When the narrator observes that the Black man looked at Julian with annoyance, we can understand. But still it is Julian with whom we are concerned. "He would have liked to teach [his mother] a lesson that would last her a while, but there seemed no way to continue the point. The Negro refused to come out from behind his paper" (37).

Apparently the Black man does not matter any more to O'Connor than he does to Julian. Julian would use him immorally as a weapon to teach his mother a lesson—and he fails. Yet O'Connor has used him as a moral weapon to teach the reader a lesson—and she succeeds.

Her motives are admirable enough, and certainly the Black man is not abused by her treatment of him. In fact, on a moral level he comes out the victor. But before the story has reached its climax he leaves the bus, having come from some nameless stop along the way and now heading off in some unknown direction. He has no name, no face, no background, no destination—only a newspaper and some well-tailored clothes.

But what of the two other Black characters, the "bulging figure encased in a green crepe dress" and her son Carver? Do they fare any better? At first glance the mother would seem to, since it is her purple and green hat that makes Julian's mother feel so uncomfortable. Yet the reader who is amused at the white woman's discomfort has little reason to care if her Black companion is similarly perturbed at finding another bus rider—white or Black—with a hat like hers. She is merely something grotesque to look at: "the ponderous figure, rising from the red shoes upward over the solid hips, the mammoth bosom, the haughty face, to the green and purple hat" (39). Except for such external descriptions almost our entire attention remains focused on the two white characters.

Then comes the high point of violence. Julian's mother has offered the penny (she has no more nickels) to the Black child. And how do we react? With embarrassment for her rather than for him. And what happens when the Black woman hits Julian's mother with her red pocketbook? Again it is the white woman's eyes that are described, and it is her son's helplessness that we share.

Though the Black pair have been involved in the story's action for a longer time than the Black man, they have not changed any more than he did. The Black woman—"the Negress" (40) the narrator calls her—was proud when we first met her. "Her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out. The downward tilt of her large lower lip was like a warning sign: DON'T TAMPER WITH ME" (39). And by the end she is no different, though her violence has contributed to the death of one person and to the anguish of another. Yet there we leave her, concerned that the point of the story apparently concerns the other mother-son pair—the white ones. Just as the Black family came onto the bus out of an unilluminated darkness, so they leave without a destination, "disappearing down the street."

There has to be a certain unintended irony in all this. Flannery O'Connor, evangelical Catholic writer, attacker of spiritual blindness—could she have been blind to the separate-yet-unequal status she affords her Black characters? One would doubt that she is either a proud bigot like Julian or a patronizing figure like his mother, yet still she has populated this story with Black characters who serve only functional roles, who illuminate her white characters while not revealing themselves. Or to change the metaphor, O'Connor uses Black catalysts only to precipitate a white reaction.

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