

The Violent Are Gored: O'Connor's Theory of Violence in "Greenleaf"

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Flannery O'Connor's "Greenleaf" can be used to explore the affinity in her fiction between violence, grace, and epistemic clarity. Robert Donahoo, an editor of the 2010 *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, calls for her work to be used as a form of theory creation, not just theory criticism. This paper asserts that O'Connor does just that by using violence to defamiliarize the reader with the increasingly violent world post-1945. This happens in three ways. It begins with O'Connor's treatment of the persecuted and grotesque Greenleaf family. These persecuted characters create a dialogical narrative voice that stands in opposition to the authoritarian voice of the implied narrator. Ultimately, the tension between the characters and this authoritarian narrator culminates in Michael Taussig's death space—a textual space where singular cultural identities are violently intertwined—which leads to a moment of epistemic clarity for at least one character.

John Desmond points out in his essay, "Violence and the Christian Mystery," that violence "in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor has always been both an attraction and a stumbling block," causing significant shifts in epistemic clarity for O'Connor's readers. This means that the act of violence in her fiction causes repulsion in some readers while simultaneously drawing them in.

Donahoo looks forward to this role of the reader in O'Connor studies not as an endlessly viable resource to extract information about the author and her work, but perhaps to "move from using her as the subject of analysis to using her as a tool for theory creation" (249). In this way, he advocates that O'Connor understands that the text and the reader's experience should be a cause for creating epistemic clarity, or a more accurate way of understanding the phenomenon of violence, not just analysis. For the reader this means there is a moment in the narrative where the reader can empathize with a character undergoing a violent transformation or event. The moment of death for many O'Connor characters, for example, especially those whom the reader may find despicable, leads to a moment of reclamation: a shuddering and violent dispensation of knowledge previously inaccessible to the character. The fact that O'Connor makes this available to her morally reprehensible characters can jar the reader into recognizing his own prejudices. Indeed, this continuous strand of violent reclamation suggests that O'Connor is teaching the reader to explore the depths of violence and integrate their findings into the very process of reading. She does this by asking the reader to look in the margins of violence for meaning.

The potential theory-maker, the reader, must not "count the number of bodies at the side of the road or in the ditch" but rather "concentrate on what those explicit acts of violence signified in the interior world" (Desmond 130). One way she is able to illustrate this connection between the spiritual ramifications of violence is in the formal and tightly structured representations of violent acts. Thus, grace becomes the most crucial element for the O'Connor reader. Violence defers to grace—a swerving away from the flesh toward the goal of "the wrenching moment when grace confronts the 'natural' being—the double violence of, first, its intrusion into the natural order and then the violence caused by human resistance to that

intrusion" (132). Richard Giannone explains "God's presence can be bitter. It can stop the heart, can turn events on a dime....We trust that God is on the side of victims only to see in O'Connor's theology he is concerned for aggressors too" (x). Here God's grace extends to all living creatures; there is no hierarchy of salvation. This leaves the reader with a sense of instability, which eventually may lead to the knowledge that binaries in O'Connor's world are also unstable.

While Giannone chooses to illustrate that O'Connor accepts the transformative possibilities of violence for her characters and more importantly for a modern American tapestry, perhaps O'Connor is implicating the reader in his violent tendencies as well. Marshall Bruce Gentry notes that "Redemption is the moment when oppression lapses or is unfelt" engaging and expanding on the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism (5). This idea of dialogism requires competing narrative codes of hierarchy to be discarded in favor of polyvocality (8-9). Gentry sees this monologic narrator as highly suspect; instead, he argues for a narrator that vilifies in order to correct prejudicial treatment by readers on characters. For example, the sympathy some readers express toward Mrs. May's end indicates that O'Connor is teaching the reader how to interpret correctly representations of violence. This idea can be extended to O'Connor's understanding of mimetic violence in a community. It begins in "Greenleaf" with the amalgamation of two modes of language and space: the sacred and profane.

Mrs. May, representing the old order of power, has a fascination with societal offenses. This fascination with breaking through a social discourse manifests itself in Mrs. May's concept of the religious and sacred. When Mrs. Greenleaf wails out for Jesus, to "stab me in the heart!" (560) Mrs. May feels a transgression has occurred. Yet, as Girard points out, this scandal contains "a hidden element of desire and its opposite" (Ciuba 115). He continues to explain that the scandalous holds such a terrifying grip over the old order because "if it did not form an irresistible and impossible example, offering itself for imitation, as both model and anti-model at the same time" (115), then it would lose all potency for the scandalized.

In "Greenleaf" this moment of bearing away the natural order in favor of the sacred comes when Mrs. May is impaled on the horn of a bull. In his work, *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard explains that he sees human violence as generating from cultural transmission, not based in biology. He continues by stating that human violence originates in desire for some object that is lacking in the desirer. Therefore, when an object is possessed by one holder and another perceives this possession to make that holder more complete and therefore happier, mimetic rivalry is spawned (Girard 17). This rivalry quickly spirals out of control because desire is unchecked which leads to a tendency for both parties to escalate aggressively to possess the desired object. The most important aspect of this rivalry in terms of "Greenleaf" is the destabilization of persecution. There is indeed no singular persecutor; instead, nearly all are indicted. Girard's *Scapegoat* proffers a threefold classification system for how both parties typically resolve the escalating violence. It more closely resembles deferment of blame.

The first tenet of the system is that the persecutor convinces himself that a small group or individual, despite his relative innocuousness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society. Mrs. May sees the Greenleafs upsetting her concept of social structure and hierarchy. Like the bull that eats the shrubs under her window, the Greenleafs are "rhythmically chewing as if something were eating one wall of the house" (501). This intrusion, Mrs. May believes, will eventually lead to the consumption of her property and identity: "She was aware that whatever it was had been

eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the and now was eating the house ...eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs” (501). This destruction of privacy and identity leads Mrs. May to believe that somehow the effacement of her life is directly related to the survival of the Greenleafs. In her dream of the bull consuming her life, O'Connor clearly sets up a mimetic crisis within the story's framework. The community's signifiers and traditional models of power have become victims of miscegenation, manifesting itself in Mrs. May's fear that the scrub bull will breed with her dairy cows. The Greenleafs of her dreams are the sole survivors on “a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place” (502).

In this way, Mrs. May convinces herself that the Greenleafs are interlopers and responsible for the social and cultural upheaval of her farm, consuming and absorbing all that holds significance for her position of power. She directs anger toward them; Girard demonstrates that aggression and distrust are linked to an imitative model which is not instinctual, but relies on a model to be active. Mrs. May reflects that for “fifteen years, she thought as she squinted at him [Mr. Greenleaf] fiercely, she had been having shiftless people's hogs root up her oats...If this one was not put up now, he would be over the fence, ruining her herd before morning” (502). Her matriarchal position no longer holds power against the socially ascendant Greenleaf twins. As the head of the Greenleaf clan, Mr. Greenleaf is emblematic of this perceived social threat. Gary Ciuba notes that Mrs. May finds herself reacting with anger and fear as, “when individuals feel devalued, they may use force to assert the self and humiliate others” (6). Nowhere is this more evident than in Mrs. May's desire to see the scrub-bull die at the hands of Mr. Greenleaf.

She speaks deprecatorily of the Greenleaf family and threatens to divest them of home and work, further castigating E.T. and O.T.: “it's your own boys who are making you do this....If those boys cared a thing about you, Mr. Greenleaf...they would have come for that bull (521). The narrator characterizes Mr. Greenleaf as dubious, incomprehensible, and guilty of sloth: “He walked with a high-shouldered creep and he never appeared to come directly forward. He walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle and if you wanted to look him in the face, you had to move and get in front of him” (503). The narrator creates a man who appears more incomplete, and representative of an unreliable machine, more liable to break down, engine boiling over from improper care, than a man with whom Mrs. May has had a fifteen year relationship. The implied narrator creates an image of Mr. Greenleaf that more closely aligns itself with a persecutor's vantage point.

Girard tells the reader of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* that the subject of scandal is a chief human operation: “a situation that comes about when a person...feel[s] themselves blocked or obstructed as they desire some specific object of power, prestige or property” (xi). However fractious and yet long-standing this relationship is, Mrs. May comes to feel some kind horror at the thought of the Greenleafs' existence. She expresses revilement at the rupturing of her life. No more poignantly is this expressed than in the ritualized keenings of Mrs. Greenleaf over her newspaper clippings.

Mrs. May struggles with the intimacy and abandon expressed by Mrs. Greenleaf, that some kind of divinity could openly play a central role in the affairs of humanity. Essentially, Mrs. Greenleaf, in her own histrionic way, illustrates for the reader that the way to intimacy, revelation, and grace is through an imitative suffering—like that of the crucified God, Christ. In

sharp distinction, Mrs. May holds to an aseptic and sanitized religion, if she has any to call on. Her idea of scandal comes after the possibility of intimacy between creator and created. Or, to use slightly different language, the conflation and intermingling of public and private discourse and register.

Although Mrs. Greenleaf is ecstatic in her religious fervor, there is also a tight-lipped control over the entire healing ritual: “Her face was a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes, the color of two field peas, were red-rimmed and swollen, but her expression was as *composed as a bulldog’s* (507, emphasis added). In this image of Mrs. Greenleaf’s physiognomy, the narrator describes her actions as all-encompassing, tumescent, and capable of exceeding the power Mrs. May exerts on the farm. She, indeed, is a “huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth” (507). She is another imitation of the scrub bull that appears at the beginning of the story, munching away at Mrs. May’s property and family until nothing remains but an island for the Greenleafs. Destruction, as the parallel images suggest, is a form of recreation. This final image of a corpulent and devouring force leaves Mrs. May feeling “as furious and as helpless as if she had been insulted by a child” (507). But, it is this childlike simplicity that holds an appeal to Mrs. May; if only she could, like a child, submit to a higher authority, reclamation and revelation might be at hand.

With the violence of the text obviously in the foreground, O’Connor’s reader is forced to confront destructive forces which have been previously shown as a terrifying and grotesque. Michael Taussig explains the world seen in “Greenleaf” as a kind of space of death where the confluence of cultures creates and controls standard metaphors between disparate cultures. He asserts that such a “space of death has a long and rich culture. It is where the social imagination has populated its metamorphosing images of evil and the underworld: in the Western tradition Homer, Virgil, the Bible, Dante, Hieronymus Bosch...these spaces...blend into a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conqueror with the conquered” (5). Although the farming community in “Greenleaf” is not a place where hegemonic forces are especially strong, as noted previously, there is a definite hierarchy and dominant power register in use. Within the death space is an element of confusion, a mimetic crisis similar to Girard’s findings. He aligns himself with Antonin Artaud in seeing a subject/object split: “I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between the things and the ideas and signs that are their representation” (5). This confusion further demonstrates itself in O’Connor’s work through the upended social hierarchy within the community.

Furthermore, the dream Mrs. May has about the sun evidences the death space’s existence on the farm. Upon waking, she realizes that the strange noise accompanying the bullet-shaped sun is the bull munching on shrubs outside her window. This, indeed, is a strange juxtaposition of signifiers and referents. This dreaming power inserts itself into Mrs. May’s sleep, transforming it: becoming “agents of terror” (Taussig 6). Her violent dream allows for a transgression of normal signifiers: “the noise was the sun 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 her property...it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet...raced down the hill toward her” (519). Taussig asserts that the top-down model of hierarchy within the May community illustrates that “people become like things, their dreaming power passes into things that become not only like people but their persecutors” (6).

A similar space exists for Taussig's Indian reporter: "Now the pains were speaking...Of the world I knew nothing, nor the sound of my ears" (7). Predominantly, this space of death leads one from a kaleidoscopic palate of signifiers into an environment where opacity and nothingness fraternize. Finally, Mrs. May reaches the pinnacle of the death space experience where Taussig describes the existence of "long-standing, unconscious cultural formations of meaning—modes of feeling...lies in a symbolic world and not in the 'pre-Kantian' fiction of the world represented by rationalism" (9). The tree line is indicative of this tearing away of the rational construct. It becomes a "dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky" (523). Gentry sees a kind of death space transformation occur too: "the ending finds Mrs. May in transition, from a state in which she must hide from herself the significance she attaches to things, into a momentary redemption" (62). This hiding closely aligns itself with the functionality of the death space, where one who encounters it loses all sense of an essential attachment to semiotic standards.

In that death space, Mrs. May "remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief" (523), unable to free herself from the imperious forces of death. This incredulity arises from her disrupted sense of value and object assignments. She "stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was" (523). The death space rings similarly here in an account Taussig takes from an Ingano Indian: "With the fever I was aware of everything. Like a madman I wondered, consumed with fever...only the space of death—walking in the space of death. Now the world remained behind. Now the world was removed. Of speech. Nothing. Silence. And one knows the space of death there" (7). Indeed, Mrs. May knows the space of death at the appointed time. Her gaze remains fixed, her speech is impeded, and she persists in "star[ing] straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her changed" (523). However, O'Connor's depiction of this space leaves the reader with a sense of epistemic transformation, whereas Taussig's space allows for only nothingness. His death space is "Inconclusive. No cadenced harmonies. No cathartic resolution here. Struggle and pieces of possible wholes" (7). In contrast, O'Connor's epistemic clarity ratifies some measure of reclamation: "She did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed...to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (524).

O'Connor exposes the death space in which her characters become embroiled—leading to a transformation of their cultural and moral signifiers. This new signification holds greater implications for the reader than perhaps the characters. In one fashion, Gentry echoes O'Connor's advocacy of the reader's agency in triumphing against the consuming force of violence: "As with the other self-redeeming protagonists, however, there is a level of her redemption which only the reader sees...the reader appreciates, more than Mrs. May can, her rejection of the role assigned her by the narrator" (62). This transformation challenges readers, encouraging them to become like O'Connor's violently reclaimed characters: multivalent and aware that destruction can be a form of recreation.

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