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THE DEMONIC GROTESQUE IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the grotesque as a main genre in American Literature which is mostly connected with satire. It defines the grotesque from the gothic to the textual analysis of the collection of short stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) as a short fiction by Flannery O'Connor, the twentieth century American writer. He has created great tragi-comedy fictions in Southern Gothic. This paper also tries to place O'Connor's fiction as a great example of the demonic grotesque within the framework of the American gothic. Totally, this paper studies this book on the characteristics which depict the demonic grotesque.

Key words: American Literature; satire; grotesque; gothic literature.

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor, an American novelist and short story writer, has written tragi-comedy fictions in 'Southern-Gothic' which is "a term describing the work of modern Southern writers like Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and others, who were, or, are preoccupied with the private visions and psychological distortions of lonely characters in small loveless communities in the Southern U.S." [9, p. 397].

Violence is as a natural consequence of the religious fundamentalism which controls the Southern society in the time of O'Connor. This violence, every now and then, seem to prevent the appearance of grace. Therefore, O'Connor combines horror and humor with the idiom and manner of her society in her fiction. As a result, Southern life is strangely suitable for the creation of grotesque fiction. Her characters and settings reflect her native Georgia, as she has an eager ear for the dialect of Georgian farm folk. She says that,

My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. ... The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. ... to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. [3, pp 805-806].

O'Connor tries to illustrate the techniques of distortion and grotesque exaggeration. Her characters are not complete figures in having compassion, love, confidence, and self-knowledge. With her distinguished style for simplicity, she always states the truth about happenings and characters. Her grotesque characters are mostly used as satiric devices to show social, political, economic and religious themes. She masterfully uses satire in her works through exaggerating and distorting of the characters and events.

The family in a Flannery O'Connor story is more often than not incomplete: one or more parent is dead or gone; children or the young do battle with widowed mothers or fathers, or with uncles, great-uncles or grandparents: the old chafe lives with hostile or indifferent children. [2, p. 23]

This paper tries to characterize the demonic grotesque in this O'Connor's work concerning distorted characters, terrifying violence, caustic humor and satire, and irony.

Main part

O'Connor usually looks at the conflict between two generations of the same family. In *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) that is borrowed its title from the French paleontologist Teilhard De Cahrudin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, there is a collection of nine stories. Chardin believed in Darwin's theory of biological evolution in which different species go into higher and higher forms of consciousness.

Therefore, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is a collection of stories about the enlargement of vision. The characters share in the rising action of the title, toward a convergence with Christ at the summit of time. Of course, Miss O'Connor portrays degrees of illumination and uses a variety of genres: tragic, comic, tragicomic, [and] satiric. [8, p. 89].

In this collection, O'Connor illustrates the rebel of the black people, and the big gap between the young and old generations by two characters: Julian and his mother Mrs. Chestny. Julian is modern and open-minded person who is completely different from his mother as a Southern orthodox woman who is proud of being a descendent of an upper-class family, 'the Godhighs'. To her, the rebellion of the blacks is acceptable on condition that there is no convergence. Oppositely, Julian is considered as enlightened and liberal person has different views from his mother's thoughts and attitude towards the Negroes. From the beginning of the story, O'Connor shows Julian's indifference towards his mother. He thinks about different views of unlikely ways and means to teach her mother a lesson.

The story starts with Julian taking his mother to an unseparated bus for the whites and the blacks. In there, a black lady wearing a green and purple hat similar to that of Mrs. Chestny's. All at once, the black lady and Julian and his mother get down from the bus at the same destination. They quarrel together and after some time leave the scene. In the story.

When the civil rights Movement was in full swing and desegregation in the South an actual fact and blacks had begun to externalize those thoughts and feelings of anger they had repressed so long, she finally saw fit to write a story in which a black would take a key, and very active role. [8, p.7]

Therefore, the writer sets the story in the condition of the grotesque in contemporary Georgia. Mrs. Chestny's thinking about the black lady in the bus who is wearing identical hat like hers is an ironical humor. Moreover, 'hat' is a symbol showing the fact that the Negroes' economic situation is as good as the whites. She looks at the black lady as if she is a monkey that had stolen her hat. This is the way that O'Connor uses her characters as satirical tools to show the political and economic status of her society. Violence in the story shows itself. So, there is a weird co-existence of humor and violence in the story, both along with the demonic grotesque. The theme is more about racism that O'Connor focuses on it.

The writer illustrates Julian's relationship with his mother as a love-hate relationship as Julian loves her due to depending on her and at the same time he is hatred of her mother because of her views. Therefore, characters are mentally weak and dependent and can be called psychological cripples. O'Connor gives an ironic twist to the story and throughout the story her character Julian is obsessed with the thought of teaching lesson in which the black lady is the teacher and the student is Julian, not his mother. And this is the irony of the story. The story shows the changing social in the American South, especially in the time of the writer. It deals with the fall of aristocracy and the rebellion of the poor whites.

Another main theme is the religiosity of the people of South, shown in the story by two key characters, Mrs. May and Mrs. Greenleaf. Although Mrs. May knows herself as a respectable Christian lady, she says to her boys, "I don't like to hear you boys makes jokes about religion. If you would go to church, you would meet some nice girls". [8, p.35] Opposite of this materialistic character, is a superstitious lady Mrs. Greenleaf who is mystic engaged with 'prayer healing', to an extent that Mrs. May says, "Jesus would be ashamed of you" [8, p. 31]. Then, the superficial religiosity of Mrs. May counteracts with Mrs. Greenleaf's fundamentalist faith in religion.

As I mentioned before, the story explores the mother-and-son relationship. Here also, Mrs. May, as a widow, runs a farm to support her and her sons. Her sons are both irresponsible and indifferent to the chores and different problems of their mother. On the other hand, Mrs. Greenleaf's boys are really positive and successful in their life. The end of the story contains an ironic comic.

The tone of the story, meanwhile, is governed by a carefully modulated comic control, whereby seemingly gratuitous violence is subsumed under a vision of order. [6, p.23]

The death of Mrs. May makes the end of the story a violent one. It makes the story a great combination of humor and violence which is simultaneously grotesque. On the other side, Mr. Greenleaf completes the grotesque end by shooting the bull four times. Then, the unexpected death of Mrs. May shows readers the radical social transformation at work. Her death is a symbol of convergence.

The violence of her death reveals the dark beauty of the story, the beauty of a rising action that resolves harsh opposites into a converging unity. [8, p.92]

From the beginning of the story, Mrs. May is shown doing her best to keep her control over the Greenleafs. The religious and social elements are united with the theme of the story.

In another short story, we can see a relationship between grandfather, Mark Fortune, and his granddaughter, Mary. Mark as a rich farm owner allows his daughter and family to farm his land, though he hates his son-in-law, Pitts. This story also sets in rural Georgia in which the story illustrates the economic advances of the old South and also the emergence of the new South. Mr. Fortune imagines himself as the pioneer of advance and is happy for selling his land with the idea to see his rural and uncivilized environment developed and modern. He is a man of developed dreams, albeit he is seventy-nine years old.

This story also contains violence and is not lack of comedy. Mary is placed between her father and her grandfather. She loves her grandfather and simultaneously respects her father who beats her because he can hurt Mr. Fortune through Mary.

Thus, Mary Fortune Pitts is the victim of both men. She is used by her grandfather much as young Tarwater is used by the old prophet as a means of extending his will into the future. She is used by her father as the instrument of his own revenge. She is both a projection of Pitts's rage and of Fortune's hopes, as ambiguous and impersonal a character as the wilderness she loves. [4, p. 110]

This is the convergence of the features of Fortune and Pitts in Mary that brings about the misfortune in the story.

In another short story, there is also another mother-son relationship which is intertwined with the religious beliefs of people of the South. It also treats the racial theme in a higher extent. It is about

Asbury Fox and his 60-years-old mother, Mrs. Fox, and his 33-years-old sister, Mary who is a master school. The story contains the racial theme in a comic vein with frightening irony. Asbury holds his mother responsible for all of his mistakes in life. He always thinks that his death will be a kind of punishment for his family. On the other hand, his mother is also a failure in life in her domestic role as a mother of a family. O'Connor skillfully gives an ironic twist to the story as it climbs up to the climax.

Another short story is about a possessive son, Thomas, and a powerful mother. He as the protagonist of the story is an intellectual man who considers himself as the perfect blend of his parents, as he says, "he inherited his father's reasons without his ruthlessness and his mother's love for good without her tendency to pursue it" [4, p.121]. He as a possessive man wants his mother only for himself. When his mother decides to bring home a girl named Sarah Ham, Thomas tries to put some sense into his mother, but his mother does not listen to him. He continuously calls Sarah as a slut because he only wants his mother for himself not anyone else. About the end of the story, he kills his mother and pin it on Sarah.

Conclusion

Flannery O'Connor is as a main grotesque writer among her contemporary American writers. She absolutely drew on her former writers like Poe, but she introduced her own peculiar interests to the grotesque. Therefore, the elements of the grotesque are as a main thread in the short story of O'Connor.

As far as O'Connor is concerned, the contemporary Southern society becomes the butt of her satire, because she has a magnificent person-

al insight of the follies of the people around her. Her characters are all country people or farmers, landowners and sheriffs. She parodies the pride of sham intellectuals in her short stories. She mocks at the hypocritical nature of some of her self-styled sophisticated characters who pose to be progressive and modern in their outlook. Her satire did not even spare maternity and motherhood, as, widowed or divorced mothers and their disaffected children are a common feature of her fiction.

Almost all of her characters are either physically disfigured or spiritually distorted or at times even all the two put together. This fusing of the disparate modes of the laughable and the deplorable, to produce a single effect is also typical of many modern writers and O'Connor is no exception. Her humor thrives on the ironic incongruity between pretense and actuality, with a pointed satire of human foibles. It is the alarming disparity between what the characters assume themselves to be and what they are in reality, which evokes laughter, as their follies are laid bare before the reader.

Some of her stories end in a climax so grotesque that it becomes ludicrous. Her fiction is burdened with moments of severe clarification issuing from ludicrous condition, and undercurrents of hilarity rise in the midst of catastrophe. Physical violence plays an indispensable role in this paradigmatic conflict. Then, the tensions involving personal identity, social hierarchy, and economic stability inevitably lead to violence in her short stories.

To conclude, the element of central conflict, which inevitably leads to violence and death in O'Connor's stories, also becomes the pathway to the Christian aspect of Grace or Salvation.

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