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Comparative Analysis of Irony in O'Connor's Stories

Flannery O'Connor has commonly written about epiphanies and redemption for characters that aren't quite following the right path, but they believe they are. She was raised Catholic, and her religious background can be seen in her writing. O'Connor's Catholic background "teaches that grace alone saves and brings eternal reward" (Keil Par.12). She is a skilled writer who employs many different kinds of literary elements. Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) and "Revelation" (1965) both exemplify irony in characterization, use of symbolism, and elements of foreshadowing to similarly show the absurdity of human behavior.

O'Connor's skillful use of irony can first be seen in the characterization of the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find". The grandmother likes to appear as though she is a lady. For a long road trip, she clothed herself in "a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot on the print" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 118). Despite her attempts to impress others, it is hard for the reader to regard her as a lady because her thoughts show that she thinks very highly of herself. Also, she purposely misguides her family, which ultimately leads to their deaths. O'Connor "characterized the grandmother so that it is virtually impossible to say anything unquestionably good about her" (Renner Par. 7). It is almost as though the grandmother is unknowingly a wolf in sheep's

clothing; she appears a harmless lady, but she will bring destruction. The grandmother really wishes for good, and is continually saying a good man is hard to find. On the flip side, the only two people she deems as “good” are Red Sammy and The Misfit. Neither one of these ‘gentlemen’ seem to hold a true standard of good. This reveals how absurd the grandmother’s behavior is, and therefore, human behavior is.

O’Connor’s skill can secondly be seen in the ironic characterization of Ruby Turpin in “Revelation”. Ruby Turpin, like the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, is very narcissistic and egotistical. She is judgmental and materialistic, yet she professes to be “a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 502). In her thoughts, she insults nearly everyone, even “assigning most of them to a lower social class than her own” (Stephenson Par. 2). Ruby claims to be so grateful to Jesus, openly thanking him in the waiting room of the doctor’s office, but she questions how God could have let something so awful happen to her, as if she were above that (O’Connor, “Revelation” 499, 507). Ruby’s goal is for others to view her as a respectable lady, but her thoughts and actions lead the reader to believe she is a despicable human being. She constantly refers to people in her thoughts through the materialistic way that she views them: “Stylish lady”, “ugly girl”, “fat girl”, “white trash” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 489, 491). Ruby appears to be very shallow, which is not something promoted by the Jesus that she herself claims to be grateful to. The Ruby the other characters see conflicts with the true Ruby the reader knows through her thoughts.

O’Connor also skillfully shows use of irony through symbolism in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”. O’Connor plays off the characterization of the grandmother by employing her hat as a symbol in this story. The grandmother obnoxiously wears her nice hat on the family’s road trip. At the start of the trip the hat is nice and pristine, but when the family crashes, at the fault of the

grandmother, she gets out to find her hat broken (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 118, 125). This symbolically shows the grandmother beginning as something to be seen as respectable, but by the end everything has fallen apart. The façade she attempted to create has unraveled in her lies. She lies to her family so she can reminisce with a childhood memory, but ladies don't lie. The grandmother does appear to find redemption in the end, when The Misfit shoots her. This is when The Misfit so perfectly describes what the grandmother truly is, by saying, "She would have been a good woman... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 133). It isn't until she is faced with the possibility of her own death that the grandmother really understands what is good. By then it is too late to repair what the grandmother has done, just like the hat is broken beyond repair.

In "Revelation", O'Connor also applies irony to her use of symbolism. In the Bible, the book of Proverbs describes an ideal woman, even stating that a woman like this would have worth far above rubies. Stephenson claims O'Connor, influenced by her Catholic background, "ironically named her heroine Ruby after that ideal woman" (Stephenson Par. 5). It would appear as though Ruby's name does stand as a symbol to contrast the woman described in Proverbs, and therefore, she does not own up to the name Ruby. The woman described in Proverbs was hardworking, humble, and generous. Ruby would like to stand for these things as well, and maybe from the outside she does, but the privileged view of the reader sees her thoughts do not match up. Even when others (her "Negro workers") were trying to praise her for being good she didn't have better things to say than to call them "idiots", among other things (O'Connor, "Revelation" 505). Ruby lacked a gentle spirit; she felt she was deserving of something great. In viewing her own value as so high, she diminished her worth to less than rubies.

O'Connor also put to use foreshadowing to reveal irony in "A Good Man is Hard to Find". The grandmother believes she has the right ideas about what is good and respectable. She believes that the days of her beloved 'Old South' were pure and now things are corrupt. She forgets that she is a creator of the next generation with whom she is so disappointed. The grandmother even says to her family that in the past she remembers "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 119). This idealized view of her past clouds her thoughts, and it also influences how she speaks. The question arises though, if she knows what is respectable and good, why wasn't she able to instill those same principles in her children? This concept of people doing right then haunts the grandmother later in the story, when she cries out to The Misfit "You're one of my own children!" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 132). Whether The Misfit is actually her child or not, this shows that the grandmother came to the realization that she, and her generation, are responsible for the actions of the next generations to follow. Her lack of responsibility can be interpreted as people's lack of responsibility in general.

Finally, O'Connor uses irony through foreshadowing in her short story "Revelation". The title alone can be seen as foreshadowing. Its connection to the book in the Bible, with the same name, is that it tells the reader this story will connect to judgement day. This means the title has double meaning, since the title can also be seen to mean that Ruby Turpin experiences a revelation. However, there is debate over whether Ruby truly experiences a revelation in this story. Dumas believes "a closer reading reveals a degree of ambiguity" (Dumas Par. 1). Dumas thinks that Ruby may not have changed from her thinking that she is better and more deserving than others. Ruby's transformation may not have been instant and elated, but in seeing that she experienced the vision of judgement day it appears at length she accepted it. Ruby is seen at the

end to be thinking it over; “She remained where she was, immobile” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 509). She walks back to her home in a more solemn way that may lead the reader to believe she has accepted the idea that all people are equal to be true, but she isn’t necessarily excited about it. It appears to be more realistic to have a character experience such a revelation and then need to go through a gradual change, as most people don’t instantly accept new concepts or ideas.

O’Connor likes to focus on topics of grace and redemption, such as this, because of her religious background. Nazaryan claims, “religion is merely a means to material ends” (Nazaryan Par. 10). This is not necessarily true considering O’Connor shows a character here that receives nothing physical. Ruby Turpin wishes for spiritual things and receives spiritual insight through her vision of judgement day; she may be distracted by physical things, focusing on the ugly, fat, acne covered girl, but she wants to be spiritually high. Ruby is trying to find grace.

O’Connor is an incredibly skillful writer using many literary elements to convey her ideas to her readers. She was very inspired by her religion. She had a “belief that only those humble enough to ask forgiveness can receive spiritual grace and goodness” (McDowell Par. 1). This thought is seen in many, if not all, of her stories. Particularly, she employed the use of irony extensively, and it could be seen through her characterization, symbolism, and foreshadowing. Hers is sincerely a gift, to take a story and push it further to have deeper meaning, seemingly on every page.

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