Reading Flannery O'Connor and the Restrictive Femininity of the 1950s

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When reading Flannery O'Connor, one finds it impossible to ignore the strong spiritualism that runs through all of her works. O'Connor was concerned with questions of faith and redemption, and thus these elements comprise the major themes of her stories. Though O'Connor was focused on religion, one can read her works from an alternate perspective, one that focuses on gender roles in the 1950s. Among the more pervasive images during that period was the white, middle-class, suburban housewife. O'Connor includes versions of this figure in her texts, but also exposes the dangers of adherence to this patriarchal ideal. The female characters she includes in her texts reveal dissatisfaction with strict gender norms and a willingness to explore alternate versions of femininity. While O'Connor may have been writing non-realist fiction, her female characters reflect elements of truth concerning the oppressive reality that women in her time faced. Through close analysis of O'Connor's most prominent female characters and the modes of femininity they present along with comparisons to other pictures of 1950s femininity, a complicated picture of O'Connor's own feminism emerges. O'Connor does not openly support female empowerment, but her female characters exemplify a desire to find alternate modes of being outside of gender norms and a discontent with the status quo.

While some may apply modern feminist theories to O'Connor's work, this paper will focus on the feminism of

O'Connor's own time and the historical contexts that surround her writing. When speaking of women's issues in the 1950's and 60s, the looming figure is Betty Friedan and her work, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan and O'Connor were contemporaries, with O'Connor's first novel published in 1952 and *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963, but focusing on the decade earlier. According to critic Robert Donahoo, who explores the intersections of Friedan's and O'Connor's work, Friedan and O'Connor "focus their attention on the same kind of women."[1] Friedan's work explores false-happiness imposed by housewife culture, while O'Connor's work includes descriptions of female characters that subvert expectations of this contented passivity. The choices and fates of these characters align with Friedan's idea that the options offered to women in the 1950s were not satisfactory. It is important to note, however, that Friedan and O'Connor were both writing about a particular mode of femininity that applied mainly to white, middle to upper-class women of the time, and not a universal idea of femininity.

The ideal of 1950s womanhood as explained by Friedan is the American housewife, who is "healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home."[2] This figure is also present in O'Connor's works, though the majority of O'Connor's female characters break from the ideal in one way or another. This ideal housewife is content in her roles only as wife and mother, with no grand ambitions or identity outside of the domestic space.

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[1] Robert Donahoo, "O'Connor and *The Feminine Mystique*: "The Limitations That Reality Imposed."" In *"On the subject of the feminist business": Re-Reading Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Teresa Caruso and Peter Lang (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 12.

[2] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Kristen Fermaglich and Lisa M. Fine (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 11.

However, Friedan describes the problems that arise when "No other road to fulfillment was offered to American women."[3] O'Connor's work addresses this problem as well, as her female characters are trapped by limited circumstances and choices, which sometimes results in violent outbursts. O'Connor was not as overt as Friedan in her criticism of patriarchal gender roles for women, but her writing still critiques the system that limits opportunities for women, while struggling to find an alternative to these seemingly inescapable gender norms. As will be discussed in the following paragraphs, O'Connor's female characters are punished by the narrative when they adhere too closely to the gender roles of the 1950s, but even those that break the bounds of housewifery are still trapped in a society that offers limited forms of expression outside the model described by Friedan.

O'Connor's female characters can be distilled into several basic groups, and I will explore two of the most predominant: mothers and rebellious daughters. The categorization of female characters as either mother or rebel shows the real limitations that women in the 1950s faced, as the female characters that attempt to exist outside of the norms are ultimately forced back into the status quo. However, in O'Connor's writing, no woman can perfectly inhabit gender expectations of the 1950s, revealing O'Connor's critique of the false limitations placed on women. Looking at both traditional mothers and the more rebellious daughters further expands O'Connor's critique, as both sets of characters diverge from gender norms. The mothers, the characters that most ostensibly comply with gender roles, are traditional to the point of ridicule, but most do not submit fully to the bounds of the domestic sphere as do the housewives described by Friedan. The rebels fight against the system of gender oppression, but are still punished for their actions, portraying seemingly ines-

[3] Friedan, 18.

capable circumstances. In her characters' inabilities or refusal to adhere to strict gender roles O'Connor reveals some of her own dissatisfactions with the femininity of her time.

The mothers of O'Connor's stories initially seem to embody ideals of 1950s womanhood, but the punishing conclusions to their narratives complicate these portrayals of domestic femininity. The quintessential mother of tradition figure is the Grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The Grandmother, who remains nameless, is concerned with appearances and politeness above all else, putting on her best clothes for the fateful road trip to ensure "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady."[4] Her pleading and eventual death may cause a shift in the murderous Misfit, but her character remains stalwart, as she believes in the power of good breeding to the end. After all, she knows the Misfit "wouldn't shoot a lady."[5] The humor of the Grandmother lies in her twisted realism, as she is a familiar character of performative gentility taken a step further. She believes that a known murderer "must come from nice people,"[6] and that her own politeness and respect might save her from the grisly fate of her family. She exemplifies the downsides of adherence to 1950s femininity, a femininity that is concerned with class, gentility, and politeness, which, in this case, results in death.

The mother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is also a nameless, traditional figure of femininity that mirrors the listless figures Friedan explores. Donahoo argues that she is nameless because her "identity is submerged beneath that of

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[4] Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 138.

[5] O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 151.

[6] O'Connor, 147.

her husband and children."[7] The mother remains mostly silent until the end, when she politely responds, "Yes, thank you," when the Misfit asks her if she would like to join her husband in death[8], taking the role of passive wife to the extreme. She is unable to fight the horror that confronts her, marching off to death with a baby in her right arm, as her "left arm dangled helplessly" due to the preceding car crash.[9] The mother of this story is defined solely based on her maternal role, and unlike the Grandmother she doesn't have a comic personality, only a responsibility to care for her children. There isn't even a full description of the mother's appearance, besides that she looks "broad and innocent as a cabbage."[10] This mother figure is a prime example of the women Friedan describes as the ultimate product of the feminine mystique, women who have "no independent self to hide even in guilt; she exists only for and through her husband and children."[11] This type of mother figure, the one with no distinct personality, is perhaps the most pitiable of all the women portrayed in O'Connor's stories. She is tragic in her lack of selfhood, identity, and spirit. While the grandmother may be comically ridiculous, the mother is tragically forgettable.

These characters represent different elements of traditional femininity, with the grandmother the symbol of class and tradition and the mother the symbol of maternity, but

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[7] Donahoo, "O'Connor and *The Feminine Mystique*: "The Limitations That Reality Imposed,"" 18.

[8] O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 151.

[9] O'Connor, 151.

[10] O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 137.

[11] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 36.

both conform to fairly typical gender roles, are doomed to violent ends, and are not truly changed by O'Connor's signature spiritualism. The mother does not experience one of O'Connor's moments of grace, as she remains a figure of maternal devotion to the end. The Grandmother, on the other hand, does have a moment of realization, when she sees the Misfit as "one of my babies."[12] While there is a spiritual awakening due to the human connection that forms between the Misfit and the Grandmother, her moment of realization acts to facilitate the Misfit's more powerful moment of grace, as "The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady."[13] Additionally, the Grandmother's moment of spirituality is still connected to her role as a mother and caregiver, limiting her to primarily feminine roles. These two maternal figures exemplify O'Connor's concerns with adherence to strict gender roles, and especially women who refuse to diverge from these norms.

Along with an adherence to class, manners, and traditions, O'Connor's mother figures also have a strong drive to see their children, and particularly daughters, married. Mothers have the role of furthering the status quo in the next generation, but this action is punished in O'Connor's narrative much as adherence to class and traditional roles are in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." As critic Natalie Wilson argues, O'Connor's depiction of traditional mother figures "can be read as serving to reveal the ways in which women as well as men pass on and enforce patriarchal discourse."[14]

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[12] O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 152.

[13] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter to John Hawkes 14 April 1960," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 1125.

[14] Natalie Wilson, "Misfit Bodies and Errant Gender: The Corporeal Feminism of Flannery O'Connor," in *"On the subject of the feminist business": Re-Reading Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Teresa

This can be seen in countless mothers, but particularly in the old woman of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." The old woman, Lucynell, trained her daughter, also named Lucynell, to be a twisted version of the ideal 1950s housewife, teaching her to "sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe."[15] Despite her claim that she would not "give her [Lucynell] up for a casket of jewels,"[16] the old woman encourages the marriage between Lucynell and Shiftlet, marketing her daughter as the ideal wife because she "can't sass you back or use foul language."[17]

The older Lucynell passes on the tradition of femininity through an emphasis on marriage and values like purity and deferential behavior, but this continuing legacy of gender norms leads to unhappiness for both the mother and the daughter. Considering the norms of the 1950s, the marriage between Shiftlet and Lucynell should constitute a happy ending, as through marrying off her daughter, the older Lucynell has fulfilled her maternal duties and ensured that her daughter adheres to gender traditions. However, O'Connor twists this narrative by revealing Shiftlet as a con man who abandons his new wife in a diner, branding her a "Hitch-hiker."[18] O'Connor chooses to portray not an ideal marriage of the 1950s, but instead the dangers that can occur from passing on traditional gender roles to the younger gen-

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Caruso and Peter Lang (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 96.

[15] Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 176.

[16] O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," 176.

[17] O'Connor, 178.

[18] O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," 181.

eration. Another example of a mother trying to pass on traditions of femininity to her daughter can be seen in the unnamed "pleasant lady" from "Revelation."[19] This mother is rewarded for her adherence to tradition with a daughter who seems mentally unstable and who violently attacks the physical incarnation of traditional femininity—Mrs. Turpin. Clearly, strict obedience to gender roles is not a positive characteristic in O'Connor's world.

In crafting these representations of femininity, O'Connor was undeniably inspired by women of her time, and these real-life inspirations reveal some of the pressures of 1950s femininity in O'Connor's own life. When speaking about her writing process, O'Connor mentions, "the writer doesn't have to understand, only reproduce."[20] In following this philosophy, O'Connor reproduced women from her life in her texts, including representations of herself. O'Connor's letters provide a sense of her interactions with real women, and there are numerous comic examples that mirror moments from stories. For example, she describes in a letter her reaction to an old woman with "moist gleaming eye[s]" she met in an elevator, who makes her feel "exactly like the Misfit."[21] In this case O'Connor's life imitated her fiction. The influence of O'Connor's mother can also be seen in the stories, as Regina O'Connor was the figure of tradition and femininity in the author's life. O'Connor describes various interactions

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[19] Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 638, various.

[20] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To A. 17 November 1956," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 1007.

[21] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To A. 10 November 1955," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 969.

with her mother throughout her letters, but one of the most amusing is when O'Connor describes Regina's outrage at a critic's remark of "If this is really the unaided work of a young lady, it is a remarkable product."[22] Regina was not concerned that the critic was devaluing O'Connor's work due to her femininity, but was aghast that he "suppose[s] you're not a lady."[23] O'Connor recounts anecdotes of her life with her mother with humor, but Regina's role as a traditional mother is reflected in the characterization of mothers in O'Connor's writing.

The mother figures both in reality and in O'Connor's stories are tinged with comic ridiculousness that exists due to over-adherence to gender traditions. This ridiculousness can be seen particularly in the endings of several short stories, as most of the mother figures are revealed to the audience as idiotic or shallow. Despite the tragedy of the murders in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the reader may be inclined to agree with the Misfit that the Grandmother could have been a good woman if there "had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" in order to stop her incessant prattling.[24] Additionally, the audience and O'Connor are able to laugh at the ridiculous Mrs. Turpin from "Revelation," with her preoccupation with "manners"[25] and class, as she gets her due in the form of Mary Grace's attack. Mrs. Turpin is not revealed to be a mother herself, but she functions in much the

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[22] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To Robert Lowell 2 May 1952," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 897.

[23] O'Connor, "Letter To Robert Lowell 2 May 1952," 897.

[24] O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 153.

[25] O'Connor, "Revelation," 633.

same role, as a guardian of tradition and femininity. Characters like Mrs. Turpin and the Grandmother are punished and laughed at in the narrative because of their adherence to gender norms, indicating O'Connor's dissatisfaction with a society that perpetuated these roles for women.

Despite what seems to be a caricature of mothers who uphold patriarchal standards, a surprising element of many of the mothers in the short stories is their economic power, primarily through the ownership of land. Through these portrayals of female landowners, O'Connor presents female characters that both uphold and rebuff tradition, though ultimately patriarchal society reins them in. Many of the women own land in the absence of husbands or other male figures; they have usurped traditional plantation hierarchy. Mrs. Cope from "A Circle in the Fire" most exemplifies this new version of the landowner, though there are several other examples, including Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" and Mrs. McIntyre of "The Displaced Person," and Regina O'Connor, who owned a farm. Mrs. Cope is a conscientious landowner, "always worrying about fires in her woods"[26] and managing the gossipy Mrs. Pritchard. She is proud of her "work to save this place and work to keep it,"[27] and seems not to depend on any masculine figures. However, her world is ripped from her by the three boys who invade her land, despite her initial politeness and "pain" at the thought of the children going hungry. [28] Like the other female landowners, Mrs. Cope is not rewarded for her independence, but punished by an invading, masculine force, in her case, the three boys. Mr.

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[26] Flannery O'Connor, "A Circle in the Fire," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 235.

[27] O'Connor, "A Circle in the Fire," 235.

[28] O'Connor, "A Circle in the Fire," 237.

Greenleaf's bull, another metaphor for masculine power, mauls Mrs. May, while Mrs. McIntyre is forced to give up her cows and her livelihood following the events with Mr. Guizac and Mr. Shortley in "The Displaced Person."

The overwhelming theme throughout these stories is that women who exercise power through a traditionally masculine means cannot keep it, and that the status quo of male domination must be restored. A prime example of this is when the bull of "Greenleaf" "buried his head in her [Mrs. May's] lap, like a wild tormented lover,"[29] representing an undoubtedly masculine force. Mrs. May is maimed, frozen in disbelief despite her power and assurance up to this point in the story, and order is restored by Mr. Greenleaf's shooting the bull "four times through the eye."[30] The female landowner is killed, and the status quo is reinstated by a patriarchal figure. In spite of this, by portraying so many female characters with the kind of independent economic power that accompanies landownership, O'Connor defies the traditional plantation structure and represents women that exercise both power and femininity. Mrs. May is class-conscious and sleeps in an "egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept,"[31] but she also was able to take a run-down piece of land her late husband left her and "set herself up in the dairy business,"[32] despite knowing very little about country life. Mrs. May and the other landowners are not women who depend on their husbands for income, yet they are still

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[29] Flannery O'Connor, "Greenleaf," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Penguin Random House, 1988), 523.

[30] O'Connor, "Greenleaf," 524.

[31] O'Connor, 501.

[32] O'Connor, "Greenleaf," 508–509.

concerned with the traditional female dominions of class and domesticity. Mrs. Cope enacts the role of the concerned mother, and part of the reason her land is destroyed is because she decides to "keep out of their way" in regard to the three rowdy boys instead of asserting her power, as "Ladies don't beat the daylight out of people."[33]

These female landowners also inhabit unique positions in-between the working realm and the home. Friedan describes a split in the 1950s between idealized housewives and demonized career girls, but O'Connor's female landowners fit into neither category. Their livelihoods are deeply tied to the concept of home and they rely on some masculine labor, but this type of homeownership is far removed from suburban housewifery. Mrs. May is more concerned with the prospect of the bull "ruining her herd before morning" than with traditional domestic tasks like cooking or cleaning.[34] O'Connor's landowners are neither suburban housewives nor career women, thus contradicting the narrative of limited femininity of the 1950s. The consistent theme regardless of independence or power of the mother figures is that the narrative punishes them, either by making them ridiculous or by stripping them of their economic power. The female landowners in particular cannot exist within the bonds of a patriarchal society, as they are not easily categorized as traditional mothers or rebels.

While speaking about maternal figures, one must also mention the solitary character that stands apart: the reluctant mother, Ruby. Ruby, of "A Stroke of Good Fortune," is different from nearly any other female character in O'Connor's work. For starters, her story is devoted almost entirely to her. There are outside forces and interactions, but the entire narrative centers on Ruby's climbing the steps to her fourth-floor apartment and the various experiences she has

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[33] O'Connor, "A Circle in the Fire," 242.

[34] O'Connor, "Greenleaf," 502.

along the way. Ruby is also distinct because she is married, but has absolutely no desire for children. Ruby is scarred by the memory of her mother, who "got deader with every" child she had, which Ruby attributes to her "ignorance."[35] Childbearing is not a wonderful or beautiful experience for Ruby, but one that is frightening, and robs the mother of her vitality and youth, which makes Ruby's realization that she is unwillingly pregnant all the more horrifying. This portrayal of motherhood is the complete opposite of popular conception of motherhood in the 1950s, the idea that women "can know fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child."[36] Motherhood was seen as a woman's primary calling, an idea mirrored by Catholic thought of the time as well.

Motherhood as presented in this story is further complicated by the presence of birth control, which further reveals O'Connor's unease with the traditional modes of motherhood and femininity. Critic Aimee Wilson argues that Ruby's husband is a birth control salesman, as he sells "Miracle Products."[37] The traditional motherhood of the 1950s was more of a duty than a choice, one that was a "sacred occupation" in the eyes of many.[38] Most of O'Connor's mother figures embrace this "sacred" duty and are defined by mothering roles. Mrs. Hopewell still thinks of her 32-year-old

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[35] Flannery O'Connor, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 186.

[36] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 50.

[37] O'Connor, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," 184.

[38] Aimee Armande Wilson, "Southern Mother, Lethal Fetus; Or, How Birth Control Makes a Modernist out of Flannery O'Connor," *Genre* 47, no. 3 (2014): 407.

daughter "as a child,"[39] and she continues to take care of her into adulthood, a trend mirrored with several other mothers in O'Connor's texts who dote on adult children. Motherhood is a lifelong responsibility as portrayed in these texts and the media of the 1950s. And yet O'Connor, a devout Catholic, writes this story, in which the failure of birth control is more of a tragedy. Despite the not entirely serious tone of the story, Ruby's cries of "Noooo," as she lies whimpering on the floor after her discovery of the pregnancy are undoubtedly emotionally charged.[40] This story perhaps best conveys O'Connor's uneasiness with the forced gender roles of her time, but also their inevitability and the lack of feasible alternatives for women. O'Connor was not satisfied with "A Stroke of Good Fortune" as a story; on multiple occasions she complains that the story "don't appeal to me" and she "didn't want it" included in the collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.[41] This could be due to its spliced nature, as Ruby was originally a character in *Wise Blood*. But as it stands, it is a story that cannot be said to be a positive portrayal of motherhood.

The inclusion of Ruby complicates notions of 1950s motherhood, as Ruby is neither a rebellious daughter nor a content mother. She is a devoted wife and homemaker, but resists children, the logical next step in adherence with expectations for women in the 1950s. O'Connor grappled with this story, but in the end, she kept working on it. Despite her

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[39] Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 263.

[40] O'Connor, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," 195.

[41] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To Sally and Robert Fitzgerald 10 June 1955," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 939.

hesitancy concerning the final product, this struggle characterizes O'Connor's wider concerns regarding gender that subtly inform her female characters. While the presence of Ruby raises a number of questions regarding O'Connor's stance on motherhood, she is the exception to O'Connor's other mother figures, who continue to perform traditionally feminine roles even when they lead to tragic results.

When looking at the mother figures as a group, one must question if O'Connor is satisfied with patriarchal gender roles and what alternative forms of femininity exist. Donahoo suggests that "O'Connor herself does not seem to have accepted the plight of American women in the 1950s as unalterable,"[42] and this suggestion seems to be supported by the various women of the text, as none of the narratives conclude with ideal domestic femininity. As seen in the sections above, women who remain within the bounds of traditional femininity such as the Grandmother and mother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" are certainly not rewarded for their behavior. But neither are the mothers that push beyond these restrictions, such as the landowners of "A Circle in the Fire" and "Greenleaf." As I will explore at greater length, women who go even further beyond the boundaries of traditional gender roles are similarly punished. O'Connor may have envisioned more rebellious forms of femininity, but these female characters are still punished by the narrative much like the traditional female characters.

O'Connor's treatment of gender is further complicated by the female characters who overtly refuse conform to the expectations of 1950s womanhood and their connections to the women Friedan described and O'Connor herself. This final group of female characters, the rebels, rebuffs the shackles of tradition in favor of alternate ways of being. This rebellion takes several forms and faces a variety of consequences, which complicates O'Connor's seeming criticism of

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[42] Donahoo, "O'Connor and *The Feminine Mystique*: "The Limitations That Reality Imposed,"" 26.

the traditional patriarchal system as seen through the more traditional female figures. The rebellious female characters are defined by their physical and intellectual excess, as they push beyond the boundaries of the roles inhabited by the mother figures. In terms of physical excess, this trait is most often seen through physical ugliness or deformity. Hulga from "Good Country People," with her artificial leg, is the most obvious example of a physically marked character, but none of O'Connor's physical descriptions of women are entirely favorable. Even the traditional mother figures are not described as beautiful, and often they have a distinctive physical characteristic, like Mrs. Pritchard's "black eyes that seemed to be enlarging all the time"[43] or Mrs. Freeman's expression that is "like the advance of a heavy truck."[44] It is a small act against the ideal of femininity of the 1950s that most of the female characters are not physically attractive, removing the sensuality associated with the object-of-desire housewife. However, the true rebels of O'Connor's stories move beyond physical appearance and manifest ugliness through actions.

Most of the rebellious characters choose to consciously exist outside of traditional roles, whether that choice is enacted through physical appearance, personality, or education. Monica Miller, in an article on female characters' ugliness, describes female characters "who consciously choose to be ugly, in both physical and behavioral senses of the word" and the rebellion present in this choice.[45] O'Connor's

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[43] O'Connor, "A Circle in the Fire," 232.

[44] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 263.

[45] Monica Carol Miller, *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 123.

characters often follow this path, choosing ugliness as an intentional rebuff towards society or expectations. Joy chooses to be renamed as Hulga, as she wants the "ugliest name in any language."[46] Similarly, Mrs. Turpin from "Revelation" pities Mary Grace, who chooses ugliness in terms of personality, as "it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly."[47] In the cases of Hulga and Mary Grace, the choice is to embrace ugliness instead of tame it, an act that Miller describes as a way to "rebel, express dissent, or refuse the role of wife and mother and their rigid gender expectations."[48] (123). While beauty is not a trait one would associate with many of O'Connor's female characters, ugliness is a characteristic beyond mere physicality, an action that marks a woman as outside of the norm. This otherness, according to Natalie Wilson, allows O'Connor's characters to "question, subvert, and transgress patriarchal authority".[49] Thus, the conscious choice of ugliness is not only a way to reject gender expectations for O'Connor's characters, but a statement against patriarchy as a whole.

However, several of the characters that choose to push beyond the boundaries of traditional femininity exist as caricatures or comic relief, not as fully inhabited or explored personas. Mary Grace, for example, hardly speaks in "Revelation," and exists to be a figure of irony and drama, not a real character with understandable desires or motives. She is more animal than human as her "raw face came crashing

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[46] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 266.

[47] O'Connor, "Revelation," 637.

[48] Miller, *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion*, 123.

[49] N. Wilson, "Misfit Bodies and Errant Gender: The Corporeal Feminism of Flannery O'Connor," 96.

across the table toward her [Mrs. Turpin], howling."[50] Mary Grace may be a dramatized caricature of female repression, but her frustrations towards women like Mrs. Turpin, who are obsessed with feminine ideals like class and politeness, represent some of O'Connor's own frustrations. Hulga and Mary Grace not only represent O'Connor's frustrations, but also mirror certain elements of O'Connor's home life. They are single, educated, and living at home with their old-fashioned mothers. O'Connor describes Hulga as a "projection of myself into this kind of tragic-comic action,"[51] as both are highly educated, yet stuck at home due to poor health, among other things. Hulga and O'Connor also share the same independent spirit, and unwillingness to bow to the effects of illness or disability. O'Connor writes about how she is "always glad to have the door held open,"[52] but that's all the help she needs despite her fight with lupus. Hulga gives Manley Pointer a "contemptuous look" when he insinuates she can't climb the ladder to the hay loft, and then proves him wrong as he watches "awestruck."[53] O'Connor and Hulga are defiant in the face of characteristics that differentiate them from the rest of society. However, the difference between O'Connor and Hulga or Mary Grace, is that the characters are allowed to take their frustrations with their society, and particularly the expectations of females within it, to their radical extremes.

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[50] O'Connor, "Revelation," 644.

[51] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To A. 30 September 1955," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Penguin Random House, 1988), 959.

[52] Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To A. 28 June 1956," in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Penguin Random House, 1988), 998.

[53] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 279.

The female rebels of O'Connor's stories voice their dissatisfaction with the restrictive gender system through a variety of means, and these fictional women enact frustrations that real women of the 1950s struggled to convey. According to Friedan, women of the 1950's experienced "tremendous relief when a feeling is finally out in the open,"[54] in this case the feeling of dissatisfaction with gender roles. Mary Grace's and Hulga's reactions represent this need for freedom after the frustrating bounds of traditional femininity, a representation that O'Connor takes to the extreme but that still mirrors the reality of her time. Hulga decides to seduce Manley Pointer in order to prove her "True genius" and scoffs at what she perceives to be his simplistic, religious nature.[55] The masculine, patriarchal force of Manley Pointer ultimately tricks Hulga, but she still rebels against social propriety by attempting to take an active role in the seduction and lying about her age. Mary Grace's frustrations take a more physical form, as she attacks Mrs. Turpin and is eventually branded a "lunatic."[56] Both characters' reactions to their situations reveal a futility in attempting to escape the roles prescribed by gender expectations. However, the very attempt and acknowledgment that traditional roles are not enough marks a departure from Friedan's exploration of repressed women who "try to deny this dissatisfied voice within themselves because it does not fit the pretty picture of femininity the experts have given them."[57] O'Connor was not one to conform to the Friedan ideal, as she "refused to play

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[54] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 24.

[55] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 276.

[56] O'Connor, "Revelation," 647.

[57] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 19.

the role of the southern belle and declined to conform to cultural expectations of normal femininity,"[58] actions that are reflected in her semi-autobiographical characters. O'Connor did not express her dissatisfaction in as radical a way as Hulga or Mary Grace, the presence of these two characters shows O'Connor's awareness of the stifling pressures pushed upon women in the 1950s.

Despite O'Connor's engagement of a variety of female characters that represent varying adherence to gender norms, O'Connor's stories generally lack female perspectives that remark upon uniquely feminine issues. Nearly every story has at least a few throwaway female characters, but those that experience meaningful change or are at the center of O'Connor's signature revelations are few and far between. Critic Katherine Prown suggests that the lack of exploration into the feminine consciousness was intentional, as O'Connor "created as much distance as possible between herself and her female characters."[59] While there is certainly a disconnect between many of the female characters and the fiercely intelligent and independent O'Connor, O'Connor did insert herself into certain characters like Hulga and Mary Grace. However, in the majority of the stories, the lack of meaningful female perspectives in O'Connor's work is matched by a spiritual absence as well. While many of the male characters are defined by moments of reconsideration or grace, female characters are more often collateral on these spiritual journeys instead of participants. Prown writes that O'Connor "frequently shifts to focus instead on the male pro-

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[58] N. Wilson, "Misfit Bodies and Errant Gender: The Corporeal Feminism of Flannery O'Connor," 99.

[59] Katherine Hemple Prown, *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 45.

tagonist, thereby robbing female characters of the opportunity for genuine and meaningful salvation."[60] There are, of course, exceptions, but the spiritual salvation of female characters frequently depends on masculine forces, like Mr. Greenleaf's bull or Manley Pointer's betrayal. Women are not allowed to discover spirituality through their own means. This is yet another way that women are limited in O'Connor's narratives, but it is also clear that O'Connor recognized the pressures and issues that plagued women due to the constrictive expectations society placed on them.

When one considers O'Connor's engagement with gender politics, it is not enough to solely examine the female characters seen in O'Connor's published work, as many of her female characters changed drastically from manuscript to final publication. These changes reveal the social pressures acting on O'Connor as a female writer, and perhaps it is these pressures that inhibited her from further exploring the topic of alternate forms of femininity in her writing. As mentioned previously, Ruby was originally a character in *Wise Blood*. In the original manuscript of *Wise Blood,* female characters play a much larger role, as according to Prown "God essentially uses the female characters as the medium through which to reach Haze."[61] O'Connor's earlier manuscripts from her college days also reveal that "[a]t this point in her development as a writer, O'Connor was also able to take the lives of her lady characters seriously, without the hostile and often punishing tone that pervades much of her published work."[62] The shift towards male perspectives and punishing tone to-

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[60] Prown, *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship*, 44.

[61] Prown, *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship*, 116.

[62] Prown, 39.

wards women occurred as O'Connor moved through graduate school and into the realm of publishing. Prown posits this shift was due to O'Connor's concerns with being a female writer, as she eliminated overtly female experiences and "turned instead to material she hoped might earn her distinction as a serious artist."[63] O'Connor was aware of the disadvantages of female authorship, and perhaps the reason she does not overtly explore gender issues is due to this concern of seriousness. Despite elimination of female perspectives, O'Connor still inserts characters that encourage discussion of gender roles and does not write characters that fully support the gender system of the 1950s in which she herself participated.

This shift by O'Connor away from female perspectives and topics was matched by a shift in mass-media publishing away from writing about the career girl and creation of the idealized housewife. Friedan describes the creation of the norm through women's magazines, as female issues became exclusively those within the home. There was no space in the writing of the 1950s for women to be fully capable characters, as the publishing industry returned to the ideal of the passive housewife of decades prior. Thus, O'Connor's elimination of more complex female characters not only marks her own desire to be branded a serious author, but also the industry as a whole's inability to imagine alternative paths of femininity. The image of femininity as created by the publishing and media industry was strong, as Friedan recounts, "It feeds on the very facts which might contradict it, and seeps into every corner of the culture."[64] To write about women in the 50s was to write about housewife culture, which was not a restriction O'Connor was willing to accept.

What makes O'Connor's engagement with gender roles intriguing is the lack of concrete answers or alternate

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[63] Prown, 40.
[64] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 47.

solutions. O'Connor's female characters neither wholly support traditional gender roles nor completely defy them, and any female character that either adheres too closely or pushes too far is punished by the narrative. O'Connor's desire to be seen as a serious author may have dissuaded her from including more female perspectives and experiences, but what she does include shows an uncertainty and dissatisfaction with strictly defined gender expectations for women. O'Connor critiques gender norms of her day as much as Friedan does by portraying a variety of female characters, few of which are ideal suburban housewives. This repressive patriarchal system of the 1950s can be seen in O'Connor's female characters, as they try to either enact or break gender expectations. By including a range of responses to the patriarchal system, O'Connor responds to gender issues of her day while still devoting the majority of the narrative to themes of spiritualism and faith.

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