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## The matriarchal society in Flannery O'Connor's fiction: its characteristics, treatment, and purpose

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THE MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION:  
" ITS CHARACTERISTICS, TREATMENT, AND PURPOSE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

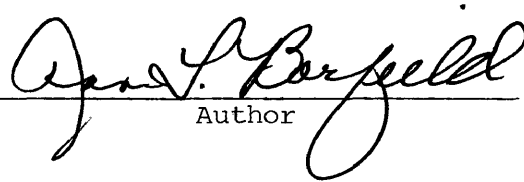
Ann L. Barfield

1981

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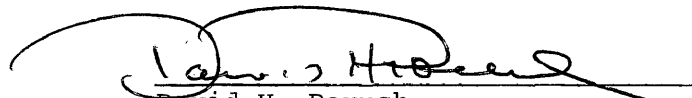
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

  
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Approved, April 1981

  
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H. Cam Walker

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the characteristics, treatment, and purpose of the matriarchal society in Flannery O'Connor's fiction.

When considering O'Connor's fictional works collectively, certain indications of female domination pervade her writings, particularly the short stories. The most obvious indication is the recurrence of a character type: the domineering, henpecking wife or mother. While the prominence of this character type is significant, O'Connor employs other more subtle devices to underscore the dominance of women. Women are often described as healthier or physically stronger than the men around them. Further, women are frequently the aggressive partners in the male-female sexual relationship. Finally, women occupy a powerful position in the economy and in their families, serving as the landowners and heads of household.

As a close analysis reveals, O'Connor takes a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward her matriarchs. On the positive side, these women display a sense of economic and familial responsibility which is often absent in the men. Balanced against this are the matriarchs' negative attributes: they are self-righteous hypocrites; they attach too much importance to their economic endeavors; and they practice emasculation.

Through her fictional matriarchs, O'Connor comments on the changes that were taking place in the post-World War II era as the South shifted from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial society, thereby undermining the traditional way of life fostered by the South's agrarian society. As landowners, O'Connor's matriarchs represent the agrarian and traditionalist concerns (Old South) which were threatened by the urban-industrial movement (New South). O'Connor's ambivalent treatment of her matriarchs reflects, by extension, her own ambivalent feelings toward their struggle to preserve the Old South. On the one hand, the matriarchs reveal some of the detrimental effects of modernization; but, on the other hand, the matriarchs' opposition to change is unrealistic and often self-serving.

THE MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION:  
ITS CHARACTERISTICS, TREATMENT, AND PURPOSE

## INTRODUCTION

In a lecture she prepared on the nature and aim of fiction, Flannery O'Connor stated that "it is from the kind of world the writer creates, from the kind of character and detail he invests it with, that a reader can find the intellectual meaning of a book."<sup>1</sup> With her advice in mind, the purpose of this study is to examine a common character type in O'Connor's fictional world, the dominant, powerful woman, and to suggest in turn how this recurring figure serves as the agent of a larger meaning in O'Connor's literary works. The organization of this paper mirrors this progression from the specific feature to its broader meaning. To demonstrate that O'Connor has established a matriarchal society in her fiction, Chapter I sets forth those details which function collectively to convey the sense of female domination. Chapter II discusses O'Connor's ambivalent treatment of her matriarchs. And Chapter III relates the characteristics of O'Connor's matriarchal society, particularly the prevalence of women landowners, to the ambivalent treatment accorded her matriarchs in order to show that through these matriarchs O'Connor made her own comment on the social and economic changes taking place in the South during her lifetime.

Although this study draws upon the whole body of O'Connor's



literary works, there are several stories which are key and are emphasized throughout the paper. Specifically, I am speaking of the stories which feature a woman landowner: "The Displaced Person," "Good Country People," "A Circle in the Fire," "Greenleaf," "The Enduring Chill," and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." To this group should be added two others stories, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "Revelation," both of which contain strong, domineering women.

From the outset it should be mentioned that O'Connor's tendency to populate her fictional world with strong women, many of whom are landowners, can be traced to the circumstances of her own life. Her father, Edwin F. O'Connor, Jr., died when she was fifteen. From that time on, O'Connor, who was an only child, was raised by her mother, Regina Cline O'Connor. They lived in Milledgeville, Georgia, where O'Connor remained until graduating in 1945 from the local college, Georgia State College for Women. She spent most of the next five years away from Milledgeville and her mother. During this period she attended the Writer's Workshop at the State University of Iowa and acquired a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1947. While still a student there, she published her first story. After completing her graduate work, O'Connor lived in and around New York City, concentrating primarily on writing her first novel, Wise Blood. It was during this time that she established a lifelong friendship with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald and their family, with whom she lived in Connecticut until the end of 1950.<sup>2</sup> Although physically separated from each other, O'Connor and her mother corresponded daily, as Sally Fitzgerald notes in her introduction to O'Connor's letters, The Habit of Being. According to Fitzgerald, O'Connor looked

forward to "This daily exchange of news and talk. . . . Her strong family feeling was manifest even then."<sup>3</sup> In December 1950, while on her way to Milledgeville for Christmas, O'Connor became seriously ill with what was later diagnosed as lupus, the same disease that her father died of. This debilitating disease would claim her life also.

For the next thirteen years, until her death in 1964, O'Connor lived with her mother at Andulasia, a farm near Milledgeville, which her mother had inherited and decided to occupy. From this location, O'Connor pursued her writing career, and the observations of life in and around Andulasia provided the stimulus for many of her stories. However, I believe that it would be wrong to interpret the situations in O'Connor's stories as solely biographical. Undoubtedly the circumstances of a widowed woman operating a farm were familiar to O'Connor; and the fact that she was dependent upon her mother for so many years is one explanation for the prominence of the strong, healthy matriarch in her fiction. Yet, I believe that the details of O'Connor's life supplied only the seed which her fertile imagination developed into a number of different fictional accounts. Moreover, when studying O'Connor's fictional matriarchs, one realizes that they bear little resemblance to O'Connor's own mother, other than being widows and owning a farm. Although the correspondence between O'Connor and her mother is not included in The Habit of Being, the letters O'Connor wrote others reveal the love and admiration she showed for her mother. As Sally Fitzgerald reports, these letters are "full of Mrs. O'Connor: she is quoted, referred to, relished and admired, joked with and about, altogether clearly loved."<sup>4</sup> And Fitzgerald comments that in their

last conversation O'Connor spoke of her mother and said, "'I don't know . . . what I would do without her.'"<sup>5</sup> Obviously, Mrs. O'Connor is not the model or source for O'Connor's fictional matriarchs, who are treated with ambivalence, often satirized and ridiculed, and frequently singled out for some violent action. What I am suggesting is that the existence of a matriarchal society in O'Connor's fictional world reflects the circumstances of her real life world, in that her mother was the main figure in her life. Beyond this, these real life circumstances only provided an idea and frame of reference for O'Connor's fiction.

Much critical attention has focused on the religious aspects of O'Connor's writings, and rightly so, since O'Connor, a devout Catholic, repeatedly avowed a Christian purpose to her writings. For instance, in her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor states that

. . . I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Typically, her fiction is built around the need for mankind to recognize his "fallen" state and to seek and accept Christ as his Redeemer.

While I recognize that any analysis of O'Connor's literature cannot ignore the religious underpinnings of her work, at the same time I

agree with those critics, among them Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who assert that the social and secular themes of O'Connor's work also deserve attention. In fact, as Rubin suggests, the religious and secular themes are compatible and often reinforce each other.<sup>7</sup> This study approaches O'Connor's writings from a secular viewpoint by examining the southern setting that she employed in her works within an historical and socio-economic context, while remaining mindful of the relevance of her religious intentions. I believe that Flannery O'Connor would have approved of such an approach; for she recognized the combination of the secular and religious influences on her writing when she commented that "The two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of being Southern and being Catholic."<sup>8</sup>

## CHAPTER I

### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

When examining O'Connor's body of fictional work collectively, certain indications of female domination pervade her writings, particularly the short stories. The most obvious indication is the recurrence of a character type: the domineering, henpecking wife or mother. While the prominence of this character type contributes to the sense of female domination, O'Connor employs other more subtle devices to underscore the dominance of women. For example, women are often described as healthier or physically stronger than the men around them. Moreover, although male-female sexual behavior is not a major theme in O'Connor's literary works, in the few instances where such an interaction is presented women are frequently the aggressive partner. Finally, and most crucial to the establishment of a matriarchy is the powerful role that women play in the economy. In O'Connor's fiction we repeatedly find that women are the landowners and heads of household, while men are the farmhands, the tenant farmers, or the unmotivated, irresponsible, and powerless husbands and sons.

The domineering wife is a common figure in O'Connor's fictional

world. Interestingly, the men involved quite often submit passively to this domination, thereby suggesting that this type of relationship is normal. A good example of a wife who controls her husband is Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation." As Dorothy Walters, author of Flannery O'Connor, appropriately remarks, Mrs. Turpin regards her husband as "merely her satellite, an extension of her own personality."<sup>9</sup> That Mrs. Turpin "wears the pants in her family" is evident at the very beginning of the story when Mrs. Turpin and her husband, Claud, enter the waiting room at the doctor's office:

Mrs. Turpin put a firm hand on Claud's shoulder and said in a voice that included anyone who wanted to listen, 'Claud, you sit in that chair there,' and gave him a push down into the vacant one. Claud was florid and bald and sturdy, somewhat shorter than Mrs. Turpin, but he sat down as if he were accustomed to doing what she told him to.<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Turpin does not even allow Claud to speak for himself. When one of the waiting patients asks Claud how he acquired the ulcer on his leg, Mrs. Turpin immediately responds, "'A cow kicked him'" (p. 489).

Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person" also occupies the position of power in her family, and her husband accepts this arrangement. For instance, as soon as she discovers that Mrs. McIntyre intends to fire her husband, Mrs. Shortley, without consulting her husband or daughters, rushes back to her cottage and begins packing up their belongings in preparation for an early morning departure from Mrs. McIntyre's farm.

Mr. Shortley reacts to his wife's decision about the family's future as follows:

When Mr. Shortley came in, she [Mrs. Shortley] did not even look at him but merely pointed one arm at him while she packed with the other. 'Bring the car around to the back door,' she said. 'You ain't waiting to be fired!'

Mr. Shortley had never in his life doubted her omniscience. He perceived the entire situation in half a second and, with only a sour scowl, retreated out the door and went to drive the automobile around to the back. (p. 212)

Mr. Shortley's blind obedience to his wife's commands is particularly apparent the next morning as the Shortley family drives off: "'Where we goin?' Mr. Shortley asked for the first time" (p. 213).

In "Parker's Back," we find an extreme example of a henpecked husband. O.E. Parker is unhappy in his marriage and wants to leave his wife, Sarah Ruth; however, he seems to feel that she exerts some magic spell which keeps him under her power:

Parker understood why he had married her--he couldn't have got her in any other way--but he couldn't understand why he stayed with her now. She was pregnant and pregnant women were not his favorite kind. Nevertheless, he stayed as if she had him conjured. He was puzzled and ashamed of himself. (p. 510)

Later, after he gets his new tattoo, Parker reflects upon his compelling desire to please his wife and satisfy her demands: "It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her" (p. 527).

The end of the story focuses on Parker's pathetic attempt to assert his husbandly authority when he returns home after being gone overnight to get his new tattoo:

He arrived finally at the house on the embankment, pulled the truck under the pecan tree and got out. He made as much noise as possible to assert that he was still in charge here, that his leaving her for a night without word meant nothing except it was the way he did things. He slammed the car door, stamped up the two steps and across the porch and rattled the door knob. It did not respond to his touch. 'Sarah Ruth!' he yelled, 'let me in.' (p. 528)

Thus Parker's attempt to establish himself as head of his household is immediately thwarted by his failure to gain access to his home. Furthermore, before Sarah Ruth lets Parker in, she puts him through a lengthy, demeaning question-and-answer game, requiring him to do what is most distasteful to him: articulating his full first and middle names, Obadiah Elihue. Once inside, Parker displays the new tattoo which he got to please his wife, but his wife disapproves and further emasculates him by beating him out of the house with a broom, symbolizing the victory of wife over husband. The final scene portrays a wife in complete domination of her husband, as we find the callous Sarah Ruth,



"her eyes hardened" (p. 530), looking outside her house at Parker, "leaning against the tree, crying like a baby" (p. 530).

At least two women express an admiration for women who maintain the upper hand as far as their husbands are concerned. This is implicit in Mrs. Shortley's reflection concerning Mrs. McIntyre: "She had buried one husband and divorced two and Mrs. Shortley respected her as a person nobody had put anything over on . . ." (p. 197). In "Good Country People," Mrs. Hopewell is impressed by Mrs. Freeman's (her tenant farmer's wife) superiority to her husband and compliments her accordingly:

She [Mrs. Freeman] was quicker than Mr. Freeman. When Mrs. Hopewell said to her after they had been on the place a while, 'You know, you're the wheel behind the wheel,' and winked, Mrs. Freeman had said, 'I know it. I've always been quick. It's some that are quicker than others.' (p. 273)

Note the immodesty and feeling of pride with which Mrs. Freeman accepts her role as the dominant partner in her marriage.

Just as common as the domineering wife is the overbearing mother. Typically, this woman is a divorcee or widow who has had the sole responsibility of rearing her children. Further, it should be noted that sons are more susceptible than daughters to a mother's overbearing behavior. For example, the daughters in "A Circle in the Fire" and

"Good Country People" both display a defiant attitude toward maternal authority. When Mrs. Cope ("A Circle in the Fire") tries to get her daughter to dress more appropriately, the daughter flatly rejects her mother's interference: "'Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain't you.'" (p. 190). Similarly, the daughter in "Good Country People" refuses to capitulate to her mother's requests that she behave pleasantly; she tells her mother, "'If you want me, here I am--LIKE I AM'" (p. 274). In contrast to these daughters, sons in similar situations are more compliant.

In the story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian, a college graduate, is dominated by his widowed mother with whom he lives. One reason for this domination is that Julian is financially dependent upon his mother "who was supporting him still, 'until he got on his feet'" (p. 406). But one senses that this arrangement will be more permanent: "'Some day I'll start making money,' Julian said gloomily--he knew he never would . . ." (p. 406). Even though Julian has convinced himself that "he was not dominated by his mother" (p. 412), his actions prove otherwise. The story takes place on Wednesday, when "Julian had to take" (p. 405) his mother to town for her weekly weight reducing class. Although Julian finds this weekly task distasteful, nonetheless "every Wednesday night he braced himself and took her" (p. 405). That Julian views this requirement to accompany his mother as a form of subordination is evident when he resigns "to make himself completely numb during the time he would be sacrificed to her pleasure" (p. 406). Granted, Julian is partly to blame for his situation, since he has failed to assert himself as the male head of the household or become financially independent; however, his feeling of oppression is understandable, because his mother

is indeed overbearing. She gains his "cooperation" by constantly reminding him of all she has done for him in the past, and she demonstrates that she is a henpecking mother when she nags Julian until he puts his necktie back on (p. 409).

Like Julian, Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" is a grown man (thirty-five years old) living with his widowed mother. Thomas' dependence upon his mother is illustrated by his attachment to all the domestic "comforts" that she provides: "His [Thomas'] own life was made bearable by the fruits of his mother's saner virtues--by the well-regulated house she kept and the excellent meals she served" (p. 386). But unlike Julian, Thomas is well aware of the submissive role he has assumed in the mother-son relationship, yet he is unable to reverse the roles. When his mother disrupts their peaceful household by bringing in a female juvenile delinquent, Thomas is highly displeased and recognizes that he should have asserted himself when his mother first became involved with this girl: "If then and there he had put his foot down, nothing else would have happened. His father, had he been living, would have put his foot down at that point" (p. 386). The story recounts Thomas' unsuccessful, and ultimately tragic efforts to be the head of his family as his father was. In fact, Thomas often hears the voice of his dead father berating him for his submissive behavior: "Numbskull, the old man said, put your foot down now. Show her who's boss before she shows you" (p. 392). In the end, Thomas takes over momentarily as head of his household, only because he accidentally kills the former head, his mother.

A variation on the domineering-mother motif occurs in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," where we find that the grandmother dominates her



married son, Bailey, and his family. The grandmother exerts a greater influence over her son than his wife does; O'Connor reinforces this impression by referring to the wife throughout the story as "the children's mother," and not as Bailey's wife or by any specific name. It is the grandmother who pesters Bailey to detour off the main road and visit an old mansion, thereby setting a deadly collision course with the escaped convict, the Misfit. Moreover, when Bailey and his son are being led to the woods to be executed, Bailey's parting words are addressed to his mother: "'I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!'" (p. 128). In his fear, Bailey is looking to his mother, rather than to his wife, for strength.

A second way in which O'Connor creates the sense of female domination is by rendering women as physically superior to the men around them. Such women are usually able to control men. On the other hand, when women are not physically superior or possess some type of handicap, then men can take advantage of them (e.g. Hulga in "Good Country People" and Lucynell, the daughter, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own").

The description of Mrs. Shortley in the opening paragraph of "The Displaced Person" immediately establishes her as an imposing figure:

The peacock was following Mrs. Shortley up the road to the hill where she meant to stand. . . . Her arms were folded and as she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was. She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand

self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything. (p. 194)

The words prominence, giant, tremendous, grand, and mountain combine to create a picture of Mrs. Shortley as a woman of large physical stature who dominates her environment.

As for Mrs. McIntyre, in the same story, there is the implication that she is healthier, both physically and psychologically, than the two husbands she divorced; for it is revealed that one of her former husbands is committed to a mental institution, while the other is an alcoholic (p. 218). But unlike Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre is "a small woman" (p. 197); and her diminutive stature may account partly for her inability to muster up the courage to fire her employee, Mr. Guizac.

Mrs. Turpin's ("Revelation") domination of her husband, Claud, is characterized by a physical superiority to him. She is taller than her husband (p. 488) and outweighs him, 180 to 175 pounds (pp. 490, 497). Furthermore, Mrs. Turpin appears to be in perfect health, but her husband is the one who requires medical attention and prompts their ill-fated visit to the doctor's office. And Mrs. Turpin is aware of Claud's fragility and assumes a protective role; she tells the doctor who checks her after the young girl's violent attack, "'Lea' me be. . . . See about Claud. She kicked him'" (p. 501).

There are a number of other examples of large, strong, healthy women who dominate the men in their lives. Julian's mother, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," is apparently a heavysset woman, since she is under a physician's orders to lose weight. Likewise, Thomas'

mother ("The Comforts of Home") is described as having "a heavy body" (p. 384). Parker's wife ("Parker's Back") is "a tall raw-boned girl" (p. 512) who is strong enough to overpower her husband. Finally, in "The Enduring Chill," we find Mrs. Fox and her daughter who both are in fine health, while the son and brother, Asbury, is confined to bed with an illness that he wrongly believes to be fatal.

Another indication of female dominance in O'Connor's works is that, in those few instances where a male-female sexual relationship is portrayed, the woman is often the dominant partner. One notable exception occurs in "Good Country People," where Hulga intends to seduce the Bible salesman but is herself symbolically raped when the Bible salesman removes her artificial leg and absconds with it. Hulga, however, numbers among those women who have a physical impairment that makes them susceptible to being taken advantage of by men. Hence, Hulga's failure to dominate the young man is consistent with her physical inferiority.

In O'Connor's short novel Wise Blood, Hazel Motes, the male protagonist, encounters three sexually aggressive females: Mrs. Watts, Sabbath Lily Hawks, and Mrs. Flood. Upon his arrival in Taulkinham, Hazel (Haze, for short) goes to the home of Mrs. Leora Watts, the town prostitute (he found her name inscribed on the wall of the men's restroom). Although Hazel initiates the visit, it is evident that Mrs. Watts is the aggressor once Hazel arrives, as the following description of their meeting indicates:

She [Mrs. Watts] reached out and gripped Haze's arm just above the elbow. 'You huntin' something?' she drawled.

If she had not had him so firmly by the arm, he

might have leaped out the window. Involuntarily his lips formed the words, 'Yes, mam,' but no sound came through them.

'Something on your mind?' Mrs. Watts asked, pulling his rigid figure a little closer.

'Listen,' he said, keeping his voice tightly under control, 'I come for the usual business.'

Mrs. Watts's mouth became more round, as if she were perplexed at this waste of words. 'Make yourself at home,' she said simply.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Watts inducts Hazel into the world of sexual activity; but after a couple days, Hazel begins to resent her superiority over him in this regard: "He didn't want to go back to Mrs. Watts. . . . he had had enough of her. He wanted someone that he could teach something to . . ." (p. 63).

So Hazel decides to assert his masculinity and seduce Sabbath Lily Hawks, the daughter of the blind man, Asa Hawks, because Hazel "took it for granted that the blind man's child, since she was so homely, would also be innocent" (p. 63). Hazel moves into the same boarding house where the Hawks live; but he soon adopts a passive role regarding his sexual intentions toward Sabbath Lily, while she, on the other hand, becomes the pursuer:

. . . he[Hazel] couldn't get rid of her [Sabbath Lily].  
She followed him out to his car and climbed in and  
spoiled his rides or she followed him up to his room  
and sat. He abandoned the notion of seducing her and

tried to protect himself. He hadn't been in the house a week before she appeared in his room one night after he had gone to bed. She . . . wore . . . a woman's nightgown that dragged on the floor behind her. Haze didn't wake up until she was almost up to his bed, and when he did, he sprang from under his cover into the middle of the room. (p. 80)

Hazel uses a straight chair to expel Sabbath Lily from his room, thereby avoiding any sexual contact with her. Indeed Hazel's violent reaction to Sabbath Lily's sexual advances suggests that he is afraid of sexual involvement.

Another aggressive woman whom Hazel attempts to avoid is his landlady, Mrs. Flood. Although Mrs. Flood, a widow and Hazel's senior by many years, is not trying to seduce Hazel, she is trying to marry him so that she can secure a legal entitlement to his monthly government check. In fact, Mrs. Flood commits the ultimate aggressive act when she proposes marriage to Hazel: "'I see there's only one thing for you and me to do. Get married'" (p. 124). Hazel quickly dresses and leaves his room, once again retreating from any relationship with a woman.

Sarah Ham, or "the slut" as Thomas calls her, in "The Comforts of Home" is another sexually aggressive female. She has even admitted to Thomas's mother that she is a nymphomaniac (pp. 384-85). Regardless of the validity of this claim, Sarah does make a number of sexual advances toward the very unwilling Thomas. One night while Thomas is sleeping, she sneaks naked into his bedroom. When Thomas awakes to discover her there, he



reacts in much the same fashion as Hazel did when he found Sabbath Lily in his room:

She had invaded his room. He had waked to find his door open and her in it. . . . He had sprung out of his bed and snatched a straight chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat. He had driven her silently down the hall. . . . The girl, with a gasp, turned and fled into the guest room. (p. 384)

Thomas, like Hazel, treats a promiscuous female as a wild animal, something to fear. Thomas' fear of Sarah is particularly evident on the night that he must drive her back to town:

As soon as he found himself shut into the car with Sarah Ham, terror seized his tongue.

She curled her feet up under her and said, 'Alone at last,' and giggled.

Thomas swerved the car away from the house and drove fast toward the gate. Once on the highway, he shot forward as if he were being pursued. (p. 391)

Parker's wife, Sarah Ruth ("Parker's Back"), is the dominant partner in their sexual relationship, but she is not an active pursuer of sexual gratification, as both Sabbath Lily and Sarah Ham are. Rather, Sarah Ruth makes the decision whether or not she and her husband will engage in any sexual activity; Parker appears to have little, if any, control over the matter. Before they were married, an incident takes place which gives

Sarah Ruth the upper hand as far as their sexual relationship is concerned:


Not long after that she agreed to take a ride with his truck. Parker parked it on a deserted road and suggested to her that they lie down together in the back of it.

'Not until after we're married,' she said--just like that.

'Oh that ain't necessary,' Parker said and as he reached for her, she thrust him away with such force that the back door of the truck came off and he found himself flat on his back on the ground. (p. 518)

After they are married, one senses that Sarah Ruth is still not very generous about granting sexual favors. For instance, when Parker returns home in the early morning hours after getting his new tattoo and begins to take off his shirt, Sarah Ruth is quick to state, "'And you ain't going to have none of me this near morning'" (p. 529).

While the physical and sexual domination of men by women contributes to this notion of a matriarchy, the most persuasive evidence that a matriarchal society exists in O'Connor's fiction is the ruling position that women hold in the family and in the economy. The high incidence of this domination on the part of women as compared to men is also convincing evidence. The list of female heads of household is impressive: Mrs. Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own"; Sally Poker Sash in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy"; Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire"; Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person"; the mother in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"; Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People"; Mrs. May in "Greenleaf";



Mrs. Fox in "The Enduring Chill"; Thomas' mother in "The Comforts of Home"; and Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." This is not to say that there are no male heads of household among O'Connor's characters; there are several, but the legitimacy of a number of them is undercut, as we have observed, in that they are dominated by women. These pseudo-patriarchs include: Mr. Turpin, O.E. Parker, Mr. Shortley, Mr. Freeman ("Good Country People"), and "Bailey Boy" ("A Good Man Is Hard to Find").

Even more significant than the number of female heads of household is the prevalence of women landowners. Women virtually control the agrarian economy; they are the employers and make all the economic decisions. Men, on the other hand, are the employees, serving as tenant farmers or just plain farmhands. In at least two instances ("Greenleaf" and "The Enduring Chill"), there are grown sons who should assume management of the mother's property; but in both cases the sons are unmotivated and ineffective and, moreover, are satisfied to "sponge off" their mothers.

There are five women who own and operate large farms: Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. May, and Mrs. Fox. A sixth woman, Mrs. Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," also owns a farm; however, one gets the impression that her operation is smaller and less lucrative than the other five female-owned farms. In contrast, I can only identify two male landowners among all of O'Connor's characters. One of these is Mr. Turpin, but it is reasonable to suspect that his wife is in charge of their property. The other character is Mr. Fortune in "A View of the Woods." Interestingly, though, this story deals in part with the conversion

from a patriarchy to a matriarchy, as Mr. Fortune makes plans to will all his property to his granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, rather than to his son-in-law. It should be noted that Mason Tarwater in O'Connor's novel The Violent Bear It Away owns a piece of property, but his land holding is meager and serves only to provide a subsistence-level income.

On these female-owned farms, women control the decision-making process to the almost complete exclusion of men. The landowner appoints the tenant farmer's wife as her second-in-command, and together they form the power center of the farm. The exceptions are Mrs. Fox, who does not have a tenant farmer, and Mrs. May, who will not have anything to do with the wife of her tenant farmer, Mr. Greenleaf, since Mrs. May considers Mrs. Greenleaf to be white trash and a disgusting religious fanatic. Thus, Mrs. May single-handedly supervises her farm, not delegating any authority to her sons or Mr. Greenleaf.

In "The Displaced Person," Mrs. Shortley functions as Mrs. McIntyre's assistant and confidante. When Mrs. McIntyre goes on an inspection tour of her farm, she takes Mrs. Shortley along. Mrs. Shortley apparently sees herself as Mrs. McIntyre's lieutenant, as she maintains close watch over all the happenings around the McIntyre farm, while also keeping the Negro farmhands in line. Mrs. McIntyre considers Mrs. Shortley to be her confidante and companion; for after the Shortleys have been gone for a while, it strikes Mrs. McIntyre "that it was Mrs. Shortley she had been missing. She had no one to talk to since Mrs. Shortley left . . ." (pp. 226-27). Later, she rehires Mr. Shortley, now a widower, "though actually she didn't want him without his wife" (p. 227).

We find another alliance between the landowner and the tenant

farmer's wife in "Good Country People," with Mrs. Hopewell, the owner, joining forces with Mrs. Freeman to run the farm. With these two women in charge--Mr. Freeman never even makes an appearance--the kitchen becomes analogous to a corporate headquarters: "They carried out their most important business in the kitchen at breakfast" (p. 271). That Mrs. Freeman wields a lot of authority is the result of a conscious decision on Mrs. Hopewell's part. Before she hired them, Mrs. Hopewell had learned from the Freemans' former employer that "Mr. Freeman was a good farmer but that his wife was the nosiest woman to ever walk the earth" (p. 272). Undaunted, Mrs. Hopewell hired the Freemans and developed a strategy to deal with Mrs. Freeman:

. . . she [Mrs. Hopewell] had made up her mind beforehand exactly how she would handle the woman. Since she [Mrs. Freeman] was the type who had to be into everything, then, Mrs. Hopewell had decided, she would not only let her be into everything, she would see to it that she was into everything--she would give her the responsibility of everything, she would put her in charge. (p. 272)

Apparently Mrs. Hopewell is satisfied with Mrs. Freeman's performance, for the Freemans had been her tenants for four years.

A similar relationship exists between Mrs. Cope, the landowner, and Mrs. Pritchard, the tenant farmer's wife, in "A Circle in the Fire." Here again, the husband, Hollis, is absent from the action. As the story opens, we find the two women together, wearing "sunhats that had

once been identical but now Mrs. Pritchard's was faded and out of shape while Mrs. Cope's was still stiff and bright green" (p. 175). The identical hats bind the women, with the difference in condition of the hats placing Mrs. Cope above Mrs. Pritchard. Throughout the story, Mrs. Pritchard functions as Mrs. Cope's second-in-command, serving as her intermediary with the other farm help and as her intelligence gatherer. When Mrs. Cope notices that one of her Negroes is not properly operating the tractor, she instructs Mrs. Pritchard, "'Tell him to stop and come here!'" (p. 176). Accordingly, Mrs. Pritchard passes on this command to the Negro: "'Get off, I toljer! She wants you!'" (p. 176). After the three young boys invade Mrs. Cope's farm, Mrs. Cope confers regularly with Mrs. Pritchard about the situation, making Mrs. Pritchard her ally in combatting this invasion. Mrs. Pritchard becomes Mrs. Cope's personal spy and keeps her up to date on the boys' activities:

In a little while Mrs. Pritchard came over and stood in the kitchen door with her cheek against the edge of it. 'I reckon you know they rode them horses all yesterday afternoon' she said. 'Stole a bridle out the saddleroom and rode bareback because Hollis seen them. He runnum out of the barn at nine o'clock last night and then he runnum out of the milk room this morning and there was milk all over their mouths like they had been drinking out of the cans.' (p. 186)

Indeed, Mrs. Pritchard's omniscience makes her a valuable cohort for Mrs. Cope.

In all, the strong, aggressive, economically powerful female is a recurring figure in O'Connor's fictional world. One critic, Josephine Hendin, has commented on the prevalence of these strong women in O'Connor's works and on the absence, by contrast, of strong, admirable male characters. Accordingly, in her study The World of Flannery O'Connor, Hendin asserts that the "ineffectual male [is] a stock personage in O'Connor's world,"<sup>12</sup> and that "images of the husband and father, those potent men . . . are . . . hard to find . . . in O'Connor's world."<sup>13</sup> Significantly, O'Connor entitled her first collection of short stories A Good Man is Hard to Find.

## CHAPTER II

### FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S TREATMENT OF THE MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Although O'Connor has created a matriarchal society in her fiction, one should not conclude that she necessarily approves of or advocates a social system in which women, rather than men, are in charge. Actually, as a closer analysis of her matriarchs reveals, she takes a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward these powerful, dominating women. In almost every case, these matriarchs are the object of O'Connor's comic satire; but underlying her satiric treatment of them is the recognition of their positive qualities. In particular, these women display a sense of economic and familial responsibility which is often absent in their male counterparts or other male figures surrounding them. On the other hand, the matriarchs exhibit a number of negative attributes: they are self-righteous hypocrites; they attach too much importance to their economic endeavors; and their over-assertion of authority results in emasculation.

One of the admirable characteristics associated with a number of O'Connor's matriarchs is a sense of economic responsibility coupled with a dedication to the work ethic. That these women own and manage large farms, serve as the heads of households, and have raised and educated



their children almost single-handedly certainly attests to their financial prudence and their willingness to work hard. Granted, these women are often the first "to toot their own horn" in this regard, which is no doubt O'Connor's way of poking a little fun at them; however, it remains that the circumstances presented in the stories bear out the matriarchs' claims that they are the only person concerned about the money and work required to maintain their property or household.

In "Greenleaf," we witness Mrs. May's uphill struggle to operate her farm profitably. She has two grown sons, one a teacher at a "second-rate university" (p. 319) and the other a "'nigger-insurance salesman'" (p. 315), who both live with her but refuse to do any work whatsoever around the farm. And as though it were not bad enough that the sons, Scofield and Wesley, live with their mother while not contributing to the maintenance of her farm, they also persist in antagonizing her; they downgrade their mother's industriousness and make fun of her frequently voiced concerns about what is going to happen to the property when she dies. Sometimes Scofield and Wesley are just plain cruel to their mother, such as when Wesley insensitively expresses his distaste for her farm and anything connected with farm work, telling his mother, "'I wouldn't milk a cow to save your soul from hell'" (p. 321).

Mrs. May's other foe in her struggle to keep her dairy farm solvent is her tenant farmer, Mr. Greenleaf. Getting Mr. Greenleaf to perform his daily tasks requires constant prodding on Mrs. May's part. The story includes a number of instances in which Mrs. May must "ride herd" on Mr. Greenleaf in order to get the farm work accomplished.

The following passage characterizes Mr. Greenleaf as a worker:

. . .after she [Mrs. May] had told him three or four times to do a thing, he did it; but he never told her about a sick cow until it was too late to call the veterinarian and if her barn had caught on fire, he would have called his wife to see the flames before he began to put them out (p. 313).

In contrast to Mr. Greenleaf, his sons, O.T. and E.T., are industrious men, having started their own dairy business and made it into a success. Even though Mrs. May attributes their success to the government pensions and other entitlements that they receive as veterans of World War II, she is, nonetheless, devoted to the work ethic and admires others who adhere to it: "They [the Greenleaf boys] were energetic and hard-working and she would admit to anyone that they had come a long way . . ." (p. 318).

Like Mrs. May, Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" is a hardworking landowner who is saddled with a group of inefficient, lazy, irresponsible workers, until she acquires the industrious Mr. Guizac, a Displaced Person. Mrs. McIntyre is delighted with the multi-talented Mr. Guizac, who exemplifies the work ethic that she believes in: "'he has to work! He wants to work!'" (p. 203). Even when Mrs. McIntyre becomes disillusioned with Mr. Guizac because of his plan to wed his niece, who is incarcerated in a Polish prison camp, to one of her Negroes, she still admires his efficient working

habits, describing him as "smart and thrifty and energetic . . . ." (p. 224). Perhaps Mr. Guizac's unprecedented industry and agricultural expertise may account for Mrs. McIntyre's inability to fire him, despite her avowed intention to do so. What Mrs. McIntyre faces in her dilemma with Mr. Guizac is a conflict between two deep-seated beliefs: the work ethic versus the taboo on miscegenation.

Mrs. McIntyre's other farmhands include two Negroes, Astor and Sulk, and her diaryman, Mr. Chancey Shortley, whose first name certainly suggests something about his reliability. The approach that these three take to their work is simply to do as little as possible and only enough to get by. In fact, the three are in collusion to restrict their workload, as we learn from the Negroes' reaction to the news that Mrs. McIntyre had rehired Mr. Shortley: "The Negroes were pleased to see Mr. Shortley back. The Displaced Person had expected them to work as hard as he worked himself, whereas Mr. Shortley recognized their limitations" (p. 227-28). All three operate stills during the after-work hours, a factor which might explain the "attack . . . [of] over-exhaustion" (p. 204) which incapacitates Mr. Shortley one day. And not only are Mr. Shortley and the Negroes inefficient and unconcerned about their farm duties, but they are also dishonest and untrustworthy. The Negroes steal turkeys from Mrs. McIntyre--it is expected that they will steal; and Mr. Shortley smokes in the dairy barn, despite the prohibition on smoking.

In other O'Connor stories, we find the similar pattern of women taking a responsible attitude toward work, while the men are disinclined to work and financially irresponsible. For example, both the mother

and daughter in "The Enduring Chill" work; the mother, Mrs. Fox, manages the family's farm, and the daughter, Mary George, is "the principal of the county elementary school" (359). But the son, Asbury, is an unproductive intellectual; he claims to be a writer but has written nothing worthwhile or publishable. Asbury has contributed very little to the family farm, and at times he has attempted to do harm to the operation. During a brief period that Asbury worked in his mother's dairy, he tried to undermine his mother's authority and the farm's productivity by encouraging the Negro farmhands to smoke in the dairy and to help themselves to glasses of the fresh milk.

Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire" is another work-oriented, economically responsible landowner. In a conversation with Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Cope specifically credits her success to a belief in the work ethic: "'I have the best kept place in the country and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it'" (p. 178). While Mrs. Cope does not voice any complaints about her tenant farmer, Mr. Pritchard, she does have to contend with two shiftless Negro workers. On one occasion the Negroes are driving a tractor with a mower attached to the rear, and Mrs. Cope catches them trying to take a circuitous route to the mowing site rather than the direct route through a fenced-in pasture. When asked why they bypassed the pasture gate, one Negro replies, "'Got to raise the blade on the mower if we do'" (p. 177). Not even a fire can spark an energetic response from her Negroes; for when a fire breaks out in a nearby woods, Mrs. Cope's exhortations to "'Hurry, hurry'" (p. 193) result in the Negroes moving "slowly across the field toward the smoke" (p. 193), saying, "'It'll be there when we git there'"

(p. 193).

Another characteristic which speaks favorably for O'Connor's matriarchs is their concern for the welfare of their children. In particular, the matriarchs are associated with the maintenance of the home. At least two stories recount the struggles and sacrifices made by widowed women to raise, educate, and provide well for their children. Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is "a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him [Julian] through school and who was supporting him still, 'until he got on his feet . . .'" (p. 406). For Julian's sake, she has made sacrifices such as denying herself dental care: "her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened . . ." (p. 411). In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May, a widow whose only legacy from her husband was a "broken-down farm" (p. 319), was forced to move from the city to the country and to undertake the difficult task of turning a dilapidated farm into a dairy business which would support her and her two sons. Mrs. May still provides a home for her sons, even though both are grown. Having them reside with her imposes an additional burden; for Wesley, as an example, she must prepare a "salt-free diet" (p. 320).

Sprinkled throughout O'Connor's works are women, like Julian's mother and Mrs. May, who provide comfortable homes for their children and minister to their children's physical needs. Notable among these is Thomas' mother in "The Comforts of Home," a story which focuses in part on a son's inability to move out of his mother's home because he has become over-attached to all the domestic comforts she provides. Mrs. Fox ("The Enduring Chill") maintains a good home for her children,

whom she sent through college on her own after her husband died. Moreover, Mrs. Fox spares no cost or effort to make Asbury comfortable during his illness. The list of these mothers goes on. They are: Mrs. Lucynell Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," who cares for her retarded daughter; Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People," who has her handicapped, well-educated daughter, Joy-Hulga, living with her; and the mothers in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "A Circle in the Fire," each of whom has a young daughter who seems well taken care of. It should be noted here that although O'Connor's mothers are responsible providers and attend to their children's physical needs, they often do not really know or understand their children's characters.

In The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor, Carter W. Martin addresses O'Connor's satirical treatment of motherhood and comments that O'Connor's mothers "are parties to a traditional conflict between generations, and they are satirized for their usually betrayed pride in their children and for expecting their children to conform to stereotyped, though alien, patterns of behavior and outlook."<sup>14</sup>

While I can only think of one truly neglectful mother in all of O'Connor's works, Mrs. Ashfield in "The River" (and her husband is an equally unfit parent), just about every single male parent we encounter in her fiction neglects the care and welfare of the children in his charge. This factor, then, acts indirectly to reinforce the favorable qualities of O'Connor's matriarchs, who at least provide a comfortable and healthful home for their children.

O'Connor's novel The Violent Bear It Away features two male heads

of household, Mason Tarwater and Rayber, each of whom fails to take proper care of the boy in his custody. Mason Tarwater has his orphaned nephew, Francis Tarwater, living with him on an austere dirt farm. A description of the interior of Tarwater's home provides a glimpse of the unsatisfactory domestic environment in which Tarwater is raising his nephew:

The downstairs of their house was all kitchen, large and dark, with a wood stove at one end of it and a board table drawn up to the stove. Sacks of feed and mash were stacked in the corners and scrapmetal, wood-shavings, old rope, ladders, and other tinder were wherever he [the nephew] or Tarwater had let them fall. They had slept in the kitchen until a bobcat sprang in the window one night and frightened his uncle into carrying the bed upstairs where there were two empty rooms.<sup>15</sup>

Rayber is a worse parent, for the child that he neglects, his son, Bishop, is mentally retarded. He denies Bishop genuine affection; and the little boy's external appearance, as described below, indicates a similar inattention to his physical needs:

The afflicted child looked as if he must have dressed himself. He had on a black cowboy hat and a pair of short khaki pants that were too tight even for his narrow hips and a yellow t-shirt that had not been washed any time lately. Both his brown hightop shoes

were untied. The upper part of him looked like an old man and the lower part like a child (p. 396).

Most damning of all is the revelation that Rayber tried to drown Bishop. However, at the last minute he had a change of heart and plucked his unconscious son from the water and took him to shore, where a man successfully administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Another unsatisfactory father is found in the story "The Lame Shall Enter First." Sheppard's neglect of his son, Norton, is apparent at the very beginning of the story, as we find father and son preparing and eating their respective breakfasts; Sheppard is "eating his cereal out of the individual pasteboard box it came in" (p. 446), while watching his young son forage about the kitchen for his morning meal, which ultimately consists of a stale piece of chocolate cake garnished with peanut butter and ketchup. During "breakfast," Sheppard upsets Norton with continuous talk about Rufus Johnson, a juvenile delinquent to whom Sheppard pays greater attention than his son. This finally causes Norton to regurgitate his food. The story recounts Sheppard's emotional and intellectual deprivation of his son in favor of Rufus Johnson and Norton's pathetic longing for his dead mother, which leads to his committing suicide as a way to be with her.

Asa Hawks, the fake blind man and false evangelist in Wise Blood, also numbers among O'Connor's unfit fathers. Hawks does not care if his fifteen year-old daughter, Sabbath Lily, is a slut or has no place to live. In fact, when Sabbath Lily informs her father that she is having difficulty seducing Hazel Motes in an effort to establish



some sort of live-in arrangement with him, Hawks warns his daughter, "'I'm leaving out of here in a couple of days . . . you better make it work if you want to eat after I'm gone.'" (p. 80). We are told that "he was drunk but he meant it" (p. 80). Later we learn that Hawks has abandoned his daughter, "gone off on a banana boat" (p. 117).

Although O'Connor's matriarchs exhibit admirable characteristics, specifically their sense of economic responsibility and their concern for the welfare of their children, balanced against these positive aspects are several negative attributes associated with the dominant women in O'Connor's works.

First of all, many of these women are self-righteous hypocrites. They adopt rigid views which are often incorrect; but yet they are unwilling to compromise or to admit they are wrong because they believe that they are somehow intellectually or socially superior to those around them, even though circumstances in the story prove otherwise. A classic example is Mrs. Turpin, the domineering wife in "Revelation." As Dorothy Walters notes in her critical analysis of Mrs. Turpin, "The door to her [Mr. Turpin's] mind has long ago swung shut, and no approach short of violence can lead to any revision of her stubbornly held views."<sup>16</sup> We are told early in the story that "Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people" (p. 491). Mrs. Turpin arranges these sharply defined classes in a hierarchical structure, which conveniently places her and her husband, Claud, near the top. At the bottom of her hierarchy

were most colored people . . . then next to them--

not above, just away from--were the white trash . . .  
then above them were the home-owners, and above them  
the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud be-  
longed. Above she and Claud were people with a lot  
of money and much bigger houses and much more land  
(p. 491).

However, Mrs. Turpin is finding more and more that the lines which separate each class are becoming blurred, as overlapping and exceptions become more prevalent. Nonetheless, rather than recognize that former class distinctions are no longer valid, Mrs. Turpin rigidly adheres to her classification system and uses it as the basis for all her expectations and judgments concerning people.

Further, although Mrs. Turpin claims to be a charitable, Christian woman, her hypocrisy is all too evident. For instance, while sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin reflects upon the philanthropic approach she takes to her fellowmen:

To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so (p. 497).

But the sincerity of this philosophy of goodwill is immediately undercut; for when she hears the white-trash woman say that her son has an ulcer and that the only food she can get down him is "Co' Cola and candy" (p. 497), Mrs. Turpin smugly comments to herself,

That's all you try to get down em. . . . Too lazy to light the fire. There was nothing you could tell her about people like them that she didn't know already. And it was not just that they didn't have anything. Because if you gave them everything, in two weeks it would all be broken or filthy or they would have chopped it up for lightwood. She knew all this from her own experience. Help them you must, but help them you couldn't (p. 497).

Like Mrs. Turpin, Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" tenaciously abides by the old social distinctions, specifically the superiority of whites to Negroes. She refuses to accept that conditions have changed and that Negroes have been granted equality with whites; rather, she lives in the past, constantly referring to her aristocratic heritage. The story reveals that Julian's mother's views are not only outdated but also potentially dangerous. While she and Julian are riding the bus, a large Negro woman and her small son get on. The Negro woman, whose face is described as "set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out" (p. 415), is wearing the identical green and purple hat that Julian's mother has just bought and is wearing. Here is evidence of racial equality; the white woman and Negro woman have similar tastes in clothing and possess a comparable purchasing power. But Julian's mother ignores the significance of the identical hats. When she, Julian, the Negro woman and her son get off the bus at the same stop, Julian's mother, blind to the inappropriateness of her

behavior and not recognizing the potentially explosive situation she is in, insists on following her customary practice of giving little boys a nickel. Not finding a nickel, Julian's mother offers the Negro boy "'a bright new penny'" (p. 418), a gesture to which his large mother responds by striking Julian's mother with her pocketbook and knocking her down, shouting, "He don't take nobody's pennies!" (p. 418). Julian's mother is made "painfully" aware of the change in white-black relations; and although Julian is an unsympathetic character, he is right when he tells his mother "'that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn'" (p. 419). Yet, at the end, one is left with the impression that Julian's mother, who has suffered a stroke and is dying, still embraces the old world, as she seeks refuge in her dead past: "'Tell Grandpa to come get me. . . . Tell Caroline [her mammy] to come get me . . .'" (p. 420).

Similarly, Mrs. May ("Greenleaf") is unwilling to admit that the traditional social structure is no longer operative, despite evidence to the contrary. Throughout the story, Mrs. May's sons, the offspring of the landed class, are compared with Mr. Greenleaf's sons, the descendants of "white-trash" parentage. Nonetheless, the Greenleaf boys, O.T. and E.T., have overcome class barriers and, because of their initiative, own and operate a successful dairy farm. Mrs. May's sons, on the other hand, have not fared as well. Scofield, to Mrs. May's chagrin, sells "nigger-insurance" (p. 315); and Wesley is a college professor at what is demeaningly described as a "second-rate university" (p. 319) that Wesley himself hates because of "the morons who attended

it" (p. 319). Even though she witnesses how successful the Greenleaf boys are in comparison to her own--in a fit of anger she tells her sons, "'O.T. and E.T. are fine boys. . . . They ought to have been my sons'" (p. 321), she "suffers from an acute sense of her own superiority"<sup>17</sup> and cannot bring herself to admit that the Greenleaf boys can ever rise socially above their white-trash origins:

Whenever she [Mrs. May] thought of how the Greenleaf boys had advanced in the world, she had only to think of Mrs. Greenleaf sprawled obscenely on the ground [practicing her religious fanaticism], and say to herself, 'Well no matter how far they go, they came from that' (p. 317).

Mrs. McIntyre, the matriarch in "The Displaced Person," is a hypocrite and, moreover, proves not to be as smart as she thinks she is. From the background information concerning her relationship with the Judge, we learn that what Mrs. McIntyre thought was a smart move, marrying the Judge "when he was an old man and because of his money" (p. 218), actually backfired. Although Mrs. McIntyre enjoyed the three years they were married, her expectations of wealth upon the Judge's death were dashed with the revelation that "his estate proved to be bankrupt" (p. 218). Mrs. McIntyre is hypocritical when it comes to her sentiments regarding Negroes. Normally, she categorizes Negroes as "sorry people" (p. 202), and on one occasion she even calls one of her Negroes, "'a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger'" (p. 222). But when it serves her purposes, she hypocritically expresses a fondness for her Negroes. Seeking to justify why she should fire Mr.

Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre tells the priest that Mr. Guizac "'doesn't understand how to get on with my niggers and they don't like him. I can't have my niggers run off'" (p. 225). Furthermore, Mrs. McIntyre assumes a very self-righteous attitude concerning her responsibilities toward Mr. Guizac and his family. When the priest points out that if Mr. Guizac is fired, "'he has nowhere to go . . .'" (p. 225), Mrs. McIntyre retorts, "'I didn't create this situation, of course'" (p. 226); and a little later, continuing to absolve herself of any responsibility, she remarks, "'It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go. . . . I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world'" (p. 226).

The three women in "Good Country People" manifest an air of self-pride and intellectual superiority which a young Bible salesman (Manly Pointer) easily exposes as false and, in fact, manipulates to his own advantage. According to one critic, "the story is, among other things, an excursion into the follies bred of vanity and pride."<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Hopewell takes great pride in her ability to distinguish those people who are "good country people" from those who are "trash"; and as she tells Mrs. Freeman, the Bible salesman whom she invited to stay for dinner the day before belongs to the former category: "'he was so sincere and genuine . . . . He was just good country people . . . just the salt of the earth'" (p. 282). Mrs. Freeman, who "could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point" (p. 271) and describes herself as mentally "quick" (p. 273), reaffirms this sense of superiority in her assessment of the Bible salesman: "'Some can't be that simple. . . . I know I never could'" (p. 291). But what neither Mrs. Hopewell nor Mrs. Freeman knows

is that the Bible salesman is not at all simple. Rather, he is a con artist who travels about the countryside using different names and claiming to be a Bible salesman. Thus, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are shown to be the simple ones, since they fall for the Bible salesman's con game. Further, Mrs. Hopewell's daughter, Joy-Hulga, who has a Ph.D. in philosophy and intends to seduce the Bible salesman and indoctrinate him concerning her nihilistic beliefs, is also fooled by the Bible salesman. Knowing that Joy-Hulga expects his behavior to conform to that of a good simple Christian boy, Manly Pointer is able to turn the tables on her and seduce her by detaching and absconding with her artificial leg. As Louise Westling remarks about Joy-Hulga in her essay "Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters," "For all her intellectual superiority and bitter cynicism, she cannot see that he [Pointer] merely plays on her repressed and naive sexuality in order to steal her wooden leg."<sup>19</sup> And in a parting shot aimed at her intellectual affectations, Pointer tells Joy-Hulga, ". . . you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (p. 291).

A second negative attribute exhibited by a number of O'Connor's matriarchs is the overarching importance that they attach to their property and material possessions. For some of these women, their farms become a substitute religion, a mortal sin within O'Connor's strict Christian viewpoint. Others among these matriarchs consider their property and material well-being so important that they commit uncharitable or inhumane acts to protect or to further these self-interests.

Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" clearly substitutes her

farm for religion; she has little use for religion and is somewhat disgusted by it. During a visit from the priest, who regularly brings Christ into their discussions, Mrs. McIntyre reflects that "Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother" (p. 226). And in a later discussion with the priest, when she is thoroughly disillusioned with her Displaced Person (D.P.), Mrs. McIntyre makes a particularly derogatory remark about Christ: "'As far as I'm concerned . . . Christ was just another D.P.'" (p. 229). On the other hand, Mrs. McIntyre worships her land and the economic prosperity it can bring her. Before she is disenchanted with him, Mrs. McIntyre congratulates herself on acquiring the hard-working, mechanically-oriented Mr. Guizac and thinks of him in terms of monetary savings: "she figured he would save her twenty dollars a month on repair bills alone" (p. 201). Mrs. McIntyre considers Mr. Guizac to be her personal savior; as she tells Mrs. Shortley after recounting all the problems with her former farm workers, "'But at last I'm saved! . . . That man [Mr. Guizac] is my salvation!'" (p. 203). Later, she thinks of Mr. Guizac as "a kind of miracle" (p. 219), yet another indication of the religious-like value that Mrs. McIntyre attaches to her farm and its financial success.

Likewise, Mrs. Cope ("A Circle in the Fire") worships her property. Our first glimpse of Mrs. Cope pulling weeds around her house reveals that she regards her efforts to maintain her farm in terms of a religious struggle: "She worked at the weeds and nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (p. 175). Hence, anyone or anything which threatens the prosperity of her farm is considered an evil force. Uppermost on the list of "evil" threats is the



possibility of a forest fire: "Mrs. Cope was always worrying about fires in her woods" (p. 176). Her obsession with the possibility that a fire might destroy her property leads her to encourage her daughter to pray for the safety of her property: "When the nights were very windy, she would say to the child, 'Oh Lord, do pray there won't be any fires, it's so windy . . .'" (p. 176). Yet the real evil is Mrs. Cope's obsessive concern about her property, which has become for her a false idol to which everything else, including religion, has been subordinated. In the end, the woods are set on fire; and the closing lines, which are an allusion to the Biblical story of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego in the book of Daniel,<sup>20</sup> imply that the hand of God is at work here: "The child. . . . stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them" (p. 193).

In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mrs. Lucynell Crater, who we are told is "ravenous for a son-in-law" (p. 150), considers her property so valuable that she uses it to "buy" a husband, a one-armed tramp named Mr. Shiftlet, for her deaf, retarded daughter, Lucynell. Although I believe that Mrs. Crater is genuinely devoted to her daughter, at the same time she views her own and her daughter's future well-being as dependent upon her farm; and to this end, she acts in a manner which has tragic consequences for her daughter. Mrs. Crater's error is that she places a disproportionately high value on her rather modest property holdings. Whereas she believes that Mr. Shiftlet would jump at her package deal: "'a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent

girl in the world'" (p. 152), Mr. Shiftlet demonstrates that not everyone places such a high value on real estate. All Mr. Shiftlet wants is Mrs. Crater's car. He marries the daughter and acquires the car, which he keeps, while abandoning his helpless bride at a roadside diner.

One further example of a woman acting in an inhumane fashion in order to protect or enhance her material well-being, is Mrs. May ("Greenleaf"). She will not permit Mr. Greenleaf to transport an errant bull back to his sons' farm but orders him to shoot the bull because, according to Mrs. May, "'I can't have that bull ruining my herd'" (p. 326).

Implicit in O'Connor's treatment of these matriarchs is one other negative feature: that emasculation is an unfortunate and undesirable consequence of female domination. The most extreme example of emasculation occurs in "Parker's Back," when Sarah Ruth engages in a series of actions which humiliate her husband, Parker. She locks him out of the house and makes him play a game in order to gain entrance. She informs Parker that he cannot have sexual relations with her because it is too "'near morning'" (p. 529). She soundly condemns the tattoo of Christ that Parker has just had inscribed on his back for her sake, calling it "'Idolatry!'" (p. 529). And finally, Sarah Ruth physically overpowers Parker, brutally beating him with her broom and ultimately expelling him from their home:

. . . she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it.

Parker was too stunned to resist. He sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for

the door (p. 529).

The cruel picture that O'Connor paints of Sarah Ruth as she emasculates her husband with her feminine power stick conveys O'Connor's own disapproval of Sarah Ruth's actions. This disapproval is even more apparent when one realizes that the tattoo of Christ signifies Parker's personal acceptance of Christ as his redeemer: "The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything" (p. 527).

One unfortunate side-effect of emasculation is that it permits men to become passive, in that they become increasingly dependent upon the strong, assertive female figure. Although we can admire the hard work and the "take-charge" attitude of the matriarchs, these qualities may cultivate a feeling of satisfied passivity on the part of the men involved. For example, Mr. Turpin in "Revelation" appears perfectly satisfied to be led around and ordered about by his domineering wife. In fact, he would probably be hopelessly lost without her. Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" has provided well for her son, taking care of all his expenses and sending him through college. However, after completing college, Julian is still dependent upon his mother and lacks the initiative and the confidence to establish his financial independence: "'Some day I'll start making money,' Julian said gloomily--he knew he never would . . ." (p. 406). Similarly, in "The Comforts of Home," thirty-five year-old Thomas remains living with his mother because she has made his surroundings so comfortable that he has no incentive to set up his own separate household.

On the other hand, female domination may produce an aggressive reaction. Some men may harbor resentment as a result of their emasculation, and the only way they can relieve their repressed resentment is through some inappropriate or violent act aimed at the source of their frustration. Several O'Connor stories dramatize the undesirable, and at times tragic, results of a hostile response to patriarchal authority.

This occurs in "The Comforts of Home," when Thomas sees his state of satisfied passivity threatened by the intrusion of a female juvenile delinquent, Sarah Ham, into his mother's house. Although Thomas directs his ridicule at Sarah, the real source of his frustration is his mother, who allows the girl to remain in their house against his wishes. Thomas believes that if "he had put his foot down" (p. 386) earlier, he could have prevented this situation. Meanwhile, his sense of powerlessness is compounded by the voice of his dead father, constantly urging him to be assertive: "Show her [Thomas' mother] who's boss before she shows you" (392). In her discussion of this story, critic Josephine Herdin suggests that what Thomas hears is "the voice of the dead, impotent male in himself."<sup>21</sup> Eventually, Thomas becomes so frustrated that he resorts to dishonesty and plants his pistol in Sarah's purse in an attempt to frame her. Finally, his repressed feelings of powerlessness are released in one explosion, when Thomas "as if his arm were guided by his father" (p. 403) shoots and kills his mother, instead of his "intended" target, Sarah.

Two stories employ a bull, the symbol of masculine power and virility, as a surrogate display of male aggression in a situation where female domination is present. In "A Circle in the Fire," the three

young boys from the city who invade Mrs. Cope's farm react aggressively to the matriarchal society that they encounter there. Initially, the three meet the farm's central authority figures, Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard; and later one of the boys sees Mrs. Cope's daughter at her upstairs window, leading him to comment unflatteringly on the ubiquity of females: "'Jesus,' he growled, 'another women'" (p. 185). While on the farm, the boys are subjected to Mrs. Cope's rules and regulations, particularly her demands that they stay out of "'her woods'" (p. 183); and their dissatisfaction with her control and with feminine authority in general emerges when one of the boys says to Mrs. Cope's tenant farmer, "'I never seen a place with so many damn women on it, how do you stand it here?'" (p. 186). Frustrated by Mrs. Cope's oppression, the boys let her bull out of his pen, an action symbolizing the release of masculine authority from its "pent-up" status. Unfortunately, as we observed in "The Comforts of Home," reactions against feminine authority can go beyond such relatively harmless acts as unpenning a bull; and the three boys in this story follow up their symbolic act of male assertion with numerous acts of vandalism against Mrs. Cope's property.

The bull in "Greenleaf" represents masculine power which, when threatened and suppressed, will eventually resort to violence to assert itself. As Josephine Hendin (The World of Flannery O'Connor) points out, "The action of the story is her [Mrs. May's] attempt to kill or drive away the bull."<sup>22</sup> Hendin argues, and I agree, that Mrs. May fears strong aggressive men, such as the Greenleaf boys, who threaten to become more successful economically than she is. Moreover, even

though she has two grown sons, she retains control of her household. The implication is that Mrs. May is reluctant to turn over the farm she has nurtured to her sons for fear of losing her authority. In an effort to show the Greenleaf boys that they cannot take advantage of her, she orders her tenant farmer, the Greenleaf boys' father, to shoot the bull. Faced with extinction, the bull must resort to violence as the means of self-preservation. The sexual dimension of the bull's attack on Mrs. May is conveyed when the bull is described as having "buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover . . ." (p. 333).

O'Connor's treatment of her matriarchs is consistent with the manner in which she portrays all her characters. Several critics have noted O'Connor's tendency toward ambivalent characterizations in general, and some have commented specifically on the ambivalent nature of her matriarchs. In discussing O'Connor's use of irony, Carter W. Martin relates this idea of ambivalence:

Her irony is referable to an extremely objective view of reality that discovers each man to be lacking in some fashion, grotesque in some way, a misfit in one sense or another; and yet also finds that all of these inadequacies are insufficient grounds for excluding the character from compassion. . . . Her irony is such that the reader has responded poorly if he does not feel revulsion as well as compassion for each of the principal figures and some of the minor ones.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of her analysis of "A Circle in the Fire," Martha Stephens,

author of The Question of Flannery O'Connor, remarks that "As in most of the conflicts on which O'Connor short stories are erected, our sympathies are not bent clearly towards one party or another. . . ." <sup>24</sup>

Commenting on the ambivalent character of O'Connor's matriarchs, Martin states that "Although they perpetuate narrow and simplified attitudes toward life--attitudes which blind them to some basic truths--their charitable concern for their children and for others is genuine." <sup>25</sup> While the matriarchs' charitable concern for others is a redeeming virtue, nonetheless their benevolence, which is sometimes misguided, self-serving, or limited, is not sufficient to make them entirely admirable characters. Thus, our attitude toward O'Connor's matriarchs wavers between sympathy and antipathy.

### CHAPTER III

#### FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S MATRIARCHS AND THE SOUTHERN AGRARIAN TRADITION

While O'Connor's matriarchs are an interesting study in their own right, these women are not an end in themselves; for they serve a much larger purpose. They dramatize what was going on in the South, particularly in the rural-agrarian setting, in the era following World War II, when the South was undergoing a long overdue industrial revolution. During this time, Flannery O'Connor began her writing career; and, not surprisingly, her fiction reflects the momentous changes that were taking place in the South during her lifetime. Because O'Connor lived much of her life on a farm, she witnessed first-hand the impact that these changes had on the agricultural community. O'Connor's attention to the details of farm life is revealed in her recently published letters, The Habit of Being, which include numerous references to the people and events at her mother's farm in Georgia. For example, in a 20 September 1951 letter to her close friends Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, O'Connor writes: "Me & Maw are still at the farm. . . . She is nuts about it here, surrounded by the lowing herd and other details, and considers it beneficial to my health." In a later letter to the Fitzgeralds, written in December 1951, O'Connor



discloses a source for "The Displaced Person," a story which focuses on agrarian life: "My mamma is getting ready for what she hopes will be one of her blessings: a refugee family to arrive here Christmas night. She has to fix up and furnish a house for them, don't know how many there will be or what nationality or occupation or nothing" (p. 30). Another letter (summer, 1952) reveals O'Connor's interest in her mother's farm help and her intention to use them in her fiction:

You would relish the [present farm help]. My mama says she has never read Tobacco Road but she thinks it's moved in. I don't know how long they will be with us but I aim to give my gret [sic] reading audiance [sic] a shot of some of the details sometime. Every time Regina [O'Connor's mother] brings in some new information, our educ. is broadened considerably (p. 41).

O'Connor's residence on a farm together with the many observations she makes about farm life in her letters act to identify her with agrarian interests. At the same time, however, O'Connor was a well-educated, intelligent woman, who traveled and lived outside of the South and could, therefore, transcend the provincial interests of the agrarian South and view the changing complexion of the South with admirable objectivity.

The many historical, economic, and social studies made of the twentieth-century South emphasize the dramatic changes that the region experienced in the post-World War II period. A sampling of comments from scholars of the South illustrates the unprecedented nature of these changes. In his book, The Improbable Era (1975), which specifically

examines the post-World War II South, historian Charles P. Roland states that

Southern society after World War II underwent the most severe stress in its entire history. Despite the trials of the Civil War and the upheavals of Reconstruction, neither of these experiences had threatened the core of the traditional southern society with the force of the recent political, economic, and social changes.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Thomas D. Clark, author of The Emerging South (1968), views the post-World War II South as a region in the state of transition: "For better or worse, the South in the years since 1945 has lost many of its traditional characteristics."<sup>28</sup> A group of economists and educators, led by James G. Maddox, have collaborated to study the employment problems brought about by the transformation of the South's economy since the 1940's. Early in their book, The Advancing South (1967), the authors state that "The South is in a period of great transition. It is closing the door on one period of history and entering another. The changes it is experiencing are numerous and complex."<sup>29</sup> One final illustrative comment comes from James F. Doster, a professor of history and specialist in the economic development of the South. Doster writes in his essay "The Old Way and the New" that "The rapid changes in the South between 1940 and 1960 were nothing short of revolutionary."<sup>30</sup>

The catalyst that set in motion this radical transformation of the South is industrialization. To understand why industrialization had such a revolutionary impact on the South, one must recognize that once

industrialization took hold in the South, it spelled the end of agriculture's almost three-and-a-half-century-long domination of the South's economic base. Yet it was not so much that industrialization replaced agriculture as the leading economic force as it was that industrialization threatened everything that southern agrarianism represented. The over three hundred years of agrarianism had provided the South with a whole way of life that was venerated by white Southerners (and some Negroes also) and would not be discarded overnight. W.J. Cash's classic study, The Mind of the South, is an examination of the southern way of life and thinking which distinguishes it as a region from the North. While Cash concedes that there is diversity within the South, particularly in terms of geography, he points out that

. . . there is also one South. That is to say, it is easy to trace throughout the region . . . a fairly definite mental pattern, associated with a fairly definite social pattern--a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas. . . .<sup>31</sup>

And Cash links this distinctive code of behavior and pattern of thinking to the South's agrarian tradition when he explains that the mind of the South "is continuous with the past. And its primary form is determined not nearly so much by industry as by the purely agricultural conditions of that past."<sup>32</sup>

Despite the South's efforts to retain its agrarian economy, "it was clear by 1930 that the old-line cotton-tobacco-plantation southern

farm was approaching demise."<sup>33</sup> A solution to the South's severe economic problems was desperately needed. Although it had met with little success in its post-Civil War campaign to industrialize the South, the "New South" movement now gained more support for its advocacy of industrialization. Moreover, the Federal Government intervened in the South's economy and promoted greater industrialization and encouraged the diversification of the South's two-crop agricultural economy. But the advent of World War II proved to be the turning point in southern economic history. To assist the ailing South, the Federal Government concentrated its war industries there; and as the authors of The Advancing South note,

World War II created an unprecedented demand for labor, raised incomes, and encouraged large migrations of workers from one region to another to take advantage of war-created jobs. It thus generated new pressures for changing the traditional nature of southern society.<sup>34</sup>

And the traditions feeling the pressure of change were those associated with agrarianism.

Besides the conversion from an agrarian to an industrialized economy, the South experienced other radical changes in the post-World War II period, all of which were the by-products of industrialization. Most significant among these were: the trend toward urbanization, the mechanization and improvement of farming methods, the increasing emphasis on education, and the breakdown of traditional racial and social distinctions.

One of the immediate effects of the industrial build-up in the South was urbanization. According to Doster, "In the 1940's and 1950's population movements of great magnitude took place in the South from the rural regions to the towns and cities. Some migrants left the South; others moved to other locations in the South seeking jobs."<sup>35</sup> Thus the South's population in this period can be characterized as highly mobile. In The Improbable Era, Roland lists several factors which accounted for the migration from the country to the urban centers: "The lure of favorable wages, the promise of a richer or more exciting life, the mechanization of agriculture, and the conversion of land to uses requiring less labor. . . ."<sup>36</sup> The extent of this population shift can best be conveyed with statistics. As reflected in The Advancing South, "From 1940 to 1960 large-city population in the South increased more than 80 per cent, whereas the increase in the non-South was only 16 per cent."<sup>37</sup> And James M. Henderson cites statistics in his essay "Some General Aspects of Recent Regional Development" which highlight the effect of urbanization on the South's rural population: "There was a net movement of more than nine million persons from rural to urban areas during the 1950-60 decade. . . . The effects of these nation-wide movements were considerable in the South. The South accounted for roughly 60 percent of the nation's rural out-migration."<sup>38</sup> For the rural South, industrialization meant not only an end to its former economic dominance but also the erosion of its population. "Native" agrarians were now being exposed to urban values and patterns of behavior.

Although the South in the years during and after World War II

shifted from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial economy, it is wrong to assume that agriculture in the South died out. On the contrary, the southern farmer experienced his own industrial revolution. The mechanization of farming procedures and the application of scientifically advanced methods combined to improve the efficiency of southern agriculture. But at the same time, the traditional agrarian work life was altered markedly.

The many studies of the South's agricultural revolution generally agree as to the nature and effects of this modernization process. Essentially, as a result of the increased use of both farm machinery (e.g. tractors, mechanical cotton pickers, tilling and harvesting machines) and fertilizers and pesticides, there was a significant rise in "agricultural output per acre and per man. . . ." <sup>39</sup> Accordingly there was a displacement effect, as farm machinery made the mule and unskilled farm laborers obsolete. Further, the greater capital investment required to operate a farm profitably forced the small farmer and the already vanishing tenant farmer out of business. <sup>40</sup> The trend was toward fewer, but larger farms employing more machines and fewer laborers: "The average size of farms in 1960 was twice that of 1930, while total man-hours of labor used for farm work in the South in 1960 was less than half that used in 1940." <sup>41</sup> Southern agriculture became more broad-based due to crop diversification. Also significant was the increase in dairy farming and the expansion of the livestock industry. <sup>42</sup> In all, southern agriculture moved away from the labor-intensive type of farming which had fostered the plantation-style work system.

Education is another area which felt the effects of industrialization.

Historically, education in the South had been tailored to the needs and demands of the rural-agrarian community. Thomas D. Clark points out in Three Paths to the Modern South that farmers agreed to support schools as long as their children were available to work on the farm during planting and harvesting seasons.<sup>43</sup> Because little formal education was needed to perform the unskilled tasks associated with farm work, the emphasis was on vocational, or practical skills. Therefore, educational "achievements were gauged by the lowest scale of bare literacy."<sup>44</sup> Consequently, many Southerners were ill-prepared for the technological world in which they found themselves in the 1930's: "With the coming of the great depression in the South thousands of its people ceased to be farmers. With the outbreak of World War II, the industrial demands made on laborers far exceeded the minimum standards of education in the rural South up to date."<sup>45</sup> Thus, in order to meet the demands of modern society, educational standards in the South were upgraded--illiteracy is practically nonexistent now;<sup>46</sup> and educational programs were given a more scientific and theoretical orientation. Clark specifically points out that recent trends in education acted to erode rural-agrarian influence in the South:

In 1920 most communities functioned socially about the schools and churches, but since 1945 tremendous expansion of the southern urban population has resulted in a major separation of educational standards from those of old and restricted community standards. Further, this change has made deeper inroads into the traditional pattern

of southern ruralism.<sup>47</sup>

For southern traditionalists, perhaps the greatest threat posed by all the changes occurring in the post-World War II era was the blurring of the racial and class distinctions which have long governed southern thinking and behavior. In the 1930's, a group of Harvard-educated anthropologists studied the caste and class system of the South. Their book, Deep South, provides an excellent, not to mention eye-opening, discussion of this well-developed and rigidly-followed system. In short, the caste and class system in the South is a way for the white Southerner to justify his continued subordination of the Negro and to preserve his position in the social hierarchy. Allison Davis, one of the anthropologists, defines the color-caste system:

It is a closed system consisting of two groups--whites and Negroes--between which there is no social mobility, whether by marriage, change in income, educational achievement, or any possible change in cultural behavior. By birth, every individual is defined as a member of one of these castes; his caste status is fixed for life.<sup>48</sup>

The class system arranges various groups (e.g. tenant farmers, professionals, landowners) within each color-caste into a hierarchy which indicates who is superior to whom.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of the ethics of such of system, it is cherished by many white southerners, particularly the descendants of plantation owners. Thus the developments of the post-World War II period--rising incomes for Negroes and lower class whites,<sup>50</sup>



educational advancements on the part of all southerners, and the Federal Government's actions to impose integrational policies in the South--acted to erase many of the conditions which had formerly defined and justified the traditional social structure.

It can be seen, then, that the changes taking place in the South after World War II undermined and disrupted the traditional agrarian community, and therefore it is understandable why many old-line agrarians were opposed to modernization. Hence there exists in this period a conflict between the "Old South," those like the agrarians who call for the status quo and the retention of the traditional Southern way of life, and the "New South," the forces for modernization who say that the South has been economically depressed for too long and the only way to improve is through industrialization.

It is within this context of social and economic upheaval in the post-World War II South that Flannery O'Connor's matriarchs assume their larger meaning. As landowners, which the majority of these matriarchs are, they are attached to the soil, a factor which establishes their strong agrarian orientation. Consequently, O'Connor's matriarchs can be viewed as representing southern agrarian and traditionalist concerns in the post-World War II era. While these female landowners stand for the Old South, they are quite frequently opposed, or perceive that they are opposed, by people and circumstances representing the forces of the New South. Many of O'Connor's stories which feature matriarchs can be interpreted in terms of the struggle between the Old South and the New South as waged on an agrarian battleground. These particular stories, as my discussion of them will show, focus from an agrarian viewpoint on the crucial issues involved in the industrialization

process: urbanization and rural out-migration ("The Life You Save May Be Your Own"); rural out-migration and the reduction in farm laborers ("The Displaced Person," "Good Country People," "Greenleaf," and "Revelation"); urbanization and the threat to rural life ("A Circle in the Fire"); the agricultural revolution and the threat to the traditional social structure ("Greenleaf" and "The Displaced Person"); modern education and the "real" improvements attained ("Good Country People," "The Enduring Chill," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "Greenleaf"); and the changing social structure and interracial relations ("Everything That Rises Must Converge").

Furthermore, O'Connor's ambivalent treatment of her matriarchs, the vanguards of the Old South, reflects, by extension, her own ambivalent attitude toward their struggle and what they are fighting for. Through these women, O'Connor conveys both the positive and negative aspects of the two competing causes. As a positive for the Old South, the matriarchs reveal some of the detrimental effects of industrialization and urbanization on a society, while also raising valid questions about modern trends in education, where the stress is on theory at the expense of practical knowledge. On the other hand, O'Connor seems to see these matriarchs as fighting a losing battle; they need to be realistic and come to grips with the inevitability of change. Their overly rigid adherence to tradition and their tenacious loyalty to their land and all it stands for has caused them to be insensitive to human needs and to ignore or reject some of the favorable effects of modernization.

One way to view the short story "The Life You Save May Be Your

Own" is as a dramatization of the appeal of country life and its stability versus the attraction of city life and the mobility associated with the urban trend. In this regard, the story is no doubt inspired by the migration from the country to the city in the post-World War II South; and it is not surprising that the automobile is central to this story, since it is the very instrument which facilitated this mass movement to the urban centers. Clark's discussion in The Emerging South of how the automobile affected the rural South explains the symbolic importance of the automobile in a story dealing with the deterioration of the agrarian tradition:

New-found mobility and speed gave the southern yeoman his greatest release from the bonds of the past. In his new vehicle he found both dignity and independence. Distance no longer held him in its stifling grip, and the persistence of payments on his car blasted him loose from the ancient routine of a southern agricultural past and its uncertain year-end returns.<sup>51</sup>

The story develops into a dialectical discussion of the two opposing lifestyles. The matriarch, Mrs. Crater, whose name suggests a deep entrenchment in the soil, is the advocate of agrarian life. Her identification with a stationary existence is reflected by her automobile, which stopped running fifteen years ago and has been allowed to rust in a shed. On the other hand, we have Mr. Shiftlet, the one-armed, wandering tramp whose name links him with instability and movement. Further, from the time he sets foot on Mrs. Crater's property, Mr.

Shiftlet becomes Mrs. Crater's antithesis, as he has his eye on her automobile and devotes himself to putting it into good running order.

Not long after his arrival, Mrs. Crater sets out to persuade the transient Mr. Shiftlet to marry her deaf, retarded daughter and then to remain on her farm. Mrs. Crater bases all her arguments upon the appeal that the stability and security of her farm would have to a drifter like Mr. Shiftlet:

'Listen here, Mr. Shiftlet . . . you'd be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. You don't need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man' (p. 152).

After Mrs. Crater submits her marriage deal to him, Mr. Shiftlet considers the offer in terms of this opposition between stability and movement: "'Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit . . . . The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move . . .'" (p. 152). Not comprehending that Mr. Shiftlet prefers the unfettered existence of a drifter, Mrs. Crater counters his reluctance by offering him what he has wanted all along, the car; yet still she fails to see that she is engaged in a losing cause, even though Mr. Shiftlet has told her: "'I got to follow where my spirit says to go'" (p. 153).

As the story closes, Mr. Shiftlet has abandoned his new bride at a roadside diner and is driving toward the city, Mobile. Thus the city proves to be a greater enticement than the country, but this should

not necessarily be construed as an exhortation to leave the country or as an endorsement of urban life and a rejection of rural life. Rather, I believe the story suggests that both modes of living have drawbacks.

Because she has been isolated so long on her farm, Mrs. Crater approaches life with blinders on. Her preoccupation with her farm has limited her and made her insensitive to some of the intrinsic benefits of living in the country. For Mrs. Crater, the setting of the sun is a routine event; "'Does it every evening'" (p. 146), she tells Mr. Shiftlet. Moreover, she intertwines human concerns, specifically the selection of a husband for her daughter, with business interests, the preservation of her property.

Like Mrs. Crater, Mr. Shiftlet is preoccupied with things; for him, the world of machines, symbolized by the automobile, takes precedence over human concerns. He is willing to marry Lucynell in return for the automobile and then dispose of her and retain the vehicle. Hence there is a dehumanizing element attached to the automobile; and certainly O'Connor intended to convey the idea of the threat to human safety and well-being posed by the proliferation of automobiles when she used the common traffic warning, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, as the title of the story. Ultimately the automobile is the emblem for the whole world of machines on which industrialization is based. Mr. Shiftlet makes this connection between the automobile and the impersonality of modern industrialized procedures when he compares Mrs. Crater's old model car to the more recent products of the automobile industry:

He raised the hood and studied the mechanism and he said

he could tell that the car had been built in the days when cars were really built. You take now, he said, one man puts in one bolt and another man puts in another bolt and another man puts in another bolt so that it's a man for a bolt. . . . Now if you didn't have to pay but one man, you could get you a cheaper car and one that had had a personal interest taken in it, and it would be a better car (p. 150).

Several of O'Connor's "matriarch stories" expand upon this idea of rural out-migration in the post-World II period by addressing one specific effect on the agrarian community: the reduction of farm help, particularly tenant farmers.<sup>52</sup> In these stories, the female landowner launches into a monologue or has a lengthy reflection concerning her trouble with tenant farmers and farmhands; and it is not only the quantity of farm laborers which is a problem but also the quality and reliability of those she has to pick from. Throughout "The Displaced Person," Mrs. McIntyre voices complaints about the turnover of tenant farmers and the sorry state of farm help in general. This is reflected in a conversation with Mrs. Shortley in which Mrs. McIntyre provides a catalogue of her former tenant farmers:

'For years I've been fooling with sorry people. Sorry people. Poor white trash and niggers. . . . They've drained me dry. Before you all came I had Ringfields and Collins and Jarrells and Perkins and Pinkins and Herrins and God knows what all else and not a one of them left without taking something off this place that didn't

belong to them. Not a one!' (p. 202).

Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People" has experienced a similar rapid turnover among her tenant farmers: "Before the Freemans [her present tenant family] she had averaged one tenant family a year" (p. 273). Moreover, her decision to hire the Freemans was essentially dictated by the shortage of tenant farmers: "She had hired them in the end because there were no other applicants . . ." (p. 272). The shortage of tenant farmers is apparently the main reason why Mrs. May ("Greenleaf") has tolerated her lazy, unresponsive tenant farmer, Mr. Greenleaf, for fifteen years. Even though "no one else would have had him five minutes" (p. 313), Mrs. May "had not fired him because she had always doubted she could do better" (p. 313). While in the waiting room at the doctor's office, Mrs. Turpin ("Revelation") discusses the difficulties that she and her husband, Claud, have in finding enough workers to pick their cotton: "'It's no use in having more than you can handle yourself with help like it is. We found enough niggers to pick our cotton this year but Claud he has to go after them and take them home again in the evening'" (p. 494).

A different approach to the urbanization issue is reflected in "A Circle in the Fire," in which an underlying theme is the threat posed by urbanization to the tranquility and well-being of the agrarian way of life. In his essay "Environmental Influences in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Michael Cleary asserts that the "contrast of country and city environments"<sup>53</sup> is a recurring topic in O'Connor's works. According to Cleary and other critics, O'Connor generally associates good with

the country and evil with the city.<sup>54</sup> Following this pattern, then, "A Circle in the Fire" portrays what happens when the evil of the city invades the country. As in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the forces associated with urban life score a victory over their rural-agrarian opposition; however, this victory comments on the inevitable spread of urban values and standards rather than on the favorable aspects of urban life. Indeed, the story makes a negative comment on urban life; but since Mrs. Cope, the representative of rural life, is not an entirely sympathetic character, the story reflects an ambivalent attitude toward the Old South-New South conflict.

The three boys from Atlanta who invade Mrs. Cope's farm represent an intrusion of urban elements into rural life. The initial description of the boys approaching Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard "as if they were going to walk on through the side of the house" (p. 178) underscores their role as intruders. Further, one of the boys says that, if given the opportunity, he would "'build a big parking lot on'" (p. 192) Mrs. Cope's property, thus linking the boys with an urban background and with the uses to which land is put in an urban setting.

These boys, the products of an urban environment, reveal the undesirable aspects of city life. As we learn, the boys are escaping from their dehumanized existence in the city to the countryside, specifically Mrs. Cope's farm, the place where one of the boys, Powell Boyd, "'had the best time of his entire life'" (p. 180). During the boys' first conversation with Mrs. Cope, we hear of the unsatisfactory living conditions that they and other city dwellers are subjected to. In two passages, the description of these urban conditions is



juxtaposed with certain reminiscences of Mrs. Cope's farm, thus highlighting the disparity between city and country life. For example, the youngest boy explains to Mrs. Cope that Powell has been attached to her farm ever since he was young and his father worked there:

'He [Powell] don't like it in Atlanta. . . . He ain't ever satisfied with where he's at except this place here. Lemme tell you what he'll do, lady. We'll be playing ball, see, and he'll quit playing and say, 'Goddamn, it was a horse down there name Gene and if I had him here I'd bust this concrete to hell riding him!' (p. 182).

And shortly thereafter, in response to Mrs. Cope's remark, "'So you boys live in one of those nice new developments'" (p. 182), the same boy reveals the impersonal character of urban housing projects:

'The only way you can tell your own [apartment] is by smell. . . . They're four stories high and there's ten of them, one behind the other. Let's go see them horses . . . ' (p. 182)

In all, Powell and his two friends present a dismal picture of urban life. For them, Mrs. Cope's farm is an idyllic retreat, but Mrs. Cope stands ready to deny them this brief respite from their adverse circumstances in the city. In essence, Mrs. Cope is more concerned about her property than the plight of these young boys. The primacy of property to humanitarian concerns is what reflects negatively upon Mrs. Cope and other agrarians like her who zealously protect their property and sacred traditions, while ignoring the emotional needs of

people caught up in the dehumanizing forces of modern society. Moreover, despite Mrs. Cope's relentless resistance, Powell and his friends set fire to her woods and, thereby, succeed in leaving their urban mark on Mrs. Cope's property. This symbolic victory on the part of the urban intruders suggests that the agrarians are powerless to prevent the spread of urban influences. More importantly, the vandalism that these urban urchins commit indicates the destructive effects of urbanization upon the natural landscape. Whether or not it was intentional on O'Connor's part, having the boys set fire to the woods is an act which emphasizes the seriousness of this destruction. Because the lumber industry had denuded the South's countryside, Clark (Three Paths to the Modern South) explains that strict conservation measures came into being in the post-World War II era to protect the South's virgin timber. Hence, as Clark notes, "Setting a woods fire is now a greater criminal hazard than the malicious burning of a cotton house in picking season was forty years ago."<sup>55</sup>

Another transformation occurring in the South during this period was the agricultural revolution, which brought industrialization to the agrarian community. The most significant change to southern agriculture was the mechanization of farming methods; and in a November 1953 letter, O'Connor records her awareness of this process when she remarks that "Mamma has a new silage cutter . . ." (p. 64). Two O'Connor stories, "Greenleaf" and "The Displaced Person," deal in part with a female landowner's reaction to the agricultural revolution and its impact on the traditional social structure. In "Greenleaf," the matriarch is distinctly aligned with the Old South in her opposition to

the modernization of farm methods, while her counterpart in "The Displaced Person" goes along with the new farm technology until it threatens to displace a deep-seated traditional belief, the taboo on miscegenation. Hence, both women are ultimately identified with agrarian conservatism.

In addition to being a symbol of masculine power, the bull in "Greenleaf" may also be associated with the "powerful" force of modernization. The bull belongs to the Greenleaf boys, O.E. and E.T., who, like Mrs. May, own a dairy farm. However, unlike Mrs. May's farm, theirs incorporates all the latest in farm technology. Mrs. May adheres to the traditional class distinctions and does not want to admit that the Greenleaf boys, who come from a white trash family, could break through class barriers and be successful farmers like herself. Yet, the Greenleaf boys are successful because they have capitalized upon modernization, exactly what Mrs. May ignores (she owns only a few pieces of farm machinery); and their bull seems to function as a reminder to Mrs. May of this very fact. Indeed, it is because their bull has strayed onto her property that Mrs. May visits the Greenleaf dairy farm and gets the unwanted confirmation of their success when she secretly takes a look at their milk parlor and finds it both impressive and "spotless" (p. 325).

That the bull is the instrument of Mrs. May's death could signal the collapse of the traditional agrarian way of life under the pressures of modernization. This idea is explored by Dorothy Walters who asserts in her analysis of the story that Mrs. May and the Greenleafs are

near-allegorical types of the Old and New South. Mrs.

May's pride develops out of her sense of superiority as a property owner, one who heads an established family with a secure position in the local hierarchy. But the South is in a highly fluid state. . . . The Greenleafs are in the ascendant because they possess the vitality and imagination which have disappeared from the 'respectable' classes.<sup>56</sup>

And Walters goes on to state that

The bull is Greenleaf property, and his abrupt annihilation of Mrs. May prefigures the Greenleaf takeover of a world traditionally dominated by 'Mays.' The demise of Mrs. May strongly suggests, therefore, the radical transformation currently at work in the South.<sup>57</sup>

Once again the forces of the New South deal a setback to the supporters of the Old South. But despite Mrs. May's selfishly stubborn resistance to progress, the New South does not gain an unqualified victory; for O'Connor subtly reveals in the story some of the less desirable aspects of modernization and "progress." For example, I find the fact that the Greenleaf boys knowingly permit their bull, which has a history of being destructive, to roam about and to destroy other people's property as a sign of gross negligence and intentional malice. By extension, then, the forces associated with progress assume a sort of Machiavellian character. Another undesirable aspect of modernization is the sense of conformity and impersonality that it fosters with its emphasis on quantity rather than quality. This is clearly the case

with the Greenleaf boys' modern home, which is described as "a new red-brick, low-to-the-ground building that looked like a warehouse with windows . . . [located] on top of a treeless hill. It was the kind of house that everybody built now and nothing marked it as belonging to the Greenleafs except three dogs" (p. 323). The Greenleafs' home is the rural equivalent of the urban housing project in which the three Atlanta boys in "A Circle in the Fire" live. Finally, Mrs. May's glimpse of the Greenleaf boys' milk parlor, revealing the "metal stanchions [which] gleamed ferociously" (p. 325), could be considered as a positive or negative comment on modernization, depending on how one interprets the word ferociously. On the one hand, the word could reflect Mrs. May's feeling that her superior position in the traditional South is being threatened by this modern dairy equipment; but on the other hand, the word could attribute a certain menacing quality to these machines.

In one respect Mrs. McIntyre ("The Displaced Person") is like the Greenleaf boys: she sees the advantages of modern farm technology. However, in the end, Mrs. McIntyre reveals that she is deeply rooted in the traditions of the Old South. Before Mr. Guizac, the Displaced Person, arrived, Mrs. McIntyre owned only a few pieces of farm machinery; but after learning of Mr. Guizac's mechanical expertise, Mrs. McIntyre quickly purchased several additional machines, since "for the first time, she had someone who could handle machinery" (p. 207). Thus, Mr. Guizac is associated with modern technology. The immediate effect of mechanization on the McIntyre farm is displacement: the displacement of mules by machines and eventually the displacement of people by machines, as Mrs. McIntyre finds the Shortleys dispensable

due to the efficiency of mechanized procedures. As long as Mr. Guizac and his modern technology enhance her pocketbook, Mrs. McIntyre is willing to promote changes to the agrarian way of life, including the displacement of people in the favor of machines; but when Mr. Guizac attempts to arrange an interracial marriage between his Polish cousin and one of Mrs. McIntyre's Negro workers, then Mrs. McIntyre feels threatened by Mr. Guizac, since he attempts to displace the long-standing Southern taboo against miscegenation.<sup>58</sup> From this point on, Mrs. McIntyre retreats into her traditional way of life. She tells the priest that Mr. Guizac (also, Mr. Technology) "'doesn't fit in'" (p. 225) and that "'He's extra and he's upset the balance around here . . .'" (p. 231). She prefers to have the old, familiar farmhands working for her; for, even though they are lazy and inefficient, nevertheless they reflect the traditional way of thinking with which Mrs. McIntyre is most comfortable. In all, "The Displaced Person" demonstrates the grip that Southern traditions hold on the rural-agrarians; the paradox here is that the willingness to modernize out-dated farming methods implies no intent to modernize out-dated social practices.

In her book The World of Flannery O'Connor, Josephine Hendin notes that the past versus the present is a dominant theme in O'Connor's works and that one manifestation of this theme is the "discord between generations."<sup>59</sup> Thus we find the conflict between mothers and their children as another variation on this clash between the Old South and the New South, with the mothers, or matriarchs, representing the traditional way of life and their children functioning as products of or voices for the New South.

As mentioned previously, one of the effects of modernization in the post-World War II South was improved education. Interestingly, a number of O'Connor stories focusing on the conflict between mother and child address the issue of what kind of real improvement has been attained by all the emphasis on education. While these matriarchs do not oppose education--indeed many of them have worked hard and sacrificed in order to send their children through college, they find that all this education has produced graduates who are less and less capable of doing anything practical. In this regard, O'Connor's matriarchs raise questions concerning modern society's formula for progress, i.e., more education equals better workers; for they find that their well-educated children have turned out to be sterile dilettantes and pseudo-intellectuals rather than productive workers. These pseudo-intellectual children are often satirized by O'Connor. As Carter W. Martin notes in The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor, "The pride of intellectuals is mocked throughout her work";<sup>60</sup> O'Connor wanted to convey "the limits of man's reason."<sup>61</sup> In a zany passage from a September 1952 letter to her friend, Betty Boyd Love, O'Connor mocks the "progressive education" offered at one southern college:

All the tra-la-la is about to begin in the instution [sic] of higher larning [sic] across the road, folderol and poopppoopado . . . , the spirit of Progress, advancement, and progressive education in pursuit of happiness and holding the joint open as long as possible without funds. Hey nonny nonny and ha hah ha . . . " (p. 44)

Mrs. Hopewell ("Good Country People") questions the value of her thirty-two year-old daughter's (Joy-Hulga) liberal arts education, culminating in a Ph.D. in philosophy:

The girl [Joy-Hulga] had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, 'My daughter is a nurse,' or 'My daughter is a schoolteacher,' or even, 'My daughter is a chemical engineer.' You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.' That was something that ended with the Greeks and Romans (p. 276).

Mrs. Hopewell's suspicions regarding the purposelessness of her daughter's academic pursuits are confirmed when out of curiosity she opens one of Joy-Hulga's philosophy books and finds the following passage underlined: "'If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.'" (p. 277). And it appears that Joy-Hulga's extensive education has prepared her for precisely that, nothing. Although Joy-Hulga claims that if she did not have a heart condition she "would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about" (p. 276), which is "Nothing," her behavior around her mother's house proves that she has been trained to do nothing practical and, in fact, that her education may have soured her attitude toward life: "All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading. Sometimes she went for walks but she didn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men" (p. 276).




Similarly, Mrs. Fox in "The Enduring Chill" finds increased education to be counterproductive. She recalls that her dead husband "was a lawyer and businessman and farmer and politician all rolled into one . . . [and] had his feet on the ground . . ." (p. 361). And moreover, her husband accomplished all this, even though he "had gone to a one-room schoolhouse through the eighth grade . . ." (p. 361). In contrast, both of Mrs. Fox's children, Mary George and Asbury, are college graduates; however Mrs. Fox has "observed that the more education they got, the less they could do" (p. 361). Mary George, at least, is the "principal of a county elementary school" (p. 362); but Asbury, whom Mrs. Fox describes as "being smart . . . [and having] an artistic temperament" (p. 361), is an aspiring writer who has produced nothing publishable.

There are other examples of children who, though well-educated, are sterile, unproductive intellectuals. Julian ("Everything That Rises Must Converge"), a college graduate, lives with his mother who supports him. We learn from Julian's mother that Julian "'wants to write but he's selling typewriters until he gets started . . .'" (p. 410). Mrs. May's ("Greenleaf") well-educated son, Wesley, is another sterile intellectual. His sterility is underscored by the fact that, like Joy-Hulga, he is sickly and is not attracted to members of the opposite sex. Although Wesley is employed as a professor--significantly he serves on the faculty of a "second-rate university" (p. 319)--overall he lacks initiative, and his education has made him, like Joy-Hulga, a cynic:

He [Wesley] didn't like anything. . . . He hated the country and he hated the life he lived; he hated living with his mother and his idiot brother and he hated hearing about the damn dairy and the damn help and the damn broken machinery. But in spite of all he said, he never made any move to leave. He talked about Paris and Rome but he never went even to Atlanta (p. 319).

In all, O'Connor's portrayal of the "fruits" of modern day education and intellectualism tends to sympathize with the matriarchs' point of view. This is not the case, however, when it comes to another change taking place in the post-World War II South: the breakdown of the deep-seated tradition of white supremacy. Here O'Connor resumes her ambivalent treatment of the Old South-New South debate.

In her story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," O'Connor employs the "discord between generations" to dramatize the tension between the Old South and the New South over the issue of interracial relations. As Dorothy Walters indicates, this "story revolves about the various racial attitudes of the central characters. . . . and the narrative ends with the elimination of one."<sup>62</sup> The attitude which is eliminated belongs to Julian's mother, one of O'Connor's prominent matriarchs and a spokesperson for the Old South. Although she presently resides in a town, Julian's mother is identified with agrarianism and the old plantation social structure when she tells her son, "'You remain what you are. . . . Your great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves'" (p. 408). Her attitude toward Negro advancement and the attainment of equality with whites is that "'Its ridiculous.



It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (p. 408). She believes in the color-caste system, which permits Negroes to rise but only within their own caste. Because she is blindly devoted to her traditionalist heritage, Julian's mother ignores or rationalizes away all the evidence indicating that Negroes are no longer inferior to whites. Ultimately her rigid conformity to traditional patterns of behavior leads to her death in a violent convergence with a hostile Negro woman who is offended when Julian's mother, following her customary practice, offers the Negro woman's son a shiny coin.

In her role as the representative of the Old South, Julian's mother is opposed by her son, Julian, who adopts a progressive approach to interracial relations, advocating Negro rights and a closer relationship between whites and blacks. Yet, as a number of critics point out, the sincerity of Julian's liberal views is questionable, since his pro-Negro attitude is motivated in part by a desire to persecute his mother. Furthermore, John F. Desmond properly asserts that "Julian's so-called progressivism [is] based upon intellectual and cultural elitism (he wishes to associate with intelligent, liberal Negroes) rather than a recognition of spiritual equality. . . ." <sup>63</sup>

It is important to note the objectivity with which O'Connor treats the racial problem in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Although the white supremacist attitude of those associated with the Old South is eliminated symbolically with the violent death of its representative, Julian's mother, O'Connor does not place all the blame for racial tensions on the southern traditionalists. She views the belligerent Negro, like the woman in the story, who wears a "chip on his shoulder" and is "set not only to meet opposition but to

seek it out" (p. 415), as also responsible. And she suggests that the pro-Negro attitudes of white liberals, who are associated with the New South, may not be totally genuine; self-interests may lie beneath their pro-Negro gestures. In commenting about the impartial evaluation that O'Connor makes of the racial situation in this story, Dorothy Walters explains that to O'Connor

the biased Southerner clinging to outmoded perception, the enthusiastic liberal eager to demonstrate his goodwill, and the sullen black resentful of white overtures are all examples of pride, absurdity, and vice. The work is a warning to all involved. . . . The villain is the lack of compassion, failure of sympathy, and, as such, it resides in the souls of all, black and white young and old.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, it is this same sort of impartiality that characterizes O'Connor's treatment of the conflict between the Old South and the New South in the post-World War II period. She appreciated the need for change, but she also was acutely aware of the price one pays for "progress," particularly in terms of the dehumanizing effects it imposes. Further, she saw the injustice of clinging uncompromisingly to outmoded ways of life, but she also recognized that established traditions cannot be replaced overnight.

## CONCLUSION

In his essay "Some Contemporary Literary Views of the Newest South," O.B. Emerson discusses the concerns of contemporary southern authors and states that a "persistent theme in Southern literature has been the continuous interaction between the traditional rural South and the emerging, urban South."<sup>65</sup> As this study reveals, the interaction between the Old South and the New South is a prominent theme in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. More important, however, is that this study has uncovered O'Connor's ambivalent attitude toward the transformation of the traditional southern way of life, when the South during the post-World War II period shifted from a rural-agrarian society to an urban-industrial society. The discovery of this larger meaning to be derived from O'Connor's fiction is the result of focusing specifically on O'Connor's matriarchs, who consistently espouse the traditional, agrarian way of life but are portrayed in an ambivalent manner by O'Connor.

In O'Connor's fiction, neither agrarian society nor urban-industrial society escapes criticism. She de-romanticizes agrarian life, characterizing it as anything but harmonious. Her rural families are engaged in internal conflicts, while the landowners and the farm help display animosity toward each other. Furthermore, the agrarian setting is often a place where violent, destructive, and lawless acts are

perpetrated. On the other hand, part of this lawlessness is attributed to the encroachment of urban influences in the rural community. O'Connor clearly records the destructive and dehumanizing effects of urbanization and industrialization in several of her stories, "A Circle in the Fire," to name one.

There is evidence outside of her fiction which suggests that O'Connor's feelings toward the traditions of the Old South vacillated. O'Connor was realistic; she knew that the old southern manners were approaching extinction and could matter-of-factly write in a 3 March 1954 letter that "The formality that is left in the South now is quite dead and done for of course" (p. 70). Moreover, she recognized that the trend toward an urban-industrial society in the South was irreversible and that it was foolhardy to dwell on or try to recapture the Old South. In a 1962 address to the Georgia Writers' Association, O'Connor expressed this very sentiment:

The present state of the South is one wherein nothing can be taken for granted, one in which our identity is obscured and in doubt. In the past, the things that have seemed to many to make us ourselves have been very obvious things, but now no amount of nostalgia can make us believe that they will characterize us much longer.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, O'Connor had respect for traditional Southern manners and realized that, on occasion, they must be observed. This attitude is reflected in a 25 April 1959 letter to friend and playwright,

Maryat Lee, in which O'Connor explained why she could not go to see black writer James Baldwin when he came to Georgia:

No I can't see James Baldwin in Georgia. It would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on--it's only fair. Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia. I have read one of his stories and it was a good one (p. 329).

The ambivalence that O'Connor expressed personally toward southern traditionalism is reflected in her fiction through her matriarchs, the representatives of the Old South, whom O'Connor invests with positive and negative attributes. On the positive side, the matriarchs are hard-working and economically responsible, whereas the men surrounding them are lazy and financially irresponsible. In addition, the matriarchs provide for their children's physical needs, while their male counterparts neglect the care of their children. Thus O'Connor's matriarchs are associated with industriousness, financial prudence, and devotion to the family, all of which are traditionally cherished values.

On the negative side, many of the matriarchs are self-righteous hypocrites. Although they claim to be charitable women, their charity is often limited to their immediate families or, when extended beyond the family circle, is shown to be self-serving and insincere. Typically, the matriarchs adopt rigid, unjust views and adhere to a strict,

but outdated, social code; and they ignore any evidence which invalidates their beliefs, since to acknowledge it they would compromise their perceived intellectual and social superiority. As a result, the matriarchs behave inappropriately and insentitively. A negative aspect of the matriarchs' dedication to the work ethic is that many of the female landowners attach too much importance to their property and economic endeavors, causing them to subordinate human considerations to material well-being. Hence the charge that industrialism is devoted to the acquisition of material wealth at the expense of human needs can also be leveled at the proponents of agrarianism. Finally, the domineering, powerful role that the matriarchs play in the economy and in their families frequently results in emasculation, and unfortunate consequences arise from this situation. Men either submit passively to female domination and become satisfied to depend permanently on the matriarch, or they become frustrated and resort to violence in order to assert their masculinity.

In the midst of all this uncertainty regarding our attitude toward matriarchs, one fact about them remains certain: they rule O'Connor's fictional society. Considered collectively, O'Connor's women dominate the men around them. Wives henpeck their husbands, and mothers maintain control over their grown sons. This sense of female domination is furthered by the portrayal of women as physically superior to the men; O'Connor's women are frequently bigger, stronger, and healthier than the men around them. Usurping a traditionally masculine function, O'Connor's women are often the aggressive partners in the male-female sexual relationship, while the men involved assume a passive role.



Most importantly, her women control the economy and serve as heads of household; in O'Connor's short stories, women are the landowners, the employers, the decision-makers, and the providers. On the other hand, the men in these stories are the tenant farmers, the farmhands, the subordinates, and the parasitic sons.

Not only do these matriarchs rule their fictional world, but they also dominate O'Connor's fiction. The strong, domineering, powerful woman is a recurring figure in O'Connor's literary works; and as such, this character type is important to a fuller understanding of O'Connor's fiction. O'Connor clued us as to the significance of her characters when she stated that the meaning of a work of fiction can be derived from "the kind of world the writer creates, from the kind of character and detail he invests it with. . . ." <sup>67</sup> Indeed, as this study indicates, O'Connor's matriarchs, these domineering women of the countryside, contribute much to the meaning of their creator's body of literary works.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Fitzgerald, Introd., Everything That Rises Must Converge, by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), pp. vii-xii.

<sup>3</sup>Sally Fitzgerald, Introd., The Habit of Being by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Random House, 1980), p. x.

<sup>4</sup>Fitzgerald, The Habit of Being, p. x.

<sup>5</sup>Fitzgerald, The Habit of Being, p. x.

<sup>6</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor's Company of Southerners: or, 'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, No. 6 (1977), pp. 62-63.

<sup>8</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 196.

<sup>9</sup>Dorothy Walters, Flannery O'Connor (New York: Twayne Publishers,

1973), p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 488. All subsequent references to O'Connor's short stories refer to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood, in Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York: The New American Library, 1962), p. 23. All subsequent references to this work refer to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Josephine Hendin, The World of Flannery O'Connor (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> Hendin, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> Carter W. Martin, The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1969), p. 223.

<sup>15</sup> Flannery O'Connor, The Violent Bear It Away, in Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York: The New American Library, 1960), p. 309. All subsequent references to this work refer to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Walters, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Walters, p. 137.

<sup>18</sup>Walters, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup>Louise Westling, "Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters,"  
Twentieth Century Literature, 24 (1978), 517.

<sup>20</sup>Martin, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup>Hendin, p. 117.

<sup>22</sup>Hendin, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup>Martin, p. 233.

<sup>24</sup>Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton  
Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1973), p. 180.

<sup>25</sup>Martin, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup>Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. Sally Fitzgerald  
(New York: Random House, 1980), p. 26. All subsequent references to  
O'Connor's letters appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>27</sup>Charles P. Roland, The Improbable Era: The South Since World  
War II (Lexington, KY: The Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1975), p. 168.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas D. Clark, The Emerging South, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford  
Univ. Press, 1968), p. vii.

<sup>29</sup>James G. Maddox et al., The Advancing South (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1967), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup>James F. Doster, "The Old Way and the New," in Vol. II of The Rising South, ed. Robert H. McKenzie (University, AL: The Univ. of Alabama Press, 1976), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup>J.W. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. viii.

<sup>32</sup>Cash, p. x.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas D. Clark, Three Paths to the Modern South: Education, Agriculture, and Conservation (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1965), p. 49.

<sup>34</sup>Maddox, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup>Doster, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup>Roland, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup>Maddox, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup>James M. Henderson, "Some General Aspects of Recent Regional Development," in Essays in Southern Economic Development, ed. Melvin Greenhut and W. Tate Whitman (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 173.

<sup>39</sup>Maddox, p. 21.

<sup>40</sup>Arthur M. Ford, Political Economics of Rural Poverty in the South (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 25-26.

<sup>41</sup>Maddox, p. 21.

<sup>42</sup>Clark, Emerging South, pp. 84-85.

<sup>43</sup>Clark, Three Paths, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup>Clark, Three Paths, p. 18.

<sup>45</sup>Clark, Three Paths, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup>Clark, Three Paths, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup>Clark, Three Paths, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup>Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, Deep South: A Social and Anthropological Study of Caste and Class, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 337.

<sup>49</sup>Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup>Clarence H. Danhof, "Four Decades of Thought on the South's Economic Problems," in Essays in Southern Economic Development, ed. Melvin Greenhut and W. Tate Whitman (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North

Carolina Press, 1964), p. 51.

<sup>51</sup>Clark, Emerging South, p. 127.

<sup>52</sup>For a discussion of the status of tenant farmers and farm laborers in the period, see Clark, Emerging South, pp. 94-95; Roland, p. 23.

<sup>53</sup>Michael Cleary, "Environmental Influences in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, No. 8 (1979), p. 20.

<sup>54</sup>Cleary, p. 20; also Martin, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup>Clark, Three Paths, p. 89.

<sup>56</sup>Walters, pp. 138-39.

<sup>57</sup>Walters, p. 140.

<sup>58</sup>For comments regarding the strictness of the taboo on miscegenation, see Clark, Emerging South, pp. 222-23; Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, p. 25; and Roland, p. 172.

<sup>59</sup>Hendin, p. 30.

<sup>60</sup>Martin, p. 217.

<sup>61</sup>Martin, p. 218.

<sup>62</sup>Walters, p. 127.

<sup>63</sup>John F. Desmond, "The Lessons of History: Flannery O'Connor's 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,'" Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, No. 1 (1972), p. 41.

<sup>64</sup>Walters, p. 130.

<sup>65</sup>O.B. Emerson, "Some Contemporary Literary Views of the Newest South," in Vol. II of The Rising South (University, AL: The Univ. of Alabama Press, 1976), p. 121.

<sup>66</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 37.

<sup>67</sup>O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 75.



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