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THE FICTION OF TRUTH:

Intergenerational Conflict
in the Life and Works of
Flannery O'Connor.

Elizabeth Reed

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Aside from the fact that most of Flannery O'Connor's works are set in the South where she lived nearly her entire life, her idiosyncratic characters and the consistently horrifying fates that they meet could not seem further removed from the widely accepted image of the author herself.¹ This image, instigated by her loved ones and perpetuated by critics, is of a witty, intelligent, and above all else devout Catholic who was stoic in the face of a crippling disease that cut her life short. Despite the limits placed upon her by illness, O'Connor is described as having been socially receptive while living a fairly retired life with her beloved mother, Regina Cline O'Connor, on their dairy farm where she raised scores of peacocks and other fowl as a hobby. The main determinant of O'Connor's literary personality and the most influential force affecting her writing has almost universally been acknowledged to be her staunch Catholicism. Much criticism of O'Connor's work reinforces this notion to such a degree that one might infer any study not dealing with O'Connor's Christian perspective to be inherently lacking. Robert Drake, for example, writes:

What then about those readers who do not- or can not- share Miss O'Connor's "Christian concerns"? How far can they enter into both the substance and the shadow of her work? There *does* seem a point beyond which such readers, even with the best will in the world, finally cannot go: they cannot honestly share the theological assumptions which *are* part of her *donnée* (43).

While an understanding of O'Connor's Christian dogma is undeniably crucial for obtaining a complete understanding of the intentions of her works, criticisms focusing solely on faith issues have tended to overshadow all other considerations of her writing. I would like to propose that Flannery O'Connor's relationship with her mother was also significantly influential on her works. Little has been written about this relationship, but the existing criticism tends to overlook its importance. I would like to argue not only that this relationship was the most

crucial one in her life, but also that the conflict that was an inevitable part of it is repeatedly and extensively expressed in her writing.

Although O'Connor never writes directly about herself and her relationship with her mother, there is evidence in several stories of significant autobiographical content. More important, though, is the astounding recurrence of themes dealing with intergenerational conflict in O'Connor's work. O'Connor was primarily a short story writer; of the nineteen stories found in her two published volumes of stories, A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Everything That Rises Must Converge, sixteen deal largely (if not exclusively) with intergenerational tensions of one sort or another. Her two novels also address family-related themes, The Violent Bear It Away being particularly ridden with familial conflict. The sheer frequency with which these issues recur and indeed become the focus of O'Connor's writing seems almost obsessive. Additionally, all but one of the parent/child relationships depicted in her works are single-parent situations resulting either from divorce or the death of one parent-- a point that becomes all the more interesting in light of the fact that O'Connor lived alone with her mother for much of her life.

Some frequently recurring themes found in O'Connor's works are the following: the dependencies that family members have on one another; the incredible strength and pervasiveness of genetic ties; the desire for autonomy from one's roots and the futility of this desire; the link between genetic and spiritual resemblances; the intensity and uncontrollable nature of emotions that bind family members together; and finally, the destructive power of blood connections and the facility with which love can be mistaken for or transformed into hate and violence. Through a study of Flannery O'Connor's relationship with her mother and an examination of the thematic content of her work, some illuminating connections can be made. My analysis will begin with a

biographical inquiry into O'Connor's relationship with her mother in an attempt to construct a more complete picture of this relationship than has previously been done. I will then examine "Good Country People" as an example of a story that is particularly high in autobiographical content. Next I will discuss two stories, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "A View of the Woods," which illustrate themes of intergenerational conflict, and I will conclude with a discussion of The Violent Bear It Away to demonstrate how these themes are developed more extensively and intricately in the novel form.

I

As with many aspects of Flannery O'Connor's life, her relationship with her mother Regina has been revealed to readers from the one-sided and somewhat limited perspective of close friends, their good intentions being to prevent us from assuming that the parent/child relationships which frequently appear in O'Connor's works are representative of O'Connor's relationship with her own mother. As a result, the image of a perfectly affectionate and respectful albeit teasing mother/daughter relationship is now commonly accepted. Sally Fitzgerald and her husband Robert were close friends and correspondents of O'Connor's; Sally edited the book of O'Connor's selected letters, The Habit of Being. In her introduction to the book, she writes of O'Connor, "she had in fact, only one great fear- that her mother would die before she did. 'I don't know,' she said, 'what I would do without her.' The letters themselves are full of Mrs. O'Connor: she is quoted, referred to, relished and admired, joked with and about, altogether clearly loved"(HOB:xii). This image of the relationship was adopted and extended by critic Loxley F. Nichols who, following an examination of O'Connor's published letters, describes O'Connor and her mother as a "comedy

team', so to speak, with Regina playing the indispensable 'straight man', and O'Connor providing either the punchline or the wry perspective that jogs the anecdote into comic distortion"(20). Although an examination of O'Connor's letters do show playful bantering to be one salient aspect of the relationship, Nichols provides only a limited view of the relationship as a whole. What Nichols chooses to ignore and Sally Fitzgerald only hints at when she mentions O'Connor's fear that her mother may die before she does is O'Connor's extreme dependence on her mother due to lupus erythematosus, a disease that forced O'Connor to live under her mother's care for much of her adult life. Although affection, respect and playfulness are inherent in O'Connor's relationship with her mother, these must be integrated with O'Connor's dependence on her mother and the frustration that must have at least occasionally accompanied it in order for an accurate understanding of the relationship to be achieved.

Unfortunately, no comprehensive biographical study has been written on the life of Flannery O'Connor to help us put her relationship with her mother into perspective. What information we have about her must be gleaned from chronologies, occasional biographical essays (i.e. Sally Fitzgerald's introduction to The Habit of Being) which are generally written by her friends and whose unbiased accuracy must thus not be taken for granted, and finally her massive published correspondence. O'Connor's letters are undoubtedly the richest source for direct information about the author, but this source is not even free from limitations. The Habit of Being is a huge tome, yet even so, not all of O'Connor's correspondence is included in it. In using these letters as a biographical source, it must be taken into consideration that O'Connor may have written most of her letters in the knowledge that they might one day be published. She was known to draft and redraft her letters, and she was obviously very scrupulous about how she presented herself in them, thus O'Connor's deliberate and self-conscious

portrayal of herself should not be taken as a strict and accurate document of her personal life.² Additionally, omissions have been made in many of the letters for whatever reason, leaving the reader with the impression that perhaps the complete story is being hidden from us.³ Also frustrating for the researcher is the fact that none of O'Connor's letters to her mother have been published, although she wrote to her mother every day when she left home for the first time to attend graduate school at Iowa State University, and she continued to do so for the rest of her life whenever she was away from home. O'Connor did write about her mother in literally hundreds of letters to others, however, which are included in The Habit of Being, thus it is our most important source for gaining an understanding of the nature of their relationship.

For most of her adolescence and adulthood, O'Connor's mother was her sole immediate relation; she was an only child, and her father died of lupus when she was merely fifteen. Their close relationship is attested to by their daily correspondence, yet there is ample evidence to suggest that when O'Connor moved home to live with her mother in Milledgeville, Georgia in 1951, it was not a voluntary decision. The diagnosis of disseminated lupus erythematosus at this time-- the same disease that had claimed her father's life-- can be seen as one of the greatest determinants of the course of her career. Had her life not been in such grave danger, there is little doubt that O'Connor would have continued to live and write in the North. As she writes to Maryat Lee (June 9, 1957) when Maryat is considering coming to the South: "So it may be the South! You get no condolences from me. This is a Return I have faced and when I faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me"(HOB:224). This reluctance to move home is acknowledged by Sally Fitzgerald who admits that, "Flannery did... at one point want to leave the South. Like so

many gifted young people, she was sure, at twenty-one, that she could never properly 'work' in her own native region"(HOB:xv). In a sense, O'Connor was forced home by her genes; she had inherited lupus genetically from her father, and it was because of the disease that she returned to the South. There is also evidence that O'Connor had been moving towards a life of greater independence from her Georgian ties when the illness changed her life's direction. From the time she entered graduate school in 1945 until the lupus brought her home in 1951, O'Connor had only returned home for holidays, and in 1948 after declining a fellowship to Iowa State in order to live at the Yaddo Foundation's writer's colony-- a decision that upset her mother-- she chose to stay North for Christmas to save money rather than returning home to be with her mother. These details do not prove the existence of any great antagonism between the mother and daughter, but they do indicate that O'Connor's initial return home was involuntary. After heading towards a more independent lifestyle, O'Connor was forced into a position of great dependence on her mother's care due to genetically determined circumstances over which she had no control. Her letters indicate that she quickly adjusted to living and working at home, and this is supported by the fact that her writing was hardly hindered by her return-- in fact, she later deemed it the true beginning of her work. As she writes to Cecil Dawkins, July 16, 1957:

I stayed away from the time I was 20 until I was 25 with the notion that the life of my writing depended on my staying away. I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The best of my writing has been done here(HOB:230).

Initially then, O'Connor did desire to abandon her southern roots, but by learning to be content in the South through an acceptance of her southern heritage, she was able to enter her most prolific period of writing.

The bulk of O'Connor's published letters were written from 1951 when she was diagnosed with lupus until her death in 1964. These letters reveal a lot about

O'Connor's relationship with her mother, although what is revealed necessarily comes entirely from O'Connor's point of view. O'Connor consistently uses her mother as a source of humor in her correspondence, but at the same time the sense that she holds much respect and gratitude for her mother is clearly voiced. O'Connor's unavoidable dependence required a great deal of attention from her mother, and O'Connor frequently alludes to her mother's superhuman ability to care for her and simultaneously run the dairy farm, Andalusia, on which they lived. The more incapacitated O'Connor becomes due to the lupus, the more frequent are her expressions of gratitude in the letters, for example, this statement in a letter to Louise and Tom Gossett, May 12, 1964: "So my parent is running the Creaking Hill Nursing Home instead of the Andalusia Cow Plantation. Or rather she is running both"(HOB:576). O'Connor was obviously quite conscious of the magnitude of her dependence on her mother, which must have been somewhat frustrating for a young person struggling to express herself.

O'Connor's style of correspondence is replete with humor and wit, and undeniably, some of the most amusing moments in her letters stem from her light mockery of the fact that her mother's literary abilities are somewhat malnourished. There is no doubt that O'Connor and her mother are on two entirely separate intellectual planes. As she writes in a July 25, 1959 letter to a correspondent identified only as "A.", "My mother... has got the idea that 'literary' writing is distinguished from what normal people enjoy and therefore cannot be judged by her feeling about it. She said, 'Does it have symbolisms in it? You know when I was coming along, they didn't have symbolisms'(CW:1101,2). In another letter (undated; summer 1953) she tells the Fitzgeralds how her mother has heard-- and undoubtedly has believed-- that "Shakespeare was an Irishman"(HOB:55,6); and in yet another letter to the Fitzgeralds (January 2, 1953) she writes: "My mamma and I have interesting literary discussions like the

following which took place over some Modern Library books that I have just ordered:

SHE: 'Mobby Dick. I've always heard about that.'
ME: 'Mow-by Dick.'
SHE: 'Mow-by Dick: The Idiot. You would get something called Idiot. What's it about?'
ME: 'An Idiot.'(HOB:55,6)

This joking about her mother's cultural simplicity is sometimes also extended beyond the realms of literature. In a letter to Thomas Stritch (February 11, 1964), O'Connor writes about her mother's reaction to a recently acquired record player: "I think she just likes some noise in the background, I don't know if she listens or not. Every now and then she says, that's pretty"(HOB:564). O'Connor's correspondents were generally very well-read, and it is worth noting that the somewhat elitist attitude that O'Connor conveys in creating humor at her mother's expense seems inconsistent with her insistence elsewhere that much of her writing is directed against the northern, secular, scholarly community whom she accuses of intellectual pride. Marion Montgomery argues against the common assertion that O'Connor's writing is anti-intellectual. Montgomery asserts that this anti-intellectual claim stems from the conflict that O'Connor creates for her pseudo-intellectual readers by revealing to them that "you can't be poorer than dead"- dead spiritually and intellectually," and that "it can no longer be maintained that her fiction is local color used to satirize local yokels"(76). Although Montgomery presents a solid argument, it would appear from O'Connor's letters that perhaps this "pride of intellect" is something that O'Connor too was forced to try to suppress in herself on a frequent basis when she lived with her mother.⁴ At the very least, O'Connor asserts her intellectual superiority to her mother through humor in her letters, and although this is less offensive than open intellectual scorn, humor is often used as an outlet for deeper

feelings that cannot be directly expressed. Joking, then, may have been O'Connor's preferred method for masking her own "pride of intellect".

Another indication of the disparity that existed between O'Connor and her mother is the fact that-- like many others at the time-- Mrs. O'Connor could not fully appreciate her daughter's work. O'Connor generally alludes to this in an amused manner, for example, in a mid-September, 1951 letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald: "My mother said she wanted to read it again [her first novel] so she went off with it and I found her a half hour later on page 9 and sound asleep"(HOB:27). Similarly, after the completion of her second novel, she writes to Cecil Dawkins (July 17, 1959):

The current ordeal is that my mother is now in the process of reading it. She reads about two pages, gets up and goes to the back door for a conference with Shot [a farmhand], comes back, reads two more pages, gets up and goes to the barn. Yesterday she read a whole chapter. There are twelve chapters. All the time she is reading, I know she would like to be in the yard digging. I think the reason I am a short-story writer is so my mother can read my work in one sitting(HOB:340).

In general, as this quotation indicates, O'Connor seems to take her mother's lack of total comprehension (or perhaps interest) in her work rather lightly. It appears that her mother's lacking in this respect was merely another circumstance to which O'Connor had to adjust, and she did so frequently with the help of humor. The following quotation, however, from an April 3, 1959 letter to Cecil Dawkins is an example of one of the rare occasions when O'Connor directly reveals some of the angry frustration that she must inevitably have felt from time to time when dealing with her mother:

The other day [Regina] asked me why I didn't try to write something that people liked instead of the kind of thing I do write. Do you think, she said, that you are really using the talent God gave you when you don't write something that a lot, a LOT of people like? This always leaves me shaking and speechless, raises my blood pressure 140 degrees, etc. All I can ever say is, if you have to ask, you'll never know(HOB:326).

This is a fairly blatant expression of the conflict that O'Connor faced, but it is only just to add that it was not a conflict that she had with her mother alone, but with many others, particularly those southerners who viewed her depictions of the South to be negative. She writes of being commissioned by her mother to write a sort of explanatory introduction to be pasted on the inside cover of a copy of her first novel before giving it to her mother's elderly cousin so that Cousin Katie "won't be shocked"(HOB:33). Flannery was also obliged to revise her story "The Partridge Festival" to make it "less objectionable from the local standpoint"(HOB:405). As she writes to Maryat Lee [October 14, 1959], "Did I tell you I finished the other one and then realized that I couldn't publish it because it would hurt some people around here?"(CW:1113) Thus it would seem that O'Connor faced controversy over her writing not merely from her mother but from many other angles as well.

So what picture of Flannery O'Connor's relationship with Regina O'Connor emerges through an examination of her letters? Certainly the typical image created by her friends is justifiable, but it has been shown that this image is limited as it avoids the more sensitive issues of O'Connor's dependence on her mother and the undeniable differences in their intellects that caused conflict from time to time. While conflict was certainly not the focal characteristic in the relationship, it is necessary to acknowledge its importance in addition to the natural love and affection that Flannery O'Connor and her mother shared.

II

"Good Country People" is an appropriate story to discuss first, because not only does it touch on the issue of intergenerational conflict, but it is also highly autobiographical. As O'Connor writes in a June 1, 1956 letter to "A.", "what comes

easiest is what is most natural and what is most natural is what is least affected by the will. For instance, I wrote ["Good Country People"] in about four days, the shortest I have ever written anything in, just sat down and wrote it"(HOB:160). The ease with which she wrote this story as well as her claim that it was "least affected by the will" indicate that the story was at least in part the result of O'Connor's own feelings and experience. And when compared superficially, many similarities can be drawn between the life of Flannery O'Connor and her protagonist Joy Hopewell (or Hulga) in "Good Country People". Both are "highly educated" invalids who out of necessity have moved back to the South to live with their mothers. Both of these mothers have lost their husbands, one through death, the other through divorce, and both women run farms. O'Connor's and Hulga's ailments differ, but the effects of them are similarly debilitating. Hulga has a heart condition and "The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five"(CW:268); she also has a wooden leg that causes her to lumber around. O'Connor's lupus similarly curtailed her life expectancy, and the necessary treatment for the disease caused bone deterioration making locomotion difficult for her. At the time she wrote "Good Country People," O'Connor had to use a cane while walking, and she often referred in her letters to the awkwardness of her movements.⁵ Hulga is also described as sitting all day "on her neck in a deep chair, reading"(CW:268), and reading was one of O'Connor's most frequent pastimes.

Both O'Connor and Hulga have had their names changed. O'Connor was originally baptized "Mary Flannery", and when she first dropped the Mary, her friends and family continued to call her Mary Flannery; similarly, Mrs. Hopewell continues to call her daughter Joy even after she has had her name changed to Hulga. There is no evidence that O'Connor went so far as to drop Mary from her name in order to torment her mother in the way that Hulga does, choosing the

name “purely on the basis of its ugly sound”(CW:266). But the same tendency towards purposefully negative self-portrayal that Hulga demonstrates by adopting an unattractive name was displayed by O'Connor when she painted her self-portrait. It was painted when the treatment for her lupus had rendered her the most homely: her cheeks were swollen and her hair was falling out. She also indicates in a letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald that her mother thought the portrait was “awful”, undoubtedly because it was so unflattering. O'Connor sent a copy of the portrait to her friend “A.” on October 20, 1955 and she writes, “Nobody admires my painting much but me. Of course this is not exactly the way I look but it's the way I feel”(HOB:110). A self-portrait is a relatively permanent form of self-representation as is the changing of one's name, thus there is an ironic correlation between these two intentional attempts of author and character to present themselves in negative lights. A juxtaposition of two passages, one from “Good Country People” and the other from a letter, reveal other compelling similarities between O'Connor and Hulga which emphasize their desire to create negative images of themselves. The first is from “Good Country People”:

Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about... Here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweatshirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it. She thought this was funny. Mrs. Hopewell thought it was idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child. She was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense(CW:268).

Compare this to the following passage taken from an August 9, 1955 letter to “A.”:

I am highly pleased that you noticed the shirts... I am chiefly exercised by the hero rampant on the shirt and the always somewhat-less occupying it. This is funny to me. The only embossed one I ever had had a fierce-looking bulldog on it with the word GEORGIA over him. I wore it all the time, it being my policy at that point in life to create an unfavorable impression. My urge for such has to be repressed, as my mother does not approve of making a spectacle of oneself when over thirty(HOB:94).

Add to the information found in this passage the fact that in 1947 O'Connor had applied for several college teaching positions and that, as Hulga, she was reluctant to return home to the South, and we find a fairly clear autobiographical parallel.

In a sense, Hulga's decision to change her name can be seen as an attempt to regain control over herself. She is sick and thus dependent on her mother's supervision as is Flannery O'Connor, but she bitterly resents this dependence and fights it through scorn.⁶ By changing the name her mother has given her out of love, Hulga hopes to break away from that love: "One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn herself into Hulga"(CW:267). In the same way that O'Connor's mother wishes her daughter would write something that could be enjoyed by "normal people", Mrs. Hopewell continually tries to get Hulga to conform to her idea of normalcy: "It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year [Hulga] grew less like other people and more like herself- bloated, rude and squint-eyed"(CW:268).⁷ Hulga, however, refuses to conform and does not even attempt to hide her resentment at being pressured to do so, which is apparent in this statement to Mrs. Hopewell: "If you want me, here I am- LIKE I AM"(CW:266). Hulga reacts to her mother with sarcasm and scorn; in Flannery O'Connor's case, scorn is made more bearable by being translated into humor. O'Connor writes the following in a September 30, 1955 letter to "A.":

Hulga in this case would be a projection of myself into this kind of tragic-comic action- presumably only a projection, because if I could not stop short of it myself, I could not write it. Stop short or go beyond it, I should say. You have to be able to dominate the existence that you characterize(HOB:106).

Thus, characterizing Hulga in the way she does can almost be seen as a cathartic act for Flannery O'Connor in which she more directly expresses the sort of

conflict that inevitably existed to some degree in her relationship with her mother.⁸

III

Although not directly autobiographical, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" touches on several points of conflict that also characterized Flannery O'Connor's relationship with her mother. The story's primary purpose is to address the race controversy which was an extremely sensitive issue when O'Connor wrote the story, however as with much of her writing, the conflict resides in and emerges out of a parent/child relationship. The story revolves around Julian, a sarcastic, bitter young intellectual and his well-intentioned but ignorant mother. In the course of the story, the following issues are examined through Julian's relationship with his mother: the question of dependency, the futility of attempting to separate oneself from one's roots and the obligations one holds towards family members, and the narrow barrier that separates love from hate among family members. As a whole, these themes are indicative of the extreme complexity of emotion that O'Connor saw to exist in parent/child relationships.

Julian's relationship with his mother resembles that of Hulga with Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People" and thus also that of Flannery O'Connor with her mother. In all three cases, there is the absence of a father figure.⁹ Like Hulga and O'Connor, Julian has returned home to the South after receiving an education to live alone with his mother. Julian is not forced home due to illness, but he is nonetheless dependent on his mother, "a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still, 'until he got on his feet'"(CW:485). Julian's higher education has made him cynical, and

moving home is equivalent to a form of torture for him. He feels intellectually superior to his mother, and his attitude towards her is condescending: "Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him"(CW:485). Because of this attitude, Julian is blind to his dependence on his mother. He must accept the fact that he is financially reliant on her, but he has convinced himself that he is emotionally detached:

...in spite of her, he had turned out... well. In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother(CW:492).

Julian cannot face the fact that he needs his mother; he "did not like to consider all she did for him"(CW:485), because doing so would force him to acknowledge his dependence on her. He has an intense desire to separate himself from his limiting roots, so he chooses to ignore that he could not endure the separation.

In order to convince himself that he does not need her, Julian projects his own dependency onto his mother. He believes he has the ability to see through her, although he is convinced that she cannot begin to understand him:

...Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. ...His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity(CW:491).

This smugness in regards to his perceptual prowess leads Julian into a period of fantasizing about his imagined control over his mother and her supposed dependence on him. During the bus ride into the city, Julian creates several

scenarios in which he abandons his mother, either physically or spiritually, with the intention to "teach her a lesson that would last her a while"(CW:393) because, "There was no reason for her to think she could always depend on him"(CW:493). In his fantasies, Julian sometimes views his mother as a child while he plays the role of the caretaker who must keep the child in line. In every situation, he lets his imagination put him into the controlling position, reversing their roles so that she appears to be the one dependent on him and not vice versa. Because Julian is in fact dependent on his mother, his fantasies manipulate reality in order to appease his pride.

Julian's scorn for his mother is explicit throughout the story, and the malevolence he expresses towards her occasionally verges on violence: "The presence of his mother was borne in upon him as she gave him a pained sigh. He looked at her bleakly. ...There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit"(CW:489). Julian seems to take morbid pleasure in her displeasure, but in the final scene when his mother collapses, O'Connor reveals how easily hatred and resentment can be transformed to desperate love:

'Mother!' he cried. 'Darling, sweetheart, wait!' Crumpling, she fell to the pavement. He dashed forward and fell at her side, crying, 'Mamma, Mamma!' He turned her over. Her face was fiercely distorted. ...'Wait here, wait here!' he cried and jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. 'Help, help!' he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of a sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow(CW:500).

This pathetic conclusion reveals all that Julian has denied to this point. His exclamation of "Darling, sweetheart, wait!" is uncomfortably like the cry of a jilted lover. No longer the babysitter in charge of his mother, Julian finds himself abandoned-- exactly what he had threatened to do to her in his fantasies-- and his childlike reaction exposes his utter dependence on her. He needs her not only for

financial support but for emotional solace as well. He has tried to rise above his mother's pettiness and ignorance by convincing himself that he is indifferent to her love and by building up a barrier of moral indignation to protect himself from her influence, but the barrier collapses with his mother onto the pavement, laying bare his weaknesses. Julian is doomed to live out his life in "the world of guilt and sorrow": guilt because he will inevitably feel that his scorn somehow makes him responsible for her death, and sorrow because his need for her unconditional love will no longer be fulfilled. As with "Good Country People", then, we can see one aspect of Flannery O'Connor's life surfacing in exaggerated or distorted form in her writing. Intellectual pride, when inflated to scorn and taken to its extreme, can have tragic results.

IV

The story "A View of the Woods" deals extensively with the complicated nature of genetic connections. The action revolves around the nine-year-old girl Mary Fortune Pitts and her maternal grandfather, Mr. Mark Fortune. Mary Fortune and her grandfather are strikingly similar-- physically and temperamentally-- yet they must separate somewhere, and that point of separation exists because Mary Fortune has outside blood in her. As O'Connor writes in a December 28, 1956 letter to "A.", "Part of the tension of the story is created by Mary Fortune and the old man being images of each other but opposite in the end"(HOB:190). She is torn by her genes because while she is a Pitts through her father's bloodline, her grandfather continually pressures her to defect to his side and become "pure Fortune". Mary Fortune is forced to make a choice between the two bloodlines that are merged in her one small body, but genetic make-up is

not something that can be changed at will; thus her attempt to separate the two inevitably precipitates tragedy.

The sharing of physical traits is often an indisputable signal that two people are related. Relatives who do not share traits can more easily view themselves (and be viewed by others) as completely separate entities, but when two relatives resemble one another, it serves as a visual reminder to the world that they are genetically connected. Mary Fortune is tied to her grandfather because his genes are painted all over her face:

No one was particularly glad that Mary Fortune looked like her grandfather except the old man himself. He thought it added greatly to her attractiveness. He thought she was the smartest and the prettiest child he had ever seen... She was now nine, short and broad like himself, with his very light blue eyes, his wide prominent forehead, his steady penetrating scowl and his rich florid complexion(CW:525,6).

O'Connor uses this physical resemblance as a basis for binding the two characters to one another. Because it is undeniable and obvious to all who care to notice it, it makes their other similarities seem equally unavoidable: "she was like him on the inside too. She had, to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and his push and drive. Though there was seventy years' difference in their ages, the spiritual distance between them was slight"(CW:526). Showing that Mary Fortune and her grandfather are so intricately intertwined creates expectations in the reader that make their eventual rift excruciatingly tragic.

Continual reiteration of the similarities between grandfather and granddaughter guides the reader to view them as nearly the same person, or at least as clones of one another; the language O'Connor chooses to emphasize this is particularly suggestive of this notion. Mary Fortune does not merely resemble her grandfather-- her face is "a small replica of the old man's"(CW:525). The idea that Mary Fortune is the mirror reflection of Mr. Fortune is manipulated: "He went to bed certain that just as usual, he would wake up in the morning looking into a

little red mirror framed in a door of fine hair”(CW:539). The lack of distinction between the two is most forcefully impressed upon the reader, however, when Mr. Fortune actually begins to suffer Mary Fortune’s pain for her when she is beaten by her father: “This was Pitts’s revenge on him. It was as if it were *he* that Pitts was driving down the road to beat and it was as if *he* were the one submitting to it”(CW:531). Theoretically, Mary Fortune is Mr. Fortune’s double, but the fact that he is able to spiritually step into her shoes when she is being hurt indicates the near interchangeability of the grandfather and granddaughter.

The one thing that sets Mary Fortune apart from her grandfather is the fact that she is not purely of his bloodline. Mr. Fortune despises her father, Pitts, and although he wishes Mary Fortune were not related to Pitts, he does not initially blame her for it: “The fact that Mary Fortune was a Pitts too was something he ignored, in a gentlemanly fashion, as if it were an affliction the child was not responsible for. He liked to think of her as being thoroughly of his clay”(CW:528). The tension in the story builds, however, as Mr. Fortune slowly comes to the realization that his alter ego and namesake is not in fact his clone. Mr. Fortune cannot accept the instances when Mary Fortune’s Pitts characteristics begin to surface: “‘You act more like a Pitts than a Fortune,’ he said. He had never made such an ugly remark to her before and he was sorry the instant he had said it. It hurt him more than it did her”(CW:537). It is significant here that not Mary Fortune but her grandfather himself is hurt by this accusation. She is being torn in two directions by her blood, the composition of which is completely out of her control. It is impossible for her to deny either of her bloodlines, because they join to create her and one cannot exist without the other yet they are constantly at war with each other. The following passage illustrates the torment that she faces when she is forced to choose between them:

'Are you a Fortune,' he said, 'or are you a Pitts? Make up your mind. Her voice was loud and positive and belligerent. 'I'm Mary- Fortune- Pitts,' she said. 'Well I, 'he shouted, 'am PURE Fortune!' There was nothing she could say to this and she showed it. For an instant she looked completely defeated, and the old man saw with a disturbing clearness that this was the Pitts look, pure and simple, and he felt personally stained by it, as if it had been found on his own face(CW:541).

Mr. Fortune cannot bear her separation from him; Mary Fortune cannot prevent it, and her unwillingness to even attempt to prevent it is too much for her grandfather to endure.

Mary Fortune's eventual rejection of her Fortune bloodline leads to the final tragedy of the story. Her grandfather has forced her to make the decision but this is asking for the impossible, and it proves fatal for both of them. What makes the final scene so horrifying is that as Mary Fortune and her grandfather struggle, it seems as though one person is at war with himself: "With a sudden surge of strength, he managed to roll over and reverse their positions so that he was looking down into the face that was his own but had dared to call itself Pitts"(CW:545). Similarly, as Mary Fortune appears to have beaten her grandfather, O'Connor writes, "She paused, her face exactly on top of his. Pale identical eye looked into pale identical eye"(CW:545); and the following passage describes Mr. Fortune as attacked by himself rather than by Mary Fortune:

Then with horror he saw her face rise up in front of his, teeth exposed, and he roared like a bull as she bit the side of his jaw. He seemed to see his own face coming to bite him from several sides at once but he could not attend to it for he was being kicked indiscriminately... (CW:545).

With this excruciating image of familial love so uncontrolled that it can only be channelled through destruction and violence, O'Connor indelibly impresses on the reader the extreme power and complexity of genetic connections. Mary Fortune and her grandfather are controlled by their genes in the same way that O'Connor is controlled by the genetically inherited disease that shortened her life,

and the tragedy of this is expressed by the destinies of the characters in "A View of the Woods."

v

The Violent Bear It Away raises many questions about the interdependency of family members and the difficulties that arise when one tries to extricate oneself from familial ties. Some of the themes that have been shown to have been central to Flannery O'Connor's own life can be found in exaggerated form in the novel. For example, one of the most significant events of her life-- at least as far as her writing is concerned-- was the necessity that she live and work at home in the South. Initially, O'Connor had chosen to try to separate herself from her southern connections, and being forced to return was extremely difficult for her to accept. Equally difficult was the inevitable fact of her dependence on the care of her mother. Only as O'Connor gradually ceased struggling with her southern roots and accepted the necessity of her situation did she begin to flourish as a writer.

The locus of conflict in The Violent Bear It Away rests in the struggles between Francis Marion Tarwater, his Great Uncle Tarwater, his Uncle Rayber and Rayber's son Bishop. The overriding theme controlling the action of the novel is the idea that it is impossible to escape one's genes. O'Connor extensively manipulates the notion that natural inclinations are inherited through one's bloodline; the best one can do is learn to control those inclinations, because they can never be completely eradicated. This theme is expanded throughout the novel on several different levels, and evidence of the unavoidable power of blood connections can be seen in each of the main characters. A distinct but related issue addressed in the novel is the intense psychological influence that relatives

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can have on one another. O'Connor frequently merges these notions of the psychological influence of one's relatives and the even less avoidable power of naturally inherited inclinations to illustrate the extreme complexity of relations of kin. She toys with the fine line that often exists in familial relationships between uncontrollable love and uncontrollable hate. As in "A View of the Woods," O'Connor frequently uses the device of family resemblances both to tie the characters together and to emphasize their inescapable genetic connectedness.¹⁰ Although there is continual struggle among the family members, they must all come to accept the implications of their kinship for the book to achieve its resolution.

One of the most intriguing aspects of The Violent Bear It Away is the extent to which the characters are controlled psychologically by their blood connections. Old Tarwater, Rayber and young Tarwater must all struggle with the fact that freewill can only take them so far-- that it is impossible to entirely liberate themselves from their relationships with one another. Each character experiences this struggle to varying degrees and responds to it with differing forms of rebellion, but it is crucial for the eventual resolution of the novel that they all accept this destiny that has been determined by their genetic makeup. The fate that controls all three characters is a compulsion to prophesy. As Rayber meditates:

The affliction was in the family. It lay hidden in the line of blood that touched them, flowing from some ancient source, some desert prophet or pole-sitter, until, its power unabated, it appeared in the old man and him [Rayber] and, he surmised, in the boy. Those it touched were condemned to fight it constantly or be ruled by it. The old man had been ruled by it. He, at the cost of a full life, staved it off. What the boy would do hung in the balance(CW:402).

This passage touches on several important themes that are developed throughout the novel. First is the idea that personal characteristics can be passed on from generation to generation through the bloodstream. If something gets into one's

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bloodstream, it is nearly impossible to halt its pervasion of the body. O'Connor manipulates this idea to point out the futility of the characters' attempts to combat their religious compulsions as well as their attempts to abandon their connections with one another. This idea is put forth by Old Tarwater as he explains to young Tarwater that Rayber's attempts to reject his heredity are worthless. "Good blood flows in his veins,' the old man said. 'And good blood knows the Lord and there ain't a thing he can do about having it. There ain't a way in the world he can get rid of it'"(CW:367). Young Tarwater also fears that his blood is similarly and irrevocably infected by this starvation for religious fervor:

...what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life(CW:343).

The reiteration of this theme is important in that it drives in the awareness that try as they may, the characters cannot escape their fate; at best they can merely hold it at bay. The degrees to which Old Tarwater, Rayber and young Tarwater are able to control or be controlled by their blood form much of the action of the novel.

Rayber claims that Old Tarwater is "ruled" by the family affliction, but there is evidence that even the old man has had to struggle with it to some degree. He has come to terms with this inherited inclination long before the novel begins, which does seem to lend the impression that perhaps he is the root of the disease rather than just one of the many who perpetuates it. Because Old Tarwater seems so amenable to his role as a prophet and because he so actively tries to force both Rayber and young Tarwater to accept their similar fates, it is easy to place the responsibility for the conflict of the novel on him. But as was noted earlier, the compulsion reached the old man through his blood "from some ancient source." Old Tarwater insinuates that his life as a prophet has been a struggle when he

instructs young Tarwater "in the hard facts of serving the Lord"(CW:332), and "When he couldn't stand the Lord one instant longer, he got drunk, prophet or no prophet"(CW:358). Old Tarwater's religious fanaticism, then, would appear to be the result of a gradual acceptance of a burdensome but inescapable destiny.

Rayber's struggle to accept his fate has been somewhat more complicated than the old man's. Rayber was kidnapped at an early and impressionable age by his Uncle Tarwater, and although he has intellectualized himself to a safe distance from his uncle's fanaticism, he still considers himself to be psychologically stained by his uncle. He sees the kidnapping as the point when his life was irrevocably marred and has a mental picture of himself at the time as "innocently walking out of his own yard, innocently walking into six or seven years of unreality"(CW:408). In claiming this innocence, Rayber tries to justify his inclinations by repudiating his responsibility for them. If he can show that his drives are beyond the realms of his control, the intellectual shame they inspire in him is lessened. Rayber's painful consciousness of the influence his uncle has had on him leads him to believe that he is in complete control of it. In an argument with young Tarwater (who is unwilling to admit that he too has been affected by the old man), Rayber claims, "I know it's in me and I keep it under control. I weed it out but you're too blind to know it's in you. You don't even know what makes you do the things you do"(CW:449). O'Connor herself affirms that this is the idea she intended to convey in a letter to Alfred Corn (August 12, 1962) where she states, "they spend all their time fighting within themselves, drive after drive. Tarwater wrestles with the Lord and Rayber wins"(HOB:488).

Although Rayber may have his uncle's influence basically under control, at least to the point where he can live his life without succumbing to the strong pull of his prophet-producing lineage, there is evidence that he has not been completely able, as he says, to "weed it out." Rayber believes that his hatred of his

uncle is thorough. He resents his uncle for "ruining" his life, and this resentment allows him to remain unconscious to the intense love he holds for his uncle. The existence of this love becomes apparent when Rayber is faced with the prospect that Old Tarwater may die. In a conversation with young Tarwater, the old man relates Rayber's reaction to this realization: "And you should have seen his face,' he said. 'He looked like he'd been pushed all of a sudden from behind. ...when he thought of me going, it was like losing somebody for the first time. ...He loved me like a daddy and he was ashamed of it'"(CW:375). When Old Tarwater actually does die, Rayber's feeling for his uncle momentarily leaks out again, only to be hastily masked:

'Dead?' the schoolteacher said. 'My uncle? The old man's dead?' he asked in a blank unbelieving tone. He caught Tarwater abruptly by the arms and stared into his face. In the depths of his eyes, the boy, shocked, saw an instant's stricken look, plain and awful. It vanished at once(CW:386).

While Rayber comes close to hiding his love for his uncle under a facade of resentment, the fleeting moments when the love is allowed to surface confirm the psychological vise that still holds Rayber in its grip. Through this relationship, O'Connor shows that there is a very fine line drawn between uncontrollable love and uncontrollable hate among family members. Because one can so easily turn into the other, it is often difficult to distinguish when an act should be interpreted as a display of love or a display of hate. The important point in this case is that both are beyond the control of the characters involved.

Rayber cannot support the intense love that he feels for Old Tarwater-- and he must find an outlet for it. Thus his love achieves manifestation in another of Rayber's relationships: that with his son Bishop. Rayber's love for his son is intense to the point of almost becoming a sickness. As O'Connor writes in a March 5, 1960 letter to "A.," "Rayber's love for Bishop is the purest love I have ever dealt with. It is because of its terrifying purity that Rayber has to destroy

it"(HOB:379). I would venture to claim that part of the reason the emotion is so frightening for Rayber is that it contains all the love that Rayber possesses-- yet cannot bear to acknowledge-- for Old Tarwater. The old man's connection to Rayber is something that he desperately wants to obliterate, yet he cannot; by channeling the emotion he feels for the old man into Bishop, Rayber can find some relief from the burden it causes him. It is no coincidence that Bishop resembles Old Tarwater: "...the child reminded him of the old man. Bishop looked like the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence"(CW:400). Even when the old man is dead he never really leaves Rayber because he is incarnated in Bishop. Young Tarwater's image of Rayber and Bishop's relationship is interesting in this respect: "The boy had a vision of the school teacher and his child as inseparably joined. ...The child might have been a deformed part of himself that had been accidentally revealed"(CW:390). The power of this image is due to the fact that Bishop represents Old Tarwater. Rayber views the old man's beliefs as "deformed", yet he carries them around with him and in fleeting moments they are "accidentally revealed." The following passage expresses the complexity of Rayber's love for Bishop and all of the psychological trappings that go with it:

...moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity. It was only a touch of the curse that lay in his blood. ...If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him- powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal. ...It was love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. And it only began with Bishop. It began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated. He always felt with it a rush of longing to have the old man's eyes- insane, fish-coloured, violent with their impossible vision of a world transfigured- turned on him once again. The longing was like an undertow in his blood

dragging him backwards to what he knew to be madness(CW:401).¹¹

This passage touches on many of the ideas that I have already discussed. Rayber cannot escape this love because it is part of the legacy handed down to him through his blood. The love controls Rayber to the point that it forces him to abandon reason, when intellectualizing has been his sole means of distancing himself from the affliction of his genes. This passage also reveals that the uncontrollable love is extended vicariously to the old man which proves that Rayber is not free of his influence. As much as Rayber believes he wants to be freed from the old man, in reality he would be lost without him. This is why Rayber cannot go through with drowning Bishop: "The body, caught by an undertow, almost got away from him but he managed to come to himself and snatch it. Then as he looked at it, he had a moment of complete terror in which he envisioned his life without the child. He began to shout frantically"(CW:419). Rayber cannot bear to destroy Bishop, because in doing so he would destroy the old man-- a prospect that is inconceivably horrific for him.

The character whose entanglement is the most complicated and who must fight the most excruciating battle in the novel is young Tarwater. The action of the novel follows the progression of the young boy's struggle with his roots from beginning to end: from the insemination of fanatical belief into his mind by his great uncle, through his varied attempts to rebel and escape that belief, up to his eventual submission to it. Tarwater's struggle becomes the focus of the book, and it can be seen as a fully expanded view of the type of conflict experienced by both his Uncle Rayber and Great Uncle Tarwater. As it is dealt with more extensively than the other two, there are many interesting facets that arise in relation to it.

Even before his Great Uncle dies, Tarwater has determined to choose his own course, separate from the one Old Tarwater has planned for him. Old Tarwater intends to mold Tarwater into a prophet to replace him when he dies,

and one of Old Tarwater's personal holy quests is to insure that Bishop, the mentally handicapped child of Rayber, gets baptized:

'If by the time I die,' he had said to Tarwater, 'I haven't got him baptized, it'll be up to you. It'll be the first mission the Lord sends you.' The boy doubted very much that his first mission would be to baptize a dim-witted child. 'Oh no it won't be,' he said. 'He don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me'(CW:335).

With this denial, Tarwater commences a long, painful battle with his will. More than anything he desires to be independent of what he sees to be his great uncle's curse to prophesy. Like many young people who reject the actions of their parents and claim they will grow up to act differently, Tarwater is convinced that he is not influenced by his great uncle; he says confidently to Rayber, "He ain't had no effect on me"(CW:394). But like many of those people who claim they will act differently than their parents do mature to find themselves mimicking the exact actions they once purported to reject, Tarwater proves to be no exception. He denies that he feels compelled to baptize Bishop, yet he is inevitably driven to do it. Fighting this urge is almost painful for him as is evident when Tarwater first comes face to face with the object of his unwanted mission:

Tarwater clenched his fists. He stood like one condemned, waiting at the spot of execution. Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. ...He tried to shout, 'NO!' but it was like trying to shout in his sleep(CW:388,9).

The sense that Tarwater's fate is inescapable and that despite this fact he will rebel is clear at this moment. Tarwater knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he must baptize Bishop, but his desire to restrain himself is so strong that he manages to convince himself (if no one else) that he is not going to do it. Even after he actually goes through with it, he cannot admit to himself that it has any significance, because admitting to the baptism would be analogous to admitting

defeat and accepting the life of a prophet that Old Tarwater has set up for him. This acceptance is unbearable for him, so in his mind the baptism becomes "an accident and nothing more"(CW:465).

In order to convince himself that he has rejected his great uncle, Tarwater engages in some significant acts of open defiance against restrictions the old man had placed on him while alive. By opposing the old man through concrete actions, Tarwater hopes to erase the old man's presence from his life. First Tarwater abandons the task of digging his great uncle's grave and goes to the still to get drunk. His uncle had been opposed to his drinking: "He had been drunk only one time before and that time his uncle had beat him with a piece of crate for it, saying liquor would dissolve a child's gut"(CW:358,9). Once drunk, Tarwater proceeds to set fire to the house in which he believes his dead uncle lies. This is, to him, the ultimate sign of defiance, because Old Tarwater had been obsessed while living with the necessity that he receive a proper burial. Old Tarwater had been particularly sensitive about the prospect that Rayber might return and have him burned rather than burying him: "Go ahead and let him burn me but watch out for the Lord's lion after that... I been leavened by the yeast he don't believe in,' he had said,' and I won't be burned!"(CW:344) It is important for the unfolding of events in the novel that both Tarwater and the reader believe that the old man actually has been burned with the house. Believing that Tarwater has realized the old man's worst fear temporarily empowers him; it leads him to believe he will truly be able to shake off the old man's influence. It also drives in further his sense of defeat at the end of the novel when he finds that Buford, the black farmhand, had finished burying the old man while Tarwater was out getting drunk. Not only was Tarwater unable to escape his fate, but this fact proves Old Tarwater to be a true prophet since he has proclaimed, "and I won't be burned!" For the full impact of this event to be felt, it is important that the reader also is led to

assume that the old man has been burned. Because we know only as much as Tarwater does in this case, we experience his defeat with him when he learns the truth. The resolution of the novel at this point, with Tarwater finally accepting his life as a prophet, seems to be the only logical conclusion.

O'Connor makes interesting use of the symbol of Tarwater's hat throughout the novel to indicate that Old Tarwater's presence never entirely leaves the boy despite all of his attempts at rebellion. Wearing the hat is a habit Tarwater has picked up from the old man: "He followed his uncle's custom of never taking off his hat except in bed"(CW:337). The hat becomes a constant for Tarwater, and losing the hat is traumatic for him. When the old man takes Tarwater to the city for the first time, Tarwater accidentally drops his hat out of the window of a high-rise building: "...leaning forward, he saw his new hat drop down gently, lost and casual, dallied slightly by the breeze on its way to be smashed in the tin river below. He clutched at his bare head and fell back inside the room"(CW:347). Tarwater's horror when deprived of his hat is better understood if the hat is seen to represent his tie to Old Tarwater. Throughout his struggle to reject Old Tarwater's influence, the hat never leaves him. In the following scene, O'Connor seems to endow the hat with life; and the distinction between the boy and his hat becomes negligible:

A light went on in the window of the next house and revealed, at the end of the hedge, the hat. It turned slightly and Rayber saw the sharp profile beneath it, the set thrust of a jaw very like his own. ...He turned again and again Rayber saw only the hat intransigently ground upon his head, fierce-looking even in the dim light. It had the boy's own defiant quality, as if its shape had been formed over the years by his personality. It had been the first thing that Rayber had seen must go(CW:405).

It might be more appropriate to assert that the boy's personality had been formed by the hat rather than vice versa. Having been raised by Old Tarwater, young Tarwater's entire world view has been molded by the old man, and the hat is an

insistent reminder of this. It is no wonder that Rayber has such an intense aversion to the hat and that he devotes so much energy to trying to convince Tarwater to get rid of it. Rayber's sole aim from the time young Tarwater appears at his doorstep is to reverse the damage he believes Old Tarwater has done to the boy. As long as Tarwater continues to rely on the psychological protection the hat seems to provide for him, the old man's influence remains with him. Similarly, Rayber's failed attempts to get the boy to abandon his hat are analogous to his failed attempts to purge the boy of Old Tarwater's influence.

Like his uncles, Tarwater is controlled by his bloodline; but his situation is worsened by the fact that he is pulled in two directions by it¹²-- first in the direction of prophecy and acceptance of his fate by his Great Uncle Tarwater, and secondly in the direction of intellectual control and resistance to his blood by his Uncle Rayber. It is no wonder that Tarwater is a psychological basket case. He continually displays ambivalence in relation to his uncles. He does not want to be controlled by either one of them, yet he is ultimately affected by them both. The fact that both his uncles have baptized him seems to somewhat explain Tarwater's confusion. Old Tarwater first baptizes the boy legitimately, and then Rayber, in a deliberate attempt to be sacrilegious, rebaptizes the boy:

If one baptism is good, two will be better,' he said and he had turned Tarwater over and poured what was left in the bottle over his bottom and said the words of baptism again. Old Tarwater had stood there, aghast at this blasphemy. 'Now Jesus has a claim on both ends,' the nephew said"(CW:377).

The conflict between Old Tarwater and Rayber is thus symbolically passed on to Tarwater. He must decide whether to choose one route or the other-- or to reject them both and be left totally alone. As has been shown, Tarwater's various attempts to deny his great uncle's influence fail as he finally, albeit grudgingly, accepts his fate to become a prophet. But Tarwater also attempts to reject his attraction to his Uncle Rayber and again does not succeed. The first thoughts that

Tarwater has about Rayber after Old Tarwater dies come in the form of a rejection of him. Worried that Rayber might come to try to take him to the city now that Old Tarwater is dead, Tarwater says, "I'll never go to him. Him nor nobody else will ever get me off this place"(CW:343). It is no surprise, however, that the very same day, Tarwater heads for the city to find his uncle. As with his Great Uncle Tarwater, he verbally repudiates Rayber while being uncontrollably drawn to him. It is the ultimate irony, then, that when Tarwater is violated by the stranger at the end of the novel, the stranger takes from him the two material objects on which Tarwater places any value: his hat, the representation of Old Tarwater, and his corkscrew, which has been given to him by Rayber in an act that comes close to creating a sympathetic relationship between the two. Stripped of these two things, Tarwater is left spiritually naked and vulnerable, and it is at this moment that he must choose which direction to take, either the predestined path of prophecy or the intellectually motivated path of relative normalcy and suppressed drives. Tarwater chooses the former.

I would now like to turn to a discussion of some themes O'Connor uses to emphasize the complexity that exists in familial relations. O'Connor uses the eye as a powerful symbol in The Violent Bear It Away. The old man's "silver protruding eyes that looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads"(CW:335) are what have captivated Rayber as a child, and they continue to haunt him later: "I looked up and there he was, those mad fish-coloured eyes looking down at me. ...It was the eyes that got me,' Rayber said"(CW:436). The old man's eyes are partially duplicated in Bishop whose eyes "were grey like the old man's but clear, as if the other side of them went down and down into two pools of light"(CW:344). Rayber also has grey eyes, and before seeking him out in the city, Tarwater becomes somewhat obsessed with trying to visualize his eyes: "The boy was beginning to see a consistent image for the school teacher's eyes. ...He saw

them dark grey, shadowed with knowledge, and the knowledge moved like tree reflections in a pond where far below the surface shadows a snake may glide and disappear"(CW:365). Grey eyes is a family trait that simultaneously ties the characters together and torments them. When Tarwater burns down the house supposing he is burning Old Tarwater, he has a terrifying vision of what must be Old Tarwater's eyes: "he began to run, forced on through the woods by two bulging silver eyes that grew in immense astonishment in the center of the fire behind him"(CW:361). Similarly, he is haunted by a pair of eyes near the end of the novel as he is getting a drink of water from a well. "He looked down into a grey clear pool, down and down to where two silent serene eyes were gazing at him. He tore his head away from the bucket..."(CW:466). No doubt the eyes that Tarwater sees are merely part of his own reflection, but his reflection mirrors that of his great uncle, and this terrifies him.

O'Connor manipulates the idea of family resemblance, expanding it beyond the similarity of their eyes. By having the characters resemble one another in appearance and in some cases temperament, O'Connor creates a circular connectedness from which they cannot separate themselves. The physical similarities between the characters serve as visual reminders to them that they are related. Young Tarwater does not so much resemble his great uncle as act like him, which leads Rayber to feel oppressed by the old man's aura when he is around Tarwater: "Rayber had never, even when Old Tarwater had lived under his roof, been so conscious of the old man's presence"(CW:398). Physically, young Tarwater resembles Rayber to the degree that when looking at Tarwater, Rayber sees "himself so clearly in the face before him that he might have been beseeching his own image"(CW:395). In fact, Tarwater "looked enough like him to be his son"(CW:391), whereas his true son Bishop looks like the old man:

The little boy somewhat resembled Old Tarwater except for his eyes which were grey like the old man's but clear... the old man had been so shocked by the likeness and the unlikeness that the time he and Tarwater had gone there, he had only stood in the door, staring at the little boy and rolling his tongue around outside his mouth as if he had no sense himself. That had been the first time he had seen the child and he could not forget him(CW:344).

This passage is interesting because it describes the old man as beginning to mimic the idiot child rather than vice versa which seemingly completes the circle connecting all of the family members. The old man's presence is perpetuated in Tarwater who is the mirror image of Rayber; Rayber and Bishop are "inseparably joined"; and Bishop, the youngest family member, closes the circle off by resembling the oldest family member, Old Tarwater. O'Connor thus subtly weaves the connectedness of the characters into an unbroken circle from which they cannot escape.

Although the short story was O'Connor's preferred medium of expression, it is clear that the novel form allowed her to more thoroughly expand the themes of intergenerational conflict through psychological probings into her characters and through symbolism. Her intricate treatment of familial relationships in The Violent Bear It Away is indicative of O'Connor's view of the complicated nature of the such relationships.



Flannery O'Connor's relationship with her mother was unquestionably complex. Her dependence on her mother's care and her sense of intellectual superiority to her mother must have caused her frustration, but her belief in the futility of rejecting one's roots was stronger than any need she may have felt to be independent of them. Unlike many of her characters, O'Connor's struggle with her roots ended in acceptance, and she was able to prosper because of this. That O'Connor occasionally wrote from her own experience has been illustrated in the

case of "Good Country People," but what exactly does this mean? As O'Connor writes to "A." on May 19, 1956:

Fiction doesn't lie, but it can't tell the whole truth. What would you make out about me just from reading "Good Country People"? Plenty, but not the whole story. Anyway, you have to look at a novel or a story as a novel or a story; as saying something about life colored by the writer, not about the writer colored by life. She distorts herself to make a better story so you can't judge her by the story(HOB:158).

Granted, it would be fallacious to claim that "Good Country People" is a direct representation of the life of Flannery O'Connor, but the fact that she chose to write from experience at all is significant. Creating an image of herself, however distorted, is nonetheless an image of herself. That O'Connor used Hulga and others to express frustrations that were perhaps too risky for her to carry out in her own life is a real possibility. It should also be considered that an author may not always be wholly aware of the information she relays through her writing. In an August 2, 1955 letter to "A.", O'Connor writes, "You are right that I won't ever be able entirely to understand my own work or even my own motivations"(HOB:92), and in a November 17, 1956 letter to "A." she writes, "I certainly have no idea how I have written about some of the things I have, as they are things I am not conscious of having thought about one way or another"(HOB:180). That O'Connor was not always cognizant of the personal implications of her writing is thus also possible. The existence in her work of themes reflective of her relationship with her mother may in fact have been largely unconscious, but their frequency and the fact that she elaborated on them so extensively (as shown in The Violent Bear It Away) prove that conscious or not, intergenerational conflict occupied her thoughts often; the complexity that O'Connor saw in intergenerational conflict sparked her imagination to the point that it became a thoroughly pervasive thematic force in her writing. Regardless of authorial intentionality, this in itself

is evidence that the intergenerational conflict O'Connor faced in her own life was profoundly influential on the nature and content of her writing; and the insights it provides about her life, although they may be indirect and "distorted", are nonetheless illuminating.

NOTES

1. Apparently, many of O'Connor's readers expected her to be as bizarre as the characters she created. As she writes in a letter to Elizabeth and Robert Lowell (November 10, 1957), "Tell [your friend] to come see me. A lot of people come. Some of them are nice but most of them are mighty peculiar and expect me to be too and go away greatly disappointed"(The Habit of Being:252). [From this point on, the following abbreviations will be used to clarify the two works most frequently cited in this paper: HOB refers to The Habit of Being, and CW refers to Flannery O'Connor, Collected Works.]
2. The following passage provides further evidence that O'Connor was very self-conscious about how she was perceived publicly. In this letter to "A." (October 3, 1959), O'Connor discusses an interview for which she had prepared, revealing her desire to be in control of the public's view of her: "I thought that I would be prepared for questions which are usually always the same, so I wrote down a list of answers before she came and handed them to her. This should make her work easier as well as assuring me a few intelligible sentences. There were some questions however that I wasn't prepared for, such as How does being a Catholic affect your work? ...I said it was a great help. Why? I sputtered out a lot of incoherencies, which I will really hate to see when they appear"(HOB:351,2).
3. Through a comparison of the letters in The Habit of Being (in which some omissions have been made) and the letters published in the Collected Works (which do not have omitted sections), it is possible to pinpoint some of the deleted passages to speculate on the meaning of their absence. Frequently it appears that sections have been deleted in order to protect people about whom O'Connor has loosely spoken, but on occasion it seems that omissions have been made in order to perpetuate a specific image of O'Connor. For example, a few passages seem to have been omitted simply because O'Connor mentions alcohol (CW:940, CW:1162 and CW:973), and on occasion omissions were made when her language becomes somewhat impious, for example, when she refers to "the Hell of my filing system"(November 10, 1955; CW:967) and, "They administer the True Faith with large doses of Pious Crap..."(January 17, 1956; CW:983).
4. The following passage from a letter to Mrs. Rumsey Haynes (February 9, 1956) indicates that perhaps this "intellectual pride" was occasionally extended to a denigration of the South in general, or at least an insecurity in the face of the North's reputation for being intellectually superior to the South: "I have made a good many talks in the past year but all in the South, which is like talking to a large gathering of your aunts and cousins- I know exactly what they don't know- but talking to Northern ladies is a different thing. I can't imagine that there's anything they don't know"(HOB:136).
5. In a letter (September 29, 1955) to Frances Neel Cheney she writes, "I am oa crutches and will have to be on them a year or two. Right now I feel like the Last Ape. It requires a major decision for me to swing across the room. All this is on account of a bone condition in the hip... There is always something crashing in my wake(23)."
6. An interesting reversal of this dependence theme is found in the story "Judgement Day": Old Tanner is forced by old age to move from the South to the North (much against his will) to live under the care of his daughter.
7. Two similar characterizations depicting resentful, pseudo-intellectual daughters can be found in "A Circle in the Fire" and "Revelation."
8. There are other instances when O'Connor's writing appears to have provided a means of catharsis for her. O'Connor writes the following about the story "Greenleaf" in a letter to "A." (January 13, 1956): "I am very happy right now writing a story in which I plan for the heroine, aged 63, to be gored by a bull. I am not convinced yet that this is purgation or whether I identify myself with her or the bull"(HOB:129). This statement is provocative because the heroine of "Greenleaf," Mrs. May, suspiciously resembles

O'Connor's mother: they both run dairy farms and have difficulties finding suitable farmhands, and Mrs. O'Connor was sixty years old when the story was written, approximately Mrs. May's age.

9. The consistent absence of father figures in O'Connor's work is worthy of note. There are only five fathers found in her nineteen published stories (they appear in "The River," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "Judgement Day," "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "A View of the Woods"). It is thus not surprising that O'Connor rarely mentions her own father in her letters. One of the few times she does, she writes to "A.", "He died when I was fifteen and I really only knew him by a kind of instinct"(HOB:166).
10. O'Connor uses the device of family resemblance in other stories, for example in "The Artificial Nigger": "They were grandfather and grandson but they looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age, for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it"(CW:212); and in her unfinished story, "Why Do The Heathen Rage?": "She might have been looking at a stranger using the family face. He had the same noncommittal lawyer's smile as her father and grandfather, set in the same heavy jaw, under the same Roman nose; he had the same eyes that were neither blue nor green nor gray; his skull would soon be bald like theirs"(CW:798).
11. A similar uncontrollable love is found in "The Comforts of Home": "Thomas loved his mother. He loved her because it was his nature to do so, but there were times when he could not endure her love for him. There were times when it became pure idiot mystery and he sensed about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control"(CW:575).
12. This is reminiscent of Mary Fortune's dilemma in "A View of the Woods."

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Reading List

1. Wise Blood, Flannery O'Connor
2. A Good Man Is Hard to Find, Flannery O'Connor
3. Everything That Rises Must Converge, Flannery O'Connor
4. The Habit of Being, ed. Sally Fitzgerald
5. The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys, ed. C. Ralph Stephens