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A Feminist and Psychoanalytical Analysis of Flannery O'Connor "Good Country People"

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A B S T R A C T

Flannery O'Connor is one of the greatest American writers during the twentieth century whose writings have been analyzed as criticism for the emptiness in the American society. She dissents the new attitudes towards rejecting religion and resorts to her literature to bridge the chasm that was highly expanded with the prevalence of Darwinian nihilism between religion and the individuals. However, critics assume that the complexity in O'Connor's works transcend the theological limits; thus, they have started to analyze her literary production from new perspectives. This paper provides a close feminist and psychoanalytical reading for "Good Country People" to highlight the acts of repressing women in patriarchal society, applying a psychoanalytical approach to examine Hulga's psychological defenses to maintain the balance between herself and the society, in addition to dissect the spiritual transformation of Hulga by resorting to a clear analysis for the psychological and archetypal symbols in the text.

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تحليل نسوي ونفسي لقصة " بلد الشعب الطيب " للكاتبة فلانري اوكونور

م. م منيبة خلف محميد/ جامعة تكريت /كلية الآداب

الخلاصة:

فلانري اوكونور هي واحدة من أعظم الكاتبات الأمريكيات في القرن العشرين ، وقد عدت نصوصها بعد التحليل بأنها نقد للفراغ في المجتمع الأمريكي، وكانت اوكونور تعارض المواقف الجديدة تجاه رفض

الدين وتلجأ إلى الكتابة لردم الهوة التي اتسعت بشكل كبير بين الدين والأفراد مع ظهور العدمية الداروينية، مع ذلك يفترض النقاد أن التعقيد في أعمال اوكونور يتجاوز حدود اللاهوتية ، وهكذا بدأوا بتحليل إنتاجها الأدبي من منظور جديد، وتقدم هذه الأوراق قراءة لقصة "بلد الشعب الطيب" من وجهة نظر النظرية النسوية ونظرية التحليل النفسي لتسلط الضوء على قمع النساء في المجتمع الذكوري، فهي تطبق نهج التحليل النفسي لتقصي الدفاعات النفسية للبطلة Hulga ، وكذلك هي تحاول الحفاظ على التوازن بينها وبين المجتمع، بالإضافة إلى شرح التحول الروحي لها من خلال التحليل المبسط للرموز النفسية النموذجية في القصة.

Introduction:

Flannery O'Connor is one of the most preeminent and more unique short story authors in American literature. In spite of the fact that her unparalleled style of writing has caused many judgments and rumors about her, she received many awards and honors during her life time. In her writing, she often touched upon theology until considered a criticism for the emptiness in the American society. She dissents the new attitudes towards rejecting religion and resorts to her literature to bridge the chasm that was highly expanded with the prevalence of Darwinian nihilism between religion and the individuals. Actually, she considers herself a devoted Christian and declares that the audience of her writings "is the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people... [she is] conscious of writing for" (QTD in Rogers 103). However, critics assume that the complexity in O'Connor's works transcend the theological limits; thus, they have started to analyze her literary production from new perspectives. Preston Browning assumes that her writings deserve to be analyzed apart from religious attitudes; he asserts that her writings encapsulate a "persistent habit of finding the human reality in the extreme, the perverse, the violent... [that] calls for closer examination" (qtd in Fowler 127).

O'Connor's "Good Country People" is one of her most anthologized short stories in which she portrays the life of her heroin Hulga who receives her grace after meeting a Bible salesman holds the same nihilistic ideas that she has. Rereading this story beyond religious orthodoxy and examining Hulga from different angles,

one clearly observes that O'Connor represents her audience a distinct portrait about the image and the status of women in the southern patriarchal society. Hulga fights against patriarchal notion in objectifying women and refutes the social standers in order to assert her identity as an independent female philosopher. She rebels against the rigid dogma and announce her beliefs in nihilism. But, as one of O'Connor recurrent themes, Hulga is ironically traumatized and eventually transformed by discovering the futility of her nihilistic beliefs. This paper provides a close feminist and psychoanalytical reading for "Good Country People" to highlight the acts of repressing women in patriarchal society , apply a psychoanalytical approach to examine Hulga's psychological defenses to maintain the balance between herself and the society, in addition to dissect the spiritual transformation of Hulga by resorting to a clear analysis for the psychological and archetypal symbols in the text.

A Feminist and Psychoanalytical Analysis:

As a female writer in a patriarchal society, O'Connor deeply realizes both the stereotypical image of 'ideal woman' as the perfect wife and mother, and the masculine superiority which shackled and confined women within domestic role. "Good Country People" is a manifesto of the "negative portrayal for women and excessive acts of violence against them ... [in order to] reveal marring social contexts that enforce and maintain their inferiority" (Wilson 96). To reveal such 'marring social context', O'Connor adopts a polarity of characterization for her female characters to reflect the chasm between two images of women : the rebellious character incarnated in Hulga the doctor of philosophy who refutes any sort of authority : maternal authority, masculine authority and even divine authority (God) .The other one is the image of the desirable ideal patriarchal woman incarnated in Mrs. Freeman's daughters , Glynese and Carramae . Hulga "the large blond girl who had an artificial leg" (O'Connor 1556) does not fit her society's standers as an "ideal woman" as she rejects the domestic role and be a submissive woman. She resorts to violate the patriarchal doctrines and works very hard to educate herself and get a PhD in philosophy. She also adopts an extreme dogma in rejecting God. On the other hand, Glynese and Carramae represent another image as they accept and completely fit their patriarchal role. Glynese "a

redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers” and Carramae, “a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant.” (O'Connor 1556). It is obvious that Glynese and Carramae existence is identified with their masculine surrounding.

According to her society as well as to her mother, Mrs. Hopewell who is internalized as patriarchal woman, Hulga violates the rules of normality as she has never been in a love relationship, or in other words, she does not attract men as any ‘normal’ girl, actually “ she looked at nice Young men as if she could smell their stupidity”(1559). Mrs. Hopewell always compares Hulga with Glynese and Caramae, who are “fine girls” with” common sense”:

It was hard to Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child is thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times. (1557)

Mrs. Hopewell cannot identify her daughter outside the frame of her masculine society. She is really entrapped within a state of denial; she denies the fact that her daughter is different and unique, that she refuses to communicate with her daughter outside the perspective of her patriarchy. Hulga, in her turn, tries to urge her mother to abandon the patriarchal dogma and see her from a feminine angle that’s why she calls her ‘woman’ instead of mom or mother, and wonders if she “ever look inside? and see what ... [she is] not?” (O’Connor1559); calling her mother with the word ‘woman’ is a clear invitation, from Hulga to her mother, to abandon the programmed role as a patriarchal mother in order to see and sense her as a woman with pure feminine lenses.

Mrs. Hopewell’s attitudes towards her daughter’s education also alludes the masculine society perspectives toward educating women. she believes that “it was nice for girls to go to school to have a good time” and it is acceptable to work as school teacher or even as nurse, as these two jobs are related to the typical role of women in raising children and looking after others. But Hulga goes beyond the rules of her patriarchal society and transcends the limit as she wants to be a role model and illuminate the people around her as a doctor of philosophy she becomes

indifferent to the dogmas of her society and “grew less than other people and more like herself”(1559).

O'Connor also condemns objectifying women and addressing them as an inferior, emotional and sexual figures; she pin points to the “Traditional gender roles [that] cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson 85). This Inferior look towards women is reflected by the attitudes of Manley Pointer towards Hulga and her mother. The main masculine character in this story, Pointer is represented as a rational character that could recognize Mrs. Hopewell weak spot as an emotional figure , manage to attract her attention and stir her emotion by making up the story of his miserable childhood, the death of his father and his weak heart just like her daughter. He also succeeds in seducing Hulga and penetrates her cocoon that he “had touched the truth about her... [and surrendering herself to him] ... was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his” (1567). O'Connor wittingly invests the characterization to represent a clear image by which we interfere the dogma of the patriarchal society that tends to classify women according to their gender role in addition to objectify and project them as sexiest objects. She uses her character Hulga to scandalize such masculine society that tends to outcast and marginalize women if they try to violate their patriarchal system.

Patriarchal Discrimination, being oppressed and undermined her by a patriarchal authority caused Hulga serious psychological scars and entrapped her in a state of low self-esteem and fear of intimacy as she no longer fits the norms of her society neither physically(because of losing her leg , lacking the feminine look in her clothes as well as her body) nor, later on, ideologically (as she penetrates the social and theological dogmas). According to Freud, the repressed feelings and emotions, that are stored in the unconscious, are the regulator of our conscious life. Hulga's rebellious identity is crystallized by the repressed fears, conflicts and frustration in the unconscious that “desires not to recognize or change our destructive behaviors... [so they] are served by our defenses” (Tyson 15). Hulga seems to suffer feelings of low self-esteem generated from the traumatic accident of losing her leg which left her in a case of denial and refusal. Hulga tries to keep her fragile feeling of safety by sheltering to two mechanisms of defenses: denial

and avoidance. Hulga denies that losing her leg causes her any problem. On the contrary the artificial leg becomes part of her identity that “She took care of it as someone else would his soul” and “she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail” (1566). She also distracts herself from these repressed feeling by empowering her ego through changing her name from Joy to Hulga as a declaration to refute the maternal authority.

She considers the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom; presumably, the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. (1558).

She also tends to educate herself and get a Ph.D. in philosophy to penetrate the taboo of the patriarchal authority to assert her identity as knowledgeable woman who rejects the domestic role of female and to prove herself and others that she has the ability and lacks nothing. She also transgresses the theological boundaries and repudiates the existence of god.

Hulga resorts to avoid people and action that reminds her about her inferiority that she “seldom paid attention to her surroundings” (1566). So, she chooses to step away not only from her mother but also from others like Mrs. Freeman and her daughters. However, she benefits from their existence to distract her mother attention and avoid her commentaries:

Hulga had learned to tolerate Mrs. Freeman who saved her from taking walks with her mother. Even Glynese and Carramae were useful when they occupied attention that might otherwise have been directed at her. At first, she had thought she could not stand Mrs. Freeman for she had found it was not possible to be rude to her. (1558)

Rereading the relationship between Hulga and Mrs. Freeman psychologically, readers can interfere that Mrs. Freeman manages to penetrate Hulga’s shell; she could sense the buried fears and realize the enveloped weakness inside Hulga. Freeman’s “beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind [Hulga’s]face to reach some secret fact” related to her unseen inner conflicts

(1558). She realizes that Hulga both derives her power and hides her weakness behind the artificial leg.

Just like Mrs. Freeman, Manley pointer with “his eyes like two steel spikes “(1567) deduces that Hulga’s artificial leg is what makes her unique. He also realizes Hulga’s repressed desires to be loved by a man and her hunger towards power and control to assert herself in patriarchy. He makes her feel her femininity that “He gazed at her now as if the fantastic animal at the zoo had put its paw through the bars and given him a loving poke. She thought he looked as if he wanted to kiss her again” (1563). In other words, He manages to liberate her libido. According to Freud’s theory, Hulga seeks her pleasure but “Under the influence of the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle”

(Beyond the Pleasure Principle 4); She convinces herself that her desires towards pointer stem from her eagerness to illuminate him rather than fulfilling her repressed sexual passions. Her true intentions are scandalized by her fantasy, she is longing for being appreciated as a woman who attracts men and seduces them.

During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful (1564)

The previous quotation alludes to Hulga’s repressed feeling and her anxiety about revealing her carving needs to be seen as an attractive woman and to fulfill her desires as in obtaining power.

Hulga traumatic experience caused by her relationship with Pointer makes her go through spiritual death and rebirth. In fact, her journey to the wood with him alludes to undergoing in a suggesting female womb. Their walking inside the wood as flying “The boy walked lightly by her side, bouncing on his toes” (emphasis added) Also suggests sexual activity. When he starts kissing her which illuminates an “extra surge of adrenalin ... [that directly] ... went at once to the brain.” his

kisses shock her mind that “she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience”. The psychological transformation inside Hulga is wittingly projected on nature; as mentioned in the text that “The hill was sprinkled with small pink weeds” and “The two pink-speckled hillsides”. The pink color is created by mixing white the symbol of purity and innocence with red the color of blood and disorder. Using pink is very suggestive it alludes the Hulga’s psychological transformation caused by her journey to wood with pointer whose name has sexual allusion.

Moreover, entering the ‘barn’ is another symbol of female womb that asserts another spiritual death and rebirth of Hulga. Hulga’s action in climbing the ladder is an important symbol; according to Freud’s theory “Ladders, steps and staircases, or, more precisely, walking on them, are clear symbols of sexual intercourse” (QTD in Petocz 114). Once Hulga climbs the ladder, her attitudes record a slight change especially when Pointer removes her glasses that she began to

“[kiss him] and after she had put several on his cheek, she reached his lips and remained there, kissing him again and again as if she were trying to draw all the breath out of him... She looked away from him off into the hollow sky and ... then down farther into what appeared to be two green swelling lakes. She didn’t realize he had taken her glasses but this landscape could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings.” (emphasis added: 1566) Hulga starts to see the world around her, without her glasses, from a new perspective; the “shifty landscape” (1566) reflects the process of the inner transformation. The blue sky which used to suggest purity and security turns to be hollow as it is vacuumed of its color. The lakes are now green which alludes to death, decay and the water, “the commonest symbol of the unconscious” (Jung: 18) is swelling and expanding; this image high light that Hulga unconscious is about overflow. Yet her ego still fights to control the Id that her mind until this moment “never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings” (1566). The crucial moment in Hulga transformation is when he takes off her artificial leg. She has completely lost her old self (spiritual death) and starts to think differently as a new person.

“She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again... Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at.” (1566)

Hulga has completely transformed and reborn; for the first time she feels dependent on others in addition to her inability to rely on her mind as she stops to think according to her previous ideology. New Hulga is no longer controlled by her mind; she is now overwhelmed by her emotions and desires.

From another psychological perspective, the relationship between Hulga and Manley Pointer in their society can be seen as a psychological allegory to represent Freud’s division of the human psyche: ego, Id and super ego. Hulga perfectly stands for the ego as she struggles to maintain the balance in herself and mediates between her super ego which is represented by the maternal authority (Mrs. Hope well) as well as her society. She depends on her mind to sustain this balance by keeping every “matters of mind control” (1565). Hulga as representing the ego fights to assert herself in front of the authority of Mrs. Hopewell (super ego). On the other hand, pointer represents the Id as he is impulse and driven by his desires. He is a boy “with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom” who seeks after his pleasure and cheats on other people to fulfill his desires. He actually gains joy from cheating on others; he has “gotten a lot of interesting things ... [that he once deceived a woman and] ‘got ... [her] glass eye” (1568) just like the way he did with Hulga. He tempted and seduced her to join him a journey to the wood. He urges her to “walk to the gate with ... [him]” (1563). He is driven by his pleasure principle. Moreover, when Hulga decides to meet him at the gate she “escap[es] without drawing Mrs. Hopewell’s... [the super ego] attention” (1564).

Reexamining the characters of Hulga and pointer in light of being representative of id and ego, we deduce that the text alludes many similarities between them; they both have heart condition, threatened by early death because of their heart disease

and the most important thing is that they are both nihilistic and believe in nothing; pointer admits “I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!”(1568). The only difference between them is that Hulga is controlled by mind whereas pointer impulses with his desires and instincts. As Freud asserts “the fact that id and ego are originally one” (On Freud's "Analysis Terminable and Interminable 240); Hulga and pointer are two faces the same coin. Thus, Hulga’s journey with pointer in the wood is actually a journey into her unconscious and her meeting with him in the barn incarnates the traumatic confrontation with her own id. Moreover, the black valise that joins pointer wherever he goes is very symbolic. It just like Pandora’s box that hide evil inside it and the human unconscious that stores forbidden desires and emotions; once it is opened Hulga realizes that she is overwhelmed by her own false beliefs in nothing and left alone ,without her leg, with a blur and disturb consciousness as suggested in phrase “the dusty sunlight” (1568).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, although the biographical information of O’Connor suggests a theological lens to examine her writings as manifestation of her religious beliefs, the complexity of her characterization for individuals and social authorities imposes new attitudes to analyze her literary product beyond the superficiality of religious doctrines. “Good Country People” documents the violations of patriarchy against women in suppressing them and projecting them as sexist object with definite domestic role that they are forbidden to transgress it. The story also depicts the labyrinthine of human psychology ; the inferior look towards Hulga, as she does not fulfill the notions of her patriarchal society, causes her ineffaceable psychological scars that she tries to hide by resorting to defenses mechanism of denying and avoidance such as changing her name, educating herself and rebelling against and avoids her society and her mother. Driven by her pleasure principle, Hulga, eventually, lets herself to fulfill her desires but ironically, she is traumatized when she discovers the shallowness of her beliefs. She passes through a spiritual death and rebirth in which nature’s phenomena, colors and objects are wittingly employed to reflect her transformation.

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