Flannery O’Connor as a Colonizer

In a 1965 issue of The New York Review of Books, Irving Howe stated the following in his article “Flannery O’Connor’s Stories”:

Miss O’Connor was a serious Catholic, and what she called ‘the Catholic sacramental view of life’ is certainly a controlling force in her stories. But it is not the only nor always the dominant one… Miss O’Connor’s religious convictions certainly operate throughout most of her stories, but at so deep a level… that the skeptical reader is spared the problem of an explicit confrontation with ‘the Catholic sacramental view of life’. (Howe)

Indeed, it is true that Flannery O’Connor’s Catholic beliefs are recognizable in all of her works; however, it is arguable that this religious influence does permeate her writing in such a way as to be a central, primary objective of her stories that is not easily ignored. When considering the context of Miss O’Connor’s surroundings and upbringing, it is important to note that she is a religious minority as a devout Catholic in a largely Protestant South. This serves to emphasize her desire to project a unique religious voice that could be distinctively heard amongst such a homogenous chorus of Protestantism.

In considering this perspective, it may be argued that Flannery O’Connor utilizes a postcolonial criticism approach in several key ways. First and foremost, she typifies what critics of this literary practice would call a colonizer. By writing about the white Protestant middle class members of society living in a strained, racially integrated community, she observes an opportunity to inject Catholic views through the violent revelation experienced by her characters. Contrary to Irving Howe’s previously mentioned statement that “the reader is spared the problem of an explicit confrontation” with Catholicism (Howe), O’Connor requires her audience to
consider a Catholic minority perspective. This is in keeping with the traditional history of Catholic conquests made in the past. Recognizing this minority leads her to examine the invisible barriers between the North and the South as well, another postcolonial methodology. The South of the United States is largely characterized by the struggles experienced during and after the Civil War, particularly the scars left by the institution of slavery. The North is seen as a looming, distant power that somehow manages to keep a close watch upon the weaker southern region. This relationship is explored in her writing as her characters speculate the slow, steady integration of northern influences in their southern world. Thus, Flannery O’Connor is recognized as a modern-day colonizer in literature because of her insistence on conquering the Protestant religion with Catholic beliefs and the permeation of the South by Northern ideals and stereotypes.

In order to treat this proposal, it is important to understand the purpose and objectives of postcolonial literary criticism. In essence, postcolonial refers to a time of recovery and growth experienced by Third World countries or minority groups after being dominated or displaced by a colonizing invader (see A Handbook of Colonial Approaches to Literature, Sixth Edition, p. 361). The goal of postcolonial critics is to analyze the works of those who are heavily influenced by foreign oppression, thereby determining what lasting effects are wrought upon their subsequent development. It is impossible to reach ultimate conclusions concerning a particular culture or nation without also acknowledging the presence of the other nations who conquered and controlled it. Both colonizer and colonized are affected.

Postcolonial studies are heavily influenced by the ideas of Edward W. Said, who introduced the term “orientalism”. Said describes this as “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said 15) and “a
Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 10-11). The concept of orientalism provides an explanation for the decisions made by numerous nations in the past to justify the conquest, invasion, and colonization of what they deemed to be lesser nations. Though there may be other motives, the endeavor becomes acceptable simply because of perceived differences or a lack of understanding. As explained by Ann B. Dobie, there exist “pejorative stereotypes that the British, other Europeans, and Americans create of the people unlike themselves, thereby making it easier to justify military or economic conquest” (Dobie 209). World history is built upon this repetition of conquest, invasion, and dominance achieved by violence and superior rule. As before mentioned by Dobie, this typically refers to the white race colonizing colored people. This follows the pattern of subjugation based upon differences in race.

All of these factors contribute to the realm of postcolonial criticism known as spatial studies, or “the study of space and place. It involves, but is not limited to, geography, material objects, the built environment, social institutions, the body, imaginary sites, and ideological positions” (Gunderson). This addresses the “spaces” between cultures, races, and regions created by social structures. These are barriers that exist in the human mind and further widen the gaps between varying groups of people.

One primary example of this mindset of orientalism is the conquest of the Americas by the Catholic Spanish Empire beginning in the late fifteenth century. This was intended to be a religious, spiritual endeavor by the Catholics that ultimately resulted in complete domination of the indigenous peoples living there. A collision between two worlds occurred as Catholic priests began enforcing their practices upon the natives under the heavy-handed conquistadores. Nicholas Klar further describes the process as follows:
The Church had ruled that enslavement and war could only be made on groups that had rejected the Gospel. When encountering a people the [Requirement] was to read to them. Afterwards, if they still chose not to submit to God's will, violence was permissible. This was regardless of whether the people actually understood. (Klar)

The characteristics of orientalism are evident in this description of the Spanish conquest. The native peoples of the Americas assume the role of what many postcolonial critics call the “other”, meaning those who have the undesirable traits feared by the West projected upon them (Dobie 209). The Catholic Spaniards are the colonizers, or those who indoctrinate and rule by sheer force and brutality. Because the native peoples’ way of living is different, it is viewed as uncivilized by their oppressors. These particular colonizers resorted to violence and brutality because of the inability to communicate effectively. As mentioned by both Said and Dobie, the differences in living conditions, physical appearances, and religious practices sufficed as validation for dominance.

Flannery O’Connor, a Catholic, similarly introduces her religious beliefs by utilizing the concept of violence in a foreign religious territory throughout her stories. This is a common trait of her writing. In this sense, O’Connor takes on the role of colonizer through the forceful presentation of Catholicism upon another established religious group— the Protestants of the South. A well-known example of this is found in her short story “Greenleaf” in which the protagonist Mrs. May is pitted against a bull that roams freely on her farm. The bull seems to startlingly appear at every turn and serves as an inescapable Christ figure. She notes that, “The bull lowered his head and shook it and the wreath slipped down to the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown” (O’Connor 312). The prickly crown brings to mind images of the crucified Christ. Mrs. May wants nothing more than to be rid of the bull but
eventually must confront it after refusing to do so for so long. The violent revelation comes when, after standing in “freezing unbelief”, “[o]ne of [the bull’s] horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip” (O’Connor 333). The bull as a Christ figure symbolizes the traditional Catholic belief that God is as big as the universe and yet can dwell inside one’s heart. The bull had wandered uninhibited on Mrs. May’s property for days and yet managed to find where she was and pierce her heart.

Another example of this is represented by Asbury in “The Enduring Chill”. This wayward son finds himself on his deathbed under the watchful care of his devout Catholic mother who eventually risks suggesting that “the retired Methodist minister” (O’Connor 371) visit him. To spite his mother, Asbury insists that a Jesuit priest stop by. After curtly replying, “You’re not a member of that church” (371), Asbury’s mother makes the phone call. In the end, this attempt to irritate his mother backfires as the Jesuit priest proceeds to scold and chastise Asbury for his lack of faith and failure to pray (375-76). He is left to waste away in bed with no approaching escape from his miserable life. O’Connor uses this character’s plight to be faithful as an example of what occurs when God is discredited and absent from one’s life. She suggests that faithful prayer is absolutely necessary in attaining lasting internal peace.

One final example is the awakening that Parker experiences in “Parker’s Back”. Despite his previous rejection of anything remotely spiritual or religious throughout his life, he experiences a drastic change when rifling through the pages of a tattoo book and comes across a picture of a Byzantine Christ, as described here:

On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK. Parker returned to the picture—the haloed head of a
flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes. He sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power.

(O’Connor 522)

The Byzantine Christ, a figure originating from the Roman Empire, captures Parker’s full attention and does not leave him. He is rendered completely unable to shake the piercing stare of Christ’s eyes, resulting in his resolute decision to have the picture tattooed on his back. This is highly symbolic of both the Lord’s almighty piercing gaze and a true, life-altering conversion to a particular belief. O’Connor clearly and unmistakably presents doctrine to her audience in this way. Just as the eyes in the tattoo are impossible to ignore, it is impossible for O’Connor’s audience to ignore the religious references staring them in the face. She acts as a Catholic conquistador through her writing by violently indoctrinating those who are unable or unwilling to learn by any other means.

Flannery O’Connor acts as a colonizer not only in a religious sense but in a symbolic geographical sense as well. Situated in the deep South of the United States, she experiences firsthand the invisible barrier placed between her native southern home and the North. Herein lies the spatial studies aspect of postcolonial criticism. There is no physical wall or manmade structure separating the North from the South; however, there is a very real invisible wall created by mankind that dwells unconsciously in the mind of every American citizen. O’Connor uses this backdrop to reference the psychological division between the two geographical regions and further emphasize their many cultural differences. The brooding, impending force emanating from the North is eluded to regularly in her works. One such example is again found in “Greenleaf”. Mrs. May oversees the management of the family farm after the passing of her husband. During this time, she experiences many changes as the government continues to
provide financial aid for the Greenleaf family. One such change is the construction of a new shiny barn with milking machines. She describes the scene as follows:

She opened the milking room door and stuck her head in and for the first second she felt as if she were going to lose her breath. The spotless white concrete room was filled with sunlight that came from a row of windows head-high along both walls. The metal stanchions gleamed ferociously and she had to squint to be able to look at all. She drew her head out the room quickly and closed the door and leaned against it, frowning. (O’Connor 325)

This passage occurs after Mrs. May explains to Mr. Greenleaf in regard to milking and other duties around the farm that, “I have to do for myself. I am not assisted hand and foot by the government” (O’Connor 324). The contempt and mistrust felt by Mrs. May toward the government from the North is clearly evident in these passages. O’Connor symbolically portrays the North as a bright, modern, overwhelming presence that the southern Mrs. May is unaccustomed to. It literally and “ferociously” blinds her. Because of the foreign nature of the building and machines, she converts her uncertainty into disapproval, as opposed to considering the efficacy of such a development. She instead prefers to remain in her southern bubble. The contrast between the old-fashioned South and the more progressive North is starkly portrayed in this story, a contrast studied and recognized by postcolonial critics as a cultural space.

This is not the only example of distance felt between the two regions. In “Revelation” there are instances in which the hostility is recognizable. Throughout the tense conversation held by Mrs. Turpin and the other patients in the reception area of the doctor’s office, there is an explanation brought to everyone’s attention for Mary Grace’s poor manners. After refusing to answer a direct question from Mrs. Turpin, the rude girl’s mother apologetically explains,
“‘Mary Grace goes to Wellesley College’” (O’Connor 498). The story goes on to say, “She twisted one of the buttons on her dress. ‘In Massachusetts,’ she added with a grimace” (498). This of course is accepted by all in the room as a clear indication to the destructive effect the North has upon all who venture there. It is seen as a cold, brash environment void of manners and southern hospitality. This is further presented in Mrs. Turpin’s speculation: “‘Way up north,’ [she] murmured and thought, well, it hasn’t done much for her manners” (O’Connor 498). This episode created by O’Connor gives a taste of the prejudice felt between two geographical regions, separated only by stereotype and misunderstanding. Traces of the tragic Civil War are still evident amongst her southern characters. Flannery O’Connor acts as a colonizer in this regard as she pokes and prods the southern inhabitants with reminders of the powerful influence of their northern neighbors, ensuring that they do not easily forget what happened during the nineteenth century and simultaneously pushing them towards full integration within the United States.

The literary approach taken by Flannery O’Connor is one that provides the world of postcolonial critics with rich insight and unique perspectives. By violently arousing the white middle-class characters of her stories, she is able to convey her beliefs as well as her personal experience as a religious minority and as a southerner. These methods beg the question, “What is to be done? How is a more universal, accepting tolerance of all religions, cultures, and ways of life to be achieved?” The overarching purpose of postcolonial criticism is to give a voice to the silenced, ignored, and oppressed. Through her stance as colonizer, Flannery O’Connor ironically achieves this purpose as she gives voice to various minorities found in the South. She in turn asks her readers that they do the same as they consider the struggles and challenges faced by those who are different from them. In the end, all are equally affected by stereotype and
prejudice. It is crucial that these perceived differences do not overshadow the basic human similarities shared by all of mankind.
Works Cited

Dobie, Ann B. “Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism.” *Cengage Learning.*


