



4-2020

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Wride, Gavin (2020) "Clichéd Language and Commonplace Faith," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol13/iss1/7>

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Clichéd Language and Commonplace Faith

Gavin Wride

Flannery O'Connor's short stories were bred through the clichés of life in the American South where platitudes and idiomatic phrases played a pedestrian role in interactions. These overused dialogical instances and tropes work together to create a southern mythos within the realm of the Southern Gothic. O'Connor crafts her stories meticulously, caring for every detail. The inclusion of dialogical clichés in such conscientious writing begs further observation because overused language in such careful storytelling seems almost flagrant when mistakes in O'Connor's work verge on non-existent.

Carole Harris and Fred Thiemann have proposed studies of the language used by the characters in O'Connor's "Good Country People." Both place an emphasis on the repetitive, superficial language used by Mrs. Hopewell specifically, as well as the language of all characters in the piece. In his essay "Usurping the Logos: Clichés in O'Connor's 'Good Country People,'" Fred Thiemann claims that the Hopewell family's reliance on dialogical cliché derives from their desire to manipulate the world in which they live. He asserts that Mrs. Hopewell's total reliance upon cliché bars her from redemption due to the excessive pride involved in her desire for social control. Carole Harris, in her essay "The Echoing Afterlife of Clichés in Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Country People,'" makes a subtler claim that O'Connor's

use of cliché in “Good Country People” introduces a social game for Mrs. Hopewell and allows for familial cohesion. She proposes that a study of the context surrounding the use of cliché in the text induces a deeper study of the characters’ relationships.

While both of these claims merit further analysis, I contend that O’Connor’s use of dialogical cliché presents the shallowness of the characters, depicting them as simple in social interaction. O’Connor creates rigid, obtuse characters, as shown by their dialogical cliché, but she uses naming within the story to present the inflexible societal and social roles in which the characters live. These literary tools amplify the ideals of the grotesqueness of the Southern Gothic in order to condemn pride and hypocrisy. O’Connor’s display of obstinate characters ultimately conveys her idea that piercing through the fog of cliché—especially the greatest cliché of nihilism—allows for a moment of grace where revelation may catalyze a change of heart.

“Good Country People” tells the story of a mother, Mrs. Hopewell, who views her nihilist daughter with a prosthetic leg, Hulga, as an individual incapable of enacting any good. In an attempt at rebellion against her mother and Christianity, Hulga endeavors to seduce a Bible salesman who ends up subverting the Hopewell family’s judgments by expressing his own nihilistic beliefs, thus flipping Hulga’s worldview upside down. Fred Thiemann’s criticism of the piece aligns with O’Connor’s Christian writing and themes of sin and redemption. He claims that Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga’s use of clichés in their speech is “a form of the sin of pride, a usurpation of the divine *logos*, which alone can embody absolute meaning” (Thiemann 46). It is with this abuse of language that the mother and daughter strive to control their surroundings. Thiemann argues that Mrs. Hopewell’s clichés coincide with her categorizing the world into “good country people” and “trash.” The creation of such a hierarchy of people is one way in which she, as Thiemann puts it, attempts “self-deification” (49).

Mrs. Hopewell, far from displaying a godlike superiority complex, uses dialogical clichés out of simplicity of character rather than attempting “a usurpation of the divine *logos*,” as Thiemann argues (46). The inclusion of divinity in this claim seems misguided when considering the implications behind using language—especially repetitive, overused language—to control others and consequently exalt oneself to the status of a god. Thiemann does make the point that it is simply the desire for godhood through manipulation that introduces the sin of pride, but the text itself points to the naiveté behind

Mrs. Hopewell's tired speech. She spews platitudes and clichés like "nothing is perfect," "that is life!" "everybody is different," and "well other people have their opinions too" (O'Connor 272-73). After having delivered her longest tirade of clichés to Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman, she goes to check on dinner and speaks with Hulga who says she should get rid of him. Mrs. Hopewell replies saying, "I can't be rude to anybody" (279). She then goes back to the room with the Bible salesman and invites him to stay for dinner. Allen Tate in his book *Platitudes and Protestants* describes Manley Pointer as "a moral monster without human motivation" (67). Anyone who falls prey to such a person simply out of not wanting to be rude cannot stand on the same niveau as one who attempts to usurp the divine *logos*. This piece of the story exemplifies the simplicity of Mrs. Hopewell's interactions with those around her. She does not attempt "self-deification;" rather, she represents the foolish whose faith is ungrounded, living in a world of tired speech where platitudes and purported piety create a film of hypocrisy. Ultimately, Mrs. Hopewell's dialogical cliché reveals her own hypocritical faith rather than any grand motives such as manipulation.

O'Connor shapes her characters into clichéd roles in order to allow for such a reversal as Hulga experienced. Hulga had a PhD in philosophy and acted exactly in a cliché and stereotypical way in order to fit her character. Mrs. Hopewell grew up Christian in the American South and acted exactly how one would expect. Even Mrs. Freeman, practically absent from any supporting role in the story, acts as would a poor farmhand mother of two in the South. The characters' functions within the story are strengthened through O'Connor giving them dialogue riddled with clichés. She proposes that impotent, shallow language leads to a deadened faith. Mrs. Hopewell, the character most deeply situated within the sinuous quagmire of clichéd language and lifestyle, illustrates this connection between empty words and desolate fate when O'Connor writes Mrs. Hopewell's response about where she keeps her Bible. "I keep my Bible by my bedside.' This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere" (278). Mrs. Hopewell speaks as if she lives the stereotypical conduct of a woman in the South. O'Connor strives to relay Mrs. Hopewell's lack of faith by showing she doesn't live her religion actively; she only professes to do so.

The dialogical cliché in the story represents the simplicity of the characters rather than any sort of emotional attachment as argued by Carole Harris. Her essay references the conversations between Mrs. Hopewell and

Mrs. Freeman as a “call-and-response pattern, [which creates] a sense of intimacy over time” (Harris 61). She claims that the use of such platitudes and simple speech endears one to another. It is Manley Pointer, Harris argues, that exploits the emotionally charged clichés when he sees “the dialogic nature and echoing afterlife of clichés” (61). Harris contends that Manley’s understanding of clichés allows for his seduction of Hulga, triggering those intimate emotions and guiding them toward himself. She goes so far as to say that Pointer’s use of cliché presents his “defensive emotions” and makes him sound “uncharacteristically out of control of his language” (Harris 62).

This concept remains flawed, however, due to Hulga realizing the nature of cliché and how it makes one appear foolish. Manley Pointer confronts Hulga with a cliché indicating the most serious portion of his seduction had begun. He said, “[Your leg’s] what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else” (O’Connor 288). This cliché should, according to Harris’s argument, produce an intimate emotion within Hulga that would lead to her loving him, but all that comes of it is Hulga realizing she was “face to face with real innocence” (289). This idea of innocence equates to what Hulga would consider naivety, ignorance, and simplicity. She sees her mother as possessing these same qualities. Her nihilistic behavior and physical disabilities represent “her emotional detachment—an inability to love anyone or anything” (Oliver 224). Because of these inhibitions, she keeps herself steeled against emotions and therefore free of the emotional manipulation Harris claims lies within Pointer’s use of cliché.

We can see then, that O’Connor’s use of dialogical cliché holds the purpose of having certain characters fill their respective roles. The dialogue promotes the theme of inflexibility in the characters. Mrs. Hopewell especially exemplifies this attribute by her “loyal use of and reliance on clichés” (Steed 307). This rigidity of the characters does not mean that complexity eludes O’Connor’s characters. It rather demonstrates that O’Connor’s writings rely on symbolism and plot to convey her Catholic themes as opposed to detailing the inner struggles within her characters. This style of writing with its emphasis on plot over character is reminiscent of the “Southern Gothic” genre in which O’Connor participated. Strafford, in *Modern Fiction Stories vol. 28*, describes the gothic as presenting “a world beyond the understandings of metaphor, a world of mysterious inhuman forces that cannot adequately be explained by the metaphors of psychology or sociology or well-meaning humanism” (478). O’Connor works within the realm of the grotesque, a

term now synonymous with gothic, and uses her characters to explore this southern world and explore the harshness of life. The people themselves fall prey to the world rather than acting as agents able to interact with the world around them. Thus, O'Connor's pieces defy "well-meaning humanism" (478); they transcend into a sickly form of realism.

O'Connor's stories contradict the norm of gothic texts by introducing morality as a theme during the climax of the story. Shaddix explains her outlier morals within the genre by saying that "O'Connor's [grotesque] is representative of an archaic sort of realism. It creates the possibility for an awareness of the self as essentially deluding by underscoring the comic element of an inevitably errant human will" (6). This "awareness of the self" often accompanies the nucleus of the text. When O'Connor's characters come to their awareness, they also confront redemption, grace, or a revelation of their inhumanity, and thus they sidestep the delusion. Christian authors—even those as dark and post-modern as Flannery O'Connor—must be concerned with morality, or the lack thereof, in the stories they write. When the awareness of self is met with Christian grace, the "deluding" possibility fades into an opportunity for change, a crossroads within the story. O'Connor constructs her stories to convey morality to the reader; in this case, the immoral way of life consists of hypocritical faith, declaring piety while living in opposition to one's words.

O'Connor uses the grotesque scene with Manley and Hulga to promote the connection between revelation and redemption. Hulga became aware of a nihilism that outweighed her own which caused the world as she understood it to become reversed. Manley Pointer existed in a world where nothing mattered because he had "been believing in nothing ever since [he] was born" (O'Connor 291). O'Connor could only achieve the depth of this scene because of the foundation of dialogical cliché she constructed throughout the story's introduction. I agree with Harris's analysis that Pointer understood clichés and was able to manipulate people accordingly, but he did not do so on the basis of emotion. Pointer understood that these country people had compartmentalized others into societal boxes. He also noticed that they did not stray from the compartments they built around themselves.

"Good Country People," in addition to dialogical cliché, fortifies the characters' inflexibility through naming. A few of the names within the story simply become titles that indicate the character's role, though an underlying symbolism adds complexity to some of them. Mrs. Hopewell's

name is clearly emblematic of her personality. She has an outlook on life that involves the existence of “good country people” in the face of O’Connor’s realism in which she displays no semblance of such people. Mrs. Hopewell’s name dictates that she hopes life goes well. Mrs. Freeman bears a common name that many farmers in the 1940s and 50s had. Her role is simply to let Mrs. Hopewell bounce clichés back and forth and to offer an understanding of the principles that a “good country” person might embody.

Joy Hopewell, who changes her name to Hulga, offers the greatest insight into O’Connor’s brilliant use of naming due to the nuance and irony introduced. Joy Hopewell has a heart condition (279), an artificial leg (274), and is “bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (276). These attributes comprise a character who—Mrs. Hopewell might argue because of her PhD in philosophy—was holistically unhappy, contrary to what her name might suggest. Her developing nihilism and disparaging relationship with her mother led Joy to change her name to Hulga, of which Mrs. Hopewell “was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language” (274). Edmondson, in his book *Return to Good & Evil*, said of Hulga’s name that it was “the proud symbol of her own nihilistic creativity” (81). She likely chose the name because of its repulsive sound in the English language, believing that if nothing mattered, she might as well have that ugliness reflected in her name. O’Connor’s choice in the name, however, reflects her ironic humor and interest in minute details.

Far from simply sounding ugly, O’Connor introduces an ironic twist through the roots of the name “Hulga.” Ruth Holsen offers a linguistic analysis of O’Connor’s choice of the name “Hulga” in her essay “O’Connor’s Good Country People” by discussing the origin of the name. Holsen argues that Hulga likely knew the name’s foreign meaning and ironically took it upon herself. “Hulga” is a name based off of the Norwegian name “Helga” of the root “hellig,” which means “holy,” or as a noun, “saint.” Holsen argues that the holiness she picks, however, comes not from the same Christianity of her mother. Hulga believes that “we are all damned . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there is nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation” (O’Connor 288). I agree that Hulga sees herself as a saint of nihilism and seeks a certain holiness in that belief, but I do not subscribe to the idea that she knew the origins of the name. I argue that this knowledge escaped the understanding of the character Hulga, but O’Connor’s awareness and attention to detail led her to pick this title for that very reason. Hulga,

whose “remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum” (274), cared only to shock her believing mother to give her a glance at how devoid life is of meaning. She wished to tote that same ugliness as her title. O’Connor uses the name Hulga, deeply entwined in the hidden fabric of the story, to set up the character for her moment of grace and Christian redemption in the end.

Manley Pointer’s name becomes arbitrary because we learn at the end of the story that it’s simply a disguise, but his role in the story represents an evil that profits from a nefarious abuse of others’ stereotypes. Edmondson notes that “Pointer’s uncanny knack for identifying himself with little known and intimate family secrets implies that he possesses an unearthly nature and, by this and other characterizations, O’Connor hints that Manley Pointer is something more than human” (76). He represents a wickedness in “Good Country People” that proffers the other characters a chance at redemption. Manley uses clichés in order to gain access to the Hopewell household. He recognized the safety found in saying little and speaking the same dead language which helped him seem inconspicuous. It was his appearance, however, that originally provided an entrance into the world that the Hopewells lived in: one of superficiality where looks and words mean everything. The disguise of a Bible salesman offered Pointer the unassuming countenance on which he could capitalize. He hides his nihilism in the commonplace faith found in the American South which parallels the same lack of faith within the other characters in the story.

A study of cliché in “Good Country People” aids the reader in his or her understanding of why Hulga needed redemption and how the grotesque triggered this response. As discussed, Mrs. Hopewell had encapsulated herself into a world of cliché and, in doing so, diluted her faith. Hulga, having grown up in such an environment, suffered from the same pride of cliché through her repetitive desire to speak ugliness. Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga ensnared themselves within the trap of dead language and thereby killed off their faith; Hulga simply did so more openly. Manley Pointer embodies the pride of cliché and personifies its entire lack of liveliness. In the epitomizing incident of the story, when Manley Pointer seduces Hulga, she not only becomes shocked to a realization of a greater nihilism, but she recognizes the deadness of her own language. This understanding brings about the first step to an actual faith. Hulga proclaimed, “You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all—say one thing and do another” (O’Connor 290). She then

recognizes the deceptiveness in cliché, the dead faith of her mother, and, more poignantly, the deadness of her nihilism.

Such an analysis of O'Connor's works allows the reader to understand more fully how language relates to salvation from O'Connor's view. She implicitly condemns those who live a life of hypocrisy regarding *how* they live and how they *say* they live. O'Connor likely noticed the destructive nature of absent language in relationships and saw how it begins the path to pride. She uses elements of the gothic form because she blamed "the modern championing of sentimental compassion for dulling the reader's sensibility to deeper kinds of realism" (Shaddix 18). Everyone speaks with cliché and O'Connor seeks to shock the reader out of this way of living through realism in the dialogue and the gothic grotesque to show its folly. O'Connor's idea of grace can then be defined by revelation that unveils good and evil, allowing for clear decisions to be made. For Hulga, the revelation came when she was left with only one leg to stand on, an implicit cliché that, in context, shows that support does not come from artificiality but from truth.

O'Connor constructs her characters to fit a mold and to function solely within that role. She builds the structure for the characters through their conversations and names. When we study their dialogue, we observe that most of their platitudes or idle speech hold little meaning. The chosen names for the characters also set them into their respective positions, but Hulga is set apart from the beginning once the reader learns she changed her name. This modification to the character dictates that in the face of rigid, inflexible characters, she would not remain static. Revelation comes to her as she begins to understand the hypocrisy and pride that clichés had previously composed her life. Her character, unrightly named something as sentimental and trite as Joy, ironically names herself a saint in rebellion only to later receive the opportunity to become one. To O'Connor, dead language and dead faith, even the clichéd death that comes from nihilism, can be overcome through grotesque circumstances and ultimately through grace.

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