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The South and The Grotesque: Flannery O'Connor's 'Twisted' Characters*

Güney ve Grotesk: Flannery O'Connor'ın 'Çarpık' Karakterleri

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ÖZ

Bu makalenin amacı Amerikan Güney'inin grotesk çağrışımlarını araştırmak, Wolfgang Kayser'in (1906-1960) tiplerini temelinde Flannery O'Connor'un (1925-1964) kısa öykülerindeki grotesk karakterleri incelemek ve buna bağlı olarak bu karakterlerin şiddet olgusuyla ilişkilerini ortaya koymaktır. Güney'in kendine özgü özellikleri çoğunlukla sürekli olarak grotesk vurgusu yapmasıyla bilinen güney yazınının her alanına nüfuz etmiştir. Önemli bir güneyli yazar olarak O'Connor da kendi edebiyatında grotesk karakterlere yer vermiştir. O'Connor'un karakterleri üç farklı şekilde grotesk özellik göstermektedirler; bedensel kusurluluk, düşünsel aykırılık ve davranışsal yozlaşma. Bu makalede, bahsi geçen üç grotesk kaynağı üç kısa öykü aracılığıyla incelenmektedir: "Parker's Back," "The Comforts of Home" ve "The Partridge Festival."

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to research the grotesque undertones of American South, investigate the grotesque characters in Flannery O'Connor's (1925-1964) short fiction based on Wolfgang Kayser's (1906-1960) typology and accordingly reveal their affinities with the phenomenon of violence. The distinctive qualities of the South infuse all aspects of southern literature that is mostly notable for its perennial emphasis upon the grotesque. As a significant southern writer, O'Connor also employs grotesque characters in her fiction. O'Connor's characters emanate grotesque singularities in three different manners; corporeal malformation, intellectual incongruity and behavioural degeneration. These three motives for the grotesque are analyzed through three short stories in this article: "Parker's Back," "The Comforts of Home" and "The Partridge Festival."

1. Introduction

Derived from the Italian *grotte*, meaning 'caves,' the term 'grotesque' denotes artistic amalgamations of humans, animals and/or vegetables. However, in a literary sense, the grotesque is the fictitious articulation of personal and social blemishes through unorthodox characterization and subtly

constructed story lines. It is the narrative of what is unwonted, aberrant, absurd, unstable and unpleasant and "is an artistic style that audaciously rouses disgust and astonishment in the viewer or reader" (Mikics, 2007: 138).

Within the context of American literature, the South has always been of paramount significance. The singularity of the

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region is predicated on the idiosyncratic disposition of its traditionalist and isolated people, effectuated by its vexatious history of slavery, the Civil War (1861-1865) and racism. The far-reaching consequences of these historical circumstances like the feeling of defeat, fear, anxiety, inferiority and poverty are almost palpable in the compelling vision of quite a lot of southern writers that are named as southern gothic writers by some critics who deem the region as a fertile ground for gothic possibilities: "The American South, with its legacy of profound social and economic problems, became a major focus and source of American literature in the twentieth century, and the principal region of American Gothic" (Crow, 2009: 124). These writers endeavour to unravel the precarious foundations of the regional identity through faithful representations of local colours, such as the employment of rural areas or plantations as the setting and isolated people haunted by obsessions, past events and psychological traumas as main characters. What individuates southern gothic writing as a distinctive form of local fiction is, predominantly, its consistent accentuation upon the grotesque, which comprises alienation, unexpected motives and occurrences, violence and crime.

Grotesque, as one of the significant features of the southern gothic genre, finds its most powerful examples in Flannery O'Connor's (1925-1964) short stories. O'Connor's characterization in her short fiction firmly hinges upon the grotesque possibilities of the South, for she aims to expose the frailties of human nature in the region. In her *Mystery and Manners*, she espouses the fact that self-evident discrepancies between the South and the North precipitate the experience of grotesque, since "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader", which enunciates the fact that the grotesque is a relative conception; accordingly, the prevailing recognition that the South is grotesque is pre-eminently based on the northern perception (1984: 40). This avowal of O'Connor is in accord with Wolfgang Kayser (1906-1960), whose *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* underpins the categorization of O'Connor's characters in this study: "[T]he grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception. Yet it is entirely possible that things are regarded as grotesque even though structurally there is no reason for calling them so" (1963: 181). In his compendious research into the historical background of the grotesque's signification, Kayser analyses E. T. A. Hoffmann's works and discovers three categories of grotesque characters; the characters with grotesque demeanour, the idiosyncratic artists and the malevolent villains (105-106). On the basis of Kayser's typology, three different motives can be identified for the emanation of grotesque characters in O'Connor's stories; corporeal malformation, intellectual incongruities and behavioural degeneration. No matter what the conspicuous and predominant impetus for grotesque characterization is, it is nearly always supplemented with a spiritual flaw that haunts the character throughout her/his life and the imminent consequence of the grotesque is mostly violence.

2. Delusions of Redemption in "Parker's Back"

One of the bases of O'Connor's grotesque characterization is bodily disfigurements which can manifest themselves as congenital disabilities or infirmities or as self-inflicted physical deformities on the character's body. In each case, the bodily deformation is the essential concomitant of some spiritual susceptibility. The grotesque singularity that exudes

from bodily malformations can be epitomized by Parker in "Parker's Back" (1965).

Parker is a black man of twenty-eight, without a steady job, who sports multifarious tattoos that cover his whole body. Having been intrigued by a man that he encountered in a fair when he was a child, he alighted on the idea of having tattoos done on his body. The wide assortment of tattoos that he accommodates does not have a thematic coherence, since the figure is not important as long as it is multicoloured (O'Connor, 1990: 514). The grotesque nature of these tattoos emanates from such incoherence; as a matter of fact, Parker is consciously disrupting the harmony in his body so as to cope with his desultory cycle of life. Dismissing the fact that he has that fixation with tattoos, it is possible to propound that he leads an apathetic life; this is how the narrator bolsters the antinomy between Parker and his wife, Sarah Ruth Cates, who is an ardent fundamentalist. Sarah's strict adherence to a restrained way of life paves the way for a constant depreciation of Parker's tattoos as she thinks they are "no better than what a fool Indian would do. It's a heap of vanity" (515). The grotesque sensation built by Parker's tattoos is nothing more than an efficacious echo of the South's fragmented identity. Josephine Hendin delineates O'Connor's South as "a land where meaning flattens out, where there is no sense of continuity great enough to create a sense of history" (1970: 154). Parker is a typical southerner with grotesque overtones and the "mass of chaotic pictures" on his body demonstrates a certain sense of disintegration and incongruity, since the motley bundle of tattoos are in a state of complete disorder; there is no single thematic pattern that relates them to each other (Hendin, 1970: 154). A similar form of inconsistency is apparent in Parker's social relations, not least in his relationship with Sarah, which embodies a disconcerting sense of incoherence and dissension.

Parker's relationship with Sarah is not emblematic of what is expected from a conventional marriage, as Parker considers his marriage as a means to reach salvation (Gentry, 1986: 79). The fact that he resolves to have a Byzantine Christ engraved on his back is nothing more than a redemptive manoeuvre, since he thinks that she is going to be beguiled by the image. However, this spiritual entreaty is not underpinned by any corporeal compromise. Even the first portrayal of Sarah suggests Parker's physical repugnance for her; her pregnancy begets revulsion in Parker. He queries his marriage throughout the story, yet this aversion is not unilateral; Sarah seems to have a similar and strong feeling of dislike about Parker, particularly his tattoos: "Except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down" (519). Suzanne Morrow Paulson construes this animosity and dissension between Parker and Sarah as a signifier of the ultimate dichotomy of O'Connor's story which is "body/spirit duality" (1988: 103). Parker is haunted by the feeling that he is not contented throughout his life and this state of mind predisposes him to pursue atonement through his marriage with Sarah. However, to his chagrin, the attempt to gain her wife's commendation with the Byzantine Christ on his back is forestalled by her fiery response: "Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don't want no idolator in this house!" (529). It is evident that the grotesque connotations of the story rest upon not only Parker's tattoos, but also the idiosyncratic relationship between him and Sarah. This intense encounter also instigates a moment of

violence, for Sarah batters Parker with the broom, which leaves him aghast and speechless.

Parker's quirky communication with Sarah unveils one of his personal perturbations, which is his distaste for hearing his own name. In one of their early interactions, Sarah demands to know what his name's initials signify. Being quite reluctant in answering this question, he finally assents to confide this exclusive information; O. E. stands for Obadiah Elihue. The religious implications of his names, meaning "worshiper of Jehovah" and "whose God is He" respectively, also substantiate Parker's above-mentioned search for atonement (Orvell, 1991: 169). However, he does not wish to unfold this spiritual struggle; that is why, when Sarah calls him with his initial names, he castigates her: "If you call me that aloud, I'll bust your head open" (517). In this way, his alienation from his 'self' is indubitably discernible in the uncanny way of repulsion he cultivates for his own name. For Parker, his name is no more an innocuous way of self-identification, but rather a sort of *unheimlich*, the German word for the uncanny, which means, for Freud, "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1919: 1-2). This estrangement from his own individuality, the essence of which is the transmutation of the familiar into the uncanny, is another source of the grotesque for Parker. Kayser also affirms in his *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* that "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD" and accordingly, Parker's estrangement from his identity nurtures the sense of the grotesque both for himself and the narratee (184). The tattoo of the Byzantine Christ also engenders a similar experience for him; Ronald Schleifer elucidates this by suggesting that "Parker is both familiar and strange to himself with God's constant eyes literally upon him, and he is in a country in which he is both native and alien" (1993: 180). Rather than the ferocious beating given to him by Sarah, it is this grotesque confrontation between the familiar and the uncharted that makes him cry "like a baby" at the end of the story (530).

3. The Grotesque "Comforts of Home"

The intellectual characters in O'Connor's short stories also possess a grotesque potential as their outlooks on life is deplorably outlandish. The reason why these characters are considered intellectuals is that they come to the fore with their relatively higher level of education in a rural community that is marked for so-called philistinism. Their grotesque nature lies in their pronounced philosophy of life that is manifest in the way they keep the outside world at a distance with a flagrantly imperious demeanour. They hold themselves aloof from people in many instances. Another wellspring of grotesque for them is their psychological issues; they have an unsound fixation on the idea of home. With the absence of a father figure, the bond between these intellectuals and their mothers is vulnerable and unwholesome. Their precarious and unstable worlds are disturbed by an outsider in each case, whose primary function seems to overturn their ostensible integrity, the prominent example of which is her "The Comforts of Home" (1965).

In her "The Comforts of Home," O'Connor depicts an alienated intellectual, Thomas, who is marked for his disdainful and cavalier attitude towards the others. He is a history writer and single; he lives with his mother. The

'material' absence of his father who haunts Thomas only as an incorporeal voice in his mind and his convoluted relationship with his mother give rise to the desperate plight in the end; matricide. The main reason behind this predicament that Thomas is dragged down to is the unwilling reception of an outsider, Sarah Ham, into his home following the invitation of his mother that imposes her will upon him. The lack of a solid reason for the admission of Sarah in their home is bound to have unforeseen ramifications for Thomas. Sarah's grotesque characterization makes her an impeccable foil for Thomas, as she disintegrates the supposedly solid and thriving world of Thomas, leaving him deprived of "[a]ll the comforts of home" (392). All grotesque aspects of her existence, including her "physically crooked" appearance and her purported psychological anomalies, such as being a "[n]ymphomaniac" and "congenital liar", exacerbate the situation for Thomas, since he feels his home has been defiled (388, 385, 388). She is a social misfit who is "not insane enough for the asylum, not criminal enough for the jail, not stable enough for society" and for this very reason, Thomas's mother cherishes the prospect of providing an accommodation for her (388). Unlike his mother's ostensibly philanthropic attitude which seems to be a mere pretension in view of her constant references to Sarah's decadence, Thomas eschews her company with haughty disdain, since he thinks she is "the very stuff of corruption" (390). However, Thomas's strong aversion does not perturb her in the least, but rather enchants her; she savours Thomas's growing antipathy towards her. All the same, Thomas's perpetual altercations with Sarah serve to expose his malfunctioned attachment to his mother.

The most crucial aspect of Thomas's grotesque temperaments lies in the family dynamics that permeate all levels of his identity. His late father is conspicuous by his absence, since Thomas is tormented by his voice until the very end while his relationship with his mother has oedipal overtones. His father was cold and domineering and the memory of him functions as a reference point for the feeling of impotence Thomas has when he tries to supervise his mother. The moment Sarah is received as a guest into his home, his father starts to talk to him, adjuring him to bring his mother into line, which can be interpreted as a resonant return of the repressed: "Numbskull, the old man said, put your foot down now. Show her who's boss before she shows you" (392). The peremptory tone of his father's fanciful voice haunts him throughout the narrative and his vacuous willingness to obey his mandates precipitates the eventual catastrophe for his family. It is his voice that orders Thomas to put the gun into Sarah's handbag and even to shoot at Sarah, yet Thomas ends up killing his own mother. The eventual frame of mind and psychology that he attains borders on hysteria, which corresponds to E. T. A. Hoffmann's "eccentric artists" that "are threatened by insanity" (Kayser, 1963: 105-106). The grotesque nature of this tragedy is not merely about the supernatural and gothic connotations of his overbearing father, but also about his engrossing compliance to his instructions. As a vocal incarnation of his unconscious, his visionary experiences suggest an oedipal undercurrent towards his mother. His dysfunctional commitment to her sets the scene for their fatal confrontation in the end. This debilitated commitment is disrupted with the advent of Sarah, which has an immense significance for Thomas, as it means that his position as the sole possessor of his mother's affection is now challenged by an outsider:

In this story, part of that complexity derives from the fact that Thomas's possessiveness at some level suggest an Oedipal conflict-an attachment to the parent and an inability to expand the horizons of one's love. Whereas his mother would share her home, Thomas can only declare possessively that it is, as he puts it, "mine" (CS, 394). He conflates "home" and "mother" subconsciously. In other words, when he is "overcome by rage" (CS, 383) at the idea of having to share his mother's love, he sees the girl as a rival he cannot tolerate, rather than as another human being of the opposite sex he might love (Paulson, 1988: 32).

This is the main reason why Thomas's discernible unease about the fact that he now has to contend for the love of his mother deteriorates into an outrageous domestic violence. The unconscious anxiety over the possible loss of his mother turns him into a vicious matricide; despite the fact that it is not his mother, but Sarah, that he has aimed at, his unconscious perturbation blocks his vision and he shoots his mother. The most salient aspect of Thomas's identity is his role as his mother's son. For this reason, Sarah Gordon's description of Thomas as one of O'Connor's "adult children" who "seek retaliation against the parent figure and some measure of power over their own lives" is considerably compelling (2000: 228).

The connotation of 'home' engenders the same experience of 'the uncanny' for Thomas as his name and the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ do for Parker: "Ironically titled, 'The Comforts of Home' is a perfect example of the Gothic uncanny, the snug refuge revealing itself as a place of crazy horror" (Crow, 2009: 132). The fact that Crow denominates Thomas's experience as 'Gothic uncanny' is worthy of consideration, since the gothic genre is spatial by its very nature, thus employing indoor spaces such as houses, mansions and castles as the setting. Thomas regards the house in which he resides as his sanctum that nestles him and his mother from the outer world and Sarah's unwelcome presence in it is a sacrilegious attack on his domestic integrity: "His home was to him home, workshop, church, as personal as the shell of a turtle and as necessary. He could not believe that it could be violated in this way" (395). The arrival of Sarah is the onset of his tragic estrangement from his home as he is terrified at the thought of any prospective domestic dislocation, which turns him into an outsider in his own abode. The embracing idea of home becomes a trap for his very existence. As he associates the idea of home with his own mother, the same process of alienation also transpires in the affinity between them, since "the invading Sarah causes his estrangement from his mother" (Morton, 1980: 76). This association between the house and the mother also has gothic implications: "In Female Gothic narratives, houses and mansions function figuratively as maternal spaces. . ." (Rubenstein, 1996: 320). In this way, the conversion of the familiar domestic space that subconsciously correlates with motherly qualities, as has also been suggested by Suzanne Morrow Paulson, into the uncanny embodies a substantial undertone of the grotesque for Thomas (32).

4. The Grotesque of the 'Mock Court': "The Partridge Festival"

In addition to physical disfigurements and intellectual aloofness, another wellspring of the grotesque in O'Connor's short fiction is decadence on behavioural level. Such behavioural debasement may sometimes be palpable in the form of racial chauvinism through which O'Connor explores the phenomena of racism and slavery that are indelibly imprinted on the southern consciousness as a consequence of the historical conditions. In a similar manner, as a Roman Catholic that lives in the South where the majority of the population is Protestant, she exposes the ubiquitous religious bigotry, pretences and fanaticism. The nefarious outsiders that impair the domestic peace in her short stories, such as Sarah Ham of "The Comforts of Home," can also be discussed within this category. By means of such characters that are individuated as depraved and irredeemable, she pores over the phenomenon of physical and emotional violence as an integral part of the southern society. Most of her characters with such demeanour are cynical and misanthropic. They are the interlopers of the society and whether their degeneracy is the reason behind or the consequence of this isolation is equivocal.

In "The Partridge Festival" (1961), O'Connor's grotesque insight concentrates on Singleton, who was sent to a mental hospital after shooting six people during the Partridge Festival. The great-grandson of the Festival's founder, Calhoun is a writer and returns to his hometown to investigate this horrendous incident. He and Mary Elizabeth resolve to visit Singleton in the mental hospital, as both of them presume him to be blameless and they believe that his ostracism is the consequence of the society's culpable failure to assume responsibility: "He was the scapegoat. While Partridge flings itself about selecting Miss Partridge Azalea, Singleton suffers at Quincy. He expiates. . ." (435). Their strong conviction that Singleton is irreproachable is closely related to the event that paved the way for Singleton's offence. Prior to the inauguration of the festival, Singleton was heard by a mock court since he had not purchased an Azalea Festival Badge and was sardonically incarcerated into an outdoor toilet; he thereupon perpetrated the crime (422). For this reason, for Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, the real culprit is the society itself: "but this whole place is false and rotten to the core. [. . .] They prostitute azaleas!" (434). As a matter of fact, Mary Elizabeth sanctifies Singleton; he is "[a] Christ-figure" for her (435).

The mood of buoyancy pervades the first section of the narrative, for they are thoroughly convinced that Singleton is the innocent victim of social excommunication. However, they cannot desist from feeling disgruntled when they encounter Singleton in the mental hospital: Raving and charging at Mary Elizabeth, he behaves dementedly and hysterically, which makes them think that he is no more than a psychotic patient: "Singleton, an insane comic figure in 'The Partridge Festival,' is intended to be exactly the opposite-crazy and lecherous and pointing toward the demonic" (Hawkes, 1962: 405-406). Singleton's grotesque temperament is essentially determined by lunacy and hysteria that are ubiquitous sources of the grotesque in fiction: "The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us" (Kaysner, 1963: 184). The Christ figure they have fantasized about meeting all

along turns into a grotesque anti-Christ. Their high ideals are grotesquely deformed to the extent that they feel utterly disillusioned at that moment:

It is through Singleton's behavior and speech after Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth arrive at the hospital that O'Connor makes her intention clear. They expect Mish-kin, all suffering and innocence; what appears is frenzied lust. Singleton's association with the Devil is suggested through comically evoked disorder in a scene dominated by unbalance. His eyes are mismatched; he wears a black, movie gunman's hat in contrast to his white hospital gown; he enters the room suspended between two husky attendants, the frenetic activity of his spidery shape emphasized by their contrasting stolidity. His first words are curses and his first gestures lustful advances. [. . .] Within the comic framework, O'Connor draws a picture not of the innocent scapegoat but evil displaying itself as madness (Lindroth, 1984: 54).

The fact that Singleton appears to be the incarnation of the Devil leaves them speechless and they experience a moment of uncanny estrangement. Gentry states that “[a] festival, according to Bakhtin an institutionalized use of the grotesque, is here idealized and trivialized. . .” (70). This can be confirmed based on all the constituents of Singleton’s case; the court that tries him is a mock court; the place where he is imprisoned is a privy; he is the grotesque, transformed and infernal anti-Christ.

5. Conclusion

In his lengthy discussion on the historical evolution of the grotesque, Kayser postulates that the sublime is semantically antithetical to the grotesque, since “just as the sublime (in contrast with the beautiful) guides our view toward a loftier, supernatural world, the ridiculously distorted and monstrously horrible ingredients of the grotesque point to an inhuman, nocturnal, and abysmal realm” (58). In this sense, O’Connor’s fictional fancies dissipate the sublimity of human experience and contrive the grotesque in a remarkable way; such distortions and fright that are to be considered grotesque find their expressions extensively in O’Connor’s arresting characterization. Grotesque singularities of her characters become evident on physical, intellectual or behavioural modalities. In “Parker’s Back,” she manifests the inherent conjunction between physical deformation and spiritual vulnerability. In “The Comforts of Home,” she exposes the arbitrariness of her unsettling storylines that frequently introduce a precarious confrontation between an inexperienced southerner, an intellectual recluse in this case, and a threatening evil outsider in an unexpected way. In “The Partridge Festival”, she portrays the grotesque disposition of a miscreant in a manner to demonstrate the fine line between being a victim and being a culprit. In all three of these stories, the grotesque is accompanied by physical and / or emotional violence. However, no matter what the conspicuous source of the grotesque is, its primary function is to accentuate the terror and anxiety that haunt the southern consciousness as a consequence of some historical episodes.

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