

COMPLICIT AUTHORITIES AND CAPITALIST HAUNTINGS: POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN O'CONNOR'S GOTHIC CRITIQUE OF PROGRESS

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Abstract

Employing a Gothic Marxist lens, this paper argues that in Flannery O'Connor's "A View of the Woods," the dual trope serves as an essential tool for exposing the dysfunctional connection between inadequate political authority and capitalist oppression. An in-depth textual and theoretical analysis indicates that the conflict regarding the family pasture transcends a mere personal dispute; instead, it acts as a metaphor for the "creative destruction" inherent in a progress ideology upheld by a self-serving elite. Besides exposing class struggle, the reflected identities of the landholder, Mr. Fortune, and his working-class granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, also emphasize the oppressor's mental dependence on the oppressed. This examination, which integrates O'Connor's Gothic sensibility with concepts of the alienated "political field" (Pierre Bourdieu) and the "power elite" (C. Wright Mills), concludes that the narrative provides a scathing criticism of a political establishment that is involved in its own estrangement. Ultimately, it showcases a leadership that rationalizes the commercialization of human and natural connections as a force that severs essential communal bonds, resulting in social and spiritual decay instead of collective advancement.

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's "A View of the Woods" offers a stark Gothic allegory of political breakdown rather than just a simple generational dispute over a piece of land. The story's central conflict, the patriarch Mr. Fortune's decision to sell the family pasture to developers who offer a cleaned-up "view of the woods", reflects the disastrous consequences of political leadership that has abandoned its moral duties to the community. This essay argues that O'Connor depicts the deadly consequences of a political ideology that has merged with the principles of capital through the grotesque device of the Gothic double, represented in the conflicting yet mirrored relationship between Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter Mary Fortune Pitts. The dispute goes beyond a straightforward family dispute to show how governmental initiatives can lead to "creative destruction" that threatens the social structure and emotional purity they purport to uphold when they are in line with speculative development rather than the welfare of the community. The crude implement of this failed policy is the bulldozer that levels the ground, symbolizing progress that, in its clamor, stifles moral responsibility, historical continuity, and interpersonal ties. By examining the pathological relationship between the landowner and his working-class counterpart—one that encourages modernization and development initiatives but results in social destruction rather than collective progress, this analysis reveals how O'Connor criticizes mid-century American political leadership.

Significance of the study

This analysis demonstrates how O'Connor's regional Gothic literature provides profound and enduring societal insight. It shows how the identity of the oppressor depends parasitically on the subjugated, revealing the psychological processes of class oppression that go beyond just religious

interpretations. The study highlights the spiritual ramifications of environmental commodification, arguing that the destruction of communal land signifies a deeper deterioration in moral responsibility and community relationships. As a result, the story emerges as a warning about progress devoid of moral foundation, a critique that resonates strongly in contemporary discussions about unsustainable development and social inequality. In the end, this analysis demonstrates how literature serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for understanding the human cost embedded in economic and ideological frameworks, confirming the enduring value of Marxist critique in literary interpretation.

Research Question:

How does Flannery O'Connor use the Gothic double in "A View of the Woods" to highlight the moral and psychological ramifications of capitalism progress for both the oppressor and the oppressed?

Research Objectives:

1. Analyze the political initiatives, their ties and the consequences on society.
2. Examine how the commodification of landscape symbolizes the alienation inherent in capitalist "progress."
3. Investigate the psychological dependence of the bourgeoisie on the working class for validation of their superiority.

Literature Review

Political authorities fascinate the observable beauty more than any material around them. This is the result of their already owning the property and seeing the luxuries of life that the others might only have imagined this is opined, "The aesthetics of property, the look and feel of owned space, is fundamental to the exercise of social power. Ownership is not merely legal but perceptual." (Mitchell, 2003, p. 241). The existing things of beauty don't allure them rather they push them to move step ahead as stated, "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. (Marx & Engels, 1848/1969, p. 38). The presence of ease in their lives makes them bored of their life. This ease gives them enough time to bring changes in the society directly and indirectly to uplift their life-style as stated, "What is decisive is that politics more and more becomes a mere instrument for the self-preservation of the ruling class, for the consolidation of its economic position, and for the enhancement of its private well-being." Marcuse, H. (1964, p. 51). They have power of wealth and influence which they exert on the people to believe that they are in authority to satisfy their superiority complex as Pareto (1935) writes, "The ruling class uses force and persuasion to maintain its authority. It uses persuasion when force is too risky or ineffective. The ability to make people believe in its authority is its most crucial skill." They overlook even one of the most important things for them like the way to earn bread and butter. Bourdieu (1991) argued that "the political field tends to develop its own logic, its own issues, its own interests, which are increasingly irreducible to those of the social world it is supposed to represent" (p. 181). The modernity is disguised in the destruction of one of the biggest social-class and their concerns as written by Harvey (2012), "The process of creative destruction is embedded within the circulation of capital itself. Innovation ... devalues, if not destroys, past investments and labor skills. Creative destruction is within the process of urbanization, the history of the built environment, and the formation and destruction of territorial complexes and regional cultures." (p. 24). A man who sits in air-conditioned room cannot understand the pain of harsh sunshine. The life in different atmospheres brings different interpretations of certain same things as stated by

Harper Lee, "First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—" "Sir?" "—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." (Lee, 1960, p. 39)

The sources the working-class use for the betterment of their family is considered not worthy of preserving and protected rather authorities use it for their own purposes as written, "The commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations... conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights." (Harvey, 2005, p. 159) It is very painful for the proletariats but they can do nothing in its response. They lack the power of doing anything for the protection of even the fruit they have after burning the midnight oil as opined, "The alienation of the worker from the product of his labor means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him." (Marx, 1844/1959, p. 72). They lack the communication and so the factor of unity. The proletariat's emotions and signs are considered nothing. They are often misinterpreted as stated, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both. Yet people do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction... They are seldom aware of the connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history." (Mills, 1959, p. 3)

The men in the corridors of power don't have any empathy for the people less than them in power as opined, Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. (Acton, 1887/2000, p. 383) They have strong ties with the capitalists and their powerful fellows that they have no problem in doing any good for their relatives but they hurt the weak people intentionally to prove their significance and authoritative role as written, "The power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women... These circles of political, economic, and military power intersect and coalesce, making decisions that have national and international consequences." (Mills, 1956, p. 4). Cruelty, near them, is the only way for them to show their supremacy as suggested, violence appears as a last resort to keep the structure of authority intact." (Arendt, 1970, p. 56) Despite of anything, they are the humans and have heart in them. They can differ between good and bad. So, whatever they do bad regarding their responsibility is intentional as Peck (1983) proposes, that evil people are not lazy. They are busy. They are busy destroying people and things. They are not 'sick'; they are actively, consciously choosing a path of destruction, often while wearing a mask of normalcy or even virtue. Officials only have relations on the basis of reciprocity and only skin deep. "They accept each other, understand each other, marry each other, tend to work and to think if not together at least alike... They are not a permanent class; they are a rotating clique." (Mills, 1956, p. 11). There are a number of reasons for the government officials or the legislatures to act only in reciprocity. They become insecure for their personal reasons and then do harm to the public as is stated, "Men must be either pampered or crushed, because they can get revenge for small injuries but not for grievous ones. So any injury a prince does a man should be of such a kind that there is no fear of revenge." (Machiavelli, 1532/2005, p. 9) The government representatives are unable to communicate themselves with their closed ones and so receive unexpected repercussions. This creates insecurity in them. Due to their selfishness, they remain unable to respond to any social reaction effectively except something materialistic. They always prioritize themselves in comparison to their even own

people as stated, "The representative individual in our models... is guided by his own self-interest, as he perceives it, and this will not coincide perfectly with the 'public interest' or the 'general welfare,' however defined." (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962, p. 34). Public figures always emphasize on their own sacrifices and count the others nothing as suggested fictionally, "The whole management and organization of this farm depend on us. Day and night we are watching over your welfare. It is for your sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples... Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back!" (Orwell, 1945, p. 35).

The inhumanity brought by the machinery is not hidden from the elite-class. They are aware that the machinery is not good for the liveliness as proposed, This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force." (Weber, 1905/2002, p. 123) It speeds up the life and ease and calmness in life vanishes as stated, We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." (Thoreau, 1854, p. 35) They go against the nature of mankind to portray himself as leader as demonstrated in the drama, CORIOLANUS: "Would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am." (Act III, Scene 2) Capitalism brings false hopes for the advancement of the society. The innovation is flooded with the sweat and blood of the hard-workers as stated, "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations... and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'" (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002, p. 6). The pseudo-benchmarks of gaining respect come with the industrialization. It gives all the powerful people chance to exploit the proletariat.

The capitalists which are contracted with the governments spend money on the projects that they sign for so they want the money back from the project and this seems logical. The capitalists, along with the leaders, are also guilty because, when they are backed up and appreciated by the governments, they consider themselves the masters and the others their subjects same as the leaders Mills (1956) proposed that the power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women... The political directorate, the corporate rich, and the warlords coalesce into a psychologically similar and interlocking directorate that makes the big decisions. They collectively alienated the proletariats from the joy of life by creating scarcity in the society of the relaxing materials Graeber (2018) writes that the moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it (Graeber, 2018, p. 1). Capital attracts the investors. Symbolically it is stated that the capitalism changes the ways to live in the modern world and even a single step with carelessness is fatal even for the capitalists. The capitalists are more selfish than the land-owners and the politicians, they try to steal what they love as backed by Marx (1844), All the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of all these senses – the sense of having." (Marx, 1844/1959, p. 87) So, their attentions are necessary for their own survival. Capitalists work silently until they reach the goal they set for themselves. One of the important factors is highlighted in the story that the leaders teach their children not to listen anyone except what they themselves want to. They have this cold-bloodedness from their homes. The simplicity serves all the sectors of the society but when the commodity is commercialized and commodity fetishism is created, then only some people get what they want because, it needs the money from which the proletariats are also deprived through the industrial

systems. The hatred is so much for the working-class in the mind of upper-class that they don't want to have their name with their name either in the happiness or the sadness as Orwell (1937 writes, "The real secret of class distinctions in the West... can be summed up in four frightful words... 'The lower classes smell.' ... It is a physical reaction of incompatibility, deeper than reason." (Orwell, 1937, p. 112).

Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to explore the intricate socio-political and psychological aspects of Flannery O'Connor's "A View of the Woods." The analysis fundamentally relies on Marxist Criticism, mainly utilizing Karl Marx's ideas regarding class conflict and alienation, along with David Harvey's notion of creative destruction. This framework is crucial for grasping how the narrative depicts the brutal restructuring of social and physical environments in the pursuit of capitalist advancement. To investigate the distinct literary style in which O'Connor presents this critique, Gothic Literary Theory is utilized, especially its elements of the double or doppelgänger and psychological haunting, which reveal the broken identities and suppressed violence in the story. Moreover, perspectives from the Sociology of Power, particularly C. Wright Mills's concept of the "power elite" and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the independent "political field," offer a framework to analyze the gap between the interests of the ruling class and the well-being of the community. Ultimately, Ecocriticism, guided by thinkers such as W.J.T. Mitchell, aids in interpreting the meanings behind landscape and property aesthetics, uncovering how the manipulation and commercialization of nature are essentially demonstrations of social and perceptual authority.

Research Methodology

The study is carried out using a qualitative textual analysis of O'Connor's short story. This approach focuses on a detailed examination of significant symbolic features, like the forest, the bulldozer, and the reflective portrayal of faces, to reveal their complex meanings. A psychoanalytic reading of character interactions, especially the connection between Mr. Fortune and Mary Fortune Pitts, is utilized to investigate ideas of repression, projection, and the split self. To anchor the narrative in its particular time, the examination incorporates a historical context reflecting the post-war American enthusiasm for modernization and suburban growth during the 1950s. This thorough analysis of the text is persistently influenced by and related to the theoretical frameworks mentioned earlier, fostering a conversation between the literary piece and recognized ideas from Marxist, Gothic, sociological, and ecocritical perspectives to formulate a unified and perceptive argument.

Textual Analysis

In the short story, the girl somehow is the reflection of old man's inner voice, as seen when her face is described as "a small replica of the old man's" (O'Connor, 1971). But she is shown as the member of the working-class. So, she understands the ups and downs in their lives though she is so young but the difficulties in the working-class home make the children to think of what should be done and what should be avoided to run their family smoothly. The family becomes witty due to the harsh experiences of life. The inability of working-class is illustrated by the description where the child sat and absorb the whole movement of the machinery that how calmly and happily the work is for the betterment for only those who have resources to buy those amusements. The beautiful world inside the new buildings in the modern world are out of reach of workers and their families. This is the analogy between the politicians and the land-owners that they pledge to work for the betterment of their people but totally neglect them. A politician is the personality with some

sort of revolution and mind of change in the society. They are in pursuit of their hunger for being acknowledged as the well-wisher and change maker in the society. For this purpose, they don't care the real benefits of the ordinary people and because of the reason that they already have property, which increases their resemblance and tilt towards the capitalist because they are both the cruel, people chose them their leaders. They call their own thoughts the name of developments, as the old man states, "Any fool that would let a cow pasture interfere with progress is not on my books" (O'Connor, 1971). The old man is depicted as mean through the particular description of his habits and concerns like he didn't believe anybody and in his vicinity, he hated most of the people. The child, represents the sub-conscious of Mr. Fortune. Cruel man sees himself beaten by the working-class. The value of upper-class is in front of him in the jungle where he was sure that no man was watching. In that scenario, it is illustrated in a gothic way that the impurity of their heart is nothing in front of the hard-work of the proletariats who earns only to feed their family. Purity in the intentions comes and they find no time to toxify their surroundings while the authoritative people and the Industrialists have enough time to cook the things against their opposition, which they make the others because the proletariats have no personal problem with the bourgeoisie. Their inner-selves are rightful of the disrespect they have from the workers' hands. The hiding in the jungle is in itself a matter disclosed beautifully in the story that the proletariats are even not independent of taking revenge in public. They have a great public and class-pressure. The relation with cruel supervisors is directly linked with their quality of life. The oppressors even themselves ask the question in surprise that why don't you acted in the opposition of the working-class, as when the old man demands after witnessing a beating, "Why didn't you hit him back? Where's your spirit?" (O'Connor, 1971). In reality they run away from their own self and try to tell them that they are superior than their fellow beings. Bad man's condolence means nothing to the good one because they are the people behind the poor life-style of workers. Proletariats have capacity to understand what are they saying and from where are they coming. The thoughts of the cruel beings are haunted by oppressed. They are captivated completely by working-class and they cannot go leaving them unattended because they want them to acknowledge their superiority. Whenever they suffer psychologically and consider themselves too much dependent on the approval of proletariats, they rather than rectify themselves, they work against the working-class to suppress them which result more in their mental destruction. The sounds of machines muffle the human voices, exemplified when "the bulldozer moved under them again and drowned out the rest of what he wanted to say" (O'Connor, 1971). The children are not understood in this age who come in contact with the modern-day technology. There is a generational gap which held in both the three generations of people from different background. The old rich people who have seen the old as well as the modern world, try to achieve the modernity in the industrial-world. The next generation, as Mr. Fortune's son-in-law, have also seen the modern life style, tries to get to the old one because it was so serene and all the people were busy in doing their own work rather than pulling legs in the pursuit of materials that much but then comes the third generation, shown in the story as the grand-daughter of Mr. Fortune, seeing both the economic conditions of their households by being stuck to the old methods and also seen the moral destruction of the society due to the progress. They try to mediate the conditions by keeping the company with the old ones and advocating for the collective survival of the upper-class as well as the proletariats. Industrialization and the modernization of the world has brought happiness only to few people who have the resources. The proletariats need the actions that support their existing life-style rather than bringing a sudden shift in their lives. Man needs time for adjustment in any of the new

environment. The sharp turns in life with no moral and financial support take them to face various traumas, psychological, economic, social and familial problems. Negating the facts is in the nature of bourgeoisie and policy makers. Selfish policies are the cause of modernization and so is the scarcity of sustainable future for all the classes. The romantic dreams of the proletariats are at stake. The selfishness is manifested by the move of Mr. Fortune that he is not ready to give his place for work. They throw their own duties to other people who are themselves in the race of gaining power and wealth. Whatever the good schools and roads a government builds for the betterment of the populace, until the better opportunities of earning good money for their family members, they don't support them wholly. Future for any man is important and even only those legislators and industry owners are truly liked by working-class who do good for them rather than merely speaking. O'Conor wants to justify that hope is very necessary to strive for something and the hopelessness leads to fatal consequences. Man decides his livelihood depending upon the conditions he has. It can differ from person to person. The future of the manhood depends on the natural environment because they are the source of sometimes oxygen, sometimes the food necessary to survive and the hope for betterment. Man goes against his own will and the collective wellness of the humanity when do some harm to the working-class. This is obvious that the intent of a man cannot be purchased. It can be influenced by affection and showing empathy towards them. Man after denying his own self think that he has conquered himself but on the contrary, he fails himself.

Conclusion

"A View of the Woods" ends sorrowfully with O'Connor's strong denunciation of a political framework that emphasizes transaction rather than stewardship. The final outcome of leadership efforts disconnected from those they affect is the collective demise of Mr. Fortune and Mary Fortune Pitts in the disputed arena. Within O'Connor's Gothic framework, the true horror lies in the internal division occurring when decision-making power merges with capital's commodifying forces, rather than in the external violence of the bulldozer. The result is not a more promising future, but a spiritual desert: a vacant space where community, identity, and connections across generations have been relinquished for the sake of personal, speculative profit disguised as a benefit for all. O'Connor's caution, thus, echoes with sharp leadership immediacy. Her narrative indicates that any leadership unable to recognize the humanity displaced by the allure of property, and that pursues validation through control instead of service, orchestrates its own moral decay and the collective despair of those it guides. The concluding, tranquil landscape serves not as a symbol of hope, but as a chilling reminder of the disastrous price of advancement sought without ethics, a stark indication that when the forests are razed for personal perspective, what is ultimately erased is the collective foundation of our shared humanity.

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