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# Doubles and Mirrors
## Two Flannery O'Connor Stories About Race Relations

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**Abstract:** This article examines the depiction of racial relations in two short stories by Flannery O'Connor against the backdrop of sociopolitical changes in the mid-20th-century United States. It is often assumed that, because O'Connor occasionally expressed racist views in her letters, her fiction is also tainted by racism. However, a close reading of two of her short stories, *The Artificial Nigger* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1961), reveals an entirely different agenda. This article seeks to demonstrate that O'Connor provoked her white readers and undermined white supremacy in her fiction. Thus, one could argue that, by exposing the prejudice and hypocrisy of white people, her stories supported the cause of the civil rights movement. By studying these two stories, I juxtapose O'Connor's portrayal of two different types of characters and settings and two distinct historical moments: rural versus urban perspectives on racial issues before and after the enactment of desegregation laws. Like many people in her social environment, O'Connor witnessed integration with mixed feelings, but her fiction transcends this disorientation.

**Keywords:** short story, African Americans, civil rights movement, mid-20th century, desegregation

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# Sobowtóry i lustra
## Dwa opowiadania Flannery O'Connor o relacjach rasowych

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy relacji rasowych zobrazowanych w dwóch opowiadaniach Flannery O'Connor na tle przemian społeczno-politycznych w Stanach Zjednoczonych w połowie XX wieku. Często zakłada się, że skoro pisarka nie stroniła od wyrażania rasistowskich poglądów w swoich listach, jej fikcja jest również skażona rasizmem. Wnikliwa lektura dwóch opowiadań: „Sztuczny Murzyn" (*The Artificial Nigger*, 1955) oraz „Spotkanie" (*Everything That Rises Must Converge*, 1961) ujawnia jednak inny program polityczny. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu wykazanie, że w swojej twórczości O'Connor prowokowała białych czytelników i podważała białą supremację. Można zatem twierdzić, że poprzez obnażanie uprzedzeń i hipokryzji białych ludzi, jej opowiadania wspierały ruch na rzecz praw obywatelskich. Analizując te dwa teksty, zestawiam sposób przedstawiania przez O'Connor dwóch różnych typów postaci i scenerii oraz dwóch momentów historycznych: wiejskiego i miejskiego spojrzenia na kwestie rasowe przed i po uchwaleniu przepisów o desegregacji. Podobnie jak wiele osób w jej środowisku społecznym, O'Connor postrzegała integrację z mieszanymi uczuciami, jednak jej opowiadania wykraczają poza tę dezorientację.

**Słowa kluczowe:** opowiadanie, Afroamerykanie, ruch na rzecz praw obywatelskich, połowa XX wieku, desegregacja



# 1. Introduction

A recent spate of publications on O'Connor's fiction, including monographs by E. Jane Doering and Ruthann Knechel Johansen (2019), Angela Alaimo O'Donnell (2020), and Ruth Reiniche (2020), as well as volumes edited by Henry T. Edmondson III (2017), Mark Bosco and Brent Little (2017), and Alison Arant and Jordan Cofer (2020), to name a few, demonstrate not only that her writing is still relevant today, but also how it resonates with contemporary sensibilities, including the issue of race. Inspiration for such an approach can also come from the visual and performative arts. Mark Bosco, for example, recalls how an interview with New York director Karin Coonrod, who had staged O'Connor's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" as a post-Rosa Parks bus ride through Atlanta, made him "realize more than ever that the question of race was everywhere in O'Connor's work" (Bosco 2018: 84). The issue of race was acknowledged in a chapter that Robert C. Evans devoted exclusively to the topic in his 2018 study of O'Connor's critical reception from the 1960s to the 2010s (Evans 2018: 188–211). It was not until O'Donnell's much-needed and long-overdue book-length study of 2020, however, that the question of race in O'Connor's life and fiction came to the fore.

In her study of race in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, O'Donnell argues that race may not be "the primary focus" in O'Connor's thirty-one stories and two published novels, but "from beginning to end race is a constant presence in O'Connor's work, just as surely as African Americans were a constant presence in the lives of Southern whites in the 1950s and 1960s" (O'Donnell 2020: 3). O'Connor repeatedly laid bare interracial confrontations: from her first story "The Geranium" (1946) to the last story "Judgment Day" (1965), which is a version of that first story, written weeks before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The unpublished letters housed in the special collections at Georgia College and State University and Emory University, which O'Donnell was allowed to quote for the first time, expose O'Connor as a racist, even though as a high school student she had sympathized with the political and social plight of African Americans and had written stories from the point of view of black characters (Gooch, qtd. in O'Donnell 2020: 40). She was right to later abandon the experiment of appropriating black voices, but the ambiguities of her "race-haunted work" (O'Donnell 2020: 11) destabilize the straightforward categorization and signal O'Connor's internal conflict and contradictory ideas about race (O'Donnell 2020: 7).

It is easy to demonstrate that black people are present in O'Connor's fiction, though rarely as full-fledged protagonists. This apparent marginalization should not in itself be seen as discriminatory in a white author. However, when combined with blatantly racist remarks in her letters, it has often led critics to formulate the question of O'Connor's attitude toward African Americans only in terms of degree, that is: how racist was she? (see Elie 2020). The discussion of race in O'Connor has revolved around her private correspondence and her fiction, which seem to offer opposing views on the subject. In her letters, O'Connor seems to reveal her racism through casual remarks and explicit assertions. Her fiction, on the other hand, is often read as a blistering critique of those very prejudices. Moreover, to further confuse the situation, both her letters and her fiction are laced with the N-word, making her work "increasingly difficult to teach or read" (Evans 2018: 188). Thus, accusations of racism often focus on her use of the N-word, with O'Connor seen as someone who comfortably used, both privately and publicly, a word that is now unpronounceable and was considered highly offensive even in her time.

In this article, I will limit myself to her fiction in the hope of at least partially unraveling this complexity. I will examine how and why the N-word is used in selected stories, as well as the larger goals of her fiction in critiquing the world of prejudice in which she lived. I will argue that in her fiction, as opposed to her more casual and sometimes flippant epistolary prose, O'Connor deliberately uses language and narrative as a provocation, and thus, despite her attempts to distance herself from activism, her art becomes a form of activism (or "artivism"). The powerful provocation of her fiction inspires readers to find her work both brilliant and still relevant to a contemporary conversation about race. The juxtaposition of letters and fiction is not the issue here; this article will only attempt to clarify the use of criticism and problematic language. Through a careful analysis of two short stories, I will argue that O'Connor's fiction exposed the arrogance and absurdity of white supremacy and thus, from her allegedly "racist" standpoint, actually supported the cause of civil rights activists.

In the following sections, I address two stories that echo the process of dismantling the grip of the Jim Crow laws: from the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of

Education in 1954, which O'Connor witnessed, to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Right Act of 1965, which she did not live long enough to see. I begin with the 1955 story of two rural people's trip to the city and back, and juxtapose it with the 1961 story of a one-way trip, set entirely in the urban space.

## 2. "The Artificial Nigger" (1955)

Published the same year in the *Kenyon Review* and then in the collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, this story focuses on two rural Georgians: the grandfather Mr. Head and his orphaned grandson, ten-year-old Nelson. The two embark on a journey to the big city of Atlanta. Nelson's mother, who was Mr. Head's daughter, has died, and the boy's father is not even mentioned. The boy claims to have been born in Atlanta. Thus, the trip is a comeback that he longs for. His grandfather, who has not been to Atlanta in fifteen years and does not miss it, hopes that the trip will be unpleasant enough for Nelson to keep him from leaving the country, as his mother had done before. In other words, the grandfather is organizing the trip as a preventive measure. Black people are from the grandfather's perspective a major part of the "evil" to which he intends to expose the boy on the way to and in Atlanta. Toni Morrison brilliantly observes that "O'Connor opens her story with a feint, a deliberately misleading description: Mr. Head is introduced to the reader in language invoking aristocratic symbols of royalty" (Morrison 2017: 20). The "royal" aura reflects the grandfather's sense of racial superiority. Paradoxically, this is the light in which the boy later perceives black characters on the train, until the grandfather teaches him not to trust his own perception. Mr. Head's mission is to educate Nelson "in the process of Othering, of identifying the stranger" (Morrison 2017: 20), regardless of the boy's impressions or instincts.

There is no apparent reason for Mr. Head's disdain for black people. It is simply part of the mental makeup he represents and longs to pass on to his grandson. In her story, O'Connor captures the process of transmitting racial prejudice, and exposes in a series of vignettes the absurdity of both racism and the methods of its dissemination. The first such glimpse is of a group of three gaily dressed characters on the train, who proceed majestically to the dining car: "A huge coffee-colored man was coming slowly forward. He had on a light suit and a yellow satin tie with a ruby pin in it. [...] He was proceeding very slowly, his large brown eyes gazing over the heads of the passengers. He had a small white mustache and white crinkly hair. Behind him there were two young women, both coffee-colored, one in a yellow dress and one in a green" (O'Connor 1988a: 215). The reader looks at the group with the boy's eyes and admires the awe-inspiring aura of power and wealth. The grandfather, however, takes an opportunity to test Nelson's racial vigilance.

As the trip is meant to be a lesson, the grandfather first asks the boy to look at the man, who is or appears to be wealthy, and who in his turn ostentatiously ignores the other passengers. In his innocence, Nelson attributes to the man "a kind of patriarchal grandeur" that suggests "royalty" (O'Donnell 2020: 111). As the procession passes them, the grandfather tellingly asks the boy to say "what" (and not "who") it was (O'Connor 1988a: 216). He diminishes the man's humanity in a way that is reinforced by his insistent use of the

N-word. The boy describes the man as fat and old, and he is surprised when his grandfather claims, using derogatory terms, that the man is a black person. The boy's racial innocence makes him admit that he thought the man was simply suntanned. This realization, however, does not lead Nelson to acknowledge the constructedness of race, as would be expected today (see Fowler 2011: 130–131). Instead, he begins to hate the black man for deceiving him, for appearing to be white and suntanned.

The boy – whose given name also begins with the letter "N" and honors the British admiral Horatio Nelson – had never seen black people before because, as his grandfather proudly proclaims, "[t]here hasn't been a nigger in this county since we run that one out twelve years ago and that was before you were born" (O'Connor 1988a: 212). The boy's gut instinct led him to recognize the patriarchal grandeur in the black man, but the grandfather eradicates that instinct, just as he helped drive the blacks out of the county to make room for his own brand of patriarchy.

As the grandfather and the boy inspect the train, they again encounter black people in the dining car: "Three very black Negroes in white suits and aprons were running up and down the aisle, swinging trays and bowing and bending over the travelers eating breakfast. One of them rushed up to Mr. Head and Nelson and said, holding up two fingers, "Space for two!" but Mr. Head replied in a loud voice, 'We eaten before we left!'" (O'Connor 1988a: 217). Nelson and his grandfather are there to witness the spectacle of segregation and to prove to themselves their own superiority. Apart from "very black" waiters, they notice the cheerfully dressed trio, roped off at their breakfast table in the dining car. This scene reveals several other paradoxes of racism. First, there is the social difference between the very black waiters on the one hand and the "suntanned" guests on the other. Second, the wealthy blacks are segregated, or "roped off," despite their telltale "suntan," which is associated with their superior economic status. Third, blackness diminishes a worker's power. In other words, the black waiter can stop Mr. Head from entering the diner's kitchen, but Mr. Head can insult him in public and the black waiter will not retaliate. He can and will protect the train company's property, but he does not and cannot protect his own civil rights. O'Connor captures all these absurdities and exposes them for what they are.

When the grandfather and grandson arrive in Atlanta and wander around, they eventually get lost and end up in a black neighborhood, which again allows the grandfather to vent his racist views (O'Connor 1988a: 221). At this stage, the grandfather feels both superior to the poor black people and insecure among them. He hesitates to ask for directions to avoid ridicule. Nelson, too, is "afraid of the colored men" and he does not want to be "laughed at by the colored children" (O'Connor 1988a: 222), but he finally chooses a tall, good-natured woman as his informant. This character has provoked a heated critical debate, which O'Donnell summarizes and develops (O'Donnell 2020: 114–116). In the present analysis, however, the focus of attention is not on the symbolic significance of the woman "as both mammy-figure and sexual object" (O'Donnell 2020: 115), but on how she and Nelson interact. In this regard, it is important to note that the woman is kind to the boy, even though there is neither politeness nor direct insult in the way he addresses her. In other words, she is blocking out negative emotions. Looking at her, the motherless boy (and a man *in spe*) experiences an irresistible elemental emotion that seems to erase racial difference: "He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and down

into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel" (O'Connor 1988a: 223). The woman must have sensed this longing because she concludes the instructions by lovingly referring to Nelson as "Sugarpie" (O'Connor 1988a: 223). As a term of endearment, the word has a phatic rather than informational function, but the image it evokes is of white refined sugar (see McDonald 2016 for a history of white sugar in the U.S.) melting into a brownish sugar cake. The distinction between black and white seems to disappear in this moment of tenderness, which the jealous white patriarch needs to prevent. He pulls the boy "roughly away" from the woman and again rebukes him for his gut instinct: "You act like you don't have any sense!" (O'Connor 1988: 223).

The whole story hinges on another episode that brings to a head the ever-simmering conflict between the old man and the boy. When Nelson feels exhausted, the grandfather lets him sleep on the street, but to teach him another lesson, the grandfather hides from the boy, so that when Nelson wakes up, he thinks that he is alone, and runs very fast down the street in a panic. He knocks down an elderly woman, who threatens to call the police. Mr. Head joins the group but when the boy tries to hug him, hoping to be rescued, the grandfather claims not to know him. The grandfather's act of "Othering" the boy is a bizarre moment, but, ironically, it solves the problem at hand because all the people gathered around, feel sorry for the disowned boy. The conflict with the angry crowd is defused, but the family relationship has suffered. The boy feels hurt and the grandfather is sorry. This act of disowning of the boy by his grandfather parallels the "Othering" of black people and it is exposed in this scene as a way of evading the responsibility for damages.

Paradoxically, Nelson and his grandfather are reunited only when they deny the analogy between the "Othering" of the boy and black people, and find a common enemy, or the idea of an enemy, in "the plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence that curved around a wide lawn" (O'Connor 1988a: 229). The narrator creates yet another analogy when describing the happy-sad, dilapidated figure as "about Nelson's size" (O'Connor 1988a: 229). On a symbolic level, the plaster figure, a courtyard statue, represents the segregation laws known as Jim Crow, after an offensive minstrel caricature (Morris 2021: 24). In the racist entertainment known as the minstrel show, black characters were played by whites in blackface. The symbolic figure that Mr. Head and Nelson see is thus "the product of a white imagination" (O'Donnell 2020: 118). The idea of race is materialized in this deplorable image of an image that the grandfather rightly recognizes as "artificial." In commenting on the figure, the grandfather makes a racist remark that gives the story its title. The boy repeats it. This act of naming in derogatory terms what they imagine to be the opposite of their own reaffirmed whiteness reunites them as a family; they become indistinguishable in their words and body language.

In this final image of a figure from the minstrel show, O'Connor underscores what remains incomprehensible to both the grandfather and the boy: she suggests that race is a miserable construct, not only absurd but also dilapidated. The vignette illustrates Doreen Fowler's claim that O'Connor points to "the cultural construction of identity," and that this construction also includes "repression in formulating identity and meaning" (Fowler 2003: 31). In focusing on repression, Fowler takes her cue from O'Connor's identification of African Americans as "our darker selves, our shadow side" (qtd. in Asals 2007 [1982]: 86) or "doubles of the white majority" (Fowler 2003: 31). As the story comes full circle,

the final vignette of the plaster figure echoes the gaily dressed African Americans in the first "lesson" Nelson receives. In their quasi-theatrical performance on the train, the "suntanned" trio enacted blackness even though they could probably pass for white. Likewise, at the end, Mr. Head and Nelson unite in performing whiteness, despite their deeply felt and repressed "shadow side."

O'Connor insisted on using the N-word in the title of her story, even though it was bound to offend African American readers in 1955 (O'Donnell 2020: 57). The editor of the *Kenyon Review*, John Crowe Ransom, tried to persuade her to change the title so as not to offend "black folk's sensibilities," but she refused, claiming that the title was "much more damaging to white folk's sensibilities" (qtd. in Armstrong 2004: 298). As Benjamin Mangrum explains, O'Connor's exchange with Ransom "occurred in the midst of the growing outcry against institutional racism": after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling and before the murder of Emmett Till in August 1955 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in December 1955. These were "the two events that forced the civil rights movement [CRM] into mainstream white consciousness" (Mangrum 2019: 237). The N-word has, however, caught the attention of critics who targeted O'Connor for her "white privilege [that] did allow her to ignore race in ways that African Americans could not" (Armstrong 2004: 303). O'Connor's provocation, evident in her seeming alignment with a class of people who would use such derogatory terms, has fallen victim to a shallow political correctness that scholars, such as Hilton Als, rightly deplore (qtd. in *Flannery* 2019).

## 3. "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961)

Some six years later, the racial conflict escalated, which is reflected in the other story analyzed in this article. Unlike the previous story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is set entirely in an urban space. This time, there is no straightforward provocation in the title. The sociopolitical situation was too serious to test anyone's sensibilities. The story was published in the literary magazine *The New World Writing* in 1961, at the time when "protests against Jim Crow were raging on the streets, [...] [t]he drama being beamed into American living rooms" (Morris 2021: 24; see Television News of the Civil Rights Era 1950–1970 website). In a letter of March 29, 1961, to Roslyn Barnes, a friend and devotee, O'Connor admits that the story's title refers to "a physical proposition that [she] found in Pere Teilhard." She is referring to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a controversial French Jesuit priest and paleontologist, who in 1959, almost overnight, "became a theological superstar in the US" (Wright 2020). As Wright mentions and Susan Kassman Sack shows in her book, "some of Teilhard's musings seemed to chime with the civil rights movement" (Wright 2020). O'Connor writes in the letter that she is applying his "physical proposition," as she puts it, "to a certain situation in Southern states & indeed in all the world" (O'Connor1988b: 1268, note 485.1). What she cryptically refers to as "a certain situation" is a matter of race relations, to which she astutely ascribes global significance, as is still done today. It seems misleading to refer to de Chardin's theory of spiritual evolution

as "a physical proposition," but the phrase may well signal O'Connor's intention to link once again physics and metaphysics, and to look for manifestations of spiritual phenomena in everyday life.

The central conflict in O'Connor's famous story appears to be intergenerational, with the attitudes of the protagonist, Julian, and his mother toward black people serving as the main difference and the main weapon used by both. As the setting shifts from the interior of an apartment to the street and then to the interior of a recently "integrated" city bus, the intergenerational conflict becomes a racial one. Julian, who is the focalizer in the story, hates his mother's aloofness toward black people, even though she is by no means the most vocal racist in the public space. When they get on the bus and the mother strikes up a conversation with other white people who are subtly but unmistakably characterized as white trash, she is not the one making the most offensive statements. To teach his mother a lesson, Julian ostentatiously chooses a seat next to an elegant black man who has just boarded the bus.

Despite these manifestations, it becomes clear eventually that Julian is just as racist as his mother, and perhaps even more nostalgic for the glorious past of his plantation-owning ancestors. The difference between the two is that the mother has a transgenerational memory of living close to enslaved blacks and depending on their services, while Julian only imagines a new kind of intimacy with blacks on new, seemingly equal terms. Significantly, however, he always imagines intimacy with black people who are educated and wealthy. Poor blacks are excluded from his idea of interracial solidarity. In addition, his (imaginary) association with wealthy, educated African Americans would improve his own social standing. Despite his college education and literary aspirations, Julian is economically dependent on his mother, who struggles to support them both. His reluctance to accompany her on the bus to her "reduction class" at the YMCA signals both his protest against her vague fear of being attacked by a black person and his own uncomfortable sense of economic dependence. This way O'Connor shows how a stance on racial issues also depends on factors other than one's racial identity.

O'Connor depicts a society in which segregation may have been abolished by law, but in public spaces, not to mention domestic ones, there is still a thick wall between blacks and whites. Their relations are tense and threaten to erupt into open conflict at any moment. Black people getting on the bus avoid any direct contact with white people. This is also true of a tall black woman and her small son, both overdressed, who board the bus at a later stop. It is the generation of sons who, wittingly or unwittingly, unsettle the generation of mothers. Out of spite, Julian chooses to sit next to the black woman, and the little black boy, named Carver, feels drawn to Julian's mother and attracts her attention, much to the chagrin of his own mother. The two women seem to have swapped their sons, which is no compliment to Julian, who is the equivalent of a little boy. But that is not the end of their unwanted association.

As it turns out, the two women are wearing identical expensive hats that, as the focalizer attests, are ugly. Deprived of any aesthetic function, the two hats become symbols of wealth, authority, or some other form of social significance. Thus, not only the hats, but also the social roles of the two women appear identical and therefore interchangeable, regardless of the difference in skin color. Both women insist on their social status (rise), achieved as if at the expense of the other, only to converge symbolically on the city bus. O'Connor masterfully describes the tension that builds on the bus and culminates outside

when the two mirror-images of mothers and sons disembark. Julian's mother insists on giving the little boy a coin as a parting gift. What seems like an ordinary act of goodwill is also a condescending gesture. She happens to have no dime and offers a penny instead; a substitution that reflects her diminished circumstances. O'Connor does not spell it out, but Paul Elie suggests another significance of this unfortunate coin. It is "a penny with Lincoln's profile on it" (Elie 2020). The message, unspoken in the story but still readable in the black woman's reaction, is that a white president may have tried to give freedom to enslaved people, but his magnanimous offer was worth little for nearly ninety years to come. The black mother does not explain her reasons, she simply strikes back; she literally hits Julian's mother with her big red bag.

Julian is older than Nelson in "The Artificial Nigger," he is also educated and urban, all of which may contribute to his urge to teach his mother a lesson: "He stood over her for a minute, gritting his teeth. Her legs were stretched out in front of her and her hat was on her lap. He squatted down and looked her in the face. It was totally expressionless. 'You got exactly what you deserved,' he said. 'Now get up.'" (O'Connor 1988b: 498). The roles in this generational conflict are reversed from the other story, and gender certainly plays a role in this reversal. Julian's unceremonious attitude toward his mother illustrates his generation's difficulty coming to terms with the history of systemic injustice that the older generation seems to embody and take for granted. While Julian's mother remains unaware of her guilt or shortcomings in this regard, her son suffers from remorse, but he has no clear idea of how to resolve the racial conflict. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the "Othering" to which Morrison referred in her reading of "The Artificial Nigger" goes both ways: the black mother is intent on teaching her child to avoid contact with whites (and their condescension) whereas the white mother fears attack and seeks to restore black-white relations to what they were in her youth. What Hilton Als recognizes as one of O'Connor's major themes is also evocatively realized in this story. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," O'Connor recreates "the spectacle of blacks and whites regarding each other across a divide of mutual outsiderness" (Als 2001). Als admits that "O'Connor was not a polemicist, but her work is implicitly political, given the environment she drew from—the South during its second failed attempt at Reconstruction, otherwise known as Integration" (Als 2001). From the polemicist's perspective, the racial divide is unbridgeable. O'Connor, however, experimenting with de Chardin's idea, imagines convergence through the mirror effect.

# 4. Conclusion

The two stories in this article focus on white characters, exposing their mental habits and especially their ineradicable racism: openly stated racism, as in the case of rural and uneducated people like Mr. Head and Nelson, and veiled racism, as in the case of urban and educated characters like Julian and his mother. Between the publication of the two stories, segregation was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1956, the result of a year-long bus boycott that began in Montgomery, Alabama. A wave of African American protests brought about change, and O'Connor's fiction reflects this. The earlier story depicts an example of

segregation in a train diner, while the later story confronts the reader with desegregation, a difficult process for both blacks and whites. Whereas Mr. Head and Nelson are united in their view of race relations, in the later story, Julian questions his mother's habits. Thus, at least in urban areas, the self-confidence of white supremacists is crumbling, and the white population feels lost. "This lostness is echoed in Julian's mother's final words in the story, as she wanders down the alien sidewalk in a world she no longer belongs to" (O'Donnell 2020: 106).

It may be true that African Americans are only background characters in O'Connor's stories, but even so, the attitudes of white characters toward black people become a central element of their portrayal, as in the story of Mr. Head and Nelson or the story of Julian and his mother. Unlike the characters in her fiction who seek to teach others a lesson or two, O'Connor eschews any form of didacticism. Her stories are ambiguous, and despite a clear conclusion – Mr. Head' and Nelson's return home and the death of Julian's mother – they remain inconclusive about the future of race relations. The latter story, however, makes clear that there is no return to the status quo ante. In her essay "The Teaching of Literature," O'Connor bluntly stated that "Good fiction deals with human nature. If it uses material that is topical, it still does not use it for a topical purpose, and if topics are what you want anyway, you are better referred to a newspaper" (O'Connor 1969b: 126). In other words, she distanced herself from topical writing and consequently also topical reading of fiction. O'Connor's letter of May 21, 1964, to her friend Maryat Lee, a playwright involved in the CRM, reveals that she was not keen on meeting either Martin Luther King or James Baldwin. She appreciated their social and literary work (O'Connor 1988c: 1208), respectively, but would not be co-opted by a political movement. Nevertheless, her depiction of the ugliness of racism in stories addressed to her white audience can be seen as analogous to Martin Luther King's suggestions for behavior on segregated buses addressed to blacks (see King 1956). O'Connor's message is more ambiguous than King's suggestions, but it is just as powerful.

Asking uncomfortable questions is very much in keeping with O'Connor's provocative stance, evident in both her fiction and nonfiction. She knew what it meant to go against the tide, whether by necessity or choice, in more ways than one: as a Roman Catholic living in a mainly protestant region (Als 2001), or as a hard-working female writer challenged by disability and navigating "a predominantly male world of writers and publishers" (Bosco 2018: 79). She classified herself as a religious writer, but she was the kind of believer who questioned what others took for granted. Thus, Michael Mears Bruner can read her stories as "a dual critique – a call to arms, really – against both the weak-kneed sentiments of conventional religion and what she termed [in her essay "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor 1969a, 159] the 'domesticated despair' of contemporary culture's narrative" (Bruner 2017: 1). Her portrayal of disabled people appears ruthlessly sincere unless viewed through the lens of "a sacramental aesthetics" and "an incarnational art." These perspectives were first advanced by Susan Srigley (2004) and Christina Bieber Lake (2006), respectively, and then explored by Donald E. Hardy, who used computational tools (Hardy 2007: 1–2). Such anodyne takes, however, often seek to defuse the bombs that O'Connor planted in her fiction. Her attitude of boundless curiosity that overrides self-interest also characterizes her depictions of African Americans as an oppressed people. I have argued in this article that even though she was not a civil rights activist, there is an element of activism through

art, or perhaps even artivism (*avant la lettre*), at least in her fiction. Art is meant to provoke, and O'Connor does that all the time.

My textual analyses of two short stories that span rural and urban attitudes toward African Americans, before and after desegregation laws, showed that, for all her disclaimers, O'Connor was a careful and unabashed reader of the great social and political challenges of her time, and, as it turns out, ours, albeit in a different form. What also allows contemporary readers to see O'Connor with new eyes is the fact that the CRM that O'Connor viewed with awe has, in recent decades, evolved into the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement. In particular, twenty-first-century activists have replaced the CRM's "centralized governance structures" with "loose, decentralized ones" (Morris 2021: 33). "Whereas the CRM was deeply embedded in Black communities," the BLM movement has become global, attracting "[m]any white people and members of other minority groups [who] have joined the movement, augmenting its strength" (Morris 2021: 33). The activists of the BLM movement have also demonstrated that civil rights are, in fact, human rights. Changes in the idea and practice of the contemporary liberation movement have opened it up to communities across the ethnic and social spectrum far more than the CRM ever did. Thus, paradoxically, there is more room for O'Connor today than in her own time of social upheaval. Her often misunderstood provocations resonate with the current need to undermine entrenched hypocrisies.

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