

Beata Williamson*

“Radically Ambivalent”

On Race Matters and Flannery O’Connor

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2025.018>

In the introduction to her study, Angela Alaimo O’Donnell modestly announces her intention: it is merely to “illuminate the role of race in O’Connor’s work,” rather than offer an “extended analysis” of the subject. In this task, she employs a range of theories, from “racial formation [...] and critical whiteness studies” to “historical, political, theological, religious, and literary contexts” (O’Donnell 2020: 11). She analyzes Flannery O’Connor’s letters and interprets several stories. The word “ambivalence” in the book’s title conveys O’Connor’s attitude toward race matters: she is “of two minds” yet not “neutral” (O’Donnell 2020: 1). In the end, O’Donnell achieves more than her introduction promises: her book is absorbing, provocative, gracefully written, and occasionally even moving; it is satisfying to the intellect and to the heart.

The first chapter, “‘Whiteness Visible’: Critical Whiteness Studies and O’Connor’s Fiction” opens with an historical survey of critical responses. The title of this chapter, clearly alluding to William Styron’s *Darkness Visible*, gives us an optic on O’Donnell’s position with respect to these responses. (Styron’s subtitle is “A Memoir of Madness.”) In 1975, Alice Walker praised O’Connor, grateful that the white writer left race issues alone, and particularly, that she did not attempt to enter the minds of her Black characters. But after Walker’s “respectful assessment” came others that “bristled” at the writer’s depictions of African Americans. This “typical binary” of assessments continues into the 21st century (O’Donnell 2020: 15–16).

O’Donnell, however, invites the reader to keep in mind the “slipperiness” of various terms referring to race, and to see the South as almost equivalent to a minstrel show, complete with roles for everybody, where even lynchings are “the grimmest of theatrical

* PhD. She teaches at the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Gdańsk. Her scholarly interests include 19th-century sentimental fiction and the literary criticism of Henry James.
E-mail: beata.williamson@ug.edu.pl | ORCID: 0000-0002-5086-9463.

rituals” (O’Donnell 2020: 18). O’Connor herself, though, was often on slippery grounds, or perhaps thin ice. She invokes “the codes” that allowed the races to coexist and labels them “manners” (O’Donnell 2020: 21). She even declares herself “integrationist by principle and segregationist by taste” (O’Donnell 2020: 19). I cringe at the word “taste”; it underscores rather than excuses O’Connor’s ugly supremacism. Wisely, O’Donnell does not protest, dismiss, or accuse but instead offers interpretations of “Geranium” and “Judgement Day,” the first and last stories O’Connor completed in her life, or actually, the same text she kept rewriting. In the early one, the Black man is sympathetic; in the latter, complex and troubling, he is sinister. The protagonist of the two texts, a white Southerner relocated to the North, dies when his codes fail him; yet each time, his death is merciful, and “both of his saviors are black.” We never know the thoughts of the Blacks; innocent of cultural appropriation, O’Connor the racist convincingly shows that “whiteness and blackness [...] are fictive social constructions” (O’Donnell 2020: 34).

The second chapter, “Race, Politics, and the Double Mind: Flannery’s Correspondence versus O’Connor’s Fiction,” is plainly disturbing. O’Connor maintained a “strange silence” in response to the bloody events of the 1963 Civil Rights Movement, and while many other white, Christian, Southern writers expressed “rage” at the racial injustice, she ridiculed their stance, indignant at this attack on her beloved South; she was more concerned about the attitude of “stupid Yankee liberals” than violence done to her own Black neighbors (O’Donnell 2020: 37). O’Connor’s private letters reveal a genuinely repellant personality, that of a writer who deliberately uses racially offensive terms. Even if we forgive the blunt vocabulary, her crude racial jokes are in strikingly bad taste. Her “manners” fail her spectacularly – she is vulgar. O’Donnell notes that “numerous passages were deleted from the published versions of the letters [...] to protect O’Connor’s reputation” and promote her “hagiography” (O’Donnell 2020: 55). Ironically, O’Connor claimed to detest “hagiography of any kind,” such as the image of Martin Luther King’s as “a secular saint” (O’Donnell 2020: 52). That she denounces the culture’s hagiography of a Black man is itself significant.

The chapter carefully documents how O’Connor changed in her attitudes; open-minded in her youth, she became more racist as she aged. Her early texts show Blacks sympathetically and even respectfully, as in “Barber,” a story which also ridicules her “archetypal man of liberal thought” (O’Donnell 2020: 41). Dutifully fair, O’Donnell reports that the writer’s oft-discussed refusal to see James Baldwin in her home came rather from the fear of “redneck fools” in her neighborhood who would object to the Black man’s visit than her own prejudice (O’Donnell 2020: 50). “Revelation” is the story that exemplifies much of the chapter’s insights: “an unconscious but blatant racist” learns “God’s unequivocal love for all his creatures, black and white alike” (O’Donnell 2020: 58). O’Donnell continually emphasizes that the letters and the fiction show a different person, as the chapter’s title implies. *Flannery* practiced racism; *O’Connor* wrote fiction in which she “[resists] her own inherent evil tendencies” (O’Donnell 2020: 69). While this double mindedness could hardly make for a peaceful frame of mind, it goes some way toward explaining the power of O’Connor’s fiction.

O’Connor’s changing attitudes to matters of race parallel the changes her faith underwent. In “Theology, Religion, and Race: Conversion and the Beginning of Vision” (Chapter 3), O’Donnell shows the writer’s growing conservatism. Sympathetic to rebellion as befits a young person, liberal as a student in Iowa, where she was exposed to the views of

Northern intellectuals, she returned to Georgia a grown-up, “newly recommitted Catholic” (O’Donnell 2020: 76). Yet it was not solely her personal religion that influenced the adult O’Connor’s racial beliefs; the Catholic church, as O’Donnell relates, included both backward and progressive attitudes. Disliking the “left-leaning Church’s liberalism,” O’Connor chose a “slow church, [...] resistant to change” (O’Donnell 2020: 86). She “saw events in light of eternity” – the perspective she called “anagogical vision,” and “contemporary racial politics” played little role in it; she instead sought “the deep mystery of human experience” (O’Donnell 2020: 78).

Here, in this central chapter of O’Donnell’s book, reading about “cosmic forces of good and evil” that O’Connor concerned herself with, it becomes clear O’Connor turned to metaphysics while there was trouble at her doorstep. She thus emerges more as a coward than a thinker. Following a discussion of various “theological visions” that impacted the author, O’Donnell writes, “it is easy to see why O’Connor would find the efforts of civil rights activists to be a form of folly, at best, and a collective act of overweening pride, at worst,” and moves to interpreting “Everything that Rises Must Converge” as the illustration of the folly (O’Donnell 2020: 81). O’Connor lashes at all participants of the conflict – the deluded young progressive, his prejudiced mother, and the aggressively self-righteous Black woman. To be sure, they all act wrongly. Yet when O’Donnell states that “O’Connor refused to demonize one side of a political debate and idealize the other” (O’Donnell 2020: 81), I must disagree: it would be more honest to admit that O’Connor *demonized* one side and backed herself with divine authority. But the critic does concede that the writer was “blinded to [her] white privilege” in political, social, and religious matters (O’Donnell 2020: 88). Mercifully, the chapter turns to “Revelation,” about “a decent woman who has been misshapen by a culture that runs counter to her faith” (O’Donnell 2020: 89). Written a few months before the author’s death, the story clearly shows she began to understand the “burden” of whiteness; “touched by Christ,” she began to see the light (O’Donnell 2020: 96).

“Africanist Presence” and the Role of Black Bodies” (Chapter 4) speaks of American literary contexts of O’Connor’s writing. No white American writer, says O’Donnell, could ever dismiss race, and since Toni Morrison’s pathbreaking 1992 critical reimagining of American canonical fiction, *Playing in the Dark*, “critics have made up for their relative silence on these matters” (O’Donnell 2020: 98). O’Donnell protests against critical accusations that Blacks in O’Connor’s fiction are simplified or stereotyped and focuses in this chapter on their physical bodies. These matter as well, just as her Lupus-ridden body mattered to O’Connor. As a Catholic, she saw Christ’s suffering body in her own deformed characters. These freaks are associated with redemption.

As for African Americans, none can escape remembering what their bodies meant in US history. O’Donnell quotes M. Shawn Copeland: “An intrinsic evil, racism is lethal to bodies, to black bodies, to the body of Christ, to Eucharist”; yet how much O’Connor realized her own “evil” is of no concern here. Disdainful of the civil rights movement, disliking “topical” in literature – in her own words, “a plague on every body’s house as far as the race business goes” (O’Donnell 2020: 101), she writes “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” where black and white bodies reflect one another with frightful resemblance. They are both mothers, they are dressed the same, and each behaves badly. Obviously, it is the white woman’s “progressive” son who is the villain. Yet O’Donnell sees something else – “the

black woman as an embodiment of O'Connor's own fears of black rage and violence"; the text, she maintains, "[undermines] the author's intended message." The O'Connor reader will agree and will understand the Black mother's anger with all its consequences. This is the example in American literature that Morrison sought – where racism is “exploded and undermined,” where the text overrides what the writer “means to say” (O'Donnell 2020: 106).

As another example, “The Artificial Nigger” features black bodies of flesh and stone. They matter in various ways, but they all “move [the child protagonist] from being an unbiased observer of black physical bodies to acculturation into white ways of perceiving blacks” (O'Donnell 2020: 110). O'Donnell acknowledges stereotyping, especially in the maternal/sexual symbolism of the Black woman, but again she suggests that there is more than “O'Connor, perhaps, intended” (O'Donnell 2020: 115). In the universal suffering which the black statue represents, O'Connor is guilty of appropriation – the white woman has no right to use Blacks for her theological ruminations. But ultimately, the white characters in her fiction gain “the terrible knowledge,” namely, that “race is a relative rather than an absolute condition.” To the reader, her black bodies bring a “destabilizing effect,” even a certain “uneasiness,” but right or wrong in her opinions on race, O'Connor “refused to look away” (O'Donnell 2020: 123, 124). Hence the writer needs no defense, no apology – she is honest, complex, and powerful.

In her final, fifth chapter, “The Failure and Promise of Communion,” O'Donnell sets her subject among “white American writers of every era.” None of them “can afford not to address the question of race” (O'Donnell 2020: 125). Like Herman Melville, O'Connor probes the depth of the question; unlike Margaret Mitchell, she does not prettify the issue. She feels no respect for the “past glory” of her homeland, as “The Last Encounter with the Enemy” shows via its somewhat playful account of a 104-year-old Confederate general who lives in the dream of a “fictional cultural narrative” (O'Donnell 2020: 128). Yet he is not a general and might not have fought for the Confederacy at all. He is false and so is his dream. O'Connor denies “glory days” to her South. Certainly, her perspective is white; rejecting Southern mythology, she nonetheless appears to be oblivious to the positive outcome of the Civil war – Blacks gaining their freedom. Yet this is also her right, O'Donnell argues; “grant the artist her vision, [...] perhaps especially when it does not conform to our own” (O'Donnell 2020: 130). O'Connor's image of race relations, biased as it is, “is enlightening to all readers” (O'Donnell 2020: 131). I choose to agree.

Denying O'Connor's perspective the right to exist, as I see it, positions us in the bubble of false correctness. A frequent issue in her texts is the failure of communication between individuals of both races. She enters the minds of whites only but emphasizes the higher understanding of Blacks. In “The Enduring Chill,” among other examples, Blacks refuse to communicate with an apparently sympathetic white person. Inscrutable and seemingly ignorant, they act “according to Southern racial code” (O'Donnell 2020: 132) – their strict adherence to such codes has allowed them to survive. The white boy wants to be loved and admired, but he does not understand how “utterly unlovable” he is (O'Donnell 2020: 134). In their wisdom, Blacks recognize the danger of any interracial communication and remain mute. The last text which O'Donnell interprets is *The Violent Bear It Away*. African American Buford Munson is the moral compass and “agent of [the white hero's] conversion”; Munson teaches by “means of his actions and example” but even more, he “verbally lessons the boy.”

He speaks directly, following no codes, sure of the power of his righteousness. The white man listens. The “promise of communion” ends the novel. The “image of the Black savior” (O’Donnell 2020: 138) braces O’Donnell’s study.

O’Donnell is no apologist for O’Connor’s views. The reader of *Radical Ambivalence*, who on the basis of her stories suspects the writer of racial prejudice, will be vindicated. O’Donnell shows the pervasive racism in O’Connor’s fiction, and does not shy from exposing blunt, ugly prejudice in the writer’s private letters. At the same time, this very honesty is respectful to O’Connor; indeed, the most distressing matter the critic addresses is the attempt to save the writer’s reputation by deleting the letters” compromising parts before publication. Ultimately, O’Donnell’s study is generous towards O’Connor: calling her “race hunted as well as God hunted,” the Christian critic offers high praise. About only one matter I remain unconvinced, that “in order to fully appreciate her humanity and her art, we need both” O’Connor’s fiction and her letters (O’Donnell 2020: 68). I would rather her correspondence remained private, just as she granted privacy to her Black characters” minds. O’Connor’s letters make her too rebarbative a personality, a “Wildcat” I simply want to run from. Of course, many famous writers” lives were scandalous, shameful, self-destructive, or the like. How we deal with their personal lives is perhaps fundamentally a personal matter. For me, Flannery O’Connor is a writer, and I will know her by her art. Her art holds – that’s the wonder.

Bibliography

O’Donnell, Angela Alaimo 2020. *Radical Ambivalence: Race in Flannery O’Connor*. New York: Fordham University Press.