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Varieties of Displacement in Flannery O'Connor's *The Displaced Person*

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2025.017

This story by Flannery O'Connor presents a complexity of xenophobia, discrimination and displacement. It is a bit longer than the "classic" examples of the short story genre according to Poe or Hemingway, altogether forty-one pages. It can be "read at one sitting," though, and it provides the "unity of effect": uncanny bafflement at where one belongs and to what extent one may get alienated from one's own environment. The story has three parts, and at the end of each, a more or less surprising new level of displacement is disclosed. The text can also be seen as the "tip of the iceberg" in the sense that it shows only one set of examples of the various ways in which the notions of the "us" and the "them" may sweeten as well as poison the lives of allegedly free individuals in the United States – and elsewhere, all around the world. As David Griffith argues in his essay "The Displaced Person. Reading Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Islamophobia," the story "carries a dark moral force without recourse to didacticism or sentimentality."

Concerning the form of the text, William Burke's excellent observations are worth considering:

> Each of the story's three sections is presented in a different narrative form, so that the acts of community dissolution dramatized in the three sections are embodied in literary acts that suggest the instability of a central literary strategy, the absence of a necessary principle of form. Each section, that is, involves a method that cancels as much as it complements the methods of the other two sections. In Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" the displacement of

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LITTERARIA COPERNICANA 1–2(51) 2025
ISSNp 1899-315X
ss. 159–164

place and community is underscored by the displacement of its own recording (Burke 1986: 219–220).

While expanding Burke's observations, my paper focuses on varieties of displacement in both the plot and the narration. I suggest that displacement is a necessary and uncanny condition that must be faced in post-World War Two society (just like in the 21st century), and it is only through a universal sense of humor, like Flannery O'Connor's that this discomfort might be somewhat relieved.

The person mentioned in the title is Mr. Guizack, who comes as a refugee from Poland, together with his wife, son and daughter, to work at a run-down Southern estate (presumably in Georgia)[1]. He is introduced to the owner, Mrs. McIntyre by an old Catholic priest, Father Flynn (who, in the mainly Protestant South is somewhat of an outsider, has a foreign accent and a curious admiration of the peacocks[2] on the farm). The presence of the Guizack family becomes increasingly irritating first and foremost to the white tenants working at the farm, Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, then to the African American farm hands, the old man Astor and the young man Sulk, finally to Mrs. McIntyre herself. In the course of the story, all of these characters become displaced and alienated.

The text labels Mr. Guizack as a D.P. – understandably, since he is sent to America from a D.P. camp in Europe after the Second World War. It is more puzzling that the mode of narration also seems to displace Mr. Guizack by never showing his point of view, so the reader can only guess what he and his family might think of their situation. He wears gold-rimmed glasses that (besides giving him an intellectual look) also alienate him from the others. (The glasses remind Mr. Shortly of the German soldier in World War One who threw a hand grenade at him and they might remind the reader of the criminal Misfit in O'Connor's other, most famous story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find.") In spite of his incessant and effective work on the farm, being able to handle all the machines, Mr. Guizack, too, is somewhat machine-like: there is nothing *organic* about him. At the very end of the story, when he becomes a victim of an accident (or a tacit agreement of letting him get killed), it is an uncontrolled machine that takes his life: this is the only time when one of his very vital *organs* is mentioned: the tractor wheel breaks his backbone. It is his inability to perceive and accept the tacit laws of the region that irritate others the most – but these tacit laws, in Mr. Guizack's mind, would undermine and override the most basic concepts of democracy and of Christianity (e.g. African American farm hands can steal turkeys on the farm without a problem, but interracial marriage is absolutely unthinkable). How could he have ever been prepared for things like that when coming to the land of the free and the brave? There is no knowing what he can and cannot see behind the gold-rimmed glasses. As Mrs.Shortley remarks: "It's them little eyes of his that is foreign" (O'Connor 1996: 206).

The first part of the story focuses on his first enemy on the farm: Mrs. Shortley. Her presentation as a giantess, "with the grand self-confidence of a mountain" (O'Connor 1996: 194) implies that she feels like belonging here by nature, observing the events with arms folded from a hilltop. However, her "icy blue," "surveying" eyes do not seem to notice the

[1] For the historical sociocultural context see Johnson 2018.

[2] It aligns with the symbolism of immortality attached to peacocks, standing also for resurrection and spiritual life, within the Christian context.

sun ("which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder" (O'Connor 1996: 194). As Richard Giannone observes, "one senses foreboding in her apathy to nature's loveliness" (Giannone 1999: 103). I would also add that the narration introduces the celestial body of the sun as an intruder in itself, exactly at the moment when the Polish family's intrusion into the world of the Southern farm occurs. Mrs. Shortly's looks "first grazed the tops of the displaced people's heads and then revolved downwards slowly, the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air until it alights on the carcass." What shocks her is the fact that the DP's look exactly like other people. "The woman had on a dress she might have worn herself and the children were dressed like anybody from around" (O'Connor 1996:195). She had imagined them as visibly different, and instead of relief, their similitude to Americans raises suspicion and fear in her heart. Her fears are signs of her short-sightedness: she had seen a newsreel after the war in which piles of dead bodies were shown in great disorder, ("a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing" O'Connor 1996: 196)) and she has an intuition: "[the Guizacks], like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place. If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?" (O'Connor 1996: 196). This logic of criminalizing the victim leads to effective xenophobia, and Mrs. Shortly prophetically sees the ruin of the Southern microcosm in the arrival of the strangers. She feels that with the appearance of the efficient Pole, the African American farm hands are in direct danger. She explains the term "Displaced Person" to Astor and Sulk in the following way:

> "They come from over the water," Mrs. Shortley said with a wave of her arm. "They are what is called Displaced Persons."
> "Displaced Persons," he said. "Well now. I declare. What do that mean?"
> "It means they ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go – like if you was run out of here and wouldn't nobody have you."
> "It seem like they here, though," the old man said in a reflective voice. "If they here, they somewhere."
> "Sho is," the other agreed. "They here." (O'Connor 1996:199)

When the two farm hands don't seem to understand her point, she explains it more directly:

> "Before it was a tractor," she said, "it could be a mule. And before it was a Displaced Person, it could be a n*****. The time is going to come," she prophesied, "when it won't be no more occasion to speak of a n*****." (O'Connor 1996: 206)

However, it soon turns out that Mrs. McIntyre, satisfied with the work of Mr. Guizack and wanting to raise his salary, is considering the dismissal of the Shortleys, not the African Americans. Mrs. Shortley, who had thought herself to be safe on the farm (since Mrs. McIntyre had shared her thoughts with her about the former tenants, many of whom she had seen as "trash"), is now shocked, and decides to leave the place immediately, packing up all their belongings. When the car starts with the Shortley family, she has a sudden stroke – in her fit, she displays a disorder of body parts reminiscent of the newsreel: "She suddenly

grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself" (O'Connor 1996: 213). In the narrator's words: she had been "displaced in the world from all that belonged to her" (O'Connor 1996: 214). Her death is very poetically described: "her eyes like blue painted glass seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country" (O'Connor 1996: 214). I intend to return to the phrase "true country" later in this paper, since it indicates that the feeling of belonging might only make sense in another dimension.

The second part of the story focuses on Mrs. McIntyre's past hardships and on her view of Mr. Guizack. In the first part, she had already said to Mrs. Shortley: "that man is my salvation" (O'Connor 1996: 203), to which the tenant woman had answered: "I would suspicion salvation got from the devil" (O'Connor 1996: 203). Beside the possible theological implications, these words have a very practical meaning in the context: Mrs. Shortley is jealous and sees the source of all evil in the Polish man, and it becomes clear that Mrs. McIntyre had gone through difficult times after the death of the Judge (her first husband, an old man who left her nothing but the house and the farm). Although she had two other unsuccessful marriages, she still respected the Judge the most, recalling his proverbial sayings, like "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't." Except for Astor, she had to hire all farm hands herself, and many families (the ones she had referred to as "trash") had cheated on her and left her. No wonder she is satisfied with the hard-working Displaced Person. Although she still doesn't understand Mr. Guizack's thoughts and ways, she feels extremely relieved that due to his expertise, things are going much better at the farm. In spite of her growing admiration, "[t]he truth was that he was not very real to her yet. He was a kind of miracle that she had seen happen and that she talked about but that she still didn't believe" (O'Connor 1996: 219). Her attitude changes when she finds out that Mr. Guizack had made a deal with Sulk, the young African American worker, so that his sixteen year old niece, who had been living in DP camps for three years, could come to America and marry him. This idea is unthinkable for Mrs. McIntyre. Her upset reaction discloses both her racism and her strong ties to African Americans: "Mr. Guizack! You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking n*****! What kind of a monster are you?" (O'Connor 1996: 222). And, a little later: "I will not have my n*****s upset. I cannot run this place without my n*****s. I can run it without you but not without them and if you mention this girl to Sulk again, you won't have a job with me. Do you understand?" To put an emphasis to her change of mind, at the end of Part Two of the text, Mrs. McIntyre climbs to the top of the slope, stands "with her arms folded," taking a look over the field. "She narrowed her gaze until it closed entirely around the diminishing figure on the tractor as if she were watching him through a gunsight" (O'Connor 1996: 224). The scene recalls Mrs. Shortley's position and indicates that Mrs. McIntyre has taken sides against the Displaced Person, that is, she belongs to the Southern community.

The third part of the story presents Mrs. McIntyre's dilemma of firing Mr. Guizack. In her conversations with Father Flynn, she is more and more irritated by the pious and senile priest's arguments, to the point of the following utterance: "As far as I am concerned," she said and glared at him fiercely, "Christ was just another D.P." (O'Connor 1996: 229). With this, she probably means to show the priest that she does not care about the doctrines of

the church (in Part One of the text, she had ridiculed Father Flynn's infantile admiration of the peacock behind his back.) The parallel between Christ and the D.P. is still striking, especially considering Flannery O'Connor's deep Catholic faith. As soon as Mr. Shortly returns to the farm, Mrs. McIntyre feels as if she had been travelling and finally got home. It becomes evident that for her, the first person plural, the concept of the "us" includes Mr. Shortley and the African Americans and excludes the Guizacks and the priest. She promises Mr. Shortley that she would get rid of the Pole as soon as possible – but she finds herself repeatedly too weak to do so. After several attempts, she finally makes up her mind, but just before she could walk up to Mr. Guizack, the accident, or, according to Richard Giannone's interpretation, the "murder" (Giannone 1999: 105) happens: the Pole is lying under a small tractor to fix it, Mr. Shortley steps out of the big tractor on the top of a slope to close a gate, the brake loosens and the uncontrolled machine rolls down, destroying the Pole and putting an end to Mrs. McIntyre's dilemma. While this is happening, there is a look between her, Mr. Shortley and Sulk that suggests words like murder and conspiracy: "She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever" (O'Connor 1996: 234). Perhaps it is not so much the tragedy itself as this look of complicity in breaking the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" that displaces them from their own environment. When the priest gives the dying man the eucharist, the last communion, Mrs. McIntyre feels as if "she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance" (O'Connor 1996: 235).

Soon after this, Mr. Shortley leaves the place without notice, Sulk also goes away to the Southern part of the state. Astor cannot work alone, so he retires and Mrs. McIntyre hardly notices the emptying of the farm, since she has a nervous affliction and has to be hospitalized. She comes out of the hospital with numb legs and hands and impaired vision, stays in the house with a colored woman to help her and it is only Father Flynn who visits her weekly to talk about the doctrines of the church.

With all characters completely displaced, except Father Flynn, who had already been somewhat of a stranger from the beginning, it is also important to consider the anagogical level of the story – the level that refers to the metaphysical dimensions. In *Mystery and Manners,* Flannery O'Connor had suggested that there is a "moment of grace" in her stories, often revealed through violence, a moment of divine intrusion into the texture of our three-dimensional world (O'Connor 1969: 112). In this text, this moment is very hard to find. The ending suggests destruction, displacement and decay. However, the text is carefully interwoven with symbols and signs of another value system: the peacock, lifting his many-colored tail, reminds Father Flynn of the transfiguration, he in fact says once: "Christ will come like that!" (O'Connor 1996: 226). "Christ in the conversation embarrassed [Mrs. McIntyre] the way sex had her mother" (O'Connor 1996: 226) comments the narrator sarcastically, indicating her complete lack of appreciation for the metaphysical. She continues to talk about Mr. Guizack, and the priest about Christ, this is how the following awkward dialogue can occur:

> "He didn't have to come in the first place," she repeated, emphasizing each word.
> The old man smiled absently. "He came to redeem us," he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go. (O'Connor 1996: 226)

This dialogue has a grotesque effect and a very serious message as well. O'Connor is a master of blending the two. She draws a caricature of the infantile priest and has her reader see him as completely inadequate, still, it is only he who might usher Mrs. McIntyre to her "true country." The story seems to suggest that equal respect for others is impossible in the earthly three dimensions, communities are formed on the basis of excluding outsiders, and the very notion of "us" can only work against the "them." It is "us" that laugh behind the backs of the "them" we despise, look down on and ridicule. Humor itself develops along these lines. The priest and Mr. Guizack have no sense of humor in this story, precisely because we never get the view of their first-person plural. However, broader and multidimensional humor is needed on the author's part when she presents her own metaphysical value system through the caricature – displacing herself from her writing. Displacement, thus seems to be both an uncanny and a necessary condition, which can only be relieved by a universal sense of humor. May we conclude that displacement itself is a condition of feeling at *home* in the broadest sense?

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