

Review Article

NIHILISM IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE

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Abstract:

Flannery O'Connor is an American author and one of the renowned writers in the domain of Christian Realism. Her writings depicts the modern world void of God and spiritual morality, which according to her, is already leading humanity towards great devastation. This paper tries to explore the element of nihilism through the main character of the story, Hulga. Hulga is a doctorate and professor by profession. She doesn't believe in God or any moral principles. She assumes of her self as an intellectual and as an individual above others. She gets attracted to a boy of half of her age and tries to establish physical connection with him. She tries to indoctrinate him that it was no wrong deed, but at last she was the one fooled, deceived and left lost raising questions on her own beliefs, intellect and wisdom.

Key Words: Nihilism, Spiritual immorality, Humanity, God.

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INTRODUCTION:

Flannery O'Connor is an American short story writer and novelist. She has authored a less number of works - thirty two short stories and two novels, but are very renowned for their themes of spiritual decadence and immorality, in relevance to the contemporary scenario of mankind. She is a strong catholic and her catholic faith is pervaded throughout her writings. She is considered a remarkable writer in Christian fiction canon for her Christian themes. Her works emphasize the need for the presence of God in man's life to lead a righteous and content life, and bring forth the perils of practising ungodly life. Characters across all her works are morally and spiritually degraded and are confronted by "grotesqueness", a special characteristic employed by O'Connor, as grace from God to transform and prosper. She employs southern gothic writing style in her works. The select story "Good Country People", one of her celebrated stories revolves around an atheist and pharisaic woman, Hulga, who is in turn trapped and doomed while she plans to overpower an uneducated and country boy.

Hulga, the main character of the present story "Good Country People " is an atheist. She is a thirty two year old woman holding a doctorate in Philosophy but is resorted to house since several years. She lost her leg at 10 years of age and has an artificial leg. She also has a heart condition for which she is not allowed and not capable of going out for work. She has a desire to teach to students in schools and colleges whom she felt would understand her thoughts and philosophy, as she feels her mother and Mrs. Freeman, the only two women she has to live with don't understand. She spends all her time reading only books and lone walks. One day she happens to get acquainted with a nineteen year old bible sales boy called Manley Pointer. Hulga gets fascinated with Pointer. Condescending Pointer for his immature and young nature, Hulga thinks to overpower him by her words of wisdom to convince him to have a carnal intimacy with him. But at the end, Hulga is the one fooled and trapped in the cunning and real worldly wisdom of Pointer.

Hulga doesn't believe in God or any moral principles. For this attitude and ideology, she can be identified a nihilist. When Manley questions Mrs. Hopewell that there was no Bible in their parlour, she says that her "daughter [Hulga] is an atheist" [1]. The same thing is reiterated by Hulga when questioned by Pointer whether she is saved while they are walking towards the barn - "I don't even believe in God" [2]. She doesn't have any firm belief in morality either. The exact causes of her inclination towards Manley is not described but she conceived fanciful thoughts towards him - "During the night she had imagined that

she seduced him" [3]. As she believed Manley is a good country boy and a Christian, she predicted that he would feel remorseful for doing intimate deeds with her. Considering him just a naive boy and herself to be an intellect, she thought she could enlighten him by her knowledge that there was no wrong in involving in carnal actions - "True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful"[4]. This shows immorality existing in Hulga. When she realised Manley is intrigued about her, to retain it, she dared not lie to him about her age as seventeen.

Hulga is a philosopher and spends all day reading. It seems she read a good amount of books on ideologies and philosophies based on God. During the breakfast she yells at her mother regarding her platitudes and ideology about life - "Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" [...] "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!"[5]. She uses the reference of sixteenth century French philosopher Malebranche. This premise that humans are not their own light is not a direct one from Malebranche, but his favourite one postulated by Augustine. According to this premise, all reason, knowledge and wisdom of man comes from God, but not from his ability of thinking and reasoning.

Following Augustine, Malebranche often stresses that the human mind is not a light unto itself, and that God (or what he sometimes calls 'universal Reason') is the only true light, that is, the only source of truth and knowledge: 'Man is not a light unto himself. His substance, far from enlightening him, is itself unintelligible to him. [6]

If usage of this premise by Hulga is taken literally, it seems like she is saying to her mother that she is not reflecting God and is expecting her to introspect and align back into God's light. And this means that Hulga is acknowledging and inclined to God. But here, Hulga uses this in an ironic sense. For Augustine and Malebranche, humans are reflections of not self, but God. For Hulga, it should be the reflection of self-knowledge and wisdom instead of God's light. Emphasizing this, she is reiterating Malebranche's phrase ironically to say in literal sense that her mother should be really reflecting self, not God. That is why she is questioning her mother "see are you not" implying that she is not reflecting her own intellect, but trying to reflect God. Hulga using this premise of a Christian philosophers and rejecting it

reveals that she is very firm in her own philosophy of atheism and nihilism, to an extent to invalidate all other philosophies based on God.

Confident of her wisdom, Hulga anticipated that plotting to take him to barn and seduce him would be no difficult. But she fails to recognize that he is the one seducing her and she was falling into his trap. When Pointer suggests them to go out for picnic, Hulga feels that her plot was going well and he was falling for her - She had a moment in which she doubted that this was actually happening and then they began to climb the embankment [7]. Manley already attempted to steal some kisses and succeeded in it. But Hulga didn't return any. It was the first time she has been kissed by someone in her life. She tries to analyse the kiss with her scientific mind and concludes it as only a mental process, against a general notion of interchange of feelings. She still tries to project herself as a detached individual. But in their rendezvous in the barn, Hulga unknowingly starts to loose herself to the feeling of physical pressure. While they were kissing, Manley removes her spectacles which Hulga doesn't recognize at all. This shows Hulga's artillery of her wisdom slowing fading away. During these moments, Manley demands her to confess that she loves him. Hulga answers that love is an illusion and she doesn't believe in it - "I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing" [8]. Manley doesn't understand her words and insists her to say that she loves him. After she said that, he asks her to prove by showing him where her artificial leg joins her body. For Hulga, her artificial leg is a very private and personal issue. She never had allowed even her mother to see and help in replacing it. But finally she shows him and also teaches him how to detach it and attach back. When Manley tries it to do himself, she dreams of eloping with him and he would be helping her remove it nights and attach in the mornings. By allowing him into most private areas of life, in fear of his rejection, Hulga completely surrenders herself to Manley. All her knowledge, her wisdom of believing nothingness got wiped away in her want of physical satisfaction from Manley. But after detaching her leg, Manley never puts it back.

This is the point where he first times reveals his real identity to Hulga. He opens his bible and "It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it. He put the blue box in her hand. THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE" [9]. The bible contains no pages inside but a bottle of wine, a deck of cards with obscene pictures on it and a condom. This horrified Hulga. All her life, Hulga thought she was above the people for her enlightened mind - for understanding of truth of no God and belief in nothingness. By her knowledge and wisdom she believed herself saved and no one can bring her down. But for the first Hulga experienced overpowered by someone. Her confidence in her wisdom and intellect utterly failed in judging Manley as a naïve boy. Her surrendering to him by allowing him into most sensitive and private areas of her life for physical hunger helped her identify reality of her wisdom. She experienced being overpowered, deceived, vulnerable and lost for first time in her life. Out of this vulnerability and fear in her heart, she expresses her disbelief as he was a good country boy and a Christian and she has not expected him this corrupt. She reverts saying she wasn't really any intelligent and he was the one who believed in no morals or principles more than her- "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" [10].

Though Manley is corrupt and immoral, Jordan Cofer says in his book *The Gospel According to Flannery O'Connor*, that Hulga is

brought revelation by him [11]. Hulga considers herself to be an atheist and believes in nothingness, she never realised how vulnerable and weak she is. This realisation occurred only after she faced Manley Pointer, a true atheist and a bigger believer of nothingness than her. All her life she lived in an illusion of high intellect and being above others understanding. Her own naivety and vulnerability lead her into path of doom by Manley Pointer. Jordan Cofer quotes Edmondson in his book - "the message of 'Good Country People' seems clear: roll in the hay with a nihilist and you'll be left without a leg to stand on" [12]. Stating this, Edmondson recognises Manley as bigger and true nihilist than Hulga and also implies indirectly the need of God's help in living in a world filled with people who don't believe in God and morality. This implies to Hulga that she need to embrace God and illuminate him as Malebranche reiterated.

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