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The Shadows of Time: Chronotopic Diversity and Ethical Unreadability in Flannery O'Connor's Tales[1]

Marita Nadal

> The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location.
>
> —Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

> I myself am afflicted with time[.]
>
> —Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*

Mikhail Bahktin defines the chronotope "(literally, 'time space')" as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84) and "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (250). Significantly, the chronotope combines spatial and temporal factors with an evaluation of their meaning "as judged from a particular point of view," as Michael Holquist has observed: "time and space are never merely temporal or spatial, but *axiological* as well (i.e. they also have *values* attached to them)" (152, emphasis original). Thus, the chronotope transcends the boundaries of fiction, involving also the perspective of the reader, both in time and space. Interestingly, the notion of the chronotope implies that "the text is always in production" and that the text's time/space relation "will always be perceived in the context of a larger

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set of time/space relations that obtain in the social and historical environment in which it is read" (Holquist 141). Consequently, we could even speak of a "*creative* chronotope" (Bakhtin 254, emphasis original) inside which the exchange between work and world takes place and which produces the text's continual renewing and its eternal unfinishedness.

On the other hand, ethical criticism emphasizes two basic premises that articulate the relationship between text, author, and reader: the resistance of the text to be fixed by the reader, and the creative relationship between the former and the latter. In *The Ethics of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller argues that the text is always subject to an ethical law that cannot be read within the text but remains in reserve: "This law forces the reader to betray the text or deviate from it in the act of reading it in the name of a higher demand that can yet be reached only by way of the text. This response creates yet another text which is a new act" (120). Miller concludes, "The text gives only itself. It hides its matter or thing as much as it reveals it. It could be said that any text falsifies or mistranslates the 'thing'" (121). In this sense, the text "is unreadable" because "it does not transmit its own law or make its own law legible in it"; the text is just an example of the productive force of the ethical law, "not the law nor even the utterance of the law" (121). Therefore, the text becomes the signifier of the ethical law that presupposes an absent signified that can never be reached.

Miller's assumptions about the "ethics of reading," which emphasize openness to and respect for the text, are related to other postmodern ethical approaches that derive from Levinas and insist on the centrality of concepts such as "paradox," "incommensurability," "heterogeneity," "irresolution," "undecidability," "self-difference," "incessance," "desoeuvrement," and "dialogue" (Cf. Andrew Gibson, Maurice Blanchot, Christopher Falzon, among others) that always accompany the ethical encounter. Thus, Gibson understands the ethical significance of the novel "not as a form of unitary cognition, but as a form which works

radically to surpass and, indeed, dissolve any given set of cognitive horizons" (91). Significantly, he connects Bakhtin's concept of the eternal unfinishedness of the text with Levinas's notion of ethical incompleteness, which, in turn, evokes Miller's emphasis on the ultimate unreadability of the text.

As we shall see, the ongoing discrepancy that characterizes the criticism of O'Connor's fiction exemplifies Bakhtin's and Miller's contentions: the resistance of the text to be fixed by the critical subject, the productive, performative relationship between text, author, and reader, and, finally, the inaccessibility of the ethical law that is hidden in the text but also revealed through it. Thus, the contrast between O'Connor's interpretation of her own tales and the critics' assessment of them epitomizes these characteristics, revealing that "the ethical moment," as Miller observes, involves four "dimensions": author, reader, narrator, and characters (*Ethics of Reading* 8-9). Moreover, a detailed analysis of O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Artificial Nigger," and "A View of the Woods" suggests that these tales can be taken as representative of different types of unreadability as well as of diverse chronotopic and axiological factors.

In her essays, O'Connor recurrently explains that she is a Southern writer "with Christian concerns," worried about "what is eternal and absolute": "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (*Mystery and Manners* 26, 27, 32). As a Roman Catholic, she focuses her writing on the subjects of violence, grace, and the devil: "I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. I have also found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil" (118). Significantly, "violence is never an end in itself" but a force "strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (112-13). The kind of fiction she attempts to

write is characterized by its "prophetic vision," and she conceives the writer as a prophet, "a realist of distances": "It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth" (179). Undoubtedly, her realism, which distorts "without destroying" (50) epitomizes the Southern grotesque: a combination of humor, violence, extreme situations, and eccentric characters—sometimes "freaks," in her own words (118)—that tries to convey O'Connor's religious conception of "mystery" (40, 42, 98, 111).

In a world dominated by secular thought, she argues, the Catholic writer "may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience" (*Mystery and Manners* 185). O'Connor insists on the exclusion of "telling" as a narrative technique, however, emphasizing the necessity of "showing":

> a piece of fiction must be very much a self-contained dramatic unit. This means that it must carry its meaning inside it. It means that any abstractly expressed compassion or piety or morality in a piece of fiction is only a statement added to it. It means that you can't make an inadequate dramatic action complete by putting a statement of meaning on the end of it or in the middle of it or at the beginning of it. It means that when you write fiction you are speaking *with* character and action, not *about* character and action. The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense. (75-76, emphasis original)

> The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible. He has only a short space to do it in and he can't do it by statement. He has to do it by showing, not by saying, and by showing the concrete—so that his problem is really how to make the concrete work double time for him. (98)

Passages like these evoke the influence of the New Criticism on O'Connor's literary education, as Sarah Gordon has observed (88-89), and they especially attract the reader's attention to O'Connor's varied narrative strategies in her own fiction, which, in turn, constitute an important factor to be taken into account in the analysis of the tales, as we shall see later on.

As a response to O'Connor's reading of her own work, Harold Bloom quotes D. H. Lawrence's popular statement, "Trust the tale, not the teller," which he considers "an essential principle" when reading her stories. He describes O'Connor as a fierce moralist, adding, "As teller, O'Connor was very shrewd, yet I think her best tales are far shrewder, and enforce no moral except an awakened moral imagination" (*How to Read and Why* 51). Bloom remarks that O'Connor's "fiction's implicit theology is very different from what [she] thought it to be, a difference that actually enhances the power of the novels and stories" (Introduction 4). In Bloom's view, "there is sadism in O'Connor's temperament" (*Genius* 579): her fiction has more to do with Southern Gothic, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism than with Catholic orthodoxy. In *Genius*, a volume dedicated to the study of great literary authors, Bloom recapitulates his estimation of O'Connor: since we now live in a "new Age of Terror," characterized by global terrorism and a variety of fundamentalisms, "her fiction is likely to seem even more relevant" while "our lives perforce turn more grotesque" (575). Finally, Bloom celebrates her genius not as a Roman Catholic moralist but as an "authentic prophet of the American Religion," a religion that he describes as "[r]egeneration through violence," "at once the source of our individuality in literature and in life, and the origin also of our endemic violence," which O'Connor parodied "but with a certain ambivalence" (579).

In contrast to Bloom and other O'Connor critics, Joyce Carol Oates argues that O'Connor was really conscious of what she was doing and of how she could best accomplish it. In Oates's opinion, "the immediate problem for most critics is *how* to wrench her work away from her, *how* to show that she didn't at all know herself, but must be subjected to a higher, wiser, more objective consciousness in order to be understood" ("Visionary Art" 48, emphasis original). She discards the interpretation of critics like John Hawkes, who concludes that "as writer [O'Connor] was on the devil's side," her "author-impulse" was "immoral,"

and her creativity "perverse" (Hawkes 12, 16). In Oates's view, O'Connor's fiction cannot be understood from a secular perspective, because in her literary world, *"the entire process is divine"* ("Visionary Art" 48, emphasis original):

> There is no ultimate irony in her work, no ultimate despair or pessimism or tragedy, and certainly not a paradoxical sympathy for the devil. It is only when O'Connor is judged from a secular point of view, or from a "rational" point of view, that she seems unreasonable—a little mad—and must be chastely revised by the liberal imagination. (48)

Oates concludes that the complexity of O'Connor's work has to do with its mystic and visionary character, reflected in an apocalyptic religious experience "immune to any familiar labels of 'good' and 'evil'" (53).

As a Southern writer from Georgia, Alice Walker feels especially attracted by O'Connor's work. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* she observes the apparent contradiction between O'Connor's Catholicism and its reflection in her fiction to the point that many readers believed that the texts had been written by an atheist. Walker observes:

> [O'Connor] believed in all the mysteries of her faith. And yet, she was incapable of writing dogmatic or formulaic stories. No religious tracts, nothing haloed softly in celestial light, not even any happy endings. It has puzzled some of her readers and annoyed the Catholic church that in her stories not only does good not triumph, it is not usually present. Seldom are there choices, and God never intervenes to help anyone win. (55)

From her African-American perspective, Walker does not object to O'Connor's treatment of blacks in her fiction; on the contrary, she values her narrative detachment and the fact that the narrator has no access to the black characters' minds. Walker concludes that "*essential* O'Connor is not about race at all, which is why it is so refreshing, coming, as it does, out of such a *racial* culture" (53, emphasis original). Walker's opinion is worth pointing out since the issue of race has become increasingly foregrounded and opened to debate in recent criticism of O'Connor's fiction, as we shall see below.

In "Physical Disability and the Sacramental Community in Flannery O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge*," Jeffrey J. Folks focuses his analysis on the ethical aspects of O'Connor's second collection of tales. Surprisingly, Folks analyzes O'Connor's tales in the light of her essays and letters, always foregrounding her chronic disease—O'Connor suffered from lupus eritematosus—and her progressive disability. Although O'Connor was determined to keep separate her fiction and the problematics of her failing health, Folks insists on connecting O'Connor's illness with the various disabilities of her characters in order to emphasize the redeeming value of pain and suffering as reflected in the passion and crucifixion of Christ. In the same vein, Folks concludes that "her stories point to 'the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all' " (105), extrapolating a quotation he takes from one of O'Connor's letters in which she refers to the meaning of the ornamental black figure in just one tale: "The Artificial Nigger." In keeping with this approach, Folks decides to restrict his study to the texts' content, neglecting the decisive role of form, which always conditions the interpretation of the text. Clearly, his reading of O'Connor's fiction is poles apart from that of critics like Bloom or Hawkes, thus exemplifying the ongoing debate about O'Connor's work.

If, as Gibson remarks in his study of Levinasian ethics, "distinctions between modes of narration are also the crucial ethical distinctions" in so far as "ethical and epistemological questions are inseparable" (26), the analysis of the narrative technique of O'Connor's tales proves especially appropriate to illuminate the ethical aspects of these texts.[2] "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a splendid example of O'Connor's peculiar style and also of ethical unreadability given its narrative features. In it, a family of six members, grandmother included, leaves Atlanta for a short trip

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[2]This is also Phelan's contention and point of departure for his ethical approach to *Beloved:* "I regard the ethical dimension of reading as an inextricable part of approaching narrative as rhetoric" (319).

to Florida, but they never reach their destination. On their way, they meet The Misfit, a dangerous criminal escaped from the Federal Pen, who kills them one by one. The narrative recurrently emphasizes the grandmother's responsibility in the catastrophe, but in a comic way. For example, upon seeing The Misfit, she foolishly reveals his identity, thus dooming herself and all the family. As The Misfit replies "smiling slightly," "it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (127). Significantly, O'Connor handles this violent and tragic plot with humor and wit.[3] Her external narrator-focalizer describes the events with detachment, keeping the rhythm of the events themselves without temporal disruptions. To some extent, the effect is that of a camera registering the voice and movements of the characters, only that its lens tends to magnify apparently unimportant details that contribute to the general grotesque and humorous effect. For instance, the narrator twice diverts our attention to the ridiculous pattern of Bailey's shirt—yellow with bright blue parrots—in the passages of greatest tension, just after the car accident and, some time later, when he is about to be killed, thereby undermining the gravity of the situation and even the transcendence of death.

The only exception to this external view of events is the focalization of the grandmother: significantly, the narrator-focalizer has access to her mind but not to that of the other characters, who are only depicted from the outside. Although the access to the old woman's consciousness is brief and limited to a few occasions, this formal device has some ethical implications since the reader has the opportunity to realize her air of superiority, hypocrisy, and shallowness, and also her responsibility for the tragic turn of events: thus, her decision to secretly take the cat with her will provoke the accident; on top of that, their following the wrong road—which will result in the encounter with The Misfit—is all her fault: she suggests visiting an old plantation provided with a secret panel she fabricates to attract the children's attention. Interestingly, this formal proximity to the grandmother is explored in a comic light, which, again, seems to diminish the significance of her errors.

[3]Cf. O'Connor's words on these characteristics: "this story . . . should elicit from you a degree of pity and terror, even though its way of being serious is a comic one" (*Mystery and Manners* 108).

In any case, the narrator does not provide any comment on the development of the events or the meaning of the story: in fact, it is the dialogue between the grandmother and The Misfit at the end of the tale that conveys, or, rather, fails to convey, the ethical message that O'Connor intended. While the two subordinate killers get rid of the children and their parents, the grandmother, apparently indifferent to the murder of her family, is determined to save her life with phrases like "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" (127), "I know you're a good man at heart" (128), or "pray, pray. . ." (130). In contrast to these selfish and hypocritical words, The Misfit's seem to be more frank and insightful, though they are mainly concerned with the justification of his crimes:

> "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best you can by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness." (132)

Significantly, these remarks convey a twofold message: on the one hand, they point to a radical and fundamentalist view of religion; on the other, they emphasize The Misfit's sadistic personality and the violent atmosphere that pervades the whole story. Let's recall now the perverse reaction of the children after the car has turned over: "'We've had an ACCIDENT!' the children screamed in a frenzy of delight. 'But nobody's killed,' June Star said with disappointment" (125).

It is particularly significant, however, that the grandmother's late epiphany—the spiritual climax of the tale, which evokes

"the action of grace"—may pass almost unnoticed and even misunderstood in a passage dominated by The Misfit's religious reflections and his furious reaction to the old woman's reply:

> "I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't [raise the dead]," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now". His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them. (132)

Although it is the grandmother's "murmur of recognition" that matters for O'Connor, as Bloom puts it (Introduction 3), the reader is likely to pay more attention to The Misfit's ironic remark that follows the grandmother's death: "She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133), which, in keeping with the comic tone of the narrative, sounds like a cruel joke rather than like a transcendent revelation. Similarly, The Misfit's final statement, which puts an end to the story, only suggests a shift from sadism to nihilism, since his previous "No pleasure but meanness" becomes "It's no real pleasure in life" (133). Interestingly, it is O'Connor's discussion of the tale's ending that makes explicit the text's intended but unclear message:

> The Grandmother is at last alone, facing the Misfit. Her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture. (*Mystery and Manners* 111-12)

As we have seen, O'Connor's narrative technique—her preference for "showing" rather than "telling"—results in a brilliant and powerful story in which its formal devices and peculiar style undermine its intended ethical implications or even suggest

conclusions that the author had not foreseen. Many students, when confronted with the text without previous introduction, are puzzled by the tale: its combination of gratuitous violence, sadism, and Christian concerns, black humor, hyperbolic dénouement, and inscrutable narrator point to a proliferation of readings, ranging from an implied sympathy for the devil or a Manichaean view of the world to the blank nihilism inherent in the last words of The Misfit.[4] Significantly, the passing of time has somehow changed our perception of the story, as the notion of the chronotope implies: in this "age of terrorism" (Hewitt ix; cf. also Bloom's *Genius* 575), haunted by pervasive violence and varied fundamentalisms, the plot of this tale has become more realistic and less grotesque than it was when it was first published.

In contrast to the opacity of this tale, "The Artificial Nigger" appears more transparent since its dramatic sense does not conceal the moral one.[5] Its ultimate ethical unreadability has more to do with temporality—"the dominant principle in the chronotope" (Bakhtin 86)—than with formal ambiguity. The external narrator describes the events lived by a back-country grandfather, Mr. Head, and his ten-year-old grandson Nelson on their one-day trip to Atlanta, which the grandfather appropriately conceives in "moral terms": "It was to be a lesson that the boy would never forget. He was to find out from it that he had no cause from pride merely because he had been born in a city. He

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[4]Haddox has recently pointed out this problem of interpretation:

> O'Connor tells us, famously, not to pay attention to [the corpse], but to "the action of grace" and the "lines of spiritual motion" (*Mystery and Manners* 113). Unfortunately, only the body is in the text; whatever grace and lines of spiritual motion there may be exist only in readers. To interpret the murder either as an unambiguous but highly entertaining horror, as secular readers might, or as a sign that the Grandmother has been saved by one of God's more mysterious ways, is to go outside the text, to refer to structures of belief rather than to simple, unproblematic evidence. (233)

[5]Cf. O'Connor's assessment of this tale: "'The Artificial Nigger' is my favorite [story] and probably the best thing I'll ever write" (*Habit of Being* 209).

was to find out that the city is not a great place" (251). In fact, it is the arrogant grandfather who is taught the unforgettable lesson in the city. In Atlanta, the two of them get lost, quarrel, and Mr. Head even denies Nelson when he is in danger. Finally, they are reconciled by way of an artificial black figure, an ornamental statue they discover in a white neighborhood and that, according to O'Connor's explanation in her essays and letters, represents "the working of grace" (*Mystery and Manners* 115) and "the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (*Habit of Being* 78): "They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" ("The Artificial Nigger" 269).

It is significant that this unexpected encounter with the artificial nigger takes place at the end of a journey in which the characters recurrently show their fascination with and fear of the black inhabitants of the city: in contrast, this figure becomes for them an emblem of misery and shame rather than of fear and power. Upon the return to their rural environment, Mr. Head experiences an epiphany that evokes that of the grandmother in the previous tale; whereas in "A Good Man..." that illumination is suggested rather than explained, however, O'Connor is rather explicit in this case, since the narrator-focalizer, entering the mind of Mr. Head, not only describes his thoughts and feelings but openly conveys the author's theological concerns:

> Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as he forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise. (269-70)

Despite the ambiguous nature of this narrator—who throughout the text combines limited omniscience with a complex style that conveys erudition, solemnity, irony and humor—the Christian message becomes evident: for that reason, some critics have objected to the obtrusiveness of the author's voice in this long paragraph. Thus, John D. Sykes Jr. observes, "The penultimate paragraph is jarring in context. It stands out as an interruption, an intrusion—an injection of 'telling' into the poetics of 'showing'" (133). But whether we find this passage appropriate or intrusive, the ethical undecidability of the tale is mainly concerned with the decisive role that temporality has played in the reading of its racial issues, in a way that probably O'Connor could not have anticipated. In fact, much has been said already about the racial elements of this story, its controversial title, and even O'Connor's alleged racism—and it is significant that these critical views on O'Connor and race are varied and even divergent.[6] Thus, in *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South,* Ralph Wood argues that even if O'Connor's narrators always use the "dignity-granting" word "Negro" (142) in opposition to the characters' preference for "nigger," her "frequent recourse to the demeaning term 'nigger' is troubling" because "Southern whites of her social class and Christian conviction did not regularly resort to the word" (99). In contrast, Joyce Carol Oates concludes that "nigger" may have been "a usage common to [O'Connor], as to her fellow Caucasian Georgians," and, interestingly, she emphasizes the effects of the passing of time on the connotations of this term:

[6]Cf. for instance Sarah Gordon's *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination* (236-44), where she refers to this debate including the views of critics such as Sally Fitzgerald, Catherine Moirai, and Ralph Wood.

> Forty years after the composition of "The Artificial Nigger," the very word "nigger" has become so highly charged with political significance that any work of art containing it, especially by a white Southerner, is unwittingly abrasive, even provocative. O'Connor could not have foreseen how the word "nigger" would come to seem, in some quarters of America, an actual obscenity of the nature of those sexual obscenities she would not have wished to include in her fiction. ("Workings of Grace" 343)

In any case, both Oates and Wood point out that this tale has become so offensive that it has been removed from the reading list of some American academic programs as a racist text (Oates 343; Wood 143). For these reasons, I think that Hans Robert Jauss's historical approach to reception theory is helpful in understanding the peculiar unreadability of "The Artificial Nigger": for Jauss, works of art "incorporate the open horizon of the future into the story of the past"; the work exists in a dialectical relationship "between the production of the new and the reproduction of the old." Thus, this tale exemplifies Bakhtin's emphasis on the multiple temporalities of the text, which always has both an "actual" and a "virtual significance" that are always incommensurable (Jauss 61, 35). In turn, this undecidable significance points to what Levinas calls "the alterity of another instant" (qtd. in Gibson 196) that in "The Artificial Nigger" especially increases the ethical resistance of the text. Similarly, Gibson's reflections about Levinas's concept of temporality are clearly applicable to O'Connor's tale: "temporality itself is a relationship with an alterity that cannot be reduced to a presence, above all, in the encounter with the other, whose time itself is different to and not simultaneous with mine. To think time thus is to think it ethically" (196). Just as Mr. Head's and Nelson's encounter with this ornamental figure implies their confrontation with another time and another race, our present-day reading of O'Connor's tale is different from that of her own contemporaries, magnifying the alterity inherent in any ethical encounter. Obviously, the *topos* factor complicates even more the ethical accessibility of the text, since the interpretations

of Southern or U.S. readers in general will differ from those of other countries.[7]

In this regard, it is worth referring to Toni Morrison's approach to "The Artificial Nigger" in her essay *Playing in the Dark,* which, in its concern with the relationship between history and race, points to the central role of temporality discussed above. Apart from emphasizing the fact that critics have traditionally overlooked the "connection between God's grace and Africanist 'othering'" (14)—particularly evident in this tale—Morrison focuses on one of the strategies employed in fiction to deal with blacks: "[d]ehistoricizing allegory." This device, which, as she notes, produces "foreclosure rather than disclosure," results in the indefinite duration of the civilizing process and the exclusion of history, perpetuating racism: "Flannery O'Connor's 'The Artificial Nigger' makes this point with reference to Mr. Head's triumphantly racist views in that brilliant story" (68). Interestingly, the passing of time has contributed to disclosing the effect of "foreclosure," but at the risk of conflating the characters' racism with the author's intended message.

Finally, this relationship between literature and history brings to mind Miller's *Versions of Pygmalion,* his sequel to *The Ethics of Reading,* in which he offers four rules of reading, two of which are clearly reflected in "The Artificial Nigger": the first states that

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[7]It is worth pointing out that both "A Good Man…" and "The Artificial Nigger" can be taken to exemplify other relevant Bakhtinian contentions about the *topos* aspect of the chronotope: thus, both tales foreground the chronotope of the road and that of meeting, which serve to fulfill "architectonic functions" since the two plots are structured around them. Bakhtin also notes the importante of the motif of meeting— sometimes the dénouement and culmination of the plot—which "may have different nuances depending on concrete associations," as happens in these texts (the providential meeting with the artificial nigger vs. the ill-fated meeting with The Misfit): "a meeting may be desirable or undesirable, joyful or sad, sometimes terrifying"; "the entire fate of a man may depend on them." Bakhtin adds that the chronotope of meeting is closely related to the motif of recognition and may be combined with that of apparition ("epiphany") "in the religious realm" (Bakhtin 97-99): curiously, this is also the case in both O'Connor tales, since the religious epiphany experienced by the grandmother and Mr. Head takes place after their eventful and fateful encounters.

the "relation of literature to history is a problem, not a solution," and the fourth one argues that reading is transformative, since a literary text "intervenes in history when it is read" (*Versions* 33-34). No doubt, this tale has had a remarkable impact in history since the time of its publication,[8] and, in turn, history has contributed to increase and problematize the interpretations of this text.

Finally, "A View of the Woods" deserves analysis[9] because it conveys a different kind of ethical unreadability that originates in O'Connor's extreme interpretation, which is at odds with the one held by the majority of critics and readers alike. Appropriately, this discrepancy can be taken as a metaphor for the opposition between Levinas's concepts of the saying (*le dire*) and the said (*le dit*):[10] in his view, language is made up of the "transcendent" saying and the "immanent" said, and it is the interweaving of the two that allows the ethical to signify. Whereas the said "creates essence" and "imposes a finite meaning", as Eaglestone observes, the saying implies fragmentation, interruption, questioning, and "the impossibility of denying the other" (144-46). As we are going to see, O'Connor's radical reading of this tale may stand for the said insofar as it delimits, controls, and provides a definite meaning; in turn, the critic's and reader's approach, like the saying, questions and fractures the essentialism of the said, opening up to the otherness of the other.

[8]As a matter of fact, this story managed to produce an impact even before its publication, since John Crowe Ransom, the editor of the *Kenyon Review*, where the tale was published in 1955, suggested changing the title. O'Connor refused, however, and her opinion prevailed.

[9]As in the case of the previous tales, there is critical agreement about the greatness of "A View of the Woods," which was included in *The Best American Short Stories* of 1958. "The Artificial Nigger" had appeared in *The Best American Short Stories* of 1956.

[10]Cf. Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence* (1981) and *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillipe Nemo* (1985).

At least there is agreement about the darkness of "A View of the Woods", which in O'Connor's words was "a little grim" and "not very cheerful" (*Habit of Being* 175, 186) and which critics have described, for instance, as "a story of unrelieved ugliness" (Giannone 81) or as "a sublimely ugly tale" (Bloom, *How to Read and Why* 53). In it, the author portrays the relationship between a nine-year-old girl, Mary Fortune Pitts, and her seventy-nine-year-old grandfather, Mr. Fortune. Although the old man despises the rest of the family—his own daughter, her husband, Pitts, and the other six children—he is proud of Mary Fortune, because she is the only one like him—both physically and "on the inside" (336)—and not an idiot like the others. In fact, both of them are hateful—selfish, stubborn, spoiled, and hubristic—rather than just proud. It is very significant that although Pitts sadistically submits Mary Fortune to regular beatings as a peculiar revenge on the old man, she reacts with a mixture of "terror," "respect," and "something very like cooperation" (340), and then she denies the evidence of the beating to her grandfather with a ready-made phrase that appears five times in the text with slight variations: "Nobody's ever beat me in my life and if anybody did, I'd kill him" (340, 341, 343, 351, 354).

The conflict arises when old Mr. Fortune decides to sell by lots his eight hundred acres of land in the name of progress, but mainly to spite Pitts, who works on the property and is not allowed the possibility of purchase. Finally, the girl is infuriated when her grandfather announces that he is also "going to sell the lot right in front of the house for a gas station" (341), above all because they "won't be able to see the woods across the road" (342). In the end, this growing antagonism ends up in a cruel fight in which Mary Fortune, threatening her opponent with the recurrent "Nobody's ever beat me . . ." hits the old man with repeated brutality, exclaiming triumphantly "I'm PURE Pitts" (355) while he asks her to stop. This sudden declaration changes the course of events, and the grandfather's renewed strength results in the young girl's death, which is followed by

that of Mr. Fortune, who has a final view of the woods while dying of a heart attack. This is O'Connor's radical "view" of the text:

> Pitts and Mary Fortune realize the value of the woods, and the woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol. They walk across the water, they are bathed in a red light, and they in the end escape the old man's vision and march off over the hills. The name of the story is a view of the woods and the woods alone are pure enough to be a Christ symbol if anything is. Part of the tension of the story is created by Mary Fortune and the old man being images of each other but opposite in the end. One is saved and the other is damned and there is no way out of it, it must be pointed out and underlined. Their fates are different. One has to die first because one kills the other. (*Habit of Being* 189-90)

Critics and readers alike have been puzzled by this judgment. Even O'Connor's editor and personal friend, Sally Fitzgerald, expressed her surprise at these statements: "This is a rather extreme verdict, given [the old man's] unawareness of the nature of what he was doing all along, and the killing of the child was clearly accidental" (*Habit of Being* 190). In turn, Harold Bloom's opinion about the tale is quite radical, as these passages suggest:

> O'Connor remarked that Mary Fortune Pitts was saved and Mr. Fortune damned, but she could not explain why, since they are equally abominable persons, and the death struggle might have gone either way. It is splendid that O'Connor was so outrageous, because our skepticism outraged her, and inspired her art. And yet her obsessive spirituality and absolute moral judgments cannot just sustain themselves at the reader's expense. (*How to Read and Why* 53)

> What divine morality it can be that saves Mary Fortune and damns her wretched grandfather is beyond my ken . . . . Surely Mary Fortune is as damnable and damned as her grandfather, *and the woods are damnable and damned also* (Introduction 6; Introduction, New ed. 6-7, emphasis mine).

Contrary to Bloom's reading, we may agree with O'Connor that Mr. Fortune is more wicked than the girl: he originates the conflict, enjoys doing harm to his family, and acts with premeditation. These elements do not justify O'Connor's "extreme verdict," however. As before, we have to pay attention to

the narrative mode of the tale, which O'Connor conceived in allegorical terms: that is why she alluded to the story as "a little morality play" (*Habit of Being* 186). Like "The Artificial Nigger," this text is articulated around a central symbol—the woods—recalling a device used by Hawthorne, one of O'Connor's literary models. As in the former tale, the narrator-focalizer focuses on the consciousness of the grandfather, who is in both cases the character chosen to be the recipient of grace. While Mr. Head acknowledges the action of grace conveyed by the black statue and reacts accordingly, however, Mr. Fortune remains unaffected by the woods and their message; appropriately enough, the reader appears to replicate the insensitiveness of this character. In this regard, what O'Connor says about her fiction as a whole is clearly exemplified by this tale: "There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment" (*Mystery and Manners* 118).

What seems unquestionable in "A View of the Woods" is that the realistic-naturalistic level of the story is more powerful and engaging than the allegorical one and functions on its own without making use of the woods as a Christian symbol. It is true that the external narrator, in the first paragraph, refers to "a black line of woods which appeared . . . to walk across the water" (335), an image that might evoke the figure of Jesus walking on the waters; later on, after Mary Fortune's objections to the selling of the lawn, the grandfather experiences a vision when looking at the woods for the third time that might recall a biblical revelation (note also that number three is a magical and biblical number):

> The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o'clock and the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in

his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. (348)

But this vision, though imbued with "uncomfortable mystery," appears to anticipate a tragic event—it can be taken as an omen for the death of the two protagonists—rather than evoke Christ's passion and blood. In accordance with O'Connor's carefully crafted designs, the final paragraph of the story brings the reader back to the image of the walking woods depicted in the first one: the narrator-focalizer, entering the mind of the dying man—the only character in the story focalized internally, like the grandmother in "A Good Man . . ."—describes what he is seeing: "On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance" (356). As before, Mr. Fortune is portrayed as experiencing a transcendental vision, but the woods, which function as a signifier of the ethical law, only bespeak the incommensurable.

As we have seen, the various and even divergent interpretations of O'Connor's tales reveal the complexity inherent in the act of reading, which always has an ethical sense and involves four dimensions (author, narrator, characters, reader). On the one hand, this diversity of interpretations emphasizes the creative and performative relationship established between text, author, and reader, and, on the other, it highlights the simultaneity and inseparability of time, space, and value, pointing out the ongoing exchange between work and world and the relevance of temporality ("temporality itself *is* essence" [Gibson 136, emphasis original]), which results in the ethical resistance of the text and its "eternal unfinishedness." This analysis has foregrounded the tales' unreadability, that is, the irreducibility of the text to the reader's terms, whoever the reader is: a student, a critic, or the author herself. As has recurrently been remarked and this study has pointed out, specialists can be the "least ethical of readers," since they make demands of the text rather than heed its demands (Gibson 191). Even the author,

who may claim to have access to the fullness of her work, cannot anticipate the whole range of ethical approaches that the text can produce and can also be misled by her own assumptions. Miller seems to be aware of this double bind, since there is a degree of caution in his words when he remarks, "Writers . . . are in one way or another exemplary readers, perhaps even of themselves" (*Ethics of Reading* 102).

Finally, this analysis has pointed out the decisive role narrative technique plays in the tales' unreadability: whereas in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the author's original message is blurred by the narrator's opacity, the excess of violence, and the pervasive comic tone, in "The Artificial Nigger," the more communicative and transcendental nature of the narrator does not redeem the characters' prejudiced behavior and irreverent vocabulary or their reification of blacks. Finally, "A View of the Woods," which combines the violence of the former story with the allegorical impulse of the latter, exemplifies the ultimate unreadability that transcends specific narrative devices: through the inscrutable image of the woods, we experience the imperative of the ethical law that forces us to question not only the critics' or the author's judgment, but mainly our own. It is in these uncanny moments[11] that the ethics of reading are at their clearest, since they bear witness to our inescapable responsibility as readers and to the otherness of the other—an otherness felt more acute when face to face with O'Connor's freaks.

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[11]Drawing on Terence Hawkes, Robert Eaglestone uses Freud's notion of "the uncanny" (the heimlich and the unheimlich) to discuss Levinas's distinction between the saying and the said and the role of criticism. In turn, I have borrowed from Eaglestone, since, in my reading, this literary uncanniness is related both to Miller's notion of the ethical law and to Levinas's emphasis on individual responsibility and openness to the other: "The said, at home, is the quiescence resulting from a familiar, often-used critical method, interpretations of texts that no longer threaten or interrupt. The saying is the state of not being at home, the strangeness of the ineluctable call to responsibility: criticism, renewed by 'theory,' is the question, the interruption, put to the said by the saying" (Eaglestone 177).

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