

A Freudian Psychoanalysis of Hulga in “Good Country People”

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Received: May 22, 2015 Accepted: June 23, 2015 Online Published: August 31, 2015

doi:10.5539/ells.v5n3p88 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v5n3p88>

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor is identified today as one of the most outstanding American Southern writers. Enlightened by Christianity, she treats spiritual crisis as her works' eternal theme. She believes that writers' responsibility is to help the readers get profound insight into humanity. The critical reviews on O'Connor's works have focused on the religious motif and the characters' grotesqueness, sin and salvation, etc. So far, researches have been conducted within the framework of new criticism, feminist criticism, violence aesthetics and narratology and so on. Until now, however, few Freudian psychoanalytic studies have been done to explore the internal reasons for the characters' grotesqueness and the author's writing motivations. So this paper applies such Freudian concepts as libido, defense mechanisms and life- and death instinct to interpret the protagonist in O'Connor's “Good Country People”, in an attempt to shed light on Hulga's actions and minds as well as the author's motivations. Moreover, the integration of Freudian psychoanalysis into the social background and the author's experiences provides us with a new perspective to scrutinize the inner nature of O'Connor and her fictional figures.

Keywords: Freudian psychoanalysis, “Good Country People”, grotesqueness, spiritual crisis

1. Freudian Psychoanalysis and Relevant Concepts

As one of the main branches of western psychology, psychoanalysis was originally popularized by the Austrian neurologist and psychologist Sigmund Freud. In the 1890s, Freud began to work on his psychoanalysis and spent nearly five decades establishing his theory. His psychoanalytical concepts mainly include the unconscious, the tripartite account of the personality structure, defense mechanisms, life- and death instinct and so forth.

According to Freud, among those concepts, the unconscious plays an important role in guiding human behavior and interpreting human dreams. The unconscious—“outside of our awareness”—is the “major determinants of our personality” and “the intrapsychic mysteries of the mind” (Heller, 2005, p. 184). Founded on the conception of the unconscious, Freud divided the personality structure into id, ego and superego. The id is “[c]ompletely submerged in the unconscious” and “houses the instinctual impulses of sex and aggression and their primal wishes” (Heller, 2005, p. 90). It strives to gratify our instincts for pleasure. By contrast, the superego thrusts those instincts that society regards as unacceptable back into the unconscious. And the ego serves as the governing agent of the psyche, “arbitrat[ing] the blind demands of the id and the restrictions that the external world imposes” (Heller, 2005, p. 91). Whereas the id is completely unconscious, both the superego and the ego are partly conscious. Consciously, the ego helps people “function rationally and make wise decisions”; unconsciously, it helps “cope with the inevitable conflicts that arise in daily life through defense mechanisms” (Heller, 2005, p. 91).

Defense mechanisms, as the “unconscious strategies of the ego”, “protect the ego from the slings and arrows of a sometimes harsh reality” (Heller, 2005, p. 67) usually through distorting reality and reducing or redirecting anxiety. Instincts, according to Freud, are “the forces which we assume to exist behind the tensions caused by the needs of the id” (as cited in Akhtar & O'Neil, 2011, p. 102). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud clearly proposed this opposition—the life instinct or Eros and the death instinct or Thanatos—“one constructive or assimilatory and the other destructive or dissimilatory” (1961, p. 43). While the former aims to maintain ethnic reproduction and individual life, the latter impels people to return to the calm, or ultimately the nonliving state.

During the process of refining his psychological theory, Freud expanded its scope to various fields of human life and cultural development. He once pointed out that “literature, indeed all art forms, are largely products of unconscious forces at work in the author, in the reader” or “in our society as a whole” (Tyson, 1999, p. 32).

Beyond doubt, Freudian psychoanalysis has provided a sound perspective to analyze the characters' psychic activities in literary works, in which way the ultimate causes underlying their behavior and emotions can be well examined.

2. Flannery O'Connor and Her "Good Country People"

This section briefly introduces Flannery O'Connor, the main plot and previous criticisms of her short story "Good Country People".

2.1 Flannery O'Connor as an American Southern Writer

Flannery O'Connor was an American Southern writer and essayist, short-lived but remarkable for her distinctive writings. Although she did not receive any notable awards during 39 living years, her *Complete Stories* won the American book industry's highest prize, the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction in 1972. And in 2009 this short story collection was named the "Best of the National Book Awards" by internet visitors.

Born on March 25, 1925 in Savannah, Georgia, O'Connor grew up in a prominent Roman Catholic family. Even in her childhood, she began to read extensively and created short stories with cartoons. Having graduated from Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College and State University) in 1945, she continued a creative writing session at the University of Iowa. However, in 1951 when O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus erythematosus, she was forced to retire permanently to Milledgeville, a small and uneventful town with her mother. Striving against the unfair reality, she never gave up her writing. And it was exactly this physical suffering that made her understand more thoroughly about the meaning of life and the mysterious grace of God, which became the major concerns in her works. Throughout her literary career, altogether O'Connor authored two novels and 32 short stories, three of which have been nominated for O. Henry Awards. As a Southern woman writer and a devout Christian, she examined questions of morality and ethics in her writings through depicting the Southern life and grotesque characters in the Gothic style. She usually ended her stories with the depraved protagonist's pursuit of God's grace by making him/her undergo transformations, which were often accomplished in unexpected settings via pain, violence and brutality.

2.2 Main Plot of "Good Country People"

"Good Country People" centers on a thirty-two-year-old girl Joy/Hulga and how she is cheated of her artificial leg. Being the only daughter in the family, Joy loses her leg in a childhood accident and has been fitted with an artificial leg ever since. She changes her name to Hulga, the ugliest name she can ever imagine, as an act of rebellion against her mother Mrs. Hopewell. After attaining a doctor's degree in philosophy, she is forced by her heart trouble to return home and live everyday life under the care of her mother. Incongruous with the surroundings, Hulga spins a web exclusive to her own self until the appearance of a Bible salesman named Manly Pointer, who is believed to be "good country people" by Mrs. Hopewell. At the invitation of this young man, Hulga intends to seduce him during their date but is tricked of her wooden leg and glasses. It is merely in the end that she realizes Pointer is not a pious Bible salesman but an atheist often tricking crippled women with a fictitious name.

2.3 Previous Criticisms of "Good Country People"

This short story has been interpreted by scholars from various perspectives. The features of southern literature have been studied through analyzing the protagonist Joy/Hulga as a representative of O'Connor's grotesque characters and evaluating the Gothic horror embodied in her constant description of horrible settings and unexpected cruel satire. Ke (2009) in his article combines Hulga's plight and absurd phenomena in the whole society, indicating that Hulga is merely a symbolic representative of those with deformed mentality and belief. He claims that through revealing grotesqueness and violence, O'Connor aims to guide people lost in the materialistic world to realize the sins in human beings and the significance of religious belief. The religious concern as an eternal motif in O'Connor's works has also been widely explored, concerning how the characters undergo spiritual crisis and how the protagonist obtains her ultimate redemption. Edmondson (2004) argues that Hulga's pursuit of nothingness leads to her tragic fate and the recovery and right use of reason, which are vital for man's well-being and helpful for Hulga to gain rebirth. In addition, considering O'Connor's own life and the society she lived in, researchers such as Bosco (2005) and Andrews (2010) examine the characters' identities by relating this story to the author's experience or by questioning the construction of feminine identity in a patriarchal culture.

Apart from the researches based on O'Connor's identity as a Christian Southern writer, some critics focus on writing techniques used in this story and explore their contribution to the story's themes. Steed (2005) explores O'Connor's use of humor in "Good Country People" and sees the inflexibility and blindness in all characters

except Pointer as the primary source of humor. He classifies this humor as Bergsonian humor, which involves the readers to realize together with the protagonist the real threat “of inflexibility, of blindness or a lack of self-awareness in ourselves” (pp. 185-186). Through this analysis, he also concludes that O’Connor strives to provoke and promote redemption in the then society. Another technique—irony used in this story is discussed by Dan (2006). She interprets the irony revealed in those meaningful dual names of the characters and discusses its roles in presenting the conflicts between the characters’ expectations and the reality, as well as in depicting their pride and ridiculousness. What’s more, Zhang (2009) focuses on the stylistic effects brought about by shifting point of view such as suspense, defamiliarization, structural contrast and multi-leveled irony which highlight the story’s themes.

All the research angles are intended for a solid and profound interpretation of this short story. However, this intention has failed so far when psychological approach is concerned. Previous psychoanalysis of this story has confined the exploration of the characters’ mental world to their experiences and the author’s life. It neglects to trace the psychological motivation of characters’ behavior to its origin. With the support of such Freudian concepts as libido, defense mechanisms and life- and death instinct, this paper aims to investigate the interrelations between Hulga’s actions and emotions. Besides, based on the psychoanalysis, not only Hulga’s inner being but the author’s motivations are expected to be better sought.

3. Interpretation of Hulga with Freudian Psychoanalysis

With the support of textual evidences centering on the protagonist Hulga, the psychoanalysis of the target story is to be made from three aspects: the respective reflection of libido, defense mechanisms as well as life- and death instinct in Hulga.

3.1 Reflection of Libido in Hulga

“Freud gives a specific name to the mental energies of the sexual drives in particular: libido. [...] Libido is, by definition, fundamentally sexual, and belongs to the sexual drives” (Thwaites, 2007, p. 75). Freud claimed that all human life abounds with and is manipulated by the sexual impulse. Libido, in his famous sexology theory, thus plays an important and irreplaceable role in the development of the personality and the society.

In this story, the detailed process of the Bible salesman’s seducement of Hulga is important to properly understand the shifting of Hulga’s libido. As Freud observed, in one’s sexual development narcissism is the primary stage when libido is originally directed onto the self; and later libido will be withdrawn from the ego to the external objects (Thwaites, 2007). So Hulga’s sexual goal is supposed to shift from her-self to a boyfriend if she grows like a normal person. However, a crippled body and the grotesque mind repress her pursuit of men’s love. She believes that she is a knowledgeable young girl despising the disgusting secular life, young men’s love included. But she doesn’t realize that her belief is based on her long-time suppression of longing for love and her lost ability to love.

The covert shifting and the revival of Hulga’s libido are marked by the overt change in her attitudes towards Pointer’s kiss and in her protection of her artificial leg. When the young man kisses her for the first time, Hulga holding herself aloft can keep her mind “clear and detached and ironic anyway” and regard Pointer “from a great distance, with amusement but with pity” (O’Connor, 1977, p. 197). But gradually, touched by his tenderness and lured by the young man’s sweet words she has never experienced before, she begins to trust him and enjoy their kisses. So in this process the sexual drive in Hulga is awakened little by little. When Pointer asks her to prove her love by showing him where her wooden leg joins on, regarding the artificial leg as her sacred soul, she hesitates for a while but finally yields to all his requests. When she agrees to take that leg off, she surrenders completely to him: “It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his” (O’Connor, 1977, p. 202). At this moment, Hulga’s libido is completely activated and her emotion ultimately vanquishes her reason.

3.2 Reflection of Defense Mechanisms in Hulga

In “Good Country People”, Hulga mainly resorts to three forms of defense mechanisms: psychological projection, denial and displacement to keep her balance of mind.

Psychological projection occurs when a person subconsciously denies his or her negative attributes by ascribing them to the outside world instead. It involves one’s imagining or projecting “unacceptable and disturbing thoughts and impulses” (Heller, 2005, p. 68) onto others. Through the projection method, s/he expresses the unwanted unconscious impulses or desires, thereby reducing anxiety. In the story, Hulga suffers from heart disease, due to which she has to stay home giving up her dream of teaching in a university. Apparently never does she accept the unfair reality deep down. In dealing with such situation, Hulga fails to get rid of depression and projects her own detestation of physical disability onto her surroundings. Believing that physical disability

makes her inferior to others, she holds that they may think in the same way and mock at her behind her back. This thought leads to her oversensitivity and distrust in others. She takes a contemptuous attitude towards people caring for her and sometimes even turns her rage on her mother. So Hulga's projection is a major cause of her rebellion against and indifference to the surroundings, through which her anxiety of deformity can be reduced to some degree.

Hulga's indifference to others also results from her denial of physical disability. Denial occurs when a person refrains from awareness of unpleasant "external events whose perception threatens our ego" (Heller, 2005, p. 69). Plagued by the physical illness, Hulga instinctively refuses to admit this bitterness for fear that she should be mocked or manipulated by others, another kind of severe insult to a heart full of scars. To protect herself against depression and to prove her ability, she turns to another form of defense mechanism: displacement. Through displacement, a person can "shift or displac[e] an impulse from a threatening to a nonthreatening object" (Heller, 2005, p.70). In the story, Hulga works hard to obtain her Ph.D. in philosophy even in her thirties in order to balance her inner world. Intellectual achievements appear to be the protector of her fragile soul and enable her to get rid of self-contempt. But this kind of displacement does not contribute to the improvement of Hulga's relations with her surroundings. Still she seldom talks with others because she cannot stand their trivial and tedious conversations. So quite often she "sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading" (O'Connor, 1977, p. 184) indulging in her own thinking without others' interruption.

3.3 Reflection of Life- and Death Instinct in Hulga

In the short story, Hulga's struggle with her physical illness and her mental depression illustrates her self-preservation or life instinct. The loss of her leg changes her way of living. Since her childhood, she cannot walk as other people sound in body. However, she isn't overwhelmed by the illness but instead attempts to remedy physical handicap by proving her intelligence. When she finally obtains her Ph.D. in her thirties and dreams of being a teacher in a university, she is told that her weak heart cannot afford her to live over forty-five years. That misfortune again deprives her of the right to do what she wants. But still, her instinctive needs of life prompt her to survive and live as normally as she can.

Opposite to the life instinct, Hulga's death instinct always haunts her and exerts negative effects on her life. The obvious embodiment is her self-destructiveness. She changes her beautiful name Joy into the ugliest one Hulga, indicating her self-abasement and disgust at her wooden leg. She goes about all day "in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt" (O'Connor, 1977, p. 183), symbolizing not only her timidity in facing the harsh reality but her betrayal of God. This self-destructiveness also leads to her incompatibility with and indifference towards the outside world. So her despair of physical disability and her cynicism about the sleazy world interweave to shape her deformed mentality.

To conclude, in "Good Country People", Hulga can hardly achieve the balance of two forces—the constructive life instinct and the destructive death instinct—because the force of her life instinct is too fragile to fight against her powerful death instinct, which eventually causes her tragedy and grotesqueness.

4. Roles of Freudian Psychoanalysis in "Good Country People"

With the above application of Freudian psychoanalytical concepts to the interpretation of the protagonist in "Good Country People", not only Hulga's personality and inner world but the spiritual crisis in the whole society can be better probed into.

4.1 Clarification of Hulga's Crisis

The shifting of Hulga's libido demonstrates the long-time repression of her sexual drive. On hearing a few sweet words, she begins to lessen defenses and gradually yields to the drive of libido. Her quick surrender of reason to emotion represents her desperate longing for love in the unconscious. So even when the only access to achieving that sweet love is to take off her artificial leg—her ultimate primacy—for the Bible salesman, she is willing to do that at the cost of exposing her complete self.

Hulga's denial of physical disability results in her self-detestation. This feeling is then projected onto the surroundings, which makes her skeptical about others' attitudes towards her. So these two defense mechanisms give rise to her rebellion against the secular life and others' banal world. In addition, Hulga's resort to displacement is supposed to distract her concentration on physical deformity to the pursuit of knowledge and search for spiritual fulfillment. However, the overwhelming force of Hulga's denial overshadows the effect of displacement. Her intellectual achievement—the obtainment of the Ph.D. degree—turns her extremely self-conceited. As the source of her arrogance, it results in her contempt for conventions. She attacks everything that seems boring and unbearable, with a look of constant outrage that "obliterate[s] every expression from her

face” (O’Connor, 1977, p. 179).

On the other hand, Hulga’s overuse of denial manifests that she is very fragile and extremely sensitive deep in heart. For most of the time her arrogance and indifference is a way to protect her from being hurt in the deformed condition. So Hulga’s sensitive and fragile soul ranks among the fundamental causes of her cynicism. And the other underlying reason is her lack of religious belief. Thinking of herself as a good nihilist who sees through people’s ostensible religious belief and frees herself from all conventions, she attempts to create a powerful self, tough-minded, rational and unsentimental. She believes that her knowledge and rationality will enable her to achieve her goals. But the solid fact is that she belongs to the ignorant and blind kind without any self-knowledge.

Rather ironically, she fantasies seducing the young man before their date, but turns out to be easily seduced and cheated of her artificial leg and glasses. She believes she is superior to that naive-looking man and overconfidently says “I don’t even believe in God” (O’Connor, 1977, p. 197) and “I’m saved and you are damned” (O’Connor, 1977, p. 198). However, it is the young man who turns out to be tactful and an atheist; and it is Hulga who turns to be taught a lesson instead. These contrasts clearly show her ignorance and that her self-righteous belief in nihilism is, apart from her depravity and decadent life, another evidence of her spiritual dilemma. Hulga does not realize her mistaken obsession, her barren knowledge and that she is not the controller of her own fate until the end. At that moment, the only way out for her is either death or spiritual rebirth, which may give her the chance to look inside herself and see what life really is.

4.2 Investigation of the Social Crisis

By Freudian psychoanalysis, we see how Hulga’s abnormal mental development results in her psychological deformity and grotesque behaviors. Her excessive defensive actions intended to protect her traumatized self caused by the loss of her leg lead to the repression of her libido and the destruction of her sound soul. Taking Hulga as a typical case, we can also trace the underlying psychological reasons for other characters’ mentality.

In fact, all characters in this story present the same characteristic of grotesqueness. Mrs. Hopewell is hypocritical when she pretends to be a devout Christian by lying that she keeps the Bible by her bedside. Pointer, the Bible salesman, delights in sexual conquests of crippled women by snatching away as trophies their artificial eyes and legs. And Mrs. Freeman, the help of Hulga’s mother always enjoys seeking pleasure from others’ weakness and sufferings. All their actions and speeches display a view of people’s spiritual wasteland in a sterile modern society.

However, “Good Country People” is not only a reflection of the characters’ actions and minds, but an epitome of the then social life lacking spiritual beliefs. To confirm this point, some of O’Connor’s values should be taken into consideration. Believing in Catholicism all her life and having a strong sense of social responsibility, O’Connor depicts the life of the lower classes in the American South. She believes that as a writer, her responsibility is to discover and reveal the disgusting absurdities and grotesque phenomena in life. The invention of grotesque and deformed figures is her device to help the readers see clearly the corroded society and recognize their spiritual crisis. “Good Country People” is not an exception, embodying the author’s eternal concern for humanity.

O’Connor wrote “Good Country People” in 1955. People were in a morbid mental state due to their frenzied quest of money and pleasure. Their pursuit of material success seemed to blur and distort the essence of the valuable ideals. But no matter what desperate efforts they make, still they as human beings need more love and communication. Hulga in this story is merely a representative of atheists in the then society. She is living blindly and needs someone to remind her to abandon some superficial worldviews. Through depicting such a character, O’Connor attempts to present the social problems and to arouse people’s attention to their spiritual pursuit and personality development. To sum up, in this story, she exposes the readers to a typical case of deformed mentality and alerts them to the necessity of attending to their own spiritual needs.

5. Conclusion

Grounded upon the foregoing analysis of the protagonist in “Good Country People”, it can be seen that Freudian psychoanalysis plays an irreplaceable role in interrelating characters’ actions and mental states, as well as in figuring out the author’s writing motivations. Through analyzing Hulga’s resort to defense mechanisms like psychological projection, denial and displacement, we can see reasons for her actions. For example, the unwillingness to get along with her surroundings may result from her fear of others’ teasing or her contempt for their banality. But the hidden reason for her fear or contempt lies in the unconscious denial of her physical disability and the displacement of her self-abasement by intellectual achievements. By applying Freudian

concepts of libido and life and death instinct to the interpretation of Hulga, it can be well explained why she reacts to the Bible salesman in different ways at different stages, and what directs Hulga's positive and negative performances in the outside world. This analytical method taking into consideration characters' psychic states provides us with a new perspective to investigate the grotesqueness of Flannery O'Connor's fictional figures. In addition, Freudian psychoanalysis of this story along with its social background clarifies the reasons why O'Connor employs grotesque characters and violence to work out her theme. Firstly, psychological exploration of characters presents us their morbid mentality. Secondly, the characters depicted in the story are modeled on people in the real world. Thirdly, the author aims to reflect people's spiritual crisis in the then society and help them step out of such crisis through displaying the bloody truth before the readers. So this kind of reading can guide us away from misinterpreting O'Connor's intention of writing in the Gothic style and depicting deformed characters. The essence of the story and the author's inner nature, i.e. the psychological cause for her writing can be well accounted for or restored. Last, those problems embodied in O'Connor's works set an alarm for modern society in terms of alerting people to their psychic crisis.

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