

The Dynamics of the Artificial Negro Overshadows O'Connor's Religious Intention in "The Artificial Nigger"

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Keywords

キリストによる贖罪	Redemption by Christ
南部の精神風土	Southern mentality
黒人に対する排他性	Africanist othering
文化的構築物	culturally constructed
ダイナミックな黒人人形	dynamics of "artificial" Negro

Flannery O'Connor is a well-known Catholic Southern writer with a deep respect for religious intention. In her essays on the art of writing, she emphasizes the need for a writer to see things from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy. She says, "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" (MM 32). "The Artificial Nigger," for instance, is one of the most notable short stories with all her efforts directed to her spiritual purpose. She approves "The Artificial Nigger" as her favorite and says, "probably

the best thing I'll ever write" (HB 209). She ensures the authenticity of the protagonist's redemption against a dispute,¹ stressing the importance of his religious conversion: "Mr. Head is changed by his experience even though he remains Mr. Head. He is stable but not the same man at the end of the story" (HB 275). She states emphatically that "Mr. Head's redemption is all laid out inside the story" (HB 350).

However, when we read "The Artificial Nigger" from the point of racial justice, we will be skeptical about Mr. Head's redemptive suffering. His struggles never show any signs that he has thrown doubt upon his essential identity as a white superior. He traveled into the city where his racial innocence was tested but came back in full satisfaction to the country where white supremacy would safely prevail. As Toni Morrison says in *Playing in the Dark*, she is frustrated by the readers who dare not to see any "connection between God's grace and Africanist 'othering' in Flannery O'Connor" (Morrison 14). Indeed, in crafting the narrative of Mr. Head's redemption, how does O'Connor theologically interact with the artificial Negro of the Africanist presence? First, I will look into the interaction between her religious intention and the Southern burden of racial justice. Second, I will show how deliberately she exposes Mr. Head to the race question with her profound racial insight. Third, I will discuss the internal dynamics of "the artificial nigger," the cruel Southern icon, and prove what will be eventually projected to the reader.

Religious Intention vs. the Southern Burden of Racial Justice

O'Connor's fiction has a characteristic interplay between being a Catholic and being a Southerner. She wrote to Andrew Lytle, "To my way

of thinking, the only thing that keeps me from being a regional writer is being a Catholic and the only thing that keeps me from being a Catholic writer (in a narrow sense) is being a Southerner" (HB 104). She respected a Christian spiritual order and saw things by the light of her Christian faith. As for racial matters, racial justice was a demand of Christian spirituality and was naturally an accepted conviction for her. And yet her respect for the region was as significant as her religion. She was born and bred in the heritage of the Southern mentality, and the sensibility attuned to the manners of her region was a part of her. Her frustration was, for instance, shown to the court-ordered racial integration and toward the self-righteous activists and Northern liberals who sought racial utopia. In her letter to "A" she said, "all the stupid Yankee liberals [are] smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty Southland" (HB 537). Her racial reality in the South is also suggested in her other remarks: "For the rest of the country, the race problem is settled when the Negro has his rights, but for the Southerner, whether he's white or colored, that's only the beginning" (Magee 104). This is what she sincerely felt about the South. She therefore, in shaping a work, denied romanticizing the race matter and presented it by sharing reality through "what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched" (MM 91) in the light of spiritual conviction.

In "Everything That Rises Must Converge" she focuses on the suffering of an old white Southern lady who fails to follow the progress toward racial equality. It is a story about a liberated son, Julian, who causes his mother's death by the rightful demand of racial justice. In "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day" there appears an old, poor, white Southerner who is stunned by the freedom of blacks in the integrated North and unable to adjust himself to his surroundings. The story ends

with his death showing that his daughter, a young racial liberal, is helpless in understanding her father's suffering. O'Connor's emphasis is to present the reality of provincial, old, white Southerners who are bogged down in the conventional racial codes and have lost themselves in the hard fact of racial equality. She shows the readers how their sufferings will never diminish without "a code of manners based on mutual charity"(Magee 103) and tests the self-righteous, liberated, young generation.

In "The Artificial Nigger" Mr. Head is also O'Connor's typical character who is unadjusted to the progress of racial reality. Here is, however, an explicitly different setting to project the race question. First, the title shows the essential mechanism of racial prejudice and suggests that the word "nigger" used to revile the racial other is "artificial," culturally constructed (Fowler 22). Second, the story is centered on the protagonist whose sufferings are mitigated by the Africanist presence, a wretched statue of an "artificial nigger." O'Connor allows the plaster figure of a Negro to act as a trigger to the climax of Mr. Head's redemption. Focusing on the crucial role of "the artificial nigger," I will hereafter look into how the Southern burden of racial justice represents her Christian faith in "The Artificial Nigger."

Mr. Head's Exposure to the Race Question

The story begins with Mr. Head who awakens in full moonlight in his room. The omniscient voice narrates his pride in himself as a sixty-year-old man: at his age with the "calm understanding of life" (249) he is ready to guide the young. His physical responses as well as moral ones have never been dulled. In his features his eyes are "alert but

quiet" (249) with "a look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men" (249-50). He considers himself a suitable guide who carries out the moral mission counting on his years of experience.

One day he plans to take Nelson, his grandson, to the city of Atlanta and teach a lesson about how the boy's birthplace is corrupted in moral terms. Nelson, at the age of one, had moved from the city, Atlanta, to his grandfather's home in the country and was brought up in his sole care. He has no memory about his birthplace but an inflated pride that he was born there. On the other hand, Mr. Head, a white supremacist, connects the city's corruption with blacks. Before their departure he emphasizes the city as "full of niggers" (252) and despises the boy's lack of knowledge. He treats Nelson as ignorant, stressing that he has not seen any blacks in his life. All Nelson can retort to his grandfather is "I reckon I'll know a nigger if I see one" (252). Mr. Head is therefore determined to let him see the city and to impress the corrupted image on his grandson.

On the way to the city he never misses a chance to teach Nelson his own racial prejudice. On finding a black man in the train, he suddenly loses his serene expression and grips Nelson's arm. Loosening it, he asks Nelson as if the black man were some sort of a thing: "what was that?" (255). The boy then says, "a man" (255). And he reluctantly describes the old black man as "a fat man" or "an old man" (255) to Mr. Head's persistent questioning. What we see here is that Nelson's description has no significance to debase the black man as a racial "other" as Mr. Head expects. Nelson further protests that he is not black but deeply tanned (255). However, his pride is hurt by Mr. Head's triumphant remarks, "That was a nigger" (255) and "You're just ignorant is all" (255). His failure to recognize blacks then makes him build up "a fierce raw fresh

hate" (256) toward them. He is readily persuaded that the black man deliberately humiliated him in public and walked down in the train aisle to make a fool of him. Mr. Head, repeatedly naming a black "a nigger," eventually succeeds in implanting a hateful image of blacks in Nelson's mind. Judith Butler says, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 33). So is racism, a product rooted in continual manner of treatment. Mr. Head's role and function show how the socially maintained norms about blacks have been handed down and internalized into the next generation.

When they get to the station, they walk out into fast-moving traffic and crowds. They soon lose their direction back to the station and get lost in a black residential area. We notice here that Nelson has learned to use the term "nigger." He says on seeing blacks living in the unpainted and rotting houses: "Niggers live in these houses" (260). But seeing blacks everywhere in the street he begins to feel insecure. His skin begins to prickle. The sense of seeing blacks turns into that of being watched: "black eyes in black faces were watching them from every direction" (260). Both of them indeed become a spectacle (Fowler 24). O'Connor shows us how imperfect the position is between watching and being watched. Mr. Head, proud to be a moral guide in his teaching white superiority, is tested. He is now not only confused to have lost his way but also threatened with losing the boundary between black and white.

Due to his pride he refuses to ask one of the "niggers" for directions and makes Nelson ask. But another test is waiting for Mr. Head. He is shocked to see a powerless white Nelson in front of a black woman. The timid boy chose a woman, expecting her to be sympathetic to his inquiry,

but he was overwhelmed by her physical presence. Nelson, with no remembrance of his own mother, encountered her plump and stocky knees, forehead, and "tremendous bosom" (262). "He stood drinking in every detail of her" (262), wishing to be held in her bosom and feel her breath on his face. It is, however, unacceptable and shameful for Mr. Head to see his grandson's mind-blowing behavior toward the black woman. He furiously pulls him away from her and growls: "You act like you don't have any sense!" (262).

When they finally reach a white residential area, Mr. Head begins to enforce his racial code on Nelson again. Reminding him of his reaction to the black woman, he says, "And standing there grinning like a chim-pan-zee while a nigger woman gives you direction. Great Gawd!" (263). He denounces Nelson with the abusive naming of "a chim-pan-zee or monkey," which has been a connotation of blacks for years, and the unnatural smiling as well. Expressing his resentment of his grandson's behavior, he struggles himself to recover the cherished notion of white supremacy.

Yet another test is waiting for him: his feeling of being secure in the white district soon disappears. O'Connor prepares to give the hardest blow to Mr. Head. He confronts an incident that makes him lose all hope: the reliable relationship between grandfather and grandson collapses completely. Being lost and tired, Nelson falls in an exhausted fit of sleep on the street. On the other hand Mr. Head, hunching "like an old monkey" (262) ² hides from Nelson behind a trash can. When Mr. Head decides to awaken Nelson, he kicks the can causing such a loud noise that the terrified Nelson runs away like "a wild maddened pony" (264) and bumps into an elderly woman passing by. In a fury, the woman claims to be injured and calls a policeman. Frightened by her accusation

Mr. Head denies his relation with Nelson: "This is not my boy" (265). His grandfather's treachery strikes Nelson with abhorrence. Realizing "the depth of his denial" (266), Mr. Head has been thrown into self-abhorrence deeper than any doubt he has ever had about himself before.

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In their desolation they encounter a plaster figure of a Negro bent over on a low brick wall. The wild look of the black figure is grotesque and miserable. One of his eyes is entirely white and the other chipped. His mouth is stretched up at the corners, which expresses neither age nor emotion. This Negro figure takes them aback "as if they were faced with some great mystery" (269). Standing nailed to the spot with their hands trembling identically in their pockets, they feel "the artificial Negro" dissolving their differences like "an action of mercy" (269). Eventually the wretched figure of a Negro takes effect in producing reconciliation from their bitter experience.

Interestingly enough, what O'Connor uses to save Mr. Head from defeat is a Negro figure. She had seen such a weather-beaten plaster figure in front of a country house with her mother, "the artificial nigger ...cracked and falling from the wall and eating a piece of brown, not red, watermelon" (Letters to Editor 181). Possibly, the statue did strike her as a good device for her theological vision and helped her deepest conviction that "it [fiction] should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality" (MM 148). The statue is therefore given a holy role for Mr. Head's spiritual growth as if it were the icon of the Savior. The similar beneficial image from the black race is

also seen in role of the black woman Nelson encounters in the city. As he is lost in wonder and comfort by the remarkably bulky woman, O'Connor suggests "the mystery of existence" (HB 78) in a physical way. For a boy who had never seen "a nigger" or known any women, O'Connor explains, "such a black mountain of maternity" would give him "the required shock" (HB 78). Indeed, this white boy's experience is linked to the miracle of the white old man whose redemption is guided by "the artificial Negro." What O'Connor has in mind is to express "the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (HB 78) in the course of the story. It is her hope that the decades of suffering of the black race would hold "a kind of redemptive grace of its own" in terms of releasing "the work of the original redemptive suffering of Jesus" (Edmondson 152).

Truly, O'Connor's discerning eye catches Africanist "otherness" in the miserable, grotesque figure of a Negro. The hardship of a person despised and rejected by others is associated with the Suffering Savior as is much of the Book of Isaiah (53:1-5). She devotes herself largely to the concluding paragraphs, hoping to make Mr. Head's redemption more convincing. She rewrote them many times, hearing Mrs. Tate's advice, "the endings are too flat" (HB 78). In order to "gain some altitude and get a larger view" (HB 78), namely to emphasize the theological impact, she sets his redemption in rising from the Garden of Eden to the Gates of Paradise in the last two paragraphs. The narrator says, "Mr. Head stood very still and *felt* the action of mercy touch him again" (269 italics mine). "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" (270 italics mine). Including three other "feel" words in the endings, we notice that his felt moments stand out in the

narration of his "redemption."

A major question will be then raised: whose voice is it that describes the felt moment? Is it Mr. Head's? Or is it the omniscient voice? The narrator's statement in relation to Mr. Head's mind remains controversial among the critics. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. says that the shift of the narrative consciousness in the endings is close to "embodying O'Connor's essential Catholic perspective" (81). Louise Y. Gossett sees the ending slip into "exegesis rather than narration" (96) whereas Edward Strickland claims the narrator's voice as "an excess of moral earnestness" (453). Their comments basically show that the narrator is deeply and overly engaged in trying to prove the protagonist's redemption. Then, why does the narrator sound unreservedly committed to Mr. Head? Here, we need to pay attention to O'Connor's narrating principle. She says, "when you write fiction you are speaking *with* character and action, not *about* character and action" (MM 76). In other words the omniscient narrator is deliberately committed to Mr. Head's blood and flesh and merges herself into Mr. Head's conscious thought. His inner state is described *with* him and never given a judgmental comment on the character of Mr. Head. Moreover, O'Connor cherishes a character's autonomy that will create his or her own situation. And she readily discovers a meaning in what she writes instead of imposing her disposition on the character (HB 188). This is what she does to the character of Mr. Head. She deliberately lets Mr. Head govern himself and allows him a free hand. Obviously he slips from the author's control in the course of her scheme.³ Therefore, it is inevitable that Mr. Head's "redemption" is destined to provide us with more room for inviting racial considerations in it than his spiritual growth of religious conversion.

For race conscious readers, it will be natural to interpret that Mr.

Head's "redemption" is morally corrupt. His destiny is unlikely to be correlated with the redemptive suffering of the black race. The reason is shown, for instance, shortly after his "redemption." His remarks to his grandson articulate his position toward blacks: "They ain't got enough *real* ones here. They got to have an *artificial* one" (269 italics mine). He claims his statement "lofty" (269), but it offers the following interpretation. That is, it is not the living black essence but the fabricated one that indeed saves him from his powerlessness and despair.⁴ Namely, a miserable "artificial" black statue is indispensable for Mr. Head who has been shamefully defeated by the living blacks in the city. The figuratively silenced body of the Africanist allows him to recover his identity of being an American in the white society. Consequently, when Mr. Head's conversion is narrated, it sounds fictitious to those who believe that racism rejects the dignity and worth of human beings created equally in the image of God.

The character's autonomous speaking voice does create an ironical paradox in the climax of Mr. Head's "redemption." The more the narrator emphasizes Mr. Head's assurance of God's mercy, the more the readers come to reflect on the credibility of his "redemption." In the midst of God's glory, it is "the artificial nigger" that appears as the icon of the black race's suffering. This symbolic wretched statue convinces the readers that the depth of Mr. Head's soul has been saved by a culturally constructed Africanist othering. O'Connor's faith indeed leads her to devote herself to employing allegory based on her theological vision of the "artificial nigger" that did reflect on sin and salvation in our racially oppressed society. And she implies that the sacrifice of the black race is figuratively equal to Christ's crucifixion; it has redeemed Mr. Head who hid his racism under naiveté and innocence.⁵ It is, however, the

dynamics of the “artificial nigger” that impedes her religious intention. O’Connor’s sharing a continuation of Christ’s suffering is kept in the background and her commitment to the black race’s suffering is indeed in the foreground.

When O’Connor was asked to change the title by *Kenyon Review* editor John Crowe Ransom who had worried about hurting black sensibilities, she defended it: “I don’t think the story should be called anything but ‘The Artificial Nigger’” (Letters to the Editor 181). She continued, “the story as a whole is much more damaging to white folk’s sensibilities than to black” (Letters to the Editor 181). Though her defense fueled a controversy as to why she stood up for it,⁶ she firmly protested in a letter to Ben Griffith about why the term “nigger” is essential in the title. She said, “What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro’s suffering for us all” (HB 78). As Alice Walker admits that O’Connor’s strong belief is rooted in “justice for the *individual*” (Walker 77 italics mine), her characters of both races are equally the representatives of an oppressed people. Her portrayal of a white male or female character is often described as demeaned and absurd as her black one. Her efforts in fiction have been made not to appeal to justice along racial lines but to “grace for two races to live together” (Magee 103). In spite of all her strivings, ironically, a helpless old white racist (Mr. Head) whose character the author portrays in caricature is more projected than a man, regardless of race, in need of redemption.

Notes

- ¹ Critics have been wrestling with the ending paragraphs of Mr. Head's "redemption." Paul W Nisly argues that Mr. Head's epiphany is merely demonstrating "the depth of Mr. Head's pride and self - deception" (54). On the other hand Richard Giannone interprets the Atlanta trip as proving "the depth of an eternal experience" (16) and claims Mr. Head's theological renewal.
- ² O'Connor uses the word "chim - pan - zee" when Mr. Head abusively calls Nelson and at the same time describes Mr. Head as "monkey," suggesting that it is meaningless to draw a racial boundary through the derogatory naming of African Americans.
- ³ Using the fictional theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Mary Neff Shaw explains that "the protagonist initially rivals and eventually plunders the narrator's authoritarianism" (105).
- ⁴ Toni Morrison has indicated to the white society that a carefully fabricated Africanist presence is crucial to their sense of Americanness (Morrison 6).
- ⁵ Roland Végso's analysis is persuasive in showing how the rhetorical complexities of Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" act out the conservative postwar liberalism of her age through the narrative representations of naiveté and innocence.
- ⁶ Sally Fitzgerald's letter to the editor on April 15th, 1995 stirred up a dispute about O'Connor's word choice for the title. See the appendices of *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 23(1994-95).

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