Southern Post-Modernism, Anti-Romanticism and Gender Difference in Flannery O'Connor and Some Other Southern Contemporaries

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SOUTHERN POST-MODERNISM, ANTI-ROMANTICISM AND GENDER DIFFERENCE IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND SOME OTHER SOUTHERN CONTEMPORARIES

A Thesis
Presented to
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by
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SOUTHERN POST-MODERNISM, ANTI-ROMANTICISM AND GENDER DIFFERENCE IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND SOME OTHER SOUTHERN CONTEMPORARIES

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Ada Travelsted Skillern
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Flannery O’Connor has long been an established southern writer of the mid-twentieth century. This paper discusses briefly the tenets of both Modernism and Post-Modernism as literary movements of the twentieth-century, then looks specifically at how O’Connor’s fiction makes her a key hallmark figure in the movement known as Post-Modernism, but also as one of the first female southern writers to utilize very anti-Romantic themes and style.

Further, this paper attempts to examine through a discussion of various contemporary male and female southern writers the depth of O’Connor’s influence on their own works. Attention is also given to the differences found in voice, theme and tone between southern contemporary male and female writers today, and explanations are offered as to why these marked differences exist.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction, Overview of Post-Modernism, and Southern Fiction

My interest in Southern American literature originates in my own family’s southern identity. While Kentucky itself is considered historically a “border” state, a supporter of both the Confederate and Union causes, my father grew up in the decidedly southern, rural farming community of Russellville, where he recalls the economic struggle and hardship typical of most families in the 1940s. On the other hand, I was exposed as well to my mother’s comparatively northern upbringing, in which Louisville served as an extension of her own mother’s Michigan roots, where automotive industrialism, traveling abroad, and chicken à la king became a way of life. Perhaps this balance subconsciously provides me a more objective point of view. However, as a child, I grew up believing that everything my father pronounced was absolute truth, because he spoke with such adamant conviction and natural passion. The one constant thread of those orations were the stories of family, and a strong sense of personal history, and the importance of loyalty, even though perhaps flawed, to those whom we love. These stories about relatives, their struggles, small triumphs, strokes of creative or mischievous genius, were not about perfect, heroic, or even noble people; but they were perfect in their imperfections, their realistic flaws, perhaps simply because they
represented us.

Post-Modernism, a term first used in the late 1950's and early 1960's, is a literary and critical movement that represented a major break from other distinctly outlined literary movements, such as Romanticism, Realism and Modernism. Both a descriptive and an evaluative term, Post-Modernism refers to all literature produced since 1946, or all post-World War II works; in the evaluative, or critical sense, Post-Modernism is much more ambiguous, but often is referred to as “a mood or condition of radical indeterminacy” (Selden & Widdowson, 175). The writer’s approach toward the world around him is one “of self-conscious, parodic scepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual and political life” (175). Some literary theorists argue that the Post-Modernist movement is simply an extension of Modernist ideas. Holman and Harmon define Modernism, which began in England in 1914 with World War I, as a movement that sprang from numerous circumstances, including the explosion of writing talent and experimentation, along with the stress and hardship resulting from war, followed by the economic boom of the 1920's and then the Depression of the 1930's.

The catastrophic results of the subsequent second World War left Britain, Europe and America in a negative and uncertain period. This mood is reflected everywhere in the literature of the first half of the twentieth-century, and led to the establishment of Analytical Criticism. With leaders like T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, and F.R. Leavis, an “informed, essentially anti-Romantic” approach was created, with the writer “concentrating on the work of art itself,” rather than on the historical and social
structures in place during the composition of the work (298-9). Modernism describes a time when England was undergoing military and "national and cultural diminution," as well as writing characterized by a sharp and intentional deviation from literary tradition; "it elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious" (298). The psychologies of Sigmund Freud as well as Carl Jung emerged as highly influential, and a very intentional exploration of the private self; Holman and Harmon write that Existentialism and Surrealism, both sub-movements within Modernism, prefer disorder over "the practical and systematic," in reaction in many ways against the previous emphases on Realism and Naturalism (298). However, Selden and Widdowson make one clear distinction that the "Modernists [key figures being T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Wallace Stevens] remain tragically heroic, while Post-Modernists express exhaustion and 'display the resources of the void'" (177). In reaction against high Modernists such as Eliot and Pound, Post-Modernist works are also characterized by "anti-elitism, anti-authoritarianism. Diffusion of the ego. Participation. Art becomes communal, optional, anarchic... As opposed to Modernist experimentation, Post-Modernists produce 'open, discontinuous, improvisational, indeterminate, or aleatory structures'" (177).

Post-Modernist literature seems to view history with greater skepticism, and ironically, as opposed to the more romantic, rose-colored attitudes of previous generations such as the Romantics or even the Realists and Modernists. Post-
Modernism often combines time periods, genres, and theories in ways previously considered absolutely distinctive, and reminds the readers with subtlety and, sometimes to the discomfort of the reader, that he or she should always consider exactly whose truth the story represents (178). For example, *Gone With the Wind* (1936) is told from the decidedly romantic viewpoint of Margaret Mitchell, a southern woman writing sixty years after the Civil War of the loss of an entire aristocratic way of life, and twenty-five years before the civil rights movement forced that same mainstream American society that found such a story so appealing to consider for the first time the other major perspective not given attention, that of the southern black population, which had provided the foundation for such a society to exist in the first place. Also in 1936, a male southern writer, William Faulkner, explored many of the same themes as Mitchell, in another cornerstone book, *Absalom! Absalom!*

The hallmarks of modern Southern literature have been well-defined over the years, through the works of timeless authors such as Mitchell, Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle and Eudora Welty. These tenets include, briefly, the following: 1) An obsession with the past, such as with life before and after the Civil War, but also, a general, and sometimes rose-colored nostalgia for things to be as they once were. 2) A strong sense of place, and heritage. Battlegrounds, homesteads, land and the history of that land, and the families tied to it, abound, particularly in modern southern literature. 3) A dichotomy of reality versus disillusionment and fantasy.

Contemporary Southern literature sometimes shares many of these
characteristics, such as is later discussed in Bob Shacocis' "Where Pelham Fell" (1987), but differs as well from its Modern predecessors, both stylistically and in subject matter. Of major prevalence is the contrast between the male and female point of view in both Modern and Post-Modern Southern literature. These differences are numerous. For instance, female characters seem harder, more cynical, and more realistic survivors of their surroundings which, frankly, are remnants created and inherited from an ultimately unsuccessful patriarchal society. In Charles Frazier's best-selling Cold Mountain (1997) Ada begins as a young idealist and well-read dreamer, until she is left alone by the death of her father, Monroe, and the absence of any rescuing suitors, who are all off fighting against the Union. Ada contrasts starkly to Ruby, who must teach her how to make a failing farm a productive, self-sufficient means of survival. Consequently, Ada undergoes radical change, but significantly under the tutelage of another woman. Ultimately, she seems, though, to hold onto her essential self, remaining philosophical and compassionate, but with an edgier, more persevering nature. That her survival and transformation is owed to Ruby is ironic, since the reader today would consider Ada by far the more "literate," more sensitive person.

The men in these contemporary stories, such as the grandfather in Robert Penn Warren's "When the Light Gets Green" (1937) and Joe Robert Kirkman in Fred Chappell's I Am One of You Forever (1985), frequently focus much more heavily on the past. Their narratives are characterized by a heavy sense of history, and a profound wistfulness or reverie, perhaps because they as a group had so much more to lose than
others, and did in fact lose so much, through the Civil War, the two World Wars, and the Great Depression. As a whole, a decidedly romantic longing to go back to “the way things were” at the same time consciously or subconsciously feeling a burden of guilt pervades the literature focusing around male characters. Andrew Lytle, in his *A Wake for the Living* (1975), refers to the prelapsarian and postlapsarian gardens, and the sense of burden and guilt that comes with living in the “garden after the fall”; but the Post-Modern author seems to ask us to consider who owned the pre-Civil War Southern garden.
CHAPTER TWO

Flannery O’Connor

Flannery O’Connor is a touchstone figure for Post-Modernist tenets, as well as a female writer who clearly undercuts the Romanticism that seems to pervade much early Southern literature, through her characters and themes. When asked why she used such violent or absurd situations for her stories, she responded that “... With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are the times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives...” (“A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable,” 113). She was referring to one of her most violent and enigmatic characters, the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” but in many cases today, it is not so much the violence of the characters as it is the seemingly absurd situations in which they find themselves, which eventually lead to some drastic action that becomes the climax of the story.

O’Connor’s genius lies in her keen ability to follow one of the major tenets of both Modernism and Post-Modernism, to get inside the minds of real people and recreate them within contexts that draw out their true natures. Arguably, the verisimilitude which she gives to some of the narrowest minds in all of literature is more difficult to achieve than the most complex T.S. Eliot characters’ psyches. She lets the characters stand on their own thoughts and actions, interjecting only the slightest hint of a moral overture, but so vividly that it is almost impossible for the reader not to
cry out at the end with a heavy sense of judgment, not just for the specific character, but for all the other real people the reader recognizes as part of frequent personal encounters in some Southern shade.

So many of O’Connor’s protagonists are females left to task, such as Mrs. McIntyre, in “The Displaced Person,” and Mrs. Cope, in “A Circle in the Fire.” The major tragic flaw of these women, who embody what Holman and Harmon refer to as the “antihero” typical of Post-Modernist works, (370) is their complete antipathy toward their fellow human beings. They are anti-Romantic in the most unsentimental sense. These independent female landowners deal with characters with telling names like Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Shortley, and pride themselves on their cynical ability to outsmart and outlast such contemptible, lazy “white trash.” They are landowners, but not the fiery, gorgeously proud heroines like Mitchell’s Scarlett O’Hara; the only quality that separates these Post-Modern protagonists from their employees is not aesthetic at all, but simply paper ownership of a piece of land. They, too, have provincial minds; Mrs. McIntyre becomes highly suspicious of the Polish refugee, Mr. Guizac, simply because he is a foreigner, though his resourcefulness and faultless work ethic are the reasons for Mrs. McIntyre’s newfound prosperity. So why does Mr. Guizac make her, even more than the Shortleys and the hired black help, who stand only to lose their livelihoods because of their comparative laziness, feel so uncomfortable? He forces her to examine herself and certain truths, more effectively than the indoctrinating priest ever can proselytize with his doctrines of the Church. Guizac is a tireless worker and feels
contempt for those around him who are lazy and fail to seize upon any economic opportunity. O'Connor further illuminates the hypocrisy of so many Southerners in another female protagonist farmer, Mrs. Cope, in “A Circle in the Fire.” She prides herself on being appreciative and thankful for what she has, and believes that she models the image of the tireless worker. However, the reader quickly discerns that Mrs. Cope, paradoxically to her name, is inept or intractable in her ability to “cope” with anyone who falls outside her limited philosophy of life. When three delinquent boys present themselves uninvited for an impromptu vacation on her farm, she is the only female character of the three who decides on a weak course of action to remove them when they refuse to exit. Further, she rationalizes her decision not to move them forcibly by claiming that she is trying to be generous and charitable. The reader might believe this if she did not turn around almost in the same breath and treat her daughter in such a scathing, belittling manner, simply because she voices her strong disagreement with her mother on the issue of how to remove the squatting boys.

When her daughter shows a flare of imagination, perhaps from her constant reading, by appearing as an armed cowboy ready to defend aggressively the farm, which she refers to repeatedly as a “fortress,” her mother cries scathingly, “with a tragic look, ‘Why do you have to look like an idiot?.. Suppose company were to come? When are you going to grow up? What’s going to become of you? I look at you and I want to cry!’” (190) The child’s answer is indeed significant, and the Post-Modernist would view her response as exactly the antithesis of tragic, as a harbinger of hope for the
future. “Leave me be,” she says, “in a high irritated voice. Just leave me be. I ain’t you” (190). The child then goes into the woods in search of the truth, and as a defender of her beliefs, at the same time instinctively recognizing that her mother lacks the temerity to do either. Mrs. Cope tries to project, unconvincingly, the image of a grateful, positive, well-intentioned Christian woman. Her hamartia is that she is incapable of reconciling the uglier circumstances and misfortunes of those with whom she must deal, although she uses their labels frequently in abstract conversation: “all those poor Europeans... the Negroes... [those] in iron lungs...” (190). Those concrete individuals around her, however, the Negro worker, Culver, the hired help, Mrs. Pritchard, the three runaway boys, and even her own unnamed daughter, she finds only fault with. She is not a true sympathizer, but more a disillusioned elitist, arguably worse than the old antebellum aristocrat, because she remains forever incognizant of the motivations or workings of others, and refuses to entertain notions that do not initiate within herself. Her daughter, though, ultimately recognizes, with her sympathetic imagination, the common suffering of humanity. “It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody a Negro or a European or to Powell himself” (193). Sun imagery, used throughout the story, and emblematic of the circular fire set by the “prophets dancing in the fiery furnace” (193) projects hope and grace, for it is a power that continues to operate in spite of the human grotesqueness and disaster which O’Connor brings so accurately to life.
In “Good Country People,” O’Connor masterfully swipes at the meaninglessness of platitudes, by using one popular southern expression as the title for her story, as well as by implementing names which prove completely ironic to their characters. For instance, Joy is certainly not a “joy,” to herself or others, but a bitter, angry woman saddled with an artificial wooden leg after having her own shot off in a hunting accident at age ten. Likewise, Mrs. Hopewell, her mother, is a “hopeless” pit of banalities; her responses to practically every situation involve answers like, “Nothing is perfect,” “Well, other people have their opinions, too,” and “A smile never hurt anyone.” Ironically, she prides herself on not being offensive or judgmental, but to Joy, such reflexive blather is the supreme offense. When she bursts out at dinner, “without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full—‘Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!’ She had cried sinking down again and staring at her own plate, ‘Malebranche was right: We are not our own light. We are not our own light!’” (276) She is frustrated that her mother has no cognizance of herself; in a sense, she is soulless, hollow, like Joy.

Joy’s decision to change her name to Hulga, “the ugliest name in any language” (274), the one issue mother and daughter seem to agree on, is Joy’s extremist attempt to make her mother acknowledge some shred of truth, even if that is only to admit that Joy is emphatically not a joy. Conversely, Mrs. Hopewell’s attempt to smooth over life makes her daughter more determined to be brutally confrontational and impolite. At
times in the story, it is difficult for the reader to surmise who is the more tortured soul.

In keeping with Post-Modernist tradition, O’Connor does not make Joy the enlightened, truth-telling heroine of her story, however, despite her refreshing contrast to the likes of her mother and the hired help, Mrs. Freeman, who has three expressions, all compared to the driving mechanisms of “a heavy truck” (271). If she is superior in her intellectual knowledge of book philosophy and academics, she is painfully naive in the emotional hazards of the world, as she discovers in her encounter with Manly Pointer, the young traveling Bible salesman. He is a dilettante of the simplest kind, or so he seems. “I like girls that wear glasses,” he tells her when they are alone. “I think a lot. I’m not like these people that a serious thought don’t ever enter their heads. It’s because I may die.” (284)

O’Connor’s Joy is an archetypal Post-Modern protagonist, in that she is distrustful and skeptical of traditional structures. For instance, she completely loathes the idea of Christian salvation, but begins to plot to convert the supposed converting missionary to another, loftier belief, the salvation of the intellect. She plays right into his “good country people” trap, as they both are intent on seducing the other, though for entirely different reasons. At the climax of the story, when Joy finally allows herself to be vulnerable to Manly’s advances, he takes, literally, her most personal possession, her wooden leg, and shows that his Bibles in fact are merely false boxes to store his pornographic playing cards and flask of whiskey. He does not wish to convert her soul, but add her artificial leg to his traveling collection of grotesque items he has duped from
other "good country people." Joy and Manly Pointer have more in common than she ever would have realized; he says with contempt in the barn loft before stranding her, helpless, “You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (291)

He is a Post-Modernist figure as well, but used the guise of traditional religious beliefs to attain his true objectives, which significantly are macabre symbols of the sufferings of others, such as Joy’s wooden leg and the elderly woman’s glass eye.

Conversely, Sally Poker Sash, in another O’Connor story, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” represents a different sort of misguided protagonist. She is the anti-Post-Modernist, in that she blindly, and stupidly, believes in any tradition connected to Southern history. This literary work centers around Sally’s grandfather, “General Tennessee Flintrock Sash of the Confederacy,” actually not a general, but a major, named in fact George Poker Sash, whose greatest accomplishment seems to be his interminable stubbornness to live. At 104 years old, he is humorously described as a living and literal relic, whose existence is marked by his annual presence at historical events: “Every year on Confederate Memorial Day, he was bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum where he was displayed from one to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery, and historic documents...In the spring when the old homes were opened for pilgrimages, he was invited to wear his uniform and sit in some conspicuous spot and lend atmosphere to the scene. Some of these times he only snarled at the visitors but sometimes he told about the premiere [of Gone With the Wind] and the beautiful girls” (139). O’Connor’s Post-Modernist influence is clearly
revealed in Sally’s character, who believes ceremony is of tantamount importance. The irony in this, however, soon becomes apparent.

She is a teacher, a notably bad choice once the reader delves into her character, and has worked toward her college degree for twenty consecutive summers. She considers this requirement of a degree not an opportunity to learn, but a contemptible punishment, and each fall, “she always taught in the exact way she had been taught not to teach, this was a mild revenge...” (135) O'Connor presents Sally as one of the worst sorts of Romantics; she prays every night that the “General” will live to see her graduation not because he is a cherished family member and it is an occasion to celebrate the commencement of higher learning, but “because she wanted to show what she stood for, or, as she said, “what all was behind her,” [the General sitting in his place of honor on stage] and was not behind them. This them was not anybody in particular. It was just all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living” (135). She is atypical of most female characters in O’Connor’s fiction, for exactly this blind sentimentality for archaic institutions that insist on patriarchal dominance and limit her own gender’s social, economic and political opportunities. By contrast, and to further emphasize the author’s anti-Romantic theme, the General repeatedly scoffs at anything historical; the highlights of his life consist of superficial wonders like “beautiful guls” and parades: “He had no use for any of it. What happened then wasn’t anything to a man living now and he was living now” (142). The manner in which he “lives for the moment” is not admirable; however, the
General demonstrates a bit more charm by at least knowing why he likes what he likes, even if his short list excludes his granddaughter. Like Manly Pointer, the General uses the very traditions which he holds in contempt for his own ulterior purposes.

"The Geranium" and "The Displaced Person" both explore another common Post-Modernist theme of Southern literature, that of alienation and usurpation. Again and again, Post-Modernist writers reflect that same Modernist anxiety after 1914 that no institution is stable or trustworthy or honorable. White Southerners, defeated in 1865, ought to recognize and empathize with the plight of such displaced persons as Mr. Guizac better than anyone, but tragically, they show only ignorance and apathy.

In "The Geranium," Dudley, the elderly father, has moved to his daughter's cramped apartment in New York City, a location completely antithetical to the small southern town he has occupied his entire life. He spends his days running occasional small errands for his daughter, but mostly sitting in a chair watching the window of the apartment across the way, where the occupants place a geranium each morning. Dudley longs for the days when he hunted with "Old Rabie," a black man who, in the circumstances of the South, where integration occurred only through servant or subordinate roles, allowed Dudley to order him around and play a dominating role. In contrast to Dudley is his daughter, who, despite being raised "proper," possesses a contemporary pragmatism common to metropolitan areas, and advises her father that he should avoid interfering in others' lives and making judgments.

When the geranium falls to the bottom of six flights of steps, "roots in the air,"
it of course symbolizes Dudley’s precarious depression caused by being taken from his comfort zone. Likewise, the author incorporates the incident with his daughter’s neighbor, the impeccably dressed and compassionate black man who helps Dudley up from the stairs, to show the Southern male’s discomfort with this role reversal. He is incapable of considering anyone else’s situation other than his own, or he would easily recognize the parallels of his own experiences in New York City with the plight of black Americans in the South. In his native town, his ineptness is smoothed over by the traditional roles blacks and whites continue to perpetuate, and though he is by no means affluent, the color of his skin makes possible his pseudo-aristocratic demeanor, while the city, where people “rolled off the street and down steps and into trains—black and white and yellow all mixed up like vegetables in soup” (7), Dudley’s attitude is chided and regarded as foolish and childish.

In “The Displaced Person,” Mrs. Shortley, another hired help equivalent to “A Circle In the Fire’s” Mrs. Pritchard, is extremely judgmental and suspicious of anyone outside her narrow experience. For instance, when she learns that Mrs. McIntyre will be hiring on Mr. Guizac and his refugee family, she takes one newsreel picture from the Holocaust and makes grand assumptions, to the great humor of the reader, that Europe must be a place “where they had not advanced as in this country” and that “these people” obviously “did not have an advanced religion” (197-8), if such violence was allowed to occur there. Meanwhile, her insecurity in her own station makes her derogatory and arrogant toward her fellow co-workers, “the Negroes,” who can’t easily
argue with her because of her color, or perhaps understand her better than she will ever understand herself, and know that arguing would prove futile.

In conclusion, each of these short fiction works demonstrate both O’Connor’s kindredness to Modern and Post-Modern tenets, as well as her heavy influence on Southern Post-Modern fiction writers who followed her example as well as diverged in numerous ways from the stylistic and thematic foundations she established. O’Connor took a genre heavily burdened in a tradition of irreconcilables, the simultaneous romantic reverie for the past as well as the guilt for wanting to perpetuate such a system that obviously serves a single aristocratic group. She attempted to make better sense of these attitudes, stripping the genre of all its romance, in order to get to the essentials of what she believed was the true humanity of so many of her characters. Indubitably, what she reveals for the reader is far from flattering; the hypocrisy, lack of self-knowledge and self-awareness, in the Dudleys and Mrs. Hopewells and Joys of the South provoke outrage and disgust in the reader, but these people are real, not the stuff of fairy tales and romances. O’Connor’s innovative attempt to get to the heart of her characters, along with the works of a few other Southern Post-Modernists, such as Faulkner, help later Southern contemporary writers move in new directions as well, as is evident later in the discussion.
CHAPTER THREE

Fred Chappell

O’Connor’s anti-Romantic, Post-Modern influence is clear in today’s Southern writers. However, the male voice in Southern literature differs dramatically in many cases from the female voice. Fred Chappell’s *I Am One of You Forever* (1985) is one clear instance where human flaws are not brought forth to reveal badges of ignorance or blatant grotesqueness, but as sympathetic, Romantic portrayals of that “still, dark sadness of humanity” that William Wordsworth refers to in his “Lines Written Above the Ruins of Tintern Abbey.” Chappell’s characters abound with eccentricities and human, often tragic, error. Beneath all of the boyish pranks and daily humor exists an almost overwhelming sense of burden and tragedy. In O’Connor’s fiction, optimism and hope come in the form of beautiful symbols of grace, such as peacocks and the sun, or moments of realization, but the reader must look carefully for such subtle signs, or miss them altogether and declare the entire collection a sad commentary on human ignorance and meanness indeed. Her characters are real, but dark, and absolutely reflective of the Post-Modernist’s conscious effort to reveal human beings for what they really are, pocked faces, scars and all. Chappell, too, reveals human flaw, but with a greater dignity, perhaps because his focus centers around the tightly-knit family unit which seems to exist more so in the South, where agricultural families were once a way of life, than in the North, dominated by industrialism and much more frequent mobility.
Significantly, Chappell’s novel is told from the first-person, personal narrative, omniscient viewpoint of Jess Kirkman, who is only eight years old at the time the events take place. It is as much what Chappell does not say through young Jess as what he does say that is important; Johnson Gibbs, the hired 18 year-old orphan, and Joe Robert Kirkman, Jess’s father, attempt to keep Jess, still innocent at the beginning of the book, from discovering the pain of uncomfortable, uglier truths. Despite their efforts, it is clear through Jess’s recounting of incidents and allusions to things spoken by these two older role models that he gains a sense of the harder, colder world that lies beyond the safety of the farm. Protecting Jess’s young sensibility, as well as Joe Robert’s and Johnson’s own latent fears through a male society of “running jokes, pranks, passwords, and private signals” (21) is a way of life. In the middle of World War II and after the Depression, perhaps comic relief is the only method available to give the men some sense of control, in a land where their dominance formerly would never have been challenged. Johnson, Joe Robert and Jess spend spare time coordinating projects that the women in the family would dismiss as completely irrelevant to the productivity and success of the farm. Substituting rotten eggs for the grandmother’s fancy company candy and then eavesdropping through a window to evaluate the success of their endeavor is one example. It is not that the females lack a sense of humor, too. Grandmother must keep secret that she found the joke just as hilarious as they did, for she says to her daughter and Jess, with tears of laughter streaming down her cheeks, “I wasn’t going to laugh in front of them. If they seen me
laughing, Lord only knows what they’d do next time” (15). The reader senses that she is struggling to keep control, and to show no hint of weakness or vulnerability to their wit. After all, it is her farm, alluding to the reality that Joe Robert could not support his family independently in difficult economic times.

Overall, Chappell’s novel focuses on the precariousness felt by Modernists and Post-Modernists with their situation in a world that seemed no longer familiar, no longer stable, to them. The author relies heavily on the use of allusions to classical mythology, perhaps to illustrate that the human condition, the state of the world, is not after all so very different as it has been since the beginning of recorded time, when Homer sang of the Trojan War. The work opens with a flashback of Jess and his father building a bridge in a garden, which they work hard to tame, as a welcome-home present for Jess’s mother. Just as they complete their elaborate labor of love, just as Joe Robert fumbles with the red ribbon to mark for his wife her gift, the paper factory releases its floodgates and their creation is swept away in a ruin of new lumber and mud. The bridge, of course, symbolically ties the traditional agricultural lifestyle of the South to a cold, corporate modern industrialism which threatens to wreak impersonal havoc, just as Hitler and other tyrants are obliterating Europe and its peoples across the ocean. The bridge is delicate, fragile. Cora, like the mythical Helen of Troy, arrives home just in time to witness the destruction of their paradisal fruits. As she takes in the situation and begins to understand their purpose, Jess remembers that “she turned again to face us [and] looked as if she were in pain. A single tear glistened on her cheek,
silver in the cheerful light of midafternoon” (6). The author describes her tear as expanding until it encompassed the entire family; she embraces them and shares their pain, despite their failure.

As the reader would anticipate of a Southern novel, *I Am One of You Forever* weaves tales of family history into the present. Chappell does so through a series of vignette portrayals of visiting relatives, all male with the exception of cousin Samantha, who also bears the distinction of being the most welcome and honored guest. Uncle Luden, a prodigal son, who will “lie down with swine or anything else handy” (26), is an incorrigible skirt-chaser and alcoholic, yet Jess’s normally stern grandmother welcomes him with unconditionally maternal arms and watches him with deep concern and a certain reverence. While he is a guest, the family dines as if every meal were a holiday, and the telephone rings incessantly, with women giggly and giddy for Luden. Luden for awhile is one continuous holiday; however, when the phone callers become angry husbands and boyfriends, Chappell paints a sorrowful picture of his dark side. Dressed like Gene Autry and completely intoxicated, he lines up twelve dolls and shoots them dead-on from forty-five feet away, reciting after each successful target one of the twelve steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous treatment creed.

On the family picnic, which Luden insists on having before he leaves his native land again, despite anonymous threats to his life, he and Grandmother begin reminiscing about the “old times,” by which Jess is turned off immediately, because it is so filled with “drab tragedies and the cruel rusties... Those mountain people of used-
to-be seemed as alien to me as Siberians. When my grandmother talked to me about the old times, she seemed to be making it clear that I wouldn’t have lasted long in that milieu” (39). He remarks wistfully that the mountains in California simply are not the same as those in North Carolina, a Southern trait he cannot shake, despite his wild nomadic lifestyle. Likewise, Jess’s mother, he declares “liked anything having to do with family. If she heard there was a cockfight in hell, she’d favor it as long as the whole family was involved” (37).

Every male relative who returns to his birthplace in Chappell’s narrative seems burdened with unspoken demons. Jess’s grandmother senses their feelings of loss and helplessness as she watches her sons, saying only, “Poor old soul” as acknowledgment of their common human condition, which seems predominantly male. In addition to his use of bridges and storms as symbols of transformation and preservation, the author refers to doorways frequently; each of Jess’s uncles serves as a literal passageway to some other experience or facet of humanity. When Uncle Gurton visits, he is reminiscent of a lonely wanderer, a hermit figure of silence who will respond only to “yes” or “no” questions with a nod or shake of his head. His legendary characteristic, a long white beard, is also a forbidden sight, tucked under his overalls, away from the satisfaction of Jess’s and his father’s curiosity. Similar to a Pandora’s box which they cannot resist, they encounter a world of entrancing and frightening visions that almost drown them when they release Gurton’s beard as he sleeps: “... now out of that misty mass and downover the edge of the bed came a birchbark canoe with two painted
Cherokee Indians paddling with smooth alacrity. Above them, out of the mist-bank of beard, flew a hawk pursued by a scattering of blackbirds. We heard a silvery distant singing and saw a provocative flashing and then a mermaid climbed out of the beard and positioned herself in the streaming-over straight chair. She did not seem to see my father and me, but gazed into some private distance and sang her bell-like song..." (59) She is reminiscent of Homer’s Sirens and their mysteriously entrancing beauty and irresistible power. Jess does not understand this allure, though he watches with great dismay as Johnson undergoes the change to adulthood with Laurie Lee, until the Coda of the book.

Significantly, too, none of these wandering males have wives or families. Their lives are transient and nomadic, without permanent purpose or employment. They seem in subconscious search of lasting meaning, and the women seem to understand this quest better than the men. Chappell’s novel begins and ends with references to the classical Helen of the Trojan War, an archetype for the loveliness and power of all women. Without Helen, the grit and terror and hardship inherent to life have no value, no purpose. Jess seems to be saying, at the conclusion of the book, that she is the source of love and meaning. The final chapter preceding the “Helen” coda significantly is titled, “Bright Star of a Summer Evening,” and centers around the only female visitor of the novel, Aunt Samantha Barefoot. She is an exuberant and passionate source of life with a warmth contagious to all she touches; she delights Jess with her swearing, and Joe Robert with her unabashed frankness and affection. Yet she has not been
immune to tragedy, but suffered great personal hardship. Joe Robert is drawn
irrevocably to her because of her misfortunes, and her ability nonetheless to lavish love
and spirit upon others. Samantha is the only visitor the family truly loves having. Like
her male cousins, she, too, contains a past with unresolved regrets. It is a revelation for
Jess when he realizes that, despite her fame and wealth, she is deeply lonely for her
family, especially his grandmother, her cousin Annie Barbara. Samantha reveals his
grandmother to be much more complex and multidimensional than Jess ever thought
when she persuades her to join her on the radio show by appealing to her business
acumen. Here she utters the only joke, up to now an entirely male trait, Jess has ever
heard her speak. He learns she was once a beautiful young woman with a rare musical
gift invited to play before the Queen of England. Samantha is a muse-figure,
with stranger and more beautiful, inexplicable powers of art than any of the men in her
family. She is a Post-Modern Helen. Both songs she plays with Jess’s grandmother on
her last evening there are about the love men and women have for each other, and its
tenuous wonder. The verse Joe Robert chooses for them to sing goes to the heart of the
novel’s meaning, and alludes again to Helen and the Trojan War:

I have often wondered why women love men,
But more times I’ve wondered how men can love them;
They’re men’s ruination and sudden downfall,
And they cause men to labor behind the stone wall.

Jess’s recollection of his grandmother’s voice singing and the strange, beautiful words
his father loved move him to tears even as a grown man. “... those wistful broken
chords sounded like the harmony that must lie beneath all the music ever heard or thought of—tremulous, melancholy, constant. It was a music you might hear down in the autumn grass on a cold hillside...My face burned like a comet; I mumbled and choked. I couldn’t sing then and I can’t sing now. If I could sing—sing, I mean, so that another human being could bear to hear me—I wouldn’t sit scribbling this story of long ago time.” (178-9) Instinctively, even as a young ingenue unaffected by adult love he understands that the music is rare beauty inspired by all the sorrow of the universe. Somehow, she translates, transforms all the sadness and aching of humanity into extraordinary experience.

Chapter Four, “Change of Heart,” is a strongly symbolic commentary on the state of religion. Joe Robert’s beliefs represent a much more Post-Modernist view than his fanatical Southern neighbors, whom he refers to as “hillside Holies” (67); the worst extremist example of these false visionaries is the zealot Canary, aptly named, for he is a parrot-figure, “a green eyed, crooked-toothed skinny fellow” (64), who blights the grocery store owner, Virgil Campbell’s, existence with his unsolicited holier-than-thou exhortations on the miseries of hell, where he pronounces to Virgil that he will surely burn for all eternity. Virgil, of course, harkens the reader back to the virtuous heathen, and the irreconcilable problem for Dante of having the classical Virgil of the *Aeneid* accompany him as a spiritual guide in the Christian *Divine Comedy*. Jess’s grandmother berates Joe Robert when he recounts the manner in which he encounters poor Virgil under Canary’s attack and shoos him from the store by declaring, “The Lord
God Almighty appeared to me in a vision... saying, This man Canary is not to be trusted. He is using my name in vain, the Lord told me, to poke his snout where it’s got no business...” (66) Furthermore, his mother-in-law tells him, “You got a good heart, Joe Robert, nobody’s got a better. But you ain’t come to serious manhood yet... You are too flibbertigibbet and not contrite” (68). Perhaps it is that state of innocence, even contrived through the use of humor, which saves his earthly soul from the darker views of Modernism and Post-Modernism. He is not a believer of empty platitudes and Bible Belt banalities, like the Mrs. Copes and Mrs. Hopewells of the world. Rather, Joe Robert possesses a gentle and respectful skepticism toward their visionary proselytizing, and feels a kindredness to the more rare Virgil Campbells.

Joe Robert is a Romantic, and a Transcendentalist, who chooses to see God and spiritualism in nature, as the storm reveals. Jess likens it to the Norse god, Thor, in powerfulness. Unlike scripture and Bible-beating, the storm gives Johnson, Jess and Joe Robert an overwhelming sense of awe. He remembers and repeats several times, “We couldn’t stop looking” (70), and recalls the acute awareness the storm gives their senses, and the feelings of insignificance and helplessness it evokes within them as they watch and can only pray that the hail does not ruin all of their work, just as the bridge in the beginning was swept away in a single rush of wave. In Post-Modern surrealist fashion, Chappell describes Johnson as a man suddenly possessed by something beyond himself, “an extension of itself both human and inhuman” (71). The three men watch visions of “storm angels” dancing within a tower of lightning, and
Chappell alludes to the classical, divine music of the primum mobile, or planetary and heavenly spheres when he writes of the strange dancers of the storm:

...inside this cylinder of white-purple light swam shoals of creatures we could never have imagined. Shapes filmy and iridescent and veined like dragonfly wings erranded between the earth and heavens. They were moving to a music we couldn’t hear, [to a] measure that we couldn’t understand.

(71-2) He writes that they “were bewildered and frightened not by the nearness of death but by the nearness of life” (72), remarkably different from the Baptist diatribes on the imminent threats of death and infernal fire used to keep sinners treading the primrose path of goodness. Also unlike Canary and his fellow zealots, Jess and his father and Johnson instinctively vow not to lessen the spiritually transfigurative effect of the storm by attempting to articulate it with clumsy words to a cheap audience.

The central chapters of the book concern that ultimate reality and consternation of life, death, brought to glare by Johnson Gibb’s death in battle. Johnson’s departing farewell is described in the same surrealistic, transformative terms used elsewhere: “The world outside our hills had come over the mountaintops like a great black cloud full of lightning and thunder, full of shattering voices which were alien to us, voices speaking in languages we had never truly believed to exist” (92). A dichotomy significant to the novel is brought to light in these chapters, that of storytelling versus the most private, inner struggles the individual faces alone and in silence; typical to Post-Modernism, Chappell focuses in these darker chapters on the psychological
struggle of individual man. He personifies the telegram that delivers the news of Johnson’s death, comparing it to “ugly pus,” and Jess remembers that no matter how many times it is removed, it always returns to the kitchen table, “to stare at us” (93), a hideous inescapability that Jess discovers he cannot bury in a rathole or seal with a rock, a reality that leaves the living scarred as tangibly as the “red and white burn streaks” (94) on Jess’s hand from trying. The telegram is compared figuratively to “an endless yellow glacier” and a “yellow spot” in Jess’s eye that burns and cannot be washed out, even with weeping, yet surviving family members do not discuss their private pain and struggles against it. Only when Jess sits down to the kitchen table alone and straightforwardly confronts it does the telegram metamorphosize, into a glowing yellow rose that disappears into darkness forever, leaving Jess confused, shaken, but lighter-hearted and more confident. Markedly, this rite is most difficult for Jess’s mother to undergo.

*I Am One of You Forever* ends as it began, with a surrealistic, italicized coda dedicated to Helen. The scene is from Uncle Luden’s visit, in a cabin where only the four males have retreated for deer hunting in winter. As young Jess lies awake in his bunk, he hears each man whisper, separately, “Helen” in their sleep and then bolt upright in their beds, still entranced with her vision, which appears before all of them. “Framed by glossy black hair, a face appeared there, the features blurred by a veil and yet familiar to me, I fancied, if I could remember something long ago and in a distant place.” (182) That Jess cannot discern her features makes sense, for in all of the
literature inspired over the ages by her presence, she is never described physically, except as “the face that launched a thousand ships.”

The novel concludes with a final vision of Johnson Gibbs the morning after Jess’s fateful dream. “His blue eyes were very bright... Against [the] harsh light Johnson’s figure loomed black, black as velvet, blackly burning, and his voice sounded deep and hollow: ‘Well, Jess, are you one of us or not?’” (184) The title, of course, is Jess’s later reply to a question he perhaps failed to comprehend until much later. Johnson’s death serves to sharpen Jess’s memories and experiences, much as the storm’s power earlier in the novel sharpens and transforms their awareness to take in even the slightest nuance and detail. Chappell, like Cousin Samantha, takes the uncertainty and fear and tragedy of human life, spoken of with such irreverence in much Modern and Post-Modern literature, and uses these as impetuses to whet and renew memory and purpose and personal history into achingly poignant and universal beauty. He brings human flaw to light and gives men and women grace, in a much different manner than O’Connor, more Romantic perhaps, as well as more optimistic.

If O’Connor consciously implements distortion to reveal the essence of human nature, then Chappell incorporates the human subconscious to illuminate an equally present, if more lofty and more rare, facet of humanity. Chappell’s subsequent novel, *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989), could serve as a more hopeful philosophy for Post-Modern times than that of many of his contemporaries. Set in spring, 1946, this sequel centers around Joe Robert’s post-war vocation as a school teacher. He is a
dreamer and artful creator of new, twentieth-century myths; the opening chapter of the novel describes his and Jess’s capturing of the moon one cold winter night as they are milking cows in the barn. Contrary to his Romantic nature, however, Joe Robert also finds himself the chief proponent of the scientific controversy which the vehement religious sects O’Connor writes of equated tantamount to blasphemy long after the rest of the western world accepted evidence as fact: Darwin’s theories of evolution. In a dialogue with Socrates himself, Joe Robert defends his methodologies before the school board.

Earlier in the day, when the parents of a former student, a decorated war hero named Lewis Dorson, come to him to tell of their son’s apparent suicide and offer him a medal by which to remember him, Joe Robert reflects alone in the shadows of the school hall, haunted by all the uncertainties of the archetypal Post-Modernist:

If he’d been a praying man, he would have prayed that Pruitt Dorson was wrong, that it wasn’t the lessons and the books and the teachers that had brought this century to nothing but disaster. But how could you be sure? Every time you looked anywhere, there was the schoolhouse smack in the middle of it with its fool ideas and its silly hopes. Maybe it was not the cure but the disease, maybe it would have been better always to let well enough alone.

Very much in tune with the Post-Modernist mood, Joe Robert has endured the seemingly senseless death and meanness and nonsense of the world, but overall, Chappell conveys hope. Romantic or not, it is the reaching out to others rather than our isolation that offers redemption. Joe Robert is a skeptic, but not a heartless or humorless or arrogant one. “Brighten the corner where you are” is an appropriate
epithet for Joe Robert, and for the more optimistic Post-Modernist.
CHAPTER FOUR

Contemporary Female and Male Southern Writers

In the works discussed so far, it is evident that even contemporary male characters are more wistful, though not less disappointed, than female characters, with the state of their lives. Traditionally, males of course have more to mourn and hold in reverie, while women held an even less privileged, less advantageous stance under the old patriarchal scheme than today. The prelapsarian garden did not ever exist for them, just the fallen one full of treacherous snakes and poisonous fruit. If the family unit in Chappell’s and Frazier’s novels is a source of nurturing and support, then it is far less so in other southern contemporary works. As shown in the loveless and dysfunctional homes of all O’Connor’s characters, contemporary female writers, such as Jill McCorkle and Jennifer Moses, depict family in an equally unromantic manner. Family proves to be one of the primary forces of rot that lead to the downfall of humanity, simply another war zone in addition to hostile, alienating forces of the outside world.

Once Flannery O’Connor began removing the proverbial Southern skeletons from the closet, it seems to have become mainstream for today’s Southern fiction writers to focus on subjects who represent the underprivileged, disadvantaged, and struggling. Gone are the days of Mitchell and others, who write of wealthy heroines and courageous, aristocratic plantation owners. One sardonically humorous example of this is McCorkle’s “Man Watcher” (1992), which reads something like a very cynical stand-
up comedy skit. Centered around the rather convenient and not at all warm relationships of three women thrown together by family ties, the protagonist, Lucinda, likens herself to a Post-Modern Cinderella, harangued by Lorraine, her step-sister, and “Mama, Too,” the name she gives to her “evil step-mother.” Mama, Too, twice-widowed, and Lorraine, attracted only to “worthless pigs and middle-aged crazed sleazos” (22), are completely preoccupied with finding the proper mate, who invariably will solve their numerous dissatisfactions and unhappinesses with life. Lorraine and Mama, Too look disdainfully upon Lucinda and accuse her of abandoning her family and their “natural ways” when she worked away from them in Washington, D.C. for a year. Lucinda, in turn, is constantly critical of their disillusioned quests for fulfillment with the opposite sex, because she herself is so adamant about not falling into that classic trap of dependence and disillusionment and the naive belief in the cure-all power of the male “species,” as she significantly refers to them. She writes of her conversations and observations with humanity as active research, and expresses a desire to compile a parallel to “Audubon’s bird book” on men. “I’d call it Male Homo Sapiens: What You Need To Know To Identify Different Breeds” (21). Her description of Lorraine’s former boyfriend, one of the “middle-aged crazed sleazo” category, makes the reader roll with laughter:

You know the type, someone who is into hair (especially chest) any way he can get it: rugs, Minoxidol, transplants. That poor grotesquerie would’ve had some grafted on his chest if he could’ve afforded the procedure. He’d have loved enough hair on his head to perm and chest hair long enough to preen. You know the type
of man I mean, the type that hangs out in the Holiday Inn lounge like a vulture, sucking on some alcoholic drink, his old wrinkled eyes getting red and slitty as he watches young meat file through the doorway. He likes chains and medallions and doesn’t believe in shirt buttons.

(25) At the same time, however, the reader intuits that Lucinda’s raucous but cynical philosophy is a brittle defense against any potential pain or chaos derived from truly loving another. She craves order, independence, “a sensation you need forever. Otherwise, you’re sunk” (26), and stability, not drama or love or hate. At thirty-something, she correlates Mr. Right only as someone who might be able to provide her prosperity. Her one true audience seems to be not her deprecating step-mother and step-sister, but her readers, who sense that, despite her tell-all bravado, fears of loneliness and unfulfillment exist in her soul that she is afraid to confront or admit to anyone, including herself.

Jennifer Moses’ “Girls Like You” (1998) exemplifies the “anti-heroine” of Post-Modernist fiction. The narrator, a fifteen year-old seventh-grader pregnant with her second child, arguably is more tragic and less noble than any heroic protagonist produced in previous literary periods. Like T.S. Eliot’s “J. Alfred Prufrock,” Retha LaMonte defies all heroic paradigms. Many readers want to shake Prufrock for his self-inflicted inability to make even the simplest decision for fear of what others might think; equally frustrating is Retha’s bitterness and loathing, overwhelming in one so young, yet she is quite recognizable as a real person in contemporary society. Retha is not a tragic consequence of war or a negative by-product of urbanization, but in her
is all the isolation and loneliness Prufrock could ever have felt. Moses spares none of the animosity or impropriety inside the young girl; the effect of Retha as first-person narrator is startling. Moses uses the “Second White Lady,” mandated by the school board to home-school the pregnant teenager, as her impetus for expressing Retha’s disgust: “New White Lady got some of the dog-ugliest clothes I ever seen... Glasses make her look like a frog. Hair like a dirty gray mop... She don’t even notice. She tell me she got a degree in Education and another in Social Work. Like she some kind of genius” (150).

Her hostility toward everyone radiates, but it is her inner thoughts, made possible through Moses’ choice of narration, that make the reader sympathize with the girl’s plight. Moses reveals that not only does Retha’s mother’s boyfriend cajole her into sex, fathering her first child, but the mother, only 28 herself, is passed out from too much beer when Retha and her sister have to call “911” to get to the hospital delivery room. Understandably, Retha equates success and happiness not with love or dignity or self-worth, of which she has never been provided with even the concept, but with material possessions and attracting someone who has them, a more hopeless version of Lorraine’s step-mother and step-sister in McCorkle’s “Man Watcher.” Significantly, the one shred of empathy, or sorrow, the reader is allowed to see in Retha comes from the novels New White Lady gives her to read. While she speaks only with contempt of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Retha recounts, “What Color Purple? Ain’t bout no purple. What kind of dumb-ass title... Make me good and angry... She give me
another book. This one call *Bluest Eye*. She say, What you think? I don’t tell her it make me cry” (151). Moses truly brings out the utter desolation and tragedy of this girl through Retha’s voice, leaving one feeling appalled, outraged, but finally helpless, even after a second, more contemplative reading. The only hint of hope or grace in the story is in the concluding paragraph, where Retha says that New White Lady keeps bringing her more books to read, and that she tells no one about them, because they are hers. This one narrow window of escape offers the chance that she will be able, unlike so many of O’Connor’s characters, to rise up out of her situation through eventual self-awareness and determination.

Overall, contemporary female writers seem more cynical, and more deprecating toward each other as well as the opposite sex. Each of these stories possesses a female protagonist who erects defense mechanisms of one form or another against the cruelty of outside and family forces. They are very much reliant upon the isolationist mood of Modernism and Post-Modernism. Neither Lucinda or Retha want to rely on or trust in any other person, nor do they seem capable of achieving happiness within and by themselves.

Feelings of isolation and fears of profound self-awareness abound in Post-Modern Southern fiction written by males as well. Marie, the eighty-six year-old African-American of Edward P. Jones’ short story, “Marie” (1993), has lived in the roughest neighborhood of Washington, D.C. for most of her life, though she was raised in the rural South. The impersonal nature of the Social Security Administration, where
she must come in for an appointment according to a letter from a Mr. John Smith, whom Marie knows to be deceased, so that they can determine that she is indeed “still blind in one eye... still old and getting older” (334), represents merely one instance of the institutional apathy and corporate nature so many Modernists and Post-Modernists protest. Not surprisingly, Marie’s creed is that “life was all chaos and painful uncertainty and that the only way to get through it was to expect chaos even in the most innocent of moments. Offer a crust of bread to a sick bird and you often draw back a bloody finger” (334). Her inner strength and independence is evident, in her encounter with a thief on the street, whom she cuts with her knife; when the receptionist, aptly named Vernelle Wise, at Social Security repeatedly shows only vapid apathy and then treats her degradingly, Marie slaps her, though again she does so with no personal malice or feelings of triumph (335). It is as if the depersonalized circumstances of her world have forced her to respond in manners with which she seems uncomfortable, and immediately regrets having to defend herself. When her friend Wilamena, in love with a dying man, begs her to keep her company at his bedside, Marie shows courage and compassion for someone practically a stranger to her. She is the one who holds his hand through the night and listens to his dying words and repeats the Lord’s Prayer over his still body and waits to wake her friend, asleep at his feet.

Personal human touch and communication haunt Marie. Long after the Social Security incident, she “was haunted by the way Vernelle’s cheek had felt, by what it was like to invade and actually touch the flesh of another person” (340). When
Wilamena tells her she is in love with Calhoun, despite his illnesses, Marie advises her to “avoid heartache” (337). Marie possesses the strength to confront death, yet it takes her far more courage to listen to the sound of her own voice on a tape recorder. When George, a Howard University student, coaxes her to participate in his folklore project, she expresses eventual awe to Wilamena. “He’s takin’ down my whole life” (342), and it frightens her “to be able to talk so freely with him” (341). In Marie’s lifetime, she has learned that people generally are not kind and gentle until they are near death, like Calhoun; the romanticism in her mother, who spoke when Marie was a young girl still in the rural South, of Washington, D.C. as a sort of paradise where “things can be made right” (345), has long since proved to be mere myth. Her dead husbands, too, she speaks of as belonging to a faraway past. It is Marie’s moments of incredible vulnerability, despite her efforts to protect herself from any sense of loss through her stoic, survivalist attitude toward the world, that move the reader. She is drawn to the human record of her life which is on the tapes, yet “She knew that however long she lived, she would not ever again listen to them, for in the end, despite all that was on the tapes, she could not stand the sound of her own voice” (348). The pain and loneliness inherent in those words makes the reader desire to do exactly what Marie has learned to protect herself from, to reach out and show her that compassion and love have even greater powers than the suffering and anguish of the human condition.

Mark Richard’s “The Birds for Christmas” (1991) illustrates another common Southern Post-Modernist protagonist, in a kind of 1990s satire or mini-parody of
Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. As the foreword suggests, the main character, Michael Christian is indeed profane rather than sacred. Like Moses’s Retha, he, too, is the rather ambivalent recipient of various charities and ministries, a “Big Boy” hospital orphan in leg braces who pounces on every opportunity to insult volunteer visitors and staff. Richard employs anaphora to emphasize the simplicity of Christian’s one simple Christmas wish: “What we did not want for Christmas were wristwatches. What we did not want for Christmas were bars of soap. We did not want any more candy canes, bookmarks, ballpoint pens, or somebody else’s last year’s broken toy. For Christmas we did not want plastic crosses, dot books, or fruit baskets. No more handshakes, head pats, or storybook times... We did not want any more Christmas Wishes.” (241)

Through Christian, Richard creates a very anti-Romantic, Post-Modernist sensibility. All of these things represent only empty gestures, designed not to fulfill Christian’s one, simple wish, to watch Alfred Hitchcock’s horror movie, “The Birds,” but to make the charitable visitors feel better about themselves, with traditional, standard gifts for the “hungry, meek and poor” that their own Christian Bible mentions so frequently. When the Head Nurse replies that “The Birds” is not an appropriate Christmas week movie, and that Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Frosty the Snowman would be much more spiritual, Christian retorts to another warden, “Fuck Frosty... I seen that a hunrett times. I want to see ‘The Birds,’ man. I want to see those birds get all up in them people’s hair.” (238) In keeping with Post-Modernist times,
which demand redefinition of established traditions, Christian denounces Frosty and Rudolph, which would represent absurd myth with their inherent innocence and happy ending resolutions. Christian can identify and empathize with the horror and pathos of “The Birds,” as Richard’s descriptions of the hospital as a jailhouse filled with inmates and freak cases show that his own life is not far removed from any circumstances Hitchcock could imagine. “We were certain someone would eventually come for us [to take us home for Christmas]. We were not frightened yet. There were still some other Big Boys around—the Big Boy who ran away to a gas station every other night, the Human Skeleton who would bite you, and the guy locked away on the sun porch who the Young Doctors were taking apart an arm and a leg at a time” (238).

As in I Am One of You Forever, Christian and the other hospital inmates share code words and use the imagination as escapist attempts from the grimmer realities of their lives. Tired of the endless parade of “treasures handed out by the church and state charities—the aging fruit, the surplus ballpoint pens” (239), Christian becomes a ruder, louder mouthpiece than before, squawking out of context, “Gimme some Birds, man!” to the young seminary students who attempt to proselytize instead the Bethlehem narrative. Like Jennifer Moses’ Retha, Michael Christian spits out the truth to anyone who comes within striking distance. Niceties and gestures do not matter to him, and his lack of diplomacy makes the reader uncomfortable. He relentless quest to see “The Birds” parallels the wise men’s pilgrimage to Bethlehem. As a Post-Modernist figure, deeply isolated from mainstream society, he is attempting to create a narrative structure
that suits his own existence, similar to Christians creating the Baby Jesus narrative to encourage a more compassionate patriarchy and bolster religious beliefs.

Traditional, inexperienced seminary students and “society ladies” with gifts of “nice hairbrushes” for “white people” (239) for obvious reasons provide no comfort or understanding to Michael Christian, who likens himself to “James Brown in the Hospital.” As in many Post-Modernist works, the humor is dark, and cynical. When the nurses one day mistake Christian’s singing practice for painful moans and rush to ask him what hurts, he retorts sarcastically, “I’m warming up ‘I Feel Good,’ stupid bitches” (238), and promptly lands himself in isolation, his “wrists hanging over the safety bedrails like jailhouse-window hands... ‘Aw, man, now I feel BAD!’” (238) he calls out to the other Big Boys in protest. The hospital wardens’ real “Savior” turns out to be one of their own, Sammy, a former hospital patient himself, still scarred with a cleft palate and harelip, who appears before them late one night during Christmas week, “blistering drunk, wearing a ratty Santa suit” (240). Nevertheless, Sammy delivers a portable television just as the Andy Williams Christmas Special ends and “The Birds” begins. Richard’s final words are haunting, and remind the reader how subtly and appropriately, he has inverted the Christmas story: “Through a hole in the pony blanket I had pulled over my head I could see Michael Christian’s bed. His precious Afro head was buried deep beneath his pillow. At the dark end of the ward a baby cried in its sleep and then was still. It was Christmas Eve, and we were sore afraid.” (242) The babes are in swaddling hospital blankets and they sleep in beds surrounded by
protective rails and machines, rather than mangers; the infants and Big Boys have been abandoned and forgotten by the rest of the world on the eve of Christianity's most joyous event; they are damaged, cynical, absolutely real, and yet, utterly "precious," as the speaker pointedly reminds the reader.

Bob Shacocis's "Where Pelham Fell" (1987) provides an example of the contemporary Southern short story that exhibits some of the tendencies of traditional Modern Southern fiction. Its protagonist, Colonel Taylor Coates, is altogether obsessed with the past, especially the Civil War, and the physical manifestation of this obsessiveness comes in his quest for an old soldier's bones. His wife's private thoughts reaffirm for the reader this curious preoccupation; Shacocis writes, "There were days when she wished to God that He would make Taylor vanish into history, which was what the man had always wanted anyway" (68). "Pelham" takes place amid the Blue Ridge mountains, also the site of numerous Civil War battlefields, which the Colonel visits and reconstructs in his mind frequently. Shacocis skillfully emphasizes the themes of alienation and disillusionment by revealing the old Colonel's private thoughts, but also by juxtaposing them with the commentary of his wife, which differs markedly. The Colonel thinks during one of his drives through a military cemetery, "After the war between the North and the South, that was all the aristocracy had left, the right to remembrance" (62). The Colonel clearly believes, perhaps because of his Southern, male status, that he is a member of that bygone aristocracy, and tries to persuade his grandchildren to share in his interest by telling them personal accounts of
relatives who served in the War between the States.

But these stories involve only male characters, and their heroes or tragic sufferers are all white. And even the white, male representative of a new, post-war, Post-Modern generation refuses to “suffer” and “mourn” for the old days which elude Taylor. When he writes his grandson, a college student in New England, to inform him of his proud Southern heritage and ancestors who died for the Confederate cause, the response he receives is far from supportive: “... the rebellion, not to mention the family’s participation in it, was too disgraceful and produced in him a guilt by association...” (69) When Taylor’s reckless driving and dementia-driven daydreaming about Confederate battles in which he never participated lead to his death, Dippy, his octogenarian wife, is far from the grieving widow. Her reaction is stoic, and epitomizes the Post-Modern response, as Shacocis concludes his story with her final thoughts on the burial of her husband with the bags of old soldiers’ bones, “She could have told them how relieved she was to be the last southern woman, the last of the last to lower the men who had broken from the Union into their graves... she was finally alone, free of glory” (79).
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

While the society do-gooders visiting Michael Christian, and even the second White Lady working with Retha may feel alienated from their temporary charges’ worlds, or that their efforts are received churlishly, Richard and Moses still manage to evoke sympathy for their protagonists from the reader. Sympathy is not an accurate or precise term; it sounds too Dickensian, in just the sentimental style that the Post-Modernists discussed consciously avoid. Rather, their narratives strive to convey the truths of their subjects. If Michael Christian seems ungrateful and rude and a troublemaker, it is because he is, and, if Retha appalls the reader with her vulgarity, promiscuity and baseness, then she also strikes a chord somewhere in the heart of her audience. Something in Moses’ style and Retha’s voice provoke the reader to ask, how did she become this way? What circumstances at such an early age have cumulatively formed this young person who seems so tragically doomed at twelve? The writers have achieved that rare dichotomy which makes up humanity, a verisimilitude and complexity which reflects what Aristotle so long ago declared, that all true fine art is simply “an imitation of real life.” In fact, Post-Modern Southern writers in some ways have softened the light of O’Connor’s bright glare; while no contemporary Southern writer examined here writes with the overall craftsmanship and tightness O’Connor demonstrates again and again, somehow they do give readers more multidimensional,
or at least, more endearing characters who still represent truth. No character in O’Connor evokes endearment, but frequently a reaction of judgment or recrimination, which of course, was her purpose.

Arguably, the Post-Modernist’s consistent determination within this selection of stories to “tell the truth,” a trait for which O’Connor was a frontrunner, is much more difficult, and much less biased, than the Romantic tradition which Post-Modernism flouts. As a literary movement, Post-Modernism, like Modernism, often appears bleak and aimless, painting depictions of worlds with little comfort or compassion; however, it is arguable that it is precisely this relentless verisimilitude characteristic of Southern stories today that make them more appealing, refreshing, and finally, trustworthy. Absent are the glorious plantation and southern aristocracy myths Mitchell and others made sound so appealing to previous generations; O’Connor’s Sally Poker Sash may despise education reformers and other advocates of change for taking away the ‘old’ world of proud traditions and forcing her to live in a new one of higher educational standards which she deems punishment, but it is because she simply is too obtuse to realize what her grandfather has known forever, that such a world never existed in any honorable, reconcilable form. Writing the truth is one of the most difficult tasks of any writer. Such Southern Post-Modernists as discussed within rise to that task; the reader knows these people. While they may not be the heroes and heroines we would like to idolize and romanticize, we trust that they have been portrayed accurately. O’Connor often surprised readers who inquired why she wrote about such unflattering, even
gruesomely immoral or ignorant characters, when she was so intrigued and concerned with individual human grace. She believed that the only way to achieve grace, and salvation, were in those moments when the individual must confront extreme circumstances, or even death.

Further reflection on O’Connor’s fiction, however, leaves the reader feeling ambivalent. She possesses a deliberate, well-practiced masterfulness of craft, illustrated again and again; the more closely one analyzes and considers the elements of fiction, such as characterization, symbolism and irony, the deeper the appreciation for O’Connor’s technical and artistic symmetry. Indeed, much truth as the Post-Modernist would define it, exists in her pages. However, too much of this truth, or only O’Connor’s brand, leaves one feeling rather cold toward humanity. She is shrewd, accurate, and unprideful in her portrayals of people every southerner can easily recognize; further, she shames the audience with equal subtlety into not glossing their hideousnesses over with “good country people” and “southern pride” epithets. And excuses. O’Connor somehow gives her reader just enough evidence that he is not allowed to endorse hypocrisy or rationalize the essence of pseudo-affable women like Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Hopewell. In fact, she seems a bit harsher in her treatment of female characters than males, who are more distinctly bad, such as Manly Pointer, and one-dimensional, like Dudley in “The Geranium.”

Perhaps O’Connor does this because women have a greater tendency overall to rationalize or be hypocritical toward one another. The female landowners and their
hired female hands secretly mistrust each others’ motives and sincerity, but never confront each other, and this unspoken conspiracy ironically gives them a common bond. The men, for the most part, remain silent; they are also more nomadic than women in O’Connor’s fiction, kindred in this way to Chappell’s entourage of visiting and unemployed uncles. Manly Pointer is so perfectly duplicitous as a fraudulent Bible salesman, and the con man of “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” is devoid of any redeeming characteristics. But the women O’Connor devotes more time to, though they certainly are not blameless, just far less cognizant of their own hypocrisy. Joy Hopewell and Manly Pointer clearly illustrate this, as do Mrs. Cope and the three delinquent boys. The men are apparently bad, and oh, do they know they are bad, and flout their badness. The women, however, are more troublesome; they tend to be bad, too, but unwilling to admit it, especially to themselves. Admitting and addressing this paradox seems to have been one of O’Connor’s primary objectives in her fiction.

However, even equipped with O’Connor’s colder objectivity, the southern reader cannot feel that her fiction alone captures the total essence and importance of Southern literature. As such a reader, I feel profound attachment not simply to my own family, but to my southern heritage, and geography, as well. It emphatically is not the misplaced pride of the older son in Patricia Lear’s “After Memphis,” who brandishes the Confederate flag as a rebellious symbol of honor everywhere the family goes when he and his parents are uprooted to the North; it is not for our participation in the Civil War, as upholders of slavery and an elitist lifestyle begotten through the bondage and
impoverishment of others. O'Connor has made it easier for southerners to laugh at and scorn their own absurdities and weakness, but she also leaves the same reader feeling stripped, and asking in semi-mock horror, 'Well, what then is there which is worthy in the South?'

The answer lies in works like Chappell’s and Frazier’s, and even Richard’s. Markedly, males, who have lost more in comparison to other groups in the South, seem also to offer greater compassion, sympathy and reverence for what is benevolent in the human spirit. Frazier’s Inman endures misery and repeated encounters with the worst excuses for sub-humanity imaginable on his Odyssey-like journey home from the Civil War; nevertheless, he retains somewhere within himself the vestiges of warmth and love despite these seemingly endless trials. Inman emphatically is not a Romantic, but he is a survivor. Like Chappell’s Joe Robert Kirkman, Inman focuses on a woman, Ada, to help him retain those parts essential to his humanity in the face of great strife and pain. Memory, family and loyalty all play tremendous roles for the protagonists of both works. Inman is a complex, very much Post-Modernist protagonist. He never claims to have answers, or that his actions have been heroic. Indeed, he is a deserter, hunted and haunted by the heinous and cruel round-up squad throughout his harrowing journey home. He fears that the war has scarred him physically and emotionally beyond even his own recognition, that he will no longer be a man worthy of Ada’s love, even if he does somehow succeed in coming home to her.

Like Joe Robert’s vulnerability, Inman’s pain the reader feels profoundly, to the
very marrow of his bones. Just as O’Connor has achieved a remarkable verisimilitude in the universal recognizability of her characters, so, too, have these male authors, to marvelously different effect. The reader wants to laugh with Joe Robert and Jess, not at them. This quality alone seems to me more "precious," to borrow Richard’s term for Michael Christian, but indebted too and unattainable without O’Connor as precursor.
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