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Tracing Poe in short stories of Flannery O' Connor

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor was a Southern gothic writer, a subgenre of Gothic fiction. Edgar Allan Poe, the father of Gothic fiction, contributed substantially to it. Many gothic elements of O'Connor are from Poe. These two writers have been from the same region. Her fiction does not include the exact writing style of Poe. Despite that, she has successfully used gothic elements slightly differently than he had and altered its elements in her writings.

She has imbued mental and physical alienation, confinement, grotesque, macabre, and isolated places with a gothic motif in her short stories, 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own', 'Good Country People' and 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'. Her characters do not have supernatural elements in her selected short stories, but they are harmful and flawed. They elicit sympathy from the readers for their plight but do the opposite to their appearance. It adds grotesque, a gothic fiction sub-element. It makes her short stories compelling.

Unlike Poe, her villain and evil characters usually do not directly kill. They try to mentally hurt the victims, as in the first two stories. The story revolves around the idea of alienation. While decaying and desolate surroundings create an isolated zone in Poe's writings, self-absorption is the primary cause of alienation in O'Connor's works. Swindling individuals' entails macabre, such as confinement in O'Connor's stories. On the contrary, it is supernatural in Poe's work.

In terms of location, the stories' settings are similar. Alternatively, the story's primary storyline and climax are often confined inside a small area. Many of these elements are apparent in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Cask of Amontillado' and 'The Pit and the Pendulum'. This paper will study how O'Connor has traced Poe in her selected short stories.

Keywords: Alienation, confinement, macabre, grotesque, gothic

Introduction

Gothic literature arose in Europe in the 18th century because of the Romantic literary movement. It is a genre that prioritises raw emotion, combining terror with pleasure and death with romance. The Gothic is distinguished by its darkly attractive surroundings and spooky macabre stories. It gets its name and artistic inspiration from the Gothic architectural style of the Middle Ages, which is noted for crumbling castles, isolated aristocratic estates, and decaying spaces. With the release of Horace Walpole's gloomy, frightening *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, Gothic fiction was born. Since then, gothic literature has thrived and branched out numerous prominent subgenres. (Pagan 2018) ^[6].

Edgar Allan Poe had a significant impact on horror fiction. Poe's horror stories are set against a backdrop of gothic fiction and American literary tradition and his own experiences. He acquired the gothic fiction heritage and innovated on it in order to access sub consciousness. To some extent, Poe's horror stories were the forerunners of Southern fiction.

Gothic in Flannery O'Connor's stories

The story 'The Good Country People' takes place on a southern farm. Hulga, the protagonist, is alienated not just by those around her but also by herself, evidenced by her name, philosophical stance and artificial leg. It is as if she takes satisfaction in standing out from the "Good Country People" around her, as seen by her choice of a different name. The representation of detachment within the mother/daughter relationship continues the theme of alienation.

Despite her best efforts, Mrs Hopewell cannot comprehend her daughter and accept her differences without sympathy.

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Hulga's alienation serves as a means of exploitation for O'Connor. The bible salesperson notices this and uses her for his purpose. In this story, everyone is grotesque in their style. Hulga, with her wooden limb and pessimistic outlook on life, is portrayed as ugly and weird in numerous ways, mainly by Mrs Hopewell. Mrs Freeman's name is a contradiction because she does not feel free. Even though Carramae is just fifteen years old, she is pregnant with her first baby. Glynase realises she has a sty, and a boy dupes her into assisting her in getting rid of it just by pressing her neck. (Nolan 2013) [3].

Mrs Hopewell and Mrs Freeman regard themselves as good country people, while Manly Porter seems trash. They are, nevertheless, incredibly deceitful. Everything they speak and see is a representation of themselves. Mrs Hopewell demeans everyone throughout the story and then contradicts herself by claiming, "Everyone is different". At the end of the story, Mrs Freeman and Mrs Hopewell had no idea that Manley had just stolen Hulga's leg and fled with it, defrauding everyone with his Bible salesman speech and charming country boy appeal.

Manley Pointer's innocence captivates everyone. In the story, this innocence plays a horrific role. Later, his identity is revealed when he invites Hulga for a personal meeting. To divert her attention away from her artificial limb, he kisses her passionately and manipulates her into giving him her prosthetic limb. He says he has heart disease and uses it to deceive people of their trust. The gruesome components of the story become evident when he reveals his personality to Hulga. Not only Hulga but also the readers are terrified by this event. They are baffled as to what Manley's next move will be. The climax was particularly dreadful.

Manley Pointer is not an ordinary person. He is a by-product of his upbringing. He has looted people and is also on the lookout for new targets. She is shocked when he tells Hulga in the barn that he has already committed such acts in his previous life. Manley Pointer, like other characters in O'Connor's stories, is evil. He earns Hulga's and Mrs Hopewell's trust and betrays them later. He acts like a "good country people". On the other side, he tempts and abuses women for personal pleasure. He shows whiskey, preventative and playing cards with obscene images from a hollowed Bible.

Manley Pointer confines Hulga in the barn and takes advantage of her disability. Her artificial limb represents both her strength and her emotional side. She cannot move and feels imprisoned when he removes her prosthetic limb. She is unable to ask for help. The barn serves as confinement for Hulga.

The theme of alienation runs parallel in 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own. Lynell and the old Lucynell are self-confined to their farm. Her daughter's age confirms this. As a result, Mrs Crater was sceptical of Mr Shiftlet when he first came across her farm. Mr Shiftlet becomes her son-in-law because of her helplessness and loneliness. Lucynell and Old Lucynell symbolise the lack of individuality by the same name. (Arant 13)

Mrs Crater believes Mr Shiftlet will alleviate their loneliness, so she attempts to marry him to Lucynell. She had misgivings about him, but not in law. Mr Shiftlet also suffers from a sense of emptiness. He pulls over to a diner named The Hot Spot and abandons Lucynell. A hitchhiker, an alienated young boy, rejects Mr Shiftlet's sermon on the

virtues of a mother. He jumps out of the slow-moving car and kills himself. Mr Shiftlet is likewise left alone, having lost his final companion. This story also has an imprint on O'Connor's personal life.

Every character suffers from a psychological sense of emptiness. Lucynell is left alone at the diner, and Mrs Crater has no one to keep her company. Mr Shiftlet has abandoned the association entirely. The hitchhiker leaps to free himself. Mrs Crater intends for her daughter to marry a disabled man so that he can make the farm his permanent residence. Lucynell is initially confined to the farm and eventually to a Hot-Spot diner due to her disability.

The grotesque is ubiquitous in O'Connor's short stories. Shiftlet wishes to own an automobile, and in order to do so, he is willing to give up his new wife and family, as well as his permanent residence. His insane desire for a car compels him to go to any length. He makes the most of his handicap. He first gains the family's trust before robbing them. The characters are also becoming more naïve. Mrs Crater is in desperate need of a son-in-law but receives none. Mr Shiftlet shatters all chances of happiness in his life.

When Mrs Crater inquires about Mr Shiftlet's identity, he appears to sidestep the questions, revealing the macabre undertones. He replies to them in a hazy manner till he understands his target's psychology. He appears to be waiting for the ideal opportunity. He also seems to be planning to assault them. He does not kill them but loots them when the right opportunity presents itself.

When she inquires about his reason for being there, he dodges the question and instead says, "lemme tell you something. There's one of these doctors in Atlanta that's taken a knife and cut the human heart—the human heart" (O'Connor 157). The way he reacts suggests something suspicious. Rather than simply responding to her, he poses the unsettling question, "What is a man?" (O'Connor 158).

Mr Shiftlet has been keeping an eye on the car since the outset. Instead of inquiring about Mrs Crater's family, he inquires about the car when he visits her property. He does not talk about his past. He appears to provide his family's false information deliberately. It is as though he is used to this type of work. As a result, even a strong tie like marriage has little effect on him.

Mr Shiftlet, like other characters in O'Connor's works, is wicked. He is an opportunist who waits for the right moment to take what others consider trifling. He fixes the automobile and gets the Crater family's trust. He accomplishes this by teaching Lucynell to speak "bird." He focuses immediately on the actual target of his infatuation, the car. With Mrs Crater, he strikes a perfect bargain. His smile stretches out as a lethargic serpent awakens by a fire.

Besides a monster, a southern character, such as a paralysed man, conveys a monster's bad or peculiar features, whose degeneration is essential to the story's plot. The character is referred to as a grotesque figure who stands out badly from the rest of humanity and inspires pity and contempt with his looks and conduct. Their identity is determined by their abnormality and pessimistic outlook on life. In addition, incarceration and victimisation are prominent traits. The action takes place on a shabby and desolate southern plantation. Because he only has one arm, anyone could feel empathetic for him at first.

The grandma is mentally and physically isolated in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'. She is physically confined when the misfit spots them in the ditch. Enslaved by recollections, she

wished to go to her favourite place rather than of children. Thus, she was psychologically trapped. Instead of Georgia, she lands in Tennessee. The entire family was caught, and there was no way out except death. The misfit was likewise stuck in a zone of secret locations because he could not face the public for fear of being apprehended by the authorities.

When her family members were murdered unaided, she was simply concerned about her survival. She did not care about anyone except herself. As a result, she begs the misfit to leave her life. "Jesus!" the old lady cried. "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! (O'Connor 144). He should pray, she reminded him. It clearly defines the idea of confinement. She is unable to move, both mentally and physically.

The story contains aspects of the grotesque. The face of Bailey's wife was presented "as broad and innocent as a cabbage." The accident does not affect John Wesley and June Star because they are egocentric. The grandmother, like the misfit, is a weird person. She has only a semblance of faith in God, which exposes her hypocrisy.

The misfit is shirtless and armed in the very first scene. Rather than killing them all at once, he converses with the grandmother intellectually. His talk demonstrates the wisdom he has accumulated through time. He has also acquired many negative thoughts about the world. He is unconcerned about anyone and murders the grandmother. "She would have been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." (O'Connor 145).

According to the misfit, everyone is bound to accompany Hiram and Bobby Lee in the woods. They murder John Wesley and Bailey first. The rest of the family can hear the gunshot, which gives the story a macabre feel. Bailey choked as he realised it was time for him and his son to die.

Grandma has been announcing the impending threat to them all since the beginning. The cat is a metaphor for death when it leaps on Bailey, he loses control of the automobile, and it flips upside down. The accident had left everyone shaken. In Flanner O'Connor's short story, the grandma is in mental alienation. Grandma continues to swim in the past. Her present is ruined because of her history. She loses track of the place where she is supposed to go. As a result, she transports them all to a new area, where they all die.

The misfit is vile and murders Bailey's entire family without compassion. He holds Christ responsible for the resurrection of the dead. The granny is naïve and has a habit of acting on her impulses. Although she knows the misfit will shoot her, she acts as if she has no idea. She addresses him as if he were a decent person though she knows that he has murdered other members of her family. She also believed that he might pity her. Her gullibility had led her to think that nothing could harm her.

Gothic in Edgar Allan Poe's stories

Roderick Usher and his sister Madeline lived at their family's ancestral home in 'The Fall of the house of Usher'. For them, it was essentially a restricted space. The element of confinement is vital in gothic fiction. Either the characters are unable to go out or do not consider leaving their home. This is what happens with Roderick and Madeline. He always heard strange noises, but he never considered fleeing.

Being alone and the absence of human contact that ends in death is the motif of "The Fall of the House of Usher." They

resided in an estranged house and had no family or home nearby. It was the only house in the neighbourhood surrounded by decaying trees. The narrator's spirit was filled with indescribable despair when he first saw the edifice.

With which the mind frequently gets even the harshest natural impressions of the desolate. There was no human touch in empty eyelike windows on the bleak walls and a few rotting tree trunks with white bark. In the narrator's description of the house as lonesome and wrapped in spooky despondency, there is an undercurrent sense of isolation and sorrow. Because the narrator did not know much about his special friend because he stayed in his home, the depiction of him as overly and usually reticent set the tone for the story's theme of isolation.

One indication of isolation was the Usher family's ancestry. The complete family fell on the straight path of inheritance. Roderick and Madeline Usher's residence was secluded, indicating that the Usher family had been in self-confinement (Nunez 2014) ^[4]. The narrator had noticed Madeline, but he never saw her again until she was discovered ostensibly dead: A demonstration of her solitude. An extreme example of imprisonment was Madeline's enslavement after appearing dead. The most vulnerable expression of solitude and terror is to be buried alive.

Roderick is psychologically trapped, and the narrator does everything he can to help him escape it, but his sister's misery constantly influences him. He even picks up her eerie voice. When his twin sister dies, it affects him as well. He continues to wither, showing no signs of recovery. The narrator tells him stories in an attempt to heal him, but it is futile. When the entire home shatters into nothingness, the narrator eventually hears the voice and encounters evil.

The characters in the story are ill, which is the first grotesque sign. They keep withering and do not seem to heal. Madeline was sick and showed no signs that the narrator had come in.

The structure has a crack from the roof to the waters of the tarn. The outside of the Usher's house is infested with fungi, crumbling stone chunks, and zigzag crevices. Everything is worn out and destroyed inside the house. Some instances of horrible sounds are when Roderick and the narrator hear sounds emanating from everywhere throughout the house and realise it could be Madeline emerging from her tomb. When the hefty weight shifted on its hinges, it made a loud noise. Roderick was conscious of the voices but remained silent for many days. Both the narrator and Roderick were terrified when Madeline emerged from the casket. They were now aware that she had been buried alive.

To begin with, when the narrator encounters the family apothecary, who accosts him, the ruined buildings point at the macabre elements of the story. The twin-ailing sister barely notices him. The narrator sees her, but she never looks at him. Roderick decides to bury her in a casket when she dies.

They transport the body to the underground vaults, where only torches provide illumination. They become lost in the darkness somewhere. Roderick, who is terrified, wanders around the home. He has begun to hear some faint noises. The narrator can also hear low and indeterminate sounds on the seventh or eighth day of Madeline's death. The story takes place in an enclosed dwelling where the narrator and Roderick have no touch with the outside world. Usher is a naïve individual who is unable to deal with the circumstance

and hence seeks assistance from his friend. He always appears to be unconcerned. His naivety caused his death.

Although the story 'The Cask of Amontillado' is set in an unnamed Italian city, the catacomb is the central focus. It signifies that whatever occurs to Fortunato will be impossible for him to escape. Montresor has him trapped and bound. Montresor buried his friend alive solely to satisfy his need for vengeance. It is damp and chilly here. Fortunato overlooks the danger of not being able to breathe, which is the first indicator of impending death. He keeps moving throughout the catacomb, tasting the wine. Fortunato was imprisoned not only in the catacomb but also in the intoxication of wine.

When Fortunato asks for the sign of his masonry, then like a wily being, Montresor showcases the trowel, the weapon he will use to kill Fortunato. Montresor, a dangerous man, seduces Fortunato with the promise of wine. It reveals his nasty nature. He makes him intoxicated so that he will go along with him without complaining.

Systematically, he pushes him to the brink of death. Montresor's malevolent nature can be seen in his strategy to have no voice heard during the carnival because of the commotion. He enjoys inflicting pain on his body and psyche by erecting a wall with mortar and bricks. He only leaves enough room for a single brick to hear his shrieks. Then he drops his torch, allowing Fortunato to witness his death through his own eyes. (Lee 2014) [2].

This story is likewise full of naiveté. Fortunato follows Montresor around like a crazy kid, running after a lollipop. Montresor, a villain, is still thrilled with his decision after fifty years. He has no regrets about the murder he committed. He overpowers him by purposefully weakening his physique. The wetness affects him, but Montresor does not seem to mind. In fact, he encourages him to visit the amontillado. Instigating him not to lose the chance, Montresor secretly keeps Luchesi as his rival.

In the story 'The Pit and The Pendulum', alienation is a major theme. The protagonist is confined to a cell. He is unable to leave and must see the torture. No one kills him. Instead, they make his life difficult. He alone witnesses every scene in the story. It reveals his sense of isolation. There is no other character, like in other stories, who finds a different picture that is scarier every time.

For any interpretation, the readers must rely on the narrator. His mental state makes him an untrustworthy narrator. In prison, the narrator has no company and only has intrapersonal communication. His unaddressed previous criminal activities have landed him in prison. He is so lonely that he begins measuring the cell's perimeter.

There is terror in the narrative. The narrator could not understand anything as the story began. The panel of seven stern judges terrified him. The punishment had horrified him. However, he had no idea whether death would be better or punishment (Winters 2020) [8]. It seemed to him that seven spectres had emerged from the seven candles. He was perplexed. He dozed off and awoke in a dark room, much to his surprise. He was curious as to his whereabouts. Anyone would be terrified by the frequent scary changes in his surroundings. He was in a new and terrifying situation when he awoke from his dream. He is tortured all the time and can only witness it. The room became increasingly crimson and smaller, and the Pendulum remained suspended above him. The Pendulum hung over him and continued to

descend gently. He believes that today is his last day. Because of his terror, he passed out very often.

Conclusion

Flannery O'Connor's short stories are the most compelling stories of her time. To her, anything in the Southern is grotesque. Poe's terrible life conditions caused him to become depressed and wish to die. The protagonist Roderick Usher, preoccupied with pain, cruelty, and premature burial, could be a reflection of the author's wish for self-destruction. Similarly, Flannery O'Connor's fascination with evil, horror, and disfigurement may have stemmed from her situation. They both examined the interior world in their short stories but primarily focused on the darker aspects of human nature.

Readers of Poe's and O'Connor's works rarely encounter characters who experience pleasure, calmness, or harmony. Most of her stories abound with alienation, macabre and confinement. The settings of her stories are similar, with the primary storyline in a confined zone or on a farm. It is tough for the characters to escape. As in Poe's stories, they are mentally and physically alienated. The weird disabled individuals usually gain pity initially, but they turn precisely opposite to their personalities and this is frightening. These characteristics show that O'Connor has incorporated Poe in her short stories.

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