

Towards the Abolition of Hierarchy—On O'Connor's Racial Ideas in her Works

Jiping Yang

School of Humanities, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunication, Beijing, China

Email: amyyang77@bupt.edu.cn

Abstract—An unavoidable problem in Southern American history is the racism. Racial relationship is under Flannery O'Connor's consideration in several stories. By examining the protagonists' process of self-transformation and their different ways of looking at the white-black relationship, O'Connor tries to demonstrate that only by truly abolishing the hierarchy between races can the white and the black achieve their harmonic relationship, that is, the black workers have to remove the "inferiority complex", the "paternalism" and the white farm owners have to remove "superiority complex". Otherwise, the disaster will definitely follow as before although the blacks have been emancipated politically for such a long time. Only by truly abolishing the racial hierarchy can American society set up a cozy atmosphere between the races based on true acceptance and understanding.

Index Terms—Flannery O'Connor, racial relationship, hierarchy, abolition, harmony

As one of the important members of Southern American Renaissance, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) is claimed as "America's greatest post-World War II short story writer" (Getz, 1980, p. x). Although all of her fictional works add up to only two novels and 31 short stories, O'Connor was even identified as "American South's best fiction writer" and named among "the nation's ten best women writers of all time" (Getz, 2000, p. x). As "a complete original" (Hendin, 1970, p.1), O'Connor produced works unlike many other writers of her generation by fusing the lessons of the New Critics with her other various identities such as Southerner, Catholic, female and modern intellectual. As a Southern woman writer, racial relationship, an unavoidable problem in Southern history, is unavoidably under O'Connor's consideration in several stories. O'Connor's first published story, "The Geranium", its revised version "Judgement Day", her posthumously published story "Everything That Rises Must Converge", and "Revelation", O'Connor tries to demonstrate that only by truly abolishing the hierarchy between races can the white and the black achieve their harmonic relationship, that is, the black workers have to remove the "inferiority complex", the "paternalism" and the white farm owners have to remove "superiority complex" (Mitchell, 1930, p.114). Otherwise, the disaster will definitely follow as before although the blacks have been emancipated politically for such a long time. Only by truly abolishing the racial hierarchy can American society set up a cozy atmosphere between the races based on true acceptance and understanding.

"The Geranium" and its revision "Judgement Day" demonstrate the transition in American people's treatment of the racial problem. Through the protagonists' process of self-transformation in the two versions, the writer shows the social changes in the white-black relationship. The most striking difference between the two versions is the old men's attitude toward the racial relationship, but the most striking similarity is the old men's similar tragic destiny. In both of the stories, the protagonists, named Old Dudley and Tanner respectively, live with their daughters in a Northern city. Both Old Dudley and Tanner often recall their past in the South when they live with a nigger. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley often thinks of his past together with the nigger named Rabie. He is the "boss" of the nigger (O'Connor, 1986, p.5) and between them is the "equal but separate" principle. The hierarchy between them is clear. The verb "explain" is used when the old man speaks to the nigger as if he were teaching the one who is inferior to him in intellect: he "would explain the mechanism to him" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 6). In his eyes, the nigger is inferior and unable to be independent. The ridiculous state of the black is full of his memory. In this story, Old Dudley's connection with Rabie is still built upon the master-slave pattern. The nigger Rabie is still childlike in the eyes of the white man and should be protected by his master. This is the basic pattern composed by the southern white in their Southern family romance. For many Southern thinkers, especially those in the Southern Renaissance, the society-as-family is the ideal toward which Southern society should strive. The region is conceived of as "a vast metaphorical family, hierarchically organized" (King, 1980, p.27). The influence of the southern tradition on Old Dudley is reflected in his attitude to the blacks. The way he behaves shows that he has internalized the values. He has come to the north and lives with his daughter, but he has never questioned white supremacy. In his eyes, the blacks are in their "dependence and helplessness" and "unquenchable happiness" (Taylor, 1963, p.283). His feelings of supremacy make it impossible for him to accept the black as intellectually and emotionally equal to him. There is no real communication between them. For him, although the nigger named Rabie politically emancipated, he is still psychologically dependent. In this way, the gap between the races exists.

While "The Geranium" implies that the relationship between Dudley and his southern black friend Rabie follows a southern pattern, "Judgement Day" is an attempt to demonstrate a desire for racial understanding. Whereas in "The

Geranium" Dudley and Rabie live separately, in "Judgement Day" the two friends live together happily for years before Tanner moves to the North. "Judgement Day" presents a weaker and weaker notion of the southern white supremacy in Tanner/Coleman relationship. In "Judgement Day," the protagonist, Tanner, intends to make closer connection with blacks although he fails to either make friends with the blacks in the North or go back to the blacks in the South. First, he decides that he will return to his black friend, Coleman, in Georgia. Tanner desires to be back with Coleman. The old man will achieve all that is worth achieving. He gives his return a religious dimension. He imagines that upon his return he will pretend to be dead, and his fantasy also suggests a faith in his resurrection. He dreams that he jumps out of a coffin and announces Judgment Day to Coleman. Tanner has a vision about his return to the south:

Once he got in the freight car, he would lie down and rest. During the night the train would start South, and the next day or the morning after, dead or alive, he would be home". "Dead or alive," He adds, "It was being there that mattered; the dead or alive did not." (O'Connor, 1986, p. 532)

He provides his reunion with Coleman with the spirit of a rebirth, his resurrection from his tomb. This spiritual connection shows the preliminary acceptance between the two.

Through the two versions of the same story, we can discover the transition from the racial hierarchy to the gradual equality in thinking, not only in politics. However, in "The Judgement Day", although there are changes in the white old man's attitudes toward his relationship with his black farmhand, real friendship is being recognized, and even the old man and his black friend live together, yet, "[t]he old Negro was curled up on a pallet asleep at the foot of Tanner's bed" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 534). This detail shows that it is not completely equal between the old man and his black "friend" in some sense. This is the paradox in the white people's dealing with the problem. For many white people, in the area of race, a special effort is called for to improve race relations and for the abandonment of the notion of black inferiority, but this does not mean that segregation will be abolished, only that the "inequalities" will be taken out of the biracial system. For many whites, this can be done "without destroying the integrity of the races" (King, 1980, p. 487). This is the very reason why the old man dies before he comes back to the South and reunites with Coleman. If the old man cannot recognize what is real equality between them, he cannot be really together with his black friend. Another image that O'Connor repeats in her two versions of the story is the black neighbor of the old man's daughter, who the old man meets on the stairs. In "Geranium", after Old Dudley moves to the North with his daughter, when a black neighbor of her daughter helps him upstairs and "patted Old Dudley on the back," "[t]he pain in his throat was all over his face now, leaking out his eyes" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 13). For the old man, this is more torture than help. It is an insult. "His throat was going to pop on account of a nigger--a damn nigger that patted him on the back and called him 'old-time'" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 13). Then he decides, "He wouldn't go down and have niggers patten' him on the back" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 14). The old man's rejection of the help from his black neighbor further demonstrates his prejudice against the black. In "Judgement Day", the old man changes his attitudes toward the black neighbor of his daughter. He tries to show his friendship, but he does not know what to do. That he addresses his as "Preacher", which is considered as an insult by the black, brings the fatal disaster to the old man. He was thrown between the stairs and died. This story tells the reader that if the white don't get rid of his sense of superiority to the blacks, they will be misunderstood and only violence will be provoked by their misused friendliness. The very root of the violence between the races is from the racial hierarchy, especially that from their deep mind.

In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," O'Connor returns to the subject of white attitudes toward the Negro. In this story, O'Connor shows her ideas about the racial relationship more directly, that is, racial superiority between the white and the black can only lead to violence and even death. Julian's mother, Mrs. Chestny, comes from the prominent Chestny family which has already declined. One day, she asks her son to accompany her to a reducing class. On the bus, she sees a black woman who is wearing the same hat as hers and coincidentally they get off at the same stop. Out of her social superiority she offers the woman's child a shiny penny from her pocketbook, and, in turn, gets from the boy's mother a pocketbook swung in her face. She is knocked down by the black woman, violently stunned and dies of a heart attack.

Julian's mother has been holding the anachronistic attitude that the blacks' struggle for equality is a sure sign that the world has gone terribly awry. She believes that it is a threat to her own status. The defense of this hierarchy is clearly a defense of the protagonist's own sense of "place" in it and her racist beliefs are an integral part of her code of life: "I know who I am" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 407). The mother recalls her "darker" nurse, Caroline, with nostalgic fondness. Julian's mother can see the brutality of the slavery and the kindness of her "darker" nurse, but the ideology of the plantation society blinds her to the fact that neither of them is superior to the other in nature and spirit. She feels now, with the onset of unfamiliar integration, that "they [blacks] should rise, yes, but on their own side of fence" (p.407), although there is "no better person in the world" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 409). So Julian's mother still holds the rule of "Equal but Separate" which comes from white supremacy directly. O'Connor uses the setting of an everyday familiarity to expose feelings hidden beneath the surface of our daily lives. Julian's mother's adjustments to the race question reflect a common reaction among the Southerners to the issue, which is elaborated by James Dickey (1961): "[F]or the Southerner, buses have been transformed into small, uncomfortable rolling arenas wherein the forces hidden for a hundred years in the structure of his society threaten to break loose and play themselves out each time a bus pulls away from a corner" (p. 2). O'Connor story provides a fascinating embodiment of Dickey's argument.

The story is firmly rooted in the exacerbations of racial relations in the South. Julian's mother's life has been "a struggle to act like a Chestny without the Chestny goods" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 411). While she has fallen from the land owner class, "her eyes, blue-sky, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten" (p. 406). Julian's mother still remains preoccupied with defending the social hierarchy against all of its enemies. And without the inherited home and land, all Julian's mother has inherited from her former sense of empowerment is her breeding—particularly her ability to be gracious to those she believes to be social inferiors, especially to the Negroes. In Julian's mother's mind, her ability to engage in conversation with those whites on the bus who are clearly "not our kind of people" and to be patronizingly kind to black children is her badge of social superiority; her sense of identity enables her to be "gracious to anybody" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 407). As Julian's mother is wont to point out, she is related to the Godhighs and the Chestnys, prominent families of the Old South whose former status is conveyed nicely by the high-ceilinged, double-staircased mansion which Julian has seen as a child, and which "remain[s] in his mind as his mother had known it" although the double stairways "had rotted and been torn down" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 408). But with the end of the plantation system, the mother's glorious ancestry is meaningless: she has had to work to put her son through a third-rate university, and she lives in a poor neighborhood which was fashionable forty years earlier. One of the most telling and subtle indicators of her loss of socioeconomic status is her participation in a program at the YWCA. "A reducing class at the Y" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 405) is a "bourgeois event" (Maida, 1970, p. 549), but more than this, it suggests how much Julian's mother, and the socioeconomic system she represents, have declined by the early 1960s. She is simply another poor, native country woman trying to survive in a hostile urban environment. And the hat and gloves she pathetically wears to the Y—those emblems of wealth and respectability—serve only to underscore her socioeconomic decline because of the fact that it resembles the hat of a black woman. However, Julian's mother is not able to accept the fact. And the black woman who kills her accidentally is not able to accept the idea of white supremacy, either. Thus, violence follows.

The two women are actually the victims of racism. The tragedy happening to Julian's mother results from her social superiority to the black woman under racism. Julian's mother has internalized the notion of the white supremacy and considers herself superior to the black, which of course leads to the attack from the black woman. They represent their race respectively. These racial biases have affected black and white women's images of themselves as well as their images of each other. As a result, in "interracial encounters, racial stereotypes may constrain behavior in ways to cause both blacks and whites to behave in accordance with those stereotypes" (Rothenberg, 1988, p. 266). Thus social role segregation prevents them seeing each other as victims of the same patriarchal system. Julian's mother and the black woman have both internalized the social prejudice of their own race against each other. Their reactions toward each other are based on their respective racial base. Julian's mother's firm belief in her own elevated position in the hierarchy, evidenced by her ability to graciously interact with her inferiors in the manner of a true Southern lady, entitles her to denigrate her fellow human beings; the persistence in her own racial dignity in the black woman leads to her violent reaction to Julian's mother.

Recognition of any similarities between black and white women has been rendered difficult in the South by a history of slavery and segregation, which has caused blacks and whites to define themselves in opposition to each other, to see difference as innate rather than socially constructed because "the white plantation society, because of its economic and social dominance, makes established conventions of behavior of women, both black and white" (Rothenberg, 1988, p. 257-62). Only when people from different classes and races accept each other as spiritual equals, deprive themselves of their internalization of the patriarchal and racist ideology can they reach a harmonic relationship. The political liberation can not lead to their spiritual liberation.

Then, in "Revelation", O'Connor frankly depicts her vision of ideal racial relationship in the reality. The hierarchy developed under the assumptions of superiority complex is completely deconstructed and the racial hierarchy is subverted.

Mrs. Turpin, the protagonist, is another female character who holds the idea of hierarchy strongly. Mrs. Turpin reveals an overwhelming pride in her position within the community and in relation to God. Mrs. Turpin's most distinguishable hobby is "naming the classes of people" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 491). Although she readily admits to herself that her envisioning of a hierarchy based upon race, class and money is flawed, as it fails to account for richer people who are morally or racially inferior to herself, she still insists upon defending it. What makes Mrs. Turpin different from other characters holding the notion of hierarchy is that she thinks and questions. She questions God. She begins to think and speak in face of God, although it is only in her fantasy. She no longer lives in her past. She has the courage to see and to speculate. This is the beginning of her rebellion and liberation. In a fantasy, she wonders: If Jesus had said to her before he made her, "There's only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash," what would she have said? "Please, Jesus, please," she would have said, "Just let me wait until there's another place available," and he would have said, "No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places so make up your mid." She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, "All right, make me a nigger then—but that don't mean a trashy one." And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black (O'Connor, 1986, p. 491).

Mrs. Turpin has such a fantasy and makes such a choice because she realizes that the hierarchy is changed, even turned upside down in some aspects, which puzzles her and sends her thinking at the same time. There is a colored

dentist in town who has two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. Usually by the time she falls asleep all the classes of people are moiling and roiling around in her head, and she will dream they are all crammed in together in a boxcar, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven (O'Connor, 1986, p. 491-92). The stable hierarchy is not available in her fantasy. The stability of hierarchy is not accessible. This she makes clear in her waiting room conversation, where she brags about her crops and livestock and bemoans her inability to find good help: "You can't get the white folks to pick [cotton] and now you can't get the niggers—because they got to be right [up] there with the white folks" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 493).

Definitely, Mrs. Turpin's fantasy displays her prejudice against the low-class whites and her desire to maintain her social superiority. But the fantasy also explains that Mrs. Turpin is already getting ready for the collapse of the established hierarchy. In her mind, the traditional hierarchy is being dissolved little by little and she is involved in breaking it sometimes unwittingly and unwillingly. This vision shows that Mrs. Turpin imagines herself on the way to her banal hierarchy which is to be collapsed. She has been holding an ideal of hierarchy but she questions it herself and she is puzzled at what is happening in the changing society. She is waiting for the collapse. She is thinking about her own situation and she even questions God about this. Turpin gains her redemption through her abandonment of patriarchal hierarchy at the end of the story, which shows O'Connor's ideal of breaking the racial hierarchy and achieving real racial equality.

Mrs. Turpin's revelation comes from her dealing with the girl named Mary Grace in the waiting room when she is waiting to see a doctor. From the gathering in a physician's waiting room, Mrs. Turpin generates a preferential hierarchy of people: The rich, home-and-land owners, those who own home but not land, white trash, and blacks. Basically, it is an economic hierarchy. Mrs. Turpin is thankful to be on the upper end. She talks with another descent-looking woman complacently about her social position. As she is rejoicing to herself that things are not different, Mary Grace, an ugly girl in the room who is reading a book, grows more and more outraged at the self-satisfied remarks of Mrs. Turpin and hurls her book across the room at Mrs. Turpin's head. Then she tells Mrs. Turpin, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 500). The remarks of the girl break Mrs. Turpin's complacency and set her thinking about the hierarchy that she gives to different people. Thus she begins to move toward transformation.

When Mary Grace becomes destructive, Mrs. Turpin is absolutely convinced that the girl should be listened to. Apparently, destruction and truth are closely tied in Mrs. Turpin's mind. Even after Mary Grace throws the book at her, Mrs. Turpin makes an extra effort to ask the disturbed, partially sedated girl for a message. And when she receives that absurd message that she is a hog from the hell, she decides it is true, so true that she fears even her husband will agree that she is a hog from hell. Besides, although the previous insult from the white-trash woman insults Mrs. Turpin almost as nastily as Mary Grace does, she accepts. The conversation Mrs. Turpin has with the white-trash woman shows her weakness in terms of protecting the hierarchy she has set up. As Mrs. Turpin describes the operation of the Turpin farm, she mentions that the Turpins have hogs and that she is tired of "buttering up niggers" to get them to work (O'Connor, 1986, p. 494). The white-trash woman's response is to place herself above Mrs. Turpin: "Two things I ain't going to do: love no niggers or scoot down no hog with no hose" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 493). And she lets out a bark of contempt. Mrs. Turpin and Mary Grace's mother agree, however, that "you had to have certain things before you could know certain things" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 492). Thus they agree that social elevation depends upon relationships with humans on the lowest social level and even with nonhumans. Even as she defends herself against the white-trash woman's opinions, Mrs. Turpin senses disruptions of the hierarchy. In response to the complaint about hogs, Mrs. Turpin quickly points out, of course, that her hogs are far from the "nasty stinking things" the white-trash woman considers them. The Turpins' hogs' feet "never touch the ground" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 493). The angelic associations of a hog whose feet never touch the ground are a displacement of the natural hierarchy; she calls the white-trash child a "poor nasty little thing" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 493) and holds that he is dirtier than the Turpins' hogs. The seemingly casual ease with which Mrs. Turpin rejects the white-trash woman's criticism suggests that she has nothing specific to refute the disturbance caused by the uprising of the lower class and she is unconsciously ready for the collapse of the hierarchy in spite of her possible unwillingness.

First, when she tries to complain to her black farm hands about her tragic encounters, she knows clearly that she won't get real sympathy from them, which is an improvement on the protagonists in the above stories who never really knows why they fail in their relationships with the blacks. She desires to complain to someone who will refute the assertion of Mary Grace, but she knows that she will not believe the refutation. This attitude shows that Mrs. Turpin herself has already questioned her own identity though she does not realize it consciously. As she gives the black workers water, Mrs. Turpin knows that they will flatter and defend her excessively and maddeningly if she tells them what happens to her in the doctor's waiting room, but she knows what the fact is like: "Mrs. Turpin knew exactly how much Negro flattery was worth and it added to her rage" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 505). As she expects, when she tells the black workers on the farm what Mary Grace does, they respond with praise for herself, which Mrs. Turpin herself will reject: "She pretty too," the other two said. "Stout as she can be and sweet. Jesus satisfied with her!" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 505). She receives no satisfaction from her disclosure. Afterwards she goes alone to the pig parlor. Mrs. Turpin asks God, "Who do you think you are?" (O'Connor, 1986, 507) and her question "returned to her clearly like all answer from beyond the wood" (O'Connor, 1986, 508). Facing the revelation from Mary Grace, Mrs. Turpin does not merely ask

how she is like a hog, but asks, “How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too” (O’Connor, 1986, 506)?

Mrs. Turpin finds in Mary Grace the disruption of hierarchy that she has already sensed. When she receives her curse from Mary Grace, she becomes completely serious, and she spends the rest of the time in the story bringing up to consciousness the full expression of the revelation she has been speculating upon and even waiting for. Her conscious protests confirm her real convictions: “I am not,” she said tearfully, “a wart hog from hell”. But “the denial had no force” (O’Connor, 1986, p. 502). Mrs. Turpin is so convinced that she is a wart hog that it is not until she has returned home that it occurs to her to recall that others also deserve condemnation: “She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now” (O’Connor, 1986, p. 502).

Mrs. Turpin questions God and has a vision that, in essence, “the first shall be last and the last, first” (O’Connor, 1986, p. 508). She dreams repeatedly that all the social classes are “crammed all together” (O’Connor, 1986, p. 492), and in her final vision she manages to see herself on a fiery pathway to heaven. So it is interesting to note that Mrs. Turpin’s redemption is a process. Her redemption is the result of her thinking and questioning of the existing hierarchy. Before Mrs. Turpin reaches the point in her fantasy when the collapse of the hierarchy occurs, she refers to the people she is categorizing as a “heap,” a word that implies that the collapse into a mass is inherent in categorizing people. Consequently, when Mrs. Turpin finds herself in the doctor’s office and, carefully noting the quality of everyone’s shoes, begins to build the hierarchy again, her thoughts and actions in the waiting room do indeed reveal an unconscious desire to disrupt the hierarchy she has created. One violation of the class hierarchy in Mrs. Turpin’s system of belief is her agreement with a gospel hymn on the radio in the doctor’s office. When she hears the line “When I looked up and He looked down,” her mind supplies the last line: “And wona these days I know I’ll we-ear a crown” (O’Connor, 1986, p. 490). Here Mrs. Turpin envisions for herself an eventual displacement from her position in her imagined hierarchy. In this instance Mrs. Turpin imagines that a disruption of the hierarchy will move her up. The final vision is of a “vast horde...rumbling toward heaven” (O’Connor, 1986, 508). Mrs. Turpin is like a hog from hell, and she is going back where she came from, but her real origin is heaven. Mrs. Turpin may seem fully conscious of her redemption. She does, after all, hear “the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah” (O’Connor, 1986, p. 509) even after her vision fades.

Patriarchy is “a multi-layered system of domination, centered in men’s control of women, but including class, race, and generational hierarchies, clericalism, war, and the domination of nature” (Ruether, 2002, p. 4). The thinking reflected in Mrs. Turpin’s story is unique among O’Connor’s stories. This is the only story in which the character has possessed the ability to question and has reached her answer. The collapse of the hierarchy and the tendency toward real equality between different classes and races in Mrs. Turpin’s mind is the result of her thinking and understanding and it is also O’Connor’s thinking and understanding. For O’Connor, misunderstandings arise on both sides because of racial differences. In her stories, O’Connor shows that racial prejudice will definitely lead to violence between two parties no matter whether the violence is directly or indirectly from racial conflicts. The fates of O’Connor’s white characters demonstrate that only when they really accept the blacks as equal partners can they really live together harmoniously and get their revelation and redemption and only a shared humanity can make them coexist harmoniously.

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Jiping Yang was born on April 29, 1971, Siping, Jilin Province, China. She got her Ph.D. in American Literature from Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China, 2006. Her academic interests are in Twentieth-Century American literature and Southern American Women writers with special interest in Flannery O'Connor.

She is an Associate Professor of Literature at BUPT. She published *The Subversion and Reconstruction of Western Theology and Sexual Relationship* and over 20 academic papers. She has finished the projects Flannery O'Connor Study and Transformation of the China Images in American Literature supported by Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunication. Currently, she is hosting the Humanities & Social Science Research Project Flannery O'Connor Study (09YJC752002) supported by Ministry of Education P.R.C., Network Literature under the Perspective of Feminism supported by Chinese Universities Scientific Fund (BUPT 2009RC1116) and Cyber Literature Study under a Feminist Perspective by Chinese Universities Scientific Fund (BUPT 2009RC1116), and A Study of Transversing Novels supported by Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunication.