



GROTESQUE CHARACTER AS A CRITICISM TO RACISM IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "THE GERANIUM"

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Abstract

Grotesque character commonly refers to Southern Black or Black character who represents "misfit" and "freak" and bad things.

Grotesque character is often used in Flannery O'Connor's short stories to criticize the issues in society. In the short story "The Geranium," she criticizes the Black racial issue in White society at that time. This paper aims at showing how a White character, Old Dudley, who is considered as having high status, is placed as a grotesque character in the form of a "freak" person with dislocations and hallucination. This paper also intends to show how O'Connor represents Southern, and Northern Black characters legitimated as grotesque or evil in White society indeed have good sides. This study finds out that grotesque is used to address a criticism toward White supremacy on Black subordination and that grotesque is indeed a bad part of the dual quality (good and bad) of all human characters in the short story.

INTRODUCTION

The term grotesque in literature commonly refers to Southern American characters, including Southern Black characters in literature. Grotesque characters refer to the characters that go through defeat and doubt (Haar, 1983). One of the American writers that often uses grotesque in her work is Flannery O'Connor. She is a Southern American writer that presents the grotesque characters to criticize the unstable society during her time. For example, she uses grotesque in her short story "The Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) as a mechanism to purify the Southern American society that has been far away from religious belief (Windriani, 2018). Many of her short stories that include grotesque characters are to reflect the condition of society. She often highlights the theme that is related to race, especially in her short stories of "The Geranium" and "The Judgment Day," in which the characters are presented as displaced Southerners whose lives are to circumnavigate in Northern cities (Weinshilboum, 2009).

O'Connor's literary works are known for her grotesque characters, especially in her short stories, which refers to the man character to meet his nature (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 257). O'Connor uses grotesques to criticize Southern American society concerning political instability, dictatorial regime, and hypocrisy in the Church, including racial issues among White society and others, by presenting the violence, horror, and emotional freaks in the characters of her short stories to create self-realization upon faith and humanity (Windriani, 2018). In "The Geranium," O'Connor uses Southern grotesque to criticize, especially the racist society in America during that time. O'Connor often uses grotesque characters with its representation of "freak" and "misfit." She uses grotesque realism, which means a grotesque body or grotesque situation, to sabotage any hints of sentimentality in society. This paper's discussion is on Flannery O'Connor's "The Geranium," therefore, this investigates how she puts the characters to form her criticism toward racism issues at that time in America.

Other than that, O'Connor is rarely and almost none to use a character that is ugly, violent, repulsive, and meaningless because she believes that there are possibilities on the character for beauty, kindness, appealing, and meaningful (Evans, 2009). The fact means that there will be two sides of the human representation in the characters of her works. Related to the characters in her works, O'Connor mostly embodies both the good or white side and dark side or grotesque in her characterization. For instance, in the analysis of O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Windriani shows the dark side or grotesque of the man and the dark side of the grandmother. This paper, however, focuses on "The Geranium" to find how O'Connor shows both good and bad sides embodied in each main character in the short story.

A further statement about O'Connor's work is that the typical characters she uses in her short story usually project extreme mental states such as having unconsciousness life, incorporating dream, fantasy, and hallucination (Muller, 2009). The statement matches the fact that in "The Geranium," Old Dudley is portrayed as the White character who suffers from dislocations that cause hallucination as the final result. Therefore, this article aims to reveal how O'Connor places her criticism using both Black and White characters.

"The Geranium" (1920) tells about the life of an old man, namely Dudley, who is dragged to live with his daughter in an apartment in New York City. His daughter has a good intention to take care of her father in his old days. However, Old Dudley feels unnecessary and boring for him to live with his daughter and small family in a big busy city in a small apartment. He is even surprised to see how the world in New York is turned up-side-down where he finds his next-door neighbor is a Black man towards whom he has such old prejudices. Old Dudley finds his environment is very different from his Southern place where a Black man is considered as in lower caste whose job is usually a servant. Finding that Black people are not servants subservient to White people, Old Dudley gets even more surprised when he sees the Black man next door behaves well and does business like a White man. Old Dudley finds many contradictions about the life of Black people surround him. He feels offended and frustrated as he could not believe it in his mind.

Two previous research and articles are discussing the race issues in O'Connor's "The Geranium." The first research is by David Weinshilboum of "Flannery O'Connor Uncanny Vision and Race Relation." It discusses the character of Old Dudley, who is in yearn for hierarchy and color caste in his new place in New York City, like in his native South. Weinshilboum identifies the symbols found in the things related to the geranium. The first, the geranium that he sees across his neighbor's window, becomes the plant that gets him always remember on his past native life in the South. Wiensilboum further explains that the neighbor's geranium, which is at the end smashed down in the ground by the owner, also becomes another symbol that the man is a destroyer of old southern code. However, this present paper will investigate not only Old Dudley's character with his psychological issues but also the Black characters' positive attitudes toward him, in which O'Connor clarifies her criticism related to racism.

Also, there is a previous article from JSTOR by David Fowler (2003), "Writing and Rewriting Race: Flannery O'Connor's "The Geranium" and "The Judgment Day" that discusses the racial issue happens in the works. While Winshielboum argues that Old Dudley's identity-threatening experience is due to his yearning for a color-caste system,

Fowler identifies that as a dislocated person, Dudley wants to have his old Southern code back where Blacks are to live separately from Whites and Whites are differentiated from Blacks. Both previous research foreground on the Old Dudley's character and the symbols found in the story. This present paper is going differently into focusing more on how O'Connor, in "The Geranium," places her characters - White character, Old Dudley, and Black or colored characters who are Rabie, Lutisha, and Grisby boy, and Black neighbor - to form her criticism.

This paper aims at contributing to one revelation of O'Connor's "The Geranium," on how she works on her White and Black characters to criticize the society told in her short story. This research investigates how O'Connor represents Southern, and Northern Black characters legitimated as Grotesque or evil in White society, while their good sides are often not recognized. Secondly, this paper also seeks on how the White character, Old Dudley, who is considered having a higher status according to White Supremacy, is placed to become Grotesque in the form of a "Freak" person.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Glance of Grotesque

Grotesque was initially derived from the Italian word *pittura grottesca*, which refers to painting in the rooms of ancient buildings in Rome (Edwards and Graulund, 2013). According to Holman and Harmon (1986), grotesque is once a term refers to the decorative style of sculpture and painting about animals and humans that usually have formal distortion of the natural points such as having comic absurdity, ridiculous ugliness, or ludicrous caricature. Holman and Harmon further explain that in the twentieth century, the term grotesque is used in literature to refer to comic and tragic works of art, primarily referring to Southern character fiction. The characterization is by having a physical deformity or grotesque body such as mentally ill, idiot, madman, dwarf, half-wit, psychotic, a subnormal, and abnormal, and so on. Therefore, grotesque refers to estranged, defamiliarized, and dislocated, and it varies into religious grotesque, frontier grotesque, and Southern grotesque. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley is told to experience the grotesque situations in his characterization as a dislocated elder person and also has a hallucination.

In line with the Old Dudley's characterization, there are characters such as Rabie, Lutisha, and Grisby boy who are told to have the grotesque body characterization. For example, Rabie is assumed by Old Dudley to do stealing, Lutisha is remembered by Old Dudley as a sass-mouthing woman, and Grisby boy as the one who has a physical deformity.

Edwards and Graulund (2013) add grotesque characters of the story may be represented in the forms of “freaks and freak” and “freaks and geeks.” In “The Geranium,” the grotesque freak is Old Dudley, depicted as a dislocated and hallucinated White character.

Geoffrey in Edwards and Graulund (2013) argues that the term grotesque appeals depending on the readers and audience in their period and regions. So, grotesque will be considered according to the historical context. In “The Geranium,” O’Connor puts Old Dudley to experience grotesque situations by placing him in two different places that move from South to North. The South is where slavery and White supremacy are, and the North is known for industrialization, advanced technology, and people from various races are living free and independently. Thus, O’Connor places Old Dudley into grotesque periods as where Old Dudley is told as an older person who had lived in the times when White supremacy and slavery were on the highest points.

This paper aims to show that O’Connor criticizes the racial issue by placing the White character as a grotesque character. It means that not only the Southern Black characters are always to have the bad sides or the grotesque sides, but also the white character may also possess these sides. O’Connor also highlights the positive attitudes of Black characters in the story, which means a lot to Old Dudley. Highlighting positive attitudes of the Black characters aims to give a stand to her criticism. Besides, all human characters have both good or white and bad or grotesque sides in their life after all.

DISCUSSION OF MAIN THEMES

Placing a Criticism through Grotesque

Flannery O’Connor uses the grotesque character to mark her criticism of the Black racism issue in American society at that time. Fowler (2003), on his review on the short stories by Flannery O’Connor, especially in “The Geranium,” marks the race theme in the story where O’Connor focuses on the cultural formation and hierarchical racial identities. According to Jalaludin (2013), racism issues on Black among White society did happen a long time ago. He asserts evidence that White did legitimate unjust and oppressive behaviors toward African or Black using the religious text “The Biblical Myth of Noah’s Son.” Jalaluddin also expounds evidence from Talmadge Anderson’s book that is related to grotesque depictions toward black, that they are referred to as negative connotations of physicality such as dirty, bad, evil, and so on.

Carroll (2010), in her article, reviews Flannery O'Connor's works of fiction in which she states that O'Connor uses displaced characters who make a denial in her works. As in "The Geranium," the displaced person is depicted in character Old Dudley. It shows that Old Dudley, who believes in the white supremacy and color caste, faces different realities from what he used to have in the South. The experiences of dislocation are portrayed as relating his past life in the South while he already lives in the North. However, the culmination of his dislocations would eventually lead to his hallucination or loss of his consciousness on the stairs in which he is then helped by the Black neighbor living next door.

To locate the evidence found in the text, here are passages representing Old Dudley's experiences as signs of dislocations and representing his hallucination as the culmination of his dislocation in his new place.

The window in that room showed him the river—thick and red as it struggled over rocks and around curves. He tried to think how it was besides red and slow. He added green blotches for trees on either side of it and a brown spot for trash somewhere upstream. He and Rabie had fished it in a flat-bottom boat every Wednesday. Rabie knew the river up and down for twenty miles. There wasn't another nigger in Coa County that knew it like he did. He loved the river, but it hadn't meant anything to Old Dudley. (O'Connor, 1971)

The paragraph above shows that Old Dudley's dislocation occurs when Old Dudley starts to imagine that he is in his homeland in the South with his friend, Rabie. Physically, he is in his room and staring outside of the window. Another paragraph that shows other evidence of his displacement signs is below.

He chuckled. Lot of good a nigger in a Sunday suit would do them. Maybe this nigger would know the country around here—or maybe how to get to it. They might could hunt. They might could find them a stream somewhere. He shut the door and went to the daughter's room. "Hey!" he shouted, "the folks next door got 'em a nigger. Must be gonna clean for them. You reckon they gonna keep him every day?" She looked up from making the bed. "What are you talking about?" "I say they got 'em a servant next door—a nigger—all dressed up in a Sunday suit." She walked to the other side of the bed. "You must be crazy," she said. "The next apartment is vacant and besides, nobody around here can afford any servant." (O'Connor, 1971)

Old Dudley's certain memories come up in his reality until he thinks that the Blacks in New York apartment are the same kind as he used to befriend in his boarding house in the South, such as his Old Black friends, Rabie and Lutisha. Further, showing his displacement, he insists on inviting the Black neighbor living next door to go hunting and fishing, as seen in the paragraph below.

"Well," he said, "I think I'll go over and see what day he gets off. Maybe I can convince him he likes to fish," and he'd slapped his pocket to make the two-

quarters jingle. Before he got out in the hall good, she came tearing behind him and pulled him in. "Can't you hear?" she'd yelled. "I meant what I said. He's renting that himself if he went in there. Don't you go asking him any questions or saying anything to him. I don't want any trouble with niggers." (O'Connor, 1971)

The culmination of Old Dudley's displacement is seen in the paragraph below. Old Dudley loses control of his consciousness until the Black neighbor living next-door catch him to strangely act as like he is just doing possum hunting with his gun on the stairs.

"What are you hunting, old-timer?" the Negro asked in a voice that sounded like a nigger's laugh and a white man's sneer. Old Dudley felt like a child with a pop-pistol. His mouth was open and his tongue was rigid in the middle of it. Right below his knees felt hollow. His feet slipped and he slid three steps and landed sitting down." (O'Connor, 1971)

Those passages give evidence on how Old Dudley always remember and recall memories when he just does his activities in his apartment. He simply cannot move on from his past life in the South. By those psychological issues in Old Dudley's characters, O'Connor satires the racial issue by twisting and putting the White character, Old Dudley, into the grotesque situations. Those situations mark the bad sides or grotesque sides of Old Dudley in which O'Connor wants to reveal in the short story. With Old Dudley's character in "The Geranium," O'Connor marks to clarify to take no side to racism. As evidence in "The Geranium," she denies issues that arouse among the Whites society at that time when Blacks are considered to be evil by placing such Old Dudley character in the story. The character of Old Dudley opens a possibility that a White character can also suffer grotesque experience in life. Thus, not only do Black characters possess grotesqueness but White characters also.

Highlighting Positive Attitudes on the Black Characters

Flannery O'Connor often uses black character to set irony in her works as she often uses Black catalyst only to precipitate white reaction (Williams, 1976). In "The Geranium," it is seen that irony is set when the Black characters are portrayed as good people. Therefore, despite the malicious accusations Old Dudley addressed towards Black characters, O'Connor sets irony by promoting the Blacks' good sides, which is seen through the Old Dudley's confessions and experience while interacting with them. The kindness and goodness of Black characters are represented in these four paragraphs.

Lutisha could have taken that geranium and stuck it in the ground and had something worth looking at in a few weeks. Those people across the alley had no business with one. They set it out and let the hot sun bake it all day and they put it so near the ledge the wind could almost knock it over. They had no business with it, no business with it. It shouldn't have been there. Old Dudley

felt his throat knotting up. Lutisha could root anything. Rabie too. (O'Connor, 1971)

This first paragraph shows that Rabie and Lutisha, the Black characters, are good gardeners. They can grow plants passionately so that the plant can grow up real good. The second paragraph below is about their positive attitudes.

“Ain’t no use settin’ yo’ line down dere, boss,” he’d say. “Ain’t no fish dere. Dis ol’ riber ain’t hidin’ none nowhere ’round hyar, nawzuh.” And he would giggle and shift the boat downstream. That was Rabie. He could steal cleaner than a weasel but he knew where the fish were. Old Dudley always gave him the little ones. (O'Connor, 1971)

The second paragraph shows that Rabie is a good fish hunter. He knows the spot in the river that has lots of fish. He always helps Old Dudley to find fish and treats him passionately. The third paragraph below also marks the Black characters’ kindness and goodness.

Rabie and Lutisha lived down in the basement. Lutisha cooked and Rabie took care of the cleaning and the vegetable garden; but he was sharp at sneaking off with half his work done and going to help Old Dudley with some current project—building a hen house or painting a door. He liked to listen, he liked to hear about Atlanta when Old Dudley had been there and about how guns were put together on the inside and all the other things the old man knew. (O'Connor, 1971)

This paragraph shows how helpful Rabie and Lutisha for Old Dudley. Lutisha cooks meals for them, and Rabie is such an excellent listener to Old Dudley. The fourth paragraph below also shows how helpful Rabie to prepare Old Dudley’s gun for doing possum hunting and shows how skillful Rabie on doing any job as he works fast and has a quick response.

Old Dudley would get out his gun and take it apart and, as Rabie cleaned the pieces, would explain the mechanism to him. Then he’d put it together again. Rabie always marveled at the way he could put it together again. Old Dudley would have liked to have explained New York to Rabie. If he could have showed it to Rabie, it wouldn’t have been so big—he wouldn’t have felt pressed down every time he went out in it. “It ain’t so big,” he would have said. “Don’t let it get you down, Rabie. It’s just like any other city and cities ain’t all that complicated.” (O'Connor, 1971)

From those lines about Rabie and Lutisha, O'Connor highlights the positive attitudes of Black characters. Rabie and Lutisha are both good gardeners as they can grow plants well. Lutisha can cook well, and Rabie is clever to find the spot to fish. He also loves the river. Rabie is a loyal friend to Old Dudley as he patiently listens to Old Dudley’s story about Atlanta and always accompanies Old Dudley to do possum hunting and to prepare by

cleaning tools for the hunting. Rabie is the one that is always offering help to Old Dudley when Old Dudley is tired of doing his business because Rabie is light-footed and helpful.

O'Connor highlights not only the positive attitudes of Black Southern characters but also the positive attitudes of Black neighbors in New York (Northern) through Old Dudley's experiences while he is interacting on the stairs with them at his daughter's New York apartment. The Black neighbor helps the tired and hallucinated Old Dudley to walk through the stairs. Here are some passages showing Old Dudley's experiences with the Black neighbor in New York City apartment.

Bang! A squeak on the staircase made him wheel around—his arms still holding the invisible gun. The nigger was clipping up the steps toward him, an amused smile stretching his trimmed mustache. Old Dudley's mouth dropped open. The nigger's lips were pulled down like he was trying to keep from laughing. Old Dudley couldn't move. He stared at the clear-cut line the nigger's collar made against his skin. "What are you hunting, old-timer?" the Negro asked in a voice that sounded like a nigger's laugh and a white man's sneer. Old Dudley felt like a child with a pop-pistol. His mouth was open and his tongue was rigid in the middle of it. Right below his knees felt hollow. His feet slipped and he slid three steps and landed sitting down". (O'Connor, 1971)

The paragraph above shows how the Black neighbor greets Old Dudley friendly, yet Old Dudley sees it as insulting. This Black neighbor is the one that greets him on the stairs while no one greets Old Dudley and just passes by. The paragraph below also shows how the Black neighbor starts a warm conversation with Old Dudley about things related to guns and hunting; at the same time, he helps Old Dudley to step the stairs carefully.

"You better be careful," the Negro said. "You could easily hurt yourself on these steps." And he held out his hand for Old Dudley to pull up on. It was a long narrow hand and the tips of the fingernails were clean and cut squarely. They looked like they might have been filed. Old Dudley's hands hung between his knees. The nigger took him by the arm and pulled up. "Whew!" he gasped, "you're heavy. Give a little help here." Old Dudley's knees unbended and he staggered up. The nigger had him by the arm. "I'm going up anyway," he said. "I'll help you." Old Dudley looked frantically around. The steps behind him seemed to close up. He was walking with the nigger up the stairs. The nigger was waiting for him on each step. "So you hunt?" the nigger was saying. "Well, let's see. I went deer hunting once. I believe we used a Dodson .38 to get those deer. What do you use?" Old Dudley was staring through the shiny tan shoes. "I use a gun," he mumbled." (O'Connor, 1971)

This paragraph below also shows how passionately the Black neighbor assists Old Dudley to step the stair slowly. He comforts Old Dudley's mind with his kind words, although Old Dudley still listens to them as insults for him.

"I like to fool with guns better than hunting," the nigger was saying. "Never was much at killing anything. Seems kind of a shame to deplete the game

reserve. I'd collect guns if I had the time and the money, though." He was waiting on every step till Old Dudley got on it. He was explaining guns and makes. He had on gray socks with a black fleck in them. They finished the stairs. The nigger walked down the hall with him, holding him by the arm. It probably looked like he had his arm locked in the nigger's. They went right up to Old Dudley's door. Then the nigger asked, "You from around here?" Old Dudley shook his head, looking at the door. He hadn't looked at the nigger yet. All the way up the stairs, he hadn't looked at the nigger. "Well," the nigger said, "it's a swell place—once you get used to it." He patted Old Dudley on the back and went into his own apartment. Old Dudley went into his. The pain in his throat was all over his face now, leaking out his eyes." (O'Connor, 1971)

Those passages mentioned above portray the Black neighbor's positive attitudes towards Old Dudley. The Black neighbor shows his kindness towards Old Dudley even when Old Dudley goes through his hallucination to do possum hunting with Rabie on the stairs. First, the Black neighbor tries as much for not laughing on seeing Old Dudley's weird activities on the stairs to avoid uneasiness. Second, the Black neighbor helps Old Dudley to walk the stairs by assisting him. Third, he starts to chat with Old Dudley with warm conversation related to Old Dudley's fondness on hunting with guns, and at the last moment before his departure, he charms Old Dudley friendly and supportively.

The points that O'Connor marks on her stand to Black is that all the positive attitudes of Black characters in the story are good, meaningful, and helpful for Old Dudley. As evidence in the passages, even when he is in trouble stepping the stairs as he feels exhausted and lost his consciousness and no one passing the stairs pleased to help him, the next-door Black neighbor comes to greet him and helps him to step the stairs pleasantly. This moment is the peak of O'Connor's criticism that clarifies the Black racial issue. She breaks the Black justifications of being unreasonably grotesque or bad. She puts the White character into a grotesque condition like it is depicted in Old Dudley. Therefore, what is considered as grotesque predication is not always attached to Black characters but also White characters. Meanwhile, the message of her criticism is that what is called grotesque or bad side is naturally owned by all human characters no matter what color of the skin and origin they have. So, being discriminative and racist is against humanity.

CONCLUSION

Whites, according to Old Dudley's old-fashioned racial mindset, are privileged compared to Blacks. It means that all the good things are on Whites, and Blacks are in bad lucks as they live as slaves and humble under the White supremacy. By unusually presenting grotesque "freak" in the White character Old Dudley and promoting good attitudes in Black

characters, Flannery O'Connor reminds on a value related to humanity that human character embodies both good sides and bad sides or grotesque. All human characters are equal by having both quality sides, which are good and bad. Good sides are not limited to persons with particular racial identities, but all human beings. O'Connor criticizes the racial issues by representing grotesque in White character to mock on racial gap ensued in American society, specifically between Black as subordinate and White as superior. Thus, further research related to grotesque in O'Connor's other short stories would be worth researched to reveal the interesting ways she uses the characters to note her messages.

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