

Female Images in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" and Alice Walker's

"Everyday Use"

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Though Flannery O'Connor and Alice Walker were both born in Georgia, USA, their life experiences were of great difference. O'Connor was born nearly twenty years before Walker, and they are racially distinct: O'Connor the white race and Walker the African-American. Interestingly, the female images in their works bear close resemblance to each other. Their depictions of some female characters also correspond to their personal experiences. In the two stories—"Good Country People" and "Everyday Use," male characters were absent, and in reality, male figures were absent in both writers' lives. We can say that the reason why O'Connor and Walker had strong female consciousness is that they were raised in matriarchal families. Therefore, compared to those writers who grow up in patriarchal families, their female characters have strong and vivid personalities. However, though strong and independent, their characters still could not escape the bonds of patriarchy. In fact, O'Connor and Walker are famous for their sharp observations of their societies and their critique of various social prejudices and stereotypes. O'Connor is more interested in faith and moral issues, while Walker puts more emphasis on the issues of race and gender. What interests me is the phenomenon that though O'Connor and

Walker are modern writers, the stories that I am going to discuss have pre-modern origins that are related to ancient Greek mythological archetypes. In other words, the female images that are portrayed by the two writers bear some resemblances to some goddesses that can be traced back to the beginning of human civilization. In this essay, the highlight will be on the analysis of female images and their resemblances to the mythological archetypes in "Good Country People" and "Everyday Use." By analyzing the female characters and revealing their roots in the ancient Greek mythology, we will find many doubles in the stories. These doubles include the modern Joy-Hulga and her double, the ancient Hephaestus; the modern Mrs. Johnson and her double, the ancient Demeter. We can extend the structure of "doubleness" to cover pairs such as Joy-Hulga and her double O'Connor, Mrs. Johnson and her double Walker, Joy-Hulga and her double Dee-Wangero. Through a careful analysis of these doubles, we can see the persistence of certain eternal qualities that transcend the barriers of time, space, and races.

O'Connor, a star in American literature, was born in 1925 and a devout Catholic for her entire life. Her writings were mainly set in the American and her characters were mostly grotesque figures. Her works probe into religious questions of ethics and moralities and she questioned common cognition of religion and faith. Born the only girl in her family and with her father died in her early adolescence, she lived along

with her mother, who spiritually and financially supported the family since O'Connor's childhood. In 1951, she was diagnosed with Lupus, the same disease that killed her father earlier. Soon she lost her walking capability so that she must depend herself on a cane. That was the time when O'Connor started writing "Good Country People" and identified herself with Joy-Hulga, who had an artificial leg because of her childhood wound. At that time, O'Connor was forced to leave her intellectual zone and to move back to the South. The circumstance was exactly the same as Joy-Hulga, who dreamt of teaching in college with her high intellect but was forced to stay at home due to her disability. However, in the story O'Connor gave Joy-Hulga a peculiar gift—a doctoral degree of philosophy, which hints at the deep thirst for intelligence for both O'Connor and her character. Joy-Hulga's struggle between atheism and Christianity reveals O'Connor's self-ambivalence toward her faith. Eventually, Joy-Hulga was rescued by Christianity. It indicates O'Connor's confirmed belief in her Christianity.

Another important star in modern American literature was Alice Walker, who shined differently because of her African-American identity. Her stories chiefly focus on gender and racial issues. Born in Georgia as well, Walker was the youngest of eight children. Since her childhood, Walker had been undergone racial crisis and her racial experiences strengthened her self-awareness of her racial identity and

sensitivity toward racial oppressions. Growing up in a two-parent household though, Walker's mother was the financial support of the family. This family background resembles O'Connor's in the sense that the male parent plays a minor role in both of their lives. This female-dominant archetype also influenced her story's setting in "Everyday Use." In 1952, when Walker was only 9 years old, her right eye was shot by a BB gun by her brother, and since the treatment was postponed, Walker's right eye became permanent blind. However, her blind right eye allows her to see the world with extraordinary sensitivity. After graduating from college, she was active in the civil rights movement. In reality, Walker endeavored to fight for the rights of minority; in her story, she put faith in the value of minority. Walker thought that African American should "take pride in the living tradition of folk art" (14). What she means is that black people do not have to compromise themselves to follow those standards set up by the white race; being black is valuable and beautiful. We can say that Maggie and Dee-Wangero in the story represent the bright side and the dark side of Mrs. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson herself was the embodiment of Walker. The continual tension between Maggie and Dee-Wangero demonstrates Walker's own dilemma when facing her African-American identity. In the end of the story, Mrs. Johnson, instead of yielding to Dee-Wangero's strong will like she always did, sided with Maggie by giving her the quilt, the emblem of their black spirits. Walker sends us the

message that she in fact identified with Mrs. Johnson and took pride in being black.

In the two stories, Joy-Hulga and Dee-Wangero can be identified with each other. Though Joy-Hulga's story is about the shallowness of faith and Dee-Wangero's story is about racial identity, we can find some similarities between them. Both characters were desperate to get rid of their roots: Joy-Hulga the Christianity and Dee-Wangero the African-American identity. They were both highly educated compared to other members of their families. Besides, they could not identify themselves with their families. As Carol M. Andrews said, "Each story develops a conflict between a mother and a daughter in which the mother attempts to perpetuate the values of the society which has produced her" (2). Joy-Hulga and Dee-Wangero both struggled to relieve themselves from the burdens that their families imposed on them. They also looked down on their families, as Mark Bosco writes: "She[Joy-Hulga] has officially changed her name to Hulga to reflect the ugliness she feels about life and to spite her mother" (2). Joy-Hulga's despite of her mother is manifest in her mother Mrs. Hopewell's words: "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor" (265). She changed her original name given by her mother into Hulga, "the ugliest name in any language" (263), thought Mrs. Hopewell. She was so anxious for cutting off the bond with her mother. However, she was attracted to the imposter, Manley Pointed, who swindled people by selling Bibles and pretending to be religious

and innocent. Toward the end of the story, Joy-Hulga realized the con man to be an even purer atheist than her, and she broke down. She learnt a lesson from a demon and recognized her deep desire for Christianity. Dee-Wangero despised her family as well. She was looking for recognition from the white race. Like Joy, Dee changed her original name that Mrs. Johnson named her after her grandmother. She was eager to run away from her roots. Not until Dee-Wangero participate the Black Pride Movement in the North did she start to embrace her identity. But her ways of cherishing her black identity, like taking away the quilts to display in her polished home in the North, was not a truly identification with her own roots. It aimed to prove herself superior among the white society. As David Cowart accurately pointed out in "Heritage and Deracination in Walker's 'Everyday Use,'" "The visitor[Dee-Wangero] rightly recognizes the quilts as part of a fragile heritage, but she fails to see the extent to which she herself has traduced that heritage" (2). Joy-Hulga and Dee-Wangero both had conflicts with their families, and they both struggled to negotiate with their own roots.

Moreover, in these two stories, we can find some archetypal motifs or images that transcend time, uniting the past with the present. In "Good Country People," Joy-Hulga was endowed with the Greek mythological archetype. Joy-Hulga's lamed leg is similar to the god of fire in the Greek mythology, Hephaestus, who was

incapable of walking as well. The injuries of their legs were both caused in their early childhood. One thing that Joy-Hulga was highly proud of is the name “Hulga” she gave to herself, and she regarded the name as “her highest creative act” (263). In John Thorburn’s essay, he, citing Henry Edmondson’s observation, claimed that “The name ‘Hulga’ is an anagram of the word ‘laugh’” (3). Apparently, Joy rejected her mother’s expectation for her to bring joy to the family, and she even betrayed the expectation. The pronunciation of “Hulga” is close to that of “Vulcan,” the Roman name of Hephaestus. O’Connor herself strengthened this connection when she explained the name given by Joy-Hulga: it “had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called” (263). According to John Thorburn, the original image of “the ugly sweating Vulcan” can be found in the *Iliad*, when “Thetis, seeking armor for her son Achilles, finds Hephaestus ‘sweating as he turned here and there to his bellows’” (3). In addition, the wife of Vulcan in the *Iliad* is Charis, the Greek name of “joy.” We can say that Joy-Hulga is a combination of Charis and Vulcan, a combination of female and male, for she appeared in the story in a sexless image. As in the first line of the story, O’Connor portrayed Joy-Hulga as having “the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone” (261). Joy-Hulga remained single all the time, and even though she dated Pointed once, Pointed was attracted to her grotesque lame leg, not to her

femininity. “The poor stout girl in her thirties...had never danced a step or had any *normal* good times” (263), said Mrs. Hopewell. Therefore, we can assume that the character Joy-Hulga derives from the archetypal myth of Vulcan, and her name was a combination of Vulcan and Charis.

In contrast, the character Mrs. Johnson in “Everyday Use” bears a resemblance to Demeter in the ancient Greek mythology. The god of the underworld, Hades, fell in love with Persephone, the daughter of the goddess of the harvest. He abducted her while she was playing with her mother, Demeter, in the mortal world. The distraught Demeter looked for her daughter so desperately that she became too exhausted to work, and the world became lifeless. Finally, Zeus, the father of Persephone, sent Hermes to let Hades release his daughter. When Persephone went back, Demeter was happy. However, knowing that Persephone had eaten the fruit from the underworld, Demeter reluctantly accepted the truth that her daughter had to go back to the underworld. In this story, Hades symbolized something of extreme power, just like the belief of white supremacy prevalent in Walker’s times. Dee-Wangero was like the daughter who was kidnapped by Hades, and ate the fruit there. Therefore she was implanted the idea of white supremacy and became the victim of internalized racism. Maggie was the submissive daughter who stays with the mother all the time. Dee-Wangero represents Persephone besides Hades and Maggie represents

Persephone besides Demeter. Mrs. Johnson was alike Demeter for her close relationship with her younger daughter; her strength, independence, and survival skills can be illustrated in the following statement: "In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands" (109). Interestingly, in Demeter's and Mrs. Johnson's lives, males were absent. Zeus, the father of Persephone, compromised himself with Hades in order not to harm their brotherhood. In "Everyday Use," Dee and Maggie were raised solely by Mrs. Johnson. These evidences show that Mrs. Johnson is closely related to the goddess Demeter in ancient vegetation myths.

O'Connor was born about twenty years earlier than Walker, and they had different life experiences. Being a Catholic, O'Connor grew up in a white family, received a good education, and was forced to return to the South on account of her illness. Walker grew up in an African-American community, experienced racial crisis since her childhood, became racially confident after being educated, and volunteered to go home to participate in African-American Civil Rights Movements. The female characters in their stories can be seen as versions of themselves. For instance, Joy-Hulga, a cripple who is blinded by her intellectual superiority, is a version of O'Connor, and the submissive Maggie and the defiant Dee-Wangero can also be said to be versions of Mrs. Johnson, or even Walker herself. Besides, the two main characters in the stories, Joy-Hulga and Dee-Wamgero, bear a close resemblance to

each other. They both fought with their families and experienced emotional conflicts themselves. As I have shown in this paper, the uncanny doubleness can also be found in the female characters' resemblances to some archetypal or mythic images. Joy-Hulga is a combination of Hephaestus and his wife in the *Iliad*, Charis. Dee-Wangero is the reincarnation of Persephone who had eaten the fruit in the underworld. While Dee-Wangero was absent, Maggie became the good daughter who stayed with the mother. Mrs. Johnson was the embodiment of Demeter. Through these doubles, the similarities between the female characters are clearly illustrated. By disclosing these underlying motifs, we can unlock the mystery of great literature and understand the reason why certain patterns have magic powers to elicit profound psychological responses and aesthetic appreciations.

Works Cited

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Flannery O'Connor's first short story collection, written in 1955, will knock you off your feet. Ruthless, penetrating, and loaded with subtext, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* was brave for its time and feels just as consequential today. Discover and share Flannery O'Connor Quotes. Explore our collection of motivational and famous quotes by authors you know and love. Fiction Writing. Portraits of Authors in Their Own Words. People say that the lines in your face are representative of the life you've led "as in, love your laugh lines because clearly you've had a good run of it" and maybe we'll Never Dead. William Faulkner. "Good Country People" is a short story by Flannery O'Connor. It was published in 1955 in her short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. A devout Roman Catholic, O'Connor often used religious themes in her work. Many considered this to be one of her greatest stories. Mrs. Hopewell owns a farm in rural Georgia which she runs with the assistance of her tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Freeman. Mrs. Hopewell's daughter, Joy, is thirty-two years old and lost her leg in a childhood shooting accident. Joy is an... Hulga Hopewell of "Good Country People" is a unique character in O'Connor's fictional world. Although O'Connor uses the intellectual, or the pseudo-intellectual, in one of her novels and in seven of her short stories, Hulga is the only female in the bunch. Her gender, however, does not keep her from suffering the common fate of all the other O'Connor intellectuals. In every instance, the intellectual comes to realize that his belief in his ability to control his life totally, as well as control those things which influence it, is a faulty belief.