

Beyond Flannery O'Connor's Works: Moral Realization Through Loss

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Article information	Abstract
DOI : Correspondence : restymaudina@hum.unand.ac.id	Mary Flannery O'Connor is famous for her religious view and self righteousness concept which she portrays on her literary works. This study aims to see hidden meaning of O'Connor's work. This research adopts a formalist approach to analyze the work by examining its intrinsic elements to uncover how the work elements produce overall meaning and aesthetic effect. The findings highlight the self-contained nature of the literary work and emphasize the interrelationship between its various structural components to show moral lesson like realization after tragedy. The result shows O'Connor delivered moral message that through tragedy human realizes his mistake and regret is indeed at the end.
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INTRODUCTION

Mary Flannery O'Connor spent her short life time of 39 years writing mostly religious view and self righteousness works. She is one of the most unique authors and acknowledged by her hilarious, twisting, and creepy plot elements, irony, characters, and symbols. As she was born in the Southern City of Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, no doubt almost all of her works influenced by her Roman Catholic Faith. However, the messages delivered depends on the reader's lens of interpreting it (Roberts, 1999). O'Connor was the only child of her prosperous parents. She went to high school in Milledgeville until she made it into Georgia College for Woman. She's majored in social sciences. After graduated, she received her master degree in writing from Iowa State University in 1947, she keeps writing down her stories. Kathleen said she had ever attended Yaddo writer's colony in New York to write her first novel "wise blood", but she moved back to Milledgeville after she suffered her first attack on lupus (Wilson, 1997). Her father, Edward Francis O'Connor, died from the same illness that soon after took her life, degenerative lupus. Even so, O'Connor keeps producing her works either novels or short story collection. She's best known for her published short story collections which are *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. She won three O. Henry Memorial Awards, Ford Foundation Grant, A National Institute of Arts and Letter Grant in Literature for her short stories. Her fiction won A National Book Award after her death (Graves and William, 1971).

Her compassion toward harsh realities made me choose to write an essay about her. The aim of this paper is to investigate the theme of her work *The Lame Shall Enter First* by involving the evidences of this

fiction included symbols, irony, characters, and few elements she used. Flannery O'Connor's *The Lame Shall Enter First* tells the story of Sheppard, an atheist and well-meaning but emotionally distant father who tries to help a troubled, disabled teenager named Rufus Johnson while neglecting his own grieving son, Norton. Convinced that reason and good intentions are enough, Sheppard becomes obsessed with "saving" Rufus, seeing him as a project to reform. Meanwhile, Norton, still mourning the death of his mother, is left feeling unloved and invisible. As Sheppard grows more invested in Rufus, he misses the signs of his own son's despair. The story ends in tragedy.

Behling (2006) in her analysis draws on disability studies, theological reflection, and literary criticism to examine how disability functions within Flannery O'Connor's narrative. Behling argues that physical impairment in O'Connor's work is not merely incidental but central to the story's moral and spiritual landscape. In particular, Behling reads Rufus Johnson's clubfoot as a symbolic challenge to the worldview of Sheppard, the rational, well-meaning atheist who takes Rufus into his home. For Sheppard, disability is something to be fixed—just another problem to solve through logic and moral education. Harden Fritz (2023) applies catholic existentialism and virtue ethics to Flannery O'Connor's "The Lame Shall Enter First" to explore how the story offers ethical lessons relevant to leadership and human relationships. She interprets Sheppard's failure to understand Rufus Johnson as an example of inauthentic leadership because of arrogance and emotional blindness rather than empathy or humility. Gálla (2021) uses concepts from social psychology to analyze how isolation leads to emotional, moral, and intellectual deterioration. Gálla argues that the isolation experienced by Sheppard, Rufus Johnson, and Norton results in distorted perceptions which ends in tragedy. Koçsoy (2021) examines how physical disability in *The Lame Shall Enter First* functions as a source of power rather than weakness. Koçsoy focuses on the character of Rufus Johnson, whose clubfoot is traditionally seen as a limitation but in O'Connor's story becomes a tool for emotional and psychological influence over others. Koçsoy draws on reversal of normative power structures and christian symbolism, to argue that O'Connor challenges the reader's assumptions about disability. Wood (2024) suggests that O'Connor's doubts about Sheppard's portrayal reflect a deeper tension in her work between illustrating the consequences of pride and ensuring that her characters remain relatable to readers. Wood's critique uses a combination of theological analysis and literary criticism to explore pride, grace, and the human capacity for self-deception. Aravind (2019) examines the effects of neglectful parenting, focusing on Sheppard's failure to provide emotional support to his grieving son, Norton. This neglect leads to Norton's tragic suicide, highlighting the consequences of parental narcissism and emotional detachment. Aravind uses psychological and literary analysis to underscore the importance of empathetic parenting and the dangers of substituting intellectual pursuits for genuine emotional connection. Compare to those previous researches, I focus on examining *The Lame Shall Enter First*'s intrinsic elements to uncover how moral lesson like realization after tragedy.

METHOD

The method used to analyze how a literary text builds its moral message through internal elements is rooted in formalist literary theory, particularly as developed by New Criticism. This approach treats the text as a self-contained work of art, where meaning arises from its internal elements such as plot, character, setting, tone, and imagery rather than from external contexts like the author's life or historical background. Close reading is essential, involving detailed attention to language, structure, and literary devices. According to Cleanth Brooks (1947), a central figure in New Criticism, the value and meaning of a text lie in its "organic unity," where all parts contribute to the whole. In this view, moral themes are not stated directly but emerge from the text's internal tensions, character choices, and narrative resolutions. Thus, by analyzing how the text structures conflict, character development, and symbolic elements, the reader uncovers its implied moral stance. This method emphasizes how form and content work together to convey meaning without relying on external interpretation. Hart (1963) explains that Brooks avoided relying on historical context or the author's background as Brooks emphasizes on close reading and the intrinsic unity of a literary work allows for the exploration of complex moral and philosophical ideas. By

analyzing elements like irony, paradox, and ambiguity, Brooks revealed how deep moral and metaphysical meanings could emerge from within the work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This short story tells us about how self righteousness could horrifically lead us to tragic ending. O'Connor (2012) gives us an idea, since the beginning, Sheppard egotistically has a strong idea of Norton should be what he wants him to be "...his intense blue eyes fixed on him. The boy's future was written in his face. He would be a banker. No, worse. He would operate a small loan company..." The way he assures himself about Norton explains he's self-righteous. It is just about the same as the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." She insisted she doesn't want any of her family having a vacation to Florida just because she strongly believes that they would encounter the Misfit because the newspaper said the criminals escape to Florida. Even so, she decides to keep joining. He couldn't accept the way his son is. Just because Norton is not physically accepted by the standard he has, he strongly believes his son is dully "don't you want to get up and look through telescope, Norton?" he said. It irritated him that the child showed no intellectual curiosity whatsoever. "Rufus is going to be way ahead of you." O'Connor presents her sympathy of children who have parents who underestimate them and force them to be somebody else.

The irony is Sheppard wants his son be unselfish while he himself is selfish. "All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish..." Even the beginning shows he engrosses on his job while not noticing about his son anymore. Sheppard's selfishness appeared at the part he really pays attention on Rufus Johnson "when he was in the reformatory, he looked pretty good, but when I saw him yesterday, he was skin and bones. He hasn't been eating cake with peanut butter on it for breakfast." while he's not noticing his son eating the food because it is no longer fresh "the child paused. 'It's stale,' he said, 'that's why I have to put stuff on it.'" But still his self righteousness makes Sheppard thinks his son is selfish and not even thinking about sharing his. Sheppard keeps thinking he's good because he cares about other people [Rufus] and his son is wrong for not being generous to share to others. It comes up again when Sheppard said "I can't see a child eating out of garbage cans." While he can't help his own son and be a good father and mother since his wife's death.

Looking back at the beginning, Norton is indirectly explained that he has to play his mother role, preparing his breakfast. "The boy approached the bar with the jar of peanut butter under his arm, a plate with a quarter of a small chocolate cake on it in one hand and the ketchup bottle in the other. He didn't appear to notice his father." The last sentence of this part demonstrates that he's half either a robot-like, day-dreaming or in grief. It is later proved that he's in grief of losing his mom. Eye symbol shows Norton doesn't get engaged when his father asks about what Rufus Johnson was doing yesterday. "The child looked at him with a kind of half attention, his eyes forward but not yet engaged. They were a paler blue than his father's as if they might have faded like the shirt; one of them listed, almost imperceptibly, toward the outer rim." Sheppard thinks he's completely doing right "don't you think I miss her? I do, but I'm not sitting around moping. I'm busy helping other people." While he doesn't help his son like a father supposed to be. He even whips Norton "he had had to whip him only once since Johnson had been with them-the first night when Norton realized that Johnson was going to sleep in his mother's bed." Here O'Connor mentions how mostly people [Sheppard] think themselves or their perceptions or their judgment as the rightest one and neglect logic and empathy "his credentials were less dubious than a priest's; he had been trained for what he was doing."

There are few parts that strengthen this idea. The part of "there are lots of things about yourself that I think I can explain to you." helps us assume he proudly thinks he knows everything even he never knows Rufus Johnson. It is again supported by the narration of Sheppard reaction after Rufus Johnson talk about Satan "he smiled again, a smile that was like an invitation to the boy to come into a school room with all its windows thrown open to the light." It strengthens Sheppard's pride about himself as if he could enlighten Rufus Johnson like a priest, even though he is not. Apparently, Sheppard doesn't only believed he was doing the right thing, though he failed to see his son's emotional needs, but he also doesn't care

about what his own son said. He thinks he is the only one that is right. Even though Norton had alert him how rude and impolite Rufus is, he keeps on his ideas about having Johnson at home without considering what Norton has said. “‘he went in her room and used her comb!’...’what about it, Rufus?’ he said. “‘Will you stay with us for a while?’” Even O’Connor shows the outrage through Rufus “‘he thinks he’s Jesus Christ.” Sheppard even insisted he’s going to save Rufus Johnson “‘...I’m stronger than you are and I’m going to save you...’” He tells Norton as if he knows everything “‘oh my god,’ Sheppard muttered. ‘No no,’ he said, ‘of course she isn’t’. Rufus is mistaken. Your mother isn’t anywhere. She’s not unhappy. She just isn’t’.” He still believes it is right to let Rufus stay at his home while he himself heard Rufus would tell Norton about the hell and her mom even though Sheppard asks him to stop “‘on the way down the attic stairs, he heard Johnson say in a loud whisper behind him, “‘I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow, kid, when himself has cleared out. He’s so positive thinking about letting Rufus in the prison will let him learn not to do bad things again. He’s wrong, for the next events he becomes more rebellious “‘Sheppard stood in the door and watched them get into the patrol car and drive away. He summoned his compassion. He would go to the station tomorrow and see what he could do about getting him out of trouble. The night in jail would not hurt him and the experience would teach him that he could not treat with impunity someone who had shown him nothing but kindness. Then they would go get the shoe and perhaps after a night in jail it would mean even more to the boy.” He doesn’t want to consider of letting Rufus go even though the cop had warned him there’s something different about Rufus. ‘If I was you,’ the one nearest him said, “‘I wouldn’t be responsible for any little bastard like him.” Even for the second time the cop comes and insists to let him see Johnson, Sheppard doesn’t change his mind; Rufus Johnson has nothing to do with the mess the cop accused him. “‘Sheppard went in the house and sat down in the living room in the dark. He did not suspect Johnson and he did not want the boy to think he did “‘I do have confidence in you,” Sheppard said intensely. “‘I believe in you and I trust you completely.” Even though Norton tries to tell him, he doesn’t want to discuss it. “‘Across the hall Norton’s door was open. The child lay on the bed on his side, looking into the light from the hall. After this, the road with Johnson would be smooth. Norton sat up and beckoned to him. He [Sheppard] saw the child but after the first instant, he did not let his eyes focus directly on him. He could not go on and talk to Norton without breaking Johnson’s Johnson’s thrust.” It shows he has been blinded by his own self righteousness. He even doesn’t want to investigate Norton who is with Johnson in the cinema either Johnson in the cinema with him or not. He thinks he knows everything, but he’s not. If Sheppard really paid attention on his son, he will surely realize the way his son’s eyes confess his dream of becoming astronaut isn’t as normal as the other boys want to be. “‘There was a glitter of wild pleasure in the child’s eyes, “‘a spaceman!” he shouted. “‘Wonderful,” Sheppard said bitterly.”

The next part he keeps bugging Norton on asking where Rufus Johnson is without noticing unnatural sadness of Norton’s eyes. “‘There was unnatural brightness about his eyes. After a moment he seemed to see that it was Sheppard “‘I’ve found her!’ he said breathlessly...’Mamma!’” It is the same idea as in *The Good Man is Hard to Find*. The grandma thinks the family shouldn’t go to Florida because she knows there the Misfit and gangs’ escapes. And she then remembers there is no paved road and she incidentally leads her family to where Misfits and gang is. It is ended tragically by the death of the whole family member. If we look at the situation explained by O’Connor we know there will be a certain climax tragedy is coming up. “‘Somewhere in the small wood behind the house, a bull frog sounded a low hollow note.” And “‘...the reporter scrambled into the front door and the siren wailed into the darkness.” Not long after Rufus was hand-cuffed and got surprised of Rufus blurting out he’s atheist or even thinking he’s the god. He realizes he’s wrong and wanted to be a good father and mother for Norton and won’t let him suffer again.

CONCLUSIONS

This is how O’Connor delivered her short story messages. She showed how tragedy is needed in order to make people learn something or realize that something has been wrongly done. Only tragedy

makes the character realize he has done wrong and put a desperate regret. In *The Lime Shall Enter First*, Sheppard found his only son die; launching himself to find his died mom. The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space. Sheppard believed he was doing the right thing, though he failed to see his son's emotional needs and through loss he tasted regret.

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