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**“Gawd Owns Them Woods”: The Intersectionality of Religion,  
Gender, and Class in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Circle in the Fire”**

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By *Adrienne Flippin*

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Thesis Director  
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

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Thesis Adviser  
Dr. Merritt Moseley

Critic Richard Kane contends that to see how deeply author Flannery O'Connor felt about regional writing, readers need look no further than her published essays, where she expresses an admiration for regional fiction and the "distinct insularity" that the American South held after the loss of the Civil War (45). As she wrote from a rural estate in Milledgeville, Georgia, less than a hundred years removed from patriarchal plantations and slavery, Southern history and landscapes were certainly influential in O'Connor's experiences and opinions. In many ways, O'Connor's home region was ideal for the kind of fiction that she wanted to write. Dark characters and violent encounters were made even more impactful against backdrops of lonely fields, decaying barns, and dense woods.

As in most of O'Connor's fiction, setting is important to the plot and character identities in her short story "A Circle in the Fire," which was published in 1955. The story's protagonist is Mrs. Cope, a proud woman who owns a small rural farm. Mrs. Cope manages a staff of lower-class workers, both black and white, and attempts to manage her rebellious twelve year-old daughter as well. For Mrs. Cope, her careful management of the farm allows her to impose order and a sense of identity, both onto herself and onto those around her. That order and identity soon crumbles, however, as three adolescent boys invade and destroy what Mrs. Cope has constructed. The boys can be seen as representations of the intrusion of several intersectional realities: gender, in the form of their defiance and intimidation of the formerly powerful Mrs. Cope, as well as their domination of the land; class, in the form of their apparent poverty and gritty urban background; and Christianity, in the form of their belief in a masculine "Gawd" figure and their prophetic burning of the woods.

To understand Mrs. Cope's relationship to power and her social and moral hierarchy, it is important to understand the tradition of female land-owning in the South, the inequality that

came with that tradition, and the power of white males to overturn it. Although the institutions of the early South were undoubtedly patriarchal, historian Kirsten E. Wood estimates that ten percent of Southern slaveholders were women in the year 1850 (35). Most of these women were widows. Termed “broken reeds,” the widows were expected to be broken down by the loss of the husbands that they fully depended on, to don their black dresses and to go through the appropriate protocol for mourning. At the same time, however, they were expected to take over most of their late husbands’ duties. Wood writes that these widows’ slaveholding peers “expected their widowed kinswomen to show signs of severe emotional distress, even helplessness, but they also expected widows to shoulder many duties usually associated with the men of their class, which included superintending the family’s finances and dealing with merchants, overseers, and field hands” (35). Unless they had a son who was willing and able to take over the duties of master, widowed mistresses stepped into the role themselves. In many ways, Mrs. Cope is like these slaveholding widows. Although no diseased husband is mentioned, Mrs. Cope runs her farm alone, and despite her obvious pride in the land, “A Circle in the Fire” alludes to the duties and worries that ensue. Early on in the story, Mrs. Cope looks around at her property and shakes her head “as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back” (177) Later on, the reader learns that “even a small change in the weather made Mrs. Cope thankful, but when the seasons changed she seemed almost frightened at her good fortune in escaping whatever it was that pursued her” (190). It seems that Mrs. Cope does have to “cope” with pressures and insecurity, not unlike the broken reeds that preceded her.

One of these pressures was about appearance; even property-owning women could not neglect humble, feminine appearances. A woman’s continued control and power over land required many levels of maintenance. Widows, Wood attests, needed to construct themselves as

“at once canny negotiators and self-sacrificing mothers” (39). She adds that “in a society where slaveholding women’s claims to privilege usually hinged on submission to men of their class, and where defiance usually met with severe sanctions, the idioms of obligation, self-sacrifice, and duty remained more natural than those of autonomy, self-determination, and willfulness” (40). Similarly, Mrs. Cope never fully claims credit for the success of her estate. She tells her farmhand Mrs. Pritchard that she has “the best kept place in the county” because she works harder than anyone else, but during the same conversation, she repeatedly mentions her prayers of thanksgiving for what the Lord has given her (O’Connor 178). The pride she takes in her work must be tempered with overtones of Christianity; to avoid appearing to take too much credit or agency upon herself, she must attribute the ultimate credit to God.

Another way that slaveholding widows maintained their status was by making it clear that they were superior to male slaves and workers. According to Wood, “widowhood increased slaveholding women’s determination to defend the wealth, connections, social standing, and legal protections that slaveholders enjoyed” (43). For these women, maintaining class barriers was vital to keeping a sense of authority over the men on their plantations. It was in their best interest that the white elite class remain intact; without it, they would have no leverage in society. Although “A Circle in the Fire” is set after the end of slavery, Mrs. Cope maintains this sort of elitist divide between herself and her black male employees. When one of these employees goes the long way around the property to avoid raising the blade on a mower to go through the gate, what seems to be a small indiscretion causes a large reaction in Mrs. Cope. She thinks that they are going the long way around “at her expense” because they are just “too lazy” to do their work as they should (O’Connor 176). After a verbal rebuke, she mentally aligns “her Negroes” with the nut grass that she is pulling up, as they are equally “destructive and

impersonal” to her (O’Connor 177). Mrs. Cope takes ownership of the black employees just as she takes ownership of the land, placing her less in the position of a manager and more in the position of a master. In the story’s beginning, she does seem to have sovereign control of the estate, obeyed by the gossipy helper Mrs. Pritchard, her husband Mr. Pritchard, and the estate’s black workers; notably, no powerful white males are a part of her estate.

From the first mention of setting in the story, however, the reader is given a clue that this particular day will be a day of change on the land. The opening establishes the action to come, stating that “sometimes the last line of trees was a solid gray-blue wall a little darker than the sky,” but that on this particular afternoon, “it was almost black and behind it the sky was a livid glaring white” (O’Connor 175). As Sally Virginia, Mrs. Cope’s daughter, watches her mother and Mrs. Pritchard working from inside the house, she observes that “the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall, trying to break through” (176). She also describes the boundary of trees in her mother’s woods as a “sentinel line” (176). This military language implies that the estate is under attack from some outside force. What that outside force is becomes clear with the arrival of Powell Boyd, the orphaned son of a poor white former farmhand, and his two orphaned friends. When an old pick-up truck drops the boys off at the edge of the property, they walk in a single-file line towards Mrs. Cope, in a style reminiscent of marching. At the moment of their arrival, Mrs. Pritchard has just finished warning Mrs. Cope that if real trouble were to come to the estate, “it wouldn’t be nothing you could do but fling up your hands” (178). Mrs. Pritchard then folds her arms and gazes down the road “as if she could easily enough see all these fine hills flattened to nothing” (178). This fatalistic comment foreshadows the destruction that is soon to follow the arrival of the three boys. When the boys come closer, the military language is applied specifically to Powell Boyd, who has one eye “with

a slight cast to it,” causing his gaze to seem to come from “two directions at once, as if it had them surrounded” (179). As he talks to Mrs. Cope, he stares at her with one eye, while the other assesses the land, “examining the house and the white water tower behind it and the chicken houses and the pastures that rolled away on either side until they met the first line of woods” (179). Powell seems already to be making his battle plans, threatening the property with his gaze alone.

After Mrs. Cope begins to talk to the boys, she discovers that they live in a housing development in Atlanta. Powell’s two comrades tell Mrs. Cope that Powell talks about the estate constantly, saying that “everything” was there, and even telling them that he wanted to come there when he died (180). It seems that for Powell, the estate he grew up on was his idea of heaven. Once again, the space of the estate is the propelling force behind the plot of the story. Powell and his fellow invaders come from a busy, industrial setting. They desire what they have mentally constructed as the paradisiacal pleasures of the country life. In historical terms, the boys’ desires seem to be for the Old South, a legendary agrarian, rural world that existed before the Civil War and the collapse of plantations. There is more than history at play here, however; feminist critic Louise Westling argues that O’Connor’s use of setting stretches beyond pure regional writing. Westling writes that when O’Connor’s Southern experience was “coupled with her sacramental view of the natural world as bristling with spiritual meaning,” the results were “landscapes which on one level are irrefutably Southern but on another are universal” (133-134). Mrs. Cope’s estate is a setting where deeply political and philosophical themes can unfold. In the sense of philosophical space relations, the orphaned boys are relating to an ancient binary between “the Ideal City” and “the Garden.”

Modern philosopher Abraham Akermann explores this binary in his article “Femininity and Masculinity in City-Form: Philosophical Urbanism as a History of Consciousness.”

Akermann emphasizes the historical roots of the myths; he asserts that “the Garden” was connected to femininity at its origin, writing that “symbolizing fertility, the female gatherers of fruits and vegetables become the Garden's emissaries. Another myth, that of the Citadel, then arises along with the first appearance of citadels and forts. Evolving from the Myth of the Garden, the Myth of the Citadel subsequently becomes a masculine paradigm” (230). The Garden is associated with nature and organic growth, whereas the Citadel, also called “the Ideal City,” emerges with early human civilization. Akermann also suggests a divine allegiance in the Garden. He references the biblical story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain kills his brother Abel in the fields and then flees to build a city. In Akermann’s interpretation, the story illustrates that at the end of “selflessness” in the Garden, “the dread of human existence emerges through the discovery of reason and through the rise and decline of the Citadel” (232). If the Garden is aligned with sacred nature, the Ideal City cannot escape an alignment with sin.

Through another lens, the feminine Garden and the masculine Ideal City can be viewed as combatants in an internal battle of the human subconscious. Akermann points out that in Friedrich Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche sees Greek tragedies arising from two subconscious impulses: the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Each impulse is named for a god and relates to a myth: “Emerging from nature's wilderness, Dionysus, the god of wine, agriculture and fertility, carries the earmark of uninhibited passion, while Apollo - the god of prophecy and the patron of cities and city walls - is associated with control and the imposition of limits” (Akermann 232). Akermann adds that “intuitively, the Citadel is perceived as representing severance as well as stability, solitude, and solidity” and also “evolves into an

expression of self-interest and egoism” (233). Over time, the Ideal City comes to stand for more than just an arrangement of geometric order; it stands for competitive drives and monetary pursuits. As such, “the Ideal City” cannot be ideal for everyone, especially in an increasingly-oppressive capitalist system. In “A Circle in the Fire,” it is not ideal for the three orphaned boys.

The story makes clear that Powell Boyd is unhappy living in a housing development in Atlanta. One of his friends tells Mrs. Cope that Powell “ain’t ever satisfied with where he’s at except this place here” (182). When Mrs. Cope asks more about the “nice new developments” that the three live in, one boy replies that “the only way you can tell your own is by smell” (182). This simple comment has a number of implications about the differences between life in the city and life in the country. Like the Ideal City, Powell’s experience of Atlanta is about order and symmetry, economizing space and leaving no room for personalization or originality. Mrs. Cope’s land is the agrarian ideal for Powell. The Garden is a place where economic class does not prevent him from having freedom and adventure even if, in reality, Mrs. Cope owns the property.

Mrs. Cope’s attitude toward her estate reveals less about the binary of the Ideal City and the Garden than it does about the overlap of the two. When applying these myths to the reality of life, Akermann debunks the existence of a Garden that exists separately from the Ideal City, and vice versa. He argues that “it seems that throughout modernity the Myth of the Garden found its way, time and again, into well-intended urban schemes, only to become perpetually consumed by the Citadel” (242). In a modern world, the distinction between city and country becomes harder to make. More often than not, the same values that rule the Ideal City creep into the Garden as well. There is no true escape from forced linear order and economic pressures. The estate is a place of growth, but not the wild, unhindered growth that takes place in the mythical Garden.



Mrs. Cope imposes complete order on her estate, even down to the way her farmhands drive the mower. Instead of exalting the virtues of altruism and selflessness, it is clear that she cares a great deal about her personal ownership of the property. She feels the need to defend the estate's ownership throughout the story, especially when she feels that it is being challenged by the boys. As they seem to silently defy her with their blank stares, she repeats phrases such as "this is my place" (186). Mrs. Cope's fear of fire is significant as well; fire is wild and uncontrollable, and she seems sure that if the boys throw down a single cigarette, the entire place will burn. To return to the language of the Dionysian impulse, the fire seems to be the biggest symbol for the "uninhibited passion" associated with the Garden.

Louise Westling agrees that the fire is symbolic, but she views that symbolism in the wider lens of invaded female domains. She writes that the mother-daughter pairs in O'Connor's stories "all preserve a fear of disaster hovering just at the borders of consciousness. This fear is a defensive understanding of the predatory forces that they have only narrowly survived" (146). As land-owning widows struggled to support themselves and their families throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, the challenge of defending their right to be independent was daunting. Since Mrs. Cope has already overcome this challenge in some sense, she seems to experience hesitation when considering bringing a male authority figure to her estate. At a point of extreme frustration, she does say, "I think I have been very nice to you boys. I've fed you twice. Now I'm going into town and if you're still here when I come back, I'll call the sheriff" (189). Yet, Sally Virginia looks back and sees that the boys have not moved. One explanation for their refusal to leave is their total disregard for legality, but it is also possible that they are reading Mrs. Cope more clearly than she recognizes. If she were to actually call the sheriff to her land, Mrs. Cope would be admitting the necessity of involving a male in her affairs.

Literary critic Peter A. Smith notes that although O'Connor's female protagonists may appear "unlikable" to readers, "all deserve credit for employing a clever strategy in attempting to survive in a man's world while essentially manless, and all deserve sympathy because they are faced with an impossible task in having to synthesize aspects of both gender roles in order to maintain their livelihoods" (35). To this point, Mrs. Cope is successful at imposing a masculine sense of order and authority over her estate, but it fails when she must interact with the three boys. Instead of using what Smith deems her "managerial tone," Mrs. Cope addresses the boys in a maternal manner (37). She assesses their blank stares and mentally exclaims that, "They were staring because they were hungry!" (180). Her reaction is to offer them food; what she fails to notice, however, is that even with the offer of food, "their expressions, composed and unsatisfied, didn't lighten any. They looked as if they were used to being hungry and it was no business of hers" (180). A bit later in the story, when Mrs. Cope tries to shame a rock-throwing Powell with the phrase "I'm sure your mother would be ashamed of you," it has little effect and he continues to look "through" her (188-189). The boys do not trust Mrs. Cope or what Smith calls "her insincere maternal solicitude" (37). Expanding on the lack of true maternal instincts in Mrs. Cope, O'Connor scholar Suzanne Morrow Paulson adds that "in O'Connor's work, assertive widows assume their dead husband's power and take on stereotypically male characteristics. They are aggressive and unwilling to nurture anything but their own egos" (39). Mrs. Cope is only willing to help the boys in order to get them off her property. It seems that she correctly assesses their hunger, but she does not realize that they are hungry for something beyond the crackers and sandwiches that she condescendingly offers them. They are hungry for freedom, power and, by the story's end, dominance and destruction.

To put the struggle in terms of Southern femininity, Mrs. Cope does not understand how to wield her power over boys who will not recognize her as a Southern lady who should be treated with reverence. Smith claims that most of O'Connor's women characters "firmly maintain that, as 'ladies' in the traditional Southern sense of the term, they are entitled to the respect, protection and labor of those around them, particularly those of a lower caste" (36). To return to the example of Mrs. Cope's prayers, it is worth noting that her prayers of thanks are often oriented around her status in society. She tells Sally Virginia to be thankful for who they are, for "they might have had to live in a development themselves or they might have been Negroes or they might have been in iron lungs or they might have been Europeans ridden in boxcars like cattle" (190). Instead of being grateful for life in and of itself, Mrs. Cope is only grateful for the privileged kind of life that she has been living; her prayers are more boasts of her class status than anything else. The invading boys, in contrast, stand to gain nothing from their poor place in the Southern hierarchy. They are undoubtedly the antagonists of the story, but literary critic William M. Burke argues that their position is more complex than that. He argues that O'Connor employs two types of protagonist-antagonist relationships: relationships of metaphor and relationships of metonymy. The relationships of metaphor appear in stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find," which ends in a connection between the two main characters. But in the relationships of metonymy, O'Connor's stories "dramatize a world involved in competing and unreconciled moral dimensions" (Burke 100). He adds that, in these relationships, the story world "is not whole and complete. There remain the competing moral schemes suggested but not clarified, and this disjunction may suggest an unspoken quality in her world of the ominous, of the dark and disturbing, of the malign" (Burke 100). Applying Burke's theory to "A Circle in the Fire," the inability of Mrs. Cope to communicate effectively with the boys

signifies the different ways in which they view reality. While she draws power from her financial status and her property, their power is vulgar and violent. One of the phrases that illustrates this point most comes from Powell's friend Garfield, who remembers how Powell would often remark in the housing development, "Goddam, it was a horse down there name Gene and if I had him here I'd bust this concrete to hell riding him!" (182). Powell does not respect Mrs. Cope's ownership of the horse, he does not shy away from the foul language she disapproves of, and he clearly has a taste for demolition.

In contrast to her mother, Sally Virginia also attempts to perform a masculine destructiveness. She is far less willing than her mother to be identified as traditionally feminine; in fact, when one of the boys makes a comment about her being "another woman" on the estate, Sally Virginia stands "with her back against the wall, squinting fiercely as if she had been slapped in the face and couldn't see who had done it" (185). The girl recognizes the phrase as an insult, even if she cannot quite identify why it strikes her that way. In Louise Westling's approximation, the character of Sally Virginia follows the pattern of O'Connor subverting the Southern belle ideal. She writes, "Nothing could be further from the beauty and grace of the Southern belle than the glasses, ugly braces, and extra pounds of O'Connor's twelve-year-old girls" (Westling 146). Beyond her appearance, Sally Virginia approaches the boys with a violence that shocks her mother. She tells Mrs. Cope that she wants to "beat the daylight" out of one of the boys, to which Mrs. Cope responds, "Ladies don't beat the daylight out of people. You keep out of their way" (185). The use of "their way" is telling; in a sense, Mrs. Cope seems to be telling Sally Virginia that the boys have more right to be around the property than she does. While her mother hopes that the boys have left the estate, Sally Virginia decides to go on an adventure in the woods and see for herself. She dresses up for the occasion, putting on a pair of

overalls and a man's felt hat, and "arming herself with two pistols in a decorated holster that she had fastened around her waist" (190). Mrs. Cope responds with a "tragic look," then exclaims: "When are you going to grow up? What's going to become of you? I look at you and I want to cry! Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard!" (190). Identifying her unfeminine child with her hired help reveals what Mrs. Cope believes about gender and class; when Sally Virginia does something unladylike, she is aligned with lower-class status. In the same vein, Sally Virginia responds by saying, "Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain't you" (190). Westling emphasizes Sally Virginia's use of the word "ain't," asserting that "the child deliberately speaks in poor-white dialect as she defies her mother's efforts to make her conventionally feminine" (147). By using this dialect, Sally Virginia pushes against her mother's wishes, but she also reifies the gender and class associations that Mrs. Cope has made.

Smith offers an alternative reading of Sally Virginia's behavior, one that attributes her with a higher level of consciousness about gender; he argues that "Sally Virginia reveals that she, like Mrs. Pritchard, understands what her mother cannot: that the boys have no use for the Southern code of behavior by which a lady is owed deference, that their broken homes give them little experience in knuckling under to domestic authority, and that they will respond only to pure masculine power" (37-38). In this interpretation of Sally Virginia's character, she is not enacting poverty just because it upsets her mother, but also because she recognizes that Mrs. Pritchard's world view is more realistic than her mother's. Throughout "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Pritchard provides pessimistic, yet accurate, commentary on the story's events. When the boys cause chaos on the estate, Mrs. Pritchard repeatedly tells her employer that "there ain't a thing you can do about it" (189). In an omniscient moment in the story, the reader is privy to Mrs. Cope's opinions of Mrs. Pritchard's way of thinking: "Mrs. Cope prided herself on the way she handled the type

of mind that Mrs. Pritchard had. When Mrs. Pritchard saw signs and omens, she exposed them calmly for the figments of imagination that they were” (189). Superstition is often used as a part of the lower-class female trope, especially in Southern literature; in O’Connor’s story, however, Mrs. Pritchard’s signs and omens are really just astute observations about the balance of power and the futility of Mrs. Cope’s alternating attempts to mother and shame the boys. Mrs. Cope is the character who is deluding herself into thinking that the boys’ age and poverty give her the agency to control them.

The poverty of the boys resonates on multiple levels in O’Connor’s work, allowing them to represent not only urban space and social change, but also religious righteousness. Critic Carter Martin argues that O’Connor was writing about Southern poverty not only from a historical perspective, but also from a humanitarian angle. Martin points out that despite the fact that she “cited relatives, friends, and the little ladies from Dubuque, all of whom wished that she would write fiction that was easier to understand, or less violent, or more uplifting,” O’Connor continued to write about impoverished characters (458). In *Mystery & Manners*, O’Connor comments on this trend in her own work, attesting that a novelist’s “concern with poverty is with a poverty fundamental to man” (131). Martin finds that as a result of this attitude, it is often the characters coping with poverty who represent the spiritual plight of the average person, whereas middle and upper-class characters represent flawed values. Mrs. Cope takes a great deal of pride in the land and status she possesses; despite her surface-level piety, she seems to place her deeper faith in what Southern literary critic Barbara Wilkie Telford calls the “secular work ethic” (29). She is able to keep up the pretense of Christianity, but her worship is really more oriented around her land and herself than any deity.

The boys, however, choose to align themselves with the masculine “Gawd” figure, especially in relation to Mrs. Cope’s woods. Mrs. Pritchard reports that when farm hand Hollis tells the boys not to drop cigarettes in her woods, they bring into question Mrs. Cope’s ownership. One of them comments, “Man, Gawd owns them woods and her too” (186). In this one casual comment, Mrs. Cope’s foundation of self-worth becomes unsteady. In *Risen Sons: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of History*, John S. Desmond connects this concept with O’Connor’s perceptions of the modern world. He writes, “what O’Connor found to be ‘grotesque’ in the modern world was its attempt to deny the true spiritual grotesqueness of man, a denial made by rational and Gnostic claims to human self-sufficiency” (Desmond 37). If the boys are designed to correct this spiritual grotesqueness in Mrs. Cope, the title and the story’s last image—“as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them”—have a more distinctly Christian message. The fiery furnace referred to is likely that from the biblical King Nebuchadnezzar story in the Book of Daniel. In the story, King Nebuchadnezzar has a giant golden idol built for worship. When three Jewish men refuse to worship the idol, Nebuchadnezzar has them thrown into a fiery furnace, but an angel of God saves them by clearing a circle. The experience is a religious awakening for Nebuchadnezzar, who decides to worship God, forgoing the idol.

A main difference between this story of Nebuchadnezzar and the story of Mrs. Cope seems to be the purpose of the fire. While Nebuchadnezzar orders the fire, Mrs. Cope is deeply afraid of fire, and the fire in the woods is set by the three boys. Fire has religious significance in Christianity, however, and specifically in the Baptist denomination. As religious literary critic Albert Sonnenfeld demonstrates in his article “Flannery O’Connor: The Catholic Writer as Baptist,” “there are two orders of baptism in the *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, John the

Baptist's and Christ's own" (446). While the new order of Christ focused on "instruction through parable and example," the old order centered on "fire and action" (Sonnenfeld 446). The boys certainly do not belong in the new order; they are far too rude and crass to be leading by example. In regards to the old order, however, the boys do prove their point about Mrs. Cope's ownership of the woods with action and fire. Sally Virginia overhears a conversation about ownership just before they take their matches to the brush:

"Listen,' the big boy said, sitting down quietly in the water with the little one still moored to his shoulders, 'it don't belong to nobody.'

'It's ours,' the little boy said" (192).

While the bog boy expresses the inability of anyone to own the land, the little boy claims it for the three orphans. Both ideas reach the same conclusion: Mrs. Cope is not truly in charge of the woods.

Despite Sally Virginia's initial bravado with her outfit and her threats, she can do little more than watch as the boys set out to destroy her mother's property. From the first moment she spots them, she begins to edge back toward the pasture. Westling notes the importance of pastures versus woods in O'Connor's works, stating that "woods serve distinctly different functions from pastures or cultivated lands, and both are closely associated with the women of the stories" (157). If the woods are a space where Sally Virginia can be wild and violent, the pasture is a space where she can feel safe in the order and containment of her mother's construction. Yet, Sally Virginia is not safe; she tries to run across the field, "but her legs were too heavy and she stood there, weighed down with some new unplaced misery that she had never felt before" (193). In spatial terms, the word "unplaced" can be interpreted literally, as Sally Virginia and Mrs. Cope are losing the fortress she describes at the beginning of the story. The



misery could come from an awakening of gender, class, religion, or perhaps even all three. Maria Vallas, who has written extensively on O'Connor and materialism, writes that "there is every indication, in Mrs. Cope's case, that she has some kind of epiphany. When her greatest fear is realized and it is clear she is about to lose the property and possessions she defines herself by, she is left with nothing but herself" (33). Indeed, the reader sees Mrs. Cope's reaction as mediated through Sally Virginia, who looks up at her mother's face and thinks that "it was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself" (193). The child wittingly refers to the very disadvantaged people that her mother often thanks God that she is not. Without the power associated with her land, however, Mrs. Cope ends the story without any more advantages than any other Southern woman.

The variety of O'Connor criticism presented here proves her skill as a thought-provoking writer; a story that is less than twenty pages long has sparked numerous discussions and debates. When speculating on O'Connor's success, professor and O'Connor family friend Ted R. Spivey wrote that "maybe there is a fantastic and baroque *South* in the soul of every American, partially submerged by our pragmatic, mechanistic civilization, now emerging in the lives of those no longer satisfied with the machine-dominant, man-isolating social *system* we have willed" (qtd. in Morrow Paulson 137-138). The orphaned boys from Atlanta may arrive at Mrs. Cope's farm in hopes of reclaiming that fantastic and baroque *South*, the same *South* that Spivey sees in every American. They reclaim their independence, the land, and some vision of a "Gawd" who favors them, operating under the idea that the proud Mrs. Cope deserves a come-uppance. Mrs. Cope manages her life on the farm through the labor of lower classes and the supposed blessings of God, but class divisions and strange prophets destroy her and her farm. Perhaps the salient point

is that the fantastic and baroque *South* cannot be attained—or even maintained—in the complex American system of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

When reading “A Circle in the Fire” in modern times, the issues and intersections of gender, class, and religion may seem intentional. But even though retrospect makes it easy to apply both historical and feminist criticisms to O’Connor’s stories, it is important to note that the writer did not see the effects of society’s gender binaries in her own work. In a correspondence with her friend “A,” O’Connor wrote that “on the subject of the feminist business, I just never think, that is never think of the qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine” (qtd. in Westling 145). Yet, Westling points to a pattern which repeats itself in a number of the short stories: “Males are usually aggressive and vindictive, whereas females are rendered passive by punishment” (145). “A Circle in the Fire” ends with three boys shrieking in victory while Mrs. Cope and Sally Virginia watch their power and agency burn away. Other stories conclude in the defeat, abandonment and even death of female characters.

Are readers to believe, then, that O’Connor was unaware of the gendered patterns in her work? It is apparent that Southern female writers such as O’Connor, Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers depicted some of the “matriarchal traditions” of their region, but in staying true to realistic writing, they could not allow these traditions to overrun patriarchal foundations (Westling 38). In “A Circle in the Fire,” Mrs. Cope is a character who internalizes harmful stereotypes about how a land-owning Southern woman should behave. She manages her workers with strength and superiority, yet addresses the young male intruders with a maternal attitude, and ultimately proves to be helpless against their destruction. The author may never have thought of feminism, but that does not mean that she was beyond its influence. On the contrary, O’Connor aligns male characters with the righteousness of “Gawd” and victory, exposing a

deeply ingrained gender bias. Her experience reveals that one need not recognize the patriarchal structure of society by name to feel its effects; it was in her religion, her region's history, and her daily life.

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