

“Study it and git your fill’: Gluttonous and Destructive Voyeurism in O’Connor’s ‘The Lame Shall Enter First.’” Paper presented at the Flannery O’Connor Society Session at “In Concert: Literature and the Other Arts,” the 87th annual conference of the **South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLMA)**, in Durham, NC. Nov. 2015.

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Gluttonous and Destructive Voyeurism in O’Connor’s “The Lame Shall Enter First”

Flannery O’Connor’s 1962 short story, “The Lame Shall Enter First” focuses on a father’s neglect of his son and the father’s misguided and failed attempts to reform a violent youth, and it reveals O’Connor’s preoccupation with sight. Rufus Johnson, the violent youth and the character with the most acute vision, perceptively reads and manipulates Sheppard and his son, Norton, by controlling their own flawed perceptions of reality. Through Johnson, the power of vision ultimately becomes conflated with consumption, control, and destruction.

Early drafts and reworkings of the material reveal the fact that, even in its earliest inception, “The Lame Shall Enter First” was and is a story concerned with vision. And the story in its *published* form is permeated with references to sight, vision, eyes, looking, watching, gazing, staring, and leering. Every single page contains multiple such references, and almost every action, emotion, transformation, or description is given in terms of a character’s eyes or perception. In order to depict a character’s emotional response to a given situation, O’Connor constantly refers to eyes hardening (450, 468), gleaming (462, 465), crumbling (451), or growing hollow (461), just to name a few examples. And within this story, almost all of O’Connor’s ocular references emphasize the act of looking as an attempt toward control, control that

becomes associated first with consumption and eventually with destruction.

Now most, if not all, writers will inevitably have a preoccupation with vision. Writers observe the world in order to project their own interpretations upon it through the act of writing, and then readers gaze upon the writer's work in order to create their own interpretation of the writer's words. For almost any writer, then, the act of observing carries with it a tension between the writer and the world while the act of writing brings with it a potential conflict or tension between authorial intent and the reader's interpretation. Looking becomes an act of conflict.

O'Connor was especially likely to be conscious of the significance of sight and the anxiety experienced by the object of someone's gaze. Susanna Gilbert argues that readers should interpret O'Connor's work—especially her final collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, which includes “The Lame Shall Enter First”—with an awareness of O'Connor's almost lifelong struggle with systemic lupus erythematosus (114-15). Although O'Connor often claimed that lupus did not affect her writing, Gilbert argues that O'Connor's lupus “intruded far too regularly in her daily life to be discounted lightly” (116). After all, O'Connor witnessed her father's struggle with and death from lupus at an early age. Her own struggles with lupus caused O'Connor to return to Andalusia in Milledgeville, Georgia where her symptoms organized her daily life and forced her to rely completely on her mother. O'Connor's swollen face, resulting from steroid treatments, would have certainly impaired her vision, especially when combined with both mental and physical exhaustion. The unpredictable and seemingly omnipresent symptoms of this terminal disease had to have as profound an impact on her psyche as it did her body and must have certainly affected not just O'Connor's daily life but also the composition of her fiction, permeating it with a concern for sight and vision.

Furthermore, despite various claims to the contrary, O'Connor admits that, at times, she

felt patronized, hostile, resentful, and angry about people's reaction to her crutches (117) and even compares herself to H. Mote, the protagonist of her novel, *Wise Blood*, Hulga from "Good Country People," and the Misfit from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (115-117). In such an association, she identifies with the cripples or the grotesque figures of her fiction, which would include the club-footed Rufus Johnson in this story, the character who enacts his own gaze most forcefully upon others and defies the attempts of all others to do the same to him. Johnson has a power of vision matching O'Connor's, and like Johnson, O'Connor feels the power of people's gaze all too keenly and resents it, especially when she feels that she—her body *or* her fiction—is being misread.

The anxiety of being watched and the implicit power that exists with the watcher has been an object of study for both modern and postmodern theorists. About a decade after O'Connor's story, Michel Foucault would discuss Jeremy Bentham's nineteenth-century *Panopticon*, stating that "visibility is a trap" (97), associating immobility or lack of autonomy with being seen. To be the subject of the gaze is to cease existence as a subject and to become an object. Anyone caught beneath the power of another's gaze, whether he or she is a literal prisoner in Bentham's *Panopticon* or an innocent individual within the line of sight of another, loses autonomy and selfhood. Foucault clearly delineates both the self-conscious powerlessness of the object of the gaze and also the power that arrives to the watcher through the act of watching, for to have clear vision is to hold the power to define and control others while limiting their own vision.

In O'Connor's story, the trio of characters—Johnson, the doctor; Norton, his son; and Sheppard, the troubled youth—all perceive the world differently and with varied levels of clarity, and Sheppard is ultimately the character with the weakest vision. Although he attempts to

actively transform those around him, his attempts are in vain and his ineffectuality is signified by the language concerning his own acts of looking. With an irony typical of O'Connor, Sheppard is blind to his own blindness, trusting in his ability to quickly read and understand the people around him. He misunderstands his son's grief over the death of his mother, Sheppard's wife, labeling it as mere selfishness. Meanwhile his first meeting with Rufus Johnson exhibits a similarly flawed certainty in his cursory judgments of others. As soon as he notices Johnson's club foot and before Johnson and Sheppard exchange a single word, he confidently determines a diagnosis: "The case was clear to Sheppard instantly. His [Johnson's] mischief was compensation for the foot" (450). Just as Sheppard fails to accurately read his son, he fails to accurately read Johnson, blaming his criminal activities on his environment, upbringing, and club foot. Even when Johnson is given a loving home, conducive to self-improvement, however, he remains a criminal, inherently malignant.

Sheppard's efforts to reform Johnson are ultimately ineffectual. When first explaining his plans to have Johnson live with them, he tells Norton, "I can't see a child eating out of garbage cans" (446), in which the act of seeing becomes conflated with the act of allowing, with giving permission or affirmation of an event. Sheppard recognizes the power inherent in the act of looking, but his sight is simply too weak to wield that power. When Norton later tells Johnson that, thanks to Sheppard's intervention, he will no longer have to eat from the garbage, Johnson responds, "I eat out of garbage cans...because I like to eat out of garbage cans. See?" Ultimately, Johnson chooses to do the very act that Sheppard will not allow, and both actions are described with references to seeing, the act of controlling.

Part of the control implicit in acute vision is the ability to control the vision of others, and Sheppard hopes to control the direction of Johnson's gaze in order to reform him, thus redefining

him into an individual Sheppard deems acceptable. This attempt at control arrives in the form of the telescope Sheppard purchases for Johnson in hopes that a view of the stars will motivate Johnson to forego his criminal activities and reach what Sheppard interprets to be his true potential: “He wanted to give the boy something to reach for besides his neighbor’s goods. He wanted to stretch his horizons. He wanted him to *see* the universe, to see the darkest parts of it could be penetrated. He would have given anything to be able to put a telescope in Johnson’s hands” (451). When the stars become something for Johnson to see, they also become something for him to reach for as an alternative to “his neighbor’s goods.” In this way, the act of looking becomes conflated with the act of reaching, grabbing, and stealing. To look is to take and to reappropriate.

Sheppard’s gaze, however, is all too limited. Sheppard is unable to see Johnson’s true character and misreads Johnson’s belligerence as a defense mechanism. When Johnson is accused of vandalism and—significantly—*leering* into a window, Sheppard misplaces his trust and vouches for Johnson, claiming responsibility for him despite the warnings of the police officers, misreading the police as lazy and prejudiced while ignoring his own son’s warnings and still unable to recognize Johnson’s true nature. When Johnson later smugly informs him that he is, in fact, guilty, Sheppard is unable to comprehend. Admitting his own limited vision in an attempt to deny the truth, he stammers, “I didn’t see you leave” (473).

Even in the final dreadful scene of enlightenment when Sheppard’s sight becomes as strong as possible, he still resists seeing the truth. When Johnson finally leaves his home in handcuffs, shouting allegations about Sheppard, Johnson realizes how he has misread the boy and neglected his own son’s needs. Responding to a reporter, Sheppard states, “I did more for him than I did for my own child” (481). As he goes inside, he repeats this statement to himself,

consoling himself and justifying his actions. Eventually, though, this self-justification becomes a self-accusation and a realization of his own limited vision: “His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation. Norton’s face rose before him, empty, forlorn, his left eye listing almost imperceptibly toward the outer rim as if it could not bear a full view of grief” (481). In typical fashion, O’Connor provides a revelation at the final moment, and Sheppard only achieves any true vision after he has failed in his mission to redeem Johnson and has failed his fatherly duties to his son.

The tragic victim of Sheppard’s failure is most assuredly his son, Norton, the character with whom the reader is probably intended to direct the most sympathy. Norton’s vision, while not quite as weak as his father’s, is still limited, and O’Connor goes to great lengths to make this evident even in the opening scene in which Norton prepares his breakfast of chocolate cake, oblivious to his father’s gaze, the impotent object underneath the gaze of the invisible watcher. Furthermore, O’Connor implies that Norton has a lazy eye or some other kind of visual impairment: “He had very large round ears that leaned away from his head and seemed to pull his eyes slightly too far apart.... 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” (445). Before Norton is allowed to speak a word in the text, he is depicted as oblivious, the object of the gaze, and unable to focus his own eyesight. His faded eyes and shirt emphasize his own weakened vision, foreshadowing his own role as the ultimate victim of the story.

Norton eventually succumbs to Johnson’s control and manipulation, letting Johnson teach him about the Bible, heaven, and hell. Offered no vision from his father, Norton allows Johnson to control his sight for him, for it is the arrival of Johnson that first motivates an active sense of

looking in the child. When Norton hears Johnson's uneven footsteps in his house, his persona takes on an extreme transformation: "All at once his eyes became alert.... He remained motionless, only his eyes turning" (452). It's worth noting that the only character capable of inspiring any power of sight to Norton is Johnson, rather than Sheppard. Norton's weak vision, limited by what his father refuses to acknowledge or discuss and by Johnson's manipulative explanation of heavenly justice, becomes distorted. When Johnson tells Norton that his mother is in heaven, he says, "It's in the sky somewhere...but you got to be dead to get there. You can't go in no space ship" (462), and when Norton asks where he will go upon dying, Johnson answers, "Right now you'd go where she is...but if you live long enough, you'll go to hell" (462).

Norton's perception of the universe, then, is constructed by Johnson as a warning that the only way for Norton to reunite with his mother is to die soon in order to get to heaven. Exposed only to knowledge of the material world by his father and given a flawed explanation of heaven and hell by Johnson, Norton misunderstands the nature of heaven and becomes obsessed with seeing his mother in the stars through a telescope, an obsession that acts as the catalyst driving Norton to suicide. Norton dies without any kind of spiritual revelation, driven to suicide at the age of ten because his father fails to recognize his neglect of his own son and because Norton's view of reality becomes distorted by Johnson, constricted within the narrow beam of the telescope, aimed at physical stars rather than a spiritual heaven.

Rufus Johnson, on the other hand, is the only character who exhibits any acuteness of vision, and O'Connor depicts him with "steel-colored and very still" eyes (449) and says he stares at others "stonily" (450), "with a black sheen" (450) or "a glint of challenge" (451). Every time Johnson looks at the world, he interprets it and imposes his own meaning upon it, challenging creation to argue. He sees through people and controls what others see. Unlike

Sheppard, Johnson understands his own personality. When Sheppard offers to help Johnson discover the motivation behind his criminal behavior, Johnson replies, “I ain’t asked for no explanation.... I already know why I do what I do.... [Satan] has me in his power” (450). While Sheppard rejects this explanation as a sign of Johnson’s neglected and closed-minded upbringing, Johnson is ultimately revealed to be an inherently destructive character. Suzanne Morrow Paulson labels Johnson as “a striking version of a character type common to O’Connor’s stories: the vicious child” (21) and claims that Johnson is “O’Connor’s most explicit rebuttal of the notion that upbringing and environment ought to excuse bad behavior” (21). Contrary to Sheppard’s belief, Johnson neither needs nor desires help or rehabilitation. When literary critic John Hawkes noted Johnson’s demonic nature in an article discussing the presence of the Devil in O’Connor’s work, O’Connor replied to him with a letter that states, “In [‘The Lame Shall Enter First’] I’ll admit that the Devil’s voice is my own” (Paulson 141). Such a statement reveals Johnson’s inherently evil nature and the possibility that his condemnation of the pseudo-intellectual Sheppard is a channel for O’Connor’s own frustrations.

In many ways, Johnson’s most potent attribute is his power of vision, his ability to read and deceive others. Johnson, like O’Connor as the insightful writer, has a keen sense of observation and will note and condemn the pretentious and the false. Furthermore, Johnson, like O’Connor, feels frustrated and angry when others impose their flawed gazes and misperceive what they see. Johnson defies all of Sheppard’s attempts at imposing any gaze or interpretation upon him, and he sees through all of Sheppard’s pretensions, ultimately understanding Sheppard better than Norton or even Sheppard himself. At one point, he complains that Sheppard “thinks he’s Jesus Christ!” (459). Meanwhile, as he is being arrested toward the end of the story, Johnson tells a reporter that he wants to expose Sheppard as a fraud, claiming, “He don’t know

his left hand from his right, he don't have as much sense as his crazy kid!" (480). Ultimately, Johnson recognizes Sheppard's blindness and Norton's distorted vision. He is the only character who understands the other characters in the story and who is able to manipulate what others see in the story. He rejects Sheppard's offered telescope and instead controls Norton, encouraging his interest in Christianity in order to annoy and infuriate Sheppard. Again, it is this manipulation of Norton's vision that leads to Norton's death, which transforms Sheppard's revelation into a futile awakening of what should have been.

Johnson's gaze is truly a violent one, as is any gaze used with any sense of power or control, and in the text, the act of looking becomes conflated with the act of eating or consuming. The second line of the story combines Sheppard's act of eating with his act of surveillance of his son (445). Meanwhile, when Sheppard first meets Johnson, he is unable to control his eyes which "dropped involuntarily to [Johnson's club] foot." Johnson notices this as he notices everything and quickly responds, "Study it and git your fill" (450). Looking or studying becomes equated with eating, and any sense of eating in this text will inevitably remind the reader of the opening scene in which Norton consumes a quarter of a stale chocolate cake, covered in ketchup and peanut butter before eventually vomiting under the close scrutiny of his father. In a similar vein, when Sheppard realizes that Johnson is no longer using the telescope, Norton explains to him that Johnson "said he was fed up looking at stars" (464). The power-hungry act of gazing is an attempt at control and is a gluttonous activity of consumption.

While the act of looking is a metaphorically violent act in which the viewer projects meaning and anxiety upon the object of the gaze, O'Connor allows the act of looking to be associated with eating and with other literal signs of violence and destruction as well. When Johnson eats, O'Connor states that "he tore into the sandwich and ate steadily until he finished

it” (454). His gaze and appetite are larger than anyone else’s, and when he rejects the telescope and chooses instead to read the encyclopedia, O’Connor states that “he devoured the encyclopedia as he devoured his dinner, steadily and without dint to his appetite. Each subject appeared to enter his head, be ravaged, and thrown out” (467). The act of looking has already been associated with eating, which is now associated with violent destruction. This final imagery centered around the encyclopedia effectively equates looking or reading with eating and with the act of ravaging or destroying.

This conflation appears once more when Johnson attempts to prove his faith to Sheppard by eating a page from the Bible. Johnson shouts, “I’ll show you I believe it!” (477) and tears out a page of the Bible to eat. Rather than read or gaze upon the Bible, Johnson will eat it, and in this way, eating becomes an act of destruction and a show or act of display: “He fixed his eyes on Sheppard. His jaws worked furiously and the paper crackled as he chewed it.... The boy raised the Bible and tore out a page with his teeth and began grinding it in his mouth, his eyes burning.... Johnson swallowed what was in his mouth. His eyes widened as if a vision of splendor were opening up before him” (477). For Johnson, the conflation of vision with consumption and violent destruction is akin to a religious experience, an equation that is appropriate considering his demonic attributes. It is in the pleasure of looking that he perceives the weaknesses of Sheppard and Norton and manipulates both characters for his own sadistic pleasure, exploiting their own limited powers of sight, which leads to death and despair.

In “The Lamé Shall Enter First,” O’Connor explores her own frustrations as a writer concerning the need to capture her observations through language and the inherent tensions between her perception and readers’ perceptions of the text. Furthermore, she channels her own frustrations with her occasionally limited sight and with the way others misread her disease.

Ultimately, O'Connor is well aware of the power of the viewer and the anxiety of the viewed, and she explores this relationship through a trio of characters who exhibit various levels of visual acuteness. For O'Connor, the act of looking has many dark definitions, as dark as the "jungle of shadows" (482) in which Norton hangs in the story's conclusion. To look is to see through illusions, deceptions, and pretensions. To look is to objectify the subject. To look is to project a definition, meaning, or interpretation upon the object of the gaze. To look is to control the object's perception of reality. And in the end, to look is to eat, devour, consume, and destroy.

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