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The Grotesque as a Tool of the Past in *As I Lay Dying* and “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

By Leela Actis

University of Vermont College Honors Thesis, Spring 2020

Advised by Prof. Valerie Rohy

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## Introduction

The Southern Gothic novel has been a prevalent and crucial part of the American literary tradition, ever since it first emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The genre spread from the Gothic movement of the nineteenth century that featured romance novels containing bleak ambience and shocking monsters. Classics of the Gothic genre, such as *Dracula* or the works of Edgar Allen Poe all employed the use of supernatural devices and deviant behaviors to eventually reveal a deep-buried, ugly truth. As these forms of dark romanticism merged with naturalistic themes and Southern-based humor, a new genre of the Southern Gothic materialized. A method of expression in literature, Southern Gothic writing “employs the grotesque, the forgotten, the failed, and the macabre” in order “to unearth and displace the values of the American South.”<sup>1</sup> Southern aristocratic society instituted a continuous façade of decorum and gentility in order to mask the way people really lived. Writers of this region would juxtapose these customs through the use of grotesque caricatures and shocking, violence-based imagery in order to amplify the ever-present contradictions of Southern society.

Many other scholars have critiqued and written about the connection between the South as a region, and the Southern gothic as a genre. Additionally, scholars have gotten more specific with their criticism, choosing to focus on singular themes that come up throughout the Southern Gothic genre. In his essay “Gothic Landscapes of the South”, Matthew Wynn Sivils explores the development of literary tropes “in the depiction of Southern landscapes, from their origins in colonial writers...viewing them as sites of racial and environmental haunting.”<sup>2</sup> Scholar Ellen Weinauer critiques a different aspect, focusing on the Southern Gothic, the theme of race and

<sup>1</sup> Mark Helmsing, “Grotesque Stories, Desolate Voices: Encountering Histories and Geographies of Violence in Southern Gothic’s Haunted Mansions,” 316.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Castillo and Charles Crow, *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, 4.

exploring “the law as gothic villain”.<sup>3</sup> Venturing away from race and region, there is also a multitude of scholarly criticism focusing on gender and sexuality. One example is seen in Kellie Donovan-Condron’s “Twisted Sisters: The Monstrous Women of Southern Gothic”, where she discusses various representations of the monstrous or grotesque feminine.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, one other common topic for scholars within the genre is the actual theme of the monstrous. Whether it is vampires, beasts or voodoo, this theme of the supernatural is a common one throughout the Southern Gothic (and even the European Gothic) genre. Some scholars writing on this topic even go so far as to contrast literature within the genre with television and film. One example of this can be seen within Ken Gelder’s essay “Southern Vampires: Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris and *True Blood*.”<sup>5</sup> The Southern Gothic genre is vast and layered, allowing scholars a multitude of topics to discuss within. However, this thesis won’t focus on any one of the themes exemplified above, instead focusing on commonalities between two stories within the genre and their use of the grotesque.

This thesis will examine how the idyllic version of America, and the dream of an agrarian South are ripped apart in southern gothic texts. Using the grotesque to expose the consequences of the region’s shameful history of racism, classism, and patriarchal values, it becomes evident that Southern Gothic authors were haunted by the brutal past of the American South. Arguably two of the most famous Southern Gothic writers, William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor use grotesque writing in order to expose the traumas of an American, Southern past. As evident in their own novels, this past haunts the present that Faulkner and O’Connor were writing in. By

<sup>3</sup> Castillo & Crow, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Kellie Donovan-Condron, “Twisted Sisters: The Monstrous Women of Southern Gothic”, 339-351.

<sup>5</sup> Castillo & Crow, 5.

basing their writing so deeply within grotesque devices, they are able to expose a number of once-hidden, brutal truths. Specifically, the reality of slavery, oppressive patriarchy, and how these ended up impacting a postbellum South. At the heart of this thesis lies the idea that grotesque devices of Southern Gothic literature serve to exemplify the considerable repressions of a cruel, traumatizing history that the American South would rather stay buried.

Southern Gothic, as a genre, “in many way...originated on its own, but always as extensions of other Gothic pathways.”<sup>6</sup> The first chapter of this project will focus on the origination of Southern Gothic literature. As Jay Ellis states, the term “‘Southern Gothic’ has long been used to refer to a particular subspecies of American Gothic” which in turn is its own “subspecies of the Gothic, a genre of much-contested boundaries.”<sup>7</sup> The roots of this original, Gothic genre are found in classic British and European literature. Classics like Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) became staples of the British Gothic. Eventually, a second rise followed the first, producing such works as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).

The European Gothic was soon adapted in the United States by American novelists. The roots of the American gothic exist and are most “recognizable as a regional form.”<sup>8</sup> Some of the earliest American Gothic texts included the works of Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne. However, it eventually gave way to the Southern Gothic genre. The American South, “identified with gothic doom and gloom”, exists in the country “as the nation’s ‘other’, becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself.”<sup>9</sup> Because of this shift in region, everything begins to change within the genre as well. Ellis writes,

<sup>6</sup> Jay Ellis, *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature*, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 4.

“changes in setting, the villain, and the victim all allow for the transportation of an iconic British Gothic genre to the American South.”<sup>10</sup> While this thesis begins by exploring the rise and sub-genres of the Gothic literary category, it will end with the emergence of Southern Gothic literature, and the specific aspects that characterize it as a genre, before lastly ending with an in-depth analysis of one literary aspect within the genre: the grotesque.

The second part of this thesis will examine the American South’s relationship to the Southern Gothic genre through the works of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. Trauma, brutality and inequality make up the past of the American South, all centering on the horrors of man and their continual acceptance (and emphasis) on slavery. Being aware of the atrocities that were constant and normalized in the past will always be significant. It opens up a massively important lens that contemporary scholars can employ in order to gain a deeper understanding of the present. This thesis will work to use a lens of the past when analyzing both *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner and “A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor. While a variety of authors have studied the genre of southern gothic fiction, there is almost no scholarly work that directly examined the writings of both William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor in relation to each other, as scholars choose to either examine one or the other. The genre they were writing in is defined as using the presence of irrational, damaged characters and gruesome elements. Within the genre, the grotesque is used to represent the extent of these characters’ flaws, and show a connection to the violent flaws of people who existed in a slavery-consumed South. By understanding the grotesque as a literary device, one is able to gather a better understanding of Southern life, and the culture Southern authors existed within.

<sup>10</sup> Goddu, 5.

## The Southern Gothic Genre

A quote by Ellis perfectly sums up the Gothic genre by describing it as one that “takes us out there, below ground, and behind the door we would rather leave closed.”<sup>11</sup> The Gothic as a mode or genre serves to stir up dread, confusion, or even disgust in its audience, due in part to its fundamental ambiguity. The genre came out of the larger, romantic literary movement. Gothic work began to pop up throughout the literary canon, featuring stories described as having “moldering castles, treacherous villains, distressed damsels and dark secrets.”<sup>12</sup> In 1764 Horace Walpole wrote what scholars consider one of the first pieces of Gothic work. His first novel, *The Castle of Otranto*,<sup>13</sup> evolved as a subgenre of “that earlier generic term, ‘romance.’”<sup>14</sup> Walpole had originally applied the word as a sophisticated joke, titling his novel “A Gothic Story.” In the 1700s, the word “gothic” meant something along the lines of “barbarous”, and Walpole used these connotations in order to present his story as essentially, a discovered antique relic. Walpole wrote about the gloomy Prince Manfred, who falls in love with the beautiful betrothed to his own son and heir. Beginning with his son being crushed to death, the story progresses with the Otranto castle coming (supernaturally) to life until evil is eventually defeated.

Scholars of the Gothic “point to the time period of 1760 to 1820 as the heyday of the ‘classic’ British Gothic.”<sup>15</sup> After Walpole’s *The Castle of Ortanto*, a rise in Gothic literature emerged, beginning a new literary canon. These classics included works such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. All of these novels followed somewhat of a “Gothic recipe”, proposed by early critics of the genre. An

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, xxvii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 3.

example of this recipe recommended a number of essential ingredients, such as an “old castle, half of it ruinous...three murdered bodies, quite fresh...many skeletons, in chests and presses” and even an “old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.”<sup>16</sup> As Gothic writing started to emerge around the world, these recipes continued to highlight the shock factors of a complicated, ambiguous genre.

Even though Walpole had suddenly burst onto the literary scene with *The Castle of Otranto* and other European authors had begun to join the genre, American authors were struggling to write Gothic fiction. As Donald Ringe points out, the opinion at the time “rejected ghosts and goblins as objectively real creatures, explaining them away as the chimeras of a diseased, or at least disturbed, imagination.”<sup>17</sup> Because of this, writers were faced with two options. To either “give play to the imagination and write a fiction that, on its very basis, was necessarily suspect, or to concentrate on the unimaginative commonplaces of actuality.”<sup>18</sup> Refusing to give in to either extreme, American fiction writers had to walk a thin line between both. The original rise of Gothic (particularly in Europe) was followed by a secondary rise in the 1890s, which featured such works as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).<sup>19</sup> These novels would fall directly into the genre of Gothic fiction, as they were all based in feelings of fear, ambiguity, uncertainty and featured supernatural elements. Rising on its own, separate from the European Gothic, some of the earliest American Gothic novels were Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). The Southern Gothic genre eventually sprouts from the two rising Gothics

<sup>16</sup> Ellis, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Ringe, *American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ellis, 4.

(European and American) in the middle of the nineteenth century with various forms of fiction. Two authors that emerged as significant figures in the American Gothic genre were Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe. Hawthorne and Poe served as stepping stones from the American Gothic into the Southern Gothic genre. Both, subsequently, began their literary careers immersed in classic Gothic fiction.

Ringe's book covers the lives of both Poe and Hawthorne, as well as their integration into the American Gothic tradition. As a teen in 1819, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to his sister discussing the books he had recently read. Among them was *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Ann Radcliffe's classic British Gothic piece of literature.<sup>20</sup> Literary Gothicism is apparent in a majority of Hawthorne's pieces of writing, as he works to set a "general ambience of the mode."<sup>21</sup> Specifically as Ringe points out, Hawthorne applied to his writing things like "the darkness in which the Gothic experience most often takes place; the flickering of candle, lamp or hearth which, projecting moving shadows, renders the vision uncertain" or even the "pale glow of moonlight, which bathing the surroundings in a soft light, transforms even the commonplace into what seems to be a completely different world."<sup>22</sup> All these aspects borrow from the classic Gothic genre, which is reflected in the works of earlier Gothic romancers like Ann Radcliffe or Charlotte Smith whose heroines would walk the halls of ancient manors at night with a flickering candle in their hands.<sup>23</sup> Influenced by these earlier Gothic works, Nathaniel Hawthorne worked to refine his skill in walking "that difficult and narrow line between the Natural and Supernatural,"<sup>24</sup> which was a skill well-recognized in his day. This neutral space between the

<sup>20</sup> Ringe, 152.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ringe, 156.

two served as a basis for much of his work and provided him with a medium to introduce aspects of eeriness and mysticism into his writing. His novels, such as *The House of the Seven Gables*, contain Gothic devices such as apparitions. Ringe writes that “Hawthorne’s ghosts are...effective representations of the pervasive influence of the past.”<sup>25</sup> Ringe goes further by discussing Hawthorne’s use of “living ghosts...blighted by sin or sorrow” whose “lives have been destroyed by events that occurred long before.”<sup>26</sup> This characteristic of ghosts from the past haunting the present are directly connected to (and constantly found within) the works of the Southern Gothic. While Hawthorne was not writing specifically within the genre of Southern Gothic, his use of the Gothic served as building blocks for Southern authors to come. Donald Ringe ends the chapter on Hawthorne by writing “As long as Americans turn their backs on the total experience of mankind, fail to perceive the significance of the past, and refuse to accept the reality of those ghosts and devils that emerge from its gloomy depths...they will not achieve the insight that can only come...from a full awareness of the dark underside of life.”<sup>27</sup> Hawthorne’s Gothic world provides a vehicle for expressing those harsh, disturbing truths to his American readers.

While Hawthorne wasn’t writing from the South, Edgar Allen Poe actually was. However, few consider Poe first and foremost as a Southern author. Author Tom F. Wright discusses Poe’s complicated relationship with the south. He argues that Poe’s “gothic is...the most canonical.”<sup>28</sup> An influence for many Southern Gothic authors to come, Poe mastered Gothic literature, constructing a sense of terror and shock throughout his writing. In her book *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation*, author Teresa Goddu dedicates a whole chapter to Poe and his connection to race within the Southern Gothic genre. Goddu writes “as a

<sup>25</sup> Ringe, 159.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 10.

canonical representative of the South and the gothic, Poe becomes the figure through whom romance and race are linked.”<sup>29</sup> While Hawthorne was writing in an American Gothic form, he was not writing about race, yet Edgar Allen Poe was. Goddu perfectly explains the relationship between the South and the gothic. She writes, the “South’s ‘peculiar’ identity has not only been defined by its particular racial history, but has also often been depicted in gothic terms”, those terms specifically describing the South as a “benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by the ghosts of slavery.”<sup>30</sup> The “gothic excess and social transgressions” all combine to brand the South as the nation’s other. While most of his stories do not take place within the Southern region, Poe is still considered by many scholars to have inextricably linked the South and the gothic.

Raised in Virginia, Poe was able to use the Southern Gothic genre as a way to “explore the racial discourse of his period, a discourse concerned as much with perfect whiteness as terrifying blackness.”<sup>31</sup> Poe was writing at a time when slavery existed as a norm within society. In the world Poe was growing up in, brutal treatment and oppression of others was commonplace within. Subsequently his shift into the genre of the Southern Gothic was understandable. By writing within this genre, he was able to figure out some way to meditate on the discourses of his time. Thus, Poe’s short stories were full of haunted figures or apparitions, murder and death. These haunted figures exist “In the South” where “ghosts and men in white sheets are real, as are shackles and clanking chains, and the Southern Gothic is a genre that arises from the area’s often violent and traumatic history”<sup>32</sup>. Poe exists within this genre by grappling with these traumas, as do subsequent authors within the Southern Gothic literary canon.

<sup>29</sup> Goddu, 75.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.

Grotesque literature and writing cuts through oppressive societal norms to exemplify a confusing, and sometimes brutal reality. The social norms that the grotesque works to represent are deeply rooted within repressed, violent memories of the past. Longhorn Dictionary defines the grotesque as “something ‘strange and unnatural so as to cause fear, disbelief, or amusement.’”<sup>33</sup> Scholarly studies on the subject are generally connected to the gothic and subsequently, southern gothic writing. In an article written by Peggy Bailey, she writes that “the literary grotesque functions as a distinctly American, frequently Southern, aspect of the Gothic.”<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Maximillian Novak analyzes the grotesque in his journal article “Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque”. Novak writes, “by ‘grotesque’, I simply mean the combination of conventionalized organizational structures, ideas and characters in fiction dealing with the supernatural and bizarre from the time of Horace Walpole to the present day”<sup>35</sup>. When discussing the grotesque in relation to earlier gothic novels, Novak goes further by writing the “vision of the past as conjured up for readers of the time involved a sense of disorder and the grotesque suggestive of moral evil.”<sup>36</sup>

The grotesque, throughout literature especially the Gothic genre, is directly connected with moral evil, as well as “vice and disorder.”<sup>37</sup> Evoking disgust as a final result, the grotesque demons of the Gothic genre “represent a sudden revelation of the uncontrolled forces of the mind as they are reified in the seemingly ordered, real world.”<sup>38</sup> Aspects of instability and horror exemplified within a supposed normal reality are what makes the grotesque such an impactful

<sup>33</sup> Dieter Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Peggy Bailey, “Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and Bastard Out of Carolina: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic”, 270.

<sup>35</sup> Maximillian Novak, “Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque”, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Novak, 10.

characteristic throughout literature. Bailey is able to shed more light on the grotesque within the Gothic genre. Discussing Ellen Glasgow's views on the topic, Bailey writes that Glasgow "conflates the Gothic and the grotesque when she critiques Southern Gothic writers as the originators of 'goblins' and 'Southern monsters' –grotesques by other names."<sup>39</sup> Bailey herself goes further with Glasgow's criticism by writing that the Gothic "has from its inception included grotesque characters that, despite their mere humanity (or because of it), are able to generate real horror."<sup>40</sup> It is evident that the grotesque is tied directly to horror and fear, as well as its connection to a character's basic humanity. Bailey once again writes "the Southern Gothic, with its unflinching portrayal of human frailty, degradation, violence, and suffering, found its most haunting, consistently recognized and acclaimed embodiment in the fiction of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, authors known for their creation/representation of grotesques."<sup>41</sup> The novels of both Faulkner and O'Connor feature scenes of grotesque action or characters with disturbing mentalities.

<sup>39</sup> Bailey, 270.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 271.

### *As I Lay Dying* Analysis

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* represents his relationship to the haunting and brutal history of his home. Throughout the novel, the grotesque is used to expose the consequences of the region's shameful history of racism, classism, and patriarchal values. Through writing about classism, grotesque scenarios, complexly unstable male characters and oppressed, weak female characters, Faulkner exemplifies a region plagued by its repressions of a shameful history. His examination of unhinged, white Southern men and subdued women are grotesque in their own way and help to show the progression of gender roles that began in an older South. Additionally, Faulkner continually inserts grotesque descriptions throughout the novel as a way to further exemplify a misery-filled history that is continually connected to the Southern region.

The novel begins with a description of a pastoral South, as Faulkner describes a field full of "green rows of laidby cotton" on a hot July day.<sup>42</sup> This idyllic, bucolic image of the South, while nice at first, is soon destroyed by the subsequent events of the novel. The agricultural beauty of the setting is highlighted with Faulkner describing Jewel as he stops "at the spring and takes the gourd from the willow branch and drinks."<sup>43</sup> This natural beauty and peaceful landscape is immediately disrupted as the chapter ends with Darl going back to his house, "followed by the Chuck. Chuck. Chuck. Of the adze."<sup>44</sup> Straightaway, Faulkner sets a stage for the theme of the grotesque, as the sound of Addie's coffin and her imminent death hover over every aspect of the story, especially at the very beginning.

Grotesque descriptions are ever-present throughout *As I Lay Dying*, something Faulkner makes sure is never forgotten. The death of the Bundren matriarch, Addie Bundren, hangs over

<sup>42</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

the entire book. While she is alive at the very beginning of the novel, her description draws back to themes of the European Gothic genre. Faulkner writes, “Her face is wasted away so that the bones draw just under the skin in white lines. Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks.”<sup>45</sup> Similar to the classic British or European literature of the earlier Gothic genre, Faulkner draws on these descriptions in order to create a sense of fear, ambiguity, uncertainty and almost supernatural elements, as Addie is essentially a walking ghost. In Addie’s brief living moments, she is again described as “propped on the pillow, with her head raised so she can see out the window, and we can hear him every time he takes the adze or the saw.”<sup>46</sup> Faulkner also writes “If we were deaf we could almost watch her face and hear him, see him.”<sup>47</sup> Death becomes the entirety of Addie’s character even while she is still alive, as in her last hours on Earth she insists on listening to the creation of her own coffin. However, her death comes quickly, eventually leading Addie’s body to become the very idea of the horrific grotesque.

Seconds away from passing, she is described as “a bundle of rotten sticks.”<sup>48</sup> Fixing her eyes on her youngest son, “her eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant. Then they go out as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them.”<sup>49</sup> Faulkner is once again bringing in aspects of the older European gothic, comparing Addie’s own life force to the haunting image of candle flames. All that now remains with the family are “the handful of rotten bones that Addie Bundren left.”<sup>50</sup> By constantly describing her as brittle and rotten, Faulkner is creating an unsettling feeling. The responses to

<sup>45</sup> Faulkner, 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

her death are just as disconcerting as the death itself. Pa, the patriarch of the family, “stands beside the bed, humped, his arms dangling.”<sup>51</sup> Dewey Dell, the only remaining woman in the family, “does not move” from her mother’s side, while Cash goes back out to the unfinished coffin and gets right back to work. Staring at the corpse of his mother, all the color drains from Vardaman’s “face into his mouth, as though he has by some means fleshed his own teeth in himself, sucking.”<sup>52</sup> Faulkner paints a surreal image with his description of the young boy. However, Vardaman’s connection with horrific, grotesque imagery is something exemplified even before Addie dies. Catching a fish to show his mother, he throws it to the dirty ground, “turns it over with his foot and prods at the eye-bump with his toe, gouging it out.”<sup>53</sup> Told to the reader by his father, Vardaman then enters the house “bloody as a hog to his knees, ant that ere fish chopped up with the axe.”<sup>54</sup> His violence towards this helpless fish is upsetting, but made even more troubling due to his young age and his mother’s looming death. Meanwhile as the family begins to travel with the coffin, Darl is described as sitting “with his dead ma laying in her coffin at his feet, laughing.”<sup>55</sup> All different emotional responses, yet they almost feel foreboding as the family struggles to come to terms with the devastation that now encompasses them.

In the aftermath of Addie’s death, the family continues to struggle. Pa is again described in an unsavory, grotesque manner. Looking at her father, Dewey Dell views him as looking “like right after the maul hits the steer and it no longer alive and don’t yet know that it is dead.”<sup>56</sup> The Southern Gothic is evident in Dewey Dell’s description of her father, as Faulkner employs a

<sup>51</sup> Faulkner, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 105.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 61.

simile reminiscent of an agricultural, pastoral environment while still focusing on graphic and grotesque descriptions. Dewey Dell is comparing her father to a dying animal, one essentially stuck between life and death. After the coffin is finally finished and Addie's corpse is put inside, the family finds Anse the next morning "lying asleep on the floor like a felled steer" and next to him, "the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in the last one. When they taken the lid off they found that two of them had bored on into her face."<sup>57</sup> In death, Addie Bundren becomes even more of a grotesque figure due to her corpse's sudden disfiguration at the hands of her son. With the description of the wood as "swollen,"<sup>58</sup> Addie, wearing her old wedding dress, is laid into the coffin in reverse. The family "had made her a veil out of a mosquito bar so the auger holes in her face wouldn't show."<sup>59</sup> Addie has become a deformed corpse, now entirely emulating the theme of a haunting grotesque figure. Uncanny descriptions follow her even in death, as every aspect of it is distinctively unsettling from her actual physical position in the coffin to the holes in her face. Faulkner continues to stress a death-filled, disconcerting feeling connected to her coffin as buzzards continually circle above the family as they make their journey, something a majority of the characters acknowledge within their chapters. Furthermore, as their journey is close to the end, Addie's soaked, wood coffin begins to smell horribly. This is mentioned subtly by members of the towns they stop through, as well as Vardaman himself, who thinks "*My mother is not in the box. My mother does not smell like that.*"<sup>60</sup> Faulkner continues to portray the grotesque nature of Addie's death as she begins to rot. The reader can only imagine the horrific scene before them, as a disgusting smell begins to emulate from her water-bloated, deformed corpse.

<sup>57</sup> Faulkner, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 196.

Addie as a grotesque, gothic figure is only expanded on within her own chapter. Towards the very end of the novel is when the reader gets their first and only chance to witness Addie's point of view. Literally talking beyond the grave, Addie entirely emulates the supernatural elements that exist within the older European Gothic genre. Her cold mentality is apparent on the very first page of her chapter. Addie recognizes a saying from her childhood, "that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time."<sup>61</sup> Her chapter creates an air of uneasiness, as Addie is discussing the concept of death while basically existing within the world of the novel as a ghost. Addie dismisses Anse's love for her as well as the entire concept of motherhood, viewing both as her "aloneness" being "violated."<sup>62</sup> Faulkner creates a Southern American family that is unraveling at the seams, but as Addie expresses in her chapter, the Bundren's familial dysfunction seems to have begun years before her death. After having Darl, Addie expresses her belief that she would kill Anse, feeling as though he had tricked her with the birth of her second child. When referring to her children, she even goes so far as saying that "I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them... That was my duty to him, to not ask that, and that duty I fulfilled."<sup>63</sup> Her cold, callus views on not only the world but her own family just further support her characterization as a haunted, detached yet disturbing figure. The entirety of the novel follows the family as they go to great lengths to bury their mother. While her chapter adds another layer to the complicated nature of Addie as a character, her memory is wiped away by Anse at the end of the novel. Jill Bergman writes "*As I Lay Dying*, in horrifying if rather comic detail, tells of a woman-mother of five and wife of a poor tenant farmer... who dies relatively young and is taken on a too-long journey to Jefferson, where she is buried and replaced rather

<sup>61</sup> Faulkner, 169.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 174.

easily by the next Mrs. Bundren.”<sup>64</sup> Addie’s role as a woman, especially her controversial opinions over reproduction and Southern motherhood, are vast and complicated. Yet Faulkner portrays her as replaceable by having Anse take a new wife, stripping Addie of her agency as a woman. Bergman acknowledges this, and writes “as a southerner, Faulkner inherited the images, icons and demons of his culture.”<sup>65</sup> Among these demons was the completely oppressive, patriarchal culture that was a constant in the old South.

While the theme of the disturbing is heavily focused on through the characterization of Addie (and is made worse by her erasure from the family at the very end), other members of the family, specifically Cash, help to maintain the grotesque nature of the novel. After the disastrous endeavor of crossing the river, Cash becomes injured. Lying on the earth in the wake of his injury, Cash’s face surrounded by his vomit, “appears sunken a little, sagging from the bony ridges of eye sockets”. His injuries are soon revealed as a broken leg, and the Bundrens all decide to set it with cement. The horror connected to this decision soon becomes evident, with Faulkner going so far as to describe his “leg and foot below the cement” as looking “like they had been boiled.”<sup>66</sup> Finally reaching proper medical care for his leg, Cash is informed that not only is he going “to lose sixty-odd square inches of skin to get that concrete off”, but he is going to “have to limp around on one short leg”<sup>67</sup> for the rest of his life. The drawn out descriptions of his broken leg are constant throughout the rest of the novel. Faulkner is almost torturing Cash with the antics his family put him through when trying to fix the leg. The imagery Faulkner conjures up is once again almost inconceivable due to its disturbing nature. Specifically, the image of one’s swollen, broken and bleeding leg crushed into place by concrete. The brutality is

<sup>64</sup> Jill Bergman, “This was the Answer to it: Sexuality and Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”, 1.

<sup>65</sup> Bergman, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Faulkner, 213.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 240.

one the reader can only imagine and further serves the overall concept of the grotesque that Faulkner works to convey.

While the characters of Addie, Vardaman, Cash and Anse all engage at one point or another with grotesque actions, the character of Darl Bundren represents a different kind of monstrous nature. As the novel progresses, Darl's characterization becomes more and more unhinged until the very end, where he quite evidently seems to lose his mind. However, even before the end, his maddened behavior is still on display. Faulkner hints at his selfish nature at the beginning of the novel. In one instance, as Addie is seconds away from death, Darl departs the farm and insists on taking Jewel with him. Darl tells him that Addie is going to die "before we get back" yet still demands that Jewel come with him, as Darl wants "him to help me load."<sup>68</sup> Darl seemingly has no sympathy not only for his mother's dying moments, but no sympathy for Jewel and his relationship with their mother. Faulkner portrays Darl in this instance as only caring about his own needs, even in as dire and delicate of circumstances as his mother's death. This is only supported as the novel progresses, as Darl continues to taunt his younger brother, saying "do you know that Addie Bundren is going to die? Addie Bundren is going to die?."<sup>69</sup> His insensitive, brutal teasing is unwarranted and unnecessary, yet Darl constantly tries to provoke his brother. Even after his mother's death, Darl continues to get joy from tormenting Jewel by making a point of alerting Jewel to the buzzards circling their mother's coffin. Susan Donaldson writes on the value of "the historical context of elite white male Southern identity."<sup>70</sup> Darl, especially at the beginning of the novel, has an "elite male identity" that rests "upon the good behavior of one's subordinates" yet at the same time, is incredibly vulnerable "to any sort of

<sup>68</sup> Faulkner, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Donaldson, "Faulkner and Masculinity", 5.

disruption or challenge.”<sup>71</sup> Darl’s constant provocation of his younger brother is just one instance of this white male identity, however his identity is eventually disrupted as the novel progresses as his madness is brought to the surface. After Addie’s passing, it becomes evident that Darl’s instability is acknowledged, at least within the family. Sitting on the wagon with Addie’s coffin at his feet, Darl seemingly burst into laughter, to which Anse replies “How many times I told him it’s doing such things as that that makes folks talk about him.”<sup>72</sup> As Anse tries to get his son to respect his “own ma not cold in her coffin yet”, Darl responds by “setting on the plank seat right above her where she was laying, laughing.”<sup>73</sup> His behavior is alarming and speaks to his inner volatility.

Towards the end of the novel, Darl’s madness is fully on display. Almost reaching their destination, the family takes shelter at a local farm. Setting the coffin “under the apple tree, where the moonlight can dapple the apple tree”, Faulkner is again creating imagery reminiscent of a rural south. Yet the grotesque is still evident, specifically in the contrast between the beauty of the agricultural landscape and Addie’s rotting, bloated body in her coffin. The idyllic countryside does not last long, as fire sweeps across and devours the barn. In the chaos that follows, Faulkner eventually reveals, through the eyes of Cash and Vardaman, that Darl was the one who set fire to the barn. Barns and the farms they are attached to exist as key parts of industry within the agricultural south. By burning it down, the reader can connect Darl’s destruction to the barn as one of symbolic importance, as he is really destroying this image of a beautiful, older, pastoral South. Faulkner writes, “It was either send him to Jackson or have Gillespie sue us, because he knowed some way that Darl set fire to it.”<sup>74</sup> Left with no other

<sup>71</sup> Donaldson, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Faulkner, 105.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 232.

options and fearful of Darl's erratic behavior, the family decides to commit him to a mental institution. The family dynamic shifts, and Darl does not go quietly. Fighting tooth and nail, Darl eventually sits on "the ground and us watching him, laughing and laughing."<sup>75</sup> Witnessing it all from Cash's point of view, he acts as a voice of reason, saying "It was bad...I be durn if I could see anything to laugh at. Because there just aint nothing justifies the deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his own sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into."<sup>76</sup> Cash, like the rest of the family, is aware of Darl's almost psychotic nature and his dissolve into laughter only strengthens his family's belief. Marybeth Southard, when examining Darl's insanity, writes "many Faulkner critics investigate the question of Darl's madness without stepping back to explore undercurrents of the economic, political, and moral milieu."<sup>77</sup> These undercurrents can be traced back to the social climate within the past of the Southern region. The economic and political system of an older South was one that prospered off of forced, black labor. Subsequently, morality was skewed especially in the minds of those who tried to uphold this society, which were majority white men. Southard additionally writes that "Darl's complex consciousness is crucial to the text, but the question of Darl's madness...has been...easily accepted by critics as the 'vortical subject of the play'...leaving the 'plot as inert backdrop to the main character.'"<sup>78</sup> The majority of Faulkner's novel is told from Darl's point of view. By stressing Darl's psychosis in his last narrative chapter, his role as an unreliable (and now unstable) narrator is revealed. Darl says to the reader, "Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing" before switching tenses and writing "Is it the

<sup>75</sup> Faulkner, 238.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>77</sup> Marybeth Southard, "Aint None of Us Pure Crazy: Queering Madness in *As I Lay Dying*", 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 1.

pistols you're laughing at?' I said. 'Why do you laugh?'"<sup>79</sup> Faulkner exemplifies Darl's madness in a variety of ways, but none give the reader as much clarity as the constant switching of tenses, and the instability of narration this creates. Looking at his family as the train begins to leave, Darl's internal monologue turns repetitive and borderline nonsensical. Faulkner writes, "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams. 'Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes.'"<sup>80</sup> Darl has lost his grip on sanity entirely. Faulkner intentionally makes his white, agriculturally-based male character who narrates the majority of the novel unstable and evidently mad, illustrating the nature of psychotic behavior.

<sup>79</sup> Faulkner, 254.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

### “A Good Man is Hard to Find” Analysis

Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, established her as one of the most famous authors within the Southern Gothic genre. O’Connor’s writing consists of provocative work that directly connects to the culture of the American South. The entirety of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” focuses on a grotesque, distressing situation and features themes of racism and classism evident throughout the story. The women are seen as weak-willed and the men as aggressive and alarmingly unstable. All of these aspects seen throughout O’Connor’s story serve to demonstrate the values and constant injustices of the past and the contrast of these values in a more contemporary, post-slavery era.

The first two lines of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” state, “The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind.”<sup>81</sup> O’Connor immediately grounds the story in the South, stressing this older woman’s former “connections” to the region. Her agency is slim, as the grandmother is never even given a proper name. While this lack of substantive identity is used to establish her lack of distinctiveness, the relationship between her and her son do the same. One of few adults named, Bailey is the obvious patriarch and subsequent controller of every member of the family. While the grandmother tries to make her desires heard, specifically a desire to return to her Southern roots, it all depends on the decisions of her son. This patriarchal control of the family is very reminiscent of an old South, reflecting a time of massive inequality in every aspect of life. Bailey is described as “the son she lived with, her only boy.”<sup>82</sup> Her dependency on him is evident, as is his indifferent annoyance towards her. Bailey does not even look up in interest as the grandmother begins to read about a murderous prisoner on the run.

<sup>81</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find: and Other Stories*, 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

O'Connor writes, "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed towards Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people."<sup>83</sup> His crimes are seemingly too horrific for the grandmother to even name, yet Bailey pays no mind. The grandmother's own self-righteousness and self-interest to change the family vacation is mixed in with her pleas to her son, as she says "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."<sup>84</sup> While the grandmother offers condescending parental advice, the mention of her conscience is significant. The grandmother throughout the story, can continually be referenced as representative of the past, simply because she is the eldest member of the family. Subsequently, her idea of what makes up a good conscience is skewed, especially since she (quite obviously) looks down on others who are not white, or are not in the same economic class as herself. By having her preach about a conscience on the first page of the story, O'Connor is essentially illustrating the hypocrisy related within the beliefs of older, white upper-class Southerners.

Finding no source of recognition from her son, the grandmother then turns to "the children's mother,"<sup>85</sup> who is another female character who is never given a name. Her absence of self-identity and substance is illustrated in her description, as she is described as a "young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage...sitting on the sofa feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar."<sup>86</sup> Her entire existence is tied to her domestic role as a mother. Even her physical description, of slacks, and a "green head kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears,"<sup>87</sup> further exemplify her own featureless, unexceptional

<sup>83</sup> O'Connor, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 2.

characterization. Women as unremarkable beings was another older Southern mentality, as they were at the bottom of the social, economic and political ladder in every way. The mother takes a background role throughout the story. However, the grandmother exists as the opposite. Even though she is also never named (reminiscent of the complete lack of agency that effected women in the old South), her personality is strong, controlling, self-righteous and as it is later seen, dangerous to the other members of her family. The grandmother and the mother are opposite portraits of women, one representing dominant ideals of an old South and the other representing a more passive existence typical of women in the old South. Flannery O'Connor is collapsing appropriate gender roles through extreme polarization of the two women. This in itself is unusual and subsequently adds to the already unnerving feel of "A Good Man is Hard to Find".

The grandmother's role throughout the story is to represent the older mentality and ideals of the American South. This is never more evident than in the description of her physical appearance. The first one in the car on the day of the family vacation, the grandmother "had her big black valise...in one corner."<sup>88</sup> She is wearing her "white cotton gloves...a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print."<sup>89</sup> The obvious physicality of the grandmother goes to show her connection to the high-society, Southern social class she used to exist in, and accentuates her "whitewashed nostalgia for the Old South."<sup>90</sup> Yet O'Connor goes further in this connection by writing "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady."<sup>91</sup> This sentence seemingly comes out of nowhere and is evidently grotesque. The fact that

<sup>88</sup> O'Connor, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Rea, "Flannery O'Connor's Murderous Imagination: Southern Ladyhood in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'", 171.

<sup>91</sup> O'Connor, 3.

the grandmother desires to be considered “a lady”, even in death, show the roots of the ideals of upper-class, white Southerners. Robert Rea writes that the grandmother’s “character design retrofits Southern ladyhood as ‘an object of representation’, a loaded image that ridicules what would have been the South’s sacred view of women.”<sup>92</sup> Rea expands on his point, writing that “Southern belles were the darlings of the antebellum world...In theory white women embodied all the virtues of a patriarchal culture built on honor and chivalry.”<sup>93</sup> O’Connor reimagines the Southern lady, having her be obviously egotistical and ignorant. This connection to the grandmother’s past, and the influence it consequently still continues to have on her, is seen again when she’s talking to the kids. The young boy, John Wesley, says he wants to go quickly through Georgia “so we don’t have to look at it much.”<sup>94</sup> This does not sit well with the grandmother, as she immediately admonishes him by saying “If I was a little boy, I wouldn’t talk about my native state that way.”<sup>95</sup> Her southern pride immediately comes to light, even in the face of a silly little boy. However, he sees her intense devotion to her past and recognizes it as an opportunity to provoke her, calling Tennessee a “hillbilly dumping ground” and Georgia “a lousy state too.”<sup>96</sup> As the little girl, June Star, agrees with her brother, the grandmother cannot take it any longer. Folding her “thin veined fingers” (yet another reminder of her age), the grandmother begins to say, “In my time...children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then.”<sup>97</sup> The grandmother lived in an America where slavery wasn’t that far into the past. Racist mentality, sexist and classist ideology was ever-present. The

<sup>92</sup> Rea, 169.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> O’Connor, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

fact that the grandmother says that “people did right then” just goes to show her own blindness to, or inability to confront the horrific past transgressions of her region.

Even though the grandmother tries to blanket her own ingrained racist and classist ideals, Flannery O’Connor brings that to light in the next sentence. After lecturing her grandchildren on the glory of a Southern past, she suddenly says “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny... Wouldn’t that make a picture”, pointing to “a Negro child standing in the door of a shack.”<sup>98</sup> The grandmother is immediately reverting back to the exploitative, racist mentality that many Southern whites had throughout the creation of the country as a whole. As June Star points out his lack of britches, the grandmother says “He probably didn’t have any. Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do. If I could paint, I’d paint that picture.”<sup>99</sup> Within this observation and exchange, O’Connor is bringing to light the harsh realities of older Southern society. The grandmother is viewing the little black boy as an Other, a person entirely separate from herself, her family, and her reality simply due to the color of his skin and his lower-class social standing. His lack of pants just goes to further her own toxic, classist and racist mentality. A mentality that was continually the norm in the old South, and evidently persists even in more contemporary times. Rodney Edgecombe writes that “the grandmother is the exemplar of all the moral and social deficiencies of the old South, and she tries to freeze its racial and social inequalities in a pictorial frame, recalling the way in which the proponents of the Picturesque embellished their landscapes with laboring peasants.”<sup>100</sup> She recognizes the obvious inequality in American between whites and blacks. Yet she does not seem to care, daydreaming again about using the child to paint a picture. By having this interaction between the grandmother and a little

<sup>98</sup> O’Connor, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Rodney Edgecombe, "O'Connor's A Good Man Is Hard to Find.", 58.

black boy, though brief, O'Connor successfully destroys the grandmother's idyllic Southern mentality by exposing the racist cracks within.

However, this exchange is intentionally brief as the story shifts back to the scene within the car. The reader is once again reminded of the grandmother's past, as she insists of telling a story to quiet the kids. O'Connor writes, "She said once when she was a maiden lady she had been courted by a Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden from Jasper Georgia."<sup>101</sup> The grandmother was so well off that she had the luxury of being courted by handsome men. Yet the grandmother once again exemplifies her ingrained racist mentality as she continues her story. Mr. Teagarden had "brought her a watermelon every Saturday afternoon with his initials cut in it, E.A.T."<sup>102</sup> One day, "there was nobody at home and he left it on the front porch...but she never got the watermelon, she said, because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials, E.A.T!"<sup>103</sup> The grandmother continues to perpetuate the Southern mentality she grew up surrounded with, which includes her refusal to acknowledge the fact that her own comforts came from black labor, as well as the continuous dehumanizing lens she employs when looking at black adults and children. As the family continues on their road trip, they stop for lunch at Red Sammy's Famous Barbeque. Both his own nickname ("Red" Sammy) and his wife's description ("a tall burnt-brown woman with hair and eyes lighter than her skin") hint at the idea that they are both not white. As Red Sammy's wife coos over June Star as the child says she would never "live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks", the grandmother hisses at his wife, "Aren't you ashamed?"<sup>104</sup> The classism of the Old South continues to haunt the present, as evident through

<sup>101</sup> O'Connor, 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 7.

the grandmother's comment. It is apparent that the mentality the grandmother represents is discriminatory to those that do not fit into the white, economically well-off ideal.

The grandmother and Red Sammy begin to discuss the culture around them and who they can trust. Prompted by the grandmother saying, "People are certainly not nice like they used to be", Red Sammy launches into a story of two men who he let charge gas they bought. Questioning why he did that, the grandmother responds with "Because you're a good man!"<sup>105</sup> This archetype of being a good man is continually exposed by O'Connor throughout the short story as hypocritical. The good man ideal is a notion related to a grand and storied Southern past, full of well-behaved, morally superior (white) people. However, this fictitious exclamation by the grandmother is exposed as just that. Red Sammy says "A good man is hard to find...Everything is getting terrible."<sup>106</sup> He and the grandmother begin to converse over their opinions of Europe and the nostalgia of "better times."<sup>107</sup> Yet these better times seem to completely ignore a past where slavery was a recent memory, and intense inequality and discrimination were norms among Southern society. Even though Red Sammy evidently fails to fit into the economic standing the grandmother finds appropriate, she still uses him to uphold her own morals of goodness. She is taking advantage of Red Sammy's beliefs and adopting them as her own. As the grandmother and Red Sammy talk, the "children ran outside into the white sunlight and looked at the monkey in the lacy chinaberry tree. He was busy catching fleas on himself."<sup>108</sup> Red Sammy's chained monkey is representative of a chained Other. Black men, especially Southern slaves, were constantly compared to animals, as they weren't even considered human. This monkey, and the white children's fascination with it, are O'Connor's

<sup>105</sup> O'Connor, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

way of contrasting the grandmother's idealized, morally superior past with the reality of what actually existed within the South.

The climax of O'Connor's short story begins after the family leaves Red Sammy's. The grandmother suddenly remembers an "an old plantation that she had visited in this neighborhood once when she was a young lady."<sup>109</sup> The very idea of a plantation can be linked to the grotesque, as it was the epicenter of slave activity, full of beaten and broken black bodies surrounded by picturesque nature. But of course the white high class Southern generation only remembers the beauty. The grandmother describes the old plantation as one soaked in this natural beauty, with an "avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden."<sup>110</sup> So enamored with her memories of the past, the grandmother riles June Star and John Wesley up enough so they convince Bailey to stop by. However, as the family searches on a road that "looked as if no one had traveled on it in months", the grandmother once again catalyzes her family towards disaster as she realizes the error of her ways.<sup>111</sup> Remembering that the plantation "was not in Georgia but in Tennessee", the grandmother startles the cat which leads to an eventual car crash.<sup>112</sup> In the aftermath, June Star disappointingly notices that "nobody's killed" as the grandmother limps out of the car, her sailor hat with violets broken yet still pinned to her head.<sup>113</sup> As the family sits in a ditch, injured and dazed, the children's mother says "Maybe a car will come along" and a few minutes later, one does.<sup>114</sup> At this point in the short story, O'Connor is deliberately foreshadowing the end of the story through the family's dialogue. By predicting

<sup>109</sup> O'Connor, 9.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

the gruesome events that are about to happen, O'Connor creates a sense of doom or anxiety that lingers throughout the rest of the story.

The family finally sees a car driving their way, “coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them.”<sup>115</sup> Once again acting as a catalyst for doom, the grandmother dramatically waves both arms to attract their attention. The car, “a big black battered hearse-like automobile” comes into view.<sup>116</sup> O'Connor is figuratively ushering in death through the foreshadowed comparison of the car with a hearse. As the men step out of the car, one is described as a “fat boy in black trousers...his mouth partly open in a kind of loose grin” while the other wore “a blue striped coat and a gray hat pulled down very low, hiding most of his face.”<sup>117</sup> Their descriptions are vague and disconcerting, and with one stationed to the right, one stationed to the left, the men are essentially circling their prey. Finally, the driver emerges, and right away he seems out of place. An “older man” with “hair just beginning to gray...he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look”, no shirt or undershirt, and “blue jeans that were too tight for him...holding a black hat and a gun.”<sup>118</sup> Blue jeans were (and still are) a staple of American culture and by making her antagonist wear them, O'Connor is establishing the Misfit as a distinctly working class, American man. His ambiguous characterization is supported by the grandmother's thoughts once she sees him. The grandmother thinks that his “face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was.”<sup>119</sup> His familiarity is crucial to the grandmother as her past was full of sadistic, white men who made up and controlled a South steeped in slavery. By having the grandmother feel familiarity with a

<sup>115</sup> O'Connor, 12.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 12.

vicious, older white man only goes to show the twisted mentalities of the older South, while setting the stage for brutality that will undoubtedly affect the family. Passing as polite and well-mannered, the Misfit says “Good afternoon...I see you all had you a little spill.”<sup>120</sup> Additionally, the Misfit immediately reverts back to older, patriarchal ideals by taking charge of the situation as he tells the children’s mother, “Children make me nervous. I want all you all to sit down right together there where you’re at.”<sup>121</sup> His control over others is evident and again, O’Connor is foreshadowing the horrors to come as the family sits in front of a “line of woods” that “gaped like a dark open mouth.”<sup>122</sup> Symbols of death and demise are constant throughout the story, and only get worse once the Misfit is introduced.

As the grandmother suddenly realizes the Misfit’s true identity, he states that “it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of reckernized me.”<sup>123</sup> This in turn leads Bailey to say “something to his mother that shocked even the children.”<sup>124</sup> O’Connor makes sure to emphasize that male influence is ever-present and dangerous. Yet her female characters are stuck either in immanence, like the unnamed mother, or are a catalyst for stupidity and eventual demise, like the grandmother. Crying with fright, the grandmother practically begs the Misfit, saying “You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would you?” to which he replies, “I would hate to have to/”<sup>125</sup> Being a lady is, in the grandmother’s opinion, the height of morality, yet his inability to understand her beliefs is frightening to her. Pleading to the Misfit, the grandmother says “I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come

<sup>120</sup> O’Connor, 14.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 15.

from nice people!”<sup>126</sup> The Misfit takes the compliment while showing off his “row of strong white teeth.”<sup>127</sup> The grandmother’s definition of a good man is once again twisted by her older Southern beliefs. A good man, in the grandmother’s opinion, is one that does not have common blood. By having the grandmother’s desperate plea still be rooted in a classist ideal, O’Connor is once again showing the past of the American South still controls the mentalities of those who lived within it, even in their most distressed moments. This is further illustrated as the grandmother says “you shouldn’t call yourself the Misfit because I know you’re a good man at heart. I just look at you and tell.”<sup>128</sup> Whether it is his dental hygiene or the fact that he is white, the grandmother is using physical markers to make assumptions on what kind of person he is. Regardless of the articles she read about his past crimes, she draws on her own Southern beliefs of a “good man”, which included being upper class and white.

However, the Misfit seems to recognize her skewed moral code, and goes against it. Shortly after ordering his associates to go into the woods and murder Bailey and John Wesley, the Misfit says “Nome, I ain’t a good man...but I ain’t the worst in the world neither.”<sup>129</sup> He understands that being a good man is not dependent on the grandmother’s Southern ideal of whether one has “common blood”. The Misfit has a different approach and quotes his own father, saying “‘it’s some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and its others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He’s going to be into everything.”<sup>130</sup> The Misfit’s own belief system is ambiguous, yet has some connection to what his father says. The haunting past is once again evoked, as his father’s insistence of going “into everything” is

<sup>126</sup> O’Connor, 15.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

reminiscent of Southern white male control in every aspect of society (whether it is through modes of production or within the family). Either a curiosity for the way the world works or the fundamentals of being human, it is clear that the Misfit does not view morality like the grandmother. His view of morals are much more twisted and uncertain. Yet through the character of the Misfit, the reader still notices his older Southern habits. Left standing in front of the female members of the family, the Misfit suddenly says “I’m sorry I don’t have a shirt on before you ladies... We borrowed these from some folks we met.”<sup>131</sup> Considering the Misfit’s characterization up until this point, the reader can assume that the people who originally wore those clothes are no longer alive. By acknowledging that, O’Connor is making the situation even more grotesque than it already is. Having just ordered the murder of a father and son, the Misfit adopts a polite and well-mannered demeanor, while also having taken clothes off some of his previous victims. The imagery is horrific, especially if the reader can foresee what is to come in the last few pages of the story. Another example of alarming imagery can be found in O’Connor’s continual description of the forest. The family is slowly brought into the forest in shifts, beginning with the men and ending with the women. As the grandmother is left alone, she hears “a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another... She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath.”<sup>132</sup> O’Connor continually connects the forest with the death of many, creating a grotesque and horrific setting for the climax of the story.

The Misfit’s past is revealed towards the end of the story. He says, “I was a gospel singer for a while... been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet’ and he looked at the children’s mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their

<sup>131</sup> O’Connor, 17.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

eyes glassy; ‘I even seen a woman flogged.’”<sup>133</sup> Sitting in front of his doomed victims, telling horror stories about his past is troublesome behavior and further promotes a feeling of the grotesque. Additionally, the Misfit having a religious past in reminiscent of the moral high ground white southerners found in religion during a violent time. However, the Misfit once being a religious man just ends up destroying the old South’s façade of morality because of his psychotic behavior in the present. Being a religious man and being a serial killer are a dichotomous pair, and O’Connor makes that evident while at the same time exposing the hypocrisy of white men of the old South. The Misfit’s psychotic (and subsequently grotesque) nature is further revealed as he discusses being in prison, unable to recall his crimes. He says, “It was the head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I know that for a lie.”<sup>134</sup> When asked by the grandmother “why don’t you pray”, he responds “I don’t want no hep...I’m doing all right by myself.”<sup>135</sup> To murder his own father and not even remember it exemplifies someone who is unstable and unpredictably volatile. In front of the grandmother, the Misfit puts on her murdered son’s “yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it”, before preaching to her once again.<sup>136</sup> He says “I found out the crime don’t matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you’re going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.”<sup>137</sup> He’s clearly unhinged, and does not have a grasp on right and wrong. To compare taking a human life to taking a tire off a car clearly demonstrates the Misfit’s loose and dangerous grasp on reality. O’Connor further makes this

<sup>133</sup> O’Connor, 18.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

point as he politely asks the mother, her baby and her little girl to “step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband” to which she replies ““Yes, thank you.””<sup>138</sup>

Once again the Misfit’s true nature is illustrated in the grandmother’s final moments. As she begins to break down, she offer’s him money in exchange for her life. Stephen Bandy writes “at her moment of extremity, the Grandmother lurches desperately form one strategy to another...all her ruses, so dependable in the past, have failed.”<sup>139</sup> The Misfit is aware of this and replies with a grotesque joke, saying ““there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip.””<sup>140</sup> His true psychotic beliefs are revealed as he says ““it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.””<sup>141</sup> This meanness and brutality is what encapsulates the Misfit as a character. Reaching out to touch him, calling him “one of my babies”, the grandmother is immediately shot dead.<sup>142</sup> Her body is grotesquely described as half sitting and half laying “in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.”<sup>143</sup> The Misfit’s last lines are “She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life...It’s no real pleasure in life.”<sup>144</sup> In these final moments, both the Misfit and the grandmother have a sort of revelation. The grandmother finally recognizes her own flawed humanity and puts aside her own pretentious, distorted moral code of what makes a good man by equating her murderer to one of her children. The Misfit, meanwhile, acknowledges that he does not gain pleasure from brutal

<sup>138</sup> O’Connor, 19.

<sup>139</sup> Stephen Bandy, "One of My Babies": The Misfit and the Grandmother”,107.

<sup>140</sup> O’Connor, 21.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

murder, and recognizes she had potential to be good. However, his actions speak louder than words as he unflinchingly annihilates an entire family, and the reader is left to wonder if they should believe anything he has said. O'Connor is acknowledging the brutality and violent horrors of the Southern past by having it continue to haunt the two most flawed characters as they fail to recognize the harm their own faults and actions cause to those around them.

## Conclusion

Both Faulkner and O'Connor create stories that stress a haunting past that their characters cannot escape from. The history of the American South is what shapes Southern gothic literature, and the frequent use of the grotesque in both Faulkner and O'Connor's writing further exemplify this history. Through both Darl and the Misfit, white male madness (and the subsequent violence that follows) is represented. Darl Bundren seemingly has no sympathy or ability for regulating his emotions as his demeanor is constantly portrayed as unstable. As he has the most narrative chapters within *As I Lay Dying*, the glimpses into his unpredictability immediately create an air of uneasiness throughout the entire novel. In Darl's last chapter, Faulkner puts his madness entirely on display. It had been confirmed by multiple family members that Darl intentionally set fire to the barn, risking not only Gillespie's ability to thrive off of this agricultural society, but also the lives of helpless animals and the ability to finally lay his mother to rest. Switching between first and third person, his thoughts are fragmented and his ability to grasp reality seems to be slipping. By ending the story with Darl manically laughing as he's carted off to a mental institution, the Southern white male ideal of the past is shattered as his true, psychotic nature is revealed.

Meanwhile, O'Connor approaches her character of The Misfit slightly different than Faulkner with Darl. From the very first page of the story, the Misfit is characterized as dangerous. He is assumed to have committed unspeakable violence even before he physically enters the story. Once the Misfit is introduced, his instability is on display and his struggle to form cognitive thought is reminiscent of Darl Bundren's final narration. Switching between explaining the horrors he's seen around the world, quoting the wisdom of his father before admitting that he was locked up for actually killing his parent, the Misfit's capricious behavior

help make the story as unsettling as possible. Especially coupled with the fact that between discussing his life, the Misfit is ordering his henchmen to kill children and their parents in cold blood. While both Darl and the Misfit exist with their madness in different ways, their erratic characterization is constantly visible to the reader. By using Darl and the Misfit to exemplify a sadistic nature reminiscent of white Southerners who supported and upheld slavery, the authors are indicating that the past continues to haunt their characters, even if they are placed in a more contemporary reality.

Additionally, both novels employ instances of alarming violence to illustrate the power of the grotesque. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner writes multiple scenes of animal violence and in one instance, animal violence committed by a child. Furthermore, the concept of the Bundren's spending days with Addie's corpse is a grotesque, disturbing notion to begin with. In reality, this idea is only made worse as it struggles to be brought to fruition. The holes in her face, the smell of her rotting, water-bloated body and the buzzards constantly circling the coffin throughout the entire novel just serve to further depict the grotesque as a literary device. The ever-present theme of death and decay is a constant, and translates over into "A Good Man is Hard to Find". Through the family's bizarre interactions with Red Sammy, as well as the constant foreshadowing of their deaths before the Misfit even enters the picture, O'Connor successfully creates a disturbing, haunting short story full of grotesque imagery.

Both considered some of the most popular authors of Southern Gothic literature, William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor use literary devices within the genre such as the grotesque to create stories with unsettling circumstances and violent characters. Drawing on these aspects that were constants of the past help to illustrate the profound injustice that existed all throughout older Southern society. While this past was violent and shameful, especially in its treatment of

women, people of color, and anyone of lower economic standing, it is still important to recognize and analyze, especially through fiction coming from the same region. Southern Gothic literature and the use of the grotesque within this genre, allows Faulkner and O'Connor to bring to light the extent in which the idealized version of a pastoral, picturesque South rested heavily on the massive repressions of its historical reality.

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