CHAPTER II
DIFFERENCE AND SAMENESS : THE RACIAL CONFLICT
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A major theme in the O'Connor canon is conflict within the family and class conflicts with an underlying racial prejudice. Psycho-analytic theorists and social psychologists of the forties and fifties were saying things about grounds for racial prejudice which have an applicability to O'Connor's short fiction, especially some of the stories analysed in this chapter. Lawrence Kubie, Joel Kovel and Mary Ellen Goodman explain that attitudes towards the body associated invariably with darkness, dirt, and death profoundly affect human responses to the dark skin. Many parallels exist between what Goodman says about responses of whites towards the dark skin and the traits of O'Connor's racist characters. O'Connor's stories depict racial prejudice in terms of aversion towards dirt. In "Judgement Day" Tanner associates a black woman with dung. Josephine Hendin argues that in O'Connor's work, "Racial conflict is a spectacle." But O'Connor is constantly wary of the danger of her work being read as social criticism. For example, she says that the topical is poison. Her attitude to race is complex and has been obscured by her reluctance to play a pious, self-righteous role. Further, her attempt was to
establish her art as a poetic and philosophical kind not limited to depicting social fares in the mode of social realism. Her commitment was to expressing deeper kinds of realism. As her art matured, O'Connor revealed an awareness of the difficulties inherent in creating the kind of vision she wanted to create. Her problem was, as John Desmond pointed out, one of connecting the Incarnation with fictional incarnation.4

With the possible exception of "Turkey," Flannery O'Connor's first five stories give a few hints of the distinctive themes that come to be realised in her fiction more fully. Not until she began to work on the Hazel Motes material which became the subject matter of Wise Blood did she seem to discover her true subject and begin to develop fictional strategies for dramatising it. In Wise Blood, O'Connor achieves a breakthrough by which she is able to present the literal action in terms of the larger Christian vision of history. In fact, O'Connor develops a strategy of simultaneous discovery of the Christian historical vision and the analogical method.

"The Geranium" was published in 1946. Nowhere in O'Connor's works is the theme of alienation and death more evident than in "The Geranium." The struggle
to overcome mortality by establishing one's significance apart from others is clear in this story. Dudley, a sedentary and alienated old man, spends his last days staring out of the window at his neighbour's geranium. The geranium is on a window ledge high above the abyss of a multi-storied apartment complex in New York. The precarious position of the geranium aptly reflects Dudley's own situation. It places before us the image of the dangling man, as the existentialists have defined it, in order to characterise a particular kind of human predicament. Dudley thus is an emblem of the modern man. He finally migrates to New York because it seems an important place for him which could accommodate this alienated man:

Old Dudley would have liked to have explained New York to Rabie. If he could have showed it to Rabie, it wouldn't have been so big—he wouldn't have felt pressed down every-time he went out in it. "It ain't so big," he would have said. "Don't let it get you down, Rabie. It's just like any other city and cities ain't all that complicated."

But they were. New York was swishing and jamming one minute and dirty and dead the next.

Old Dudley, the protagonist, is a southern person living with his daughter in New York city. Cut off
from his native roots, he feels trapped in the alien world of the urban north. He expects the city to affirm his self-importance. He longs for significance and wants to distinguish himself from the crowd. The mass of humanity, he feels, drains his sense of individuality. But at the same time the city also reminds him of his own mortality.

Dudley's situation and his memories of the South enable O'Connor to suggest the conflict in values between the anonymous, hostile city and the traditional city of the South. Nothing in the story suggests that the southern values represented by old Dudley should be seen in a larger historical perspective. In the southern writers' handling of the theme of the South, memory is a mode of ordering the chaos of experience. O'Connor's use of the theme of memory in "The Geranium" dramatises old Dudley's reveries of "black home."

Nothing in the structure of the story suggests a fusion of the linear and the cyclical which is so characteristic of the analogical view of reality and the Christian vision of history. Nevertheless, given the inherent possibilities in the basic situation of the story, O'Connor would return to this theme near the end of her career in a story like "Judgement Day"
where the fictional material is viewed analogically so that a Christian providential vision of death and resurrection emerges from the story.

At the start of the story, "The Geranium," Dudley's alienation and the problem of time's progress are emphasized. The story follows the pattern of a flash-back which reveals that Dudley maintained a sense of community at his boarding house. O'Connor juxtaposes his memories of his neighbour's geranium with the Geranium of the present. This old man longs for the security of the past represented by Mrs. Carson's Geranium, which was "better looking" (3). The present faded flower is about to fall off from the ledge. The city geranium's roots are only tenuously secured in the flower pot. When Dudley recalls how Lulish, his former servant, "could root anything" (3), his own sense of uprootedness is heightened. The old man suffers from an identity crisis. He struggles for meaning in a world which is becoming increasingly chaotic and uprooted.

In Dudley's imagination there is a felt sense of contrast between the powerlessness of old age which is his condition now and the masculinity of his past when he could assume superiority in his community.
Dudley is afraid of a negative description of him, as for example, when the black neighbour calls him an "old timer" (12). His sense of self depended on certain roles of the masculine stereotype he recalls. He explains to Rabie, his black servant, the mechanism of his gun. He considers himself the provider of fish (5). It is by his own choice that Dudley isolates himself from those in his former community. He resents his black neighbour's help. He dislikes his daughter's care. Given the roles that he assumes of a masculine head of a household or white master, he cannot form meaningful relationships with others when he moves to New York. Dudley's revulsion for life and for others arises from the fact that he does not recognise that he shares the same fate as the rest of humanity. His daughter takes him shopping and he is afraid there of the clouds. In the subway, she pulls him back from the edge of the train platform where he almost falls because the scene overwhelms him:

People boiled out of trains and up steps and over into the streets. They rolled off the street and down steps and into trains — black and white and yellow all mixed up like vegetables in soup. Everything was boiling. The trains swished in from tunnels, up canals, and all of a
sudden stopped. The people coming out pushed through the people coming in and a noise rang and the train swooped off again. Old Dudley and the daughter had to go in three different ones before they got where they were going. He wondered why people ever went out of their houses. He felt like his tongue has slipped down in his stomach. She held him by the coat sleeve and pulled him through the people. (7)

This short story "The Geranium" portrays a particular identity crisis suffered by the whites. The acknowledgement of sameness, and not difference, and the deprivation of a sense of superiority are called for in the Whites, as this story projects it. At the same time the story also portrays a peculiarly southern fear. Fearing dependence on blacks, Dudley asserts his superiority over Rabie and over his black neighbour. In the stories that deal with racial conflict, Flannery O'Connor pursues this theme vigorously. At the end of "The Geranium," the geranium falls to the alley below. But Dudley refuses to retrieve it. He refuses because retrieving the geranium would mean risking an encounter with the black neighbour. He would accept the Negro as a servant, but not as a neighbour whose hand he might shake. Finally, Dudley is very much like the owner of the geranium who complains about Dudley's habit of
staring at his window. He tells the old man that he does not "like people looking at what I do" (6). This story discusses alienation from self, family, and the community.

A comparison of "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day" would indicate the directions of growth of the narrative vision of Flannery O'Connor. Both the stories use the same basic situation of the southern displaced in the north. But there are striking differences in tone and philosophical perspective between these two short stories. Flannery O'Connor moves in "Judgement Day" towards depicting the social context and focussing on interactions between individuals referring to racial or class identity. "Judgement Day" satirises the races whereas "The Geranium" deals with the alienated man struggling in a meaningless world. "Judgement Day" is a reworking of "The Geranium" but in this story the white man's self-image is thrown into doubt. It is redefined and ambiguously merged with that of the black man. As in "The Artificial Nigger" human pain and pleasure are one. Tanner has an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself.

"Judgement Day" condemns the dominant whites' relation to the blacks as one-sided and as having
narcissistic implications. The white face reflects the black mask. This story defines the racist character through a portrayal of the interactions between the races. Tanner possesses a heart which is "Hard and tough as an oak knot" (545). Tanner considers murdering the black doctor who buys the land and he threatens to stab his black workers. He explains that he has an ability to overpower the blacks with his wit, though he often exhibits murderous impulses. Ironically, this powerful "master" first appears in the story as an impotent old man. Initially, the story starts with its hero in the manner of an infant being dressed by his daughter. While the outer reality is that of an infant, the inner reality is that of one in a regressive state. Tanner sees his daughter as a threat. He sets up barriers against her intention, like a small child defending his territory. That is, Tanner cannot develop channels of communication with his daughter. His daughter and his servant are mere reflections of his own needs. Barriers between families lead to barriers between races. Tanner in fact cannot think of the blacks except as inferiors. His daughter treats them as things. When a Negro moves into the apartment next door, Tanner assumes that his daughter's status has been reduced. His condescending attitude is revealed in his calling
the black neighbour either as "John" or as preacher (543, 544). Thus Tanner refuses the black his true identity. These subtle attacks by Tanner create in his black "actor" "some unfathomable dead-cold rage (which) seemed to ... shrink him" (544-545). He further feels that a tremor racked him. A tremor here suggests impotence as this white man emasculates the black man by refusing to allow him his role as "actor."

There is much in this story to suggest that O'Connor's sympathies are with the Negro rather than with Tanner. Tanner's treatment of the black servant involves a show of masculine power. He drains Coleman's power. When Coleman first meets Tanner, he sees in the white boss an "invisible power" (538). He focuses on the white man's power, though he himself is twice Tanner's physical size. Metaphors associated with the bear and monkey are used in order to communicate a sense of the shrinking of Coleman.

The old Negro was curled upon a pallet asleep at the foot of Tanner's bed, a stinking skin full of bones, arranged in what seemed vaguely human form. When Coleman was young, he had looked like a bear; now that he was old he looked like a monkey. With Tanner it was the opposite;
when he was young he had looked like a monkey but when he got old, he looked like a bear. (534)

The above passage shows that Coleman is Tanner's "doubled-up shadow" (535). It suggests that at bottom they are alike because they belong to the same human species. But Tanner is characterised by a "failing vision" (531). That is, he suffers from the blindness of being unable to see what we experience as a common lot. The pair of glasses which Tanner gives his black worker is an important image in the short story. In order to assert his power over Coleman and to make him see the world his way, that is, to see the differences rather than the similarities between them, he gives this pair of glasses which forces Coleman to see and accept the master-servant relationship.

But Tanner's vision is ultimately seen to be a fleeting, lost one. When Coleman puts on the glasses, Tanner's inability to see becomes clear. Tanner experiences only "an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. The vision failed him before he could decipher it" (538-39).
The title "Judgement Day" is significant because whereas Tanner expects it to confirm his salvation, O'Connor depicts his damnation. When Tanner attempts to "escape" his daughter, his body is described as being "like a great heavy bell whose clapper swung from side to side but made no noise" (548). The passage shows how Tanner is described as lacking in an inner self. He only assumes the social role of a superior white rather than develop his own integrity. This picture is a contrast to the picture of the grandfather Head in the short story "The Artificial Nigger." Grandfather Head assumes the role of a moral guide as he encourages his grandson to conform to his own view of the community from which he chooses to isolate himself.

O'Connor's technique in dealing with race is most subtle in "The Artificial Nigger" which describes Head's racist aversions towards the black community. In "The Artificial Nigger," at the very start, the mind/body, "Head/" Sewer dichotomies are expressed. The initial description of Head's role establishes an ironic distance between reader and protagonist because of the disparity between Head's shack and the old man's exalted view of himself as he prepares for the moral vision of initiating his grandson into
manhood by taking him to the city which is "not a great place" (251) because Negroes live there. Head plans to acquaint the boy with Negroes so as to encourage him to stay at home for the rest of his life. This narcissistic wish of the father to possess the son and to keep him at home in an innocent, dependent state hardly seems moral. Head wants to allow his grandson no independence. He wants to educate him about Negroes who represent for him evil. Evil is here defined in terms of the body. A number of excremental images are used in this story. The attention given to the toilet on the train and sewer in the city cannot be explained as mere setting. O'Connor presents Head as transforming a humble scene into a romanticised setting. She gradually develops the implications of Head's behaviour so that we gain a greater understanding not only of the narcissistic parent, but also of the racist mind. From the beginning of the story we get an account of Head's attempt to overpower Nelson and to reveal his aversion for dark-skinned persons. Head claims superior knowledge on the ground that he has been to the city more times than Nelson and that the city is full of niggers.

"The Artificial Nigger" is a story about youth, age and redemption. Head's idea is that only with years
does a man enter into a calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young. Coming at the beginning of the story, his idea is ironic. The journey motif is one of the important motifs in the story. It hints at famous journeys and guides — Virgil and Dante, Raphael and Tobias. Mr. Head is his grandson's guide in the city. The purpose of the trip, as already outlined, is to teach Nelson a moral lesson on the sin of pride. But it is soon found that Head himself is more guilty of that sin. The imagery O'Connor employs in the story forebodes the disaster of the trick. The moon, the apparition image of the train which is to take them, the sleeping bodies in the train car, their reflections as ghosts on the windows, that pimp and his two whores are all ominous omens. A poignant truth underlies Head's claim to knowledge. The fact about him is that he lives in an isolated shack in a sparsely populated, all-white rural area. Although Head does not live in the north, the fact that Nelson has not yet been introduced to a negro suggests a similar kind of isolation from and aversion to Negroes.

In spite of Nelson's ignorance of Negroes, he too claims knowledge. Head's and Nelson's efforts to outdo one another become ridiculous. Nelson's
insistence that his infantile experience counts supports the Freudian contention that we are governed by unconscious, infantile experience. The years of infancy seem related to the present emotion: his hatred for his grandfather's belittling behaviour has been displaced by the hatred for the Negro. Thus, the very human struggle for control over others results in aggressive behaviour, like the kind Head exhibits when he competes with his grandson. Head and Nelson "looked enough alike to be brothers ... not too far apart in age" (251). Head exploits his authority when he threatens his grandson with those experiences that infants fear most: engulfment in the Sewer, hunger and abandonment.

One way to overpower a rival is to treat him as if he were a thing. This "Thingification" relates to racism because American slave owners counted Negroes among their possessions and thus dehumanised them. Dehumanisation and the need to dominate have contributed in a large measure to the institutional forces that constitute racism. It is here that the title of the story "The Artificial Nigger" is significant. The title itself focusses on the phenomenon of a person turned into a thing. Here is a Negro formed into a
statue and playing as it were a sub-servient role. Head's tendency to "thingify" the Negro is pervasive throughout the story. When Head directs Nelson towards the kitchen, his comment about the black waiter equates Negroes and cockroaches. Similarly, the Negro shoe polisher is the "thing" that marks their way once they get to the city. At the end of the day when they try to escape the black section of the town the decreasing number of blacks is another thing that suggests to them that they are going the "right" way.

There is nothing in the story "The Artificial Nigger" to indicate that on the sociological plane the right way is an avoidance of the blacks. Head goads Nelson into asking directions from a black woman, a black woman who seems to answer Nelson's craving for maternal love intensified by his paternal upbringing. Thus Nelson's quest for self-definition is in fact a quest for origins. He seeks the mother in order to discover "Where I come from" (259). In her Letters O'Connor states that this black mountain of maternity symbolises the mystery of existence. Nelson's response to the black mother figure is confused because Head instils in him a revulsion for blacks by showing him an excremental view of the city. The associations Head encouraged during the Sewer scene between the bowels of
the city, dirt, darkness, and by implication, Negroes who live in the city, elicit aversion and fear in Nelson. Head's racism develops an implicit equation. The city is associated with Negroes and with engulfment. The Negroes are associated with darkness, dirt, sexual temptation, and death. But when the two travellers encounter "The Artificial Nigger" and acknowledge the suffering he represents, they are mysteriously reconciled to each other. O'Connor in fact declares that the central black form in this story represents "the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all." This is a timeless Roman Catholic theme. Nelson and Head's reconciliation seem to have a redemptive moment when they recognise in the statue's "wild look of misery" (268), the misery and sense of alienation that they themselves are suffering from. They become reconciled to each other. That is why O'Connor declares that "The Artificial Nigger" is "a story in which there is an apparent action of grace." The trials along the way lead Head to a moment of illumination. The statue of the "Artificial Nigger" serves as a catalyst in enabling Head to gain his knowledge of mercy through the agony of sin. One of the qualities of the short story is that whenever O'Connor presents a story about a rebellious child seeking a sense of self
and makes the child mirror the parent, the parent's integrity is questionable.

Head and Nelson no doubt reconcile themselves to each other. But what differences are there to "dissolve" between these two? They are characterised by a sameness. O'Connor stresses thus: "The two of them stood there with necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets" (268). In fact the Artificial Negro is the same size as Nelson, and Nelson and Head observe the same feeling of misery in his eyes as they themselves have experienced. Head never acknowledges or overcomes his aversion to blacks or his narcissistic pride. O'Connor writes that in the last paragraphs of this story she has "practically gone from the Garden of Eden to the Gates of Paradise." Paradise, as Head views it, might be construed as this worldly control over his grandson. "The Artificial Nigger" employs the psycho-analytic context suggesting regressive behaviour and at the same time deals with the larger issue of racial conflict, with an apparent action of grace worked into the fictional incarnation.

Yet another story about the importance of race in the Flannery O'Connor canon is "The Displaced Person." It is one of O'Connor's most successful
stories. The story is divided into several parts, with the first part enabling us to meet the principal characters, Mrs. McIntyre, a sixty year old once widowed and twice divorced woman, Mrs. Shortley, wife of the dairyman, Guizac, industrious, displaced person, the priest, an eighty-year old eccentric, the peacock which fascinates the priest, and the two Negroes, Astor, the old man, and the Yellowish boy, Sulk. O'Connor incidentally uses the peacock as a major symbol in the short story. We are also introduced to important attitudes here. Mrs. McIntyre feels that her hell takes advantage of her. Mrs. Shortley promotes dissention through gossip. Once again in this short story O'Connor represents the southern social aristocracy. The added representation of the suffering foreigner and the priest provides a broader philosophical base for the stories concerned with the social group in the O'Connor canon.

At the start, Mrs. Shortley and McIntyre appear to be a somewhat harmonious pair. But finally McIntyre's firing of Mr. Shortley causes the eventual death of Mrs. Shortley. The displaced barns become deadly antagonisms, affection yields place to betrayal. The story ends with Mrs. McIntyre, Mr. Shortley, and a black servant in collusion as the tractor rolls over Guizac and kills
him. Thus there is a final closing of the ranks occurring, not between members of the same family or social group, but between members of displaced groups united by self-interest. The point that this story stresses is that forming ranks, asserting differences, and denying sameness or human drives must be overcome in order to establish a unified human family.

The structure of the story derives itself from an organisation of the narrative wherein the differentiating factors are initially clarified. Part one focusses on how Mrs. Shortley distinguishes herself from those beneath her and associates herself with those above her in the social scale. Part Two depicts Mrs. McIntyre's struggle for power over Mrs. Shortley and others. Part Three stresses the priest's clarification on the deficiencies of the pair. In this part, people are divided on the basis of those who trespass and those who belong, those who violate the rights of others and those who are dominated. Even the son is presented as an "intruder" and the peacock, whose "eyes in the tail stand for the eyes of the Church," seems an eavesdropper. In this respect, the peacock is not unlike Aster and Sulk, the Negro workers who hide behind a mulberry tree in order to watch the arrival of the displaced persons who have recently
been hired by Mrs. McIntyre from Poland. These "intruders" and the priest form a group of "outsiders" pitted against the so-called "insiders." Mrs. Shortley asserts her position as an "insider." When the Guizacs first arrive on the farm, Mrs. Shortley notes that foreigners are "only hired help like the Shortleys themselves and the Negroes" (194). But she spends the rest of her time wishing to be differentiated from any one she feels is her inferior. Mrs. Shortley is all the time preoccupied with fitting everyone into her particular scale of values. Her scale of values are governed by her sense of self-worth and her so-called elevated status. This farm woman depends on white-black polarities such as "advanced" (the Americans) and "backward" (The Poles). In her eyes, the Guizacs' "Catholic beliefs have none of the foolishness ... reformed out of (them)" (198). Mrs. Shortley's puritanical southern protestantism encourages racism and classism. In this story, as in "The Geranium," there is the association of some characters with dirt and insects thereby revealing an aversion for physicality. That Mrs. Shortley associates the Guizacs with death is evident when she considers their language:
She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel. God save me, she cried silently, from the stinking power of Satan! And she started from that day to read her Bible with a new attention. (209)

Jealous of Guizacs' efficiency and industriousness, Mrs. Shortley uses religion to strengthen her case and asserts thus: "It is no man... that works as hard as Chancey, or is as easy with a cow, or is more of a Christian" (205). What is important here is that O'Connor satirises Mrs. Shortley's religious pretensions. Mrs. Shortley uses religion as a status symbol and "grace" as a token of worth in the material world. She considers her son who had been to the Bible School as superior to the Guizacs boy. But Mrs. Shortley makes use of religion only to differentiate herself from the inferior Guizacs. Otherwise she is hypocritical enough to deny religion itself:

She had never given much thought to the devil for she felt that religion was essentially for those people who didn't have the brains to avoid evil.
without it. For people like herself, for people of gumption, it was a social occasion providing the opportunity to sing; but if she had ever given it much thought, she would have considered the devil the head of it and God the hanger-on. With the coming of these displaced people, she was obliged to give new thought to a good many things. (203-204)

Mrs. Shortley's suffering from a stroke is an event in this story which highlights the idea of sameness that transcends racial, social and national barriers. The last view of Mrs. Shortley with one leg "twisted under her and one knee almost into her neck," and "clutching at everything she could get her hands on" (213) points to sameness, though here O'Connor stresses the fact that we all suffer the same fate and must learn to overcome narcissistic tendency. While Mrs. Shortley is obsessed with asserting differences, Mrs. McIntyre is obsessed with the idea of the same-ness. She repeatedly declares that the Jewish Guizac family, the white Shortley family, and the blacks are all "the same" (220).

Part Two of the story which focusses on Mrs. McIntyre's development shows how this farm manager who heads the social hierarchy puts on an appearance of
independence in spite of her dependence. Mrs. McIntyre's conversation with Aster is marked by her use of the personal, first person plural form: "we've seen them come and seen them go" (214). Even here she speaks only in a monologue. The negro only serves to reflect her own thoughts. The threat of miscegenation is the ultimate threat to Mrs. McIntyre's desire to feel control over her own fate. In a striking image that occurs following the incident when Mrs. McIntyre condemns Guizac's plan to save his cousin from the concentration camp by marrying her to the Negro, Sulk, Mrs. McIntyre "climbed to the top of the slope ... and she narrowed her gaze until it closed entirely around the diminishing figure (of Guizac) on the tractor as if she were watching him through a gun sight" (224). This description prefigures the murder of Guizac. Her aversion for Guizac who is "no larger than a grasshopper in her widened view" (224) and for what she calls "a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger" (222) is an aversion for the body that threatens decay. Finally, it is Mrs. McIntyre who is displaced: "she felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger" (235). Mrs. McIntyre's tendency to treat everyone else except herself as the same reaches its
climax when she equates the devil and the priest and the displaced person and Christ (230). The first equation is absurd. The second one is ironically true in that Guizac and Christ both partake of the divine and are united in suffering. The priest who represents true independence, charity, and faith is the imaginative unifying perspective in this story. Mrs. McIntyre is his opposite. She ends her life in a state of total dependence on two black figures that serve as symbols for unity through suffering.

Thus these four stories "The Geranium," "The Artificial Nigger," "Judgement Day," and "The Displaced Person." are stories which deal subtly with the racial theme against the southern background even as they attempt to forge O'Connor's thesis relating to the idea that we must overcome the narcissistic tendencies that causes us to want separation from and superiority over others. Yet another short story "Revelation" is important in the O'Connor canon in the treatment of this theme. Mrs. McIntyre is not as fortunate as "the visionary" who attains her revelation before she has reached a level of alienation too drastic to be overcome. In "Revelation" Flannery O'Connor uses a cross-section of the society to reveal the main character's personality. Mrs. Tupin, apart
from displaying her hypocrisy, reveals in this story an overwhelming pride in her position within the community and in relation to God. O'Connor makes in this short story an explicit statement on race as well.
REFERENCES:


9. The Habit of Being, p. 78.

10. The Habit of Being, p. 509.