CHAPTER III

MALE-FEMALE CONFLICTS AND PSYCHIC FRAGMENTATION
Although some critics have written as if Flannery O'Connor's fiction is theology in disguise, her stories a series of illustrations of Grace, she has continually stressed that she was writing fiction and not religious tracts. Her narratives have been discussed in terms of the "real" Southern world she creates, though her attitude to "racism" has become well known. The attempt has been to strip Flannery O'Connor of her various fictional disguises and expose the truth behind the irony, the ambiguity, and the paradox of her writing. In so doing an attempt will be made to focus on O'Connor's language and her awareness of the sense of despair and human mortality as a means of heightening one's moral sense and as a means of presenting an existentialist apprehension of alienation and psychic fragmentation. A struggle for significance and permanence in a world of alienation, fragmentation, and transience is depicted in O'Connor's short stories. In the process, a highlighting of materialistic aspects of life takes place. Following Jung and Eric Neumann, whom O'Connor read and respected, she seems to assert that the dominance of masculine aggressive values would threaten the hope for a peaceful and civilized future for mankind.
"Greenleaf" is a story which explicits the rivalry between Mrs. May and Mr. Greenleaf and that between Mrs. May and her sons in order to exploit the male female dichotomy and the resultant materialistic aspects of life. The story contains overt religious symbolism and an abundance of metaphors. A crown of thorns, the trinity, the use of prayer healing, the image of a snake are employed in the short story as part of its religious symbolism.

The story opens with Mrs. May being awakened by a bull that has broken loose from its pen. The loose bull gives cause for her to reflect on her farm hand tenants, the Greenleafs. That Mrs. May is opinionated, proud, and self-pitying is something that we learn about from her interior monologue. The basis of the real conflict emerges because the Greenleafs' sons, O.T. and E.T., have done well. They were serjeants in the war, married French women, built a brick duplex, and now the farm. Mrs. May's two sons, Wesley and Scofield, who live with their mother, make fun of her and are indifferent towards her problems and are at best not even worth shooting. Scofield is an Insurance salesman for blacks. Wesley is an intellectual, a teacher who hates everything. Mrs. Greenleaf is a
prayer-healer who wallows in the dirt over miseries of people she does not even know. In Mrs. May's eyes she is a lazy person. When Mrs. May learns that the loose bull belongs to O.T. and E.T., she denounces Mr. Greenleaf about his son's lack of responsibility. The scene ends with Mrs. May's threat that she will have Mr. Greenleaf shoot the bull - if the bull is not removed from her property. The bull is described as "squirrel-coloured, with jutting hips and long-light horns ... a Greenleaf bull if ever I saw one" (323), as Mrs. May puts it. The sexual connotations of Greenleaf's phallic bull is reinforced when we notice the procreating powers of the Greenleaf family and the passivity of Mrs. May's children. Mrs. May of course matches the masculine characteristics of Mr. Greenleaf. But this unfeminine female farm manager ironically uses her femininity as an excuse for not being more successful in exacting obedience from her hired male hand. She complains to Mr. Greenleaf that his sons do not comply with her wishes because she is a woman: "They didn't come because I'm a woman ... You can get away with anything when you're dealing with a woman. If there were a man running this place..." (329). The competition between Mrs. May and Mr. Greenleaf results in a power struggle that reveals the violence of the male materialistic world suggested by both characters.
Mr. Greenleaf operates on a primitive level in his aim to organise his world in Mrs. May's space. He is depicted in the short story as walking "on the perimeter of some invisible circle" (313). The circle invokes several ideas. That Mr. Greenleaf is confined to the circle of self is one of the implications. Circling also connotes the hunter's attitude towards his prey. Greenleaf tries to increase his power, enlarge his territory, and centre himself in the world. The story uses a number of regressive symbols in conveying this idea. In O'Connor's view the pursuit of material territory and the inability to transcend self indicate primitive natures. Both Mr. Greenleaf's and Mrs. May's ambitions are regressive. Mrs. May's dream caused by the bull's munching on the hedge outside her window suggests a regression to the state of infancy. She dreams that something was "eating her and the boys, and ... eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleaf's on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place" (312). It is relevant that Mrs. May thinks of territorial claims, possessiveness and competitiveness bordering on the manifestations of the narcissistic self. That the bull intrudes "like some patient god come down to woo her" and "to tear out the hedge" (311) suggests the myth of
the rape of Europa and the conflict between male and female, spiritual and bestial forces. Again, Mrs. May's "primitive" fear of being eaten by the bull reverses the Dionysian ritual mode of the worshippers eating a bull.

By suggesting the male female conflict and incorporating overtones of an inversion of the Dionysian ritual mode, Flannery O'Connor introduces a complex of allusions. "Greenleaf" and "May" ironically suggests regeneration and yet Greenleaf's character paradoxically suggests "the death-life oxymoron of Picasso's Minotaur, the surrealistic depiction of a mythical god holding a knife formed as leaf."²

The bull symbol indicates how violence dominates the story. Violence is the culmination of the intense vieing for superiority on the part of Mr. Greenleaf and Mrs. May with regard to their offspring. The accusations and counter accusations that these two characters make regarding their children indicates how religious faith is replaced by ideals of resourcefulness and possessiveness. The suggestion of primitivity is further strengthened by Mrs. Greenleaf's peculiar ritual of burying tragic newspaper clippings. In fact, Mrs. May is obsessed with acquisitive struggles for
material success measured by the success of her offspring and the size of her property. Her identification with her property is such that "When she looked out any window in her house, she saw the reflection of her own character" (321). This is the egotistical self-portrait of Mrs. May who is like Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person." Especially, Mrs. May is worried about her sons' capacity to secure wives. Scofield is in pursuit of success which is defined in terms of acquisition of material goods. He exploits Negroes by selling them insurance that they probably do not need. Wesley hates the female element, He "didn't like nice girls ... he hated living with his mother" (319). He declares openly to his mother thus: "I wouldn't milk a cow to save your soul from hell" (321). All the characters in "Greenleaf" in a way are engaged in an aggressive competition with one another. It is the destructiveness of this kind of behaviour that is suggested by the violent ending of the story when Mrs. May is impaled on the horns of the Greenleaf bull. Mr. Greenleaf completes the violent scene by shooting the bull. But Mr. Greenleaf's complicity in Mrs. May's death is subtly indicated by a repetition of circling images at the end. He "circles" the car as they set out after the bull. He "circles" the gate
and the hill (331) before he allows his escape. Greenleaf finally approaches Mrs. May's mortally wounded body as if "on the outside of some invisible circle" (334).

The religious symbolism which has accompanied the violent crescendo raises in our mind the question of redemption. A close analysis of the text would reveal that Mrs. May only seems to be "whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (334), as the narrator of the story tells us. The last discovery may be that self-sacrifice rather than self-perception, capacity for love rather than aggression are necessary for achieving wholeness of self and harmony within the family.

In this story the dominance of masculine values results in an attack on the mother, a fragmentation of family, and a failure to continue the chain of human development.

Yet another story which deals with the theme of materialism but subtly introduces an element of devilry is "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Though simple on the surface level, the story is perplexing in several ways: the mother's relationship with her daughter Lucynell, Shiftlet's attitude towards the human condition. Shiftlet wanders onto Crater Place, talks his way into work, marries the daughter for convenience, abandons the idiot-daughter, and flees to
Mobile. Shiftlet's question, "What is a man?" has faint echoes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

This story is a companion piece to "The Misfit" story. In Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater we have an encounter between a diabolical young man and a motherly older woman. Here in the story a Satanic figure looms over innocence, but unlike in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the comic impulse is noticed from beginning to end. In its presentation of the interaction between the Con man and the fallible victim, this story draws on popular American humour.

Mrs. Crater belongs to the category of a devouring mother, "ravenous for a son-in-law" (150). Her nature is aggressive and unfeeling. She lives alone with her handicapped daughter in a desolate spot. But still she greets the vagabond Shiftlet because she "could tell, even at a distance" that he is "no one to be afraid of" (145). While Mrs. Crater's responses to Shiftlet seem to be characterised by a monotonous repetitive singleness of response, in Shiftlet there are suggestions of duplicity. Shiftlet suggests the devouring quality of The Misfit and also spiritual deformity. Paradoxically, Shiftless appears before Mrs. Crater's porch so that "his figure formed a crooked
cross." This suggestion is further reinforced by his resurrecting the old woman's automobile and feeling "as if he has just raised the dead" (151). But Shiftlet is indeed an anti-Christ figure whose interest is in possession. His preoccupation with the materialistic world makes him sacrifice innocent young women. Shiftlet marries the idiot daughter only because he wants the old woman's car. He promptly deserts this girl when she falls asleep at the counter of a restaurant.

The story gives subtle hints of the duplicity of Mr. Shiftlet. The name itself is suggestive. Shiftlet's hometown is Tarwater, which suggests split ("Tear" means "rip"). Mrs. Crater ask him whether he is "single." The irony is Shiftlet is one-dimensional. He is single-minded in his exploitation of others and in his inability to see beyond the material world. His entirely materialistic outlook is evident from his declaration:

"A body and a spirit," he repeated,

"The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always ..." (152)

Shiftlet is only a mock philosopher, a man who puts on the appearance of a social critic. But his
philosophical formulations reveal an essentially comic incongruity between what he is and what he appears to be. He makes use of the flame imagery and the imagery of surgical incision in order to project a picture of the heartlessness around him. He tells a story about a surgeon who "cut the human heart ... out of a man's chest and held it in his hand" (147). Constantly projecting blame on to others, Shiftlet is unaware of his own crimes. He lights the match of human suffering as it were. The symbolism of money and material gain versus spiritual well being, the references to Lucynell as an angel and an innocent, and the metaphor of Shiftlet's smile which is like a snake combine to suggest the temptation motif. Mr. Shiftlet's dissatisfaction arises when Mrs. Crater refers to him as a disabled tramp at a marriage ceremony, after he drops Lucynell at The Hot Spot and after the hitchhiker jumps out of the car.

In her Letters O'Connor says that "moments (of Grace) are prepared for (by me any way) by the intensity of the evil circumstances." Shiftlet progresses from gospel singer to undertaker. He does not actively destroy his victims like the other more aggressive criminal. He just deserts Lucynell and
does not care for her after marrying her. His passivity reminds us of what we saw in Mrs. McIntyre when she allowed the destruction of Guizac. O'Connor aptly describes Mr. Shiftlet's moral condition thus: he is for her "of the Devil because nothing in him resists the Devil." The extent of Shiftlet's depravity is demonstrated to us in the story when he feels "oppressed" when he picks up a young boy, a runaway. Shiftlet's depravity becomes apparent when he speaks to the young boy in the following lines and expresses the point of the story:

He was more depressed than ever as he drove on by himself ... There were times when Mr. Shiftlet preferred not to be alone. He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker. Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own." (155)

The child sees through Shiftlet's hypocrisy and shocks him: "My old woman is a fleebag and yours is a stinking pole cat" (156). But to the end, Shiftlet is intent on denying his own culpability. This story is one of abandonment with its conflation of the mother's abandonment of the child (in Shiftlet's case) and the child's
abandonment of the mother (in the hitchhiker's case). The story satirises our desire to have a sense of justice administered. Shiftlet rides off to Mobile in his stolen automobile and escapes with the "guffawing peal of thunder" (156) in a gesture suggesting de-humanising. Shiftlet's passivity and materialism deprive him of spiritual values.

"The Enduring Chill" is another short story where the materialistic orientation of man becomes visible in the mother-son relationship. Asbury Fox directs his aggression towards his mother in this short story and he tortures her with the idea that he is about to die. Each word that stems from him seems "like a hammer glow on top of her head" (372). This story has a three-part structure. In the first part, Asbury Fox returns from New York City to his home, Timberbore, Georgia. Asbury thinks that he comes home to die. His mother Mrs. Fox and his sister Mary George pick him up from the train and drive him to the house. In his own distorted and romantic way, Asbury relishes the thought of his dying as a kind of punishment in his family. A contrast is presented in this part of the story between Asbury and his friends in New York, a pseudo mystic and a priest. His friends mirror the wild disparity between what Asbury wants to be and what he really is.
The middle part describes the afternoon of Asbury's first day at home. The concluding part provides clues to Asbury's problems. He indulges in a flash-back and recalls the previous year when he had smoked in the milk barn. After this, Asbury badgers his mother into inviting a priest and this scene where Father Finn chides Asbury for not knowing his catechism is one in which the dwindling self-esteem of Asbury is vividly placed before us.

Asbury Fox fails to develop a constructive relationship with his mother. In fact, he instructs his mother to "close the blinds and let me sleep" (365). That is, he wishes to be blinded to his own responsibilities. Asbury's mother is suspicious of higher education and she advocates plain work and sunshine as a cure for all her son's ills. She is conventional in the sense that she wants her son to do "real work, not writing" (361). While the son represents aggressiveness, isolation, and cold rationality, the mother represents tenderness and femininity.

Asbury feels pleased when he sees his mother's grief over his illness. He considers suicide a mode of punishment for his mother. But he decides to spare her and refrain from suicide because that would cause
the mother "public embarrassment" (370) of failing as a mother. Asbury knows only how to torment his mother in ever so many ways. He breaks his mother's rule of not drinking unpasteurized milk. Drinking forbidden milk is a victory over his mother. It is revenge against being weaned. There are subtle hints of oedipal conflicts in Asbury's aggressiveness towards his mother. His sister represents a rival for his mother's love and therefore he loathes her. O'Connor tells us that Mary George and Asbury "had the same features except that hers were bigger" (359). Asbury and Mary George are both unable to appreciate the members of the family and their community and thus they choke a fine flowering of their self. Driven towards fame because he thinks he has literary gifts, Asbury denies himself human ties. He wants to establish the difference between him and his mother. The difference is to be translated into a sense of "superiority" defined by intellectual pursuits. He tells himself thus:

He had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was sending him Death. He had seen this from the first with a kind of mystical clarity. He went to sleep thinking of the peaceful spot in the family burying
ground where he would soon lie, and after a while he saw that his body was being borne slowly toward it while his mother and Mary George watched without interest from their chairs on the porch. (373-374)

Asbury writes a pretentious letter to his mother thinking that it was such a letter as Kafka addressed to his father. (364) He writes of his desire to find freedom and to take his imagination like a hawk from its cage. Though Asbury is never shown actually producing anything, he ironically feels his heart will enable him to transcend death. The paradox of Asbury's situation is that he feels that somehow dying a unique death will enable him to overcome death, by means of an escape from the common fate. Even the topic of Asbury's unwritten play shows his urge to establish his superiority and to distinguish himself from his community. But his intentions reveal a superficiality of outlook.

Goetz, Asbury's New York friend who is interested in Eastern religions, seeks the loss of individual identity in a kind of Nirvana. In contrast, Asbury's own life is "a unique tragedy of ... a death whose meaning had been far beyond the twittering
group" (360). Asbury rejects Goetz's interest in Eastern philosophy just as he rejects Dr. Block, the community doctor. For him, his illness is a means of differentiating himself from the crowd. But unfortunately he fails to see that his quest for some significant experience which he evolves "for himself out of his own intelligence" (378) will not bear fruit. This will not fructify unless he follows the advice of Father Finn to seek Christ through prayer. Asbury tells the priest that the myth of the dying god has always fascinated him. But he is attracted to the Priest only for what he offers the individual, not for any notion of self-sacrifice for the community. The Priest indeed represents both the community and the salvation of the individual. The story ends with Asbury's realisation that his disease will not kill him. He must face "The Enduring Chill" of accepting life and living in a community where individual self-importance with its materialistic orientation is not validated. That is, the story "The Enduring Chill" presents the matter-spirit dichotomy in terms of the male/female conflict in order to suggest the meaning that Asbury Fox has to admit the feminine side of his nature and become more like his mother by attending to others than by being obsessed with the self.
His humanity is furthered by the water stain which symbolises the Holy Ghost:

Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend. (382)

Another story in which the conflict associated with materialism is presented is "A View of the Woods." This short story portrays the sin of pride manifested in a grandfather Mr. Fortune and his nine-year old granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts. Mr. Fortune tries to bring up his granddaughter on materialistic lines rather than on the naturalist lines. He gives her gifts which she does not ask for and hints that she will inherit his money when he dies. Mr. Fortune envisions himself as a man of progress but the conflict arises when he decides to sell a strip of land between their house and the road, affectionately called "the lawn." In spite of protestations to the contrary, he sells the plot to Tilman who has the devilish characteristics of a snake.
Mary Fortune is described as "a small replica" (336) of the old man and she ends up with miming his aggressive wilfulness. This is a story which describes a parent's effort to remake a child and the consequent dividedness of the self that is experienced by the child. In spite of the child's efforts to be unlike the parent, the child is destroyed. The prototype for the story is *The Violent Bear It Away* where the child, Francis Tarwater, adopts the behaviour of his crazy uncle who believes himself a prophet of God.

When Mary Pitts sits on her grandfather's Cadillac and half on her grandfather "as if he were no more than a part of the automobile" (339), the point that is emphasized is that Fortune's materialism and cold-heartedness reduce him to being like a mechanism. Mark Fortune maintains his power over his daughter and her family by treating them as tenants, not as family. Like Old Dudley, he also in fact denies his daughter who dutifully cares for him. He turns to his granddaughter to satisfy his narcissistic need to possess a single love object. The story builds up a family system of rivalry, jealousy and revenge. Mary Fortune rebels against her grandfather because he threatens to obscure the family's view of the woods.
Ultimately, Fortune seeks his granddaughter not as a satisfying mirror image of himself but as an ominous other. Mary Fortune attacks her grandfather when he tries to beat her for throwing bottles at him and Tilman, as they sign an agreement that ensures the construction of a gas station on Pitts's front lawn. Mark Fortune then murders his own offspring to preserve himself — to rid himself of what he now perceives as a reflection of the son-in-law's will. This macabre ending of the story is laced with imagery to suggest the inner turmoil of Mr. Fortune, a turmoil heightened in his mind because he sees in a mysterious way that Mary Fortune is his other self. The old man suffers a heart attack after his struggle with the other self. His last view is ironically of the woods:

He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him. He could see it in the distance already, a little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water. It grew as he ran toward it until suddenly the whole lake opened up before him, riding majestically in little corrugated folds towards his feet. He realised suddenly that he could not swim and that he had not bought the boat. On both sides
of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance. He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay. (356)

The last thing Mark Fortune sees, however, is the bulldozer, but while nature is indifferent to him, the mechanical monster cannot help him. Mark Fortune and others are "death-haunted questers" whose alienation from self, family and community leads to a sense of despair and to a hyper-awareness of death. This results in an attempt on their part to establish their sense of identity as entirely independent of the community. O'Connor's characters who suffer a fear of death and are alienated from self and society are divided against themselves. She depicts conflicts within the human psyche like conflicts between masculine and feminine and between self and society.
REFERENCES:


