

Ambiguous Seduction: The Mythical Paradigm of Flannery O'Connor's

Good Country People

Flannery O'Connor's short story *Good Country People* narrates the deception of a highly educated woman of thirty-two, Hulga, who on account of her health has returned home to live with her mother after obtaining her Ph.D. in philosophy, by a crooked Bible salesman Manley Pointer. Arrogant in her superior education, she looks down upon the salesman, whom she imagines seducing on a picnic they arrange together. She is in the end herself seduced by the salesman, who steals her wooden leg and leaves her vulnerable in a barn loft. In this story critics have noted a derision of intellectualism and identified elements of the grotesque. Di Renzo compares it to a Medieval fabliau, citing among other aspects of the story the presence of three tropes common to fabliaux: 'a bizarre seduction, a missing limb, and elements of religious parody' (Di Renzo 1993, 73ff.). The story also contains several pointed references to Graeco-Roman antiquity. Near the outset, Hulga, who has with spite legally changed her name from Joy, is said to have 'a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably the goddess had to come when called.' (CS 275) As Gentry (1986, 115-16) notes, in her physical disability and her grotesqueness, Hulga indeed resembles Hephaestus, and yet she also plays the role of the seducing goddess Venus. When Manley Pointer has removed her leg, he lays before her a flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and condoms 'one at a time in an evenly-spaced row, like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess' (CS 289). Thorburn (2006) has argued that the story owes a debt to the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemus. In this paper I explore further the classical resonances in the story, in particular aspects of the ambiguous

seduction that recall the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, a myth at whose centre lie questions of knowledge, deception, and religious authority. I also consider the implications of the stance towards classical learning taken by Hulga's mother, who thinks of Hulga's profession, 'You could not say, "My daughter is a philosopher." That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans.' (CS 276)

Bibliography

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