The First Fruits of Literary Rebellion: Flannery O’Connor’s “The Crop”

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In Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, other scholars see the writer embracing a male literary tradition, citing as evidence her works’ “androcentric and often misogynistic characters, narrators, and plots” (Prown 159) as well as “the toughness of the narrative style and subject matter” (Gordon, *Imagination* 30). These critics read “The Crop,” one of the six stories that comprised O’Connor’s 1947 University of Iowa master’s thesis, as a repudiation of the role of the female author. Katherine Hemple Prown asserts that O’Connor’s experiences at Iowa taught her “that her literary reputation depended upon her ability to keep her fiction free from the taint of femininity” by “bury[ing] her female self beneath layers of masculinist forms and conventions” (38, 161). According to Prown, Miss Willerton, the protagonist of “The Crop,” allows O’Connor to distinguish herself from “penwomen” and their “petty concerns” (43). Mark McGurl echoes Prown, describing the story as an “auto-exorcism . . . of the spirit of the amateur ‘penwoman’” (538).1

These critics are correct in contending that O’Connor uses “The Crop” to distinguish herself from certain literary forms associated with women writers. But this is only half of the story. Miss Willerton’s fiction—in contrast to which O’Connor defines her own work—represents the worst of not only sentimental pastoral fiction, a woman-authored form, but also gritty social realism, a genre dominated by male writers. “The Crop” thus represents not an exorcism of the penwoman, as others have argued, but a manifesto excoriating these generic forms. O’Connor aims to address the experiences of the South’s poor white farm folk, but in “The Crop,” she reveals the limitations of the preeminent genres for doing so.

“The Crop” is, as McGurl observes, “metafiction”: a “story about storytelling” (536). The tale opens with Miss Willerton, the writer-protagonist, engaged in “the hardest part of writing a story”: devising a “good subject” from her limited reading and even more
limited experience (O’Connor 33, 34), Willerton evaluates potential subjects in terms of their social import, reflecting that an “air of social concern [...] was so valuable to have in the circles she was hoping to travel” (35). First rejecting bakers because they lack “social tension” and next deciding that “teachers weren’t timely,” Willerton at last settles on a suitable subject: “Social problem. Social problem. Hmmm. Sharecroppers!” (34). In her effort to write about sharecropping poor whites, Willerton invokes—indeed, models her fiction on—two central Southern modes for fictionally treating the “social problem” of rural white poverty: female pastoralism and social realism.

An unnamed novel suggestive of the work of social realist Erskine Caldwell provides the model for the first part of Willerton’s story. Social realism has been fittingly described as “not a style of the period but the style” of the 1930s (Wolfe 34), and Caldwell is the mode’s signal Southern practitioner, penning fictional and nonfictional works depicting the struggle of the Southern agrarian proletariat. Caldwell loomed large at the start of O’Connor’s career not only as a fellow Georgia writer but also as a bestselling American author: in 1946, the year O’Connor entered the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, God’s Little Acre was issued in a twenty-five-cent mass market paperback that sold a million copies in the first six months alone—an unprecedented sales figure at the time (Caldwell, Experience 224). Furthermore, Caldwell’s fiction was a touchstone for early reviewers of O’Connor, because the more established writer’s fusion of “gothic comedy and social exposé” provided one of the few points of comparison for O’Connor’s stories (Cook 276). This correlation, though, should not be overstated. As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. observes in his 1955 review of A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories, although O’Connor’s work is reminiscent of Caldwell’s in terms of its poor white subject matter and direct style, the authors differ profoundly in “attitude”:

Caldwell is [...] preoccupied with the poor farmer’s oppressed economic condition. Flannery O’Connor has [...] no such simple approach to people. More kin to the Bundrens of As I Lay Dying, her people confront spiritual and moral problems, not economics. There is in her characters a dignity [...]. All of them are [...] responsible agents, not trapped automatons. (678-79)

By establishing Caldwell’s work—which “combined social realism with sex and violence” (Oakes 68)—as a model for Willerton’s fiction, O’Connor exposes the class and gender conventions of her predecessor. The book on which Willerton models her story’s opening gambit is a scandalous novel intended for male readers. Willerton’s clandestine mode of acquiring the book—she “ordered it from the publisher because she didn’t want to ask for it at the library”—hints at its male-aimed salaciousness (O’Connor 36). The response of Miss Lucia, Miss Willerton’s housemate, to the novel confirms its tenor and target audience. Lucia burns the book after finding it in Willerton’s bureau, explaining to Willerton that she thought Garner, the house’s only male inhabitant, must have put it in the drawer “for a joke,” because “I was sure it couldn’t be yours” (36). What makes this work of Caldwellian social realism “awful” is, in large part, its lurid depiction of rural life (36).

Willerton’s characters, modeled on the example of her social realist source text, personify not flesh-and-blood people but fictional types. Despite the fact that she “had never been intimately connected with sharecroppers,” Willerton feels confident that one “might reasonably be expected to roll over in the mud”—one of the first actions she has Lot Motun perform—because in the novel she read, characters “had done just as bad and, throughout three-fourths of the narrative, much worse” (35-36). Willerton conceives of poor white characters not as fungible figures who adapt in personally
coherent ways to the exigencies of the plot but rather as static stereotypes who respond to stimuli with collectively predictable actions. Thus Willerton’s plan for the plot is simply to create situations that will showcase dirtiness and degeneracy, with Lot’s exploits generalized from what one expects of “that kind of people” (36). Having quickly dispatched with the dirt—“roll[ing] over in the mud” ensures that Lot is filthy (36)—Willerton introduces degeneracy through the kind of violence endemic to Caldwell’s fiction. Willerton’s plan for the “action” of her story consists of “some quite violent, naturalistic scenes, the sadistic sort of thing one read of in connection with that class” (36). O’Connor’s work, to be sure, is violent, but Willerton’s description of “naturalistic” and “sadistic” violence evokes not O’Connor, for whom violence functions most often as a vehicle for spiritual revelation, but Caldwell, in whose novels domestic violence illustrates poor white dissoluteness writ large, and poor white women’s decadence in particular.

7 To distinguish O’Connor’s use of violence from the violence of Caldwellian social realism is to insist that O’Connor, far from attempting to insert herself into a violent boys’ club, is upending that club. At the start of her career, violence was widely considered a central, yet exclusively masculine, element of contemporaneous fiction. A 1946 review of Caldwell, for example, asserts that “men like Steinbeck and Caldwell and Hemingway and Faulkner in America [...] have, in recent years, made violence a necessary ingredient [...] in their work” (Frohock 353). O’Connor employs this “necessary ingredient” with a twist, because rather than emulating this stripe of social violence she introduces spiritual violence. In a short story entitled “Greenleaf,” for example, a violent attack—a goring by a bull—serves as a catalyst for spiritual upheaval, because it endows the assaulted character with a moment of transcendent vision. O’Connor further departs from her male predecessors by representing women as both perpetrators and victims of violence. In fiction by the authors mentioned in W. M. Frohock’s review, men are violent while women are either victimized by or virtuously opposed to violence. In Faulkner’s Sanctuary (1931), Temple Drake is brutally raped when she ventures into a masculine world of moonshining, murder, and other mayhem. In Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Rose of Sharon’s virtuous closing act—breastfeeding a stranger—serves as an antidote not simply to her brother Tom’s violent acts but more broadly to the brutality of the novel’s dog-eat-dog world. In O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” by contrast, an angry woman’s fist unsettles Julian and his mother. In “Revelation,” a young girl named Mary Grace is the story’s vehicle of violence, hurling a book at—and delivering a spirit-moving message to—Mrs. Turpin. O’Connor’s violence thus differs from the violence of male counterparts, like Caldwell, who inspire Willerton’s fiction.

8 Violence will be catalyzed by the poor white female protagonist, Willerton decides, because “that type of woman always started trouble,” often because of “her wantonness” (O’Connor 36). For Caldwell, indeed, a novel’s action is frequently propelled by a woman’s wanton antics. Tobacco Road (1932), for instance, opens with Ellie May’s bare-bottomed slide across the sand—“like [the] old hound used to do when he got the itch”—toward her brother-in-law Lov (18). Ellie May’s licentiousness does start trouble, just as Willerton’s reading of “that type of woman” predicts; her scooting seduction incites a fight between Lov, who possesses a bag of turnips, and Ellie May’s family members, who snatch the turnips from Lov while he is distracted by Ellie May. O’Connor is “in no sense concerned with the pornography and lasciviousness to which
Caldwell often resorts” and, through her stories, repudiates this kind of hypersexualization of the poor white woman (Rubin 678).

Willerton’s female protagonist makes manifest a classed misogyny seen in Caldwell’s fiction but anathema to O’Connor’s work. Willerton’s male protagonist Lot Motun is a class hybrid because he exhibits not only traits common to the archetype of the poor white Southerner such as hookworm, stooped posture, and a red neck but also attributes of the ruling class hero including nice teeth and a strong work ethic. His female counterpart, by contrast, embodies only the negative characteristics of the poor white female stereotype. Willerton imagines her as lazy and careless, noting that “she hadn’t bothered to put salt in” the grits and describing her communications with Lot by means of vituperative verbs like “yowl,” “whine,” and “sneer” (O’Connor 37). While unflattering depictions of poor white farm folk are by no means unique to Caldwell, the gender politics here suggest O’Connor’s fellow Georgian. Caldwell’s poor white men, while physically dirty and sexually degenerate, can be heroic, giving voice to socially salient sentiments like those that Caldwell expresses in his nonfiction. In *God’s Little Acre* (1933), for example, Will Thompson offers a socially and linguistically savvy explanation of why people who trade in cotton futures are called brokers: “Because they keep the farmers broke all the time. They lend a little money, and then they take the whole damn crop. Or else they suck the blood out of a man by running the price up and down forcing him to sell” (75). The opportunities for wisdom and valor open to Caldwell’s female characters, by contrast, are dubious at best. In the same novel, Griselda achieves her narrative zenith by praising rape as a form of male heroism and female fulfillment. While Willerton’s work conforms to the classed and gendered logic of Caldwell’s model, O’Connor’s fiction flies in the face of it, opening a Pandora’s box of poor white characters. Through her representation of Willerton’s literary apprenticeship to Caldwell, O’Connor distinguishes her own nascent fictional approach from the South’s androcentric social realism.

Willerton’s frustration with the vapidity of her poor white female character has an effect never seen in Caldwell: fed up with the “fool,” Willerton strikes her “a terrific blow on the head” and sweeps her from the scene, inserting herself in the woman’s stead (O’Connor 37). McGurl notes that this act represents “the cardinal formal sin of pre-modernist narration: authorial intrusion” (539). This act of intrusion is a micronarrative infraction, as McGurl argues, but it is also a macronarrative innovation, because this feat allows O’Connor to effect a dramatic shift in Willerton’s style. In order to move from representing the poor white as the third-person other to the first-person self, Willerton abandons social realism in favor of the female pastoral. This genre emerges in the twentieth-century South in response to male writers’ pastoral fiction and gives rise to novels in which women draw strength from nature and characters act cooperatively.1 By taking recourse to the female pastoral’s conventions for representing agrarian life, Willerton catalyzes the story’s shift in tone and focus; the “sneer[s]” and sadism that characterized the relationship between Lot and the unnamed wanton give way to the “smile[s]” and domestic accord enjoyed by Lot and Willie, the affectionate diminutive that Willerton assigns her fictional self (37). Willerton’s depiction of the labor and love of rural poor whites allows O’Connor to shine a light on the limitations of the female pastoral tradition.

The inspiration for Willerton’s pastoral style might be Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s novel *The Time of Man* (1926). Although not widely read today, Roberts’s story of a poor
Kentucky farm woman’s coming of age was a bestseller in the 1920s—one adopted by the Book-of-the-Month Club and praised by literary luminaries including Sherwood Anderson, Ford Madox Ford, and Robert Penn Warren. With “The Crop,” then, O’Connor confronts not insignificant writers but authors she admired and learned from—and Roberts and Caldwell are arguably the most skillful and successful novelists of their respective genres. “The Crop” defines the importance and iconoclasm of its author’s work by distinguishing it from all—even the best—that has come before.

Roberts’s and Willerton’s tales offer sanguine pictures of the hardscrabble lives of small farmers in the South. Ellen Chesser, the protagonist of The Time of Man, finds much to be happy about as the wife of a sharecropper. Returning to a plot of land that she and her husband previously tilled with “less goods than when they [first] came, but two children more,” Ellen nonetheless envisions (and, to be sure, finds) a life of plenty, including a food storage cellar, a pig contributed by the farm owner, and “a fine garden” (337, 339). Willie likewise finds pleasure amid the privations of tenant farming: “Even with as little as they’d had, it had been a good year. Willie had cleaned the shack, and Lot had fixed the chimney. There was a profusion of petunias by the doorstep and a colony of snapdragons under the window” (O’Connor 38). O’Connor critiques the female pastoral by inserting discordant narrative elements that draw attention to the dubious nature of the form’s soft-focus take on the physical deprivations of poverty. In this instance, Willie’s vision of “a good year” is rendered absurd in its elaboration, because the advantages Willerton offers by way of illustration instead betray her ignorance of the realities of farming. In fictional and nonfictional accounts alike, a good year for a tenant farming family in the US South is one in which successful struggles are waged against droughts, floods, boll weevils and other agricultural pests, market prices, and employer chicanery in order to see a profit from the year’s toils. Defining a good year with reference to petunias and snapdragons is a jarring non sequitur that represents the story’s most significant act of authorial intrusion: neither “intimately connected with sharecroppers” nor imaginatively able to conjure them, Willerton imposes her domestic experience onto her fictional self, erasing the myriad duties and disappointments of the farm wife and focusing instead on a fantasy of tidying a shack: the metonymic equivalent of crumbing the table, Willerton’s “particular household accomplishment” in the frame story (35, 33). Roberts and Willerton treat simplicity as a euphemism for scarcity, enveloping their characters in a bucolic bounty that sanitizes the harsh realities of sharecropping.

O’Connor critiques not only the material bounty enjoyed by the heroine of the female pastoral but also her impregnable physical and psychological health. Although Roberts acknowledges the physical deterioration of other farm women, whose teeth “go snaggly” and whose backs grow “crooked” after a few years of marriage, Ellen Chesser, mother of five children, looks like “a girl” and “walk[s] proudly erect,” “her feet light” (49, 156, 376). This bodily vigor is intertwined with Ellen’s emotional stability. In the final pages of the novel, for example, Ellen is described as “living lightly and freely with the passing days” despite the fact that she has just learned that her husband stands accused of burning a barn—a charge that will lead to his midnight beating at the hands of neighbors and her family’s hurried exodus from home (376). Willie's unflappable optimism is of the same order. When the year's crop is destroyed at the same time that a daughter is born—extinguishing Willie’s hopes of giving the child “a good start” in life—Willie is left marveling at “all I got” (38, 39). O’Connor’s typical poor white protagonists take a decidedly less sanguine approach to their troubles than Roberts’s or
Willerton’s characters. Farm worker Mrs. Pritchard’s response to her employer’s optimism in “A Circle in the Fire” provides an especially droll example: in reply to Mrs. Cope’s assertion that “we have everything,” Mrs. Pritchard declares, “all I got is four abscess teeth” (177).

In an essay titled “The Regional Writer,” O’Connor wrote that “the best American fiction has always been regional” because the region affords “the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light” (58). Aiming to use the rural South’s “small history” to address big questions about religion, morality, and society, O’Connor opened her authorial career with a story that surveys—and ultimately skewers—two leading methods for representing Southern farm folk. In this way, “The Crop” makes manifest the rebellious sensibility that characterizes O’Connor’s body of work: the “radical reality” (Gretlund and Westarp) and “imagination of extremity” (Asals) most commonly attributed to her 1950s-1960s fiction. “The Crop,” written in the 1940s, launches a spirited salvo against dominant modes for addressing her oeuvre’s central subject matter—Southern agrarian life. In “The Crop,” we glimpse the first fruits of O’Connor’s iconoclastic style.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. For other articulations of the penwoman thesis, see Asals (16-17) and Gordon, “The Crop” (99-100).

2. Sarah Gordon also notes this evocation of Caldwell’s stripe of fiction, but contends that “O’Connor indirectly attacks the emphasis in mid-twentieth-century fiction on social and economic realism” (“The Crop” 99). I, on the contrary, define this as not an indirect attack but a full frontal assault: a repudiation of her literary forebears that lays the groundwork for O’Connor’s own approach to Southern sharecroppers.

3. The relationships among the characters in “The Crop” are not clear. Although it seems that the main players are related in some way, because Willerton refers to them as “the family” (36), the ties among them are not made explicit. It is plain, in any event, that they live together.

4. This definition comes from Harrison (10-15). While Harrison’s study offers a crucial point of entry to this genre, her analysis proposes a liberatory politics for the female pastoral at odds with my reading, because Harrison treats women’s social visions as broadly emancipatory. For example, Harrison argues that the Southern woman author, freed from the patriarchal order, replaces hierarchical values with communal ones and works to surmount barriers to sexual, socioeconomic, and racial equality. I suggest, instead, that the genres of social realism and female pastoralism—deemed socially and sexually progressive, respectively—represent rural poor whites’ experiences in androcentric and naïve ways incommensurate with the aims of O’Connor’s fiction.

ABSTRACTS

« The Crop » donne ainsi à voir les premiers fruits du style iconoclaste qui caractérise l'œuvre de Flannery O'Connor.

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