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Depiction of Violence in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"

KAREN F. JENSEN

Catherine Barragy Mackin Memorial Prize

In Flannery O'Connor's short story the self-righteous, self-loving Ruby Turpin is the victim of, at first glance, a random violent attack in a doctor's waiting room. An ugly girl with the significant name Mary Grace with a blue acne face throws her book at her and tries to strangle her. After being sedated, the girl gives Ruby the verbal deathblow: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (827). Offended and confused, Ruby goes home. As the day passes, her anger moves away from the girl who attacked her and over to God. Ruby cannot comprehend why God sent her, the good, respectable Ruby Turpin, such a condescending and devastating message. She is angry and yells at God, but then she has a vision. The vision dismantles the image Ruby has drawn of herself, other people, and the world. The physical and psychological suffering Ruby endures is a form of purgation. At the end of the story, Ruby is given grace by God. The verbal and physical violence functions as a catalyst for Ruby's spiritual awakening and change. Violence is not only a destructive force, but also a productive force with a divine and spiritual purpose.

One of the immediate results of the violent incident in the doctor's waiting room is the alienation and pathologization of Mary Grace, the agent of violence. After being removed from Ruby and anesthetized by the doctor, Mary Grace is taken away from the waiting room in an ambulance. When the ambulance arrived, "the attendants came in and set the stretcher down beside the girl and lifted her expertly onto it and carried her out. [...] 'That ther girl is going to be a lunatic, ain't she?' the white-trash woman asked the nurse" (827). Mary Grace's act of violence is labeled as a crazy action, and she is therefore labeled as a lunatic. Her behavior and character are pathologized when she is taken away by health professionals in an ambulance instead of police officers. She is labeled as sick and deviant from the rest of the people in the waiting room. However, already before the violent incident took place, Ruby labeled Mary Grace as an ugly freak.

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Her face is purple and blue with acne, and by turning her lip downwards and inside out, she makes the ugliest face Mrs. Turpin had ever seen (823). Ruby also anticipates a violent action from Mary Grace when she believes that the girl looked like she wanted to “hurl them all through the plate glass window” (825). The significant change in the depiction of Mary Grace as a freak after the violent incident is that the doctor and apparently the people in the waiting room share Ruby’s perception of Mary Grace as a freak. The freak label is no longer simply the opinion of an unreliable narrator, but a perception that will probably have consequences for the rest of Mary Grace’s life. The pathologization of the agent of violence results in an apparent ignorance of societal circumstances, and even the specific circumstances that caused the violence. Ruby does not have to consider whether she did anything to cause the violence, and the other people and the health professionals do not have to consider social and societal circumstances as a context for the violence. As soon as Mary Grace is labeled as a lunatic, all the other possible causes of her violent outburst are eliminated.

On the way back from the doctor’s office, Ruby has strong feelings of confusion and of being an innocent victim. Her greatest source of confusion is not, however, the physical violence, but the verbal violence of which she was a victim:

“I am not,” she said tearfully, “a wart hog. From hell.” But the denial had no force. The girl’s eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to bum instead with wrath. (828)

Ruby understands that she was not a completely random victim of violence. She understands that she was singled out as a victim, but she does not understand why. Because she is incredibly self-righteous, she believes that other people in the waiting room would have been more suitable victims. Her strong sense of victimhood also leads her to tell the story to the black cotton pickers and further construct herself as an innocent, suffering victim of violence. The cotton pickers tell her exactly what she wants to hear, but she is not satisfied, probably because she knows that they are not genuine. Her construction of victimhood is cracked. Something makes it difficult for her to believe in her own innocence, respectability, and righteousness. She cannot settle her mind and fully believe that

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she was the random victim of a lunatic.

The most prominent product of violence is Ruby's revelation by the end of the story. As the day comes to an end, Ruby's confusion and anger increase in strength. She understands that God has tried to send her a message, but does not understand why. She mentally shakes her fist at God and roars: "Who do you think you are?" (832). After her angry outburst at God, she has a vision:

She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the other with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (832)

At first glance, the vision confirms Ruby's arrangement of people into a social and racial hierarchy. The people in the procession are still labeled as "lunatics," "freaks," and "white-trash." The class of people that includes her and Claud are the leaders and the superiors in the procession. Ruby, however, observes that the virtues of people from her class are being burned away. Seemingly, both the virtues of people she perceives as superior and the vices of those she perceives as inferior lose their significance. This last part of Ruby's vision is the revelation. God reveals to her that the hierarchy she has used to classify people as more or less virtuous is not valid when people go to Heaven. God condemns that in which Ruby, the good Christian, believes.

The revelation is strongly related to one of the destructive effects of violence. The violent act destroys Ruby's image of herself and other people. After Mary Grace attacks her and calls her a wart hog from hell, Ruby's perception of herself and the hierarchy of people begin falling apart. Ruby suffers and struggles as she finds out that the system which she apparently always has believed in is not necessarily true and good. However, Ruby's suffering has a purpose. Sykes argues that "indeed, one of the bracing first principles of O'Connor's work is that suffering is good, not evil, as long as that suffering is identified with

the redemptive suffering of Christ” (82). Following Sykes’ argument, Ruby’s suffering is good, not bad. Just like Christ’s suffering redeemed his followers and future followers, Ruby’s suffering redeems her. She experiences redemption from the opinions and beliefs that make her the despicable woman she was. The destruction and suffering that Mary Grace’s violence causes is essentially good and constructive. Thus, Flannery O’Connor’s depiction of violence as a potentially good force differs from the way in which other Southern writers, like Fredrick Douglass, Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, and Dorothy Allison depicted verbal, physical, and sexual violence. These writers, even though the people they wrote about were not necessarily killed or completely destroyed by violence, generally depicted violence as negative, destructive force. O’Connor’s depiction of violence, however, suggests that violence can trigger a change and push the victim of violence in the right direction.

The violence of which Ruby is victim leads her to her revelation. However, the violence and its consequences are also parts of a purgatorial experience. According to Srigley, Ruby is able to make sense of her revelation because her purgatorial experience has already begun before she has the vision (135). Srigley also says, “In a sense, Ruby needs to be confronted with herself from a perspective different than her own. Her self-love distorts her vision of others: religious self-satisfaction makes her a harsh critic” (137). When Mary Grace throws the book at Ruby, tries to choke her and then calls her a wart hog, Ruby is actually confronted with an opinion of her that differs very much from her own. Mary Grace is not the pleasant woman who tells Ruby that she is not fat. Nor is she the cotton picker who tells her she is a beautiful and nice woman. Mary Grace does not confirm Ruby’s perception of herself as a “respectable, hard-working, church-going woman” (828), she tells her she is a wart hog from hell. This experience of being confronted with someone whose perception of her so strongly deviates from her own stirs up Ruby’s life and guides her to revelation. Thus, violence is also depicted as an awakening that prepares Ruby for what happens later in the short story.

Ruby is the victim of violence in the short story, but she also acts as an agent of violence. When she and Claud enter the waiting room, she makes him sit down in a violent and rough manner. She “put a firm hand on Claud’s shoulder and said in a voice that included anyone who wanted to listen, ‘Claud, you sit on that chair there,’ and gave him a push down into the vacant one. Claud was florid and bald and sturdy, somewhat shorter than Mrs. Turpin, but he sat down as if were accustomed to doing what she told him to” (818). Ruby has a *firm* hand, and she

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pushes Claud down into the chair. She speaks loudly. She does not ask him to sit in the chair, or suggest that he sits in the chair, but she commands him to do so. Claud is also clearly used to obeying Ruby. Ruby's violence is not as blatant as Mary Grace's attack on Ruby. However, subtle as the violence might be, it is important to recognize that Ruby's everyday gestures are tainted by physical, verbal and psychological violence. Also, even though it is not stated, Ruby could have provoked Mary Grace. Ruby says that she feels pity for the girl. She "thought how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age. She gave the girl a friendly smile but the girl only scowled the harder" (819). Given that Ruby, because of her distorted self-image and her extreme self-righteousness, is an unreliable narrator at times, one should not trust the way she depicts herself and the environment. One cannot know if Ruby actually gave Mary Grace a friendly smile. Ruby's smile could have been pitiful, even condescending. Her smile would therefore represent a subtle, psychological violence against Mary Grace. Essentially, even though she is not throwing a book at anyone or trying to choke anyone, Ruby understands the language of violence. Her role as an agent of violence is inseparable from her role as a victim of violence. That is why God sent her a message through a violent act—because she eventually would understand it.

Ruby speaks the language of violence, but she is not alone. O'Connor portrays a society where most people are familiar with a language of violence. When Ruby tells the cotton pickers that the girl called her a wart hog from hell, they say that they want to kill her: "Lemme see her. I'll kill her!" "I'll kill her with you!" the other one cried" (830). It is doubtful that the cotton pickers have a genuine wish to kill Mary Grace and that they would do it if they had the chance. Nevertheless, it is significant that they choose this violent rhetoric. They say that they want to kill the girl because they think that is what Ruby wants to hear. God sent Ruby a message through violence not only because Ruby speaks the language of violence, but because the society in which she lives is invested in violence. O'Connor does not, however, glorify the violent society. She stated that "with the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. Violence is a force that can be used for good and evil" (Fitzgerald qtd in Sykes 45). Just as it has its negative uses, violence also has its good uses. In O'Connor's depiction of a society engrained with violence, violence does not only represent destruction, but also construction, production, and revelation.

The violent society depicted in Flannery O'Connor's story was not exclusive to the South, nor to the U.S. The investment in violence must be seen in context with social and historical movements and events of the time. When Ruby tries to fall

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asleep at night, she tries to organize and name all the classes of people: “Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven” (820). It is hard not to see Ruby’s dream as a reference to the Holocaust and the genocide of millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, physically and mentally handicapped people, socialists and communists. The Holocaust happened only twenty years before “Revelation,” was published. People who were seen as inferior due to race, ethnicity, sexuality, religious or political beliefs, and physical or mental capabilities were exterminated in a highly efficient way. Ruby’s manner of organizing people into a class system in which some classes are more superior than others shares similarities with the ideology behind the Holocaust. American soldiers participated in the liberation of concentration camps in Europe, and no genocide took place in America in the twentieth century. However, Ruby’s grotesque dream about showing people into a gas oven indicates that some Americans, racists in particular, shared some ideas about class and race hierarchy with the creators and supporters of the Holocaust.

Another prominent social and historical context for O’Connor’s short story is the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the movement mainly used boycotts, sit-ins, and other peaceful methods. Important figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., promoted non-violence, even when peaceful demonstrations were met with violence from the police and the mob. In the 1960s, however, a radical part of the movement emerged, and figures like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael promoted self-defense and black power instead of non-violent resistance. 1965 was the year of Malcolm X’s assassination and the Watts riots. Riots in Newark and Detroit erupted in 1967, followed by the assassination of King in 1968. Ruby is a racist, and has no sympathy for the civil rights movement. When she talks to God by the end of the story, before her vision, she says, “Or you could have made me a nigger. It’s too late for me to be a nigger, but I could act like one. Lay down in the middle of the road and stop traffic. Roll on the ground” (831). Here, Ruby could be making a reference to the civil rights movement, as blocking traffic is a method of civil disobedience. She makes fun of non-violence and sees it as filthy, not heroic. Ruby also expresses contempt over the idea of equal rights. She says, “but niggers don’t want to pick cotton any more. You can’t get the white folks to pick it and now you can’t get the niggers—because they got to be right up there with the white folks” (821). Ruby’s contempt for black people and their desire for equal rights must be seen in context with the widespread racism in the South at the time. Just as Ruby, along with Mary Grace, is an agent

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and victim of violence in a violent society, she is a racist in a racist society.

In a letter to her friend Betty Hester, Flannery O'Connor wrote, "More than ever now it seems that the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence, or not at all. You have to push as hard as the age pushes you" (Fitzgerald qtd in Sykes 41). Commenting on O'Connor's statement, Sykes says,

She suggests that violence, like suffering, death, and the grotesque, has a divine purpose. This...assertion also goes against the modern grain, which may countenance violence in form of war and even revel in it for its entertainment value on stage and screen, but condemns it from a moral point of view. For O'Connor, the violence of sin requires a divine counterviolence that receives violence and turns it against itself in the interest of peace. (41)

The idea of pushing as hard as the age pushes you could be directly connected with the ideas of the militant part of the civil rights movement. They believed that violence could and should be met with violent self-defense. Hypothetically, O'Connor would have been supportive. Judging by O'Connor's statement, she believed that the use of violence in a violent society is not only inevitable, but also necessary. If used the right way, and for a good purpose, violence is not wrong. To change a violent person like Ruby, it is essential to use a violent method. Because the purpose is to change Ruby to the better, the use of violence is justified. Sykes draws an interesting connection to the present. Today, real suffering, death, and the grotesque is abject. It is often sanitized or pathologized, or isolated in institutions. At the same time, staged or performed suffering, death, and the grotesque, along with violence, is revealed in, not only on stage and screen, as Sykes argues, but also in literature and video games. A great gap between the real and the performance exists; people go to the movies and enjoy extremely violent movies, though very few would appreciate being the victim of violence on the way back to the car. O'Connor's depiction of violence in "Revelation," represents a stark contrast to the ambivalent relationship many people have with violence today. In her short story violence is neither to be morally condemned nor revealed in. Violence is simply a force with both positive and negative potential, depending on usage. The reader is not supposed to enjoy the violence against Ruby as entertainment. The violence is part of the divine message Ruby receives, and what essentially gives her grace at the end of the story.

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