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Racial Prejudice in Flannery O' Connor's Short Story, "The Artificial Nigger"

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Abstract

Flannery O' Connor was not much concerned about 'Race Question'. But her parables overflow with race related themes. In her work, one can see that typical Southern attitudes are frequently revealed in casual comments or in passing allusions that betray entire systems of thought. It is quite explicit that stern moral vision and racism constituted an important theme of her stories. The present paper focuses on the theme of racism in "The Artificial Nigger" along with the critical analysis of its central characters and their journey from ignorance to self-realization.

Keywords

Flannery O' Connor; "The Artificial Nigger"; Epiphany; Journey; Racism.



I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy... For me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that. - Flannery O' Connor

Flannery O' Connor, a divine angel, has been allotted the brief span of life. Her untimely death at the age of thirty-nine silenced one of the finest voices of American fiction. In spite of her short period of creativity she has assumed a permanent place as a major Southern author. The Southern racial hierarchy clashes with integration and multiculturalism in her fiction. Her creative work occurred between the 1950s and 1960s, a tumultuous time in race-relations in America. Walters observes that

Race relations remained an issue at the forefront of O'Connor's consciousness outside of her writing, too. She acknowledged the divide between the black caricature found in literature and the reality of southern blacks, a far more complex subject than how they were depicted in apocryphal accounts penned by white southerners. (34)

In "The Artificial Nigger" O' Connor reflects the complexity of racial definitions. She comes up with the portrayal of comic yet sympathetic characters in the form of Mr. Head and Nelson. Even the very title of the story gives rise to a number of speculations making it abrasive and provocative at a later stage. The title itself notes how race—whether Blacks as defined by law or 'nigger' as defined by society—is a construct that is developed by those in power. In the short-story Blacks occupy a significant position, even though the major encounter is among Whites rather than between Blacks and Whites. It can be seen that for the white boy Nelson, the journey is the archetypal voyage into experience. He learns through the voyage and ends up showing God like virtues while forgiving his grandfather even after a critical and horrific incident.

Nelson is born in the city but he is brought to the rural regions as an infant. He is determined to return to his birthplace to discover different avenues. Nelson's grandfather, Mr. Head who is convinced that the city holds no merit,

intends the trip to be an instruction in humility for Nelson so that he will no longer boast of his superiority arising out of his cosmopolitan origin.

In “The Artificial Nigger” one can see that Whites and Blacks are not in a harmonious relationship rather the presence of one makes another uncomfortable. Apparently there exists no clash between them but a feeling to dominate the other becomes too obvious through their conversation and as a result a cold war of words persists throughout. Nelson and his grandfather planned out a journey and for them “going to the city means entering upon an unfamiliar experience in which one’s previous identity is temporarily dissolved in an unfamiliar milieu” (TAN). Mr. Head brings his grandson to the city to see his first Black. In the rural country where they live, Blacks have been barred for many years. Thus Nelson has reached the threshold of adolescence without any firsthand experience with Blacks. His ignorance on this score has been mocked and taunted by his grandfather, but he expects that in the city he will prove his ability to deal with the Blacks and thus confirm his overall competence in his grandfather’s view. Dealing efficiently with Blacks is of utmost importance for Nelson as it’ll give him a chance to prove his worth in front of his grandfather whom he considers to be an ideal figure.

The first Black man he encounters, appears on the train. The Black passenger is striking in his vulgarity. Nelson finds that the dark man is indeed tan, rather than black. Nelson becomes angry because finds that his grandfather’s definition of a “nigger” is incorrect. “‘You said they were black,’ he said in an angry voice. ‘You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don’t tell me right?’” (TAN).

Moving ahead Nelson is introduced to the curious convention whereby various shades of skin and gradation of blood are classed under the single category of ‘Negro.’ After his grandfather smugly points out this mistake, he concludes that, ‘the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate.’ Afterwards Mr. Head and Nelson decide to walk to the dining car, where they find more Black

people working in the kitchen and the Black man from earlier encounter sitting at a table. When Mr. Head is told by one of the Black kitchen worker that passengers are not allowed in the kitchen, Mr. Head mocks at him and surprisingly Nelson feels proud of his grandfather as he feels more confident about his grandfather's ability to guard him against any evil. Finally they return to their seats, and soon the train arrives in Atlanta.

In the city the travelers ultimately find themselves lost in a black section of town. Even the two whites appear to be aliens wandering without direction through a foreign country. Finally, Nelson approaches a black woman to ask directions as Mr. Head appears to be too proud to ask direction from a Negro, and finds himself pulled toward her by some strange magnetic force. The motherless child responds instinctively to the maternal attractions of the black woman; but her attitude is mocking, superior and after her explanations, the two whites are left as lost as before.

The betrayal scene, in which Mr. Head denies his grandson before the world is shocking to both culprit and victim. Nelson losing sight of his grandfather, runs in panic and knocks an elderly woman to the ground and at the reappearance of Mr. Head he clings to him in terror, but Mr. Head announced to the shocked crowd, 'This is not my boy....I've never seen him before.' Nelson is appalled by his grandfather's rejection, and Mr. Head is miserably aware of the magnitude of his failure. 'He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation.' Mr. Head's rejection, at such a crucial juncture, when Nelson needed him most, portrays him as a coward who fails to support his grandson who considered him to be his hero. He feels deceived and detached. For a sensitive soul like Nelson the horrific experience comes as a shock leaving him devastated. This tragic episode suggests a terrific sequence, a nightmare experience of Nelson where his dream world gets shattered.

The authority exerted by Blacks in their neighbourhood can be well understood as the reconciliation of the leading characters occur through a Black

man, not a real one but an imitation statue used as a lawn decoration. As they stared in a mystified silence, Mr. Head delivers the pronouncement, 'They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one'. Mr. Head's observation, irrelevant as it seems, is sufficient to heal the breach separating the estranged pair. Mr. Head's comment serves to interpret the meaning of the phenomenon and thus to restore the balance so rudely upset by his unjustifiable repudiation of Nelson earlier. It helps in bridging the gap between them. 'He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.'

Once again the grandfather is the instructor and he is the pupil. He is obviously grateful to have his elder returned to the position of wisdom. The scorn of the statue that is implicit in Mr. Head's observation epitomizes the contempt which the two visitors feel toward the city itself, the large world which they can neither comprehend nor cope with. Through their rejection of the battered figure both of them reassert their own superiority to all the dwellers of the 'nigger heaven' and they claim once more their own identities which have been so madly assailed in the unfamiliar realm. From the experience in the city Nelson confirms for himself the basis of his grandfather's antipathy towards the great world. It is, however, Mr. Head himself who experiences the major instructions, for he discovers not only the depravity resident in his own soul but also the bounty of grace that permits forgiveness:

He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion, as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise. (TAN)

In essence the theme of racism is dominant in “The Artificial Nigger”. In a number of incidents the disrespectful behaviour becomes quite obvious, reflecting the bitter truth where the protagonists not only feel superior to Blacks but also try to make fun of them. It is explicit through the dialogues that they don’t give any importance to the Blacks rather don’t leave an opportunity to let them down.

In *Mystery and Manners*, the author speaks of ‘The Artificial Nigger’ in Catholic terms, stating that the "artificial nigger" reunites Mr. Head and Nelson in a way not to be explained except as a ‘working of grace’. Though she interprets the term as, ‘All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.’ At the story’s conclusion, Nelson no longer reveres his grandfather as the great purveyor of knowledge. He has realized that Mr. Head’s definition of a ‘nigger’ is somewhat problematic. His grandfather, as per his realisation, is flawed. The last image is of Nelson watching his grandfather with ‘a mixture of fatigue and suspicion’. In the end we see that Nelson and Mr. Head finally decides to get back with a peculiar feeling of satisfaction as Nelson declares that he would not return to the city though he was happy that he went once and simultaneously Mr. Head feels grateful to God for His grace. Here we witness that his pride is being replaced with grace, bringing Mr. Head to an eloquent epiphany that presumably changes his life and his subsequent attitude toward his grandson, himself, and God. The grandfather’s goal was to teach his grandson a moral lesson so he would never leave home again, a home devoid of Blacks. But what we finally see or hope is that though Nelson vows never to return to the city, he will perhaps be willing to stray beyond the confines of his grandfather’s world view. Perhaps Nelson will abandon his grandfather’s hovel and venture out beyond the parameters of previous generations, both physically and philosophically as ‘The Artificial Nigger’ not only acts as an eye opener but also helps him to resolve the conflict and to become a refined soul.

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