The Irony Revealed by the Characters’ Names in *Good Country People*

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**Abstract:** Irony is Flannery O’Connor’s best-known technique. In her short story *Good Country People*, by applying the technique of irony, O’Connor creates three images of “deformed” people, three seemingly shrewd figures behaving abnormally to satisfy their hollow spirit. This research paper will merely focus on interpreting the irony revealed by the names of the characters to present the contradictions between their expectations and the reality.

**Key words:** irony   hope well   Vulcan   manly

Sharp, penetrating humor, bizarre and often grotesque characters, situations and actions typify O’Connor’s stories (Magill, 1981), and make her one of the major short story writers in the 20th century. Beneath O’Connor’s often startling surface events there is always a deep and complex world of moral and religious mystery that is convincingly brought to life through the author’s deft handling of symbolic narrative (ibid). The short story *Good Country People* is a typical example of O’Connor’s characteristics above. In this story, O’Connor exhibits her best-known technique “irony” to her heart content, which enables the careful readers to smell the “wry comedy” (McMichael, 1740) anytime and anywhere. This paper will merely focus on interpreting the irony revealed by the characters’ names to show the contradictions between their expectations and the real life.

*Good Country People* tells us a story about a farm owner Mrs. Hopewell, her only daughter Joy-Hulga and a Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, as he calls himself. Joy loses one leg at ten, which devotes to forming her eccentric attitude toward everything. Holding the overweening pride, she gets Ph.D. in philosophy, disdaining the common humanity represented by the people around her, especially men. One day, a Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, comes to the farm, bringing the test for every character here, which ironically reveals their blindness to evil (Asals, 1986: 102). Pointer is very good at complimenting people, which helps him get a good meal from the shrewd and mean farm owner, Mrs. Hopewell, and also helps him win Joy-Hulga’s hand. The next day, when he and Joy date in the second storey of a barn, Pointer coaxes Joy to take off her artificial leg, and then unmasks himself and disappears with the wooden leg, leaving Joy-Hulga to suffer the shock of recognizing her own folly.

Mrs. Hopewell, the farm owner, is an old divorced lady who persuades herself that she is in control of the situation and hopes everything goes well. Ridiculously, simply nothing goes well to her wish (ibid). Her only daughter Joy is never ready to develop a good term with her and fails to bring her pride as well (Magill, 1981). Her daughter has taken Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. She thinks one can say, “My daughter is a nurse”, or “My daughter is a school teacher,” but that one cannot say, “My daughter is a philosopher which has ended in Greeks and Romans” (O’Connor, 1995: 444). Worse, Joy even does not want to show a primary respect to her at the presence of the tenants: she slams the door and calls her mother “woman” while her mother was eating, with Mrs. Freeman, the tenant, sitting beside. Mrs. Hopewell regards her daughter as the apple of her eye and gives her a beautiful name called Joy (Asals, 1986: 102). However, her overweening daughter has it legally

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changed to Hulga as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home. She does not tell her mother until she has done it and gone. “Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language” (O’Connor, 1995: 440). To keep the dignity and authority before her daughter, Mrs. Hopewell “continued to call her Joy to which the girl responded but in a purely mechanical way” (ibid: 440-441). Bitterly and tragically, the daughter thinks that “one of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy” (ibid: 441). As to Mrs. Hopewell’s cheery advice to the daughter, such as “a smile never hurt anyone” (ibid: 443) and do it pleasantly if you do, she would respond to none of them. “It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she grew less like other people and more like herself --- bloated, rude and squint-eyed” (ibid). All these are the thorns upon Mrs. Hopewell’s heart (Asals, 1986: 103). So are her tenants, the Freemans. They cannot behave as Mrs. Hopewell hopes and Mrs. Freeman is an intolerably talkative lady to most normal persons. When the Bible salesman Manley Pointer first gets acquainted with her, he says, “Mrs. Hopewell, I hope you are well”. In fact, she could never be even worse: she herself is exploited by a BOY, and her dearest daughter will be hurt deeply by HIM in the near future. Mrs. Hopewell can hardly get her hope well.

Joy is also weak to put the content of her name into her dull and monotonous life. She gets the name Joy first, but joy is impossible for her to reach (Magill, 1981). She loses one leg when she is ten. To make up for this, she gets Ph.D. and wishes to lecture “to people who know what she was talking about” (O’Connor, 1995: 443). Unfortunately, her heart condition prevents her from doing this. And she has no hobby at all. “Sometimes she went for walks but she didn’t like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young man” (ibid: 444). When she lives at home, she finds people around her are hollow and stupid, even including her mother. They cannot understand what she is saying and they do not see what they are not. She totally looks down upon everyone and everything around her. Then where can she get joy? Eventually a mocking chance comes. Manley Pointer appreciates her and loves her and understands her, according to her appreciation (Riley, 1985: 368). However, it turns out that he is a wolf with a sheep’s skin. Joy’s poor joy vanishes soon and forever.

To gain her self-identity and independence, Joy sets her against everything Mrs. Hopewell stands for (ibid: 369). She views the changing of her name as “her highest creative act” (O’Connor, 1995: 441). Hulga is her legal name, which sounds like Vulcán, the fire god in Greek Mythology. According to the mythology, Venus loves Vulcán very much and never fails to do anything that Vulcán intends her to do (Klein, 1983: 416). By masking herself with the ugly name, Hulga expects that kind of pride secretly and cherishes the vision of an inner self that is beautifully unique (Asals, 1986: 100). Mockingly, when her uniqueness is discovered by Manley Pointer and when she thinks she has found “Venus”, everything simply turns to soap foam and goes with wind. Manley just wants to satisfy his curiosity and to get her wooden leg as one of his collections. As to her happiness and her identity and even her life, all these have nothing to do with him.

Although Manley Pointer is a totally vicious role here, O’Connor still enriches him with a special name. Manley sounds the same as “manly”, which means “having the qualities generally regarded as those that a man should have; virile, strong, brave, resolute, honorable, etc.” (Neufeldt, 1986: 823) Manley Pointer tells us before we know him that he intends to point to the manly virtues, such as genteel, honorable and honest. In verbal fields, he is undoubtedly a good and standard man, “sincere”, “genuine”, “simple”, “earnest”, and “the salt of the earth” (Asals, 1986: 100). Ironically, he never means what he says. When he tells his disadvantaged situation to Mrs. Hopewell, he simply wants to get the ticket to her house. When he compliments Mrs. Hopewell, he just aims at the good dinner. When he praises Hulga and shows great understanding of her as a unique self, he means nothing else but the wooden leg as his property. His graceful and elegant words are as hollow as the Bible he reveals in the
barn (Magill, 1981). Pointer coaxes Hulga to get upstairs to an isolated barn, taking away her glasses, saying love words, only means to take off the artificial leg and then he masks himself and takes it away, leaving Hulga on the barn helplessly and hopelessly. He never points to his truly manly virtues, though he calls himself Manley Pointer. “I been believing in nothing even since I was born” (O’Connor, 1995: 464), says Manley Pointer.

These meaningful dual names of the characters help O’Connor fully reveal the characters’ failure to acknowledge self and thus help to “hurl a decisive challenge at a cherished self-definition” (Asals, 1986: 103). Also by employing this irony, she successfully depicts these pride, pitiable and ridiculous roles for us to admire.

References:

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