

Perilous intelligence:
the dangers of being
over-intellectual in
"good country pe...



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Is being an intellectual dangerous? If having more knowledge than another person can cause trouble in 2014, then exceptional intelligence certainly brought even more risks to its bearer in Flannery O'Connor's society.

O'Connor, one of the most well-known Southern Gothic authors, often wrote about the peril of intellectuals in her day. With one of the strangest endings, the short story " Good Country People," fitting well with O'Connor's common theme, tells the tale of the grumbling atheist Joy Hopewell and the traveling Bible salesman Manley Pointer. After beginning with a primary focus on the interaction between Joy's mother and the young man, the story shifts to detail Joy and Manley's ill-fated romp in the barn where his true colors are revealed and Joy's wooden leg is stolen. Joy Hopewell's professed " kind of salvation... [in realizing] that there's nothing to see" prevents her from looking past the spiritually intellectual façade of Manley Pointer (13), recognizing his true belief that " good country people" do not get far in life (15), and understanding that the two actually hold very similar beliefs.

Although Joy views herself as enlightened, her scholarly belief that human existence holds no deeper meanings blinds her to many aspects of life and relationships. Her narrowness of vision, the reason behind her name change from " Joy" to " Hulga," shines through in that she " doesn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nice young men" (4). Joy fails to find joy in nature or people because she believes there is nothing more to them than the fact that they simply occupy space. The polysyndeton of the sentence emphasizes the multitude of objects that have no meaning to her, and in looking at the world in this constrained way, she misses the simple beauty of a rose and finds relatively little happiness in the world around her. Hulga

instead concentrates her scientific inquiries on the philosophical aspects of humanity as a species as opposed to the nature of its individual members and thus “decide[s] that...she [is] face to face with real innocence” in Manley Pointer (14). For a girl that views herself as higher than others in her “economy” due to her supposedly superior intellectual beliefs (12), Hulga fails to look past her own convictions to see the young man for his true corrupt self. If she accepted that her perspective may not always apply to every aspect of life, she might have subsequently used her intelligence to detect Manley’s disguise.

Manley’s fake spiritual ideology that God comes first in his life gives him an air which not only immediately results in praise and trust but also serves as the framework for his deceptive disguise. As soon as the young man announces that he “wants to devote [his] life to Christian service” because he “has a heart condition” and “may not live long,” Mrs. Hopewell invites him to dinner (7). The young Bible salesman’s identification with a religious calling and his similarity to Hulga’s ailment transform him into a perfectly respectable figure of the time. No one would assume that a man so understandably devoted to an upright career path would have a true nature different than what he professes. Even when first alone with Hulga, Manley, reminding her that “[one] can never tell” when the necessity for the Word of God may arise, continues his frontage of religious devotion (12). While deceiving both Mrs. Hopewell and the college-educated Hulga, the “Christian” boy misleads us as readers as well. Before the interaction in the barn loft, there is no way for us to tell that Manley’s mentality differs from what he says. This lack of perception leads to Hulga’s placement of all her

trust in him and ultimately to her realization that she should not have afforded him any of her confidence. Manley Pointer raises assurance in his morals and blindsides not only the characters in the story but also the readers by professing a deep and seemingly genuine spiritual intellect.

In reality, Manley, a clever con artist with a cynical outlook on life, believes that being simply good simply holds one back. He tells Hulga that in order to prove her love for him she must “ show [him] how to take it [her wooden leg] off and on” (14). He so convincingly twists an emotion that Hulga does not even believe in so that she will make herself completely vulnerable to him. Manley ensures the success of his devious plan by acting so seemingly “ in love” with her that she does not think that he would be the one using this feeling against her. Once Hulga recognizes his ploy, he reveals to her that he “ may sell Bibles but [he] knows which end is up...and where [he is] going” (15). Though Manley participates in an honest profession, the use of the conjunction “ but” indicates that he believes goodness in itself will not get him where he wants to go. He feels as though he must have an advantage over people, such as the other person lacking a leg, in order to achieve his desires. In disclosing his crafty web of lies, the young man reveals his wicked identity in which the only purpose of any good-naturedness is to cover up his schemes.

Although Hulga would never want to admit it, she and Manley Pointer harmonize in their intellectual beliefs more than one might think. Throughout the short story, O'Connor constantly describes Hulga as a “ girl” rather than a “ woman,” even though she is thirty two, and Manley as a “ boy” instead of a “ man,” even though he is nineteen, in order to emphasize that other

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characters view them as immature and childlike. In an intellectual sense, both characters have seasoned mindsets; Hulga's comes from her extensive and lengthy education and Manley's derives from his life experiences. Alternately, both truly are puerile in that they fail to identify other aspects of life beyond worldly observations. When Manley professes that God must watch over Hulga, she blatantly says that she "[does not] even believe in God" (11), and later we discover that he does not "believe in that crap" either (15). The dual atheism of the characters highlights how each of them arrived at the same place by different paths. Where Hulga's search for knowledge leads her to disbelief in God just as it leads her to the barn, Manley's quest to be in control brings him to an identical place both mentally and physically. Similarly, both confess - or rather openly proclaim - a central belief in nothing (13, 15). Hulga's conviction influences her to see nothing in the smokescreen of Manley's spirituality and Manley's causes him to see nothing in the value of Hulga as a person. Though the characters' parallel beliefs are deeply mentally rooted, only Hulga's is roughly uprooted by the end of the story. If Hulga had recognized some of her own characteristics in Manley then she likely would have dealt with him very differently and avoided losing not only her leg but also her dignity and the confidence she held in her own intellectual ideology.

To Hulga Hopewell's disadvantage, she fails to look beyond her own rigid profession of nothing as she unfortunately views her own intellectual ideas as ultimately superior to those of other people and in doing so fails to identify similar ideology in Manley Pointer and recognize him for his true devious, disbelieving nature. Throughout "Good Country People," one can

easily notice Flannery O'Connor's repudiation of nihilism, the ideology that "all values are baseless and nothing in the world can be known or communicated" (Pratt). One can see that there is much more to both Manley and Hulga than their ideologies would profess and that moral and religious values do exist, whether they are adhered to or not. Is being an intellectual dangerous? While not all intellect leads to disaster, the tragic end of the story teaches us that a knowing acceptance of nothing is not only ungrounded, but also perilous.

Works Cited

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