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## Natural Innocence

*A View of the Woods* by Flannery O'Connor uses the rural landscape as an example of the beauty and sacredness of nature. O'Connor contrasts her sacred vision of the landscape with the destruction of the land caused by progress. Repetitive themes of the machinations of progress versus the untouched natural are found in this short story. These themes reflect in the characters of grandfather, Mark Fortune and his young granddaughter Mary Fortune. Mark and Mary are very similar in all ways except one, they disagree about the use of their family land. Mary believes it should be preserved in a natural state, while her grandfather believes the land should be cleared and sold to build a gas station. O'Connor uses shocking violence as a tool to draw the reader into a mysterious web, leave them reeling, and cause them to consider what this socially conscious writer is really saying. O'Connor showcases the woods and progress, in *A View of the Woods*, as symbols for her hidden agenda. This hidden commentary deals with the complex battle between innocence and experience.

Mary Fortune believes the woods across the street from her house are sacred. She is not very forthcoming about the true depth of her feelings, at first. She simply says, "We won't be able to see the woods across the road," when her grandfather first suggests he will sell "the lawn" to build a gas station (loc. 6095). There are many examples in the text where, when Mary is upset or sad, she walks off into the woods.

The woods are her sanctuary away from the world. O'Connor writes of Mary's sacred woods,

She stared across the lot where there was nothing but a profusion of pink and yellow and purple weeds, and on across the red road, to the sullen line of black pine woods fringed on top with green. Behind that line was a narrow gray-blue line of more distant woods and beyond that nothing but the sky, entirely blank except for one or two threadbare clouds. She looked into this scene as if it were a person that she preferred to him (6185).

O'Connor uses Mary to show the sacred connection to the land that children can so easily evoke. Sometimes people retain it, but that sacred connection is often lost as people grow up and gain experience in the modern, progressive world. Children can be ignorant to commerce and progress, thinking only with their hearts. Mary loves the woods because to her they represent possibility, freedom, and uncertainty. A boring old gas station blocking the view of her sacred woods? That won't work for Mary Fortune. She is a believer in the sacred. O'Connor is also a believer. John Roos writes of her, "It is well documented that O'Connor was immersed in the writing of [Thomas] Aquinas. ... For Aquinas the central fact about nature or any of its parts is that it is created by God and hence participates in God's goodness" (Roos, 164).

Mr. Fortune has adopted progress over nature to get by in the world, and be successful. He loves Mary. He wants to teach his granddaughter to not be naive, because progress is the way the real world works. Mary's grandfather questions why she should care about the woods, or the view of them. He repeats her statements as questions, as if he is incredulous at her consideration of the landscape. From the

grandfather's point of view, the woods don't earn money and participate in modern progress, so he doesn't even consider them. Mr. Fortune, being the elder, is the voice of somewhat jaded experience. O'Connor writes of Mr. Fortune, "He turned and looked away over the lake to the woods across it and told himself that in five years, instead of woods, there would be houses and stores and parking places, and that the credit for it could go largely to him" (6117). Mary Fortune and her childlike view of the woods represent the natural and innocent, unspoiled by commerce, avarice, or greed.

Mark Fortune, because he loves his granddaughter so much, does try to see Mary's point of view. He can almost glimpse Mary's childlike wonder of nature as he thinks, "The sunlight was woven through them at that particular time of the afternoon so that every thin pine trunk stood out in all its nakedness," but his inspiration is gone the next second when he says, "A pine trunk is a pine trunk" (6209). Later, he tries again to see the importance of the woods to Mary, but fails. O'Connor writes of Mr. Fortune's next failed attempt:

He looked out the window at the moon shining over the woods across the road and listened for a while to the hum of crickets and treefrogs, and beneath their racket, he could hear the throb of the future town of Fortune (6218).

Because Mr. Fortune attempts to see Mary's point of view, he shows that he really wants to connect with her and her vision. Unfortunately, he is incapable of seeing the woods the same way that she does. He has lost the youthful wonder of looking at pine trees and flowers and seeing their simple beauty, like Mary does. This fundamental disconnect about the land that occurs between the older man and his young

granddaughter illustrates O'Connor's theme of the march of progress versus nature. In order for there to be progress, nature must be modified and often destroyed completely. This sacrifice of the natural for the machinery of progress is a fact, and something that a grown-up, experienced person knows. O'Connor is known for this sacred and sacrificial use of the rural landscape in her work. O'Connor may not be as well known for ecologically critical writing, but as Timothy Brake's essay from the Flannery O'Connor Review states,

Though O'Connor is not often classed as an advocate for nature, a strong and consistent ecological current runs through her work. Within a decade of her death, critics were limning this tendency in her fiction in broad strokes. More recently, critics have begun explicitly to note the ecocritical potential in her work, though few if any have fleshed out their ideas (Brake, 19).

This "ecocritical potential" is strongly present in *A View of the Woods*. Brake compares O'Connor to the famous scientist, writer, ecologist, and inventor of the idea of "the land ethic," Aldo Leopold. Brake focuses on *A View of the Woods* being "the piece in O'Connor's oeuvre most concerned with what Leopold calls "the land" (Brake 19). This concern for the land plays out through Mary and Mr. Fortune, and their different views on what should be done with the woods.

For Mary Fortune, and her grandfather - even though he may not know it consciously, destroying the woods for money to simply advance commerce and progress in the area, becomes a symbol for forgotten and lost innocence. Mr. Fortune sees a mirror of himself in his granddaughter. He knows that he has lost his childhood awe and innocence, but doesn't want to acknowledge it was ever there at all. He tries to reconnect with his own innocent child through Mary's interest in the woods. O'Connor

gives more of his attempts and failures writing, "Every time he saw the same thing: woods - not a mountain, not a waterfall, not any kind of planted bush or flower, just woods" (6208). He has passed into the realm of experience, and completely left his innocence behind. He may never have loved the woods like Mary does - even as a child, but he knows that he doesn't have something she does. He can't see the woods like she does, and he wants to understand why.

O'Connor expertly finishes this battle between innocence and experience with a shocking and violent conclusion. Mr. Fortune murders his granddaughter in a fit of rage, because she represents his own lost innocence. He really wants to kill his jaded view of innocence and nature. The violent murder of Mary Fortune is caused by her own grandfather's loss of innocence. He is older, and feels that he is ineffectual. He can't even stop Mary from being beaten by her father. He tries to beat granddaughter Mary because he thinks she respects her father for beating her. He wants that respect from her for his age and wisdom regarding the land deal, but she won't give it to him. This refusal of his experience and wisdom sends him into a rage caused by his own inadequacies, and her anger at him.

What could be more shocking than killing your own granddaughter by bashing her head on a rock? O'Connor gets our attention here with this terrible violence to focus on the real issue - innocence versus experience. Which will win? O'Connor says neither, when she kills both Mary and Mark. Gary Furnell writes of O'Connor, "She uses violence for a variety of purposes: to bring characters back to reality; to express a clash of values; and, not least, to explore the mysterious friction that results when the spiritual

and the physical collide” (Furnell, 96). She certainly displays the clash of values he speaks of in *A View of the Woods*. The battle between Mary and her grandfather illustrates opposing values concerning how the land should be used, and their physical and spiritual connections to it.

*A View of the Woods*' intentional violence between grandfather and granddaughter shows how an unrelenting push for progress can cause a death of the natural and originally innocent in humans. This death of innocence and nature ultimately leaves both sides as losers. Furnell quotes O'Connor in his essay regarding her use of violence. She says, "in my own stories I have found that violence is strongly capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept that moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work" (qtd. Furnell, 97). Mr. Fortune and Mary's heads are definitely "hard," as O'Connor says. She uses the violent killing of Mary with a rock to the head to illustrate this hardheadedness, of both Mary and her grandfather's stubborn viewpoints, that ends in destructive conflict.

This short story hinges on the hidden duel between innocence and experience, which is not revealed until the story's tragic conclusion. O'Connor often uses this shocking end of the story setup to really drive her point home to the reader. Furnell writes of her unexpected endings, "I frequently finished each story with a sharp intake of breath. Often the stories ended with a violent twist I didn't anticipate. Nor did O'Connor when she wrote them: she didn't see how a story would resolve until she reached the climax" (Furnell, 96). This intake of breath that O'Connor delivers is just what is needed to really wake the reader up, and cause them to pay attention to her

message. The grandparent and child relationship of Mary and Mark Fortune, and their horrific end, shows how innocence and experience affect perceptions of the landscape. These different views of the woods can cause a disconnect within a family - even two people as similar as Mark and Mary. Flannery O'Connor's *A View of the Woods* grabs attention through intentional, shocking violence, and draws focus to this disconnect between youth and age, innocence and experience, and progress and nature.

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