

*On Flannery O'Connor's  
Gothic Women Characters*

论弗兰纳里·奥康纳的怪诞女主角


*By Guo Lili*

郭丽莉 著

二十世纪美国南方哥特式小说的伟大作家

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弗兰纳里·奥康纳(1925—1964)是美国文学史上新一代南方作家。她明智地吸收了南方哥特式小说的精髓，深刻揭示了男性和女性的心理状况，更严酷地揭露历史原因和哥特式风格。

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# Abstract

Flannery O'Connor (1925—1964) occupies one of the most prominent positions in the history of post-war American literature. In her lifetime, she often is classified in the category of the new generation of Southern writers, alongside Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, etc.

This book concentrates on the characteristics which are most readily recognized as grotesque in order to reinvigorate an understanding of a peculiar Southern form of ugliness. The book has analyzed O'Connor's Gothic women in an objective attitude. Through the psychological analysis of these Gothic females, the author reveals the social causes that have led to the apparent grotesque characters and investigates its significance in real life.

The thesis consists of three parts: introduction, main body and conclusion. The main contents are as follows:

The first part is introduction, which deals with O'Connor's status and achievements in the literature world. It also introduces other authors' comments on Flannery O'Connor and her Gothic novels. Obviously her works belong to the Southern Gothic Tradition, but she wisely absorbs the cream of it and produces her own Gothic style by deeper exploration of modern men's/women's psychological condition and harsher exposure of the historical causes and social reality.

The second part is the main body. It is made up of four chapters.

Firstly, we should know the origin of Gothic. The phrase "Gothic" originally applied to a tribe of Germanic barbarians during the dark ages. The term became associated with ghost stories and horror novels because early Gothic novels were often associated with the Middle Ages and with things "wild, bloody and barbarous of long ago". The American writers inherited most of these typical Gothic characteristics and created many Gothic works which made American Gothic literature a unique and everlasting literary genre. Flannery O'Connor combined and invented her unique writing style.

Secondly, after the analysis of Flannery O'Connor's New Gothic Women characters, the author puts them into three categories: the freakish Southern "belle"; the assertive widows and the young rebels. Through the illustration of the three typical kinds of women characters, the author concludes that all the women have problems in their relationship with the family members, with the society and even with themselves, which make them stand as freaks and aliens in the normal ordered world. Undoubtedly, every woman mentioned above can be taken as a standard Southern woman—white, religious and has a decent history. But they all look ridiculous in the modern South. What's the reason for their grotesqueness?

Thirdly, the author will explore the root of the "New Gothic woman" from the psychological and social angles. They are the women sufferers from narcissistic syndrome and imbalance of anima and animus. Besides the theory of narcissism which explains the New Gothic woman's grotesqueness, Jung's theory also helps to psychoanalyze some of the male-like women characters, such as Mrs. May and Mrs. MycIntyre; we can get a better understanding of this kind of women's distorted sex recognition. Aside from the above psychoanalysis of the women

characters, the social reality is also a crucial factor which accounts for the emergence of these grotesque women. Besides the reality in the earlier mentioned material field, people's spiritual crises after the two World Wars also occupies a key position in the social reality. The war's cruelty and inhumanity shatters people's imagination of a pure and ideal world. The devout believers begin to doubt the existence of God, which causes a mental chaos and moral degeneration among the South.

At last, the author explains and confirms the New Gothic Women's literary value. In the works belonging to the New Gothic, the writer takes us into a world where characters live through situations which we are not likely to encounter in our everyday lives. The distorted pictures in the New Gothic works can't be comprehended by our logic. But that's the glamour of Gothic literature and the main intention of Flannery O'Connor choosing the group of freakish women as her weapons to reflect reality and to touch our soul.

The last part is the conclusion.

Based on the statement argued above, the author gets to draw the following conclusion:

(1) Obviously O'Connor's unfortunate life experience partly

accounts for the women characters who are both physically deformed and spiritually decayed;

(2) As to her writing style, we can clearly sense the tradition of Gothic Literature, which is also a mark of American Southern literature;

(3) O'Connor's New Gothic Women's obsession with religion marks another characteristic of her uniqueness;

(4) following the tendency that "New American Gothic" emphasizes the inner terror.

In short, this book introduces Flannery O'Connor as a great modern writer by emphasizing her innovative act of creating the New Southern Gothic Women in her short fictions.

**KEY WORDS:** the Gothic; Gothic female; psychological interest



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# Introduction

A Southern novelist and short story writer, Flannery O'Connor was a fundamentalist and a Christian moralist whose powerful apocalyptic fictions contributed a lot to the American Southern Renaissance. Together with Truman Capote and Carson McCullers, she was labeled one of the chief representatives of "New American Gothic Literature". Today, she is identified as the best fiction writer second only to William Faulkner in the Southern Literature of America.

Her complicated fiction has not only won her awards and prizes but also been ever-increasing appeal to scholars and readers worldwide. As Michel Gresset puts, "A small oeuvre, yet few literary careers so small hide so many magnificent punches from the reader, or have, for the critic, so many difficulties in interpretation" (Gresset, 1985:100). The "punches" and "difficulties" make O'Connor criticism a "perplex business"

(Friedman, 1977: 207). The critical works have numbered about 2,700 pieces, including over 300 monographs and dissertations by the year 2002 (Scott, 2002), and the number is on the rise. O'Connor's growing international reputation has reflected itself in the Chinese academic circle with the appearance of Chinese translations of her fiction and the publication of critical essays on her works. Yet, no critical monograph on her has been published, which calls for academic interest.

The grotesque in O'Connor's fiction has been the focus of attention in her criticism. Being an important writer of Southern Renaissance that "has become synonymous with the grotesque" (Gleeson-White, 2003: 1), O'Connor has been taken for granted as a grotesque writer and grotesque has been recognized as her typical images. Major critical studies of her fiction comment on the grotesque and its link with the strange world of the Gothic from the Romantic viewpoint. Gilbert Muller, in consideration of O'Connor's Catholic conviction, states that her grotesque is "the ideal vehicle for objectifying fears, obsessions and compulsion" and the demonic grotesque character shocks the reader into recognition of the underlying theological concepts (Muller, 1972: 21). Muller sees the grotesque as a means of contrasting the sublime. This is the characteristic of Romantic grotesque principle. Carol Shloss criticizes O'Connor, saying that "the familiar [event] becomes, in O'Connor's hands, a source

of fear and distrust" (Shloss, 1980:42). She stresses the disturbing or disgusting aspect of the grotesque. Ronald Schleifer puts emphasis on O'Connor's world which is "the country of the frontier, between the familiar and strange, the natural and supernatural" (Schleifer, 1986: 86). Consequently, he regards the grotesque as a form of the Romantic Gothic. Claire Kahane, a French critic, argues that O'Connor's grotesque belongs to the devil's camp, with O'Connor herself the chief archenemy (Kahane, 1985: 120 - 24). The foregoing discussions accentuate the fear and alienation of the grotesque while overlooking its ambivalent nature and transforming power. Furthermore, they focus on the grotesque, taking it only as a literary technique or imagery. However, technique and imagery fail to capture the range of aesthetic ingredients that characterize O'Connor's remarkable works and their subsequent reception. Therefore, the grotesque in her works has been frequently criticized but inadequately explored.

This study seeks to evaluate the grotesque in O'Connor's works as a genre and by application of Bakhtin's Theory of Carnivalization, to elucidate that her grotesque is highly carnivalized based on the analysis of carnivalesque elements saturated with carnival sense in terms of characterization, plot structure and the use of humor. Hence O'Connor's grotesque is of unifying, transforming, heuristic and subversive forces. This thesis

attempts to view O'Connor's texts beyond the Gothic gloom and horror with which they have been charged by many readers and critics for years.

The phrase "Gothic" was originally applied to a tribe of Germanic barbarians during the dark ages, but eventually it was used to refer to the gloomy and impressive style of medieval architecture common in Europe, hence "Gothic Castle" or "Gothic Architecture". The term became associated with ghost stories and horror novels because early Gothic novels were often associated with the Middle Ages and with things "wild, bloody and barbarous of long ago". Philip Thompson, reconciling with the previous definitions, pointed out that "the present tendency is to view the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites" (Thompson, 1972:11). In short, grotesque resides in the mismatched with two seemingly opposite elements juxtaposed and the boundary of different categories destroyed.

Based on Kayser's definition, this thesis proposes that O'Connor's works belong to the grotesque genre because violent clashes can be seen in those three aspects. First of all, O'Connor as a "literary theologian" (Getz, 1999:1) intentionally utilized violence and horror to convey God's grace. She observed her reading public "not as non-believers but as unbelievers" (McMullen, 1996:2), and adopted more violent means to get her Catholic vision across to the "hostile audience":

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking of it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures (MM, 33–4).

First and foremost, to convey her intent to the reader, O'Connor employs distortion so as to defamiliarize ordinary life by extremity, while the life is still discernible. Such estranged worlds with "large and startling figures" bring to the characters epiphany. Second, her fiction itself is grotesque in that the horrifying content is presented in a comic manner. Such clash is instantiated in her peculiar blending of "the Comic and the Terrifying" (HB, 105). Third, the reader gets more confused by O'Connor's grotesque treatment of the content. It is difficult to resolve the conflict in response. On the one hand, the reader responds to the tragic, disgusting or deformed nature of the characters and situations with horror and pity. On the other hand, the undoubtedly comic aspect of description induces him to respond with amusement or mirth. Therefore, her grotesque works require to delve in as a genre.

Two prominent figures who dominate contemporary debate on the grotesque genre are Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin. Kayser makes a thorough study in grotesque from the Romantic to the Modernist period and avers that

“the grotesque is a structure” and its nature is “the estranged world” (Kayser, 1963:184). He stresses the shock, strangeness, fear and alienation of the grotesque. In contrast, Bakhtin dates back to the Renaissance and discovers the hilarious and subversive voice of the grotesque. Bakhtin summarizes that the “novelistic genre has three fundamental roots: the epic, the rhetorical, and the carnivalistic” (Bakhtin, 1984a:109, original italic).

Flannery O'Connor, equally marginalized, shares Bakhtin's notions. Being an Irish American and a Catholic woman in the Protestant South determined her marginalized identity. What's more, she was forced to stay at home by the prolonged life-threatening ailment of lupus, so that she was deprived of chances to participate in literary mainstream meetings. However, her extreme conditions endowed her radical attitudes towards the vicissitudes. Unlike the pre-WWII writers such as Faulkner, she refused to establish her identity or the South's in the myths of the past. Instead, she created a modern grotesque world with an outsider's sense of disfranchisement and a will to criticize (Hoffman, 1984:224). Seeing a coming new world, O'Connor caught the essence of the grotesque to “precisely present a contradictory and double faced portrait of renaissance life” (Bakhtin, 1984b:62). In addition, as a Catholic writer, all that she was concerned about was the becoming and change of the man. Therefore, her stories and novels recorded how the characters got



self-knowledge by being exiled in an “estranged world”. The alienation provides the protagonists with the possibility to know their deeper selves. Evidently Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalized grotesque is strikingly applicable to the interpretation of O’Connor’s fiction.

So far, few critics have applied Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque to reading O’Connor besides Marshall Gentry and Anthony Di Renzo. Both of them treat grotesque as imagery. Gentry recognizes the “positive quality” of transformation in the grotesque images while failing to catch the heuristic and liberating power (Gentry, 1986:14). Renzo finds out the parallels between O’Connor’s grotesque fiction and the medieval grotesque to show that hers roots in medieval folk art (Renzo, 1993:15). That is the greatest achievement in the studies on O’Connor’s grotesque and paves the way to this study.

Her works have managed to attract readers and scholars worldwide since her death in 1964. The complexity of her small oeuvre arouses many controversies, among which the grotesque in her fiction is frequently criticized but inadequately explored. The major criticism of it focuses on the alienation and horror of her grotesque, taking it as a literary technique or image. Yet technique and imagery fail to capture the range of aesthetic ingredients that characterize O’Connor’s remarkable works and their subsequent reception. Instead, grotesque is the style of Flannery O’Connor.