A Circle in the Fire Study Guide

A Circle in the Fire by Flannery O'Connor

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Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Circle in the Fire" was originally published in 1954 in Kenyon Review. At the time of its publication, O'Connor was on the verge of being recognized as one of America's greatest short-story writers, her first story having been published in 1946. In 1955 "A Circle in the Fire" appeared in three volumes, which together assured O'Connor's place in the literary canon: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (O'Connor's first published collection); *Prize Stories 1955: The O. Henry Awards*; and *The Best American Short Stories of 1955*. The story later appeared in the posthumous collection *The Complete Stories*, which was published in 1971.

Though "A Circle in the Fire" is not among O'Connor's best-known stories, it is characterized by the same grotesque characters, religious undercurrents, and dark humor found in her famed works "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and "Everything That Rises Must Converge." "A Circle in the Fire" is set on a farm—probably in Georgia, since the visitors live in Atlanta—and seems to be set at the time of its writing.

Author Biography

Flannery O'Connor was born Mary Flannery O'Connor on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia. O'Connor preferred to use her middle name rather than her first name. Her father, Edward F. O'Connor, was in the real estate business. Her mother, Regina L. (Cline) O'Connor, came from a prominent Georgia family; Regina's father was a longtime mayor of the small town of Milledgeville, Georgia. The O'Connors were devout Catholics in a region that was at the time overwhelmingly Southern Baptist.

When O'Connor was twelve, her father became ill with lupus, a debilitating blood disease, and the family moved to Milledgeville. O'Connor's father died when she was only fifteen. She graduated from the local public high school and then earned a degree from the Women's College of Georgia (now Georgia College). O'Connor edited the college magazine and won admittance to the famed writers' workshop at the State University of Iowa (now Iowa State University). In 1947, O'Connor earned her master of fine arts degree, by which time she had already published her first short story, "The Geranium."

O'Connor moved to New York, where she wrote and published short fiction, including parts of what would become the first of her two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952). In 1950, O'Connor was, as her father before her, stricken with lupus. O'Connor returned to the family home in Milledgeville, where she essentially lived the rest of her life with her mother and wrote as much as she was able to write.

"A Circle in the Fire" was first published in 1954 in *Kenyon Review*. It was reprinted in *Prize Stories 1955: The O. Henry Awards* and in *The Best American Short Stories of 1955*. The story appears in the first collection of O'Connor's short fiction, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), as well as in the posthumous collection of her work, *The Complete Stories* (1971).

A Good Man Is Hard to Find won O'Connor recognition as a master short-story writer. Her health, however, continued to deteriorate. Beginning in the mid-1950s, O'Connor was able to walk only with crutches. O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, was published in 1960. O'Connor died August 3, 1964, in Milledgeville, at the age of thirty-nine.

A second collection of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, was published posthumously in 1965, and a collection of letters, *The Habit of Being*, was printed in 1979.

O'Connor continues to be honored as one of the best American short-story writers. Three of her stories—"Greenleaf" (1957), "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1963), and "Revelation" (1965)—won O. Henry awards. *The Complete Stories* won the National Book Award in 1972.

Plot Summary

As "A Circle in the Fire" opens, Mrs. Cope, the owner of a large, prosperous farm, is weeding a garden as Mrs. Pritchard, who works on the farm along with her husband, tells Mrs. Cope about the funeral of a distant relative. Mrs. Pritchard, a pessimist, dotes on calamity; Mrs. Cope, an optimist, tries vainly to raise the tone of the conversation. Mrs. Cope's twelve-year-old daughter Sally Virginia listens to the conversation from the window of her upstairs room. Through the girl's thoughts, readers learn that the one chink in Mrs. Cope's armor of optimism is her constant fretting about the possibility that a fire will start in the woods and destroy her farm.

When Mrs. Cope sees Culver, an African American hired hand, driving the tractor around a gate to avoid stopping to open it, she tells Mrs. Pritchard to stop him so that she can reprimand him. Culver listens to Mrs. Cope and obeys her command to open the gate and drive the tractor through it, but he refuses to look at her. In response to this exchange, Mrs. Cope says, "I thank the Lord all these things don't come at once. They'd destroy me." Mrs. Pritchard heartily agrees. Mrs. Cope responds by declaring that trials do not all come at once and that everyone has much to be thankful for and should say a prayer of thanksgiving at least once a day. She also speaks of her hard work and its role in keeping disaster at bay, saying, "I don't let anything get ahead of me, and I'm not always looking for trouble."

Mrs. Pritchard continues to insist that if trouble did all come at once, there would be nothing Mrs. Cope could do about it. As they are having this exchange, a truck stops nearby and lets off three teenage boys, who begin to walk up the dirt road toward the women. One of the boys is carrying a suitcase. From her window, Sally Virginia is the first to see the boys, and then the women see the boys coming toward them.

When the boys come face to face with the women, they stare sullenly. The boy carrying the suitcase says, "I don't reckon you remember me, Mrs. Cope." She does not, but he explains that he is Powell Boyd, whose father once worked on the farm. He says his father is dead, his mother has remarried, and the family now lives in a "development" of apartment houses in Atlanta. Powell introduces his friends, a big boy named Garfield Smith and a smaller one named W. T. Harper.

Mrs. Cope says it is "sweet" of Powell to stop and see her. W. T. volunteers that Powell has been telling the other boys about the pleasures of the farm, especially riding horses, and has told them they can ride the horses. Mrs. Cope tells them the horses are not shod and it is too dangerous for the boys to ride.

W. T. next tells Mrs. Cope that Powell has said he wants to come to the farm when he dies. Mrs. Cope's response is to offer the boys soft drinks and food. When she and Mrs. Pritchard go into the kitchen to get refreshments, Mrs. Pritchard warns Mrs. Cope that the suitcase means the boys intend to stay. Mrs. Cope replies, "I can't have three boys in here with only me and Sally Virginia. I'm sure they'll go when I feed them."

As she serves the food, Mrs. Cope sees Garfield spit a lighted cigarette onto her lawn. Calling him "Ashfield," she tells him to pick it up; he does, correcting her pronunciation of his name at the same time.

W. T. tells Mrs. Cope that Powell fantasizes about having one of her horses in Atlanta and that he says he would "bust this concrete to hell riding him!" Mrs. Cope says she is sure Powell does not use such language. Powell informs her that the boys intend to spend the night in Mrs. Cope's barn and that Powell's uncle, who dropped them off, will pick them up in the morning. Mrs. Cope says they cannot do that since she fears their cigarettes would start a fire. Powell suggests the woods, and she says, "I can't have people smoking in my woods." She finally tells them that they can sleep next to the house. Garfield mutters, "Her woods." The boys walk away as Powell says he is going to show them the place. They leave the food uneaten.

At sunset, the boys return to the house. When Mrs. Cope offers them guinea to eat, they say they do not eat such things. Still they wolf down the sandwiches she brings them. It is clear from their appearance that the boys spent the afternoon riding horses, which they deny. W. T. tells Mrs. Cope that Powell once locked one of his brothers in a box and set fire to the box. Mrs. Cope says she is sure Powell would not do that. Mrs. Cope asks the boys if they thank God every night "for all He's done for you," and the boys respond with silence. Sally Virginia makes a choking noise from her window so that the boys notice her for the first time. Garfield says, "Jesus, another woman." Later Mrs. Cope assures her daughter the boys will be gone in the morning.

In the morning, Powell tells Mrs. Cope that his uncle is not coming and that they have their own food. Mrs. Cope says, "You boys know that I'm glad to have you, but I expect you to behave. I expect you to behave like gentlemen." She reminds them, "this is my place."

The boys walk away. Mrs. Pritchard arrives and tells Mrs. Cope how her husband Hollis had tried unsuccessfully the day before to keep the boys from riding the horses. She also reports that the boys have been drinking milk from cans in the barn and that they argued with Hollis over whether Mrs. Cope owned the woods. When Mrs. Cope says she "cannot have this," Mrs. Pritchard tells her there is nothing she can do about it. Mrs. Cope says she is going to find the boys and tell them to hitch a ride on the milk truck when it comes. Sally Virginia says she will "handle" the boys, making a strangling gesture.

The boys tell Mrs. Cope they will leave on the milk truck, but they disappear when it comes and run away from Mrs. Cope when she tries to confront them after the truck leaves. Mrs. Pritchard reports that the boys let the bull out of its pen, drained the oil out of three tractors, and are now throwing rocks at the mailbox. Mrs. Pritchard all the while reminds Mrs. Cope there is nothing she can do about the boys' actions. Mrs. Cope gets into the car along with Mrs. Pritchard and Sally Virginia, and drives to the mailbox to confront the boys. She tells Powell his mother would be ashamed of him, that she (Mrs. Cope) has tried to be nice to them, and that if they are not gone when she returns from town she is going to call the sheriff. Mrs. Pritchard warns that Mrs. Cope has made the

boys mad and "it ain't any telling what they'll do," but Mrs. Cope is sure she has frightened the boys and they will leave immediately.

The women do not see the boys for the remainder of that day or the next morning. Sally Virginia puts on overalls, places two pistols in a holster, and sets off to find the boys, determined to get rid of them. When she finds them bathing in a cow trough, though, she hides and listens to them. W. T. says he wishes he lived on the farm; Garfield says he is glad he does not. Powell says that if the farm were not there, they would not have to think about it anymore. They get dressed, and Powell suggests they set fire to the woods. As the fire quickly spreads, Sally Virginia runs back to the house.

When Mrs. Cope sees the fire, she screams at the workers to hurry to put it out. Culver, knowing it is futile, responds, "It'll be there when we git there." The story ends with the narrator describing the boys' joyous yells, which sound "as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

It is afternoon, and Mrs. Pritchard and Mrs. Cope are working in Mrs. Cope's garden. Mrs. Pritchard, a large woman with a small face, works for Mrs. Cope. She is describing a wake she had recently attended for a woman who had died giving birth while confined to an iron lung. As they work, Mrs. Cope's young daughter watches from an upstairs window in the house.

Mrs. Cope is a small, trim woman who has little patience for Mrs. Pritchard's stories. As a result, she often tries to steer the conversation to more pleasant topics, a tactic that seems to annoy Mrs. Pritchard.

As the child watches from the window, she thinks about her mother's obsessive worry that a fire will start in the woods that surround their property. She thinks about the evenings they spend on the porch watching the woods and her mother's nightly requests for prayers to guard them against the danger of fire. Meanwhile, Mrs. Pritchard, oblivious to the fact that Mrs. Cope is not interested in her story, continues describing the scene she had witnessed at the wake.

As Mrs. Pritchard continues to speak, Mrs. Cope notices that her farm hands, on their way to one of the fields on a tractor, are taking a longer route than necessary. This angers Mrs. Cope because she thinks the workers are taking advantage of her and so she interrupts Mrs. Pritchard and tells her to summon a worker. When the worker arrives, she asks why he didn't go through the gate. The worker replies that to do so, he will have to raise the blade on the mower. Mrs. Cope tells him to raise the blade before dismissing him.

As the tractor disappears through the gate, Mrs. Pritchard returns again to the story of the wake. Mrs. Cope cuts her off, saying that everyone has things that they should be thankful for and asks Mrs. Pritchard if she says prayers of thanksgiving each day. Mrs. Pritchard replies that she does, and then attempts to continue her story. Again, Mrs. Cope interrupts her and says that she too says a Prayer of Thanksgiving each day. Mrs. Pritchard says that the only things she has are four abscessed teeth; Mrs. Cope responds that she should be thankful that she doesn't have five before adding that she can always find something to be thankful for.

Mrs. Cope then points to Mrs. Pritchard and remarks that as a result of her hard work, she has the best kept place in the county. She goes on to say that she has had to work hard in order to save and then keep her farm and that she manages to get through each day by not looking for trouble. Mrs. Pritchard responds that trouble usually comes all at once, an assertion that Mrs. Cope quickly disagrees with. As they continue to speak, the child notices that a pickup truck has stopped at the end of their driveway and let off

three boys. The boys walk toward the house and are nearly there before Mrs. Cope sees them.

As the boys approach, Mrs. Pritchard wonders aloud who they might be. They advance towards the woman and stop. Mrs. Cope notices that they all seem to look alike, only the middle-sized boy, who appears to be about thirteen years of age, wears glasses. He is also carrying a suitcase, and she notices that the boy is extremely thin.

Addressing Mrs. Cope, the boy asks if she remembers him. As she tries to recall where they may have met, the boy tells her that his father, who is now dead, used to work for her. Mrs. Cope mistakes the boy for his older brother and so he tells her that he is actually Powell, the second son. He then goes on to tell her that his mother has since remarried and the family lives in Atlanta. When Mrs. Cope asks who the boys are with him, Powell introduces them as his friends.

Mrs. Cope notices the suitcase Powell has with him, and in an effort to move them along their way, she thanks them for visiting. For the first time, one of the other boys speaks and tells Mrs. Cope that Powell always talks about the time he lived on her farm and that he had the best time of his life there. When the boy mentions that they might like to ride Mrs. Cope's horses, she refuses, saying she is afraid they might get hurt. They boys don't respond to her refusal but after a few moments, the smallest of them tells Mrs. Cope that Powell once said he wanted to come to her farm when he died.

Mrs. Cope is startled by the remark and after regaining her composure, realizes that the boys look very hungry. She asks them if they would like something to eat and while they say yes, they don't seem to be particularly glad that she offered.

As all of this is taking place, Mrs. Cope's daughter, Sally Virginia, watches from the window. At twelve years old, she is overweight. When she hears her mother and Mrs. Pritchard talking inside, she goes to the banister to hear what they are saying. Mrs. Pritchard is concerned that the boys intend to spend the night. Mrs. Cope bristles at this suggestion and says she is sure they will leave once they've had something to eat.

As Mrs. Cope returns outside with a snack, one of the boys throws a cigarette butt onto the grass. She yells at him to pick it up, saying she is afraid of fires. The boy picks the butt up and puts it into his pocket. Mrs. Cope puts a plate of crackers down for the boys and hands them each a soda. She then asks Powell where he has been since leaving her farm. Powell tells her that they moved to Florida and lived there until his father died, then they lived with his sister until his mother remarried and they moved again to Atlanta. The youngest of the boys tells Mrs. Cope that Powell doesn't like Atlanta and that he often talks about the time he spent on her farm.

When the youngest boy suggests that they go see the horses, Powell asks Mrs. Cope if they can spend the night in her barn. He explains that his uncle dropped them off and that he will be back for them in the morning. Mrs. Cope refuses, saying she is afraid they will set her barn on fire. Powell assures her that they won't smoke, but Mrs. Cope will not relent. When Powell suggests that they will camp in the woods instead, Mrs.

Cope becomes alarmed and tells them that the woods are very dry and she is afraid of fire. She tells them that if they are going to stay, they will have to camp in the field next to the house.

After the boys walk away to explore the farm, Mrs. Pritchard comments on how little they ate. Mrs. Cope agrees and says that they certainly looked hungry. When they return that evening, she offers them sandwiches. When she notices that one of the boys has a cut on his arm, she asks if they have been riding her horses, which they deny. As she prepares their lunches, she asks them more about themselves and they animatedly answer her questions. When she has finished making the sandwiches, Mrs. Cope brings them outside and sets them down for the boys. After they have emptied the plate, she bends down to pick it up and as she does, she notices that the setting sun is red and looks as though it might burn through the clouds and fall into the woods. The very notion of fire makes her anxious and she asks the boys if they thank God each night for all He has done for them. When the boys don't answer, she asks again. They still don't answer and so she tells them that she gives thanks each night.

Suddenly, Sally Virginia pokes her head from the window and makes a loud growling noise. The biggest of the three boys, apparently bothered by the fact that there is another woman in the house, makes a disparaging comment. As a result, when Sally Virginia sees her mother downstairs later, she comments that she would like to beat the daylight out of him. Her mother tells her to keep her distance from the boys, reminding her that they will be gone in the morning.

When the next morning arrives, the boys are still there. Mrs. Cope finds them near her back door after she has finished breakfast. When she tells them that she expected that they would be gone, the biggest boy says that they aren't leaving yet. Feeling somewhat provoked, she offers them some breakfast, but they refuse her offer. She tells them that if they are to stay, she expects that they will act like gentlemen.

Shortly after, Mrs. Pritchard arrives and tells Mrs. Cope that her husband saw the boys riding the horses the previous afternoon and also noticed that they had been drinking milk from the milk cans. Mrs. Cope tells Mrs. Pritchard that this can't continue; however, Mrs. Pritchard says that there is little that can be done and that they will probably stay until school begins. Mrs. Cope tells her that she will not sit back and let the boys do as they please. Mrs. Pritchard again says she doesn't think that they have much choice in the matter before going on to say that her husband told her that one of the boys asked if there was somewhere they could bathe. When he told them no, he also mentioned that they should not drop any cigarette butts in the woods. The comment caused one of the boys to argue that Mrs. Cope did not own the woods, the woods belonged to God.

As she listens to this story, Mrs. Cope becomes increasingly agitated and says that she will send the boys away on the milk truck. Sally Virginia says that she could handle them better and makes a gesture indicating that she would choke them. Shortly after, Mrs. Cope finds the boys and tells them that she wants them to leave on the milk truck, a decision that they apparently agree to. When she returns to the house, she tells Mrs. Pritchard that their suitcase is nearly filled with food.

When the milk truck arrives later that day, the boys are nowhere to be found; however, as it pulls away Mrs. Cope sees them in the calf barn. As she stands in her house looking at the boys, expressing her frustration at her inability to get them to leave, Sally Virginia says she would simply tell them that they have five minutes to get off their property. In response, Mrs. Cope simply reminds her that she is to stay away from the boys. Then, she decides to go out and "give them a piece of my mind."

As Sally Virginia watches from the window, Mrs. Cope walks toward the calf barn. When the boys see her coming, they run toward the woods. Soon, Mrs. Cope is joined by Mrs. Pritchard and the two women follow the boys into the woods. Unable to find the boys, Mrs. Cope returns home. A few moments later, Mrs. Pritchard comes to tell her that the boys have let the bull out of its pen. After the bull was safely captured and returned, Mrs. Pritchard repeated her earlier statement that there was little that they could do to control the situation.

Later that day, while Mrs. Cope is finishing her dinner, Mrs. Pritchard returns to inform her that the boys are throwing rocks at her mailbox. The two women and Sally Virginia get into the car and go to investigate. When they reach the boys, they are on the other side of the road throwing rocks at her mailbox. Mrs. Cope tells the boys that she is disappointed in them – that she had tried her best to be nice to them. One of the boys responds that they are not even on her side of the road. Frustrated, Mrs. Cope tells the boys that she is going into town and if they are not gone by the time she returns, she will call the sheriff. Mrs. Pritchard is concerned that this threat has angered the boys and that their destruction may reach new levels. Mrs. Cope disagrees, saying she is sure the boys will be gone when they return.

When they return from town a short time later, the boys are nowhere to be found, a fact that concerns Mrs. Pritchard. She says that she would rather see them, because then at least she will know what they're doing. Again, Mrs. Cope disagrees with her, saying that they have adequately scared the boys and they won't be returning. Sure enough, for the remainder of the afternoon, there is no sign of the boys. While Mrs. Cope says she is sure they're gone, Mrs. Pritchard says she thinks they will strike again after dark. That evening, Mrs. Cope and Sally Virginia remain on the porch until nearly ten o'clock, but there is no sign of the boys. As she became increasingly confident that the boys wouldn't return, Mrs. Cope began expressing a litany of blessings that she and her daughter had to be thankful for.

The next morning arrived with still no sign from the boys. Much to her mother's dismay, Sally Virginia dresses in a pair of overalls and an old felt hat. Armed with two pistols that she has placed in a holster fastened around her waist, she went out to the woods. As she leaves the house, Mrs. Pritchard arrives, complaining again about her abscessed teeth.

As Sally Virginia goes through the woods, she says aloud that she is going to find the boys and beat them up one by one. Stopping to rest, she hears laughter in the distance. Walking toward the sound, she finds the boys washing in the cow trough. While two of the boys were horsing around, Powell was sitting still, apparently lost in thought.

Suddenly, he springs up and proclaims that if the place weren't there anymore, he wouldn't have to think about it. In response to this, the smallest of the boys says that the place doesn't belong to anyone. With that, the boys run around the field before dropping to the ground. As they rest, the biggest boy says he would make a big parking lot out of the farm.

As the boys get dressed, Powell quietly suggests that they set the place on fire. With that, they pool together all the matches they have and begin to set the brush on fire. Sally Virginia watches in horror before running back to the house. Before she could reach the house, however, Mrs. Cope sees the flames. She screams for the farm hands, who don't move quickly enough to suit her.

As Sally Virginia stands beside her mother, she notices that she looks more miserable than she ever had before. She then looks toward the fire and sees the smoke rising above the trees. As she watches, she is sure she can hear the boys laughing in the distance.

Analysis

Flannery O'Connor's "A Circle in the Fire" is a story that explores the dynamics of power.

It is clear from the beginning of the story that Mrs. Cope, the farm's owner, is a woman who firmly believes she is in control of her farm – there is no mention of a husband, which leads us to believe that she is either widowed or divorced – her daughter, her workers and in many respects, her destiny. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that she has little control over any of these entities.

First, Mrs. Cope seems to be unable to control Mrs. Pritchard's perpetual dismal outlook. Despite her efforts at steering the conversation to more pleasant topics, Mrs. Pritchard immediately reverts to whatever sad story she was telling, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Mrs. Cope would rather not hear it. Even Mrs. Cope's proclamations that Mrs. Pritchard should be thankful for all that she has only leads to more complaints and more sad stories.

Yet, in the end, it is Mrs. Pritchard who seems to understand exactly what is about to occur. However, much like the boy who cried wolf in the childhood tale, Mrs. Pritchard's warnings are dismissed as just another example of her negative demeanor. When the boys don't leave the morning after their arrival as they originally said they would, Mrs. Pritchard says they will likely stay until school begins again, a notion that Mrs. Cope refuses to accept. When the boys finally appear to be gone after Mrs. Cope's threat to turn them into the sheriff, Mrs. Pritchard senses that they are still around. Her remark that she would be more comfortable if she were able to see them tells us that she knows that the boys are up to no good.

However, for all of her wisdom, Mrs. Pritchard does not appear to be very eager to do anything to save Mrs. Cope from ruin. Instead, she seems to almost relish her ability to

say "I told you so." This is somewhat puzzling because if the farm goes to ruin, then both she and her husband will likely be out of work. Even so, this is the posture she takes on several occasions: first when she comes to report that the boys took the horses out after being specifically instructed not to, when the boys let the bull out of its pen, and when the boys are discovered throwing rocks at the mailbox. Mrs. Pritchard's attitude is likely the result of her understanding that this may be the only way in which she can hold any sort of superiority over Mrs. Cope; as her employee it is her duty to be respectful and subservient, yet she still has right to be smarter than her employer as long as she is careful in the way she exhibits it. She realizes that there is only so much she can say without being disrespectful, which explains why she is unable to take matters into her own hands.

Mrs. Cope, on the other hand, plays the part of a Southern lady to perfection. She demands respect from her workers, which they reluctantly give, obedience from her daughter and that Powell and his friends treat her with respect and courtesy. As a result, when Mrs. Pritchard continually tells her "I told you so" and when the boys seem to ignore her hospitality by refusing to eat the snack she prepared for them and then refuse to leave when asked, her very identity is called into question.

It is interesting that Mrs. Cope does not enlist the help of Mr. Pritchard in getting rid of the boys, particularly after her repeated efforts to do so fail. This is most likely because to do so would be to show weakness, something that Mrs. Cope is loathe to do. Her last name – Cope – as well as the little bit we know about her implies that she is a woman who will make the best of whatever situation she finds herself in. The fact that she had to work hard to save and then maintain her farm is one example, and her strong reliance on prayer is another. It is clear that Mrs. Cope envisions herself as a strong, capable woman who does not need anyone to intercede for her. However, what she does not realize is that because Powell and his friends have little respect for authority, and apparently even less for women, her threats and admonishments are falling on deaf ears.

It seems that Sally Virginia, Mrs. Cope's young daughter, is the only one that understands that the boys have no respect for her or for women in general. This becomes evident when she tells her mother that she can "handle them." It becomes even clearer near the end of the story when she dresses in overalls and a man's hat, arms herself with two pistols and sets off to find the boys. By dressing in this manner, Sally Virginia is hoping to present herself as a male authority figure and get the boys to leave their property. Yet, at the end of the story, as she stands and watches the boys set the fire that will likely destroy their property and perhaps even their home, she realizes that, like her mother, she is powerless to stop them.

O'Connor uses foreshadowing to alert the reader that disaster will eventually befall Mrs. Cope. While the use of the word "fire" in the story's title is the first obvious hint that fire will play a significant role in the story, there are several more subtle hints that take place throughout the tale that create a sense of suspense. Recall from early in the story that Mrs. Cope is perpetually worried about a fire starting in the woods near her home. Shortly after that initial mention, we read how her daughter Sally Virginia often suggests

– purely in an effort to be mean – that the beautiful sunset that her mother is admiring may actually be a fire in the woods. This gives the reader an early indication that fire will indeed play a significant role in this story. There are several more references to fire which are all designed to heighten the suspense and keep the reader wondering when disaster will ultimately strike. One occurs after the boys arrive and Mrs. Cope goes inside to prepare them a snack. Recall that the biggest boy, Garfield, lies in the hammock and lights a cigarette, an act that so rattles Mrs. Cope that she refers to him as Ashfield rather than Garfield. Later, when the boys announce their plans to spend the night, she refuses to let them stay in the barn or in the woods for fear that they will be careless with their cigarettes and cause a fire. That evening, the setting sun is described as "swollen and flame-colored and hung in a net or ragged cloud as if it might burn through any second and fall into the woods." This all leads to the story's final moments when the boys do indeed set the woods on fire.

The fire that the boys set is the result of their growing resentment with Mrs. Cope and her authoritarian demeanor. When they first arrived, it was with the intention of enjoying a few carefree days in the country. Remember, Powell spent part of his childhood living on that farm and during the time he lived there, he was probably afforded more freedom than what Mrs. Cope was willing to give him during this visit. Not only does this frustrate him, but he is probably embarrassed that Mrs. Cope is treating him this way in front of his friends. And so, while the boys probably did not come to the farm with the intention of destroying it, Mrs. Cope's continual reminders that she is the owner of the property eventually agitates the boys to the point where they decide to destroy it. While this is certainly an extreme measure, it must be viewed in the context of the fact that these boys are not used to having to an authority figure, never mind a female one, in their lives.

And so, as the story ends and the flames begin to engulf the woods and nearby property, Sally Virginia hears them shrieking with joy – a certain sign that they, unlike Mrs. Cope and her daughter – will escape the fire's devastation.

Characters

Powell Boyd

Powell is a teenage boy about thirteen years old whose father used to work on Mrs. Cope's farm. Powell's family moved away from the farm sometime before the story occurs. His father has died, his mother has remarried and is working outside the home, and the family is living in an apartment complex in Atlanta. Powell arrives on the farm unannounced, along with two friends. It becomes clear that his only happy memories are of his childhood on the farm and the horses he rode there. Left alone all summer in what sounds from the boys' descriptions like a tenement, Powell longed for the farm and regaled his friends with stories about it. According to Powell, his uncle has driven the boys to the farm for a visit.

From the moment of the boys' arrival on the farm, it is clear to readers, and the other characters, that Powell and his friends despise Mrs. Cope for what she has that they do not and for her false courtesy. Powell is well aware that with his friends in tow, Mrs. Cope is powerless to stop him from doing as he pleases on her farm. He has come to the farm realizing there is nothing to keep him from fulfilling his dream of enjoying all it has to offer, albeit temporarily.

Mrs. Cope

Mrs. Cope seems to be a widow. She owns a large farm and has several people working for her, including Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard and at least two African Americans. She is a small, thin woman whose large eyes give her the appearance of someone who is "continually being astonished."

Mrs. Cope has a neat conception of the world and her place in it, a conception rooted in religious ideas. She believes that hard work, optimism, and thanking God every day for all she has will keep calamity at bay. She views virtually every other human being and every event as either an irritation or a threat, but she is convinced that all these problems can be overcome as long as she is diligent and superficially pleasant. Authentic compassion and a true understanding of human nature are not among her resources.

It becomes clear that Mrs. Cope's neat vision of the world is mistaken. When the boys show up on the farm, all her responses to them are based on a complete misapprehension of their feelings and intentions. Therefore, every encounter she has with the boys makes her ruin more inevitable.

Sally Virginia Cope

Sally Virginia is Mrs. Cope's twelve-year-old daughter. She is fat and pale and wears braces. She is a sullen, sour girl who spends a lot of time in her room upstairs, listening and watching out the window as the story unfolds. This child is as aware of her mother's ignorance as are the adult characters in the story, and her response is to be rude and unresponsive toward her mother. However, she also hates the boys. Taking two pistols with her, she sets off threatening to track down the boys to force them to leave—that is, to do what her mother has failed to do—but instead she hides when she finds them and sees them set the fire. Her inability to exert her will over the boys makes her miserable, and for the first time she sees the similarity between herself and her mother.

Culver

Culver is an African American hired hand— identified in the story as a Negro—who works for Mrs. Cope. He listens to her but refuses to look at her, showing a bare minimum of respect. When the fire has been set and Mrs. Cope orders him to hurry to try to put it out, Culver only replies, "It'll be there when we git there."

W. T. Harper

W. T. is one of the boys who visit the farm with Powell. He is the smallest of the three boys. Shortly after arriving, W. T. tells Mrs. Cope that Powell has told the others he will let them ride the horses at the farm. This statement is an early indication that Powell has no intention of respecting Mrs. Cope's authority.

Just before the boys start the fire, W. T. says he wishes he lived on the farm. This remark, an acknowledgement of what all the boys feel, leads Powell to start the fire so that this paradise they long for no longer exists for anyone.

Hollis Pritchard

Hollis is Mrs. Pritchard's husband. During the course of the boys' visit, Mrs. Pritchard reports to Mrs. Cope her husband's futile efforts to keep the boys from causing trouble.

Mrs. Pritchard

Mrs. Pritchard, along with her husband, works for Mrs. Cope on the farm. She is described as being Mrs. Cope's physical opposite, a large woman with small, beady eyes. She is, in fact, Mrs. Cope's foil in every way. Mrs. Pritchard expects catastrophe and revels in it when it comes. Though Mrs. Cope clearly thinks that Mrs. Pritchard is her inferior in every way, Mrs. Pritchard judges the boys and their intentions correctly at every turn, and she repeatedly tries to warn Mrs. Cope that disaster is imminent.

Garfield Smith

Garfield is one of Powell's friends who visit the farm with him. He is the biggest of the three boys, smokes cigarettes, and has a tattoo. Just before the boys start the fire, when W. T. says he wishes he lived on the farm, Garfield says that he is glad he does not live there and that "it don't belong to nobody." These denials are an attempt to make himself and the other boys feel better about the reality that they cannot live on the farm.

Themes

Mrs. Cope is convinced of her own wisdom, while everyone around her recognizes her ignorance. Mrs. Cope is far wealthier than all the other characters, and she believes that her material superiority is a result of her greater wisdom, diligence, and religious devotion. In reality she is completely lacking in wisdom, and her constant carping about the importance of being grateful to God sounds more like an attempt to appease an impetuous divinity than an expression of real gratitude toward a kind one.

Mrs. Cope misjudges the boys' intentions at every turn, while her less refined employee Mrs. Pritchard perfectly understands human nature. Mrs. Cope substitutes wishful thinking for good judgment; she is sure—against all evidence—that Powell does not curse and that the boys will leave the farm after she offers them soft drinks and crackers. After the confrontation at the mailbox, she is sure she has frightened the boys and they will leave. Mrs. Pritchard, however, understands that the boys are angry, not scared, and that their hostilities will only escalate.

Mrs. Cope fails to understand the difference between authority, which she has as owner of the farm, and the power to enforce it, which she lacks. It is Mrs. Cope's own ignorance that sparks the boys' resentment and incites them to start the fire.

Style

Foreshadowing

O'Connor makes frequent use of foreshadowing, so that the reader may guess the story's ending almost from the story's start. On the story's second page readers learn that "Mrs. Cope was always worrying about fires in her woods," thus making it clear that the word "fire" in the story's title is not incidental. Each time Mrs. Pritchard warns that sometimes trouble comes in overwhelming waves, it enforces the idea that Mrs. Cope's trouble may come in the form of fire. Garfield spits a lighted cigarette into the grass, and a flustered Mrs. Cope mistakenly calls him "Ashfield." By this point in the story, the reader suspects the farm's fate is sealed.

The predictability that O'Connor creates heightens tension rather than quashing it. Readers may feel as if they are on a roller coaster, careening inexorably toward a final, heart-stopping drop. They know the drop is coming, they just do not know exactly when, or what the approach to the drop will be like. Tension is created by contrasting the inevitable conclusion with Mrs. Cope's immovable, incomprehensible confidence that all will be well. Her inability to grasp the reality of looming disaster becomes more incredible the nearer the disaster draws.

Biblical Allusion

The story's title and its last sentence are biblical allusions (indirect references to a biblical tale or event). The final image of Mrs. Cope watching her woods burn as Sally hears "in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them" is an allusion to the third chapter of the Old Testament book of Daniel. This chapter tells the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three Jews who lived in Babylon during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. In the story, the king orders all his subjects must worship a golden idol he has had erected. Anyone who refuses to worship the idol is to be burned alive in a "fiery furnace." Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse despite this threat, telling the king that their God will protect them from the fire. The three men are therefore tied up and thrown into the furnace. The heat is so intense that the soldiers who throw the three into the fire are killed by the fire. Yet the fire does not burn the three Jews. King Nebuchadnezzar looks into the furnace and is shocked to see Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walking around unharmed. The king orders the men to come out of the fire and then converts to their religion.

By placing allusions to this story at the beginning and end of "A Circle in the Fire," O'Connor makes the biblical story the context for her own story and thus provides a clear direction for interpreting it.

Historical Context

Southern Gothic

O'Connor is among the writers associated with the southern gothic style of writing. This style features settings in the American South and characters who are bizarre, grotesque, and often outcast. Recurring themes include isolation, confusion, and the search for meaning. O'Connor's fiction focuses on the theme of confusion, especially confusion between wisdom and ignorance and between outward appearances (i.e., the facade of politeness, religious devotion, and conventionality) and inner reality (a meanness of spirit and egotism).

O'Connor is noted for populating her fiction with particularly grotesque characters and for crafting stories that cast them in a harsh light. Unlike some other southern gothic writers, such as Carson McCullers, O'Connor has no sympathy for her twisted characters and her casts include no heroes. In addition to McCullers, other writers associated with southern gothic writing include Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and Truman Capote.

Southern gothic is an offshoot of an earlier gothic style in European fiction that featured similarly peculiar themes and settings, such as eerie castles and dark, threatening woods. "A Circle in the Fire" shares with European gothic the use of woods as a place of danger and dark deeds, an untamed place from which destruction comes.

Civil Rights

The 1950s saw the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement that would gain momentum and make great strides in the 1960s. The movement began in the South and was largely centered there, since the abuses it sought to address—segregation of schools and other public facilities, intimidation at the voting booth, etc.—were severe and widespread in this region where less than a century had passed since the end of slavery.

When "A Circle in the Fire" was written, African Americans were still subject to discrimination in the South and often were forced to put up with mistreatment ranging from disrespect to physical abuse in order to be allowed a job and a place to live. While race is not a central issue in the story, O'Connor makes clear that Culver, the African American worker, has less status than anyone else on the farm. When Mrs. Cope sees Culver driving a tractor around a gate to avoid getting off to open the gate, she does not even call out to Culver herself. Instead she orders her white employee to get Culver's attention. After she reprimands Culver, Mrs. Cope says to Mrs. Pritchard, "It's nothing to them. They don't have the responsibility."

Women's Postwar Independence

The 1950s was a time of dramatic social and economic change. World War II had recently ended. During the war, large numbers of women had worked in factories for the first time and had functioned independently while husbands and fathers were away at war. Women were to some degree unwilling to give up the freedoms and responsibilities they had experienced during the war, which led to adjustments for both genders when men returned, expecting to pick up where they had left off. Some men were resentful of women's newfound independence. In "A Circle in the Fire," Powell is clearly unhappy about being left alone in an apartment with younger siblings while his mother goes to her job, and Garfield repeatedly expresses contempt for women— especially for Mrs. Cope, who has wealth and authority as sole owner of the farm.

Economic Boom

The 1950s were also a time of a growing economy. Middle-class Americans enjoyed a fastrising standard of living as new technologies led to the availability of laborsaving appliances. Buying on credit also became commonplace, allowing more people to buy the new products. More Americans than ever before were able to own their own homes, buy cars, take vacations, etc. While many Americans benefited from these changes, those who did not felt even poorer than they had before. There were more and more things they could not afford. In "A Circle in the Fire," Powell and his friends are resentful of all that Mrs. Cope has. Powell feels poorer in his Atlanta "development" than he did as the child of farm workers living on Mrs. Cope's farm. His standard of living has gotten worse, not better.

Critical Overview

"A Circle in the Fire" has drawn scarce critical comment as an individual story, but O'Connor's short fiction has been widely reviewed and analyzed as a whole. In the 1950s and 1960s when most of O'Connor's stories were first published, opinions of her work varied. Many critics and scholars immediately recognized that her work dealt with universal themes in a highly individual way and felt it would have lasting appeal. Others reviewers, however, criticized the stories for their grotesqueness and insisted that O'Connor was merely a regional writer of passing interest. As time has passed, respect for O'Connor's work has grown, and her early admirers have proved prescient.

In a 1965 review of O'Connor's collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, critic Irving Howe writes in the *New York Review of Books* that O'Connor's stories

stand securely on their own, as renderings and criticisms of human experience. And as such, they merit a considerable respect. The writing is firm, economical, complex: we are engaged with an intelligence, not merely a talent.

Reviewing the same collection the same year, Webster Schott writes in the *Nation:*

Artistically her fiction is the most extraordinary thing to happen to the American short story since Ernest Hemingway. . . . Flannery O'Connor was among those few writers who raise the questions worth thinking about after the lights are out and the children are safely in bed: What is reality? What are the possibilities for hope? How much can man endure?

Forty years after her death, O'Connor's place alongside Hemingway at the summit of the American literary pantheon is seldom questioned. Scholars continue to examine her work from new perspectives. In an essay in *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, Lisa S. Babinec analyzes the mother-daughter relationship in "A Circle in the Fire" and in two other O'Connor stories. Babinec concludes that the former story is "the most extreme example of maternal domination" in all of O'Connor's work. In an essay in *Southern Literary Journal*, Melita Schaum discusses "A Circle in the Fire" as a trickster narrative in which Powell Boyd is a caricature of Satan himself. Schaum admires the story as a "parable of property and loss, order and disruption" and declares that it "represents one of O'Connor's darker and more perplexing tales of grace."

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker, who once lived just down the road from Flannery O'Connor's home in Milledgeville, has written that she considers O'Connor "the first great modern writer from the South." In an essay on O'Connor in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker writes:

her characters are new and wondrous creations in the world, and . . . not one of her stories . . . could have been written by anyone else. . . . After her great stories of sin, damnation, prophecy, and revelation, the stories one reads casually in the average magazine seem to be about love and roast beef.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. In this essay, Norvell discusses the lack of a hero in "A Circle in the Fire."

Think of the body of Flannery O'Connor's fiction as a patchwork quilt. The quilt's backing—the large piece that underlies the patches and holds them together—is O'Connor's much-written-about Catholic theology. Each patch, cut from a cloth with a unique pattern, represents an individual story. Yet all the patches share something in common: the stitches that crawl across the squares are most irregular. Where they should march in a neat line, they jut unpredictably. They are tiny and puckered here, and long and loopy there. They are irreparably crooked and contorted. They are O'Connor's characters, and they are all villains and ne'er-do-wells. It has been said that in all of O'Connor's stories and her two novels, there is not a hero to be found.

"A Circle in the Fire" is not one of O'Connor's most written-about stories and is not considered one of her masterpieces. But as an illustration of her ability to craft a powerful, affecting tale without a hero—or even a single sympathetic character—it serves as well as any other story.

If "A Circle in the Fire" had a traditional structure, its main character, Mrs. Cope, would be its hero. She would be the good woman beleaguered by bad boys. She would contend with them wisely and bravely, and she would either be victorious (a comedy) or endure defeat with grace (a tragedy), comforted by the knowledge that she had fought with honor. Win or lose, a hero is somehow changed for the better by the struggle; he or she gains wisdom or compassion or some other virtue through the events of the story.

In this story, of course, it is none of the above. Mrs. Cope is its main character; she is not its hero. She demonstrates neither wisdom nor courage. She has neither understanding of human nature nor of human relationships. She fails to see that while she has authority on the farm; the boys have all the power. She assumes that her superior wealth makes her superior in wisdom, and she has no compassion for the many who have less than she does. Worse than all of this, Mrs. Cope refuses to learn from experience or to be changed by her struggle with the boys. She persists in her self-satisfied ignorance even as the other characters in the story recognize that she is creating the conditions for her own ruin. Mrs. Cope has none of the qualities of a hero.

Mrs. Pritchard, on the other hand, has one such quality: she is as savvy as Mrs. Cope is dense. Her assessment of the boys and their intentions is on target at every turn. She looks at the facts—the boys' ages, their poverty, their fearless sullenness— and makes faultless predictions about what kinds of behavior these combined elements will produce.

Yet Mrs. Pritchard does not qualify as a hero. Although she possesses wisdom, she does not value it. A hero would be eager to use wisdom as a weapon to overcome challenges. Mrs. Pritchard is a prophet of doom who is convinced that challenges

cannot be overcome. She enjoys her wisdom for the sense of superiority it gives her over Mrs. Cope and because it allows her to relish the certainty of Mrs. Cope's coming ruin—hardly heroic impulses.

Mrs. Cope's daughter, Sally Virginia, makes a halfhearted stab at heroic action. Having watched and listened to her mother's mishandling of the boys, Sally is finally overcome by frustration. Arming herself with two pistols, she sets off to find and deal with the invaders. But the pistols are only toys, and Sally is just a child. When she finds the boys, her bravado melts into fear, and she hides and watches them instead of confronting them. Even when she knows they are about to set fire to the woods, she does nothing. For a time, she is not even able to run.

At twelve, Sally is already smarter than her mother. But her idea that she can "handle" the boys is as much a fantasy as her mother's idea that they will go away of their own accord. Sally is only a child, and it seems unfair to place the burden of conquering three teenage boys on her shoulders. But children can certainly be heroes, and often are in literature. If she had somehow followed through on her desire to confront the boys, she would have been heroic even if she had failed to save her home from them. It is her lack of courage and determination that deny her the hero's role. As she realizes at the end of the story, she is very much like the mother she despises.

That leaves the boys, Powell, Garfield, and W. T. They cannot be the story's heroes because they are its villains. They invade Mrs. Cope's farm, camp there against her will, and respond to every request and command by becoming increasingly destructive. They are juvenile delinquents who finally commit a serious crime that destroys Mrs. Cope's property, wealth, and livelihood. If they had acted in the service of some ideal or cause, the boys might be seen as antiheroes in the tradition of Robin Hood. But their actions are purely impulsive, selfish, and destructive.

The boys are neither heroes nor antiheroes, but in O'Connor's judgment they are, of all the story's characters, most deserving of mercy. In a biblical allusion that echoes the story's title, O'Connor ends the story with the narrator reporting that Sally "stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them."

In this image, the boys are not invaders or delinquents or criminals but "prophets." In the Old Testament world that O'Connor has conjured up, prophets were righteous men who warned the worldly of divine punishments to come if they did not change their ways. While the fire consumes everything around them—everything that they longed for and could not have—the boys are described as dancing in "the circle the angel had cleared for them." Only the boys, of all the story's characters, receive divine favor and protection. The irony of this is heightened by the fact that Mrs. Cope has repeatedly reminded those around her that she thanks God every day for all He does for her. Further, when she asked the boys if they too thanked God every day, they responded with silence. O'Connor's God, it seems, looks at something other than people's words when deciding their fates.

That the story's cast of characters is bereft of a hero is not surprising. That there are a few among them the author deems worth saving is a little more so. But the real shock, at first, is whom she chooses to save. In a story populated with ignorant, pathetic people, in the end what distinguishes the boys is not that they are the worst of a bad lot but that they alone may be redeemable. O'Connor draws readers in not by giving them a hero who represents all the best of humanity but by shaking up their notions about who represents the worst.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on "A Circle in the Fire," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Smith discusses dual gender roles present in O'Connor's women characters in "A Circle in the Fire" and other stories.

In a Jungian analysis of three key works of short fiction by Flannery O'Connor, "A Circle in the Fire," "The Displaced Person," and "Greenleaf," Mary L. Morton claims that these stories "dramatize the ludicrosity of women who have denied the spirit of femininity, the *anima*" and that the sympathy that O'Connor generates for the protagonists of these stories is a "trick on some readers." In fact, these characters, as well as other O'Connor characters in similar positions, do not really deny their femininity, they exploit it, sometimes to the point that they seem to be parodying it. And they *should* arouse in most readers not only sympathy but also a grudging respect. Unlikable as these women may appear, all deserve credit for employing a clever strategy in attempting to survive in a man's world while essentially manless, and all deserve sympathy because they are faced with an impossible task in having to synthesize aspects of both gender roles in order to maintain their livelihoods.

While these "managerial types," as Morton terms them, or "assertive widows," as Suzanne Morrow Paulson refers to them, are all overly demanding of their hired hands, all are justified in their aggressiveness by their common economic situation. As Louise Westling has observed, O'Connor's South of the fifties is nearly as hostile to the plight of widows managing farms as the South of the immediate post-Civil War period had been, when "widows who attempted to manage their own affairs were regarded as arrogant." While these women may have "consciously adopted a masculine ethic," thereby denying an essential part of their own femininity, there is really little choice involved; O'Connor's empowered women all sincerely believe that typically masculine, aggressive behavior is the only way to overcome the misogyny inherent in the lower class male workers they must control in order to keep their farms operating. Each woman is forced by necessity to channel whatever nurturing instinct she has into assuring the survival of her "place," a significant term used by each.

In fact, the women from the above stories display a rather admirable adeptness at manipulating the myth of the "Southern lady" to help them survive in a patriarchal society. These women firmly maintain that, as "ladies" in the traditional Southern sense of the term, they are entitled to the respect, protection and labor of those around them, particularly those of a lower caste. They lay claim to all of the privileges due a "Southern lady" while also having assumed all of the economic power of an absent male. This proves to be an effective combination for a time, allowing this character to feel that she can—and must—be as "iron-handed" as any male property owner while still feeling perfectly entitled to sympathy for having to debase herself by running things. Her stature as a "lady" entitles her to complain about being abused and disrespected by her subordinates because she is "only a woman," yet this complaint serves as a weapon to encourage others to be far more tolerant than they would otherwise be toward a male superior.

The basic situation in these stories is the same: all of these characters are, presumably, widows who have inherited farms—but little money—from their departed husbands and are left to manage on their own, quite in conflict with what their upbringings have told them is the proper place for a "lady." The economic support traditionally provided by the husband is gone, and all three of these women are left to fill the power vacuum; they are forced to take on the completely unladylike position of manager/employer. It is a role that each woman is actually quite adept at, and each is able to keep her "place" running well for a time, despite uncooperative employees. The farms that these women inherit provide unique venues for them, since these farms constitute a confluence of the private, domestic sphere in which female empowerment is unquestioned, with the public, economic sphere in which Southern ladies traditionally have had no role. Thus each woman is able to view and run her "place" as an extension of her home.

In "A Circle in the Fire" this attempt to combine both feminine and masculine authority can be seen in Mrs. Cope's attempts to make her three uninvited visitors both "act like gentlemen" and display the same amount of obedience that she has come to expect from her employees. Unfortunately for Mrs. Cope, she initially misjudges the boys and tries to control them in a purely maternal fashion, in contrast to the managerial tone she adopts with her workers. Expecting the boys to be polite and deferential around a lady who is also a social superior, Mrs. Cope is shocked when the three refugees from an Atlanta housing development refuse to respond to her insincere maternal solicitude. As Margaret Whitt has noted, "the stern, businesslike woman farmer is nowhere to be found in Mrs. Cope's handling of the boy intruders. She speaks to them as a Southern lady would." Even after being informed of Powell's dismal home life, Mrs. Cope still attempts to control his behavior by reminding him of his defiance of accepted social standards: "I'm sure your mother would be ashamed of you." Mrs. Cope's language here makes clear that she is still viewing her empowerment as owner of the farm in domestic terms, with herself acting as a surrogate "mother" trying to discipline unruly children. If Sally Virginia's unruly behavior is any indicator, though, Mrs. Cope is ineffective as a controlling parent—as are most of O'Connor's single mothers.

What puzzles Mrs. Cope about the boys is that they are not only ungrateful to her for her attempt to be domestically gracious to them by offering food, but they also flatly reject her economic authority, refusing even to acknowledge her ownership of the land. The boys are clearly responding to the lack of a legitimate male authority figure, as they express disgust at the presence of a female "ruling class" on the farm. As one of the boys says to Mr. Pritchard, "I never seen a place with so many damn women on it, how do you stand it here?"

Mrs. Cope has every reason to believe that her tactics will work on the boys. After all, Powell's mother had once been an employee of Mrs. Cope's, and, presumably, she was able to control her as she controls her successor, Mrs. Pritchard. Although Mrs. Cope initially believes that she can control all of the "destructive and impersonal" forces on her farm, such as her black workers and the nut grass, this is only because none of these "forces" can question her authority. We can recognize in her paranoia about fire her awareness of how tenuous her control really is. Once she encounters a "force" that

clearly challenges her feminine authority, she can only resort to the ineffective threat of summoning male authority, the sheriff, to regain control.

In donning male clothes and strapping on pistols to chase off the boys, Sally Virginia reveals that she, like Mrs. Pritchard, understands what her mother cannot: that the boys have no use for the Southern code of behavior by which a lady is owed deference, that their broken homes give them little experience in knuckling under to domestic authority, and that they will respond only to pure masculine power. Unfortunately, the only form of masculine power on the farm is in the destructiveness of the boys themselves. In fact, Powell's arson touches off a rebellion on the part of the male workers, as they refuse Mrs. Cope's final order to "hurry" to put out the fire. The male force triumphs and Mrs. Cope ultimately finds herself without any sort of authority at the most crucial time.

In a similar fashion, Mrs. McIntyre of "The Displaced Person" eventually loses control of her workers and ends up, like Mrs. Cope, losing her farm. Initially, though, Mrs. McIntryre's control grows to previously unknown levels thanks to the presence of another who, like herself prior to her marriage, had been without a "place." Irked by the same perception of disrespectful incompetence on the part of her workers that Mrs. Cope complains about, Mrs. McIntyre begins to gain a sense of strength and power once she finally hires a truly hard working, honest and knowledgeable hand. She holds the example of Mr. Guizac up to her other workers in order to create a kind of sibling rivalry among her employees to spur productivity: one can clearly hear a why-can't-you-be-like-your-brother admonition to Mr. Shortley when she compares him to Guizac. When she adds to this the substantial economic threat of firing the entire Shortley family, it is easy to see how the atmosphere of paranoia on the farm comes to exist. Mrs. McIntyre reaches the apex of her economic empowerment and comes to exploit her new-found authority with her workers. Finally, she has found a worker "who *has* to work," that is, one who has to knuckle under to her dubious authority, and she proclaims that the long line of "white trash" families who have parasitized her and then left is now over. But she finds that her visions of freedom from worthless "poor white trash and niggers" who have "drained [her] dry" are short lived, as she must engage in a silent conspiracy with males of both of those groups to rid herself of Mr. Guizac.

Just as Mrs. Cope has her paranoia of losing all through fire, so does Mrs. McIntyre fear the loss of the social order which empowers her, hence the unlikely conspiracy to rid herself of her "favorite son." Because Mrs. McIntyre lacks any true maternal authority, since she is merely the childless young widow of a much older man, the social basis of her authority is of paramount importance to her. While Mr. Guizac continues to be a fine worker, his attempt to marry his cousin to Sulk, the younger black on the farm, is an affront to the social system that she just can't bear. While she herself had married in order to gain social and economic advancement, her union did not involve miscegenation, thus she cannot perceive a parallel. She had been willing to endure the laziness of the "white trash" and the stealing of the "niggers" because, in her view, these traits were to be expected of these classes; these acts merely reinforce the established order which puts the blacks on the bottom of the social scale, the poor whites in the middle and herself firmly on top. She admits her dependence on this order when she tells Guizac, "I will not have my niggers upset. I cannot run this place without my

niggers." To her mind, her black workers are the equivalent of weak-willed children who can always be counted on to recognize her authority as a white woman.

Mrs. McIntyre is not alone in this belief, either, as all of O'Connor's empowered women rely absolutely on their black workers' recognizing whites as their superiors—even if these women complain that blacks don't grant this recognition as readily as they once did, as Mrs. Turpin claims in "Revelation," for instance. "The Enduring Chill" provides an interesting view of the consequences of the erosion of the social division that all of O'Connor's empowered women claim *should* exist between blacks and whites. The basic situation in this story is identical to that of the above stories, with a widowed land owner, Mrs. Fox, relying upon her black workers, Randall and Morgan, to keep her dairy farm running and wanting her son to keep the social barrier in place. But Asbury, as defiant as any child of any of O'Connor's single mothers, succeeds in breaking down the barrier by enjoying a forbidden smoke with the black workers in the milking barn; the act results in "one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing." But when he tries to push the "communion" further by drinking unpasteurized milk over Randall's objections that Mrs. Fox has strictly forbidden it, he is struck down with undulant fever and eventually pushed even further away from the black workers when his attempt to communicate with them while on his sickbed fails utterly and he must look to his mother to be "saved" from them. Asbury's attempt to defy the social hierarchy results in disaster; it leaves him ill for life and accomplishes nothing beyond what he intended all along—to annoy his mother.

We can see in Mrs. Fox's frustration with Asbury's strange desires the same emotion that is behind Mrs. McIntyre's exasperation with Guizac's failure to comprehend and bow to the accepted standards of her society and Mrs. Cope's frustration at the unwillingness of the boys to act like "gentlemen" after she has been "nice" to them. Mrs. McIntyre's words to Mr. Guizac even echo Mrs. Cope's reminder to the boys: "This is my place . . . I say who will come here and who won't." In the paranoia displayed by these women over seemingly harmless plans we can see that they realize the more profound implications of the disruption of the social order which supports their tenuous claims of authority. Without this order and the accompanying rules of conduct which restrain their workers, none of O'Connor's empowered women could function effectively as "bosses."

These characters are among a number of empowered female protagonists from O'Connor's short fiction who rigorously defend what they perceive to be the hierarchy of social classes in the South, primarily because of their own relatively lofty positions in this hierarchy. Perhaps the most obvious example is Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation," whose hobby of "naming the classes of people" who exist in her perception of the world is reinforced by the high status of the home-and-land owner class, to which she and many of O'Connor's other female protagonists belong. Although Mrs. Turpin has a husband, Claude is characterized throughout the story by his meekness and compliance with his wife's wishes, so Mrs. Turpin's life on her farm involves the same sort of pride in ownership and exasperation at having to deal with non-compliant help as the lives of the empowered widows. This she makes clear in her waiting room conversation, where she brags about her crops and livestock and bemoans her inability to find good help: "You can't get the white folks to pick [cotton] and now you can't get the niggers—because

they got to be right up there with the white folks." Although she readily admits to herself that her envisioning of a hierarchy based upon race, class and money is flawed, as it fails to account for richer people who are morally or racially inferior to herself, she still insists upon defending it and envisioning it—and her own position in it—even in the face of Mary Grace's "revelation" of Mrs. Turpin's true moral status.

Similarly, while having fallen from the land owner class, Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" also remains preoccupied with defending the social hierarchy against all of its enemies—including both Julian and the "misguided" blacks who don't agree with her pronouncement that they should be "rising" only "on their own side of the fence." Once again, the defense of this hierarchy is clearly a defense of the protagonist's own sense of "place" in it. While Julian is all too aware that his mother's life has been "a struggle to act like a Chestny without the Chestny goods," he doesn't seem to understand that her racist beliefs are an integral part of "knowing who she is." Without the inherited home and land, all Julian's mother has left of her former sense of empowerment is her breeding—particularly her ability to be gracious to those she believes to be social inferiors. To Julian's mother's mind, her ability to engage in conversation with those whites on the bus who are clearly "not our kind of people" and to be patronizingly kind to black children is her badge of social superiority; her sense of identity enables her to be "gracious to anybody."

In Julian's mother's firm belief in her own elevated position in the hierarchy, evidenced by her ability to graciously interact with her inferiors in the manner of a true Southern lady, we can hear the echoes of the voices of several of O'Connor's empowered women who point to their relationships with the families of their tenant farmers as proof of their magnanimity. For instance, we are told of Mrs. Hopewell, the farm owner in "Good Country People," that she "had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack." This attitude of condescending charity can be seen in what Mrs. Hopewell regards as her masterful handling of Mrs. Freeman's intrusive personality by allowing her to be "into everything," and in her defending of the Freemans' worth despite her evident belief in their inferiority to herself: "they were not trash. They were good country people." This is a term that Mrs. Cope might apply to the Pritchards and Mrs. McIntyre might apply to the Guizacs, both of whom rate above the "white trash" employees of their past experience but below themselves.

It is in the defending of her vision of the hierarchy that both Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter experience their downfall. Just as both Mrs. Cope and Mrs. McIntyre contribute to their own defeats by their constant assertions about the social hierarchy, so does Mrs. Hopewell open the door to calamity by enthusiastically defending her opinion of the relative worth of "good country people." Because of their belief in the hierarchy, both mother and daughter are equally duped by Manley Pointer, the travelling Bible salesman, who metaphorically keeps his foot in Mrs. Hopewell's door by claiming that Mrs. Hopewell is the type of person who doesn't "like to foot with country people like me!," relying upon Mrs. Hopewell's condescending denial. Even Joy-Hulga, who seems opposed to all of her mother's ratings of the worth of fellow human beings, has bought into the idea of the hierarchy, as she sets out to seduce the salesman because

she perceives him as ignorant (and thus inferior to herself), and becomes convinced that she "was face to face with real innocence."

For all of these women, it is the persistent belief in their own superiority that entitles them to denigrate their fellow human beings, that constitutes a spiritual defect as apparent as Joy-Hulga's physical defect. Manley Pointer is mocking the notion of his conforming to the Hopewells' stereotypical view of the "good country person," as he tells Joy-Hulga that he belongs to that class. He maintains, however, that "it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day in the week," points out how the belief in any social hierarchy always carries with it a belief in one's own superiority to others. His retort also belies the built-in assumption of superiority on the part of both of the Hopewells. He's not as "good" in the moral sense, of course, but in the social sense; he makes his living from exploiting the patronizing, superior attitude of the "upper" class, who imagine themselves to be superior in every way. And belief in a social hierarchy characterizes nearly all of O'Connor's female characters, regardless of rank. Even "white trash" women such as the one in the waiting room in "Revelation" and the one on the bus in "Everything That Rises" agree with the protagonists that the blacks' struggle for equality is a sure sign that the world has gone terribly awry (after all, it is a threat to their own status as at least one step up from the bottom of the scale). In stealing Joy-Hulga's artificial leg and strolling off under the unsuspecting eye of Mrs. Hopewell, who is convinced that he has been trying to sell Bibles to "the Negroes back in there"—the implication being that such a "simple" boy could only be an effective salesperson among social inferiors—Pointer is pointing to how inane the belief in such stereotypes can be. Mrs. Freeman's sarcastic retort, "some can't be that simple . . . I know I never could," also reflects the fact that it is the Hopewells who are simple and who see the world in black-and-white terms. The hoodwinking of both members of the Hopewell family (the upper class in the hierarchy) proves how silly the notion of a hierarchy is: if "good country people" can be defined by their "simplicity," then it is surely the Hopewells who are "country people."

Another flaw in the proposition that these upper caste Southern ladies are superior, as they all seem to claim, concerns their common belief in their own graciousness and politeness toward others. Even if we can grant that graciousness is a sign of proper breeding, as many of O'Connor's protagonists claim, we have to question just how a "gracious" person can irritate virtually everyone she interacts with—including her own offspring. Mrs. Hopewell is typical in this respect, since she has divorced a husband, cannot get along with her own daughter, and has apparently been through a succession of tenant workers: "Before the Freemans she had averaged one tenant family a year." The latter is apparently a trait of Mrs. Cope and Mrs. McIntyre as well, as both have had problems with retaining employees—we know that at least one family preceded the Pritchards on Mrs. Cope's farm, and Mrs. McIntyre and Astor mention three families that preceded the Shortleys on her farm. This common attribute indicates a basic inability on the part of these women to deal with the needs and concerns of workers, a lack of true maternal solicitude.

Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" not only shares with other O'Connor characters an inability to get along with her own offspring and workers but also assigns the same amount of

importance to the established social order as O'Connor's other empowered women. Noting the unnatural rise of the "white trash" Greenleaf boys in the world, she bemoans the possibility of the Greenleafs becoming "society," thus being beyond her control. But unlike most of the other female land owners, Mrs. May does have men on her farm who are capable of helping her run things; unfortunately, Scofield and Wesley have no interest whatsoever either in keeping the farm up or in helping to perpetuate their family. Although Mrs. May defensively refuses to admit them as such, her sons represent more of a threat to the established order than the Greenleafs do. Both are openly rude and contemptuous of their mother, and both refuse to marry and become "respectable," as O. T. and E. T. Greenleaf have done. Mrs. May complains as much as Mrs. Cope, Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Fox about her shiftless, lazy and parasitic tenant workers; however, Mrs. May is also burdened with two sons who are even worse than the workers. In Mrs. May's failure to get her sons to help with the farm by trying to wield domestic authority alone, we can see how these other women would be likely to fare if they lacked the additional weapon of economic authority. We can recognize that the admonishing tone used by Mrs. May when addressing her sons is identical to the tone used by the other ladies in addressing their workers, but Scofield and Wesley do not rely upon their mother for their livelihoods: each has a job which is entirely independent of the farm. The result is that they have the freedom to reject maternal authority without fear of economic consequences.

Because she is essentially left "manless" by her sons' apathy, Mrs. May, like Mrs. Cope and Mrs. McIntyre, views the survival of the farm as the product of her hard work alone. The three women virtually echo each other in this respect: Mrs. Cope asserts that she has "the best kept place in the county and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it"; Mrs. McIntyre likens her efforts to run her farm to Mr. Guizac's "struggle" to survive his displacement, since "she had had a hard time herself. She knew what it was to struggle"; Mrs. May believes that "before any kind of judgement seat she would be able to say: I've worked, I have not wallowed." All three women classify their efforts to keep their farms afloat as "work," yet none do any real physical labor—as befits a "lady." While they may "constantly mouth shallow beliefs in the Puritan work ethic," they surely do not adhere to this ethic themselves. To them, "work" means wielding masculine authority by continually issuing orders and admonitions. Even Mrs. Cope's physical attack on the nut grass is not the act of a "worker," as O'Connor points out with the symbol of the sunhats, introduced in the first paragraph of the story: Mrs. Pritchard's is "faded and nut of shape while Mrs. Cope's [is] still stiff and bright and green," indicating that Mrs. Cope is the one who need not wear out her sunhat because she is the one in charge.

As with many of O'Connor's empowered women who speak as if their workers are more of a challenge and an affront than essential to economic survival, Mrs. May discounts the role played by her hired help, viewing the Greenleafs as a trial of her ability to assume the domineering role of the male required to keep her "white trash" workers in line. Mrs. May correctly senses that Mr. Greenleaf hesitates to recognize her authority, though she cannot see that this is partly because he has witnessed the complete breakdown of her maternal authority over her disrespectful sons, who are a stark contrast to his own respectful twins. Furthermore, the May farm lacks an underclass of

black workers whose automatic deference to a white employer might serve to establish Mrs. May as an authority figure.

While Mrs. May bemoans the lack of a "man running this place" and claims that the Greenleaf brothers ignore her demands for the removal of the bull because of her gender, it is clear that the treatment she receives is only partly due to her status as a member of the "weaker sex." Mrs. May is ignored simply because she tries too hard to compensate for the lack of a strong male figure by being overly demanding and critical. As is the case with many of O'Connor's empowered women, Mrs. May's relationship with her workers consists of little more than constant demands and complaints of noncompliance. Having been raised on a steady diet of Mrs. May's whining and now being free from their economic dependence upon her, the Greenleaf twins are glad to be able to turn even more of a deaf ear to her than their father does. Although Mrs. May imagines that she is an effective authority figure because of her ability to rule the farm with "an iron hand," Scofield's mocking of this notion by holding up his mother's hand, which resembles a "broken lily," demonstrates how weak her authority actually is.

Like Mrs. Cope and Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. May mistakes hurling verbal abuse for strength and giving commands for struggle. This is the respect in which O'Connor's empowered women are ultimately failures. While they are temporarily successful at using the power which comes as the result of land ownership and the ability to employ workers, all cross the line that separates managing workers from abusing them. If the Southern lady is to be characterized by her ability to charm and delight others, as the stereotype would seem to indicate, then these ladies fall short of the mark. In their efforts to be effective in a traditionally male role, they sacrifice an essential part of the traditional female role for people of their stature and social class. Similarly, these women are just as ineffective in translating maternal authority into managerial authority: their employees come to resent being scolded and regarded as children and come to ignore their orders. Even if this transfer of domestic power to the workplace were possible, the fact remains that Mrs. McIntyre had never established her domestic authority in the Judge's household, and Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Fox, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. May are all weak as maternal authority figures, as all fail to control the actions of their own children.

As is the case with Mrs. Cope and Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. May also finds herself abandoned by her worker at a crucial time: Mr. Greenleaf is wandering off, ignoring her demand for the bull's death (just as all other males, both May and Greenleaf, ignore her incessant demands) when the bull charges her. As Paulson has noted, Greenleaf's inattention to the bull constitutes revenge upon the "castrating woman [who has] emasculated him." As is the case in the other stories, true male power ultimately wins out. As she warns her sons repeatedly, her demise means the demise of the farm as well.

In the end, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May wind up losing their hold on the "places" they had managed to grab from the partriarchy because they ultimately fail to fully synthesize the necessary aspects of both traditional gender roles. All three end up, in essence, "displaced persons." They are, in Westling's terms, "rendered passive by punishment." But while Westling asserts that "O'Connor seems to be demonstrating that

independent female authority is unnatural and must be crushed by male force," the fact is that these women's authority was never fully independent due to their absolute reliance upon a thin veneer of social propriety. Despite our distaste for these women, there is something undeniably pathetic about their fate: there is no sense of a "natural" order being restored, only a sense of destruction and loss.

While these women may seem unsympathetic in their handling of power, it should be noted that O'Connor has her disempowered women fare no better than her empowered characters—as illustrated by the fate that befalls Julian's mother at the end of "Everything That Rises," after she has her belief in the social order that elevated her literally knocked our of her. Another helpful text to look at to illustrate the plight of the widow who owns land but is completely lacking in power is "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," in which Mrs. Crater lacks the economic ability to hire workers or have repairs made. O'Connor symbolizes her disempowerment by having her show Shiftlet that she literally has no teeth (i.e. no authority) and that she and her daughter are going nowhere, as her automobile had "quit running" the day her husband died. Mrs. Crater is forced by poverty to barter her own daughter in order to get someone to work for her; she must give Shiftlet a share in the farm in order to get him to stay.

Her willingness to make any deal to secure a son-in-law who will agree to stay on the place is seen in her willingness to deal with Shiftlet, even though he openly admits he could be lying to her about his identity because "nowadays, people'll do anything anyways," and though she knows nothing about him other than his declaration, "I'm a man." But a man is exactly what Mrs. Crater feels she needs to keep her farm running. O'Connor signals this by having her "wonder if a one-armed man could put up a new roof on her garden house" from the outset and by having her offer Shiftlet as "bait" the means to flee (the automobile) as part of the "package" for her daughter—despite her demand that he remain on the farm. Her ordering of items in this package deal also reveals what she knows is truly important to Shiftlet: "you'd be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world." But once Shiftlet assumes the power of her late husband by fixing the car, Mrs. Crater has no way to hold him to the bargain, and her innocent daughter ultimately pays the price for her lack of power. Unlike O'Connor's empowered women, who have the means to shelter and provide for their ungrateful children even well into their adult years, Mrs. Crater can't protect a daughter who is even more vulnerable than she. Disempowerment hardly seems an attractive alternative.

Perhaps O'Connor's stories should be taken as commentaries upon the impossibility of a woman of this society successfully negotiating her way through a patriarchal power structure, since no amount of "masculine" behavior can compensate for the fact that these empowered women are still inferior in the eyes of those they must control in order to survive. As women, their claims upon authority are dubious at best, and the males who destroy them recognize this. If O'Connor is satirizing these characters, it is only because they are too blind to realize that any attempt to mix masculine and feminine roles is destined to fail. Because they can obtain only toleration, but no true respect, from the males upon whom they must depend as a matter of economic necessity, these characters wind up being successful neither as "ladies" nor as bosses. In trying to act

both gender roles, these women fail to completely fill the requirements of either. Flannery O'Connor's empowered women are eventually foiled by the representatives of a society unwilling to embrace the paradox they represent.

Source: Peter A. Smith, "Flannery O'Connor's Empowered Women," in *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring 1994, pp. 35-47.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Westling explores the "radically different views toward femininity" found in a comparison of "A Circle in the Fire" and Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding *within the context of "the old mother/daughter story of Demeter and Persephone."*

Bookish southern girls a generation ago were likely to have saturated themselves with Greek and Roman mythology in childhood, because Southern culture has had a long love affair with the classics. Not surprisingly, that kind of early imaginative experience turns up in the fiction of two very different women writers, Eudora Welty of Mississippi and Flannery O'Connor of Georgia. Both writers echo the Demeter/Persephone story in dramatizing strong maternal figures who preside over pastoral settings. But while Welty celebrates the feminine power and fertility of what mythographer G. S. Kirk calls "the most pervasive of all Greek divine tales," O'Connor invokes the old patterns in order to deny their force. Welty is comfortable with her femininity and thus is able to imagine an attractive mother figure, while O'Connor seems to have only loathing for her gender and wish to deny the legitimacy of adult female authority.

"I've lived with mythology all my life," Welty told an interviewer. "It is just as close to me as the landscape. It *naturally* occurs to me when I am writing fiction." Flannery O'Connor relied chiefly on Biblical sources for imagery, but she also used myth consciously in at least one story and explored it seriously in her adult reading. Her personal library included a number of well-used books of mythology, including Bulfinch, and her friendship with Robert Fitzgerald stimulated her close reading of Homer and the Greek tragedians whom he translated. Like Welty, O'Connor was interested in mythic patterns associated with fertility, and both writers saw these as relevant to contemporary life. Critics have called our attention to mythic elements in much of Welty's fiction, and Frederick Asals has established O'Connor's careful parallels of Christian and pagan symbols in "Greenleaf." With his previous work as a background, I want to look specifically at Welty's *Delta Wedding* and O'Connor's "A Circle in the Fire" to show how radically different attitudes toward femininity are expressed in their use of the old mother/daughter story of Demeter and Persephone.

Before looking specifically at the fiction, we should recall the major elements of this oldest recorded myth of feminine fertility and renewal in the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter." This was the source for Bulfinch's and most other modern versions in popular circulation. The story describes the abduction from a flowery meadow of Demeter's virgin daughter Kore or Persephone by Hades or Pluton, god of the underworld. Demeter's grief, the aid of her sister Hecate of the underworld, the punishment of all creation for the rape by the Great Mother's withholding of fertility, then finally its restoration on the return of Persephone—all these events define the ancient motif. The setting for the rape turns out to be highly symbolic. Deborah Dickmann Boedeker has shown that typical sites for rape in Greek myth and cult were meadow-like dancing grounds where circle dances promoted fertility and associated maidens with growing plants. These sites are protected by mother goddesses, as in the Homeric Hymn "To Earth the Mother of All." The hymn sings of the great nourisher of all life and of her gift

of "fruitful land" (aroura), a word often used metaphorically to denote woman as bearing seed and fruit. Those blessed by Mother Earth have children who are like the fruits of the soil. In particular, "their daughters in flower-laden bands play and skip merrily over the soft flowers of the field." This scene is much like the blissful meadow where Persephone and her maiden companions gathered flowers where Hades suddenly appeared.

Such a fecund landscape is the setting for Welty's *Delta Wedding*—that famous bottomland in Mississippi whose name recalls ancient shapes denoting female fertility. Furthermore it is a world ruled by women: "In the Delta the land belonged to the women—they only let the men have it, and sometimes they tried to take it back and give it to someone else. . . . All the men lived here in a kind of sufferance!" Ellen Fairchild is the organizer and sustainer of domestic life in the plantation world of the novel, and matriarchal ancestor Mary Shannon Fairchild rules family tradition even from the grave. The plot is constructed of a series of feminine rituals which prepare for the most important ritual of all— the wedding of Ellen's eighteen-year-old daughter Dabney to the mysterious and slightly sinister overseer who seems to walk right in from the fields to the ceremony.

Others before me have seen overseer Troy Flavin as a "field god" and have alluded to the ritualistic movement of the novel's plot, but the full significance of these associations has not been explained. We first see Troy through Dabney's eyes as she rides horseback with two girlish companions across Mound Field, site of the Indian mound for which the plantation is named. Dabney thinks of the field as "the pre-eminent place" where she first noticed Troy a year before, and her association of him with dark and explosive forces helps us realize that this place is symbolically the pre-eminent meadow with its *omphalos*, entrance to the underworld where the earth yawned and Hades emerged to snatch Persephone front her innocent, flowery play. Now, just a few days before her wedding, Dabney sees Troy as a distant figure riding across her path on his black horse, his arm raised in greeting like a gun against the sky. She shuts her eyes and sees "a blinding light, or else it was a dark cloud—that intensity under her flickering lids." "She thought of him proudly (he was right back of the mound now, she knew), a dark thundercloud, his slowness rumbling and his laugh flickering through in bright flashes. . . ." Welty knows that storm and earthquake, attributes of Zeus anti Poseidon, could be associated with their brother Hades. Indeed, Hades was often called Zeus. If Troy Flavin's positive qualities can be stimulated, he like Hades/ Pluton will become a source of new riches from the feminine earth. When Persephone returned from her underworld marriage, her mother welcomed her like a Maenad and the land burst forth in fruit. All this is possible for Dabney and Troy, as Welty suggests when she has Troy appear with a womblike sack full of his mother's quilts which symbolize both the traditional feminine art of the mountain people from whom he descends, and also the fertility of the landscape which he and Dabney will imitate. As Troy displays the quilts, he declares his choice of one called Delectable Mountains to cover the marriage bed; "that's the one I aim for Dabney and me to sleep under most generally, warm *and* pretty." The sexual connotations of the bedroom landscape are not lost on Troy's audience, especially when he says Dabney should wait to thank his mother until she

has tried the quilts. "That's what will count with Mammy. She might come if we have a baby, sure enough." By now, even the maiden aunts are beginning to quiver.

Before Troy's embarrassingly candid hopes can be realized, however, a serious threat to the wedding must be removed by ritual actions which parallel the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter. These rituals involve mythic figures not ordinarily seen as part of the Demeter/Persephone story—chiefly Dionysian ones—but their elaboration in the plot is too complex to describe here. An outline of the rituals themselves should indicate how richly Welty has endowed her novel with mythic meaning. We begin at the hearth, with the baking of a coconut cake by the white matriarch Ellen Fairchild. The recipe is a feminine family secret, and Ellen remembers a scene of marital eroticism as she works with the ingredients, hoping that such joy awaits her daughter. Later in the novel a complementary magic cake is baked by the black matriarch Partheny; hers is a black aphrodisiac patticake which Troy tastes before the wedding. The bride and two pubescent attendants make a ritual journey to the virgin grove where the spinster guardians of family history initiate them into matriarchal family traditions. A mystic encounter of mother and archetypal daughter in the bayou woods is followed by a trip by virgin daughters into a topographically complex underworld where the dead are visited and a lost Kore figure is found and restored to the world of light. Then the bride and groom's house is blessed in a strange rite where bees swarm in the central room, as if pollinating a flower. This fertile event is followed by a symbolic baptism for a nine-year-old girl which prepares her to serve as a flower girl in the wedding. Finally the wedding itself is celebrated in a pastoral motif with bridesmaids carrying shepherds' crooks and Troy coming in with flaming hair from the side door, "indeed like somebody walking in from the fields to marry Dabney." *Delta Wedding* ends with a picnic three days after the wedding, in which the whole extended family is reunited with the newly married couple just back from their honeymoon down in the exotic nether world of New Orleans. Persephone has been restored to her mother, and a new vitality stirs in the family.

Whether or not Flannery O'Connor meant to reiterate the underlying pattern of the Demeter-Kore myth, it is the only literary precedent which can illuminate the obsessive theme of masculine invasion in her mother-daughter farm stories. "A Circle in the Fire" is the fullest exposition of the theme, revealing parallels to the myth which are surprising at the very least.

A triad of females is established as the essential population of the farm at the opening of the story. Mrs. Cope works vigorously in her flowerbed, as Mrs. Prichard [sic], her ally and the tenant farmer's wife, looks on and chats about a woman who died having a baby in an iron lung. Twelve-year-old Sally Virginia Cope spies on the two women from an upstairs window. In a very general way the group parallels the Eleusinian trinity of Mother Demeter, Kore, and Hecate the dark goddess of death, all guardians of earth's mysteries in the famous Greek cult. Mrs. Cope is custodian of the land and guardian of her daughter; Mrs. Prichard's fascination with disease and funerals allies her with the gloomy deity who led initiates to symbolic death in Demeter's awesome rites.

Weeding the invading nut grass from her flowerbed as if the plants "were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place," Mrs. Cope is suddenly confronted by much more serious agents of destruction in the form of three thirteen-year-old boys who will claim the farm as their own and wreak havoc in defiance of the "damn women" whose province it has been. For Powell Boyd, the leader of the invading trio, the farm is a paradise, lost when his tenant farmer father moved the family to Florida. Powell has brought his friends from his new home in an Atlanta slum to see the place he wants to go to when he dies, a heaven of horses to ride and open pastures to roam. O'Connor equates these hungry children with suffering European refugees and clearly intends to dramatize and finally punish Mrs. Cope's lack of real Christian charity towards them. But from the outset the boys' claim on the farm is so relentless and coldly misogynist that no possible kindness offered by Mrs. Cope could disarm their determination to have the whole place to themselves. The first thing we learn about Powell is that his gaze seems to come "from two directions at once as if it had [Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Prichard] surrounded." All three boys have "white penetrating stares," and Powell's seems to pinch Mrs. Cope like a pair of tongs. Their arrival is an assault which becomes more and more obvious as Mrs. Cope tries politely but vainly to keep them under control. When she refers to "her" woods, one boy echoes her in a sarcastic mutter. The next morning when she tells them she expects them behave like gentlemen, they stand looking away from her as if waiting for her to leave. "After all," she says in a voice strained with anxiety, "this is my place!" In her response to her authority they turn their backs on her and walk away.

The boy's resentment of women in general and Mrs. Cope's claim to the farm in particular is twice made very clear. Sally Virginia has been fascinated by her mother's increasingly exasperated dealings with Powell and his friends. Red in the face with excitement which gradually turns to rage, she peers down on the unfolding drama from the safety of an upstairs window and finally crosses her eyes, sticks out her tongue, and says "Ugggghhrhh." "The large boy looked up and stared at her. 'Jesus,' he growled, 'another woman.' She dropped back from the window and stood with her back against the wall, squinting fiercely as if she had been slapped in the face and couldn't see who had done it." Later Mrs. Prichard reports that the boys have been disputing Mrs. Cope's ownership to the farm in a, conversation with Mr. Prichard. "She don't own them woods," one boy said. The same boy who had insulted Sally Virginia complained, "I never seen a place with so many damn women on it, how do you stand it here?"

The farm is under a siege whose sexual danger Mrs. Cope senses. At Mrs. Prichard's suggestion that the boys might want to spend the night, she gives a little shriek and exclaims, "I can't have three boys in here with only me and Sally Virginia." Repeatedly she warns her daughter to stay away from the visitors, but she won't say why. O'Connor does, explaining to her friend "A" that Sally Virginia risks sexual attack if she goes near the boys. "They would do it because they would be sharp enough to know that it would be their best revenge on Mrs. Cope; they would do it to humiliate the child and the mother, not to enjoy themselves." Sexual violence is the most potent form of masculine assault, whose ominous potential Mrs. Prichard describes when she tells Mrs. Cope, "You take a boy thirteen years old is equal in meanness to a man twict his age. It's no telling what he'll think up to do. You never know where he'll strike next."

Sally Virginia finally disobeys her mother's protective warnings and marches off to confront the boys in the woods where the climactic scene of destruction takes place. Flannery O'Connor told "A" that the boy's attack takes another form than the sexual one Mrs. Cope fears, but the woods they destroy are so closely identified with the child that the effect is almost the same. Sally Virginia adopts male dress to stalk her enemy, but the overalls she wears over her dress and the toy pistols she waves in the air are ridiculously inadequate defense. She comes upon the boys performing a curious rite in the back pasture behind the woods, and she hides behind a pine tree to watch. They are bathing in the cow trough which O'Connor likens to a coffin so that we will not miss the significance of their baptismal rebirth in the symbolically female meadow. Their conversation is a litany of claims for possession of the place. The biggest boy says the farm "don't belong to nobody," and the smallest boy chimes in, "It's ours." At that signal Powell jumps out of the water and begins a celebratory race around the pasture, tracing its boundaries in a circular path. As he passes the trough again, the other boys leap from the water to follow him. Their long naked bodies glint in the sun and their masculinity must be obvious in its simplest form to the frightened girl behind the tree. The side of her face is so closely pressed against the trunk that "the imprint of the bark [is] embossed red and white" upon it. When the boys dress and move into the woods to set them on fire, we should remember that earlier in the story Sally Virginia had registered the big boy's contemptuous "Jesus, another woman" as if she had been slapped in the *face*. Her face carries the mark of her humiliated feminity just as it carries the imprint of the tree that identifies her with the ravaged woods.

Although Sally Virginia symbolically shares Kore's fate as object of male assault, the attackers' motivations differ profoundly in the Greek myth and in O'Connor's story Like Kore, Sally Virginia is wandering outside her mother's protection when the violation of the garden occurs; the attack in both cases circumvents the mother's power. But while Pluto or Hades is motivated by positive desire for Demeter's daughter as his mate, Flannery O'Connor's boys hate women and seek revenge rather than sexual union. Demeter herself makes the land barren in retaliation against her daughter's rape; her authority is never challenged. In contrast, as we have seen, that kind of authority is exactly the object of male retribution in "A Circle in the Fire." By burning Mrs. Cope's woods, O'Connor's boys humiliate the daughter and her mother, bringing the fiery devastation Mrs. Cope has feared throughout the story and destroying the female integrity of the land. For O'Connor, the boys are agents of divine retribution, prophets dancing in the fiery furnace, "in the circle the angel had cleared for them." Thus the story ends, with Mrs. Cope's pride humbled by a God who forces her to share the homeless misery of European refugess, Negroes, and hungry children.

So much emphasis is placed in this story upon the terrified impotence of mother and daughter to prevent disaster that the failure of charity which O'Connor wants us to accept as justification for the boys' vengeance is simply not sufficient cause. Unlike Eudora Welty, who not only accepted but *celebrated* maternal control of the pastoral landscape, Flannery O'Connor has dramatized its gleeful destruction in eerie male rituals which seem an inversion of the flowery circle dances of maidens protected by the mother deity which Boedeker described as traditional in ancient Greek religion. The

circles the boys trace around the pasture in their naked race are statements of possession, and the final circle in the fire is a charmed spot at the center of a holocaust.

The association between the contours and reproductive capacities of the earth and those of the female is as old as the human imagination, lying at the root of almost every religious tradition that derives from prehistoric times and continuing to find expression in contemporary life. It should not be at all surprising to find women writers especially sensitive to landscapes, and indeed Ellen Moers has revealed in *Literary Women* how from George Eliot to Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein they have associated their sexuality and autonomy with symbolic landscapes. Moers opened a whole rich mine of literary discovery when she wrote her provocative final chapter suggesting distinctively feminine metaphors which could be explored by future scholars. So far not very much has been done to develop and expand her discussion of feminine landscapes, but I hope that here I have demonstrated how differently the identification of the mother with the fruitful land can be treated in fiction. Because both Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor echoed the myth of Demeter and Kore/Persephone, its original focus upon the mother's fertile power invests both *Delta Wedding* and "A Circle in the Fire" with imaginative reverberations that are both ancient and profound. Why Welty uses them to affirm feminine identity and O'Connor to humiliate it—that is another question.

Source: Louise Westling, "Demeter and Kore, Southern Style," in *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 19, Nos. 1-2, November 1984, pp. 101-07.

Adaptations

Victor Nunez produced and directed a film adaptation of "A Circle in the Fire" that was released by Perspective Films in 1976. The film, which shares the story's title, stars Betty Miller, Ingred Schweska, Katherine Miller, Mark Hey, Casey Donovan, and Tom Horkan. It is not widely available.

Topics for Further Study

In the story, Powell and his friends consider the farm a paradise; they much prefer being there to being in the city, where they live. Do you think that this would be true for most thirteen-year-old boys in the twenty-first century? Why or why not?

The boys live in a "development" in Atlanta. It is clear from their descriptions that they live in apartments and that they do not like living there. Research housing in the 1950s. Find out what these urban apartment developments were like and what life was like for the people who lived in them.

Discuss the significance of Mrs. Cope's name. Why do you think O'Connor chose this name for her character? Do any of the other characters' names have particular significance?

O'Connor makes clear that from the time the boys arrive at the farm Mrs. Cope makes one blunder after another. Her actions make the destruction of her farm virtually certain. What should Mrs. Cope have done differently? According to Mrs. Pritchard, there was nothing Mrs. Cope could have done. Do you agree or disagree? Explain what you would have done if you had been in Mrs. Cope's situation.

At the end of the story, Sally Virginia identifies with her mother for the first time, although she recoils when she does so. What do you think is meant by this sentence describing Sally Virginia as she looked at her mother's face: "It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old, and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself"?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Hitchhiking is a common way to travel, especially for poor people in rural areas where public transportation is not available.

Today: Hitchhiking is illegal in many places and is rare even where legal. It is considered dangerous to be either a hitchhiker or a driver who might be willing to give a hitchhiker a ride.

1950s: Fire is the greatest fear for farmers, ranchers, and others who live in rural wooded areas. Out of reach of urban fire departments and water supplies, people can lose their homes, livelihoods, and even their lives as a result of an act of nature such as a lightning strike or an act of human carelessness or meanness.

Today: Residents in wooded rural areas still fear wildfires and arson. Although more resources are available to fight rural fires—such as water dropped from airplanes—fires may still burn out of control and lay waste to vast tracts of land.

1950s: Three teenage boys traveling away from home without an adult is not considered unusual or suspicious.

Today: Three teenage boys traveling away from home without an adult would most likely draw the attention of concerned citizens and law enforcement officials. In some areas, local laws restrict the activities of minors. Parents may even be held legally responsible for criminal acts committed by their children or be charged with negligence if their children are hurt.

What Do I Read Next?

The Complete Stories (1971), by Flannery O'Connor, contains all thirty-one of O'Connor's short stories and has been reprinted more than forty times. The book includes two of her bestknown stories: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

Wise Blood (1952) is one of only two novels O'Connor wrote. It is a piercing satire of humanism in general and American society in particular. The book was made into a film starring and directed by John Huston.

Collected Stories of Eudora Welty (1982) includes all forty-one of Welty's published short stories. Like O'Connor, Welty was a twentiethcentury southern writer and was recognized primarily for her short fiction. Elements of humor and southern gothic style appear in both writers' work, yet their sensibilities were quite different.

Collected Stories of William Faulkner (1950) gathers forty-two stories—far from a complete collection—by the man many consider the best southern writer of the twentieth century and one of the greatest writers of his time. Known for his use of stream-of-consciousness style and symbolism, Faulkner won two Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), by Carson McCullers, is a critically acclaimed novel by a writer who was O'Connor's contemporary and, like O'Connor, a native of Georgia. It is the story of John Singer, a deaf-mute living in a southern mill town in the 1930s.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), by Harper Lee, is the story of eight-year-old Scout and her older brother Jem growing up in the South during the Great Depression. The novel won a Pulitzer Prize.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Flannery O'Connor: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*, Bloom's Major Short Story Writers series, Chelsea House, 1999.

This introduction to O'Connor's short fiction features some of her best-known stories, including "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Bloom includes a biography of the author along with analyses of the stories.

Cash, Jean W., *Flannery O'Connor: A Life*, University of Tennessee Press, 2002.

This recent biography focuses on presenting the facts of O'Connor's life rather than attempting to interpret it. Cash catalogs even minute details of her subject's life, such as what college courses she took.

O'Connor, Flannery, *The Habit of Being*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald, Noonday Press, 1988.

This is a reprint edition of a collection of O'Connor's correspondence that was first published in 1979. Arranged chronologically, the letters take up nearly 600 pages and comprise the closest thing readers have to an autobiography of O'Connor.

Ragen, Brian Abel, *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus: Innocence, Guilt, and Conversion in Flannery O'Connor*, Loyola Press, 1989.

This volume is one scholar's attempt to explain O'Connor's Catholic beliefs and their effects on her work—especially to readers who do not share those beliefs.

Rath, Sura P., and Mary Neff Shaw, eds., *Flannery O'Connor: New Perspectives*, University of Georgia Press, 1996.

This collection of essays by eleven scholars, including the editors, examines O'Connor's short stories and novels from both traditional and contemporary perspectives, including issues such as gender politics and trends in academia and criticism.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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