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Female Agency: Standing Upon the Artificial Leg of Independence

Flannery O'Connor, in her short story "Good Country People," presents female agency as a fragile concept—while it can be established and lived out, it can also easily be undermined by males, as seen in Hulga's characterization and her ideas about the world, in Manley Pointer's character function (especially in relation to Hulga's character and the ways they are similar), and in the ending of the story itself. Female agency is the ability of a woman to act for herself and make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes. Hulga sees herself as completely in control of herself and her future—she has a philosophy degree, she has changed her name, the way she interacts with her mother, her attitude towards Manley Pointer, and even her physical appearance: the way she looks, walks, talks, and dresses—she is confident, almost cocky, in her sense of assurance in her agency. Manley Pointer's character serves as Hulga's undoing—she thinks she knows exactly who he is and how she can be in control of him, but in the end of the story (when Manley takes Hulga's glasses, leg, independence, and dignity) it becomes clear that Manley, in fact, is the one in control. He is the one with more worldly experience, the one with the ability to put on a fake personality to manipulate others to do what he wants, and the one who can walk away from a situation—in this case both literally and figuratively—without guilt. It is the combination of these three things: Hulga's characterization, Manley's character (especially as it mirrors and undermines her own), and the culmination of all the events of the story, that strip Hulga of her agency in a way that is disturbing, not just to the reader but to Hulga herself.

Notable in her drive to create visible independence is Hulga's name change from "Joy" to "Hulga." The text reads, "Her name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home, she had had it legally changed. Mrs. Hopewell [Hulga's mother] was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language...Her legal name was Hulga" (274). Hulga's mother is deeply disappointed by her name change. The name Hulga is compared to "the broad blank hull of a battleship" and an "ugly sweating Vulcan," further underscoring how deeply undesirable the name makes Hulga in the eyes of others. But Hulga's decision to

change her name is one that helps her become her own person. Her mother names her “Joy,” which is a name that reflects her Christian values and is a trait that someone can possess. By changing her name, Hulga is further underscoring the fact that she does not share the same values as her mother—so much so that her very name should not reflect that. She chooses her name, and in doing so she chooses her identity as well. She is in control of what she calls herself and what other people call her.

This can also be seen in Manley’s character—his name is one that he chooses for himself as well. With each new house that he comes to he chooses a new name, as he tells Hulga as he leaves her behind in the barn—“And you needn’t think you’ll catch me because Pointer ain’t really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don’t stay nowhere long” (291). While Manley’s identity is, in many ways, impermanent in that he changes it with every house he visits, it is still something that he crafts for himself. He gets to choose the persona he puts on, and in that he crafts the kind of identity he wants to have.

Alongside this, then, Hulga’s philosophy degree further emphasizes her drive to create her own personhood. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy, which “left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, “My daughter is a nurse,” or “My daughter is a schoolteacher,” or even, “My daughter is a chemical engineer.” You could not say, “My daughter is a philosopher.” That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans” (276). Her mother disapproves of her choice of profession and educational direction, so this proves to be yet another way that Hulga has created her own identity.

Hulga’s identity is also manifested in her attitude towards others around her. This attitude—influenced by her education and her view of herself—she holds towards her mother and towards Manley Pointer is indicative of her holding onto this world view that she thinks is unique to her. It circles back to her desire to have an established sense of agency within herself. Towards her mom, Hulga is superior and disrespectful: “To her own mother she had said—without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full— “Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!” she had cried” (276). She addresses her mother as “Woman!”, she demeans her—accusing her mother of not being able to know herself, especially in comparison to Hulga—and she shows that she thinks she can see who her mother is better than her mother can. Hulga believes that she is better than her mother—in terms of both intelligence and

introspection. She thinks that, because of her education and abilities, she can serve as a sort of savior for her mother.

When Manley enters the story, he sits down to dinner with Hulga and her mother. The story reads: “[Hulga] had given him one look on being introduced to him and then throughout the meal had not glanced at him again. He had addressed several remarks to her, which she had pretended not to hear” (280). Just as Hulga is outright rude to her mother, she is also cold towards Manley when he first enters their lives. Even as she begins to warm up to him, it is clear that she views herself as superior and in charge of him. After they briefly interact as Manley leaves her house after the first time he meets them, Hulga has a dream that she seduces him. “She imagined...that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind...that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life” (284). Hulga views herself as Manley’s savior—just as she does with her mother—and thinks that she is a step above him because of her knowledge and ‘understanding of the world.’ Hulga feels so secure in her knowledge and her control of herself that she is comfortable entering into a headspace that allows her to feel superior to those around her. She thinks that she has people pegged—that she knows exactly how to see people for who they are, and she thinks she knows what to expect from them and how to control them because of that.

Manley has the same skill as Hulga—he can look at a person standing before him and see exactly how to manipulate them. The reader can see how he walks into the Hopewell’s life and immediately gains control—he appeals to Mrs. Hopewell through his attitude towards religion, the way he speaks, and his claim to have the same heart condition as Hulga. When he talks to Hulga he tells her that she is smart and almost ‘plays dumb’ so that she thinks she is smarter than him. By the end of the story it becomes clear that, despite his lack of education (especially in comparison to Hulga), he is the one who is smarter and more able to be in control of another person.

Finally, her physical appearance—both the aspects that are in and out of her control—is a final aspect of Hulga’s character that secures her feeling of agency, as well as provides a reflection of her worldview. Her leg, shot off in a hunting accident when she was young, is artificial. Her walk is intentionally loud and clunky-sounding, and Hulga’s mother believes she walks this way on purpose: “When Hulga stumped into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise, but she made it—Mrs. Hopewell was certain—because it was ugly-

sounding), she glanced at them and did not speak” (275). While the fact that she has an artificial limb is out of her control, Hulga’s unpleasant attitude and her purposefully loud and ‘ugly-sounding’ walk are both part of the intentional air of unpleasantness that Hulga works hard to maintain for those around her to see, especially for her mother to see. Hulga wants her mother to know that she has no control over her—with every step she takes, literally, she is putting distance between her mother and herself, solidifying her independence and continuing her own sense of agency and control over herself.

Another example of how Hulga’s control over her appearance allows her to put on a certain façade can be seen in her clothing. Hulga wears glasses and walks “about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it” (276). When she leaves to meet Manley for their “picnic,” she wears “a pair of slacks and a dirty white shirt, and as an afterthought, she had put some Vapex on the collar of it since she did not own any perfume” (284). Through her choice of clothing, Hulga is putting on a certain appearance for those around her to see. She is shaping how the people around her see her, and this is something that she is in control of. She is able to choose each morning what clothing she puts on her person, and in making that choice it is not assumption to feel that she is fully aware of the appearance she is putting on for people to see.

When Hulga puts Vapex on her collar and changes her clothes before she goes out to meet Manley, she is trying to put into action what she sees as her acting on her sexuality. This is another part of her that she thinks that she is in control of—in fact, she sees herself as so agent over her sexuality that she thinks that she is seducing Manley, though the reader quickly realizes that Manley is the one who has seduced her. Manley takes what Hulga thinks of herself—that she is intelligent and able to be in control of him—and uses it to seduce her.

Many of the traits that Hulga sees as making her independent and agent over herself are mirrored in Manley, and they are more effectively utilized by him. He is able to ‘trick’ her into giving up her leg, her glasses, and ultimately her independence. The way that the reader can see how similar the two are makes it all the more striking that Hulga’s entire system of agency is subverted so fully, in a way that violates her.

It is apparent then, how Hulga’s characterization—her philosophy degree, her name change, her attitude towards those in her life, and her physical appearance--plays a large role in solidifying Hulga’s assumption within herself that she is the one in control of her life. She believes that she controls how other people see her, her career path, and her treatment of others. She is so deeply caught up in how she believes herself to be in control of her own

life and person that she fails to see that others are actually in control of her, despite what she thinks about herself, which is especially seen in Manley Pointer's character function in relation to Hulga.

Manley Pointer is able to put on a certain *air*—of being 'a good country boy'—and is successful in making Hulga feel that she knows exactly who he is and how she is able to have control of a situation that involves the two of them. But he isn't what Hulga expects him to be. He is able to put on a fake personality in order to manipulate others to do what he wants, and he is able to walk away from such a manipulation without guilt or remorse. The reader can see Manley subverting Hulga's expectations of him and proving himself to be the manipulator, rather than the manipulate-ee that Hulga sees him as.

When Manley first enters the story, he is the very picture of what a young Christian boy should be. He is a travelling Bible salesman, "a tall gaunt hatless youth" who speaks in "a cheerful voice" (277). He tells Mrs. Hopewell all about his life, claiming to have the same heart condition as Hulga. He says that "he wanted to become a missionary because he thought that was the way you could do most for people. 'He who loseth his life shall find it,' he said simply, and he was so sincere, so genuine and earnest that Mrs. Hopewell would not for the world have smiled" (280). Manley successfully creates a personality that he knows will appeal to Mrs. Hopewell's Christian sensibilities, and that personality is different from the flirtatious persona he puts on when he is around Hulga. And Hulga buys into this false persona just as much as Mrs. Hopewell does, despite the fact that Hulga believes it would be impossible for her to do so. She chooses to go to the barn with him, chooses to let him kiss her and take off her leg—because she thinks she knows who he is based on the personality he has shown her. He seduces her before she even begins to think that she could possibly seduce him.

It is because of the personalities he shows, both to Mrs. Hopewell and to Hulga, that Hulga thinks that she is able to safely make assumptions about who he is. She thinks that he is a stupid, flirty, country boy that she would easily be able to 'seduce,' and she sets out to do just that (284). Hulga, just like Manley, also puts on a fake appearance that she thinks will be alluring to Manley. She changes her clothes—from the cowboy sweatshirt into a "dirty white" one, and she rubs Vapex on the collar of her shirt as though it is perfume. She thinks that, in some way, she is making herself more desirable to Manley, so that she can seduce him all the more easily. However, it becomes clear that Manley was the one putting on the fake personality all along when he steals her glasses and her leg, leaving her behind in the loft of the barn, completely shaken and unable to make her way back home. When they go

up into the loft of the barn, he kisses her, and she eventually allows him to remove her prosthesis. When he asks, she is shaken at first, but then “decide[s] that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her... [when she agrees to let him take her leg off] It was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his” (289).

Hulga giving up her leg to Manley shows that she is, in fact, the one surrendering to him. Up until this point she has believed herself impervious to his attentions and saw herself as in control of the situation, but there is a shift in this moment where Hulga decides to trust Manley. It is at this point where Hulga is no longer completely agent over herself. Her surrender is a literal one, a physical relinquishing of her leg to Manley, but also an emotional one, where she lets him have control of the moment.

Hulga’s attachment to her leg is symbolic of her attachment to her agency and power. It is one of the things that she is completely in control of. She never lets anyone touch it but her (288), and “[takes] care of it as someone else would his soul” (288). In his book, *Flannery O’Connor, Hermit Novelist* Richard Giannone asserts that: “The evil forces in...“Good Country People” derive their power from their female victims’ prideful attachment. The women cling to their property in the belief that it can confer security...the heroine of “Good Country People” gains her status through her mind” (23). Giannone is asserting that O’Connor crafts female characters who find their security and power in being attached to something—literally, in Hulga’s case, her leg—but also in her belief that she is in control: she finds security in her agency. Her attachment to her leg, both physically and mentally/emotionally, is deconstructed all the more in that her leg is detachable. The fact that she puts so much stock in a part of herself that is removable shows just how fragile her sense of security in her agency and control is to begin with.

Manley differs from Hulga, as well, in that he is able to walk away from the situation that he put them both in (in the barn) without guilt. He grabs her leg and her glasses, throwing the leg into his suitcase (he still has her glasses in his pocket from the beginning of their barn encounter when he took them off), and flees, telling Hulga that he has done this to a number of women before—“I’ve gotten a lot of interesting things,’ he said. ‘One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way...And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga’ he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, ‘you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!’” (291). In one swift motion and with just a few short sentences, Manley’s plan to strip Hulga of her sense of self comes to a head and she realizes

that he's been doing it all along. He tells her she is not intelligent, he's taken pieces of her property—literally parts of her—that she needs to get through everyday life, and he dismantles her entire belief system. She asks him, “Aren't you...aren't you just good country people?” (290). At the climax of the story it becomes clear that Manley is not the simple country boy Hulga assumes him to be and she realizes that she has given herself up to him—both her body and her mind—and it is in that surrender that her agency is taken from her. The way that this agency is taken from her—in a moment where she trusts the person doing the taking—is deeply disturbing.

Hulga's leg is something that is a private part of herself. When Manley is 'seducing' her—they have kissed a little bit and are lying close to one another—he asks Hulga to reveal her leg to him.

He leaned over and put his lips to her ear. 'Show me where your wooden leg joins on,' he whispered. The girl uttered a sharp little cry and her face instantly drained of color...she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away (288).

The way that she goes through with taking her leg off for Manley then letting him take it off himself creates a feeling in the reader of being privy to an almost-sexual encounter between the two characters. There is nothing definitively provocative about it, but the way that she gives up authority of her artificial leg to Manley is a clear indication of Hulga willingly giving a private part of herself away—there is a very clear sense of intimacy in that act for her. In revealing that to him—in letting him touch her, especially where her leg ends and her prosthesis begins, she is giving up a sort of virginity that she has held onto by not letting others deal with her leg—largely, this is an act of trust. She says, “Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him” (289). Manley betrays that trust when he throws her leg into his suitcase and runs away from her with it. When she realizes that something feels wrong about the situation she is in with him, she speaks to him pleadingly, then with full on panic—“Give me my leg' she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily...‘You're a Christian!’ she hissed. ‘You're a fine Christian!’” (290). She realizes that she is without her leg and can no longer trust in the character she assumed of Manley, and she panics. This realization—this moment of realizing the truth—that Manley isn't what she thought he was can also be seen when he takes her glasses from her.

Hulga wears glasses, something that Manley initially tells her that he likes: “‘I like girls that wear glasses,’ he said” (284). When their interaction in the barn begins, one of the first things he does is take her glasses off—“When

her glasses got in his way, he took them off of her and slipped them into his pocket” (287). Hulga literally uses her glasses to see—they make the world around her clearer. When Manley takes her glasses off, he is literally removing some of her sight from her, but he does so on both a literal and metaphorical level. He literally takes away the device she uses to help her navigate the world, but at the same time he removes her glasses early on in his ‘seduction,’ and essentially blinds her—literally and figuratively—to his true character. This is notable not just because he takes her glasses without asking, but also because she does not object when he does so, as she doesn’t realize that not having her sight could be a bad thing—she is clearly trusting him.

In her decision (arguably both a conscious one and an unconscious one) to trust Manley, Hulga is giving up her independence. In allowing herself to succumb to him—even with all the education she has attained and worldly knowledge she thinks she has—Hulga is surrendering her independence and singularity. When she allows Manley to take off her leg O’Conner writes that “it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his” (289). Hulga is completely aware that she is the one choosing to let Manley remove her artificial leg, yet she is unaware of the fact that Manley has manipulated her (through his words, actions, artificial respect and awe) to this point. She allows herself to surrender to him, and in many ways it’s not an unpleasant thing—she is almost reborn in ‘losing her own life and finding it again in his’—in fact, she is not startled by the situation until it is too late.

When Manley jumps up with her glasses and her leg and runs away from her, Hulga is not just startled, she is angry and afraid. He has taken her physical property from her, yes, but has also taken her independence and her dignity—in this, he has dismantled her mindset and subverted her belief system in one short lived physical encounter in a barn. Hulga believes that she is the one seducing him and in control of him, but she is the one who is ultimately seduced. She thinks that she knows exactly who he is—that he is simple, ‘good country people’ like her mother whom she looks down upon—but when he seduces her and runs away, he proves that he was never ‘good country people’ to begin with and shows Hulga that she, in fact, might be the one who is simple and gullible enough to be considered ‘good country people.’ They have effectively exchanged identities here—where Manley was meant to be the gullible one who believes too readily, Hulga is the one who is seduced, and by the boy she thought too simple to have the ability to do so to her. Hulga thinks that she doesn’t believe in anything at all, but Manley’s actions show her that she holds certain beliefs about the world. She believes that her education and even her

physical appearance would make her attractive to Manley, she believes that Christians are supposed to act in a certain way, she believed, until the end of the story, that she could control a situation where she saw herself as superior to the other person. But Manley shows her that she is reliant on a belief system that she has created for herself that is ultimately her undoing.

Hulga's realizations through Manley's actions disturb her deeply—it is as if a rape as occurred. Not in the form of literal sexual assault, but in the form of the dissembling of an adhered-to set of fundamental beliefs about the world. Manley strips Hulga of her agency—both physically and mentally/emotionally—and this is something that is deeply disturbing. It doesn't just cause Hulga to question everything she has always believed in, it also gives the reader pause—how many of his beliefs could be undone/undermined just as Hulga's were? O'Connor intentionally uses an extreme example here, of a woman having her physical autonomy taken from her to illustrate her dependence on herself. This extreme, according to Frederick Asals in his book *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, is part of the power of O'Connor's work:

It seems to me that central to the perceived power of O'Connor's writing is what Henry James called a "rich passion ... for extremes," ... extremes govern not only the matter of her fiction but the form as well, and while the antipodal perspectives introduced are played with and explored, characteristically they are not resolved. Rather than merging, blending, informing one another, they are sustained in a set of vibrant tensions that seem to open ever wider, to strain furiously toward a breaking point (126).

It is in this extreme situation (of a young woman robbed of her prosthetic leg and left behind in a barn, questioning everything that she thought she believed about the world) that the flawed nature of Hulga's philosophy comes to light, yes, but it is also in this extreme example that her very person—her agency—is brought to a breaking point and taken away from her. The things that she believes about herself and philosophy and the world are taken and twisted and handed back to her in a way that leaves her in an unresolved state, just as Asals claims. The story does not resolve itself and the reader is left to sit in the tension of having read this story of a woman's agency being stripped from her in a way that leaves her not just shaken, but also violated—both physically and emotionally.

O'Connor's "Good Country People" is a striking story that illustrates the fragility of female agency. While agency can be established as Hulga establishes it (in her profession, her clothing, her mindset, her behavior), it can also easily be undermined (swiftly, with the toss of an artificial leg into a suitcase and a rapid descent down a ladder,

like Manley Pointer), and often it is undermined in a way that is not just demeaning but disturbing. The way that Hulga's agency is taken from her doesn't just disturb the reader, it also disturbs Hulga. While it is a necessary revelation for Hulga (to realize that she is not as knowledgeable about the world as she thinks she is), it is also a deeply disturbing breakdown of her very person—she is no longer in control of herself. She has submitted to trust in a person that she thinks she understands completely. Ultimately, she is left behind to face the reality that she has no real understanding of the world. The sense of agency that is so clear in Hulga at the beginning of the story is broken down in just nineteen and a half pages. This locus of control that Hulga perceived within herself is taken from her, and she comes to realize that her independence—her mindset, her beliefs, even her very person—is no more her own than the artificial limb that was taken from her and carried away in a suitcase like a spoil of war.

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