

Flannery O'Connor's New York Stories: "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day"

Yoshie SAKAMOTO

Cyber University

サイバー大学 IT 総合学部・准教授

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor, one of the most important writers of the 20th century American South, began and ended her literary career by describing a Southerner in New York, the largest US city in the North. Her first short story "The Geranium" was published in 1946. She continued to revise the story after that, and in 1964, just before her death, completed "Judgement Day."

This paper examines what motivated the author to revise her first story all through her life as a writer, focusing on the characterizations and the depictions of racial issues. Through the scrutiny of similarities and differences between the two stories, we will understand O'Connor's scope in dealing with racial issues becomes wider. That is, unlike her first story, "Judgement Day" deals with the uncontrollable white-supremacist paradigm by connecting the racial tensions in the South and the North. Moreover, the story describes the moment when the two main characters face the racial reality through their involvement in the paradigm.

Keyword: American literature, female writer, Flannery O'Connor, race

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), one of the most important writers of the 20th century American South, had a rather short literary career that only lasted for around 20 years, as she was suffering from the chronic disease lupus. While her works are often set in the rural or urban South and unfold there, it can be said that her career as a writer began and ended by describing a Southerner in New York, the largest US city in the North. Her first short story "The Geranium" was published in 1946, when O'Connor was still a graduate student in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She continued to revise the story after that, and in 1964, just before her death, completed "Judgement Day."

When comparing the two stories, in which the circumstances of the protagonists are almost the same, we cannot help but notice the astonishing differences between

原稿受付日：2008年12月2日

原稿受理日：2009年2月13日

the characterizations of the major figures, including the protagonists.

I will first refer to some earlier research examining the comparisons and contrasts between "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day," and highlight my points in this paper. After that, this paper will begin discussing the two stories. It will deal with the elements that these stories share in common: descriptions of city life in New York. Then, it will shift focus to the differences between the two stories, especially the characterizations and the depictions of racial issues. Through such an examination, I would like to reveal what motivated the author to revise the former story, and how she resolved the unsettled problems in the final version.

1. Earlier Research

Among the research concerning O'Connor's racial viewpoint, it is necessary to refer to some studies that attach importance to the fact that the author had continued to revise "The Geranium" all through her literary career until she finished "Judgement Day." Miles Orvell notes the endings of these stories, and how O'Connor succeeds in representing the redemptive vision in the later version, not in the former one. This demonstrates the change in her style when she describes redemption.¹ Akio Hattori also focuses on the endings, considering that the author transforms the significance of "home," that the protagonists of the pieces long to return to, from an actual region on the map into somewhere which lies far beyond human society and enables people to be completely emancipated.² A Southern black writer Alice Walker chiefly discusses the changes in the characterizations of African American figures in the two stories.³

Particularly, Ralph C. Wood's research is very inspiring.⁴ His focus is on the traditional Southern manners that O'Connor continued to describe. According to him, the manners are crucial in the O'Connor's fictional world, because they are the only factors that enable humans to have mutual charity towards each other. Moreover, the mutual charity is the prerequisite for redemption at the ending of her stories. Therefore, he concludes that O'Connor's motivation to revise her debut short story "had less to do with her changing racial views than with the false idiom that both the black and white characters use, with the fake manners that characterize their actions, and thus with the deep untruthfulness of the story."⁵ Here it seems to be reasonable to ask how O'Connor's racial views change between "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day." The purpose of this paper is to examine the change of the author's racial views by reading carefully the characterizations of the central figures, both black and white, and the relationships between them.

2. Outline: "The Geranium"

Old Dudley moves from a rural area of the American South to New York in order to live with his daughter, who decides to take care of him out of a sense of duty, rather than affection. Although he is first excited with curiosity, he now feels isolated and confined within his daughter's cheap apartment, an environment that he finds totally alien. The only aspect of his current life that comforts him is the potted geranium placed at the window of another apartment across the alley – one that looks just like his daughter's. This geranium pot reminds him of his good days back in the South.

In the South, Dudley attracted respect from an African American couple who worked in the boarding house where he resided. He was particularly pleased about his relationship with Rabie, a male caretaker, because Rabie always made an effort to treat Dudley properly as a white man, and never threatened his racist and white-supremacist belief.

One day, an incident that would have been incredible in his former environment occurs in the life of the old man. An African American who is not a servant accompanying a white family moves into the apartment next to Dudley's. This neighbor tries to communicate with the old man politely, but without showing any racial obsequence. Dudley is greatly shocked by the neighbor's attitude and seeks the geranium pot for comfort; however, he finds that the pot has fallen from the window and lies shattered on the ground.

3. Outline: "Judgement Day"

In this story, too, the protagonist is a racist old man from the South named Tanner. He has also moved to his daughter's New York apartment. Like Dudley, Tanner yearns for his life in the South and feels almost suffocated in the urban environment. The reason for Tanner's move, however, is more serious than Dudley's, which suggests the fact that Tanner's former life in the South cannot have been entirely pleasant.

Tanner was a supervisor of workers of African origin in a lumber mill. The relationship between the white supervisor and the black workers was one characterized by tension and potential violence. Later, an African American doctor buys Tanner's property, and offers Tanner to let him continue to stay on the property if he is willing to bootleg for him. Old Tanner refuses the offer, and in the end, he is

forced to evacuate his house and land. However, Tanner was also comfortable with his life in the South. In particular, he deeply cherished his relationship with Coleman, an African American servant. Coleman became loyal to Tanner after Tanner convinced him that the old man is white and is hence entitled to supremacy over the black man.

Therefore, when Tanner sees an African American neighbor, he tries to befriend him in the way that would flatter Coleman. However, Tanner's patronizing racist attitude infuriates the neighbor, who pushes him away, and in the end, fatally assaults him.

4. What the Two Stories Have in Common

As we have seen in the outlines, both the old protagonists of these two stories are faced with the same circumstances: both of them have left their native South and moved to a totally unfamiliar large city in the North, New York City.

The lives that the two old men lead in New York are also described in the same manner. Considering the lifestyle in a large city, we should pay attention to one particular aspect that O'Connor depicts. The inhabitants of the large city are required to follow a rule: don't meddle with others.

In "The Geranium," we come across residents who willingly obey this rule more often. The woman wearing an apron, whom old Dudley sees while running an errand for his daughter, is just "looking at him cold in the face," as if she is trying to prevent him from speaking to her, and then goes past him without saying a word.⁵ The boy who is told by his mother to hand Dudley a shirt pattern also "didn't [doesn't] say anything" (Geranium 11). In addition, the rule is again embodied in the ending of the story. The man at the window across the alley, where the geranium pot is usually placed, labels Dudley as a prier.

"I seen you before," the man said. "I seen you settin' in that old chair every day, starin' out the window, looking in my apartment. What I do in my apartment is my business, see? I don't like people looking at what I do." (Geranium 14)

This statement shows a definite contradiction between the man's words and actions. How does he know that old Dudley looks out the window? The answer is simple: it is he who tries to pry into the apartment across the alley. We can understand that city life motivates residents to communicate in the warped manner that they do: they are interested in others only when they keep an eye on and prevent others from

interfering in their own lives.

On the other hand, the rule “don’t meddle with others” has more profoundly affected the city residents in “Judgement Day” – so much so that they even try to withdraw into themselves. Tanner’s daughter has acquired the habit of conversing with herself, and obviously wants nobody to interrupt her conversations. Besides, she asks her father to “look at the TV”, and not out the window.

“The trouble with you [Tanner] is,” she said, “you sit in front of that window all the time where there’s nothing to look out at. [...] If you would let me pull your chair around to look at the TV, you would quit thinking about morbid stuff, death and hell and judgement. My Lord.”⁶

We should note the fact that she says “look at the TV,” not “watch TV.” She might unconsciously understand that what really matters is not the programs you see on TV, but withdrawing into yourself without being interested in the outside world.

The residents described in the two stories have to most carefully conform to the rule regarding communication when they deal with racial issues. The two daughters tell their fathers not to meddle with the African American neighbors who have moved in next door.

“And you tend to your own business,” she added. “Don’t have anything to do with him [African American neighbor].” (Geranium 9)

“If you have to live next to them [African American neighbors], just you mind your business and they’ll mind theirs. That’s the way people were meant to get along in this world. Everybody can get along if they just mind their business. Live and let live.” (Judgement 543)

The fathers’ responses are different. Dudley is shocked because white and black residents are treated equally in the apartment building; moreover, he hates the thought of communicating with his African American neighbor as an equal. In contrast, Tanner continues to pursue his friendship with his neighbor because he believes that he knows how to handle people of African origin very well.

5. What Differentiates the Two Stories

As we have seen above, it is how the old racist protagonists and their African

American neighbors behave under the city rule for prohibiting or distorting its residents' desire for communication that distinguishes "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day." That is, this is the point that continued to dissatisfy O'Connor and motivated her to repeatedly revise the former story.

5.1 The Black Neighbor Free from the City Rule in "The Geranium"

To begin with, we should notice the African American neighbor's clothes in "The Geranium." According to the author's description of their clothes, the white residents of the apartment building where Dudley lives are indicative of a frugal life: "a fat woman with an apron on" and "a man in his undershirt" (Geranium 10, 13). In stark contrast, the African American newcomer is dressed very fashionably.

He [the African American neighbor] had on a gray, pin-stripe suit and a tan tie. His collar was stiff and white and made a clear-cut line next to his neck. His shoes were shiny-tan – they matched his tie and his skin. (Geranium 8)

His appearance is primarily characterized as being completely distinct within the setting of this story.

Further, his behavior is also distinct when compared with that of the other white residents, who are undoubtedly obedient to the city rule. As we have examined above, O'Connor describes the white residents as people who refuse to communicate with others, or communicate only in order to tell others not to meddle in their lives. Although Dudley has not yet adjusted to the rule, his racist belief makes him abhor communicating with the African American neighbor as an equal. However, the neighbor friendly and amiably chats with Dudley about guns and hunting while he helps Dudley walk up the stairs. Although Alice Walker regards the African American couple in this story as "being passive, self-effacing people,"⁷ the characterization of the African American neighbor includes certain aspects that cannot be described as passivity or modesty. First, it is he who talks and offers help to Dudley. Second, although he makes polite conversation, to some extent, he is also mocking the ignorance and strangeness of the senile redneck.

A squeak on the staircase made him [Dudley] wheel around – his arms still holding the invisible gun. The nigger was clipping up the steps toward him, an amused smile stretching his trimmed mustache. [...] The nigger's lips were pulled down like he was trying to keep from laughing. [...]

"What are you hunting, old-timer?" The Negro asked in a voice that

sounded like a nigger's laugh and a white man's sneer.

Old Dudley felt like a child with a pop-pistol. His mouth was open and his tongue was rigid in the middle of it. [...]

They went right up to Old Dudley's door. Then the nigger asked, "You from around here?"

Old Dudley shook his head, looking at the door. He hadn't looked at the nigger yet. All the way up the stairs, he hadn't looked at the nigger. "Well," the nigger said, "it's a swell place—once you get used to it." He patted Old Dudley on the back and went into his own apartment. (Geranium 12-13)

Certainly, the African American neighbor shocks and humiliates Dudley—a rather stark contrast from Raibe, an African American caretaker in the South who served Dudley in a "passive and self-effacing" manner, and never threatened his white-supremacist belief.

When Raibe had to be careful to flatter Dudley, how can the African American neighbor deal with him so casually, ignoring the racist old man's shock and hostility toward him? The answer might be implied in the fact that the neighbor has a voice that "sounded like a nigger's laugh and a white man's sneer." O'Connor's characterization of him is thus meant to allow him to transcend racial boundaries. We can also identify this ability to transcend racial boundaries in his behavior under the city rule. Unlike the white residents in the story, the African American character is completely free from the negative effect on the desire for communication that the city rule imposes.

The importance of this characterization is obvious: by describing an African American character who is completely unaffected by the negative influence, O'Connor shows how significantly the white characters' ability to face the racial reality is undermined. For example, although Dudley's daughter is vaguely conscious of the racial tension brought about by community life with African American neighbors, she never attempts to face it. Instead, she turns a blind eye to it, as the city rule requires her to. Thus, the city rule that prevents people from taking an interest in others enables them to stop thinking about racial issues.

We could regard this representation of African American characters by O'Connor as insightful, especially when we examine representations by other writers throughout the history of American literature. However, even if O'Connor believed that the racial circumstances in the South were rather different from those in the North⁸, the African American character who easily transgresses the city rule appears to be a rather problematic one. Can such characterization be said to reflect the racial

reality in the large city of the North? Can we conclude that there are two completely different racial realities in the South, where people of African origin passively accept the white-supremacist hierarchy, and in the North, where these people are totally free from racial boundaries and the rule related to city life?

It is these questions that might have driven O'Connor to continue revising "The Geranium." Therefore, in the final version that was completed after nearly 20 years, "Judgement Day," the racial realities between the two regions are closely connected with each other, and much more convincing. In accordance with this change, the characterization of the two protagonists is also considerably revised: "rage" becomes the main characteristic of the African American neighbor, reflecting the social background of the Civil Rights Movement⁹, and the old man's racist white-supremacist belief becomes much more complicated and unyielding.

5.2 The Black Neighbor Infuriated by Racist Patronization in "*Judgement Day*"

Unlike the earlier story, in "Judgement Day," old Tanner persistently tries to befriend the neighbor. Because he believes that he has learned how to deal with African American people back in the South, he addresses the neighbor as "preacher," attempting to flatter him. However, Tanner is completely taken aback by the neighbor's response: as the neighbor is an actor, not a preacher, he is infuriated by Tanner's greeting, which he considers to be insulting.

"I don't take no crap," he whispered, "off no wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you." [...] "And I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God."

The old man felt his heart inside him hard and tough as an oak knot. "And you ain't black," he said. "And I ain't white!" (Judgement 545)

Some critics point out the importance of this scene. As per Wood's interpretation, Tanner "answers the actor's brazen unbelief with his own unashamed testimony that the God of Jesus Christ is as real as skin color."⁹ Like him, Carter W. Martin also maintains that Tanner "expresses an equation between the mystery of man's identity and the mystery of God's being."¹⁰ Certainly, for Tanner, who is one of the typical fanatical Christians found in O'Connor's fictional world, it is self-evident that the God exists and that He assures him of his identity as white. In this story, however, another paradigm has been inserted; under it, Tanner can easily be regarded as non-white.

5.3 The Racial Hierarchy Controlling White People as Well as Black People

To examine the paradigm, we should return to the past of the South. The scene below is the one where Tanner and his servant Coleman meet for the first time. Tanner has a penknife with him because he commands his African American workers to obey his orders by threatening to stab them. Seeing a big African American man wandering around the workplace, Tanner approaches him.

His [Tanner's] own penknife moved, directed solely by some intruding intelligence that worked in his hands. He had no idea what he was carving, but when he reached the Negro, he had already made two holes the size of half dollars in the piece of bark.

The Negro's gaze fell on his hands and was held. His jaw slackened. His eyes did not move from the knife tearing recklessly around the bark. He watched as if he saw an invisible power working on the wood.

He looked himself then and, astonished, saw the connected rims of a pair of spectacles. (Judgement 538)

Attaching pieces of wire to the connected rims that he has been caring out, Tanner makes the African American wear the glasses and asks him the following question:

"What you see through those glasses?"

"See a man."

[...]

"Is he white or black?"

"He white!" the Negro said as if only at that moment was his vision sufficiently improved to detect it. [...]

"Well, you treat him like he was white," Tanner said. (Judgement 539)

As Jill Peláez Baumgaertner points out, Tanner tries to "establish himself as sign-giver" in order to "maintain control," and then "succeeded [succeeds] in forcing him [Coleman] to define the parameters of their relationship."¹¹ Coleman can recognize Tanner as a white man only by wearing the "spectacles" made by Tanner. Moreover, he learns to act loyal to the old man by being urged to treat him "like he was white." Obviously, what Coleman accepts at this moment is white supremacy. However, we should notice a more important point in these quotations: not only Coleman but also Tanner fails to understand what Tanner has been making. Tanner does not intend

to make glasses; however, he ends up carving them because of the “intruding intelligence.” This description implies that even white people cannot control the white-supremacist paradigm; rather, like people of African origin, they are only factors in it. In this sense, Coleman is the very “negative image of himself [Tanner], as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot” (Judgement 538–539). In fact, although Tanner refused to work for an African American dentist and decided to come to New York, he now thinks it is much better to become “a nigger’s white nigger” than to stay in the city.

The paradigm controls, but is not controlled by, either white people or black people in the way it classifies people using racial attributes as metaphors. This so-called uncontrollable white supremacy explains the African American neighbor’s rage. It is also possible to consider him as a Civil Rights activist, as Jean W. Cash does.¹² As long as the paradigm prevails in the society, the neighbor’s fight for equality for the black race will be in vain. Even if he succeeds in his mission, he will be counted as one of the “black whites.” This paradigm is difficult to destroy because it firmly maintains the main framework of white supremacy and colored inferiority, and classifies exceptional cases into the sub-framework: the “white blacks” and the “black whites.” Through Tanner, the African American neighbor recognizes the unconscious agent that is maintaining the uncontrollable white-supremacist paradigm.

Paradoxically, however, we cannot overlook the significant role that Tanner plays. No other white resident of the apartment building might succeed in communicating with the African American actor. Only Tanner succeeds, even though the method of communication is ultimately violent. O’Connor explains the reason she uses violence in the following manner: “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace.”¹³ It is obvious that Tanner can receive God’s grace through the violence by the African American neighbor, because his body is sent to his native South, as he wished, after it was once buried in a cemetery in New York. In addition, the neighbor can also face the racial reality because of Tanner, who reveals to him the existence of the uncontrollable and prevailing white-supremacist paradigm.

Conclusion

O’Connor’s portrayal in both “The Geranium” and “Judgement Day” shows that people are deeply affected by the rule of city life, which requires residents to be indifferent toward others, and cannot face reality, especially the racial reality.

Although the former story contains an African American character who is

totally free from the effects of the rule imposed on other people, O'Connor's frustration with the characterization of this figure is one of the major points that motivated the author to revise this piece repeatedly. As a result of the revision that occurred over an extended period, the two major characters, a white racist old man and his African American neighbor, have more complicated and convincing personalities. O'Connor's scope in dealing with racial issues also becomes wider; therefore, "Judgement Day" deals with the uncontrollable white-supremacist paradigm by connecting the racial tensions in the South and the North. Moreover, the story describes the moment when the two characters face the racial reality through their involvement in the paradigm.

Notes

- 1 Miles Orvell, "Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Temple UP, 1972, 180-188.
- 2 Akio Hattori, 'Flannery O'Connor's Literary Works: The Development of "The Geranium" into "An Exile in the East" and "Judgement Day,"' "Insight," vol. 21, English Linguistic and Literary Society of Norte Dame University, 1989, 25-41.
- 3 Alice Walker, 'Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor,' "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose," Women's Press Classic edition, the Women's Press, 2000, 53-54.
- 4 Ralph C. Wood, "Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South," William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, 121-142.
- 5 Ibid., 134.
- 6 Flannery O'Connor, 'The Geranium,' "The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor," The Noonday Press, 1994, 10. Further quotations from this short story will be identified with the abbreviation Geranium and a page number in the parentheses after quoted passages.
- 7 Flannery O'Connor, 'Judgement Day,' "The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor," The Noonday Press, 1994, 541. Further quotations from this short story will be identified with the abbreviation Judgement and a page number in the parentheses after quoted passages.
- 8 Walker, op. cit., 54.
- 9 See O'Connor's letters Maryat Lee on 25 April 1959 and on 21 May 1964. Flannery O'Connor, "Habit of Being," ed. Sally Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979, 329, 580.
- 10 Walker, op. cit., 54.
- 11 Wood, op. cit., 139-140.
- 12 Carter W. Martin, "The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Vanderbilt University Press, 1969, 25.
- 13 Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, "Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring," Revised edition, Cornerstone Press Chicago, 1999, 211.
- 14 Jean W. Cash, "Flannery O'Connor: A Life," The University of Tennessee Press, 2004, 153.
- 15 Flannery O'Connor, "Mystery and Manners," ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, The Noonday Press, 1969, 112.

ニューヨークの南部人

— フラナリー・オコナーの「ゼラニウム」と「審判の日」—

坂本美枝

20世紀アメリカ南部文学を代表する重要な作家のひとりであるフラナリー・オコナーは、「北部の大都会ニューヨークに行った南部人」を描いてその作家としてのキャリアを開始し、その活動の最後期に、再び同じモチーフを使用した。初めての出版作品である「ゼラニウム」は1946年に発表されたが、オコナーはその後この作品の改訂を続け、1964年、死の直前に「審判の日」を完成させた。

本稿では、作家オコナーが生涯にわたりデビュー作の改訂を続けたのはどのような動機によるものか、人物造形と人種問題の描写に焦点をあてて検討していく。上記の2作品における類似と相違を精査することにより、オコナーの人種問題に係わる視点がより広がりを示していることがわかるだろう。「ゼラニウム」では見られなかったが、「審判の日」において作家は、もはや白人層にとっても制御不能なほど強固となった白人至上主義というパラダイムを浮かび上がらせ、アメリカ南部と北部の人種に係わる緊張状況を、切り離すことなく一体のものとして描き出すことに成功している。さらに、そのパラダイムへの関わりをとおして、2人の主要登場人物が人種問題の現実に向き合う瞬間を捉えてもいる。

キーワード：アメリカ文学，女性作家，フラナリー・オコナー，人種