Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” and the Homeric Tradition

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Introduction

The thirty-nine years of Flannery O’Connor’s brief life (1925–1964) yielded two novels and thirty-two short stories. Whereas many analyses of O’Connor’s work have focused on her treatment of fragmented households, her use of the grotesque,¹ her place as a Southern writer, the plight of women living alone, and religion,² scholars have given little attention to the influence of the classical tradition upon her work. Although the adult O’Connor lamented her lack of formal training in the classics and believed


that “such an education is essential for the writer,”³ in 1955, the same year as the publication of “Good Country People,” she wrote to Betty Hester that “the only good things I read when I was a child were the Greek and Roman myths which I got out of a set of child’s encyclopedia called The Book of Knowledge” (98).⁴ Additionally, we know that as early as eighth grade she studied Latin at Peabody High School, “a laboratory school of Georgia State College for Women.”⁵ Her acquaintance with the classics would have deepened after her college years.⁶ In 1949, two years after earning the Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa, O’Connor met Robert Fitzgerald, the now-famous translator of numerous classical works, including both Homeric epics. That same year Fitzgerald invited O’Connor to stay in Connecticut with him and his wife Sally, who was working on O’Connor’s biography until her own death in June 2000. O’Connor accepted Fitzgerald’s invitation and spent a significant amount of time with the Fitzgeralds until returning to her home in Georgia in 1951. She remained close to the Fitzgeralds throughout her life and a number of her letters to them are extant. In a letter to Ben Griffith, dated February 13, 1954, she indicates that she had read Robert Fitzgerald and Dudley Fitts’ translation of Sophocles’ Theban plays and admits doing “a lot of thinking about Oedipus” while “writing the last part of [Wise Blood]” (918). In a letter to the Fitzgeralds dated January 4, 1954, O’Connor expresses gladness that Robert’s translation of the “Odyssey is ahead of schedule” (916).

Although O’Connor’s surviving works and correspondence do not expressly state that she had read either the Odyssey or Iliad, in this paper we argue that her short story “Good Country People,” which she wrote four years after her stay with the Fitzgeralds, shows significant influence from

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, references to O’Connor’s works and writings are taken from Fitzgerald (above, note 1). O’Connor refers here to Arthur Mee and Holland Thompson, eds., The Book of Knowledge: The Children’s Encyclopedia (New York: Grolier Society, 1912).
⁵ Cash (above, note 3), 36.
⁶ For biographical information on O’Connor, see not only Cash (above, note 3) but also Barbara McKenzie, Flannery O’Connor’s Georgia (Athens, GA: U of Georgia Pr, 1980); Harold Fickett and Douglas R. Gilbert, Flannery O’Connor: Images of Grace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 11–35; Fitzgerald (above, note 1), 1237–1256; and Getz (above, note 2), 1–81.
the Homeric epics, especially the ninth book of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, O’Connor’s literary encounter with figures like Homer’s god Hephaestus and the Cyclops Polyphemus may have triggered self-reflection that she integrated into her story’s character of Joy-Hulga Hopewell, a character whom O’Connor herself, in September 1955, admitted was “a projection of herself” (959). Additionally, a Homeric reading of O'Connor’s short story suggests that characteristics and deeds of Odysseus are present in certain characters in “Good Country People.” The author’s engagement with the classical tradition adds a complexity to O’Connor’s story that goes beyond the usual labels applied to her of “Catholic writer” and “Southern writer.”

**Joy-Hulga and Hephaestus**

When O’Connor was fifteen years old, her father died of lupus (February 1, 1941). Ten years later, she herself was diagnosed with the disease, and by the end of 1954 she “is forced to use a cane when walking” (1247). Not many weeks later, in February 1955, O’Connor wrote “Good Country People.” O’Connor’s difficulty in walking is paralleled in this story, where the central figure, a thirty-two-year-old woman named Joy Hopewell is described as “large hulking Joy” (264); Joy has an artificial leg because her natural one “had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten” (266). In addition to the physical similarities between O’Connor and Joy Hopewell, O’Connor’s description of Joy recalls the Greek divinity Hephaestus, the lame craftsman of the gods. According to tradition,

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8 For Joy’s physical afflictions as symbolizing her “emotional, intellectual, and spiritual impairments,” see Kate Oliver, “O’Connor’s ‘Good Country People,’” *Explicator* 62.4 (2004): 234. On her leg as “the embodiment of her secret self,” see Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., *The Art and Vision of Flannery O’Connor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U Pr, 1989), 147. John F. Desmond writes that “[i]n Hulga’s skewed vision . . . the leg as an object has been elevated to the status of an idol” (*Risen Sons: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of* ...
Hephaestus had difficulty walking either because his legs were deformed at birth (Ili. 18.395–397) or because his legs were injured when Zeus, his father, cast him from Olympus after he had taken Hera’s side in a quarrel between Zeus and Hera (Ili. 1.590–594).9 Both Joy and Hephaestus have injuries to their legs at a young age. Although both traditions make another god (Hera or Zeus) the cause of Hephaestus’ injuries, the reader is not told who was responsible for Joy’s injury. One might guess, however, that the injury had been caused by Joy’s father (compare Zeus), whom Joy’s mother “had divorced . . . long ago” (265). Perhaps the injury to Joy and the divorce were related.

The connection between Joy and Hephaestus is strengthened when we learn that Joy had her name legally changed to Hulga (266). As Henry Edmondson astutely points out, “The name ‘Hulga’ is an anagram of the word ‘laugh.’”10 Thus, the laughter that Joy’s mother might have hoped her child would bring to her parents and that a child named Joy would herself enjoy has been rejected and distorted by the girl into a name that signifies how she truly feels about herself. In addition to being an anagram for “laugh,” “Hulga” sounds like “Vulcan,” the Roman name for Hephaestus. O’Connor confirms this connection when she writes that Joy had changed her name to Hulga because she “had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called” (266–267). O’Connor’s description of the “sweating Vulcan” appears to echo Iliad 18.372, where the goddess Thetis, seeking armor for her son Achilles, finds Hephaestus “sweating as he

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9 There is a fall in each case: at Ili. 18.395–397, it is Hephaestus’ mother Hera who contrived his fall from Olympus (μητρὼς ἔμης ἔτοιμην, 396); she, according to Hephaestus, “wanted / to hide me, for being lame” (396–397). Complicating matters, as Timothy Gantz has observed, is the fact that “at no point” in the version of Hephaestus’ fall in Iliad 1 “is it said that Hephaistos became lame because of the fall” (Early Greek Myth [Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1993], 75). It is possible, then, that he was lame at birth in both cases. Weighing the evidence of Apollodorus and the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, Gantz concludes, “Nevertheless, even if Homer did understand these two expulsions as two distinctly separate events, we should probably suppose them in origin variant methods of explaining the same phenomenon: either Hephaistos became lame because he is thrown out of Olympus, or he is thrown out of Olympos because he is lame” (idem). It is, in the end, the fact of Hephaestus’ lameness that matters for our purposes.

turned here and there to his bellows.” O’Connor’s reference to “the goddess” could refer to the goddess Charis, who is Hephaestus’ wife in the *Iliad* (18.382–383) or Aphrodite, whom the *Odyssey* names as Hephaestus’ wife (8.266–270). On the one hand, O’Connor may have had the Iliadic Charis in mind because one of the meanings for the Greek noun *charis* is “joy.” Thus, the given name of O’Connor’s character chooses that she would behave or appear like the Iliadic Charis, but the character prefers the name (Hulga) and behavior of Charis’ husband, Hephaestus/Vulcan. On the other hand, Aphrodite is best known as Hephaestus’ wife, and Gentry rightly points out that Joy-Hulga’s failed attempt to seduce Manley Pointer bears some resemblance to Aphrodite’s failure to commit adultery with Ares without attracting the attention of Hephaestus. In *Odyssey* 8, however, the bard Demodocus relates how Hephaestus caught Aphrodite and Ares *in flagrante dilecto*. Thus, for Gentry, “In her relationship with Manley Pointer, Hulga plays two roles: consciously she is Vulcan, and unconsciously she is the captured Aphrodite.” Although it is possible that O’Connor had in mind the Odyssean story of Hephaestus and Aphrodite, we shall argue that the encounter between Manley Pointer and Joy-Hulga bears greater similarities to the encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops Polyphemus in *Odyssey* 9.

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13 The Aphrodite-Ares parallel seems hampered by the fact that if Manley represents Hephaestus and Joy corresponds to Aphrodite, then we have no correspondent for Ares. Even if one rejects the Aphrodite-Ares scene as having influenced O’Connor, the *Odyssey* provides several other possible influences for the sexual aspect of “Good Country People.” After all, during Odysseus’ return to his native land, he leaves several women in his wake: Nausicaa, Calypso, Circe, and even the Sirens. One may easily find elements of each of these women in Joy-Hulga: her sexual inexperience can be found in Nausikaa, whereas Calypso, Circe, and the Sirens are all powerful female characters who fail to master Odysseus, just as Joy failed to master Manley (despite her belief that she would seduce him). The failure of Joy’s seduction is especially reminiscent of the Odysseus-Circe encounter, where the goddess fails to transform him into an animal (as she had done with several of his comrades) and then, when he draws his sword against her, she invites him into her bed (*Od*. 10.274–347).
Despite the physical challenges shared by O’Connor, Joy-Hulga, and Hephaestus, all three are intelligent and creative. The divine Hephaestus serves as the craftsman for the other gods. In the great ekphrasis of *Iliad* 18, he creates new armor for Achilles, and in that same book we hear not only of wheeled tripods that “of their own motion . . . could wheel into the immortal / gathering, and return to his house: a wonder to look at” (376–377) but also of his servants, “golden, and in appearance like living young women. / There is intelligence in their hearts, and there is speech in them / and strength” (418–420). In *Odyssey* 8, Hephaestus memorably fashions and rigs an invisible snare that catches his wife Aphrodite and her lover Ares. O’Connor’s creativity is evident in her writing, but she also practiced drawing, painting, and cartooning. Although O’Connor held a Master’s degree from the University of Iowa, she bestows upon Joy-Hulga a “Ph.D. in philosophy” (268). Joy-Hulga’s creativity manifests itself, most significantly for our thesis, in the name Hulga, the conception of which “[s]he saw . . . as the name of her highest creative act” (267).

**Joy-Hulga, Manley Pointer, and *Odyssey* 9**

1. *The Cyclops: setting and traditions*

  Although early in “Good Country People” O’Connor connects Joy-Hulga and Hephaestus/Vulcan, later in the story she links Joy-Hulga (and, again, thus herself) with another hulking Homeric figure, the Cyclops Polyphemus. Although physically disfigured, Homer’s Hephaestus appears to live on Olympus with the other gods. In contrast, Polyphemus, despite also being of divine stock—he is the son of Poseidon—lives in a cave, albeit on an island that Homer describes as idyllic (*Od*. 9.108–111). In this land, the Cyclops toils as a shepherd, which has a parallel in “Good Country People,” where Joy-Hulga and her mother live on a farm with a tenant family. At the time O’Connor wrote her short story, she lived with her mother in Georgia, on a dairy farm that was kept functioning by hired laborers.

  In addition to Polyphemus, Joy-Hulga, and O’Connor herself living in agrarian settings, each is also unmarried. As it did in ancient Greece, being unmarried continues to carry something of a social stigma for women living in the southern United States (the stigma was much worse in O’Connor’s day). Moreover, in Greek society a man’s being unmarried would have been similarly unusual and socially suspect (compare especially the titular character of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*). Homer indicates that each male Cyclops was “the law / for his own wife and children” (*Od*. 9.114–115), but the poet makes no mention of Polyphemus having a family.

  Post-Homeric sources do, however, explore the romantic side of Polyphemus. Although O’Connor may not have been aware of Theocritus’
Idyll 11, which presents a Polyphemus singing of his love for the nymph Galatea, O’Connor may have encountered the same story in Ovid’s better-known Metamorphoses (13.750–897). From the perspective of our thesis, it is interesting to note that the post-Homeric tradition not only makes Polyphemus a composer of love poetry, but also a rejected lover. In Ovid, despite Polyphemus’ efforts to win over Galatea with his song, she rejects him in favor of the handsome young Acis, whom the enraged Polyphemus later kills. Perhaps Polyphemus’ failed seduction of Galatea influenced O’Connor’s construction of Joy-Hulga’s failed seduction of Manley Pointer, to which we now turn. For the latter half of O’Connor’s story focuses on a sexually charged encounter between Joy and an itinerant Bible salesman, who gives himself the phallic name Manley Pointer (271). Other scholars have described Pointer as the “embodiment of the devil,” “both child and devil at once,” and “the essence of nihilism itself,” but similarities, as we will see, can also be found between O’Connor’s cunning traveler and Homer’s Odysseus, who wandered the Mediterranean and beyond for ten years following the fall of Troy.

2. Violations of xenia

Like the encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops, the first encounter between Joy and Manley occurs in a context of a begrudging guest-friendship (Gk. xenia). Despite the warnings of Odysseus’ comrades to the contrary (Od. 9.224–230), Odysseus wants to visit the Cyclops to “find out about these people, and learn what they are, / whether they are savage and violent, and without justice, / or hospitable to strangers and


with minds that are godly” (9.174–176). Odysseus finds that the Cyclops is both inhospitable—he eats several of Odysseus’ comrades—and, despite being the son of Poseidon, has an ungodly mind. Just as the encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops takes place at the latter’s dwelling and turns on an extreme lack of hospitality, the first encounter between Joy and Manley also takes place at an inhospitable meal at Joy’s house. Manley comes to the house to sell Bibles, but manages to wheedle a dinner invitation from Mrs. Hopewell, much to Joy’s chagrin: “Get rid of the salt of the earth [Manley] . . . and let’s eat” (271). Despite Joy’s inhospitable nature, Manley is eventually invited to dinner, although “throughout the meal [she] had not glanced at him again,” and she ignored him when “[h]e had addressed several remarks to her” (272).

Although Joy is inhospitable, after dinner Manley encounters Joy at the road to the house and they agree to meet the next morning for a picnic. This time the guest-friendship encounter is voluntary, but still flawed. When Homer’s Cyclops dines in the presence of Odysseus, the monster gives Odysseus no food and makes his meal from Odysseus’ men. In Joy-Hulga’s case, “She didn’t take anything to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic” (276–277). Joy-Hulga does not, of course, exhibit the cannibalistic traits of Homer’s Cyclops, but it is worth noting that earlier in the story she is described as “standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full” and screaming critically at her mother’s failure to “see what you are not” (268). The sloppy eating habits of Joy-Hulga are somewhat reminiscent of the Cyclops’, who, after Odysseus gets him drunk, lies on his back asleep until “the wine gurgled up from his gullet / with gobs of human meat. This was his drunken vomiting” (Od. 9.373–374).

3. Appearances

In addition to the similarities of the failed guest-friendship and the unusual or bizarre eating habits of the Cyclops and Joy-Hulga, both the monster and the woman have a physical appearance that leaves Odysseus and Manley Pointer astonished. At Odyssey 9.190–192, the poet states that the Cyclops “was a monstrous wonder made to behold, not / like a man . . . but more like a wooded / peak of the high mountains.” During Manley’s rendezvous with Joy-Hulga, O’Connor’s description of Manley “gazing at her with open curiosity, with fascination, like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo” (275), seems to have a Homeric quality.

4. Gifts

Besides the metaphoric transformation that O’Connor and Homer apply to both Joy and the Cyclops, we note that Odysseus and Manley do not come to their respective encounters empty-handed. When Odysseus
arrives at the Cyclops’ cave, he brings “a great wineskin” and “provisions / in a bag” (9.212–213). Subsequently, Odysseus uses the wine to intoxicate the Cyclops, which allows the hero to blind the monster. Manley, for his part, carries with him an equally treacherous and deceptive “large black suitcase” (269). When he first arrives at Joy’s house, this suitcase is full of Bibles. When he returns the next day for their date, “still carrying the black valise” (277), it contains only two Bibles, one of which is hollow and conceals a deck of playing cards with erotic pictures, a package of condoms, and “a pocket flask of whiskey” (282).18 Unlike Odysseus, who uses the wine as a tool to allow him to blind the Cyclops, O’Connor chooses a different intoxicant, human sexuality, to blind Joy figuratively.

5. Vision and blindness

Moreover, both Joy and the Cyclops have abnormal vision that devolves into blindness. According to tradition, the Cyclopes had only one eye (the Greek kyklôps means “circle eye”). Ultimately, that eye is destroyed when Odysseus blinds him. Joy has a similar impairment. O’Connor, herself a wearer of glasses, uses epithets, perhaps modeled in the Homeric fashion, to describe her short story’s central character as “the big spectacled Joy-Hulga” (266); she also characterizes her as “bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (268). Even before Manley Pointer’s seduction of Joy, O’Connor writes that Joy had “the look of someone who had achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it” (265). When Pointer seduces her, he further impairs her vision, in Odyssean fashion, by taking her glasses, a fact that “[s]he didn’t realize” (280). Despite Joy’s figurative and almost literal blindness to Manley’s seduction, she, with Cyclopean arrogance, believes she sees everything with perfect clarity: “I’m one of those people who see through to nothing” (280).19 Furthermore, in declaring to Manley her atheistic views, she opines, “We are all damned . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation” (280).20

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18 May (above, note 2), 88, compares Pointer’s “gifts” to those of the biblical magi.

19 For more on nihilism in “Good Country People,” see Muller (above, note 1), 28; Edmondson (above, note 17), 73–90; Brinkmeyer (above, note 8), 145; Wood (above, note 7), 100–118; and Wood (above, note 1), 179–216.

20 For more on sight in “Good Country People,” see Donald E. Hardy, *Narrating Knowledge in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction* (Columbia: U of South Carolina Pr, 2003), 138–139, 141–142.
6. Isolation and ignorance

The Cyclops and Joy are also both isolated from the outside world. Homer describes the Cyclopes as having “no institutions, no meetings for counsels; / rather they make their habitations in caverns hollowed / among the peaks of the high mountains” (9.112–114). When Odysseus tricks the Cyclops, he preys upon the monster’s ignorance of wine: preparing to eat two of Odysseus’ men, the uncivilized Polyphemus guzzles the proffered wine and falls asleep, which allows Odysseus and his surviving comrades to blind him by driving a huge beam of olive wood into his eye. As for Joy, she exhibits a similar inexperience with the outside world: “She [Mrs. Hopewell] thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times” (266). During Joy’s encounter with Manley Pointer, we learn that “[s]he had never been kissed before” (278).

7. Atheism

In addition to Polyphemus and Joy’s ignorance of the outside world, both show scorn for the divine. At Odyssey 9.269–271, Odysseus cautions the Cyclops about treating him and his comrades disrespectfully: “. . . respect the gods. . . . We are your suppliants, / and Zeus the guest god, who stands behind all strangers with honors / due them, avenges any wrong toward strangers and suppliants.” At 9.275–277, the Cyclops retorts that “The Cyclopes do not concern themselves over Zeus of the aegis, / nor any of the rest of the blessed gods, since we are far better / than they…” O’Connor characterizes Joy-Hulga as similarly atheistic. Mrs. Hopewell knows that her “daughter is an atheist” (270), and during Joy’s morning rendezvous with Manley Pointer, she twice tells him that she does not believe in God (277, 278). Thus O’Connor appears to follow Homer’s lead in making her Cyclopean character an atheist. O’Connor’s twist, however, comes when she also makes her Odysseus-figure an atheist. As Manley Pointer flees with Joy’s leg, he declares that “I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (283).21

8. Arrogance

Besides making both Joy and Manley atheists, O’Connor also portrays both as believing that they are superior to the other. This too may reveal Homeric influence. Polyphemus’ monstrous size and brute strength give him little to fear from Odysseus and his comrades. After the blinded Cyclops learns Odysseus’ true identity, the monster is incredulous that he

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could be bested by “a little man, niddering, feeble” (9.515). Even though Odysseus has watched the Cyclops devour some of his comrades, he does not give up hope but considers “how I might punish him” (9.317).

In similar fashion, Joy views herself as Manley’s intellectual superior, although, according to the story’s narrator, “She was brilliant but she didn’t have a grain of sense” (268). Before her morning rendezvous with Manley, Joy has “imagined that she seduced him” (276). Even when Joy and Manley are in the midst of their morning encounter and the reader knows that Manley is in control of the situation, Joy believes that “[s]he had seduced him without even making up her mind to try” (280). Despite the belief of both the Cyclops and Joy-Hulga in their superiority to Odysseus and Manley, respectively, they are both defeated by those they consider inferior. Because of Joy’s inexperience with the world, her Ph.D. in philosophy is no match for the talk of the “street-wise” Bible salesman, who tells her, “I think you’re real sweet” (275) and “I like girls that wear glasses” (276). He goes on to compliment her bravery in persevering in spite of her wooden leg and expresses admiration for her because her leg “makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else” (281). Manley’s flattery blinds Joy to the fact that he is seducing her.

9. Intoxication

Whereas Odysseus uses wine to bring about the Cyclops’ downfall, Manley has no need to employ alcohol. We have mentioned above that Manley carries a flask of whiskey, but Joy is already intoxicated. When Manley kisses her, this passionate gesture “produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain” (278). Furthermore, upon being kissed again, Joy’s “brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at” (282). Most significant, however, is the juxtaposition that O’Connor creates between the kiss and alcohol: “She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind’s control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka” (278). The Cyclops’ first draught of wine from the outside world leads to intoxication and blinding;

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22 For the seductive Joy-Hulga as “the condescending Eve,” see Preston M. Browning, Jr., *Flannery O’Connor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U Pr, 1974), 43.

23 We might add that just as the Cyclops, after Odysseus blinds him, marvels that he has been tricked by his physical inferior, Mrs. Hopewell, unaware what has happened to her daughter, describes the departing Manley as “that nice dull young man” who is “so simple” (283).
Joy’s first kiss has an inebriating quality that puts her under Manley’s control.

10. Setting, escape, and names

Like the unwitting Cyclops, whom Odysseus destroys in the monster’s own cave, Joy is led by Manley to her demise in the barn on her family’s farm. The “large two-story barn,” “cool and dark inside” (279), has a cave-like quality and recalls the lair of Polyphemus. Joy and Manley climb up to the hayloft and continue their bizarre encounter. Despite her wooden leg, Joy “pulled herself expertly through the opening,” whereas Manley “began to climb the ladder, awkwardly bringing the suitcase with him” (279). In a short time, Manley completes his seduction, gets Joy to remove her wooden leg, and prepares to makes away with his prize.

After Odysseus has blinded the Cyclops, the hero still has to escape from the cave, whose entrance the monster has blocked with a vast stone. Accordingly, Odysseus and his men lash themselves to the underbellies of the Cyclops’ sheep and manage to avoid his groping hands when he sends his flock to pasture. Obviously, Manley will not lash himself to the underbelly of livestock to escape from the loft, but, given the other similarities between the two stories, O’Connor might have had in mind the image of the groping Cyclops when the author makes a deceived and “blinded” Joy thrice cry out, “Give me my leg” (282–283).

Since our assertion that Joy’s cries for the leg parallel the Cyclops’ groping for Odysseus and his men may seem strained, we point to two other, more certain Homeric echoes in support. First, both Odysseus and Manley taunt their victims as they make their escape. Odysseus “called out aloud to the Cyclops, taunting him” that Zeus was punishing him for his cannibalistic acts (9.474–479); the fleeing Manley casts Joy’s formal education in her teeth: “you ain’t so smart” (283). Second, during Odysseus’ tricking of the Cyclops, the hero famously tells the monster that his name is “Nobody” but reveals his true identity after he escapes the cave. Similarly, Manley Pointer is in fact a pseudonym and “Manley” reveals that this is a false name as he is making his escape (283).

Although his initial entry into the loft was somewhat awkward, Manley deftly and quickly escapes with the suitcase through the loft’s opening: “He slammed the lid shut and snatched up the valise and swung it down the hole and then stepped through himself” (283). Thus Manley escapes from Joy’s cave-like barn in Odyssean fashion. When Joy-Hulga, who has also lost her glasses to Manley, watches him cross the green pasture, her distorted vision causes her to see, “his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake” (283). Some scholars have
compared Pointer’s movement to Jesus walking on the sea. A classical reading of the story, however, again suggests Pointer as an Odysseus, “struggling successfully” to sail clear and escape the Cyclops’ island.

11. Summary and some complications

As this paper has attempted to show, O’Connor’s portrait of Joy-Hulga contains a few echoes of Homer’s description of the lame god Hephaestus from the *Iliad*; the most extensive Homeric influence, however, comes from the *Odyssey*, as O’Connor models her encounter between Manley Pointer and Joy-Hulga on that between Odysseus and Polyphemus in Book 9. Both meetings occur within the context of a perverted guest-friendship; both involve parties who believe that they are superior to the other; both feature the blinding and intoxication of a victim; both tricksters use false names and escape from cavernous structures.

O’Connor, to be sure, has made changes to Homer’s story. Whereas Homer’s god-fearing Odysseus serves, in effect, as the earthly agent of Zeus by punishing the Cyclops for his lack of hospitality, O’Connor has the atheistic Pointer punish the equally atheistic Joy-Hulga. The dominating and self-sure Joy-Hulga takes on the masculine personae of both Hephaestus and the Cyclops. Additionally, O’Connor transforms the massive wooden stake that Odysseus uses to blind the Cyclops into the wooden leg that Manley steals from Joy. Although the physical challenges faced by the Cyclops (a single eye) and Joy (a single leg) are different, in both cases these handicaps seem to serve as outward and visible signs of internal shortcomings. For both the Cyclops and Joy, physical impairments point toward an incomplete knowledge of the world. The Cyclops may be the son of a god, but both his inexperience with Odysseus’ wine and his failure to take Odysseus as a serious threat (despite a prophecy warning that he would be blinded) lead to his downfall. In Joy’s case, she never imagines that the simple Bible salesman could be a match for her Ph.D. O’Connor transforms the seeming physical superiority of the Cyclops into Joy’s seeming mental superiority.

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25 Manley, however, does have “eyes like two steel spikes” (282). For a fleeting description of Joy-Hulga as “the Philoctetes of Georgia, and both her wound and her bow are taken from her,” see Miles Orvell, *Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O’Connor* (Philadelphia: Temple U Pr, 1972), 139. Orvell does not develop this line of thought, but we note that it was Odysseus who was responsible for acquiring Philoctetes’ bow. In Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, Odysseus enlists Achilles’ son Neoptolemus to steal the bow.
“Good Country People” and Flannery O’Connor

As noted above, several autobiographical elements are present in O’Connor’s characterization of Joy. Of course, O’Connor is not exactly like Joy, Polyphemus, or Hephaestus, especially regarding matters of religion. Joy is a self-professed atheist and Polyphemus scorns Zeus and other gods. O’Connor’s personal correspondence clearly reveals her as a practicing Christian. Like Joy, however, O’Connor did encounter people who appeared to be Christians and who might have claimed to be Christians, but who were, in fact, charlatans like the Odyssean Manley Pointer.

Although obvious differences do exist, O’Connor, Joy, and Hephaestus are united as intelligent beings with physical challenges. All three suffer from visual impairments and live in relative isolation in agrarian settings. In contrast to Joy, though, O’Connor does not seem to have been antipathetic about her life on the farm; yet like Joy and Polyphemus, O’Connor remained unmarried. Similar to Ovid’s Cyclops, whose love for Galatea was unrequited, O’Connor herself (probably a little over a year before she wrote “Good Country People”) appears to have fallen in love with the writer Brainard Cheney, but Cheney was married. Whatever her feelings, O’Connor enjoyed a close friendship with the Cheneys throughout the rest of her life, as the numerous extant letters between the three attest.

Unlike Ovid’s Cyclops, however, who regarded himself as a handsome hulk and even put a positive spin on his single eye (Met. 13.840–853), O’Connor’s correspondence shows that she considered herself physically unattractive, especially after the debilitations brought about by her illness. Nevertheless, seeing that the lame Hephaestus and some of Homer’s gigantic, one-eyed Cyclopes were married, why should O’Connor herself not have had a husband? A biographical reading of “Good Country People” might suggest that if O’Connor did consider the possibilities of sharing her sexuality with another person, then she concluded that she was destined to remain single. The irrationality that often accompanies intense feelings of sexuality, as evidenced by Joy-Hulga’s experience in the story,

26 Fitzgerald (above, note 1), 1245, writes that after O’Connor was diagnosed with lupus and had to return to Georgia, she found “increasing pleasure in Andalusia.”

27 Fitzgerald (above, note 1), 1246.

28 See C. Ralph Stevens, ed., The Correspondence of Flannery O’Connor and the Brainard Cheneys (Jackson: U Pr of Mississippi, 1986).

29 See, for example, Fitzgerald (above, note 1), 956: “I am learning to walk on crutches and I feel like a large stiff anthropoid ape . . . .”
would seem to be something incongruous with the life of the mind that O’Connor enjoyed.

O’Connor was clearly aware of her own challenges when constructing the character of Joy-Hulga, and a modern student of O’Connor’s life certainly feels sympathy for the author’s plight. Even so, examination of O’Connor’s extant correspondence and writing does not give the impression that she wanted anyone to feel sorry for her. A month before writing “Good Country People,” O’Connor wrote to Beverly Brunson, “I think it is impossible to live and not to grieve but I am always suspicious of my own grief lest it be self-pity in sheep’s clothing” (928). As for Joy-Hulga, the reader of “Good Country People” may well feel some sympathy for her. She is, after all, an educated person surrounded by simpletons. As noted above, Joy’s mother feels sorry for her because she has never danced nor had the social experiences typically enjoyed by other young people. As for the Cyclops, surely it is impossible to sympathize with his hubris and cannibalism. The morning after his blinding, however, when the Cyclops, “suffering and in / bitter pain” (9.440–441), releases his sheep from the cave, the monster, he suggests to the last animal to emerge from the cave, “Perhaps you are grieving / for your master’s eye, which a bad man with his wicked companions / put out” (9.452–454). Such remarks have led at least one scholar to find “much Pathos in the . . . scene.”

Moreover, as noted above, the post-Homeric tradition clearly tended to treat Polyphemus sympathetically.

Conclusion

The evidence above highlights the Homeric influences at work in “Good Country People,” and even suggests that O’Connor’s reading of epic narratives about Hephaestus and the Cyclops may have caused her to reflect upon and examine her own life in a critical way. In this short narrative, O’Connor appears to explore her own physical, mental, and spiritual challenges. Furthermore, our study indicates that O’Connor’s knowledge of classical literature extended further than a set of encyclopedias for children and reading a translation of Sophocles’ Theban plays. We suggest that she engaged in a rather close reading of the Homeric epics, albeit in translation. This apparent fact adds a further layer of complexity to O’Connor’s art. When examining her works, we must, then, not only consider the impact upon her writing of her life in the South and the various hypocrisies (especially religious ones) to which she was exposed, but also that the classical tradition can be seen to have exerted

some influence upon her writing. In “Good Country People” that influence is considerable.\textsuperscript{31}

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