



RACE AND THE COLD WAR IN O'CONNOR'S "THE DISPLACED PERSON"

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The fiction of Flannery O'Connor has most often been studied from theological or psychological perspectives, but also her work is deeply entrenched in, and reflective of, the culture of the mid-twentieth-century United States. O'Connor's work makes purposeful use of the cultural issues of the mid-twentieth century, particularly in regards to the Cold War, and that O'Connor's novels and short stories are small scale representations of larger national and global concerns.

The present paper focuses specifically on O'Connor's short story that deals intensely with issues of race: "The Displaced Person." The South, deeply entrenched in its rigid views of cultural location and social place, divided those locations not only by economic status and inherited social rank, but also by race. The lines that defined these distinctions are blurred by integration, and by the fear of race mixing, which whites feared would further disrupt social order. The chaos that ensued became a defining feature of the mid-twentieth century. Many white Southerners felt they are being invaded by unwanted changes, and this paper highlights the parallels in O'Connor's fiction between that fear and the nation's fear of the invasion of Communism. The focus of racial issues in "The Displaced Person." is the displacement of white Southerners during the mid-century—a displacement that is most often cultural displacement due to the changing environment of Southern society as the South became integrated. Though the characters mostly remain in the South, they are all plagued by an inability to locate themselves in the changing society of the mid-century South, and the cause of their displacement is their unwillingness to make room for the changing social equality between races at mid-century.

Part of the maintenance of Southern social structure is achieved by a strict adherence to a code of exclusively white reproduction. O'Connor's 1954 short story "The Displaced Person" focuses not only on the anxiety caused by the presence of a foreigner in the rural south, but also on the anxiety created by the potential for race mixing. "The Displaced Person" portrays a Southern fear of miscegenation that is strongly influenced by American fear of Communism and that the story reveals the ways in which Cold War fear further complicated racial tensions in the mid-twentieth century South. "The Displaced Person" is centred around Mr. Guizac, a man whose family has fled the displaced persons camps of Poland after World War II and come to live and work in the American South on the farm of Mrs. McIntyre. Though the imagery of the story is tied closely to the Holocaust, the Guizacs also bring with them an anxiety associated with Communism. The Guizacs' homeland is likely under Soviet control after World War II. O'Connor is aware of this because of her own anti-Communism; she would not publish her work. Therefore, in "The Displaced Person," Mr. Guizac's appearance on the farm is accompanied by the threat of Communist influence. This potential influence, however, does not play out in Mr. Guizac's direct association with Communism or in his political tendencies. Rather, it plays out in the Southern social taboo of miscegenation, which the characters of O'Connor's story view as a threat to their way of life. Many white Southerners viewed desegregation not only as a loss of Southern identity but also as a loss of the white racial purity of future generations. His concern with the amalgamation of races is particular to the South's regional identity, and is a concern of many white Southerners in the mid-century.

Mr. Guizac is the best worker Mrs. McIntyre has ever employed, yet his suggestion that his white cousin marry Sulk, a black worker on the farm, causes Mrs. McIntyre's opinion of him to change so drastically that, as a result of her desire to get rid of the man who has disrupted the Southern racial and social order of her farm, she plays a silent and passive role in his death. In a passage after the discovery of Mr. Guizac's intention to marry his white cousin to Sulk, O'Connor writes in "The Displaced Person," "The Pole worked as fiercely as ever and seemed to have no inkling that he is about to be fired. Mrs. McIntyre saw jobs done in a short time that she had thought would never get done at all. Still she is resolved to get rid of him" (228). Despite his excellent work, the Displaced Person presents too great a threat to the codes of the South and to anti-Communist America. In *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture*, Jon Lance Bacon argues that the pastoral setting of "The Displaced



Person” is disrupted by ideas of desegregation because the McIntyre farm “founded its social structure on racial division” (88). When Mr. Guizac disrupts this structure, bringing with him the threat of Communism, he is viewed as a foreigner who must be removed, even if that removal means his death.

In “The Displaced Person,” the United States’ fear of invasion by Communists trickles down to the Southern fear of invasion by its own country and from there to the specific Southerners on the farm in O’Connor’s story who fear Mr. Guizac and his foreign ideas about race. The connection between these fears is noted that the southern red scare is in many ways a by-product of the region’s massive resistance to integration. Its proponents’ main goal is to discredit the civil rights movement by associating it with the nation’s greatest enemy, Communism. By linking Communism to integration, the racism of the South is able to continue to flourish under the banner of the preservation of Southern identity. It is the concern of many white southerners in the 1950s and 1960s that the forces of Communism and integration had signed a devil’s pact to destroy the region’s way of life.

Fear of race mixing became a heightened concern in regards to the integration of schools in the South, a fact made evident in which he points to school integration as a sure sign of future generations with mixed racial heritage. Race mixing, a long-present fear of many white Southerners, became a major component of segregationists’ arguments against school integration. The segregationists believed that the South is the last repository of the pure white race, and therefore southerners developed a pathological fear of miscegenation, and of the damage that they believed interracial sex and marriage would cause to white southern society.

In “The Displaced Person,” miscegenation is the sole reason that Mr. Guizac is transformed in Mrs. McIntyre’s eyes from the most valuable employee she has ever had to one whose presence is a burden. She does not mind much if her black workers steal, nor does she fire her white employees for being lazy or poor white trash, but she is so disturbed by Mr. Guizac’s unrealized intention to marry his white cousin to a black man that she fails to take action to prevent his death.

Mrs. McIntyre also notices Mr. Guizac’s ignorance to the way race is perceived in the South. When he reports to her that Sulk has stolen a turkey, O’Connor writes in “The Displaced Person” “Mrs. McIntyre told him to go put the turkey back and then she is a long time explaining to the Pole that all Negroes would steal” (202). This incident makes clear not only Mrs. McIntyre’s own racist generalizations, but also her desire to teach Mr. Guizac about the racial codes of the South, something she believes he must learn in order to be a functioning member of this farm community. As John N. Duvall notes in *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction: From Faulkner to Morrison*, although his skin is white, “Guizac clearly does not know how to act white according to the codes of the South” (71).

Mr. Guizac’s lack of racial code knowledge contributes to Mrs. Shortley’s view of him as non-white from the first time she sees him, when she notes that he treats Astor and Sulk like he might have been as black as them. It is significant that she doesn’t notice that Mr. Guizac views Astor and Sulk as if they are as white as he, but rather that he views himself as being as black as the two farmhands. Mr. Guizac’s lack of racism aids the labeling of him as non-white, just as it prevents him from functioning in the same racist manner as the other white people on the farm. Mr. Guizac, a man neither raised nor educated in the American South, does not function the same way as the Southerners around him. Because Mrs. McIntyre, Mrs. Shortley, and the others on and around the farm demonstrate behaviour and beliefs that agree with Sass’s assertion that learned racism is a positive factor in Southern society, Mr. Guizac’s lack of racism becomes problematic for him. Because Mr. Guizac is foreign, and because his inability to be white in the same way as his employer and co-workers leaves him vulnerable to being labelled as non-white, the Southerners of the McIntyre farm, especially Mrs. Shortley, find it problematic to classify him. For Mrs. McIntyre, this only becomes a problem when Mr. Guizac reveals his lack of white Southern-ness by promoting miscegenation, but Mrs. Shortley views him as foreign and alien before he even arrives. She equates his foreignness with an inability to recognize common things, such as the difference in colours, asking Mrs. McIntyre as they hang mismatched curtains for the Guizacs, “You reckon they’ll know what colors even is?” (196). Mrs. Shortley’s question proves to be more prophecy than speculation, as Mr. Guizac is indeed unable to recognize colours in the same way the Southerners of the farm are, though the colours he cannot



recognize are those of race, not curtains. Mrs. Shortley expresses the same view as many Americans of the mid-century that the immoral and evil ways of other countries, namely Communist countries, would spread to America like a contagion. While Mrs. Shortley links the Displaced Person not with the Soviet Union but with America's World War II enemy, Nazi Germany, she does think in terms drawn from the Cold War rhetoric of disease. Desegregation and race mixing are seen as symptoms of this contagious illness, and when Mr. Guizac brings miscegenation onto the farm, he spreads dangerous, Communist ways. Because he is foreign, Alan C Taylor notes in "Redrawing the Color Line in Flannery O'Connor's 'The Displaced Person,'" Mr. Guizac "may corrupt the purity of the white race in which [Mrs. Shortley] claims membership" (74).

Americans are afraid of the influence of foreignness in the mid-century, as the newly organized American Communist movement is made up largely of immigrants, non-citizens, and non-English speaking, reinforcing the image of communism as a foreign import. The Guizacs belong to all of these categories and this does not escape the notice of the people on Mrs. McIntyre's farm, particularly Mrs. Shortley. In "The Displaced Person" integration and miscegenation are literally imported from Europe, just as many mid-century Americans feared Communism would be. But the Guizacs are displaced, and do not really belong to Poland any more than they belong to the Southern farm on which they find themselves.

Mr. Guizac's foreignness is problematic for him in multiple ways on the farm, but most notably because it prevents him from knowing how his idea to promote an interracial marriage will be perceived by his employer. His assumption that the marriage of his white cousin and a black farm worker is acceptable makes evident not only his ignorance to the Southern code of race, but also his own inclinations about racism. Just as he treats the black workers no differently from himself upon meeting them, he also views interracial marriage in the same way he views intra-racial marriage.

It is Mr. Guizac's acceptance and promotion of interracial marriage, however, that causes him to be viewed as too foreign to be a member of Mrs. McIntyre's farm community. Though initially enthusiastic about his presence on the farm, Mrs. McIntyre finds Mr. Guizac's encouragement of miscegenation impossible to reconcile with the codes of a mid-century South preoccupied with desegregation and its connection to Communism. Mr. Guizac's presence on the farm, in fact, results in the displacement of the Southern farm workers. The society of their farm, built solidly upon an understanding of hierarchy based on race and economic status, is disrupted by the Guizacs, particularly by Mr. Guizac's introduction of miscegenation to the farm community. Though the Guizacs are the characters of O'Connor's story who have been physically displaced, the Southerners of the story find themselves culturally displaced in their own region, and their rejection of this change causes Mr. Guizac's death.

O'Connor called race a topical matter that is not as significant as the other themes that ran beneath the surface of her work. But her treatment of race in "The Displaced Person" reveals that the race concerns she deemed topical are deeply connected to other anxieties and fears of mid-century American culture, in the South and out of it. O'Connor may have viewed race issues as topical matters, but her stories indicate that race concerns in the South reflect intense anxiety about the Cold War and about the changing nature of Southern cultural identity. When the rigid cultural codes of the South began to change, many white Southerners felt displaced in their own hometowns. No matter how topical O'Connor thought race issues in the South are in her fiction, the impact of the Civil Rights movement in conjunction with fear of Communism in the mid-century South makes these matters central to her characters' beliefs, fears, and actions.

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