The Contemplative Mentality in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People”
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Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” offers readers a chance to better understand the shortcomings of modern political theory. The story makes explicit references to the modern thinkers Malebranche and Heidegger, both of whom sever philosophy from sensual reality. Hulga embraces these thinkers’ approach, but is unprepared for the con artist, Manly Pointer. Mrs. Hopewell accepts the ideas of early modernity without question, and is likewise deceived by Pointer. Mrs. Freeman, who relies on her senses, immediately recognizes deception. The story reflects O’Connor’s preference for a Thomistic approach to political thought that honors the senses and cultivates contemplative habits.

Flannery O’Connor once joked about an invitation to lecture on the significance of the short story. “I haven’t the foggiest notion what the significance of the short story is,” she quipped, “I think I’ll tell them something very grand, such as that the short story restores the contemplative mentality.”¹ One can almost hear O’Connor laugh as she writes these words, but, as is so often the case, her humor is yoked to her most weighty observations.² While modestly suggesting that she has given little thought to the purpose of the short story, she reveals what she understands to be one of the most troubling aspects of the modern world: its inability—its very unwillingness—to cultivate and honor contemplative habits. O’Connor laughed at the invitation to play the modern and define the short story, because she understood her work as a response to modernity’s proclivity toward categorical definitions. For her, fiction at its best is an occasion for reflection upon those parts of life that avoid easy description, cannot be reduced to mathematical formulation, and lie outside the grasp of modern science. However grand it may sound, she did hope that her stories would open up the possibility for contemplation in the modern world.

That Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964) was responding to the ideas of modernity is hardly a point of contention.³ She explained herself in these terms often and clearly, most famously when she said that those of us living today “breathe in nihilism”; adding that, if not for her Catholic faith, she would be “the stinkingest logical positivist you ever saw” (HB
The temptation to live according to the currents of the times is always strong, making it necessary for the one who does not want to be swept away to grasp hold of a trustworthy and timeless buoy, and thus O’Connor held tight to the Church. From that vantage point, she saw a culture in crisis, one in which moral sense had been “bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat” (HB 90). She imagined that this “generation of wingless chickens” must resemble the herd of listless last men that so nauseated Nietzsche, yet rather than address herself to some supposedly superior class that can overcome the nausea and will a new kind of life, O’Connor thought it best to awaken her contemporaries to moral reality with shocking stories: “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (MM 34). In this way she hoped to remind them of that ancient wisdom that understood that an active life divorced from contemplation will find itself sooner or later at the edge of the abyss.

While O’Connor’s response to the nihilism of modernity is prompted primarily by her religious faith, the source of the problem she diagnoses is not simply theological; it is also political in the broadest sense of the term, insofar as the ideas of early and late modernity manifest themselves in the institutions, laws, and manners of our everyday life. In her view, theology and political philosophy are far from mutually exclusive; if interest in theological reality is to be awakened, one first has to come to terms with the political theory that has put it to sleep. This is not to say that O’Connor is a political philosopher, for that is a title that she no doubt would have declined (MM 154). She did, however, understand that the characters of her fiction were bound by the manners of the regime in which they lived, and that the regime was deeply informed by the ideas of modern political theorists such as Machiavelli, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Indeed, disagreements between these thinkers are at times dramatically portrayed in O’Connor’s stories, such as when the Nietzschean Hulga confronts her Machiavellian mother in “Good Country People.” But what is more important for O’Connor is that early moderns and post-moderns alike dismiss the older tradition of political philosophy that was far more open to and supportive of theological reflection.

O’Connor once described herself as a “hillbilly Thomist,” by which she indicated her suspicion of the ideas associated with modern political theories, which were critical of the Scholastic tradition that so closely followed St. Thomas and Aristotle (HB 81). She did not think all things modern were bad; modern science, after all, happily discovered the means of helping her fight lupus, allowing her to extend her life and write more...
The Contemplative Mentality in Flannery O'Connor stories. For that reason and others she was careful not to scoff at the advantages of modernity. At the same time, however, she was aware of modern science’s potential abuses and theoretical flaws. The problem is not fighting diseases or multiplying comforts; it is when these goods are taken as final ends that she saw danger, specifically the danger of reducing life to existence without concern for higher realities.

My purpose here is to explain the way in which O’Connor’s fiction presents a response to modern political thought and points back to a more classical, particularly a more Thomistic, approach that both honors contemplation of eternal truth and accepts the responsibilities of political life. Though similar points could be made using nearly all of her stories, I limit myself here to “Good Country People,” which makes reference to two figures associated with modern political thought, Nicolas Malebranche and Martin Heidegger. The story is rightly read as a rebuke of the nihilism associated with late modernity, but the inclusion of Malebranche—a follower of Rene Descartes—serves as O’Connor’s reminder that the root of nihilism goes back to the original break with the classical philosophical tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas.

GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE

O’Connor claimed to have written “Good Country People” in just four days (HB 160). She sent it off to her editor Robert Giroux, hoping it would be included in her first volume of stories and stating (with some irony given the protagonist’s position at the end) that it would “set the whole collection on its feet” (HB 75). She saw the story setting the tone for the collection as a whole, even more than the title story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Perhaps Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter Hulga would have done well to think that good country people were hard to find; they might not have been taken in so easily by the deceptive Bible salesman, Manly Pointer. Hulga, like much of the audience for whom O’Connor was consciously writing, is an intellectual nihilist who believes God is dead (HB 92). “Good Country People” thus offers a response to the fanciful nihilism of late modernity, but importantly the story’s critique points back to the ideas of early modernity as well.

The action of the story only includes four characters: Hulga the outspoken nihilist; her industrious mother, Mrs. Hopewell; a manipulative Bible salesmen going by the crude name Manly Pointer; and the tenant-farmer’s wife, Mrs. Freeman. Hulga is a thirty-two-year-old, “highly educated” woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy, and her education taught her to look down on her moral and cultural inheritance, dramatically emphasized by the fact that she legally changes her given name from Joy to the more
German-intellectual-sounding Hulga. As a child she had lost a leg in a hunting accident and now stomps around on a wooden prosthetic leg to irritate her mother, who still calls her Joy and thinks of her as a young girl. Hulga would like to be teaching philosophy at a university, but she lives at home because of a heart condition that will likely result in an early death. She is unreconciled to the reality of her situation, and takes pains to cultivate that which she knows her mother will find ugly.

Whereas Hulga is an overly reflective student of late modernity, her mother appears never to have questioned her own way of life or modern attitudes. She probably has never read Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, or Locke’s *Second Treatise*, but she intuitively understands their common teaching that the successful use of power, including the power one has over private property, should be measured by temporal, worldly standards rather than by a transcendent reality. For example, Mrs. Hopewell feigns friendship with her hired-help’s wife in order to make good use of Mrs. Freeman’s busybody inclinations. Mrs. Hopewell’s modern spirit is also manifested in her independence and strong will when it comes to governing a successful farm with little to no concern about the state of her soul. We know nothing of her husband other than that she took the initiative of divorcing him, perhaps because he was a poor administrator of their property. We also know that, consistent with the liberalism of modern political theory, she is open-minded and tolerant when it comes to the views of others, and even has several pithy phrases at the ready to respond to almost anything: *Nothing is perfect* and *Everyone is different* are among her favorites. The most important of her platitudes, we are told, is *Other people have their opinions too*. O’Connor remarks in a letter that Mrs. Hopewell is a realist, but not a poet, meaning that she accepts as fact the idea that humans pursue self-interest, which allows her to manipulate her hired help, but she also lacks the imaginative capacity to see beyond self-interest, and therefore cannot understand her daughter any better than she understands the lessons of the Bible that is stored away in her attic (HB 121).

Hulga disdains her mother’s embodiment of early modernity, rejects all of her mother’s pithy sayings, and aims to recreate life on the farm by destroying all that her mother cherishes along with anything else that she has not created, including nature, religion, social conventions, and even her given name. “One of her major triumphs,” we are told by the story’s narrator, “was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga” (CS 275). She chose the name because of its ugly sound and associates it with Vulcan, the mythical god said to be so horrid that he was rejected by
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his mother, Juno.⁵ He would go on to be the god of metal-works, creating new instruments for human use, and like Vulcan, Hulga wants to be a creator-god; she wants to be the poet her mother is not.

MALEBRANCHE AND HEIDEGGER: DUALISM AND POSTMODERNITY

Hulga’s desire to be god-like is something she learns to want from the authors she reads in college and graduate school. We are only given the names of two of these authors, but it is enough to give us a fairly clear understanding of her education. The first is Nicolas Malebranche, a seventeenth-century Cartesian philosopher who draws a strict dichotomy between mind and body. Hulga’s reference to Malebranche comes during a meal in response to Mrs. Hopewell’s pregnant suggestion that “a smile never hurt anyone.” Hulga becomes angry, chides her mother to “look inside and see what you are not,” and then adds an exasperated “God!” followed by a remark to herself that “Malebranche was right: we are not our own light” (CS 276).⁶

Malebranche taught that it is through ideas—not our senses—that we come to know truth, but that our minds on their own are dark; we therefore require the light of God in order to know anything. Malebranche saw himself following Augustine in teaching that all knowledge comes through God, which makes the atheist Hulga an odd character to reference him. On one hand, what she says to her mother is a faithful account of Malebranche: Look inside and discover that you are not God. But Hulga says “God!” not as part of her sentence about Malebranche, but rather as an irreverent exclamation of her disgust at her mother’s modern attitude. What she is actually saying to her mother is quite sinister: Look inside and discover that not only are you not God, but that you are nothing. While this is not what Malebranche means when he says we are not our own lights, Hulga’s use of him does not indicate a misunderstanding of his teaching so much as an embrace of the dualism that characterizes his theory that our ideas do not derive from our senses—an idea that Malebranche accepts from Descartes. Hulga’s atheism therefore rests upon a Cartesian foundation in which one seeks knowledge by looking inward to the mind rather than outward to the sensual world, and it is no accident that the mischievous O’Connor has Hulga utter these Cartesian lines with her mouth half-full of food, as if to remind us that sustenance comes before thought.

Hulga’s embrace of Malebranche’s dualism is clarified by the second philosopher we know she has been reading, the twentieth-century, postmodern thinker, Martin Heidegger. We even know which words of Hei-
Heidegger have particularly struck Hulga, for when Mrs. Hopewell picks up one of her daughter’s books she finds the following underlined:

Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing—how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing. (CS 277)

These lines come from Heidegger’s essay, “What is Metaphysics?,” in which he argues for the irrational nothingness that lies outside of science’s reach. If science is going to concern itself only with the rational, then metaphysics ought to counter its moves and even rebel. When Mrs. Hopewell reads these lines she shudders, thinking them to be “some evil incantation in gibberish.” She does not understand the lines, and she experiences a chill because she has no experiences that allow her to make sense of what she has just read. How could she? Heidegger’s thought does not require its audience to relate what they are reading to nature or sensual perceptions. His theory operates at the level of the mind without reference to the body. As distant as Malebranche’s thought appears from Heidegger’s, the dualism at the core of seventeenth-century epistemology makes possible the abstract nature of twentieth-century, post-modern philosophy. Hulga follows these thinkers in believing that the world can be made anew without the limitations perceived by our senses, and that truth is an abstraction and as such is a matter of the mind and not the body.

The Heidegger quotation reveals something further about the tense relationship Hulga is deliberately fostering with her mother. Just as Heidegger says that science’s concern with being must be met with a metaphysics of nonbeing, so too does Hulga intend to meet all of her mother’s concerns with their opposites. Where Mrs. Hopewell wants a smile and politeness, she will be given a scowl and rudeness; where she wants cooperation, she will be given resistance; where she expects tolerance, she will be given intolerance; and where she wants Joy, she will be given Hulga. Mrs. Hopewell ultimately wants her farm to be orderly, pleasant, comfortable, and, in a word, modern. Hulga groans at her mother’s unconscious embrace of modern ideas and wants to move past them, but she is unable to move past modernity on the terms she wishes, because reality keeps getting in her way. No matter what she does she will always be her mother’s daughter; her wooden leg reminds her that the past cannot be rewritten; and her medical condition forces her to live in her mother’s home with the knowledge that death will soon be coming. The abstract theories of
Malebranche and Heidegger are of little use to Hulga in helping her come to terms with her own existence.

**BELIEVING IN NOTHING**

Hulga finally comes to realize the impoverishment of her education through an encounter with an evil man, Manly Pointer. He is a wolf clad in sheep’s clothing, a diabolical character disguised as a young Bible salesman. Both Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga are taken by the disguise and assume him to be a good country boy, but they should have smelled a rat from the beginning. He is overly familiar, mistakes the family name, all but forces his way into the house, and wangles an invitation to dinner. They take him to be a simpleton, whereas he is actually a great manipulator. “I’ve come to speak of serious things,” Pointer says, revealing much about his place in the story, for it is through his manipulation that Hulga is given a chance to reform her life and her views.

When Pointer finds Hulga alone he invites her for a walk in the woods and a picnic. Hulga, we are told, is not interested in nature but she agrees to go. She sees it as an opportunity to destroy the young man’s Christian faith and replace it with something of her own creation. She plans to seduce Pointer, rob him of his innocence, and then turn his remorse “into a deeper understanding of life” and his shame “into something useful” (CS 284). She considers herself his superior in intellect, and wants to get a new idea into his mind. This, she reasons, is the mark of true genius. Yet it is Pointer who ends up doing the seducing, leaving Hulga alone in a barn loft without her glasses or wooden leg. Before leaving her, however, Pointer offers some final words, which are intended to be insulting but also provide a lesson in self-knowledge for the young woman. Using the name Hulga “as if he didn’t think much of it,” Pointer says, “you ain’t so smart,” and then adds, “I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (CS 291).

Before the seduction scene, Hulga had revealed her atheism and nihilism in didactic language, as though she were prepared to instruct the young man in the ways of the world. When pushed to say she loves him, she still thinks of herself as a sort of teacher and even announces that she has several degrees. Pointer is unimpressed by her education, and Hulga continues to think this is a symptom of his simplicity. This misunderstanding leads her to relinquish access to the one thing she considers sacred, her wooden leg. For her nothing is more personal or more intimate than giving someone access to her leg. When the newfound trust she has placed in Pointer is immediately violated, she rightly feels abused, but her professed atheism and nihilism do not provide her with language for expressing the
wrong that she experiences. Like the seasoned businessman who laughs at technical-talking MBA graduates, Pointer loses patience with Hulga. Degrees and bookishness do not make one a nihilist. It is not simply an idea in an essay somewhere. Manly Pointer has been a nihilist as long as he can remember, and it was not something he had to learn from Heidegger.

Hulga is left on the loft to contemplate the emptiness of her education. This is not to say that education is bad per se, but hers has been. Why would one take the time and spend the money to learn how to believe in nothing? From Pointer’s perspective, Hulga is the ultimate dupe. For him it is good fun to get people to buy bibles from a person who does not believe “in that crap” (CS 290). Hulga, the atheist, was a bigger challenge for him, but ultimately she fell fairly easily. At least it can be said of Mrs. Hopewell that she never actually bought a bible from Pointer, though she was certainly convinced that he was a good country boy. Hulga did far worse than buy a bible from an atheist, which would have been ironic but not morally wrong; she gave up her most precious possession to someone she hardly knew. But this also makes Hulga more fortunate than her mother. Having been tricked by Pointer, the daughter receives an opportunity to reconsider her life, whereas her mother’s habits and ideas go unchallenged. Hulga comes face-to-face with her own theories; unable to create anything new out of the false bible salesman, she is left to discover herself anew.

THE INSIGHTS OF MRS. FREEMAN

Interestingly, there is one character in the story who is not in the least duped by the false bible salesman: Mrs. Freeman. She has not been “highly educated” as Hulga has, but her eyes see more clearly than both Hulga’s and Mrs. Hopewell’s; in fact, we are given three instances of her insightful eyes. The first is her ability to see something about Hulga that escapes both the girl and her mother. As mentioned above, Mrs. Hopewell always calls her daughter Joy, but Mrs. Freeman took to calling her Hulga, and she would say the name in such a way that it would make “the big spectacled Joy-Hulga . . . scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon.” What is more public than a name? Yet Hulga considers this to be a personal affair, one chiefly aimed at her mother. But Mrs. Freeman’s “steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind [Hulga’s] face to reach some secret fact” (CS 275). Hulga concludes that Mrs. Freeman is fascinated with her because of the artificial leg, due to the fact that Mrs. Freeman was interested in deformities and diseases, and was always interested to hear about the hunting accident that took the leg. Yet this hardly seems reason enough for calling the young woman by her made-up name; it is more likely that Mrs. Freeman perceived some link between the arti-
ficial limb and the artificial name. To the extent that Hulga is correct and that Mrs. Freeman has an interest in the grotesque, it is connected to her love for life. For example, Mrs. Freeman likes to give daily updates on her daughter’s morning sickness, but it is clearly because she is excited to be a grandmother and not, as Hulga seems to imagine, that gross things fascinate her. Mrs. Freeman rightly understands that from the undesirable can come great blessings, just as morning sickness announces the coming of a new life. What is intuitively clear to Mrs. Freeman based upon the simple observations of the senses is lost on the abstract-minded Hulga.

The other two instances of Mrs. Freeman’s perceptive eyes involve Manly Pointer. Both she and Mrs. Hopewell see, but do not hear, his asking Hulga on a date. Mrs. Hopewell cannot imagine what they have talked about and only hopes that her daughter has not been rude to the simple bible salesman. Mrs. Freeman seems to smell something sinister in the air, and she causes Hulga to blush—something very strange for a would-be post-modern—when she looks at her with knowing eyes. In response to Mrs. Hopewell’s remark about Pointer that “It’s very good we aren’t all alike,” Mrs. Freeman says, “Some people are more alike than others” (CS 282). In fact, Mrs. Freeman often qualifies Mrs. Hopewell’s pithy phrases, but this time she does so with an insinuation that she shares a secret with Hulga. This conversation nearly repeats itself at the end of the story when Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are digging up onions and see Manly Pointer leave the woods (with Hulga’s leg in his valise). Mrs. Hopewell says, “I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple,” to which Mrs. Freeman says, “Some can’t be that simple. . . . I know I never could.” She is far from taken in by Pointer’s game. As with Hulga, she senses something fraudulent about him. Mrs. Hopewell puts Pointer and the Freemans in the same class—good country people—but Mrs. Freeman more aptly recognizes similarities between Hulga and Pointer.

A RETURN TO CONTEMPLATION

Fortunately for Hulga, her encounter with Pointer gives her the chance to change. She can now become more like Mrs. Freeman, who is able to see clearly because she believes what her eyes tell her. She is in tune with nature, even its earthiest aspects. She might not be educated, but she is prepared to benefit from a good education precisely because she does not divorce ideas from nature. This also puts her in a better position than Mrs. Hopewell, who is more concerned with technical knowledge about running a farm than with moral knowledge. Hulga is not wrong to see the soft nihilism behind her mother’s favorite sayings. Mrs. Freeman, however, is everything but abstract. For her, details matter very much. She may be a
busybody, but this is the product of a well-grounded need to live life submerged in particulars, which are made known to use through our senses.

For human beings, our eyes represent one of the most important senses. The fact that Hulga’s glasses have been stolen at the end of the story indicates that she is given the opportunity to see the world anew, though an adjustment period will be needed. The last thing we are told of her involves that new vision. She sees Pointer’s “blue figure struggling successfully over the green-speckled lake” (CS 291). Manly Pointer chose his name as a bad joke, but it means more than he intends. His duplicity has the unintended consequence of pointing Hulga back in the direction of Joy. Whether she accepts this grace we do not know, but we are left with her seeing something natural, the lake, as well as something supernatural, someone appearing to walk across it. This is a mysterious vision in which nature and grace appear united. This union is beyond the reach of science, but is also far from the non-being of Heideggerian thought. Without knowing or intending it, Pointer points Hulga to a mystery worthy of contemplation, the mystery of her soul and its salvation.

We are led, by reading O’Connor’s fiction, to have similar conversions as Hulga. Her stories not only depict contemplative conversions, they are also invitations for us to have similar experiences. Her stories push us to ask questions: What does Hulga’s vision of a man walking on water mean? Why is Mrs. Freeman not duped by Manly Pointer? In answering these and the many similar questions about O’Connor’s stories, we cannot fall back on generic formulas. We are left, not unlike Hulga, who sits alone in a barn loft at the end of “Good Country People,” to ponder the human condition and our own way of life. Americans in particular are likely to recognize themselves in Mrs. Hopewell, for we tend to be good moderns eager for worldly success and armed for every uncomfortable situation with a quiver-full of trite phrases. Whether we know it or not, our manners tend to be shaped by the theories of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke, and as such we are a very practical people that leave little time in our day for the life of the mind. Academics who notice this fault are often too ready to join Hulga and Heidegger in throwing the western tradition out the window in exchange for an embrace of nothingness. O’Connor would have us recover that older tradition of political philosophy embraced by St. Thomas Aquinas that, while giving due credit to the senses, attempts to balance the active life with what she so aptly calls “the contemplative mentality.”
Notes

1. Flannery O’Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 101. Further citations of this work will be abbreviated HB. O’Connor lectured on writing short stories on multiple occasions. For a good indication of what she said in those lectures, see Flannery O’Connor “Writing Short Stories,” in Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), 87–106. Citations of this work will be abbreviated MM.

2. In another letter written about the same time, O’Connor says, “In my own experience, everything funny I have written is more terrible than it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny.” See HB 105.


4. O’Connor was certainly aware of the distinction between classical and modern political thought. She was familiar with the works of Eric Voegelin (HB 294–95), Hannah Arendt (HB 539), Russell Kirk (HB 110), and others. In fact, she wrote reviews of these authors’ works for her diocesan newspaper, which can be found in The Presence of Grace, ed. Leo J. Zuber and Carter W. Martin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983). For a general view of what she read, see Arthur F. Kinney, Flannery O’Connor’s Library: Resources of Being (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

5. For discussion of the name, see Wood, Flannery O’ Connor, 200n26.

6. Hulga is referring to Nicolas Malebranche’s Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion, first published in 1688. For a modern translation, see that edited by Nicholas Jolley and David Scott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See Edmondson, Return to Good and Evil, 86.

7. Heidegger’s essay was based on the inaugural lecture he gave at the University of Freiburg in 1935 and was first published in 1953. For a recent English translation, see that of Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000). See Wood, Flannery O’Connor, 199–204.

8. “Good Country People” begins and ends with Mrs. Freeman—she is its frame. For a similar discussion, see Preston M. Browning, Flannery O’Connor (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 45.

9. Fredrick Nietzsche’s Zarathustra calls human beings “the animal that has red cheeks” and goes on to say that “the noble person commands himself not to shame,” or blush. See Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press), 67. For a good discussion on this point, see Edmondson, Return to Good and Evil, 82–84. Richard Giannone, Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), argues that shame is a key theme of “Good Country People.” See pages 62–66.