

*Flannery O'Connor in the Filipino Classroom*

Jose Marcelino Nicdao

University of Asia & the Pacific, Philippines

0466

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

The Philippines is known as the only English-speaking country in Asia. This reputation makes the country assume to be close to the English-speaking world, most especially the United States. The close cultural and familial ties with the US have perhaps made other people expect that the Filipino culture and society be highly associated with American culture and literature. A fairly well-known American short story writer is Flannery O'Connor. Her stories have been mainstream fodder for the literature classroom and it is no surprise that in some English literature courses in the Philippines, a selection of her short stories have been studied. It is expected that Filipino students can easily understand her stories since there is a common culture shared with the US. Aside from this, since O'Connor is Catholic, many of her themes are of a religious, and even more so, Catholic nature. However, the experience of this study shows that the assumption of connectedness can be placed in question. The study describes the teaching approach and methodology used in the classroom. Discussion experiences are enumerated while responses to her stories are collected. The feedback gained from student responses reveal that in the classroom where her works are exclusively taught, there is a wide gap in understanding the deeper meaning of her stories. The question that can be asked here is if there is true connectedness or alienation between Filipino and American culture since a canonical American writer's works seem to be disjointed from the Filipino student's experiences. Further research can compare the experiences between a literature classroom devoted to a Western writer and a one on a local writer.

## Introduction

The Philippines is known as the only English-speaking country in Asia. Moreover, Filipinos have close family and cultural ties with the United States. This closeness has extended to American culture and literature.

The Philippines' Catholic society and a close affinity with American culture may be an advantage for Filipinos when reading American literature. A fairly well-known American short story writer is the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. Her stories have been mainstays in the literature classroom and it is no surprise that in some English literature courses in the Philippines, a selection of her short stories have been read as well.

Since Filipinos share commonalities with O'Connor, the primary problem that this paper seeks to answer is this: Will Filipino undergraduates who share the same Catholic convictions and a similar culture with O'Connor have an easier time understanding and getting at the deeper levels of meaning in her texts?

In order to answer this question, the study describes the teaching approach and methodology used in the classroom, the data gathered from classroom discussion and student journals, and analyses possible answers.

I believe that I am in a fair position to answer this question because I have taught courses on modern literature (from modern mainly Anglo American writers) to undergraduate students who are not literature majors in a small university in the Philippines. In at least two semesters exclusively dedicated to O'Connor's works, I have observed how Filipino college students have responded to her writings.

## Methodology

An informal study was conducted over a semester's worth of material. The stories chosen from O'Connor's works come from two collections, "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The study chose her more well-known stories in order to give a good representation of her work. Aside from the short stories which formed the bulk, the novel *The Violent Bear It Away* was read halfway through the course to provide a more extended reading material. An end of term paper included an option to compare a story not taken in class with some other story of the same writer.

The respondents of the study are undergraduate Filipinos from a liberal arts university in the Philippines. About more than 90% of a total of 54 students from three sections are Catholic or Christian. Each section is composed of a little less than twenty junior-level students. The modern literature course is a requirement in a five-year straight masters program. The learners are not sophisticated readers; they come from an average high school background and can be considered as fair readers. The students are non-literature majors, mostly coming from the management, economics, marketing communication, and political economy majors. Before taking the modern literature course, these students have already done three college-level literature subjects. Moreover, they are required to take theology and philosophy courses during their stay in school.

The data gathered come from classroom discussion observations and weekly student journals. As shown by Davis (2009), these are some of the more effective classroom approaches in teaching. The first part of the discussion was group work where the students were told to get the facts of the story straight. Questions were shared and some key elements of the story were highlighted. The second session consisted of the full-class discussion. The classroom discussion was conducted through a modified Socratic method where a basic or a big question was posed and the students were expected to come up with valid interpretations from the text with the help of the leader, normally the teacher. This method is also known as the Seminar from the Paideia Program or the Shared Inquiry Method from the Great Books Program (The Great Books 2013). This discussion approach is a non-technical, close reading treatment of the text. Through questions that lead to a deeper interpretation, the students are helped to answer the basic question. The basic question is a question that will open up the meaning of the story. The leader's role is to facilitate deeper understanding of the material and ideally just asks questions. The leader of the discussion takes down notes and observes how the group responds.

The weekly journals or blogs consisted of two parts. The first part is the group journal and the other is the individual journal. These journals were submitted via web forum in Google groups (Nicdao 2013). The group journal summarises the contribution of each group member for the different basic literary elements such as synopsis, characters, questions, and others. The group journal was submitted before the group discussion. After the whole class discussion the learners were required to write unstructured reflections, or individual journals and blogs, on the short stories. This individual journal was unstructured so that the learners can express what is foremost in their minds without having to worry about fulfilling strict parameters. The gut-feel response was essential to gauge how students react to the material. The post-discussion journals were written right after the class discussion. The journals were posted on a class website where everyone could read the responses.

Although the research method is not at all statistical but anecdotal, nevertheless, the feedback gathered is a fair gauge of the learning and response of the students to the stories. Both the classroom observation and the weekly journals offer an external view of the learners and an internal glimpse of their thoughts, respectively.

## Results and Analysis

Based on classroom observation and group blogs, learners do get the basic elements of the story, plot, character, literary devices, etc. On the surface or literal level, the text is easily understood since the literary elements are straightforward. Save for some modernistic elements such as fractured narrative or unfamiliar diction in some stories, in general learners easily understood the stories. Some share questions about the story and yet as expected many do not know how to go about answering these questions. There may be some difficulty in grasping finer details like minute clues that connect the elements together such as O'Connor's use of color, nature, and names. American culture poses no obstacle to the Filipino learner. American culture is likewise presumed as understood. Learners see issues of racial equality prevalent in O'Connor's stories as cultural artifacts. Quirks in the narrative are likewise non issues since Filipinos are familiar with American expressions.

For example, readers can get the obvious reference to Dante in "The Artificial Nigger" since the learners in this study have to take a Dante course. Many connect Mr. Head to Virgil and the boy to Dante since there are textual clues to support that interpretation although Allen (1984) argues that it was Hawthorne whom O'Connor was alluding to. For the same story, students do get around picking up on different religious allusions. Students are very familiar with Catholic allusions and American culture and so the teacher does not have to go to excessive lengths to explain certain details in the stories. More often, they make use of what they have learned in their other classes and bring them in. However, unfounded opinions or answers that tend to stray too far from the text are discouraged.

During class discussion, the basic or discussion question is often deceptively simple and yet encourages a greater understanding of the text. Despite a shared background with the writer and having read the story several times, students agonise over their answers. Many answers are disjointed or one dimensional. It seems that students have a hard time coming to a deeper, more comprehensive answer to the basic question. The discussion of the basic question and the answers given show that students need to read the text even more closely. Many do not understand the relationship between the parts of the story. By failing to connect the events, they thus are unable to penetrate below the surface. In many instances, the leader has to show them the clues and path by which the question can be answered. And even then, there is great difficulty in getting to a deeper understanding since the deeper answer is far removed from their initial conception. Only later on after the discussion do they see how much deeper the stories use the Catholic material.

An example of some of the realisations in class is the function of the characters. A noted peculiarity of the O'Connor's characters is that many of those who are bad are agents of good. That good is effecting a change or a revelation in another character, usually the main character. This is a point that surprises learners because they think that someone who is bad cannot be an agent of good. O'Connor seems to manage to break such a stereotype by doing the unconventional--allowing the bad character to elicit good. Yet still another common observation that the learners manage to discover is the need for violence to enact grace on the characters (Katz 1974) even if the conversion of some of the characters remain open ended (Coulthard 2010).

The weekly individual journals written after the class discussion show that many of the learners find the stories fairly easy to understand on the surface level. The Catholic elements as well are seen on the surface level. Responses show that even if the test group was brought up in a Catholic environment, many miss out on the more religious undertones of O'Connor. In support of the observations made during the classroom discussion, many say that they were surprised by the answer to the basic question. Some expected the basic question to be asked while many did not. For straightforward narration, students easily grasp the plot but fail to go deeper. Nevertheless, they show an appreciation for the way many elements of the story are connected.

## Analysis

It can be presumed that those sharing the same beliefs as the writer should have an easier time understanding the story but this does not seem to be the case with the test group. Despite having a fairly good grasp of the elements of the story, American culture, and the Catholic material, Filipino students still fail to connect with or to approach a deeper interpretation consistent with the overall message of the story.

Several hypotheses may be proposed at this point to answer the problem posed in this study. First is that in general, perhaps the reading skills of the learners are not up to the challenge of such type of literature. The students do read but the level of reading material remain to be light reading.

Second is that the students are burdened with reading habits they have acquired in high school which tends to look for the moral lesson of the story and so fail to read the text closely. A big danger especially with texts that have overt religious themes is that the learners tend to look for a moral lesson. And looking for moral lessons limits the interpretative value of the stories which hinder further understanding. In addition, the reliance on background knowledge to read a literary text while downplaying what the text itself says (New Critical approach) seems to hinder close reading.

Third is that even if they understand the Catholic references, they see them as just formal elements that do not have a deeper implication or forward a truth about the Catholic faith. As a result of the failure to read the text closely, students do not form the necessary connections to piece the text together.

And fourth, perhaps because of how students hold on to stereotypes about how stories or characters are supposed to be constructed, their expectations are subverted. O'Connor's characters and narrative subvert such expectations. Learners are resistant as stereotypes are challenged.

Perhaps the difficulty can be traced as well to O'Connor's strategy of sliding in an anagogical meaning between the lines of the text (Bosco 2009). On the surface it is difficult to detect what lies beneath but it certainly appears or is manifested after a careful reading. Her stories are like huge jigsaw puzzles filled with obvious and not too obvious clues that challenge the reader. A strong modernist tendency pervades her craft and learners without previous literary training may find this extremely daunting.

The results of classroom discussion observation and weekly learner's journals seem to suggest that a Catholic and shared culture audience is not much of an advantage in understanding O'Connor's works. Perhaps the more crucial factor in reading her works is the ability to read the text closely. As shown by the results, although there may be things that are common between O'Connor and a Filipino audience, her literariness and craft still pose as obstacles to understanding her stories better.

## Conclusion

The feedback gained from student responses reveal that in the classroom where O'Connor's works are exclusively taught, there is a wide gap between getting the basic elements together and coming to a deeper meaning in her stories.

The test group disproves the expectation that readers who are Catholic and familiar with American culture should have an easier time at understanding her. Despite a common background, learners fail to understand the deeper levels of meaning. The results seem to imply that a reader does not have to have a solid grasp of Catholic belief or American culture to appreciate her stories. To some extent the background of Filipinos may be an advantage but it only goes so far. It seems that the students are not yet adept at reaching the anagogical level of meaning in her story--the anagogical sense as Candler (2010) puts it where the supernatural is contained in the natural. An ideal reader therefore is someone who has a solid background in Catholic beliefs and who can read the text carefully.

The question that can be asked now is if there is true connectedness or alienation between Filipino and American culture since a canonical American writer's works seem to be disjointed from the Filipino student's experiences. Further research can compare the experiences between a literature classroom devoted to a Western writer and one on a local writer.

The study is limited to one writer for one semester dedicated to her works and the number of students. It is limited as well to the rigor by which the study was conducted. To extend this study and give it more validity, some recommendations are suggested.

O'Connor can be approached in a purely literary way since she talks of the human person and her stories transcend the overt Catholic and American themes. As avenues for more enriching studies, other studies can see how learner background influences reading literature, especially for learners who share a commonality with the writer. Maybe a different kind of learner profile can be studied such as non-Christian readers. Another avenue is to conduct a more scientific or rigorous statistical study which may reinforce the findings of this paper that learner background plays but a minor role in reading O'Connor.

The overt Christian and American identity of her stories hide a much deeper theology and a strongly universalist message. It is the human condition that seems to be foregrounded in the stories. Catholic and American themes are certainly there but on a deeper level, her stories appeal to a universal reading because of a shared human condition. What is difficult in reading her is not explicitly her Catholicity but her craft in writing. What is more crucial for learners is the ability to read the texts more critically.

#### Works Cited

- ALLEN, WILLIAM RODNEY, 1984. "Mr. Head and Hawthorne: Allusion and Conversion in Flannery O'connor's 'The Artificial Nigger'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 21.1: 17. Available from: EBSCOhost.
- BOSCO, MARK, 2009. "Flannery O'connor as Baroque Artist: Theological and Literary Strategies." *Renascence* 62.1: 41-62. Available from: EBSCOhost.
- CANDLER, PETER M. JR., 2010. "The Anagogical Imagination of Flannery O'Connor." *Christianity & Literature* 60.1: 11-33. Available from: EBSCOhost.

COULTHARD, A.R., 1983. "From Sermon to Parable: Four Conversion Stories by Flannery O'Connor." *American Literature* 55.1: 55. Available from: EBSCOhost.

DAVIS, BARBARA GROSS, 2009. *Tools for Teaching*. 2nd Ed. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

THE GREAT BOOKS FOUNDATION WEBSITE, 2013. The Great Books Foundation [online]. 1 Apr., 2013. Available from: <http://www.greatbooks.org/>

KATZ, CLAIRE, 1974. "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision." *American Literature* 46.1: 54. Available from: EBSCOhost.

NICDAO, JOSE MARCELINO A., 2013. *Modern Literature with Flannery O'Connor* [online]. University of Asia & the Pacific, 5 Nov. 2012. Web. 29 Mar. 2013. Available from: <https://groups.google.com/a/uap.asia/forum/#!forum/oconnor>

O'CONNOR, FLANNERY, 1988. *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works; Wise Blood, A Good Man is Hard To Find, The Violent Bear it Away, Everything That Rises Must Converge. Stories and Occasional Prose Letters*. USA: The Library of America.

The logo for the International Association of Forum and Oral Research (iafor) is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters "iafor" in a light blue, sans-serif font. The text is enclosed within a circular graphic composed of two overlapping, thick, curved lines. The upper-left portion of the circle is a light red color, while the rest of the circle is a light blue color, matching the text.





