VERBEIA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH AND SPANISH STUDIES
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS FILOLÓGICOS
2026
ISSN 2444-1333
Año XII, Número 11

CC BY NC SA

The Latent Specter of Old Age in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction: Nostalgia, Otherness, and the Allegory of Premature Aging

Marta Miquel-Baldellou
Universidad de Lleida
marta.miquel@udl.cat
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9002-5679

Recibido. Received 30/03/2025
Aceptado. Accepted 08/04/2026
Publicado. Published 30/04/2026

ABSTRACT

Flannery O'Connor's short fiction has been traditionally categorized as representative of Southern fiction, owing to its portrayal of marginalized characters, its representation of decadence and nostalgia during the years following the collapse of the confederacy, along with the depiction of the grotesque as a type of realism of distance that is able to reach the transcendental. Nevertheless, up to date, the nostalgic, but also decadent, mood often related to Southern fiction, which reflects itself in O'Connor's short fiction, has hardly ever been associated with the prevalent presence of elderly characters, who acquire particular centrality in many of O'Connor's short stories, together with thematic aspects related to aging. This article offers an analysis of old age in O'Connor's later short fiction by means of the identification of elderly characters and thematic aspects related to aging, along with the use of old age as a metaphor of the illness which befell the author and subjected her to a symbolic process of premature aging.

KEYWORDS: premature aging, grotesque, nostalgia, uncanny, otherization..

El espectro latente de la vejez en la ficción breve de Flannery O'Connor: nostalgia, otredad y la alegoría del envejecimiento prematuro

RESUMEN

La ficción breve de Flannery O'Connor ha sido tradicionalmente categorizada como representativa de la ficción sureña, debido a su retrato de personajes marginados, la representación de la decadencia y la nostalgia durante los años posteriores al colapso de la confederación, así como la descripción de lo grotesco como un tipo de realismo de la distancia capaz de llegar a lo trascendente. No obstante, hasta la fecha, el nostálgico, a la par que decadente, ambiente que a menudo se relaciona con la ficción sureña, y que se refleja de forma recurrente en la ficción breve de O'Connor, apenas ha sido asociado con la presencia de personajes envejecidos, los cuales adquieren un protagonismo central en muchas de las narraciones breves de la autora, así como aspectos temáticos relacionados con el envejecimiento. Este artículo ofrece un análisis de la vejez en la ficción breve tardía de O'Connor mediante la identificación de personajes envejecidos y de aspectos temáticos relacionados con el envejecimiento, así como el uso de la vejez como metáfora de la enfermedad que afectaba a la autora y que la sumía en un simbólico proceso de envejecimiento prematuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: envejecimiento prematuro, lo grotesco, nostalgia, lo extraño, otredad.

Cómo citar:
Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "The Latent Specter of Old Age in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction: Nostalgia, Otherness, and the Allegory of Premature Aging". *Verbeia,* 11, 2026, pp. 142-162.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," which was originally published in 1960, Flannery O'Connor notes that the readers and critics of her time demanded a kind of limiting realism which prioritized fidelity to everyday life. In contrast, O'Connor was more drawn to the kind of realism found in grotesque fiction, which moves away from typical social patterns, and instead, leans toward mystery and the unexpected. O'Connor defines it as a kind of vision and a descent through the darkness of the familiar, which relates to her own religious convictions and faith. According to Lamar Nilsy, as a Christian author, O'Connor felt concerned to make modern life appear as distortions to an audience that was used to seeing them as natural (89), and conversely, to delve in grotesque situations and portray them coherently as a way to gain insight into latent truths. Accordingly, for O'Connor, the kind of realism that should go in fiction is the realism of distance that characterizes the prophet. In fact, given O'Connor appreciation of the grotesque to attain transcendence, theorists like Marshall Bruce Gentry (1986) have even referred to O'Connor's religion of the grotesque.

As its main tenets, grotesque fiction mostly juxtaposes apparently opposing terms, it explores the nostalgia for the lost past, and it draws attention towards the displaced. According to Thomas Aervold Bjerre, the grotesque turns into a site of transgression that challenges the status quo, evokes the Bakhtinian notion of carnivalesque as a strategy of disruption, and exposes a confusing matrix of contradictions (4). In this respect, as Claire Kahane (1979) observes, the grotesque in O'Connor fiction often involves an oscillation between the comic and the fearful, which takes place as a result of introducing humor in the midst of ferocious events, and ultimately finding revelation through satire and even violence. Likewise, the grotesque is mostly grounded in nostalgia and the evocation of the past, inasmuch as the antebellum South evokes an idyllic and agrarian area, but also a past repository of all American historical shortcomings, such as slavery and racism, which displays aspects like decadence, intergenerational conflicts, and death. In this respect, Mark Graybill (2021) finds in O'Connor's fiction instances of Svetlana Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia, which stresses a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, and of Theodor Adorno's notion of the authoritarian personality, which prioritizes social order and hierarchies to bring a sense of control in a chaotic world. O'Connor thus delves in a toxic mixture of nostalgia for the Southern past in terms of romanticized manners and values, coexistence with racial tensions, and the ideals of the Civil War. Accordingly, as Bridget

Marshall (2013) puts forward, O'Connor's fiction addresses the lost principles of the dispossessed Southern aristocracy, whereas, as Christopher Walsh (2013) argues, it also engages in the dark legacy of slavery and racial segregation. Moreover, drawing on Teresa Goddu's premise (1997) that the American South has traditionally served as the nation's other, Marita Nadal has analyzed the pervasive presence of the displaced and the deviant in O'Connor's fiction as "peculiar figures that constitute an instrument of revelation" (206), and that possess a prophetic potential to the extent that their presence may bring forward epiphanies and convey transcendental values.

As regards the displaced figures that populate grotesque fiction, little attention has been drawn so far to the fact that there is a high number of aging characters in O'Connor's Southern fiction that play a prominent part as agents of revelation. Approaching O'Connor's writings with a particular focus on aging, it is only recently that some theorists have drawn attention to the older characters and thematics aspects of old age that become pervasive in O'Connor's short stories. In this respect, Robert Evans (2025) points out that some of O'Connor's most memorable characters are of advanced age and many of them are explicitly identified as grandparents. Likewise, taking aging as object of analysis, Susana Miró López and Fernando Viñado Oteo (2020) approach O'Connor's short fiction through Erik Erikson's notion of a later stage in life, in which the integrity of the self finds balance with desperation, and Romano Guardini's definition of old age as a phase of culmination in which the individual may reflect upon the emptiness of existence, or rather, upon his encounter with the transcendence. It is thus possible to associate the relevance that aging acquires in O'Connor's short stories with the attention that is drawn toward the displaced, nostalgia, and the blending of contradictory elements in grotesque fiction. A close analysis of the pervasive presence of aging in O'Connor's short fiction reveals the central role attached to older characters and some thematic aspects related to aging. In particular, though, O'Connor's autobiographical details regarding the last stage of her life may also play an essential part in her personal concern about aging as is reflected in her short stories. Although O'Connor passed away when she was only thirty-nine years old, at a later phase in life, she had to face the limiting physical symptoms of the immune disorder known as lupus, the awareness that her life expectancy would be reduced significantly, and the feelings of dependence on the care of others. As Sheldon Blau (1974) explains, lupus consists of a self-defensive illness which may easily be mistaken for other disorders to the extent that recent studies show that lupus and the effects of the aging process share a series

of symptoms. It could thus be argued that, as the physical effects of lupus befell O'Connor, thus hindering her everyday life and depriving her of strength and autonomy, her illness unleashed a symbolic premature process of aging, which finds reflection in her later short fiction. According to Alice McDermott (2021), lupus had a great impact on O'Connor's writings, to the point, as she explains, that "it was the illness, I think, which made her the writer she is." Additionally, Bridget Kurt (2017) claims that "having lupus affected O'Connor's writing both spiritually and practically," insofar as it caused "fatigue, joint pain, itching, hair loss and other health issues that reduced her ability to write to just a few hours a day." Nonetheless, as a result of her faith, O'Connor envisioned her illness as a way to gain further insight into revelations about existence. In this respect, as Dorothy Tuck McFarland (1976) claims, feelings of vulnerability and even disability endowed O'Connor's writings with a significant quality of spiritual transcendence. Similarly, as Sally Fitzgerald (1980) notes, O'Connor's letters display that, owing to her illness, she felt driven by a sense of urgency, hence revealing that, as Carl Horner (2005) puts forward, O'Connor's genius grew more defiant and enabling after being diagnosed with this disorder. As a case in point, in the letters that she wrote to her friend Cecil Dawkins in the summer of 1957, O'Connor confesses that her illness conditioned her writing, but also improved it, since she admits that, being forced to go back home, "the best of my writing has been done here" (Fitzgerald 230). Additionally, suffering from bone trouble and resorting to clutches for mobility, O'Connor claims that "when you can't be too active physically, there is nothing left to do but write, so I may have a blessing in disguise" (Fitzgerald 234). Correspondingly, as Harold Bloom points out, in the fall of 1963, even if O'Connor's health had worsened significantly, she recovered to experience "a burst of productivity" (12), which enabled her to keep on writing until the end of her life.

Having to come to terms with an immune disorder such as lupus, O'Connor was forced to experience as well as reflect upon issues which the advent of old age usually brings about. Accordingly, even though older characters and thematic aspects of aging in her fiction echo widespread cultural notions of old age as a narrative of decline, O'Connor's personal approach to aging as particularly productive rather envisions old age as a narrative of progress. According to Margaret Gullette (2011), from a social perspective, the decline narrative understands aging as a process of loss and diminution, which is characterized by decreasing capabilities, in contrast with progress narratives, which rather challenge the ageist master narrative of aging as a narrative of decline. Besides, though, O'Connor also

experienced a symbolic process of otherization through her illness, which also arises along the aging process. As Simone de Beauvoir explains, the individual usually regards her aging self as otherized, thus stating that "within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old and that other is myself" (284). As a result of misrecognizing the aging other as oneself, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth (1999) coin the notion of the mask of old age, which expresses the tension between the aging body and the inner sense of identity. Similarly, Kathleen Woodward (1986) also refers to the mirror of old age, as a reversal of the Lacanian mirror stage, since, instead of embracing the mirror image as the child does, the aging person rather refuses to accept the aging image that the mirror renders back and anticipates disintegration. Nevertheless, despite the fact that her illness and symbolic process of premature aging unleashed an increasing sense of otherization, as a writer, O'Connor could detect a sort of unusual earnestness and determination that characterized her writings at a later stage of creativity. In this respect, Anne Wyatt-Brown (1993) identifies diverse models of late-life writing according to the stance that a writer may take in relation to her creativity with the advent of old age. According to Wyatt-Brown's classification, O'Connor's model of late-life writing would correspond with that of late-life revival, by means of which the author experiences an increase of creativity which may be explained precisely on account of the advent of aging. In particular, as O'Connor herself admits in her personal writings, as her illness rendered her increasingly disabled in body, she felt enabled to focus more intensively on her fiction.

Drawing on recent studies that have begun to underline the relevant role that aging plays in O'Connor's later short fiction, this article aims to identify O'Connor's short stories in which aging attains particular prominence, as they feature older characters and they deal with thematic troped related to aging. In particular, though, this article also seeks to argue that O'Connor's incapacitating illness, which unleashed a symbolic premature process of aging, operated as a catalyst to include aging as a relevant discourse in her fiction, but also to reactivate her productivity at a later stage of creativity. Based on these premises, the analysis of aging in O'Connor's short fiction will focus on the characterization of older characters, thematic tropes related to the discourses of aging, and autobiographical aspects that remain latent in O'Connor's short fiction and evoke her illness and turn it into a metaphor of old age.

2. A FOCUS ON AGING: CHARACTERS, THEMES, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

Approaching O'Connor's short fiction with a focus on aging reveals that a selection of ten of her short stories revolve explicitly around older characters and thematic issues in relation to the discourses of aging, along with echoes that evoke biographical aspects as regards O'Connor's own process of premature aging. These ten narratives, compiled in O'Connor collection of complete stories, comprise "The Geranium" (1946), "Wildcat" (1947), "A Stroke of Good Fortune" (1949), "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953), "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" (1953), "You Can't Be Any Poorer than Dead" (1955), "The Life You Save May be Your Own" (1955), "The Artificial Nigger" (1955), "A View of the Woods" (1957), and "Judgement Day" (1965). O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus in 1950, when she was only twenty-five years old, which coincides with the bulk of her short stories dealing explicitly with aging, even if three of them were written before the diagnosis, which may also be due to the fact that she started experiencing the limiting effects of the illness before its detection. It could thus be claimed that O'Connor perceived her illness as a catalyst that would urge her to write her stories with a focus on aging. Nonetheless, O'Connor's interest in the grotesque in Southern fiction as a kind of realism also conditioned her increasing concern about aging, which showed in the juxtaposition of contrasting elements such as decline and progress, the pervasive trope of nostalgia through the memories of a lost past, and the importance attached to the displaced, given the ostracism that some older characters may have to face. In the selection of the ten short stories that are object of analysis in this article, the main characters are often elderly individuals, thematic aspects in the stories often revolve around aging explicitly, and some of them evoke turning points in O'Connor's personal life that she experienced as her illness took a turn for the worse.

In all these short stories, the main characters are elderly individuals who face different challenges in their everyday life as a result of their aging process. First of all, in many of O'Connor's stories, older men are characterized as experiencing statism and ostracism. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley regrets having moved to New York to live with his daughter, and he spends his days waiting for the neighbor, who lives in front of their building, to take out a geranium and place it on the window ledge, thus establishing an ironic and critical parallelism between the geranium and himself. In "Wildcat," Old Gabriel must stay home while the youngsters in the village go hunting for a beastly cat, which shows he can no longer resort to the same degree of strength and dexterity that he rejoiced in his youth. Nonetheless, older men are also considered embodiments of a glorious past and of the

permanence of traditions. In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," a woman who is about to receive her college degree wishes to bring her elderly grandfather, General Sash, who served in the war, to her graduation ceremony, out of pride and reverence for the aging man. However, for the most part, the values that these older men represent are usually considered outdated and even narrow-minded by younger generations. In "You Can't Be Any Poorer than Dead," Old Tarwater, who raised his nephew on his own, makes the young man promise that he will give him a Christian burial when he passes away, although his wishes are not ultimately fulfilled. In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head plans to take his grandson Nelson to Atlanta although the older man's lack of experience as regards the ways prevailing in the big city put in jeopardy his assumed authority. In "A View of the Woods," Mr. Fortune feels closely attached to his granddaughter Mary, whom he considers the relative who mostly takes after him, even if latent differences between them end up in tragedy. In "Judgement Day," as an elderly man, Tanner dislikes living in his daughter's and son-in-law's apartment and misses the time when he lived in the country.

The older women in O'Connor's short stories reflect upon the effects of aging, take pride in assuming her role as guardians of the old traditions, and display a great degree of independence, even though the stories convey that cultural and social ageist prejudices often subject these older women to ostracism and exclusion. In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby is an older woman, who has difficulty in going up the flight of stairs in her building, hence wondering whether she must be growing old, or rather, whether she is expecting a child, thus delving in the equivocal symptoms of aging. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," a grandmother gives in to go to Florida in her family's car although she has heard rumors that a dangerous criminal and his gang are roaming free, which are ignored by her younger relatives. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Lucynell Crater is an elderly woman who lives with her daughter, who has a cognitive disability, when a man, who is physically impaired, offers himself to work at their farm, and the elderly woman makes arrangements so that the man marries her daughter although her plans come to no fruition.

The pervasive presence of older characters in these stories pave the way for the discussion of thematic aspects related to aging that are grounded in the grotesque and the gothic in Southern fiction. Accordingly, tropes related to aging include rites of passage that evoke aging and bring to the fore the contrast between the past and the present, intergenerational tensions that underline the schism existing between old values and modernity, and the dyad between the country and the city as a paradigm of the nostalgia for former times in contrast

with the hectic rhythm of urban settings in which older characters from the old South seem unable to fit. Passages in some of these stories depict transitional moments like turning points, journeys, and graduations, which metaphorically underline the aging process. Accordingly, the act of going hunting and slaying a dangerous beast signifies a rite of passage which evokes aging, and eventually, death in "Wildcat." The family trip in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" symbolically involves a shift from home to the unknown that ends tragically in spite of the grandmother's warnings. The academic graduation in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" in which General Sash is exhibited conjures a final turning point in his life. Intergenerational conflicts are also explored, which denote a contrast between old traditions as embodied by older characters and modernity on behalf of their younger counterparts. As a case in point, as soon as his great uncle passes away, Tarwater follows his own whims in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," disregarding his uncle's last wishes. In "The Artificial Nigger," the generational gap between Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson is brought to the fore and eventually reversed as a result of their testing experience in a big city, which discredits Mr. Head's assumed authority. In "A View of the Woods," despite the apparent close tie that bind them together, Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter Mary end up in a violent fight in a graphic display of intergenerational conflict. In O'Connor's short fiction, older characters find themselves away from home, living with their children's families in urban settings, which paves the way for establishing a contrast between the country and the city, along with the respective values that each geographical paradigm represents. In this respect, Old Dudley is taken to his daughter's home in the city in "The Geranium," as also happens with Tanner in "Judgement Day," whereas, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother initiates a journey with her family far from home that will end in tragedy. O'Connor's short stories thus address thematic aspects in relation to aging like transitional moments that evoke aging, intergenerational conflicts that establish a contrast between past and present values, and divergent geographical locations that symbolize the clash between former times and modernity.

From an autobiographical approach, O'Connor's short stories about aging also bring to the fore latent anxieties in relation to her illness, which find correlation in passages in which older characters resent the physical effects of aging, regret their dependence on the care of others, and feel nostalgia for the lost past in the rural South. As an immune disorder, lupus involves a case of the defense system fighting against the body itself, its effects may last for an unpredictable lapse of time, and the increasing recurrence of symptoms leads to the

patient's need of being under treatment. As a result of her illness, whose effects could easily be mistaken by untimely outbursts of aging, O'Connor felt progressively isolated in the home as a result of increasing immobility and pain. In this respect, her situation was not unlike that of the older characters in her stories "Wildcat," in which Old Gabriel is prevented from joining the hunt, and "A Stroke of Good Fortune," in which Ruby complains about the progressive decline of her body. When O'Connor's illness was diagnosed, she felt compelled to move back to her mother's home and remain under her care despite being a grown-up adult. Her situation at the time is evocative of the older characters in stories like "The Geranium," "Judgement Day," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" and "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," in which Old Dudley, Tanner, General Sash and Old Tarwater feel dependent on their younger relatives and are unable to lead an autonomous existence. As O'Connor went back to rural Georgia as a result of her illness, she reconnected with her roots and the values prevailing in the old South which she had imbibed in her youth. Having lived in big cities and towns on the east coast for part of her adult life, O'Connor's return to her hometown may have stirred early memories of the South. The clash between rural and urban settings which O'Connor may have experienced finds correlation in stories like "The Artificial Nigger" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in which older characters leave their hometown in the rural South to begin a journey towards a threatening and unfamiliar destination. O'Connor's process of coming to terms with an immune disorder, which shares a series of symptoms with the advent of old age, and forced her to return to the rural South and feel dependent on the care of her mother, finds reflection in the pervasive role of aging—in terms of characters, themes, and latent autobiographical aspects—that characterises her short fiction at the time.

3. PORTRAYING THE AGED: PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF AGING AND AGEIST BIAS

In O'Connor's narratives portraying old age, elderly characters are described by means of emphasizing the effects of aging on their bodies. Likewise, older characters display some eccentricities or peculiarities of temperament, and they also exhibit some monotonous and repetitive daily habits that emphasize passivity. Accordingly, the characterization of the elders in O'Connor's stories generally complies with Gullette's notion of narratives of decline (2011), whereby aging is mostly envisioned as a process of gradual loss and decreasing capability. Besides, O'Connor's short fiction dealing with aging also includes numerous passages which display prevalent ageist attitudes towards the elders, whereby

older characters are ostracized and debased on account of their age, thus anticipating Robert Butler's notion of ageism, which was coined in 1969, only a few years after O'Connor's short stories about aging were published.

In some stories, the portrayal of older characters underlines their physical and mental deterioration. In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," General Sash's age, since he is "a hundred and four years old" (134), is emphasized through the portrayal of his physical and mental condition, as "he was as frail as a dried spider" (140), while "the past and the future were the same thing to him, one forgotten and the other not remembered" (139). Similarly, in "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head is portrayed as having "a small amount of white hair that had turned tobacco-colored over the years and this lay flat across the back of his head—the front of his head was bald and creased" (253), while Lucynell Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is depicted grotesquely, since, when Mr. Shiftlet offers her some chewing gum, she raises "her upper lip to indicate she had no teeth" (146). Likewise, in many stories, older characters suffer from some mobility impairment, as is the case with "The Geranium," in which Old Dudley's daughter takes him to go shopping, but he is "too slow" (3) to follow her pace, while, in "A View of the Woods," Mr. Fortune declares that he is an "old man with a heart condition" when he argues with his granddaughter Mary (344). Likewise, in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby must stop "on the fifth step to blow" (97), as she gets exhausted upon going up the stairs, and in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," Old Tarwater foretells that "the stairsteps would take ten years off is life" (294). In addition, in these stories, some elderly characters are often associated with passivity and monotonous routines, since, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," it is revealed that, while being driven in the car, "the grandmother took cat naps and woke up every few minutes with her own snoring" (123), and analogously, in "Wildcat," Old Gabriel affirms that there is nothing "for old people to do but wait" (30), while in "Judgement Day," Tanner's son-in-law asserts that all that his elderly father-in-law does is "sit all day with that hat on" (532). Accordingly, the overall portrayal of elders in these stories emphasize their physical and cognitive deterioration, sedentarism and passivity, which mostly equals aging with decline.

In contrast, though, some of O'Connor's stories about aging also reveal ageist prejudices towards elderly characters on behalf of their younger counterparts, who often treat their elders with contempt, ignore them or simply consider them as relics from the past. This attitude evokes Butler's concept of ageism defined as "a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged" and "a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old,

disease, disability" (243). Additionally, Alex Comfort defined the term as "the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specified number of years" (35). As cases in point, in O'Connor's short fiction, older women are ridiculed for trying to hold on to their youth or impose their ways on their younger counterparts. In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby's neighbor, Mr. Jerger, ironically refers to the fact that "Ponce de León was looking for the fountain of youth," and that "he was trying to be young always" (101), as Ruby feels concerned about the fact that she must be growing old. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," when Lucynell Crater meets Mr. Shiftlet, she persuades him to marry her daughter, since "she was ravenous for a son-in-law" (150), as matriarch who wishes to exert control over her daughter's future. Besides, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," when the grandmother and her family encounter a dangerous criminal on their way to Florida, she lectures him about his mischievous behaviour, and she even tries to convince him to abandon his criminal ways, until he finally exclaims, "she would have been a good woman […] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133). Older women are thus treated with particular disdain by younger counterparts.

Elderly men are also exposed to ageist prejudice, as they are scorned and even commodified by their own younger relatives. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley is offended when his daughter's African-American neighbor pats him on the back and calls him "old-timer" (13). In "Wildcat," the young hunters make fun of Old Gabriel, as they believe that he is afraid of staying home on his own in case he is attacked by the beast. In "A View of the Woods," despite Mr. Fortune's attachment to his granddaughter, after facing her insolence, he admits to himself, "he had never seen a child behave in such a way in his life—neither his own children nor anyone else had ever displayed such temper in his presence" (353). In "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," after Old Tarwater passes away, his nephew tells himself that "old men are selfish" (304) and "you could have been a city slicker for the last ten years—instead, you been deprived of any company but him, you been living in a two-story barn in the middle of this earth's bald patch" (306), thus suggesting that his choices were limited as a result of Old Tarwater's constant surveillance. In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," General Sash is literally treated as a commodity and exhibited like a relic of the American Civil War, since, "every year on Confederate Memorial Day, he was bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum where he was displayed from one to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery, and historic documents" (139).

Sometimes ageist prejudice takes overstated proportions, since, in "Final Judgement," Tanner's daughter and son-in-law discuss where they are going to bury him when he passes on, unaware of the fact that Tanner is listening. Consequently, O'Connor's short fiction gives evidence of instances of the prevailing ageism existing in society that subject the elders to discrimination and ostracism.

4. THEMATIC TROPES OF AGING: NOSTALGIA, WISDOM, GENDER

As narratives of Southern fiction, and particularly, of a kind of realism of distance that characterizes the grotesque, some of O'Connor's short stories about aging focus on the nostalgia that elderly characters feel towards the golden years of the past and the places where they had the best time of their lives. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley spends his days watching the flowerpot opposite his daughter's apartment, because it reminds him of "the sick Grisby boy at home and it was the color of the drapes the old ladies had in the parlor" (9), thus conceding that he misses his own home. Analogously, in "Judgement Day"—a later story that O'Connor based on her early narrative "The Geranium"—Tanner, who is also living in his daughter's flat, indulges in memories of better times, as he remembers that "at home he had been living in a shack but there was at least air around it—he could put his feet on the ground" (541). Some elderly characters also feel nostalgia for the splendor of her golden years, since, in "Wildcat," when Old Gabriel realizes that the young men go hunting, he recollects "memories of his youth when he also wanted to catch a cat" (27), whereas, in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," although his granddaughter wishes to introduce her grandfather as a war veteran, elderly General Sash ponders that "this was not the same uniform he had worn in the war between the States," and that "he had not actually been a general in that war—he had probably been a foot soldier" (135). In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother muses about her past as a Southern Belle, as she recollects "an old plantation that she had visited in this neighborhood once she was a young lady" (123). Nonetheless, in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," one of Old Tarwater's nephews invites him to stay in his apartment so that he can write an academic paper on him based on his habits and ways of thinking, ultimately declaring him "a type that's almost extinct" (301). Accordingly, the elders are believed to be repositories and guardians of the traditions and values from the past, which they struggle to preserve although the legacy that they represent seems to be doomed in times of modernity.

Moreover, in addition to holding on to their role as respectable patriarchs and matriarchs who are preservers of old morals and ideals, in O'Connor's fiction, these elders are also embodiments of wisdom and ancestral knowledge. In his analysis of images of older people in art and society, Herbert Covey (1991) identifies the traditional role attached to the elders as sages. In O'Connor's story "The Geranium," as Old Dudley feels lonely and ignored in his daughter's apartment in New York, he recollects how his African-American boy, Rabie, enjoyed listening to his stories about the past and "about Atlanta when Old Dudley had been there and about how guns were put together on the inside and all the other things the old man knew" (5). In other narratives, older men display overtly that they hold a high opinion of themselves. In "Wildcat," Old Gabriel commits himself to hunt the beast and asserts that he will catch it, as opposed to what happened to old Hezuh, who was slain by a wild cat when Old Dudley was only a child. In "A View of the Woods," Mr. Fortune considers himself "a man of advanced vision, even if he was seventy-nine years old" (338). If older men praise themselves for their courage and entrepreneurial skills, older women display their vanity and sense of class. In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby's vanity is displayed when she compares herself with her own mother when she was the same age, and in comparison, she exclaims that she is "extremely young looking for her age" (98). Similarly, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother dresses herself up for the journey, since, "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (118), and in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Lucynell Crater displays a sense of superiority when she meets Mr. Shiftlet, whom she dismisses as a tramp, since, as is mentioned, "the old woman watched him with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun" (146), hence showing her assumed authority as a matriarch.

Elderly characters are also portrayed as experienced, knowledgeable, and guardians of the values of the past which extol them as leaders and guides particularly for the youth. In "The Artificial Nigger," as Mr. Head plans to take his grandson Nelson to Atlanta, he admits that "age was a choice blessing and that only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young" (249), while, during their stay in Atlanta, Nelson is afraid of getting lost and admits to himself that "his grandfather was indispensable to him" (257). Besides, as a result of his longevity and his splendorous past as a veteran, in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," General Sash is portrayed as a "glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions" (135). Likewise, in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," following Old Tarwater's death, his nephew recollects

that "his uncle had taught him figures, reading, writing, and history beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden" (293), thus describing him as a mentor from whom he has learned everything that he knows. In O'Connor's short fiction, the portrayal of the elders as preservers of wisdom recurs and contrasts with instances of ageist prejudice, which also persist as indicative of prevailing social bias against the aged.

These narratives also give evidence of the way that old age conditions gender, inasmuch as gender also conditions old age, since elderly characters attempt to hold on to the same conceptualizations of masculinities and femininities prevailing in their youth, which are called into question as they grow older. Drawing on Pamela Gravagne's precepts (2013), with the advent of old age, elderly men appear to undergo a symbolic process of emasculation, as they are gradually deprived of forgone ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which have been conventionally associated with strength, authority, and dominance. Elderly men miss the action they enjoyed in their youth, as is the case with "Wildcat," in which Old Gabriel would like to join the party of hunters, while, in "The Geranium," Old Dudley recollects his good old days when he used to go fishing with his friend Rabie, since, back in the country, "he was the man in the house and he did the things a man in the house was supposed to do" (5). Likewise, in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," although General Sash is honored as a war veteran for his strength and courage, it is put forward that "his feet were completely dead now, his knees worked like old hinges, his kidneys functioned when they would" (139), hence admitting that he is no longer in possession of the masculine assets that categorized him as a national hero in his youth. Similarly, in their old age, male elders are divested of their authority as patriarchs, as happens in "Judgement Day," when Tanner assumes that, since he had moved into his daughter's flat, "he had been nothing but a nuisance to her" (547). Moreover, in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," Tarwater is disloyal to his great uncle's last wishes with regard to his burial arrangements, whereas, in "A View of the Woods," Mary Fortune loses all respect to her grandfather even to the extent of mistreating him physically. Similarly, in "The Artificial Nigger," although Mr. Head had planned to take his grandson to Atlanta to teach him a lesson, when he is in the city, he gets lost, he feels at the mercy of strangers, and he even loses the admiration of his protégé, which leads Mr. Head to realize that "now he was wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before, a long old age without respect" (267), thus feeling pity for himself.

Besides, if elderly men try to hold on to conventional ideals of dominant masculinities, while being deprived of them in their old age, older women also try to retain an idealized image of themselves in their youth as Southern Belles. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother recollects her youth and tells her grandchildren about the pretenders she had, while, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," as the lady of the plantation, Lucynell Crater holds on to her past ideals of femininity and fantasies about getting her daughter settled and married. Nonetheless, as Kathleen Woodward (1999) asserts, with the advent of aging, older women also dread the feeling of resembling their mothers and the shock of identifying themselves with the older woman. In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," when Ruby gains awareness of her own aging process, she recollects the way her mother looked at her age, stating that "she had looked like a puckered-up old yellow apple, sour" (97), conceding that having children may have led her to grow old prematurely. When Ruby suspects that the reason why she often gets exhausted lies in the fact that she is pregnant, she believes that this circumstance is bound to hasten her aging process and deprive her of her good looks as a woman, as also happened to her mother. This process of metaphorical alienation that appears to come along with aging paves the way for the emergence of the aging other, which acquires particular relevance in the way O'Connor approached her own symbolic process of premature aging as a result of her illness.

5. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOTIFS: THE OTHER AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Along O'Connor's short fiction about aging, there is a series of latent motifs, associated with the advent of old age, which appear to conjure O'Connor's own fears and anxieties as a result of her illness and her ongoing process of premature aging. According to psychoanalytic precepts, Amelia DeFalco (2009) describes aging as a source of the Freudian uncanny, which is that sort of frightening that has been repressed, but leads back to what is familiar. Likewise, for Simone de Beauvoir (1972), old age involves a process of internalization of difference, which paves the way for the alienation that gives rise to the figure of the aging other. During the course of her immune disorder, in which her defense system fought against her own organism, O'Connor might have faced an experience of symbolic otherization, whereby she was forced to embrace that other self, which looked familiar, but estranged. O'Connor was thus obliged to confront her aging other in the mirror. Besides, given the fact that her immune disorder gradually deteriorated her bodily functions, and that her father had died of the same disease, O'Connor had to confront her anticipating fears

of the shadow of death, which menaced to interrupt her life prematurely despite her young age. In her short fiction about aging, the motifs of the other and of death recur in passages in which individuals must confront their symbolic aging doubles and also feel threatened by the latent presence of death.

In some of O'Connor's short stories, aging acquires a psychoanalytic quality, since the individual's psyche is split and the archetype of the double emerges, thus including passages in which older and younger selves must confront each other. In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson are portrayed as doubles, insofar as they exchange qualities, particularly in terms of age, since "Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already" (252), while it is also disclosed that "Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man" (269). Analogously, in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," when Old Tarwater passes away, his nephew, who has lived all his life with the elderly man, undergoes a process of alienation, which is signaled as his voice alters, since, "the voice sounded like a stranger's voice, as if the death had changed him instead of the old man" (295). Similarly, in "A View of the Woods," Mr. Fortune senses that a special bond binds him together with his granddaughter, which is elicited by their resemblance, as is stated that "no one was particularly glad that Mary Fortune looked like her grandfather except the old man himself" (336), although when they disagree with each other on the way to administer his property, their fight is portrayed as if the elderly man was struggling against himself, insofar as "he managed to roll over and reverse their positions so that he was looking down into the face that was his own" (355). The symbolic clash between older and younger selves is particularly depicted in the narratives by means of the traditionally established close connection between the life stages of childhood and old age. In this respect, in "The Geranium," as a result of his dependence on the care of others, "Old Dudley felt like a child with a pop-pistol" (12) and, in "Judgement Day," Tanner's daughter admits that the fact of taking care of her father is "as bad as having a child" (533). Similarly, in "Wildcat," Old Gabriel recalls that, as a child, he was obliged to stay home as the youngsters went hunting, and now, as an elderly man, he is also prevented from going out in the woods to hunt the beast, thus implying that both children and elderly men are equally discouraged from taking action and running risks in comparison with adult men. Accordingly, these stories about aging portray the emergence of a symbolic other, underline the process of symbolic alienation that aging brings about, and describe aging as an experience of the uncanny.

Besides, by means of the blending of tragedy, horror and black humor, some of O'Connor's narratives come to an end with unexpected ironic twists that lay bare the inconsequence of life that commonly leads to the absurdity of death. In "The Geranium," Old Dudley contemplates the flowerpot on the window ledge opposite his daughter's apartment, hence feeling symbolically identified with it, and when the flowerpot falls off, it denotes an ironic elegy of Dudley's lost youth and prospective death. In "The Artificial Nigger," in his role as a mentor, Mr. Head intends to take his grandson Nelson to Atlanta, even if, ironically, he is gradually deprived of his authority when he gets lost and even ends up following his grandson along the streets. The unpredictable end of some of the stories involving elderly characters underscores that their fate is simultaneously tainted with cruelty and irony. In this respect, the grandmother finally encounters the criminal about whom she had been warning her family in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the conman that Lucynell Crater meets takes away her daughter as he marries her in order to steal their car in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and Ruby realizes that the cause of her tiredness lies in the fact that she is expecting a child, which, in her view, also amounted to the reason why her mother grew old prematurely in "A Stroke of Good Fortune." Finally, older characters often meet ludicrous deaths that exacerbate both the ironic and tragic quality of their fate. As cases in point, the grandmother meets a violent death at the hands of the criminal whom she was trying to amend in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," General Sash passes away, but nobody takes notice as his still dead body looks the same as before in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," Old Tarwater dies suddenly as he is having breakfast with his nephew in "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," Mr. Fortune passes away after he quarrels with his favorite granddaughter in "A View of the Woods," and Tanner is killed as he lands upside down in the middle of the flight of stairs in the building where he lives with his daughter and son-in-law, although he believes that he is finally on his way back home in "Judgement Day." Consequently, some of O'Connor's narratives about aging portray the latent presence of death, which often takes place suddenly and unexpectedly, thus suggesting its invisible omnipresence. Insofar as death sometimes occurs as a result of ironic twists of fate, O'Connor seems to be underlining its ludicrousness, which is only counteracted by her faith and embracement of the afterlife.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The significant number of O'Connor's short stories that focus on aging are indicative of their categorization as exponents of Southern fiction and the grotesque, given its attention to tropes like the clash of contradictory elements, the prevalence of nostalgia, and the protagonism that the displaced acquire. Nonetheless, the pervasive instances of aging in O'Connor's short fiction may also be due to more personal reasons. As O'Connor struggled with the symptoms of lupus at a later stage, the illness had a deep impact on her life as well as on her creativity as a writer, leading her to undergo a symbolic process of premature aging in spite of her youth. This circumstance not only endowed her writing with a sense of urgency, as if she were running out of time, but it also appeared to trigger an instinctive interest in old age. In this respect, it could be argued that aging turns into a pervasive trope in O'Connor's short fiction, insofar as it was particularly after she was diagnosed with the disorder that an increasing number of her stories explicitly dealt with aging.

As has been shown, O'Connor's short fiction features elderly characters as protagonists and old age as a thematic trope which acquires diverse functions ranging from decline and ageism to nostalgia and wisdom along with the symbolic archetype of the double and the shadow of death. Insofar as O'Connor's fiction has often been extolled as an exponent of Southern fiction and the grotesque, it may be argued that the relevance that old age acquires in her short stories turns it into a pervasive trope intrinsically associated with this subgenre by means of an allegorical use which denotes decadence, nostalgia, and death. Nonetheless, an autobiographical approach to O'Connor's short fiction also allows for interpreting the pervasive presence of aging in her stories as indicative of latent personal fears and anxieties about growing old, the symbolic process of otherization that aging may ential, and the progressive insight into the inevitability of death.

WORKS CITED

Bjerre, Thomas Aervold. "Southern Gothic Literatures." *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia: Literature*, Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 1-21.

Blau, Sheldon. *Lupus: The Body Against Itself*. Doubleday, 1974.

Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Major Short Story Writers: Flannery O'Connor*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1999.

Butler, Robert. "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry". *The Gerontologist*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1969, pp. 243-246.

Comfort, Alex. *A Good Age*. Crown Publishers, 1976.

Covey, Herbert. *Images of Older People in Western Art and Society*. Praeger, 1991.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Coming of Age*. Trans. Patrick O'Brien. Putnam, 1972.

DeFalco, Amelia. *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*. The Ohio State UP, 2009.

Evans, Robert. "Age and Aging in Some Short Stories by Flannery O'Connor." *Fiction and Poetry to Help Us Age: Criticism and Reflections by Professors of Literature*, edited by Laurence Mazzeno and Sue Norton, Palgrave McMillan, 2025, pp. 249-262.

Fitzgerald, Sally, ed. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Vintage-Random House, 1980.

Gentry, Marshall Bruce. *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*. UP of Mississippi, 1986.

Goddu, Teresa. *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. Columbia UP, 1997.

Graybill, Mark. "Nostalgia, Race and Authoritarianism in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction." *American Studies*, vol. 66, no.3, 2021, pp. 441-462.

Gravagne, Pamela. *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*. McFarland, 2013.

Gullette, Margaret M. *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*. The U of Chicago P, 2011.

Featherstone, Mike and Mike Hepworth. "Ageing and Old Age: Reflections on the Postmodern Lifecourse". *Becoming and Being Old: Sociological Approaches to Later Life*, edited by Bill Bytheway, Teresa Kiel, Patricia Allatt and Allan Bryman, Sage, 1989, pp. 143-157.

Horner, Carl. "Misfit as Metaphor: The Question and the Contradiction of Lupus in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 25, no.4, Fall 2005, pp. 1-14. https://dsq-sds.org

Kahane, Claire. "Comic Vibrations and Self-Constructions in Grotesque Literature." *Literature and Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1979, pp. 114-119.

Kurt, Bridget, dir. *Uncommon Grace: The Life of Flannery O'Connor*. PBS, 2017.

Marshall, Bridget. "Defining Southern Gothic." *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature*, edited by Jay Ellis, Salem P, 2013, pp. 3-18.

McDermott, Alice. *Flannery*. Directed by Elizabeth Coffman and Mark Bosco. American Masters Films, season 35, episode 2. PBS. March 2021.

McFarland, Dorothy Tuck. *Flannery O'Connor*. Ungar, 1976.

Miró López, Susana and Fernando Viñado Oteo. "El reto de envejecer: la vejez a la luz de Flannery O'Connor, Erik Erikson y Romano Guardini." *Veritas*, vol. 47, 2020, pp. 133-150.

Nadal, Marita. "Southern Gothic: The Monster as Freak in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." *Monsters and Monstrosity: from the Canon to the Anti-Canon: Literary and Juridical Subversions*, edited by Daniela Carpi, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 205-218.

Nisly, Lamar. *Impossible to Say: Representing Religious Mystery in Fiction by Malamud, Percy, Ozick, and O'Connor*. Greenwood Press, 2002.

O'Connor, Flannery. "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, pp. 40-43.

---. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 117-133.

---. "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 134-144.

---. "A Stroke of Good Fortune." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 95-107.

---. "A View of the Woods." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 335-356.

---. "Judgement Day." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 531-550.

---. "The Artificial Nigger." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 249-270.

---. "The Geranium." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 3-14.

---. "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 145-156.

---. "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead." *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 292-310.

---. "Wildcat". *Complete Stories*, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 26-32.

Walsh, Christopher. "Dark Legacy: Gothic Ruptures in Southern Literature." *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature*, edited by Jay Ellis, Salem P, 2013, pp. 19-34.

Woodward, Kathleen. "The Mirror Stage of Old Age." *Memory and Desire: Aging, Literature, Psychoanalysis*, edited by Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz, Indiana UP, 1986, pp. 97-113.

---. "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature." *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, edited by Kathleen Woodward, Indiana UP, 1999, pp. 149-170.

Wyatt-Brown, Anne. "Introduction: Aging, Gender, and Creativity." *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, edited by Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, UP of Virginia, 1993, pp. 1-18.