



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

34 | Spring 2000

Notes on the Irish and Irish-North-American short story

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/479>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2000

Number of pages: 109-118

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

R. J. Clougherty, Jr, "Blank Gray to its Farthest Reaches: Silence and Ambiguity in Frank O'Connor's "Bridal Night"", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 34 | Spring 2000, Online since 09 September 2008, connection on 28 November 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/479>

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Blank Gray to its Farthest Reaches: Silence and Ambiguity in Frank O'Connor's "Bridal Night"

R. J. Clougherty, Jr

- 1 Frank O'Connor's work is always approached in terms of extremes; on the one hand, we see the world comically through the innocent child narrators of "First Confession" and "My Oedipus Complex"; on the other hand, the tragedy can be seen through the hardened characters in "Guests of the Nation." Within each of these stories, the most basic notions of good and evil come into conflict as social and private value structures come into conflict producing moral ambiguities. In each of O'Connor's stories, this moral ambiguity is illustrated through irony. In "First Confession," the story ends with Jackie having confessed his desire to murder his grandmother; and as a result of his confession, instead of receiving an overwhelming penance, he receives candy from the priest, leading his sister, Nora, to state in the last line of the story: "'Tis no advantage to anybody trying to be good. I might just as well be a sinner like you."¹ The irony is that Nora's abusive treatment of her brother is the true sin, but by the letter of dogma and rule, she is the better person. The irony and moral ambiguity here is that good and evil as commonly accepted are no measure of morality. At the end of "Guests of a Nation," the reader becomes aware that the moral ambiguity—having to execute friends for the benefit of a nation—effects the protagonists' perceptions of the world. In this instance, the narrator ends with the statement, "And everything that ever happened to me after I never felt the same about again."² Confronting such moral ambiguities not only effects the immediate perception, but re-shapes the character's entire view of the world around them. However, this narrator also makes an interesting observation about the ambiguity just prior to discussing its effect on sensory inputs.
- 2 The narrator of "Guests of the Nation," after returning from burying the bodies, states, "It is so strange what you feel at such moments, and not to be written afterwards."³ In this line, O'Connor raises the issue of the ability of discourse to convey experience. Not only is this unusual for O'Connor's better known works, but the fact that he places it at

the end of the story where it will reflect back and cast doubt upon all which the narrator has stated is even more unusual. In short, O'Connor creates an ambiguity in the reader's mind; forcing the reader to re-examine all that they understand of this narrative. Thus, the story itself becomes questionable not through the language which is present, but in the absences and the silence.

- 3 The issues of ambiguity and silence are raised most clearly in O'Connor's story, "Bridal Night." Given the fact that O'Connor published over 100 short stories, not even to consider his translations, his poetry, and his critical works, scholarship has not always been able to fully cover all of the stories. "Bridal Night" falls into that category of works with very little criticism written of them. What criticism there is usually treats the story only to contextualize or compare other stories. James H. Matthews writes most fully of the story and notes of it that it: "is powerfully impressionistic, and though it has more emotional impact than most of his [O'Connor's] stories, it is hardly sentimental. What strikes the reader is not just the emotion, but the aptness of emotion."⁴ Matthews' support of this thesis is simply a summary of the contents of the story. He does not have any opportunity to explore the specific symbols used in it. Deborah Averill, in her essay "Human Contact in the Short Stories," discusses "Bridal Night" as a story about human contact on both the level of the story and the level of the frame, noting that on the level of the story that to the character of Denis, "The moment of contact and the single-mindedness of his love carry him outside time."⁵ She then points out at the end of the essay that this contact is what gives the contact between the narrator and Denis' mother who tells the story to the narrator a greater sense of significance. Richard Ellmann uses the story to support his thesis that O'Connor, "wanted life to be something other than martyrdom to either a public or private religion. It should be free and impulsive, as purely unmitigated as the teacher in 'The Bridal Night,' who risks contumely to lie in the bed beside her delirious lover."⁶ None of these readings challenges or encounters some of the most basic symbols used within this story, for if we carefully examine the metaphors and images of the story, we discover that the story collapses in on itself in that it does not simply represent ambiguity as a signifier, but the story itself is a signified through its ambiguity. It does not simply tell us of an event loaded with ambiguity, but rather, it illustrates the ambiguity through its own ambiguous nature. In order to convey the ambiguity, O'Connor turns to silence as the ultimate signifier of it.
- 4 The essence of this story is that the narrator is walking along the coast of the West of Ireland and encounters an old woman⁷ sitting by herself with whom he strikes up a conversation. The entire conversation, however, is one sided as the old woman tells the story of her son Denis who, after falling in love with a local schoolteacher, goes insane. While raving with insanity, he asks for the teacher who comes, lies beside him, and after that, he calmly goes to the (O'Connor's term, not mine) "asylum." While this may sound like a fairly reasonable plot for a Frank O'Connor short story, at this point we must consider two important points that will call that assessment into question. First, O'Connor's usual practice in the short story is to never have the story based on idiosyncrasies of the main character. Not only is this his practice in his writing, but Richard T. Gill notes that O'Connor stressed this point in the writing classes which he taught at Harvard.⁸ Thus, to view Denis, the young man who supposedly goes insane, as the main character would seem to defy O'Connor's usual practice. As all of the characters in this story show some degree of idiosyncrasy, this could be O'Connor simply putting his own rule aside, or the main character is the narrator of whom we

know nothing except that he is the one who is relaying the old woman's story. Thus, we have a main character, who except for platitudes and questions which enlighten the old woman's story, does nothing except describe the scenery. Likewise, if the narrator is the main character, then the essence of the short story must be not in the story itself, but in its telling, and more specifically, in the main character's listening. This in turn hinges on his ability to understand and interpret the key details correctly.

- 5 The second point is the unusual ending. The old woman comments about how wonderful it is that no one in the town ever spoke badly of the school teacher for having to lie down beside Denis, at which point, the narrator abruptly ends the story with one of the most powerful lines in O'Connor's canon: "Darkness had fallen over the Atlantic, blank gray to its farthest reaches." While the summary above was rather metonymical, we must shift into the metaphorical to read this line. The contradictory nature of this line—darkness would usually be synonymous with black, while O'Connor insists on gray makes the line stand out—throws up an immediate flag here. If the essence of this story is at the level of the frame with the narrator functioning as the main character, then this line which the narrator writes directly to the reader, must be viewed as crucial. We must then ask, to what issue in this story does the concept of gray apply?
- 6 As we saw in the examples which this essay opened with, moral ambiguity is always an issue in O'Connor's fiction, and this story is certainly no different; however, I would argue that the gray also applies to the issues of language and communication, and in particular silence, as well. To begin with the moral ambiguity, we can see that the teacher (Miss Regan) obviously encounters a moral decision in deciding whether she should follow the community's moral standards and not lie beside a man to whom she's not married or if she should provide comfort to the mentally ill and fulfill his request that she lie beside him. However, this point requires us to make a number of assumptions. First, and obviously, we assume that we as readers understand the story. Second and third, we assume that the narrator both understands the story which the old woman tells him accurately and is able to convey that clearly to us. Fourth, we assume that the old woman is able to and does convey the story in an accurate and true manner. Finally, we assume that the old woman accurately knows all of the relevant information. This five step discursive chain makes us further ponder as to why a narrator is placed between the reader and the teller of the story (as opposed to the majority of O'Connor stories where the narrator is a character within the events). The fact that the story makes constant references to mis-communication and to silence makes the discursive chain not only a symbol of distance between speaker and listener in any linguistic act, but also representative of the multiple layers of meaning in any usage of language which compound the number of possibilities of misunderstanding.
- 7 At the level of the frame, the language which is being used is never revealed to the reader. It is never made clear as to whether the old woman is telling the narrator the story in English or Irish or which lines of the dialogue are in English or Irish. We only know that it is an Irish speaking area for in the very first paragraph that introduces Miss Regan as a character, we are told that "The neighbors could make nothing of it, and she being a stranger, and with only the book Irish, they left her alone."⁹ Obviously, linguistic difference ostracizes Miss Regan from this community. What is important here, however, is that the ostracizing occurs because she does not speak Irish in a native dialect; if English were the common tongue, then the quality of her Irish would

be a moot point. If Miss Regan communicates with the people of the community in Irish, then the dialectical difference could potentially lead to mis-communication. If the natives of this region, which the narrator tells us is extremely isolated, used Irish as their basic language with little exposure to English, then the use of English between Miss Regan and the community could also lead to mis-communication. Thus, whichever language is used, the potential for misunderstanding is high. As Averill noted above, the frame is reinforced by the story, the same is true when we approach language as a theme of the story; all of the potential communication problems between Miss Regan and the old woman and Denis must also apply to the communication between the old woman and the narrator. At some level, parts of all of this story must be a translation which automatically makes it further suspect in that an interpretive act occurs between speaker and reader.

- 8 Additionally, we also have reason to suspect the narrator who justifies his questions to the old woman thus: "I had no fear of trespassing on her emotions. These lonesome people in the wild places, it is their nature to speak; they must cry out their sorrows like the wild birds" (B 20). Thus, the narrator places her voice parallel to the sound of the birds which he notices in the setting, and hears what she says as a set of random sounds, not giving credence, credibility or even recognition to what she is saying.
- 9 As if these issues do not reflect enough possibilities, O'Connor further indicates that despite the communication differences, the characters also attempt to use irony. The old woman tells of how Miss Regan would often visit the land around their house, and "That was where my Denis saw her. He'd go up to her of an evening and sit on the grass beside her, and off and on he might take her out in the boat with him. And she'd say with that big laugh of hers: 'Denis is my beau.' Those now were her words and she meant no more harm by it than the child unborn, and I knew it and Denis knew it, and it was a little joke we had, the three of us had" (20). However, we have no way of knowing if Denis knew it. If Denis took what she said seriously, then his reaction to her avoidance becomes more understandable as an emotional reaction to rejection and less questionable as the delusional symptoms of mental illness.
- 10 This issue is compounded by the fact that the old woman admits to wishing that a relationship would develop between them:
often enough stirabout and praties was all we had for days. And there was she with money to her name in the bank! And that wasn't all, for he was a good boy; a quiet, good-natured boy, and another would take pity on him, knowing he would make her a fine steady husband, but she was not the sort, and well I knew it from the first day I laid eyes on her, that her hand would never rock the cradle. (21)
- 11 Thus, the old woman herself did not accept the full irony of the joke—she herself wished for the ironic to be literal.
- 12 On the next level, we have to wonder if the old woman even knows the entire story and nature of the relationship between Denis and Miss Regan. They know each other more intimately than the old woman realizes:
When darkness came on there was a little bit of wind blew up from the sea and Denis began to rave to himself, and it was her name he was calling all the time. 'Winnie,' that was her name, and it was the first time I heard it spoken. 'Who is that he is calling?' says Sean. 'It is the schoolmistress,' says I, 'for though I do not recognize the name, I know 'tis no one else he'd be asking for.' (23)
- 13 Obviously they have communicated and been intimate enough to be on a first name basis. This is further reinforced by the fact that Denis' first question to Miss Regan is,

"isn't it the long time you were away from me?" to which she responds "but you know I couldn't help it." Clearly, there is a deeper relationship here than the old woman is aware of. It is not simply an issue of presence, but again it becomes a matter of understanding. Denis insists that Miss Regan lie beside him and stresses that it be beneath the bedclothes; Miss Regan not only agrees but insists that the old woman and Sean leave them alone in the room. The old woman notes:

We went into the kitchen, Sean and myself, and we heard every whisper that passed between them. She got into the bed beside him: I heard her. He was whispering the foolish things boys do be saying at that age, and then we heard no ore only the pair of them breathing. (24)

- 14 While there are many implications and suggestions within that paragraph which we could explore, the most important is the fact that the old woman assigns no meaning value to the words which Denis was whispering. She does not even tell the narrator what it was, either because she saw no meaning value to it, or because she was embarrassed at the content. (Her reference to boys at that age would seem to indicate that she knows the contents but does not wish to convey them.) Either way, the full story is not told.
- 15 This takes us to the final and most important issue of this short story and that is the issue of silence. On a theoretical issue, silence will always be problematic. All signifying systems will recognize absence within the model. If we take a Saussurian approach, the present signifier can represent the absent signified. If we take a Peircean approach, the sign stands for that which is absent (the observant can connect a present sign to an absent object). However, neither model can function if we invert them. In the Saussurain model, we cannot place absence in as a signifier as the result would create an infinity of signs in that it could represent nothing and everything simultaneously. Likewise, in the Peircean model, we could not determine if the absence was iconic, indexical or symbolic, and when we set it within Peirce's triad, the observer would not be able to recognize the absent sign (as the absence would not present a sign hence the whole process cannot be initiated). Similarly, if we begin to analyze the concept of metaphor, we can have an absent tenor but not an absent vehicle. Thus, silence as a symbol would seem to be an inherent contradiction. Without a key to decode this sign, our only hope is to examine the interpretations placed upon it as hypotheses. What we must seek is not simply an interpretation, but a code system into which such an interpretation fits.
- 16 If we attempt to use silence as a signifier, we must first split it into two forms, for the purposes of this essay, we will refer to them as "demarcating silence" and "communicative silence." Demarcating silence is an absolute necessity in any use of language. The silences between syllables or the white spaces between letters demarcate and make possible the existence of the word. Likewise, we can carry this upward through various constructions (the pause between two sentences being longer than the pause for the semi-colon) until we get to the very use of silence to demarcate a text—the text is preceded by silence and concluded in silence. In "Bridal Night," O'Connor stresses the silence at the opening and the closure of the frame of this short story through the sense of serenity in the opening (in particular that the old woman is sitting by herself on a rock and not speaking) and the sensory denial of the final line's "blank gray to its farthest reaches."

- 17 Communicative silence is silence used deliberately as a signifier (as opposed to its role of demarcating signifiers above). In this instance, common usage finds silence to be extremely communicative. For example, if a person makes a friendly approach to a friend and the friend makes no response, the silence is taken to communicate a sense of displeasure on the part of the friend. The silence has its effect not because of its existence, but because of one's expectations of signs (it is the absence of expected signs not simply the absence of signs). Thus each time the narrator stresses the silence it expresses at a deeper level the expectation of communication.¹⁰
- 18 The key, then, to decoding silence as a signifier will be in the context of the expectations of the speaker who notes the silence. In the code system that we recognize to be the context of this story, silence, as a sign, implodes as it is interpreted twice within this text, once on the story level and once at the frame level. On the story level, silence is used as a sign of Denis' mental illness. The old woman tells us, "he lost his tongue entirely.... 'Twas madness in him and he knew it, and that is what made him lose his tongue...." (21). If silence were used as a signifier of mental illness throughout the text, then we would have a clear sign established; however, on the frame level, in its usage by the same character (the old woman) silence becomes a sign of goodness. The old woman believes that the community she lives in is a good one because no one ever spoke about Miss Regan spending the night in the bed beside Denis:
- And isn't it a strange and wonderful thing? From that day to the day she left us there did no one speak a bad word about what she did, and the people couldn't do enough for her. Isn't it a strange thing and the world being as wicked as it is, that no one would say the bad word about her? (25)
- 19 In this instance the silence is portrayed as a sign of goodness. If the same sign can be used for both insanity and goodness, how then do we read this story? The final line which I quoted above indicates a peaceful as well as silent situation; thus, the narrator has entered either a world of insanity or a world of goodness.
- 20 Likewise, given the questions of mis-communication that the story raises, how are we to trust the silence that we have only been told about. At the opening of this story, the narrator comments that the house is well removed from the community and that the old woman is sitting alone. It could very well be that people did talk about Miss Regan, the old woman was simply removed from the discourse community and did not hear it. Thus, silence can also represent the old woman's ostracization from the discourse community in the same way that Denis was ostracized from Miss Regan's attentions. The implication of this is that the use of silence as a sign also moves to a deeper level in telling us the place of the observant of the silence within that given code system and/or discourse community.
- 21 Indeed, this story does cast Blank Gray to its farthest reaches. If signs become unreliable and unstable, then the ambiguity of language creates the moral ambiguity. Perhaps we should at this point re-examine where we began this discussion. In "Guests of the Nation," we see that words, labeling one as friend or enemy, leads to the ambiguity of good and evil based upon those very terms. In "First Confession," the very ideas of sin and goodness we find once more simply to be arbitrary terms. "Bridal Night" turns away from the presence of signifier and turns to silence. Despite, madness, hints of domestic violence, publicly acknowledged sexuality, and poverty, goodness is proclaimed in the silence that surrounds them.

- 22 If we take the silence itself to be real, then this itself creates a moral ambiguity. On the one hand, the society can be viewed as positive both for not feeding on malicious gossip and for not pronouncing evils of its own value structures in the actions of others. On the other hand, a great deal of atrocity occurs in the story, the exploitation of the woman teacher, the abuse of the mentally ill, etc., which the silence refuses to acknowledge.
- 23 The issue of silence reinforces the significance of language itself in the story. The semiotic clash occurs on the levels of numerous codes. The differences of class and socioeconomic status, educational levels, and moral codes also parallel the differences in language. Dennis the character captured between the two code systems is declared mentally ill because he interprets language literally and loses his ability to see irony. Yet the other characters in the novel use literal interpretation as a means of ignoring the evidence and issues before them; thus, silence becomes an acceptable form of ignoring reality. Thus, even the standards of mental illness and normativity themselves become ambiguous for there is no ambiguity like silence.
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NOTES

1. Frank O'Connor, "First Confession," *Collected Stories*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Knopf, 1981, p. 182.
2. O'Connor, "Guests of the Nation," p. 12.
3. *Ibid.*
4. James H. Matthews, *Frank O'Connor* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1976), p.59.
5. Deborah Averill, "Human Contact in the Stories," *Michael/Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor*, ed. Maurice Sheehy (NY: Knopf, 1969), pp. 33-34.
6. Richard Ellmann, "Michael-Frank," *Michael/Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor*, ed. Maurice Sheehy (NY: Knopf, 1969), p. 24.
7. It is revealed in the course of the story that her name is Peg Sullivan. However, this is revealed indirectly (one character refers to her as Peg, another as Mrs. Sullivan). The narrator refers to her as "an old woman" or "the old woman." She, of course, refers to herself in the first person. I here refer to her as "the old woman" to remain aligned with the narrative perspective of the story.
8. Richard T. Gill, "Frank O'Connor in Harvard," *Michael/Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor*, ed. Maurice Sheehy (NY: Knopf, 1969), p. 43.
9. Frank O'Connor, "Bridal Night" p. 20
10. Thus, silence is indeed a sign in Peirce's concept. Peirce's definition of the sign is that which by knowing we know something more. Thus, the fact that silence as a sign carries the idea of expectations and signs which should be used places silence within the parameters of Peirce's definition.