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Cara Triebold
caratriebold@gmail.com

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Cara Triebold

Dr. Lamszus

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Hit with the Truth

In Flannery O’Conner’s short story titled “Revelation,” she describes Mrs. Turpin, a proud southern woman, and her visit to a doctor’s office. The story recounts Mrs. Turpin’s inner judgments of the people she meets, the sudden attack of a girl, and a revelation that restructures her previously well-ordered world. Applying Georg Hegel’s dialectics to this text brings into focus the story’s themes of self-recognition and truth.

As the “master” in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, Mrs. Turpin does not know herself, or the truth of the world around her. In his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel describes the master as “the lord” who “is the consciousness that exists *for itself*...” (552). This idea of the “master” is not only shown in the nature of Mrs. Turpin’s worldview, but also in the way she interacts with those around her. From the very beginning, she is described as a dominating figure in her surroundings. She stands “looming” in the center of the room, “a living demonstration that the room was inadequate and ridiculous” (O’Connor 488). Already, Mrs. Turpin’s view is established. We continue to see it in the descriptions that are made from her perspective, descriptions that are subtle judgments of everyone in the room. Almost everyone is defined by a negative characteristic, emphasizing their distinction from herself. The child is “dirty,” the man is “a lean stringy old fellow,” and the teenage girl is “ugly” with a “face blue with acne” (488, 490). Her sense of superiority is reinforced by the mental hierarchy she describes. She begins her classification with the group she judges to be the “lowest.” The order thus begins with “colored

people,” then “white-trash” followed by “home-owners.” Above these, she places “home-and-land owners,” the category she self-identifies with (491). When she contemplates the higher rungs of her hierarchy “the complexity” is said to “bear it on her” (491). Since Mrs. Turpin epitomizes the “master” in Hegel’s dialectic, any notion of someone superior to herself is hard for her to grasp.

In her role as “master,” Mrs. Turpin views others as “slaves.” The “slave” in Hegel’s dialectic has a higher form of self-consciousness because, as a person who is dependable on the “master,” they are forced to recognize the not-self—what is not themselves. Mrs. Turpin not only considers others as beneath her, but she also considers them through a lens that highlights their use to her. This is exemplified in the way she treats the African American workers that are employed to pick cotton. She announces her philosophy to the room by saying: “you got to love em if you want em to work for you” (494). Mrs. Turpin creates such a distinction between herself and others through the way she judges them and ranks them that it is impossible for her to have a relationship with the not-self.

This lack of relationship results in her lack of self-understanding. Hegel explains this by saying “the *truth* of the undefended consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman. This, it is true, appears at first *outside* of itself and not as the truth of self-consciousness” (553). Thus, Mrs. Turpin lacks “truth” because she lacks a relationship with what is outside of herself. We have already seen this in the way she has a hard time grasping those that rank above her. She further proves her misunderstanding of the not-self through her ignorance in her argument that African Americans would not want to leave America because “they got it too good here” (O’Connor 495). Her limited thinking is also exemplified in the way she thinks about the “white-trash” woman. She claims that due to “her own experience” there is

nothing about “people like them that she didn’t know already” (497). When we apply Hegel’s master-slave dialectic to “Revelation” and consider how this relates to the notion of the “not-self,” we see more clearly the self-knowledge Mrs. Turpin lacks.

When Hegel’s dialectical process is applied to Mrs. Turpin’s character, we see how Mrs. Turpin’s self-recognition is realized in the story. The climax of this story is generated by a confrontation with the antithesis of Mrs. Turpin’s worldview. Hints of this turning point can be seen as Mrs. Turpin is faced with an uneasiness, triggered by Mary Grace, the “ugly girl” who is with her in the waiting room. The tension between these two characters, created by the girl’s open hostility, identifies her as the catalyst. Her hostility prompts Mrs. Turpin to think “why girl, I don’t even know you” (O’Connor 495). This thought is significant since this is the first time Mrs. Turpin admits the knowledge she lacks of the not-self. Her world is literally shaken when Mary Grace physically attacks her, throwing the book she is reading at Mrs. Turpin’s head. Mrs. Turpin is knocked off her feet and fears an impending “earthquake” (499). When Mary Grace follows up her attack with the proclamation that Mrs. Turpin is an “old wart hog,” she provides an antithesis to Mrs. Turpin’s former opinion of herself (500). This knowledge, Hegel’s promised truth, is found by Mrs. Turpin through the subsequent synthesis of the two opposing ideas she is presented with.

Applying Hegel’s dialectic to the text, we can see readily how the synthesis takes place within Mrs. Turpin’s mind and how it connects to the theme of truth. According to Hegel’s dialectic, the collision of a thesis with its antithesis must result in synthesis or “process of ‘overcoming’” (545). Remaining unsettled, Mrs. Turpin and her husband return home. Mrs. Turpin cannot sleep because “the image of a razorback hog” remains locked in her thoughts (O’Connor 502). Although she contests this idea, her “denial [has] no force” (502). This results

in a stampede of questions that continue to break down her prior understanding of herself. “How am I a hog and me both?” she asks herself (502). As she continues to synthesize, she begins to see her world from a different perspective. In her view by the pig parlor she sees her husband as small and insignificant, describing their truck as a “child’s toy” (508). In this moment Mrs. Turpin realizes that “a bigger truck might smash into it” and destroy Claud as well as the workers. In this brief vision, her hierarchy is leveled and the truth of her existence begins to be realized. The result of her synthesis causes a revelation that flips Mrs. Turpin’s hierarchy on its head. She visualizes it as a bridge to heaven on which people “like herself” bring up “the end of the procession” and “even their virtues...[burn] away” (508). All of the qualities that make her the “good woman” she describes herself as in the very beginning fade away as if insignificant to the journey of the “souls” up to the “starry field” (497, 509). This revelation causes Mrs. Turpin to be able to perceive the “abysmal life-giving knowledge” she encounters through the vision (508). Mrs. Turpin’s discovery of Hegel’s promised “truth” is found through the formation of the antithesis and the subsequent synthesis.

Applying Hegel’s dialectic to O’Connor’s “Revelation” reveals its major themes of self-recognition and truth. The master-slave dialectic can be used to describe Mrs. Turpin’s state of being at the beginning of the story. Her revelatory experience, when analyzed in line with the Hegelian process, reveals Mary Grace as the catalyst who provides her with the jarring image of truth that contests her conception of herself. The struggle she goes through to reconcile these opposing images is in fact the synthesis that moves her toward her revelation and ultimately, a greater understanding of herself and the world of which she is part.

Works Cited

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