

Southern Mother, Lethal Fetus;
Or How Birth Control Makes a Modernist out of Flannery O'Connor

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The relationship which unites a father and mother to their child is rooted in organic fact and still more in the deliberate action of the husband and wife who give themselves to one another and whose will to give themselves blossoms and finds its true result in the being they bring into the world.

– John L. Thomas, *Marriage and Rhythm*

The romanticized depiction of parenthood above appeared in John L. Thomas's *Marriage and Rhythm* (1957, 128), a manual intended to instruct Catholics in the foundations of Christian marriage. Thomas's book was published just two years after Flannery O'Connor's short story collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955). At this time, official Catholic doctrine stridently maintained that the marital ideal was a large family that let children come as they may, despite the Church's reluctant sanction of the rhythm method in extreme circumstances. The most salient of the Catholic arguments against birth control presented motherhood as a woman's highest calling, an experience denied to her if she used birth control.¹ Although the rumblings of discontent with this ideal could be heard among the laity – spurred by economic pressures and doubt about the validity of the church's prohibition on artificial contraception –, most American Catholics still believed in the underlying principle that children are a blessing and motherhood a sacred occupation.

Compare this sentiment to that found in “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” one of the stories in *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955, hereafter “A Stroke”). Motherhood, instead of being a “good fortune” as the title suggests, is a horrifying state that shortens and shrivels the mother’s life – a state the protagonist, Ruby Hill, stridently attempts to avoid. Ruby shuns motherhood because she was traumatized by witnessing her mother’s incessant and painful pregnancies: “All those children were what did [Ruby’s mother] in – eight of them: two born dead, one died the first year, one crushed under a mowing machine. Her mother had got deader with every one of them” (66). Interestingly, the story also undercuts the claim, promoted by some birth control advocates, that contraception is a miracle product. This is not to say that the story rejects contraception as a practice; rather, the story derides the claim that birth control is a panacea. “A Stroke” shows that birth control can be used to create oppressive, even gothic, situations if women do not wield the control denoted by the name. In short, the story sets up a tension between motherhood and contraception because both are portrayed as potentially harmful.

As might be expected of a devout Catholic, O’Connor herself condemned the use of contraception on religious grounds, as against god’s will, and she claimed that “A Stroke” portrayed that belief (*HB* 1979, 85). The story’s few early critics read the ending – Ruby sitting at the top of the stairs bemoaning her pregnancy – as either a punishment for violating the natural laws of the human body or as the first step toward Ruby’s acceptance of motherhood as a blessing.² Certainly these readings are due in large part to O’Connor’s own explanation of the story as “the rejection of life at the source” (*HB* 1979, 85). Readings that condemn Ruby’s beliefs about motherhood by suggesting that she will someday come around to the “right” ones fit neatly with O’Connor’s and the Church’s stance on contraception.

Yet, I argue, the story itself does not support such a condemnation. Instead, it contains the unexpected rejection of, not birth control, but the “miracle product” label implicitly promoted by some birth control activists. Some of the best-known activists of the twentieth century advocated birth control as miraculous by suggesting that it would erase the most pernicious problems affecting humanity. American activist Margaret Sanger, for one, suggests that lack of birth control is “the root of evil,” and that access to contraceptives would “change the destiny of mothers whose miseries were vast as the sky” (1971, 92). According to Marie Stopes, an internationally known author and the face of the British birth control movement in the first half of the twentieth century,³ the “conscious and deliberate exercise” of voluntary procreation would allow humanity to “step from its present entanglements on to a higher plane,” where the “depravity of human nature, to-day so wide-spread, may appear like a black and hideous memory of the past” (1920, 81). Bringing into conversation Christian and feminist discourse, “A Stroke” ironically offers up Bill Hill, Ruby’s husband, a traveling salesman hocking the “miracle product” of birth control, as a birth controller-cum-prophet.

Importantly, the prophet in “A Stroke” is male, which makes the story’s treatment of birth control all the more a feminist statement: by showing that contraception can be used to manipulate female reproduction against the wishes of the women involved, “A Stroke” undercuts the claim that birth control is miraculous. As a result, “A Stroke” makes a feminist argument for women’s increased access to and knowledge of contraception. Although some critics have noticed feminist sensibilities within “A Stroke,” they overlook the fact that the feminist elements of the story hinge upon the story’s modernist understanding of the subject as “contextually re-defined,”⁴ that is, the subject as an unstable, always changing product of the events of everyday life. Indeed, by examining “A Stroke,” we can see that knowledge of birth control conditions a

particularly modernist subjectivity. In tandem, this reading demonstrates that the story's combination of modernism and Catholicism illustrates the discursive limitations of feminist, religious, and medical arguments about reproductive control at the middle of the twentieth century.

A Failure of a Story?

The symbolic possibilities of birth control carry the promise and threat of breakage, discontinuity, and rupture; these possibilities disrupt both a character's identity and what we might call the identity of an O'Connor text. If the typical O'Connor narrative contains a negatively depicted character who is opened to the possibility of grace through a physical catastrophe (Bauer 2004, 50), – as in the theft of Joy/Hulga's leg in "Good Country People" (1955) or the grandmother's murder in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1955) – the presence of birth control disrupts this narrative arc. Beth Widmaier Capo argues birth control can act as a type of "textual contraception" by allowing authors to imagine how "the traditional biological plot of women's lives – virginity to marriage to pregnancy to motherhood and domesticity – [could] be narratively interrupted" (2007, 19). A frequent result of this textual contraception, one not identified by Capo, is a modernist aesthetic. Birth control disrupts the traditional, linear plot, and once this biological plot is discarded the writer is forced to deal with a character whose identity, goals, and history are unsettled. In other words, a character's knowledge of birth control conditions a new subjectivity, one that is fractured, unstable, and easily re-defined by the external environment. In "A Stroke," as in other stories with a birth control thematic, the narrative drama arises from Ruby's identity crisis, which makes her intellectual crisis more salient than her physical one. Knowledge of birth control offers Ruby the possibility of rupturing

family lineages and avoiding her mother's lifestyle, but she thinks, incorrectly, that it will also allow her to capture the subjective unity associated with an older way of life (the definable, predictable child-wife-mother trajectory). Whereas many critics, and O'Connor herself, considered "A Stroke" a failure, recognizing the story's contraceptive disruptions as resulting from Ruby's incoherent subjectivity allows us to see the story as a modernist text rather than a narrative failure.

In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," protagonist Ruby Hill becomes trapped, like her mother and sisters before her, in a gothically vitalistic cycle of motherhood. Ruby is a social climber who prides herself on leaving her rural hometown of Pitman, Tennessee, five years ago when she married Bill Hill, a "Miracle Products" salesman from Florida (64). As Ruby arduously ascends the stairs of their apartment building, she puzzles over the cause of some recent health problems, variously ascribing them to heart trouble, cancer, aging, and gas, only to realize that pregnancy is the cause. For Ruby, this realization is devastating. She and Bill successfully prevented children for five years and Ruby hoped to keep it that way. She views motherhood as a torturous process, each child sucking out more and more of the mother's life. Ruby's mother had eight, only four of whom lived to adulthood, leaving a dried-up, dying woman who "looked like she wasn't satisfied" with her lot in life (66). In other words, her mother's pregnancies were vitalistic: incessant, involuntary, and deadening.

As Ruby climbs the steeple-like staircase to her fourth-floor apartment, she imagines her brother, Rufus, as a lethal fetus: "waiting, with plenty of time, out nowhere before he was born, just waiting to make his mother that much deader" (75) The realization of her own pregnancy is brought on by encounters with two neighbors on her journey up the stairs and through an earlier conversation with her psychic, Madam Zoleeda, who predicts a "long illness" followed by "a

stroke of good fortune” (65). Ruby mistakenly thinks the good fortune will be a move to the suburbs. The story ends with Ruby sitting at the top of the staircase, trying unsuccessfully to rationalize away the pregnancy with thoughts of Madam Zoleeda’s prediction. A neighbor’s kid rudely runs into Ruby as she feels something in her stomach “resting and waiting, with plenty of time” (79). So like her mother before her, Ruby is incapable of preventing her body from reproducing despite efforts to prevent what she believes will be a deadly pregnancy.

O’Connor reworked this story at least three times, publishing it first in 1949 as “The Woman on the Stairs,” again in 1953 in *Shenandoah* as “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” and finally in 1955 as part of the short story collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. O’Connor was not satisfied with the final version. Before the book was published, she wrote to her editor Robert Giroux that she would not mind if it were pulled from the collection (*HB* 1979, 73). Nevertheless, O’Connor had worked on the story over a period of at least six years, which implies that she thought it held something worth investigating and revisiting. Indeed, subsequent revisions changed Ruby’s brother Rufus into Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood*.⁵

In the earliest version of the story, “The Woman on the Stairs,” Ruby is in charge of the couple’s contraception. Ruby, not Bill, has “been taking care of that for five years” (1949, 43). When O’Connor revised the story into its final iteration, she changed the power dynamic so that Bill “takes care of that” for the couple (1955, 76). The change is significant because it strengthens the implication that the miracle products Bill peddles are various forms of birth control.⁶ If Bill’s business is contraception, it makes sense that he would manage it within his own relationship. Ruby’s recent weight gain does not make him fearful that his miracle products failed. Rather, “Bill didn’t mind her being fat, he was just more happy” and Ruby, at least, “didn’t know why” (77). Bill’s track record of five years of successful prevention implies that he

did know a reliable method and makes it more than likely that he intended to get his wife pregnant. Just like Bill *Hill* gave Ruby his name, he also gave her a baby. Her rationalizations and denials of this fact demonstrate the extent of her faith in her husband and his assurances that his miracle products will prevent pregnancy.

Bill's Florida origins further support the argument that his miracle products are contraceptives. Ruby's neighbor Mr. Jerger links the state of Florida to Ponce de Leon's search for "a certain spring...whose water gave perpetual youth to those who drank it" (71). In Ruby's worldview, birth control is a sort of fountain of youth since it allows her to avoid pregnancy. Staying young is not for Ruby only a matter of vanity (though vanity is certainly there, too). Rather, youthfulness means escaping a constricted life followed by an early death. Ruby's mother was old before her time because of her never-ending pregnancies, which shortened and shriveled her life and turned her into "a puckered-up old yellow apple" at the age of thirty-four (67). Ruby credits her marriage to Bill as the reason she was able to escape her hometown, a place she associates with incessant pregnancies and the early death they bring. Congratulating herself on getting out of Pitman, Ruby thinks, "She had married Bill B. Hill, a Florida man who sold Miracle Products, and had come to live in the city" (64). This sentence syntactically connects Bill, his Miracle Products, and the ability to leave Pitman. For a woman who believes, as I will later argue, that the only way to move away from the deadening and disappearing lifestyle that Pitman represents is to get outside the deadly cycle of unwanted pregnancy that afflicted Ruby's mother, Bill's contraceptives would indeed seem miraculous. Bill Hill from Florida offers Ruby her own fountain of youth by allowing her to avoid children *and* enjoy married life.⁷

That birth control allows Ruby to have it both ways would seem to be O'Connor's target of criticism in the story. On the subject of contraceptives, O'Connor wrote in 1959:

The Church's stand on birth control is the most absolutely spiritual of all her stands and with all of us being materialists at heart, there is little wonder that it causes unease. I wish various fathers would quit trying to defend it by saying that the world can support 40 billion. I will rejoice in the day when they say: This is right, whether we all rot on top of each other or not, dear children, as we certainly may. Either practice restraint or prepare for crowding.... (*HB* 1979, 338)

By defending the Church's stance as "spiritual," O'Connor is arguing against eugenic and economic justifications for contraceptive use. Though opinions among American Catholics varied widely, in general, lines were drawn between those making the natural law or spiritual argument against birth control – that birth control is immoral because it denies the natural, God-given functions of the human body – and those who were swayed by materialist and eugenicist arguments that promoted, respectively, birth control's virtues for easing economic constraints and its ability to aid the pursuit of a so-called ideal or racially pure population (Leon 2004, 387-90). That O'Connor defends the Church's stance as spiritual implies that she saw abstinence – practicing restraint – as the only acceptable method of preventing children and stemming the tide of population growth. In this view, Ruby's use of contraception severs two states that God intended to be intertwined: the pleasures of marital relations and the responsibilities of parenthood. A woman choosing to have marital relations must accept the possibility of becoming a mother. If we read "A Stroke" in this light, Ruby's fear of pregnancy makes her sinful rather than sympathetic, a woman who thought contraception would let her have her cake and eat it,

too. Critical readings tend to view the story in this light and ultimately declare that Ruby's desire to be childless is selfish, vain, and sinful.

These readings overlook the strength of Ruby's fear of childbirth and motherhood, and pay little or no attention to Bill's role in the couple's use of birth control. O'Connor called the story a failure because it was "too much of a farce to bear the weight" of such a heavy topic (*HB* 1979, 85), a rather perplexing statement in light of the fact that O'Connor actually increased the story's farcical elements during her various revisions. Charles W. Mayer demonstrates that O'Connor's revisions increased the physical comedy in the story. Indeed, the first version of the story did not contain a scene in which Ruby's neighbor, Laverne Watts, teases Ruby about looking "swollen all over" and performs a grotesque dance while spelling out M-O-T-H-E-R (75-6). We might read O'Connor's attempt to push the story towards farce as an attempt to portray Ruby as someone deserving of ridicule rather than someone to sympathize with. This interpretation fits the pattern identified by Katherine Hemple Prown, in which O'Connor gradually silences the "female-sexed voice" that once pervaded her writing in order to fit into the Southern masculine literary order (2001, 2). As Prown notes, "A Stroke" represents a hinge point in O'Connor's changing aesthetic (2001, 123). The first versions of "A Stroke," written very early in O'Connor's career, contain a more sympathetic depiction of Ruby than the later, farcical versions. By increasing the story's farcical elements, O'Connor decreased the likelihood that the story would be read as a feminist statement against patriarchal domination.

Yet Ruby, selfish and unlikable though she is in the final version, nevertheless appears justified in rejecting the horrible life her mother led and the children that bring it about. So the story does reject "life at the source" – O'Connor's words (*HB* 1979, 85) – but does so in a way that is at odds with O'Connor's aforementioned strident admonition to "practice restraint or

prepare for crowding.” “A Stroke” reveals ambivalence in O’Connor’s position toward birth control because it depicts circumstances in which a woman would reasonably reject motherhood. In fact, the story humanizes and complicates even pro-birth control rhetoric because it evocatively imagines reasons for rejecting motherhood at the same time that it depicts the potential for birth control to trap women rather than liberate them. Margaret Sanger, for instance, advocated female-controlled contraceptives (such as the diaphragm) be dispensed by doctors rather than made directly available to women. Jean H. Baker argues that Sanger’s advocacy stemmed in part from political expediency, but it also stemmed from a sense that women needed to be taught how to use contraceptives. A few, less prominent, birth controllers, like Mary Ware Dennett, saw that Sanger’s position was counter-productive since women still would not have direct control over their own reproduction and birth control could be used to circumscribe options, especially for women in the lower classes who had fewer choices of physicians and methods (Baker 2011, 212).

Several critics, notably Margaret D. Bauer (2004), Louise Westling (1978), and Linda Naranjo-Huebl (2010), have read the story in a feminist light and suggest that O’Connor employed a sort of accidental feminism in “A Stroke.”⁸ In so doing, these critics offer a way to move beyond traditional interpretations of O’Connor as anti-feminist or pro-patriarchy. But even Bauer’s compassionate reading of Ruby glosses over the terrifying consequences of motherhood that Ruby imagines. For Bauer, “Ruby does not wish to have children and consequently age before her time” (2004, 41). Aging “before her time” fails to capture the gothic horror – the shriveling, drying, and screaming – that appears in “A Stroke.” As a child, Ruby walked ten miles into town to “get clear of the screaming” of her mother in labor (66). In town, she watched a horror picture and two westerns. Gunfights and monsters were apparently preferable to

childbirth. Ignoring this gothic horror and seeing Ruby's anti-natalism as an attitude stemming from a desire to stay young makes it far easier to read her fears as vain or trivial, which in turn makes it easier to understand why some scholars dismiss "A Stroke" as an unsuccessful anomaly amongst O'Connor's works because nothing truly catastrophic happens.⁹

If we acknowledge Ruby's actual fears, we see that catastrophe is not absent. The victimization of Ruby and the horrific descriptions of motherhood suggest a very different reading if we do not force the story into a Catholic paradigm (or into a common critical paradigm in which a character receives grace in a moment of revelation). Recognizing the contraceptive disruptions in Ruby's narrative makes her a tragic rather than comic character. The story, read in a modernist-feminist light, appears as a condemnation of people who would deny women access to and control over contraception. The scholars who recognize the feminist drift of the story offer an important critical counter-balance, but they fail to discuss the narrative elements that make such feminist readings possible: that the story's feminism is dependent upon its modernist framework. The knowledge of birth control conditions a modernist subjectivity, which gives rise to a story in which the drama is located in an individual's confused, rapidly shifting perception of the world and of herself. Instead of abstract theological principles, readers see the complexities that inform a decision to use birth control and the inadequacy of a single, unified narrative (such as papal infallibility) for addressing the heteroglossias of modernity.

A Modernist Experiment

Some of the modernist traits that result from the birth control thematic in "A Stroke" are easily identifiable. Most obviously, the catastrophe at the end of the story has affinities with the Joycean epiphanies that pervade *Dubliners* (1914).¹⁰ Almost as obviously, the plot, without

Ruby's interior monologue, is essentially "nothing." May Sinclair's appreciative review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimages* explains that "nothing happens" in modernist novels; "[i]t is just life going on and on" (1918, 6). The idea that "nothing happens" in a modernist text – which is now used derisively as often as appreciatively – easily applies to "A Stroke." In this story, a woman talks to some neighbors as she walks up a flight of stairs. As I mentioned earlier, this lack of physical or external action led some critics to dismiss this story as an unsuccessful anomaly in O'Connor's oeuvre. I read the fact that the story foregrounds consciousness and subjectivity as a central characteristic of its modernism.

In "A Stroke," the suspense and narrative momentum depend on an individual's thoughts and perceptions to a degree not usually seen before the modernist experiment with subjectivity. Like Randall Stevenson, I maintain that many of the traits we associate with modernism "need to be seen not altogether as innovations, but as changes of emphasis – even as quantitative rather than wholly qualitative differences from earlier writing" (1992, 34). So while O'Connor's attempt to portray the nuances of a character's mental state is not unique to "A Stroke," the story's focus on the life of the mind over and above the physical or external catastrophe suggests that O'Connor was moving toward a modernist aesthetic while writing this story. This movement toward modernism results from the story's birth control thematic. I noted at the beginning of this essay that an author writing about a character with knowledge of birth control must contend with a character whose history, goals, and identity are in the lurch. What's more, the traditional narrative paths for a female character are disrupted because birth control creates the possibility, and perhaps the longing, for a life not defined by motherhood. So in terms of both plot and character development, the writer must find ways to tell the story that convey this character's alienation from traditional lifestyles, her incoherent identity, and susceptibility to influence from

the everyday stimuli that bombard the modern subject. Modernist narrative techniques were, of course, developed to address just these concerns, meaning that a birth control thematic leads easily and logically to modernist aesthetics.

Indeed, most of “A Stroke” is written from the perspective and in the language of Ruby’s unspoken thoughts rather than related objectively by an authoritative narrator. The opening paragraph uses a stable narrator to introduce Ruby: “Ruby came in the front door of the apartment building and lowered the paper sack with the four cans of number three beans in it onto the hall table” (63). By the second paragraph, however, O’Connor has begun to use the free indirect discourse that dominates the remainder of the story. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the second paragraph. Among Ruby’s groceries are collard greens:

She had bought these on account of Rufus but she wasn’t going to buy them but once.

You would have thought that after two years in the armed forces Rufus would have come back ready to eat like somebody from somewhere; but no. When she asked him what he would like to have *special*, he had not had the gumption to think of one civilized dish – he had said collard greens. She had expected Rufus to have turned out into somebody with some get in him. Well, he had about as much get as a floor mop. (64)

This narrative style – pushing to get inside a character’s mind without doing away with the stabilizing authority of a third-person narrator – is characteristic of that which Stevenson identifies with the early modernist experiments of Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and Henry James. The narration in these texts “is no longer the manner of a narrator telling a story to a silent listener, but a style which follows the inner voice – if not always the actual words – of a character silently addressing himself” (Stevenson 1992, 28). Similarly, the aforementioned passage from “A Stroke” reads as part of Ruby’s thoughts because it uses her idioms and speech

patterns (“he had about as much get as a floor mop”) although it is ostensibly related to us by the narrator (“*she* had expected Rufus...”). In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O’Connor similarly foregrounds a character’s subjective perceptions, but does not make such extensive use of free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness. The voice of the narrator remains distinct from that of the protagonist through O’Connor’s regular use of attributive tags such as “the child observed” or “she began to realize” (96). In “A Stroke,” the narrative voice is discernible from Ruby’s, but the two increasingly merge together over the course of the story.

The fact that “A Stroke” retains the stabilizing authority of a narrator – keeping Ruby at a distance by discussing “her” from a presumably outside perspective rather than delving entirely into her perspective – suggests that this story is an early, limited experiment with a more explicitly modernist style, one brought on by Ruby’s knowledge of birth control. Many modernists experimented with stream-of-consciousness and subjective narration on a small scale before moving into a more extensive use of the techniques. As Stevenson notes, Joyce’s experiments with subjectivity in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* seem tame compared to his later work in *Ulysses*, and Dorothy Richardson’s use of “a new ‘subjective method’” grew steadily throughout *Pilgrimage* (1992, 45; 37). I would argue that the birth control thematic in “A Stroke” impelled a similar early experiment with modernist techniques. Biographer Jean W. Cash explains that “A Stroke” may have been written while O’Connor was enrolled in the Iowa Writers Workshop (2002, 105). If so, O’Connor conceived the story at a time when she was encountering many different writing styles and was likely encouraged to experiment with them. Indeed, Katherine Hemple Prown demonstrates that O’Connor’s aesthetic began a dramatic shift under the tutelage of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and others at the University of Iowa who exhibited a “philosophical kinship to high modernism” (2001, 30). That O’Connor did not

continue to develop this style and push further into her characters' minds can be explained by her dissatisfaction with the story.

It is not just the degree to which "A Stroke" depends upon the life of the mind for its narrative momentum that makes it modernist; the implications of the subjective narrative style are characteristically modernist, too. By following Ruby's impressions and disjointed thoughts, "A Stroke" depicts subjectivity as a series of digressions and ruptures, a far cry from the pre-modernist notion of character as a stable, knowable identity. For instance, seeing the collard greens in the grocery bag makes Ruby think about her brother, which makes her think about her hometown Pitman, which train of thought abruptly shifts to her recent illness when she faces the stairs she must climb, and these thoughts about illness drift into thoughts about her psychic (64-5). Moreover, when Ruby recognizes herself as pregnant, she is forced to recognize that she is not in control of herself – that who she is is defined by external forces. This story thus relies on modernist notions of the subject as contextually re-defined, but pushes this theory of subjectivity further by combining it with changing ideas of corporeality that suggest that the body, too, is contextually redefined. Lara Vetter explains that at the turn of the twentieth century, the body, "exposed to everything from medical instruments to radio waves...was no longer understood to be a closed system and was increasingly viewed, and experienced, as malleable and penetrable" (2010, 16). The penetrable, malleable body, particularly when that body is pregnant, alters the individual's understanding of self and other, inside and outside, artificial and natural. A lack of birth control would seem to weaken the subject's ability to be self-determining, opening the door for the excessive, grotesque, vitalistically reproducing body. Like most modernist narratives, "A Stroke" laments this loss of subjective coherence and seeks a new way to tame the chaos; the remedy suggested here is birth control.

But as O'Connor's story makes clear, birth control can help only if the woman herself wields the control. Bill's "miracle products" allow Ruby to imagine she is self-determining. She believes she is in control of herself, her identity, and her future, but her identity is not as coherent and controllable as she thinks. She thinks she has an independent identity – she sees herself as separate from her mother and sisters and thinks she knows herself – but this "wholeness" is an illusion. The story offers a grotesquely ironic twist on the idea that motherhood makes a woman whole when we are told that Ruby "felt the wholeness of herself, a whole thing climbing the stairs" (69). Contrary to commonplace assertions that motherhood "completes" a woman, pregnancy in "A Stroke" only reveals the fractures in a woman's identity.

Ruby's fear that motherhood is a type of life-in-death is literal – that her body will waste away as a result of its uncontrollable reproduction – but we can read this fear on an aesthetic level, too. When a woman in the traditional biological narrative becomes a mother, she is assumed to have reached the pinnacle of happiness and fulfillment. Capo notes that many early twentieth century writers were constrained by the "limited range of narrative possibilities for female characters that reenacted the narrow range of roles available to women" (2007, 18). In these traditional narratives, alternative lifestyles are foreclosed because the narrative literally and figuratively ends once the woman becomes pregnant. "A Stroke" confirms this pattern by ending immediately after Ruby's recognition of her pregnancy. Without control over her own body, Ruby is beholden to a male-authored narrative: her husband's desire to see his wife become a mother. Without the control offered by birth control, she will not be able to forge the new, coherent identity she seeks. So even as Ruby feels her "wholeness," even as she comes closer to being a "whole" woman by realizing herself as pregnant, the further she is from a whole or unified subject. Her vitalistically reproducing body is emblematic of a fractured subjectivity

conditioned by knowledge of birth control: her body is re-defined by her husband's desires at the same time that her identity is re-defined by competing ideologies of the Old and New South.

Between the Old and New South: Subjectivity in the Lurch

Without recognizing the modernist qualities of "A Stroke," Peter T. Zoller acknowledges that "Ruby is O'Connor's exemplification of Southern individualism gone wrong. Through her efforts to raise herself in the changing social system of the 'new South,' she has forgotten the religious basis that was part of her past" (1977, 61). What Zoller does not recognize is that the Old South social system is spiritually and physically damaging for the lower-class women within this story and, what's more, the people and towns that perpetuate this social system are disappearing. Entire towns have dried up and blown away. Ruby is proud to have left her hometown of Pitman, a place befitting its name: deserted and shriveled. We find out that, "[a]ll the people who had lived at Pitman had had the good sense to leave it, either by dying or by moving to the city" (64). This town symbolizes not only the disintegration of Ruby's family unit but also the general disintegration of the customs of the Old South. Although the narrator's depiction of Ruby as supercilious might imply that readers should disapprove of her attitudes, we cannot absolutely condemn her rejection of Pitman. It is clear that the way of life represented by Pitman is no longer viable because Pitman itself no longer exists. Ironically though, Pitman lives on in Ruby. She runs from this social system, but does not completely forget and forego the traditions of the Old South. And since one of these traditions leads her to cede control to her husband, she is vulnerable to his manipulation.

Ruby seems to think that she is either a mother and is trapped in the Old South cycle of grotesque motherhood or she is childless and part of the New, progressive South, but the split is

not nearly so neat. Ruby resists the Old South but is still tied to it, and in the recognition of her pregnancy she recognizes herself as a subject beholden to the laws of the Old South. In this sense, Ruby's conversations with her neighbor Laverne and with her psychic work like the policeman's call in Althusser's famous formulation (1971, 174): by making Ruby recognize herself as a pregnant woman, she is constituted as a trespassing subject, a person who tried and failed to break the patriarchal, Old South law that commands women to reproduce. The first of these constituting calls occurs when Ruby accidentally sits on a toy gun, which is phallically described as "nine inches of treacherous tin" (67). Ruby was unaware of her husband's deception just as she is unaware of the gun on the stairs until too late. As she grumbles over this child, Hartley Gilfeet, and his mother's poor parenting, Ruby thinks that Hartley's nickname, "Little Mister Good Fortune," is woefully inappropriate. The connection between this nickname and Madam Zoleeda's prediction is obvious to readers and should suggest itself to Ruby, but she maintains a steadfast denial of her own coming "good fortune" and thus fails to recognize herself in the Old South's call. Ruby's later conversation with her neighbor Laverne is more explicit. Although Ruby refuses at first to recognize herself in Laverne's grotesque pantomime of Ruby's condition ("Not me!" she shouted. "Not me!" [76]), she eventually acknowledges that these utterances of Laverne's and Madam Zoleeda's accurately refer to herself. The words of her psychic and her neighbor make her recognize what her body could not.¹¹

Ruby's beliefs about contraception, specifically whether she or Bill is in charge of it, highlights her fluctuation between the Old South and the New. "The Woman on the Stairs" presents Ruby as thinking, in free indirect discourse, "She had done all right doctoring herself all these years—no bad sick spells, no teeth out, no children, all that by herself. She would have had five children right now if she hadn't been careful" (1955, 63). This reference is unchanged in

the final version of “A Stroke.” Later in “A Stroke,” however, O’Connor made the aforementioned change from Ruby saying that she had “been taking care of that for five years” (1949, 43), to Ruby saying “Bill Hill takes care of that!” (1955, 76). The revised version thereby contains a contradiction that displays Ruby’s incoherence. Believing herself to be a modern Southern woman, Ruby asserts control over her body and her life by claiming responsibility for the couple’s contraception. Later, as awareness of her incoherent state begins to dawn on Ruby, she acknowledges her lack of agency by telling Laverne that her husband is responsible for the contraception.

As this example suggests, the Old South’s call unintentionally produces a subject that is modern and excessive. Expanding on Althusser’s original theory, Judith Butler wonders whether a reprimanding utterance must “wield the power to compel the fear of punishment and, from that compulsion, produce a compliance and obedience to the law,” or whether there are “other ways of being addressed and constituted by the law...that disarticulate the power of punishment from the power of recognition” (1993, 122). Butler argues that the reprimanding utterance can sometimes produce a situation that exceeds the bounds of the law’s disciplining power. In these instances, “[i]nterpellation...loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent” (122). The purpose of the hail – a policeman’s call or a friend’s hello – is to bring and keep the subject in conformity with a particular ideology. In the case of “A Stroke,” Ruby’s pregnancy is both the hail and the reprimand that would bring her into line with the laws of the patriarchal Old South, in particular the injunction to reproduce.

This hail, however, produces an excessive, incoherent subject because it reveals the fact that Ruby is torn by competing ideologies, that of the Old and New South. Consider first the

ways that Ruby both enacts and rejects the customs of the Old South. Her resistance to family life in the Old South is clear. As we have seen, she believes that family life is actually destructive. Ruby repeatedly thinks of ways that she is different from her family: that her hair is not gray like her mother's, that she is plump while her parents "had been the dried-up types," or that she "had done so much better than her sisters" in marrying a man from out of town (66; 68; 67). On the surface, then, leaving Pitman and the way of life it represents was a logical choice. Ruby leaves the town in the hopes that it will allow her to escape the gothic cycle of pregnancy and parenting that defines her relatives.

Since the old way of life is inextricably tied in Ruby's mind to childbearing, the only way she can truly leave Pitman behind, she believes, is through the intelligent use of birth control. Preventing pregnancy allows her to grasp at the progress signified in urbanization; contraception becomes a metaphor for all her attempts to create a modern lifestyle defined by knowledge and autonomy (a lifestyle she never really achieves). As she distances herself from her rural hometown she simultaneously runs from the idea of "wife" as one that necessarily entails "mother." By offering Ruby the promise of a new lifestyle, birth control disrupts traditional kinship structures. Thinking that controlling birth means controlling her life, Ruby is unprepared to find herself faced with the prospect of repeating her mother's life, and thereby realizing herself as still subject to (and a subject of) the laws of the Old South.

Despite Ruby's naiveté, the narrative provides ample clues for readers to see that Ruby is still beholden to the ideology of the Old South. In her insistent assertions of difference from her mother and sisters, we glimpse her fears that she will never truly escape her past. Contraception's promise of a new lifestyle is never realized because contraception, the narrative implies, is a tool and not a miracle product. Ruby's unacknowledged adherence to certain

customs of the Old South changes birth control from a tool of progress to one of oppression. Without the control implied in birth control, Ruby retains a certain amount of continuity with the old customs and ways of life. As would be expected of a woman adhering to the customs of the patriarchal Old South, Ruby allows her husband to make decisions for the couple. She relies on Bill to take care of the contraception, and he has the final say in the couple's housing.¹² Like the vitalist maternal body that reproduces excessive children, the Old South's call unwittingly creates an excessive subject that cannot be fully disciplined by the law. Thus, Ruby's vitalistically reproducing body is a physical manifestation of the difficulties an individual faces in forging a coherent identity in the modern cultural landscape.

It seems that Ruby's misstep is in thinking herself to be a wholly modern, progressive woman when that subject position (the position of any modern subject) is "wholly" nothing: unmoored from traditional lifestyles and narratives, buffeted about by the winds of everyday life, the modern subject is incapable of forging the unified identity he or she longs for. Ruby recognizes the truth in this concept for herself when she recognizes her pregnancy. At the beginning of the story, Ruby merely calls herself "baby," saying, "You better take it easy, baby...you're too young to bust your gears" (66). By the end of the story, she has become the baby. As she sits wailing at the top of the dark staircase, confusing her history with her mother's, she "gazed down into the dark hole, down to the very bottom where she had started up so long ago" (79). She is back to the beginning of her journey up the stairs and of her journey through life. Ruby, sitting at the top of the staircase, wails "Noooo" and feels a roll in her stomach "as if it were out nowhere in nothing, out nowhere, resting and waiting, with plenty of time" (79). These concluding words ominously echo those that she uses to describe her brother Rufus as a fetus "just waiting to make his mother that much deader" (75). As Claire Kahane notes, "at the

end of the story the images confuse a fantasy of giving birth with Ruby's own birth" (1985, 346). But Ruby does not only re-live her own birth; she actually confuses her identity with her mother's: "[Ruby] felt her face drawn puckered: two born dead one died the first year and one run under like a dried yellow apple no she was only thirty-four years old, she was old" (78). This stream of consciousness evinces broken ego boundaries between Ruby and her mother. Early in the story, her *mother's* face was puckered, her *mother* had four dead children, and her *mother* was old at thirty-four; yet, here, Ruby cannot keep straight whose life is whose. Ruby has become her mother, a woman thoroughly assimilated into and produced by the Old South, and simultaneously a baby on the verge of birth, an avatar of the as-yet undefined ideology of the New South. This scene of grotesque parturition shatters the illusion that she had ever been a unified, coherent subject because she realizes she is still determined and impacted by the Old South's narratives. In other words, she realizes that she is a contextually re-defined subject rather than a self-determining person.

Through O'Connor's use of stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse, the reader is privy to the vacillations that Ruby's mind undergoes as she tries and fails to reconcile her identity into a single, coherent whole. Her inability to do so makes her identity grotesque. She is not simply a subject hailed by two competing ideologies, but a subject stretched between them, always exceeding the bounds of the Old South identity because of her horror of children, and exceeding the identity of the New South because of her lingering adherence to traditional kinship systems. As we saw in Ruby's thoughts about the collards, the stairs, and the psychic, her mind flits from one subject to another, rarely finishing a thought before an external stimulus sends her mind in another direction. Through O'Connor's modernist aesthetic, we see how susceptible Ruby's mind is to influence and re-direction. An immanently modern character,

Ruby is trying to shore together a new kind of life but cannot because her lingering adherence to the Old South way of life led her to cede control of her body to her husband. O'Connor's story implies that Ruby's excessive subjectivity made her vulnerable to Bill's manipulation; in other words, her continued adherence to some of the customs of the Old South meant that she would eventually recognize herself in its call.

"A Stroke" suggests that if Ruby had taken more control over the couple's contraception (and therefore her body), she could have avoided this end. In this manner, the story privileges coherent subjectivity – a subject more firmly identified with the progressive, independent New South – as an ideal even as it uses Ruby's incoherence to undermine the injunction to reproduce. It is in the depiction of Ruby's unstable identity that "A Stroke" is able to demonstrate the complexities that inform any decision about reproduction and the inability of any traditional, coherent narrative to contain those complexities. The feminist sentiment within this story thereby hinges on a modernist version of subjectivity. Her excessive subjectivity mirrors her mother's excessive reproduction; thereby the injunction to reproduce is repeated into hyperbole. Returning to Judith Butler, consider that:

Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole. (1993, 122)

"A Stroke" parodies the injunction to reproduce by enacting that very injunction to hyperbolic and grotesque excess. In the parodic inhabiting of these laws, "A Stroke" resists them. The women of the Old South will reproduce, but because of the conflict created by subjective and bodily excesses, mothers and children become grotesquely distorted. It is in the excesses that

O'Connor's story (though not Ruby) finds room from within to critique the injunction to reproduce. The natalist bent of the Old South kinship system appears physically and psychologically damaging; the desirability of the injunction to reproduce is thereby called into question.

The story's feminist sensibilities do not square with the traditional critical understanding of O'Connor. After all, this is a writer who professed to ignore gender differences in favor of divisions between "the Irsome" and the "Non-Irsome" (*HB* 1979, 176). Yet "A Stroke" manages to dramatize the complex possibilities *and* perils of birth control in a more nuanced manner than many explicitly feminist narratives. Significantly, contemporary readers were more likely to see the story as a humanist, if not feminist, work rather than a Catholic plea against, as O'Connor put it, the "rejection of life at the source" (*HB* 1979, 85). To explain the line of reasoning that leads to these conclusions, as well as the role of modernist aesthetics therein, we must first understand the cultural and religious climate in which "A Stroke" was published.

That O'Connor would make a statement on such a politically contentious topic as birth control is perhaps unusual within her oeuvre but is not entirely unpredictable. O'Connor paid attention to theological debates and, since birth control was one of the most frequently discussed issues among church leaders in the 1940s and 1950s, she was sure to be aware of the various arguments for and against birth control. In the years surrounding O'Connor's publication of the story, birth control was discussed more publicly than ever before as the topic gained prominence in the United States. In contrast to the Catholic reticence prior to World War I, in the post-bellum years the laity pressured the Church to openly declare its position on the permissibility of various forms of birth control such as the rhythm method, condoms, or diaphragm (Tentler 2004, 173-5).

Heated debate ensued between the Church and secular organizations, between the laity and the clergy, and among the clergy themselves.

Many priests felt torn between the Church's prohibition on most forms of contraception, and the stories of harrowing economic destitution and sickness they often heard during confession. Prior to 1931, few clergy asked questions about contraception in confession, preferring to assume that if penitents used birth control they were in "good faith ignorance" of the Church's teaching on the subject (Tentler 2004, 44). The Church's official stance after 1931 was harder to ignore, stemming from Pope Pius XI's very public condemnation of birth control in *Casti Connubii*, an encyclical on "Christian Marriage" (1931). This document, primarily concerned with upholding the sanctity of marriage, strenuously denounces the use of artificial contraceptives as a "criminal abuse" of the conjugal act (Catholic Church 1931, par. 53). Importantly for our purposes of parsing O'Connor's story, *Casti Connubii* grants no exception in the case of the mother's health, stating:

Holy Mother Church very well understands and clearly appreciates all that is said regarding the health of the mother and the danger to her life. And who would not grieve to think of these things?...God alone, all bountiful and all merciful as He is, can reward her for the fulfillment of the office allotted to her by nature, and will assuredly repay her in a measure full to overflowing. (1931, par. 58)

This basic sentiment with regard to artificial contraceptives remained unchanged even after Pope Pius XII's tentative approval of the rhythm method in 1951. Nevertheless, rhythm was an egregiously unreliable method and recourse to more reliable methods was still prohibited. So even if Ruby is correct to perceive motherhood as a death sentence, the Catholic Church maintains that women like her are committing a mortal sin by using artificial contraception.

Nevertheless, contemporary readers, even Catholic ones, were not likely to see Ruby as an unredeemable sinner. The depiction in “A Stroke” of subjectivity as a series of digressions and disruptions vividly displays the complex factors that inform any decision about reproductive issues. In the case of Ruby, O’Connor’s use of modernist techniques like free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness provides background on Ruby’s character, doing so in a way that allows readers to experience the cognitive conflict, discord, and fear that lead her to use contraception. The narrative techniques used by O’Connor carry a great deal of authority, encouraging readers to believe what we are told. The less a narrator seems to intervene in the transcription of a character’s thoughts, even if the narrator is always there, the more the reader is inclined to believe that the character’s fears are genuine and views unvarnished. Furthermore, unlike with traditional narrative techniques that maintain a distance between the character and the reader, these modernist techniques allow us to inhabit Ruby’s thoughts, bringing us closer to the complex of forces influencing her decisions. Seen from this close perspective, her fear of childbirth momentarily becomes our fear, and her disgust with her mother’s ignorance becomes our own.

This intimacy is crucial. Often in moral and political debates, divisive issues become less so if the conversation moves away from polarized positions and toward individual cases. As a current example, we might look to debates about abortion. A recent Gallup poll (2011) found that although Americans are nearly evenly divided between those who identify as pro-life (46%) and pro-choice (47%), there is significant agreement between pro-life and pro-choice individuals when asked about more specific and individualized circumstances.¹³ In effect, it seems, the more people know about individual circumstances – the more they understand about an individual’s pressures and challenges – the more likely they are to accept an act that otherwise seems

impermissible. O'Connor's use of modernist narrative techniques is, as I argued earlier, tempered by the fact that she retains the stabilizing authority of a third-person narrator, the presence of which keeps the reader at more of a distance than a fuller use of the technique, such as that seen in Joyce's *Ulysses*, might do. Nevertheless, O'Connor ventures close to a character's interior monologue in "A Stroke," meaning that this story works to erase the distance between reader and character, which raises question about the humanity of the prohibition on contraception.

The same basic phenomenon with regards to intimacy held true within the Catholic Church at the time of publication of "A Stroke." Strong community bonds and close contact with parishioners made it very difficult for many priests to demand adherence to the Church's stance on contraception. This tension grew throughout the first decades of the century as men like Monsignor John Ryan called on the Church to be more outspoken in its condemnation of contraception; Leslie Tentler explains that it "was one thing for Ryan or even a bishop to endorse a more proactive practice when it came to combating sinful modes of family limitation. Men like these, after all, had limited pastoral contact with the laity. It was quite another thing for priests to implement such reform in the parishes that were their lives" (2004, 42). Similarly, it is one thing for *Casti Connubii* to pity the suffering of a nameless woman who would become a martyr for motherhood, but it is quite another to detail the suffering of an individual woman facing an early death through pregnancy.

O'Connor admitted that stories sometimes escaped her intentions or even understanding. In 1956 she wrote to a friend, "Perhaps you are able to see things in these stories that I can't see because if I did see I would be too frightened to write them" (*HB* 1979, 149). Perhaps, then, O'Connor's explanation of the story's failure as too much of a farce obscures the more heretical

notion that the story “fails” because it sympathizes with women suffering under the church’s prohibition on contraception. The story’s birth control thematic interrupts O’Connor’s usual narrative patterns by introducing a modernist aesthetic; as a result of the reader’s intimate experience of Ruby’s fractured subjectivity, the story’s rejection of *the idea* of contraception as a “miracle product” overshadows the Catholic rejection of *the practice* of contraception as against God’s will. The birth control thematic of “A Stroke” thereby challenges the notion that any coherent, unchanging narrative, such as papal infallibility, could possibly account for the multiple and complex realities of modernity. Thereby, the modernist move away from stable, knowable characters illuminates the dangers and cruelties latent in the Church’s – or anyone’s – move to deny women control over their own bodies.

NOTES

¹ This argument rests, of course, on the faulty logic that contraception is used by women hoping to avoid motherhood entirely rather than women who want to limit or space their children.

² See, for instance, John R. May (1976) and John V. McDermott (1980).

³ Marie Stopes’s 1918 book *Married Love* was an international success and secured Stopes a wide audience (as well as a fair amount of infamy). It sold 2,000 copies within the first two weeks and more than a million copies by 1939, eventually being translated into a dozen languages (Soloway 211). In it, Stopes argued that marital sex should be pleasurable for men and women, and that female frigidity was usually due to a man’s insensitivity to her desires.

⁴ The phrase “contextually re-defined” is borrowed from Christy L. Burns (1994, 344).

⁵ Margaret Earley Whitt explains that “Rufus, younger brother of Ruby Hill, is the character who became Hazel Motes. The apartment neighbor, Laverne Watts, who is interested in Ruby’s size nine B feet and young Rufus, is an earlier try at Leora Watts, the too-large prostitute who services Motes” (1995, 56).

⁶ The couple’s method of contraception is not identified but we can narrow the possibilities. The contraceptive pill is not an option because it was first marketed in the United States in 1960 (Tentler 2004, 137). The rhythm method was widely used by Catholic couples in the 1940s and ‘50s because the Church reluctantly permitted it as a “natural” way to regulate fertility. As a result of the Church’s sanction, many companies began selling calendars to help couples figure out the safe period. This method was prone to failure. So while it could account for the “slip-up,” it does not explain the five previous years of successful prevention. Furthermore, there is no indication that Ruby and Bill are Catholic. Unapproved methods, so-called artificial contraceptives, are more likely candidates. Methods most likely to be available to couples like Ruby and Bill were condoms, coitus interruptus, the diaphragm, and spermicides. Coitus interruptus requires no special device, and condoms, in use for at least 400 years, are insufficiently new to be considered “miraculous” by anyone in the 1940s. Since the diaphragm is an invention of the late nineteenth-century, it is a chronological possibility but nevertheless unlikely since Ruby says that Bill is in charge of the couple’s contraception. In the end, the salient issue is probably not

what method they use but that they use contraception at all. Leaving the method unspecified implicates contraception in general rather than any one form.

⁷ Although Charles W. Mayer argues that Bill's Florida connection implies that Bill's "fountain of youth" is his desire for a child, which desire Bill will pass on to Ruby (1979, 72), Mayer overlooks the possibility that the Miracle Products could be contraceptives. The latter interpretation becomes the more likely of the two when we consider the couple's five successful years of prevention and Ruby's association of Bill's Miracle Products with her ability to leave Pitman.

⁸ Bauer, for one, argues powerfully for Ruby as a character worthy of our sympathy. Bauer questions arguments that equate womanhood with motherhood, asking, "Ruby...does not want to have children. Does this make her less of a woman?" (2004, 42). Louise Westling might suggest that O'Connor herself was unconsciously asking the same question: "Whether she intended to do so, Flannery O'Connor has made a vivid protest against sentimental stereotypes of motherhood, by presenting Ruby's horrified sense of the physical cost of reproduction and her awful realization that she has been tricked into paying it" (1978, 516).

⁹ See, for instance, Dorothy Walters (1973, 86).

¹⁰ Consider the conclusion to "A Painful Case." Whereas, in "A Stroke," Ruby realizes that her marriage is a sham and that she is doomed to an unsatisfying life, at the end of Joyce's story protagonist James Duffy sees a pair of lovers and knows his gaze on them is unwanted, prompting the realization that he is an outcast from life's feast (2006, 99).

¹¹ Althusser argues that the creation of a subject is a continuous process rather than a single moment of recognition as implied by the example of the policeman's hail (1971, 176). We can understand Ruby's production as a subject of the Old South as similarly occurring through a succession of calls (Hartley's gun, Madam Zoleeda's prediction, and Laverne's song). Further, Ruby *is* a subject of the Old South before she acknowledges her pregnancy but is in denial of it, claiming to be a subject of the New South instead. Her recognition of herself as a pregnant woman reveals to herself her subjective incoherence.

¹² Bauer notes that despite Ruby's dislike of their apartment and strong desire to move to the suburbs, "Bill has apparently not yet agreed to the move, and apparently, it is his decision to make" (2004, 48).

¹³ According to Gallup's Lydia Saad, "Abortion politics have been quite contentious in the United States; however, self-described "pro-life" and "pro-choice" Americans broadly agree on more than half of 16 major abortion policy matters Gallup tested in June and July [of 2011]. These policies generally have to do with protections for women's vital health, preventing late-term abortions, and ensuring that abortion patients and parents are fully informed before an abortion" (2011).

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