

THE POWER OF THE DISABLED: FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "THE LAME SHALL ENTER FIRST"

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor's (1925-1964) "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962) deals with three characters: Sheppard, a widower, his son Norton, a ten years old boy and Rufus, a miscreant teenager, whom Norton dislikes. Rufus has a clubfoot, is very intelligent and fond of violence. Sheppard is a philanthropist and likes to help Rufus inviting him to live with them, contrary to Norton's wishes. In fact, Rufus despises Sheppard, resists help and is aware of his own evil nature. He makes Sheppard embarrassed and causes Norton's death deliberately, leaving both of them as victims. O'Connor in this context, de/reconstructs the prejudice against the disabled people; in the American South the disabled are regarded as evil characters. On the other hand, although it is generally accepted that the disabled people are good, she shows them as ordinary people having both good and wicked sides. Moreover, they may refuse help and prove personality despite the fact that non-disabled people are inclined or regard it duty to help them. She problematizes the disabled body as 'the other/marginalized' being pitiful and pitied. Thus, it becomes clear that O'Connor acknowledges the disabled people as normal as the non-disabled, or powerful, not physically but spiritually and intellectually. The tenets of 'Disability Studies' are insightful to discuss the work.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First", "Disability Studies", American South

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Disability is a discriminating element towards the disabled in terms of behavior, attitude and language in many societies. Along history, it has been seen as a disease to be cured or rehabilitated; medical authorities also support this idea. The historical and cultural logic of disability emphasizes the disabled people's lack of physical and cognitive potential and capacity, vulnerability and dependency prescribing various public and social policies. "Disability is still viewed as an unexpected, undesired, asocial, apolitical, bodily condition" (Titchkosky,2000: 213). In many cultures, disability symbolizes evil and evil is made visible in the body of the disabled. Quicke states:

there are, latent to the dominant culture, ideas about handicap and disability from an earlier period which still have considerable force. An example is the notion, which runs through the history of Western civilization and is legitimated by various religious teachings, that disability indicates possession by the devil or by an evil force, or is the outcome of evil doing (1985:3).

Thus, deformity of the body refers to the deformity of the soul and "[t]he person who is afflicted is made to bear the burden of sin, the burden of wrongdoing" (Stiker,1999:30). Moreover, "deviant bodies are constructed as social problems and ... public presentations of these bodies address stigma" (Backstrom,2012:684). The disabled are regarded as abnormal, hateful and repellent people, metaphorically and literally. Predominant mentality depicts the "defectives as a repulsive, dangerous, and costly menace to society" (Pernick, 1996:143), because it is accepted that they have jealousy toward the able-bodied. In addition, bodily impairment signifies deviance, which is a danger for social balance and general morality. Thus, the binary oppositions of able-bodiedness/disability and normalcy/deviance appear and the disabled become isolated and alienated in society.

On the other hand, Disability Studies, which emerged in the last decades of the 20th century, defends an understanding that disability is a social construct. It resists distinctions between disabled and non-disabled subjects.

Disability studies is a relatively recent rubric that seeks to group research that focuses upon the historical, political, social and professional meanings ascribed to disability and disabled populations. ... Disability studies takes the medicalized model of disability as its primary object of critique (Mitchell and Snyder, 1997:24n2, italics their own).

It is interested in how 'normal'/non-disabled people's point of view to the disabled shapes the disabled people's character and cast of mind. It focuses on the ongoing wrong attitudes and how they can be corrected. It is preoccupied with the protection of the rights of the disabled and their integration into society with a comfortable life. According to Garland-Thomson disabled people should be regarded as 'normal', because their situation springs from creation or they meet such a condition later. She coins the term 'normate': it

usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them (2017:8).

'Normate', here is a social construct and what normal is must be thought over. In this sense, disabled people are as 'normal' as the non-disabled; they should be helped if they want and the non-disabled need not to feel pity for them.

Disability Studies also deals with the configurations of the disabled in literature. Evil stereotypes as the others have extraordinary powers like intelligence, rhetoric or supernatural powers to intuit or foresee and they arouse the feeling of the uncanny. Fictional "portrayals that show those with disabilities as people to be feared or pitied – and avoided" (Nelson, 2003:175) reflect the point of view towards the disabled people in social frame. Crime fiction, for example includes the disabled characters' motivation for jealousy of and revenge against the non-disabled. Garland-Thomson writes that in literature disabled characters with power virtually always represent a dangerous force unleashed on the social order,... Because these characters operate as embodiments of an unnamed, profound peril, the narrative resolution is almost always to contain that threat by killing or disempowering the disabled character (2017:36). At the end of such works, the disabled evil character is mostly punished.

In the American southern literature too, this negative point of view against the disabled is prevalent. The South is a fertile ground for gothic possibilities: "No other genre so welcomes culturally defined 'sickness' and horror as the gothic" (Gross,1989:59) and "[t]he American South, with its legacy of profound social

and economic problems, became a major focus and source of American literature in the twentieth century, and the principal region of American Gothic" (Crow, 2009: 124). Grotesque, related to gothic is the narrative of the uncanny, atypic, absurd, unstable and unpleasant and "is an artistic style that audaciously rouses disgust and astonishment in the viewer or reader" (Mikics, 2007: 138). In the southern gothic genre, disabled people are often portrayed as having negative or grotesque characteristics, which comprise hauntings, obsessions, alienation, aberrant motives and occurrences, violence, crime, corporeal malformation, and intellectually obsessional belief. In this frame, the depictions of the disabled are abundant, and they reflect the southern people's view of the disabled which is deprecating in the genre.

As a modernist, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) depicts fragmented and alienated characters such as misfits and eccentric personalities. Many characters are left searching meaning in life at the end. On the other hand, as a southerner she knows the cast of mind of her people and criticizes its deficiencies and faults. She is aware of the understanding of disability in the south and deals with this phenomenon in her work greatly. She amalgamates disabled and grotesque characters in her fiction together. Her deep acquaintance with Roman Catholicism and her own disability drives her to write about these subjects. "To appreciate fully O'Connor's art, we must accept it in the religious context from which it was written" (Magistrale, 1990:98). O'Connor's fiction has references to the Bible and Christian theology. Thus, it is impossible to understand her fiction without religious approach. In the same way, "she uses the grotesque and violent to reveal spirituality in her fiction" (Angle, 1994-95:160). For O'Connor, absence of spirituality leads to violence and to the grotesque. The remedy for them is to accept that life is not easy to conceive, and it is beyond human understanding. Man is a creature full of character defects and she employs her characters, both non-disabled and the disabled with such deficiencies; however, both groups will find peace, salvation, and redemption through suffering.

O'Connor questions the disability phenomenon in "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962), her longest story, which tells how Rufus Johnson, a disabled and mean-spirited teenager asserts his personality against Sheppard, a good-intentioned, rational and secular widower. Rufus is an orphan and stays at a reformatory; he was mistreated by his grandfather, who left him defective psychologically. Rufus explains everything according to Christian fundamentalism. Sheppard seeing that the boy is of high intelligence decides that he can become a brilliant scientist if he is given rationalist thought, but he disregards his stubborn and obsessive character. Their life philosophies deeply clash because Rufus hates rationalism and secularism. During the week, Sheppard is the City Recreational Director, but on Saturdays, he works at the reformatory as a counselor. He is an atheist and believer of reason, science and progress; he aims at helping the children improve themselves scientifically. He does this to forget the pain of his wife's death a year ago and to find solace. He has an ordered family life with a cook coming every day, but he fails in understanding and helping his ten years old son, Norton's personal development. He sees himself high and wants to see his child as his mirror. He thinks Norton's mourning as prolonged and not rational, so he finds him irritating. Sheppard's attitude to his son is detached. He often scolds him and reminds the facilities he has, making comparison with him and the poor children. Although Sheppard gives all his energy and time to the other children, he is indifferent to his own son's emotional needs and does not provide proper psychological care for him. He denies his own son of fatherly love and interest which is his defect and contradiction although he claims himself a rationalist. He urges him to learn to share feelings and material possessions with other people, which is difficult even for adult people. He despises him for his selfishness; indeed, he is not. Sheppard ignores Norton's feelings and pressures after the loss of his mother and defines him as stupid. As an innocent child, Norton cannot accept that he will not see his mother again; "the atheistic tenets of Sheppard's secular humanism" (Magistrale, 1987: 112) does not allow him to make a metaphysical or religious explanation about this subject. He cannot console the child; if he had made a spiritual/religious explanation to the death, his acceptance would be smooth: "His lot would have been easier if when his wife died he had told Norton she had gone to heaven and that someday he would see her again, but he could not allow himself to bring him up on a lie" (O'Connor, 2021).

Rufus is a delinquent boy of fourteen with a club foot. O'Connor portrays his physique implying an uncanny side: "His eyes, steel-colored and very still, were trained narrowly forward. His thin dark hair hung in a flat forelock across the side of his forehead, not carelessly like a boy's, but fiercely like an old man's. A kind of fanatic intelligence was palpable in his face" (O'Connor, 2021). He draws Sheppard's attention with his high intelligence. Sheppard decides to improve and educate him, teaching good deeds and

applying pedagogical methods to 'save' him. He feels disturbed and cannot love or respect a person if h/she is flawed and lacks 'normal' appearance and function. He automatically desires to transform it. On the other hand, Rufus is a rebellious boy, very egoist, strictly religious and wicked. Sheppard talks with him once a week about psychology, astronomy or other subjects that can attract his attention to more respectable and scientific matters than stealing. "Johnson said little and what he did say, for the sake of his pride, was in dissent or senseless contradiction, with the clubfoot raised always to his knee like a weapon ready for use,..." (O'Connor,2021) He hates Sheppard and insistently shows it by sneering and challenging him. He tells that he eats out of garbage cans because he likes to. Sheppard is indifferent to his unpleasant reactions to him believing firmly that he will be a good person. He approaches the boy scientifically and reasonably. He disregards his evil character and misdeeds linking it to his parentless situation and to his disability; he is without friend, support or love. He accepts that "bodily disability brings with itself social disability" (Oğuz,2015:3). When he asks him why he behaves like that, he answers that the reason is Satan. "He felt a momentary dull despair as if he were faced with some elemental warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now. This boy's questions about life had been answered by signs nailed on the pine trees: DOES SATAN HAVE YOU IN HIS POWER? REPENT OR BURN IN HELL. JESUS SAVES. He would know the Bible with or without reading it. His despair gave way to outrage. 'Rubbish!' he snorted. 'We're living in the space age! You're too smart to give me an answer like that' " (O'Connor,2021). In the same way, he defends various fundamentalist beliefs which to Sheppard are only triviality. Sheppard disregards the contradiction between his mischief and piety. In short, Rufus is antipathetic both physically and spiritually. Treated as a freak all his life, he seems at peace with his disability, not desiring to change his position in life and not desiring a home. In addition, he does not see himself vulnerable as a disabled person. Sheppard wants to give 'a life lesson' to Norton via Rufus. Disregarding the psychology of his son, he proposes Rufus to stay with them. He gives the house key to him to show his confidence in him; by this he could know a place to come for rest. He tells Norton that he cannot stand seeing a child eat out of garbage cans. He taunts Norton again asking how he would feel if he has undergone such experiences. The boy feels threatened by the division of his father's affection.

When Norton is alone in the house, Rufus comes and opens the refrigerator without permission. They meet first in his room: "He stood there like an irate drenched crow. His look went through the child like a pin and paralyzed him" (O'Connor,2021). He feels insecure and threatened when he sees Rufus. He sits on his bed with his shoes. From the first encounter, he domineers him referring to his crippled leg: "Johnson wiggled it slightly and smiled. 'If I kick somebody *once* with this,' he said, 'it learns them not to mess with me'. The child nodded" (O'Connor,2021). He tries to suppress him by the appearance of the clubfoot shoe. Moreover, he bullies him and gives orders. He dirties his bed with juice and comments: " 'You're his kid all right,' he said. 'You got the same stupid face''I don't care if he's good or not. He ain't *right!*' Norton looked stunned" (O'Connor,2021). Rufus talks about Sheppard in an insolent way and despisingly, laughs at his room and bathroom. He calls the cook as 'nigger'. He enters the mother's room and combs his hair with her comb, giving the model of Hitler. He uses her belongings without permission which saddens and distresses Norton. When Sheppard comes, he finds him reading in the parlor. He is happy to see that but Rufus is detached, as usual. He knows how to make role, tease and manipulate people. Sheppard finds Norton hiding himself in the closet looking miserable. When Norton complains about his disrespectful manners to his mother, he rebukes him in front of Rufus. " 'He said you weren't nothing but gas!' the child shrieked. A sly look of pleasure crossed Johnson's face. Sheppard was not put back. These insults were part of the boy's defensive mechanism" (O'Connor,2021). He slurs over what Norton says and the child is again disappointed in not being heard and important in his father's eye. He feels angry because he humiliates him in front of such a bizarre and malignant figure.

Rufus does not avoid gossiping about Sheppard when he is absent; he states: " 'how do you stand it?' His face was stiff with outrage. 'He thinks he's Jesus Christ!' " (O'Connor, 2021) implying Sheppard's intention to 'save' him. O'Connor introduces the modern rationalist man, Sheppard as devoid of spirituality and Rufus sees and rejects his atheism sharply. He is obsessed with religion, though he is only a child but dares to talk and comment upon moral and philosophical issues. He understands that Sheppard gives importance to appearances. His effort to buy new shoes for his club foot is a proof for this, according to Rufus. He declares that only Christ can save him both in this world and in the next. He regards his club foot as the reflection of his degenerated identity; that means he is at peace with his disability. He also sees it as

a kind of sanctity and the new shoe as a threat to his salvation. He determines that all other attempts to save him are useless, and refuses rehabilitation. Sheppard is unable to perceive his mentality and "as readers... we also recognize the O'Connor technique of putting in the mouths of the most disreputable characters the most profound truths" (Gordon,2003:171). O'Connor, in line with the ideas of Disability Studies, prescribes that the disabled people are as ordinary as the non-disabled: they can be wicked, they can be clever and can have ideas and strong beliefs. Here, she employs Rufus to explicate her ideas about the contrast between piety/spirituality and atheism; in addition, she demonstrates how narrow the scientific/rationalist/secular approach to delinquency and disability is.

According to Goffman, "we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human" (Goffman, 1963:5). Sheppard tries to expand Rufus' imagination by offering him a library in the house and buying a telescope; because he too within the traditional/social sphere, believes him to be incomplete and tries to help him be complete. Johnson is soon bored with looking through the telescope and his approach to knowledge is contemptuous: "He devoured the encyclopedia as he devoured his dinner, steadily and without dint to his appetite. Each subject appeared to enter his head, be ravaged, and thrown out" (O'Connor:2021). He rejects Sheppard's philanthropic optimism and rationalism. He finds Sheppard and scientific approach arrogant and asserts his individuality self-assuredly. Rufus' beliefs are "manifested physically in his monstrously swollen foot; the willfully good Mr. Sheppard, with his modern theories of social rehabilitation, tries to camouflage that physical incarnation of evil with a new specially therapeutic shoe" (Sonnenfeld, 1972:456). Rufus, not surprisingly rejects the shoe with vulgarness to the shopkeeper embarrassing Sheppard. He is always forgiving to and hopeful for Rufus: "'Rufus,' Sheppard said in a slow hypnotic voice, 'you can be anything in the world you want to be. You can be a scientist or an architect or an engineer or whatever you set your mind to, and whatever you set your mind to be, you can be the best of its kind'" (O'Connor,2021). However, Rufus' only aim is to punish and revenge him because of his atheism and helpfulness, since for him only God can help.

With the destruction of the house's peace, Norton becomes subject to domestic dislocation together with physical and emotional violence. Sheppard even beats him due to Rufus. Rufus mocks him in front of Sheppard and he is silent and delighted. Thus, Norton feels threatened by both of them. When Rufus perceives that Norton misses his mother, he says he must die to see his mother, so Norton thinks death as an equivalent of meeting his mother again. In this frame, Norton helplessly directs himself to Rufus, who uses him only to take revenge against Sheppard. Rufus insists and persuades Norton that there is a next world, depending on the Bible and his mother is there. As an innocent child, he makes plans to come together with his mother by dying. Sheppard is unaware of his son's admittance of Rufus' Biblical truths, which he opposes. Anxious of breaking Rufus' trust, he overlooks this matter, too.

Meanwhile, Rufus continues his mischiefs by escaping from the house or smashing the neighbors' houses. He leaves Sheppard embarrassed when the police bring him home handcuffed. After committing violent acts Rufus leaves clues to be caught as a cunning boy. He even slanders Sheppard complaining of him to the police: "He made suggestions to me!...He's a dirty atheist,..." (O'Connor,2021) He, in fact tests Sheppard's patience and confidence in him by such behaviors. Deciding that these are wrong examples to his son, and becoming exhausted, Sheppard says him to go, but he is anxious that he will come again and set the house on fire. He "confronts [his] own heart's darkness due to being unable to find out how to save [Rufus] from his meaningless world" (Köseman,2020:76).

Upon Rufus' efforts to persuade, Norton while looking through the telescope, says that he sees his mother in the Heaven. As Sheppard taught Norton about space travel, the child in order to find and come together with his mother, flies into space by hanging himself just before Sheppard decides to become a good father:

Norton's face rose before him, empty, forlorn . . . His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. His image of himself shriveled until everything was black before him. He sat there paralyzed, aghast (O'Connor,2021).

It is ironical that his intentions of philanthropy cause harm, the death of his son. To teach him sharing, he victimizes his own son and feels responsible for his suicide. Left alone under the burden of guilt, he sees clearly that he should not have tolerated such a spoiled and impertinent boy like Rufus. He experiences

an epiphany that he ignored his son: "he had sacrificed his reputation, he had done more for Johnson than he had done for his own child" (O'Connor,2021). As seen, he is not a careful man to scrutinize events and people, nor his own self. He confronts with his illusion that human nature or character is not easy to understand, the reason of evil is groundless and inner evil is intact and cannot be changed. Nevertheless, he faces with his own vanity, which is for O'Connor a great sin. Wisdom of God is revealed at the end: "O'Connor's criticism of secular humanism and liberal precepts ..." (Magistrale,1990:93) proves right under these conditions. Sheppard must face with the evil in himself; evil here means his vanity in denying God's presence. Incapable to recognize this, he becomes a grotesque character in O'Connor's terms.

"...O'Connor's knowledge of both human nature and spirituality helps her to show how these two realities are intrinsically coupled" (Angle,1994-95:166) and Sheppard's folly is that he denies the existence of human wickedness and spirituality in life. His anticipation about the boy proves wrong; Rufus features his personality as a person although Sheppard thinks of him only a handicapped one. This is his illusion of him and he exhibits a traditional point of view about the disabled. He disregards Rufus' personality and believes that he can educate and change him. With this 'scientific' rationalization, he spoils him. He evaluates him wrongly when he expresses that Rufus does evil for he is disabled and comes from a low socio-economic class; in fact it is because he is evil by nature. He (ab)uses his deformity as power which Sheppard sees as weakness.

On the other hand, Sheppard will suffer and get matured. He sees the true face of Rufus, how he caused Norton's death and how he abused his good intentions. He destroys Sheppard's respectability in front of the policemen because of his guilts. After his experience with Rufus, with his family tragedy, Sheppard becomes aware of his own selfishness: he wanted to prove his capability as a counselor using scientific methods and approach. "The father—the provider, the nourisher—stands accused by the body of his son as a false shepherd whose self-deception brings its own punishment" (Asals,1970:105). Like a doctor or a psychiatrist with the moral responsibility he tries to 'normalize' and socialize Rufus. He does not accept him as a different person having a personality. He cannot believe that he as a disabled person is a dissolute one and his authority disturbs and annoys him. This means he is prejudiced towards the disabled thinking that they like help and feel gratitude. In fact, they are like other people, they may carry negative character traits. Sheppard first deconstructs the perception of disability by disregarding Rufus' wickedness, then reconstructs the traditional/southern view to disability and may be seen as disabled spiritually; he adopts a high goal in 'correcting' the world, but cannot see his realities and defects. Although he is a counselor, he lacks the capacity to see his own son's problems. His lack of insight into unworldly issues causes his catastrophe, but O'Connor implies the solution in grace. Katz states: "O'Connor's conscious purpose is evident enough, and has been abundantly observed by her critics: to reveal the need for grace in a world grotesquely without a transcendent context" (1974:54). She compares belief with unbelief and prescribes a life with religious faith. According to O'Connor, if he had a religious faith, he could perceive the nature of disability and decide how and to what degree he must help. Here, her message is consistent with the aim of Disability Studies.

O'Connor shows Rufus' disability jointly with his defective character. The moral intent of the work lies on the fact that wickedness has deeper and wider sources and cannot be solved easily, like Sheppard's philanthropic attitude and tender approach to Rufus. O'Connor suggests that the link between disability and evil character must remain unaccountable. Both O'Connor's ideas and the tenets of Disability Studies overlap in that the disabled are as 'human' as the non-disabled, they should receive help if they desire and everybody is free to live her/his fate. Rufus, though a miscreant character explicates O'Connor's modernist point of view on disability. She poses the question of the true nature of the bodily disfigurements. It is not only the physically disabled character who needs compensation or support; like Sheppard's, there are other/spiritual disabilities.

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ENGELLİLERİN GÜCÜ: FLANNERY O'CONNOR'IN "THE LAME SHALL ENTER FIRST" ADLI ESERİ

F. Gül KOÇSOY

ÖZ

Flannery O'Connor'ın (1925-1964) "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962) adlı eseri üç karakter ile ilgilidir: dul bir erkek olan Sheppard, on yaşındaki oğlu Norton ve onun sevmediği kötü karakterli bir ergen olan Rufus. Rufus yumru ayaklıdır, çok zekidir ve şiddetten hoşlanır. Sheppard iyilikseverdir ve Norton'un istememesine rağmen Rufus'u kendileriyle birlikte yaşamaya davet ederek yardım etmek ister. Rufus aslında Sheppard'ı küçümsemekte ve yardıma karşı koymaktadır; kendi kötücül doğasının da farkındadır. Sheppard'ı utandırır ve her ikisini de kurban durumuna düşürerek Norton'un ölümüne kasden neden olur. O'Connor bu bağlamda engelli kişilere karşı olan önyargıyı yapıbozuma uğratıp yeniden inşa eder, çünkü Amerikan Güneyi'nde engelli kişiler kötücül olarak kabul edilir. Öte yandan, engelli kişilerin genellikle iyi olduğu kabul edilmesine rağmen, onların hem iyi hem kötü tarafları bulunan ve alışık olunan bireyler olduğunu gösterir. Dahası, engelsiz bireylerin onlara yardım etmeyi görev bilme eğilimlerine karşın yardımı reddedip kişiliklerini ortaya koyabilirler. O'Connor engelli vücudu acınası ve acınan 'öteki/dışlanmış' olarak sorunsallaştırır. Böylelikle, onun engelli bireyleri engelsizler kadar normal veya fiziksel değil ama ruhsal ve zihinsel olarak güçlü kabul ettiği ortaya çıkar. "Engellilik Çalışmaları"nın ilkeleri eseri yorumlamada faydalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Flannery O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First", "Engellilik Çalışmaları", Amerikan Güneyi