Deception is in the eye of the beholder

Is anyone really who they appear to be? A person may present themselves as wholesome, charming, and trustworthy. Appearances can be deceiving. That was the case in Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “Good Country People.” For example, Pointer appeared to be a simple, country boy. He was later revealed to be a thieving charlatan. Mrs. Hopewell’s clichéd world served as her safe place. It was in this world that she thought herself to be superior to those around her. Even though Mrs. Freeman placated Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman was more astute. This was evident in the small dialogues that Mrs. Freeman had throughout the story. Hulga’s higher education and belief in atheism helped her live with a nihilistic point of view. Even though Hulga was portrayed to believe in nothingness, she had a deep need to be accepted. She told her mom, “If you want me, here I am – Like I am” (O’Connor 3). Hulga needed to be accepted as she was. She had not been accepted since the hunting accident over twenty years ago. Deception is the theme in the story, “Good Country People,” where Flannery O’Connor suggests humans, just like the characters in her story, lack trust. Moreover, when individuals do trust, it is often superficial, which leads to disappointment and sorrow.

As Hulga hid behind her degrees and education, Mrs. Hopewell hid behind her perceived superior social class. Mrs. Hopewell uses trite remarks, such as: “It takes all kinds to make the world” and “Everybody is different” (O’Connor 3). In reality, Mrs. Hopewell did not accept her own daughter, who was different. Hulga’s PhD in Philosophy was a problem between mother
and daughter. Mother and daughter were both self-righteous women. Both think they are right and are stubborn in their beliefs. Mrs. Hopewell thought that the purpose for girls to go to school was for them to pass the time on such things as gossip and awaiting a suitor. She did not value formal education. Because of Mrs. Hopewell’s failure to understand Hulga, Hulga made the choice to not have a meaningful relationship with her mother. Instead, Hulga indulged in her books and own thoughts. Those indulgences made her feel superior to those around her. Hulga’s lack of effort in her appearance gave Mrs. Hopewell an excuse to think of Hulga as a child. Constance Pierce argues that in “Good Country People,” “each of the main characters has a mechanistic way of dealing with the world, a façade that conveys their underlying neutrality and nothingness” (Pierce para 7). Deceit is seen time and again, both in the characters’ thoughts and the way they treat others.

Hulga’s façade was her self-righteous nature. Hulga saw herself as the most intelligent person in the room, which led to her superiority complex. Mrs. Hopewell considered herself as the most superior person in the room when surrounded by good country people. Mrs. Hopewell was a divorcee living in the south. Besides the land she lived on, all she had that gave her worth was her social class. Mrs. Hopewell is said to have had, “plenty of experience with trash” (O’Connor 3). Mrs. Hopewell was referring to the previous tenant farming families that had lived on her land. Mrs. Hopewell ranked good country people above trash, but not as high as her level. Hulga did not give much value at all to country people. Mrs. Hopewell, however, claims to respect all people, whether from the country or not. She was being deceptive because she saw these folks as just one step above trash. Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga should trust each other. They would not have to agree on every subject, but an honest eye to eye relationship would yield them less disappointment and manipulation.
The divide between mother and daughter grows wider by Mrs. Hopewell’s attitude towards Mrs. Freeman’s daughters. Mrs. Hopewell called them, “two of the finest girls” (O’Connor 2) that she knew. Mrs. Hopewell’s attitude towards Hulga was a striking contrast. Mrs. Hopewell was ashamed of Hulga’s name, the way she presented herself, and her behavior. Hulga’s name change from Joy to Hulga really pained Mrs. Hopewell. Mrs. Hopewell was convinced that Joy thought long and hard until, “she hit upon the ugliest name in any language” (O’Connor 3) and then changed her name. Mrs. Hopewell was correct. Hulga was full of contempt for her mother. Hulga blamed her mother for not being able to further her education and achieving her dream of becoming a professor. Hulga knew that between the accident and her heart condition, she was forced to live under the same roof as the person that was supposed to be able to protect her. Hulga was so sure of her intellectual superiority that she would tramp around the house like a spoiled toddler. Hulga would barely oblige to speak to her mother, yet everything she did was a calculated move to garner her mother’s attention. Hulga’s behavior is further evidence of the idea that Flannery O’Connor suggests about the characters lacking trust in those closest to them. Instead of trusting each other and enjoying a full relationship, both more freely trust a stranger and his seemingly simple manners.

Mrs. Hopewell referred to Mrs. Freeman as good, country people. Mrs. Hopewell was naïve in her trust in the morality of good country people. “It is on the basis of this appreciation that she [Mrs. Hopewell] will admit into her home a devious Bible salesman” (Edmondson 157). It was Mrs. Hopewell’s closed mindedness that allowed Manly Pointer to enter their lives. His comment “People don’t like to fool with country people like me” (O’Connor 7) triggers a switch within Mrs. Hopewell. When Pointer spoke of his heart condition, he had Mrs. Hopewell on the hook. Pointer’s paralleled with Hulga’s heart condition. That parallel earned him a spot at the
kitchen table. Despite not engaging with Pointer in conversation, Hulga did agree to meet him the next day. Now Pointer had Hulga on the hook. “Heretofore, Hulga has only shown disdain for “good country people,” but now she appeals to the reliability inherent in those who enjoy the predictability and safety of ordinary life” (Edmondson 161). Hulga agreed to meet him the next day because she believed that she was intellectually superior. Hulga laid awake half the night presuming that she would seduce the salesman, and then feel sorry for him after the fact. Hulga’s misconception of her intelligence and Pointer’s innocence would be later revealed to show how ignorant, arrogant, and foolish she actually was. Hulga’s plan to deceive Pointer would be her ultimate undoing. Hulga was more willing to trust a stranger because there was no history between she and Pointer. Hulga believed there was nothing to lose when it came to Manly Pointer. She knew, because of what she had planned for Pointer, that she was not trustworthy. Unfortunately for her, she did not give Pointer the same consideration. Hulga’s superficial trust of Pointer leads her to great disappointment and sorrow.

The following day plays out like, “the archetypal encounter of innocence with experience, only in a reversal of expectations, it is the supposedly intellectually superior Hulga who, despite her plans to educate and seduce, is revealed to be the ignorant, foolish innocent who is seduced” (Steed 183). The poor, good, country boy persona that was Manly Pointer was gone. In the place of that façade was the devilish con artist. Manly Pointer could have been called an identity thief. When he stole Hulga’s leg, he stole her identity. “Joy/Hulga learns a lesson in humility from the incident in the barn” (Kirk 72). Hulga was not by nature a humble person. Hulga was actually a self-righteous person. Hulga could not recognize her own stubborn inflexibility. It was the deception that was Manly Pointer that blew the story wide open. Hulga inquired of him, “aren’t you just good country people?” (O’Connor 18). Manly Pointer’s
response to her question was a slap in the face for Hulga. Pointer admitted that he was good country people, but he saw that as an insult. He hurled back an insult at Hulga. He told her that he was as good as her any day of the week. “The loss of the leg is a loss of the crutch of artificiality that had supported the pretense and arrogance that kept her from truly seeing” (Hubbard 55). The loss of her leg left Hulga both literally and emotionally disabled. The deception of Manly Pointer caused Hulga to lose both her intellectual and psychological poise.

Hulga was shocked out of her former safe existence. She was devastated both physically and spiritually. “Good Country People” is a multi-layered story about one’s principle blindness and, more importantly, deception. Manly Pointer used his background story to deceive the Hopewell’s as well as the readers. Joy changed her name to Hulga because she had no joy in her life. She was ugly on the outside and, even worse, ugly on the inside. The person that she deceived the most was herself. Mrs. Hopewell’s description of good country people versus white trash was symbolic of her inferiority. Mrs. Hopewell was interested in social class and only wanted to be seen with people that she considered “fine.” This demonstrates how out of touch Mrs. Hopewell was with what was going on in the world around her. This story shines light on how each character, and person, wears a mask. The characters in “Good Country People” deceive each other and themselves. The lessons that Flannery O’Connor put to paper over fifty years ago are relevant with human behavior today. Hulga surrounded herself in the belief of nothingness. Hulga is a self-proclaimed atheist, meaning, for her, there is no more a God than there is evil. This hampered her in seeing through Manly Pointer’s agenda. The scene between Manly Pointer and Hulga played out religiously. “Flannery O’Connor, despite her Catholic lifestyle, surrounded her stories with grotesque characters, settings, and plots” (Hubbard 62). Manly was in a way delivering Hulga from her nothingness into grace. Flannery O’Connor
suggests humans, just like the characters in her story, lack trust. Moreover, when individuals do trust, it is often superficial, which leads to disappointment and sorrow.

In conclusion, like the characters in the story, people are faced with deception. People deceive others with outward appearances, as well as their inward motives. As humans, we can fall victim to our own deceit. Like Hulga experienced, the greatest sorrow is when we find that we have been deceiving ourselves. Flannery O’Connor proposes that the characters, especially Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga, are more concerned with strangers or even social appearances than they are with repairing the trust in their family. Deception is the theme in the story, “Good Country People”, where Flannery O’Connor suggests humans, just like the characters in her story, lack trust. Moreover, when individuals do trust, it is often superficial, which leads to disappointment and sorrow.
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