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Imagining a Common Ground: Place, Community, and the Possibility for Place-Based Education through Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf'

Christine Mahoney

Clemson University, camahoney01@gmail.com

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IMAGINING A COMMON GROUND: PLACE, COMMUNITY, AND THE
POSSIBILITY FOR PLACE-BASED EDUCATION THROUGH
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "GREENLEAF"

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by
Christine Alyssa Mahoney
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Dr. Sean Morey, Committee Chair
Dr. Erin Goss
Dr. Angela Naimou

ABSTRACT

Through literature, news outlets, media, parents, teachers, and peers, youth are currently being made aware that there are severe problems in the environmental and social realms. However, the imagined but representative stories found in literature also offer opportunities for students to learn how to combat these crises, and instilling the value of place in students through pedagogy will help them become proactive adults. The particular dynamic between community and place is one we see at work in “Greenleaf” by Flannery O’Connor, an author who has been left out of ecopedagogical conversations but can be useful in finding imaginative connections between place and community. This essay explains the importance of these lessons and how literature is a useful tool in conveying them, next offering an ecopedagogical reading of “Greenleaf” showing how it might be used in the classroom to help students think through the questions raised throughout the essay.

Using literature in place-based learning can help students reach beyond the local place and see how they themselves, and their place, fit into a larger world context. A fictional world gives students an opportunity to imagine and represent important social and environmental issues by presenting a different kind of lived experience. Harsh in its observance of the human condition, “Greenleaf” raises questions and concerns about social problems that still affect most people today, also addressing issues of the human drive to control nature and the part people play in cultivating their environment. The story renders many opportunities for students to discuss and reflect upon their position amongst each other, their communities, their environments, and their global space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
SECTION	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH LITERATURE.....	3
3. UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PLACE	5
4. EDUCATION’S ROLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS	10
5. “GREENLEAF”: AN ECOCRITICAL READING	13
WORKS CITED	27
SUPPLEMENTAL WORKS	29

INTRODUCTION

Many conversations about ecopedagogy and the teaching of environmental literature stress the importance of situating experience within local contexts, specifically local lands and landscapes. For example, Sid Dobrin, Greta Gaard, Christian Weisser, and David Sobel all suggest that place and location deserve a role in pedagogy, positing that only by instilling the values of place in young students will these pupils grow into compassionate adults concerned about ecology, social justice, and community. In *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Robert Thayer explains, “People who know a place may come to care about it more deeply. People who care *about* a place are more likely to *take better care of it*” (5-6), and people, or children more specifically, can come to know their place by developing what Thayer calls a “life place learning structure” (244) beginning early in their educations. Sobel expands this notion in *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*, suggesting that this type of learning addresses environmental and social problems in local ways by using “a school’s surroundings and community as a framework within which students can construct their own learning” and as a result examine “how landscape, community, infrastructure, watersheds, and cultural traditions all interact and shape each other” (9). Thus, just as Dobrin states that “writing takes place,” pedagogy should also “take place”; it should take ownership and awareness of place of and for education.

To the extent that education also instills ideas and values of community, Wendell Berry offers that communities as a whole should be built upon the values of locality and place, thus making elementary and secondary schools prime places for an early

establishment of connections between community and place. Berry has noted that due to a lack of this type of connection, human connections are deteriorating, and in *What Are People For?*, he commands people to slow down their lives, rebuild these human connections, and value the land around them in order to ensure their independence, their freedom from alienating globalization and consumerist culture, and their quality of life, values that are often taught in formal educational settings. When a community¹ is built upon human connection, according to Berry, people are more likely to be sympathetic towards each other and more likely to address social problems that affect the community and its members, which will in turn increase the community's inhabitants' concern for the condition of their specific place.

In "Children's Environmental Literature: From Ecocriticism to Ecopedagogy," Gaard points out Clare Bradford's argument that "many environmental children's books are 'strong on articulating ecological crises, but weak on promoting political programs or collective action' necessary to address these crises effectively" (328); through these imagined but representative stories, as well as through news outlets, mass media, parents and teachers, and their peers, youth are currently made aware that there are severe problems in the environmental and social realms, thus these stories also offer opportunities for students to learn how to combat these crises and become proactive adults. Instilling the value of place in students through pedagogy is an answer to this problem, and the particular dynamic between community and place is one we see at work in "Greenleaf" by Flannery O'Connor, an author who has been left out of ecopedagogical

¹ The term "community" should be understood throughout this essay as a "body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity" ("Community").

conversations but can be useful in finding imaginative connections between place and community. After I explain the importance of these lessons and how literature is a useful tool in conveying them, I'll then offer an ecopedagogical reading of "Greenleaf" showing how it might be used in the classroom to help students think through the questions I raise.

TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH LITERATURE

Currently, children aren't given the "imaginative" models for which to see, create, and experience other possibilities of their connection with land, and thus have little ability to ask "what if?" That is, when it comes to environment, science becomes a primary mode of inquiry while humanistic inquiry, especially relating community to land, is given short shrift. As educators, we have a responsibility within the institution of the education system to not just teach our students to be responsible individuals, but to also give them the knowledge and tools, through the use of imaginative models such as literature, to become local activists as well as effective global citizens who understand and can affect the role of institutional actions within different environments, so just as Rob Nixon insists that writer-activists have tremendous power, I insist that teachers have the power to be active contributors in solving environmental and social problems. As Lawrence Buell suggests, environmental literature offers us a conduit to reestablishing the power of imagination, which offers a way out of these environmental crises. Moreover, just as literary scholarship has "taken on the subject of race, class and gender...away from texts and canons, toward cultural formations," ecocriticism and environmental literature can help students think through reading not as literary studies

exclusively, but as a cultural practice (“Ecocriticism” 105). Essentially, literature, and ecopedagogical approaches to literature, can offer students imaginative scenarios that help them make important connections about their individual and collective identities. While Buell has tended to focus on American Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Emerson, some of these connections have also been explored by Flannery O’Connor in her short story “Greenleaf,” amongst others, which raises intricate and complicated questions about how American society’s lack of connection to place affects one’s constantly developing sense of community and collective identity.

Literature in general offers an imaginative domain in which to view problems and solutions through a transformative lens, yet O’Connor has been overlooked by ecocritics as an author with insight into ecocritical questions about the relationship between place and the development of community, perhaps because of her heavy reliance on the problematic setting of the rural South or her confrontation of issues of race and racism, elements in literature that are just beginning to receive attention in the realm of ecocriticism. Nevertheless, land and place become very important in her stories and have the potential to teach us about how literature can help students establish this connection mentioned by Dobrin, Weisser, Gaard, and Berry. In “Greenleaf,” as I’ll return to below, community becomes less about people’s connection to the actual soil they live on, as Berry would have it, and more about finding, or the failure to find, a common ground on which to base both one’s individual and collective identity within a community. This short story can be brought into the place based education system proposed by Thayer and Sobel, specifically into the setting of a high school classroom, to teach students about the

problems that arise when thinking about these types of relationships. The characters in “Greenleaf” are not an example of a perfect community with strong relationships with each other and with their place; instead, they offer a view of one ecological setting – a farm in the rural South – and how its inhabitants disjointedly interact with one another and, in turn, how these connections and disconnections affect their sense of self and belonging. Ultimately, this story can provide a lens through which students can examine their own communities and the problems that arise when trying to establish the healthy relationships between people and place encouraged by so many.

UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PLACE

Though the focus here is not on soil, it is still important to acknowledge that land has a significant impact on the experiences we have and the people we become, as it even does on the characters in “Greenleaf.” Berry tells the story of an old bucket left hanging on a door for several decades, and as time passed, the fallen leaves, insects, rain, and bird droppings left undisturbed in that bucket accumulated and formed a sort of rich soil. He goes on to suggest that like this bucket, a “human community...must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself...that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related” (*A Part* 154). According to Berry, by developing love for the land, place, or “local soil,” people can restructure culture and community in such a way that human relationships will develop power of their own and result in a stronger foundation for society as a whole. Bioregionalism, a belief in promoting the

“decentralization of the economy, in the form of regional diversification and self-sufficiency, as well as the anarchistic dismantling of the centralized nation-state in favor of confederated self-governing communities of 1,000 to 10,000 people” (Garrard 127-28), has already been championed by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster. But Kirkpatrick Sale hints that the real value of bioregionalism is the theory that by restructuring our societies into smaller, more intimate communities, people will “know each other and the essentials of the environment they share” (94-95). It is “a politics of ‘reinhabitation’ that encourages people to explore more deeply the natural and cultural landscape in which they already live” (Garrard 128), and to become more familiar with the place they already share.

However, there can be no “reinhabitation” if there is no inhabitation with which to begin, a concept illustrated in “Greenleaf.” Young children are inherently prone to explore their immediate surroundings, and they define themselves primarily by their relationships with the people and places close to them. But if children lack the guidance that can help them explore the meanings and implications of these important relationships, sometime shortly after this period of childhood they stop *desiring* home, losing that sense of the “intensely lived world” (Banting 788), and they begin to pursue what they believe their goals should be. In “Greenleaf,” the main character lives on a piece of land with her children, but she fails to teach them about the “essentials of the environment they share,” and her relationships with those she does share her environmental space with are poor at best. Her community is an example of the lack of

intimacy that can result from a weak connection with one's natural and cultural landscape.

As early as 1933, F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson recognized this concept of bioregionalism and commented on how our way of life has changed from a community in which people worked *with* the land to a society in which people worked *upon* it. They write that members of this past community, which they refer to as the organic community, “represented an adjustment to the environment; their ways of life reflected the rhythm of the seasons, and they were in close touch with the sources of their sustenance in the neighboring soil. The modern citizen no more knows how the necessities of life come to him...than he can see his own work as a significant part in a human scheme (he is merely earning wages or making profits)” (74). The essential argument here is that people have shifted their focus further from fostering a healthy life at home with the communities and land near them and onto the pursuit of careers and economic gain, goals that now often require mobility “over” and “on” the land rather than a rooting “in” it, and that by losing touch with the land, people have lost touch with each other and themselves; “[i]f the local culture cannot preserve and improve the local soil, then, as both reason and history inform us, the local community will decay and perish” (*What Are People For?* 155).

However, this argument also implies that people always have a choice as to how the land they live on is used, as well as choice as to whether or not to stay in place, and this is simply not the case at all. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon explains how official landscapes are “forcibly imposed” over vernacular

landscapes. A vernacular landscape is much like a bioregion plus the social region in that it is “shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features” (17). However, though bioregionalism is a good idea in theory, Nixon points out that official landscapes are “typically oblivious to such earlier maps; instead, [they] write the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental,” projecting themselves onto ecosystems inhabited by “dispensable citizens” (17). So, to push for a general “return to the land” is both naïve and incredibly problematic. Instead, a refocusing on the different relationships (human-human, human-land, community-place, people-government, to name a few) that affect how people live can give us all a better understanding of how to approach social and environmental issues, and the use of literature in the education of youth remains a good place to start.

From this clash of “temporal perspectives between the short-termers who arrive (with their official landscape maps) to extract, despoil, and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath and must therefore weigh wealth differently in time’s scales” (Nixon 17) there arises a demand for these problems to be addressed. Zygmunt Bauman remarks in *Wasted Lives* that the “processes of the commodification, commercialization and monetarization of human livelihoods have penetrated every nook and cranny of the globe” (6) and are “trampling on its way all remaining forms of life alternative to consumer society” (59). Yet there are no global solutions to these local problems. In fact, “all localities (including, most notably, the

highly modernized ones) have to bear the consequences of modernity's global triumph. They are now faced with the need to seek (in vain, it seems) *local* solutions to *globally* produced problems" (6). The global community is motivated almost entirely by the promise of progress, and it is *killing* everything local, particularly local values and morals. For example, while small farms and local agricultural businesses work to preserve ties to the land and help their communities establish a relationship to the food they consume, large industrial farming corporations and meat-packing companies trample on those values by making revenue and "progress" their first priority. As P. G. Payne explains, to combat this loss of morality, a problem recognizable also in O'Connor's "Greenleaf," Bauman "encourages us, as the knowledge producers for future generations, to heed the threat of the 'moral lag' of modernity" as our "acceleration within/toward postmodernity has further emptied out those moral spaces that previously were understood as an opportunity to 'take responsibility' for each other and, perhaps, for the environment" (Payne 210), and these opportunities are readily available at the local level between members of individual communities, such as in schools and classrooms. As the knowledge producers for the future, we need to develop pedagogies for the future in order to effectively disseminate this alternative ideology that promotes awareness of global issues, instills a sense of duty and proactive involvement in those issues beginning at the local level, and inspires a sense of responsibility to neighbors and community, both around the globe and next door.

EDUCATION'S ROLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

As a consequence of distancing ourselves from the value of local relationships, we begin to distance ourselves from nature² and our immediate environment as well.

Scott Hess writes in his essay “Imagining an Everyday Nature,”

This tendency to locate ‘nature’ apart from ourselves skews our environmental awareness and priorities in ways that blind us to the devastating ecological impact of our own everyday lives and incapacitate us from pursuing realistic alternatives. If we seek nature apart from our lives, how can we restructure those lives—not just individually, but socially, politically, and economically—in order to change the current patterns of environmental destruction? (85)

Life and nature have become in many cases property of corporations (enter again the “official landscape”) used to bring in monetary profit rather than a part of the community. For example, after forming a near-monopoly over plants like corn, soy, wheat, and beets, Monsanto genetically engineered their seeds to contain a “suicide gene”: “traditionally, farmers around the world have saved seeds in order to cultivate a variety of strands to help maintain bio-diversity,” but “Monsanto now forces farmers to use one seed that essentially kills itself so it cannot be used the next season, resulting in mono-crop farming,” a type of farming already proven to be destructive to the environment (Nagy).

In order to “restructure” the way people live, we have to become aware that we do in fact

² According to Hess, there is no *one* way to define “nature”: “The cultural category of ‘nature’...is transformed from a universal and external standard into an ongoing process of cultural action and negotiation, constructed out of the various activities of everyday life” (102). In this essay, we must think of nature as the collective phenomena of the physical world which we see in “our daily actions and lifestyles, our social structures, and the places and communities in which we live, through which we generate our main environmental impacts” (108-109).

have natural ties to the earth in the sense that we all depend on it for our own well-being, whether we live in the country or the city; we have no choice but to *use* the land in order to survive, and if we do not treat the literal foundation of our lives with care, then we will suffer for it. Currently, we *are* suffering for it.

It is important to note that while many ecological and social problems begin at a local and private level, they cannot be completely solved at this level. In all actuality, as Nixon argues,

although advocating personal environmental responsibility is essential, to shrink solutions to the level of the private and the small is evasive.... Planetary problems—and transnational, national, and regional ones—cannot simply be resolved by the aggregated actions of responsible individuals. Institutional actions (and institutionalized inaction) have a profound impact on environmental outcomes...which no collectivized ethical behavior can combat without backing from well-implemented transnational accords. (39)

When we as knowledge producers view this shift from the value of local community and memory to the value of mass progress as a shift that has happened gradually over several centuries, it becomes clear that how we educate children is part of this problem: “[T]here are few positive imaginative and ecological models to encourage deep commitment to the unspectacular, developed, aesthetically ordinary environments where most of us live and work” (Hess 90). Their exposure to nature occurs in the form of television programs and vacations to “beautiful” places, and not on the land or in the communities in which they

live. Thus, they have little commitment to the earth or people around them and consequently might see themselves as separate entities rather than as contributing members of a functional community. Young people have an intrinsic need for guidance when it comes to establishing values, because the only way for children to develop principles and standards of behavior is by observing those around them. Teachers of literature have an opportunity for activism built into their professions; we can guide students through the imaginative scenarios presented in creative fiction and nonfiction, encouraging them to draw parallels and differences between the imagined world and their own, helping them think critically to discover the strengths and weaknesses of their own and of their communities so that they may become understanding, active, responsible citizens both locally and globally.

Teachers practicing place-based learning will turn to their immediate surroundings to provide lessons for their students, perhaps delving into the history of their place and its politics, or maybe researching their local flora and fauna to understand their ecosystem. These are tangible lessons, but using literature in place-based learning can help students reach beyond the local place and see how they themselves, and their place, fit into a larger world context. A fictional world does not necessarily provide an *escape* from reality, but rather it gives students an opportunity to imagine and represent important social and environmental issues by presenting a different kind of lived experience. In short, literature opens up subjects for students and leads them to greater questions, and O'Connor's "Greenleaf" is one of those fictional worlds ready to be taken up by students. Harsh in its observance of the human condition, "Greenleaf" raises

questions and concerns about social problems that still affect most people today.

Furthermore, it addresses issues of the human drive to control nature and the part people play in cultivating their environment. Overall, the story renders countless opportunities for students to discuss, write about, and reflect upon their position amongst each other, their communities, their environments, and their global space.

“GREENLEAF”: AN ECOCRITICAL READING

For Berry, a culture is only as alive as its memories or “local soil,” and memories can only live on if culture is preserved. Therefore, if a human community is to last, it “must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place” (*A Part* 155). This local memory is important because it preserves a place’s history and how it should be “well and lovingly used” (166), thus creating common ground for one whole community. And, finally, fostering this sense of true community among people in a shared place will strengthen the communication between its habitants which will encourage them to act on their values and strive to make their communities last.

However, as Nixon implies in *Slow Violence*, this is an idealistic and utopian idea, one that cannot be fully accomplished simply due to the nature of humanity as it stands today. “Greenleaf,” though set in a place where one would expect to see this ideal happy and “healthy” community blossom, gives readers an example of what can more realistically be expected—classism, familial discord, and a disconnection from place—and in turn can give students an imaginative lens through which they can examine their own reality and how they both affect and are affected by their communities and place.

Before delving into my interpretation of “Greenleaf,” an overview of the story will help situate and connect the following analysis. Mrs. May wakes one morning to find the same stray bull that has been grazing on her property for days in the hedges beneath her bedroom window, and it exasperates her that her farmhand of fifteen years, Mr. Greenleaf, hasn’t yet run the bull off her land as she ordered him to do. Mrs. May is a respectable person who has dedicated her life to doing the “right” thing, yet bad things keep happening to her. First her husband died, leaving her only this piece of farmland and forcing her out of the city and into the countryside with her two young boys. Now, her sons, both well-educated, in their mid-thirties and unmarried, continue to take advantage of her by living at home and refusing to help with the farm work, while Mrs. May absorbs their verbal abuse and disrespect.

Mrs. May’s outrage at the bull’s continuous presence only escalates when she learns that it belongs to Mr. Greenleaf’s twin sons, grown boys who served in the military and have now settled nearby with their French wives and many Catholic children. On an everyday basis, Mrs. May is reminded that although she prides herself on working hard and doing everything “right,” her sons are a disappointment, yet the simple-minded and idle Mr. Greenleaf and his religious fanatic wife, both of whom Mrs. May considers to be her social inferiors, have two sons who went to war, rose in the ranks, married well-mannered women and had children, and now own their own land and a dairy finer than her own. She becomes obsessed with the bull that is eating all her grass and “ruining her herd,” a bull that the Greenleaf boys won’t attempt to control, so she orders Mr. Greenleaf to shoot it.

Ultimately, the bull exceeds human labors to assert power of nature, a fact the Greenleafs seem not to challenge. To Mrs. May, however, the bull is a piece of someone else's property ruining her property, and she forces Mr. Greenleaf to shoot it by physically driving him in her car to a field and telling him to kill the bull. When the bull runs into the woods, Mr. Greenleaf follows, but as Mrs. May leans on her car and waits to hear a gunshot, the bull runs out from the tree line and gores her through the heart, killing her.

The first thing students will notice about Mrs. May is her fierce sense of ownership, a quality that reflects a moral shortfall in her relationships. She is awakened by the rhythmic chewing of the bull, manifested in her dream, or nightmare in her case, as something that had been eating everything from her fence to her house and "with the same steady rhythm would continue eating through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place" (311-12). Mrs. May exhibits a powerful sense of identity in relation to her land and her children, constantly referring to them throughout the story as "her place" and "her boys." While teaching this story, teachers might ask their students to reflect, through a writing assignment or group discussion, on the very idea of "ownership," asking, what do they, the students, truly own? What are the ramifications of basing one's identity on ownership? Though it is normal and common to define oneself by one's relationships to people and places, Mrs. May does so through *ownership* of these things, and it seems hurtful, not helpful, to her various relationships. For example, Mrs. May's neglect of relationships for the sake of

her property extends into the community in which she lives. While walking through some woods one day, she hears an agonized voice groaning, “Jesus! Jesus!” Her first thought is not to find and help the person in trouble, but rather that “somebody had been hurt on the place and would sue her for everything she had” (316), a point in the story where a teacher could pause to discuss the growing practice of filing lawsuits and the effect such practice has on communities. Furthermore, when Mrs. May warns her eldest son, Scofield, that he won’t find a good wife, he replies, “Why Mamma, I’m not going to marry until you’re dead and gone and then I’m going to marry me some nice fat farm girl that can take over this place! ... [S]ome nice lady like Mrs. Greenleaf” (315). At this exclamation, Mrs. May storms to her bedroom and whispers to herself, “I work and slave, I struggle and sweat to keep this place for them and soon as I’m dead, they’ll marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything. They’ll marry trash and ruin everything I’ve done” (315). Her concern clearly is not for her son’s future or happiness, but rather for her farm, her property, to be kept up to her standards after she’s gone. Just like her concern that the Greenleafs’ inferior bull will ruin the purity of her own herd, she worries that the Greenleafs will ruin the “purity” of her own family, offering teachers an opportunity to discuss with their students a wide range of issues related to so-called “purity,” such as the breeding of animals, the use of herbicides for weed and pest-control, discrimination, and disabilities. For Mrs. May, her relationships with her children are not nearly as important as appearances, propriety, and things being done “right.”

For the most part, Mrs. May’s life has been defined by her devotion to appearances. For example, when her physical appearance is first described, she has green

rubber curlers sprouting “neatly over her forehead and her face beneath them was smooth as concrete with an egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept” (311). In addition, her use of religion is for appearance purposes only, as she is “a good Christian woman with large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (316). Most importantly, she runs her farm with an “iron hand,” never letting any weaknesses show, but the reader will clearly see she is deeply vulnerable as her “iron hand” is described as a “delicate blue-veined little hand [that] would dangle from her wrist like the head of a broken lily” (322). This vanity and her defining sense of ownership can be read as examples of Bauman’s idea of the threatening “moral lag” that comes with the acceleration towards postmodernity and the unceasing pursuit of economic progress. The reader knows Mrs. May loves her sons; she moved away from the comforts of the city in order to provide the most she could for them, she raised them herself and provided them with good educations, and she continues to let them live at home. However, her priorities blind her to the importance of these relationships and the happiness of the human people she cares most about. Students studying this story might be urged to reevaluate their own priorities or the priorities of their communities.

Students can also examine Mrs. May’s sense of displacement and underlying lack of belonging in “her” place and come to a fuller understanding of their own relationship, or lack thereof, to their place and community. In a sense, because of her unwavering priorities described above, Mrs. May is doomed to live out the rest of her life in a place that belongs to her but to which she does not actually belong; thus, “ownership” does not in itself equal belonging. One must note Mrs. May did not choose a life on a farm: “The

late Mr. May, a business man, had bought the place when land was down, and when he died it was all he had to leave her. The boys had not been happy to move to the country to a broken-down farm, but there was nothing else for her to do” (319). Like Mrs. May and her children, most families choose to or are forced to move to an unfamiliar place at some point in their lives, and this process of moving is often described as being “uprooted.” However, it is not necessarily the place that defines a person, that “roots” the person, but rather the person that defines the place; Mrs. May only sees “her place” as one of never-ending responsibilities, heartache, disappointment, and duty, and thus the reader might see that she defines herself, perhaps unknowingly, in these terms as well. Jeff Fearnside notes in “Place as Self” that

we find ourselves tied to place in an inextricable way, for when writing about place, we seek not so much to define that place as to determine our place in it and in the larger world. ... We are born of particular places, live in them, love in them, and are otherwise marked by them even as we leave our marks upon them. As they change, we inevitably change with them, if not physically then at least in our hearts and minds. The places in our lives are part of the constantly evolving aggregate of who we are. (770)

Though Fearnside is addressing people who *write* about place, what he explains is applicable to educators and students as well, especially in the place-based learning system. If students are taught lessons in relation to their own place, they will learn both how they fit into the place and how that place has an affect on them. Youth almost never have a choice when it comes to where they live and grow up, and focusing this absence of

choice through “Greenleaf” will help students explore their own sense of belonging in the different areas of their lives – school, home, community – and the types of choices which they actually control. Superficially living “upon” a place as Mrs. May is does not encourage any deep or committed relationship to those with whom one cohabitates the place and thus does not foster a caring community who will care for their environmental and social health.

Furthermore, one can see how Mrs. May’s poor sense of belonging has affected her own offspring, offering a lesson to students (and teachers) about the urgency of considering place throughout their educations. Because Mrs. May has had such a negative experience on “her place” due to her shallow priorities, she sets a poor example for her children of how a person can become part of a place and a community of people. Wesley, her intellectual son, hates his job as a professor, the countryside he lives in, living with his mother and brother, and hearing about the dairy farm, but “in spite of all he said, he never made any move to leave. He talked about Paris and Rome but he never went even to Atlanta” (319). Wesley’s mother has provided him with absolutely no example of how to develop relationships with the people and places around him, and one could even argue she has projected her misery and disappointment upon her own son. Furthermore, the fact that he makes no effort to go elsewhere reflects the importance of guidance in children’s development of important relationships in their lives. Mrs. May likely has the means now to move off the farm that makes her miserable, but she chooses to remain there, defining herself only by what she owns rather than by the place itself, and she fails to teach Wesley that there is any value to forming any type of meaningful

relationship with a place. Mrs. May's sons are doomed to her same fate: a miserable life without meaningful values or relationships.

The fact that Mrs. May is entering her senior years and her children are in their thirties and none of them have yet found fulfillment in their lives further heightens the student reader's sense of urgency in pursuing these relationships. Scofield and Wesley, both grown men now, disrespect Mrs. May and have no real mother-son relationship with her, as evidenced by the many condescending remarks they make to her, calling her "Sweetheart" and "Sugarpie." Also, they do not care at all about the "place" Mrs. May has "made" for them: "When [Mrs. May] looked at them now, ...neither one caring the least if a stray bull ruined her herd—which was their herd, their future—...she wanted to jump up and beat her fist on the table and shout, 'You'll find out one of these days, you'll find out what *Reality* is when it's too late!'" (320). In fact, the boys care so little about the farm that Wesley remarks, "I wouldn't milk a cow to save your soul from hell" (321). The May family's sense of kinship is entirely lacking and in many ways tragic, making "Greenleaf" a valuable learning tool for teenagers in secondary school. In response to a discussion about this lack of kinship in the central family of the story, students should be asked to list the people who they believe have had significant influence on their lives. This exercise would present an opportunity for these young citizens to realize their own responsibility in their important relationships; I place much emphasis on the importance of guiding youth, but high school is the period during which many people begin to psychologically develop beyond egocentrism and thoughtfully consider the opinions and thoughts of others. Therefore, this short period of life carries great potential as a time for

shaping children into sympathetic neighbors and concerned citizens who will care for their communities of people and places.

As students study Mrs. May's role in "Greenleaf," they will quickly note her acute disgust at any mention of a Greenleaf and how her highly classist view of her own community has tremendous effects on her sense of identity. Mr. Greenleaf is slow at his job and not very intelligent, qualities that Mrs. May has learned to begrudgingly accommodate. Mrs. Greenleaf, however, turns Mrs. May's stomach, as she is described as a "large and loose" woman whose "house looked like a dump and her five girls were always filthy" (315). Furthermore, Mrs. Greenleaf practices "prayer healing," a ritual of cutting all the morbid stories out of the newspaper each morning, burying them in the woods, and then flinging herself onto the ground over them, mumbling and groaning for over an hour, a habit that Mrs. May finds preposterous, shameful, and obscene. However, with the guidance of thoughtfully posed questions, a careful student reader might conclude that Mrs. May's discomfort and disgust caused by the Greenleafs stems from a painful truth that she is not willing to accept: though she seemingly hates them, she covets the Greenleafs' family relations, success, and happiness. Mrs. May might be disgusted by the Greenleaf's inferior sense of propriety, but Mr. Greenleaf, when listening to his employer talk about her sons' good qualities, "never lost an opportunity of letting her see by his expression or some simple gesture that he held the two of them in infinite contempt.... He never hesitated to let her know that in any circumstance in which his own boys might have been involved, they...would have acted to better advantage" (317). She knows this is true, but she never outwardly admits it.

A worksheet with a chart of two sections, one for each family, would help students visually compare the differences between the Mays and Greenleafs. For example, in great contrast to the May family, the Greenleafs, not at all concerned about vanity and appearances, are happy, young in spirit, and in many ways more successful in life than Mrs. May and her boys. Most notable are the twins, O.T. and E.T. Greenleaf, who voluntarily joined the military service during World War II. Eventually, the boys returned home with French wives with whom they had Catholic children who would be “brought up with manners” (318), and with their pensions they were able to establish themselves as dairy farmers with more sophisticated equipment than Mrs. May can afford. Furthermore, one of the Greenleafs’ hired hands tells Mrs. May that the two “never quarls” and are “like one man in two skins” (326), indicating that the Greenleaf brothers respect and love each other with a sense of shared goals and shared place, unlike Mrs. May’s sons who get into physical altercations at the dinner table and hate each other passionately. Though the Greenleaf boys have grown into happy and successful adults, Mrs. May still looks at them as inferior as she clings to the only thing she thinks she has left: her civility and social class. Comparing the families will not only help students understand the conflict in the short story; listing out qualities of the characters will allow students to see how much they relate to them.

Mrs. May’s poorly developed relationships with both the place in which she lives and works and the people with whom she cohabitates it are most strongly highlighted in the culmination of the plot line at the end of the story. Mrs. May has made up her mind to have the bull killed that day, so she drives to her dairy and orders Mr. Greenleaf to get

his gun and get in her car. After the bull runs into the woods, Mr. Greenleaf has to go into the woods to find it, so Mrs. May drives to the center of the pasture to wait for him. As she sits on her front bumper, her mind wanders not to a romantic admiration of the beautiful day, warm sun, and bright green pasture, but rather to the way she has worked for fifteen years: “She decided she was tired because she had been working continuously for fifteen years. She decided she had every right to be tired, and to rest for a few minutes before she began working again. Before any kind of judgment seat, she would be able to say: I’ve worked, I have not wallowed” (332). As she reflects on her past fifteen years, the only thing of value that crosses her mind is her unrelenting dedication to work, not to her family or her community.

Her mind wanders to the Greenleafs, and the reader continues to note just how little she cares for them. She denounces Mr. Greenleaf in her thoughts for being lazy, and she reflects on how simple, poor, and inferior Mrs. Greenleaf is compared to herself. When Mrs. May realizes more than ten minutes have passed and Mr. Greenleaf has not yet returned, she considers the possibility that the bull has killed him, imagining that “O.T. and E.T. would then get a shyster lawyer and sue her,” bringing a “fitting end to her fifteen years with the Greenleafs” (333). To bring this moment into sharper congruence with the rest of the story, the teacher could ask her students to recall another moment when Mrs. May imagines the people she’s lived with for fifteen years in some serious trouble, but instead of concern for their well-being her worries turn to her possible loss of property. Her knowledge of deep truths she has learned from her interactions with the Greenleafs has not manifested itself in her actions whatsoever, and

just as she has spent all her energy attempting to exert control over her family, her land, and the Greenleafs, her final moments are spent trying to control the rogue bull. As the bull runs out from the woods and with its horn pierces Mrs. May through her heart, she has “the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable” (333). One might read this ending as an allegory for what might happen should we choose to neglect efforts to form deeper relationships with people and places, but this final moment in the story opens up an excellent dialogue with students due to its inherent ambiguity. What, if anything, is Mrs. May “seeing”? Why use the word “restored”? Or, in greater terms applicable to the students’ own lives, what are some great truths being realized today, perhaps about social justices or environmental issues, that are hard to swallow?

“Greenleaf” allows student readers to examine how one’s values affect relationships with places, family, and community because O’Connor provides two pairs of sons for her readers to compare, as well as two sets of parents and two ways of living. Its short plot line, wide variety of characters, and many lessons make it an excellent teaching tool in the place-based education system. In “Literature and the Living World: Environmental Education in the English Classroom,” Jennifer Beigel explains, “[E]ducation includes all the social processes that bring a person into ‘cultural life.’ In the schools in becomes the process that cultivates the skills, knowledge, and values that enable a child to become an active participant in society” (107). Furthermore, Beigel notes that a survey shows that English teachers feel their most important purpose is “to help students understand themselves and the human condition” (108). Thus, including

texts that address the importance of relationships with place, land, people, and community to individual and collective identities would be valuable in teaching students about themselves and how they can become active participants in in their human *and* biotic communities.

Literature has the ability to place pupils in new environments and encourage them to develop their own connection between themselves and place. Cheryl Burgess Glotfelty notes that ecocriticism can help people establish stronger connections between the environment and issues of social justice by encouraging a “diversity of voices...to contribute to the discussion” (qtd. in Gaard 322). Toward a similar point, Buell insists in *The Environmental Imagination* that people need to imagine nonhuman agents, like places, as “bona fide partners” (179), and by cultivating this close relationship between human and nonhuman agents, we can produce powerful tools that can change discourse and thereby change society (204). In each of these cases, the environmental imagination is spurred by the imaginary worlds that literature provides, foreseeing problems and solutions for how we treat each other and the environment. “Greenleaf” becomes a guide for the student into these worlds.

Thus, as many ecocritics contend, teachers can use environmental literature to help youth reimagine the place in which they already live and to encourage their own individual senses of identity with their places and communities. Literature offers imaginative insights into how we can think about human society’s relationship with the land. Especially as an overlooked author within ecocriticism, O’Connor offers us

understudied visions that can teach us about the relationship between people and place, which have the potential to serve as a guide to teach students while they are still young and have an aptitude to appreciate place and community before becoming disconnected. Whether she was making an environmental argument or not, she still gives us foresight into the possible and impossible. Hopefully in future works ecocritics and proponents of place-based education will attend more closely to O'Connor and how she can help us imagine new possible relationships between ourselves and place.

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