# exploration

## THROUGH ENGLISH

# How One Student Found Meaning in the Place Least Expected


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# steps of the journey

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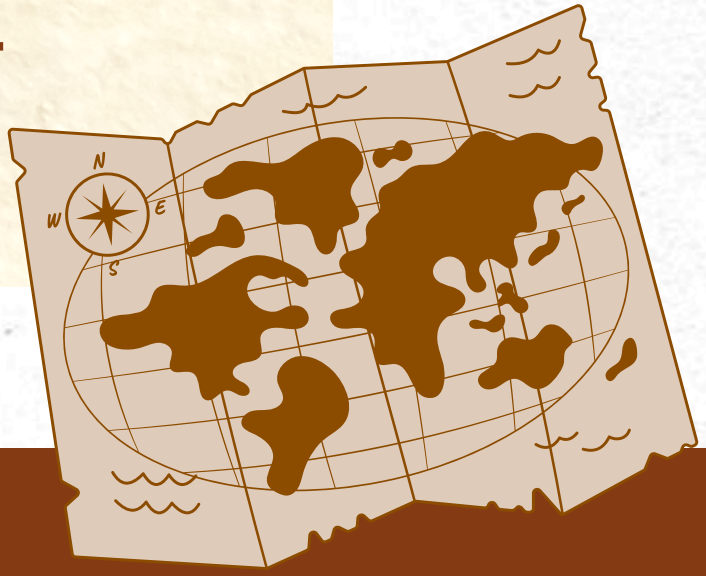


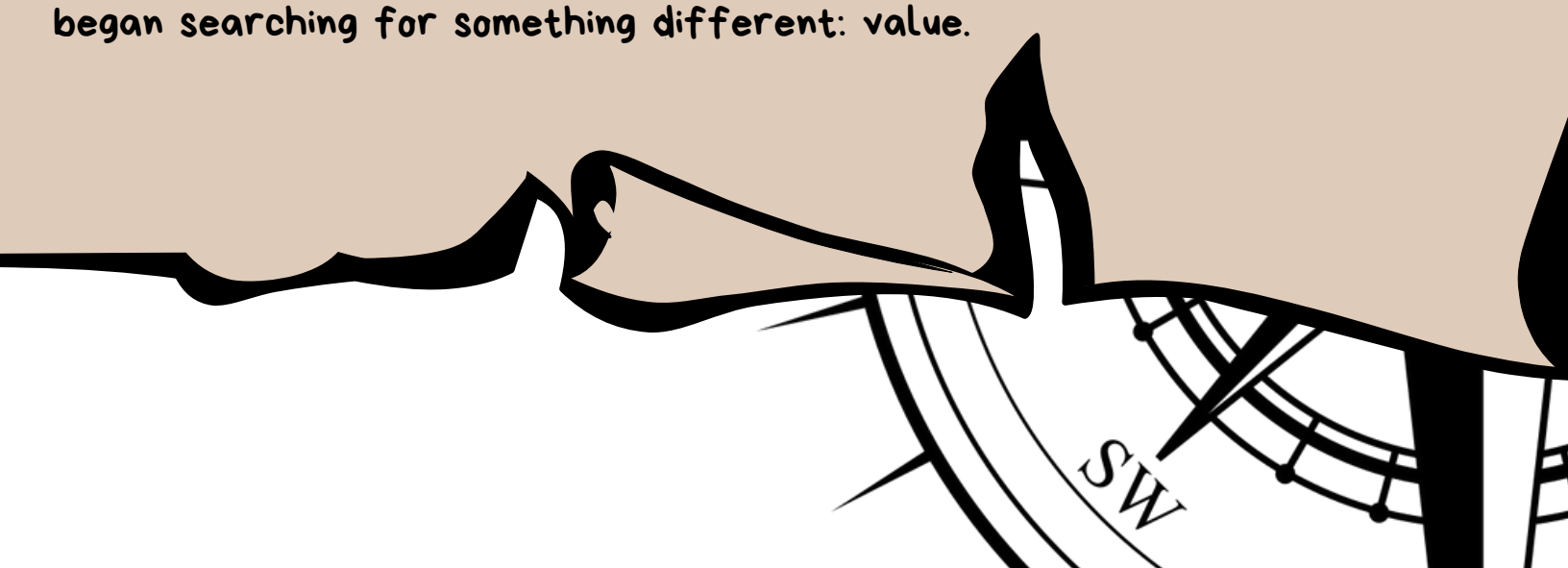
# the explorer

## NOTES FROM PAST DISCOVERIES:

I've always enjoyed the unknown. It's a place that often reveals more about me than about itself. Growing up in the suburbs, my favorite thing to do over the summer was explore, for the small forest behind my developing cul-de-sac seemed to be both the most dangerous and most intriguing place I could dream of. With each day, I'd move a few steps farther into the woods, until one afternoon I realized I had reached the edge.

It was a sad moment in my childhood, for I'd discovered that the infinitely large woods had been conquered. Shortly after, however, my quest to unearth the unknown resumed with something called 'school.'

Throughout my years, I enjoyed science, as it felt like something new was being discovered every single day. In math, I'd look forward to learning a new formula and thoroughly enjoyed discovering a much simpler way to do long division—a calculator. Even history had questions unanswered. But Language Arts? To me, that seemed like just a bunch of stories that had already been written, told, and told again. It didn't seem as if there was any chance to discover something new. As Language Arts transitioned into English and the world became increasingly smaller, I began searching for something different: value.



I knew that when I grew up, I wanted to be a physician, so learning about the relationships between compounds in Chemistry or how different structures of the body interact in Physiology seemed to be applicable to my journey. So, when I learned I had to take yet another English course in college, I was disappointed, as I imagined it would be an environment where what I was searching for simply wasn't very valuable to my life. I couldn't have been further from the truth.

In ENGL1102, I've unearthed more previous unknowns than my Biology class and learned just as many applicable skills as my Psychopathology course. Matriculating into college, I was seriously doubtful that this would've been the result, as the ability to discover had been lacking in my previous high school English courses, where surface level analysis and messages so general they could be plastered on t-shirts seemed to be the expectation. However, the content and instruction has reignited the same flame that encouraged a younger version of me to venture into the woods. The possibility for discovery isn't a possibility—it's a guarantee, and the skills gained are many that simply couldn't be taught any other way.


# a retelling of expeditions past

Discovery is rarely a facile process. Through the content and instruction in ENGL1102, I was encouraged to explore to ideas I'd never considered and challenged to write on a deeper level than ever before. It was a daunting task, but the skills—both concerning writing and life—I've strengthened couldn't have been taught any other way. For that, I am grateful for my journey.

Before embarking on an expedition into the woods as a child, I would always gather as much information and as many supplies as necessary. I'd look to clouds as a sign for weather and pack a snack in case I got lost and became hungry. Sometimes, I'd know exactly what I was searching for, but more often than not, I'd wander into the forest with only a general idea of what I could discover. When writing, I apply this same level of maximalism and garnering of information to my drafting process. Although I may not know exactly what the prompt may entail or which perspective I'm going to take, this examination of all possible information provides me with step by step directions while I search for a thesis to chase after. In my first essay, my research on the Southern Gothic style of Flannery O'Connor's writing and the representation of discriminatory perspectives through a specific character allowed me to eventually form a clear thesis. Because I examined the way certain elements—such as literary movements or allusions—influenced both the writer's argument as well as the audience's interpretation, I set off into the forest of drafting knowing exactly what thesis I was searching for.

Additionally, by employing a maximalist methodology concerning research, the vast majority of evidence I would need to support my eventual claim had already been found, as I was able to write portions of my paragraphs centered around these sources before committing to a thesis. Because of this, when I had finally solidified my interpretation of the piece, I didn't have to start from scratch, I merely had to modify and add to the existing sentences to better align them with my thesis. Just like exploring, I would take in the information around me, find my bearings, and be able to find exactly what I was looking for rather than wandering aimlessly.

However, sometimes I wouldn't have all afternoon to explore, so I'd have to travel with a lighter load and arrive at my destination in a more efficient manner. I found this to be the case in drafting as well, for a rigorous course load would often restrict the amount of time I could spent examining every source, perspective, or allusion regarding a piece. In my paper analyzing Fences, for example, time forced me to arrive at my thesis in a more efficient manner, meaning I had to forgo some of my usual research to focus on topics such as actor interpretation and the fundamental differences between theatre and film.

While I am—without a doubt—a macro-style writer who prefers to focus on the 'big picture' ideas, these are often found and explored in depth most easily through extensive research. Writing multiple essays in ENGL1102 has allowed me to experiment with different drafting styles, however, and I'd found by my final paper a hybrid style in which I could absorb a great amount of peer-reviewed information and permit it to influence my drafts without letting it dominate them.

Just as an explorer focuses his journey around making a big discovery, I write in a macro-style to focus on the key points in my argument as opposed to merely summarizing or examining a new topic with every sentence. However, this is possible because my writing style is refined, and my drafts usually don't require an excessive amount of line-by-line editing and proofreading.

Regardless of the drafting style, however, I felt that as a writer, I succeeded in strengthening my audience awareness and genre awareness. Particularly evident in paper about Fences, I worked from the initial feedback provided by Professor Vasconcelos-Hammock to tailor my piece to the scholarly aspect of my audience and discuss actor interpretation and adaptation.

Before receiving the necessary direction in ENGL1102, I would present my findings as an explorer similarly to how I'd present my interpretation of a piece: without direct examples. Oftentimes, I'd return from the forest with claims that I'd discovered an animal skull or tiles from a house previously built on the site without any real evidence to support my findings. Similarly, in my paper about A Good Man is Hard to Find, I made statements that should've been strengthened instead of merely presented and moved on from. For example, when I discussed the society in which O'Connor lived as possessing divisive, hateful, and foundationless ideologies, I then began discussing how this affected the crafting of a character as opposed to expanding on the point and providing evidence to back my claim. While I was able to rectify this issue in my revised paper, it is one in which I have room to grow, as an argument without evidence is merely an opinion. Additionally, while I've been able to eliminate some redundancy from my pieces, I still have my work cut out for me when it comes to being concise.

Rooted in my maximalist style and original drafting process of researching as much as possible, I've always written near the top end of the word count. However, while I still struggle with this, ENGL1102 has increased the purpose of each word. While the word counts themselves may not have shrunk, I feel as if I'm able to put forth more content and relevant analysis. For example, while my third paper may be nearly three thousand words, I believe this is due more to my deep-dive analysis than the repetition of a few points.

These attributes as a writer aren't limited to literary writing, however. The skills I've discovered in ENGL1102 apply to all types of writing, from lab reports to job applications. For example, while a poem focused on immigration to the United States in the 19th century may appear to have no similarities to a summary of an experiment determining the concentration of various starch supplements, how I write both is similar thanks to the instruction I've received in this class. Both require an analysis of the content presented, as they share common attributes of a claim, evidence, and the author or researcher's interpretation of whatever the focal point may be. When writing an analysis of this poem, I'd focus on both the words individually as well as their meaning when viewed in the context of the entire poem and the time in which it was written. I'd develop a thesis and discern what the author is trying to convey. When writing a lab report, I now focus on the same things. Although the individual words may be "concentrations" or "molecular compounds," they need to be understood in the context of themselves as well as their relationship to the overall experiment.

Beyond writing as a whole, the skills I've developed are still applicable in other ways as well, especially in helping me attain my aspiration of becoming a physician. As a course focused on multicultural literature, ENGL 1102 has granted me the opportunity to express empathy by analyzing and writing about pieces written by authors who have experienced completely different worlds than myself. For example, my wildcard examines the connection between Fences and Oskar Eustis' Ted Talk regarding the importance of theatre in reflecting our world. Fences discusses taboo topics, from infidelity to parental abandonment, and from racism to gender inequality. Literature and theatre continue to allow me to take a step back from my perspective and view a conflict from someone else's. Without a doubt, the content and instruction in ENGL1102 have not merely expanded my horizons to other cultures and identities, but has provoked me to alter the way in which I see the world. For example, I was taught in middle school about the Deep South and post-Civil War America, but by analyzing Flannery O'Connor's A Good Man Is Hard to Find, I was able to place myself in that time as opposed to memorizing facts from a slideshow. I explored in particular the grandmother as a representation of the 'Old South' mindset, which displayed to me not the numbers or causes of

segregation, but the way in which members of the African American community were discriminated against every second of their lives. This new perspective—this personal perspective—is arguably more important than the line-by-line facts presented in most history courses, as it allowed me to understand and empathize with what individuals were enduring day in and day out. While I typically enjoy history classes more than their English counterparts, I found the multicultural perspective that this class took interesting because it widened the influence of English in my daily life. For example, I aspire to become a physician, and while many may not view English as particularly pertinent to diagnosing conditions or performing surgery, one of the most important aspects of serving others is the ability to empathize. In fact, one of the modern translations of the Hippocratic Oath reads, “I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.”

Over just a semester, I’ve hearkened back to my days as an explorer, as I’ve not only developed as a writer but discovered the skills of empathy and perspective necessary to thrive as a member of our global community. While I still face issues regarding word count and providing direct examples to support my thesis, I’ve strengthened my ability to consider new perspectives, draft efficiently, and be aware of my macro-writing style and audience. Due to the content presented and instruction provided in this course, I’ve grown into a more empathetic, more focused, and more advanced student and explorer and look forward to employing these skills in many facets of my life.

# THE SOUTH

Righteousness is an often-hazardous combination of excessive confidence, self-valuation, and saintliness. Flannery O'Connor, a twentieth-century female American novelist, incorporates her vision of America as a flawed conglomeration littered with those who possess an abundance of this and preclude the nation from moving forward. With an emphasis on self-righteousness, O'Connor's work *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* serves to exemplify how powerfully this trait can corrupt not only an individual but harm those around as well.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor crafts the character of the grandmother as an embodiment of the mindset of many in the 'Old South.' She keeps up appearances, wants to be 'in the know,' and tries to manipulate even those close to her. In modern America, we label these individuals 'fake,' whereas in the Old South, they were oftentimes the 'belles of the balls.' Perhaps O'Connor is conveying that those those in America during that time who identified themselves as 'good people' only focused on the outward appearance of what it meant to be good: kempt, courteous, connected. Corroborated by author Timothy J. Basselin in his piece "Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity", this 'perceived' goodness is a hallmark of O'Connor's writing: "the good she questions in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,'...is society's misrepresentation of what is good" (Basselin 34). Those who present this false, heightened sense of righteousness suffer from a pressing problem. Where goodness is truly defined—in the ways a person behaves, interacts, and thinks—this 'ladylike' group falters. Whether it's an overabundance of self-righteousness, blatantly discriminatory thinking, or a lack of concern for others' wellbeing, those who don a façade of outward goodness—O'Connor believes—are, in actuality, the very antithesis of what they try to convey to others.

This hypocrisy, present in the overt racism the grandmother exhibits when seeing a young African American boy near the road directly contradicts how she views herself as a dignified 'lady': "'In my time,' said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers,' children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!...Little n*ggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture'" (O'Connor 1307). Whilst a 'good' individual would,

even in those times, show compassion or refuse to make a derogatory comment, the grandmother deliberately uses racial slurs, yet brushes them off as if they are used daily. Particularly, “pickanniny” is, according to Ferris State University, an African American individual having “bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. They were themselves tasty morsels for alligators. They were routinely shown on postcards, posters, and other ephemera being chased or eaten. Pickaninnies were portrayed as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken” (Pilgrim). In addition to perpetuating racist, untrue stereotypes, this language is used by the grandmother in a quotidian nature, as if slurs such as these are a part of her daily lexicon. Furthermore, the grandmother fails to express any empathy for the child, and instead of wanting to create a world where minorities have the same access to opportunities as she, the grandmother merely mentions that she wants to paint him on the side of the road. The intentional utilization of this language is crucial for O’Connor to lay out her opinions on America, for employing words and phrases to connotate the ‘Old South’ mindset allows readers to better grasp both the inner workings of the characters as well as fully engage in what the ‘good Old South’ really meant.

Without O’Connor’s deliberate usage of these insensitive, antiquated terms, readers would be entering an almost filtered world, where the rough edges and brutal treatment of second-class citizens had been polished out. These phrases also reflect the author’s view of America through the grandmother, as they shape a character meant to represent the large group of individuals O’Connor experienced who still possessed divisive, hateful, and foundationless ideologies targeted at those with different skin tones. However, O’Connor also crafted a character with whom she shared certain values on race: ““On one hand she crafts visions of grace and redemption; and on the other she retells stories and complaints by Black farm workers seasoned with racial epithets that make one cringe with discomfort” (West 439). In recent years, O’Connor’s legacy has come under fire for her use of racially insensitive language and letter she wrote which “provide information on her thoughts about Black intellect and how those preconceived notions and perceptions about Blacks may have shaped character creation and interaction” (West 440). For example, in one letter, O’Connor referred to those with darker skin as “primitive” and failing to learn as quickly as whites (West 440). Unfortunately, O'Connor shared some of the perspectives of the discriminatory grandmother she crafts in *A Good Man is Hard to Find;*

however, this discovery strengthens rather than weakens her creation of the character. This is because instead of O'Connor using a third person experience to craft someone who is supposed to be representative of a large group of people, she employs some of her thoughts, purposely or coincidentally to be represented, meaning the racist language and discriminatory sense of righteousness is more authentic. Irregardless, the phrases such as "pickanniny" play into O'Connor's creation of an overly righteous figure, as the grandmother consistently refers to herself as 'lady' and believes she is morally and socially above many others; however, the use of racially insensitive terms encourages readers to notice the misalignment between the grandmother's view of herself as innately good and the observer's perception of a cynical, bigoted relic of the past (O'Connor 1307). Through the stylistic utilization of such raw terms as "pickanniny," O'Connor is not just exemplifying the racism present in her world but is forcing readers to get a glimpse of what the oppressed experience on a daily basis.

The grandmother, meant to represent the 'Old South' and its definitively unjust frame of mind, is additionally crafted as the means by which the entire family into trouble and eventually killed. Quite possible, then, O'Connor purposefully pens the narrative to end in this manner. Timothy J. Basselin further explains this point: "We do not pity the grandmother in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' because her own hypocrisy and lies and limitations bring about her fate" (Basselin 2). This danger-arousing nature is taken a step further by O'Connor, however, by not merely punishing the grandmother for her own actions but choosing to extend her suffering to the multigenerational family, O'Connor expresses that the dangers of overt righteousness and willing ignorance extend to our multi-generational and multi-racial nation. Until her last moments, the grandmother retains this sense of moral superiority, questioning how the Misfit could kill a 'lady;' the author not only has the grandmother identify herself as this for its obvious relation to righteousness but also purposefully refrains from having the grandmother beg for the lives of her family to be saved. A truly good person would, in O'Connor's Catholic eyes, be willing to sacrifice himself or herself to save others; however, at no point does the audience experience a scene where the grandmother advocates for the lives of her own family. In addition, the author places the emphasis on the grandmother in the final scenes, for the father, mother, and children are quickly taken away in a few lines of the piece, whereas the Misfit entertains a lengthy conversation

with the grandmother before bringing an end to her life. By quickly sweeping away the other characters, O'Connor dispels any rumors as to which mindset is most dangerous to American society. Because O'Connor penned the conclusion of the piece in this manner, she was able to express that merely one person, one ideology rooted in the preservation of ill-willed self-saintliness, can cause damage to the entirety of our slowly evolving society.

Whilst all characters in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* are entitled to their flaws, the other members of the family represent more modern Americans, and O'Connor purposefully crafts the plot in such a way their deficiencies prove to be less fatal. While the children encourage the parents to drive into the woods, it is due to the suspense and excitement created by the grandmother's story, and the grandmother's embarrassment which causes the events leading to the accident as well. The children, for example, while perhaps a tad 'bratty' or disrespectful, seem to value more important things than appearances. When the grandmother discusses how she should've married a man simply because he was rich and bought her watermelon, the granddaughter immediately contradicts this shallow thinking, as she values herself as more than to marry someone for such materialist reasons (O'Connor 1308). O'Connor's utilization of the granddaughter to represent the newer generation of Americans who reject the traditional, 'ladylike' mindset stretches beyond the confines of marital issues, however. The inevitability of the grandmother passing and the younger generations taking her place works as an example to show those still clinging to a racist, overly righteous state of mind that their way of thinking, while hindering progress and creating division in the present, will eventually succumb to time in the future.

Furthermore, O'Connor digs deeper into the root of this soon-to-be-extinct mindset by creating a colloquy between the grandmother and Red Sam, where the 'good old days' is the focus of the conversation. Reminiscing about how 'safe' things used to be, the two exchange words about the distrust that seems to have suddenly appeared in their world: "'People are certainly not as nice like they used to be'... 'Isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust'" (O'Connor 1309). However, history tells a different story. Progressing from slavery and being sold at auction to being lynched and persecuted isn't progress. The 'good old days' were only that for the few white, upper-class plantation owners in the South, not the rest of the socioeconomic spectrum, and certainly not for blacks. Another example of O'Connor's ability to seamlessly weave in the

irony of history, politics, and perspective through literature, this exchange is crafted to illustrate the rationale behind why so many at that time seemed to possess a disdain towards change. Looking back at the past from a position of privilege, wealth, and stature, the grandmother blames Europe for robbing her of a better way of life, despite her, and the group she represents, being the means by which the country is failing to progress.

Without mentioning or considering how different societal pressures might affect those of a different race or community, the grandmother instead seems to be perfectly content remaining ignorant and deflecting responsibility. Another reflection of many individuals O'Connor experienced in her own time, this side of the grandmother is used to criticize the passive Americans who pretended to be oblivious to the miscarriages of justice taking place during the author's life. While some of these individuals did possess inherently racist ideologies, others didn't; regardless, they were unwilling to expose themselves to the possible repercussions of fighting for equality for the disenfranchised. Looking back on history, one can clearly observe that de jure policies--such as Jim Crow laws or neighborhood covenants—as well as de facto segregation had an infinite number of negative impacts on those who were being discriminated against. O'Connor's stylistic choice to have the grandmother fail to attribute even the smallest responsibility to the foundations of slavery represents those Americans who seemed more than content turning a blind eye to the plight of African Americans and other marginalized communities. This relates to O'Connor's belief that "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figure," as a majority of the country willingly stayed silent, scared of repercussions or fearful of the possible personal implications taking action for equality might have on them.

By expressing this belief, O'Connor could have been voicing a multitude of thoughts; perhaps, she was frustrated with how the Civil Rights movement was trying to convince whites to advocate for justice. While many efforts during that time were targeted at changing the country's mindset on the debate of black versus white, O'Connor may have believed that those engrained with racist ideologies weren't going to be swayed by protests and marches. Additionally, O'Connor's own racism impacts this expression as well. Because she possessed some of what she could have been criticizing, speculations arise on whether O'Connor recognized herself as a racist or merely in line with the shared ideas of many in the South at the time. Either way, O'Connor could be expressing

through this piece that those who felt compassion for the oppressed but chose not to speak up were truly the group who could, if encouraged, garner enough voices to force the country to embrace its rich and diverse collection of citizens.

While O'Connor was vocally opposed to returning to the South after her diagnosis of lupus, she recognized that creating access to influence those she represented was possible due to her characterization as a definitively Southern Gothic writer. This style was immensely popular in her region, as assistant professor of literature and cultural studies Alfredo Poggi states, "in the American social imaginary of the first half of the twentieth century, the 'Confederate' South became a region of the Gothic grotesque: the horrors of racism, anti-modern religiosity, 'the repository for everything the nation is not'. Despite the negative burden that the South placed on the American social imaginary, a group of authors, including O'Connor, knew how to rescue its riches, contradictions, complexities, and uniqueness" (Poggi). O'Connor was familiar with the popular writing style at the time, and purposefully included in A Good Man Is Hard To Find grotesque characters such as the Misfit, sudden plot changes like when the "hearse" arrives, and other characteristics of this literary style (O'Connor 1311). However, O'Connor's outlook on the state of the country and its racial debate was quite different than many other regional Southern Gothic authors at the time; yet she was able to use this to her advantage. By employing the style of Southern Gothic and incorporating literary devices familiar to those at the time, she gained access to the thoughts of her target audience, many of whom may not have otherwise read literature with such politically motivated undertones. O'Connor recognized that the region in which she lived housed many ideologies even more antiquated and racist than her own, and instead of trying to convince them otherwise through more direct messaging, she used a familiar writing style to draw Americans in and expose to them her view of a divided country in need of advocacy. Familiar characters, too, allowed her access to influence the thoughts of her readers. The grandmother, for example, represented someone almost all of her readers would know, and by exposing her excess of self-righteousness and outright racist behavior and putting the audience in an observatory perspective, readers are given a new angle and are allowed to witness the damage that this mindset can bring upon an entire group.

Through the employment of her specific literary style in A Good Man Is Hard to Find, Flannery O'Connor addresses self-righteousness and the danger its popularity amongst individuals in the South is bringing to America as a whole.

The deliberate development of the grandmother as a representation of this issue, in addition to representing the willingly ignorant American, allows O'Connor to reach her audience through the familiarity of the Southern Gothic style. The utilization of raw, unfiltered vocabulary provokes readers to experience the hypocrisy O'Connor describes, and the purposeful ending of the piece leaves the audience with little doubt regarding how an abundance of righteousness can poison not only an individual but can lead to dangerous consequences for all those involved. This piece serves as her resolution to her quote "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures," as it works as a mechanism by which O'Connor can expose her thoughts to an attentive audience on what is truly responsible for the divisiveness of America: righteousness.

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# THE PAST

Ask any lexicographer and he will agree that definitions are prone to evolution. Parallel to these definitions are pieces of literature, growing as time progresses and expanding, subverting, and in some cases, completely running astray from an author's original intent. These changes can be examined quite efficiently when the medium of the piece changes as well. August Wilson's *Fences* is a prime example of a work whose words remained nearly identical from manuscript to movie script, but whose messages—through the interpretations of the actors—evolved with the society it was written for. Communicating to a new audience in a modern way, the film *Fences* differentiated from the staged version, particularly through the interactions between Troy and Rose, as the two become more raw, relatable representations of issues African American families faced during a more discriminatory time.

Perhaps one of the scenes where Denzel Washington and Viola Davis perfected their interpretation of the script occurs when Troy reveals to Rose that not only has he been engaging in an affair, but he will be the father of another woman's child. In the movie, just prior to Troy's announcement, audiences can feel a palpable sense of nervousness exuding from Troy, in part due to the framing of the camera, but more directly because Denzel Washington can control the rate at which the words in the script are spoken. A long sigh is injected into the film before Troy admits to adultery, a tweak not present in the script (*Fences* 1:14). While there are stage instructions for a 'pause', Washington delays his words exponentially and further exhibits his interpretation by nearly whispering the succeeding lines, an edit not present in the original script (Wilson 556). This contrast allows the audience to better comprehend Troy's apprehension and nervousness regarding revealing the truth to Rose. This creates a rare moment exclusive to the film where Troy is presented as a character not overly confident or charismatic, but reserved and nervous. These small tweaks, present throughout the film and detailed below, are critical in impacting the audience's interpretation of the film versus the written piece because characters can be developed deeper, leading to more relatable figures, which allow Wilson's themes of race and family to be better communicated. Audience members can more easily compare Troy or Rose to their neighbor, colleague, or family member due to this acting choice because an increase in commonality with a character directly increases an individual's ability to empathize with whomever the character represents in their life.

Also during this scene, the camera focuses on Davis' shift in visual expressions, from a sense of impatience and exhaustion to utter shock in mere seconds. Because of this, film audiences are more clearly able to see the feelings of violation and betrayal that Rose exhibits. Individuals, even those who haven't been the victim of infidelity, can feel the emptying of Rose's spirit through this display of emotions, and when Troy states, "I'm gonna be a daddy…I'm gonna be somebody's daddy," the camera remains fixed on Davis so viewers can remain focused on this shift, a tactic that is unable to be replicated on stage (*Fences* 1:14). Live production audiences would be too far away to witness the depth of these emotions, precluding them from both gaining the deepest understanding of what Rose is feeling as well as having the ability to fully empathize. Furthermore, even the tone in which Davis speaks here is open to interpretation, as in the play, her lines are merely separated by ellipses, failing to dispel whether she's angry, disappointed, or flabbergasted (Wilson 556). However, in the film, Davis seems taken aback by the news and almost sent into a state of shock, as she matches Washington's soft tone and couples this with a facial expression of disappointment and surprise when she states, "Troy…you're not telling me this? You're gonna be…what?" (*Fences* 1:14). In the original script, these words could have been interpreted multiple ways; Rose could've immediately been expressing frustration or anger, but instead, Viola Davis speaks softly to express Rose's shock at the news. This not only reassures the audience that Rose knew nothing of the affair beforehand, but it also builds on her characterization and embodiment of the feminine, as she feels so defeated that she can barely speak. This helps to address Wilson's goal of creating vulnerable, relatable characters, for often in adulterous marriages, the afflicted party will be shocked that after so long, his or her spouse has betrayed them to such a far extent.

The distinctions between this scene in the film and in the written version are especially important when considering the chemistry between Troy and Rose, as monologues such as Rose's are a signature of Wilson's pieces. In an interview with August Wilson, it was detailed that "these monologues give Wilson's character depth, and often the audience learns a lot about a character through a few simple lines" (Heard). These scenes are crucial to crafting an audience's understanding of the piece as a whole as well, making the discussion between Rose and Troy regarding his infidelity a prime moment to explore when examining the differences between the on-screen and the on-stage version because "through these monologues, Wilson is able to create characters the audience can identify with" (Heard). Interactions such as this are designed to be crucial moments of development, so changes and interpretations by actors and actresses can have profound effects on the audience. For example, even by simply focusing the camera to observe the flash of emotions Davis exhibits after hearing the news, the filmmakers are able to control the

audience's viewing of that moment and decide exactly what they are to focus on. Even as Gabriel speaks, the camera remains mostly fixed on Davis, meaning the freedom to look wherever that is present during a live production is hijacked to display to the audience the sheer amount of shock Rose goes through. If a member of the audience were to miss this moment in a live production or focus on another character, he or she may not have the ability to fully comprehend how Rose feels, which creates cracks in the formation of empathy.

On a societal scale, Davis' interpretation of Rose heightens her representation of the 1950s African American housewife, as this scene demonstrates the frustration and inequality between men and women of the era. During that time, a husband's infidelity wasn't viewed with the same harsh stereotype as if the wife had cheated, as men were afforded mistakes, especially marital, at a higher rate than women. Wives were expected to turn a blind eye to rumors of infidelity and 'stand by their man,' as society had forced them to remain mostly dependent on their husbands for an 'appropriate' lifestyle. It was a woman's job to take care of the house and family, but a man was more important and possessed more privilege by providing for the family financially. Rose explains to Troy that his satisfaction was her "job," not that of another woman (Wilson 163). However, Rose expresses many wives' frustration with this inequality when she rebuts Troy's attempt to justify his affair. Troy states that "it's not easy for me to admit that I been standing in the same place for eighteen years," yet Rose rebuts with: "I been standing with you!" (Wilson 163). Feeling defeated and betrayed, Rose is experiencing what many wives went through during that time; despite remaining faithful and refusing to relinquish her fidelity to find happiness with other men, her husband will soon be the father of another woman's baby. Troy had exploited his male privilege by seeking an escape with Alberta, yet Rose represents the typical wife who has done everything in her power to craft a wholesome life for her family and is still betrayed. Davis expressed similar thoughts in an interview when she stated, "That's why it's so great at the end when Rose says, I wanted a house I could sing in, but what I've realized is I gave up little pieces of my life to fit into his. She now wakes up to it" (Washington and Davis). Too often, societal standards pressured the women Rose represents into roles they didn't dream of, let alone desire, and confiscated their voices and independence simply for being women. Across the nation and throughout communities, they—especially African American women—were treated as second-class citizens, dependent on their husbands for approval, yet those to whom they were married enjoyed more privileges and more forgiveness after failure.

For the majority of the scene in the film, Davis remains focused on Washington, keeping her eyes locked, whether out of shock, disappointment, or anger. This isn't able to be captured in the play, as audiences aren't limited to the close-up of Rose's

face as the dialogue continues. Davis' interpretation of the scene coupled with the framing of the camera creates a new experience for viewers, one where the shift in raw emotions and delivery of the script is far clearer. The script doesn't directly state how the lines are meant to be spoken or what the facial expressions of the characters should be, so on-stage productions of the same script may have Rose displaying fewer emotions or Troy seeming more confident when delivering the news. This could lead to more one-dimensional characters, as the cinematic features such as framing as well as the Davis and Washington's interpretation of the script are simply not present. However, audiences also affect themselves as well as the performers during live productions, so if the on-stage actors can create a feeling of shock or disappointment in part of the audience, a ripple effect is often created, leading to the entirety of the theatre gaining a better interpretation simply due to a sense of a shared experience. This phenomenon is far less common in theatres, as the communication is one-sided from the audience to the screen.

Earlier in *Fences*, audiences see another crucial interaction between Troy and Rose when they discuss Cory's involvement in football. Troy, wanting to protect his son from the same discrimination he faced while trying to make a career out of baseball, argues with Rose, who points out the differences in African American representation between Troy's youth and the current time (Wilson 544). Davis and Washington slightly edit the script in the movie version, but the most profound difference is the embodiment of the characters' attitudes that Davis and Washington choose to take. For example, Washington seems to inject a bit of humor and lightheartedness into the debate when he states, "Hell..I can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!" (Wilson 543). The original script calls for an exclamation mark at the end of this thought, possibly intending it to be expressed with disdain and frustration (Wilson 543). However, Washington puts on a smile while stating it in the film, almost making the statement with a touch of sarcasm (Washington 43:35-45). In contrast, Davis seems to stick closer to the original script when she states, almost in exhaustion, "How were you gonna play ball when you were over forty? Sometimes I can't get no sense out of you" (Washington 43:45-45) In both the original script as well as the film, the debate centers around whether the world has changed enough for Cory to invest his time in football. However, while the script appears to pit the characters against each other in a mildly heated debate, only Davis in the film version appears to express frustration in the colloquy. Washington's interpretation of the script both lightens the scene and drives further to the already-established notion of Troy brushing off problems that he doesn't view as his own. By slightly editing this scene to highlight Troy's self-centeredness, this tragic flaw can be highlighted easier, making audiences more aware of Wilson's warning regarding the dangers of self-obsession.

With respect to both the film and live production versions, Washington describes that “you have to read the script and interpret the character…so you invest in the clues that he gives you, and you interpret the role” (Washington and Davis). Years of practice on Broadway allowed Washington and Davis to perfect their interpretations of Troy and Rose, with many slight tweaks over dozens of performances culminating in their final appearance in the film.

However, fundamental differences between the live production and film inherently encourage audiences to leave their respective theatres with slightly different interpretations of the piece as a whole. For example, in a film, scenes can have multiple takes, allowing the performers, director, and effects crew to create the perfect version. In fact, Viola Davis mentioned in an interview that they shot the scene where Troy confesses his affair a remarkable twenty-three times (Smart). These cuts permitted Davis to best illustrate Rose’s rapid change of emotions and Washington to deliver the news in just the tone he wanted to, leading to a piece where each moment is edited, retouched, or reshot to capture one perfect take. Even though they both had performed this piece many times previously, the ability to create each individual moment in the desired fashion simply is impossible in a live production, even with an infinite amount of practice. Additionally, Washington discusses that “we won't have to be as 'big,' obviously, as in a theater -- because we're not in a theater” (Denzel Washington on ‘Fences’). This means that actors and actresses won’t have to display emotions as loudly, leading to the display of more nuanced facial features and speaking tones. This is especially present when Davis is able to shift from varying emotions after Troy admits his infidelity, shifts that simply wouldn’t be observable to audiences in a live production, as they aren’t mere inches away from her face. Despite the majority of the actors and actresses, including Davis and Washington, having years to practice the piece on stage before transitioning to the film, it’s nearly impossible to achieve perfection or explore minute details in every scene, meaning that the film can more clearly illustrate to the audience Washington’s interpretation of Fences through every piece of dialogue, the framing of every shot, and even the lighting of the set.

On the opposite hand, however, are the benefits of a live production. Quoted in an interview, August Wilson argues that the presence of an audience has a larger effect on how members leave the theatre than some might realize: “One of the things that makes theatre so exciting, and for me what makes it such a wonderful art form, is that the audience participates (it is a live event) and influences what happens on stage. The communication between the actors and the audience is different with each and every audience. If you do the play 700 times, you are going to have 700 different groups of people sitting out there, and so each audience has its own nature, its own thing, and they respond differently, and that's what makes it thrilling. You

have a play, you have a large number of African Americans in the audience, and it is going to be a different response" (Heard). Essentially, actors and audiences feed off one another, and because each new production entails a distinctly different audience, the words in the script may be the same, but the actors' and actresses' interpretations will vary (Heard). The film may be one interpretation, but because the audience is unable to influence what happens on the screen, a lack of rapport between the characters and the audience may form more easily, encouraging members of the audience to identify more from a perspective of viewing as opposed to experiencing. Experiencing a piece brings one into the drama and allows relationships to be formed and empathy to be expressed more freely. Wilson crafts his characters to be relatable, and by possessing the ability to influence the way in which they act—even if it is as simple as the tone of the performers' voices—audience members may walk away with a richer understanding of the piece overall.

These distinctions matter, not merely due to the gravity of the themes of Fences, but because the messages of racial inequality and familial disputes are unfortunately still present in the world today. For example, when Troy admits to infidelity—an occurrence not rare today--film audiences are restricted to observing a shocked Rose displaying dozens of emotions within the span of a few seconds. However, live production audiences or those reading the script of the play have the possibility to experience the scene in a multitude of ways, for each production is slightly different and each reader's background will influence the degree to which he or she empathizes with Troy and Rose. These varied, yet distinct discrepancies between the film and the original piece are possible at any moment, encouraging a variety of audiences and individuals to view the characters—and therefore individuals and messages they reflect in their own lives—in slightly different ways.

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# a reflecting pool

Perhaps one of the most important focal points from Eustis' discussion is that theatre entices the audience to view a conflict from two, often opposite, points of view, leading to heightened empathy for all sides of the argument. In *Fences*, the conflicts between the characters are so incredibly applicable to society, both in the 1950s as well as today, that Eustis' point is strengthened by the piece. For example, the disagreement between Troy and Rose regarding Troy's extramarital affair is one that many in the audience most likely can relate to, as divorce or even temporary separation is relatively common in modern society. However, while these issues are often multi-faceted and taboo, audiences experiencing or reading Fences are presented with a perspective of the ‘cheater' and the 'cheated.'

Through Troy, audiences are encouraged to understand, if not relate to, his disappointment in fate, as his trajectory to professional sports was deconstructed by the discriminatory policies of the time in which he lived. He spent time in jail and was unable to witness or influence much of Lyon’s upbringing. Until winning his case, Troy was suppressed at his job and dealt with trash all day instead of driving the truck. Lacking in Troy's life was a silver lining, or at least one he could recognize. He had a family and a close friend in Bono, but audiences recognize how frustrated he becomes when discussing what 'could have been,’ particularly as he expresses his views on famous African American baseball players (Wilson 543). This sense of being cheated is

one of the causes Troy cites as to why he sought fulfillment in other areas of life, most notably of which was his affair with Alberta (Wilson 559). When taking into account the hardships he has experienced, the morality of his infidelity may not be supported by the audience, but its roots are—at a minimum—better understood, as the reasons Troy sought joy elsewhere haven't changed in the decades since the piece's inception. Troy isn't necessarily crafted to be a likable character, but his faults can most certainly be felt by anyone in the audience even remotely familiar with the effects of infidelity in a relationship.

Through Troy, Wilson represented the many who struggle with lives they are less than content leading and feel as if there's little room for improvement in many facets of their journey. However, Rose is portrayed as the opposite in this conflict. It is implied that she met Troy at his prime, yet despite his slow downfall, she has remained devoted; she not only exercises the role of a mother well, but she tolerates some of Troy's less positive qualities. For example, when Troy is outside discussing his duels with death, she doesn't complain other than to mention his excessive drinking (Wilson 530). Additionally, when she meets Troy outside of work on a Thursday and asks if he will return straight home the following day, she remains calm despite his initial lie that he is going to Taylor's, followed by his confession that he will visit Alberta in the hospital (Wilson 561). Audiences can visualize the disappointment in Viola Davis' eyes; both characters know of the affair and its consequences, yet Rose seeks comfort in herself rather than trying to tear Troy down. This perspective allows audiences to empathize with the side of the 'hurt.' Eustis discusses how audiences can enter into the piece and understand the context to better empathize with different sides. In Fences, audiences may not agree with Troy's infidelity, but by viewing the issue with Troy's background in mind, they can understand better what he is searching for. With respect to Rose, audiences can empathize with the damage caused by such a betrayal, especially when Troy refuses to cut ties with Alberta and even after Rose discovers the affair.

Oskar Eustis examines this conflict between polarized perspectives in his TED Talk, particularly focusing on how theatre, "[asks] you to switch

your mind and imagine what it feels like to the other person talking" (Eustis 2:35). In Fences, Wilson isn't writing from a perspective of someone attempting to excuse or pardon affairs, but rather from a mindset similar to Eustis' which recognizes that despite individuals' best efforts, some will succumb to temptations, and rather than becoming entrenched in one's own point of view, empathy and a degree of understanding should be granted to all parties. Eustis speaks from a similar point of view, believing that theatre provides a platform by which these issues, often considered taboo, can be discussed without the formalities or downsides of a confrontation. He exemplifies this by stating, "our job...is to hold up, as 'twere, a mirror to nature; to show scorn her image, to show virtue her appearance..." (Eustis 12:16). Rather than avoiding these conversations, or worse yet, placating oneself by believing they don't happen, Eustis argues that it is the responsibility of the theatre to display even the negative aspects of life and to encourage conversation that leads to a better understanding of opposing viewpoints. This point is furthered by his discussion of the AIDS crisis and its representation in theatre: "...there was more information about AIDS in Frank Rich's review in the New York Times than the New York Times had published in the previous four years. Larry was actually changing the dialogue about AIDS through writing this play..." (Eustis 5:42). The relatedness of AIDS and affairs is unimportant in examining Fences in the context of Eustis' talk due to the fact that both are often avoided topics of conversation, with members of the general public—and therefore the audience—often taking polarizing sides. Through theatre, Eustis explains, these vulnerable conversations can take place and encourage even those on opposite ends of a spectrum to begin a meaningful dialogue.

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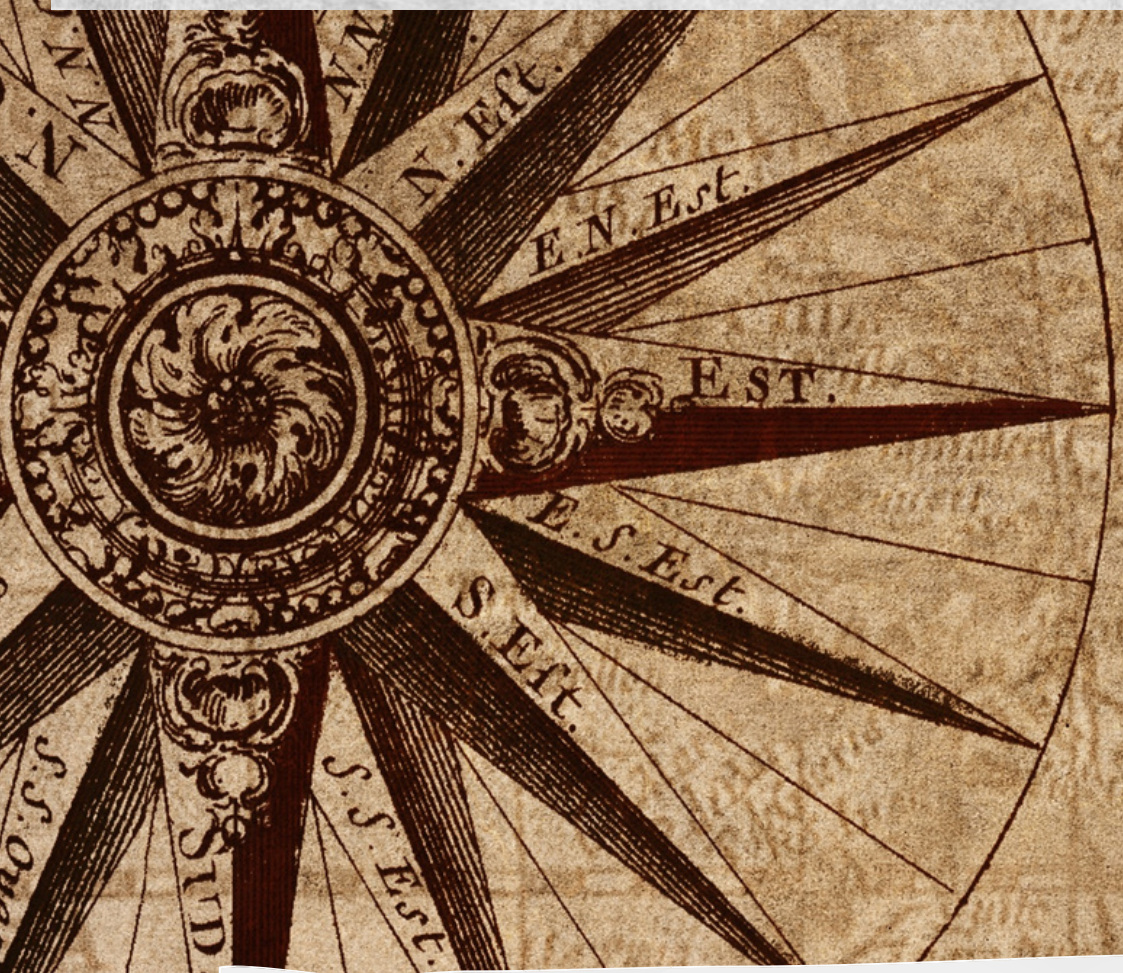


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