

Possible topics for “The Comforts Of Home” papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- Like “The Terrapin,” this is a story about a mother and son, and like Highsmith's story it ends with the mother dead at her son's own hands. Compare the two, with particular attention to the psychological interplay between the characters, and the moral intent of each story. Be sure to take note of the difference in age between the protagonists.

- This story is one of many by O'Connor on the subject of virtue. Thomas thinks, “no excess of virtue is justified [...] a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil.” Write an essay on the subject of virtue– what does it mean to do good? Is Thomas correct that too much virtue results in its opposite?

- O'Connor wrote a number of stories featuring an impotent intellectual whose arrogance causes a kind of blindness. Read a few of these (“Good Country People” is the most obvious example) and write an essay on O'Connor's view of the relationship between morality and intellect.

- This story has an interesting structure– it begins close to the end, flashes back to the day before, then flashes back even further before making its way back to the present, and the circumstances that lead directly to the crime. The fulcrum of these shifts seems to be our first glimpse of Thomas's gun. What is O'Connor up to here? Why not write the story linearly instead?

- Once again, we have a story driven by sexual frustration and dysfunction; it is perhaps most reminiscent of *The Big Sleep* in its protagonist's sexual self-disgust, and a young woman's apparent addiction to unhealthy sexual attention and childish demeanor. And in this case, we've got mom involved, too. Compare these two stories by analyzing their protagonists and the women who sexually vex them.

- Actually, you could definitely do a paper on sexual metaphor in this story alone; the innuendo and imagery are rampant. Case in point: “He grabbed the red pocketbook. It had a skin-like feel to his touch and as it opened, he caught an unmistakable odor of the girl. Wincing, he thrust in the gun and then drew back.” Uh huh. Have at it!

- Perhaps the strongest character in this story isn't even alive: Thomas's father, who squats like a countryman and takes no nonsense from women. He is prominent in Thomas's memories and fantasies, and emerges a few times in the guise of others: the misogynist sheriff, and, at the story's end, when “his mother gasped at the sound of the other presence in his voice.” Analyze the father here and his influence over Thomas, or if you wish, discuss it in the context of other literary fathers, like the ones in “Ransom,” “The Baby In The Icebox,” and *The Big Sleep*.

- In his book *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, critic Frederick Asals writes of Thomas and Sarah, “The two characters are complementary figures, obverse doubles, alter egos. The arrival of the girl thus inevitably exacerbates all those psychic tensions which have lain dormant beneath Thomas's bland exterior.” Analyze the two as reflections of one another, and/or as one interesting pairing among others we have read (Holmes and Watson, Carmen and Marlowe, the impassive Parker and the chaotic Rosenstein).

- O'Connor was a devout Christian, and her stories and novels are rife with sin and redemption. Discuss the religious overtones in this story, and others by O'Connor (they are all pretty good!).