

Manana Garibashvili

I.Gogebashvili State University

Telavi, Georgia

manana.gharibashvili@tesau.edu.ge<https://doi.org/10.52340/lac.2025.10.79><https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5118-3690>

The Role of Poverty in American Literature: Pragmatic and Stylistic Insights from the Short Stories of Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty

1. Introduction

Poverty is an extraordinary important and crucial issue in American literature, directly connected with the complex social, political, and economic history of the 19th- century America. The topic obviously depicts the struggles of individuals and communities of that epoch which influences the material deprivation of people, as well as their psychological and emotional states in their lives, dreams, and sense of identity. Consequently, literature is a key instrument for depicting these key issues and presenting them to the reader through carefully crafted literary works.

Regarding the theme of poverty, we have chosen two prominent American writers of 20th-century literature—Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty—who are renowned for their powerful portrayals of the American South. Readers can easily recognize the issues of poverty, social class, and the struggles of individuals living in economically challenging circumstances in their works. Their characteristic portrayal of exposing these issues attracts immediate attention. For our study, we have selected two short stories: "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Connor. In both stories, the theme of poverty is obviously expressed and transmitted with the help of rich stylistic techniques and pragmatic approaches.

Consequently, this manuscript aims to investigate how poverty is depicted in the works of Eudora Welty ("A Worn Path") and Flannery O'Connor ("The Life You Save May Be Your Own") by analyzing both the pragmatic and stylistic (literary devices and techniques) aspects of their writings. Our analysis focuses on understanding how these authors use their characteristic styles to illustrate the economic struggles of their characters and to highlight the broader implications of poverty within the context of American Southern literature.

2. Methodology

Based on our research, we have applied a comparative analysis approach to compare how Welty and O'Connor address similar themes (poverty, social class, moral decay) through

different narrative styles. In addition to the comparative analysis, we have also used a pragmatic approach to examine how the aforementioned texts function in a real-world, practical sense.

Results

2.1. Thematic Analysis of Poverty in O'Connor's and Welty's Short Stories

The short stories "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Connor are a pure depiction of poverty. Although each author portrays poverty in her own characteristic way, they still have some aspects in common in how they describe and express the social, moral, and psychological challenges their characters face throughout their short stories.

These short stories express vivid links between poverty and morality and prove how difficult circumstances force characters to make harsh choices. Both authors highlight the ways in which poverty shapes a person's sense of self and identity. What stands out most is that poverty isn't portrayed as just a personal struggle—it's closely tied to broader issues of social injustice and inequality, particularly within the context of the American South.

2.2. Pragmatic Insights: The Role of Poverty in Social and Political Critique

Pragmatics offers a way of exploring how meaning is constructed in texts, even when they appear incomplete or ambiguous from a semiotic perspective. It emphasizes the role of context in shaping interpretation" (Sinha, 2021: 30-31). In this light, both Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty use the concept of poverty not only to describe their characters' living conditions but also as a powerful tool for criticizing the social and political realities of their time. Through subtle yet pragmatic techniques woven into their narratives, these writers draw attention to the social inequality and moral decay of the American South in the 20th century. Their impact extends beyond individual words or phrases, relying heavily on context. As Mey (1999) explains, "context is more than placing the words in their proper local environment, their 'collocation,' as it is often called.... It is the entire text and its message that are problematical in a deeper respect" (p. 5).

According to Chapman & Clark (2019), 'Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. In simple terms, the key claims are that human cognitive processes aim to 'maximize' relevance, i.e., to derive as many positive cognitive effects as possible for as little effort as possible, and that ostensibly communicative acts raise fairly precise expectations of relevance (that the communicator has an interpretation in mind which it is worth expending effort in deriving)' (p. 8). In literary texts, this principle suggests that meaning is not only conveyed explicitly but also inferred through subtle contextual clues. In this regard, the concept of poverty is constructed not just through direct descriptions but also through characters' speech, appearance, actions, and the implicit context embedded in the narrative.

Building on these theoretical insights, we can observe how O'Connor and Welty pragmatically represent poverty through nuanced narrative techniques. Their characters do not merely exist in impoverished conditions; rather, their speech, actions, and interactions subtly reveal the economic and social constraints that define their world. Both authors construct poverty not merely as an economic condition but as a pragmatic mechanism that shapes their characters' identities, interactions, and moral dilemmas. Their narratives do not explicitly

define poverty; rather, they embed its presence within characters' speech patterns, physical surroundings, and symbolic actions.

For instance, in *A Worn Path*, Welty's depiction of Phoenix Jackson's journey highlights how poverty influences even the most mundane aspects of her existence: "***She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her***" (Welty). In this sentence, the symbolism of "cane" attracts the readers' attention as it is described as "thin" and "small", which could easily indicate on the character's weakness or limited resources. The fact that the cane was made from an umbrella indicates the owner's poverty and financial hardship. In a pragmatic context, the cane indicates that poverty forces a person to assign different functional roles to the objects at their disposal. Walking slowly with a cane on the frozen ground may indicate the character's struggle to overcome difficulties in a harsh environment. The frozen ground could represent not only the physical challenges of movement caused by the conditions but also the barriers to solutions created by poverty. Poverty "freezes" opportunities, and the character is portrayed as constantly striving to move forward despite these obstacles. This action reveals a determination to overcome barriers, even though the character has limited resources (a fragile cane and frozen ground).

In the following passage: "***She wore a dark striped dress reaching down to her shoe tops, and an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks, with a full pocket: all neat and tidy, but every time she took a step she might have fallen over her shoelaces, which dragged from her unlaced shoes***" (Welty). The way Phoenix Jackson is dressed (e.g. a long apron made from sugar sacks and open shoes) indicates that the woman cannot afford proper cloth to make clothes. An interesting implication for her dressing style is the full pocket instead of carrying a handbag where she keeps her essential items there, or possibly even unnecessary ones for the journey. This portrayal adds to the depiction of her poverty and the practical limitations she faces. The following example also points to the vivid elements of poverty: "***Under her small black-freckled hand her cane, limber as a buggy whip, would switch at the brush as if to rouse up any hiding things***" (Welty). In the passage, the imagery of the "small black-freckled hand" and the "limber cane, like a buggy whip" arouses a sense of uphill battle and hardship. The character's hand, "dried by the sun," speaks volumes of a life marked by relentless labor and hardship. The cane, likened to a simple buggy whip, is a testament to resourcefulness, yet it also hints at a lack of access to more suitable comforts. The sight of them carefully searching the ground for something, anything, underscores the constant urgency of need. In their world, even the smallest, seemingly insignificant item holds immense value and potential.

"***She did not dare to close her eyes, and when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble cake on it she spoke to him. 'That would be acceptable,' she said. But when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air***" (Welty). In this moment, the woman's unease—her reluctance to even close her eyes—and the sheer anticipation of the cake reveal the heavy psychological and emotional toll of hunger and deprivation. When she responds to the little boy, her words, "That would be acceptable," betray a deep yearning, a desperate grasp at a moment of joy, a brief chance to savor something good. But as her hand reaches out, hope

blossoming at the thought of the cake, it meets only emptiness. In that instant, the fragile illusion is shattered, and she's left facing the harsh truth of her existence once more.

Pragmatically, this scene powerfully conveys the chasm between longing and possibility—a painful reality for those living in poverty. The woman's brief flicker of hope, the anticipation of easing her hunger, is abruptly extinguished. The missing cake becomes a stark symbol of the basic necessities that remain perpetually out of reach, highlighting how this constant thwarting of expectations, even for something as small as a piece of cake, chips away at the spirit.

The story "A Worn Path" is rich with examples of poverty described in a pragmatic way, though the other story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Connor, also contains similar examples of this character trait. ***"His left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him. He had on a black town suit and a brown felt hat that was turned up in the front and down in the back and he carried a tin tool box by a handle"*** (O'Connor). In this description, we see not just a man, but a life etched with decline, both physical and social. His "gaunt figure" and "folded-up coat sleeve" poignantly speak to the toll hardship and poverty have taken on his body, rendering him fragile and deeply vulnerable. The "black town suit," a stark and jarring contrast to his present circumstances, hints at a time when he held a higher place, a past now tragically lost to deprivation. It's also possible that the suit was given to him, a well-intentioned gesture that poignantly underscores his reliance on the kindness or charity of others. Ultimately, this detail lays bare the disparity between who he once was and the dependent state to which he has been reduced simply to survive. The overall imagery evokes the deep psychological and physical wounds inflicted by poverty, the painful chasm between expectation and reality, and the profound sense of social displacement and loss he must feel. ***"That car ain't run in fifteen year," the old woman said. "The day my husband died, it quit running"*** (O'Connor). This simple statement by the old woman speaks volumes about her personal decline and the crushing weight of economic stagnation. The fact that the car "ain't run in fifteen year" and, poignantly, stopped working the very day her husband died, suggests a profound connection between her personal loss and the feeling that her life has also come to a standstill. The car, once a symbol of movement, of journeys and progress, has become a stark metaphor for her own inability to move forward, mirroring the emotional and economic paralysis she's experienced since her husband's death.

The following sentence is an interesting sample how we can pragmatically identify the hidden information throughout the speech: ***"They wasn't as advanced as we are," the old woman said. You don't need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man"*** (O'Connor). The characters' words, with their grammatically unrefined expressions like "They wasn't" instead of "They weren't" and "You don't need no money" instead of "You don't need any money," reflect the language of everyday conversation. While this kind of language is typical in many communities, it can also point to social barriers, such as limited access to formal education or opportunities for social advancement. These linguistic choices, though part of common spoken dialects, may suggest

Mrs. Crater's social and educational standing, hinting at a life marked by certain deprivations or lived outside of mainstream academic settings.

Tom Shiftlet's proud and sarcastic response, "*Where would you find you an innocent woman today? I wouldn't have any of this trash I could just pick up,*" can indeed suggest that he feels disillusioned with the idea of marriage or forming relationships due to his economic situation. His tone reflects a bitterness, perhaps stemming from the belief that in his current state—likely impoverished or without means—he has little to offer in terms of stability or resources for a family.

Mrs. Crater's words, "*I ain't got nothing but this old house and this old car, and I ain't never going to have anything else,*" emphasize her poverty and desperation. She sees her material possessions as worthless and is resigned to her impoverished life, with little hope of change. Her statement reveals her bleak view of the future, and her lack of resources highlights her need to rely on others for survival and a better life.

2.3. Stylistic Insights: Literary Techniques for Depicting Poverty

Both Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty use unique literary techniques to describe poverty in their narration. Each author's approach vividly serve to make the language more expressive. By analyzing their techniques, we can observe how poverty is depicted in their texts and how these literary means contribute to the overall impact of their narratives.

Both authors use alliteration assonance for creating musicality and setting the tone of narration. The following sample immediately attracts the reader's attention as it unites several devices under one set including alliteration, assonance, epithet and comparison: "*he wished he lived in a desolate place like this*"... (O'Connor,F). In this sentence [i] sound is transmitted through various syllables in the words 'he' 'wished' "lived" "this" while [ei] sound appears in "place" "desolate". As we have already mentioned, this sentence also exemplifies a comparison, as the character wishes to be in a desolate place, highlighting the contrast between his current life and the imagined environment.

The authors also share the technique for comparing things and enhancing the expressiveness. The sentences like "*The cones dropped as light as feathers*" (Welty,E.) and "*His eyes were blue and bulging, like the eyes of a dead fish.*" (O'Connor,F) are the examples of a simile giving the emotional impact to the texts.

Emotional coloring is also vividly seen in metaphors. Both stories are rich with metaphor which indicates that metaphors are essential in shaping the emotional and thematic depth of the narrative. E.g. "*A whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead.*" (Welty,E.) This is a metaphor, as it compares the wrinkles (or lines) on her forehead to a tree without using "like" or "as," suggesting the deep, intricate nature of the wrinkles and their spread. The following sentence also represents a very interesting example of metaphor: "*The car was a lemon.*" (O'Connor,F). This literary device not only describes the physical condition of Mr. Shiftlet's car (which is broken and very old) but also symbolizes Mr. Shiftlet's inner character.

Besides the metaphors there are the numerous samples of epithets - "*bright frozen*", "*numberless branching wrinkles*", "*Clay-colored eyes*", "*A fat yellow moon*"; as well as hyperbole - "*Numberless branching wrinkles*" (as an exaggeration emphasizing the vast number

of wrinkles) and "*Almost too bright to look at*" (an exaggeration meant to convey just how intense and overwhelming the brightness of the pine needles is).

As we observe both authors (Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty) masterfully use different literary means and devices such as alliteration, assonance, similes, metaphors, epithets, and hyperbole to intensify the emotional impact and thematic depth of their stories. Through these stylistic choices, they not only convey the harsh realities of poverty but also bring to life the complexity of their characters' inner worlds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis of Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" exposes the complex part poverty plays in both stories. Both authors use pragmatic and stylistic tools and devices to portray the economic struggles and social implications of poverty. Their works not only describe the economic deprivation of their characters but also express the vivid inequalities and moral challenges characteristic for the American South of that period i.e. the 19th century. By examining the pragmatic implications of language and the masterful usage of literary devices, the reader obviously feels how these authors clarified the complex interplay between poverty, identity, and societal critique.

Key words: Poverty, American Literature, short story, pragmatic analyses, stylistic devices

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**სიღარიბის როლი ამერიკულ ლიტერატურაში: პრაგმატული და
სტილისტური გააზრება ფლანერი ო'კონორისა და ევდორა ველტის
მოკლე მოთხრობების მიხედვით**
აბსტრაქტი

სიღარიბე ერთ-ერთ მთავარ და უნიშვნელოვანეს საკითხს წამოადგენს მე-19 აუკუნის, რომელიც დაკავშირებულია ამერიკული საზოგადოების სოციალურ, პოლიტიკურ და ეკონომიკურ დემოკრატიზაციასთან. შესაბამისად, აღნიშნული თემატიკა ცხადად ასახავს იმ ეპოქის ინდივიდებისა და საზოგადოებების ბრძოლას, რაც არა მხოლოდ მათ მატერიალურ გაჭირვებას, არამედ მათ ფსიქოლოგიურ და ემოციურ მდგომარეობასაც განაპირობებს. შესაბამისად, ლიტერატურა უმნიშვნელოვანესი ინსტრუმენტია ამ არსებითი საკითხების წარმოსაჩენად და მკითხველამდე სწორხაზოვნად მოსატანად.

წინამდებარე სტატია მიზნად ისახავს დეტალურად აღწეროს და გაანალიზოს, თუ როგორ არის სიღარიბე ასახული იუდორა უელტის („გაცვეთილი ბილიკი“) და ფლანერი ო'კონორის („ცხოვრება, რომელიც შენია, შესაძლოა მხოლოდ შენი გახდეს“) ნაწარმოებებში, როგორც პრაგმატული, ისე სტილისტური (ლიტერატურული ხელსაწყოები და ტექნიკები) თვალსაზრისით. ჩვენ მიერ ჩატარებული ანალიზი ცხადყოფს, თუ როგორ ახერხებენ აღნიშნული ავტორები, მათთვის დამახასიათებელი სტილის წყალობით, საკუთარი ნაწარმოებების გმირების მატერიალური ბრძოლების წარმოჩენასა და ფსიქო-ემოციური სურათის ასახვას

საკვანძო სიტყვები: სიღარიბე, ამერიკული ლიტერატურა, პრაგმატული გააზრება, სტილისტური გააზრება, ფლანერი ო'კონორის „ცხოვრება, რომელიც შენია, შესაძლოა მხოლოდ შენი გახდეს“, იუდორა უელტის „გაცვეთილი ბილიკი“