

**Ain't No Laughing Matter:
Southern Humor in Clyde Edgerton's Raney**

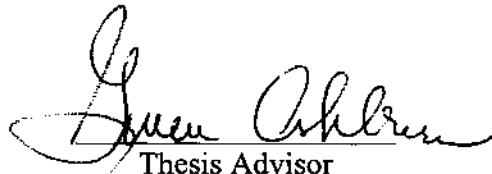
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“Humor has always been a tangible quality in American literature although it has varied considerably in time and place” (ix), according to Wade Hall in the preface of The Smiling Phoenix: Southern Humor from 1865 to 1914. This thesis will focus on Southern literary humor, and the various ways that author Clyde Edgerton uses the techniques as did earlier writers such as Mark Twain and Flannery O’Connor to parody the types of people and places he knows well. Specifically in his first novel, Raney, Edgerton, a contemporary Southern novelist, uses humor to entertain, enlighten, and explore the flaws dictated by one-sided fundamentalist Christian beliefs, and the effect these beliefs have on issues of morality, and issues of appearance versus reality in the Southern region that Edgerton is parodying. Through satire, exaggeration, contradiction, and irony, Edgerton as did his famous predecessors, creates characters which superficially fulfill regional stereotypes yet lead readers to see human foibles shared by people far beyond the Mason Dixon Line.

The field of Southern humor is extensive and has been noted in literary texts as far back as 1830. Despite the regional title, Southern humor has reached much farther than the label of “Southern” implies. According to Mark Steadman in the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, ironically enough, Southern writing has “been better received and more appreciated outside the region than in it” (855). Of course, on the surface, this type of humor seems to perpetuate Southern stereotypes, especially on the basis of class and intellect, which may possibly offend many Southerners. However, as M. Thomas Inge points out in The Companion to Southern Literature:

They [Southern humorists] usually redeem their characters by revealing that beneath their crude exteriors and rough behavior lies a sense of dignity and belief in the possibility of redemption. Comedy moves beyond racism, sexism, and filopietty, showing them to be the

genuine evils they have been in Southern life and culture, and pointing the way to a moral and aesthetic catharsis through laughter (356).

This catharsis can be seen throughout the works of Southern humorists from the earliest to the most current time. Mark Twain's character Huck Finn, Flannery O'Connor's character Hulga Hopewell, and Clyde Edgerton's character Raney all have this redemption by the end of their stories, where their prior behaviors shift and the reader is able to identify with these characters, despite the exaggeration that takes place throughout in their literary depictions. The comedy of these authors serves to show the flaws and stereotypes of the South as they have always existed, and will possibly exist generations later. More than criticizing the region as a whole, Southern humorists use this region as an example of an identifiable area to poke fun at while conveying more serious issues. As Southern humor has developed there has been a shift from laughing at the simpletons of the South to laughing with them, identifying oneself and those around them as the characters that exist in these short stories and novels. Earlier in the history of Southern humor, the laughter is found as narrators point out flaws in other characters of the text, specifically race related. However, as Southern humor has continued to develop, Twain took a bold step towards turning laughter inwards at the narrator, instead of the narrator being above the rest, the narrator, Huck is portrayed as naïve and innocent, and therefore, being made fun of. In this instance it becomes almost more acceptable to laugh at one's own life as the narrators have shown by example.

Southern humor is its own distinct genre, and similar to any other genre it has its own defining characteristics, as Inge states, "lively action, incongruity, exaggeration, and stylistic virtuosity in language and dialect have been the hallmarks of modern southern humor" (361). This brand of Southern humor that characterizes the works of O'Connor and even more recently,

Edgerton has been constantly tweaked and shifted since the times of Twain and even before. Mark Twain, who is now identified as a Southern humorist, but during his time was classified as a Southwestern humorist (Southwestern being Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama) “combines and transcends the best aspects [stated in the Inge quote above] of local-colorists and southwestern humorists,” according to Steadman (354). O’Connor and Edgerton have also managed to combine the techniques of prior humorists, and as Inge states in regards to these writers

[They] have sought out exaggerated tales and entertaining lies about the southern experience and turned them into fables and exempla reflecting on the sad failings and self-delusions of human nature at its most contrary and cursed. Southern culture, despite or because of its racial contradictions and stubborn resistance to change, serves in their hands as a paradigm for the absurdity of life everywhere in the nation – except that in southern versions, it is faced with laughter rather than despair (361).

However, throughout Southern humor, it is ironic how the incidents throughout the body of work are not as humorous as would be expected initially. The pages of Southern humor are drenched in death, abandonment, character flaws, alcoholism, and other more pressing issues but somehow readers are able to meet these issues with a sense of laughter. This paradox is only possible through the artistry of the Southern writer who takes these experiences and turns them into humorous tales through lively characters, distorted dialect, irony, exaggeration, contradiction, and satire. Readers can actually find themselves laughing at the lives of these characters knowing that these people and predicaments are not just limited to the South, but as Steadman makes note, “the South remains the only *region* that still has identifiable comic types associated with it” (856).

A brief overview of the history of Southern humor shows how this genre has changed as the region changes. Stephen A. Smith in his article, "Humor as Rhetoric and Cultural Argument" discusses the development of Southern Humor and in regards to this branch of humor, he states that it "developed distinctive motifs and satiric situations during the colonial period of the eighteenth century" (52). This regional satire carried into the nineteenth century as well, in an "oral society" where humorous stories flourished. Eventually these outlandish stories full of Southern stereotypes in the early nineteenth century became identified as "Southwest humor" in which "tall tales, wild stories, and grotesque character sketches were soon captured, transcribed and embellished," (52) continues Smith. Southern humorists used "dialectic tensions" that were abounding in Southern culture as a defining characteristic of this new genre. During this time in history "the South was fresh with the political footprints of Andrew Jackson... Their tales were rhetorical narratives... [They] revealed social attitudes similar to the Congressional speeches of the anti-Jacksonian aristocrats," (52) according to Smith. The speech patterns of the narrator versus the subjects could be clearly seen differentiated in the fact that the latter used colloquial speech while the narrator spoke with an educated and elevated diction; the contrast evoked disdain in the "locals." After Reconstruction came stories employing a black dialect among other pre-established techniques such as exaggerated stereotypes of blacks and poor whites. Continuing, in the early twentieth century, Southern Humor "reinforced the social and political power of the dominant white culture and served to further marginalize the powerless groups in the South." (53) This can be seen in Twain when his character Jim is viewed as much less than his white owners, which is reinforced through the derogatory reference to him as a "nigger." Southern Humor has found its way through history, shifting, changing, redefining, but always having the same underlying techniques even if they have been tweaked from century to century

as the region changed. The Southern Humorists have been informed by earlier predecessors, and challenged with the task of recreating what our culture today calls for to define Southern Humor. Clyde Edgerton continues in the tradition of Southern humorist Mark Twain, using the storytelling technique of presenting a surface appearance that contradicts the reality of his characters' situations. He also follows the footsteps of another Southern writer, Flannery O'Connor, in which he creates characters who inspire self-examination in the reader.

According to Louis D. Rubin, Jr. in The History of Southern Literature, Mark Twain developed the idiom of Old Southwest humor into a vernacular literary discourse that could document and interpret everyday experience of time and change[...]as Ernest Hemingway declared, "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* (240).

Twain's artistry as a storyteller truly defines his place in the Southern Humor genre. Storytelling serves as the basis of one of Twain's most famous short stories, "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." The narrator who introduces Simon Wheeler the monotonous, and therefore, humorous storyteller can be seen as the in-story representation of the reader. Steven J. Venturino in, "The Notorious Jumping Reader of Calaveras County: Twain, Blanchot, and Dialectic of Storytelling," makes the observation that Simon Wheeler seems to be "unaware of the 'ridiculous and funny' nature of his story" (374). The oblivion is reinforced by the narrator's description of Simon Wheeler's approach to telling his story of Jim Smiley:

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to

which he tuned his initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse (Clemens, 2).

The same approach that Twain's narrator takes can be seen in direct comparison to Edgerton's approach, except his narrator, Raney, is the one telling her own story, her experiences, and her explanations of the events. Raney, like Wheeler, is also oblivious to the humor that her story conveys which as Venturino argues throughout his article makes the short story, or in Edgerton's case, novel, even more humorous.

One of the predominant techniques that Twain utilized is known as the art of self-deprecation, which Stephen L. Tanner discusses in his article, "The Art of Self-Deprecation in American Literary Humor." Tanner states that:

Like many forms of humor, it [self-deprecation] is preoccupied with revealing the discrepancy between seeming and reality. It often takes the form of high expectations comically transformed into disappointments. The narrative personae are continually forming high estimates of themselves which collapse under the pressure of actual situations (54).

In Twain's second major novel, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the character of Huck Finn is a self-deprecating narrator. He does not feel that he is really a bad child; he just does not have the education or the same moral upbringing as his caretakers, Miss Watson or Widow Douglas had, and expect of him. Because of this he seems to find himself disappointed through various

comic situations before and after he sets out on his river journey. An example of this can be seen when Huck mentions his life on the raft, where his interpretation of how his life seems is a stark contrast to the reality that exists around him and Jim, as runaways, “We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (116). Using a similar technique, Edgerton has a narrator, Raney, who shifts into this self-deprecating mindset towards the end of the novel when she realizes she is not as superior (morally speaking) as she previously felt. The comic situation in the feed room which will be expanded on later shows Raney's high estimation of herself collapsing when the discrepancy between seeming and reality clash. An author using this sort of humor, and humor in general “reflect[s] a given character's openness to change, his or her adaptive potential” (57), according to Paul Lewis in Comic Effect: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature. This adaptability or lack thereof contributes to the discrepancy between seeming and reality, and the humor drawn from this, because typically the less that characters are open to changing how they seem to others, the greater the discrepancy and the humor found in these situations. Michael Pearson in, “Stories to Ease the Tension: Clyde Edgerton's Fiction,” makes the point that “storytelling is at the center of Clyde Edgerton's fictive world” (1). Stories that Raney tells of her marriage and family are full of self-deprecating references but are also amusing because of the self-inflicted dilemmas of the characters.

After Twain in the twentieth century came Flannery O'Connor who is also well known for her use of Southern Humor. As Thomas Frazier points out in The Companion to Southern Literature,

For Southern writers, O'Connor has cast a long shadow primarily in three areas: her use of the grotesque, often known as “southern gothic,” connected to applications of

seemingly gratuitous violence to make her moral points; her powerful religious thought, which makes some of her fiction readable as Christian allegory; and finally, her rich comic sense, often portrayed through the dialogue of “regular folks” (600).

Most importantly in the context of this thesis are her comic sense and her attention to detail in her character’s dialogue. More often than not, what is being said is not what is humorous so much as how it is being said. O’Connor had an ear for believable character dialogue which decades later has only been met by a few writers with such skill, one of which being, Edgerton. As Frazier mentions “many southern writers are indebted to O’Connor’s most brilliant gift, the use of a character’s inimitable speech to fix, through humor, their moral as well as physical situations” (601). Edgerton especially owes his knowledge of this technique to O’Connor. He uses his character Raney’s development, seen through her speech patterns and reasoning, and as she develops in her understanding of the moral issues permeating in her world as she describes them. This is similar to O’Connor’s character Hulga Hopewell in “Good Country People.” Pearson in his article on Edgerton draws parallels between these two Southern humorists. He says “His [Edgerton’s] understanding of the South and the people who live in it is as keen as Flannery O’Connor’s” (7). Also, her views on religion and her ability to write about those views have rarely, if ever, been surpassed by any other Southern humorist. According to G.W. Koon in The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, “Religion, of course, has long been a concern of southern writers; but probably no successful writer of the region has treated it as specifically and as thoroughly as O’Connor” (891). The entire premise of her short story, “Good Country People,” is the idea of a household with conflicting views on religion, Mrs. Hopewell being the mother who has the bible out in the family room, while in direct comparison her daughter Hulga, a learned woman, who questions the validity of religion. These opposing views by mother and

daughter lead to further tension when a supposed bible salesman comes into their lives, and points out a sense of hypocrisy in religion when he seduces Hulga and takes off with her prosthetic leg. As Koon discusses earlier, O'Connor's characters point to a godless world, with casual statements such as "the life you save may be your own" (891). Certainly Clyde Edgerton's focus on the conservative religion of the rural South is quite reminiscent of the way O'Connor has employed it, though Edgerton seems less concerned with a godless world. His characters inhabit a world where all believe in God but Episcopalians beliefs differ from those of small-town Baptists.

O'Connor's humor can be defined as Bergsonian humor, which is discussed as part of Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People" in the article "'Through Our Laughter We Are Involved': Bergsonian Humor in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction" by J.P. Steed. The primary function of humor according to this Bergsonian theory is to "provide and provoke self-examination, self-understanding, [and] self-criticism" (299). O'Connor uses the situations her characters find themselves in, paired with the "inflexibility" of her characters who embody this "stubborn and foolish pride" that we can see a little bit of in ourselves. This pride also keeps these characters from seeing beyond their own preconceived notions of the world until they encounter the more worldly and experienced men who enter their lives. In O'Connor's, "Good Country People," Hulga Hopewell, though she thinks of herself as more sophisticated, is an example of this inflexible character who exemplifies this pride. Manly Pointer is the worldly and experienced bible salesman who similar to Raney's husband Charles, provides an opposition to the naïve perspective she has had growing up surrounded by family and friends. As readers are invited to examine themselves and draw comparisons with the characters that surface in O'Connor's works, they are able to see the more serious flaws in their own lives. Instead of

feeling directly criticized by the author, readers can turn what they read inwards to a self-criticism. Throughout Southern humor, from Twain to O'Connor to Edgerton, the audience is prone to find a little bit of themselves and their families in the characters' lives they are reading about.

Clyde Edgerton's first novel, Raney follows the first two years of newlyweds Raney from Bethel, North Carolina and Charles from Atlanta, Georgia. The story of these two characters from opposite sides of the track lends itself to various conflicts dealing with issues pertaining to religion, and sins of morality such as drinking, sex, and pornography. Told through the first person perspective of Raney as the events in her life occur, the reader is able to see the changes in the narrative as naive Raney shifts to a more aware individual in a world larger than their small community of Listre, North Carolina.

As W. Todd Martin discusses in his article "Where Trouble Sleeps: Clyde Edgerton's Criticism of Moralistic Christianity", "Edgerton takes issue with some of the religious values that dominate the Southern Baptist community. And, of the few scholarly works written on Edgerton's work, most cannot resist at least a passing reference to religion" (1). Religion serves as a source of tension in Southern culture, but also a source for humor in fiction by Twain and O'Connor, among others. According to J.A. Bryant in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature, "Most [Southerners], of course, regarded themselves as Christian[...]even among freethinkers most were prepared to declare a church preference –and discuss or debate its merits" (3). Religion becomes more than just a social pastime, more than just a denominational brand; it becomes a part of these Southern characters identities. Religion as a basis for conflict is woven throughout Edgerton's novel, Raney. Part of Edgerton's humorous treatment of characters living in the "Bible Belt," and the predominance of religion in Southern culture. Bryant states that,

“among Protestants church preferences tended to run in families and constituted a secondary family designation. Wives, as they did with regional political preferences and other such matters, normally took their husband’s church preference along with his name” (3). Raney’s character challenges this assumption when she sticks very firmly to her Baptist roots, despite having married Charles with his more worldly Episcopalian beliefs.

This conflict among their religion arises because Raney feels that in a sense she and Charles are worlds apart. Referring to the Episcopal Church in a disagreement between Charles’ mother, Millie, Charles, and Raney, Raney states that “they’re against some of the things we believe in most,” (69) exemplifying Raney’s naïve perspective, because she has this unchangeable (for now) conviction that any beliefs that are not in direct agreement with her Baptist roots are inherently wrong. Michael Pearson argues in “Stories to Ease the Tension: Clyde Edgerton’s Fiction,” the whole point for Raney is a merging of this old South represented by Raney and the new South embodied in Charles. The novel is set in Listre North Carolina in 1975, and according to Pearson, it is a “reflection of the times it portrays” (2). “In the South things were at high tide – attitudes toward race, religion, and sex were changing faster perhaps than they ever had before[...]Atlanta was becoming the new heart of Dixie” (2). The South was being transformed by industrialization and urbanization; with this changing South came a backlash by those who felt their brand of religion and their brand of “Southern” were inexhaustibly right and the only acceptable version. Raney’s religious beliefs were deeply seeded in her Baptist upbringing, and all defenses for her arguments are based on her understanding of how she had been taught the Bible from her family, and the elder gentlemen in her church. Her training in the conservative interpretation of the Word definitely serves as a platform to perpetuate humorous arguments between her and Charles in matters of religion. One of the first

arguments that Raney makes in order to point out the differences in their faith is the point in the Bible where Jesus has turned the water to wine. Unlike Charles (and his mother), who believed that Jesus turned water to wine at the wedding at Canaan, Raney maintained that when the Bible said wine, it actually meant grape juice. Her explanation, "If Jesus turned water into wine on the spot[...]it had to be grape juice because it didn't have time to ferment" (70). This logic is an example of how Raney interprets most of life dictated by her family and her life-long church, Bethel Free Will Baptist.

Educated readers see Raney as the naive narrator who, though entertaining, is very sheltered in her views on the more serious issues of life and religion. However, even though her logic and rationale are often flawed, Raney's character invites readers to question how environment and upbringing influence one's outlook on life and how that outlook can change with maturity and through others influence. W.Todd Martin encourages us that

In considering Edgerton's portrayal of Baptists in his fiction, we must not fall into the trap that sparked much of the controversy around Edgerton's first novel, Raney. Edgerton lost a teaching post at a Baptist institution following the publication of Raney due to what was considered a derogatory representation of Baptists. But Edgerton's goal is not to ridicule the Baptist Church but to use humor to point out its shortcomings because, as satire implies, he sees the possibility of reformation. Raney, for example, grows up in Baptist circles, and the novel explores her interaction with her husband's more liberal, Episcopalian family. Yet, while the novel is often humorous in its portrayal of Raney, she is a sympathetic character whom the reader sees develop and mature in her views. (Martin 1-2)

As evidenced by what Charles says to Raney about her closed-minded perspective, we see how various life experiences make certain individuals more "worldly." In another argument between the two of them, Raney is trying to understand why Charles insists on maintaining friendships with people who are college professors and can't be friends with her friends, during which Charles verbalizes his awareness of the differences in his view on the world and Raney's. "These people think" says Charles, "I mean think about something important, something beyond the confines of their own lives [...] It means getting beyond Listre and Bethel"(74-75). Charles' observations can be referred to as what Steed termed Bergsonian humor where "our initial reaction may be a superior grin at the spectacle[...]But, through our laughter, we are involved; and we are led to reflect upon the most serious questions touching the human experience," (300). And although we do not see ourselves as naïve as Raney's character we can identify with bits and pieces of her sheltered view on certain issues. We almost want to sympathize through our laughter for seeing in ourselves similar qualities to Raney. Through Edgerton's use of exaggeration, we recognize an aspect of the art of self-deprecation from Twain's time, and although we are most likely not as oblivious to other world views as Raney, there are certain aspects of our lives that we try to keep sheltered. We don't particularly see Raney as a shallow, stereotypical character, but we do understand her upbringing has limited her understanding of the changing world.

Raney does not think for herself when it comes to the issues pertaining to religion, and the moral issues that stem from these religious convictions. Therefore these issues of morality find themselves on the forefront in Edgerton's novel and in the Southern region as a whole. Small towns are notorious for having certain spoken and unspoken standards that the individuals from that area are expected to abide by on the basis of morality. In David E.E. Sloane's, Mark

Twain as a Literary Comedian, he notes that “life held moral objectives and was lived within social boundaries” for Twain’s characters (22); these boundaries all true in the Southern culture that Edgerton depicts. Alcohol consumption, sex, and pornography all of these seem to have biblically prescriptive negative connotations or ways in which these issues are considered morally acceptable, according to Raney. Of course as the novel unfolds and Raney becomes more aware of a world beyond Listre, she realizes that issues of morality are not so black-and-white, because her community is more hypocritical and less moral than she ever realized.

The reality of characters versus the superficiality of their assumption about themselves serves to create tension and humor. Pascal Covici, Jr. discusses how in Twain, “the discrepancy between what seems to be and what actually exists forms the crux of numerous pranks perpetrated by Southwestern scalawags” (7). Edgerton also uses this discrepancy between Raney’s perceptions of herself and our perception of her as the root of many humorous occurrences.

One issue that seems to take precedence in the novel from the day Charles and Raney said “I do,” is the consumption of alcohol. Ever since Raney introduces drunken Uncle Nate to us in the second chapter, we understand Raney’s view of how sinful and damaging it is for someone to drink, even socially. She actually tries to drink a sip herself, and she just cannot manage to get beyond her feelings of shame for drinking. “Charles knew all about Uncle Nate and how I -- how my whole family -- feels about drinking” (12), says Raney in regards to Charles being drunk at their wedding.

Charles is standing with this red-faced grin. When Preacher Gordon says you may kiss the bride, I turned to Charles and there were these little red blood vessels in his left eye that looked like red thread and all of a sudden I caught a whiff of you-know-what. It hit me. It all suddenly fell together. I thought they had been going outside to *talk*. (11)

Raney's aversion to any amount of drinking becomes more and more pronounced, because any time alcohol is mentioned Raney immediately flashes back to her wedding night, where the evil beverage shattered her girlhood fantasy. Charles was drunk on champagne and the consummation of their wedding "turned into an argument which finally turned into a sort of Chinese wrestling match with my nerves tore all to pieces" (20).

Raney's moral convictions arise from a sense of superiority over those who do drink as taught by her family and church. This disdain for alcoholics or even social drinkers can be seen in her interactions with her drunken uncle Nate, and her arguments with Charles regarding the issue. Even though in the Bible, drunkenness is a sin and Raney follows the Word closely using it as a guide to live by, it is not her sole reason for viewing alcohol and drinking as morally wrong. She has had many encounters with alcohol, as she and her family coped with the drunken Nate. Raney is self-conscious and deeply concerned about what members of her community would think if they found out that such perversity were occurring under her own roof. Because of this, her Uncle Nate who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is sacrificed; when he finally kills himself because the family is too ashamed to seek help for him. In the rural South, there is a significant focus on the perceptions others have on what is happening in the lives of anyone from the community. Morality for Raney is grounded in what the Bible says, but when Raney brings up the issue and argues the point, there seems to always be some connection back to what others might think if they were to find out.

Another issue that leads to tension is sex, and even though it is not morally wrong in the biblical sense because they are wed, Raney, again in her small-town mindset believes there are correct ways to engage in sexual relations. Again readers are reminded of how naïve Raney is from an upbringing with such conservative, fundamental beliefs. Even on the honeymoon, Raney, who has been filled in on the details by her mother and the Bible, knows from her limited education that sex should only take place in a certain way. After having the consummation of their marriage go so horribly wrong, Raney explains how the marriage should have been consummated. "I was supposed to come out of the bathroom in my negligee, go get in the bed, get under the cover, and then he was supposed to go in the bathroom, come out, come get under the cover, and accomplish what was supposed to be accomplished" (22). Raney's view of sex is prudish and stilted—not to be enjoyed but endured.

Of course, Charles is much more open about the bedroom issues and Raney's prudish and stilted views when it comes to their sexual relationship. As the novel progresses, sex becomes even more of an issue in their lives; Raney believes sex is a very private subject, while Charles desires to discuss this part of their relationship with someone, such as a counselor, to help their marriage. When they actually go see a counselor, Raney becomes very offended, and even though in her small town upbringing where everyone tells everyone more than they ever really needed to know, the issue of sex is "not supposed to be talked about. It's something which is supposed to stay in the privacy of your own bedroom" (24). Readers are reminded of the issue with Uncle Nate, the fact that you have a mentally disturbed uncle should not even be considered as a possibility in a small rural southern town. Not until the final chapters of the novel does Raney's awareness and, ultimately, viewpoint on the subject change. Raney's turning point can be seen in the incident in the feed room of the store, an unlikely place for an epiphany. Raney,

who had just days before been appalled after seeing her co-worker and his girlfriend in a compromising sexual position while reading pornographic magazines, had this complete shift.

Well, I don't know how to explain what happened...but I wanted to sit on a feed bag in my underwear. I don't know where it all came from, unless from the very Devil himself, but I thought to myself; Charles and me are married. There's nothing in the Bible about what married people can't do together. It's a free country (226).

Prior to this sexual awakening, Raney had only been informed by what she believed others would think of her actions, but as she becomes more aware of her own ability to choose after her marriage to Charles, she begins to see how one's actions don't have to fit the community mores to be morally acceptable. Jokes about taboo subjects such as sex are a mainstay of humor; Edgerton uses the subject well.

Initially, Raney is also very naïve about pornography. Pornography is first mentioned when Raney begins working at her father's general store and she finds *Playboy* magazines located under the counter. She is completely appalled and can't believe that such filth is being sold, and that her father of all people allows his business partner to sell something so disturbing and sinful. The issue of sinfulness in this instance is dealing with what images Christians should have in their minds, because in the Bible what one thinks is just as wrong as what one does. "Charles, the Bible warns against lusting in your heart. That's all I need to know about the subject. That's all I'm supposed to know about the subject. That's all I want to know about the subject. That's all there *is* to know about the subject" (198). Of course, leave it to sweet Raney to contradict herself and find a way to talk about *Playboy* in a way that no one ever thinks of the magazine. Of all the aspects of the magazine, the first thing she mentions is that she doesn't

disagree with the whole magazine because "I must admit I couldn't help laughing at some of the cartoons" (188). Without knowing anything about the magazine, the title *Playboy* inspires an immediate and negative response in most people, especially in small town church goers, especially in Listre. But if everyone were as moral and holy as they professed to be, then no one should even have heard of the magazine, let alone purchased it. And then when Raney talks about learning of the *Playgirl* magazines from her friend Madora, in one breath she contradicts her initial statement with her train of thought that flows thereafter,

Madora told me about *Playgirl*, but I don't care to see one. I wonder if they have the men all hazy like in a dream like in *Playboy*. I think it would be better if they had them sweaty—kind of shiny, maybe like they just got off working in the fields on a hot day. But I haven't seen one and I don't plan to (193).

Raney's naivety on pornography and her identification of it as an evil in her small world again provides a humorous aspect of Raney. Even though Raney goes the first twenty-four years of her life without knowing what kind of "under the counter" deals are taking place, those things are happening. Raney's reaction to and limited acceptance of *Playboy* parallels the whole notion of the small town narrow southern mentality, which is pointed out by Charles when he tells Raney, "they are not filthy magazines. Filth is in the mind of the beholder. [...] I do not define it as filth so what I'm saying is: speak for yourself" (197). Even though folks in Listre are in their own world, they still have the same sorts of temptations and moral issues, but they must work harder at keeping things hidden because of how they would be perceived. Edgerton's novel, Raney parodies the idea of surface appearance versus reality, focusing in on the humor of how individuals portray themselves and how they actually are. The novel delves into moral issues that are not on their own humorous, but by portraying the humor in these situations, the reader is

allowed to look into their own lives and recognize Edgerton's skillful parodies. As Raney becomes more aware of what is happening in her world, the reader is also becoming more aware of small town Southern culture.

But in Edgerton's Raney, conflicts are not always humorous. As the side story of the alcoholic Uncle Nate unfolds, readers are sobered by his suicide. It is the very idea of seeming to be the picture perfect, morally acceptable, religiously devout family that leads to even more serious issues being pushed out of sight until it is too late. Like Charles says in an argument with Raney regarding her family's religious beliefs in relation to Uncle Nate's death, "It was a whole family's refusal to look for alternatives to a...a way of life. To read—to become educated about a problem staring you in the face. Given the self-righteousness of...of fundamental Christianity in this family, your Uncle Nate didn't have a chance" (143). Alcoholism is often portrayed as humorous (stumbling drunks slurring their words) but Edgerton also uses it as a way for Raney to take a deeper look at her own shallowness.

The humor that Edgerton uses is seriously funny, but beyond the laughs, there are various hard hitting morals that he conveys to us in regards to the pitfalls of such one-sided fundamental Christian beliefs, using these as the basis for morality, and the role that appearance versus reality plays in the whole plot. Edgerton, as other humorists, benefit from their predecessors such as Twain and O'Connor who established and polished these techniques that serve as the foundation for the genre today. Of course, Edgerton's mastery reaches beyond his ability to capture these Southern characters and their region, but in his ability to reach an audience much farther than the South. The character flaws that Edgerton points out are exemplified in the South but recognizable nationwide, because every family has their equivalent of the drunken Uncle Nate, their issues swept under the rug. Laughing at Raney and Charles figuring out life in Listre, North

Carolina, is entertaining and enlightening. We readers, Southerners, Northerners, and Midwesterners, see how our unexamined beliefs and our acceptance of the stereotypical and shallow can ruin our lives. But beyond that we are left with the feeling that we are not alone, and the humor in the lives of these characters are similar to the humor one can find anywhere, and throughout the novel the reader gets some deep hearty laughs.

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