

FLANNERY O'CONNOR AS NEIGHBORHOOD MISSIONARY: THE ROMAN
CATHOLIC DIDACTICISM OF "A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND" IN
THE HEART OF THE BIBLE BELT

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SUMMARY

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor addresses the subject of eternal salvation. Influenced by her own strong Roman Catholic beliefs, she believes man will only be saved from original sin through the intercession of God's grace, for mankind, by nature, is incapable of bridging the gap through his own actions.

Her story is designed and written in such a way as to draw heavy comparison with several in the Book of Genesis. The common thread among these being the idea of God's grace taking the form of "positive destruction," where God offers eternal salvation amid earthly devastation. The story's biblical nature serves her focus of arguing the proper way of achieving salvation with fundamentalist Protestants, who surround her in the rural Bible-Belt South in which she lives

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" challenges the readers, whom I also consider to be her neighbors, in a fashion and arena with which they are quite familiar. Her story's brutal finale offers no compromise with regard to salvation, and I believe the story, because of its tone and message, is uniquely applicable to all readers and an exceptional example of great literature provoking the reader to re-examine his own humanity as a result.

Throughout the course of one's education in the field of literature, from grade school to high school to college and beyond, repeatedly, for every level of understanding and capacity to comprehend, there are certain works, whether they be poems short stories, novels, or otherwise, which, at once, intrigue, yet confound. These works compel the reader to continue, being both entertaining and exciting, yet, they stand apart from others well-written in a very distinct manner. They tend to raise questions of human nature and existence, through whatever method, fashion, or tone, for which there are no time-honored, concrete answers. Their importance lies, thus, not in their ability to answer these questions, but rather in their ability to raise the reader's consciousness to the basic human need for these questions to be answered and resolved. These works spark thought, conversation, and contemplation. They are, in essence, an important tool of human discovery, both for the collective mass, as well as for the single individual. Often times, the work accomplishes this in a very unsettling, jolting manner, thus mirroring the suddenness and unpredictability of everyday life and society. Thus, the grade schooler realizes his own inability to comprehend and understand death as Old Yeller is shot, and the high schooler relates very closely to Holden Caulfield's confusion as to why somebody would write "Fuck You" on the wall of a grade school. The reader, throughout his life, seeks to understand, in essence, the very humanness of man. Why is man often weak and fallible instead of strong and wise? Why do some do evil and hurt others rather than striving to help their fellow man? Simply, the writer furthers the basic human question of the very nature of good and evil, and both his own and God's place within this struggle? And

again, the literary word, when done well, does not seek to provide answers for the individual. Its greatness and importance rather lies in its unique ability to provide good questions.

Certain authors, throughout history, seem to better grasp this mission than others. For whatever reason, whether it be their own personal history, the society and age around them, or some combination, these writers better relate their own questions about life and death, good and evil, love and hate, and all else, to the reader. Without question, one of the very best and most important of these in the modern history of American literature is Flannery O'Connor. For years during and since her writings, there have been continual debate and question as to exactly what she believed, and how her characters should be perceived. The questions are important in attempting to gain a foothold on the importance of her works in raising those questions which readers seek to answer in their own lives. The reader must first look at where she wrote before seeking to define her questions, specifically her questions regarding the relationship between God and man, and the road to eternal salvation. As a devout Roman Catholic in the rural American South, specifically rural Georgia, Flannery O'Connor was an exception to the rule of religious preference. She was not, like many around her, a strong-willed fundamentalist Protestant, using the Bible's written word as daily law. She says, "The only thing that keeps me from being a regional writer is being a Catholic, and the only thing that keeps me from being a Catholic writer is being a Southerner. (Wood, Ralph C. "The Catholic Faith of Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Characters." Walston, Rosa Lee, ed. The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin. Milledgeville: Georgia College, 1984.)" As dually an outsider as well as a neighbor, as a

fellow Southerner but a foreign Catholic, she is afforded a unique perspective into man's relationship and definition of God, as it varies with religious background and preference. Yet, rather than this paradox of relationships with her surroundings hampering her ability to invoke question, it seems rather to invigorate and vitalize her works. Of this, she said:

...The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. But the fact that the South is the Bible Belt increases rather than decreases his sympathy for what he sees. His interest will in all likelihood go immediately to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic...(Hoffman, Frederick J., "The Search for Redemption," In Friedman, Melvin J. and Lawson, Lewis A., The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor. New York: Fordham U.P., 1977., p.32.)

Therefore, because she is drawn towards those fervent Bible-Belters, her writings are especially going to be reviewed, dissected, and very often challenged on the primary, and very profound source of disagreement between the author and her readers, between Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants, which is the correct road to eternal salvation. How should one live is at issue, both in sacred and secular life, if one hopes to be reunited with God in heaven, which is the

common goal of both. Along those lines, the writer and her neighbors are in a state of profound disagreement.

The ways of the fundamentalist South, especially in its more primitive levels of religious experience, are not those of the Roman Catholic Church. Primitive Protestantism in the South is puritanical...the struggle against Satan is individual, and salvation is a personal problem...The rural South is not so much Christ-centered as Christ-haunted...An Episcopal bishop has written, 'One gets the impression that they believe more in the reality of Satan than in the reality of God. (Hoffman, Frederick, "The Search for Redemption," In Friedman, Melvin, ed., The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor, New York: Fordham U.P., 1977)

In essence, it is fear more than faith, damnation as much as salvation, which drives these followers into the religion and in line with their doctrine and beliefs. It is the devil incarnate, Satan, who is omnipresent in the lives of the people. Rather than being pulled upward in their trust and faith in God, they constantly sense Satan down below, tugging at their heels, trying to trip them and pull them down into the fiery hells of eternal damnation. It is a life-long race for the Fundamentalist, one in which he is always only a scant step ahead of Satan, and any stumble, let up, or fall will result in damnation. It is a message and belief proclaimed early in life, and constant throughout, as demonstrated by this children's gospel song.

One, two, three, the devil's after me,

Four, five, six, he's always throwing bricks,
Seven, eight, nine, he misses every time,
Hallelujah, hallelujah, amen!

Nine, eight, seven, I'm on my way to heaven,
Six, five, four, he's knocking at my door,
Three, two, one, the vict'ry has been won,
Hallelujah, hallelujah, amen! (Brewer, Nadine,
"Christ, Satan, and Southern Protestantism
in O'Connor's Fiction" In Brewer, Sara, ed. The
Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 1985, p. 65.)

The religion seems to be a vehicle of escape from damnation rather than a tool for salvation. O'Connor, as devout a religious follower, however rather as a Roman Catholic, looks very differently upon the road to eternal salvation. Her writings closely follow Catholic doctrine. The Catholic does not run away; rather, he strives to follow the path of Jesus Christ and run towards the Lord. However according to Catholicism, it is only through the intervention of God can one be saved.

The Catholic Encyclopedia defines redemption as 'the restoration of man from the bondage of sin to the liberty of the children of God through the satisfactions and merits of Christ.' In the traditional definition, redemption results from the actions of Christ and of grace (the individual's role being merely to cooperate); redemption is experienced consciously; and the moment of redemption is a natural conclusion to a sequence of

preparations. (Gentry, Marshall Bruce, "Tracks to the Oven of Redemption," In Gordon, Sara, ed., The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin. Milledgeville: Georgia College, 1985)

The discrepancies, even on the broad level, are obvious. Therein lies O'Connor's challenge as a writer. She must, even though she is an outsider, seek to force her neighbor, her rural South, as well as all others who read her works, to again question the road to salvation, and the role of both man and God within that framework. To do so, she relies heavily upon her own Catholic beliefs to serve as both a mode of comparison and alternative source of possibilities. Her idea is not necessarily the concrete answer towards achieving eternal salvation, but it is a possibility, and the questions, thought, and arguments which arise from her words is the essence of the importance of literature.

To closely examine the way in which O'Connor deftly raises these questions, it is very beneficial and effective to use a single story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," as a source of emphasis and examination. Not only is it arguably her most well-known short story, it, without peer, raises the very question of the means and ways to salvation more acutely and lucidly than any other. In fact, the story's conflict and resolution, its descriptions of man's earthly weaknesses and inadequacies, and mode of salvation seem to best be categorized with the didactic stories found in the first book of the Christian bible, the Book of Genesis, a work with which many of her readers will be wholly familiar . Like in such stories commonly referred to as those of Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, Noah's Ark, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" demonstrates that the

Christian God, as well as here specifically the Catholic interpretation of God, is dually a vengeful and compassionate God, as well as being an omniscient God. In this story, as well as those in Genesis, God's grace takes the form of "positive destruction." The wickedness and inadequacy of man is stripped away and discarded as God, through his divine intervention, raises up man into his salvation. The violence of God's grace on earth brings eternal good and peace to those who could not rise without it. As O'Connor once said,

More than in the devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted-such as the moment when the Grandmother realizes the Misfit is one of her own children. These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances. (Ochshorn, Kathleen G., "A Cloak of Grace: Contradictions in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," In Nagel, James, Studies in American Literature, Chicago: Northwestern U.P., 1990)

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother will be the modern-day counterpart to the descendants of Adam in the Book of Genesis. Moreover, those defining, similar characteristics will be so broadly defined as to not slip pass her reader, or southern neighbor. She has a great chasm of religious debate to cross, and there will be no room for subtlety. Thus, the grandmother's faults, throughout the story, and there are many, are openly exposed as she becomes a source of annoyance to the reader. However, is she that much different than those living around O'Connor? From the outset, the very first sentences in

fact, the grandmother's self-indulgence and self-centeredness comes through. "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee, and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. (O'Connor, Flannery, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," In The Complete Stories, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971, p.117.) For the grandmother, the center of the universe, contrary to all she will say, is herself. Her first priority is her own self-fulfillment, and she is vain enough to believe she is worthy enough to seek out satisfaction through word and action. She has placed herself above the rest, whether she admits it or not. She acts just as the tribes of Genesis who gather together in the land of Shinar, and decide, "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name...(Genesis 11:6)" In both cases, the proper perspective of self-worth and self-responsibility has been skewed. No longer is the universe ordered as it should be. The tower, which "...epitomizes man's vanity,...attempting to raise themselves to heaven through their own efforts,(Driskell, Leon N., The Eternal Crossroads, Lexington: Kentucky U.P., 1971)" clearly demonstrates man's own misunderstandings. The tribes gathered, joyous in their freedom, seek more than they deserve. They are merely recipients of God's gifts, and in no way can they reach His level as provider and judge. Yet, herein lies the essence of danger in the concept of freedom of will, in O'Connor's opinion. Just like a gambler who does not know when to quit and cash in, mankind has consistently, repeatedly, shown the propensity to misjudge his place in the universe. It has been such since the beginning of man, when the serpent tempted Eve, saying, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and

ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.(Genesis 3:5)" This fault is at the very core of "A Good Man is Hard to Find's" message to the Fundamentalist. Heaven is not reached through man's actions; it simply cannot be. The tower will invariably fall short of the heavens above. It is God's grace which gaps the distance, and it is God's grace which will pull the grandmother out of the ditch in the story's conclusion.

The grandmother, however, does not have the capacity to realize her own vanities, though it is painfully obvious to the reader. Ironically, it may be possible, possibly probable, to become so agitated with the grandmother that the reader will consciously alienate the grandmother to her own individual category, and feel no kinship to her. For example, the grandmother's demeaning, faulted view of the plight of the black in the South is a source of annoyance and ridicule for the reader. And yet, today, yesterday, and for hundreds of years past, racism has been a focal, divisive point of contention for the white south. As the family begins their journey through Georgia, the grandmother spots a young black child aside the road.

"Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!" she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. "Wouldn't that make a picture, now?" she asked and they all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved.

"He didn't have britches on," June Star said.

"He probably didn't have any," the grandmother explained.

"Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture," she said.(O'Connor, p.

Simply, the car windows the family looks out of, in the grandmother's mind, separate far more than the car's interior and exterior. She feels no human kinship with the black child she sees. She is so vain and conditioned in her beliefs that the child serves far more effectively as a source of amusement, like a good book or picture show, than as a reminder of the need for Christian kindness. It is a lack of understanding as old as the South itself. First generally perceived of as impersonal property, less than human as slaves, blacks have yet, to this day, in the minds of many southern whites, fully reached the level of perceived equality of worth, equal under the eyes of God, particularly in the rural areas where contact of a non-work-related nature is severely limited. It is a vanity of many who seek to rationalize and maintain their status quo, with particular emphasis on the effect of race upon social and economic conditions. Christian aid and kindness, the "do unto others" mentality is buried beneath the layers of self-satisfaction and pursuit of individual happiness. Many whites collective this pursuit, and seek as a majority in power to ensure their own welfare. It is again an example of man trying to play judge, jury, and executioner of his own welfare. Without adherence to the examples of Jesus Christ, with regard to all people, mankind courts God's wrath. It is a theme common in Genesis. It states, before the Great Flood, "God saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5)" Here, also, the writer does not imply any conscious rebuke of God by the sinners; rather, like the grandmother, and like much of the rural South, man has again misplaced

his priorities and neglected his responsibilities as a son of God. Man has fallen victim to his own inability to say 'no;' he cannot, or will not, deny his own wants when self-gratification comes in conflict with Christian responsibility. It is a self-cursing mentality, for God is intolerant of such faults, and will respond, just as He does in Genesis, when His people begin to stray again, saying,

And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous;

I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know(Genesis 18: 21-22)

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" is not a subtle story, with many elements bearing this out, including the omniscience of God. It is a fact clearly defined in Genesis, as well as in O'Connor's story, though a superficial reading of the story, or comfortable interpretation by O'Connor's target reader, will render inaccurate conclusions due to the means of expression. God's all-knowingness, and man's inability to escape His knowledge, is learned early on by Adam, and later by his son, Cain. After eating the forbidden fruit, "...Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden, (Genesis 3:8)" but God soon finds them. Later, immediately after Cain slays his brother Adam, God confronts him, saying, "What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground(Genesis 4:9)" In O'Connor's story, the inevitability of judgement comes not from the grandmother, but from the Misfit, though it is

intended at the reader/grandmother. The reader will, in O'Connor's mind, forever be on the run, but not from the temptations of Satan, as they believe, but rather they should run towards God's judgement. However, the primary difference in the reader's perception and O'Connor's perception of the chase is that O'Connor, as a Catholic, sees the impossibility of man winning alone. No amount of human effort can outrun God's judgement, which must be realized for the runner to reach the finish line, here salvation. He may stay ahead of temptation nipping at his heels, but God's knowledge is a roadblock he cannot circumvent. O'Connor dramatizes this in her story not by speaking of the grandmother's run towards redemption, but rather the Misfit's continuous run from the law. In prison, he states, he felt the omnipresence of punishment, or judgement, against him. "Turn to the right, it was a wall, turn to the left it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor...I was buried alive.(O'Connor, p. 130)" Buried alive in prison, the Misfit comes to grip with the very fact that must be made clear to the grandmother, and to the reader, in order to achieve salvation. Each man will be held accountable for his own actions, and there is no escape from that very cold, hard truth. The Misfit has, in the action of this story, escaped the prison walls, but he has not forgotten the lessons he learned there. He tells the grandmother, "I found out the crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it. (O'Connor, p. 130-131)" Later, to the grandmother, the Misfit will explain his reasoning, but it is obvious already that he has a much better grasp of his eternal life than the grandmother. He knows, due to

his overriding Christian doubts, that he is a condemned man, and he is living his life accordingly. The grandmother does not. She believes she will be rewarded for her life, rather than punished for her vanities and sins. It is a point that O'Connor needs to make strongly, and the story's ending, one of the strongest, most jarring in modern literature--the cold execution of an entire family, including two children and a baby--does just that.

"The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon. (Kane, Richard, "Positive Destruction in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," In Rubin, Louis, ed., Southern Literary Journal, Chapel Hill: North Carolina U.P., Fall, 1987, p. 59) "

These instructions, written hundreds of years earlier by St. Cyril of Jerusalem, open the collection of O'Connor stories also entitled A Good Man is Hard to Find, and perfectly summarize the tension, exposition, and resolution of the story. The family has been led astray by the whims and self-indulgent fancies of the grandmother. Under the guise of enhancing the children's education, she has coerced her family off their path in search of a mansion she wants to see again for herself. It is one of her last definitive examples of man's vanity leading to destruction. Just as the forbidden fruit in the garden, and the Tower of Babel symbolize man's overriding concern for self-gratification, so, too, does this mansion. The pursuit of it forces man, here the grandmother, to totally become self-serving, and even sinful.

She resorts to lying, telling the children, "There's a secret panel in this house, and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found...(O'Connor, p. 123)" She purposely deceives small children who know no better, manipulating them for her own purposes. She fantasizes and covets a past and present which she desperately wanted but did not have, for it is easy to see a correlation between this idyllic mansion and her ill-fated decision to not marry Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden. O'Connor writes,

She said she wouldn't marry a man that just brought a watermelon on Saturday. The grandmother said she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out and that he had died only a few years ago, a very wealthy man. (O'Connor, p. 126.)

In fact, he would have easily been wealthy enough to afford to buy his wife a house easily of this size. And yet, her own covetness, even at an early age, prohibited that. She was not satisfied with her position; she was not receiving enough and felt she deserved more from her suiter. Thus, she showed disdain for her proper position and sought more than she deserved. Like Eve, like the tribes who built the temple, she is brought to ruin, here romantically, by her own arrogance. But her vanity does not remain in the past. Rather, she still, even as the car is driving, seeks to rise above others, using any means available. She could have been rich, thus, by transition, she was closer to being rich than others, making her of a higher order. Moreover, in keeping with her emphasis on earthly possession being overly important,

...the grandmother had on a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (O'Connor, p. 126.)

It is the reader, one of O'Connor's neighbors, who will find her on the side of the road, and it is the reader, like the grandmother expects and does, who will be shocked and saddened to see a lady, ditinguished by her clothing, dead. This very emphasis on physical appearance correlating with internal worth, which will be fleshed out in her conversation with the Misfit, is essential to the story. O'Connor herself bears this out in a letter to a high school English teacher, writing, "The story is a duel of sorts between the grandmother and her superficial beliefs and the Misfit's more profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action (Fitzgerald, Sally, Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975)." It is this duel which will, in a strong example of God's "positive destruction," strip away "...every vestige of comfortable pseudo-Christianity, with which she has shielded herself from knowledge. (Byars, John, "Prophecy and Apocalyptic in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor, In The Flannery O'Connoer Bulletin, 1987)"

To effectively convey her message, O'Connor leaves nothing to chance in the climatic scene. She seems to have purposely followed a biblical theme familiar to her more religious readers, with considerable

allusion and easy comparison to the destructive stories of the Book of Genesis. She will not fail to do so here, either. More than simply the word choice and action of the scene, the very physical nature of it will convey the same theme. She does not want her readers who treat the written word of the Bible as law to lose their possible connection in the story's most climatic, telling moments. The final conflict, the basis of need for resolution and "positive destruction," is brought upon by the symbolic grandmother. The message is clear: man is not strong enough, or fast enough, to ultimately overcome evil and reach salvation. There will simply be too many roadblocks and obstacles to overcome, eventually leading to failure. Man will, because he is weak and unworthy, fall prey to temptation, whether it be lying, manipulation, vanity, covetness, or otherwise. The grandmother epitomizes this. She vainly recalls her youth which recalls a house she might have had which spurs her to lying which leads her to manipulating her family's plans which eventually is foiled by her realization of error. The house was nowhere near them, as she had said. Simply, as mankind always does, she brings judgement upon herself.

The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and here eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey's shoulder.

The children were thrown to the floor and their mother, clutching the baby, was thrown out the door onto the ground; the

old lady was thrown into the front seat. The car turned over once and landed right-side-up in a gulch off the side of the road.

(O'Connor, p. 124)

The grandmother did not consciously seek the accident, but, simply, she could not, O'Connor implies, escape her own self. Importantly, the position of the car, family, and grandmother becomes quite essential to the story, as O'Connor attempts to shift the reader's realization of the need for grace from the upcoming Misfit, who is damned, to the grandmother, who does not realize the peril her soul faces. She states that after the accident, "They all sat down in the ditch...(O'Connor, p. 125)" No longer is the grandmother pursuing the heavenly, idyllic mansion of her dreams and envy; she is now sitting in a ditch. It is a new position which incorporates feelings of inferiority, dirtiness, and lowness. She is at the bottom looking up. This is her Sodom or Gomorrah-her plain which she will now seek to rise above. It is no accident that the family, sinners as they are, are placed in the ditch.

Equally important to the story's climax is the positioning of the Misfit in relation to the grandmother.

In a few minutes they saw a car some distance away on top of a hill, coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them. The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention. The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile. There were three men in it.

It came to a stop just over them...(O'Connor, p. 125-126)

This positioning, with the Misfit atop the grandmother, is one of the strong indications that he is not, as the Fundamentalist would argue, an agent of the Devil, who had been stalking them as in the life-long foot race. If that were the case, then he would have arrived upon them from behind or below, not in the symbolic arena of above, as in a seat of judgement or power. However, O'Connor does not leave this point open to interpretation; she continues the analogy in the simple description of the sky. It is the Misfit who first notices the absence of a sun in the sky, as the family huddles down below him. "Ain't a cloud in the sky," he remarked, looking up at it. "Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud neither.(O'Connor, p. 127)" The absence of a sun in the sky will be mentioned again. Later, as he talks, the Misfit looks "...up again at the cloudless sky,(p. 130)" and again, O'Connor states, as the family around the grandmother is being coldly, brutally executed, "There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun.(p. 131)" Though he obviously is unaware of his calling, it is the Misfit who is acting as God's instrument of positive destruction-His agent of grace-with respect to the grandmother. It is he, as an extension of God's will, who is the focal point of the grandmother's universe, and he is the physical embodiment of God's intervention on earth. Just as the sun is the giver of life to the earth, it will unknowingly be the grandmother's contact with her killer which will bring her into eternal life. Just as Saul, an unworthy sinner, on the road to Damascus, was stopped and "...suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven(Acts 9:3)," so, too, will the grandmother be confronted by her own humanness, synonymous with

her own unworthiness. Her response, failure, and eventual understanding are at the heart of O'Connor's take on grace.

Salvation is not an easy accomplishment. It is not the result of everyday action and a comfortable mindset. Moreover, it is not the result of man's action, accomplishment, or greatness. And yet, man continues to struggle in vain to build towers into the sky to reach heaven. The grandmother believes she need only build a tower to escape the Misfit; it is her belief that it is the Misfit who must build the tower towards salvation. She tells him, "If you would pray, Jesus would help you. (p. 130)" She does not see her own lacking of true Christianity and need for direction and guidance. She is firm in her own beliefs, however misdirected they are. In an effort to survive, she still resorts to her own vain beliefs equating physical nature with spiritual righteousness. She looks at the Misfit and says, "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people. (O'Connor, p. 127)" Just as she has done earlier, in her choice to dress well for the car ride, or with her opinions about the black child, the grandmother has placed herself in a position of judgement above those around her. The absurdity of this comes, in part, in her criteria-physical nature-as compared to God's all-knowing, all-wise judgement.

The grandmother further demonstrates her inability to rise out of the ditch under her own power as she talks with the Misfit. Rather than concern for the welfare of her son, his wife, and their children, which is at the heart of Christian charity and kindness, she is concerned with her own survival. In fact, her focus is on a salvation; however, it is an earthly salvation. She does not want to be shot and killed. She

asks the Misfit, "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?(O'Connor, p. 127)" Later, she screams, as the last of the family is being shot due to her vanities, "Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!(O'Connor, p. 132)" Her child and the others have just been murdered, and yet she continues to focus upon her own escape from death. She continues to be obsessed, as the Fundamentalists are, with escaping from Satan on earth, rather than looking for God's hand from above. It is here where all the story's points, issues, and confrontations come together in the mind and heart of the grandmother.

..they shall see the glory of the Lord, the excellency of our God.

Strengthen ye the weak hands,
And confirm the feeble knees;
Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be Strong, fear not;
Behold, your God will come with vengeance,
With the recompense of God he will come and save you.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped....And the glowing sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water...And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it;...No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast go up there on, they shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there...and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.(Isaiah: Book V:II:2-

Redemption is at hand for the grandmother, but it is not assured. As death engulfs her earthly existence, the grandmother is given the opportunity to reach out and touch God's hand, and he be pulled away, above her own deservedness and into salvation. It is the opportunity God gives to all His children, according to the Roman Catholic Church. It is the opportunity God gave Lot amid the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. There,

...the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven;

And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

(Genesis 20:24-25)

It is the opportunity God gave Noah before cleansing the world of the evil and wicked. There,

Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered.

And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man:

All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died. (Genesis 7:20-22)

It is God who is vengeful, wreaking havoc upon the wicked and evil. It is God, the reader can rightfully expect, who will strike down the Misfit in judgement for all his evil wrongdoings. But, more importantly to the story, it is also God who will bridge the gap between man and heaven, and offer salvation. This is the offer which fascinates O'Connor. Here, for the grandmother, as for all, "...there comes a moment when this redemption--this way out of themselves and through present trial--is offered and they must 'decide this day whom ye shall serve.{Joshua 24:15}' (Heher, Michael, "Grotesque Grace in the Factious Commonwealth, In Gordon, Sara, ed., The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 1986, p. 76.)" For her story, O'Connor chose an exceptionally violent means of expressing this ultimate point of realization for man, and her reasons are significant. First, she is not speaking to those of the same Catholic faith as herself; her neighbors, her readers, have quite a different perspective that she does. She writes,

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock--to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. (Kane, p. 47) "

And, where religion is concerned, the different, theologically competitive religions foster confusion and a lack of perspective. Thus, the brutality and coldness of the family's execution is vitally necessary for the reader to become aware of the message. Referring to "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor comments,

...Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them...In this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for dead bodies. (Montgomery, Marion, "Grace: A Tricky Fictional Agent," In Walston, Rosa Lee, ed., The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, 1980, p. 57.)

And just as Noah and Lot did, the grandmother accepts God's grace, and salvation from the vanities of humanity. Her acceptance comes in a manner conducive with O'Connor's belief about the process. She writes, "I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting, annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime. (Kane, p. 56)" The grandmother's light comes just before her death, as the last of her family is being shot in the distance, and she is left alone with the Misfit. She has exhausted her efforts to save herself by trying, ostensibly, to save him through the suggestion of turning to Jesus, and her pleas for mercy has gone unanswered. She is left to contemplate her death when the grace of God reaches out to her, and her eyes are opened.

...the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The

Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. (O'Connor, p. 132)

Her realization, her vision, for the first time, extends beyond the external. She does not see a well or poorly dressed man. She does not see a black or white man. Rather, for the first time, the grandmother sees herself as beside the man, equal under God. She feels compassion for others more than concern for her own safety. Moments earlier, as her son and his family were being shot and dying, the grandmother had been bargaining for her own life. She was the center of her own universe. Now, her vision has expanded. She feels the touch of God and sees the bridge out of the ditch, over the Misfit, and to eternal salvation. It comes, according to O'Connor, not through her own words, but through the actions of Jesus Christ, as He died upon the cross to bridge the chasm of original sin. Only at that very moment, as all about her crumbles, does she prepare herself to recognize God's grace. Hours earlier, she was not prepared, as she spoke demeaningly of blacks as the small black child they saw waved in a spirit of universal good will. She was not prepared as she, also just hours earlier, told the owner, Red Sammy Butts, "...you're a good man! (O'Connor, p. 122.)" as he verbally accosted his own wife and they together blamed and criticized all those unlike them, blaming others for ruining the world for good, deserving people like themselves. She was not prepared, which is the duty of the true believer. Only at the final moment of her life does she realize that she is ultimately to be judged, rather than judge, and that she is, above all, unworthy. The sinning Misfit in front of her is not so different than herself, or the black child, or Red Sammy Butts. They are all to

be judged, and they are all undeserving. They, none of them, can run from their own humanness into salvation; they can only hope God will allow them to open their eyes in time to see the blasting light of salvation.

On the story's surface, the grandmother dies. But O'Connor is obviously trying to get across the grandmother's rebirth, or new life. She wants the reader to feel God's grace at work, unquestionably lifting this woman out of the ditch below. She must leave no question of God's grace amidst destruction, and man's renewal amidst death. Just as in the story of Noah, after God has killed the multitudes and masses, all that were outside of the ark, he says to Noah, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. (Genesis 9:1)" The author proceeds to list, soon after, the sons of Noah that are born, and their children, and their children. Life-a better life, a life in union with God and Jesus Christ-comes from God's action. It is this new, sacred life which the author wants the reader to take heart in, not be fearful of the preceding deaths. Later, for Lot, who has lost his wife and home amidst the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, new life springs forth. In the mountains after the fiery destruction, Lot's two daughters with him decide, "Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. (Genesis 19:32)" Out of these unions are born two sons, who will go on to be the founders of the tribes of Moabites and of Ammonites, and new, less evil people are born to repopulate the land. Likewise, even in the death of the grandmother, O'Connor assures her reader that God's new life has succeeded in defeating earthly death. Her body's death position indicates that.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky. (O'Connor, p. 132)

The Misfit has served his purpose. He has been the earthly instrument, like a flood or firestorm, that perpetuated God's will on earth, and his power over the grandmother is over. He feels no joy in his actions due to his plight of doubt. He is a doomed man, and will be punished eternally. His final words, "It's no real pleasure in life, (O'Connor, p. 133.)" show his sense of hopelessness, and possibly his understanding that he is different than the woman he has just killed. His henchmen are ignorant and oblivious of the possibility that God might be able to save man from himself, but the Misfit isn't. Unfortunately, he is an empiricist, and incapable of the necessary faith to be vigilant for signs of God's blasting light, or grace, but the grandmother may not have been. He, however, knows he will be damned.

In contrast, the grandmother's body's childlike stance signifies her union in the family of God. In her acceptance of grace, the grandmother has finally found and accepted her rightful place in the universe as a child of God, no greater or no less than any other. She smiles because God has pulled her out of the ditch and up into heaven with her. She no longer has to search for the sun, for she is now within its divine and forgiving presence. It is a final resting place that Flannery O'Connor hopes that her readers will emulate. But, to do so, the reader will have to examine his or her own relationship with the grandmother. Just

as the grandmother realizes, the reader must discover that it is the earthly destination of all to be judged, rather than to judge. Therefore, O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" paints its pictures and delivers its messages with the brutality and straightforwardness of a didactic biblical story. The reader must acknowledge the universality of the grandmother's plight, and learn from it. If not, then man will be doomed to a world full of unfinished towers in the sky. The consequences of man putting faith in such towers is painfully evident, as the Misfit's string of victims dumped in woods increases. It is an awful consequence, but one that can be avoided, O'Connor believes. It is simply a matter of understanding one's own true life and death, and the causes and consequences of each. It is O'Connor's story which brilliantly raises the questions needed to gain that understanding.

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