

2014

"Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance": Grace and Redemption in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Abbie C. Harris
University of North Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/papersandpubs>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harris, Abbie C. (2014) ""Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance": Grace and Redemption in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"," *Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/papersandpubs/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (CURCA) at Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

In the world of Flannery O'Connor, the South is a region of ambiguous Christianity. Her stories bring to life a land overflowing with churches and self-proclaimed Christians, where religion is present everywhere, but rarely practiced in its true form. Because of the sheer ubiquity of Southern Christianity, anything that goes against common religious ideas must be brushed over or guarded in secrecy. This land of Christianity in turn becomes a land of hypocrisy, where people strive for respectability, ignore Biblical teachings, and only act as "Christ followers" when it benefits them. While people might appear to be "good," at the core they reject their need for Christ's redemption because to accept it would require admitting fault in themselves. Between the self-satisfied religious and the secular nonbelievers, the image and idea of God is present everywhere, but, according to O'Connor, the power of the gospel is absent. This idea is a theme on which Flannery O'Connor builds much of her writing. As an unapologetically Catholic writer, O'Connor aims to write on the need for redemption and God's grace in an unconventional manner, through the personal flaws of her characters. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor uses her characters to exemplify the weaknesses of people living in the Christ-haunted South. Through the characters of Grandma and The Misfit, O'Connor depicts the shortcomings of human beings and their dire need for redemption, whether they recognize it or not.

Born in Savannah, Georgia in 1925, Flannery O'Connor grew up as part of the Catholic minority in a region of heavy Protestant influence. Many of her works were crafted from her strong Catholic identity, as she herself admitted that she wrote from "the standpoint of Christian Orthodoxy" (Kilcourse 25). She believed that her Christianity played a substantial role in shaping who she was and her worldview, which in turn contributed to her style and personality as a fiction writer. As a strong Catholic at a time of stagnation for the church, O'Connor separated herself from the religious world around her. She aimed to create distance and perspective in order to "recognize the spiritual crisis in [the South's] unhealthy illusions" (6). Through her work, O'Connor challenges readers to recognize the religious decay and faux spirituality of the region. As a work of Southern Gothic literature, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" employs morbid, ironic events to expose the established values of the South.

O'Connor writes "A Good Man is Hard to Find" in a precise, strategic way to achieve her goal of engaging readers and challenging stereotypical ideas of religion. She begins her story with an all-too-familiar situation of a family going on vacation in the family car. The humorous depiction of the family, with a domineering grandmother, unruly children, frustrated parents, and a stowaway cat captures the reader's attention with ease. Suzanna Morrow Paulson insists that the reader's fascination with the family "hinges on our familiarity with the event and our identification with the immediately recognizable human types presented" (87). While the beginning of the story captivates readers with lighthearted,

humorous antics, it quickly takes a tragic turn, ending with the extermination of the entire family. This is due to the fact that O'Connor's protagonists are often "engaged in psychological and spiritual quests, and the physical voyages which they undertake serve to locate the meaning of the story and to provide a structure for it" (Muller 53). In the case of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Muller suggests that the quest takes place when the "absurd family trip...devolves into a violent encounter with destiny and the forces of evil" (53). This quest motif is useful for O'Connor because it helps her to maneuver her characters into situations where they must confront the religious mystery that they ignored throughout the story.

The Grandmother is the first character O'Connor introduces in her short story and a major actor in O'Connor's spiritual quest. She is described as being extremely "lady-like," wearing a dress, gloves, hat, and a spray of cloth flowers pinned to her dress, so that "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (O'Connor 679). The Grandmother's primary concern is respectability, believing that by projecting herself as a lady, she will also appear as good and worthy of the respect of others. She works hard to display her apparent goodness by talking to Red Sam about how "people are certainly not nice like they used to be," and pointing out a poor black child on the side of the road (681). After bringing attention to the child, she explains to her grandson, "He probably didn't have any [britches]... Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" (679). Instead of being genuinely concerned for the child, the Grandmother only points him out, more interested in the novelty of what she sees than the devastation and poverty of what is before her.

Through the Grandmother, O'Connor depicts a flawed human nature and, as George A. Kilcourse explains, humanity's "innate attraction to an apparent good that is chosen selfishly" (125). Essentially, she likes the idea of being a good person, but only when others are watching her. Although the Grandmother attempts throughout the story to project an air of respectability and goodness, she only proves that she is quite the opposite through her actions. Ralph C. Wood asserts that the Grandmother's sense of self-assurance "is so complete that she believes that she can manage not only her own life, but her family's as well" (39). She is so self-assured that she thinks she can save everyone by flattering the Misfit and telling him that he is a good man. She makes very few allusions to her faith throughout the story, choosing rather to focus on herself, until her life is threatened; when flattery does not work, she suddenly feigns religion, telling him "If you would pray, Jesus would help you" (O'Connor 687). When that fails, she denies her faith to save her own life. Upon being confronted by the Misfit, she blatantly rejects Christ, saying "Maybe [Jesus] didn't raise the dead" (688). Through this desperate rebuke of Christianity, the reader finally sees the Grandmother for what she truly is: "a proper lady who would gladly reduce

Christian faith to sociology or culture or personality development if, in so doing, she could save her own life” (Kilcourse 38). O’Connor’s character of the Grandmother is a hypocrite, concerned only with outward appearance and willing to reject her faith completely when faced with a life or death situation. Through the Grandmother’s empty and meaningless personal faith, O’Connor critiques the empty and meaningless faith projected by many people in the South.

If the character of the Grandmother points out the shortcomings of human beings, the vagrant serial killer, self-titled “The Misfit,” serves as her far more extreme counterpart. As an escaped prison convict who kills innocent people for pleasure, some argue that he is a representative of Satan himself. Arthur F. Bethea suggests that The Misfit acts as an antithesis to Christ, stating: “Indeed, like Satan, The Misfit is an anti-Christ... The most significant contrast is that Jesus sacrificed himself so that his true followers could enjoy everlasting life, while O’Connor’s villain is relentlessly associated with death” (247). He also dislikes children, unlike the Christ of the Bible who blessed them, has been married multiple times while Christ remained unmarried, and travels with two cohorts who serve as a makeshift Trinity. As an ex-fundamentalist, The Misfit had once been a follower of Christ, even admitting to a past stint as a gospel music singer, but he ultimately rejects his religious roots and becomes a mass murderer. Kilcourse explains that his night-and-day transition from religious devotee to anti-Christ occurs because he has become scandalized by Christ and the supernatural. He is “appalled that Jesus raised the dead. This bringer of death is profoundly offended that the Giver of Life cannot be dismissed as a mere holy man or eminent ethical figure but must be adjudged as either the incarnate of God or else a wholesale fraud” (38). The Misfit’s dilemma of not being able to completely reject nor completely embrace Christ’s reality is a core concept in O’Connor’s theme of the Christ-haunted South; God’s presence lingers everywhere, refusing to be ignored, and Southerners simply do not know what to do with it. Faced with this ambiguity, The Misfit “examines life but concludes with nihilism” (Muller 91). Instead of choosing one or the other, The Misfit rebels from Christ’s teachings and uses them to justify his acts. He states towards the end of the story, “[Jesus] thrown everything off balance. If He did [raise the dead], then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him” (O’Connor 688). By rejecting Christ and becoming hardened and bitter towards His teachings, The Misfit has indeed devoted his life to “no pleasure, but meanness” (688).

The tension between the Misfit and his victim escalates until the Grandmother makes her final statement, which in turn sends The Misfit into a frenzy and makes him decide to end their ridiculous conversation and take her

life. In a sudden moment of clarity she says to him, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (688). In her final moment of life, the Grandmother realizes that she and The Misfit are not that different from one another. She finally sees that "The Misfit is her Doppelgänger, her shadow, her second and secret self" (Wood 39). Of course, the Grandmother is no closet murderer or maniac; she merely strives for respectability by portraying a classy, Godly woman, when in reality, she is what Ralph C. Wood has termed a "practical atheist"; someone who lives self-righteously, only acknowledging God when it benefits her and denying Him when it does not. She is O'Connor's portrait of "the average Christian soul living amidst the compromises and deceits of ordinary life" (40). It is in her final moment that the Grandmother finally understands the truth of the situation: The Misfit is not a good person, and she is not a good person either. They are both in serious trouble and are in need of radical help.

The question that remains now is, considering the unapologetically sinful nature of these two characters, what place does grace and redemption have in O'Connor's story? While the series of events may appear to be hopeless and merciless, with the death of an entire family and the culprit still on the loose, Flannery O'Connor admits herself that, in spite of the readers' disbelief, "grace is not lacking" in her stories (Kilcourse 29). O'Connor explains that there is a moment in every story when grace is presented and it can be either accepted or rejected by the protagonist. In order to make grace appear credible to her reader, she often exaggerates and dramatizes the forces of evil, as she did with the crazed anti-Christ Misfit. For that reason, she explains that her fiction normally revolves around "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" (29). This is true for the Grandmother, who has her "awakening forced upon her" when she is faced with life or death at the hands of The Misfit (Gentry 21). She comes to the realization that they both need mercy and grace moments before her death, and it is then that she finally sees that they are one in the same. By saying that he is "one of [her] own children," she is admitting that his journey of finding loopholes and cutting corners "until he gradually came to commit and to justify evil deeds" is much like her own self-righteous acts, since it has brought them both to the desperate places that they are in at that moment (Kilcourse 40). However, this shared sinfulness is something The Misfit's pride would never allow him to admit, so he murders the Grandmother with three fatal gunshots.

By realizing and admitting that she is not the good person that she fancied herself to be, the Grandmother redeems herself in a way. She dies finally understanding that her hypocrisy is no more righteous nor holier than The Misfit's acts of murder. By acknowledging that both she and The Misfit are sinful and in need of God's grace, her old desires to appear better than others are eradicated. O'Connor shows the reader that the Grandmother has been changed, dying in a

state of grace, “half lay[ing] in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (688). Unlike the lady-like persona she strove for in life, in death, she sits childishly, smiling at the open sky above her in acknowledgment and acceptance.

While *The Misfit* does not readily accept the redemption that the Grandmother embraces, he is certainly changed by the events of the story. His conversation with the Grandmother is initially intended to kill the half hour or so that it takes to murder the rest of her family; however, he allows the conversation to affect him in a profound way, far more than he expected. This is apparent in the very last line of the story, when *The Misfit* says, “It’s no real pleasure in life” (O’Connor 689). This short, simple line shows that *The Misfit* has been altered, if only slightly, by the Grandmother’s conversation and her acceptance of God’s grace. This outcome is far different than what *The Misfit* had intended. Because of this, Marshall Bruce Gentry suggests that “one might even say that the conversation is potentially redemptive because it gets out of anyone’s control” (37). Even though *The Misfit* does not openly accept God’s grace, he is unintentionally changed by the occurrence, which shows that he did allow God some control in the situation, whether he wanted to or not.

Through the characters of the Grandmother and *The Misfit*, O’Connor depicts the shortcomings of human beings and their dire need for redemption, whether they recognize it or not. The Grandmother and *The Misfit* are both flawed in their own way, through fair-weather Christianity and complete rejection of Christianity respectively, and while the severity of the two sinners seems to differ, the defining moment in their quest leads them to realize that they are both the same: bad people in need of Christ’s redemption. In one single moment, they are both presented with an opportunity for grace, but only the Grandmother accepts it. *The Misfit* instead chooses to go on in his miserable ways, although he cannot deny that he has been changed in some mysterious way. Through these two characters, O’Connor shows that grace and redemption are attainable, even in a Christ-haunted, off-balance world.

Works Cited

- Bethea, Arthur F. "O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.'" *Explicator*. 64.4 (2006): 239-42. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.
- Gentry, Marshall Bruce. *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986. 21-36. Print.
- Kilcourse, George A. *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001. 6-40. Print.
- Muller, Gilbert H. *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972. 53-54. Print.
- O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man is Hard to Find." *The Art of the Short Story*. Ed. Diana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn. London: Longman, 2006. 678-89. Print.
- Paulson, Suzanne Morrow. *Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1988. 85-91. Print.
- Wood, Ralph C. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. 38-41. Print.