

ASSIGNMENT: Using secondary sources, write an interpretation of a Flannery O'Connor story.

Looking for the Good Man in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard To Find"

by Bob Brown

Christianity is the underlying theme in much of Flannery O'Connor's writing. As she herself writes, "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic" (O'Connor, "On Her Catholic Faith" 435). Without keeping her Christian background in focus, it is impossible to fully understand and interpret O'Connor's stories. Her major subjects, according to Frederick J. Hoffman, include the struggle for redemption, the search for Jesus, and the meaning of 'prophecy' (33). Of these subjects, the struggle for redemption and the search for Jesus are the major quests in a spiritually sensitive life. O'Connor's stories, suggests Dorothy Walters, tell of people in need of salvation and the violence that they encounter which wakes them up to that need (23). It often takes a personal crisis to awaken someone to spiritual matters. In the context of eternal spiritual realities, the crises in life, despite their ominous outward appearances, take on a lesser significance than the spiritual realities that these crises often uncover. These interpretations accurately describe the journey that the grandmother takes in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." It is critical to read this story in light of O'Connor's Christian focus and to look for the faith message embodied by the characters and their experiences. In this story, the grandmother's journey from manipulative self-absorption to grace symbolizes a Christian's journey toward salvation.

As we begin to look at the grandmother, it is important to note that she is nameless. The story opens, "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida" (405). She is one of three main characters in this story who are not given a name, the others being the children's mother and the Misfit. In the opening four paragraphs the grandmother is referred to three times and always with her title rather than her name. Because the grandmother has no name and only a title, it is

possible to see her as a generic example of the average person. She represents all, and her struggle with pride, manipulation, and self-importance is common to humankind.

Another aspect of the grandmother's personality is her self-centeredness. As the story opens, she is resisting the family's plans for a vacation to Florida. "She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Baily's mind" (405). The word *seizing* implies more than a casual attempt. It shows that the grandmother is exerting all her energy in a forceful, almost militant action to manipulate the situation and get her own way. The primary reason that she brings up the newspaper article about the Misfit is to attempt to change Baily's mind about the family's destination rather than as a serious concern about the family's safety. This demonstrates the grandmother's selfish focus and her willingness to manipulate others to achieve her own ends. Preston Browning says it well when he observes, "The grandmother . . . displays a soul so empty that it seems to reverberate with the echoes of her own incessant chatter. . . . [she is] smug [and] self-willed" (54). The center of the grandmother's soul is not filled with God but with herself and her own interests. This is an ungodly, sinful condition.

A further aspect of her pride and self-focus is her obsession with her outward appearance. She takes great effort to look well dressed despite the casual attire of the rest of the family. She wore "A navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. . . . In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (406). She is dressed in her Sunday best, as if she were going to the Lord's house. This is ironic because before the day is out she will meet Jesus and go to His real house. As Miles Orvell observes, "she is somewhat prescient in this regard, for if she is not precisely dressed to kill, this remnant of Southern gentility is, as it turns out, dressed to be killed" (131). Having a proper and ladylike appearance, even in death, is critical to the grandmother's sense of self-worth. Appearance mattered to her above all else, even her life.

Despite her orderly external appearance, the grandmother has some important internal inconsistencies within her character. Due to her references to the Bible, Jesus, and praying, she apparently views herself as a Christian lady, but she displays some very un-Christian values while in the car. She tells the children, “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!...Wouldn’t that make a picture, now?” (406). These are racist words, coming from someone who believes in Jesus. She is also good at lying and being manipulative. When she is losing the battle about taking a side trip to visit the old plantation house, she has no hesitation in resorting to dishonesty. “‘There was a secret panel in this house,’ she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, ‘and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found...’” (409). The word crafty shows how carefully the grandmother is choosing her words to have the most powerful effect on the children. As much as she may have wished for it to be the truth, it is a lie and she knows it. She is again making a great effort to manipulate those around her. The allure of hidden treasure is sure to get the children on her side. But for a woman who views herself as a Christian, and who wants to project just the right appearance, it’s clear that the grandmother is a hypocrite who is really far from living life as Jesus would want. The grandmother is a picture of anyone who doesn’t really know Jesus and who goes through life giving the outward appearance of being good while her inner life is full of inconsistencies. Something has to occur in a person’s life to jolt him/her out of their self-absorbed world and enlighten them about what’s really important. For the grandmother, this is about to happen.

She needs to confront her self-pride before she can truly find salvation. She believes that her manipulation will be sufficient to save her from any situation. Even after the car accident, which is largely her fault, she attempts to show herself as one to be pitied rather than blamed. She is quick to say, “I believe I have injured an organ” (411) hoping to elicit sympathy from her family. “The grandmother ...[is] convinced of [her] inner capacity to deal with reality...until [she is] suddenly confronted with forces more powerful than [herself]...For Flannery O’Connor, the instruction of pride through the lessons of humility is...the means by which the soul is

prepared for its necessary illumination by the Holy Spirit” (Walters 73). In this story, as in many of O’Connor’s stories, violence is the catalyst to effect change in the central character’s life, beliefs, and fate.

Violence is a very powerful jolt to someone’s beliefs. The coming violence removes the grandmother from her world of self-absorption and gives her the opportunity to find true redemption and grace. The first hint of the violence to come occurs when the family catches sight of the Misfit’s car. “The car continued to come on slowly...it was a black battered hearse-like automobile” (411). The Misfit, like the grandmother, goes by a title rather than a name. Being nameless, the Misfit is not just one man but represents a personification of evil in this world. The title of Misfit accurately portrays evil’s relationship to God. Evil isn’t a part of God’s plan for creation; therefore it doesn’t fit. The car that is used by the Misfit and his gang represents mortality. The incessant pounding of the destruction that evil creates gives the car its battered appearance. Evil brings death into this world just as the Misfit brings this symbol of death into the grandmother’s presence. Like many people, the grandmother doesn’t leave her world of hypocritical self-absorption until she is faced with her own mortality.

One by one, the Misfit’s men escort the grandmother’s family into the woods to be murdered. As the last of her family is killed, “There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report” (415), and only she and the Misfit are left. The grandmother’s confrontation with her own mortality and her crisis of the soul begins. Preston Browning observes that at her moment of crisis, faced with death, the grandmother resorts to the tools that have served her well in life: her external appearance of Christianity, and her beliefs in good breeding (Browning, 56). The many ways that the grandmother attempts to face evil all stem from her own self-made fictions. Mary Jane Schenck argues, “In a desperate attempt to cope with the threat posed by the murderer, the grandmother runs through her litany of convenient fictions. She believes that there are class distinctions (‘I know you’re a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell’), that redemption can be achieved through work (‘You could be honest too if you’d only try...’), and finally, that prayer will change him (‘Pray, pray,

she commanded him')” (445). All of these attempts fail to deal with the evil of the world, represented by the Misfit, that is confronting the grandmother. As O’Connor states, “The heroine of this story, the grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely” (“The Element of Suspense” 433). While Christianity teaches eternal hope and salvation, the grandmother is acting out of desperation. She realizes that she isn’t really a Christian and therefore she is unprepared to face eternity. Despite her desperate attempts to diffuse the situation and escape her confrontation with evil and her own mortality, the confrontation defies resolution.

It sometimes requires the removal of all external supports before a person is finally prepared to receive God into his or her life. The grandmother sees her family murdered. This removes her family from her life. She tries one last time to deal with this crisis by adjusting her outward appearance, “The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim...but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground” (412-413). This attempt fails as her hat breaks, and it becomes apparent that this crisis won’t be solved by outward appearances.

As her outward attempts at resolving this crisis fail, the grandmother turns inward. She has intellectual knowledge of Jesus, and at this point, the grandmother and the Misfit enter into a thoughtful exploration of His life. As this conversation reaches its climax, the Misfit, the portrayal of evil incarnate, has started to become emotional. “Listen lady,’ he said in a high voice, ‘if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.’ His voice seemed about to crack” (415). This now ceases to be an intellectual conversation about the facts surrounding Jesus and instead reaches the true core of the Christian message.

Knowing facts about God doesn’t save a person; it takes a personal relationship with Him. God must be let inside a life for that life to be saved. With everything external and internal stripped away from her life, the grandmother finally finds redemption and enters into a real relationship with Jesus. “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" (415). Paulson says that now the grandmother, realizing that all people, regardless of their deeds, are related to one another, experiences her epiphany (91). God created everyone; therefore all people without regard to their actions or breeding are His children. This is a Christian belief, one very different from the grandmother's view of people earlier in this story. A further interpretation of this line comes from Margaret Whitt: "The grandmother, to this point in the story, has not said anything that could be mistaken as seriously thoughtful. One reading of this moment is that the grandmother sees the charade that her own life has been in this split second before her existence is blown away" (47). The grandmother sees the fact that she and the Misfit are fellow creatures of God, and she finally sees that external appearances are meaningless. She has finally met the real Jesus. As even the Misfit says about Jesus, "If He did what He said, than 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..." (415). Until this point, the grandmother has been living the latter, living life the best way that she could, which included manipulating others to achieve her own ends. It takes the extreme violence brought by the Misfit to wake her up from her self-absorption. Now that she has really met Jesus, she, in her spirit, throws away everything else that has previously been important to her and is now following Jesus. She has dropped her attempts to manipulate and control and can finally express real love. She is facing an evil man who, with his gang, has brutally murdered her family, and she is now able to show him tenderness, love, and grace. Her ability to love her enemy is one of the truest signs that she has really met Jesus.

Jesus repels evil, and the reaction of the Misfit to the grandmother's love and grace is another proof that she now knows the Lord. As soon as she shows Christian grace and love, "The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (415). Evil can't accept Christian love and therefore must escape from it. The Misfit escapes it by killing the grandmother.

There is symbolism in the grandmother's death. The three bullets fired from the Misfit's gun represent the Holy Trinity. The three bullets were truly inside of her just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were now truly living inside of her. The grandmother is shot through the chest, which is where her heart is. God has penetrated her heart as the bullets penetrated her chest, and God is having a life changing impact on her soul as the bullets have a life ending impact on her body. When the Misfit says, "She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (416), he explains that receiving Christ is not a one-time event. A person must continually seek to have his or her heart filled with God every day. The posture of the Grandmother after her death is also symbolic. "Hiram and Bobby Lee [were]...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" (416). Her legs are crossed, referring to the cross of Jesus. She is lying in her own blood, symbolizing how her spirit is now resting in the sacrificial blood of Jesus. Now that her spirit has been freed from her body she has gone to join her Lord in heaven. The comparison of her posture to a child's is significant because Jesus said that to be a follower of His, you have to have the faith of a child (Matthew 18:2-4). Now that all adult pretense and externalities are gone, the grandmother has finally gotten to the deep level of true faith. She has the faith of a child. The final symbolism of her death scene is that she is smiling up at the cloudless sky. As her spirit is ascending to God in heaven, her face can finally smile. The fact that she finds salvation and that there is no reference to her family being saved is also Biblical. The Gospel writer Matthew observes, "But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:14). The grandmother is one of the few who responds to the pressure of crisis by receiving the Lord's salvation. Her family also dies, but apparently without finding God.

With the grandmother's death, it is possible to identify the real focus of this story. What is the identity of the "Good Man" who is allegedly hard to find? The answer is found by following the path of the grandmother on her faith journey. The exploration of the consequences of her prideful, selfish, manipulative, and empty life demonstrates that the good man is not

anyone like the grandmother. The good man is certainly not like the Misfit, his men, or any of the other people in this story. In the end, the grandmother discovers that the only real Good Man is Jesus¹. It is, indeed, possible to find Him, but it takes a journey of faith. The grandmother must abandon all of her manipulative self-absorption, her focus on class and her external show of Christianity. In exchange for her sinfulness, she is given the Grace of God, forgiveness and the hope of Paradise. In the end, she finally meets Jesus and is transformed by the Grace of God. This enables her to show love and grace towards the Misfit, who has just had her family brutally murdered. For the grandmother it is hard to find the Good Man, but at the end of her journey she finally finds Him and is now with Him in Paradise.

¹ During my research for this paper I ran across the concept of the Good Man in this story being Jesus. I cannot find the specific reference for this concept but I believe that it came from one of the books in either my Works Cited or Works Consulted lists.

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