

**“THE COLLISION OF EVIL AND GRACE”
FLANNERY O’CONNOR, *A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND***

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1. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", by Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was published in 1953.

Plot

2. Bailey, the head of an Atlanta household, prepares to take his family on a vacation to Florida.
 - 2.1. Bailey's mother (known only as "the grandmother" throughout the story) wants to go to East Tennessee to visit relatives instead,
 - 2.2. and warns Bailey that a convict called The Misfit has escaped from prison and is heading towards Florida.
 - 2.3. The family, including Bailey, her grandson John Wesley, her granddaughter June Star, and her infant grandchild, tended to by her daughter-in-law, ignore her.
 - 2.4. When they leave the next morning, the grandmother occupies the backseat of the family's car, dressed finely so that if she is killed in an accident, she can be recognized as a Southern lady.
 - 2.5. She hides the family's cat, Pitty Sing, in a basket between her legs, not wanting to leave it home alone.
3. While traveling, the grandmother points out scenery in Georgia.
 - 3.1. Her grandchildren respond by berating both Georgia and Tennessee, and the grandmother reminds them that in her day, children were more respectful.
 - 3.2. She delights in seeing a naked black child waving from a shack, finding the image quaint.
 - 3.3. She sees a graveyard which was once part of a cotton plantation that she jokingly says has "Gone with the Wind".
4. The family stops for barbeque at the Tower Restaurant after passing a series of billboards proclaiming the restaurant and food as "famous" and the proprietor, Red Sammy Butts, as "the fat boy with the happy laugh".
 - 4.1. On arrival, the family finds that the place is somewhat run down.
 - 4.2. Red Sammy charms the grandmother but is rather scornful of his own wife, a mistrustful waitress who worries about being robbed by The Misfit.
 - 4.3. The grandmother promptly declares Red Sammy "a good man", and the two reminisce about better times while lamenting the decay of values.
5. Later that afternoon, the family continues their trip before

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- 5.1. the grandmother falsely remembers a plantation being in the area, only realizing her mistake after persuading Bailey to turn down a rocky dirt road surrounded by wilderness.
 - 5.2. Her embarrassment when she realizes her error causes her to disturb the cat, who leaps onto Bailey.
 - 5.3. He loses control of the car, and the automobile flips into a ditch.
 - 5.4. No one is seriously hurt but the accident is witnessed by a party of three strange men, one of whom the grandmother recognizes as The Misfit.
6. The last part of the story centers on the exchange between the grandmother and the Misfit.
- 6.1. She tells him she knows who he is, and The Misfit has his men lead Bailey, the children's mother, and the children off into the woods where they are shot.
 - 6.2. The grandmother confusedly pleads for her life, insisting she knows he is a good man.
 - 6.3. The Misfit, initially dismissive, grows more and more unsettled by her words.
 - 6.4. She beseeches him to find solace by praying, but The Misfit is uncertain if Jesus Christ's power was real and unclear about his own purpose.
 - 6.5. Finally upon seeing The Misfit's despair, the grandmother reaches out, touches his shoulder, and gently tells him that he is "one of her babies".
 - 6.6. The Misfit immediately shoots her to death.
 - 6.7. When his companions return, The Misfit, while holding the surviving Pitty Sing, says the grandmother "would've been a good woman if it were someone there to shoot her every minute of her life." He seems to conclude that violence affords "no real pleasure in life".

Quotations from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

Listen," the grandmother almost screamed, "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!"

"Yes mam," he said, "finest people in the world." When he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth. [...]

"It's a beautiful day," said the grandmother. "Listen," she said, "you shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell " [...]

"I prechate that, lady," The Misfit said and drew a little circle in the ground with the butt of his gun.

[...] "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!"

"Nome, I ain't a good man," The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, "but I ain't the worst in the world neither. My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without

asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything!" [...]

"Daddy was a card himself," The Misfit said. "You couldn't put anything over on him. He never got in trouble with the Authorities though. Just had the knack of handling them."

"You could be honest too if you'd only try," said the grandmother. "Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."

The Misfit kept scratching in the ground with the butt of his gun as if he were thinking about it. "Yes'm, somebody is always after you," he murmured.

The grandmother noticed how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat because she was standing up looking down on him. "Do you ever pray?" she asked.

He shook his head. All she saw was the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades. "Nome," he said. [...]

"I was a gospel singer for a while," The Misfit said. "I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet," and he looked up at the children's mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; "I even seen a woman flogged," he said.

"Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray . . ."

"I never was a bad boy that I remember of," The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, "but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive," and he looked up and held her attention to him by a steady stare.

"That's when you should have started to pray," she said "What did you do to get sent to the penitentiary that first time?"

"Turn to the right, it was a wall," The Misfit said, looking up again at the cloudless sky. "Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done, lady. I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain't recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was coming to me, but it never come."

"Maybe they put you in by mistake," the old lady said vaguely.

"Nome," he said. "It wasn't no mistake. They had the papers on me."

[...]

"If you would pray," the old lady said, "Jesus would help you."

"That's right," The Misfit said.

"Well then, why don't you pray?" she asked trembling with delight suddenly.

"I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself."

[...] "No, lady," The Misfit said [...] "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." [...]

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother [...] found herself saying, “Jesus. Jesus,” meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing.

“Yes’m,” The Misfit said as if he agreed.

“Jesus shown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course,” he said, “they never shown me my papers. [...]

I call myself The Misfit,” he said, “because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.” [...]

“Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain’t punished at all?”

“Jesus!” the old lady cried. “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!”

“Lady,” The Misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, “there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip.”

[...] “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, 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. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.

“Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.

“I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t,” The Misfit said. “I wisht I had of been there,” he said, hitting the ground with his fist. “It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. 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 and 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. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them. [...]

Without his glasses, The Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking. [...]

“She was a talker, wasn’t she?” Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch with a yodel.

“She would of been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

“Some fun!” Bobby Lee said.

“Shut up, Bobby Lee” The Misfit said. “It’s no real pleasure in life.”

Flannery O’Connor’s declaration about the story

“Cutting yourself off from Grace is a very decided matter, required a real choice, act of will, and affecting the very ground of the soul. The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering”.

“Her [the grandmother's] head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture”.

“His [The Misfit's] shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if *he* had been there every moment of her life”.

How is the grand-mother responsible?¹

7. In understanding the ending of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the key is what to make of the grandmother.
 - 7.1. It seems quite unhelpful to see the grandmother and the Misfit in terms of good and evil or innocence and evil.
 - 7.2. The more common view is the one sanctioned by O'Connor that, limited though she is, the grandmother is granted a moment of illumination during which she realizes the emptiness of her faith and extends to the man who is about to kill her the true love of Jesus.
8. But this view seems to demand more sympathy than the story grants her.
 - 8.1. The author has characterized the grandmother so that it is virtually impossible to say anything unquestionably good about her.
 - 8.2. One cannot even fall back on the excuse that she means well, since most of what she means is to please herself by devious means.
 - 8.3. To be sure, she is created in the vein of comedy; her sins of self-serving seem ingratiatingly human and harmless enough.
9. The whole first of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is devoted mainly to the characterization of the grandmother. The portrait that emerges has two faces:
 - 9.1. one is that of a **believable old lady** [...]
 - 9.2. the other is that of the **culture** of which she is so representative a figure.
10. For one thing, **she personifies the ideal of gentility, manners, and breeding inherited from the old plantation culture.**

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¹ Renner, Stanley. "Secular Meaning in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'." *College Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 123-132.

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- 10.1. Her white gloves and prim white polka-dotted navy blue dress trimmed in organdy and lace may not be as practical for automobile travel as her daughter-in-law's slacks, but at least they certify her as a Southern Lady.
 - 10.2. Above all, she exemplifies the simplistic, uncritical religiosity for which the South is well known.
 - 10.3. In short, the grandmother is an ironic embodiment of the South of the good old days, when people were God-fearing, genteel, courteous, hospitable, charitable, and honest-in a word, good.
- 11. Of course, the grandmother is far from what she thinks she is, and thus she personifies a **culture** whose pretensions of honorable gentility are belied by reality.
 - 11.1. She actually enjoys the privation of the black child along the roadside because it is picturesque.
 - 11.2. Equally a misfit with reality is the grandmother's view of goodness in life. It is a particularly ironic measure of her blindness that the model of better times she holds in reverence is the plantation culture of the Great Southern Dream, which, insofar as it existed at all, fed on the life's blood of the slaves whose labor made it possible.
- 12. Thus Flannery O'Connor portrays the South in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as
 - 12.1. a childish, illiterate, mendacious, garrulous, and blind old woman,
 - 12.2. a failed parent who has ruined her own offspring, with a false and destructive dream of the past and an equally false and destructive self-perception in the present.
- 13. Conversely, the **Misfit** is a cold-blooded killer, yet we are drawn to sympathize with his tormented inability to reconcile himself to the profound incongruities of the world in which he is trapped.
- 14. **In its effaced point of view the story seems to withhold judgment and merely extend an invitation to see and understand.**
- 15. Clearly the Misfit sees the phenomena of existence more objectively than the grandmother.
 - 15.1. He perceives the tenuousness of faith and the crucial difference between
 - i. a divinely ordered world and
 - ii. one with no transcendent governing principle beyond natural law.
 - iii. Unable to believe in the former, he finds himself in a world of radical freedom where all possibilities are open -"You can do one thing or you can do another"-because there is no moral order to invoke.
 - 15.2. He is imprisoned in a web of necessity from which he cannot extricate himself; no matter what he does, he comes to the same fate.
 - 15.3. In a marvelous image of his existential extremity O'Connor shows the Misfit's eyes, without his glasses, as "red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking."
- 16. The Misfit is defenseless because he has no way of accommodating the apparent meaninglessness of existence:

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- 16.1. no faith to assure him of the divine purpose behind the wall of appearances, no capacity to transform what is into what one would like it to be.
- 16.2. The problem is that the grandmother's shallow view of goodness is nothing less than the institutionalized mind of the culture.
- 17. Thus the Misfit's human yearnings to live and be free are doubly denied:
 - 17.1. by his fatal entrapment in necessity and
 - 17.2. by his subjugation to a view of existence that is enforced upon him with all the authority of society even though it does not fit visible reality and is belied by the lives of those who judge him by it.
- 18. [This explains] the Misfit's violent exasperation at the incongruity between what he has experienced and seen with his own eyes and the whole cultural edifice of Jesus-centered goodness, established with all the weight of law and custom,
- 19. As the Misfit tries to explain to the grandmother the profound existential complexity of his life, she presses on him the help of Jesus as the solution to all his troubles
- 20. The Misfit feels himself drawn again into the futile confrontation between the truth of his own experience and the blank wall of the "Authorities" that has been the bane of his life (the capitalization of the term suggests its proper thematic weight).
- 21. Now, as the grandmother, deaf to his plea for understanding, reminds him of Jesus, he sees her as the blank wall of Authority, as yet another manifestation of the institutionalized standard of Jesus-centered goodness that has plagued his entire life.
- 22. Her touch on his shoulder suggests [...] the conferral of a parental blessing, but the implication of the grand-mother's causal responsibility for his misfit, together with the presumption that he is one of hers, like all the Baileys of the world, is more than he can bear.
- 23. She does not understand a word of his life's truth, but when she sees him about to cry, his real suffering touches her almost instinctive springs of sympathy and human kinship.
- 24. This may not be much, but it is enough to make the grandmother the heroine of the story.
 - 24.1. For though it is in one sense an allegory of the South,
 - 24.2. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is in a larger sense a dramatization of the human condition that chooses between two ways of responding to the patent imperfections and misfits that constitute reality.
 - 24.3. The grandmother is a caricature of the South, but in the way that her every impulse is tainted by instinctive, unconscious egoism, she is also a droll personification of human nature as we have come to understand it in the wake of Darwin and Freud:
 - 24.4. Since every action of the grandmother, however well intentioned, would, as the story shows, be tainted every moment of her life with the un-conscious egoism inherent in human nature,
 - "She would've been a good woman," in the Misfit's terms, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

25. She is able to extend to radically imperfect humanity the touch of sympathy and acknowledgment of kinship in weakness and sorrow that may be the best hope for ameliorating the human lot.

Some quotations from Flannery O'Connor's essays on being a Catholic Writer

26. "The Fiction Writer and his Country"

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural. (805)

Part of the complexity of the problem for the Catholic fiction writer will be the presence of grace as it appears in nature, and what matters for him here is that his faith not become detached from his dramatic sense and from his vision of what-is. No one in these days, however, would seem more anxious to have it become detached than those Catholics who demand that the writer limit, on the natural level, what he allows himself to see. (809)

By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he [the modern reader] has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the Obscene. He would seem to prefer the former [...] He forgets that sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence and that innocence whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite. We lost our innocence in the Fall and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. **Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite.**

If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is. An affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God. (811)

It is popular to suppose that anyone who can read the telephone book can read a short story or a novel, and it is more than usual to find the attitude among Catholics that since we possess the Truth in the Church, we can use this Truth directly as an instrument for judgment on any discipline at any time without regard for the nature of that discipline itself.

Catholic readers are constantly being offended and scandalized by novels that they don't have the fundamental equipment to read in the first place, and often these are works that are permeated with a Christian spirit. (811)

It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life. (811)

27. "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction"

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. (817)

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It is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature. (818)

And his [the reader's] need, of course, is to be lifted up.

- There is something in us, as story-tellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the **redemptive act**, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored.
- The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what **he has forgotten is the cost of it.**
- His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether and so he has forgotten the price of restoration.
- When he reads a novel, he wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised.
- **He wants to be transported, instantly, either to a mock damnation or a mock innocence.** (820)