

In our time – an
exquisite combination
of literary technique
and absurd realism

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Through an exquisite combination of literary technique and absurd realism, Flannery O'Connor reveals to the reader a grotesque underside of life in the rural south of the United States. By combining a certain flare for dialogue, an intense and primal understanding of human nature, and the constant use of irony, O'Connor paints a vivid image of the world she witnessed around her while commenting on society and the importance of traditional values.

O'Connor transfers the vulnerability of one into many, and her mastery of shifting control within the cast of characters, ensures the uncertainty of the outcome and in the process.

This reminds us that none of the roles in our lives are stagnant and that by intentionally blinding ourselves to what we do not wish to see or recognize, takes away more than just a view. Through the unique verisimilitude of her stories, she reveals to us that what we attempt to disregard inevitably emerges again and again. One of the most distinguishing aspects of O'Connor's literature are the characters she portrays and develops. Each represent philosophies and personalities, which are derived through the mid 20th century southern lifestyle.

Their response to diversity and adversity eventually leads to horrific sadness, tragedy and death, or the exposure of bizarre and atrocious values. With the constant use of religious imagery, tragic foreshadowing and humorous irony, the stories "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Everything that Rises must Converge" clearly demonstrate and portray O'Connor's ideology of the gradual breakdown of society as a whole with the internal collapse of traditional values. Predominant themes such as religion and racism provide a powerful statement on O'Connor's perspective of society.

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Through the effectiveness of these techniques, Flannery O'Connor successfully analyzes the existential plight of human existence and its conflict with traditional and religious conviction. In both stories, the antagonist is always a representation of traditional values, whether it is of strong Christian belief or of racial bigotry, whereas the protagonist is seen to take the form of modern scientific beliefs. In the story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the antagonist is the Grandmother; she remains nameless throughout the story. The Misfit is the protagonist.

Though it appears that the Grandmother is extremely manipulative and deceitful during the course of the story, as she was responsible for the deaths of the entire family, one must consider and observe the treatment she receives from her relatives. In the majority of the story, she is either ignored by her son and daughter in law, or rudely criticized by her grandchildren. The grandchildren are representative of the breakdown of respect and filial dependence seen throughout society. However, O'Connor also wanted to demonstrate the counterbalance to this concept: 'In my time,' said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, 'children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then.'

'Oh look at that cute little pickaninny!' she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack... (Pg. 119) The idea that the grandmother refers to the Negro child as a 'pickaninny' not only demonstrates blatant and unintentional racism, it subverts the lines of the respect that the hypocritical grandmother was previously referring to. Similarly, in the story "Everything

that Rises... , O'Connor demonstrates the breakdown of respect and dependence and generational confliction. The antagonist is played by Mrs. Chestny, who is similar to the grandmother in the sense that both mean well and both women hold strongly to their traditional beliefs. Julian Chestny, her son, takes the role of the protagonist, a smug and selfish young man who also represents a similar collapse. 'They don't give a damn for your graciousness,' Julian said savagely. 'Knowing who you are is good for one generation only.'

You haven't got the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are. (Pg. 407) The fact that Julian has the right to question his own mother's authority and her wisdom and knowledge is direct evidence not only of his protagonistic, but of the lack of respect he has for this woman who obviously has seen and known much more than he has. O'Connor also exhibits the issue of racism in our society. Not only does she demonstrate it, but she executes the theme in such a way that it is obvious to the reader that she believes racial segregation will be witnessed in and around our society for many generations to come.

One example of this is the fact that Julian does not realize that he himself is a racist. Being a hypocritical idealist, he displays an acute sense of anti-racism, but formulated in such exquisite irony, we find that he indeed is a racist due to his constant need to attempt to be anti-racist. Julian does not wish to accept the fact the descendant is unable to sever its bond with the ancestor. A generation cannot function without an impact from generations

past. This is similarly found in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and evidence can be found within the quote presented earlier.

The grandmother is openly racist in front of the children, even though she does not realize that her comments were racist, thereby supporting her racism as a whole. It is due to previous generations that succeeding generations remain true to and hold on to traditional beliefs and values. Ironically in the case that O'Connor depicts, is the value of racism. O'Connor shows to the reader that racism is an organic being: it is able to sustain itself and survive through generational passage of culture and tradition.

However, this is where the importance of Christianity comes into focus in O'Connor's stories. Being a devout Christian, she believed that the sole path to redemption and absolution was through religion. According to O'Connor, the only way to redeem oneself was through grace. Though this is seen to a lesser extent in both these stories as compared to several others, O'Connor demonstrates several aspects of religious allusion and symbolic image. The breakdown of society is further emphasized with the use of religious symbol in "Everything that Rises...".

She was almost ready to go, standing before the hall mirror, putting on her hat, while he, his hands beside him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him. (Pg. 405)

The allusion made in this quote is that of Saint Sebastian, a Roman martyr and an officer of the Praetorian Guard until Diocletian discovered his Christianity. His life lay in the hands of Roman archers, which is often the subject of many paintings. The arrows are frequently seen piercing his back,

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and in the case of Julian and his mother, represent the burden placed upon Julian.

The idea that Julian perceives his own mother as a burden is remarkable. Julian does not have a job and lives with his mother at her home. Not only is he ruthless and critical of her thoughts and beliefs, he does not even consider that he might be the burden. Julian's idealistic hypocrisy is countered and revealed in the conclusion of the story. The title itself is a foreshadowing quality of the story, as one can expect inevitable conflict and perhaps, concession and compromise. Julian's hypocrisy is ironic, as he claims to know the real world better than anyone else.

In the end, he is forced to understand the real world with the passing of his mother, revealing his weakness and vulnerability and the extent of dependence that he has on his mother. A tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her away from him. 'Mother!' he cried. 'Darling sweetheart, wait!' Crumpling, she fell to the pavement. He dashed forward and fell to her side, crying, 'Mamma, Mamma!' (Pg. 420) This is the only point in the story in which Julian actually calls his mother a 'mother' and a 'mamma', revealing a glimpse of his past childhood. On the same page O'Connor writes,

The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow. (Pg. 420) It is interesting that in the first quote, the tide sweeps Mrs. Chestny to Julian, and in the second it sweeps Julian to Mrs. Chestny. This further demonstrates Julian's dependence on his mother. He has finally been able to enter the real world, the world he claims to understand and recognize. In "A Good Man... ",

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O'Connor uses certain forms of foreshadowing in the early passages of the story to 'warn' the readers of future occurrences, and of certain religious aspects.

They passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. (Pg. 119) The presence of five or six graves stimulates a period of realization for the reader, as the family consists of six people, giving an eerie sense or prescience of events yet to take place. This gives the reader the impression that the conclusion to the story will be shrouded with death and despair.

Though this example of foreshadowing does not directly relate to O'Connor's theme of religion in her stories, it does in a sense foreshadow a further foreshadowing. .. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (Pg. 118) This quote is interesting, since it is because of her, that the family strays off their original path leading to Florida to one that heads for Georgia. It is also interestingly ironic as they do in fact have an accident, and the person who finds her does not see her as a lady. O'Connor uses the symbol of the path/road to identify the paths we take in life, or in this case, the proper path of religion.

If the Grandmother had been the lady she claimed herself to be and if she remained true to the righteous path of Christianity (that of truth, virtue, honest, etc.), the family would not have 'strayed off path', and the proper path would not have led them to death. With the encounter with the Misfit, we find him to exemplify the contemporary world, exposing his protagonistic qualities. 'I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't,' the Misfit said. 'I wisht I had

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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... if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now... ' (Pg. 132)

We find the Misfit not only questioning the existence of a Supreme Being, but also addressing a common dilemma of the human consciousness. Though we are aware and mindful of our own existence, we remain primitive animals with violent and primal qualities and nature. The clash between our primal and animalistic instincts is in constant conflict with our metaphysical human nature.

The development that develops between the Misfit and the Grandmother is amazing. We find belief to be anything beyond what we can see, hear, touch, smell, etc. Accordingly, any form of spiritual or anti-spiritual ideology is a leap of faith. O'Connor shows the reader that what the Misfit realizes, and what the Grandmother eventually realizes is the fact that sacred dogma and religious belief can no longer compete with the scientific and methodical views and the immorality of the modern world.

O'Connor personifies the contemporary views dominating the modern world with her use of the Misfit. As society evolves, it begins to ignore traditional values, and according to O'Connor, acts as a catalyst for the eventual total breakdown of society. In our time, there are misfits and there are lost souls, many of whom unexpectedly play the roles in O'Connor's stories as 'prophets', searching for faith and absolution, the messengers of 'lost conscientiousness'.

These prophets are used as tools to not only expose the truths and cruelties of the modern world, but also ushers the readers into a psyche of dark and desperate thoughts and feelings which engulf the human soul, imbuing them with a state of utter helplessness in view of the imminent doom in which the reader can foresee during the story. This exposed darkness, which is a prominent figure in the human condition, takes the concept of the human condition itself to a particularly unnatural level and undesired truth of human understanding.

From a grandmother who indirectly destroys her own family through her acts of attempted good will, to a non-existent and unresolved mother - son relationship united and divided under the influence and reality of racism and the tragedy that concludes the story, Flannery O'Connor makes a statement on the affiliation between the justification of religious and traditional values, and the corruption and destruction of society, ranging from the 40s / 50s era of black prejudice to an almost ludicrous extent of religious fanaticism.

O'Connor's main statement was that humanity as a whole has strayed off its path, just as the Grandmother and her family did in "A Good Man...". This story can arguably be labeled as a form of foreshadowing itself, as it shows what would happen if humanity continues on its irregular path. Just as the Grandmother and her family met brutal and untimely death as a result, O'Connor is showing us that we too, will experience this, should we continue life this way. Her numerous statements on the dark realities of our world are reminders of what we have to overcome.

She demonstrates the constant clash between the modern and the traditional. We must understand that we contain and determine our fate. It seems plain that O'Connor feels that the eventual outcome will be the death of society. In the stories "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Everything that Rises must Converge", Flannery O'Connor uses her prophetic characters in combination with Christian imagery, apocalyptic foreshadowing, and the ubiquitous evils permeating society to this particular level, and leaves the reader closing the book with a feeling of complete despondency for the future of mankind.