

# Good and evil can be interchangeable: morality in flannery o'connor

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Who doesn't want to be a good human being? Being good could bring one to happiness, joy, faith, and grace. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, however, reveals a satiric reality in which not many people fully understand the fundamental meaning of being "a good man." This short story is one of the most famous examples of Southern Gothic literature. By focusing on strange events, local color, and eccentric characters, O'Connor successfully depicts the difference and similarity of the two main characters' moral codes. Although the grandmother and Misfit have contrasting philosophies and principles, both struggle to discover their own righteousness which is buried deeply under their flaws. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor uses many literary devices such as conflict, symbolism, foreshadowing, and irony to unfold the good and evil in the story. Conflict is a main means of organizing the whole story, which begins with the disagreement between the grandmother and the rest of the family. The readers might be astonished by the fact that no one in the family cares about the grandmother or her opinions; even the children show no respect for her at all. O'Connor forces the readers to question themselves: What has the grandmother done to be treated that way? The grandmother starts out to the readers as "a harmless, busybody, utterly self-absorbed but also amusing" (Bandy, 957). However, as the story unfolds, the grandmother eventually appears to be a selfish, dishonest, and not "good" person. The central conflict is the inner conflict of the grandmother, who blindly perceives herself superior to others. Her mistaken beliefs as being good and constantly pursuing her own conscience are what finally destroy the entire family. By taking them down the wrong road and indirectly causing the

accident, the grandmother is the one who brings the family to the Misfit. Furthermore, by thinking good people always follow their conscience, the grandmother wildly tells the Misfit she recognizes him which ultimately gets her family into danger. The grandmother proudly overdresses for the trip with “ her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her necklace she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet” (O’Connor 941). The appearance of being a lady is the most important virtue that she wouldn’t want to pay anything to exchange that. Being a white lady means power and superior; thus, she relentlessly passes judgements on others. By arrogantly talking about her past, the grandmother represents an old-fashioned and upper-class Southern mindset.

One of the interesting part of the story is when she tries to tell John Wesley to be more respectful to his native state and others. Immediately, the grandmother uncovers her real self as a judgemental woman by pointing at the “ cute little pickaninny” on the road and pleases her grandchildren with a watermelon story in which a “ nigger boy” devoured it (O’Connor 942). At this moment, it is quite obvious that the grandmother “ is filled with the prejudices of her class and her time” (Bandy 957). Repetitive use of the word “ good” is symbolic as it reflects the way the grandmother views on others. She applies the label “ good” indiscriminately to anyone as long as their expectation align with her own. For example, she considers Red Sammy as “ a good man” because he blindly trusts people; she then, insists the Misfit is also “ a good man” because, she reasons, he wouldn’t shoot a lady. Finally, she never begs the Misfit to spare her family; in fact, the only person she

cares about is herself. On the surface, the grandmother is portrayed as a “good” person with her strong faith in God. The sins lie within her, however, shaping her as an evil woman by her own beliefs.

Not only conflict but also symbolism and foreshadowing are prominent narrative devices of the entire story. O'Connor has the readers to think and predict as she reveals portents of doom one by one. Right from the beginning, the grandmother warns her family about the Misfit, who is an escaped convict, heading his way towards Florida. Following her conscience, the grandmother persuades her son not to “take [his] children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it” (O'Connor, 940). The seemingly ridiculous warning signals a confrontation with the Misfit is inevitable. Secondly, the grandmother dresses in a way as if she's prepared for her own death. She carefully put on her Sunday best so that “anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (O'Connor, 941). As the story unfolds, O'Connor continues to reveal number of life-versus-death signs which prepare the readers for the upcoming catastrophe. While the family is on their way to Florida, they pass the cotton field with five or six graves which represent exactly the number of people in the car. The grandmother points and mentions they belonged to an old plantation which has “gone with the Wind” as it recalls a long gone destruction of the Old South (O'Connor 941). Finally, as the Misfit's car approaches the family, it is described as a “big black batter hearse-like automobile” (O'Connor, 945). A hearse is a vehicle that carries coffins which foreshadows the faith of the family even before the Misfit gets out of the car.

One of the main symbol in “ A good man is hard to find” is the grandmother’s hat. The hat which she put on for the sole purpose of being a lady, symbolizes her mistaken moral code. Her only concern is the appearance as a Southern lady; ironically, it’s even more important to her than her own life and even her children’s. The hat represents her selfishness and fragile moral conviction. While facing the Misfit, the grandmother lets her hat fall to the ground as she recognizes her self-conception as goodness and purity is a big flat flaw.

O’Connor judiciously incorporates many literary devices to accomplish the main theme of “ A good man is hard to find”; and irony is one of the most important devices which helps the ending of the story successful. Dramatic irony takes place when a character fails to recognize what is obvious to the reader. All through the story, the grandmother’s perception of herself and the society are greatly distorted. She considers herself as a Southern perfection and goodness in which the readers can all disagree by the way she passes judgment on others, blames Europe for the the loss of good people, manipulates her family, and mistakenly blurts out that she recognizes the Misfit. Only when facing the Misfit and death, the grandmother’s moral code is finally proved to be insubstantial and illusory. In contrast, the Misfit can be viewed as a villain as he and his men unrepentantly murder the whole family. However, he’s the only character in the story who has a consistent philosophy that everyone else seem to lack. He’s self-aware and carefully considers his action as well as his experiences in life; he knows “[He’s] not a good man, but [he’s] not the worst either”

(O'Connor 949). The Misfit relies on his moral code to guide his action; whereas, the grandmother has to turn back to her own beliefs in attempt save herself. The story is a struggle of the two main characters who are trying find their own ways to righteousness. The final irony is when the evil man, the Misfit, evokes the grandmother who she really is, a sinner. Realizing her own mistakes and understanding how troubled and confused the Misfit is, the grandmother reaches out and touches him calling: " Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children" (O'Connor 950). Throughout the entire story, it seems the grandmother finally does something meaningful and important as she's sharing compassion and understanding with others. Everything becomes clear to her at this moment; she relizes " even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined him by ties of kinship" (O'Connor 952). The act of righteousness, however, is rewarded by three bullets on her chest.

" A Good Man Is Hard to Find" leaves many readers to feel unsatisfied with the death of an innocent family. However, the story's ending brings up hope; both main characters most certainly recognize each other imperfection. Towards her death, the grandmother finally redeems herself by making a right gesture and reaching out to the Misfit. She dies with a smile a her face. The Misfit also changes from claiming earlier " no pleasure but meanness" to stating that it is no pleasure in life by killing. There is hope that the Misfit could be changed and be good. By incorporating various literary devices, O'Connor reveals that evil and good can come from many directions; and

belief can be a factor causing one to act differently. The story suggests that anyone can be changed and saved by God's grace, even a villain.

#### Work cited

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