

A good man is hard to find: literary critical analysis essay



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The short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" stands as the American Southern Gothic writer Flannery O'Connor's most disturbing work of fiction. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the title work of O'Connor's debut collection of short stories which appeared in 1955, and the piece remains her signature short story (Kinney 1).

The action of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" depicts a family vacation gone terribly awry. On a road trip to Florida a family from Atlanta encounter a homicidal escaped convict whom the media dubs The Misfit. The Misfit and his henchmen execute the entire family and steal their clothes, car and cat. O'Connor tells the story from the point of view of the grandmother.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" centers upon two themes: selfishness, and individualism. Essentially the grandmother's insistence on achieving her own selfish ends results in the death of her entire family, as well as the loss of her own life. This essay analyzes the story's thematic message in regards to selfishness, individualism and its effect on the family as well as the larger community, as represented by The Misfit.

O'Connor identifies the main character - the grandmother - only by role, while all of the other character she provides with names. Despite having no name the grandmother's character reveals itself early and profoundly; she is obsessed with appearances, connected to a vague Southern past, and concerned with propriety and the value of being a lady.

O'Connor describes her "navy blue straw sailor hat," her "collars and cuffs [that] were white organdy trimmed with lace" and "purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet" that the grandmother pins at her neckline to
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ensure that “ in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (O’Connor 2).

Behavior wise the grandmother is a selfish woman who deliberately manipulates her family to suit her own purposes unapologetically and with impunity.

She intentionally misinforms her son Bailey about her cat, Pitty Sing, which she smuggles into the car underneath her “ big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus,” even though Bailey has expressly forbid the cat to share the motel room with them (O’Connor 1). Pitty Sing later brings about the deaths of the whole family following the car accident and ensuing encounter with The Misfit.

The grandmother’s pride and inflated sense of self importance, not to mention her failing memory, bring about the family’s downfall. Upon waking up from a nap in the car, the grandmother claims to remember a plantation house from her youth. Even though she knows that her son Bailey “ would not be willing to lose any time looking at an old house...the more she talked about it, the more she wanted to see it once again and find out if the little twin arbors were still standing” (O’Connor 5).

Her son’s reluctance, in her mind, remains a simple obstacle to overcome in her desire to get things done her way. Even though Bailey’s “ jaw was as rigid as a horseshoe” in response to her goading, the grandmother does not relent (O’Connor 5).

Instead, she lies, and enlists the shrill support of her grandchildren: “ 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” (O’Connor 5). Having stirred the children’s imagination, the grandmother lies again – “ It’s not far from here, I know,” the grandmother said. “ It wouldn’t take over twenty minutes” (O’Connor 5). The fact is she doesn’t know.

She has no idea where they are. It is not until they are hopelessly lost on the dirt road that “ looked as if no one had traveled on it in months” that the grandmother’s “ horrible thought” reminds her that the plantation house in question does not exist in the state of Georgia, but in Tennessee, though she is too full of pride to admit this to her son (O’Connor 6) And the wild goose chase that she leads her family on, again, for selfish purposes, leads them to their doomful meeting with The Misfit.

Similarly, the strident individualism that propels the grandmother’s fateful actions manifests itself squarely in the character of The Misfit. The Misfit, like the grandmother, focuses exclusively on himself and employs the other people around him as pawns meant to achieve his own selfish needs and wants (Hooten 198).

The objectification of others – in the case of the grandmother this means the objectification of her own family – results in an overall loss of cohesiveness, wherein “ community holds no value” (Hooten 198). Set adrift, peripatetic and aimlessly moving from one empty community to another, “ The Misfit exemplifies this void [as] the lost individual who relates to the community

through constantly shifting roles" (Hooten 198). Like the grandmother, he takes what he needs in order to get what he wants, and then moves on.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" also treats individualism through the lens of identity. We see clearly that The Misfit shares Bailey's ire at the senseless grandmother's shriek "You're The Misfit!" she said. "I recognized you at once!" "Yes'm," the man said..." But it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me." Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children.

The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened" (O'Connor 8). When The Misfit's fellow criminal Bobby Lee returns from the woods with Bailey's yellow shirt full of parrots, a moment happens wherein The Misfit, by donning the dead man's attire, acquires his identity for a moment (Gresham 18). He, like Bailey, views the grandmother's idiotic obsession with decorum as "selfish, superficial, and condescending," yet unlike Bailey, he remains free to take action to condemn her (Kinney 1)

The short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" represents Flannery O'Connor's concern that selfishness and rampant individualism casts people apart and promotes the disenfranchisement of characters such as The Misfit, who invariably end up as "self-focused wanderers without community who use others as means to their own ends" (Hooten 197).

Very little difference exists between the character of the grandmother and the character of The Misfit, aside from their social viability. Both remain selfish and extreme individualists, who will lie, steal, manipulate and murder to affect their own ends. In Flannery O'Connor's hands, this selfishness and
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individualism collides at a disaster point and initiates the deaths of five innocent people. Worse, the instigator of their murder is one of their own.

Gresham, Stephen. " Things Darkly Buried: In Praise of A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *Shenandoah* 60. 1-2 (2010): 17-18. Web.

Hooten, Jessica. " Individualism in O'Connor's A Good Man is Hard to Find." *The Explicator* 66. 4 (2008): 197-198. Web.

Kinney, Arthur F. " A Good Man Is Hard to Find: Overview." *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*. Ed. Noelle Watson. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. 1-2. Print.

O'Connor, Flannery. " A Good Man is Hard to Find." *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing: Custom Edition*. Eds. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2011. 1-12. Print.

This story is a prime example of Southern Gothic literature due to its unsettling events, strange characters, and a strong sense of American South.

The plot of the short story centers around the family road trip that took a tragic turn. The grandmother asked the change the route for sightseeing. Such a detour leads to the car-crash.

The story is written in the third person with a focus on the grandmother. We see the events from her perspective as it's the only viewpoint that the reader can access directly.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find was written in 1953. The title was taken from the song, which was popular in 1927.