

A goodman is hard to find

Literature



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The Misfit as the Anti-Hero. Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Misfit," is a tragic tale of the murder of an entire family by escaped convicts. The most complex character in the narrative is the Misfit, the leader of the convict gang. Although he is obviously the villain, who is responsible for the brutal murder of the family, including a baby, the Misfit defies rigid definition. The Misfit's isolation, moral ambiguity, and prospects of transformation, make him the anti-hero of the story.

The Misfit's very name demonstrates his complete isolation from society. He assumes the name, 'Misfit,' because he holds that society's punishment fit his actions. He feels victimized, and says, "Yestm, somebody is always after you," (O'Connor, 7). His isolation is seen right from his boyhood, when he realizes that he is "a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters" (O'Connor, 6). He stands apart from his fellow convicts.

The Misfit has a morally complex personality. As the reader is made aware of his inner demons, it is difficult to categorize him as absolutely evil. He is embarrassed when Bailey uses abusive language to the grandmother, and politely apologizes to the women: "Im sorry I dont have on a shirt before you ladies," (O'Connor, 6). He is a man of multiple callings, from laborer to gospel singer. It is difficult to make an unequivocal moral judgment on him. After the death of the grandmother, the Misfit appears to undergo a change. The old lady's reaction towards him effects at least the hope of a transformation. When his comrade describes the killing of the grandmother as fun, the Misfit is angry and confesses, "Its no real pleasure in life" (O'Connor, 10). There is the definite hope of transformation for the better.

The Misfit exemplifies the traits of the anti-hero, He does not hesitate to harm anyone who comes between himself and his personal safety. He is

violent, and has a negative attitude towards life. At the same time, he regrets that he has to murder the family. The reader understands the factors which have made him evil. The Misfit's isolation from society, his moral ambiguity, and the hope of his transformation make him the anti-hero in "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Works Cited.

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Title of Collection. Ed. Editors Name(s).

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The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was. He moved away from the car and began to come down the embankment, placing his feet carefully so that he wouldn't slip. He had on tan and white shoes and no socks, and his ankles were red and thin. "Good afternoon," he said. "I see you all had you a little spill."

"We turned over twice!" said the grandmother.

"Once", he corrected. "We seen it happen. Try their car and see will it run, Hiram," he said quietly to the boy with the gray hat.

"What you got that gun for?" John Wesley asked. "Whatcha gonna do with that gun?"

"Lady," the man said to the children's mother, "would you mind calling them children to sit down by you? Children make me nervous. I want all you all to sit down right together there where you're at."

"What are you telling US what to do for?" June Star asked.

Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth. "Come here,"

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said their mother.

" Look here now," Bailey began suddenly, " were in a predicament! Were in . . ."

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and stood staring. " Youre The Misfit!" she said. " I recognized you at once!"

" Yesm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, " but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadnt 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.

" Lady," he said, " dont you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he dont mean. I dont reckon he meant to talk to you thataway."

" You wouldnt shoot a lady, would you?" the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it.

The Misfit pointed the toe of his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again. " I would hate to have to," he said.

" Listen," the grandmother almost screamed, " I know youre a good man. You dont 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. " God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddys heart was pure gold," he said. The boy with the red sweat shirt had come around behind them and was standing with his gun at his hip. The Misfit squatted down on the ground. " Watch them children, Bobby Lee," he said. " You know they make me nervous." He looked at the

six of them huddled together in front of him and he seemed to be embarrassed as if he couldn't think of anything to say. "Ain't a cloud in the sky," he remarked, looking up at it. "Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud neither."

"Yes, 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."

"Hush!" Bailey yelled. "Hush! Everybody shut up and let me handle this!" He was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn't move.

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

"It'll take a half a hour to fix this here car," Hiram called, looking over the raised hood of it.

"Well, first you and Bobby Lee get him and that little boy to step over yonder with you," The Misfit said, pointing to Bailey and John Wesley. "The boys want to ask you something," he said to Bailey. "Would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?"

"Listen," Bailey began, "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is," and his voice cracked. His eyes were as blue and intense as the parrots in his shirt and he remained perfectly still.

The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground. Hiram pulled Bailey up by the arm as if he were assisting an old man. John Wesley caught hold of his father's hand and Bobby Lee followed. They went off toward the woods and just as

they reached the dark edge, Bailey turned and supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted, " Ill be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!"

" Come back this instant!" his mother shrilled but they all disappeared into the woods.

" Bailey Boy!" the grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. " I just know youre a good man," she said desperately. " Youre not a bit common!"

" Nome, I aint a good man," The Misfit said after a second ah if he had considered her statement carefully, " but I aint 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, its some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and its others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. Hes going to be into everything!" He put on his black hat and looked up suddenly and then away deep into the woods as if he were embarrassed again. " Im sorry I dont have on a shirt before you ladies," he said, hunching his shoulders slightly. " We buried our clothes that we had on when we escaped and were just making do until we can get better. We borrowed these from some folks we met," he explained.

" Thats perfectly all right," the grandmother said. " Maybe Bailey has an extra shirt in his suitcase."

" Ill look and see terrectly," The Misfit said.

" Where are they taking him?" the childrens mother screamed.

" Daddy was a card himself," The Misfit said. " You couldnt 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 youd 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. " Yestm, 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 every pray?" she asked.

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

There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old ladys head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath. " Bailey Boy!" she called.

" 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 childrens 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.

" Thats 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 aint 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 wasnt no mistake. They had the papers on me."

" You must have stolen something," she said.

The Misfit sneered slightly. " Nobody had nothing I wanted," he said. " It was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I known that for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it. He was buried in the Mount Hopewell Baptist churchyard and you can go there and see for yourself."

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

" Thats right," The Misfit said.

" Well then, why dont you pray?" she asked trembling with delight suddenly.

" I dont want no hep," he said. " Im doing all right by myself."

Bobby Lee and Hiram came ambling back from the woods. Bobby Lee was dragging a yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it.

" Thow me that shirt, Bobby Lee," The Misfit said. The shirt came flying at him and landed on his shoulder and he put it on. The grandmother couldnt name what the shirt reminded her of. " No, lady," The Misfit said while he was buttoning it up, " I found out the crime dont 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 youre going to forget what it was you done and just be

punished for it."

The childrens mother had begun to make heaving noises as if she couldnt get her breath. " Lady," he asked, " would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband?"

" Yes, thank you," the mother said faintly. Her left arm dangled helplessly and she was holding the baby, who had gone to sleep, in the other. " Hep that lady up, Hiram," The Misfit said as she struggled to climb out of the ditch, " and Bobby Lee, you hold onto that little girls hand."

" I dont want to hold hands with him," June Star said. " He reminds me of a pig."

The fat boy blushed and laughed and caught her by the arm and pulled her off into the woods after Hiram and her mother.

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods. She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she 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.

" Yesm, The Misfit said as if he agreed. " Jesus shown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadnt 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. Thats why I sign myself now. I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then youll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end youll have something to prove you aint been treated right. I call

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myself The Misfit," he said, " because I cant make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report. " Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another aint punished at all?"

" Jesus!" the old lady cried. " Youve got good blood! I know you wouldnt shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. Ill give you all the money Ive got!"

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

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, " Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!" as if her heart would break.

" Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead," The Misfit continued, " and He shouldnt have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then its nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didnt, then its 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 didnt 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 wasnt there so I cant say He didnt," The Misfit said. " I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. " It aint right I wasnt 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 wouldnt be like I am now." His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmothers head cleared for an instant. She saw the mans face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, " Why youre one of my babies. Youre 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.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a childs and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

Without his glasses, The Misfits eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking. " Take her off and thow her where you thown the others," he said, picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg.

" She was a talker, wasnt 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. " Its no real pleasure in life."