

Ideology: the common thread

Business



Anthem by Ayn Rand and “ A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor both glean their appeal as stories of ideological conflict. Anthem depicts a future society defined by collectivism. While most citizens comply, the protagonist, Equality 7-2521, chafes and escapes from society to embrace individualism. “ A Good Man is Hard to Find” features a family road trip gone astray as the family takes a detour, ends up in a car accident, and encounters The Misfit, an escaped convict. Thereafter, the grandmother sustains a conversation with The Misfit as her family is killed one by one, and her final act of grace—forgiving The Misfit for his misdeeds—results in his developing faith in Christianity.

In both cases, one ideology triumphs over another. This shared feature is illustrated through the victory of individualism over collectivism in Anthem and The Misfit and the grandmother’s simultaneous spiritual enlightenment in “ A Good Man is Hard to Find.” The future depicted in Anthem is initially governed through collectivism, but Rand portrays it as a flawed ideology, making way for the change to individualism to take place. This is done primarily by showing that individuals subject to collectivism doubt its validity, as there is no logical basis for its ascendancy. For example, the general public is aware of only the vague “ legends of the great fighting, in which many men fought on one side and only a few [the Evil Ones] on the other .

. . they were conquered” (Rand 16). No explanation is given as to why the “ Evil Ones,” who opposed collectivism, were evil. Furthermore, the reigning government forbids further inquiry into the origins of the current state and refers to the era before the fighting as the “ Unmentionable Times” (Rand 3).

Naturally, this triggers curiosity—Equality 7-2521, upon discovering a concealed tunnel from the Unmentionable Times, remarks that “[w]e knew suddenly that this place was left from the Unmentionable Times .

. . [long] ago men knew secrets which we have lost” (Rand 9). Moreover, Equality 7-2521 is not alone in doubting the status quo. He recalls a man who was burned alive for rediscovering the word that connoted the concept of the individual. This man too noticed the failings of collectivism and uncovered this “ Unspeakable Word,” which is “ I” (Rand 16).

Through refuting collectivism, Rand sets the stage for a change in faith, a tactic that is similar to O’Connor’s portrayal of declining Christianity. Like collectivism in Anthem, Christianity in “ A Good Man is Hard to Find” is steadily deteriorating. This is shown through the grandmother, the archetypal devout Christian, who is revealed to be a hypocrite. For example, right after she chastises her bad-mannered grandchildren about how “[i]n her time . .

. children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else,” she calls a black child seen along the roadside a “ pickaninny,” a derogatory term (O’Connor 34). The grandmother is also dishonest; she manipulates her grandchildren into persuading their father to take a detour by lying that the side trip would lead them to a house with “ a secret panel . . . [with silver] hidden in it” (O’Connor 35).

Besides the hypocrisy of the grandmother, moral decline in the Christian South brings into focus the problems of Christianity. The grandchildren, for instance, are malicious; June Star, one of the grandchildren, remarks

disappointed after the car accident that “[n]obody’s killed” as she watches her grandmother limp out from the wreckage (O’Connor 43). June had apparently hoped for her grandmother’s death. Moral devolution is also manifest in The Misfit, a criminal who does not believe in God. He believes in “[enjoying] the last few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house” (O’Connor 43). These examples of moral devolution and the grandmother’s duplicitous characteristics illustrate the loss of true Christianity and suggest that an ideological upheaval is coming, just as Rand hinted at the return of individualism by focusing on the faults of collectivism.

The ideological upheaval is the return of true Christianity in the grandmother and The Misfit, a victory that parallels the return of individualism in Anthem. At the climax of the conversation with The Misfit, the grandmother’s head “[clears] for an instant” as she exclaims to him “[w]hy you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children” (O’Connor 43). In this action she is forgiving The Misfit for killing her family; she is redeeming The Misfit in the Christian sense, and in doing so achieves grace herself. The Misfit is profoundly affected by this and seemingly converts to Christianity, saying afterwards that committing crimes is “no real pleasure in life” (O’Connor 43). Likewise, individualism in Anthem overthrows collectivism as Equality 7-2521 renounces the current government for a new life as himself.

This is decisively demonstrated in his abandoning the assigned name of “Equality 7-2521” for a new one he chooses himself: “Prometheus,” the name of a Greek god punished for stealing fire from Zeus. In doing so, he reveals his desire to spread individualism far and wide as Prometheus did

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fire. In outlining the victories of individualism and Christianity respectively, Anthem and “ A Good Man Is Hard To Find” both examine the process in which ideological change is brought about. However, it is interesting to note that the plot of these works have little in common beyond this ideological triumph. Ideological conflict is the theme that ties them together—as a universal substratum, it transcends all forms of literature.