

Good example of literary analysis critical thinking

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“ A Good Man is Hard to Find”

Traditional convention suffered a string of devastating shocks in the first half of the twentieth century. A world war, a Great Depression, and another world war shattered many people's faith in traditional institutions. A propos, Flannery O'Connor dispenses with the conventional tropes of hero and villain in “ A Good Man is Hard to Find.” She gives the reader a villain who is not evil and a hero who is not good.

Despite the third-person narration, this is the Grandmother's story. The narrator presents her thoughts and feelings, but the other characters exhibit no evidence of inner life. They speak and act, but the reader experiences them exclusively from the outside. Furthermore, her son and grandchildren have names, while her daughter-in-law is only “ the children's mother.” The Grandmother's centrality in the story not only makes her the protagonist – the “ first actor” – but it reflects her selfishness. We know little or nothing of anyone else's feelings because she knows little or nothing about them. She ranks people by social class (gentlemen/ladies are highest, then commoners, then niggers) and degree of relatedness to her (blood relatives come first, followed by in-laws, strangers, and negros). The “ little pickaninny” is nothing more to her than a “ picture” she would like to paint. To extend the manifestation of her selfishness, O'Connor uses the Grandmother to move the plot forward. Every major event is her idea: going to Tennessee instead of Florida, stopping at the plantation house, smuggling the cat along and thereby causing the accident, and flagging down the “ hearse-like automobile” carrying the Misfit and his associates. And when it looks as though she might not get her way, she stoops to manipulation. Bailey does

not want to stop at the plantation house, so the Grandmother resorts to deceit: “‘ 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.’” She knows the children will demand to visit the house and use all their powers of obnoxious persuasion to see that their father concedes. Then, startled by embarrassing realization that the plantation house is actually not in Georgia at all, she upsets the cat she had concealed under her luggage. The aggravated cat’s claws find their way into Bailey’s shoulder and Bailey’s car consequently finds its way into a ditch. The scene of this family’s doom is set, unwittingly orchestrated by the Grandmother’s selfishness.

Selfishness, cunning, deceit: one sees these traits most often in villains. However, the Grandmother’s villainy stems not from outright malice, but from a more prosaic character flaw: egocentrism. Her salvation lies in liberating her good heart from her defective character. Enter the Misfit: a walking paradox if ever there was one. As the antagonist, he acts against the protagonist. As the hero, he rescues the Grandmother from her egoistic personality. But his heroism lacks anything one can recognize as good or moral. In fact, he is the archetypal anti-hero. He says himself that he “ ain’t a good man, but [he] ain’t the worst in the world neither.” In having “ been most everything,” the Misfit defies easy classification. Under his direction, his associates murder the Grandmother’s entire family. As long as she keeps repeating “ you wouldn’t shoot a lady,” her soul has not been saved and the Misfit continues to lecture her on the ambiguity, the absurdity of his life. But at the moment of her enlightenment, when she cries, “ you’re one of my babies,” the Misfit - at once the agent of her salvation and her destruction -

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absolves her in the name of the Father (*BLAM*) and of the Son (*BLAM*) and of the Holy Spirit (*BLAM*). The Grandmother lies dead, eyes gazing to heaven and a beatific smile on her face. Immanent death stripped away her pretensions and liberated her ultimately good heart. The Misfit understands what had just happened: “ She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

Few people qualify as truly evil. O'Connor shows her readers how a good heart can be lost in a mire of selfishness and ignorance, causing harm entirely by accident. Similarly, even a violent criminal can serve as the avatar of enlightenment in spite of himself. Some truths cannot be expressed conventionally.

Work Cited

O'Connor, Flannery. “ A Good Man is Hard to Find.” A Good Man is Hard to Find, and Other Stories. New York: Harcourt, 1955. Print.