



A Good Man is Hard to Find

by Flannery O'Connor

Content Synopsis

A disconnected family goes on a vacation from Atlanta to Florida. The children, John Wesley and June Star, are wild and inconsiderate; their parents apathetic. The grandmother complains about the changing times and lack of respect of people today. She tries to convince her son Bailey to take the family to Tennessee instead of Florida so she can visit relatives. She brings up the fact that an escaped convict called The Misfit is on the loose and headed towards Florida, but he ignores her and they take their trip. To spite Bailey and comfort herself, the grandmother brings her cat and hides it in a basket. While driving through Georgia, the grandmother reminisces about the people and places from days gone by. They stop at an old-fashioned barbecue for lunch and the grandmother and the restaurant owner, Red Sam, shake their heads over the changing times and how hard it is to trust people. Red Sam declares that, "a good man is hard to find" (O'Connor 681).

As the family drives on, they pass a dirt road, and the grandmother remembers an old plantation house from her younger years and asks Bailey to drive by it. She exaggerates about secret compartments in the house to get the grandchildren interested in seeing it. They kick and scream until Bailey finally relents and turns down the dirt road she thinks the house is on. As they travel down the long, desolate road, the grandmother realizes

that the house she was thinking of was actually in Tennessee, not Georgia. As she remembers, her cat jumps out of the basket onto Bailey and he crashes the car into a ditch. Everyone is relatively unharmed but they are now stranded. The children shout excitedly, "We've had an ACCIDENT!" while the adults shake with fear (O'Connor 683). While they await assistance, a car with three men inside approaches them. The driver of the car, a shirtless middle-aged man in "scholarly" looking wire-rimmed glasses, turns out to be The Misfit (O'Connor 684).

The Misfit's two sidekicks, Hiram and Bobby Lee, take Bailey and his son off into the woods and gunshots are heard shortly after. The grandmother grieves for him shouting, "Bailey boy!" but then tries to flatter The Misfit to save herself (O'Connor 686). She tells him that he is not a bit "common" and asks him if he prays. When he says no, she tries to convince him that prayer will help to set him on the righteous path. The Misfit then has Hiram and Bobby Lee take the mother, her baby and June Star off to the woods and three shots are heard. The grandmother continues to try to save herself. She begs The Misfit to pray and spare her life. She has a moment of heartfelt empathy for him at the end when she reaches out to touch him and calls him one of her babies, but he shoots her three times and has his partners throw her body in the woods (688). The story

ends as *The Misfit* declares, “It’s no real pleasure in life” (689).

Symbols & Motifs

The aptly named character of *The Misfit* serves as a symbol both of evil as well as a symbol of the villain’s inability to fit into society. The family also represents a bunch of misfits as demonstrated through their ungratefulness and disregard for other’s emotions. The mother ignores her children except for her baby; the children have no qualms about littering and talking back to adults. The family is living without really being aware of the fact that life is precious.

The vacation that the family is taking also has symbolic significance as a journey away from their familiar surroundings. The fact that the family is going further South might be indicative of the direction they are heading in the afterlife. Even their stop along the way at Red Sam’s resembles a place of purgatory (“Flannery O’Connor and ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’”). The grandmother revisits moments of her life as the family drives along on their way to Florida and is the only family member who seems to learn anything on the road of life.

The characters’ names act as symbols as well. John Wesley, the hostile, loud-mouthed child, is named after the founder of the Methodist religion (“Flannery O’Connor and ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’”). June Star, the bratty, selfish sister of John, has a name that resembles a starlet of the 30’s or 40’s, aptly demonstrated at Red Sam’s in her demand for a song she could dance to (“Flannery O’Connor and ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’”). The children’s mother ironically is given no name and their father is given a generic one. The grandmother is not given a name as her identity is that of the family elder.

Historical Context

Flannery O’Connor takes special care in presenting the differences between the old generation

of Southern gentility and the current (1950’s) generation, which is more abrasive and fast-paced. A personal history is explored as the grandmother reflects on plantation homes, unpaved roads and formal clothing while riding with her son and his young family on a highway to the trendy vacation spot of Florida. The grandmother appears to be struggling with the changes occurring throughout the time period. These changes are reflected in her children and grandchildren.

In the 1950s, the population was growing and expansion of cities and suburbs was occurring across the country while farmland began to decrease. The advent of rock n’ roll music fed the desire of the nation’s young people to rebel against their parents’ traditional values. Clothing became more colorful and casual. Restaurant and entertainment chains multiplied, leaving the traditional “mom and pop” joints, like Red Sam’s, to fade away. In addition, the rise of communism and the threat of espionage and nuclear war led to a population filled with fear and uncertainty.

Societal Context

This story presents a contrast between the grandmother’s generation and that of her children and grandchildren. Both generations are depicted as imperfect. The grandmother is unknowingly racist; the children are unknowingly inconsiderate to their elders. The grandmother tells her grandchildren that they have no respect for anything these days, which is true as seen in their speech and actions such as trying to throw trash out the car window. However, in the next breath the grandmother shouts, “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” and “Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do” in reference to a black child they happen to drive past (O’Connor 679). Flannery O’Connor acknowledged in her essay “The Element of Suspense in ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’” that the old woman resembles a Southern stereotype and said that most Southern readers have an older relative

who resembles the grandmother. She retains elements of Southern hospitality and manners, but it is exclusive to non-common folk and those of the white race. She is ignorant of her own ignorance.

The fact that the whole family dies at the hands of The Misfit and his random violence parallels the author's own belief that society (in the 1950's) was going fiercely downhill. Even the innocent baby is murdered. The Misfit is the epitome of everything that is wrong with society. He lacks faith, manners, and has no respect for laws and moral standards of any kind. His appearance is a contradiction in itself. He is middle-aged, graying and wearing scholarly glasses, yet he is shirtless and is wearing tight jeans. He agrees with the grandmother on many levels and entertains her talk of Jesus but shoots her without thought as soon as she tries to get close to him. He represents the hypocrisy of both the older and younger generations, but his dominance in the story reveals an apocalyptic glimpse of the future.

Religious Context

Flannery O'Connor was known to be a devoutly pious Roman Catholic and Christian principles are present in all of her work. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" O'Connor wrestles with the nature of good and evil, but even more so, presents the reality that most people stumble through life on a less than righteous path. Bailey and his wife and children appear consumed with their own desires and have little concern for others. The grandmother, as unlikable as she is, is the only character reflective enough to see how far removed society is from what really matters in life. In her essay on this story, O'Connor states, "The heroine, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it" (O'Connor 704). "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a story that reminds the reader that evil does exist in the world and the day

of judgment is always just around the corner. The story forces the reader to take a second look at his or her own life and ask the question—am I ready?

This story first appeared in a collection by the same name with the following quote from St. Cyril of Jerusalem as an opening, "The dragon is by the side road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon" (Drake 187). Whether the dragon is the devil or Christ is up for debate, but regardless, according to O'Connor, this figure is watching and judging us all.

The Misfit and his sidekicks represent the embodiment of evil and The Misfit could be compared to the devil, but even he seems more human and complex than that. The Misfit is troubled by the evil in the world even though he is a contributor. He more likely represents one more troubled soul on earth that lacks religion.

Scientific & Technological Context

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" does not have a specific scientific or technological context.

Biographical Context

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, GA in 1925 and spent much of her life in Milledgeville, GA until her death in 1964 (Goia & Gwinn 677). She graduated from Georgia State College for Women in 1945 and earned her MFA from the University of Iowa in 1947 (Goia & Gwinn 677). In 1950, she was diagnosed with lupus and shortly thereafter she moved in with her mother in Milledgeville (Goia & Gwinn 677).

Even though she was raised in the South, which is predominantly Protestant, Flannery O'Connor was a devout Roman Catholic (Goia & Gwinn 677). Her religious views colored her work as she viewed contemporary Southern society with growing disdain. The voice in her work is extremely moralist, wryly satiric and highly critical of the decline of Southern "mysteries and manners" (Goia & Gwinn 677).

She has been described as a Southern Gothic writer because of the violence and moral confusion of her characters (Goia & Gwynn 677).

In her lifetime, O'Connor published two novels, "Wise Blood" in 1952, and "The Violent Bear It Away" in 1960, as well as a collection of short stories, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" in 1955. After her death, the short story collection, "Everything that Rises Must Converge" was published in 1965 and a collection of essays "Mysteries and Manners" was published in 1969. "The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor" won the National Book Award in 1971.

Jennifer Bouchard

Works Cited

Clark, Beverly Lyon. *Flannery O'Connor*. Georgetown University. 15 January 2008.
 Drake, Robert. "The Bleeding Stinking Mad Shadow of Jesus in the Fiction of Flannery

O'Connor." *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1966, pp. 183–96.

"Flannery O'Connor's A Good Man is Hard to Find: Who's the Real Misfit?" *National Endowment for the Humanities*. 15 January 2008.

"Flannery O'Connor and 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.'" *Tyler Junior College*. 15 January 2008.

Gioia, Dana and R.S. Gwynn, eds. *The Art of the Short Story*. New York, Pearson Longman, 1992.

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Eds. Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn. *The Art of the Short Story*. New York, Pearson Longman, 1992.

O'Connor, Flannery. "The Element of Suspense in 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'" Eds. Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn. *The Art of the Short Story*. New York, Pearson Longman, 1992.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you characterize the grandmother?
2. How would you describe the rest of the family?
3. What is the significance of the title of the story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find”?
4. What purpose do names serve in this story? Who is not given a name? Why?
5. What are some examples of foreshadowing in the family?
6. How does O'Connor describe the cultural and physical landscape of the setting?
7. How does O'Connor distinguish between the old and new South?
8. What are some differences between the grandmother and the mother?
9. Who is the real Misfit in the story?
10. What is the significance of the discussion of Jesus?
11. What are the main themes of the story?

Essay Ideas

1. Write an essay in which you argue that the grandmother is the hero of the story. Use examples of the text to support your claims.
2. Analyze O'Connor's use of humor in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." Be sure to discuss how she balances humor with the grotesque.
3. Investigate O'Connor's use of symbolism in the story. Be sure to include The Misfit and the road as symbols.
4. Discuss the presence of contrasts in the story. What purpose might these contrasts serve in terms of the overall message of the story? Use examples from the story to support your analyses.
5. Write an essay in which you analyze all of the Christian allusions and images in the story. Discuss how they contribute to the key themes.

Copyright of Introduction to Literary Context: American Short Fiction is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.