

Class Collaborative Essay

Professor Conway

ENG 201, Section A100

Summer Session 2023

### The Unexpected Spark

“Literature is the art of discovering something extraordinary about ordinary people, and saying with ordinary words something extraordinary” (Pasternak). In other words, literature has the power to reveal something extraordinary about a regular character using relatable language. In the short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor, an ordinary family meets a devastating fate when they encounter a serial killer on the side of the road, who is anything but ordinary.

In the story, a family goes on a road trip and does not come back thanks to the selfish manipulations of the main character, the grandmother. Because of her actions, they end up in a car crash and meet up with a group of escaped convicts led by the remarkable Misfit. However, an unexpected gesture reveals something extraordinary about both the grandmother and the Misfit.

By any measure, this is an ordinary family. First, this is a typical nuclear family with parents, children, and a grandmother. In addition, they engage in typical family conflicts. In this case, the conflict is between where the grandmother wants to go and where the family wants to go. It is clear from the text that the family is average in educational and economical level. For example, when the family stops at Red Sam’s BBQ place, the grandmother reveals her ignorance about the world in her conversation with Red Sam. “The old lady said that in her opinion, Europe

were to blame for the way things are now. She said the way you acted would think we were made of money..." (O'Connor). She and Red Sam share a nostalgic regard for tradition. Together, they recall "the days you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched" (O'Connor). They both believe that they are good people, who maintain those admirable values. Yet it is the Grandmother's selfishness that causes the accident and the death of her whole family. She is the one who insists on bringing the cat along because it "would miss her too much" and "might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself" (O'Connor). She is also the reason Bailey veers from the main road when she mistakenly recalls an old plantation she had visited when she was young and insists on visiting it.

All through the story, the Grandmother displays her smallness and superficiality. For example, she dresses up in a fancy outfit so that if there is an accident, the people who find her body will "know at once that she was a lady" (O'Connor). Appearances are what matter to her. When they pass a shack and see a Black child "without any britches on" (O'Connor), the Grandmother uses a disparaging word, telling the children that Black children "don't have things like we do" (O'Connor).

On the other hand, the Misfit shows himself to be a very unusual person. Although he is a coldblooded murderer, he is a charismatic leader, who is philosophical, intelligent, and worldly. He has worked in many different jobs and has had many experiences. He has been "in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twice married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth" ("O'Connor). The Misfit knows right from wrong and has chosen to be bad. He has chosen to be bad because he lacks faith. For him, with out faith there is "... 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” (O’Connor).

Towards the end of the story when the grandmother and the Misfit come together, they share an extraordinary moment of epiphany. For one single moment the selfish grandmother breaks character and shows her compassion for the first time. At the same time, the Misfit breaks character as the grandmother’s touch to his shoulder penetrates to his heart. In conclusion, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” demonstrates how literature has the power to show something extraordinary about ordinary people in relatable language.

#### Work Cited

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. “The Most Handsome Drowned Man in the World.” *An Introduction to Fiction*. Eds. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. 281-292.