

A Lecture on
“A Good Man Is Hard to Find”
by Flannery O’Connor

Where Is the Goodness?

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Introduction to Literature



The story is called “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” But is there really any goodness in this narrative published in 1955 by the darkly witty Southern author Flannery O’Connor?

The author says there is, and explains her feelings in her essay “Suspense in ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find.’” She asks readers to move from the surface of the story, a place where terrible cruelty and violence occur, to the interior of the story, where O’Connor believes something redemptive happens. However, some readers and critics argue that there is not a single germ of goodness in this story—that it is unrelentingly negative and bleak. Critic Kathleen Ochshorn, for example, maintains that just because the author sees goodness and redemption in what happens to the Grandmother and The Misfit, doesn’t mean readers will or should feel they have to. Readers should decide for themselves what has happened in the story by their own response to the story, not by what an author says about it.

I think the best way to approach a puzzling story such as this one—or any story really—is to analyze the characters and see what has happened to them by the end of the narrative and if they have changed in some fundamental way.



The Grandmother

Let's start with the protagonist, the Grandmother. To begin with, she is incredibly selfish. From the moment the story starts, we see her manipulating the family to get what she wants. The first thing she wants is to change the itinerary of the trip from Florida to Tennessee. Her first tactic is to try and scare her son from going to Florida with the news that the notorious Misfit has escaped from the federal penitentiary there. She appeals to his sense of responsibility when she cries, "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. Couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

When that doesn't work, she talks about how "educational" a trip to East Tennessee would be for the children. "Children should see different parts of the world, and be broad," she says, as if East Tennessee were the Casbah. Then, in what ends up being a fatal act of selfishness she brings her cat along on the trip even though she knows Bailey doesn't like to travel with the cat.

The Grandmother is also extremely superficial. Notice how she dresses for the trip. She wears a fancy dotted dress with organdy cuffs, white gloves, a hat, and even a scented sachet. If she ends up dead on the road, she reasons, the people who find her will know she was a lady. In the Grandmother's shallow mind *looking* like a lady means that she is one.

The Grandmother is a narrow-minded character. On the trip in the car, she talks incessantly, blatantly revealing her ignorance, such as when they pass a black child in front of a shanty house who is not wearing pants. "Little niggers" don't have pants, she informs the children.

Yet the Grandmother thinks she's a good influence in the children's lives. She instructs them about not littering and tells them how they should speak well of the state from which they come. She genuinely believes that she is a good woman and is very satisfied with herself as a human being.

Along the way she regales them with a story from her youth when she was courted by Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden. She would have done well to marry him, she says, because he became a very rich man. Through the Grandmother's nonstop chatter we see how superficial, small-minded, ignorant, hypocritical, and self-satisfied she is. We also get so see bright flashes of the author's wicked, somewhat twisted, humor.

Now let's take a look at Bailey, her son. Readers can understand why he might be so silent and withdrawn. He has been listening to his mother jabber on for his whole life. Maybe tuning out has become his most effective coping mechanism. Some readers are distressed by how passive he is when the criminals lead him and his son away towards the woods where they will soon be slaughtered. Some feel he should have at least tried to save his son, perhaps by distracting the criminals and telling John Wesley to run. There would be nothing to lose by at least trying, some readers maintain.



Bailey



Bailey's Wife

As for Bailey's wife, she's hardly a character at all. In fact, O'Connor compares her to a walking vegetable. "She had a face as broad and innocent as a cabbage."

I know that if I were going to be compared to a vegetable I would want it to be something a bit more colorful, maybe a red pepper or a complicated artichoke. The description of the mother as a cabbage suggests that she is about as dumb as a plant. She is so listless and passionless she doesn't even warrant a name in the story.



John Wesley

Now we come to the offspring of Bailey and his wife, June Star and John Wesley. Even by today's standards, they are monstrous little brats. June Star is rude, spoiled, self-centered, attention-seeking, smart and disrespectful.

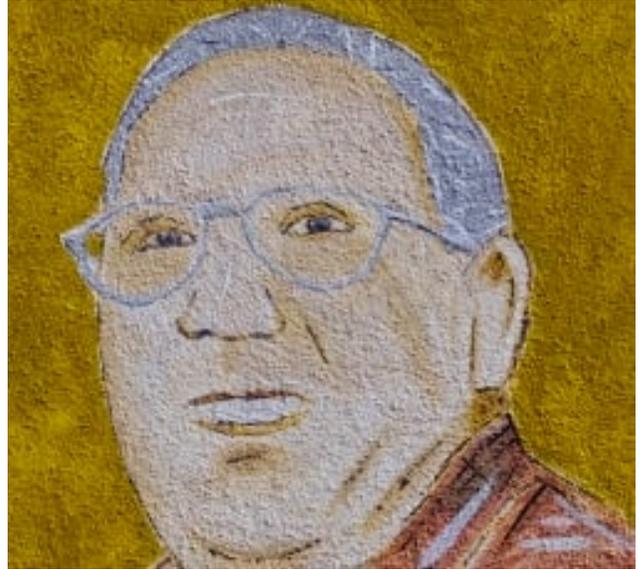
And her brother John Wesley is only slightly better. At least, he has a somewhat charming inquisitiveness. Of course, when we look at their passive, indifferent parents, it's hard to blame the children for being the way they.

By the way, it's worth noting that the boy is named after the founder of the Methodist church. This seems to indicate that the family has at least some nominal connection to religion.



June Star

When the family stops at Red Sammy's barbecue, the Grandmother meets her soulmate in the sweaty, fat-bellied Red Sam. O'Connor depicts Red Sam as the quintessential southern redneck. Like the Grandmother, Red Sam believes he is a good person. As proof of that, he tells how he recently let a couple of men charge some gasoline at his establishment. Like the Grandmother, he yearns for times gone by when people could leave their doors open and everyone behaved properly. And like the Grandmother's, his world-view is narrow, small, and uninformed. He blames Europe for the poor behavior of people in America. He is self-satisfied and sure that he is living a good life.



Red Sammy

However, readers can't help but notice how rude and bossy he is to his wife. In one searing moment of dialogue, we learn that his wife does not trust him. "It isn't a soul in this green world of God's you can trust," she says as she stares straight into her husband's face. "And I don't count nobody out of that. Not nobody."

So let's look at our cast of characters so far. Do we see any "good" people here? I think most of us would say that we don't. Are they bad or "evil" people? No, we probably wouldn't go as far as to say that either. They're just medium people. Mediocre people. They are neither very good nor very bad. You might say they are grey people.



Now let's turn our attention to the last character—the antagonist of the story—The Misfit. He is anything but grey. His list of attributes contrasts strongly with those of the other characters. In many ways, he is the polar opposite of this bland, unpleasant family.

In place of their passiveness, The Misfit is passionate. He has strong opinions and lives by his beliefs. While their worldviews are narrow and circumscribed, his are large and open. He is a man of experience. He has held many jobs. He's plowed the earth, worked on the railroads, served in the military, sung in a gospel choir, worked as an undertaker. He has been married twice and has traveled the world.

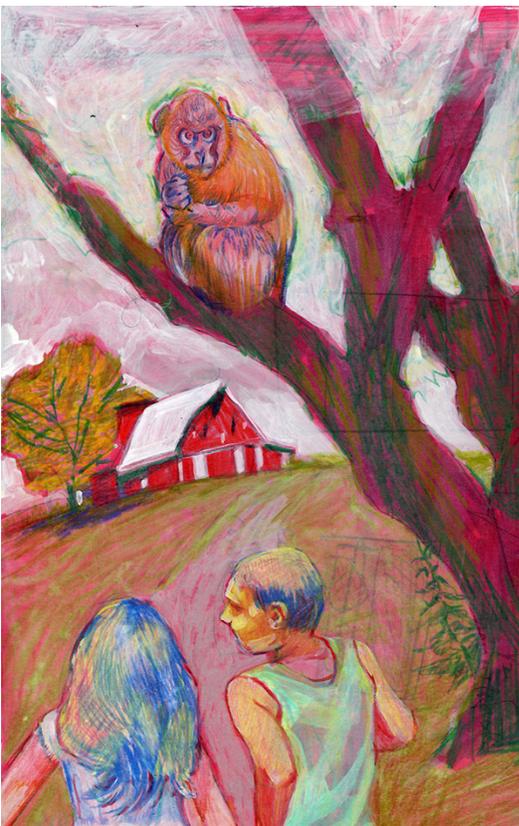
While the other characters are shallow and small-minded, the Misfit is philosophical. He has actually pondered the teachings that hypocritical old Grandmother tries to cling to at the end of her life.

The Misfit has thought deeply about Jesus and the mysteries of the Christian faith, such as grace and redemption. In his impassioned conversation with the Grandmother towards the end of the story, he says that Jesus "thrown everything off balance." He would have followed Jesus if he could be certain he was real—if he had seen him rise from the dead. He is a man who needs proof, which is why he has become obsessed with the signing of documents. He cannot believe without seeing; in other words, he does not have faith.



In The Misfit's view of reality, if one truly believes in goodness and in Jesus, then that person has no choice but to leave his comforts and consecrate his life to that goodness. If one does not believe, then "it's 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 says.

The Misfit has great clarity. He knows the difference between right and wrong. He has an unfailing moral compass. Unlike the other characters in the story, he has no delusions about being a "good man." He knows he is not one. But he also knows that most people are not good either. The family he kills are certainly not examples of good, enlightened people. They slog through their days, careless and unthinking, unaware of the shabby way in which they live.



Yes, The Misfit knows the difference between right and wrong—and he has chosen to do wrong. Once he makes this choice, he throws himself into his vocation with all the passion of his being. The Misfit sees the world in black and white. There is no grey middle ground for him. Either one is good—but truly, fiercely good—or one is wholeheartedly bad. O'Connor suggests that a true Christian, should dedicate him or herself to being good with the same vigor and passion to which The Misfit devotes himself to being bad. For a true Christian it should be not be enough to just not be bad.

Am I suggesting that The Misfit is a good man? No, of course not. He is a ruthless, self-serving serial killer with no mercy for anyone—not children nor babies nor old Southern ladies. But O'Connor in her essay ponders what he might have been like had he chosen the path of light instead of the path of darkness. Imagine if he had turned his charisma, leadership skills, his passion and self-awareness to the goal of doing good instead of doing bad? What a positive force he might have been. This is what O'Connor means when she calls the Misfit a "prophet gone wrong?"



So, if we look at our character chart in total, we find that a good man—a good human being—is, in fact, very hard to find. Especially in this story.

<p>The Grandmother</p> <p>selfish superficial manipulative overly talkative self-satisfied narrow-minded old fashioned unimaginative hypocritical ignorant</p>	<p>Bailey</p> <p>passive burned out tuned out indecisive absent silent</p> <p>Bailey's Wife</p> <p>cabbage-like passive</p>	<p>John Wesley</p> <p>rude demanding inquisitive spoiled</p> <p>June Star</p> <p>rude spoiled self-centered attention-seeking disrespectful</p>	<p>Red Sammy</p> <p>self-satisfied narrow-minded ignorant controlling bossy rude to wife opinionated untrustworthy</p>			
<p style="text-align: center;">The Misfit</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tbody> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;"> <p>charismatic open-minded knows right from wrong passionate doubting</p> </td> <td style="width: 33%;"> <p>commanding philosophical doesn't claim to be good experienced</p> </td> <td style="width: 33%;"> <p>intelligent self-aware binary worldview (black-and-white) worldly</p> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>				<p>charismatic open-minded knows right from wrong passionate doubting</p>	<p>commanding philosophical doesn't claim to be good experienced</p>	<p>intelligent self-aware binary worldview (black-and-white) worldly</p>
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So where *is* the goodness the author promises us? Well, in her essay, Flannery O'Connor tells us that the goodness comes by way of a gesture made by one of the characters. The gesture, she says, is one that "indicates where the real heart of the story lies." It would be "a gesture or action that is totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity." She says that without this gesture she would

The gesture to which she refers is the Grandmother's simple touch to the Misfit's shoulder. Up to this point she has been using every trick in her little playbook to convince him not to kill her. She has exhorted him not to kill "a lady." She has tried to flatter him with compliments about his good breeding and has offered him all the money she has. Her last resort is to suddenly climb up into the pulpit and start preaching at him. Jesus will save him, she says, if would just repent.

Then while she is prattling on, she suddenly looks at him, and in an instant of illuminating grace—and with a compassion she has not shown to anyone in the story before now—she sees the murderous Misfit as a human being, someone who could have been her own son. "Why, you're one of my own babies!" she says. "You're one of my own children!"

The Misfit springs back "as if a snake had bitten him" and shoots her three times in the chest. What is it about the Grandmother's gesture that has caused this instantaneous and violent reaction?

Well, imagine for a moment that you inhabit the dark mind of The Misfit. You have chosen your path—the path of darkness and destruction—and have consecrated yourself to the dark side. You do not believe in goodness because you have never seen it before.

Now all at once, this most shallow, vacuous, selfish woman reveals the goodness that resides deep inside her. For the Misfit this is unendurable. It throws everything off balance—his entire belief system, the history of his existence and every cruel choice he has ever made. If goodness *does*, in fact, exist, he has taken the wrong path. He has wasted his whole life.



If you're still pondering this whole question of goodness and redemption, let's turn to the author's essay again. In killing the Grandmother, O'Connor suggests that the Misfit has saved her soul. "Violence is a force," the author writes in her essay, "which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven." If the Grandmother had never crossed paths with the Misfit, it is unlikely that she would ever have experienced her illuminating moment of insight and grace—her epiphany—and found deep within herself wells of compassion she didn't even know were there. The person in a violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, writes the author, and these are the qualities he will take with him to eternity.



As for the Misfit, O'Connor writes that she likes to think that he too was changed forever by the Grandmother's touch to his shoulder. It pleased the author to imagine, as she writes, that "the old lady's gesture, like the mustard seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in The Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become."

But," as O'Connor writes, "that's another story.

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