

# HUMOR AND GROTESQUE IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S *A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND*

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**Abstract:** Flannery O'Connor is known to be one of the most notable fiction writers considered to be the strongest apologist of Roman Catholicism in the twentieth century. Being born and raised in the American South, reasonably enough, her works reflected the regional settings. Her fictional style is mainly representative of the Southern Gothic, populated with grotesque characters, depicting the moody and disturbing life in the American South. With the publication of her first short-story collection "A Good Man is hard to Find" (1955) established O'Connor's Christian character and darkly comic intent much clearer. Being one of the most famous examples of American Gothic fiction, the story embodies O'Connor's elements of fiction which have been termed as Christian tragicomedy: tragic because of its elements of the grotesque, often violent, events and characters in the stories, and comic because of the author's ability for achieving humor in the midst of this violence. Thus, this paper will look at the ways how the short story moves from satiric family comedy to brutal revelation as a grandmother leads her frustrated family on a vain attempt to find her old house in rural Georgia. While looking for the site of her girlhood property, she accidentally brings her whole family to their deaths at the hands of a tortured killer, The Misfit. He displays an odd regard for the grandmother, who forgives him right before she dies.

**Keywords:** southern gothic, humor, grotesque, evangelicalism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor published *A Good Man is Hard to Find* in 1953 along with a collection of other stories gathered under the same title. Being considered as one of the most famous examples defining Southern Gothic Fiction, it is one of her most well-known and anthologized short stories. The grotesque, the macabre, or the fantastic incidents, practices by prominent writers of the American South whose stories are set in the region is characterized by the eccentric characters and the local color, are the main focus that contributes to the creating of the moody and unsettling depiction of life in the American South. Respectively, the fiction of Flannery O'Connor is a quintessential example of the Gothic Fiction of the American South. However, according to Walters (1973) the main influences on her life that are also reflected in her fiction are "Being Catholic, and a Southerner and a writer" (p. 17). As a result, these three main influences appear in her fiction as she demonstrates her devotion to the Christian faith and her Southern identity in the majority of her work. Being brought up and led by Christian values, O'Connor (1969) believed that her readers lacked the Christian conviction that she had. Therefore, in order to reach such an audience, she believed that "The novelist with Christian concern will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (p. 33). This she accomplished by resorting to the grotesque in her fiction. Consequently, Christianity is the most striking element of her fiction. Nilsy (2002) states that O'Connor was convinced that the function of a writer could only be stated in terms of their religion: "I see from a standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (p. 84). O'Connor felt that her own religious attitude was very much in opposition to the religious attitude of her fellow citizens at that time. The grotesque element in her fiction which often has a humorous side is one of the most powerful when conveying the message about religion. Whether it occurs in the form of physical distortions or bizarre dramatic circumstances, the grotesque, as Claire Kahane (1979) observes that her fiction creates in the reader "an oscillation between the comic and

the fearful response” (p.114-15). Her characters are beautiful and ugly, impressive and ludicrous. They have monumental quality despite the grotesque elements of their characters. When elaborating on her technique of achieving the mystery of faith through the grotesque, she said that the grotesque grew naturally out of the way she sees the world: “My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable [...] The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural” (Nilsy, 2002, p. 89). However, her use of the grotesque leads to humor, another very powerful element in her fiction.

## 2. THE HUMOROUS ASPECTS

Humor plays a major role in the fiction of Flannery O’Connor therefore it is often tightly connected with the grotesque. O’Connor masterfully juxtaposes the violence of the grotesque against the comedy of the actual story. The humor arises in the middle of horrific events, and her seriousness in the middle of ridiculousness. According to Somerville, “the irony is at once strikingly comic and an indication of broader more serious possibilities. It is a technique which, like the use of the grotesque is part of O’Connor’s ‘realism of distances’ a suggestion to the reader, here in the moment of laughter that there is a world of ‘mystery’ intimately involved in the world of manners. (p. 86)

The story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* illustrates many of the techniques and themes which were to characterize the typical O’Connor story. The Misfit, the pathological killer who murders an entire family in this story, was apparently fabricated from newspaper accounts of two criminals who had terrorized the Atlanta area in the early 1950s; Red Sammy Butts, according to another critic, may have been based on a local “good ole boy” who had made good and returned to Milledgeville each year, on the occasion of his birthday, to attend a banquet in his honor, hosted by the local merchants.

O’Connor’s treatment of the characters in this story reinforces her view of man as a fallen creature. Briefly, the story depicts the destruction of an altogether too normal family by three escaped convicts. The thematic climax of the story involves an offer of grace and the grandmother’s acceptance of that gift as a result of the epiphany she experiences just before her death. The events which lead to that climax, however, generate much of the interest of the story.

The grandmother who is the protagonist in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* represents a fallen individual as her definition of ‘goodness’ associates with worldly rather than in spiritual terms. It is this kind of attitude that renders her actions humorous. She respects and considers to be *good people* those who are polite and respectful of their heritage. The reader encounters her twisted understanding of shortly after the family has begun traveling to Florida. As they are passing through Georgia eight-year-old John Wesley expresses his desire that the family would “go through Georgia so we don’t have to look at it much” (p. 119). Considering his remark disrespectful, she scolds him for talking about his “native state that way”, but her reprimand further provokes John Wesley’s condemnation of the South as he calls Georgia “a lousy state” and Tennessee “a hillbilly dumping ground” (p. 119). In response to John Wesley’s disapproving remarks about Georgia and Tennessee, the grandmother notes that, during her childhood, ““children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else,”” adding that “people did right then” (p. 119). Even though the Grandmothers’ definition of respect for one’s roots and heritage is not explicitly presented as a manifestation of her definition for goodness, it is very much indicative that she is convinced that these two notions are related.

Furthermore, she considers herself morally superior to others by virtue of her being a “lady,” and she freely and frequently passes judgment on others. She claims that her conscience is a guiding force in her life, such as when she tells Bailey that her conscience wouldn’t allow her to take the children in the same direction

as the Misfit. She criticizes the children's mother for not traveling to a place that would allow the children to "be broad," and she compares the mother's face to a cabbage. Her superficial and manners, and constant comments contribute to the humorous effects of the story which in turn later intensifies the shocking effect as the story unfolds. She also takes any opportunity to judge the lack of goodness in people in the world today. During all this, she proudly wears her carefully selected dress and hat, certain that being a lady is the most important virtue of all, one that she alone harbors. Another comic example of the Grandmother's obsession with her own background is the famous quote, "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was lady" (p. 118). This line does a lot of work in the text. It foreshadows that the family will be in an accident and also brings up the possibility of their downfall—a possibility that becomes an actuality by the end of the story—which in turn adds to the horror that makes this piece considered a standout representative of the Southern gothic.

The grandmother never turns her critical eye on herself to inspect her own hypocrisy, dishonesty, and selfishness. For example, the conscience the grandmother invokes at the beginning of the story is conveniently silent when she sneaks Pitty Sing into the car, lies to the children about the secret panel, and opts not to reveal that she made a mistake about the location of the house. When the Misfit systematically murders the family, the grandmother never once begs him to spare her children or grandchildren. She does, however, plead for her own life because she can't imagine the Misfit wanting to kill a lady. She seems certain that he'll recognize and respect her moral code, as though it will mean something to him despite his criminal ways. She tries to draw him into her world by assuring him that he's a good man, but even though he agrees with her assessment of him, he doesn't see this as a reason to spare her. Only when the grandmother is facing death, in her final moments alone with the Misfit, does she understand where she has gone wrong in her life. Instead of being superior, she realizes, she is flawed like everyone else. When she tells the Misfit that he is "one of [her] own children," she is showing that she has found the ability to see others with compassion and understanding. This is a moment of realization, one that is immediately followed by her death.

One way in which humor finds its place in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* is as reflection of faith, "a testimony to a world larger than the visible world which is equally real, is unseen and which might generally be described as the 'spiritual world'" (Somerville 87). This is what she understands as "mystery", a realism which includes not just the physical universe but "the ultimate reaches of reality" (Mystery 40). As Somerville further notes: "It is not that O'Connor wished, as we have observed already, to neglect the importance of the physical world but sought to make known the equally real dimension of the unseen particularly to an audience that often denied further reality" (p. 87).

The grandmother, with her secular definition of goodness and consequential self-centered behavior, is clearly an example of the fallen individual who is vastly separated from God. As *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* illustrates, however, the grandmother is not beyond the possibility of redemption. Indeed, the grandmother does experience the transformative power of grace, but only after she meets The Misfit. The Misfit embodies an ironic reversal of the grandmother's beliefs, and, significantly, as his stint as a gospel singer and his very literal interpretation of Christ's resurrecting powers suggest, he comes from an Evangelical background. Additionally, as Robert Brinmeyer (1969) notes, The Misfit "possesses a burning awareness of the fundamentalist imperative to commit oneself for or against Christ" (p. 33). The Misfit insists that the meaning of life depends on whether Christ was truly resurrected:

If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, 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. . . . (p. 132)

## 2. THE GROTESQUE

The elements of grotesque is another overarching aspect in the story which is highlighted by the comic instances in the plot. O'Connor manages to masterfully present the effect of grotesqueness by distorting ordinary things in a way that they become disgusting. It could be noted that there is a great amount of physical grotesqueness including the description of Red Sam at the barbecue restaurant: "His khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt". The appearance of Red Sam stands in as a representation of the deteriorating traditional Southern values, thus his physical look fosters the shock that O'Connor intended.

As Leonard (1983) notes "with an almost defiant attitude, Flannery O'Connor expected to lose most of her readers. It was in fact her desire to assault the consciousness of the complacent and worldly wise that induced her to place grotesque characters in violent circumstances"(p.48). Further adding that "For her the grotesque character was not an escape from realism, but rather an attempt to achieve a kind of spiritual super-realism, since both her experience and orthodoxy taught her that all humans are morally grotesque" (p 48). Likewise, though violence is not an everyday occurrence, it enables a proper perspective, bringing the individual a sense of ultimate priority. O'Connor employed grotesqueness and violence in her stories to illustrate the workings of grace on her characters, but more profoundly she was attempting to simulate the workings of grace in the sensibility of the reader, that rare reader who would go deeper. "The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning, but experienced meaning," O'Connor states (p. 48).

The conversation between Mr. Sammy and Grandmother represents the truth that Grandmother takes too far in the story. Red Sammy is a very similar character to Grandmother. They both understand each other immediately and share their complaints about this crazy new world. What, they wonder, happened to the days when "you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched" (p. 122). Throughout the story, Grandmother is a grotesque, a character who takes a truth to far, and this conversation shows her "truth" is the Old South's ideals. Red Sammy represents that truth as well, but he doesn't turn in it into a falsehood. Instead, Old Sammy represents the good of the Old South. He remembers a world that could trust some random boys coming for gas, a world that didn't worry about mass murderers. Back in those days, good men were easy to find. The Misfit in O'Connor's tale is grotesque in his politeness and consideration for his potential victims before he sentences them to death without any remorse. The Misfit displays a bizarre attitude while playing with his victims, giving them a sense of security before he kills them.

One may not think of politeness and consideration as a form of grotesque behavior. Therefore, readers would also be surprised to read a story about a psychotic killer that is nice and considerate to his victims' feelings right up to the moment that he kills them. This pattern of behavior can be seen as The Misfit kills his last victim in the later part of this story, in his conversation about Jesus's death with the grandmother. "'Listen lady,' he said in a high voice, 'if I had been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now'" (p.130). The Misfit is trying to explain to the grandmother that if he had been with Jesus at the time of his death, he would not be the sorry human being he now is. As the grandmother tries to comfort The Misfit in her attempt to prolong her life, all she does is aggravate him further: "'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (p. 130). Until this very moment, the grandmother's thinking has been so outrageous she thinks she just might survive; instead, she dies with peaceful thoughts in her mind.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Leonard argues that what is important to experiencing the meaning of the story is that the reader must avoid making the grandmother into either a saint or a witch and the Misfit into either a devil or a prophet (as some have done). He further adds that, “these characters, for all their grotesqueness, are meant to be real—and, as real, inscrutable at the deepest level of their spirituality. The Misfit, though devilish, is earnest as a scholar in his search for truth, polite, and genuinely sorry that he is a bad man.16 "It's no real pleasure in life," he tells his ghoulish henchman after he shoots the grandmother” (p. 133). According to him, “the grandmother, though banal, hypocritical, and manipulative, is much more likeable than her insensitive and stubborn son Bailey, his cabbage faced wife, or their whining children. At least she shows a sense of humor, a certain dignity, an interest in the world around her”. (52)

Because of her ability to bring these quite different elements--the grotesque, and humor—together into a single cohesive unit, Flannery O'Connor achieves greatness. The two are seemingly interdependent--the grotesque intends to emphasize the religious message of faith through mystery, the humor on the other hand intends to create a shocking effect in the midst of the grotesque. As a Southern writer, O'Connor overcame the inhibiting pressure to fall into regionalism, and it is through these broad elements that O'Connor does so. Because she addresses, in Southern terms, issues that cover a more widespread spectrum than do regionalists, specifically moral issues to which anyone can relate, she is able to become the influential writer that she is today.

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