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Introduction to Literature

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A Time to Sow a Time to Reap: A Good Man Is Hard to Find

Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is an insightful and colloquially accurate social commentary of a post-World War II America on the brink of the Civil Rights Movement. It delves into how the casual racism, duplicity, and chicanery of a manipulative elder lead to her and her family's undoing. The work starts out as congenial family road trip for six that becomes haunted by the specter of an escaped criminal—the Misfit. The Misfit is initially injected into the story by the grandmother, who happens upon a newspaper article about him and uses it as a motivation to divert the road trip. The grandmother and her family begin a trip to Florida that starts out as a comedy and ends in a tragedy. Subjectively this is a story about how a grandmother's longing to return to her past is interrupted by a hot bullet; but metaphorically and allegorically, this work delves into how Southern white people's refusal to let go of a white supremacist past and present are rewarded with white-on-white violence. As a cautionary tale "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" uses karmic Southern justice to expose and contrast the hypocrisy and inhumanity embedded in an oblivious Christian racist (grandmother) and the cognizant unrepentant honesty of the atheist Misfit, which in turn forces the grandmother to confront her presumptions, pretensions, and beliefs head-on.

In order to build her case against White-American Christianity and its hypocritical practitioners O'Connor adds depth to the grandmother's character as one built on bigotry, arrogance, and deception in order to make a comment on the white-supremacist systems that

founded and undergirded the South. As their journey continues O'Connor gives a detailed account of the grandmother's "navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print" (274) and then illustrates the contrast in wealth between whites and nonwhites through the following incident:

"In my time... children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. Oh look at that cute little pickaninny!" she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. "Wouldn't that make a picture, now?" she asked and they all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved. "He didn't have any britches on," June Star said. "He probably didn't have any," the grandmother explained. "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint the picture," she said. (275)

The contrast in attire or lack thereof denotes an asymmetrical relationship in status which favors the grandmother and the people she represents. Through this small passage O'Connor sheds light on the culture the grandmother has been raised in, a culture where white superiority and privilege are part of the natural order and for the Negro, poverty is their natural state. The grandmother is either in denial or cannot draw a causal relationship between her prosperity and the Negro child's lack of wealth. If the Negro child is poor, hungry, and without clothing no one can be blamed but God or the child's lazy-Negro parents. Thus, the form of hypocritical Southern culture projected by the grandmother was the prevalent cultural aesthetic of O'Connor's time.

The grandmother proceeds to inject her nonchalant, venomous, racist vitriol into her grandchildren at every turn in order to set them on a path of white-supremacist ideology by jokingly referring to America's slave-holding past:

They passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. "Look at the graveyard!" the grandmother said, pointing it out. "That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation." "Where's the plantation?" John Wesley asked. "Gone With the Wind," said the grandmother. "Ha. Ha."

(275)

This comedic reference to slavery evoked by mentioning a film based on the Civil War capture of a Confederate plantation and the conflicts that ensued between the Union soldiers and the former slaveholders minimizes and trivializes the violence and savagery used to place and keep human-beings in bondage. It also creates a reverential revisionist past of wealth and status that the grandmother most likely did not descend from. The grandmother's reverence for the past alludes to the Southern white supremacists' glorification of their slave-holding past and all that it represents.

It is safe to assume that the two main characters represent the actualized and fully-realized unrepentant sinner—the Misfit—and the ignorant, oblivious, unrepentant sinner—the grandmother—which in turn further strengthens O'Connor's critique of White-American Christendom. This ethos is best represented by the Misfit when he explains to the grandmother how he has become what he is:

She wanted to tell him he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally, she found herself saying, "Jesus, Jesus," meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing. "Yes'm The Misfit said as if he agreed. "Jesus thrown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course." He said...you

get a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you'll know what you done and can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't been treated right." (283)

The grandmother calls upon Jesus as a source of salvation in hopes that she might be spared the fate of her recently murdered family. The Misfit, however aligns Jesus and religion with the criminal justice system he has been persecuted by and sees it as the source of his suffering. In this sense O'Connor cast the characters as representing opposing philosophical conceptions of religious morality.

Just as the grandmother represents the Southern Christian woman of her era and their acceptance and promotion of the status quo, the Misfit represents the refutation of the hypocritical white-supremacist Christianity being practiced at this time. O'Connor uses this trope in order to enhance the distance between the systems they represent. The former started in church on Sunday morning and ended at the benediction and dismissal Sunday afternoon. This version of the Christian faith only extends to fellow white parishioners; anyone outside this select group is a Philistine, marked for persecution and exploitation. The Misfit exposes the inner-workings of a system that rewards the hypocrite and punishes the defenseless by stating, "I found out that the crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it" (282). The Misfit feels that the severity of his punishment has far outweighed the crime he has committed. He claims:

"I call myself the Misfit... because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment. There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by

a pistol report. “Does it seem far to you lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain’t punished at all?” (283).

The Misfit’s logic and reasoning have brought him to the conclusion that his punishment does not match his crime and is therefore state-sponsored torture; as a result, the good motives for criminal justice have been perverted into a reason to harm other human beings.

In the aggregate of all claims made it safe to assume that the grandmother represents those who have been raised in a culture where white superiority and privilege are given realities. She has been indoctrinated to revere a past where fortunes were built and maintained through human bondage. The form of Christianity she tried to summon to avoid the fate her family suffered was insincere and ineffectual. However, the Misfit’s atheism and view of society are antithetical to the grandmother’s. Although the Misfit is a white hardened criminal his analysis of religion, the criminal justice system, and America could still ring true coming from the mouth of a Negro slave, a Negro on a chain gang, or an African-American suffering under the unfair, discretionary, and racially –biased sentencing laws of today. It would have been even more provocative if the Misfit himself was cast as a black man. O’Connor’s grasp of the mainstream American consciousness and its nuances, or lack thereof, create the perfect platform to discuss religion and race.

Works Cited

O’Connor, Flannery. “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” 273-284 (further information unavailable)

