

*A Good Man Is Hard To Find* literary analysis

This essay is devoted to two characters from Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" - the grandmother and the father (who is her son). **Thesis** These characters are truly contrasting because grandmother is the central figure of the story and father is rather flat and schematic, just one of grandmother's babies.

One cannot deny that the concerns of this story are the basic concerns of Christian belief: faith, death, salvation. And yet, if one reads the story without prejudice, there would seem to be little here to inspire hope for redemption of any of its characters. No wishful search for evidence of grace or for epiphanies of salvation, by author or reader, can soften the harsh truth of "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." Its message is profoundly pessimistic and in fact subversive to the doctrines of grace and charity, despite heroic efforts to disguise that fact. This vexing little masterpiece cannot be saved from itself. It has a will of its own and a moral of its own.

What are we to think of the grandmother? At the story's beginning, she seems a harmless busybody, utterly self-absorbed but also amusing, in her way. And, in her way, she provides a sort of human Rorschach test of her readers. We readily forgive her so much, including her mindless racism-she points at the "cute little pickaninny" by the roadside, and entertains her grandchildren with a story in which a watermelon is devoured by "a nigger boy." She is filled with the prejudices of her class and her time. And so, some readers conclude, she is in spite of it all a "good" person. Somewhat more ominously, the Misfit--after he has fired three bullets into her chest--pronounces that she might have been "a good woman... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (O'Connor 133). We surmise that in the universe of this story, the quality of what is "good" (which is after all the key word of the story's title) depends greatly on who is using the term. The Grandmother's role as grace-bringer is by now a received idea, largely because the author

said it is so. But one must question the propriety of such tinkering with the character, after the fact. It reduces the fire-breathing woman who animates this story to nothing much more than a cranky maiden aunt. On the contrary, the Grandmother is a fierce fighter, never more so than in her final moments, nose-to-nose with the Misfit.

Bailey is the son of the principal character in the story, the Grandmother, and is the father of June Star and John Wesley. He drives the car as the family embarks on their vacation. Bailey's major importance in the story is his relationship to other people, especially his mother. He allows her to boss him around and to convince him to go out of the way to visit an old house she remembers from her childhood, where the family is killed. Bailey seems unresponsive to his wife and children, allowing them to take advantage of him. Overall, Bailey, who wears a yellow shirt with blue parrots, perhaps symbolizing his cowardice, is a "flat" character. Bailey is generally unmoved by his mother's idle threats as he had heard those all his life. But at the story's end, in a possibly too perfect irony, her prediction comes true, as the result of her meddling. The sting in the tail of this irony is that they would never have met the Misfit at all, if Bailey had given in to the Grandmother's demand to go to Tennessee, instead of Florida. To be sure, this is fore-shadowing with a vengeance.

The final scene of the story is truly spectacular. The Grandmother is quick to invoke the name of Jesus, but it is perfectly clear that the Grandmother's religion is entirely of the lip-serving variety. "Maybe He didn't raise the dead," she mutters in response to the Misfit's outburst, for it hardly makes any difference to her, one way or the other. She is concerned only with her survival, in the midst of the blood-bath that has engulfed her family. The fact that Bailey, his wife, and their children now lie dead nearby seems to have as little meaning for her as the divinity of Jesus--a topic, however, of compelling importance to the Misfit.

Much criticism of the story appears to take a sentimental view of the Grandmother largely because she is a grandmother. Flannery O'Connor herself, as we shall see shortly, found little to blame in this woman, choosing to wrap her in the comfortable mantle of elderly Southern womanhood. O'Connor applies this generalization so uncritically that we half suspect she is pulling our leg. In any case, we can be sure that such sentimentality (in the mind of either the writer or her character) is fatal to clear thinking. If the Grandmother is old (although she does not seem to be that old), grey-haired, and "respectable," it follows that she must be weak, gentle, and benevolent--precisely the Grandmother's opinion of herself, and she is not shy of letting others know it. Intentionally or not, O'Connor has etched the Grandmother's character with wicked irony, which makes it all the more surprising to read the author's response to a frustrated teacher whose (Southern) students persisted in favoring the Grandmother, despite his strenuous efforts to point out her flaws.

In the end, we can come to the conclusion that Grandmother is a dominating character of the story and Bailey (the father) is just another mama's boy who is unable to act independently though he strives to look otherwise.

#### Works Cited

1. O'Connor, Flannery (1969). "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, pp. 117-133.
2. Bandy, Stephen C. (1996). "One of My Babies: The Misfit and the Grandmother". *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 33.