

“The Dark Side of the Cross: Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction” by Patrick Galloway

To the uninitiated, the writing of Flannery O'Connor can seem at once cold and dispassionate, as well as almost absurdly stark and violent. Her short stories routinely end in horrendous, freak fatalities or, at the very least, a character's emotional devastation. Working his way through "Greenleaf," "Everything that Rises Must Converge," or "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the new reader feels an existential hollowness reminiscent of Camus' *The Stranger*; O'Connor's imagination appears a barren, godless plane of meaninglessness, punctuated by pockets of random, mindless cruelty.

In reality, her writing is filled with meaning and symbolism, hidden in plain sight beneath a seamless narrative style that breathes not a word of agenda, of dogma, or of personal belief. In this way, her writing is intrinsically esoteric, in that it contains knowledge that is hidden to all but those who have been instructed as to how and where to look for it, i.e. the initiated. Flannery O'Connor is a Christian writer, and her work is message-oriented, yet she is far too brilliant a stylist to tip her hand; like all good writers, crass didacticism is abhorrent to her. Nevertheless, she achieves what few Christian writers have ever achieved: a type of writing that stands up on both literary and the religious grounds, and succeeds in doing justice to both.¹

Flannery O'Connor's “A Good Man is Hard to Find”: Who is the Real Misfit?²

Known as both a Southern and a Catholic writer, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) wrote stories that are hard to forget. Whether for their humor, brilliant characterization, local color, or shocking plots, Flannery O'Connor's short stories, "in which the voices of displaced persons affirm the grace of God in the grotesqueries of the world," (Georgia Women of Achievement, via Internet Public Library) continue to disturb and resonate. As O'Connor said herself, her stories "make [her] vision apparent by shock."

One of O'Connor's most widely read stories, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (written in 1953), without a doubt is also her most shocking. Yet is it through the story's disturbing ending that O'Connor raises fundamental questions about good and evil, morality and immorality, faith and doubt, and the particularly Southern "binaries" of black and white and Southern history and progress.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction often is labeled as "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque." Responding to this genre designation, O'Connor's once said that, "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (40).

O'Connor also is considered a humorous writer. Literary critic Mark Steadman of Clemson University (SC) notes that, "Southern humor, like much of the best southern writing in general, has been boisterous and physical, often grotesque, and generally realistic How would you define the words "gothic" and "grotesque"?

- What does O'Connor mean by "grotesque"?
- What elements of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" would you describe as "grotesque"?
- What elements of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" would you describe as humorous?
- What are the effects of O'Connor's being both humorous and grotesque in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"?

¹ <http://www.cyberpat.com/essays/flan.html>

² <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/flannery-oconnors-good-man-hard-find-whos-real-misfit#section-18372>

- Bailey's family literally sets out on a journey, the family vacation. How does the road trip function as a metaphor or symbol of this journey?
- What might the road trip (and the specific images of the country road) symbolize based on what you have learned from the story at large? [Note: the road trip can symbolize many things, including the breakdown of Bailey's family (consider the kids and their behavior), the passing of time from the Old South to the New South, the journey for confirmation of Christ and Christian living, the Misfit's failed journey of redemption, etc.]

Flannery O'Connor once said that, "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted."

- What might O'Connor mean when she says "Christ-haunted"? Why "Christ-haunted" instead of "Christ-centered"?
- What passages of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" support O'Connor's claim about the South?
- "How does O'Connor use the grandmother to distinguish between the "Old" and "New South"?"
- What is symbolic about the fact that the "phantom" plantation is just a figment of the grandmother's bad memory?

Additional Questions³

- What qualities of the grandmother do you like? What qualities do you dislike? How did you feel when The Misfit killed her? Why?
- How would you characterize the other members of the family? What is the function of images like the following: the mother's "face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears" and the grandmother's "big black valise looked like the head of a hippopotamus"?
- How does O'Connor foreshadow the encounter with The Misfit?
- What does the grandmother mean by a "good man"? Whom does she consider good people? What are other possible meanings of "good"? Why does she tell The Misfit that he's a good man? Is there any sense in which he is?
- What is the significance of the discussion of Jesus? Was he a good man?
- What is the significance of the grandmother's saying, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children"?
- What is the significance of The Misfit's saying, "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life"?

³ <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/oconnor.html>