

## ANALYSIS

### "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

Flannery O'Connor

by Caroline Gordon

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the members of a Southern family are setting out on a vacation trip. The father of the family, Bailey, does not have "a naturally sunny disposition....and trips made him nervous." Bailey seems to be laconic by nature, or it may be that silence is the weapon he uses against his mother's wiles. At any rate, he speaks seldom and then usually in negation of something somebody else has said. The little boy, John Wesley--so many of O'Connor's characters take their names from the Great Revivalist!--seems to have inherited his father's negative attitude towards life and says, "Let's go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much." The mother, whose face is "as broad and innocent as a cabbage," is even more negative in her attitude towards life than her husband and son; she speaks seldom during the story and says, "Yes, thank you" as she is led off to death with her baby on her arm.

The grandmother is the only one who enjoys the trip. The children's mother is wearing slacks and still has her head tied up in a green kerchief but the grandmother has made a careful toilet; "in case of accident any one seeing her dead on the highway would know that she is a lady."

Flannery O'Connor's prose has no "poetic" passages. Indeed, one can say of her style that in general it lacks elevation--the kind of elevation which Logan Pearsall Smith in an illuminative metaphor has characterized as "the far, blue peaks of Helicon: which, he maintains, are always visible on "the horizon" of a great prose writer. Nevertheless, O'Connor's conceptions are poetic in the deepest sense. The grandmother is a lady, of high--and as the country goes--ancient degree. She represents the Old South.

"The Misfit" feels the impact of the grandmother's character and personality. The terrible dialogue seems to go on for a long time. But the bond between them snaps--suddenly and dreadfully--when the grandmother recognizes the escaped convict as "one of my babies, one of my own children" and reaches out and touches him on the shoulder. He cannot bear the confrontation and shoots her through the chest three times.

As for The Misfit, we have met him before, too, in O'Connor's stories. He is of the same breed as Haze Motes, of *Wise Blood*, who preaches the Church of Christ Without Christ or as the Bible salesman who uses a different name at every house he calls at and has been "believing in nothing ever since he was born." But whether he is stealing a girl's artificial leg as a souvenir of an attempted seduction or massacring the members of a family on a country road, he has only one preoccupation: theology. Indeed, this modern hero --or villain--concerns himself with only one dogma: the union of the human and divine which theologians call the hypostatic union. The grandmother would have lived longer if she had not uttered the name of Jesus: "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."

The Misfit responds promptly: "Yes'm.... Jesus thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything away 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..."

The Misfit, like Haze Motes and the Bible salesman, is illiterate, but he is spiritually kin to more highly placed Americans. He denies the existence of Christ but his whole life is given over to speculation on the nature of Christ. The philosopher and amateur theologian, the elder Henry James, whom Austin Warren numbers among his "New England Saints," spent his life in a similar preoccupation. The Misfit states his disbelief in words of one syllable: "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead. He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance." The elder James also rejects the doctrine of the hypostatic union when he speaks of "the venomous tradition of a disproportion between Man and his Maker"; he seems to feel that when God became Man he should not have remained God.

In Flannery O'Connor's vision of modern man--a vision not limited to Southern rural humanity--all her characters are "displaced persons," not merely the people in the story of that name. They are "off center," out of place, because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption. They are lost in that abyss which opens up for man when he sets up as God. This *theological framework* is never explicit in O'Connor's fiction. It is so much a part of her direct gaze at human conduct that she seems herself to be scarcely aware of it. This accounts to a great extent for her power. It is a Blakean vision, not through symbol as such but through the actuality of human behavior; and it has Blake's explosive honesty, such as we find in

But most through midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's ear  
And blights with plague the marriage hearse.

But though the theological framework of Miss O'Connor's stories is never explicit, it is, at the same time, never absent, which would seem to constitute the chief difference between her work and Truman Capote's. His characters move through the same mists of despair and doom but we are not given to understand why they are so fated. There is in his stories no one like "The Misfit," with his crisp, dogmatic explanation of why he is impelled to commit murder: "Jesus thown everything off balance."

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