

ANALYSIS

“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1955):



Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

“Week before last I went to Wesleyan and read ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find.’ After it I went to one of the classes where I was asked questions. There were a couple of young teachers there and one of them, an earnest type, started asking the questions. ‘Miss O’Connor,’ he said, ‘why was the Misfit’s hat *black*?’ I said most countrymen in Georgia wore black hats. He looked pretty disappointed. Then he said, ‘Miss O’Connor, the Misfit represents Christ, does he not?’ ‘He does not,’ I said. He looked crushed. ‘Well, Miss O’Connor,’ he said, ‘what is the significance of the Misfit’s hat?’ I said it was to cover his head; and after that he left me alone. Anyway, that’s what’s happening to the teaching of literature.”

O’Connor, Letter (25 May 1959)

“Haze knows what the choice is and the Misfit knows what the choice is—either throw away everything and follow Him or enjoy yourself by doing some meanness to somebody, and in the end there’s no real pleasure in life, not even in meanness. I can fancy a character like the Misfit being redeemable.”

O’Connor, Letter (13 September 1959)

“More than in the Devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted—such as the moment when the Grandmother realizes the Misfit is one of her own children. These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances.”

O’Connor, Letter (26 December 1959)

“There is a moment of grace in most of the stories, or a moment where it is offered, and is usually rejected. Like when the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him. It’s the moment of grace for her anyway—a silly old woman—but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy.”

O’Connor, Letter (4 February 1960)

“It’s interesting to me that your students naturally work their way to the idea that the Grandmother in ‘A Good Man’ is not pure evil and may be a medium for Grace. If they were Southern students I would say this was because they all had grandmothers like her at home. These old ladies exactly reflect the banalities of the society and the effect is of the comical rather than the seriously evil. But Andrew [Lytle] insists that she is a witch, even down to the cat. These children, your students, know their grandmothers aren’t witches.... Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical. Cutting yourself off from Grace is a very decided matter, requiring real choice, act of will, and affecting the very ground of the soul. The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if *he* had been there every moment of her life. True enough.”

O’Connor, Letter (14 April 1960)

“There really isn’t much brutality.... People keep referring to the brutality in the stories, but even ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ is, in a way, a comic stylized thing. It is not naturalistic writing and so you can’t really call it brutal.”

O’Connor, Interview, *Censer* (Fall 1960)

“There is a change of tension from the first part of the story to the second where the Misfit enters, but this is no lessening of reality. This story is, of course, not meant to be realistic in the sense that it portrays the everyday doings of people in Georgia. It is stylized and its conventions are comic even though its meaning is serious. Bailey’s only importance is as the Grandmother’s boy and the driver of the car. It is the Grandmother who first recognizes the Misfit and who is most concerned with him throughout. The story is a dual of sorts between the Grandmother and her superficial beliefs and the Misfit’s more profoundly felt involvement with Christ’s action which set the world off balance for him.”

O’Connor, Letter (28 March 1961)

“About that grandmother and the Misfit: it is the fact that the old lady’s gesture is the result of grace that makes it right that the Misfit shoot her. Grace is never received warmly. Always a recoil, or so I think.”

O’Connor, Letter (22 June 1961)

“The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely.

I’ve talked to a number of teachers who use this story in class and who tell their students that the Grandmother is evil, that in fact, she’s a witch, even down to the cat. One of these teachers told me that his students, and particularly his Southern students, resisted this interpretation with a certain bemused vigor, and he didn’t understand why. I had to tell him that they resisted it because they all had grandmothers or great-aunts just like her at home, and they knew, from personal experience, that the old lady lacked comprehension, but that she had a good heart. The Southerner is usually tolerant of those weaknesses that proceed from innocence, and he knows that a taste for self-preservation can be readily combined with the missionary spirit.

This same teacher was telling his students that morally the Misfit was several cuts above the Grandmother. He had a really sentimental attachment to the Misfit. But then a prophet gone wrong is almost always more interesting than your grandmother, and you have to let people take their pleasures where they find them. It is true that the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for the Misfit’s, nor is her capacity for grace equal to his; yet I think the unprejudiced reader will feel that the Grandmother has a special kind of triumph in this story which instinctively we do not allow to someone altogether bad.

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery.

There is a point in this story where such a gesture occurs. The Grandmother is at last alone, facing the Misfit. Her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she had been merely prattling about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture.

I find that students are often puzzled by what she says and does here, but I think myself that if I took out this gesture [the grandmother's expression of love for The Misfit] and what she says with it, I would have no story. What was left would not be worth your attention. Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them. The devil's greatest wile, Baudelaire has said, is to convince us that he does not exist.

I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world....

I don't want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story.

This story has been called grotesque, but I prefer to call it literal. A good story is literal in the same sense that a child's drawing is literal. When a child draws, he doesn't intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. Now the lines of motion that interest the writer are usually invisible. They are lines of spiritual motion. And in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies.

We hear many complaints about the prevalence of violence in modern fiction, and it is always assumed that this violence is a bad thing and meant to be an end in itself. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives. Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. But regardless of what can be taken by it, the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him; and since the characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of what they take with them. In any case, I hope that if you consider these points in connection with the story, you will come to see it as something more than an account of a family murdered on the way to Florida."

CRITICS

Evidence confirming the moral vision of O'Connor and the corruption of American higher education: Three of the following critics ignore O'Connor and deny that the grandmother is saved. *Seven* critics actually *identify with The Misfit!* In effect they are Satanists: W. S. Marks, III says that "Where the alternative to nonadjustment is Bailey Boy, one may agree that man does well to remain a 'misfit'"; Robert Drake says The Misfit "does win from many of us a grudging admiration which the murdered family does not command"; Dorothy Walters argues that "the wholesale slaughter of the grandmother and her family through their chance meeting with a maniacal stranger might well support a nihilistic world view"; Michael O. Bellamy declares that "the Misfit must be given credit for acting in conformity with his nature" [like Satan?]; Martha Stephens describes herself as "too far gone in anthropocentric irreligiosity" and concludes that "The Misfit is really the one courageous and admirable figure in the story"; the atheist Frederick R. Karl believes The Misfit "finds a form of salvation everlastingly denied to the grandmother, who seeks it in unfulfilling [Christian] ways... The Misfit is a prophet of sorts, a dark Jesus"; Mary Jane Schenck argues that the story is meaningless: "There is no firm ground of meaning" and by the end the characters "are totally deconstructed and no longer exist"--her way of rejecting the Christianity of the author. Schenck claims "The reader falls into 'the infinite nothingness of irony' because she does not understand irony, believing falsely that irony cancels all meaning rather than implying opposite meanings.

J. Peter Dyson is Politically Correct by avoiding religious terms and secularizing the implications of the grandmother's transformation. Redemption is not mentioned. Instead, "The breaking of her heart moves her towards the disinterested maternal love that becomes both her nemesis and her glory"; "Her gentility has seen her through; however, it is gentility now made authentic...by its disinterested acknowledgement of kinship with The Misfit, acceptance of his pedigree as one of her 'own children'." Dyson censors O'Connor by changing the spiritual goal implied in the story from redemption to becoming "authentic"--as if the author was an Existentialist rather than a Catholic. According to Dyson it is not the grace of God that has "seen her through" to the salvation of her soul, it is merely "gentility" and "kinship" on the earthly plane. Agape is replaced by "pedigree."

William S. Doxey is so hostile to Christians he accuses them of being criminals like Faulkner's white-trash Snopeses: "At the risk of having my garage burned (in lieu of a barn) by her faithful admirers, I am going to show why I am convinced that Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is a flawed short story.' He goes on to claim that the story is flawed because he is confused by it. Additional misreadings include Irving Malin's view that the grandmother has only "false love." Frederick Asals thinks we should "ignore O'Connor's comments" and see the grandmother's heartfelt expression of spiritual love for all people "as one last self-serving grasp at survival, or as...an attempt to 'adopt' The Misfit into her smothering, diminishing superficiality."

Michael Hollister (2013)

"The reader may not suspect what is going on until the Misfit dispatches 'Bailey Boy' and the two children. Perhaps even then he will but reluctantly and tardily perceive that God has made the misfit of a secular world His agent, too; and that the grandmother is engaged in a religious ordeal, that the issue is not her mortal life, nor the lives of the invincibly ignorant members of the family, but her immortal soul. Indeed, though she has a growing suspicion, the grandmother herself doesn't know until her moment of truth that God, Who can 'write straight with crooked lines,' is revealing Himself to her, is offering her the charity of salvation that a responding charity can win for her. Despite all of her ignoble efforts to save her own skin at all costs, despite her denying Him, He compassionately gives her a last chance....

[O'Connor] begins with familiar surfaces, in an action that seems secular at the outset, and in a secular tone of satire or humor. Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical, and the action appropriate to it comes with a surprise, an unaccountability that is humorous, grimly humorous, however shocking. It is a paradox, to be sure, but it rests on a theology and a Christian perception more penetrating than most people in this world are blessed with."

Brainard Cheney

"Miss O'Connor Creates Unusual Humor out of Ordinary Sin"

Sewanee Review LXXXI (1963)

“You’ll have to call [it] a ‘funny’ story even though six people are killed in it.”

Elizabeth Hardwick
Esprit 8 (Winter 1964) 28

“The husband and wife and the two older children (the third is an infant) are obnoxious, and the grandmother is little better. She fancies that gentility and refinement can save her soul. (‘In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.’) But the Misfit, who is something like the Anti-Christ Hazel Motes, puts the question to her in the imperative Gospel mode: ‘Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn’t have done it.’ When the grandmother begs him to pray to Jesus for help, the Misfit replies, ‘I don’t want no hep. I’m doing all right by myself.’ He has met the issue head-on, though; unlike many people and unlike many of O’Connor’s villains, he refuses to pretend that the issue—and the choice—do not exist. Agnostics might here cry ‘false dilemma!’—but not the Misfit. And therefore, ironically, he does win from many of us a grudging admiration [!] which the murdered family does not command.

The Misfit finally goes diabolically whole-hog in the very presence of grace. When the grandmother, in terrified and idiotic confusion, reaches out and touches him on the shoulder, murmuring, ‘Why, you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children,’ he springs back ‘as if a snake had bitten him’ and shoots her three times through the chest, then admonishes his accomplices, Hiram and Bobby Lee, ‘It’s no real pleasure in life.’ He remains a rather grand Satan—and perhaps nobler than Milton’s—to the very end.”

Robert Drake
Flannery O’Connor
(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 24

[On the whole, this critic is unsympathetic to allegory, to Christianity, and to O’Connor]: “As a narrative stylist, Flannery O’Connor belongs, however peripherally, to a Pauline or Augustinian tradition extending from Langland to Bunyan and Hawthorne. Her tastes for gothicism, allegory, and regional setting derive from that special admiration for *The House of the Seven Gables* evident in so many important Southern writers from Faulkner to Truman Capote. The mingled scorn and sorrow with which Hawthorne faced the decline of New England, his ambivalent attitude towards Puritanism, and his dubious hopefulness about America’s spiritual future find echoes throughout Miss O’Connor’s stories of Evangelical awakening amid the scattered ashes of plantation Georgia.... Although doubtless familiar with the literary methods of Dante and of James Joyce, Miss O’Connor was very much her own writer....

Her gripe against [me] white liberalism grew out of a sense of estrangement from its ultimate and unannounced purpose: the homogenizing of all racial, regional, and religious cultures into one uniform and godless civilization.... One of Miss O’Connor’s chief delights was to parody worldly wisdom through an ironic emphasis on the clichés and advertising slogans that summarize it.... In Miss O’Connor’s existential universe all events, including whatever acts of poetic justice the reader may happen to see, are essentially unpredictable, beyond human control, and, in a strict sense, accidental. It is only death, however, that speaks loudly enough to convince man of his foolish self-deceptions.... The danger of secularism (the Prison’s psychiatrically oriented rehabilitation program) is that it attempts to rationalize man’s inherent spiritual drives out of existence, rather than acknowledging and providing for them....

The irresistible hint that Red Sammy is the Devil or his agent gives the key both to his character and that of The Misfit, who to this point has remained only a sinister rumor. By pretending a flattering allegiance to the grandmother’s radical and disastrous prejudice in favor of the past, Red Sammy is no mean contributor to the family’s downfall. He is full of platitudes, lies, and diabolical half-truths.... Playing shrewdly on the religious meanings of *penitentiary*, the story draws a Kafkaesque comparison between The Misfit’s unremembered crime and original sin.... Like Dostoevsky, who made ‘use of his sufferings as a claim to be playing a Christlike role,’ The Misfit also identifies himself with Jesus...

By killing the old woman--again the reminder of *Crime and Punishment*--The Misfit asserts his spiritual independence from Dame Nature or Mother Earth. He is, emphatically, not one of her babies." [Now the critic identifies himself with The Misfit.]: "Where the alternative to nonadjustment is Bailey Boy, one may

agree that man does well to remain a 'misfit'..." [Liberals often scorn common people for not being socialists, they often identify with criminals and call for the deaths of people who disagree with them. This academic seems to affirm The Misfit. Like him, The Misfit looks "scholarly."]

W. S. Marks, III

"Advertisements for Grace: Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
Studies in Short Fiction 4 (1966) 19-27

"The Misfit is the same kind of fanatic as Hazel Motes. He also believes that things would be different if Jesus has really done what He said: '[He] thrown everything off balance'.... Although The Misfit claims that everything is Jesus' fault—if He ever lived!—he does not plan to let things stand. He will right the balance. *He will be the new Jesus of self-love.* But his church of meanness gives him no pleasure or salvation. He continues to be anxious, empty, and metallic....

The grandmother is a good person on the surface—at least the community thinks so—but she is also 'mean.' She forces her family to obey her... Because she convinces her son to turn the car toward the house with the 'secret panel,' causing the family to meet The Misfit, she seals everyone's death. She tries to adopt The Misfit, giving him well-meaning advice and false love [!]. He responds by shooting her three times.... Throughout the story Miss O'Connor uses images to reinforce the horror of self-love.... Throughout the trip we see horrifying hints of their ultimate end: accidents, dumping grounds, the nervous driver, the dangerous embankment, and the monkey who devours fleas."

Irving Malin

"Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque"

The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor
eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 113-14

"O'Connor...looks at the world through wide-open eyes and speaks about both the crude and the ugly, as did Christ in His parables... Her distortions are intended to 'break through' to those who see the grotesque as normal... Her most celebrated story, 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' illustrates these traits.... The whole story clearly illustrates the absence of love in the modern world, especially in family situations Unlike [Sherwood] Anderson's use of the grotesque, whereby one truth is stressed at the expense of Truth itself, Flannery O'Connor's grotesques correspond to dictionary meanings of the word: *distorted* (...the one-legged atheist Hulga); *incongruous* (Hazel Motes with his queer hat in *Wise Blood*); *ugly in appearance* (Sabbath Lily in the same novel).

A secondary meaning of *grotesque* refers to fantastic combinations of human and animal figures. One regular feature of Miss O'Connor's style is picturing human beings in terms of animal imagery: *large bug, wheezing horse, hyena, sheep, crab, goat, dog, buzzard, monkey* [and *pig*].... [This is also a characteristic of Naturalism, which tends to deny free will, whereas O'Connor] underscores above all the freedom of the will. It is the latter which makes her stories so very exciting for those who see: the high stakes elevate the trivial to cosmic proportions.... Here is a writer who can join laughter and pain simply, in images as everyday as a tear or sun-splattered knife, who knows that tragicomedy and life are synonymous...

Ironically, the character who says that a good man is hard to find (Red Sammy, tavern owner) is the man whose wife tells her customers that there isn't a soul in this green world of God's that one can trust.... The grandmother in all her exhortations to [The Misfit] to pray never turns to Christ herself; she wants others to practice religion while ignoring it herself... The grandmother, despite her mediocrity, much of which is a condition common to us all, reaches out to him in compassion, calling him one of her children and trying to comfort him as she might have her son Bailey when he was a small boy.... She dies smiling."

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.

"Flannery O'Connor, a Realist of Distances"
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 163-64, 174-76

"The children...are ill-mannered and brattish; they...take delight in the automobile accident. They join forces with the grandmother in torturing their father: she insists that they leave the main road to visit a

plantation which she remembers from childhood; John Wesley viciously kicks his father in the kidneys and screams until Bailey Boy reluctantly acquiesces: 'This is the only time we're going to stop for anything like this. This is the one and only time.' His words ominously and ironically suggest the fatality of their decision; their strong sense of inevitability enhances the Gothic quality.... June Star and John Wesley...are disappointed that nobody was killed....

The Misfit's evil nature is emphasized by contrast with his bespectacled, scholarly appearance and his childlike mannerisms; as the grandmother desperately appeals for her life to him as a good man, he... remains preoccupied with his doodling and his family background while Bailey, John Wesley, the mother, the baby, and June Star are taken to the woods and shot. A particularly chilling detail is the casualness with which Bobby Lee returns from the shooting of Bailey and drags the murdered man's 'yellow shirt with bright blue parrots on it.' The Misfit puts on the shirt with hardly a pause in his running conversation with Bailey's mother... Its significance lies in the symbolic identity established between Bailey and the Misfit, whom the grandmother later calls one of her own children....

The Misfit has resolved his despair into a belief in nothingness, not by a leap of faith. It is because he has ceased to believe in anything that he is able to murder the entire family without the slightest remorse. This crime is the gratuitous act of the existentialist, carried out to demonstrate the meaninglessness of the world.... Symbolically, this crime is the murder of God, after which despair descends, to be followed by one meaningless act after another, crimes leading only to the dead end the Misfit found at the conclusion of the story. "'Shut up, Bobby Lee," the Misfit said. "It's no real pleasure in life".' The Misfit [is] unable to understand the problem of evil. 'I call myself The Misfit,' he says, 'because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.' His statement is no doubt true, but it applies equally well to Christ when He was crucified, and to man in general in a fallen world in which evil seems to overwhelm him for no reason....

The grandmother...does fail to acknowledge her identity with fallen man at large, believing in a limited and ill-conceived community of good country people. As the Misfit says about her, 'She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' But like the rest of her family, she is shallow, vulgar, selfish, and generally unattractive. They are a family of the mildly damned—damned not because they are evil, but because they have never seen deeply enough into an experience to be an issue.... Having spent her life mouthing facile platitudes [the grandmother] is brought dramatically to a juncture at which she realizes the inadequacy of her former beliefs.... The words of the grandmother's acceptance of grace are her last, and they are words of mercy, compassion, and Christian vision: 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children'.... The grandmother becomes worthy by recognizing her participation in evil as the Misfit's symbolic mother."

Carter W. Martin

The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 65-66, 134-35, 164-66, 229

"That a pet, a cat, leaping at random for no great reason, should cause the destruction of an entire family expresses the randomness, the pointlessness of the murders. That the cat's name is Pitty Sing suggests O'Connor's attitude toward violence. [This critic is absurdly reductive.] In the *Mikado*, it is Pitti Sing who remarks in a sprightly way, 'Well, dear, it can't be denied that the fact that your husband is to be beheaded in a month does seem to take the top off it, you know'."

Josephine Hendin

The World of Flannery O'Connor
(Indiana U 1970) 150-51

"In...the justly famous 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' she introduced the dark line of trees, her recurrent emblem foreshadowing death and revelation.... The Misfit, a psychopathic killer, sends the members of the Bailey family into the nearby woods to die at the hands of his henchmen. The scene of the family's automobile accident which puts them in the Misfit's power is dominated by the trees; on all sides of them are 'more woods tall and dark and deep.' Just before her death the grandmother realizes there was 'nothing around her but woods'.... [archetypal Wilderness]

The Misfit...tells the grandmother that Jesus 'thrown [sic] everything off balance'.... The Tower, the barbecue joint...should bring to mind the Tower of Babel.... Miss O'Connor's opening story, particularly the scene at The Tower, leads inevitably to the last story [in the collection, "The Displaced Person"] and the sacrifice of Guizac, the good man who throws everything off balance... One recalls that the Tower of Babel epitomizes man's vanity in physical accomplishment; attempting to raise themselves to heaven through their own efforts, men discovered that their manmade tower created divisiveness...

The grandmother's response to Red Sammy reveals that she is the spokesman for a society in which goodness is linked to material things...[and] that goodness is somehow related to manners or to family and breeding. Even the children are corrupted by the value system she represents... The grandmother's duplicity leads to the encounter with the Misfit, but her duplicity alone would not have caused the family's trouble had it not been for the children's inborn avarice.... The children hound their father into following her directions to the house [reputed to contain hidden treasure].... Typically, it is the grandmother who flags down the Misfit's hearselike car and blurts out her recognition of him as a killer. She exaggerates the gravity of the accident, saying the car turned over three times, but the Misfit insists on the truth: the car turned over once.... She is perhaps best revealed by Miss O'Connor's observation that she always dressed for travel so that anyone finding her dead on the road would know she was a lady. Her primary concern is for externals; she is superficially genteel...

The Misfit is not concerned with comfort or with money... Like Haze Motes casting away the mummy, the Misfit wants only the truth, and like Haze, he wears silver-rimmed spectacles and looks defenseless without them.... Unlike the grandmother, whose religion was an easily acquired part of her respectability, the Misfit recognizes the magnitude of the question whether Jesus raised the dead.... The grandmother's revelation, though limited, is adequate; it links her to the communion of saints, which, Miss O'Connor states elsewhere, 'is created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state'... As far as her lights would carry her, the grandmother was, as the Misfit recognizes, a good woman.... Her reversion to a childlike posture and her staring at the sun suggest that her death is a good one.... Any society which glorifies the material may expect to find the Misfit lurking on the backroads, demanding values other than monetary ones and seeking absolutes denied him by a society seeking only comfort and security....

The ideal represented by the Misfit's desire for truth is planted in the collection's opening story, and, like the seeds which open silently in young Tarwater's blood [*The Violent*] at the moment of his full awareness of grace, the ideal will grow throughout the collection and reach maturity in the final story. The progression is from the fact of evil and of sin toward the reality of atonement.... Always capable of becoming a beast, man nevertheless retains his potential for full humanity and salvation."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 28-30, 67-72

"The Misfit is a complex but unified character; he is an enormous artistic achievement considering the economy with which he is developed in a few pages.... The patricide...symbolizes the rebellion of the Fall; the persistent punishment for unremembered crimes suggests the condition of man in original sin; The Misfit's sense of unjustified treatment suggests man's refusal to accept his fallen and sinful state; the climactic killing of the grandmother who offers forgiveness and love symbolizes the crucifixion and the refusal of grace... Kierkegaard describes two forms of the demonic in man who wills to be himself in despair, the active and the passive forms, and both apply to The Misfit.... The partial allegory of the Fall in the story is an anagogical rendering of The Misfit's rejection of God and his consequent estrangement....

The Misfit knows that he has to choose between God and himself as lord. He knows that Jesus threw everything off balance by raising the dead and that one must either 'throw everything away and follow Him' or else deny salvation and 'enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can.' His choice is based on two egoistic reasons. He claims that he was not there to know for sure that Jesus did what he said; thus, he precludes faith by making his own empirical knowledge a condition of acceptance. And he will not compromise his self-sufficiency....

The Misfit, however, is not doing all right, for his actions are as futile as Kierkegaard's description claims. His actions are arbitrary in themselves, since they are merely experiments performed to demonstrate his independence and ability for self-assertion. They are important to him merely because he has committed them, because he bestows importance on them, and, since he is not omnipotent and thus meets retaliation, because he is punished for committing them. So he says, 'I found out 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'....

The Misfit has already forgotten killing his father.... The amnesia which frees the Oedipal man from psychological suffering also frees the demonic man from the guilt that would refute his independence. If the demonic man is to be completely his own lord and master, he cannot admit an absolute outside of his own wishes; thus he cannot allow himself to feel guilty about what he has done, especially about the central act that has declared his independence from the father. Similarly, in terms of the Fall, man asserts himself against the power outside of himself; then he must forget the Fall to deny guilt and to deny that there was anything to fall from. Thus, both consciously through his statements on crimes and unconsciously through amnesia, The Misfit tries to deny the intrinsic importance of his actions, which have come to seem things alien from himself.... He lives in a shadow world of arbitrary gestures that are no more than expressions of his isolated self.

At one point The Misfit does state one ultimate concern as the alternative to following Jesus: to enjoy oneself through meanness, because there is 'no pleasure but meanness.' But this sadistic hedonism is a hoax, for he does not enjoy killing. Unlike Bobby Lee, his chortling sidekick, The Misfit acts either disinterestedly or compulsively; and after he has killed the grandmother he admits, 'It's no real pleasure in life.' The usual interpretation of this statement is that The Misfit is passing judgment on his life, and this interpretation seems true, for the statement does have a terrifying effect, but it does not get far enough into the character. The Misfit is not only judging his life by the standard of pleasure, but he is also admitting implicitly that pleasure is not really the end of his actions. Hedonism is a comforting ethic for the sadist. It allows him to assert his independence from external responsibilities but also to explain his actions and to believe that they are founded on an ultimate concern that is comfortably familiar and stable. But for The Misfit, as for other sadists, this simplified pleasure principle is only a rationalization. So, when he has compulsively killed the grandmother, not for pleasure but from fear and defensiveness, and when he has seen the yodeling Bobby Lee as caricaturing the pleasure of meanness, he admits that his professed motives are false. Since he acts solely in defiance and self-assertion, he has no appeal, not even to pleasure....

The Misfit has complete freedom of choice insofar as no alternative is intrinsically better than any other, since there is no such thing as the good. When alternatives are equally meaningless, however, freedom of choice is useless. Thus, Kierkegaard claims that the defiant man is a king without a country. Even if The Misfit could escape completely what is pursuing him and what forces him to recoil from the grandmother, he would become only the lord of nothing, a condition suggested by his moments of terrifying detachment.... The demonic sufferer will not accept help from without... While being offended by his suffering, he will not give up this claim against existence, this righteousness by reason of misery... The Misfit insists upon his justification through suffering and through unjust treatment.... He claims that he now keeps a signed copy of everything he does so that he will be able to prove that he has not been treated right: 'I call myself The Misfit,' he said, 'because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.' [This is a claim] against the goodness and justice of God.... He complains that he suffers because of injustice and divine determination, but he will not accept divine help.... Such contradictions are logically irreconcilable, but they are psychologically consistent in the absurd attitudes of the demonic man....

In the end of the story it is not The Misfit, with his acute and interestingly perverted consciousness, who triumphs; it is the obtuse but good-hearted grandmother as she dies in a moment of intuitive selflessness. She performs the one act that The Misfit will not do, losing the self in order to gain it.... She is...a doting mother to children, cats, and pickaninnies. These attitudes are shown mainly to be ridiculous in their sentimentality and condescension, but they do come from a real, if distorted, capacity for affection. Her recognition of The Misfit as one of her babies is partly an extension of this capacity. It is, however, more than a quantitative extension, it is a leap of perception. She does not accept him because he is part of her

literal family...she accepts him because he is suffering and, although he will not admit it, needs that acceptance. As the motives for, and objects of, her love change, so does the quality of that love. It becomes agape [spiritual love].

[As] with the mother of 'The Comforts of Home,' there are faint suggestions of the Crucifixion as the grandmother lies 'in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.' From The Misfit's point of view, the association between the old lady and Christ is emphatic: He recoils from her touch and forgiveness because it challenges the obsessive defiance of God he strains to preserve; he kills her as another rejection of Jesus. From an objective point of view, her illumination is a natural sign of grace; such love, like faith and hope, are possible only through God's mercy."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 46-52, 91-92

"The story is focused on the grandmother, who—foolish, xenophobic, racially condescending, and self-righteously banal—is set off from the others... She is the only one of the family who, in some way, expresses care: her personality moves outward toward others, toward the landscape, even toward her cat...whom she will not leave at home for fear he might accidentally turn on the gas and asphyxiate himself. And it is precisely this outward expression of care that will trigger The Misfit's cold rage. One of the oblique signs of her grace, if we may prematurely call it such, is her graciousness, which O'Connor describes with her characteristically macabre humor... 'In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady'.... If she is not precisely dressed to kill, this remnant of Southern gentility is, as it turns out, dressed to be killed....

She recalls...an old plantation house, an idyllic memory of antebellum Southern life in all its imagined innocence and order; the image stands in sharp contrast to the depicted shabbiness of present-day life. And the old lady, in a successful effort to arouse the interest of the party, craftily embellishes her description by adding a secret panel, where the family silver was said to be hidden before Sherman's march. What is barely concealed beneath the literal description of the mansion is its symbolic equivalence to a heavenly mansion; and the addition of the secret panel suggests its mysterious containment of the treasures of the past. It is home in the broadest sense—the place one starts out from, the place to which one returns. This favorite image of O'Connor's has already been noted in the homelier versions of Hazel Motes's Eastrod shack and the Powderhead cabin of the Tarwaters...

Grandmother Bailey awakens from her nap at 'Toombsboro' (the name of a real and desolate little town near Milledgeville, Georgia, by the way) to remember the mansion.... The Misfit evinces a distinguishing gentility of manner, which the old lady, with her desperate equation of manners and morals, mistakes for goodness.... And in The Misfit's accented account of his past, O'Connor mixes just the right elements of classic American drifter and morbid sophisticate to lend credibility and authority to an essentially enigmatic figure. 'I was a gospel singer for awhile'.... At the root of The Misfit's meanness, however, are not these experiences but a cosmic sense of injustice—of a universe out of kilter....

The middle way—the way of [secular] humanism (for example, Rayber)—is, for O'Connor, the way of self-deception and self-destruction.... What The Misfit lacks (and what Hazel and Tarwater, for example, are given) is a vision of grace: and, nostalgically, he yearns for just that... At...the moment of his confessed privation from grace...the grandmother is given her moment of grace.... In her last gesture of gracious care toward the world, the old lady reaches out to touch him on the shoulder. 'The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.' For the old lady's gesture, like Christ's, throws everything off balance, and it is perceived by The Misfit, ironically, as the Snake's temptation. His own act, then, of shooting the woman, is conceived by him...as a reestablishment of the particular order of his own world.... "Shut up, Bobby Lee," The Misfit said. "It's no real pleasure in life". But there is perhaps the seed of a new dissatisfaction in those last words of his, which deny what he had earlier affirmed ('No pleasure but meanness')....The woman's dying posture suggests her saving innocence...pitiable and tragic; but for O'Connor...a death unto salvation."

Miles Orvell

"The text of an *Atlanta Constitution* article of November 6, 1952, p. 29, identifies for us the source of a celebrated sobriquet. This newspaper reference was reprinted in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, Volume III, Autumn 1974. The headline says enough: "'The Misfit' Robs Office, Escapes with \$150.' Flannery O'Connor took a forgotten criminal's alias and used it for larger purposes: *her* Misfit was out of place in a grander way than the original. But we should not forget O'Connor's credentials as 'a literalist of the imagination.' There is always 'a little lower layer.' She meant to mock pop psychology by exploiting the original Misfit's exploitation of a socio-psychological 'excuse' for aberrant behavior. But even a little lower the original meaning of the word 'misfit' has to do with clothing. We should not fail, therefore, to note that The Misfit's 'borrowed' blue jeans are too tight. He leaves the story of course, wearing Bailey's shirt....

By November 15, 1952, The Misfit had been apprehended; he had also advanced himself to page three of *The Atlanta Journal*. The Misfit was a twenty-five-year old named James C. Yancey. He 'was found to be of unsound mind' and committed to the state mental hospital at--Milledgeville. Where else?... He was an unambitious thief, no more. O'Connor took nothing from him but his imposing signature. But it just so happens that there was another well-publicized criminal a loose in Tennessee and Georgia just before the time that O'Connor appropriated the Misfit's name. This other hold-up artist had four important qualities in common with *her* Misfit. First, he inspired a certain amount of terror through several states. Second, he had, or claimed to have, a certain politesse. Third, he wore spectacles. Fourth, he had two accomplices, in more than one account."

J. O. Tate

"A Good Source Is Not So Hard to Find"
The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 9 (1980) 98-102

"One of her most perfectly wrought artifacts... The grandmother is a weak, plebeian version of the gentility of the Old South.... A self-centered romantic, the grandmother arranges reality to suit herself when she can, and indulges in fantasy when she cannot. Her false gentility precludes any honest reaction to life.... Even though she watches Red Sammy treat his wife as a menial, she calls him 'a good man.' She seems completely incapable of dealing with the real world.... To Bailey, her son... reality is a heavy weight. The world is real for him—too real.... His wife... is alienated from reality by her passivity.... Only the children respond honestly (if brattishly) to reality. They fade out of view when the Misfit takes over the scene... The story seems to imply that the children instinctively see the visible world truly, and are therefore open to invisible reality.

When the family stops for lunch at The Tower... the two references to the monkey which frame the family's visit to the lunchroom seem to imply a comparison between man's power to deal subjectively with reality, and an animal's instinctive objective response.... So real are the events of the story that one can accept the metaphysical turn which the story takes when the Misfit enters.... The Misfit apprehends visible reality honestly; the grandmother rearranges visible and invisible reality to suit herself.... 'We turned over twice!' said the grandmother. 'Oncet,' the Misfit corrected. 'We seen it happen'.... For the Misfit, it mattered whether or not Christ was God: if he was, then all lives were His; if He was not, then life was meaningless. For the grandmother, it really did not matter. She could adjust supernatural reality to her own liking—'Maybe He didn't raise the dead'... Although she talked religion... it is evident that Christ has no reality in her life....

As her confrontation with the Misfit becomes more intense, more *real*, the gentility is stripped away. This is symbolized by the fate of her hat, the true sign of a lady.... 'She let it fall to the ground'.... Her concern becomes more oriented to someone other than herself. Although she begins by begging for her life, she ends by pleading with the criminal to save himself. She tells him over and over to pray.... In a final moment of absolute reality, all pretense is over and vision fills the void: 'the grandmother's head cleared for an instant,' and her heart embraces the criminal in a movement of perfect charity.... The distance which the grandmother traveled... is the distance from her vacuous comment, 'look at the cute little pickaninny' to her amazed realization of the bonds of humanity—'Why, you're one of my babies.' The story's moment of

grace is extended by the description of the dead woman 'with her legs crossed under her like a child's [reborn in an act of selfless love] and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.'

The Misfit explains his philosophy clearly, and its echoes can be heard in the voices of Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and other alienated agnostics of our time. Because he 'wasn't there,' and he couldn't 'know,' he refused to open his mind to belief. Some writers might have made him an existential hero, but Flannery O'Connor portrays the moral sterility of his world. The Misfit describes the world of the agnostic, forced to meaningless suffering in a world beyond his understanding... Symbolic of the Misfit's spiritual condition is the sky which overhangs the scene of the six passionless murders... 'Ain't a cloud in the sky'... The sun suggests divinity, and clouds suggest rain, a biblical symbol for grace. The blankness of the sky suggests the Misfit's spiritually unlighted, unnourished world.

Yet the Misfit is a 'good man' in many respects. The author draws him with compassion and puts him far ahead of Bailey and Red Sammy in gentleness and politeness.... Pride in his self-sufficiency blocks his apprehension of spiritual reality.... His father had said of him when he was a child that he would have to know the 'why' of everything. This complete dependence on reason excludes any apprehension of that which the mind of man cannot encompass.... That he...repudiates any reaching out toward supernatural reality becomes evident when he answers the grandmother's question, 'Why don't you pray?' with the dogmatic assertion, 'I don't want no hep; I'm doing all right by myself'.... The books in Flannery O'Connor's library give strong evidence of her concern with this type of pride, which is the cause of spiritual alienation....

The Misfit is...a misfit because he belongs neither with the complacent nor with the believers.... Faith implies an acceptance of mystery, which, for the Misfit, is impossible, because he has to know 'why.' The story leaves open the possibility that the grandmother's mysterious action of love will open the Misfit's mind to the reality of mystery."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.

Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 69-75

"According to O'Connor, the story is intended to demonstrate the efficacious operation of grace in extremity. On another level, however, the events suggest the disturbing possibility of a contrary—even nihilistic—interpretation [Postmodernist].... In O'Connor's view, there seems to be no place in the divine scheme for human imperfection.... [False. Postmodernists are ignorant of Christianity.] The common frailties of humanity are unacceptable [like murder?], and the imperfect specimen deserves to be damned for his failings or blasted into salvation by a final insurgence of grace that is produced in an extreme moment.... [This atheist hostility falsifies O'Connor, implying that grace comes from the gun rather than from God—"blasted into salvation." The grandmother displays the evidence of her salvation, her reception of grace, *before* she is shot.] The wholesale slaughter of the grandmother and her family through their chance meeting with a maniacal stranger might well support a nihilistic world view... [If so, the atheist critic is morally equivalent to The Misfit.]

The old lady...dresses as if she were playing the role of 'archetypal grandmother'.... [Her] dress...reflects a whole range of values deeply associated with the 'gentility' with which she so closely identifies herself.... Her constant lecturing to her grandchildren evokes a stream of sassy rebuttal, but the grandmother gamely ignores the various rebukes and secretly connives to get her own way... The foolish grandmother...must be brought to the brink of catastrophe before she forgets her obsessive self-concern in a splendid moment of selfless compassion....shot down by a maniac in cold blood, but not before she experiences that influx of love which is the mark of her final election. Fire, rapes physical and spiritual, homicide—all are weapons of the divine arsenal....

The tension which has been introduced through the family antagonisms and reinforced through the various references to the homicidal maniac who is known to be at large in the area is unleashed in full force when the car flips into the ditch and the murderers materialize on the horizon... The grandmother has brought the family to disaster. Her petty selfishness has caused them to detour off the main road to search for the misplaced plantation, just as she, through her stubborn willfulness, has placed the cat in position

ready to spring onto Bailey's neck and to precipitate the accident.... The grandmother seals the family's fate when she blurts out her recognition of the Misfit, the maniac who now stands before them. Typically, the grandmother attempts to forestall the gunman's violence with conversation. She pleads with him on religious grounds, appeals to his family background, and offers him money and clothing....

The Misfit, in turn, participates willingly in the dialogue.... Like a Kafka hero, he cannot remember the crime of which he stands convicted. The prison psychiatrist has told him that he killed his father, but whether this act was literal or symbolic is not made clear.... The Misfit concludes that one has only two real choices: to believe in Christ and follow Him, or to deny Christ and pursue a life of evil. Through the Misfit's words, O'Connor by implication indicts all who refuse either to affirm or deny."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 27, 37, 63, 70-73

"A story that contains some of the best O'Connor comedy... What we have is a skillful and richly entertaining domestic comedy of a not very lighthearted...kind.... Much of the charm of [the]...comic characterization one may certainly lay to O'Connor's gift for folk speech.... The comedy issues, as it often does in O'Connor, from the author's dry, deadpan, seemingly unamused reporting of the characters' hilarious actions and appearance. Like many good modern comedies, the story is...all the funnier for not appearing to be told in a funny way. The grandmother, of course, is the largest and funniest figure... Our easy enjoyment of the domestic comedy of this very ordinary family excursion begins at this point [the appearance of the Misfit] sharply to subside. Here the story clearly takes a much more solemn turn than we had expected it to—just *how* solemn we are not yet sure....

Like so many O'Connor vignettes, the opening scene is remarkable for what it accomplishes in a brief space; the vivid visual picture is etched in with swift, deft strokes, and the speech of the grandmother and the children...is also deftly, wittily done, so that even at the end of the first page we have a sharp sense of the personalities involved and a feeling for the kind of family life that is in question. What is particularly impressive here is the way the visual image—the image of the family gathered in the living area of the house on what is perhaps a Sunday afternoon—takes shape from the ever-widening lens of the eye of the story.... During the trip the next day we continue to relish the comical side of the grandmother's character: her busybody backseat driving—which so infuriates her ill-natured son Bailey... [Yet] it is certainly possible to feel affection for the grandmother... It is the grandmother, moreover, who sees the beauties of the Georgia landscape...

The chief horror of the whole massacre scene is the way in which his casual discussion...is punctuated by his polite commands for the execution of the other members of the family. The grandmother grows dizzier and dizzier as the orders are carried out, and finally she seems, in a sequence that has been given as many as half a dozen conflicting interpretations, to take leave of her senses altogether.... [This atheist critic is too irreligious to understand the spiritual dimension and sides with Satan against God, exalting a cold-blooded murderer over an innocent Christian grandmother]: *The Misfit is really the one courageous and admirable figure in the story.* ["Admirable?" The critic describes herself as "simply too far gone in anthropocentric irreligiosity." She replaces what she recognizes as the religious belief of the author with her own disbelief, which is irrelevant--an example of Postmodern egotism and the desire to censor the beliefs of others--a fascist impulse characteristic of Feminists. Italics added.]

Martha Stephens
The Question of Flannery O'Connor
(LSU 1973) 17-34

"At the risk of having my garage burned (in lieu of a barn) by her faithful admirers, I am going to show why I am convinced that Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is a flawed short story. This is not to say that the story is totally without merit. To the contrary, it has several redeeming features, one, from the teacher's standpoint, being the flaw itself. But just as one or two robins do not make a spring, so too an interesting character or fascinating event does not necessarily make a successful story. Before getting down to particulars, I must give my reasons for severely criticizing such a fine writer as the late Miss O'Connor. To be brief: 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' does not bear up under close analysis; *yet*, it has

been praised in terms bordering upon adoration, and has been widely anthologized and purveyed to college students as a shining example of--well--*symbolism--or something* [Here this literal-minded critic becomes irrelevant. A critic who does not understand symbolism--and *mocks* it!--is incompetent. Italics added.] Regardless of what the reason, a shift in point of view in a short story is confusing, as I believe I have demonstrated'.... [Yes, you have demonstrated your confusion.]

William S. Doxey

"A Dissenting Opinion of Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
Studies in Short Fiction 10 (1973): 199-204

"We have O'Connor's testimony that the moment of grace in the story for her 'is the Grandmother's recognition that the Misfit is one of her children'... As O'Connor so often observed, all one has to do is read the newspapers to verify this daily eruption of violence. The principal irony of the earlier scene is doubtlessly the revelation that the grandmother's unconscious desire to have her own way about the vacation (she wanted to go to East Tennessee rather than Florida) is responsible for the family tragedy: while they are still in Georgia, she directs them to a plantation that is actually in Tennessee. So shocked is she by the realization of her mistake that she upsets the cat's basket, creating the panic that causes the accident.... The Misfit, known to be headed for Florida, is introduced in the first paragraph, in support of the grandmother's preference for a vacation in Tennessee.

Her attire for the trip is so impeccably proper that 'in case of an accident anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.' Pointing out a small cemetery that they pass with 'five or six graves' in it, the grandmother explains that it is an 'old family burying ground...that belonged to the plantation.' The graveyard is of course just the size they will need at the end of the story if we take the 'or six' as an ironic accommodation of the baby. When they stop for lunch at The Tower, Red Sammy's wife interjects a harsh note of reality into a superficial exchange between her husband and the grandmother when she warns, 'It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust.... And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody.' It is 'outside of Toomsboro' that the grandmother mistakenly recalls the plantation that they detour (permanently) to visit. And throughout the story until they are escorted off into the woods to be shot, John Wesley and June Star behave so hatefully...even The Misfit seems lovable by contrast....

Although it is the grandmother who urges The Misfit to pray and introduces Jesus into their conversation, The Misfit is the one who recalls how 'Jesus thrown everything off balance.' He feels that like Jesus he has suffered undeservedly (hence his name), the only difference being that 'He hadn't committed any crime' and they could prove at least one on The Misfit. What Jesus should not have done, The Misfit claims, was raise the dead: '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'....

The grandmother's response to the word that opens up a dimension of reality her vapid gentility is inclined to disregard is the perfect counterpart of The Misfit's. 'Not knowing what she was saying,' she mumbles a denial, 'Maybe He didn't raise the dead,' and then reaches out to The Misfit as if she actually believes 'Jesus...raised the dead' when she acknowledges her responsibility for his sin, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She is the mother of his sin inasmuch as she helped to make the world that created his need. To The Misfit her touch is like the bite of a snake. The gesture of recognition and acceptance provokes immediate violence.

The Misfit denies the resurrection in deed and thereby the possibility of ultimate meaning in life, yet seems in the end to imply a desire to accept it; he is at least painfully dissatisfied with the fruit of his choice.... The Misfit himself acknowledges how the extreme situation has revealed her essential goodness. 'She would of been a good woman,' he tells Bobby Lee, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' Her appearance in death confirms the renewal implied in his words; her legs are crossed under her 'like a child's' and 'her face [is] smiling up at the cloudless sky.' (Even Bailey had shown signs of filial piety under the threat of death; the man who had just cursed his mother for identifying The Misfit said affectionately as he left for the woods, 'I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!').... It is the

grandmother's confession that reveals a sure basis of human goodness, the admission of our involvement in the sins of the world."

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 60-64

"When she is alone with this creature of nature, a victim of society and more especially society's *language* ('They had the papers on me'), the grandmother loses her cultural attributes: here, language. When the grandmother is alone with The Misfit, she has 'lost her voice.' Then and only then, after the beginnings of a process of 'naturalization,' does the grandmother reach a form of expression that is no longer an attempt to dominate the world but rather the basic and multi-faceted language of invocation: 'Jesus, Jesus,' meaning Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if it might be cursing.' The verb clauses, 'the grandmother found...she found herself,' clearly demonstrate that the grandmother has progressed from the order of desire (active) to the order of destiny (passive). She is thus ready to receive the revelation, for it is by reaching the order of nature from which Grace springs that man can receive revelations.... By attaining the language of invocation, that is, the realm of Christ...the grandmother attains the realm of God, previously defined by Red Sammy's wife as a green place: 'It isn't a soul *in this green world of God* that you can trust.'

Thus, by reaching the consciousness of Jesus beyond prayer (social and verbal), the grandmother, at the very moment of her death, receives the revelation of the *natural order* of God. This revelation is expressed to the fullest by her last remark, which takes on its full meaning only in relation (opposition) to an indication that the narrator gave us (but which could perfectly well be expressed from the grandmother's point of view) at the very beginning of the story: 'Bailey was *the son* she lived with, her *only* boy'; 'Why you're one of my *babies*. You're *one of my own children*'...a consciousness of the universal love that God has inscribed in the order of nature."

Claude Richard
"Desire and Destiny in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
Delta 2 (1976) 61-74 (France)

"It is difficult to explain the crucial event in this story, the sudden and abrupt *conversion* of the grandmother [She was already a Christian.], without reference to evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, The Misfit, the other major character in 'A Good Man,' is a visible manifestation of the theological contradictions which Milder describes in his discussion of O'Connor: *much like his author*, The Misfit is a Bible Belt Fundamentalist in spite of himself. [O'Connor is a Catholic, not a Protestant. Italics added.] Thus, we can learn something significant about this story in particular, as well as its author's more significant religious beliefs, by considering the extent to which 'A Good Man' reveals the conflict between Flannery O'Connor's avowed Catholicism and her tendency to view religious experience in the context of Protestant Election...

On the most general level, the story has resonances of the typical spiritual allegory of the Protestant pilgrim [or the Catholic pilgrim, as in Dante] Once this overall similarity to the situation in, say, *Pilgrim's Progress*, is established, specific differences stand forth. The family in O'Connor's story is on a journey, but unlike the pilgrim in Bunyan's book, they are literally, and spiritually, on vacation; it is appropriate that they get lost, for though they are headed for Florida in a sense, they are really going nowhere. O'Connor's story also differs from Bunyan's in that the entire family comes along; given the incessant bickering of the family in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' it is obvious, in retrospect, why the pilgrim in *Pilgrim's Progress* who hopes to succeed must leave his family behind. The accident that ends with the automobile 'in a gulch off the side of the road' is reminiscent of the 'slough of despond' that temporarily interrupts the quest in *Pilgrim's Progress*. The crucial difference is that the family does not survive. Their executor, The Misfit, appears on the road above them in his 'hearse-like' automobile, an Anti-Christ in his chariot, announcing the apocalypse. The Misfit's role as an Anti-Christ is subsequently maintained by other ironic inversions of divine characteristics. Unlike Christ, who suffered little children to come unto Him, the Misfit shuns John Wesley and June Star, for children make him 'nervous.' His reference to the fact that he 'was a different breed of dog' from his brothers and sisters is similarly indicative of his satanic nature, for 'dog' is, of course, 'God' spelled backwards, and demonology is based on inverting the sacred.

This set of inversions is consistent with The Misfit's entire personality, for he is a sort of Protestant exegetical scholar *manque*. Temperamentally, he is suited for the kind of profound, sustained curiosity that motivates the biblical scholar. His father used to describe this trait in a down-to-earth way: 'It's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's gong to be into everything.' The Misfit even looks like a scholar: 'His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look.' Like many literal interpreters of the Bible, he has an inordinate respect for the written word. He does not, for example, question that he is guilty of the crime for which was originally sent to prison, though he confesses he cannot recall exactly what he did. But never mind, he tells the grandmother: 'It wasn't no mistake. They had the papers on me.' For the original, but impossible, goal of tracking down his original sin, he has substituted the rectitude of keeping good records.... His interpretation of the prison psychiatrist's oedipal diagnosis is similarly indicative of exaggerated faith in the literal word. His literal understanding of Freud is but a secular correlative of a Fundamentalist reading of the Bible...

The Misfit is the man from Missouri who believes only in what he has seen, thus we learn immediately the difference between the grandmother's hypocrisy and his fidelity to his own experience when he corrects her version of the accident, stating that the car actually only turned over 'once,' for he had seen it happen. All he lacks is faith, for had he been there when Jesus 'raised the dead,' he would have immediately and radically changed his life: 'Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead'.... The central message of The Misfit's sermon, for a sermon is what his remarks amount to, is a familiar one in Flannery O'Connor's fiction; there is no middle ground between absolute belief in Christ's messianic function and a belief that life is nasty, brutish, and short. In fact, since The Misfit lacks faith in Christ's resurrection, he actually sees it as his duty to make life nastier, shorter, and more brutish. Implicit in the Manichean reduction of life to two antithetical alternatives is the Protestant [Christian] insistence on man's total depravity without God's saving grace. The misfit describes this belief as it applies to himself: 'I found out 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.'

The Misfit not only assumes that man is inherently guilty; he also assumes men are individually responsible for Original Sin. Given this congenital depravity, man is utterly incapable of doing anything to effect his own salvation. To do so would be roughly equivalent to pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. Here we have the surest sign of Protestantism [of Christianity. Read the Bible.]: the absolute necessity of faith and, as a corollary, the belief that good works are at most merely a sign of God's favor.

The Misfit *must be given credit* for acting in conformity with his nature. [Should Satan? Italics added.] We cannot say as much for the grandmother, for she is, until the moment of her death, a thorough hypocrite. It is of crucial importance that her election occurs at the very moment when she is at her most hypocritical. She has, in fact, just conceded--she will do anything to survive--that 'maybe He [Christ] didn't raise the dead' after all. The moment of her election merits quoting at length....

It is clear that the grandmother is a better woman at the moment of her death than she had been at any time heretofore; or, as The Misfit puts it, 'She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' The grandmother's salvation occurs when 'her head cleared for an instant'; thus her legs, earlier described as 'twisted' under her, are, subsequent to her salvation, 'crossed under her like a child's.' Similarly, for the first and only time, she imitates the rhetoric of the New Testament, not for her own selfish purposes, but because she actually feels a maternal concern for The Misfit as one of her own children.

The extraordinary thing about the grandmother's story is the radical discontinuity between her behavior and her redemption. In fact, this discontinuity is most apparent during the moments that immediately precede her *conversion* [She is already a Christian. Italics added.] How could the irrelevance of good works for salvation be more effectively demonstrated? How could there be any relationship between good works and election when it is the confrontation with death that brings about the moment of grace? Clearly, the grandmother will not be around for any good works, since her death is the occasion for her *conversion*. [Redemption. She was already a Christian. Every human is a sinner and most are hypocrites, including converted Christians. Italics added.]

There is another more explicit indication of the paradoxical relationship between merit and outcome in 'A Good Man': The Misfit's very name is itself indicative of his inability to discover how his punishment fits his crime. This discontinuity is but the converse of the discrepancy between the grandmother's behavior and her extraordinary fate. If Christ has, in fact, 'thrown everything off balance' by overcoming death, His offer of salvation through grace has also disturbed the balance of the [human] scales of justice. Again, broadly speaking, the imbalance implicit in the irrelevance of good works and the emphasis on the gift of faith is Protestant. [And Catholic, "broadly speaking."] The Misfit accepts this imbalance as the only conceivable interpretation of Christianity, even as he agonizes over the injustice of his own damnation. For without the gift of faith, The Misfit is inevitably unable to establish whether or not Christ actually rose from the dead: 'It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now.' Where, he asks, is the justice in a world in which grace is a gift, a gift he feels temperamentally incapable of receiving? Where is the justice when the word 'grace' actually means 'favor'? For surely, by the very definition of the word, some people are 'favored' or 'gifted' and some are not. [Some people have faith in Christ and some do not.]

This radical discontinuity between man's efforts and the divine gift of grace is the most obvious, and the most important aspect of Flannery O'Connor's Protestantism. Again, the discontinuity is apparent in fates of both of the main characters in 'A Good Man': The Misfit is genuinely concerned--in fact he is obsessed--with the ultimate issues of the human condition, while the grandmother, up to the very instant of her election, is a nauseating hypocrite. Thus, The Misfit's sincere efforts to investigate his place in the universe are to no avail, while the grandmother seems to stumble into salvation. Milder's comments on Protestantism are illuminating with respect to the fate of both characters. The attempt of The Misfit to understand his condition is bound to fail, for total depravity decrees 'that man's reason has become so obscured since the Fall and his nature so debased that he is wholly incapable of virtue in his unregenerate state.'

On the other hand, Milder's remarks on the grandmother are revealing to the extent that they tend to distort her experience. He sees 'A Good Man' as one of O'Connor's more Catholic works in that the grandmother's election demonstrates 'a free acceptance of grace,' an aspect of the episode that Milder sees as 'one of the few remaining doctrinal points which...[links Flannery O'Connor] to the Catholic tradition.' In the first place, it is obvious that 'acceptance,' free or otherwise, is not a very active word to describe the grandmother's role in the episode. Even at that, her will is barely apparent in what looks like gratuitous gesture that is utterly antithetical to everything else in her life. In fact, to attempt to touch The Misfit is much like the existentialist's gratuitous act in its radical discontinuity from what went before. Given the doctrine of total depravity, election must be gratuitous, which is to say a gift given out of the context of the receiver's life. Thus, the grandmother is suddenly *converted* [Italics added.] by an overwhelming infusion of grace, an experience much like St. Paul's abrupt enlightenment at the moment of his fall from his horse. What we have, in short, is Protestant election.

There are obvious aesthetic advantages to this kind of abrupt turn-about through a direct confrontation with God. The experience of election, as Milder perceptively points out, is far more likely to be dramatically moving than gradual spiritual improvement through the mediation of the sacraments or the practice of good works. But what is missing from the stunning *conversion* [Italics added.] of the grandmother is the sense of balance, the sense of justice, so central to what Thomas Aquinas called the *via media*, or the middle way. Acting in good faith is not, in this context, acting according to a specific body of doctrine, but rather the sort of endeavor The Misfit describes. He feels this kind of effort ought to be sufficient, but he does not believe it actually is. Conversely, the world in which the grandmother seems to be so arbitrarily saved, so far off the beaten track, or what we might call a middle way, does seem off-balance. [The "balance" is heavenly not earthly, God's not man's.]

The grotesque element that so many people have noted in O'Connor's fiction is in great part a result of this puzzling void between the few who seem to be somewhat arbitrarily saved, and just about everybody else, the depraved. The void is also a major feature of the surrealistic element in O'Connor's fiction, that nightmarish quality that pervades the allegorical landscapes in which her grotesque figures engage in Manichean struggle. But if we step back from the works and view them in the context of their author's avowed beliefs, the most significant struggle is not this Manichean battle between good and evil, but rather the conflict between Flannery O'Connor's tendency to conceive of the human condition in terms of stark

polarities, and the tendency, infrequently fulfilled but implicit in her Catholicism, to view mankind in the context of a middle way. It is because of this second attitude that the world of her fiction appears to The Misfit, to the Catholic humanist in Flannery O'Connor, and no doubt to many readers as well, as off-balance, almost at times in fact, as grotesque."

Michael O. Bellamy
"Everything Off Balance: Protestant Election in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 8 (1979) 116-24

"The Misfit remarks... 'She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' The implication is clearly that consciousness of mortality is the essential prerequisite for virtue."

Carol Shloss
Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference
(LSU 1980) 7

"We as readers should have a better understanding of how carefully O'Connor has used realistic detail for symbolic effects.... I believe that the towns alluded to along the route which the family travels were chosen for two reasons: first, and most obviously, to foreshadow; and second, to augment the theme of the story. Furthermore, because the numerous places mentioned in the story can actually be found on the map, with only one important exception.... One can literally follow the journey of the family with a road map and take the mileage they put on their car before the wreck... The grandmother points out a graveyard with five or six graves fenced off in the middle of a large cotton field, which is a rather obvious foreshadowing of the fate that will befall the family....

The family's journey is interrupted by a stop for a lunch of barbecued sandwiches at a cafe called The Tower which is located in 'a clearing outside of Timothy.' For comic effect this is one of the great scenes in all of Flannery O'Connor's fiction; yet, here one cannot plot the location of the place on the map for there is no town of Timothy in Georgia.... O'Connor selected the name Timothy for the ironic effect it would produce. The allusion here is not geographical but Biblical, and the Timothy alluded to is almost certainly the book in the New Testament which bears the same name.... O'Connor's allusion ironically tells us just where these modern-day people are in error. For example, these verses seem to apply especially to Bailey. 'He [the husband] must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect' (1 Tim. 3:4-5)....

The grandmother's superficial conception of values is ironically underscored in the vain discussions with her grandchildren about what kind of conduct was once expected from children and her trivial remarks about plantation days and old suitors. Nowhere are her ideas more tellingly satirized than in her conversation with Red Sammy in the cafe where both complain of misplaced trust in their fellow man, which the grandmother sees as an indication of the general lack of manners in the modern world.... It is generally agreed that in the traumatic moments that follow in which the grandmother witnesses the deaths of her family and anticipates her own she does learn a lesson she has not heeded previously during her life. This lesson is the central message which Paul attempts to convey to Christians through Timothy and that is, 'There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself to save mankind' (1 Tim. 2:5). The evidence for assuming that she has come to a belated awareness that her faith has been misplaced in the pursuit of social graces and a concern with manners is limited to The Misfit's remark. 'She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' Furthermore, in death she appears like a child, and her face is 'smiling up at the cloudless sky,' suggesting that she has found grace at last....

Another passage from Timothy seems especially applicable at this point: 'The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with hot iron' (1 Tim. 4:1-12). Although the whole cast of characters in the story has abandoned the faith and followed the wrong paths, the indictment of these lines would apply most forcibly to The Misfit who wears glasses and has a scholarly look. He has indeed been taught by demons, and from the Christian point of view that O'Connor takes in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' he is a hypocritical liar who has no faith in a moral purpose in the

universe and teaches that '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.' Thus, according to the ethics of this teacher, goodness is a matter of sadistic gratification. 'No pleasure but meanness,' he says, indicating how completely his conscience has been seared and his vision warped by his hedonistic atheism....

There is no doubt that Paul wrote from a similar standpoint, and his letter to Timothy has the same hortatory, moralizing tone that we find just below the surface in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find.' Thus, it seems likely that she put the town of Timothy on the map because she wanted the reader to pick up the allusion and perhaps refresh himself on the contents of the New Testament, but more probably she saw the parallel between her modern-day characters who have left the main road of Christian faith and Paul's warning to the church when he feared it was in danger off into the byways of heresy. Just the name of the town where the family stops for lunch is carefully chosen, so it the name of Red Sammy's cafe. In Christian iconography towers are ambivalent symbols...and can represent either good or evil qualities. For example, the Tower of Babel is symbolic of man's pride and stands for misbegotten human enterprises. The fate of the tower and its architects shows the consequences of overconfidence in the pursuit of fanciful ideas.... As well as its nugatory meaning, the tower is a traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary and is a token of her purity and powers of transformation...a place associated with safety and sanctuary....

As it so happens there is a Toombsboro (spelled without the 'b') on the map and it is only twenty-three miles south of Milledgeville, Flannery O'Connor's home.... If one follows the usual route from Atlanta to Milledgeville (Georgia Highway 212), the distance is 93 miles, and if one adds to this the 23 miles further to Toombsboro, plus the estimated 15 or so miles that the detour to the plantation takes, then it can be calculated that the family has come a total of 130 miles....

In the course of this story, the family's trip takes them from their complacent and smug living room to a confrontation with ultimate evil and ultimate reality as well. They are not prepared for the meeting because, like the heretics who concerned Paul in his epistle to Timothy, they have been occupied with the trivial things and involved in quarrels; and, like the builders of the Tower of Babel, they are preoccupied with vain enterprises.

Flannery O'Connor saw herself as a prophetic writer and her authorial strategy was to shock; her fiction is intended as a rebuke to rationalistic, materialistic and humanistic thought--the heresies of the twentieth century. She believed that people in the modern world were not following the true path and had to be made to see their condition for what it was--a wandering by the wayside. In 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' the family's wayward lives are given direction in their final moments and from O'Connor's point of view they are at last on the right road."

Hallman B. Bryant
"Reading the Map in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
Studies in Short Fiction 18 (1981) 301-07

"The grandmother in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' finally sees literally, that she is responsible for the Misfit *because* God literally loves her, despite the apparent terrible, murderous, absence of love; she sees that her cliches about Jesus are literally true, even though she had used them throughout the story when she had nothing to say."

Ronald Schleifer
"Rural Gothic"
Modern Fiction Studies 28.3 (Autumn 1982)

"One reason for its popularity may well be precisely that 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' writes large the representative O'Connor themes and methods--comedy, violence, theological concern--and thus makes them quickly and unmistakably available. But another, surely, is the primordial appeal of the story... [It] captures a very old truth, that in the midst of life we are in death, in its most compelling modern form. The characteristic contemporary nightmare of the sudden onslaught of violent death...the victims helpless either to escape or to defend themselves--this scenario...is the very basis of the story and the source of its immediate hold on our imaginations....

The first half of the story is given over to the narrator's relentless revelation of the selfishness, the vacuousness, the nastiness of this family, and especially of its key member, the grandmother. In the exposure of her smugness, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, of her egoistic manipulation of others, of the role of all these qualities in the causing of the car accident, the presentation walks a fine tonal line between laughter and outrage.... As the menacing undercurrent of the first part of the story rises to dominate the second, the prevailing comedy of the first half sinks and darkens still further, but does not disappear.... The grandmother becomes not less but more absurd, for her sentimental gentilities were never so preposterously at odds with the actual situation.... The controlled detachment of the narrative voice perhaps makes the horror of the second half of the story bearable....

The description of the grandmother...reaches beyond social satire to capture her moderation, worldly prudence, or 'balance'—that very balance which The Misfit says, Jesus has forever destroyed.... Whereas The Misfit 'squats' soon after his entrance into the story and does not budge from that position until he leaps back to shoot the old woman, the grandmother stands 'looking down on him' through almost all of their dialogue....The grandmother's final attempt to stave off the inevitable is a hysterically garbled parody of all her arguments.... Amongst the shattered confusion of her customary values, she collapses from her position above The Misfit, literally sinking down to his level of anguish and uncertainty. She cannot answer his arguments, but, stripped of her middle-class pretensions and self-serving assurances, she can, and does, respond as a 'grand-mother'...to his suffering. Rather than attempting to manipulate those around her to her own ends, for the first time she 'reach[es]' out to the need of this surrogate child. The Misfit, of course, shoots her at once.... The...intensity of situation...strips away the accretions of the false self.... As he discloses his deepest torment, she responds with her deepest self. It is the convergence that the entire latter half of [the story] has been moving relentless toward.

After the car accident, the landscape becomes an ominous and ever more animated witness to grim actions. The grandmother and her family suddenly discover themselves surrounded by woods that are 'tall and dark and deep' and that after The Misfit's appearance 'gaped like a dark open mouth.' When the first pistol shots are fired from those woods, the grandmother 'could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath'... The grandmother does indeed have what O'Connor calls her 'special kind of triumph,' her 'moment of grace,' but she is made to pay immediately not only for that moment but for all her conduct with her life. At this point the two poles of The Misfit's conundrum, Jesus and meanness, converge, and the ambivalence is captured in the final image of the grandmother as a beatific corpse in a puddle of blood.... We receive rapid successive glimpses of both the grandmother's soul and her dead body, an intimation of Jesus and an expression of meanness, the antithetical terms momentarily brought together in the image of her smiling corpse....

The old lady's recognition of this criminal as 'one of my own children' is made literally plausible by his donning of the same shirt her son Bailey had been wearing earlier... Bailey's most salient trait, his edgy sullenness, is clearly the mask of suppressed anger toward his garrulous and manipulative mother, an anger that bursts through only once, in his 'shocking' rebuke to her when she identifies The Misfit....[who] symbolically acts out the rage that Bailey has smothered, the repayment of all her crafty domineering and self-serving hypocrisy, for the smuggled cat, the dirt road, the car accident, the blurting out of the name that ensures the family's doom."

Frederick Asals

Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 68, 72-73, 142-54

"Flannery O'Connor's 'perverted heroes' are men who know all routes are blocked. When the Misfit in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' says that 'Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn't have done it,' in his perverse way he is straddling the American dilemma. For if He actually did raise the dead, then one must seek wholeness by seeking Him; there is no other course. But if He didn't raise the dead, then one is free to kill, enjoy, burn, destroy. *The point is that one never knows.* As the Misfit says, he wasn't there and so he can't say....

The epigraph to "A Good Man" (1955) derives from Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, to the effect that the way to a spiritual life must pass by the dragons, who may devour you. The grandmother feels that the way into

the spirit can be effected without the dragon; but the Misfit, who has no illusions about the spiritual life, is aware that dragons lie everywhere.... 'It's no real pleasure in life,' says the Misfit, and finds a form of salvation [!] everlastingly denied to the grandmother, who seeks it in unfulfilling ways [?].... The Misfit is a prophet of sorts, a dark Jesus." [This critic is another atheist who identifies with *The Misfit!*]

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 25, 230n-231n

"The Misfit...brings about a spiritual askesis [self-discipline] in the people whose lives he invades and upsets. The force of his intrusion ferrets individuals out of their elaborately articulated despair and philistinism, out of the pettiness in which they have sought refuge from the horrible burden of believing, communicating with the Holy. Bringing death, the Misfit brings the grandmother of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' to a searing intuition of the sacred, out of the old-womanly selfishness which has defined her character throughout the story. 'Jesus!' the old lady cried. 'You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people!'... She reaches such a clarity of vision that she is able to recognize what she and the Misfit have in common, and to pity his hopelessness: ... She murmured, 'Why you're one of my own babies. You're one of my own children.'

For the instant before she dies, the sacred takes hold of this old lady and for perhaps the first time in her life she is filled with charity. The Misfit has been the instrument of her salvation, and not entirely unwittingly. He says that 'she would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' He knows that he is sending the old woman off to heaven. This is why he finds no pleasure in killing and destruction. He knows that evil can have no positive impact, cannot redound to its own benefit. If it has any impact, it is as the unwitting servant of the good it despises—and secretly longs for. Evil, for O'Connor as for Milton, is comical. All its violent antics are, in the long view, so much futile slapstick. It cannot affect the ultimate outcome of things."

Jefferson Humphries
The Otherness Within: Gnostic Readings in Marcel Proust, Flannery O'Connor, and Francois Villon
(Louisiana State 1983)

"The Grandmother cajoles and flatters The Misfit in an attempt to save her family, much as we have seen her manipulating that same family beforehand. She is a 'lady' and plays the part, just as she has been careful to dress for it before setting out on the trip. She knows he wouldn't ever *shoot* a lady, that he is a 'good man,' from 'nice people,' with 'not a bit of common blood.' But he will have none of her genteel nonsense, and her attempts to use 'goodness' to disarm him fall as flat as her use of religion for the same purpose.... The Misfit is Christ-haunted (if not Christ-centered), and wholly possessed by a radical sense of the gospel as a sternly either/or proposition. A decision about Jesus determines everything else, and he has said no to Jesus while convinced that the only alternative is as vehement a yes. The Misfit has made his choice and consequently there is no pleasure but meanness.

In contrast the Grandmother introduces religion into her bargaining almost as if it were a card up her sleeve, played when everything else has failed. She tells him that he could be honest if he tried—"Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life"—and to that Kiwanis Club end she tells him to pray, although we sense that he knows more what prayer really entails than she does. The Misfit won't ask for help because he knows he will not take it. In addition to the different ways in which they each talk about religion—he as a profound unbeliever, she as a superficial Christian—we also observe how the Grandmother gradually associates The Misfit with her son. The two are initially juxtaposed when Bailey Boy curses his mother for having publicly recognized the criminal, and The Misfit attempts to comfort her.... Later, when Bailey is sent off to his death and the Grandmother calls after him, she finds herself not actually looking at her son but rather at the one who orders the execution. Finally, The Misfit puts on the dead man's blue parrot shirt, and in so doing appropriates the only physical detail we have been given thus far about Bailey's appearance. Although the Grandmother 'couldn't name what the shirt reminded her of,' The Misfit's putting it on prepares us for her blurring of distinctions between killer and kin that occurs at the story's climax.

Both the talk about Jesus and the confusion of The Misfit with Bailey precipitate the crisis that brings the story rapidly to its conclusion. While the Grandmother passes into a delirium, we watch as The Misfit becomes more and more agitated over a savior he will not believe in because he was not 'there' to know for sure. It is precisely at the point when the two seem most profoundly separate from one another that his first show of vulnerability brings them violently together.... Under the terrible pressure of these events, with a strong sun beating down from the cloudless sky, the old woman suddenly breaks—a moment for which the text allows two very different understandings.

[1] The first would see it as a breakdown, the disorientation of a person pushed too far, both physically and mentally. Minutes before, after hearing the pistol shots that killed her son, the narrator tells us the Grandmother threw back her head 'like a parched old turkey hen crying for water'; here, she looks at The Misfit dressed in Bailey's shirt and allows fantasy to turn him into the family that has just been destroyed. Our last sight of her, childlike and smiling, suggests a break with reality, the madness into which she has fallen. [2] Another possible reading, however, would see this not as a breakdown, but as a breakthrough: it would take the narrator's statement that 'her head cleared for an instant' not as irony, but as a statement of fact. To be sure, normal reality has collapsed under abnormal circumstances, but this has not been a move into madness. Rather, it affords a moment of insight in which the Grandmother finds in The Misfit's anguished face not a murderous enemy, but a beloved child: 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She has spoken of family and blood before—'You don't look a bit like common blood. I know you must come from nice people!'—but it has been only hypocritical smooth-talk designed to win him over. This is something else, an act of love that reaches toward The Misfit in his distress as if he were one of her 'connections' and not the destroyer of them, as if nothing that he had done mattered at all in the face of this transcendent tenderness, smiling up at him even from death.

But if the Grandmother's gesture permits this ambiguity of interpretation, so too does the reaction of The Misfit. On the one hand, we can understand that his violent response to her touch is a response to her violation of that necessary distance between captor and captive, a trespass of a boundary that perhaps threatens him with the possibility of a human relationship that is utterly inadmissible. He can be no mother's son, least of all this one's. His recoil at her touch, 'as if a snake had bitten him,' restores his inviolability, as well as the isolation which his identity as The Misfit absolutely requires. His statement that she would have been a good woman if someone had held a gun to her head every minute of her life is bitterly ironic when goodness here actually means madness. And yet irony aside, the incident has shaken him to the point that while life before now held no pleasure but meanness, now it holds no pleasure at all. He has reasserted his control but lost any joy in its exercise. To this extent, then, the Grandmother's reaching out has humanized him.

The second reading of The Misfit's reaction would depart from the first primarily by extending it backwards into the story, because it understands both the Grandmother's gesture and The Misfit's reaction to it in terms of the religious dialogue that has gone on between them earlier. She has told him to ask Jesus for help: The Misfit has refused, knowing that to ask for it would ultimately mean having to throw everything away and follow Him. Therefore, when the Grandmother moves out in inexplicable compassion toward him, the threat she poses is not as a crazy woman nor even as a prisoner whose blessing of her persecutor violates all the rules; it is a sign of 'what thrown everything off balance' in the first place. He pulls back from what she offers as if it were a deadly snake because he senses that to allow it to strike would, in fact, mean death to his life as The Misfit.

These two readings of the climactic moment in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' are, quite obviously, on something like the order of nature and grace respectively. While each one is plausible, neither is without its hermeneutical problems. The first stays within a largely psychological frame of reference comfortable to the secular reader because it answers to a 'normal' view of the way people work, even under such extreme circumstances as those portrayed here. In other words, the delirious Grandmother confuses Bailey's killer with Bailey, and for this mistake he shoots her, though not without himself being disturbed by the terrible humanity her mad gesture of compassion has exposed him to. But this does not take into account either the conversation about Jesus that preoccupies the whole latter part of the story or the narrator's straightforward introduction of the old woman's move—'the Grandmother's head cleared for an instant.' In other words, a

strictly naturalistic reading of the story does not deal with all that is there; it seems incomplete because of what it omits from consideration.

But while the second approach to the text makes use of its entirety and therefore offers itself as a fuller and more satisfying interpretation, it presupposes a rather great deal. In the first place, it asks you to assume that the particular events of the narrative are part of a larger drama of grace into which its participants are irresistibly drawn, not by coincidence or fate, but by God—actors as ill-equipped for their ultimate role as the Grandmother or as dead set against it as The Misfit. This approach asks you to see them each as one another's divinely-appointed judge, so that while he sentences her to her moment of self-transcendent goodness, she sentences him to a lifetime without pleasure in meanness. Furthermore, it presupposes that the truest understanding of individual or act is not psychological but religious, so that the Grandmother's reaching out to the killer, if irrational, is *above* reason, the revelation of something she participates in, even if it is quite beyond the character we have known thus far. In fact, one might go so far as to say that her inexplicable love for him makes sense only as an expression of God's inexplicable love for us.

This understanding is, of course, very like the one which O'Connor wanted the reader to come away with. We know this for a fact from the remarks she used to preface at least one public reading of the story: '[The Grandmother's] head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by the ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been prattling about so far.' But it is also clear that she made there very explicit remarks in the first place because her experience with readers led her to expect that they would not come up with such conclusions on their own. From asides in her preface to the story, as well as from her letters to people who made inquiries about its meaning, it is painfully obvious that many of them did not. They thought the Grandmother a witch, or The Misfit a satanic hero, or the latter half of the story a dream in Bailey's mind, or the whole business (as *Time* put it) 'witheringly sarcastic.' There were not many eyes sharp enough for what she called 'the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace,' or for 'the nature of the violence which precedes and follows them'."

Peter S. Hawkins

The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, & Iris Murdoch
(Cowley 1983) 40-48

"On recent years critics have worked diligently to reveal the traditions informing Flannery O'Connor's writings. This undertaking has identified several influences on her fiction. Chief among these influences have been the Bible and various Christian thinkers ranging from Aquinas to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jacques Maritain; and next in importance has been the heritage of Poe, Hawthorne, and James. The heritage of the romance tradition, however, did not come to O'Connor simply from her American predecessors. The romance tradition flourished in England too, and among the writers in this tradition was Gilbert K. Chesterton, whose Christian perspective and fictional technique would have appealed to O'Connor...

The genesis of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' has been traced to various news items in the *Atlanta Journal*.... Nevertheless, the most enigmatic moment in the story, The Misfit's conclusion that the grandmother 'would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life,' has no analog in the news accounts O'Connor read in the *Atlanta Constitution*. Its origin appears to be Chesterton's *Manalive*. *Manalive* recounts the strange adventures of Innocent Smith, 'an allegorical practical joker'... Death transforms the grandmother's postlapsarian childlike innocence: 'The grandmother... half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling.' The Misfit's remark, made while looking at the grandmother in this position...recalls Innocent Smith's motivation for shooting at his friends: to make his life good for them every moment of their lives. The similarities between Smith and The Misfit are striking....

Chesterton and O'Connor agree that nature offers humanity no answers to the riddle of life; only the end of life, each individual's experience of the apocalypse of death, can intimate life's meaning.... O'Connor's story does not merely derivatively reuse an episode in Chesterton's novel, but (as one would expect of a work by a major author like O'Connor) it thoroughly recasts this episode. O'Connor's world is patently darker than Chesterton's. Innocent Smith shoots at but never wounds his friends. The Misfit kills his victims. Smith awakens others into the realization that life is worth living: 'It's no real pleasure in life'....

O'Connor apparently appreciated Chesterton's conception of Smith's use of violence in *Manalive*; however, she could not agree with the optimistic conclusion Chesterton derived from Smith's actions. In 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' she transformed the shooting episode in Chesterton's novel to reflect her darker sense of the nature of life. *Manalive* figured in the germinal stages of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' which appears to be in part a deliberate revision of Chesterton's novel."

William J. Scheick
"Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' and G. K. Chesterton's *Manalive*"
Studies in American Fiction 11 (1983) 241-45

"Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' has been for the past decade or more a subject of virtually countless critical readings. Any brilliant work of fiction resists a single interpretation acceptable to everyone, but judging by the variousness and irreconcilability of so many readings of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' one might conclude, as R. V. Cassill does, that like the work of Kafka the story 'may not be susceptible to exhaustive rational analysis.' The suggestion, I believe would be quite apt if applied to a good many O'Connor stories. Not this one, however. If there are in fact authorial lapses, moments when the reader's gaze isled a little awry, they are simply that, lapses, instances of O'Connor nodding.

Much has been made of O'Connor's use of the grotesque, and the vacationing family in 'A Good Man' is a case in point. The family members are portrayed almost exclusively in terms of their vices, so much so, it would seem, as to put them at risk of losing entirely not only the reader's sympathy but even his recognition of them as representatively human--a result certain to drain the story of most of its meaning and power. Such is not the result, however. What otherwise must prompt severity in the reader's response is mitigated here by laughter, the transforming element through which human evil is seen in the more tolerable aspects of folly. The author laughs and so do we, and the moral grossness of the family becomes funny to us. This is what engages and sustains our interest in them and through the effect of distance that humor creates, makes possible our perception of their representative character.

What we see portrayed is increasingly recognizable. Here embodied in this family are standard evils of our culture. Indeed the term 'family' is itself a misnomer, for there is no uniting bond. It is each for himself, without respect, without manners. The children, uncorrected, crudely insult their grandmother, and the grandmother for her own selfish ends uses the children against her surly son. The practice of deceit and the mouthing of pietisms are constants in her life, and her praise of the past when good men were easy to find degrades that past by the banality of her memories. Even such memories as she has are not to be depended on; in fact, it is one of her 'mid-rememberings' that leads the family to disaster.

But this portrait of unrelieved vulgarity is extended, and by more than implication only, to suggest the world at large. This is the function of the interlude at Red Sammy's barbecue joint where the child June Star does her tap routine and Red Sammy bullies his wife and engages with the grandmother in self-congratulatory conversation about the awfulness of the times and how hard it is to find a 'good' man these days. It is hard indeed. In a world portrayed, incidentally, in scores of contemporary TV sit-coms--where is a good man to be found? Nowhere, is the answer, though in one way The Misfit himself comes closest to earning the description.

The Misfit is introduced at the very beginning of the story by the grandmother who is using the threat of him, an escaped convict and killer, as a means of getting her own way with her own son Bailey. After this The Misfit waits unmentioned in the wings until the portrait of this representative family is complete. His physical entrance into the story, a *hardly acceptable coincidence* in terms of purely realistic fiction [This is nonsense. The critic is resisting the story. Italics added.], is in O'Connor's spiritual economy--which determines her technique--like a step in a train of logic. Inert until now, he is nevertheless the conclusion always implicit in the life of the family. Now events produce him in all his terror.

The Misfit comes on the scene of the family's accident in a car that looks like a hearse. The description of his person, generally that of the sinister red-neck of folklore, focuses on a single feature: the silver-rimmed spectacles that give him a scholarly look. This is a clue and a rather pointed one. A scholar is what The Misfit was born to be. As The Misfit tells the grandmother: 'My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters'.... Life and death, land and sea, war and peace, he has seen it all. And his

conclusion, based on his exhaustive experience of the world, is that we are indeed in the 'terrible predicament' against which Bailey, who is about to be murdered for no cause, hysterically cries out. 'Nobody realizes what this is,' Bailey says, but he is wrong. The Misfit knows what it is: a universal condition of meaningless suffering, of punishment that has no intelligible relationship to wrongs done by the victim....

He was sent to the penitentiary for a crime--killing his father--of which he has no memory. In fact he is certain that he did not do it. But they had the papers on him. So, without any consciousness of the crime for which he was being punished, he was 'buried alive,' as he says. And his description of his confinement, with walls every way he turned, makes an effective image of The Misfit's vision of the world.

The penitentiary experience, however, has a further important thematic significance. It is the very figure of a cardinal doctrine of Christianity, that of Original Sin. Man, conscious or not of the reason, suffers the consequences of Adam's Fall. Guilt is inherited, implicit in a nature severed from God's sustaining grace and submitted to the rule of a Prince who is Darkness. Hence a world deprived of moral order, where irrational suffering prevails: the world that The Misfit so clearly sees with the help of his scholarly glasses. Here, he believes, are the facts, the irremediable facts, of the human condition.

What The Misfit cannot see, or cannot believe in, is any hope of redress for the human condition. He may be haunted, at times tormented, by a vision of Christ raising the dead, but he cannot believe it: he was not there. All that he can believe, really believe, is what his eyes show him: this world without meaning or justice, this prison house where we are confined. Seeing this, what response is fitting? Says the Misfit: '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 them. No pleasure but meanness,' he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.' It is like the response of Satan himself, as Milton envisions it: 'Save what is in destroying; other joy / To me is lost.' But release for hate of an unjust creation is at best an illusory pleasure. 'It's no real pleasure in life.' The Misfit says, after the carnage is complete.

What has driven The Misfit to his homicidal condition is his powerful but frustrated instinct for meaning and justice. It may be inferred that this same instinct is what has produced his tormenting thoughts about Christ raising the dead, making justice where there is none. If only he could have been there when it happened, then he could have believed, 'I wish I had of been there,' he said.... It is torment to think of what might have been, that under other circumstances he would have been able to believe and so escape from the self he has become. In light of this it is possible to read The Misfit's obscure statement that Jesus 'thrown everything off balance,' as meaning this: that it would have been better, for the world's peace and his own, if no haunting doubt about the awful inevitability of man's condition ever had been introduced. In any case it could only be that doubt has made its contribution to the blighting of The Misfit's soul.

But doubts like this are not enough to alter The Misfit's vision. In the modern manner he believes what he can see with his eyes only, and his eyes have a terrible rigor. It is this rigor that puts him at such a distance from the grandmother who is one of the multitude 'that can live their whole life without asking about it,' that spend their lives immersed in a world of platitudes which they have never once stopped to scrutinize. This, his distinction from the vulgarities whom the grandmother represents, his honesty, is the source of The Misfit's pride. It is why, when the grandmother calls him a 'good' man, he answers: 'Nome, I ain't a good man...but I ain't the worst in the world neither.' And it is sufficient reason for the violent response that causes him so suddenly and unexpectedly to shoot the grandmother.... Given The Misfit's image of himself, her words and her touching, blessing him, amount to intolerable insult, for hereby she includes him among the world's family of vulgarities. One of her children, her kind, indeed!

This reason for The Misfit's action is, I believe, quite sufficient to explain it, even though Flannery O'Connor, discussing the story in *Mystery and Manners*, implies a different explanation. The grandmother's words to The Misfit and her touching him, O'Connor says, are a gesture representing the intrusion of a moment of grace. So moved, the grandmother recognizes her responsibility for this man and the deep kinship between them. O'Connor goes on to say that perhaps in time to come The Misfit's memory of the grandmother's gesture will become painful enough to turn him into the prophet he was meant to be. Seen this way, through the author's eyes, we must infer an explanation other than my own for The Misfit's

sudden violence as caused by his dismayed recognition of the presence in the grandmother of a phenomenon impossible to reconcile with his own view of what is real. Thus The Misfit's act can be seen as a striking out in defense of a version of reality in whose logic he has so appallingly committed himself.

Faced with mutually exclusive interpretations of a fictional event, a reader must accept the evidence of the text in preference to the testimonial of the author. And where the text offers a realistic explanation as opposed to one based on the supernatural, a reader must find the former the more persuasive. *If* the two are in fact mutually exclusive. And *if*, of course, it is true that the acceptability of the author's explanation does in fact depend upon the reader's belief in the supernatural. As to this second condition, it is a measure of O'Connor's great gift that the story offers a collateral basis for understanding grace that is naturalistic in character. This grace may be spelled in lower case letters but the fictional consequence is the same. For sudden insight is quite within the purview of rationalistic psychology, provided only that there are intelligible grounds for it. And such grounds are present in the story. They are implicit in the logic that connects the grandmother and The Misfit, that makes of The Misfit 'one of my own children.' In the hysteria caused by the imminence of her death, which strips her of those banalities by which she has lived, the grandmother quite believably discovers this connection. And so with the terms of The Misfit's sudden violence. His own tormenting doubt, figured in those preceding moments when he cries out and hits the ground, has prepared him. Supernatural grace or not, The Misfit in this moment sees it as such, and strikes.

These two, the author's and my own, are quite different explanations of The Misfit's sudden violence. Either, I believe, is reasonable, though surely the nod should go to the one that more enriches the story's theme. *If* the two are mutually exclusive, I believe, however, that they are not. Such a mixture of motives, in which self-doubt and offended pride both participate, should put no strain on the reader's imagination. And seen together each one may give additional dimension to the story.

'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is perhaps Flannery O'Connor's finest story--coherent, powerfully dramatic, relentless, and unique. In essence it is a devastating sermon against the faithlessness of modern generations, man bereft of the spirit. This condition, portrayed in the grossness of the vacationing family, barely relieved by the pious and sentimental prattle of the grandmother, produces its own terror. The Misfit enters, not by coincidence but by the logic implicit in lives made grotesque when vision has departed. He, O'Connor tells us, is the fierce avenger our souls beget upon our innocent nihilism."

Madison Jones
"A Good Man's Predicament"
The Southern Review 20 (1984) 836-41

"The artist reconciles the 'apparent' and the 'real,' the profane and the sacred dimensions of reality, and achieves a certain insight or 'epiphany,' as Joyce puts it—an epiphany that transcends the usual human limitations, however fleeting. Joyce's epiphanies are this-worldly, but O'Connor affirms 'epiphany' in terms of the sacred...."

Both The Misfit and the grandmother derive from the same human family tainted by sin and suffering in the material world. Thus, they are kin: he is one of her 'own children.' The likeness she sees amounts to an epiphany; she faces the fact that the worst of us is a relative, an essential move of Christianity as Roman Catholics see it. Ironically, this lady finally dies in an unladylike pose, 'with her legs crossed under her like a child's, and this image of the child represents 'innocence' paradoxically earned through suffering and sin. Finally, The Misfit's conclusion that the grandmother 'would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life' reflects O'Connor's Catholicism. God's violence unseats the spiritually complacent and forces the recognition of what establishes commonality—the physical body and the fatalism represented by death and decay. This story affirms a transcendence through love, which is sadly lacking in contemporary human relations."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 85, 91

"If the grandmother is, as she appears to be, the 'good man' who is so hard to find in Flannery O'Connor's story, 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' then who or what, one wonders, is Pitty Sing, the

grandmother's cat? Her namesake is of course one of the 'Three Little Maids from School' who come tripping on-stage early in Act I of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado*. The connection between Pitti-Sing and Pitty Sing might not appear to be worth following up but for two reasons: the first is the nature of the fictions O'Connor was writing at this stage of her career; the second, growing out of the first, is that O'Connor herself seems clearly to reinforce the connection of the names by making one of the key utterances in her tale a clear echo of the best-known sentence from W.S. Gilbert's sardonic libretto. The Mikado explains himself and his conception of justice to his subjects.... The fictional *Mikado* execution provided O'Connor with a number of features which she incorporated into her handling of the grandmother's death....

The meaning of the cat,' [Josephine Hendin] writes, 'seems to derive precisely from its symbolic thinness. That a pet, a cat, leaping at random for no great reason, should cause the destruction of an entire family expresses the randomness, the pointlessness of the murders'.... The vagaries of human pretensions are exploited by O'Connor as the material for a blackly comic exploration of the terrifying nature of Providence.... The primary usefulness of Pitty Sing, the connector between the two works, is to illuminate the roles of The Misfit and the grandmother... Clearly, the relationship of both cat and convict to the grandmother is primarily structural; the clue to how it works lies with Pitti-Sing, the prototype... Another character from *The Mikado*, one who has bequeathed to the grandmother her most notable characteristic, her defining of herself by her gentility. This is Pooh-Bah, the courtier who sets out the Mikado's logic in combining the offices of judge and executioner....

The grandmother, at this moment when her 'head clear[s],' becomes the 'good man' who is so hard to find, precisely because she abandons her hold on gentility as a defense, a means of keeping the unpleasant 'other' at a distance. *Noblesse oblige*: she acknowledges her kinship with, her motherhood of, The Misfit. That the grandmother should be executed at the very moment she becomes 'good'--indeed *because* she has become 'good'--is the final link in the paradoxical chain of logic. Having been made the inadvertent executioner of her family, she transcends the threat posed by The Misfit by reaching a new, altruistic level of judgement about him, the consequence of which is death. In her momentary clarity of vision, the grandmother judges The Misfit and herself to be members essentially of the same race--the human--and reaches out to seal the kinship with an embrace....

The grandmother, having set herself apart from 'common' man, learns now that The Misfit is one of her 'own,' that they are both children of Adam. As Pooh-Bah would have died at the hands of Ko-Ko, the executioner whose place he would be taking had he followed the demands of gentility, so the grandmother dies at the hands of The Misfit in answer to his question, 'Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?' All the children of Adam are born to be punished by suffering and death; the grandmother's acknowledgement--however muddled--of this mystery of kinship earns her right to the title, 'lady'....

The breaking of her heart moves her towards the disinterested maternal love that becomes both her nemesis and her glory.... Her gentility has seen her through; however, it is gentility now made authentic...by its disinterested acknowledgement of kinship with The Misfit, acceptance of his pedigree as one of her 'own children'.... The primary point of connection between the two Pitti-Sings is that each is a witness to and implicated in an execution.... Essentially, Pitty Sing functions as a double of the grandmother (much the way Enoch Emery, Solace Layfield, and others act for Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*), expressing a dimension of her self of which she is largely unaware. The nature of that aspect, pointed to by the *Mikado* prototype, becomes clear when we trace the operation of the double....

The cat is a concealed, forbidden presence in the car. The grandmother's reason for bringing the cat against her son's wishes--her fear that, left on his own, Pitty Sing might unwittingly bring about his own death--ironically figures forth the direction her own life is about to take because of her insistence on bringing Pitty Sing with her on the journey.... Pitty Sing functions essentially as an extension of the grandmother's willfulness.... Bailey having flung Pitty Sing temporarily out of the action, The Misfit takes over and extends Pitty Sing's function until Pitty Sing herself returns to endorse what has transpired in his absence....

The glasses, in conjunction with the return of Pitty Sing, help chart The Misfit's spiritual course in the last moments of the story. The 'scholarly look' they endowed him with on his first appearance established his connection with the *Mikado* schoolgirl whose function is to mock; removing the glasses, he removes the mocking perspective, allowing him to look as 'defenseless' as the old lady now lying in the ditch with 'her legs crossed under her like a child's'....

The ironically sentimental tableau made by Pitty Sing and The Misfit--the killer cuddling the pussy-cat--represents in structural terms, the grandmother's apparent defeat at the hands of her 'dragon.' While the obvious dragon waiting by the side of the road may indeed have been The Misfit, it was Pitty Sing who, in an immediate sense, brought her to the rendezvous"...

J. Peter Dyson

"Cats, Crime, and Punishment: *The Mikado's* Pitti-Sing in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
English Studies in Canada 14 (1988) 436-52

[The following analyst is an Atheist and deconstructionist, both ideologies that blind her to the story: "The stories [of O'Connor] seem too brutal to be illustrative of Christian doctrine, at least as we conventionally conceive of it. [Here she flashes Politically Correct credentials by dissociating herself from Christianity and identifies herself with "conventional" thinking as if most people are atheists like herself. As is to be expected, this critic is uneducated. It is 1988 and dumbed-down, groupthink identity politics has replaced education. Leftists rule. This no-doubt Feminist critic is clearly unfamiliar with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as brutal an event as one could ask for illustrating Christian doctrine. She also rejects Christianity by calling it just another fiction, saying of the grandmother that "there is no reality behind her words." "Her fictions are proven to be 'just talk'...." Rather than set aside her own beliefs in order to honestly explicate a story, this PC critic replaces the story with nihilistic prattle about language as a cover for her ignorance about literature. She does not recognize *agape*, a Christian value defined by the ancient Greeks, which is achieved by the grandmother at the end of O'Connor's story, provoking The Misfit to shoot her--an execution recalling the crucifixion. [Italics added.]

This critic is too uneducated to recognize the meaning of redemptive love. Christians believe in love, Feminists believe in revenge. This is essentially a Postmodern attack on religion. As a deconstructionist and as an Atheist, this critic denies that the O'Connor story has any meaning at all: "By the end, when the language of the doubled selves has been unmasked, the characters behind it are totally deconstructed and no longer exist." She argues that irony cancels all meaning: There is no "firm ground of meaning"... The reader falls into "the infinite nothingness of irony".... Ironically, this critic renders herself meaningless. Her ignorance of irony is obvious to any educated English major. Irony does not cancel all meaning, it usually affirms an *opposite* meaning. Consider *Huckleberry Finn*, a novel packed with examples, such as Huck thinking he is doing wrong by helping Jim escape slavery.

Mary Jane Schenck

"Deconstructing Meaning in ['A Good Man Is Hard to Find']"
Ambiguities in Literature and Film
ed. Hans P. Braendlin
(Florida State 1988) 125-35

"'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is typical of many of O'Connor's stories, with its jolting disruption of the mundane, its satire, its toughness. Yet even more than O'Connor's other work, this story provokes extreme reactions: it is funny but also horrifying."

Beverly Lyon Clark

The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1936

"'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' is probably now, as during her lifetime, the single story by which Flannery O'Connor is best known. She herself may have had something to do with this: when she was asked to give a reading or a talk to students, 'A Good Man' was the story she usually proposed. As she wrote to John Hawkes, she preferred a reading with commentary to a lecture because 'It's better to try to make one story live for them than to tell them a lot of junk they'll forget in five minutes and that I have no confidence in anyhow.' It was not, she claimed, her favorite among her stories (that honor she accorded

'The Artificial Nigger'); she chose 'A Good Man' for public readings (or so a friend told me) because it was the only one she could get through and not 'bust out laughing'....

In 1960...her friends Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon selected it for inclusion in the second edition of their enormously influential anthology, *The House of Fiction*, and thus began the history of 'A Good Man' as a favorite of anthologizers. Its only rival among her work at the time was, once more, 'The Artificial Nigger,' which had been anthologized earlier, but in less powerful places. By 1966, W. S. Marks III could speak casually of 'A Good Man' as 'one of the more frequently anthologized of her pieces.' More recently, other stories, including those from her second collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, have displaced it as an inevitable choice of anthologists, but it was established for long enough to remain the single tale most immediately associated with Flannery O'Connor....

Its quality aside, the story probably makes available more rapidly and obviously than anything else she ever wrote the unsettling mix of comedy, violence, and religious concern that characterizes her fiction. Other stories may, arguably, be funnier, subtler, more moving, more resonant, but 'A Good Man' brings before the reader, with a powerful shock, the main features of O'Connor's fictive world. Perhaps its place in her career helps explain why it seems to capture within its borders some essence of her vision....

The grandmother...is the first of many O'Connor figures to ground the work (as *Wise Blood* never is grounded) in what Flannery O'Connor referred to as the realm of 'manners,' an everyday worldliness concerned with such matters as family relations, dress and appearance, etiquette, economic and social status. Complacent and self-satisfied, these characters--and they are usually women--may well pay lip service to conventional Christianity, but their eyes are fixed firmly on the imperatives of this world. Murderously polite criminals evolved out of O'Connor's imagination working on the more sensational news of the day...genteel ladies she had known since childhood. If *The Misfit* seems to emerge from the wildness that produced *Wise Blood*, the grandmother looks forward to the many stories that are rooted in a recognizable Southern social milieu, and their long confrontation, both comic and violent, in the second half of 'A Good Man' may be what makes this seem the quintessential O'Connor story....

Serious criticism of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' may be said to being where widespread publication of the story began, with Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate's anthology *The House of Fiction* (1960). Appearing first in 1950, *The House of Fiction* was an influential product of the most important critical movement of the time, the so-called New Criticism.... Caroline Gordon was...in fact Flannery O'Connor's mentor throughout her mature career...

Surely an important part of the story's effectiveness, of the pleasure we are able to take in what, outlined, would seem merely grim tabloid material, comes from such stylization, from the ironic comedy which distances the reader from this family and particularly from its chief member, the grandmother. Nevertheless, she is the 'chief member' only because the story has so presented her, privileging her point of view over that of the others. Within the family itself, she is clearly a marginal figure, ignored (as we see in the opening scene) by her son and daughter-in-law, freely insulted by her grandchildren, powerless before all. If she is all the things my students claimed, surely that is because she has to be; her comically desperate attempts to assert a self that is denied by all around her, no less by the parents' silence than by the children's diminishing taunts ('She has to go everywhere we go'), testify to her lack of any essential role in the only context which age, sex, and widowhood have left open to her.

Failing to produce even a reconsideration of family vacation plans, she apparently capitulates with absurd rapidity: 'The next morning the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go' (as the children claim, she is not about to be left behind, and she doubtless considers promptness a cardinal virtue). Nonetheless, the hidden presence of her cat, Pitty Sing, suggests a more complex response. Her reasons for taking the animal expose both her sentimentality and that melodramatic imagination which has already drawn her to newspaper reports of *The Misfit*--'he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself'--but the paragraph's final sentence, which concerns not the inclusion but the secreting of Pitty Sing, hints at something more. 'Her son, Bailey, didn't like to arrive at a motel with a cat' presents the animal as agent of rebellion, the

grandmother's private refusal to acquiesce without at least a token of revolt against an order that denies her. If she has her way, Bailey *will*, like it or not, 'arrive at a motel with a cat.'

No such destination, of course, is ever reached, but the cat nevertheless plays a key role in the story's action. By that time, however, it has become a more problematic locus of possibilities. The grandmother has spun her tale of the plantation house, and for once, backed by the children (who first said grandparents and grandchildren naturally gravitate together to face a common enemy?), she has apparently finally got her way, moved the family in the direction of her desires. That archetypal Southern mansion both has and is a pseudo-secret--the grandmother knows there is no hidden panel in the house, and she is about to discover there is no house at all down that road--and with the sudden revelation to her of the truth, she uncovers the genuine secret of the cat. 'The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey's shoulder.' The cat, like The Misfit, identified through their common 'snarl,' will not be contained by the newspaper, and as a result the car flips over into a ditch.

This is the turning point of 'A Good Man,' the 'ACCIDENT' that occurs precisely at the story's half-way mark. It is the moment in the tale that novelist T. Coraghessan Boyle recently approved because it 'violate[s] the familiar comic balance': 'It's very powerful when the safety net drops away from the comic universe where nothing can go wrong, and there's this overpowering terrible violence.' The sudden, unpredictable quality of the car accident is essential to the effect and implications of 'A Good Man,' yet so is the recognition that it has been precipitated, however obliquely, by the grandmother. But if her original smuggling aboard of the cat suggested her underground revolt against the family's suppression, the uncovering of that secret seems to imply a different focus of dissatisfaction. Despite the fact that Pitty Sing springs directly at Bailey, patriarch of the new order that diminishes her, the grandmother's release of the cat results from her visceral acknowledgement of her *own* failure, of the falsity of that sentimental symbol of the old order she believes she believes in, the plantation house. The cat thus comprehends the rejection of *both* social orders, the old and the new, as somehow inadequate; both Florida and the plantation house fail as possible destinations. If the story provides no justification for the grandmother's sentimental concern that the cat 'would miss her too much' (note its final appearance in the closing paragraphs), it abundantly justifies her belief in a fatally melodramatic world where 'he might *accidentally* asphyxiate himself'....

That world is most fully defined in the story by The Misfit, whom the accident seems to conjure up, as if the very incarnation of such a universe. His self-chosen title, he tells us, proclaims both his recognition of this world and his place in it, a paradoxically inevitable existence of radical contingency where 'one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all.' I have argued elsewhere that while The Misfit claims to have lived this experience, the story in its very structure demonstrates it, breaking its action with the car accident and bringing down on all members of this family, even to the infant, the same lethal 'punishment.' Yet, in her heart of hearts, the grandmother recognizes this world too, even to the point of absurdly dressing for it. She is carefully groomed so that 'In case of an *accident*, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.' In short, the gap between the grandmother and The Misfit, which closes with her fatal recognition of him as 'one of my babies...one of my own children,' is never as great as it may first appear.

Nevertheless, the action of the story is precisely designed to uncover this awareness in her, to apply such pressure that all her unquestioned assumptions will be gradually denied until her physical collapse in the ditch manifests the loss of her accustomed inner supports. It is The Misfit's stripping away of her 'social' ('good blood,' 'nice people,') materialistic ('You must have stolen something'), and conventionally religious (If you would pray...Jesus would help you) values that brings the grandmother to her moment of recognition, yet both the presence of the cat and the occasion of its catastrophic leap imply her readiness to undertake and respond to this cathartic process: the purging of the values both of a contemporary world which allows her no role and a nostalgic one which has built for her only a hollow, inauthentic self.

Meanwhile, her male antagonist is undergoing an analogous process whereby his apparent self-sufficiency and command is gradually revealed as a form of armor, a veneer which falls away to uncover the 'baby' with a gun. For all the backwoods *politesse* and homemade existentialism which locate him in

this particular time and place, The Misfit is in essence a variation on that enduring American type, the individualistic male whose violence both expresses and substitutes for inner incompleteness. Despite his assertion, he is not 'doing all right by myself,' but the only 'hep' he might accept would be disembodied, intellectual--to have 'known' whether or not Jesus raised the dead so that 'I wouldn't be,' as he at last admits, 'like I am now.' The messiness and disorder of his life in the flesh, particularly the domestic flesh, is anathema to him: children make him 'nervous,' and the touch of a foolish old woman who sees him momentarily as 'one of my children' triggers a visceral, defensive violence. If, as O'Connor said, 'It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially,' what is revealed in The Misfit is an anger and anguish never entirely assuaged by the 'meanness' he visits on the world around him.

And what is revealed about the grandmother in her comparable moment of extremity? Taking the identification of The Misfit as 'one of my babies' together with the gesture of reaching out to him as O'Connor says she intended us to, we can see the grandmother adopting for the first time an archetypal female role, one that she has denied, but that has also been denied her, in the family context so fiercely limned in the earlier part of the story. If we wish to press that maternal gesture in the direction of O'Connor's declared Catholicism, we can see glimmer through the grandmother the figure of the Grand Mother, a momentary *imitatio Virginis*--Our Lady of Sorrows, the Hope of Criminals, and so on. However, as other critics have shown, *if we ignore O'Connor's comments* [Why should we ignore the author and follow the arrogant critic?] it seems possible to see this as one last self-serving grasp at survival, or as an ironically threatening identification (all her other 'children' are dead), or as an attempt to 'adopt' The Misfit into her smothering, diminishing superficiality [Italics added.]

But the story itself has more to say of the grandmother: two other roles here get pressed on her in a kind of double epitaph, one by The Misfit, the other by the narrator. Her corpse is described with its legs crossed under it 'like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky' just before The Misfit pronounces, 'She would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.' Both 'child' and 'woman,' of course, ignore the grandmother's own social self-identification, 'lady,' and at first appear so antithetically matched as to raise the suspicion of irony. The dissonance may at first seem reconcilable by noting the gap between the living and the dead, between childlike corpse and living 'woman'--until we realize that both designations must be applied to the very moment before death. We can, with a small stretch, give the passage a Christian reading in which the grandmother, stripped to her essential being as a genuine 'woman,' has, in her recovery of simplicity, become again as a little child. Yet it can also be understood more darkly to suggest that the recovery of one's genuine female self is a dangerous business indeed, likely to reduce one to a condition of double and final powerlessness, the child-like corpse.

However we interpret the ending of 'A Good Man,' or indeed the tale as a whole, it seems to go on resonating in the imagination, perhaps the single story that has most compellingly captured the condition of modern American life where, in Boyle's words, 'the safety net drops away' and we are suddenly confronted with an overwhelming violence, a violence that apparently chooses its victims randomly and before which they are helpless. That sense of impotence in the face of terror is the stuff of nightmares (one might note that, with terror lightened to 'unpleasantness,' it is also the stuff of the grandmother's daily life in the earlier part of the story), and as such it addresses some of our deepest fears. Such fears, as 'A Good Man' itself implies, are hardly peculiar to women, yet it seems inevitable that the protagonist of such a story should be female, and that the prolonged confrontation with an armed male should end in her death.

This much is all too familiar, yet O'Connor would have us note not simply the man's violent gesture--'The Misfit sprang back...and shot her three times through the chest'--but also the woman's motions, particularly those with which she begins and ends. Her opening gesture is an aggressive (but useless) 'rattling the newspaper' at the bald head of 'her only boy,' who continues to ignore her; her final one is to reach out and touch on the shoulder the man she calls 'one of my own children.' He will certainly not ignore her, but the distance she has traveled in these twenty-odd pages places her with the figures of classic American stories--from Irving's Ichabod Crane, Melville's Benito Cereno, and Stephen Crane's Swede to those of Flannery O'Connor's contemporaries, Eudora Welty's Clytie, J. D. Salinger's Teddy, Ralph Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game'--whose initiations into a frightening world are both astonishing and lethal."

The story opens as Realism, presenting ordinary people at a specific place in the country, emphasizing the particular while revealing universal characteristics of human nature in the tradition of 19th-century local color stories by Mary Wilkins Freeman, Hamlin Garland and others. The grandmother does not want her family to take a trip to Florida because that is where an escaped convict who calls himself The Misfit is reported to be headed. The abstraction *misfit* creates a social and metaphysical allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne. The emphasis upon the escaped convict in the first paragraph implies that he is going to confirm the foresight of the grandmother, investing the story with an ominous sense of inevitability as in Greek tragedy, in Gothic horror and in the literature of Naturalism.

When the grandmother warns her family, her son Bailey "didn't look up from his reading," his wife "didn't seem to hear her" and the children disrespect her. In primitive societies the old were heeded as wise from experience, in postmodern society they are treated as a nuisance by the immature. Bailey is absorbed in sports and the children are reading the funny papers. The mother looks like a comic strip mom with a face as "innocent as a cabbage" and a handkerchief tied around her head with points on top "like rabbit ears." Her real ears are not hearing. All in the family except the grandmother are complacent. Each successive generation is getting more unrealistic, self-absorbed and detached from reality. The boy John Wesley is inflated by adolescent bravado when his grandmother asks him what he would do if The Misfit caught him: "'I'd smack his face,' John Wesley said." The grandmother, representing traditional common sense in the first part of the story, is the allegorical opposite of The Misfit. She fits in even when unfairly treated and she adapts to the collective will of the family—society. "The next morning the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go." Ironically, had she stayed home and been a misfit she would have survived. And if the family had respected her good sense they all would have survived.

The old lady is the only one goodhearted enough to bring the cat along rather than leave it alone in the house for three days as most people would, because "he would miss her too much" and might have an accident. Ironically, the cat precipitates the accident in the car. That she has to hide the cat from Bailey, the head of the family and the driver, makes him partly responsible. To some extent everyone in the family except the baby is partly responsible. The moral complexity of the situation recalls "The Blue Hotel" by Stephen Crane but the outcome here is far worse. Another irony is that the old grandmother's virtues, her kindness and imagination, lead by chance to the disaster, as the best intentions often do.

They leave Atlanta "at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890." Such mundane details as occupy our minds will soon become absurdly meaningless in the face of death. The grandmother dresses up for the trip, in white cotton gloves, white lace, white organdy and flowers: "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." As a Realist she anticipates the worst. As a lady she is Victorian—feminine, formal, and faithful. The ideal of moral purity is connoted by white. In contrast, "The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief." She is informal and modern, with her head tied up. Formality in clothes is a metaphor of social and moral forms that are being discarded in the 20th century. Nowadays people are letting themselves go like The Misfit, who is bare to the waist and wears no socks. On the whole, Postmodern people are self-absorbed, indifferent to the world around them and to other people. "'In my time,' said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, 'children were more respectful'."

The grandmother is a mostly sympathetic character until she uses racial slurs: "'Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!' she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack." Worse, she uses the N-word: "'Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do'." She means no harm. She recognizes that black children are deprived and she calls a black child cute. However, since the reader has identified with the grandmother her unwitting slurs come as a shock, deliberately eliciting the politically correct response of "racist"! O'Connor does not idealize people. The old grandmother has been conditioned in her perceptions and language by a racist social order. At the same time, by identifying the reader with her and

eliciting a stock response, O'Connor calls attention to kneejerk judgment and stereotyping by people—perhaps including the reader—who would reduce this nice old well-meaning grandmother to another slur. It is ironic that the grandmother laments that children are no longer respectful of anything and then refers to black people with slurs, but she is well-intentioned, in contrast to these children and to the liberal critics who would reduce her to a racist. The grandmother displays some virtues of the Old South tainted by the worst. She accepts the New South with good humor, referring to the slave plantation society as “Gone with the Wind.... Ha. Ha’.” Her reference to the popular novel and movie is evidence that she is adapting to the new America—that she is not a Misfit.

The grandmother wanted the family to go and see east Tennessee, with all its wilderness, “so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee.” As an archetypal metaphor, Wilderness is the place of potential transformation and spiritual growth in the individuation process. But the family wants to go back down to sunny Florida again and have fun. The grandmother tries to educate the younger generation, offers to hold the baby and “told him about the things they were passing.” She “would not let the children throw the box and the paper napkins out the window.” Apparently littering the landscape is okay with their parents. The children fight and “slap each other over the grandmother”—violently out of control until she tells them a story. She keeps trying to bring the family together. In the dance hall and diner run by Red Sammy Butts, when “The Tennessee Waltz” plays on the jukebox the grandmother “asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her.” Instead of people dancing together, June Star gets up and does a solo tap dance—the only stardom she will ever have. Then she insults the owners who give her the opportunity, like Leftists who insult the country. The grandmother tells June Star she ought to be ashamed.

“‘People are certainly not nice like they used to be,’ said the grandmother.” She calls Red Sammy a good man for giving some mill workers gas on credit. They share their concern about the escaped convict and Red Sammy’s wife says she “‘wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t attack this place right here’.” She does not trust anyone, including Red Sammy. “‘A good man is hard to find,’ Red Sammy said.... He and the grandmother discussed better times.” So is a good woman hard to find. The grandmother is the only one in her family with a sense of history, the only one with aesthetic appreciation, the only one interested in the scenery—in beauty, art and Nature. She points out details as they pass but Bailey is too busy driving, “The children were reading comic magazines and their mother had gone back to sleep. “‘Let’s go through Georgia fast so we won’t have to look at it much’,” John Wesley said.”

As they drive on southward through the hot afternoon the grandmother wakes up from a nap and recalls an old plantation she visited as a young lady “in this neighborhood.” Awash in nostalgia for “better times,” she wants to revisit the old plantation but she knows her son Bailey will not agree. “‘There was a secret panel in this house,’ she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing she were, ‘and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it...but it was never found’.” Hidden treasure is irresistible. The children are excited by the notion of a secret panel and force their father into turning around and going back and up the dirt road to the old plantation. Too late, the grandmother wakes up fully and realizes “that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee.” The romantic allure of treasure and her faulty memory idealizing the past leads to disaster in the real present world.

The grandmother upsets Bailey’s order of things when she directs the family up the wrong road out of nostalgia for a lost dream. Nostalgia for the Old South is “the wrong road.” Realizing her mistake with embarrassment she upsets her own order, revealing a hidden cat rather than a hidden treasure. The abruptness of the accident is another shock, in particular when “their mother, clutching the baby, was thrown out the door onto the ground.” The objective tone becomes Gothic humor—later called “black humor” in the 1960s—with the image of Bailey remaining in the driver’s seat as the car flips over and lands in a gulch with the cat “clinging to his neck like a caterpillar.” The family has survived having their lives turn upside-down, landing “right-side-up” so to speak—but they are stuck in a gulch like a coffin in a grave. “Bailey removed the cat from his neck with both hands and flung it out the window against the side of a pine tree.” Understatement sustains the tone of Gothic humor: The mother “only had a cut down her face and a broken shoulder.” Violence has turned the children into monsters: “‘We’ve had an ACCIDENT!’ the children screamed in a frenzy of delight. ‘But nobody’s killed,’ June Star said with disappointment.” These kids are already Misfits.

No one pays any attention when the limping old lady gasps, pressing her side, “I believe I have injured an organ’.” Her son is in shock. “Bailey’s teeth were clattering. He had on a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it and his face was yellow as the shirt.” Bailey is yellow and incompetent. He has a jaw “as rigid as a horseshoe.” He let a house cat make him wreck his car. “The grandmother decided that she would not mention that the house was in Tennessee,” not in Georgia. Despite her injury, she takes the initiative. She is the one, not Bailey, who stands up and signals a vehicle approaching along the road. She “waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention.” Once again the well-meaning grandmother becomes responsible for the disaster to follow. The approaching vehicle is a “big black battered hearse-like automobile.” Just like gangsters drive in the movies. This is the moment in a horror movie when somebody lets a killer into their house. In this case there are three of them. As the strangers take their time looking at the helpless people down in the ditch, they are ominously silent—a man and two boys. The man is bare to the waist and is holding a black hat and a gun. Guess who.

The man is wearing spectacles that “gave him a scholarly look,” contrary to the stereotype of a criminal, more like an academic. He may not be dangerous, he may just be a misfit. “He had on tan and white shoes and no socks.” Also contrary to stereotype, he is polite. “Beware of a man with manners,” Eudora Welty said once. The polite Misfit is holding a gun on them, he expresses an aversion to children and orders them to sit down in the ditch. That’s all right, lots of people nowadays have an aversion to children. “Behind them the line of woods gaped like an open mouth.” This is a stock situation in crime and war movies that lead to murders and mass executions. The reader knows before the family knows. O’Connor is one of the first major writers to “parrot” stock elements from popular culture in her satirical vision.

Bailey can only protest “Look here now’,” as if he is entitled to assistance. He is acting like a liberal too naïve to recognize the truth—the terrorist staring him in the face. Still again, it is the grandmother who dooms the family when she shrieks, “You’re The Misfit!” He is pleased to be known, “but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of reckernized me’.” Bailey curses his mother bitterly, she cries and the sentimental gunman tries to placate her: “I don’t reckon he meant to talk to you thataway’.” The killer is more polite to her than her son is. “You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would you?” she says. He replies “I would hate to have to’.” She appeals to what she thinks is his better nature: “I know you’re a good man’.” Absurdly, the ineffectual Bailey tells everybody to shut up and “let me handle this!” He was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn’t move.” Bailey never attempts to negotiate or deceive or disarm the gunman or “handle this.” Like most people he goes along, his conformity implied by the parrots on his yellow shirt. A good man is hard to find.

When ordered to go along with the two sinister boys into the woods, Bailey tries to explain his car problem: “Listen,’ Bailey began, ‘we’re in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is’,” his voice cracked.” Of course it is he himself who does not realize what his more terrible predicament is. “His eyes were as blue and intense as the parrots in his shirt and he remained perfectly still.” Now his eyes, his perceptions, are identified with parrots. Bailey is the average man in the secular modern world, dissociated from reality by liberal illusions and entertainment. Today, liberals avoid even using the word *terrorist*. The grandmother senses the truth when she lets her hat fall to the ground, whereas Bailey is still in denial when he reaches the “dark edge” of the woods, calling out, “I’ll be back in a minute, Mama, wait on me!” Does he really think they are taking him in there just to “ask him something”? The scene alludes to the recent extermination of Jews and others by the Nazis, the misfits of Europe.

That historical background adds a sharp poignancy to the moment: “‘Bailey Boy!’ the grandmother called in a tragic voice.” Her previous racial slurs now evoke comparable experiences suffered by slave families in the past. Nevertheless, she deserves our compassion even though she appeals to the killer on the basis of her class prejudice, his manners and apparent good breeding, except for his half-naked appearance (more gothic humor): “‘You’re not a bit common’.” She keeps trying to persuade the murderer that he is a good man—“I know you’re a good man at heart’”—but he replies, “‘Nome, I ain’t a good man’.” He puts on a black hat. Although she is conservative in most ways, the grandmother also is a liberal in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, whose influence in the South was expressed by Faulkner in naming his fictional Yoknapatawpha town after Jefferson. Liberalism followed Jefferson in affirming the basic goodness and perfectibility of human beings, until assassinations and disillusionment flipped liberals into cynicism and totalitarian political correctness after the 1960s. O’Connor is dramatizing the fallacy of the old liberal faith,

which seems increasingly absurd the more the grandmother insists upon it to her murderer. Will Rogers famously said he never met a man he didn't like. He never met a Misfit.

The pistol shot from the woods signals the fate of the whole family: "Bailey Boy!" she called." The Misfit proves himself a narcissistic sociopath without a heart as he goes on and on and on talking about himself while the children cower in terror: "I been most everything'." There are misfits everywhere, and some are the leaders of nations. June Star's true starring performance in life is her defiant insult when the boy reaches out to be her escort into the dark woods: "I don't want to hold hands with him,' June Star said. 'He reminds me of a pig'." At least she has spunk, unlike her father. Then the chilling objectivity of the style paradoxically evokes the deepest feeling in the story: "There were two more pistol reports [*objective correlative*] and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, 'Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!' as if her heart would break."

Horror and desperation reduce the grandmother to questioning her faith: "Maybe He didn't raise the dead,' the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her." This is a spiritual death like the fainting of Mrs. Larkin in "A Curtain of Green" by Welty. The Misfit responds by wishing he had witnessed Christ raising someone from the dead. "Listen, lady,' he said in a high voice, 'if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now.' His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own 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."

Secular Postmodernism inverts good and evil: when she touches him (and touches his heart) The Misfit reacts to the grandmother as if *she* is the evil one—the snake. His opposite now, the grandmother becomes Christ-evoking. When her "head cleared" her heart is flooded with love for the whole human race, including even her killer. Love thy neighbor, saith the Lord. And further, Love thine enemies. This is the grace of God, redeeming her from class and racial prejudice and all other sins. She is saved just before she dies, uniting with God in contrast to Granny Weatherall in the story by Porter. When saying "'You're one of my children'" she is filled with the spirit of God, who sees all believers as his children.

When he puts on Bailey's yellow shirt with parrots and kills the family, the cowardly Misfit is killing humanity. He is a secular Postmodernist parrot: (1) rejecting Jesus; (2) a materialist who believes in nothing but his own experience; (3) a narcissist (4) who feels unfairly treated, saying "'I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment'"; (5) claims to be a victim of society; (6) is vindictive; (7) cynical; (8) amoral; and (9) motivated by pursuit of pleasure through the exercise of power over other people. In opposing himself to Christ he becomes Satanic. O'Connor has said she does not want to identify The Misfit with Satan. She sees him in realistic terms as more complex than pure evil and even "redeemable." However, in terms of a reader's likely response, which is of course more limited than the author's, the shocking murders *are* pure evil. The Misfit and his accessories are the agents of that pure evil. The Misfit might even be said to be literally possessed by the Devil. Since that condition may be overcome through an exorcism, he would indeed be redeemable. On the other hand, however, he seems rather to be possessed by his own reasoning and pride. In his scholarly spectacles he is a mock-intellectual like Rayber the rationalizing atheist professor in *The Violent Bear it Away*.

The many critics who lumped O'Connor with much lesser writers like Erskine Caldwell in the category of Southern Gothic missed the cosmic religious dimension and the intellectual complexity of her art. More significant than the horror of the murders is the horror of so many grotesque damned souls--the multiplying of Misfits in the postmodern world. The story is Gothic especially in its repeated emphasis on chance and on disaster beyond human control, but it is the opposite of Gothic in its religious vision. Overall the story is typically Modernist in (1) depicting the secular postmodern world as a waste land, like T. S. Eliot; (2) integrating elements of popular culture in contrast to high culture like Eliot; (3) affirming transcendence through faith in God; (4) combining techniques of allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne with Realism, Impressionism, and Expressionism; and (5) synthesizing extremely contrasting tones in the tradition of Twain, Eliot and Faulkner—horror, humor, pathos, satire, transcendence.

Michael Hollister (2013)