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."

O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (1969) 110-14

"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

'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
Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 131-34

"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…. *The Misfit is really the one courageous and admirable figure in the story.*" [Italics added. This is an atheist critic who describes herself as "simply too far gone in anthropocentric irreligiosity."]

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

"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)

"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

"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, 230*n*-231*n*

"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

"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

"'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

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 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. 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 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'." Since the reader has identified with the grandmother her slurs come as a shock, deliberately eliciting the politically correct response of "*racist*"*!* As a Realist and a Catholic, 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 does mean to demean, in contrast to these children and to those adults who would reduce her to a racist. The grandmother represents the best 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 people 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.

She upsets Bailey's order of things when she directs the family up the wrong road out of nostalgia for a lost dream. 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. 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." 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 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 humanity 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 her killer. 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. In saying "'You're one of my children'" she is expressing identity with and love of God.

When he puts on Bailey's yellow shirt with parrots and kills the grandmother, 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 a Satan.

The many critics who lumped O'Connor with lesser writers like Erskine Caldwell in the category of Southern Gothic missed the 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)