

Flannery O'Connor's Original Sin and Redemption

A close reading of A Good Man is Hard to Find

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Abstract

Original Sin and salvation are two major themes of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. Characters, who are ignorant of their sin of their pride, self-centeredness and self-righteousness, gain their new awareness after having undergone an epiphany experience. The present thesis presents a close reading of A Good Man is Hard to Find, to examine the thematic elements in her short stories.

Key Terms: Flannery O'Connor, Christianity, Original Sin, epiphany, violence.

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) is a famous American female writer in 20th century. In her brief writer career she completes two collections of short stories and two novels. She is labeled as "a female prophet in the South" by some critic because of her unique writing style and thematic theme. In one short story after another, she brings her characters to a moment when it is impossible for them to continue their accustomed manner so that the proud are humbled; the ignorant are enlightened; the wise are shown "the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God;" and the materialistic come to the realization that materials are what they possess for a short time only. Most often, the characters undergo a certain painful experience to reach the epiphany, which is accompanied by violence and destruction.

Flannery O'Connor's Concept of Characterization

With the economic development in the South, Flannery O'Connor finds that people are too much absorbed in the materialistic gains that they have been alienated from God. She realizes it a must for her as a writer with Christian belief to shoulder the responsibility to awaken the people to their hollowness in spiritual life. Therefore, it is the inner most of human being she is most concerned. O'Connor believes that humankind are

children of Adam. They commit original sin the minute they are born. They are degenerate and only when they come to realization at a point like epiphany could they get saved. The sinful characters who claim themselves to be good people, but are not without flaws normally taken for granted, such as their desire for material things and their indulgence in hedonism, immorality, self-centeredness, conceit and vanity. Sinners in her stories can be classified into two types, the first being individuals conducting murdering or theft, the other being those who are alienated from God so as to believe in man's power to conquering the world. To her, alienation from God is a major sin for human being. While ignorance blinds our eyes to our errors, selfishness grudges our brotherly love for the needy and pride decrements our love for God. These sinners, however, can somehow get saved through God's grace. God's grace, loosely defined, is an illuminating power (the type of grace most frequently used by O'Connor in her stories) may be described as a gift, freely given by God, which is designed to enlighten the minds of people and help them toward eternal life. It may take the form of some natural mental experience, such as a dream or viewing a beautiful sunset, or of some experience imposed from outside the individual — for example, from hearing a sermon or from experiencing an intense joy, a sorrow, or some other shock- normally manifested in violence and torture in some cases. For this, Flannery O'Connor explains in *The Fiction Writer & His Country*: "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian Orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ...My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (O'Connor, 1970:32-33).

She supposes a modern reader is hostile because he tends to neglect God's power in the world and to be over-confident of human being's faculties in tackling every problem in the world. For them, the writer is forced to resort to violence and grotesque to distort what seems to be natural. "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then You have to make your vision apparent by shock- to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost – blind you draw large and startling figures" (O'Connor, 1970: 33-34). O'Connor seems to shout throughout her stories with *A Good Man is Hard to Find* at the beginning.

Sin and Redemption in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

A Good Man is Hard to Find, published in 1953, is believed to illustrate many techniques and themes typical of her stories. The story revolves around a family's trip and their accidental destruction on the trip by three escaped convicts, and ends at a climax, where an epiphany is offered, where Grandmother, the protagonist, accepts the gift upon his death: to live in harmony with her enemy.

O'Connor's treatment of the characters in her story reinforces her views of man as a fallen creature. The Grandmother's vanity and self-centered attitude is illustrated in the first three paragraphs. A series of incidents foreshadow the death of the family, and it is Grandmother who is to be responsible for the destruction of the family. Instead of acquiescing to the family's plan to Florida, she wishes to visit some of her connections in East Tennessee. She even uses the news story of Misfit, an escaped convict, to scare his son, Barley, into change his mind. But Barley doesn't answer her, nor does her daughter-in-law, which is an illustration of lack of respect to her. But the news foreshadows the family's encounter with the murders. The next morning, against Barley's order of forbidding it, Grandmother smuggles the cat, Pitty Sing into the car with her because

he would miss her or he might asphyxiate himself if left behind. In fact, the cat does survive, but it is responsible for the car accident which leads to the entire family's death. Quite contrary to Grandmother's view of her importance to the cat, it befriends the convicts who kill the whole family.

During the trip, the grandmother, dressed up "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady," (O'Connor, 1990:343) carefully writes down the mileage in anticipation her return home. She indulges herself in the back-seat drive, serves as a tour guide, attempts to chastise her grandchildren for their disrespect toward their parents and rude remarks concerning "their native states, and their parents and everything" by citing conducts of children of her own time. However, her fraudulent propriety is immediately undercut when she calls her grandchildren's attention to "the cut little pickaninny (a Negro child)" standing in the door of a shack. June Star notices that "the boy didn't have any britches on." Grandmother explains that "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do" (O'Connor: 1990:344).

As the trip goes on, the family passes a plantation with five and six graves- a number equal to the occupants of the car. When the grandmother is asked where the plantation is, she answers abruptly: "Gone with the wind," a title of a novel reminiscent of the Old South, which indicates the impending death of the family. Grandmother also recalls her early courtship days, when she failed to marry a man named Mr. Teagarden, who later bought Coca-Cola stock and died a wealthy man. This indicates grandmother's concern with pursuit of material gains. And then, the family stops at the Tower coffee for food. The scene at The Tower cafe appears to have been designed to illustrate the depths of self-interest into which the characters have fallen. Here, Grandmother has a heated discussion on the evil nature of the other people and decides that, although they are good people, a good man is hard to find. By concluding Europe is to blame for the change, they succeed in avoiding responsibility for the human condition.

After the family leaves the Tower café, the children are again attracted by a monkey. Members in the ape family have long been used in Christian art to symbolize sin, malice, cunning and lust and have also been used to symbolize the slothful soul of man in blindness, greed and sinfulness. The grandmother takes a nap after the meal and wakes up outside of Toombsboro, a place foreshadowing the coming death of the family. Recalling a plantation which she visited as a young girl and which she wishes to visit again, the grandmother succeeds in getting her way by "craftily, not telling the truth but wishing she were," informing the children of a secret panel located in the house. The children pester their father into visiting the place by kicking, screaming, and making general nuisances of themselves. It is only after they have turned down a dirt road that "looked as if no one had traveled on it in months" that the grandmother remembers that the house is not in Georgia but in Tennessee. The realization of her error makes her jump in shock during which stirs the cat and it jumps out onto Barley's shoulder and clings there until the car gets overturned. The children shout out their disappointment: "But nobody's killed." In answer to mother's hope for a passing car, "a big black battered hearse like car" appears in some distance away. The grandmother brings down upon the family the Misfit and his two companions by standing to wave to attract the attention of the people in the approaching car. It is also her identification of the Misfit that apparently causes the Misfit to decide that the family is to be killed.

In her speech concerning the interpretation of the story, she comments: "The Grandmother is in the most significant position offers the Christian. She is facing death." and she goes on to say 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"; and

finally the grandmother realizes even in her limited way that she "is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of mystery which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been prattling about so far" (O'Connor, 1970:10-11) When two of the Misfit's companion take Parley to the backwoods to kill, the Misfit exposes his mind to the talkative grandmother.

The Misfit's father had early recognized in him an individual who would have to know "why it [life] is," the Misfit has pondered the human condition and has reached certain conclusions concerning his experience with life. Because of this introspection and philosophical struggling, his capacity for grace is greater than that of the hypocritical, shallow grandmother. The Misfit has been unable to reconcile himself to the punishment he has undergone and that he has found incomprehensible the explanations of a psychiatrist (modern man's priestly substitute and a frequent target for O'Connor's satire), who has suggested that his actions are an attempt to kill his father. For him, the crime committed is of no matter "because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it" (O'Connor, 1990:352)

In her confrontation with the Misfit, the grandmother intends to use religion to escape death, which she has brought upon her family members. However, the Misfit has calculated all evidences at hand to arrive at the conclusion that "Jesus was the only one that raised the dead, and he could have done it. He thown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can- by killing someone or burning down the house or dong some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness" (O'Connor, 1990:352).

In her final attempt to save herself, the grandmother even concedes: "Maybe he didn't raise the dead." But the Misfit has concluded that "I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't... I wisht I had of been there... It an't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known... If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now" (O'Connor, 1990:353). The Misfit is obviously against Christian doctrine. The grandmother comes to the realization that the Misfit is exactly the product of those hollow and foolish ideas she and the people like her hold. Both of them live in the concern for the personal loss and material desire, giving only lip service to spiritual concepts. With sympathy and love, she reaches out to touch the Misfit's shoulder, and claims him as one of her own children. Nevertheless, the very behavior however evokes disgust in the Misfit, who shoots her three times through the chest. O'Connor's description of the grandmother's death pose has biblical meaning. The grandmother half sat and half lay in the puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky. The grandmother was like a child, which is a biblical admonition given to those who would be saved. This indicates grandmother's epiphany, when she finally accepts God's grace. The Misfit, after experiencing all these incidents, seemingly also has epiphany in his remark: "It's no real pleasure in life." After having committed the ultimate crime, he recognizes that he only does the meanness and there is no real pleasure in it. He turns back on his previous view. One would find it difficult to understand without considering O'Connor's comment on the Misfit's possible future: "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 into 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"(O'Connor: 1970:112-113).

Conclusion

To sum up, both the grandmother and the Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* are fallen creatures who have strong feelings of self-confidence to feel that they have lived in such a way that their conducts cannot be questioned. They are blind and ignorant of their shortcoming and they are alienated from God. Their unexpected encounter not only destroys their self-confidence, also provides an opportunity for the ignorant them to come to see their limitation, for the Grandmother, she readily accepts God's grace, and the Misfit, who is such impressed as to change his way of life in the long run.

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