

Flannery O'Connor's Misfit and the Mystery of Evil

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It is not difficult to label the agent of evil in Flannery O'Connor's signature story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." An escaped convict, self-named the Misfit, dispassionately orders the murder of a Georgia family—everyone from grandmother to baby—after coming upon them when their car overturns along a dusty country road. The Misfit orders the murders because the Grandmother has, foolishly, recognized and named him, and also to steal the family's car. But as in all of O'Connor's stories, the violent surface action only begins to suggest the depths and complexities of meaning embedded in the story. This is especially true when considering the mystery of evil and its relation to the action of grace.

On one level the story's title refers to the words of a popular song—"A good man is hard to find/ You always get the other kind." But on another level it also suggests Christ's rebuke to Peter when Peter tried to call him good, and Jesus responded that no one should be called good (Mark 10:18)—a mistake the Grandmother makes repeatedly in her encounter with the Misfit. At the same time, it is also true to say that, excepting Satan, no one should be called totally evil, certainly not in any absolute sense. Good and evil, as potentialities and as actualities, are inextricably intertwined in human beings, and this is true for both the Grandmother and the Misfit. It is more accurate to speak of gradations of human good and evil, and of the drama of choice in the face of competing moral options. O'Connor's story explores a range of these options and their consequences, as well as suggesting the mysterious invisible forces beyond personality and circumstance that help to shape human destiny.

A central principle of O'Connor's Catholic theology, expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians, is that evil has no being, and that evil always appears as a good to the one who commits it, i.e.,

as something good for him. Granted this principle, one can see that the Misfit's murderous actions are committed under the delusion that somehow they will reap some good for him, and somehow answer to his need. But stealing the family's battered car, while important, is only the immediate goal of the Misfit; it is not the locus of his inner energy and desire. His conversation with the Grandmother reveals many things about his deeper desires, the most important of which is that the Misfit wants some rationale and justification for his spiritual predicament. He wants an understanding of what he sees as the disproportion between the personal suffering he feels afflicted with and the actions he has committed. As he tells the Grandmother: "I call myself 'The Misfit' . . . because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."¹ The Misfit feels the mystery of evil in his bones, and he finds it incomprehensible. While there are surely elements of self-pity and self-justification in his statement, his mental suffering, his sense of guilt, and his questioning cannot be ignored or dismissed, because it reflects a spiritual condition that is both fundamentally human and conspicuously modern in temper. Though he commits evil deeds, the Misfit is also a seeker who wants some answers to the mystery of evil he feels both in himself and witnesses in the world. His keen sense of evil suggests implicitly that he also has an appreciation of the good, however distorted or misguided it may be.

The Misfit openly acknowledges his own evil. When the Grandmother tries to type him as a "good" man, i.e. a gentleman, he answers: "Nome, I ain't a good man . . .," and then adds: "but I ain't the worst in the world neither" (148). He admits that "somewhere along the line" he has "done something wrong" and been sent to prison. Subsequently, he has "forgotten" what he has done wrong, yet he feels the weight of some indefinable original sin. He also acknowledges that the punishment was "no mistake." The punishment is justified, he recognizes, but he still finds it incommensurate with his life. So now his rational solution is to sign for everything he does and get a copy of it. That way, he says, "you'll know what you done and hold up the crime to the punish-

ment and see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't been treated right" (151). But of course this does not explain the original sense of sin and injustice he feels. The strict logic of his proposal is impotent before the mystery of evil his life embodies.

The Misfit, then, wants not only to understand the mystery of evil he feels, but also, somehow, to be justified in the face of it. He wants justice as well as knowledge, and also to be liberated from his predicament. The desire itself is good; the Psalms exalt the human longing for a world of justice and constancy (Psalm 96). However, the Misfit seems more interested in personal vindication rather than communal justice. Yet better than anyone else in the story, the Misfit recognizes the ultimate stakes in the drama—personal salvation. His sense of the absolute significance of individual actions is profound. Yet supreme rationalist that he is, the Misfit cannot admit the need of a power beyond logic and human justice that is, one can believe, more than commensurate to the mystery and power of evil. For O'Connor, such a power is divine grace, made available through Christ's death and resurrection. The Misfit acknowledges this, yet refuses to submit his will to God's. "I don't want no hep," he tells the Grandmother. "I'm doing all right by myself" (150).

His refusal casts him into a posture of moral self-sufficiency and isolation, signified in part by his act of naming himself the Misfit. In this act of naming he resembles another of O'Connor's proud self-namers, Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People," whose chosen ugly name "Hulga" serves as her defense against admitting her ordinary human frailty and need, as well as being a badge of her pride. Naming, as Walker Percy has pointed out, is being.² So also, false naming reveals non-being, a refusal to speak truly of who or what one is. The Misfit says that his name signifies his awareness of the disproportion between his actions and their punishment (151). On the one hand this disproportion confounds him. But on the other hand he uses it to claim his difference from the general run of society. The Misfit's father, he explains, said he was a "different breed of dog" and added:

“it’s some that can live their whole life without asking about it and it’s some has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He’s going to be into everything!” (148). The Misfit certainly claims his difference from people like the Grandmother and her family, who seem to accommodate themselves to the mystery of evil by ignoring it or glossing it over with platitudes. If so, then on this level the Misfit can be seen as O’Connor’s scourge, a prophetic figure who raises the question of evil and redemption by Christ to a largely unbelieving audience in a stark and violent fashion. Seen in this way, O’Connor’s challenge to her audience gives the Grandmother’s bland assessment of the Misfit—that he is “not common”—an ironic ring of truth. He appears as a man suffering deep anguish over his predicament of doubt, as one oppressed by a sense of entrapment in a world of unrelieved guilt, yet also as one willing to acknowledge the profound mystery of his predicament.

The Misfit’s desire for a rational system of human justice in which actions and consequences can be meaningfully “balanced out” is good, as I have said, but it is inadequate to explain the mysterious human condition. It cannot comprehend or meliorate the mystery of evil. The Misfit is caught between absurdity and faith. He rejects belief in Christ yet he recognizes that a world in which actions and consequences cannot be made sense of leads ultimately to a world in which logical distinctions between good and evil collapse. As he says, it becomes a world in which there is “no pleasure but meanness.” Still, the fact that he perceives his dilemma reveals a man keenly attuned to the mystery of good and evil; in fact, one can say, a man of deeply religious sensibility like that O’Connor saw in Albert Camus.³

The stumbling block to faith for the Misfit, as he tells the Grandmother, is the mystery of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead:

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn’t have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but thow everything away and follow Him, and if

He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness. . . ." (152)

The Misfit is well aware of the demands of faith, just as he is aware that good actions in and of themselves are insufficient for salvation. It is important to note that the Misfit first states emphatically that Jesus *did* raise the dead, implying that he believes Jesus's claim to be the savior. Yet he argues that Jesus should not have done it. Why? Denial of the resurrection would make life much simpler for the Misfit. He has heard the Gospel message, and it gnaws at his mind. Moreover, the Misfit resents Jesus's resurrection, because it upsets the human code of justice he wishes to base his life upon. Jesus's raising of the dead, with all that it demands, and all that it implies about the supernatural power of grace, knocks the Misfit's rational system of moral coherence down like a house of cards. O'Connor reports that he ends his speech on the resurrection with "almost a snarl." The Misfit is angry, angry at the inexplicable mystery of evil in which he finds himself enmeshed. Still, the depth of his anguish must be given value. At least he has a clear sense of the dimensions of the problem.

After his initial statement that Jesus is the only one who raised the dead, the Misfit is tempted to disbelief when the dazed Grandmother says: "Maybe he didn't raise the dead . . ." (154). In his answer to this tempting remark, O'Connor likens him to the apostle Thomas when he encountered the resurrected Christ: "I wasn't there so I can't say he didn't," the Misfit says. "I wish I had of been there . . . It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen, lady . . . if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now" (152). Thus the Misfit lives as neither believer nor unbeliever in the grey world of uncertainty, of desire for truth, and of longing for some transcendent meaning. Such is O'Connor's portrait of the modern agnostic-seeker. But the Misfit cannot accept this cloud of un-

knowing. In his mind, the name “Misfit” is a badge of distinction, a proud assertion of his uniqueness and superiority. Thus when the Grandmother reaches out and touches him and declares that he is one of her own children, he reacts instantly by shooting her three times in the chest.

* * *

One way to understand the Misfit’s brutal reaction, and indeed his whole paradoxical identity, is through the lens of a writer who deeply interested Flannery O’Connor—the French philosopher Simone Weil. Although she did not begin to read Weil’s writings until 1955, O’Connor acknowledged having read “a good bit” about Weil as early as 1952.⁴ In her discussion of evil in *Gravity and Grace*, Weil says that a “hurtful act is the transference to others of the degradation we bear in ourselves. That is why we are inclined to commit such acts as a way of deliverance” (65). Shooting the Grandmother can be seen, in part, as the Misfit’s spontaneous attempt to transfer his own felt degradation to another as a means of liberation. As he said earlier: “No pleasure but meanness.” But as Weil also remarks: “When there is a transference of evil, the evil is not diminished but increased in him from whom it proceeds. This is a phenomenon of multiplication” (65). The Misfit’s killings do not liberate him from his felt degradation. Rather, they intensify his pain, a fact O’Connor points to when the Misfit says at the end: “It’s no real pleasure in life” (153).

But if the Misfit’s predicament dramatizes the mystery of evil, it is not the whole story for O’Connor. There are still the actions of the Grandmother to consider, actions which allowed O’Connor to explore the mystery of evil *and* good. Again, Simone Weil’s observations are helpful. She said: “Evil is to love, what mystery is to the intelligence. As mystery compels the virtue of faith to be supernatural, so does evil the virtue of charity” (*Gravity and Grace* 68). The Grandmother’s faith, such as it is, is surely tested in her encounter with the criminals.

The label “good” she tries to pin on the Misfit is, of course, a shallow-minded social concept that reduces the virtue of goodness to distinctions of class, breeding and manners. The Grandmother considers herself a good Christian woman, i.e., a lady of fine manners and disposition, and a believer in Jesus to boot. But the Misfit rejects her attempts to flatter him on the basis of class and manners. This so-called gentleman will not allow such trivializing of the good; in answer to it he murders women and children in cold blood.

As the drama of their encounter unfolds, the Grandmother’s sentimental self-image is shattered. Her nostalgia for a look at the old plantation is shown to be rooted in false memory and deceit: the house she begged to visit is in Tennessee, not Georgia, and she has had to lie about a “secret panel” to maneuver her son Bailey into searching for the house. Her lying and selfishness lead directly to the accident and the subsequent murder of her family. Her self-image as a “good” woman is stripped from her.

But beyond this self-discovery, the Grandmother’s encounter with the Misfit tests her religious beliefs, and in so doing, unfolds the mystery of good and evil. As Simone Weil also observed, evil exposes the true good. In this case, the Misfit’s evil and the Grandmother’s suffering mysteriously trigger in her a gesture of charity. The Misfit not only rejects the Grandmother’s facile attempts to make him a good gentleman; he also rejects her appeal to him to pray for Jesus’s help. His cold refusals, sounded against the background of the murders of the family in the woods, reduce the Grandmother to confusion and doubt. “Maybe He [Jesus] didn’t raise the dead,” she mumbles as she slumps in the ditch. But when the Misfit starts to rail angrily because he was not there to see the resurrection, the Grandmother summons her wits to see him in a new, and truer, light—the light of charity. O’Connor writes:

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 own 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. (152)

* * *

This climactic scene, full of ambiguity, has occasioned a wealth of critical comment. O'Connor herself argued that the grandmother's final words and actions represent the mysterious action of grace.⁵ Some readers have viewed it more skeptically, even arguing that the grandmother's gesture may be a final desperate attempt to save her own life. Other critics have argued a middle ground, granting O'Connor's right to her theological view, while judging the scene as satisfactory or not on the basis of strictly literary criteria. My focus here is on what this climactic scene suggests about the mysterious interpenetration of good and evil.

What initially strikes the reader about the scene is the enormous gap or lacuna between the grandmother's statement of doubt—"Maybe He didn't raise the dead . . ."—and her reaching out fatally to touch the Misfit and embrace him as "one of my babies . . .," one of "my own children." O'Connor explains nothing of what happens in the grandmother's mind and heart to bring her to this touch of kinship with the criminal, except to say that "her head cleared for an instant." The gap is mysterious, perhaps supernatural, yet also exactly right in the human sense. Such acts of *metanoia*, while inexplicable, are totally within the range of human behavior. What is significant about her calling him "one of my babies . . .," one of "my own children," and "touching him" is that her actions threaten to undermine his self-designation of himself as the Misfit, the name he chose to signify his difference from ordinary humanity. The Misfit rejects the communal world, just as his sense of "justice" is individualistic rather than communal. Significantly, he remarked earlier in that story that "children make me nervous." The Grandmother's claim of kinship rejects his solitary identity, and in-

stead places him within the community as a child of man, like any other. So also, her touching him threatens his proud, isolated self-created role as the Misfit, a threat he cannot tolerate. After all, if he is not the Misfit, what is he? An ordinary frail, suffering creature. So what we view from the grandmother's perspective as a good act—her recognition of her own bond with an evil man, her complicity, yet also her compassion for his suffering—is viewed by the Misfit as evil: he springs back from her touch “as if a snake had bitten him. . . .”

Why does the Misfit regard the touch as evil, and then answer it with evil? We recall Simone Weil's maxim: “Evil is to love, what mystery is to the intelligence.” The grandmother's touch brings the Misfit into direct contact with the good of charity. The touch of charity measures the gap between him and the good. He cannot abide such threatening contact because it would mean opening himself to an admission of failure, and more importantly, to the possibility of good within the human community. Instead, he chooses the “hell” of isolation and despair. The truth of compassion, and being named a child of the human community, is for the Misfit an “evil” he must escape. Once again, Weil's comments are insightful:

The sin against the Spirit consists of knowing a thing to be good, and hating it because it is good. We experience the equivalent of it in the form of resistance every time we set our faces in the direction of good. For every contact with good leads to a knowledge of the distance between good and evil and the commencement of a painful effort of assimilation. It is something which hurts and we are afraid. This fear is perhaps the sign of the reality of the contact. The corresponding sin cannot come about unless a lack of hope makes the consciousness of the distance intolerable and changes the pain into hatred. (*Gravity and Grace* 67)

The Misfit's pain at the Grandmother's touch is instantly transformed into a hatred of the gratuitous act of charity, which he then answers with a brutal execution. What the Misfit fears is the mystery of love,

the demands of love which the grandmother mysteriously responded to when faced with the criminal's suffering, and her own impending death. In her case, evil issued finally in good, or as Weil expressed it, evil exposed the good. But if the encounter with evil exposed the good in the grandmother, the final predicament of the Misfit is more complicated, more mysterious.

As I noted earlier, the Misfit acts under the delusion that his actions are somehow good, i.e., good for him. Since he cannot make sense of his spiritual condition, he now tries to reduce ethical mystery to a perverse pleasure-pain principle. Initially he told the Grandmother: "No pleasure but meanness." Yet his encounter with her touch has exposed his need, his human vulnerability. In his crucial final remark, he shifts from the earlier "No pleasure but meanness" to "It's no real pleasure in life." He has again failed to liberate himself from his predicament through violence, failed to "balance out" his deeds and find the meaning of his life. He himself is his own deepest mystery, a profoundly human condition which he can neither fathom nor abide. His last statement, that there is no "real pleasure" in life, shows that what he thought might bring pleasure, i.e., acts of meanness, has also proven to be bankrupt, a hollow illusion.

In the end, the Misfit's spiritual and mental suffering continues and intensifies, for with the failure of his code, his awareness of the gap between good and evil has widened. His violence is projected back onto himself as self-hatred. Perhaps at some future time his knowledge of this interior chasm will bring about the collapse of his self-begotten identity as a "Misfit," and an acceptance of his broken humanity. O'Connor suggested the possibility that he might ultimately be brought to such a conversion. She called the Misfit a "prophet gone wrong," and referred to the grandmother's touching him as "like the mustard-seed," which "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" (*Mystery and Manners* 110, 112-13). The Grandmother's touch may bring him to the point where the

mystery of good and evil is finally subsumed in the mystery of love. For the Misfit, evil may, in the end, through the grace of charity, bring about his ultimate good.⁶

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Notes

1. Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *Collected Works*, 151.
2. Walker Percy, "Naming and Being," *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 130-39.
3. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds., *Mystery and Manners*, 160.
4. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 40.
5. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 65.
6. *Mystery and Manners*, 109-113.

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