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A CLOAK OF GRACE: CONTRADICTIONS IN “A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND”

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Flannery O'Connor was often shocked to find how people interpreted her stories. Some readers of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” believed the grandmother was evil, even a witch. Soon O'Connor set out, quite explicitly, in letters and lectures to detail the theology of the story and the importance of the grandmother as an agent of grace. In a letter to John Hawkes, she explained how violence and grace come together:

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.¹

When O'Connor speaks of her Catholicism and its expression in her fiction, she is clearheaded, eloquent, and convincing. In *Mystery and Manners*, the posthumous collection of her occasional prose, she claims the assumptions that underlie “A Good Man is Hard to Find” “are those of the central Christian mysteries. These are the assumptions to which a large part of the modern audience takes exception.”² O'Connor was upset with critics who were determined to count the dead bodies: “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.”³ For O'Connor, grace is “simply a concern with the human reaction to that which, instant by instant, gives life to the soul. It is a concern with a realization that breeds charity and with the charity that breeds action.”⁴

Flannery O'Connor was most sincere in her Catholicism and her view of its expression in her fiction. She was troubled that her readers often identified with the wrong characters or with the right characters for the wrong reasons. She felt readers “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.”⁵ When she learned readers were identifying with Hazel Motes' rejection of Christ, O'Connor added a preface to the second edition of *Wise Blood* claiming Motes' integrity lay in his inability to shake the ragged figure of Christ from his mind. Generally O'Connor chalked up all the misreadings and confusion to the spiritual shortcomings of the modern reader: “Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental.”⁶

But the discrepancies between how O'Connor is often read and how she claimed she should be read cannot simply be explained by her theology of grace or by the lack of religious feeling among readers. Critical opinion over the years has tended to line up behind O'Connor's own explanations; however, O'Connor's analysis of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" still seems baffling and occasionally a critic has questioned the theology of the fiction. Andre Bleikasten, focusing on O'Connor's novels, claimed that

the truth of O'Connor's work is the truth of her art, not that of her church. Her fiction does refer to an implicit theology, but if we rely, as we should, on its testimony rather than on the author's comments, we shall have to admit that the Catholic orthodoxy of her work is at least debatable.⁷

And Frederick Asals recalls D. H. Lawrence's advice that a reader should trust the tale and not the teller. Of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Asals claims:

One can easily pass over her [O'Connor's] hope that the grandmother's final gesture to *The Misfit* might have begun a process which would "turn him into the prophet he was meant to become"; that, as she firmly says, is another story, and it would be a reckless piety indeed which would see it even suggested by the one we have.⁸

Finally, any work of art must speak for itself, and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" speaks much louder than O'Connor's claims. It depicts evil with a power akin to Dostoevsky. Yet Dostoevsky presented holy innocence in characters like Sonia and Alyosha as well as evil in Smerdyakov and Raskolnikov. O'Connor focuses her story on what is sinister in *The Misfit* and satirical in the grandmother and her family. O'Connor is dark and negative in the modernist tradition, albeit with religious preoccupations. She depicts pure evil in *The Misfit* as he obliterates the whining grandmother and her clan. This fine story, one of O'Connor's best, derives much of its power from the anger and vengeance it expresses. And that pile of dead bodies cannot be canceled out when the grandmother touches *The Misfit*.

Yet O'Connor is not diminished by the contradictions between her work and her explanation of her work; she is made richer. The fury that lights up her art keeps "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" from being reduced to a theological exercise. The complexity of this story in part explains its broad appeal to audiences who do not see the story as a parable of grace. Grace is the uneasy cloak O'Connor designed to cover and justify the violence in the story. The grace is a guise, a rationale that is not brought off. O'Connor's naive and deluded mothers and grandmothers are often brought low by a violent encounter that shakes them out of their petty superiorities and their would-be aristocratic and genteel trappings. They are forced to realize their vulnerability, their ridiculous condition.

The character of the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for several reasons, contradicts any reading of her as an agent of grace. First, the grandmother's judgments of others are totally twisted. She pronounces Red Sammy Butts "a good man" despite the evidence he is a lazy slob who treats his wife like a slave. Throughout the story the grandmother is a full-blown agent of disaster, a Geiger counter for catastrophe. Her fuzzy fantasies about a southern mansion combined with some assistance from the smuggled cat manage to cause the car wreck. Then her pronouncement "You're The Misfit" seals their fate.⁹ The few pleasures in the story involve the grandmother's false sense of superiority. She chuckles over how a "nigger boy" (p. 120) ate the watermelon Mr. Teagarden (E.A.T.) had left for her when they were courting, and she wishes to paint a picture of the "cute little pickaninny" (p. 119) she sees standing, without pants, in the doorway of a shack. Her pleasure and self-esteem increases directly in relation to the degree of superiority she manages to feel. Her limitations are so extreme that it seems impossible to imagine her thinking about anyone but herself, even for a moment.

Then the grandmother deals with The Misfit by appealing to his gentility. She keeps insisting he is a good man, from good people: "You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!" (p. 127). She waves her handkerchief and adjusts the broken brim on her hat, insisting she is a lady and should not be shot. In one of the more bizarre moments in the story, she suggests suburban propriety for what ails The Misfit: "Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time" (p. 129). Later, when she asks him to pray, she again appeals to the fact that she is a lady, and she adds, "I'll give you all the money I've got!" (p. 132). The contents of her purse seem an unlikely ransom when the rest of her family has already been shot.

O'Connor does say that the grandmother's head clears before she tells The Misfit "why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (p. 132) and reaches out to touch him. But by that time he is wearing Bailey's shirt, the yellow one with the blue parrots. And more than extending grace, the grandmother appears to be insisting on what is not real or true, as she has throughout the story. The touch expresses her final hope that her noblesse can alter her fate. But when she wishes upon a Misfit, she is likely to be murdered.

In a sense, O'Connor admitted that the grace she saw in the grandmother's touch could not have run deep. In a letter to John Hawkes, she restated and edited The Misfit's remarks: "She would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life. True enough."¹⁰ Though O'Connor claims the grandmother's limitations do not prevent her from being an agent of Catholic grace, it seems a hard won and shaky grace indeed, dependent, as The Misfit says most precisely, on "some-

body there to shoot her every minute of her life" (p. 133). And in death the grandmother smiles up with a child's face, still without comprehension.

Despite their obvious differences, The Misfit and the grandmother are bound by their concern with appearances and superficial respectability. The Misfit reddens when Bailey curses at the grandmother and adds "I don't reckon he meant to talk to you thataway" (p. 127). He admits he would prefer not to shoot a lady. He appears embarrassed when the family huddles in front of him. He apologizes: "I'm sorry I don't have on a shirt before you ladies" (p. 129). The grandmother dresses for accidents; The Misfit, for murders. He gets Bailey's shirt from Bobby Lee.

The power The Misfit has in the story resides not only in his gun and his violent sidekicks. He is energized by his keenness, his experience, his knowledge of evil. Though he claims to be confused about the extent of his own guilt, his view of human nature is certainly more direct than the view of the grandmother and her family. He is the opposite of the children's mother, "whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage . . ." (p. 117). He has been many different things, including a gospel singer and an undertaker. He has been in a tornado and even says he has seen a woman flogged. He has the same "all or nothing" mentality of Flannery O'Connor herself, who said "I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy."¹¹ The Misfit says of Christ:

"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" (p. 132).

While O'Connor clearly feels Christ is all, The Misfit thinks he is managing fine without Him. When The Misfit shoots the grandmother he is recoiling from whatever grace she offers. He is rejecting not just any warmth conveyed in the touch, but also the revolting world she represents and the repulsive notion that he is her child. With good reason, The Misfit is unwilling to be adopted by this grandmother.

Essentially, the story is a stronger indictment of the grandmother and her pathetic view of life than of The Misfit. It is no accident that the grandmother and her entire crew are killed off in the story: this family vacation was doomed from the outset. And it is with no small degree of pleasure that O'Connor finishes off this family. Her fictional world is basically satirical, not theological. She casts a plain and cold eye on a sorry sight, a real world, and renders it mercilessly. A mean pleasure sustains the satire and nourishes the reader. Though The Misfit finally decides "it's no real pleasure in life" (p. 133), there is pleasure in this story.

A personal wrath oozes from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and from most of O'Connor's fiction. The wrath is O'Connor's strength and her idealism, her refusal to believe the world around her was all. But apparently her anger left her with guilt enough to cause her to insist on an impossible reading of her own story. In her version a moment of kindness mixed with a plea for mercy would carry the day and push the massacred clan into the background, minimizing the survival of The Misfit.

The story reveals the hidden Flannery O'Connor glimpsed by Katherine Anne Porter. Porter was struck by the discrepancy between O'Connor's appearance and her fiction and suggested that the famous self-portrait with the peacock revealed an inner Flannery:

Something you might not see on first or even second glance in that tenderly fresh-colored, young, smiling face; something she saw in herself, knew about herself, that she was trying to tell us in a way less personal, yet more vivid than words.

That portrait, I'm trying to say, looked like the girl who wrote those blood-curdling stories about human evil—NOT the living Flannery, whistling to her peacocks, showing off her delightfully freakish breed of chickens.¹²

The force of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" speaks for an angry outsider, a person without illusions or sentimentality. The grandmother does not go to Florida, and O'Connor has her way. A world of propriety and illusion is laid low by wrath, not redeemed by grace.

Notes

¹Flannery O'Connor, *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, second ed. (New York: Random House, 1980), pp. 367–68.

²Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 109.

³*Mystery*, p. 113.

⁴*Mystery*, p. 204.

⁵*Mystery*, p. 110.

⁶*Mystery*, p. 161.

⁷Andre Bleikasten, "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor," *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), p. 156.

⁸Frederick Asals, "The Limits of Explanation," *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, p. 52.

⁹Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), p. 127. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

¹⁰*Letters*, p. 389.

¹¹*Letters*, p. 147.

¹²Katherine Anne Porter, "Flannery O'Connor at Home," *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 297.