



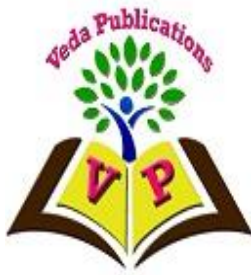
THE MISFIT AND THE REAL: A REREADING OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND"

Mark Seeley

(Department of English, Shanghai International Studies University, China.)

[doi: 10.33329/joell.7.2.61](https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.7.2.61)

ABSTRACT



Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is primarily concerned with religion, with the Grandmother character as the main focus. However, such readings consistently overlook the importance of the Misfit as well as the Grandmother's own hypocrisy. This essay argues that the focus on the Grandmother and on religion miss the larger point of the story, and are ultimately reductive. While religious readings of O'Connor have value, there is often a tendency for such readings to undervalue the psychological underpinnings of her work and overvalue the spiritual underpinnings. Methodologically, by reading this story through the lens of Jacques Lacan's trinary of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" plays upon folkloric scary stories in order to question historically revisionist expectations about the nature of reality and human perspective. Ultimately, this paper widened the scope of interpretation, placing O'Connor more firmly in the traditions of postmodern literature.

Keywords: *Grace, Lacan, O'Connor, Psychoanalysis, Real, Symbolic*

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article Copyright© 2020VEDAPublications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons

Attribution License 4.0 International License

**INTRODUCTION**

A struggle for dominance is outlined in the first few paragraphs of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and to locate what, or whom, dominates the thematic mood of the text would give indication of a frame bordering the tale, a tendency hovering over it, or a subtext at its foundation. Since the Grandmother is mentioned in the first sentence, stating her desires, she first appears to be the dominant character in the text, which is the cathexis of most criticism on this particular story. Too, the first impression of the Grandmother is not only bolstered by the matriarchal power of Grandmothers everywhere, but also in her "seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind" (O'Connor 117). She commands Bailey, "see here, read this" (O'Connor 117). It is humorous that the Grandmother's protestations ("I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it") are met with deaf ears and it is pitiful that the Grandmother does not actually have "children" but only one son, Bailey (O'Connor 117). This lack of fecundity in the Grandmother deliberately subtracts from her that traditional assertion of a woman's reproductive aura. This last point is further illuminated in the antithetical image of the daughter-in-law, young, popping out babies like a rabbit, despite the impediment of her slacks, with two recalcitrant children—one boy and one girl, a dyad suggesting future propagation, into a future the Grandmother will not experience.

Perhaps the most acute undermining of the importance of the Grandmother is the newspaper in her hand. It is here that readers learn of The Misfit, and, if the first few paragraphs are read as a power struggle for the narrative frame, then it seems clear that the Misfit wins. Indeed, the Grandmother's knowledge of the newspaper story itself later leads directly to the gruesome outcome:

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and stood staring. "You're the misfit!" she said. "I recognized you at once!"

"Yes'm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, "but it would have been better for all

of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (O'Connor 127).

Of course, the Grandmother recognizes The Misfit because she's seen his photograph in the newspaper. The article from the *Journal* in the opening paragraph of the story reports that a killer—the Misfit—is on the loose. This setup in the liminary recalls the *sjuzhet* of those haunting campfire tales like "The Hook" or "The Killer in the Backseat" which often begin with a radio report that some madman has escaped from the local asylum, bogeymen that only appear at the end of the tale as a kind of frightening punch-line. What's interesting within this view of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as a scary story is that in the scary stories of folklore the escaped madman functions merely as the impetus (the necessary haunting mood) and the terminus (the revelatory shock of fright), whereas in "A Good Man" the Misfit is not only the impetus and terminus, but the *fabula* itself. Without the Misfit, there is no story.

In this way, the Misfit functions as the Real, a Real that the Grandmother attempts to fix in her symbolic chain, a fixture against which the Real necessarily—and violently—rebels. Like the Real, the Misfit is that "limit of experience resisting symbolization" not only in the inability of the Grandmother to fix him in her symbolic chain as a good man, but also suggested by the inability of the narrative to appropriately name the Misfit (Glowinski *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms* 154). Structurally and spatially, the Misfit frames the Real of the text in a way much different from what Bob Dowell calls the "theological framework" required for an exegetical exploration (Bob Dowell "The Moment of Grace" 236). The Misfit's frame presents a Real that does not fit and will not fit the Symbolism of its *fabula*.

THE REAL AND THE SYMBOLIC

One reason why so much criticism misses the point on the importance of the Misfit is due to an over-evaluation of religious influences on the text. Donald E. Hardy addresses the fact that criticism on O'Connor is often limited, "privileging [] religious issues" and "too frequently" concentrated on theology (525). In his excellent discussion of the story



from the perspective of politeness theory, Hardy notes how

O'Connor's fiction serves to deepen our understanding of the fundamental nature of that fiction, which is an extended narrative questioning of the relationships between the grotesque and the sacramental, especially as the grotesque is manifested spiritually crippling isolation and the sacramental is manifested in connection" (Hardy "Politeness in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: Social Interaction, Language, and the Body" 527).

Hardy's interest in the grotesque and the sacramental in O'Connor parallels alignments with Jacques Lacan's trinary of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, first introduced by Lacan in the early 1950s. The "spiritually crippling isolation," as Hardy puts it, suggests the lack (*le manque*) of the Real present in symbolization, the hole of the Symbolic in which we dwell. Some of the less abstract ways which Lacan has used to describe the Real is that the real is outside of speech ("Seminar II" 164), cannot be written, or, as he says in Seminar XX, "that which does not stop not being written" (Lacan "Seminar XX" 59). Lastly, as Lacan puts it in "On Creation *Ex Nihilo*" from his *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the Real is "the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing" (Lacan 121). This is Lacan's understanding of Freud's *das Ding* which can be essentially understood as what is missing in the signifier. This is to say that our language as representation of reality fails to fully represent the signified, and what is left out of that representation is the Real.

From this vantage, the introduction of the Misfit through the medium of the newspaper points the narrative toward the "extimacy" of the Real ("Seminar VII" 139): the newspaper article is and is not the Misfit. Lacan often uses an analogy of a mirror to describe this relationship. The image in the mirror is not the thing being reflected, but the specular image; yet, the reflection in the mirror, albeit it detached from the subject, is necessary for the movement of the subject toward Gestalt. Similarly, the Misfit is reflected in the newspaper

article, but the contents of the article do not and cannot "fit" the real and grotesque immediacy of the Misfit. We can see here again the aptness of the Misfit's label as grotesque for our image as seen in the mirror reflects our physicality, a physicality that does not seem to "fit," is always outside, always external, yet still presents the only real evidence that we have of our selves.

Douglas Novich Leonard also suggests a relationship between the grotesque and the Real. Novich claims that for O'Connor "the grotesque character was not an escape from realism, but rather an attempt to achieve a kind of spiritual super-realism" (Novich "Experiencing Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'" 48). Novich walks the edge of a Lacanian reading when he writes:

Important to experiencing the meaning of the story is that the reader must avoid making the grandmother into either a saint or a witch and the Misfit into either the devil or a prophet (as some have done). These characters, for all their grotesqueness, are meant to be real—and, as real, inscrutable at the deepest level of their spirituality (Novich "Experiencing Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'" 52).

Of course, the Grandmother, despite Dowell's claim, does not seem to be either real or altogether engaged with the Real. Rather, the Grandmother is depicted quite strongly as symbolic of the desire to explain (or justify) the grotesqueness of the Real itself. Dowell's reading falls into that same desire when he writes that the "story is a simulation of the experience of grace" (Novich 53). First, Dowell desires to place the Real of the story within the symbolic chain of Christianity, just as the Grandmother does, and, second, Dowell fails to see that the Grandmother does not experience grace, but little more than a failure in her attempt to persuade the Misfit not to murder her. After the Grandmother "reckernize[s]" the Misfit, her first statement is not a plea for her son or her grandchildren, but for herself: "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" (O'Connor "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" 127)? This is not a question of grace, but of self-preservation.



Readers such as Novich, who read religiosity into the character of the Grandmother, rely less on the text of the story itself than on O'Connor's own interpretation of her work. In his essay "Secular Meaning in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,'" Stanley Renner challenges tendencies to place too much emphasis on O'Connor's own opinions about her work, "suggest[ing] that its meaning is wider than that indicated by the author's own interpretation" and instead has "broad cultural implications and overtones of universality" (Renner 123). Renner argues that the Misfit murders the Grandmother because he is "[m]addened by the incongruity between [her] simplistic exhortation and his own experience of life" (Renner 124). What is incongruous ultimately is the Grandmother's attempt to fix the Misfit into her own symbolic chain, whether it be as a good man or as one of her own children. What the Misfit denies is being named at all just as the Real in its own aporic knotting refuses to be unraveled and laid bare by the Symbolic. Renner approaches this point, writing that the Grandmother's "desire to return to the old dream world [] brings her and the culture she personifies into fatal collision with reality in the form of the Misfit" (Renner 126). For Renner, the Misfit "perceives the tenuousness of faith and the crucial difference between a divinely ordered world and one with no transcendent governing principle beyond natural law" for "in the radical indecipherability of the world the sequence of logic linking deed, guilt, and punishment has come undone" (Renner 128). The Grandmother, as Renner suggests, does seem to present "the institutionalized mind of the culture," but not one limited to that of Christian culture. Rather, the Grandmother expresses the belief that things can be named, that the signifier does have a relationship with the signified. On the other hand, the Misfit believes that such an understanding "does not fit visible reality" and "all his life has been judged him by an ideal standard that fits no one" (Renner 129-130). The affinities here between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Misfit are striking. Renner's excellent analysis presents the Grandmother as "Reality" (Renner 131), but this seems to be bad logic. It is the Misfit who is the Real and the Grandmother who is the standard-bearer of the Symbolic. Renner ends his discussion by stating

that the Misfit "cannot accommodate himself to reality," but this is exactly backwards; it is the Grandmother who tries and fails to place the Real within the symbolic chain of her Christian beliefs (Renner 131).

The scary story of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" effectively ends at the moment when the Misfit and his crew show up. O'Connor deliberately extends the duration of their arrival creating the tension necessary for the shock of the scary story: "The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearselike automobile. There were three men in it" (O'Connor 126). This slow, mysterious description leads up to what can be seen as the end of the "scary story" portion of the narrative when O'Connor reveals the punchline: the Misfit exits the car "holding a black hat and a gun. The two boys also had guns" (O'Connor 126). Where the folkloric scary story would stop at this moment to let the listener imagine the outcome on their own, O'Connor continues her tale, morphing her scary story into a lesson of sorts, brought to us by the "scholarly look[ing]" Misfit (O'Connor 126). The lesson that the Misfit wishes to share seems to be implied by the opposite view of the title: if a good man is hard to find, an evil man is easy to find.

Reading the Misfit as a manifestation of the grotesque. Real places, new significance on the relationship between past and present in the story. As Red Sammy says: "Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more" (O'Connor 122). Like the Grandmother, Red Sammy carries a conservative notion of a time when there were good men, when people were trustworthy, when times were safer. The Misfit clearly functions as a dialectic to both Red Sammy and the Grandmother's image of the way things should be. The problem is, of course, that the Edenic vision of Red Sammy and the Grandmother is purely imaginary. The Grandmother suggests this idea herself when she spots the old family plantation outside of the car window:

"Look at the graveyard!" the grandmother said, pointing it out. "That was the old family



burying ground. That belonged to the plantation."

"Where's the plantation?" John Wesley asked.

"Gone With the Wind," said the grandmother.

"Ha. Ha."

These lines can be read in a few ways. The first is that the Edenic vision of the Grandmother and Red Sammy once did exist, but no longer does. However, the playful reference to *Gone With the Wind* seems to indicate otherwise. That past is a fiction, one written about in books, symbolized and giving structure to the Grandmother and Red Sammy's Imaginary, but finding no place in the Real. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" enlarges the fictional past and forces us to see that the present, as a product of the past, is just as fictional.

CONCLUSION

The Grandmother's power is ultimately and violently stripped away at the end of the story, but the Misfit has controlled the theme from the start, although without the reader knowing it. A strong suggestion then is that "to be known" is a dangerous thing. But what exactly is being known here? This essay argued that the specificity of the focus on the Grandmother has led criticism of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" away from its more universal concerns with the nature of reality itself as hypostatized by the character of the Misfit.

The final gnomic pronouncement from the Misfit underscores the *jouissance* of the climactic moment: "It's no real pleasure in life" (O'Connor "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" 133). What the Misfit emphatically calls to mind is the void around which our desire spirals. The name of the Misfit could not be more appropriate. The Mis-fit does not quite fit the innocuous (and humorous) family road trip to Florida. In fact, very little seems to "fit" just right in the narrative. The etymological roots of "misfit" are located in the 1820s, that time of plantations and colonial mansions which functions as the Symbolic *par excellence* for the Grandmother, the "better times" of her youth (O'Connor 122). To some extent the Misfit is a creature of that time, with his polite concern manifest in his discourse during the

orchestrated massacre. At the same time the Misfit's language in no way matches his actions. The Misfit is that dark overture of the Real, which, when encountered is found to be merely a void, a hole, like the hole in the road that causes the car accident that leads to the fatal encounter with the Misfit.

To read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" through the theory of Jacques Lacan raises new questions and new significance, not only about this story in particular, but O'Connor's work in general. It encourages other readers to rethink O'Connor's other novels and short stories, all of which, to some extent, have been limited by O'Connor's own religiosity. To limit our readings based upon an author's stated or unstated intention is to limit the significance of literature as a whole. Limiting significance should not be the role of either the critic or the author. Instead, our role is to locate more significance, more potential interpretations, and, by doing so, find not only more meaning in the work of literature and the arts, but more enjoyment.

REFERENCES

- Archer, Emily. "Stalking Joy": Flannery O'Connor's Accurate Naming." *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 17-30.
- Brinkmeyer Jr., Robert H. "A Closer Walk with Thee: Flannery O'Connor and Southern Fundamentalists." *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring 1986) pp. 3-13.
- Burke, William M. "Protagonists and Antagonists in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 99-111.
- Curley, Edwin. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 65, No 3, (Nov 1991), pp. 29-45.
- De Caro, Francis A. "Proverbs and Originality in Modern Short Fiction." *Western Folklore*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan 1978), pp. 30-38.
- Dowell, Bob. "The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." *College English*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Dec 1965), pp. 235-239.
- Glowinski, Huguette, Zita M. Marks, and Sara Murphy, eds. *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms*. Free Association Books, 2001.



- Gossett, Thomas F. "Flannery O'Connor on Her Fiction." *Southwest Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Winter 1974), pp. 34-42.
- Hardy, Donald E. "Politeness in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: Social Interaction, Language, and the Body." *Style*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Narrative Representation in Art, Cognition, and Social Interaction (Winter 2010), pp. 524-546.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre." *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Critical Challenges: The Bellagio Symposium (Autumn 1975), pp. 135-163.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by A. R. Price. Polity Press, 2014.
- . *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Dennis Porter. W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- . "Seminar II, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by J. A. Miller. Translated by S. Tomaselli. 1988.
- . "Seminar XX, *Encore, on Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Edited by J. A. Miller. Translated by B. Fink. 1998.
- Leonard, Douglas Novich. "Experiencing Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'." *Interpretations*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 48-54.
- Lienard, Marie. "From Manner's to Mystery: Flannery O'Connor's Titles." *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Spring, 2006), pp. 115-125.
- Park, Clara Clairborne. "Crippled Laughter: Toward Understanding Flannery O'Connor." *The American Scholar*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 249-257.
- Renner, Stanley. "Secular Meaning in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'." *College Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 123-132.
- Schaum, Melita. "'Erasing Angel': The Lucifer-Trickster Figure in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction." *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Fall, 2000), pp. 1-26.
-