

“One Of My Babies”: The Misfit and the Grandmother

by Stephen C. Bandy

Criticism of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, under the spell of the writer's occasional comments, has been unusually susceptible to interpretations based on Christian dogma. None of O'Connor's stories has been more energetically theologized than her most popular, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." O'Connor flatly declared the story to be a parable of grace and redemption, and for the true believer there can be no further discussion. As James Mellard remarks, "O'Connor simply tells her readers—either through narrative interventions or by extra-textual exhortations—how they are to interpret her work" (625). And should not the writer know best what her story is about? A loaded question, to which the best answer may be D. H. Lawrence's advice: trust the art, but not the artist.

One cannot deny that the concerns of this story are the basic concerns of Christian belief: faith, death, salvation. And yet, if one reads the story without prejudice, there would seem to be little here to inspire hope for redemption of any of its characters. No wishful search for evidence of grace or for epiphanies of salvation, by author or reader, can soften the harsh truth of "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." Its message is profoundly pessimistic and in fact subversive to the doctrines of grace and charity, despite heroic efforts to disguise that fact. This vexing little masterpiece cannot be saved from itself. It has a will of its own and a moral of its own.

There are really only two characters in this story: the Grandmother and the Misfit. The rest are wonderfully drawn—hateful little June Star, or whiny Red Sammy—but they do not figure in the central debate. Although the Misfit is not physically present until the final pages, his influence hangs over the story almost from the beginning, when the Grandmother warns her son Bailey of the dangerous criminal "aloose from the Federal Pen" (*The Complete Stories* 117). Once the family sets off on their vacation trip, the Grandmother seems to forget her feigned concern, for it is only a strategy by which she hopes to force Bailey to take the family in another direction. But the reader has not forgotten. We wonder only when, and where, the

inevitable confrontation will take place. At Red Sam's filling station, we suppose. But O'Connor has other plans, which are fulfilled in a chain of events so contrived, so improbable, and so perfectly appropriate to this careful of cartoon characters, that we can only be delighted by the writer's disdain for the niceties of plotting. It is a brilliant stroke: their car rolls over in a field miles from anywhere; and then, as sure as sundown, the Misfit and his crew slowly move toward them. The story rapidly moves to its climax, when the Misfit shoots the Grandmother dead. But what comes just before that killing interests us even more. The Misfit has already directed the execution of the Grandmother's entire family, and it must be obvious to all, including reader and Grandmother, that she is the next to die. But she struggles on. Grasping at any appeal, and hardly aware of what she is saying, the Grandmother declares to the Misfit: "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" As she utters these shocking words, "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" (132).

Noting that some squeamish readers had found this ending too strong, O'Connor defended the scene in this way: "If I took out this gesture and what she says with it, I would have no story. What was left would not be worth your attention" (*Mystery and Manners* 112). Certainly the scene is crucial to the story, and most readers, I think, grant its dramatic "rightness" as a conclusion. What is arguable is the meaning to the Grandmother's final words to the Misfit, as well as her "gesture," which seemed equally important to O'Connor. One's interpretation depends on one's opinion of the Grandmother.

What *are* we to think of this woman? At the story's beginning, she seems a harmless busybody, utterly self-absorbed but also amusing, in her way. And, in her way, she provides a sort of human Rorschach test of her readers. We readily forgive her so much, including her mindless racism—she points at the "cute little pickaninny" by the roadside, and entertains her grandchildren with a story in which a watermelon is devoured by "a nigger boy." She is filled with the prejudices of her class and her time. And so, some readers conclude, she is in spite of it all a "good" person. Somewhat more ominously, the Misfit—after he has fired three bullets into her chest—pronounces that she might have been "a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133). We surmise that in the universe of this story, the quality of what is "good" (which is after all the key word of the story's title) depends greatly on who is using the term. I do not think the Misfit is capable of irony—he truly means what he says about her, even though he finds it necessary to kill her. Indeed, the opposing categories of "good" and "evil" are very much in the air throughout this story. But like most supposed opposites, they have an alarming tendency to merge. It is

probably worth noting that the second line of the once-popular song that gave O'Connor her title is "You always get the other kind."

Much criticism of the story appears to take a sentimental view of the Grandmother largely because she *is* a grandmother. Flannery O'Connor herself, as we shall see shortly, found little to blame in this woman, choosing to wrap her in the comfortable mantle of elderly Southern womanhood. O'Connor applies this generalization so uncritically that we half suspect she is pulling our leg. In any case, we can be sure that such sentimentality (in the mind of either the writer or her character) is fatal to clear thinking. If the Grandmother is old (although she does not seem to be *that* old), grey-haired, and "respectable," it follows that she must be weak, gentle, and benevolent—precisely the Grandmother's opinion of herself, and she is not shy of letting others know it. Intentionally or not, O'Connor has etched the Grandmother's character with wicked irony, which makes it all the more surprising to read the author's response to a frustrated teacher whose (Southern) students persisted in favoring the Grandmother, despite his strenuous efforts to point out her flaws. O'Connor said,

I had to tell him that they resisted . . . 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.

O'Connor continued,

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. (*Mystery and Manners* 110)

What is most disappointing in this moral summary of the Grandmother, and her ilk, is its disservice to the spiky, vindictive woman of the story. There may be a purpose to O'Connor's betrayal of her own character: her phrase "missionary spirit" gives the game away. O'Connor is determined that the Grandmother shall be the Misfit's savior, even though she may not seem so in the story.

The Grandmother's role as grace-bringer is by now a received idea, largely because the author said it is so. But one must question the propriety of such tinkering with the character, after the fact. It reduces the fire-breathing woman who animates this story to nothing much more than a cranky maiden aunt. On the contrary, the Grandmother is a fierce fighter, never more so than in her final moments, nose-to-nose with the Misfit.

Granted, the Grandmother is not a homicidal monster like the Misfit, and she certainly does not deserve to die for her minor sins. And yet, does she

quite earn absolution from any moral weakness beyond that of “a hypocritical old soul” (111)? For every reader who sees the image of his or her own grandmother printed on this character’s cold face, as O’Connor suggested we might do, there are surely many others who can only be appalled by a calculating opportunist who is capable of embracing her family’s murderer, to save her own skin. Where indeed is the “good heart” which unites this unprincipled woman with all those “grandmothers or great-aunts just like her at home”? The answer to that question can only be an affirmation of the “banality of evil,” to use Hannah Arendt’s well-known phrase.

O’Connor did not exactly defend the Grandmother’s selfish behavior; but the writer famously described this final gesture as “the action of grace in the Grandmother’s soul” (*Mystery and Manners* 113). Following O’Connor’s suggestion, other commentators have elaborated upon the doctrine of grace as it might appear in this episode, sometimes with surprising results: Robert H. Brinkmeyer urges, “No longer just a silly old lady, she reaches out in a Christ-like gesture to touch the Misfit, declaring he is one of her children” (161).

The doctrine of grace has caused endless trouble in the historic theological debates of the Church. Grace is not to be invoked lightly, particularly in a secular milieu. Even now there is no settled interpretation; through the centuries the Church has entertained a variety of views regarding the mechanics of grace. To bring the complex machinery of this theological abstraction into the alien world of the Grandmother and the Misfit is more than inappropriate. It is inapplicable. What does in fact happen in this part of the story is quite straightforward: the Grandmother, having exhausted all other appeals to the Misfit, resorts to her only remaining (though certainly imperfect) weapon: motherhood. Declaring to the Misfit that he is one of her babies, she sets out to conquer him. Perhaps she hopes that this ultimate flattery will melt his heart, and he will collapse in her comforting motherly embrace. Such are the stratagems of sentimentality. The moral shoddiness of her action is almost beyond description. If we had not already guessed the depths to which the Grandmother might sink, now we know. It is not easy to say who is the more evil, the Misfit or the Grandmother, and indeed that is the point. Her behavior is the manifest of her character.

It has been said that no action is without its redeeming aspect. Could this unspeakable act of selfishness carry within it the seeds of grace, acting, as it were, above the Grandmother? So Flannery O’Connor believed. But what is the precise movement of grace in this scene? It is surely straining the text to propose that the Grandmother has in this moment “seen the light.” Are we to regard her as the unwitting agent of divine grace whose selfish intentions are somehow transfigured into a blessing? Such seems to have been O’Connor’s opinion:

. . . 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. (*Mystery and Manners* 113)

We are almost persuaded to forget that none of this happens in the story itself. If this can be so, then we can just as easily attribute any interpretation we like to the scene. But in fact he is in no way changed, There is no "later on" in fiction. We do not, and will not, see "created grace" in the spirit of the Misfit.

But more important, this is not the way grace works. As we read in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*:

. . . the spiritual creature must respond to this divine self-donation freely. Hence, the doctrine of grace supposes a creature already constituted in its own being in such wise that it has the possibility of entering into a free and personal relationship with the Divine Persons or of rejecting that relationship. (6: 661)

If grace was extended to the Misfit, he refused it and that is the end. There can be no crow-filled tree, nor can there be the "lines of spiritual motion" leading to that tree, however attractive the image may be. Prudently, O'Connor added, "But that's another story" (*Mystery and Manners* 113).

It is indeed another story, in which one can almost make out, emerging from the mind of the Misfit, the shadow of Hazel Motes, central figure of *Wise Blood*. Yet we must distinguish between the story at hand and a story that had not yet been written. In just this way O'Connor's habit of after-the-fact interpretation is most troubling. Harold Bloom observes that there is "something of a gap between O'Connor as lay theologian and O'Connor as a storyteller." He continues: "I suspect though that the fiction's implicit theology is very different from what O'Connor thought it to be." We might agree with his wish that O'Connor had resisted the temptation to explain her fiction so fully. For whatever the stories may have meant to her, they often send a quite different message to the reader. Bloom concludes: "Her pious admirers to the contrary, O'Connor would have bequeathed us even stronger novels and stories, of the eminence of Faulkner's, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness" (8).

The comparison with Faulkner is apt, for O'Connor was as surely a practitioner of "Southern Gothic" as he, especially in her mingling of humor and horror. That she was well aware of this legacy is abundantly clear in such essays as "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" and "The Regional Writer," in which she ponders the powerful grip of Southern culture upon the imagination of the Southern writer. But O'Connor was not simply a "Southern" writer: she was a *Catholic* Southern writer, a distinction that she

was careful to draw. And yet, once it is drawn, in the essay titled "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," O'Connor seemed equivocal, to say the least, about the uncertain tug-of-war between religious forces and cultural forces: "What the Southern Catholic writer is apt to find, when he descends within his imagination, is not Catholic life but the life of this region in which he is both native and alien" (*Mystery and Manners* 197).

Ben Satterfield notes amusingly that "O'Connor was, after all, nearly as contradictory as the Bible itself" (42). One must take a hard look at this implied distinction between Southern Protestant and Southern Catholic. After all, both are Christian, and share essentially the same body of religious beliefs and attitudes. Although two branches (or perhaps better, trunk and branch) of the same theology, in the United States they differ mainly in their public manifestation. There is far more difference, in doctrine and in ritual, among the various Protestant sects, than between, say, Catholics and Episcopalians. But in fact most Americans are fundamentally irreligious, whatever creed they claim. If there is a meaningful distinction to be made among American Christians, it must be between active practitioners, and the inactive non-practitioners—who constitute the great majority and who certainly count the Grandmother among their number. This is not to say that there is no doctrinal difference between Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians in the South. But in general belief and practice they are probably more alike than, let us say, Southern Catholics and urban Catholics of the Northeast. Finally, for most Americans, religious doctrine is neither important nor well understood. Religious affiliation nowadays serves largely as a social marker. Indeed, when O'Connor speaks of the nearly irresistible force of "the life of this region," she seems to concede that Americans are more clearly recognized by regional differences than by religious differences.

In this light, to describe the Grandmother as the vessel of divine grace, almost in spite of herself, is to transform her into a creature who simply has nothing to do with the Grandmother's character, as given. In dismissing O'Connor's claims of this moment of grace, Satterfield rightly observes that "when the author made such statements—and she made plenty of them—she was speaking as a propagandist, not an artist" (44). It is a purely intellectual conceit, which in a real sense betrays her integrity as a character. At the risk of repeating myself, this interpretation can be valid only if it is intrinsic to the story, and not imposed upon the story. (A useful contrast can be made with O'Connor's "Revelation," in which the final hallucination, or revelation, of Mrs. Turpin surely qualifies as an experience of unmistakable sacramental significance.)

At her moment of extremity, the Grandmother lurches desperately from one strategy to another, not quite admitting to herself that the Misfit will kill her just as casually as he has killed the rest of her family. All of her ruses, so

dependable in the past, have failed. We are well acquainted with her manipulative techniques: her fruitless deceptions of her son Bailey (who knows her little games too well to be fooled), or her shameless pandering to the gas station's "Red Sammy," whom she assures, in the automatic way of habitual flatterer, that he is indeed a "good man"—a casual tossing-off of the phrase that will at the last seal her fate, when she uses it once too often. The Grandmother has perfected the technique of the insincere compliment, and we suppose that she has used it to great effect for most of her life. But not this time. The Misfit, withdrawing ever deeper into the dank recesses of his memories, hardly seems to hear her words, or even to notice her, until she mentions Jesus. And then, misjudging his reaction, she makes the great mistake of reaching out to touch him.

Here as elsewhere, the Grandmother's guiding principle seems to be "by any means necessary." As was mentioned earlier, in our first view of the Grandmother we witness a chilling demonstration of her selfishness. She is determined to coerce her son to take the family on vacation to Tennessee rather than Florida. To accomplish this end, she does not hesitate to dangle before his eyes the horrifying prospect of his children's death:

"Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is alose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that alose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did." (117)

Bailey is unmoved. He has heard such idle threats from his mother all his life. But at the story's end, in a possibly too perfect irony, her prediction comes true, as the result of her meddling. The sting in the tail of this irony is that they would never have met the Misfit at all, if Bailey had given in to the Grandmother's demand to go to Tennessee, instead of Florida. To be sure, this is fore-shadowing with a vengeance.

The Grandmother's petty acts of deception are, it seems at first glance, merely that—petty acts. Profoundly dishonest, she stops at nothing to have her way. Against Bailey's orders, she has smuggled her cat (Pitty Sing by name, an allusion to *The Mikado* that may reflect the Grandmother's less apparent cultural aspirations) aboard the car as they begin their trip. Much later, the cat's leaping onto Bailey's back will cause the accident that leads directly into the final scenes of the story. (Anyone who has traveled long distances with a cat might marvel at the fact that Pitty Sing has managed to remain in her basket undetected all this time.) As the family sets out, the Grandmother puts on her public face: carefully turned out in a lace-trimmed dress, straw sailor hat, and a sachet pinned at the neckline, so that "In case of

an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (118).

Her vanity is remarkable. But the Grandmother prefers to see herself as a valiant defender of social decorum in a world of barbarians. She speaks often and at length of the decline of civility, which in her lexicon seems a synonym for obedience—of the lack of trust, lack of respect (especially for her), and of the sad fact that people are "not nice like they used to be." At the same time, she herself trusts no one and has respect for no one who gets in her way. She is in fact a woman with neither values nor morals, though she would be shocked to be told so.

But what of it? What harm finally comes of her simpleminded preoccupation with herself? The answer to that question, it seems to me, is the key to this story, and it becomes clear only when she is face-to-face with the Misfit. He too is a person who lives only for himself, yet knowing that (as he angrily chastises the uncomprehending Bobby Lee) "It's no real pleasure in life" (133). But the Misfit has at least this advantage over the Grandmother: he knows who he is. And worse for her, he knows who she is.

In her efforts to strike a soft place in the heart of the Misfit, the Grandmother leads their conversation into religious channels. That is, she admonishes him to "pray," perhaps hoping to distract him from the frightening recital of his violent life: "If you would pray . . . Jesus would help you" (130). Mentioning the name of Jesus is a mistake, for it ignites a slow-burning fuse in the mind of the Misfit. It seems that he has given Jesus a good deal of thought—far more than the Grandmother ever had done. Indeed, as she continues to mutter the name of Jesus, "the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing" (131). With cold intensity, never raising his voice, the Misfit intones, "Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime . . ." (131). Ignoring the Grandmother's wailing, the Misfit pursues his obsession: "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance" (132). For the Misfit, as for many others (including Jesus himself on the cross), the problem is one of faith. He cannot believe, because he has no proof. Therefore, the choice is clear:

"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," he said and his voice had become almost a snarl. (132)

This is the Misfit's philosophy of life—nasty, short, and brutish. Crude and inarticulate though it be, the Misfit's view of life has an ancient pedigree,

linking him to the original Sinner himself. Like Milton's Satan, he lives by the creed, "Evil, be thou my good!" The sin of Satan, according to Milton, echoing the words of the Fathers of the Church from St. Augustine onward, was *superbia*, the monstrous pride that begets all other sins. But the heaven-storming defiance of the Archfiend is diminished, just as the underpinnings of theology have gradually fallen away. The *non serviam* of Satan becomes merely the sour nihilism of the Misfit. His anger has nothing to do with the yearning for freedom that makes Milton's Satan such a curiously sympathetic character. The Misfit's anger is the product of a conviction that nothing has value, not even freedom. No pleasure but meanness.

The emptiness in the soul of the Misfit is not an absence of religious faith (as the Grandmother naively sees it), but his lack of any kind of faith at all. The Misfit trusts nothing that he has not himself witnessed, touched, weighed and measured. This is his "reality." Whatever transcends that reality—faith, hope, and charity might sum it up very well—has no meaning for him. He will not trust the miracles of Jesus because, as he agitatedly complains to the Grandmother, "It ain't right I wasn't there because it I had of been there I would of known" (132). The Misfit's inability to believe has destroyed his humanity. His nihilism is complete: "No pleasure but meanness."

In his study of O'Connor's fiction, *The Imagination of Extremity*, Frederick Asals speaks of the strong influence of existentialist ideas on American writers after the Second World War (29). As Asals suggests, it is not necessary to prove that O'Connor read the writings of Sartre and Camus, directly or indirectly, to infer their influence upon her thought. Indeed, what bright college student of 30 or 40 years ago did not find himself or herself in the figure of Camus's Sisyphus, pushing that stone endlessly up the mountainside, without purpose or reprieve? Some found their answer in Sartre's formulation of the gratuitous act ("meanness" says it perfectly) as a way of bestowing meaning on the absurdity of life.

The questions that existentialism asks are not necessarily atheist in their origins or in their conclusions. As Asals reminds us, existentialism has always been a conspicuous thread in the fabric of Christian philosophy (29). Asals's discussion of existentialism centers on *Wise Blood*, in so many ways a tale for which "A Good Man" seems the first draft. And certainly his point can apply equally to O'Connor's earlier story.

The Misfit lives in a world with no rules, a world in which "everything is permitted," including the ultimate crime of murder. As Camus writes in *The Rebel*, "He who denies everything and assumes the authority to kill . . . lay claim to nothing short of total freedom and the unlimited display of human pride" (282). Destruction is finally the only act of affirmation available to the nihilist, his defiance of certain defeat. Like Sisyphus, he has his moment of bleak glory as he watches his stone roll down the mountainside.

The Grandmother has no more read Camus than she has understood the Bible. She is quick to invoke the name of Jesus, but it is perfectly clear that the Grandmother's religion is entirely of the lip-serving variety. "Maybe He didn't raise the dead," she mutters in response to the Misfit's outburst, for it hardly makes any difference to her, one way or the other. She is concerned only with her survival, in the midst of the blood-bath that has engulfed her family. The fact that Bailey, his wife, and their children now lie dead nearby seems to have as little meaning for her as the divinity of Jesus—a topic, however, of compelling importance to the Misfit.

Unlike the Grandmother, the Misfit has struggled to understand good and evil. His final verdict is relentlessly logical. And yet, surprisingly, their philosophical positions—his by determination, hers by accident—are not so far apart in the end. By his lights, she *could* have been "a good woman"—if only she had not talked so much. Traveling by two different routes, the Grandmother and the Misfit have arrived at the same destination, both geographically and intellectually. No words could be more shocking, and yet appropriate: "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" Indeed he *is* one of her babies; for her lack of values is his lack as well. Those two faces, so close together, are mirror images. The Misfit is simply a more completely evolved form of the Grandmother. In truth, one of her babies.

To insist at this moment of mutual revelation that the Grandmother is transformed into the agent of God's grace is to do serious violence to the story. It is as tendentious as to decree that the three bullets in her chest symbolize the Trinity. At the end, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" descends further into the depths of existential despair than very many other examples of twentieth-century fiction: Celine perhaps, or among American writers, Henry Miller. There is a fierce internal coherence to the character of the Grandmother, and it has nothing to do with forgiveness, witting or unwitting. Flannery O'Connor built better than she knew—or at any rate, better than she dared acknowledge.

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