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O'Connor's A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

Flannery O'Connor once insisted that readers should ascribe meager significance to Bailey's role as "the Grandmother's boy" and "driver of the car" in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (Fitzgerald 437). Most critics concur. If they delineate Bailey at all, it is as a device, a means to convey the grandmother from one scene to the next. Yet, many readings of the story and the passage of time have failed to weaken my conviction that it is Bailey whose "goodness" accrues throughout the story, that it may be Bailey, in fact, whose goodness the grandmother affirms at its climax.

Consider the title of the story, borrowed from a popular song of the period. The declarative sentence issues both warning and challenge. The good are rare. The voice in Eddie Green's 1918 song, "A Good Man is Hard to Find,"[1] laments that often we are duped by disingenuous lotharios: "A good man is hard to find / you always get the other kind / Just when you think that he is your pal / you look for him and find him foolin' 'round" (Green). But scarcity is just part of the problem. Even when goodness is within proximity, it is neglected. Thus, the voice insists that actions bespeaking genuine goodness should be acknowledged; their agents met with affection: "So if your man is nice, take my advice and / Hug him in the morning . . . / Treat him right / for a good man nowadays is hard to find" (Green). The lyrics avert attention from the illusive to the near.

A shift of a similar ilk is required to locate an oft-ignored source of goodness in O'Connor's narrative. Consider what we learn of Bailey in the brief exposition. Bailey is the grandmother's "only boy" (137), but perhaps not the only child. We are apprised that the grandmother, an interloper, lives with Bailey. When John Wesley suggests she stay home rather than accompany them to a destination she scorns, June Starr observes, "She has to go everywhere we go" (137). Bailey's tolerance bespeaks patience and long-suffering. Such traits are evident when he yields to her nagging, agreeing to find the plantation of her reveries (143), a detour that leads to their demise. Admittedly, Bailey can be rude and sometimes crude. He glares at Red Sammy's wife when she asks him to dance (141) and uses an expletive when his mother announces the identity of the Misfit (147). Nonetheless, Bailey emerges as more than a liminal character.[2] Like the loyal sibling in the biblical story of the prodigal son, Bailey can be read as the good but overlooked man.

Consider the following scenes. Shortly after the family leaves the Tower eatery, the entourage finds itself in a gulley off a dirt road in Georgia, in shock. Bailey's teeth are "clattering" (145); the children are screaming; the mother is cut; the grandmother is disheveled and limping (145). Spatially, no one and nothing is in the same spot. At this point, the narrator pans and zooms in on Bailey's garish shirt, an article of clothing that figures in the denouement prominently. Subsequently, Bailey is brought to the fore as he attempts to assert authority. When the grandmother tries to superimpose decency and good breeding (147) on the Misfit, Bailey enjoins his family to entrust him (Bailey) with the negotiations, for he alone appreciates the seriousness of the situation. "[Let] me handle this," he commands (147); "We're in a terrible predicament!" he persists. Directed to follow Bobby Lee and Hiram into the woods, he exclaims: "Nobody realizes what this is" (148). Albeit briefly, Bailey is the center of intelligence, for he, like the reader, senses that the family is about to be summarily executed. The weight of desperation is palpable in the scene as O'Connor builds pathos. Especially poignant is the affirmation of Bailey's character that occurs when John Wesley instinctively reaches for his father's protective hand (148). This small, tender gesture is easily obscured by all that is writ large in the scene.

As Bailey and John Wesley are led to their death, the grandmother, too, responds to him viscerally, as she and Bailey make valiant verbal efforts to stave off the horror. Bailey turns to his mother and shouts defiantly: "I'll be back in a minute, Mama, wait on me!" (148). The grandmother screams out his name, insisting that he return. To her dismay, though, the Misfit and not Bailey stands before her.

She makes a feeble attempt to infuse the Misfit with appreciation for some vague worth that he possesses. The Misfit refutes her claim that he is a good man but displays anomalous modesty. He apologizes that he is shirtless. The grandmother excuses him, then invites him to wear some of Bailey's clothing (149). "Maybe Bailey has an extra shirt in his suitcase" (149), she suggests. Doing so, she invites the Misfit to aspire to a higher standard, striving to cloak him in the goodness of that "familiar" person, the one "she had known [. . .] all her life" (146).

After hearing the shots that kill John Wesley and Bailey, the grandmother interrupts her efforts to make what many critics read as a spiritual connection to the Misfit to shout, again, "Bailey Boy" (148). Though continuing to proselytize, she gradually loses her hold on the temporal world. As the Misfit dons the yellow print shirt Bailey wore to his death, she stares at the garment, as though it were a touchstone (150). When she hears the shots that kill her daughter-in-law and her two remaining grandchildren, she emits passionate cries for her son: "Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy" (152). The narrator says it is as though the grandmother's "heart would break" (152).

In what the narrator describes as a moment of clarity, the grandmother reaches for the man who now wears her son's shirt and, seemingly, elevates him to the status of one of her children. It is at this juncture, this moment of terror and impending doom, though, that the narrative raises many questions. In this moment of lucidity, does the grandmother speak literally to the Misfit? Is she alluding to an expansive family of human beings to which, for good or ill, we all belong? Or is this act committed less in the interest of vanquishing the Misfit's evil, her child conceived of despair, and more as an attempt to make a visceral connection to what metonymically remains of her son? O'Connor does admit that violence has a sobering effect, the capacity to "[return] my characters to reality and prepar[e] them to accept their moment of grace" (*Mystery and Manners* 112).

Were O'Connor privy to the interpretation I proffer, she might level the same scold she reserved for the "Professor of English" who asked about the significance of a character's name (Fitzgerald 582).[3] In a brief note written shortly before her death, she chides: "[Y]ou folks sometimes strain the soup too thin [. . .] (Fitzgerald 582). Still, as O'Connor admits, she has no real sway over what is quickened in a story (*Mystery and Manners* 27).

Tolerate she must, then, the reader who senses that as the Grandmother reaches for her son's clothing, she—like the voice in the song—recognizes that goodness is to be found in the quotidian, the commonplace. Indeed, the grandmother's epiphany may be that goodness has been in her midst, within her reach. The good man *was* one of her babies, one of her children. The good man was Bailey.

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NOTES

1. Sally Fitzgerald alludes to the song when she mentions the pleasure O'Connor derived from noting the comic or "absurd" in the world around her (xi). O'Connor described for them "a crimped and beribboned seven-year-old singing 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'" (Fitzgerald xi).

2. Other critics have leveled the charge that the body of critical work on this story exhibits a myopia, a narrow focus on what C. R. Knopf calls "the final conversion" (177). See also William S. Doxey's "A Dissenting Opinion of Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.'"

3. The reference here is to Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" (Fitzgerald 582).

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Márquez's A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS and Bambara's THE LESSON

Gabriel García Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" seem to be worlds apart. Published in different decades, they touch on different subcultures by authors originally from the respective locales. However, "Enormous" and "The Lesson" share an important characteristic: they effectively use the narrative voice to convey social commentaries. In fact, the stories would have failed if written from different points of view.

Published in 1955, "Enormous" appeared in the midst of *La Violencia*, a particularly intense period of Colombian history. Daniel H. Levine, in his book *Religion and Politics in Latin America: The Catholic Church in Venezuela and Colombia*, describes the time: "The Violence (*La Violencia*) [was] a massive and savage explosion of killing and civil warfare which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in the decade after 1948" (62).

One can surmise "Enormous" was a commentary on the events of Colombia. Although readers usually see Father Gonzaga as a symbol of the Roman Catholic Church, it is important to realize that the story equally serves as a commentary on Colombians. The villagers represent Colombians and the "angel," religion, as opposed to the Church. The following quote illustrates this well: "[The villagers] thought that [the angel] should be named mayor of the world [. . . or] be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars" (García Márquez 107); "[W]hen [Pelayo and Elisenda] went out into the courtyard [. . .] they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel, without the slightest reverence" (García Márquez 106). These lines speak volumes about the expectations for and treatment of the "angel" by the villagers. If the reader substitutes "Colombians" for "the villagers" and "religion" for "the angel," a picture of a global, theocratic government emerges. The opinions of the villagers reveal an idealized view of religion as government; their treatment of the angel, however, betrays their reaction to rule by religious authorities.

Bambara's "The Lesson" examines the experiences of a specific subculture and its relationship with the larger society. Bambara delves into the world of African Americans in Harlem, where she was from, and their reactions to the