



## There Are No Good Men to Find: Two Stories by Flannery O'Connor

Armond Boudreaux

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ARMOND BOUDREAUX

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*University of Southern Mississippi*

## **There Are No Good Men to Find: Two Stories by Flannery O'Connor**

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Many of Flannery O'Connor's stories may strike some as formulaic. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Revelation," "Good Country People," and other O'Connor stories follow the same basic plot: a proud main character, often bigoted and usually a woman, finds redemption when an act of violence is committed against her. To dismiss O'Connor as formulaic, however, is to ignore the remarkable complexity that marks her fiction. Indeed, a closer look at some of her more "formulaic" work finds that the stories complement rather than repeat each other. Perhaps the best illustration of the way in which O'Connor's grace and redemption stories complicate and enrich each other is a comparison between "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the title stories of her two collections. At first glance, the two are remarkably similar: both stories center on the journey of an old woman and at least one member of her family; each of the old women is of the Old South and holds its values; and each woman finds herself the victim of seemingly random violence. Reading the two stories together, however, reveals that "Everything That Rises," far from telling the grandmother's story over again, answers instead a disturbing question about grace and redemption that "A Good Man" raises and leaves

unanswered: why Bailey, his wife, June Star, and John Wesley have to die at the hands of the Misfit's minions so that the grandmother might receive salvation.

Readers of "A Good Man" may be forgiven for wondering whether the grandmother's redemption is worth the lives of four people. She is certainly the most unlikable character in the story: she incessantly nags her son and grandchildren; she believes in the power of her dress and Southern manners to prove her dignity and superiority; and she disguises her racism in kindly condescension. Compared with her hollow faith in Jesus—whom she invokes only to save her own life—the Misfit's agnosticism is nearly admirable. We can sympathize with him when he says, "It ain't right I wasn't there [to see Christ raise the dead] because if I had of been there I would have known. . . . I would have known and I wouldn't be like I am now" (152). For the grandmother, however, we can feel only pity at best, and when her moment of beatitude and her ecstatic last words signal that she has received the grace she has lacked all her life—"You're one of my own children!"—we may quite rightly feel bewildered or even outraged (152). What mercy or grace is there in the grandmother's salvation coming through the brutal murder of her family, of her grandchildren? When we reflect that in religion grace and salvation often come through violence or the threat of violence—Abraham leading Isaac up the hill of sacrifice, the early martyrs, not to mention the Passion itself—we can accept the grandmother's redemption at the muzzle of a gun. But if we ask why her redemption comes at the cost of her family, "A Good Man" yields no answer.

To find a solution to the problem, we must turn to "Everything That Rises Must Converge," published ten years after "A Good Man." In that story, Julian's mother is like the grandmother in many ways: proud, a child of the Old South, racist, condescending, and shallow. In fact, Julian's responses to his mother are often the very reactions we have to the grandmother: he "cringes" at her racism, lectures her for her condescension, and believes his own intellect and social virtues justify him in loathing her. Yet in the end, we find that Julian,

not his mother, stands in most need of grace, and the redemption that comes through the violence committed against his mother is his redemption. This is not the grandmother's story retold; it is, rather, Bailey's story, the wife's story, the children's story.

Julian does not reject his mother's Old South values and her racism because he believes them to be reprehensible. Rather, he rejects them in order to feel intellectually and morally superior to her: "Meanwhile the [black] woman was bearing down upon the empty seat beside Julian. To his annoyance, she squeezed herself into it. He saw his mother's face change as the woman settled herself next to him and he realized with satisfaction that this was more objectionable to her than it was to him" (495). The nature of Julian's relationship with his mother is clear, then: he does not so much reject her values as he uses them to bolster his own pride.

In allowing readers to identify with Julian in his feelings of moral superiority, O'Connor answers the objection that attentive readers might raise to "A Good Man" by turning those objections back upon the readers themselves. If we read "A Good Man" and find ourselves feeling morally superior to the grandmother—as we must if we are in the least sensitive to issues of race and class—we turn to "Everything That Rises" and find the story reversed so that we see not only Bailey's and his wife's and June Star's and John Wesley's stories but also our own. In "Everything That Rises," Julian receives the grace for redemption when the black woman punches his mother. The mother herself may also receive some grace from the blow, but we are not told that she does. Here, then, is the answer to the problem of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The earlier story does not tell us what grace, if any, Bailey and his family have received when they die. In "Everything That Rises," however, O'Connor assures us that they may indeed have had access to the same redemptive grace as the grandmother.

#### **Work Cited**

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