The End of the Road: Language and Epiphany in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

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Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" was written by an American Southern Catholic author, and involves a journey that is both literal and symbolic. The O'Connor story has a family car trip from Atlanta to Florida, set in the 1950s, but one which is cut short by an accident and murder. However, O'Connor specifically stated her intention was to positively portray the working of divine grace upon the two Protestant main characters in her story, even if in a highly surprising and at first glance unlikely situation.

In the story, the two main characters use language to create a kind of "double" of themselves, in order to cope with a hostile empirical environment, but they face a crisis when this "story" can no longer impose itself upon reality. The theme of the story involves a moment of meaningless horror transformed into something spiritual.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her status as a staunchly Catholic woman writer in the conservative, often fundamentalist Protestant American South, Flannery O'Connor was always extremely positive about the benefits she gained from being a writer who chose the world of Southern Protestantism for the settings, characters and themes of most of her work. She felt that the strong organizational structure of the Catholic Church made it difficult for a religiously-oriented writer to avoid falling into abstractions, or to succumb to the temptations of sentimentalism or triumphalism.

The South offered a religious tradition with a highly personal, individual relationship between a patriarchal God and man, one which constantly called into question "the things of this world." The demands of this austere relationship could only be mediated and moderated by an acceptance of divine grace, in an acceptance of Christ as one's redeemer. Humanity was faced with a clear choice: accept or deny Christ; refuse or succumb to the temptations of the world. But even this could be subject to doubt regarding the ability or willingness of people to accept it. O'Connor felt that the South wanted to be "Christ-centered," but instead was "Christ-haunted."

The South also had a long tradition of story-telling and Bible-reading, a definite sense of man's Fall from divine grace since the time of Adam and Eve, made even more strongly manifest by memories of the lost war of 1861-65. As a traditional and conservative Catholic, who had scant regard for what she saw as an increasingly secular, materialist society, as well as a victim of incurable lupus, which she knew would cut short her life as it had her father's, Flannery O'Connor was more than willing to go to "Protestant" extremes to show just how far fallen mankind would go to "ignore" God's grace, and the lengths to which God had to go to get it accepted,

The first part of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a marvelously ironic satire on a Georgia family's internal relationships, as they prepare for a family auto trip to Florida for a vacation. Increasing motorization and the economic prosperity of the South after World War II led to a great increase in family car travel, as well as a great number of humorous fictional and non-fictional descriptions of such trips, in both print and non-print media.

The main character, and the focus of the otherwise 3rd person narration, is on the Grandmother, who lives with her son, "Bailey Boy," his wife, their children John Wesley and June Star, and her cat Pitty Sing. The family wants to go to Florida, but she would prefer to visit relatives in Tennessee. From the beginning, we see the family as a complete caricature, like some situation comedy from the early days of TV. The grandmother is garrulous, manipulative, opinionated and self-centered. She creates sentimentalized versions of the past, which she dresses up in platitudes, while also holding attitudes and opinions about poorer or blacker people that would have been offensive even at that pre civil rights time, were it not for their almost totally predictable nature.

In one of several examples of foreshadowing, O'Connor even has the Grandmother try to make her son change his mind by mentioning a newspaper article about a gang of escaped killers, headed by someone calling himself "the Misfit," supposed to be headed for Florida. When this and other ploys fail, the Grandmother is the first in the car on the morning of departure, all dressed up, so in case of an accident someone seeing her dead body would know she was a lady. She is also first in the car because she is secretly taking the cat with her, hidden in a basket under yesterday's newspaper, despite the express wishes of her son that he does not want to have to stop at a motel with a cat.

O'Connor makes two significant deviations from the actual itinerary a family would take driving from Atlanta to Florida in the early 1950s. The Grandmother explains about Stone Mountain as they supposedly pass by. However, Stone Mountain is north of Atlanta, although they would have

immediately headed south toward Florida. The Grandmother's misremembering locations will later precipitate the accident that begins the latter half of the story, so this could be a foreshadowing; or it could be an allusion to the mistaken "stories" the Grandmother surrounds herself with, as part of her unconscious efforts to create a "persona" that can better deal with the surrounding world. In fact, Stone Mountain was most remembered as the site of a failed memorial to the leading generals of the Confederate Army from the lost war of 1861-65. Also, the family stops for lunch at The Tower, a restaurant that has seen better days, located in the village of Timothy, Georgia. There is no such village in Georgia, but the name Timothy is derived from the Greek for "fear of God," and there are two Epistles by Saint Paul, Timothy I & II, in the New Testament. These Epistles deal with the proper behavior for Christians and the ideal human relationships among them. In fact, the proprietor of The Tower, Red Sammy Butts, and his wife are only interested in making money out of their run-down restaurant, and in agreeing with their customers out of flattery and a desire to obtain more money out of them. The theme of the present being worse than the past is brought up by the Grandmother and assented to by Red Sammy. Although the people all speak the same language, there is no real communication here, just as there has not been very much among the family members, so The Tower may well be an allusion to the Tower of Babel. The story becomes somewhat darker in tone while the family is in the restaurant and when they take to the road again, in contrast to the lighter and more upbeat references to nature that have accompanied the description of the family's journey so far. Red Sammy and his wife agree so totally with the Grandmother's negative platitudes that we end up beginning to see them as more than just stock characterizations in a comic satire of "Southern Grotesque." We can begin to see how language is being used by the Grandmother to create a "double" of herself.

After they leave The Tower, the Grandmother tells the children about an old mansion with a secret room that she knows is on a nearby side road. The children pester their father until he agrees to go by the mansion, and they turn off onto a narrow dirt road. Almost at once though, the grandmother realizes the mansion she remembers is in Tennessee, not Georgia, and the shock of the awareness startles her into jostling the basket with Pitty Sing in it. The cat leaps out and jumps on Bailey Boy's neck, causing him to drive the car off the road. No one is hurt, except the mother, who has a broken shoulder. The children are excited at having had what is described as an "ACCIDENT." It is of course the one the Grandmother had dressed up for, and in which her "stories" have caused the whole family to be caught.

Thematically, the Grandmother's awareness that her "story" does not correspond to empirical reality causes a physical reaction, carried out by the cat. The Grandmother tries to go back to "stories," hoping to convince the family she is injured, when suddenly a black car appears, and three men get out, carrying pistols. The oldest one practically immediately corrects the grandmother's version of the details of the accident. The Grandmother thinks she has seen the man before, but she does not know where (a foreshadowing of the theme of the relationship between the man and the Grandmother). Then she realizes it must be the Misfit, and tells him so.

Now the second part of the story begins, in which everything is suddenly changed, not least the lack of change that is part of stock comic and satirical characterization, and which gives the reader such a sense of superiority to the fictional characters. In a sudden reversal, the bottom falls out of the world of comic routine, and an "anti-parable" full of pathos and tragedy begins. The story continues with the Grandmother talking to the Misfit, as the other family members are taken by his henchmen into the nearby woods and shot. She appeals to the Misfit for mercy, on the basis of the words in the "story" themes she had used to avoid seeing herself and to escape from reality: her gentility, his goodness, his family background, Jesus and prayer. When she suddenly tells him she knows him and that he is one of her babies, the Misfit recoils like a snake and shoots her three times in the chest.

The narrative viewpoint in this part of the story shifts to an extremely narrow focus that closes in ever more on the Grandmother and the Misfit. The Misfit understands there is no reality behind the Grandmother's words, so her "stories" have no effect on him. However, she "named" him when she recognized him, forcing him to act according to his self-selected name. When the Grandmother brings out her usual stories, they are seen as the ones considered worthless in the Fundamentalist relationship to God: class distinction, appearance as value, redemption through good efforts, even routine prayer.

The question that finally brings these two totally self-centered people out of the selves they have created "out of words" is the relationship of humanity to the Redemption. The Misfit says, "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead, (...) and He shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow 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, ..."
The Grandmother, who in fact is the one with only a few minutes left, finally finds words beginning

to fail her: "'Maybe He didn't raise the dead,' the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her."

The Misfit's reply is significant, in that he says he wished he had been there 2000 years ago, so he could know whether or not Jesus did not raise the dead: "I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't. (...) I wisht I had of been there,... . It aint right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known ... and I wouldn't be like I am now."

It is only when her voice fractures, she cannot continue to speak as she had up to now, and she reaches out to touch the Misfit when "his voice seemed about to crack" and her "head cleared for an instant," that he shoots her. The Misfit was impervious to what was "just talk" but deeply threatened by her touch, and by her identification with him as her child, something which O'Connor intended to be more than mere words. The Misfit does not see himself as a creature of events, but rather in terms of the language that created him, from the words of his father in childhood to the legal and medical papers about him. He can not undo this, so he names himself with it, becoming the Misfit, and lives out all its implications. He imposes this double of himself on the empirical world, but in the end, after he shoots the Grandmother, he too must deconstruct it as "mere words," as had happened through him to the Grandmother. He recognizes the role he played in making her a "good woman:" "She would have been a good woman, (...) if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." But through his act of murder, the Misfit was moved from believing there is no pleasure but in meanness, to saying there is no pleasure in a life of meanness, thus destroying the self-created, self-centered nihilistic being he was, and opening the possibility of redemption, just as he had unintentionally supplied the opening for the Grandmother, in the last instant of her life, to return to her real self and accept divine grace. Flannery O'Connor thought the Misfit would himself become the Prophet he was intended to be, but that was another story. And unfortunately it was one that her rather short life did not give her time to write.

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