

A Good Man Is Hard to Find

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Flannery O'Connor

YEAR PUBLISHED

1953

GENRE

Horror, Fiction

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is told from a limited third-person

perspective, focusing almost exclusively on the grandmother's point of view.

TENSE

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is told in past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

The title "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" comes from a song composed by Eddie Green in 1918: "A good man is hard to find/You always get the other kind." One theme in the story hinges on defining a good man.

🕒 In Context

Southern Gothic

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a well-known example of Southern Gothic literature, although Flannery O'Connor preferred to label her fiction as Christian Realism influenced by her firm Catholic faith. The Southern Gothic genre is a subgenre of Gothic literature. In addition to O'Connor, some authors admired for their work in this genre are William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers. Southern Gothic literature, like its parent genre, is characterized by an undercurrent of suspense, often foreshadowing violence. Southern Gothic writers explore cultural issues unique to southern society.

Key elements of the Southern Gothic genre include the following:

- **Strong sense of place:** Southern Gothic literature features settings with a definite southern flavor, whether they be a rural middle-of-nowhere location, a small town, or an urban neighborhood. The details emphatically indicate the

setting's *southernness*. This detailed locale helps establish the narrative's mood.

- **Element of the grotesque:** This is an element of the narrative that is irregular, macabre, or sinister. It may be a gruesome situation, or it may involve significantly flawed characters.
- **Imprisonment:** Characters are often literally or figuratively in jail.
- **Violence:** Southern Gothic stories address racial, social, and class differences. These story elements lead to tensions that often culminate in outbursts of violence.
- **Uncommon characters:** Often the people are damaged in some way, whether emotionally, mentally, or physically. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" readers are introduced to a range of unusual characters:
 - **Bailey**—the put-upon father who wears a shirt that prominently features parrots. Parrots simply repeat what they have heard. Bailey does what he is supposed to do and does not seem to have any original thoughts.
 - **June Star and John Wesley**—the two smart-mouthed children. They are disrespectful and speak rudely to everyone. They whine when they don't get their way, and ultimately the family caters to them.
 - **The overwhelmed mother**—the woman too busy taking care of the children to do anything else. She doesn't even get a name and is simply known as the children's mother.
 - **The know-it-all grandmother**—a self-righteous, judgmental woman who wants respect and admiration and longs for the past. While she may mean well her behavior and talk are grating and ultimately demeaning, and she does not even realize it.
 - **The Misfit**—the violent felon who orders the murder of seemingly innocent people without blinking an eye, yet ponders religious topics with deep sincerity.
 - **Bobby Lee**—young fugitive who is overweight and easily embarrassed by insults. He enjoys killing people.
 - **Hiram**—a member of The Misfit's gang who speaks very little but is gifted mechanically.

Christian Realism

Flannery O'Connor was a Roman Catholic, and her religious views affected her writing: "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic," says O'Connor. Her modern consciousness influenced her views on religion. She believed that "church makes the current world tolerable, and, one must

suffer ... from the Church." One must appreciate the world even though it is a challenge to endure. The strength to do so comes from faith in the divinity of Christ. This paradox leads to the bitterness that shows up in many of O'Connor's stories, including "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." O'Connor's beliefs led her to label herself a Christian Realist.

Reinhold Niebuhr was the founder of Christian Realism, and he influenced many people. This belief "emphasized the persistent roots of evil in human life." However, there is the view that man has great potential. The Christian Realist believes that religion has a role to play, "dealing with social problems as a method to reduce the influence of selfishness through contrition and spirit of love."

The grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a selfish person who, in dire circumstances, is only concerned about saving her life. When she says to The Misfit, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" she is showing genuine concern for another. This act is her saving grace and the mark of a Christian Realist who is concerned about everyone.

Pre-Civil Rights South

The grandmother's condescending and biased attitudes toward African Americans were nothing unusual in the pre-Civil Rights South of the story's setting, when segregation, discrimination, and blatant inequality were still the norm. When the grandmother calls an African American child a "cute little pickaninny!" and notes, "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do," her family doesn't blink an eye because her point of view is perfectly mainstream in that time and place, as is her belief that good character can come only from "good people."

Author Biography

Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia. Her family was Roman Catholic, and religion played a prominent role in her household. O'Connor was a deep believer, and her faith impacted her writings as religion is a regular theme of her work.

The family moved to rural Milledgeville, Georgia, after

O'Connor's father was diagnosed with lupus. The disease took his life when the author was 15 and would eventually cause her death as well at the young age of 39. The Milledgeville location influenced O'Connor's writing—many of her stories are set in the rural South.

O'Connor's first published story, "The Geranium," was written while she was pursuing a Master's of Fine Arts degree at the University of Iowa. She would go on to publish two novels and two short story collections. O'Connor is renowned as a short story writer and was a three-time winner of the O. Henry Prize for short fiction. The first of her two short story collections, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, includes 10 short stories and was published in 1955. The title piece is also one of the most frequently anthologized stories of all time. Its rural southern setting and themes are similar to those found in many of O'Connor's works. The story is an example of Southern Gothic literature for which O'Connor was widely known. The narrative's themes include grace, glorification of the past, racism, and frustration with the world.

Diagnosed with lupus in December 1950, O'Connor spent the remaining 14 years of her life residing with her mother on a dairy farm a few miles from Milledgeville. Despite her disability she continued writing. Flannery O'Connor died on August 3, 1964.

Characters

The grandmother

The grandmother is judgmental and selfish. She longs for a time when she thinks things were better. This sentiment is expressed when she speaks with Red Sammy Butts. She lives with her son, Bailey, and his family and is often critical of them. While she makes some attempts to engage with the family, they show little interest and little respect for her. Her judgments of them leave them uninterested in her and her opinions. When the family is approached by The Misfit, the grandmother is concerned about her own safety and shows little care for Bailey and his family. The grandmother performs one genuine act of concern in the story, and it is her last action.

The Misfit

The Misfit is a violent, escaped convict. He is a man of contradictions. Despite his background, he blushes from embarrassment when Bailey uses foul language. While instructing Hiram and Bobby Lee to take family members away to be killed, he apologizes for not wearing a shirt. He compliments his parents, yet he killed his father. He acknowledges killing his father, but he does not take complete responsibility for his actions. He compares himself to Jesus, but says he does not believe. He gets into a soul-searching philosophical discussion with the grandmother, but after shooting her he says she could have been a good woman if she were threatened with death every minute of her life.

Bailey

Bailey, the grandmother's son, is frustrated. He says little to the other characters including his children. He is not interested in what they want and only gives in to visit the plantation because he can't stand their whining. He is a follower and shows no original thought. Bailey tries to talk to The Misfit and his gang but is unsuccessful. He shows interest in his mother only when he is being taken away, and then seems to hope that she will somehow make things better. When disaster strikes he is in over his head and does nothing to save his family.

The children's mother

The children's mother hardly speaks in the story. She is not given a name, to signify that her only purpose is to look after the children. In contrast to the grandmother and Bailey, she is selfless. Her life revolves around her children. She is particularly concerned about the baby and is always holding him. When she realizes her husband and older son have been killed, she chooses death.

June Star

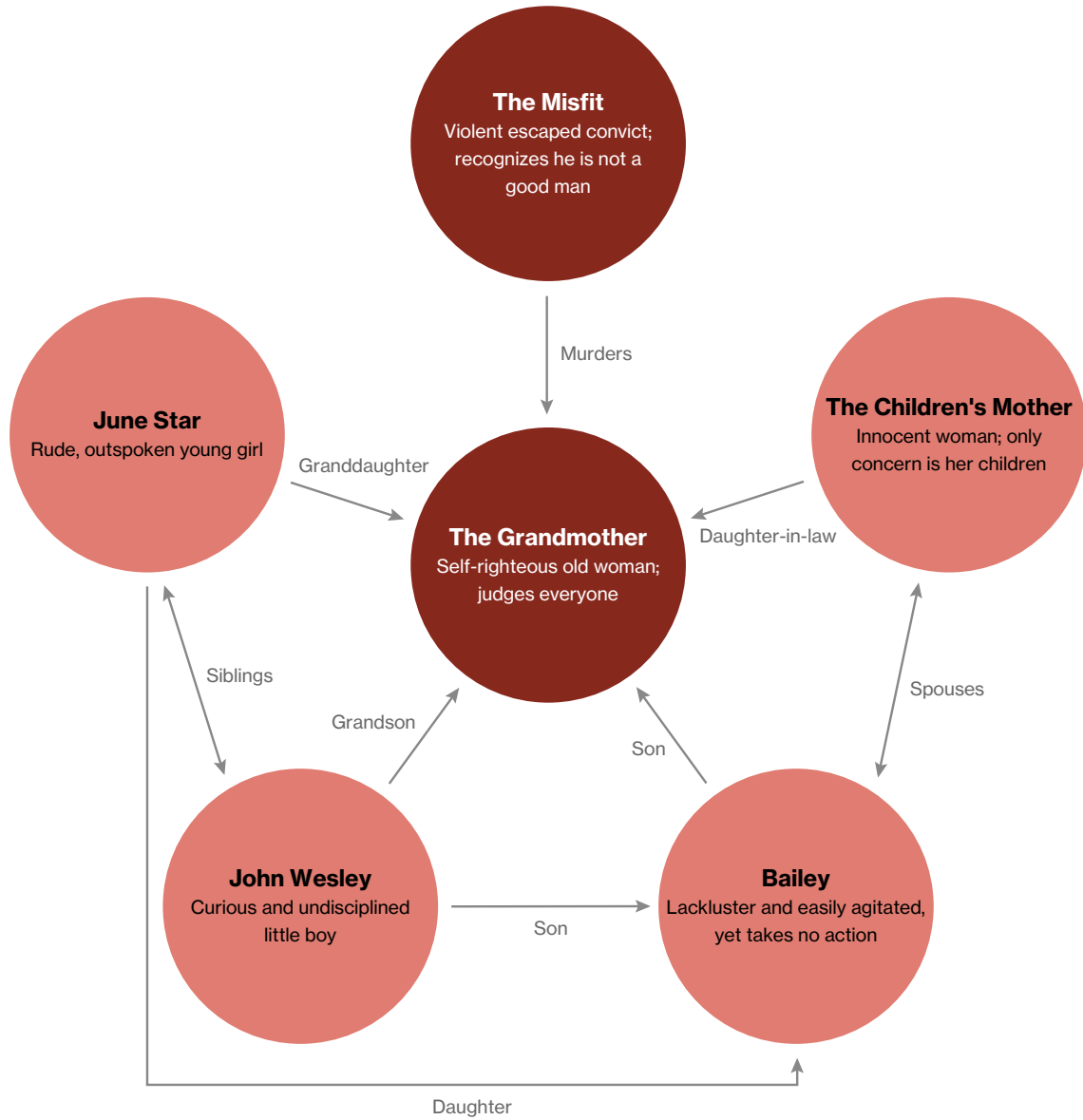
June Star is a rude little girl and is ready to say anything to anybody. Her rudeness is on full display in exchanges with her grandmother, Red Sammy Butts's wife, and The Misfit. When The Misfit orders the family around, she speaks up. She does

not respect her elders or recognize the severity of the situation. Like her brother she longs for adventure and cheers the accident, but she is disappointed when no one dies.

John Wesley

John Wesley is a precocious young boy who is interested in adventure. He feels bored and is excited when the grandmother suggests visiting the plantation because of the secret panel that hides riches. He is neither intimidated by nor particularly interested in adults. He can be obnoxious and violent: he fights with his sister and ferociously kicks Bailey's car seat.

Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
The grandmother	The grandmother, a pushy, small-minded, self-righteous woman, is the matriarch of the family.
The Misfit	The unnamed Misfit—an escaped murderer—finds the family after their car accident.
Bailey	Bailey is the grandmother's passive son; he is a high-strung individual who says little.
The children's mother	Unnamed, the children's mother—the grandmother's daughter-in-law—is innocent and seems concerned mainly with the welfare of the baby.
June Star	June Star, Bailey's daughter, speaks her mind and is disrespectful.
John Wesley	John Wesley, Bailey's eight-year-old son, is undisciplined and curious.
The baby	Son of the children's mother and Bailey, the unnamed baby serves as a prop to hold his mother's attention and, briefly, the attention of the grandmother.
Bobby Lee	Bobby Lee has escaped prison, along with The Misfit. Overweight, he is self-conscious about his appearance.
Red Sammy Butts	Red Sammy Butts owns the Tower restaurant along the highway and converses with the grandmother while the family eats.
Red Sammy Butts's wife	Red Sammy Butts's wife works at the restaurant.
Hiram	Hiram has escaped prison, along with The Misfit, and seems to have some ability as a mechanic.

The Misfit's father	The Misfit's father had a knack for handling the authorities and never got into trouble with them.
The Misfit's mother	According to The Misfit, his mother was the finest woman God ever made.
Pitty Sing	The grandmother's beloved cat, Pitty Sing's escape causes the accident.
Edgar Atkins Teagarden	Edgar Atkins Teagarden once courted the grandmother by bringing her watermelons that he carved with his initials, E.A.T.

Plot Summary

Preparing for the Trip

In the mid-1950s family road trips were a popular way to spend a vacation. The grandmother is most excited about the trip, despite her disapproval of the destination. The family is going to Florida, but the grandmother, who lives with Bailey, her son, and his family, does not want to go. She would prefer to visit her connections in east Tennessee. She tries to change Bailey's mind about where to go and mentions a story in the newspaper about The Misfit, a violent criminal who has escaped prison. Bailey ignores her, so the grandmother tries to convince the children's mother. The children's mother is busy with the baby and also ignores the grandmother.

John Wesley, the grandmother's eight-year-old grandson, suggests she stay home if she does not want to go to Florida. June Star, John Wesley's sister, says, "She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day." The grandmother asks how they would handle The Misfit if they saw him, but the children are not moved. After June Star makes another comment, the grandmother is angered and threatens to not curl her granddaughter's hair the next time she asks. June Star is unmoved because "her hair was naturally curly."

On the Road

When the family departs, "the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go." Hidden under the grandmother's luggage is her beloved cat, Pitty Sing, whom she brings because she thinks the cat will miss her too much if she is gone for three days. The grandmother keeps Pitty Sing out of sight because she knows Bailey would not approve. The grandmother has dressed very particularly in case an accident occurs. She wants people who discover her body to "know at once that she was a lady." As the family leaves Atlanta, the grandmother sits between her two grandchildren. She tracks the mileage and time, thinking this could be interesting.

During the journey the grandmother chats about various things, points out "interesting details of the scenery," and cautions Bailey about his speed. Nobody pays her much mind as the children read comic books and the children's mother sleeps.

The grandmother is concerned about the ways society is changing. On several occasions in the story she expresses a longing for the past. This romanticized past includes *good people* who come from backgrounds she approves of. While lecturing the children about respect and mentioning how things were different when she was young, the grandmother notes an African American boy standing in front of a house. When June Star remarks the boy is not wearing pants, the grandmother suggests he does not own pants because "little niggers in the country don't have things like we do."

The children's mother allows the grandmother to hold the baby. While holding the infant, the grandmother tells him about the scenery going by. The family passes a graveyard that is part of a cotton field, and the grandmother says, "That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation." When John Wesley asks, "Where's the plantation?" his grandmother jokes that it's "Gone with the Wind." After the family eats the sandwiches they had packed, the grandmother plays a game with John Wesley and June Star, which ends with them slapping each other. The grandmother offers to tell the children a story if they will be quiet. The story "tickled John Wesley's funny bone ... but June Star didn't think it was any good."

Lunch at the Tower

The family stops at the Tower, a roadside restaurant, run by Red Sammy Butts. Walking to the Tower they pass Red Sammy—who is working on his truck—and a "gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree." The family members are the only ones in the restaurant, and they are waited on by Red Sammy Butts's wife. The children's mother plays a song on the nickelodeon, or jukebox. The grandmother asks Bailey to dance, "but he only [glares] at her. ... trips [make] him nervous," and he has a negative disposition, unlike his mother. The next song is a fast one, and June Star tap dances to the music. Red Sammy's wife is impressed with June Star and asks if she would like to be her little girl. She answers harshly in the negative.

Red Sammy enters, and he bosses his wife around. She silently complies. He sits down near the family and states: "You can't win." He adds it's difficult to know who to trust these days. The grandmother agrees: "People are certainly not nice like they used to be." After Red Sammy relates a story about being ripped off, the grandmother tells him he is a good man. Red Sammy's wife agrees that people can't be trusted and looks at her husband, implying she considers him untrustworthy as well.

The grandmother brings up *The Misfit*, and when Red Sammy's wife starts talking, Red Sammy orders her away. At this point he offers the opinion "a good man is hard to find." He and the grandmother talk about better times before the family leaves.

Detour to the Plantation

Back in the car the grandmother recalls a plantation she visited when she was young. Hoping to revisit the place—but sure Bailey will not agree to the detour—she says she knows exactly how to get there and describes the plantation dramatically. When no one seems interested, she invents a story about a secret panel in the house that hides the family's silver. John Wesley and June Star are intrigued and nag their father relentlessly. Bailey eventually gives in.

The grandmother directs Bailey to the dirt road that leads to the plantation. John Wesley is scheming about how to get the silver. The grandmother recalls travel in the old days before paved roads. Bailey is anxious to get there as they go down "the road [which looks] as if no one [has] traveled on it in months."

The grandmother assures Bailey they are almost there and then realizes she has made a mistake—the plantation is in Tennessee, not Georgia. The embarrassment over the mistake causes her to stir, and the movement allows Pitty Sing to escape from his basket.

The Accident

Pitty Sing jumps on Bailey, who crashes the car. The family is banged up, but other than the broken shoulder suffered by the children's mother no one is seriously hurt. The incident excites the children, who exit the car "shouting, 'We've had an ACCIDENT!'" The grandmother wishes that she were injured in order to escape her son's fury. The adults are in shock and sit in a ditch. After a few minutes "a big black battered hearse-like automobile" with three people approaches slowly.

The Misfit: Arrival and Consequences

Three men eventually get out of the car, and it is clear that the eldest is their leader. He wears tight jeans, no shirt, "and [is] holding a black hat and a gun." The others also have guns. The children let them know the family had an accident, and the grandmother realizes the leader looks familiar. When the leader gives the family orders June Star demands, "What are you telling US what to do for?"

While Bailey tries to explain their situation, the grandmother excitedly declares, "You're The Misfit!" The Misfit tells her it would have been better if she had not recognized him. Bailey reprimands his mother. The grandmother says to The Misfit, "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" When The Misfit replies, "I would hate to have to," the grandmother says he is a good man, without *common blood* who comes "from nice people."

After affirming his parents were fine people, The Misfit brings up the weather, and the grandmother agrees with him. She again tries to tell him he is a good man. Bailey yells and says he wants to handle this. The Misfit instructs his men—Bobby Lee and Hiram—to take Bailey and John Wesley to the woods. Bailey continues to talk for a moment before "his voice [cracks] ... and he [remains] perfectly still." While he and John Wesley are being led off to the woods, Bailey calls to his

mother to wait, as he will be back in a minute. The grandmother shrieks that he should return "this instant!"

The grandmother again says to The Misfit, "I just know you're a good man." He corrects her—saying he's not a good man, but there are worse. He talks about his father who said that he (The Misfit) was different from his other children. The Misfit apologizes for not wearing a shirt, and the grandmother suggests Bailey may have an extra one in his baggage. The children's mother screams and asks where her husband and son are being taken. The Misfit ignores her and continues talking about his father. The grandmother replies he could be like his father and settle down to a decent life.

The grandmother asks The Misfit if he prays, and he says no. When two shots ring out from the woods, the grandmother calls out "Bailey Boy!" Undisturbed The Misfit casually recites a list of jobs and bizarre experiences that have marked his life. He states he was not a bad boy, although he had done "something wrong" and ended up in the penitentiary. The grandmother wants to know why he was in prison, but The Misfit claims he cannot remember. The grandmother suggests it may have been a mistake, but The Misfit says the authorities have papers that say he killed his father, so it must have happened. Yet The Misfit says his father died in the flu epidemic of 1919.

The grandmother asserts if The Misfit would pray, then Jesus would help him. The Misfit agrees, but he says he does not want help. When The Misfit's men return from the woods, Bobby Lee is carrying Bailey's shirt, which The Misfit puts on. He mentions the particular crime an individual commits does not matter: although he eventually will forget exactly what he has done, he will be punished nonetheless. When Bailey's shirt returns without Bailey in it, the children's mother struggles to breathe, and The Misfit offers her the chance to take June Star and follow her husband. She accepts and—escorted by Bobby Lee and Hiram—she walks off to the woods with June Star and the baby.

The grandmother falls silent when she is left with The Misfit. She struggles to encourage him to pray—murmuring, "Jesus. Jesus," meaning, "Jesus will help you." However, the way the grandmother is speaking "it [sounds] as if she might be cursing." The Misfit agrees with her and says he is like Jesus except Jesus had not committed a crime that could be proven while "I had committed one because they had the papers on me." The Misfit said a signature proves everything. After a

scream from the woods followed by gunshots, The Misfit goes on, but the grandmother is terrified and says, "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady!" She offers The Misfit money, but she is in no position to bargain.

Two more shots ring out from the woods, and the grandmother calls out to Bailey. The Misfit continues talking about Jesus and raising the dead. The Misfit's voice is about to crack when the grandmother reaches out to touch his shoulder, saying, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" The Misfit recoils "as if a snake had bitten him." He shoots the grandmother in the chest. In death her legs are crossed like a child's and her smiling face gazes up at the sky.

After The Misfit instructs the men to put her with the rest of the family, he says the grandmother had the potential to be a good woman, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." When Bobby Lee says killing the family has been fun, The Misfit is annoyed and says life does not include real pleasure.

🔍 Plot Analysis

The Grandmother and The Misfit—Similarities and Differences

The central characters of the story, The Misfit and the grandmother, cannot—on the surface—be more different. The grandmother is an aged proper southern woman who longs for the past. The Misfit is an escaped convict who has been jailed for killing his father and believes there is "no pleasure but meanness." Despite their differences these two characters are able to converse together in a meaningful way.

Looking beyond the surface, the grandmother is not the person she appears to be. While she claims to believe in Jesus and prides herself on being a lady, she actually is shallow, selfish, and judgmental. Like the grandmother The Misfit is not who he appears to be on the surface. He is a violent killer yet he speaks and acts thoughtfully.

Both the grandmother and The Misfit display shallowness of character. The grandmother's concern, should there be an accident, is not that her family should survive but that witnesses observing her carefully dressed corpse will realize

she was a lady. When the grandmother recognizes The Misfit, he smiles, pleased to know his reputation has spread.

The grandmother and The Misfit like to be in control. The grandmother tries to direct her family. She tells Bailey what to do and lectures the children on proper behavior. The Misfit does all he can do to manage his fate. He orders Bobby Lee and Hiram around and has them kill the family.

The connection between the grandmother and The Misfit is most evident during their conversation. The Misfit and the grandmother speak extensively about deep topics, and even when they disagree they continue to talk. During her conversation with The Misfit, the grandmother acts kindly. She says, "You're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell." When one of the men throws Bailey's shirt to The Misfit, the grandmother encourages him to "be honest" and to "settle down and live a comfortable life." She sounds like a kindly old woman who is offering sage advice to a wayward young man.

Religion

At one point while talking to The Misfit, the grandmother turns to the subject of religion. She considers herself a religious person and a believer in Jesus. The grandmother trusts religion to provide comfort and salvation. She encourages The Misfit to pray and look to Jesus and know that he can be helped. As the grandmother's fear rises, her repeated use of Jesus's name sounds "as if she might be cursing." The grandmother is out of practice when it comes to religion.

The Misfit is not a believer, mentioning "I don't want no hep. ... I'm doing all right by myself." The grandmother, however, seems to want to prove she is a woman of faith—especially in this extreme circumstance. Talk of Jesus upsets The Misfit, and at one point he claims there is "no pleasure but meanness." At this point his voice is "almost a snarl."

The Misfit's anger seems to come from his inability to believe in Jesus, since he was not present to see if Jesus raised the dead. He claims if he was a believer, "I wouldn't be like I am now." This realization saddens him greatly as he is on the verge of tears and "his voice [seems] about to crack." He appears to want inspiration and salvation.

Their conversation allows the grandmother to reclaim the good within herself as she strives to help a fellow human being. She recognizes herself and The Misfit as children of God and that

religion has saved her from living a hard and mean life. This realization kindles pity for The Misfit and, reaching out to him, she declares, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"

The grandmother's sudden religious epiphany and declaration of loving kindness overwhelms The Misfit, who—unable to accept her overture—immediately shoots her dead and attempts to shed the emotion and insight of the moment by cleaning his glasses.

The grandmother's act of grace toward The Misfit has gained her eternal peace, but it is apparent that he has not undergone such a dramatic change. He does, however, understand that it is the threat of death that changed the grandmother and that a repeated threat "every minute of her life" might have allowed her to be a good person on a daily basis. He no longer believes there is pleasure in meanness, but instead "it's no real pleasure in life." He is not yet ready to live a good life and be a good man. While The Misfit is the vehicle through which the grandmother gains grace, he has yet to achieve that state himself.

Foreshadowing

Flannery O'Connor uses foreshadowing throughout the story to build anticipation:

- **The Misfit:** The grandmother and other characters refer to The Misfit several times before the family's fateful meeting with the fugitive. As they prepare for the trip, the grandmother warns Bailey, "This fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose ... and headed toward Florida." At the Tower restaurant Red Sammy Butts, his wife, and the grandmother discuss The Misfit, wondering whether he will drop in at the restaurant.
- **Graveyard:** The graveyard the family passes contains "five or six" graves, a number that equals the population of the grandmother's family.
- **Toombsboro:** This town, which the family passes after their lunch break, is a partial homophone for *tombs*.
- **Automobile:** The "big black battered hearse-like automobile" the killers arrive in may be an omen predicting the vehicle is soon to be needed for the grandmother and her family.
- **The woods:** When The Misfit first addresses the family members, the narrator notes, "Behind them the line of

woods gaped like a dark open mouth." Ominously, the dark woods will soon be the resting place for the grandmother and the others.

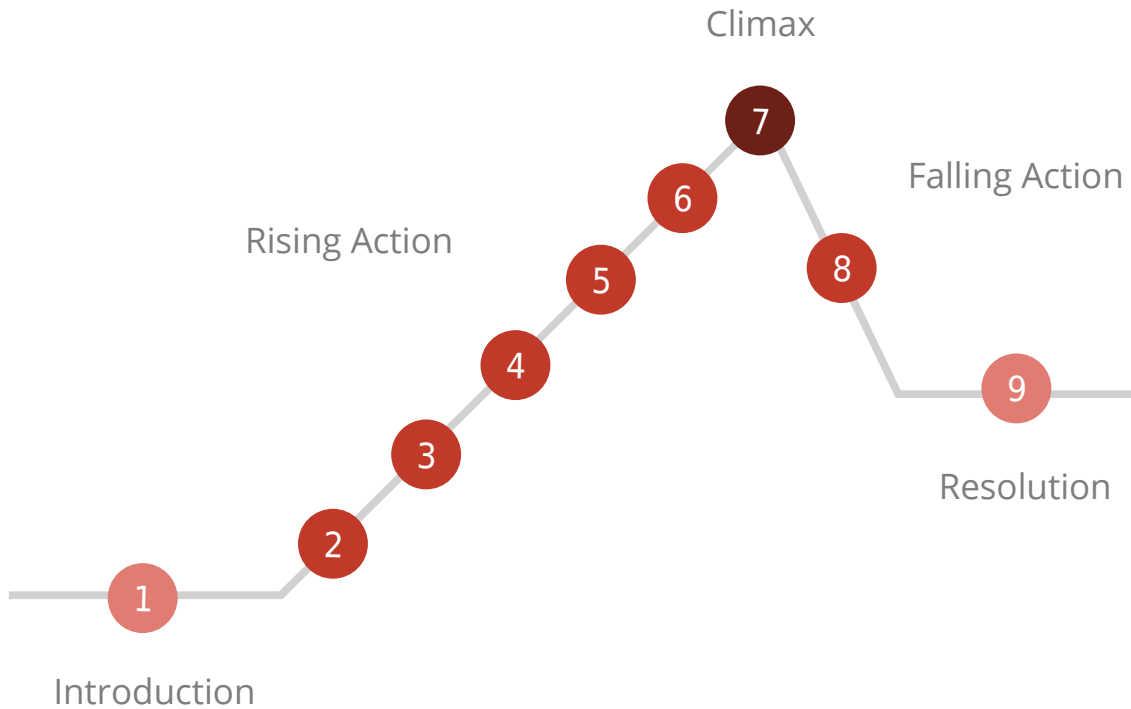
Allusions

Some of the historical and cultural allusions O'Connor uses include the following:

- **John Wesley (1703–91):** Bailey's son seemingly is named for the 18th-century John Wesley, an Anglican (Church of England) minister who cofounded Methodism. As a young man Wesley emigrated from England to Savannah, Georgia, to lead a congregation of colonists. After proposing to a woman who chose to marry someone else, Wesley returned to England, where he remained. At the time of Wesley's death in 1791 Methodism—the Christian sect he founded with his brother, Charles, and their friend, George Whitefield—had more than 110,000 followers in Britain and the United States.
- **Pitty Sing:** Grandmother's cat appears to be named for Pitti-Sing, an excitable character in the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera *The Mikado*, first performed in 1885. A further allusion may be to the Mikado character himself, whose preoccupation is to "let the punishment fit the crime." This idea reflects The Misfit's concern: "You can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match." The Misfit is concerned because he believes the punishment he has received does not match the crimes he remembers committing.
- **Gone with the Wind:** The grandmother jokingly says the roadside graveyard belonged to a plantation that is "gone with the wind." She alludes to the famous 1936 novel by Savannah native Margaret Mitchell (1900–49) and to the subsequent 1939 film—each depicting life on a Georgia plantation during and after the Civil War. With this reference she also alludes to a way of life that no longer exists.
- **"The Tennessee Waltz":** When the children's mother plays this song on the Tower's nickelodeon, it is an allusion to times gone by, to lost friendships, and to lost love. Hearing the tune makes the grandmother "want to dance." This may be a reference to Edgar Atkins Teagarden, the grandmother's suitor from long ago who went on to become a wealthy man. The song may also allude to the destination the grandmother prefers for the family trip. This song was played widely during the time frame of the story, as the most famous recording of "The Tennessee Waltz" was

released in 1950 by the singer Patti Page (1927–2013).

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. The grandmother reads about The Misfit.

Rising Action

2. The family sets out on their road trip to Florida.
3. The family eats lunch at Red Sammy Butts's restaurant.
4. The grandmother tells tall tales about a plantation.
5. The children beg Bailey to go to the plantation.
6. Startled, the grandmother causes Pitty Sing to escape.

Climax

7. Pitty Sing jumps on Bailey, causing him to crash the car.

Falling Action

8. The Misfit and his men find the family along the road.

Resolution

9. The grandmother tries to help The Misfit; he kills her.

Timeline of Events

Next morning

The grandmother is the first in the car as the family leaves Atlanta for Florida.

Later that afternoon

Grandmother tells stories of a plantation; the children whine until Bailey agrees to drive there.

Minutes after

The Misfit and his men drive up and find the family along the road.

That same afternoon

The Misfit shoots the grandmother after she calls him one of her children and reaches out to him.

Morning

The grandmother tries to convince the family to choose a different travel destination.

That afternoon

The family goes to Red Sammy Butts's restaurant. He and the grandmother agree people are not good.

A little while later

The grandmother accidentally frees Pitty Sing, who jumps on Bailey, causing him to crash the car.

A few moments later

The Misfit's men lead all the family members, except the grandmother, to the woods and shoot them.

“” Quotes

"I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal ... aloose in it."

— The grandmother

The grandmother is judgmental from the very beginning of the story. She tries to manipulate Bailey and her daughter-in-law by making them feel guilty about taking the children on the road with an escaped fugitive wandering about. She questions their judgment and parenting skills. In reality the grandmother wants to take a trip to another destination.

When Bailey and the children's mother hold steadfast to their decision, the grandmother does not fight much. She is the first person in the car, and it is her actions—bringing the cat and insisting on visiting the plantation—that ultimately lead the family to its confrontation with The Misfit.

"She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day."

— June Star

The comment is an indication of June Star's disrespectful ways as she is referring to her grandmother. She does not show any deference to adults and speaks out to others later on in the story. She alludes to the popular radio program *Queen for a Day*, on which contestants air catastrophic stories about their lives in order to win the audience's vote as queen. It is doubtful the grandmother would consider this dignified behavior for a lady, so June Star is spot on in her insight that the grandmother would prefer to rule as queen in her family instead—if nothing else to voice her thoughts and opinions.

"Anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know ... she was a

lady."

— Narrator

The narrator refers to the grandmother—a shallow person who is more concerned about appearances than consequences. She also shows a morbid streak.

This comment acts as foreshadowing. When such a scenario occurs the grandmother is more worried about herself than her family.

In the actual ending The Misfit and his men rob people of their clothes. Therefore, it is not the clothes that make someone a lady (or a gentleman), it's the individual's actions. The grandmother is more concerned with superficial things rather than her behavior and treatment of others that would actually make her a lady.

"A good man is hard to find."

— Red Sammy Butts

The grandmother and Red Sammy Butts have a conversation while the family is at the restaurant. The two of them seem to be of the same mind. They agree the past was a better time than the present and that people were once nicer than they are now. These days, a good man is hard to find. The story highlights the challenge of finding a good man as none of the men in the story are. The Misfit is the man who seems closest to being a good man, which muddies the picture of a good man since in addition to being a thoughtful individual he is also a cold-blooded killer.

"We've had an ACCIDENT!"

— June Star

June Star and John Wesley are bored and see this trip as having nothing to do with them. They are being dragged along and wish for something exciting to happen. This longing is the

reason they want to go to the plantation the grandmother talks about. They see it as a chance for adventure. For the children the accident is simply entertainment, and they are exhilarated by it. They show no sensitivity or understanding.

"The horrible thought she had ... was that the house she ... remembered ... was ... in Tennessee."

— Narrator

The grandmother realizes the plantation is not where she said it is. She is embarrassed she could forget the plantation is in a different state. She has too much pride to say anything to the family about her error. However, the mistake startles her, accidentally freeing Pitty Sing and indirectly causing the car crash.

This is symbolic of the grandmother being attached to a bygone era. Her memories of what was and perceptions of what should be are based on a distant past. The times have changed, and the grandmother is not cognizant of new realities.

"No pleasure but meanness."

— The Misfit

The Misfit and the grandmother discuss Jesus. The Misfit is unsure whether or not Jesus raised the dead, but he believes if the resurrection of the dead did not happen then he should live only for his own pleasure. Pleasure—for The Misfit— happens in acts of violence. The Misfit has a gentle demeanor, but with this statement it is clear that something about him is off. His inability to find joy except in the context of meanness paints him as an evil character.

"Sooner or later you're going to forget what ... you done and just be

punished for it."

— The Misfit

The Misfit claims he does not remember the crime for which he was punished. In fact the crime does not even matter, and neither does the memory of it. As long as authorities have the papers then the crime must have occurred and one will be punished for it. Ultimately, people are punished regardless of their crimes or sins. Memory or recollection of the action does not matter, although individuals cannot learn from their sins if the sins cannot be remembered. It seems people are doomed to repeat the past.

"I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now."

— The Misfit

As The Misfit and the grandmother ponder whether or not Jesus really raised the dead, The Misfit says that if Jesus did resurrect the dead then people must leave their daily lives and follow Him. But if Jesus didn't raise the dead, then people—such as himself—are correct in living life simply for their own gratification. Here he laments that he was not with Jesus to witness what really happened and that if he had seen the event for himself he might have lived his life differently.

This illustrates that The Misfit, despite his violent behavior, is someone who thinks about matters of faith and ethics and is still searching for spiritual guidance. He wants to grow and become a good man. This seeming vulnerability and desire to better himself leads the grandmother to her epiphany, or moment of grace. Unfortunately for them both, the actions she takes in response do not move The Misfit into his own moment of grace but instead lead to more violence on his part.

"Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"

— The grandmother

The grandmother is left alone with The Misfit and realizes that she is close to death, just as each of her family members has been killed.

When the grandmother has nearly reached her end, she opens up. She recognizes The Misfit has had a hard life, and she truly feels sorry for him. She is not judging but instead showing empathy—the first such time in the story. She reaches a moment of grace as she sees both herself and The Misfit as equals—both are children of God. She reaches out to share the experience with The Misfit who has brought her to it. However, he resists grace and kills her.

Symbols

Grandmother's Hat

The grandmother's hat symbolizes her selfish nature. She wears it so observers will know she is a lady—even when she dies. The hat also symbolizes the grandmother's hypocritical beliefs. She passes herself off as a Christian, and putting the needs of others before her own should be part of her beliefs. However, the grandmother does not worry about other people—even her own family members.

When the accident occurs the grandmother's hat is damaged though it remains "pinned to her head." Once The Misfit's men begin leading her family members to their deaths, the grandmother touches her hat and the brim breaks off. The narrator states, "She stood staring at it and ... she let it fall on the ground." While this symbol of what it means to be a lady has been destroyed, she does not yet change her ways. Instead, she frantically tries to manipulate The Misfit into believing he is "a good man" who would not shoot a lady.

After her entire family is murdered in the woods, the grandmother is at last able to leave her selfishness—and her hat—behind. She reaches a moment of grace in which she clearly sees that she and The Misfit have something crucial in common: each of them is a child of God. Now able to care about someone other than herself, she reaches out to The Misfit—showing forgiveness and empathy.

The Misfit's Automobile

While the grandmother's stunned family sits waiting for assistance beside their wrecked car, The Misfit's vehicle, described as a "big black battered hearse-like automobile," looms over the family sitting in the ditch, as if it is waiting to lead a funeral procession. The automobile symbolizes death.

The death is of the family itself, which has been approaching since the grandmother announced that The Misfit is on the loose in the first paragraph. Death has been referred to throughout the story, including when the grandmother worries about her appearance should she end up dead on the highway and when the family car passes the graveyard.

The Misfit's automobile symbolizes not only the death of the family but also the death of the old South. The way of life that the grandmother grew up with and views as correct and proper is also dying. African Americans are receiving greater freedoms and achieving higher positions. The automobile is commonplace, and people are less tethered to their homes and neighborhoods. They are driving everywhere. Lastly, religious observance is also on the decline. People are leaving organized religion.

Animals

There are references to numerous animals in the story, such as a monkey, parrot, rabbit, hippopotamus, cat, pig, cow, and caterpillar. Characters and items are described using animal references: The Misfit is "a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters." When he grows angry discussing religion with the grandmother, his voice becomes "almost a snarl." The children's mother wears "a green head-kerchief that [has] two points on the top like rabbit's ears." The characters, as a whole, show animal instincts.

Animals exist in the moment and do not consider the consequences of their actions. In deciding their destination Bailey does not consider that there is a dangerous killer on the loose in the area. The grandmother lies to get Bailey to take them to the plantation. Like animals Bailey and the grandmother focus on the needs of the now and do not

consider the future.

The family members also show their animal instincts when the car crashes. Although stranded, they simply wait docilely, like trained animals, for someone to come along. Once out of their routine they do not know how to act. They need a shepherd to guide them and tell them what to do.

The Misfit and his men also use animal instincts, albeit different from those of the family. They descend on the family like a pack of predators. Unlike the family members, the animal instinct they mimic is the survival instinct. When the grandmother declares, "You're The Misfit! ... I recognized you at once," this recognition triggers The Misfit's predator instincts. These instincts do not allow for sentimentality. He does not react to the grandmother's compliments about him being a good man. He systematically has his men kill the family before finally killing the grandmother.

Themes

Chance

Chance is the occurrence of events that seem to have no obvious cause. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the events that lead to the family's demise do have causes. The grandmother and Bailey choose actions that eventually lead to their encounter with The Misfit. Choices build upon previous choices until the situation proves impossible to escape.

Bailey chooses to go to Florida despite knowing the danger involved. He has made up his mind and will not reconsider. The grandmother chooses to bring Pitty Sing despite knowing how Bailey feels about the cat. Later the grandmother chooses to press the children and Bailey about going to the plantation although she knows The Misfit may be in the area. Lastly, Bailey chooses to give in to the pressure from the children and go to the plantation even when it involves traveling down the deserted dirt road.

The fatal conclusion would not have happened if any one of these choices had not been made. Chance does play a part, however. Although readers know The Misfit is somewhere in

the area, it is chance that Bailey and The Misfit end up driving down the same deserted road. Even though the grandmother directed Bailey to take that route, it's highly coincidental that The Misfit and his gang find them there. The accident also occurs by chance: the grandmother involuntarily jumps in her seat, frightening Pitty Sing who manages to escape—with catastrophic results. However, a person of faith believes that nothing is determined by chance alone. God has a plan. The family members cannot escape their fate, but the situation leads to a moment of grace for the grandmother.

Grace

Grace is a God-given moment of clarity—or epiphany—that allows people to see themselves as they truly are and to guide them toward spiritual salvation. The grandmother views herself as righteous and deserving. However, she is selfish and judgmental and is the character who is most in need of grace.

The grandmother is determined to be seen as a lady. She dresses for the ride so if there is an accident the people who find her "dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." This callous and shallow behavior is laughable. She does not consider the fate of the rest of the family if such an event were to occur. This is a continuation of her treatment of them as she looks down on and insults each of her family members. She also lies and manipulates them.

The grandmother's concern about herself in case of an accident comes to fruition when The Misfit finds the family. Each family member is taken away and killed, and the grandmother is left alone with The Misfit. She still clings to the hope that she will be seen as a lady and therefore escape the violent death that the rest of the family suffers. As her life hangs in the balance, the grandmother comes to see The Misfit as a person, just like her. He is deserving of her concern and care. This genuine action is the grandmother's saving grace. She dies with an innocent smile on her face.

Spiritual Blindness

The Misfit talks respectfully to the grandmother, apologizes for being improperly dressed, is uncomfortable when Bailey talks rudely to his mother, and is sensitive to the children's mother when she misses Bailey and John Wesley. While talking with the grandmother he is introspective, considers his actions, and shows a depth of thought. The Misfit seems to have more positive traits than the narrative's other male characters. However, he is a murderer both in the past and present and one who believes that there is "no pleasure but meanness." He has good inside him but is unable to perceive it, let alone make it central to his being. Yet his final words, "It's no real pleasure in life," indicate that he is changing.

Motifs

Southern Gentility

Unlocked doors, proper dress, and polite conversation represent traditional values trying to keep savagery at bay. The grandmother, Red Sammy Butts, and even The Misfit long for such elements of a civil society. However, in the case of The Misfit and the grandmother's family, savagery wins out over gentility and civilized behavior.

Prayer

The willingness to pray represents the humility of accepting help. The grandmother's idea of prayer may initially be self-serving; her urging The Misfit to pray is more a ploy to get him to spare her life than it is a plan to provide him with religious assistance. Without appealing to God through prayer, The Misfit may yet have spent more time thinking about religion than the grandmother has. He has spent time pondering whether or not Jesus actually raised the dead and—deciding that this probably never happened—believes that seeking pleasure through meanness should be his goal in life. The Misfit is not interested in prayer because, as he says, "I don't want no hep. ... I'm doing all right by myself."

The Misfit

The Misfit adopts his alias because of the imbalance he sees between one's actions and resulting punishment. His name also alludes to his not having a recognized place in society. Although The Misfit represents the personification of evil, he thinks deeply about religion and is troubled by behavior he views as inappropriate, as when Bailey speaks harshly to his mother.

Suggested Reading

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