

A Brief Introduction to Violence and Symbolism in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

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Abstract: *A Good Man is Hard to Find* is one of the most important representative works of Flannery O'Connor, a famous American female Southern writer. As the prophet of the south world, with her crafty plot imagination talents, Flannery O'Connor composed lot of attractive stories and tried to induce the degenerated individuals in the south to know the truth of their faith and persuade the perplexed sheep to seek salvation from the almighty love of God. In this story, the characteristics reflected in the novel, the decline of belief and morality, and the loss of faith can be found everywhere, and that has attracted more and more attention of literary critics. What is more, O'Connor's rich and profound symbolism, not only predicts the end of the story and the fate of the characters step by step but also conveys the author's general understanding and experience of religion, reality and humanity. This thesis will analyze the text of *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, exploring the underlying causes of malformation and violence, the symbolism usage, the crisis of the loss of religion in the south, and the way to achieve salvation through Jesus. In conclusion, there are some suggestions on how to eliminate crimes and enhance the social harmony.

Keywords: *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, Violence, Symbolism, Religious redemption.

1. Introduction

A Good Man is Hard to Find is a short story about three generations of a family traveling to Florida who are murdered by an outlaw who describes himself as a "misfit" in society. At the beginning of the story, the family is ready to travel to Florida, and the grandmother is trying to persuade her son to visit her hometown, Tennessee, although the news said that the fugitive fled to Florida. The grandmother successfully persuades and intimidates his son to change his mind, but the son said nothing and surrenders to maintain his plan. For the rest of the family, the daughter-in-law chose to ignore, the grandchildren said in a contemptuous tone that the old lady would definitely follow. Judging from this opening paragraph, the grandmother has a status in the family, but she is not liked by her son and grandchildren, and often receives cold treatment in speech. What should be a warm family in Southern literature is different from a normal family at the beginning of this novel. Worried about leaving the cat alone at home, the old woman sneaked it with her. This move set the stage for the subsequent car accident. There is certainly a human element here, but this choice is limited by man himself and cannot transcend the will of God. On the way, the grandma family stopped for dinner at a small restaurant in Georgia. The owner, Red Sammy, mentioned that two guys had driven a broken car through here last week, and the owner's wife also talked about the possibility of an attack by a group of people at an inappropriate time. Every sign indicates that Misfit has been here before. But the family kept on traveling without the slightest warning, and the grandmother recalled her youth along the way. The story ends with the death of the whole family: the son, the grandchildren and the mother and even the old grandmother, who was shot for three times on her breast.

2. Malformation and Violence

Just like Flannery O'Connor once said, "I have found that

violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace." [1] If you are a careful reader, it is not difficult to find that there are so many grotesque protagonists in her stories, such as Misfit in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, who is described as a murderous demon. Misfit is originally a faithful, good ordinary boy, whose mother is a good lady and whose father is a guy who has a heart of gold. He was born in a family with strong religious atmosphere, instead of an evil family. But the law's misjudgment of him made him an "outcast" in modern civilized society, and he claimed: "In my memory, I have always been a good boy, but somehow I did something bad, went to prison, and it destroyed me.", "The prison doctor said I killed my father, but he's lying, it's nothing to do with me, he died in 1919 in a great plague," [2] he said. From this passage, we can see that the mistakes of modern society lead a good man to become a murderous villain, and we can also conclude that the chaos of society at that time and the unsound law forced a good man to commit crimes. Misfit seems to treat people polite, educated, in fact, cold and cruel, even commit such murder atrocities. But he has no faith, rebelling society, and seems to regard murder as a pleasure. He insists on evil, refusing to believe in justice, rejecting redemption, and wanted to progress on his own way of life. Due to the betrayal of the family, society and the law, Misfit chooses cold and cruel treatment, and he fights against the society and law with his own way and that leads to his cruelty and misfortune due to the questioning of religious belief. He commanded others to shoot the old grandmother's family, while calmly chatting with the old grandmother with the mouth constantly chanting: "Jesus messed everything up. If he can do what he says, then I can give up everything and follow him. If he can't, then we can enjoy ourselves for a few minutes, killing someone or burning down his house or doing something nasty... Jesus put everything out of balance." [3] In this paragraph, the "misfit" wants to control his own fate instead of being played with by others, so he chooses violence to resist the sufferings he encountered and that thrusts himself to

the hell step by step. In fact, the violence in the novel represents the result of the conflict and confrontation between various contradictory individuals, such as good and evil, society and individual. "For Miss O'Connor, however, the suggestion that "reality fades," as the professor put it, with the arrival of the Misfit is quite another suggestion: that the liberal, secular sentimentality of our age will brook no interference, even in fictional form. And Jesus-talking man who ends up killing people, one after the other-how primitive and one gets! Meanwhile, the terrible violence of everyday life goes on. The violence done people by governments, corporations." [4] The spiritual crisis of the whole American society after the war is embodied in the novel, and the spiritual crisis of the southerners is presented in the form of O'Connor's stories.

2.1. The Protagonist - Misfit

"Misfit" was an extraordinary character Flannery O'Connor has ever created, which was mentioned many times by different people and his growth became a clue of the plot from the beginning of the story to the end. His name was first introduced by grandmother: "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is escaped from the Federal Pen and headed for Florida." Here, the writer pointed out that the man was a dangerous outlaw and set the stage for the following development of the plot. The second time the criminal was mentioned in a restaurant by the host and they warned the family that the criminals were wandering around the area. The last time of the appearance of Misfit prompted the whole story into climax, the grandmother shrieked: "You are the Misfit!" "I recognized you at once" and that crying pushed the whole family into death. Misfit believes himself a noble man and he is polite to the family at first and intends to help them at the begging before the grandmother recognized him, however, as an escaped criminal, he chooses to kill the family to protect his followers. During the whole story, Misfit behaves as a gentleman who has a good blood and good manner, what prompts him to do evil things is just the loss of the faith on Jesus. Through the description of this character, O'Connor endeavors to expose the source of the tragic life of Misfit and warn the people avoiding being trapped in the darkness of evil.

2.2. The Source of Misfit's Violence

Bandy (1996) says that "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. O'Connor simply tells her readers—either through narrative interventions or by extra-textual exhortations—how they are to interpret her work" [5] In Misfit's world, there is no justice at all, the trauma he encountered in his childhood destroyed his belief in God so he determined to solve the problem all by himself judging right and wrong with his own experience. Misfit, in somehow, a little claustrophobic because of the charge of killing his own father and that makes him suffocated because he had nothing to do with the death of his parents. His experience in prison strengthened his will of treating the world in his own way. When the Grandmother questions him about his religion, he said: "Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead," "and he shouldn't have done it, he thrown everything off balance." From the vivid shaping of this character, O'Connor successfully conveys her worrying of the degeneration of the southern society both in politics and in religion. In O'Connor's eyes, the corrupt southern world is just the reason of people's deformity and alienation, and also the source of

crime and violence.

3. Analysis of Symbolism in the Story

"O'Connor's conscious use of symbolism in an effort to depict Catholic doctrine in stories and novels set in the fiercely Protestant South of the 1940s and 1950s no doubt accounts in part for the critical attention paid her work." [6] In *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, O'Connor infuses lots of symbolic descriptions in her work, such as Grandmother's hat which symbolizes the status of a lady; The Tower tarot card which symbolizes the prediction of danger, accident, crisis of some sort, and potentially catastrophic destruction. This is usually followed by some sort of liberation. Even if the card was reversed it would signify obstacles, losses, and volatile situations. The grandmother is shot three times and curled up with her legs like a child, symbolizing her acceptance of divine grace and salvation, at the same time, the number "Three" here indicates the unity of Holy God, Jesus and Holy Spirit. The bird is a typical personal image in O'Connor's works, often symbolizing Jesus or angels. O'Connor loved Southern estates and peacocks with their beautiful tails. Religious complex and fatal illness gave her a more unique way of understanding and perceiving the world. "Faith gave her the strength to overcome the torture of illness and the fear of death, and daily life made her experience God's grace and divine power, so the periodic breeding, shedding and opening of the peacock was given religious sacred inspiration by her." [7] Granny's son, Polly, has eyes as blue as the parrot on his shirt. By strengthening the symbolic relationship between bird, God and man, and linking the symbolic system of the Bible, O'Connor implies that those who do evil will not be redeemed, so as to awaken the reader's Christian kindness and humility and achieve the purpose of her violent concern.

"O'Connor's use of symbolism and imagery -- the road, the car, the sky, the mysterious woods and the imagery of eating -- is fatalistic." [8] Chang Yaixin, in his book *A Brief History of American Literature*, pointed out that pious Puritans believed that the phenomenal world symbolized God, and that every phenomenon was the silent language of God. O'Connor was not a Puritan, but Catholicism and Puritanism were of the same origin, and the United States had a long Puritan tradition, so the world she portrayed was inevitably marked by the feature of protestant. Therefore, the symbols and images in the text reflect the will of God for the road is a symbol of choice. After the family left the restaurant, they turned off the avenue onto a dirt road. The car tossed along, raising a cloud of pink dust. The dirt road was rough, with sharp turns and dusty trees on both sides, and few people seemed to come. O'Connor uses this image for a different purpose. In Christianity, the way refers to a person's choice to obey or disobey God's commandments. Joshua, the ancient prophet of Israel, said to the Israelites, "Do boldly all that is written in the Law of Moses, and do not turn aside to the right or to the left." This dirt road symbolizes that the family has gone astray and abandoned God. The ubiquity of dust is not only suffocating but also alluding to the fate of mankind: "You are dust and you will return to dust." The rough of the road symbolizes human suffering on earth, while its bleak desolation suggests spiritual pallor and poverty. Clearly, this path leads not to heaven but to destruction. The family was on a path of no return. After her relatives were shot one by one and her own death was imminent, the old grandmother began to cry out repeatedly, "Jesus, Jesus," "Pray, Pray." After listening to the rebellious and angry remarks of the "inappropriate" person,

the readers may be shocked by the distorted religious view of Misfit. At the behavioral level, she could not agree with Misfit's violence, but at the spiritual level, she felt the pain and suffering of his loss of faith, and this understanding of others showed that Jesus' compassion and forgiveness had entered the old grandmother's heart, and her soul, which had been numb for a long time because of complacency in the trivial daily existence, was awakened at this moment. "Over the past twenty-five years or so, the fiction of Georgian Flannery O'Connor has enjoyed the widespread critical attention and popular readership that eludes far too many "serious" novelists and story writers." [9] In summary, O'Connor's biblical imagery is combined in the text and interspersed with biblical relevant content outside the text, giving her stories a symbolic meaning outside the noumenon. Thus, the readers are able to interpret O'Connor's story within a biblical framework and understand the caring thrust of her violent narrative.

4. The Salvation of the Grandmother

"According to O'Connor, some readers were looking for the moment of grace but many times did not find it because they were looking in the wrong places for the wrong thing." [10] There are a large number of characters in Flannery O'Connor's works such as Mary Fortune Fitts in *A view of the Woods*, Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* and the grandmother in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* who are busy looking for something on surface. The grandmother is an arrogant white lady who had commented the poor niggers in a mean manner. "the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim" "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." The overdecorated grandmother has never understand the truth of believing in God, until she was shot three times by Misfit. In her daily life, he behaves like a faithful believer of God, however, her hypocrisy, her selfish and her arrogance betrayed her. What she cared about is only herself and the family was living in a kind of awkward situation for the father was controlled by the old lady and dare not rebel her authority. The three generations living together should be a warm and intimate scene, but the warmth and warm moments of the family can not be found anywhere in the novel, and also the deep love and tacit understanding can not be found in the novel. So the grandmother is the one who ruined the whole family with her stupid conceit, persuading her son to the wrong destination, taking the cat on the journey, recognizing Misfit and insisting on continuing the trip without listening to the warning of the host and all that pushes the whole family into the darkness of death. In this sense, it is not Misfit but the grandmother who murdered the family viciously. At the end of the novel, under the questing of Misfit, she confessed and

received her salvation through violence.

5. Conclusion

In Flannery O'Connor's stories, the ordinary things in daily life and the unremarkable things are endowed with profound and multi-level symbolic meaning through the author's description. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", O'Connor uses violence, murder, death and other techniques to portray a thriller scene with a calm, almost detached and beautified violent attitude, so that people can wake up in shock. The grotesque features in O'Connor's works are the embodiment of the profound changes in the social consciousness of the western bourgeoisie. The writers living in the South of the United States, represented by O'Connor, were deeply influenced by Western modern literature, and keenly grasped this change in modern social consciousness. With seemingly relaxed and slightly exaggerated strokes, they revealed the root of human psychology distortion in the industrialized society, reflecting religious belief, moral humanity and the alienation of modern civilized society. According to O'Connor, the most effective way to eliminate the evil of the society is the seeking of redemption of the Southern people.

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