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Orthodoxy and Allusions in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”

Conley Greer

The ending of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" finds an entire family murdered and a self-centered grandmother reduced to a slumping pile of flesh on the side of a Georgia dirt road. The grandmother's last act of touching the Misfit and the subsequent grace afforded her because of that act is the source of much analysis and debate. There has been little, if any, debate on O'Connor's sources for the moral background of the story: the Bible.¹ "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" resounds with the Christian orthodoxy that guided O'Connor's personal life. The confrontation between the grandmother and the Misfit may provide the moment of grace, but the Biblical allusions throughout the story certainly merit just as much analysis. Flannery O'Connor uses scriptural allusions throughout "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" to invoke her orthodox critique of a society seething with nominal Christians not fulfilling the requirements of the Bible. By examining these allusions, O'Connor's message becomes much clearer.

O'Connor foreshadows a tragic ending early in the story through her description of the reasoning behind the grandmother's attire for the trip: "In case on an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady" (361). O'Connor has the family pass "a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it" (361) to increase the sense of impending doom. The grandmother informs the family that the graves belonged to a plantation family. When asked the whereabouts of the plantation, she replies, "Gone With the Wind" (361). The immediate reference of the reply is Margaret Mitchell's novel and the blockbuster movie of the same title. Traditionally, scholars tie this reply strictly in the influence that secular society has over the grandmother. David Piwinski, however, reveals the potential for a more pointed allusion in the grandmother's statement. There is an anagogical, or spiritual, meaning underlying the phrase "gone with the wind" that binds the grandmother's foreshadowed death with O'Connor's orthodoxy.

Most scholars agree that the graveyard scene clearly foreshadows the family's demise. Critics usually interpret this scene as

one of many supporting the grandmother's love of all things secular and her stubborn desire to live in the antebellum past. Thomas Hill Schaub supports this traditional interpretation and "argues that this allusion to 'the official handbook of antebellum myths' marks the grandmother as 'one who is attracted to and would gladly return to the mythic past'" (qtd. in Piwinski 73). However, Piwinski also notes that O'Connor was using the Old Testament, specifically the book of Psalms², to enrich the reference to Margaret Mitchell's novel. Piwinski, in reference to the traditional interpretation, introduces the concept of an Old Testament allusion in the grandmother's reply to John Wesley:

[W]hat these and all other explicators of this scene have failed to note is that the original source of the phrase "gone with the wind" is a passage from the Book of Psalms and that the grandmother's unwitting allusion to the biblical passage not only augments the story's complex of ironic foreshadowing but also supports O'Connor's own comments on the anagogical dimension of the grandmother's death. (73)

The reference to Mitchell's novel is only half of this very important allusion; the message that the world and its things are not eternal makes up the other half. The reference to Psalms completes the allusion and supports O'Connor's orthodoxy: eternal life is only possible through death.

The grandmother's reply of "gone with the wind" originates in Psalms 103: 15-17: "As for a man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it not more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children" (KJV)³. The theme of the passage clearly states the inherent temporal nature of man's earthly existence by comparing human life to the life of a wildflower. Piwinski explains: "Metaphorically describing the ephemerality of human existence, this passage likens and individual's physical life to that of a flower: it is short-lived and, once touched by the wind of death, it vanishes forever" (74). There is no hope of earthly eternal life. This interpretation is consistent with theological thought today. The New King James Personal Study Bible offers a similar explanation of verses 15-17: "Our life is

transitory, but by the mercy of the Lord we may participate in the enduring kingdom of God” (860). For the Psalmist, righteousness was obtained through the rights and rituals of the Mosaic Law. As a Christian, O’Connor recognized God’s new covenant with humankind through Jesus Christ. Both subscribe to the same premise: God’s kingdom, not human physical life, is eternal, and human beings should be focused on pleasing God. In this context, the allusion to Psalm 103 has a prominent role in the remainder of the story: it establishes its spiritual background.

The grandmother’s role as a central figure in the story takes on a greater spiritual significance with the allusion to Psalm 103. O’Connor presents the grandmother as completely secular until her confrontation with the Misfit. Any mention of Christianity by the grandmother prior to the end of the story would appear to be quite a paradox; her actions and dialogue until the accident reek of secular humanism. The grandmother’s unknowing biblical allusion is just that: it is an ironic statement from a secularly obsessed sinner who unknowingly comments on the Christian concept of eternal life. David Piwinski elaborates on the significance of the grandmother’s allusion to the rest of the story: “Her allusion to the Psalms passage allows her readers to view the grandmother’s death from its proper anagogical perspective by evoking the central paradox of Christian doctrine: only through death can one hope to gain eternal life” (74). O’Connor has the grandmother face, in O’Connor’s opinion, the most significant event in life that a Christian can encounter: death. In this context, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” may end grotesquely, but the allusion to Psalm 103 foreshadows hope in the sense that the grandmother will have an opportunity to experience eternal life when she comes face to face with death.

O’Connor uses the grandmother’s “gone with the wind” allusion to establish Christian orthodoxy as the framework for the remainder of the story. Prior to the mention of the town of Timothy, the places and towns mentioned in the story were real, factual places; Timothy, Georgia, however, does not exist. O’Connor introduces the fictitious town as a reference to the biblical books of the same name. The books of 1 and 2 Timothy in the New Testament deal explicitly with Christian orthodoxy. Hallman B. Bryant explains:

The allusion here is not geographical but Biblical, and the Timothy alluded to is almost certainly the book in the New Testament which bears the same name. Usually referred to as the Pastoral Letters, this gospel purports to be letters from Paul addressed to his disciples and through them to the Christian community at large. More than any other writing in the New Testament, the letters to Timothy are concerned with Christian orthodoxy. (303)

It is an accepted teaching in Christian orthodoxy that the first epistle of Paul to Timothy focused on the behavior required and leadership needed to convey the Christian message:

Paul's first letter to Timothy was designed to give the church clear directions for establishing the kind of leadership and decorum that would most effectively establish the truth of God in the gospel. This was done by focusing on love rather than speculation, salvation rather than squabbling, and true rather than false leadership. Throughout the letter Paul sought to encourage family love and respect among the believers. (Hughes and Laney 632-3)

Paul is advising and encouraging Timothy on the traits needed to live a Christian life and be a good leader of the church. However, Paul also expresses some concerns and warns Timothy of certain behaviors that are dangerous to the Christian lifestyle. Bryant notes that "the concerns expressed by Paul in his letter to Timothy are very germane to the concerns expressed by Flannery O'Connor" (303). O'Connor brings these concerns about modern society to life through her representation of the family in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

O'Connor's concern with society dominates the personalities and plot of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." O'Connor presents a dysfunctional family of six hopelessly consumed with all things worldly. There is no apparent structure or family hierarchy present in the family and with the exception of John Wesley's name,

certainly no visible signs of Christian influence. Her scathing representation of the family is in direct contrast to the Christian family epitomized by Paul in his epistles to Timothy. Bryant explains:

One has only to set the family of six from Atlanta and Red Sammy and his wife (as well as the Misfit)—all of whom Flannery O'Connor considers heretics—against certain passages from Timothy to see that O'Connor's allusion ironically tells us where these modern-day people are in error. (303)

A comparison of O'Connor's fictitious family with the guidelines of 1 Timothy reveals the source of O'Connor's disdain with modern society: society reeked of secular values instead of Christian virtues.

Whereas Hallman B. Bryant's work illustrates the connection between the fictitious town of Timothy, Georgia and the Pauline epistles of the same name, Matthew Fike explores the Timothy allusion in greater detail. Fike effectively argues that an exploration of 1 Timothy illuminates the many faults of the family in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The absolute disregard for authority displayed by the children in conjunction with their constant unruly behavior alleges that the family lacks Christian leadership and values. Christian orthodoxy demands that the father be the head of the household responsible for the behavior of all members of his family; the father is the leader. The Apostle Paul advises Timothy that the condition of a man's family mirrors the man's leadership potential:

One [A bishop or church leader] that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all chastity. But if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God? Not a neophyte: lest being puffed up with pride, he fall into the judgment of the devil. (1 Tim. 3.4-6)

O'Connor places the responsibility of the children's behavior and the family's integrity squarely on Bailey's shoulders. Bailey, as the head of the household, allows his children to run amuck. The disrespectful nature of the children mirrors Bailey's attitude toward his mother. The children do not receive one reprimand for their

reprehensible behavior. There is an overwhelming sense that the family does not have a definitive authority figure present. As a result, the family as a whole is completely dysfunctional. The grandmother living with the family only adds confusion to an already chaotic situation. Fike comments that, "Bailey's family appears to be doing the right thing: 'If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn the religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents...' (1 Timothy 5.4). Allowing the grandmother to live with them is their duty, while their behavior meets the letter of Paul's suggestion it nearly empty of the love that should undergird it, which he stresses in 1 Timothy 1.5" (Fike).⁴ The insincerity of Bailey's actions and his apparent disregard for Orthodox Christian teachings potentially stem from his childhood. Bailey would only be following the example set for him as a child. O'Connor places that example in the backseat of the car in the form of the grandmother.

The grandmother's promise to the Misfit that "If you would pray, Jesus would help you" catches the reader completely off guard (369). At no time prior to the confrontation with the Misfit is there any indication that the grandmother is a Christian. In that regard, Bailey may have been a bad father, but the grandmother is something far worse in O'Connor's eyes: a nominal Christian who knew the truth but did not practice it. Hallman Bryant points out that the grandmother fails badly in her role as a Christian woman and widow. Paul advises: "In like manner women also in decent apparel: adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire" (1 Timothy 2.9-11). The grandmother does not adhere to the Christian expectation at all. Bryant comments on Paul's advice to women (and thus the grandmother): "The instruction seems to bear most directly on the grandmother, who is vain about her Old South Heritage and certainly conscious of her social standing and what is required to be a lady. This is best brought out in her careful selection of attire for the trip" (303-4). Her focus prior to the confrontation with the Misfit was on maintaining a secular image as a "lady" instead of pleasing God. Bryant further condemns the grandmother by stating: "The grandmother's inability to 'learn in quietness' is tragically the cause of the deaths of the entire family" (304). Her shortcomings as a woman are only matched by her irresponsible behavior as a widow.

Paul defines a traditional Christian widow as a woman who will “trust God and continue in supplications and prayers night and day” and warns that “she that liveth in pleasures, is dead while she is living” (1 Timothy 5.5-6). The grandmother prays when she is finally confronted with a gun. Matthew Fike comments: “The grandmother is not godly, prayerful, or trustworthy like the positive widows he [Paul] mentions” (Fike). The lack of spirituality in the grandmother is evidenced by O’Connor’s presentation of her family. The grandmother does not provide the spiritual example required of an older widow, and the result is plainly evident in the apathy of her son and disrespectful behavior of her grandchildren. It takes an absolute tragedy to awaken the grandmother from her spiritual coma. Hallman Bryant explains the significance of the events after the grandmother identifies the Misfit:

It is generally agreed that in the traumatic moments that follow in which the grandmother witnesses the deaths of her family and anticipates her own she does learn a lesson she has not heeded previously during her life. This lesson is the central message which Paul attempts to convey to Christians through Timothy and that is, “There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself to mankind” (1 Tim. 2.5). (304)⁵

The grandmother’s moment of grace and appointment with God comes at the hands of The Misfit. The Misfit has an entire family murdered with seemingly very little remorse. O’Connor judges the murdered family according to the Pauline guidelines of Christian behavior in the Pastoral Epistles. Recent scholarship by Fike suggests that O’Connor uses the same book of Timothy as inspiration for creating The Misfit.

Paul opens the book of Timothy with a warning about teachers of false laws and doctrines. Paul reminds Timothy that the law was designed for the sinners and ungodly of the world: “Knowing this, that the law is not made for the just man, but for the unjust and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the wicked and defiled, for the murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers” (1 Timothy 1.9). The Misfit embodies the type of individual who necessitates “the law.” Robert Woodward

notes that The Misfit "commits every act Paul names and becomes the epitome of the Godless man in a Godless society" (qtd. in Fike). The Misfit has absolutely no regard for morality. If anything, his description of himself and subsequent murderous actions make him anti-moral.

While most O'Connor scholarship on biblical allusion focuses on the first book of Timothy, Matthew Fike argues that Paul's second letter to Timothy merits equal attention. Fike pays tribute to O'Connor's genius and eye for detail by referencing an allusion to the second book of Timothy. In regard to what makes a moral, enduring Christian, Paul states:

No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone completes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. (NIV 2 Timothy 2.4-6)⁶

Fike cites Luke Johnson to explain the relevance of the passage: "These references to soldier, athlete, and farmer 'are all stock examples of moral exertion in Hellenistic moral teaching'" (qtd. in Fike). The Misfit, by his own account, claims he had been "a gospel singer," a member of the "armed service," and had even "plowed Mother Earth" (368). The Misfit is not an athlete but had "been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive once," and "even seen a woman flogged" (368). Fike elaborates on the comparison between Paul's moral example and the Misfit's background:

Like Paul's moral exemplars, The Misfit has been a soldier and a farmer, but instead of the athlete's purposeful exertion, The Misfit stresses death, destruction, and violence [...]. The Misfit falls short of the athlete's morality, or he plays by no one's rules except his own. In his view, physical contact is for torture, and being a religious singer is no more meritorious or memorable than seeing a woman flogged. (Fike)

The Misfit is the type of deplorable, immoral individual required to afford the grandmother her moment of grace.

Scholars such as Bryant, Fike, and Piwinski remain ever vigilant in hoping to extract deeper meanings from the work of Flannery O'Connor. Although their respective interpretations may differ slightly, their opinions all seem to converge upon one particular point: whether alluding to the book of Psalms or the books of Timothy, O'Connor remains constant in critiquing society from a Christian perspective. Her ingenious transformation of ancient scriptures into a modern application is worthy of the scholarship afforded "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." O'Connor wanted the meanings of her stories to "go on expanding for the reader the more he thinks about it" (qtd. in Fike). The Biblical allusions ensure that "A Good Man is Hard to Find" will always offer the expandability that O'Connor desired.

Notes

¹For the sake of scholarly accuracy and discussion, I will cite verses from the Douay Rheims version of The Holy Bible unless otherwise noted. Although the scholars cited throughout this work each use a traditionally Protestant translation in their analysis of O'Connor's writing, there were only two Bibles authorized for Catholic Mass at the time of O'Connor's writing: The Douay Rheims Version and The Confraternity Edition. The Douay Rheims version was the Catholic standard for Mass until mid-1960. The Confraternity Edition was unavailable to the public until the late 1950's and even then scarcely used. Possession of any Bible not based on the Latin Vulgate, such as the King James Version, prior to Pope Pius XII's letter of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943 authorizing the use of non-Vulgate texts for biblical translation would have been considered heretical and in contrast with O'Connor's orthodoxy. The late availability and unpopularity of the Confraternity Bible leads to the reasonable presumption that O'Connor was familiar with and used a Douay Rheims version.

²Piwinski references Psalm 103 of the King James Version Bible in analyzing the "Gone With the Wind" allusion. Psalm 103 appears as Psalm 102 in the Douay Rheims version of the Bible.

³The King James Version illustrates the allusion literally with its diction. The Douay Rheims version of Psalm 102: 15-17 reads:

"man's days are as grass, as the flower of the field so shall he flourish. For the spirit shall pass in him, and he shall not be: and he shall know his place no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from eternity and unto eternity upon them that fear him: And his justice unto children's children"

⁴Fike cites the Harper Study Bible.

⁵Bryant cites the New International Version of the Bible.

⁶The diction of the NIV clarifies Johnson's analysis.

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