A Good Man is Hard to Find

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia to a real-estate agent and his wife. At the age of six, O'Connor briefly became a minor celebrity when a film was made about her trained chicken. While O'Connor was an adolescent, her father was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, and he died from the disease several years later. After studying Social Sciences at the Georgia State College for Women, O'Connor was admitted into the highly selective Iowa Writer's Workshop, a graduate program in fiction. In 1951 she was diagnosed with the same disease that had debilitated and killed her father, and she returned to live at her family's old farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. Though only expected to live five more years, O'Connor lived fourteen, continuing to write prolifically, give lectures, raise birds, and travel until the end of her life. Over the course of her career she published two novels, two collections of short stories, and many essays. Her work has won numerous awards and honors, and she is now considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Flannery O'Connor lived in the Jim Crow-era South, where slavery had been long abolished, but society remained rigidly divided along lines of both race and class. Jim Crow laws meant that black Americans, although no longer enslaved, still lived under constant oppression and had few rights and freedoms of their own. The inequality between landowners and their employees and between blacks and whites meant continued struggles for the South, and many whites retained nostalgia for a romanticized vision of the "Old South," a feeling at times connected with regret for losing the Civil War. Religious faith, too, was an integral part of the "Old South" society, which reflects itself in O'Connor's writing, both in her personal faith and in her representation of the so-called faithful as liars and hypocrites.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O'Connor engaged with the tradition of Southern Gothic literature, which typically uses grotesque events to investigate Southern life. This genre became popular from the 1940s to the 1960s, precisely when O'Connor wrote most of her fiction. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is now considered a central part of the genre, along with other O'Connor works like "Good Country People" and *Wise Blood*. Gothic fiction was first made popular with Horace Walpole's 1765 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, and centuries later Southern writers such as William Faulkner began incorporating macabre, supernatural, and mysterious events into fiction set in the American South. Faulkner's short story, "A Rose for Emily," is also considered a cornerstone of the genre. Decades later, writers like Walker Percy and Cormac McCarthy are still labeled as Southern Gothic writers. Though the term has been transformed, and some critics doubt its usefulness, the tradition has retained an interest in the dark and twisted, often accompanied by a powerful sense of irony.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Good Man is Hard to Find
- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** Milledgeville, GA
- **When Published:** 1955
- **Literary Period:** Southern Gothic
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic Short Story
- **Setting:** Twentieth Century Rural South
- **Climax:** The Grandmother reaches out and touches The Misfit, exclaiming, "You're one of my own children," and he shoots her three times.
- **Antagonist:** The Misfit
- **Point of View:** Third-person, mostly following the Grandmother

EXTRA CREDIT

Fifteen Minutes of Fame. At the age of five, a photographer came to take photographs of one of O'Connor's chickens, which she had taught to walk backwards. Film footage of this later made national newsreels.

Not Well Received. At ten years old, O'Connor began to write a series of sketches of her family members. Later in life, she described the collection, "My Relatives," as "not well received." Many of her family members were apparently displeased with how they were portrayed.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens on a family about to take a road trip. The Grandmother—who wants to convince her family to travel not to Florida, but to Tennessee—shows a newspaper article to her son, Bailey, and Bailey's wife. The article is about a convict known as the Misfit, who has escaped federal prison and is believed to be headed toward Florida. The Grandmother says that she would never take her children near such a dangerous

criminal, and that she "couldn't answer to [her] conscience if [she] did." Bailey and his wife ignore the Grandmother, and Bailey's children, June Star and John Wesley, mock her.

The next morning, the Grandmother is packed and ready to leave, sitting in the car before anyone else. Unlike the rest of the family, she is dressed up, wearing a fancy **hat**. They leave, headed south for Florida. In the car, the children fight, and to keep them quiet the Grandmother tells them a story about a suitor she had when she was younger.

The family stops at the Tower, a filling station and dance hall run by Red Sammy Butts. The Grandmother makes conversation with Red Sammy about how society has gotten worse over the years. They say that it's impossible to trust anyone any more, and Red Sammy notes that "a good man is hard to find."

After the family drives off from the Tower, The Grandmother tells the family of a plantation nearby that she had visited once when she was younger. Knowing that Bailey will not want to visit, the Grandmother lies, saying there was a secret panel in the wall somewhere with silver behind it. After the kids throw a tantrum about wanting to see the house, Bailey agrees, and drives down a deserted dirt road looking for the house. Just as Bailey is ready to turn around, the Grandmother realizes that the house she is remembering is actually hundreds of miles away, in another state. She is so distressed by this thought that she accidentally lets her cat—which she had snuck into the car—out, and it jumps onto Bailey.

Bailey swerves and the car crashes. It car rolls over and rests again upright in a "gulch off the side of a road." Another, "hearse-like" **car** approaches. Three men get out, each of them carrying a gun.

One of the men inspects the family's car to see how easy it would be to fix. As Bailey attempts to explain their situation, the Grandmother interrupts, saying to one of the three men, "You're the Misfit." The man admits that he is the Misfit, but says that it would have been better if she had not recognized him.

The Misfit instructs his two henchmen, Hiram and Bobby Lee, to take Bailey and John Wesley over to the woods. Two pistol shots are heard. The Misfit has a lengthy conversation with the Grandmother about his past, his time in prison, and his nihilistic outlook on the world. Meanwhile the rest of the Grandmother's family is taken to the forest and shot. The Misfit continues speaking with the Grandmother, and she repeatedly insists that he must be a good person at heart and would never shoot an "old lady." Suddenly she says to him, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" and then reaches out and touches him on the shoulder. The Misfit jumps back at her touch and shoots her in the chest three times.

The henchmen return from the woods, and the Misfit picks up the Grandmother's cat. Speaking of the Grandmother, the Misfit says "She would of been a good woman... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Grandmother – The Grandmother is an elderly Southern lady, and Bailey's mother. She is a naïve woman, despite her age, and seems to only think of herself. Against her son's wishes, she brings her cat along in the car, ultimately causing the wreck that leads to the family's deaths. While the rest of the family dresses casually, the Grandmother puts on her best clothing for the trip, including a fancy **hat** that she believes will ensure she is identified as a proper lady if they get in a car accident and are killed—showing how concerned she is with the appearance of respectability. When speaking with Red Sam Butts, she recites clichés about how much better and simpler things used to be, but when faced with the threat of death by the Misfit she is completely unprepared to face her own mortality. Unable to believe that the Misfit might actually be as amoral as he seems to be, the Grandmother repeatedly insists that he must be good at heart, even as the rest of her family is taken into the woods and executed. At no point does she seem to realize that these are her last seconds alive until she reaches out for the Misfit, in a brief moment of connection, claiming that he too is her son.

The Misfit – The Misfit remains largely a mystery throughout the story. The Grandmother first reads about him in the newspaper—he is an escaped convict and murderer, and is thought to be headed to Florida (like the family). When he comes across the family after their car accident, The Misfit seems to actually just want to get their car fixed and send them on their way. But when the Grandmother shouts out that she knows he is The Misfit, his plans change, and he has each member of the family killed. While the others are being shot, the Misfit carries on a largely philosophical conversation with The Grandmother. He explains that he doesn't view actions in terms of right or wrong—if he does something that other people consider wrong, he gets punished, and that's it. He acknowledges that praying to Jesus might save him, but he claims that he doesn't need that kind of help. The Misfit's attitude, in general, is apathetic toward any notion of morality—he simply does what he wills. When the Grandmother makes her final grand gesture, reaching out to The Misfit as if he were her son, he shoots and kills her. With the story's final line, however, the Misfit chastises his henchman for taking pleasure in the killings, and we get the sense that something about the encounter might have changed him.

Bailey – The patriarch of the story's central family, Bailey is the Grandmother's son and June Star and John Wesley's father. Despite the constant distractions from his mother and children,

he simply wants to go on a trip to Florida as planned. He is reluctant to take a detour to visit the house that the Grandmother remembers, and only gives in to stop being harassed by his children. Bailey seems to be a weary and irritable figure, worn down by the constant conflict in his family—particularly his mother's self-righteous nagging and his children's insolence.

Bailey's Wife (the Mother) – Bailey's wife, who is never named, is described as having a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage." She is John Wesley and June Star's mother, and the Grandmother's daughter-in-law. For most of the story, she goes along with whatever the rest of the family is doing. Like the rest of her family, she eventually is executed by the Misfit and his henchmen.

John Wesley – John Wesley, is Bailey's eight-year-old son, a stocky boy with glasses. He is rude and vocal about his opinions, and treats the Grandmother with none of the respect she feels she deserves. John Wesley is the character most interested in visiting the house that The Grandmother speaks of remembering for her youth, and mostly seems curious about the secret panel.

June Star – Seven-year-old June Star (John Wesley's sister) is loudmouthed and critical. When Red Sam's wife teasingly asks her to come live with them, June Star says that she wouldn't live in their home in a million years. As adorable as adults seem to find her, she treats them meanly and without respect.

Red Sam Butts – Red Sam Butts, whose name we first see on billboards along the highway, runs a combination filling station and dancehall that also serves food. He is a fat man with a red face, and he advertises himself as a veteran with a "happy smile." In conversation with the Grandmother, Red Sam expresses nostalgia for a simpler time when you could leave the front door unlocked. The Grandmother eagerly agrees with this and calls Sammy a "good man." Sam states that "a good man is hard to find," and claims that people are terrible nowadays. He also accepts the Grandmother's theory about how Europe is to blame for moral decay in the United States. Throughout, Red Sam Butts is quick to participate in easy nostalgia for a romanticized past, although we also sense that he uses this kind of talk as a part of his sales pitch, and is in fact more callous and greedy than he likes to appear.

Red Sam's Wife – Red Sam's wife serves the family when they stop for sandwiches at Red Sam Butts' filling station. She chats with the family and is chastised for taking too long to serve them by her husband. She is thinks June Star is adorable, even when June Star insults her home. Like her husband, she too puts on a show of "Southern hospitality," and expresses the sentiment that people have gotten less moral in modern times.

Bobby Lee – Bobby Lee is one of the Misfit's two henchmen. He is described as fat and, to June Star, looking like a pig. He follows the Misfit's orders and helps execute members of the family in the forest. At the story's end, after the Misfit has killed the Grandmother, Bobby Lee exclaims, "Some fun!" and the Misfit chastises him for taking pleasure in the killings.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hiram – Along with Bobby Lee, Hiram is one of the Misfit's young henchmen. He inspects the family's car and assists in the execution of the various members of the family.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VIOLENCE AND GRACE

At the story's end, the Misfit says of the Grandmother, "She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Flannery O'Connor may not necessarily believe that being exposed to violence makes us better people, but the message is clear: violence changes us.

As Flannery O'Connor said when delivering remarks on the story, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace." Up until the very end, each member of the family, most of all the Grandmother, acts almost exclusively out of self-interest. They do not consider questions of right and wrong, religion and grace, or even how to take into account the needs of others. They simply act on their petty instincts without much reflection or moral thought. But when she is subject to violence and forced to confront her own impending death, The Grandmother is suddenly capable of a more authentic and spiritual experience. The Grandmother's everyday considerations are likely the most petty and banal of anyone in her family, but when she is faced with her own mortality she encounters an unexpected moment of "grace"—she feels as if the Misfit were her own son, and reaches out, physically, hoping to save or comfort him. In Christian tradition (and O'Connor was a Catholic) "grace" means the unearned favor of God, but in many of O'Connor's stories, it more specifically signifies a moment of beauty and truth that is divine in nature—an epiphany that can pierce through the harshness or pettiness of life.

In the end, however, the Grandmother's "moment of grace" only results in her death. O'Connor's world is a harsh one, and grace does not come easily. Instead, it is often accompanied by suffering, violence, and death. For someone like the Grandmother, who is so caught up in everyday banality and her

own self-interest—someone so insensitive to real life—only the harsh awakening delivered by violence can cause her to open her eyes and experience something on a different, more spiritual plane.

GOODNESS

The characters of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" live by a variety of moral codes, and both the story's title and the Grandmother's conversation with Red Sam bring up the idea of goodness, and what makes a "good man." In the end, as the Grandmother still insists that the Misfit—who has just murdered her entire family—is a "good man," the question lingers: does being "good" depend on one's internal character or external actions? Or does it depend on something else entirely?

The Grandmother seems to believe that being a good person means being honest, respectful, and polite. She tells Red Sam that he is a "good man," even though all she has seen of him is that he puts on a show of friendliness and easy nostalgia in order to help his business. The Grandmother also laments that the family can no longer leave their screen door open without fear of theft—as they used to, apparently. She blames, somehow, Europe for her own country's decay, and criticizes Europeans for spending too much, as frugality seems to be another part of her criteria for decency. Speaking to the Misfit, she repeatedly insists that he would never shoot an old lady. Her sense of goodness is so based on traditional morals (and just tradition) that, even in the face of cold-blooded murder, she thinks that her old age and "respectability" will prevent the Misfit from harming her.

To the Misfit, however, the question of what makes a good man seems utterly irrelevant. He claims to have always known that he was not a good person, that he was always different from his sisters and brothers. He views crime casually—a way to make the most of his limited, pointless time on Earth. Other than when he is talking to the Grandmother, he does not seem to compare himself against any standard of good character—and thus he does not consider himself morally inferior or wicked. Instead, he simply does what he wills.

O'Connor does not attempt to answer what true "goodness" is, but rather adds complexity to the question itself. By presenting different and even ironic models of a "good person"—the Grandmother, Bailey, Red Sammy—she makes the reader feel the difficulty of the question, and the ambiguity of morality itself. Then, cutting through the heart of the issue entirely, she brings in the Misfit, whose very existence threatens the validity of any kind of objective "goodness." O'Connor's purpose is not to answer such questions, but to dissolve them: to make us more aware of how verbalized concepts and platitudes cannot touch the true mysteries of existence.

PUNISHMENT AND FORGIVENESS

Much of the discussion between the Grandmother and the Misfit concerns ideas of punishment and forgiveness. A vision of the world is presented in the Misfit's words: "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?" A fundamental question in Flannery O'Connor's Christian worldview is the problem of evil: why do bad things happen to good people, and vice versa?

We are given no tidy answers, but O'Connor clearly presents a world in which unjust or at least seemingly-unjust punishment is the norm. The Misfit is unable to remember what he was even first put in prison for—it may have been an unjust punishment, for all we know. The Grandmother, for her own part, ends up causing the death of her entirely family simply by mentioning that she recognizes the Misfit. Even though this is clearly a mistake, the resulting suffering far outweighs the "crime." Here O'Connor shows the unflinching nature of her worldview—Christian faith and action is all-important, but it is never easy. Even as the Grandmother forgives the Misfit for all his misdeeds, and even for intending to kill her, she gains nothing but a fleeting moment of grace, and she is killed anyway.

At the story's end, however, we see that that this forgiveness might mean something to the Misfit. Earlier in the conversation he claimed the only reasonable thing to do in an absurd world was to enjoy one's days causing violence and mayhem, but after The Grandmother reaches out and insists that he still must be a good person, The Misfit chastises his henchman for suggesting that there was "pleasure" in the murders. The Misfit has, in the smallest way, been changed by the redemptive power of her forgiveness. Each character suffers beyond what they may "deserve," but that does not rob forgiveness of its value and power.

FAMILIAL CONFLICT AND FAMILIAL LOVE

Only at the story's end do we get the slightest hint of familial love. Not only does the Grandmother shout "Bailey Boy! Bailey Boy!" as the only real affectionate moment inside her family, but she then goes on to refer to the Misfit as her own son. These moments of familial love, arriving only when the Grandmother faces death, appear in stark contrast to the rest of the story, which is filled with family members ignoring each other, arguing, and acting selfishly.

In the world Flannery O'Connor portrays, familial conflict is the norm. The story opens with the Grandmother trying to show Bailey an article and being completely ignored. Her grandchildren openly mock her. The Grandmother wants to go to Tennessee, the kids want to do whatever looks fun, and Bailey wants to just keep driving toward Florida. Only by

inventing a "secret panel" can the Grandmother trick her family into attempting to stop by a house that she remembers nostalgically. Not only is there constant conflict between the family members and their individual wishes, but this conflict is almost never acknowledged. Instead, the family members mostly ignore and mock one another.

Ultimately, it takes the arrival of violence to get any members of the family to display their actual love for each other. When Bailey is taken off to the forest, Bailey's wife cries out. The Grandmother, who is usually so petty and insensitive to life, and always in conflict with her family, cries out "Bailey Boy! Bailey Boy!" as her son is killed. And, finally this familial love extends outward, as the Grandmother reaches for the Misfit, feeling as if he were her own child. Thus, just as violence can bring moments of grace, it can also bring familial love out from beneath everyday arguments and conflict. The idea of familial love then seems to expand to take on a Christian aspect, with the Grandmother feeling love for the Misfit as if every man and woman were part of the same human family.

MORAL DECAY

The story's title itself refers to the apparent moral decline witnessed by the Grandmother and others. There was a time, the Grandmother believes, when it was not so difficult to find good men, though we might wonder if that was ever actually true. To the Grandmother, though, the story's action supports this belief. When stranded after a car crash, the family is not tended to by friendly neighbors, but by a killer and his henchmen. Just as the Grandmother laments early on that they could no longer leave their screen door open without fear of theft, so the past kindness of strangers, in her mind, has been replaced with brutal violence.

Throughout the story there is a tension between this modern nihilism and a more traditional sense of morality. The Grandmother chastises her grandchildren for not respecting their home state and their elders. Red Sam, whose name has become an icon of the area, agrees that things just aren't the way they used to be. The Grandmother has to prevent her grandchildren from throwing their trash out the car window, and she chastises them constantly. And, even with a gun practically in her face, she yearns for and insists upon the existence of good, old-fashioned morals and respect. It is as if she cannot even acknowledge that a different kind of morality, or absence of morality, exists in the world.

The Misfit comes to almost personify this nihilism that the Grandmother so fears. He not only disobeys conventional morals, but views himself as completely outside of them. For example, he does not deny that praying to Jesus might lead to his salvation, but he states that he does not need salvation. The Misfit claims to not only accept the immorality of his crimes, but to forget his crimes entirely. Thus he is outside the scope of an old-fashioned view of right and wrong. The Grandmother and Red Sam Butts may cling to a conventional view of an objective morality, but the Misfit simply does not. In his own view, The Misfit is not actually "immoral." He simply acts how he chooses, without regard for (what he perceives as) the Grandmother's imagined morals. Ultimately, this apathy toward social conventions and morals is what makes him a true "misfit," someone who in their own eyes is not a villain, but simply refuses to go along with what everyone else believes is right.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GRANDMOTHER'S HAT

The Grandmother, in stark contrast to her family's more casual dress, wears a fancy hat on their trip, confident that, if she ends up killed in a car accident, she will be found looking like a proper lady. Her concern for how she will be perceived after death shows that she is concerned with the appearance of respectability (and the morality that she associates with it) more than the reality of being moral or "respectable." The Grandmother's hat also makes it clear that she does not truly embrace the finality of dying. While the Misfit believes that the finality of death makes all Earthly efforts absurd and meaningless, the Grandmother buys into a more conventional view of mortality—focusing on appearances and not thinking too closely about the reality of death. It is no coincidence that the Grandmother's hat is then destroyed when the family does get into a car accident. For all of the Grandmother's attempts to prepare for a respectable death, she cannot control her fate once the harsh chaos of life (personified in the Misfit) interrupts her narrow world. Executed in a ditch by a known criminal, her death is far from orderly and proper. Rather than being identified as a "proper lady," her body may never be found at all.

THE MISFIT'S CAR

Described as a "big black battered hearse-like automobile," the Misfit's car is a clear symbol for death when it enters the family's story of petty conflicts. A hearse, a type of car that is unusually long and designed to carry the coffin to a funeral, is an unambiguous indication that the idea of death has arrived—for both the family and in the mind of the reader. Sure enough, it turns out that the car's passengers—the Misfit, Bobby Lee, and Hiram—are killers, and they end up murdering Bailey's entire family. The hearse-like car thus also symbolizes that the Misfit and his henchmen are carrying a history of violence and death with them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1971.

A Good Man is Hard to Find Quotes

"I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker), John Wesley, June Star, Bailey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation sets up a central contradiction in the grandmother's character. She is constantly talking about goodness and politeness and she seems beholden to proper morals, but she is actually very petty and selfish. In this statement, the grandmother appears to be proclaiming that she would never endanger her family because her conscience wouldn't be able to bear it, but in reality she is trying to manipulate her family into vacationing in Tennessee instead of Florida. This statement, then, is a selfish one in the guise of being a helpful and loving grandmother.

This also sets up a deep irony of the plot. The grandmother will later manipulate the family into taking a detour through a back road, and on that back road they will encounter the criminal to which she refers in this quote. In this way, she has done precisely what she says at the beginning of the story that she would not be able to bear to do, and we get to see exactly how her conscience responds.

"You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to East Tennessee."

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker), Bailey, John Wesley, June Star, Bailey's Wife (the Mother)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

The grandmother is again using manipulation to goad the family into doing what she wants, which is to vacation in Tennessee. She frames this as being good for the children, since it would broaden their horizons and show them a new part of the country. However, this seems disingenuous since nobody, including the children, wants to go to Tennessee except her, and the narrator indicates that she is mostly just interested in visiting her "personal connections" in Tennessee. This suggests that thetrip is motivated more by personal nostalgia than a real commitment to enriching the grandchildren.

The grandmother is also consumed by her belief that the goodness and propriety of society is eroding. Here she appears to appeal to that notion, stating that the grandchildren should be broadly traveled in order to be good, proper citizens. However, her self-serving motivations cast doubt on the sincerity of this seemingly deeply-held belief.

"She wouldn't stay home for a million bucks," June Star said. "Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go."

Related Characters: June Star (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

While the grandmother's pettiness makes readers reluctant to accept her warnings about the moral decay of today's youth, the grandchildren actually do seem rude and spoiled. In this quote, June Star is openly mocking her grandmother and, in a sense, manipulating her into taking the trip that the rest of the family wants by telling her that she has no way to bargain since she would never skip a trip, no matter where they go. This also paints a picture of the grandmother as a nosy, gossipy woman who would never "miss something" even when it's something she doesn't approve of.

This quote seems to validate the grandmother's concerns about the erosion of manners and goodness, but it also paints a picture of a family with deep interpersonal problems. Nobody here is presented as being truly kind or polite; all the family members seem selfish and engaged in conflict with one another. Since the grandmother, the mother of the children's father, is the oldest member of the group, this behavior does reflect back on her in that she

seems to have failed to raise respectful descendants. This allows readers to perhaps accept the grandmother's hypothesis about the erosion of politeness, but simultaneously requires readers to question where the blame for such erosion should rest.

Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.

Related Characters: The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reveals important things about the grandmother's sense of goodness and propriety. First, her old-fashioned wardrobe choice shows that she wants to be equated with the nostalgic past society that she believes was superior to the present day. She believes that if found dead in these clothes people would know she was a "lady"—in other words, that she was good and respectable. Clearly the content of her character cannot be conveyed by her clothes, but her seeming belief that it can be shows that her sense of goodness and morality is somewhat shallow.

This also shows the grandmother's flippant attitude about death. She treats it as an abstract occasion that can be meaningfully dressed for, as though once she were dead it would matter what a stranger assumed about her based on her wardrobe. This passage foreshadows the ultimate outcome of the story, in which the grandmother is forced to truly face her own mortality.

"Let's go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much," John Wesley said.
"If I were a little boy," said the grandmother, "I wouldn't talk about my native state that way. Tennessee has the mountains and Georgia has the hills."
"Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground," John Wesley said, "and Georgia is a lousy state too."

Related Characters: The Grandmother, John Wesley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange further shows the conflict that the entire family is experiencing. The grandmother attempts to instill respect for Georgia on John Wesley, who is openly rude and mocking towards places that she loves. While John Wesley's behavior is not admirable, the grandmother's insistence that the children respect their native state is not based on any particular qualities of the state, but only on the fact that they are from there and so it is proper for them to respect it. This points, again, to how shallow the grandmother's sense of propriety and goodness is—it is not related to the intrinsic goodness of a particular person or thing, but rather the appearance of goodness based on the devoted following of social rules like respecting one's home state. While John Wesley is certainly disrespectful, the moral decay that the grandmother believes to be in evidence based on his disrespect of Georgia is actually not the most startling disrespect in the passage. It seems far more concerning that John Wesley is so rude to his grandmother, but the grandmother barely acknowledges this.

"Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!" she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. "Wouldn't that make a picture, now?"

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Just after the grandmother has admonished John Wesley for his disrespect of his home state, she turns around and says something blatantly racist about an African-American child. This further casts doubt on the goodness of the grandmother's morality, since she is far more concerned about preserving abstract respect for Georgia than respecting the particular child she is gawking at. This also illuminates a troubling aspect of the grandmother's nostalgia for the goodness of the past; the past to which the

grandmother refers is one in which the South was much more deeply racist and oppressive. This moment of casual racism by the grandmother darkens each following instance of her lamentations about social decay and her regret that the politeness and goodness of the past are fading. This quotation forces us to see that the grandmother's narrative of moral erosion is in direct conflict with the narrative of social progress for African Americans.

"The grandmother said she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out and that he had died only a few years ago, a very wealthy man.

Related Characters: The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This comes in response to the grandmother telling a racist story about a suitor from her youth. While John Wesley liked the story, June Star seems to think that the suitor's gestures of love were inadequate. O'Connor sets this conversation up so that the reader expects the grandmother to either defend his gestures or agree with June Star, but instead the grandmother pivots and tells her granddaughter that marrying this man would have been a good choice because he became wealthy from Coca-Cola stock. This further points to the grandmother's pettiness and materialism by showing that she values a man's money more than his gestures of care and love. The grandmother is seemingly so concerned with goodness and propriety that we would expect her to speak of the quality of her suitor's character, but it seems that all she cares about are material things and the appearance of being proper that can be associated with money.

"Ain't she cute?" Red Sam's wife said, leaning over the counter. "Would you like to come be my little girl?"
"No I certainly wouldn't," June Star said. "I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!"

Related Characters: June Star, Red Sam's Wife (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

O'Connor has created a grandmother whose character is thoroughly revolting, but she does not present readers with a contrasting character who is moral and good. This has the disorienting effect of forcing readers to confront each character's failings rather than identifying with one who is "good" and reviling the others. This exchange further confirms that in addition to the grandmother being hypocritical and selfish, the children are likewise disrespectful and even unkind. June Star's willingness to insult a stranger who is serving her food is disturbing, particularly since the woman is actively trying to be nice to her. As the story advances, it becomes more and more clear that the family depicted is dysfunctional. It doesn't seem that anybody has been raised to be respectful and kind, and in this exchange in particular readers are forced to ask if June Star has inherited some of her grandmother's classism, as the reason she gives for not wanting to stay there is that the place is "broken-down."

"A good man is hard to find," Red Sammy said. "Everything is getting terrible. I remembered the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more."

Related Characters: Red Sam Butts (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Flannery O'Connor takes the title of her story from this statement, which seems almost meaningless in context. Readers already suspect that Red Sam is hypocritical and perhaps cruel based on, among other things, his conduct towards his wife and his having a monkey chained to a tree. The conversation in which this quotation occurs is one full of nostalgic platitudes about the decay of contemporary society. The grandmother and Red Sam make many self-righteous statements about how they themselves are good but everything else is falling apart, giving vague and irrelevant examples like needing to lock screen doors or Europe's lack of frugality. Red Sam's statement that "a good man is hard to find" at first seems to be just as vague and meaningless as the rest of their chatter, but in the world of the story, where everyone is depicted as being somewhat unsavory, it rings uncannily true. Finding a good man is likely

harder than even Red Sam and the grandmother suspect. This statement is also made in direct reference to The Misfit, the escaped killer who will murder the whole family at the end of the story. In hindsight, then, this flippant conversation about moral decay seems to disregard the true violence and chaos of society in favor of petty cliches, and points to the grandmother's shallow understanding of good and evil.

"It's not much farther," the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner.

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage the grandmother realizes that she has misremembered the location of the house that she has manipulated the family into taking a detour to go see. It is telling that instead of simply admitting her mistake, she feels humiliated by it and says nothing—clearly the moral thing to do would be to inform her son that he should turn the car around. However, her physical reaction to the embarrassment accidentally upsets her valise where she is keeping the cat that she was instructed not to bring on the trip, and the cat's escape causes the car to wreck, which sets into motion the violent end to the story. Certainly the grandmother is at fault for the accident; she has manipulated the family into driving down a dangerous road and she brought the cat after being told not to. However, the accident seems to occur as some kind of karmic retribution for the grandmother's behavior, and this introduces an issue that becomes important at the end of the story. The accident and ensuing violence seem to be a disproportionately harsh retribution for the grandmother's behavior, and for the remainder of the story O'Connor forces readers to consider the relationship between punishment and crime, and the moral complexities and violence that a skewed relationship between the two can produce.

The grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey's wrath would not come down on her all at once.

Related Characters: Bailey, The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

After the accident, the grandmother's selfishness is acutely on display. Instead of worrying about the safety of her family, the grandmother cowers under the dashboard hoping that she has been injured, because she believes that an injury might ease her son's anger that she caused the accident. Her petty self-pity and disregard of others casts serious doubts on the quality of her character, and makes her lamentations about the decline of old morals farcical.

This scene functions almost as a rehearsal for the dramatic and violent end of the story, in which The Misfit murders the grandmother and her whole family. O'Connor is interested in how violence and trauma affect people, and in particular how violence might open people to religious and moral epiphany. However, after the car accident the grandmother's character doesn't seem to shift; she remains in conflict with her family, she does not take responsibility for her actions, and she craves pity rather than true forgiveness. Because of this, the plot must escalate to truly depraved violence, which seems to be the only thing that allows the grandmother to experience grace.

The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on the top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile.

Related Characters: The Misfit

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

While the accident marks the turn in the story, the appearance of the Misfit's car confirms the dark tonal shift that the accident suggests. The family has had an

experience of violence (the car accident) and it has left them unmoved, so the black car that looks like a hearse coming around the bend can only mean that things are about to get worse.

The appearance of a car that looks like a hearse (a peculiarly shaped vehicle designed to carry coffins) can only portend death. In a sense, this is an escalation of the story's theme of unjust punishment. Since the family members are not behaving like kind and moral people and the accident has not shocked them into reconsidering their behavior, the arrival of the hearse foreshadows the ultimate punishment. Certainly this is disproportionate to the "crime" of their petty behavior, but it proves to be adequate to the task of forcing the family members to confront their own failings and mortality.

> His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was.

Related Characters: The Misfit, The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation has multiple meanings in the context of the story. Throughout the story, the grandmother has shown her flippant attitude towards death (recall her dressing like a lady so that people would know she was respectable if she died on the highway). When she sees The Misfit, whose association with the hearse makes readers think of him as a bringer of death, she thinks his face is familiar, but she cannot place it. This directly echoes her attitude towards death, which she recognizes as a vague possibility, but does not understand exactly the profundity and significance of it.

This quote also has added significance in the context of the end of the story. While at this point it is suggested that the grandmother recognizes his face since she read the newspaper article about The Misfit, right before the grandmother is killed she seems to recognize The Misfit anew, and declares that he is one of her children. This is the climax of the story, the grandmother's moment of grace in which she experiences love and forgiveness for the man who has killed her whole family and is about to kill her. In this context, her initial uneasy recognition of The Misfit seems to mark the beginning of the grandmother's transformation. This moment can be seen as the stirrings of the true goodness within her that has laid dormant so long that she barely can recognize it.

> "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!"

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker), The Misfit

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Even though the grandmother is now barreling towards her eventual epiphany, she is still largely beholden to her typical petty logic. This quote is part and parcel with the grandmother's association of goodness and propriety with appearing respectable, rather than with exhibiting actual kind behavior. The grandmother knows that she is speaking with an escaped murderer, someone who would generally be considered the opposite of a "good man." However,because The Misfit looks like he might come from a wealthy or respectable family, she pronounces him to be good, just as she declared Red Sam good just because he told a vague story about giving somebody gas on credit. This quote, then, shows the absurdity of the grandmother's attitude about goodness, and her ineptitude as a judge of character. The quotation is also a bit ironic since the grandmother agreed heartily with Red Sam when he said that "a good man is hard to find." Here, the grandmother has found someone who is not a good man—someone who would seem to support her hypothesis that the social fabric of her youth is eroding—and she cannot even recognize him as such because her sense of morality is so concerned with appearances.

> "Listen," Bailey began, "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is," and his voice cracked. His eyes were as blue and intense as the parrots in his shirt and he remained perfectly still.

Related Characters: Bailey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation marks the beginning of the characters' visible transformations. Bailey, in this quote, is the first to truly recognize what is about to happen to the family, but he never articulates it outright. Immediately afterwards, the grandmother adjusts her hat brim and it breaks. This is a moment of intense symbolism that resonates with the moment of Bailey's realization shown in the quote. The hat, which the grandmother put on so that she would appear to be a "lady" (in other words, so that she would appear respectable and good) breaks, and once her superficial signifier of respectability is gone, she is able to begin to see the situation, as Bailey has, for what it is. These are two moments in which O'Connor suggests that violence and the threat of violence have a unique capacity for bringing people towards truth and goodness. Once the characters recognize the violence that surrounds them, their behavior shifts for the better—or at least towards truth.

"Nome, I ain't a good man," The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, "but I ain't the worst in the world neither. My daddy said I was a different breed from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's other has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything!'"

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

The Misfit says this in response to the grandmother desperately telling him that he is a good man. This seems to follow a modulation in tone for the grandmother, who has just shown her first tinge of "goodness" in calling after Bailey as he is led to the woods to be shot. It appears that the grandmother is beginning to recognize that her behavior and concerns are shallow, and she is beginning to show love for her family. Her character has shifted, which indicates that her declaring The Misfit a "good man" might be different than the delusional instances in which she has said this before. She seems now to be trying to appeal to a goodness that she fears he lacks, rather than identifying a goodness she believes he has. This goodness is a kind of basic human decency, not something based on the appearance of respectability or politeness.

However, the grandmother's appeal is in vain, as The Misfit is not operating within the moral and social frameworks that the grandmother believes in. In this quotation he confirms that he is from a "good" family, but says he has always been different from them, and he doesn't offer a reason why. This defies the logic that has structured the grandmother's world, in which being from a good family means a person should be good. This, in a sense, mirrors the grandmother's own family. While the grandmother believes herself to be a good, respectable "lady," her son and grandchildren behave in petty, shallow, and even mean ways that do not reflect well on their upbringing.

"I was a gospel singer for a while," The Misfit said. "I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet . . . I even seen a woman flogged."

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

The Misfit says this after two pistol shots are heard coming from the woods—there is no doubt now in the mind of the reader or the grandmother that the family is in the process of being murdered. The grandmother asks The Misfit if he ever prays, and in response he casually lists his various occupations, placing the sacred (gospel singer) on the same level as the violent (the army) or the morbid (undertaker). He also lists violences he has experienced ("seen a man burnt alive oncet" and "seen a woman flogged") in the same sentence, without giving context or any emotional reaction to them. This suggests that The Misfit's world gives the same importance to religion as violence, and that he reserves no special reverence or fear for violence in the world. From this quotation, O'Connor makes us understand that The Misfit lives in a chaotic world where actions and consequences are disconnected, and violence occurs

without reason. That The Misfit treats violence so casually is chilling, since it seems there is nothing the grandmother can say to dissuade him from the murders in progress.

"I never was a bad boy that I remember of," The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, "but somewhere along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive."

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation comes in stark contrast to the grandmother's idea that a person's character depends on his or her station in life rather than his or her actions. It also contradicts the grandmother's ideathat a person's character is fixed as good or bad, that a person can, in his or her essence, be "a good man."The Misfit seems to think his own character has shifted senselessly, without him having much to do with it. He wasn't a bad boy, he states, but he did something wrong and was dramatically punished for it. While here he appears to admit to having done something wrong, soon after he denies that he has done the thing he was punished for. This confusion of motive, morals, and even actual events further points to The Misfit's chaotic and violent worldview in which his own violent actions seem to just be random events happening to him.

It is also significant that in this quotation The Misfit places much more emphasis on the punishment than the action that caused him to be punished, suggesting that he has not taken responsibility for whatever he did wrong. When he says that the punishment buried him alive, it suggests that he has experienced some kind of rebirth or transformation. Fitting with O'Connor's interest in how violence changes people, The Misfit suggests that his punishment was a violence done to him that has transformed him into someone for whom morals are no longer relevant.

"It was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I known that for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it."

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This is a confusing quotation, as it establishes The Misfit's unreliability and, perhaps, his mental illness. More important, it gives a sense of why he is dangerous. The Misfit's experiences in jail have led him to literally believe that punishments are arbitrary and are not only given in a way disproportionate to the crimes that caused them, but are also sometimes given without a crime having been committed at all, or for the wrong crime entirely. While the reader is left uncertain as to whether The Misfit is accurately reporting his experiences (doubt has been cast on his sanity, honesty, and memory), this quote allows the reader to understand that, by the logic of The Misfit's own belief, it would not be excessive or unjust to murder a whole family simply because one of them recognized him. In addition, because for The Misfit there is not a logical thread connecting violence to retribution and punishment, there seems to be no way to convince him to change his mind about murdering the family.

The ambiguous charge that The Misfit has murdered his own father also touches on the family conflict that has pervaded the story. Whether or not The Misfit actually did kill his father, the quote points to the possibility that it was familial strife that has led to his doom. For the grandmother and her family, it is similarly family conflict that has ultimately resulted in their deaths. This parallel forces readers to consider what exactly separates the behavior and character of the family and The Misfit.

"Well then, why don't you pray?" she asked trembling with delight suddenly.

"I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself.

Related Characters: The Misfit, The Grandmother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

If readers have not yet understood that the logic of The

Misfit's world is distinct from the logic of the grandmother's, this quotation erases all doubt. The grandmother informs The Misfit that if he prayed then Jesus would help him, and he agrees with her. When she then asks him why doesn't he pray, it seems that she thinks she has found a way to change The Misfit's mind about killing her, since she believes that being good and moral is something everybody wants. The Misfit, however, sees this kind of salvation as pointless. He believes that faith can't help him, since there is no point in being good, as violence and punishment will follow him whether or not he behaves. He is not concerned with morality, nor with the appearance of it. In fact, his statement that he is "doing all right by [himself]" shows that, for him, his behavior is correct. It is at this point that the grandmother loses courage and becomes very afraid.

"I call myself The Misfit," he said, "because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Until this moment, the name "The Misfit" seems to imply The Misfit's separation from society, either that he is different from other people, or that at least that he believes he is. However, in this quotation we learn that the name does not have to do with his assessment of his own place in society at all; he calls himself "The Misfit" because he feels he has been excessively wronged by others, to an extent that he can never reconcile his punishment with the things he knows he did wrong. Not only does The Misfit's name not imply that he is separate from society, he actually believes that he is similar to Christ, because Christ, he argues just before this quotation, was also punished excessively for a crime he didn't commit. This turns our original assumption, that the name references The Misfit's inability to fit into society, on its head; Christis the moral center of the world that the grandmother inhabits, which implies that The Misfit sees himself to be at the center of some kind of social truth. This pronouncement also makes the case thatThe Misfit feels that his life of senseless violence is not only morally justified, but constitutes, like Christ's teachings, its own moral framework.

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, "Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!" as if her heart would break.

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker), Bailey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This moment, in which the grandmother expresses love for her son and seems on the verge of heartbreak, is the beginning of the grandmother's moment of grace. In a moment of extreme violence she is realizing what is important to her and allowing herself to be deeply affected by it. The story's preoccupation with the relationship between crime and punishment makes it impossible to ignore the disproportionate nature of the grandmother's family being murdered in retribution for, in a literal sense, her recognition of The Misfit, and, in a metaphorical sense, her petty and shallow behavior. However, this connection drives home that, even though the consequences for her actions seem extreme, it was nothing less than this level of violence that could lead her to epiphany.

This moment also marks a turn in the family relationship. Throughout the story all family members have treated each other rudely and unkindly, and the grandmother's moment of grace ushers in this quotation, which is the first sign that she deeply cares for her son. The world O'Connor depicts is a dark one, however, and this moment of transformation does not alter the trajectory of the violence in progress. The grandmother's experience of grace benefits her in that it allows her to experience something good and genuine before she dies, but it cannot redeem or change the fate of her family.

"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."

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

At the time that The Misfit says this it seems perverse and menacing. Because The Misfit has experienced such violence (in the form of his disproportionate punishments) that he no longer believes in traditional morals, it seems that, for him, the only reprieve from violence is to enjoy it. This seems, too, to validate the grandmother's concern that society is eroding; it lends a certain logic to that claim to think that violence begets more violence and less concern for others, as The Misfit's statement suggests.

However, The Misfit's response to his murder of the grandmother casts this statement in a different light. When Bobby Lee calls the murder "fun," The Misfit seems to retract this quote by telling Bobby Lee to shut up because "it's no real pleasure in life," seemingly referring to violence. The Misfit, then, seems to have had his own moment of grace. Transformed by his own act of violence against the grandmother, The Misfit does not express regret or even cast judgment on himself, but he does seem to recognize that the murder did not bring him pleasure. This implies that he is capable of feeling a certain concern and empathy for others, after all.

She saw the man's face twisted closer to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.

Related Characters: The Grandmother (speaker), The Misfit

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This is the grandmother's moment of grace at its height. She knows she is going to die and she is no longer trying to change The Misfit's mind about it. Instead of simply being afraid, though, this moment of crisis brings her to a display of compassion her previous behavior did not make her seem capable of. When she sees that The Misfit seems to be about to cry, she reaches for him and tells him he is one of her children. This is such an emotionally powerful moment because it does so many things. It is, for one, the grandmother's forgiveness of a man who has done something unspeakably horrible to her family and is about to kill her, too. It is also an enlargement of her prior display of love for Bailey, which now extends to her declaring The Misfit to be a part of her family. This gives readers a sense of her newly realized love for her family, and her ability to spread that love beyond its biological confines—to see the truth about life and acknowledge the common humanity in all people. Last, this moment is tragic in that, even though the grandmother has experienced a moment of pure Christian love and goodness, she still must die. From this, we receive the message that love and goodness are essential to the human experience, but their power is personal and cannot necessarily subvert the trajectory of someone else's violence. Being moral, then, is important for the personal rewards it brings, but it does not erase or redeem all the tragedy in the world. Injustice and morality coexist—one does not cancel the other.

"She would have been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

Related Characters: The Misfit (speaker), The Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

In a sense, this is an explanation of O'Connor's ideas about the connection between violence and grace. The events of the story have shown that it took extraordinary violence to bringthis petty and mean familyto a point of showing true love and compassion. Violence, then, was what enabled the family to experience goodness by offering them grace (their moment of realization and transformation). What killed them was also, in a sense, what saved them.

What The Misfit is saying here is that he recognizes this; he saw the shift in the grandmother's behavior as she moved closer to death. When The Misfit first started talking to her she was selfish, manipulative, and shallow, but as she began to truly confront the violence she was experiencing she turned into a "good woman" for the first time. The extremity of the Misfit's statement is skewed by his own violent worldview, but he is recognizing here that if the

grandmother lived every moment of her life with the same compassion that she experienced when she was about to be shot, then she would have been a truly good person.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

The story opens on the Grandmother (unnamed), whose family is about to take a trip to Florida. Unlike the rest of her family, however, the Grandmother would rather go to Tennessee. She shows a newspaper article to her son Bailey, whose house she lives in. The article tells of an escaped convict known as the Misfit, who has escaped federal prison and is believed to be headed toward Florida. The Grandmother says that she would never take her children near such a dangerous criminal, and that she "couldn't answer to [her] conscience if [she] did."

Right from the start, the Misfit's arrival into the story is foreshadowed by a newspaper article—although at this point he doesn't seem to belong in the family's mundane world of the family's self-absorption and squabble. The story is set in the South, as almost all of O'Connor's work is, and the Grandmother already starts to appear as one of her more self-righteous, hypocritical characters.

Bailey ignores the Grandmother, so she then turns to Bailey's wife, an innocent-looking woman holding a baby. The Grandmother insists that the children—her own grandchildren—have already been to Florida, and that going to East Tennessee would be a more broadening experience for them. Bailey's wife seems not to hear, but her eight-year-old son, John Wesley, who is described as "a stocky child with glasses," asks the Grandmother why doesn't she just stay by herself if she doesn't want to go to Florida. John Wesley and his sister June Star lie on the floor reading the funny papers.

The family argues constantly: nobody listens to the Grandmother, and her grandchildren mock her. Meanwhile the Grandmother tries to use guilt and manipulation to get her way, all while pretending to be selfless. Instead of having a frank discussion about each person's views, they just bicker and get nowhere.

June Star says that the Grandmother "wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day." The Grandmother asks her grandchildren what they would do if the Misfit caught them. John Wesley says he would "smack his face." June Star repeats that the Grandmother would never stay home, out of fear that she'd miss something exciting. The Grandmother suggests that June Star remember that the next time she asks her grandmother to curl her hair.

The grandkids poke fun at the Grandmother's hypocrisy and small-mindedness—she would insist on going along even somewhere she doesn't want to go. This is seemingly a valid point, but it's also presented in a cruel and disrespectful way, so the Grandmother doesn't even consider it, but instead just keeps bickering.

The next morning, the Grandmother is packed and ready to leave, sitting in the car before anyone else. She has a valise and is hiding a basket with their cat, Pitty Sing, in it. Against her son Bailey's wishes, the Grandmother has brought the cat out of fear that it would miss her too much or accidentally kill itself.

As June Star and John Wesley predicted, the Grandmother is certainly not going to miss the trip. Her selfishness is reflected in secretly bringing the cat—though she thinks of her act as one of kindness, in somehow protecting the cat from "missing her too much."

The family leaves in the car, with the Grandmother sitting in the back with John Wesley and June Star. In the front sit Bailey, Bailey's wife, and their baby. The grandmother records the car's mileage, thinking that it would be fun to see how many miles they have driven when they get back. In contrast to Bailey's wife, who is dressed casually in slacks with her hair up, the Grandmother is dressed ornately with a fancy **hat**, a blue dress, white organdy cuffs and collars, and at her neck cloth violets surrounding a sachet. The Grandmother notes that it is a good day for driving. She reminds Bailey of the speed limit and says that patrolmen might be hiding, waiting to catch speeders.

The Grandmother's dress reveals much about her character: rather than thinking of comfort, she thinks of how her body might be found if they get in a car accident. She dresses up, hoping that, no matter what, she will be identified as a proper lady. She is so caught up in following social convention that she does not understand that death is truly the end: how she is remembered will no longer affect her. She is very narrow-minded, and can't yet consider anything like the reality of her own mortality.

The Grandmother comments on the beautiful scenery, but John Wesley suggests that they "go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much." The Grandmother advises her grandchildren not to talk so negatively about their home state, but both John Wesley and June Star agree that both Georgia and Tennessee are "lousy." The Grandmother says that in her day people were more respectful of their home state and in general. Then points at a poor black child standing in a doorway, stating that the scene would make a great picture.

To the Grandmother, John Wesley and June Star's behavior is representative of the moral decay she sees in society. They mock their home state and disrespect their elders. The Grandmother maintains a sense of superiority, but then turns around and shows that her own "old-fashioned morals" include overt racism.

The Grandmother holds Bailey's youngest child, the baby. As they pass a graveyard, the Grandmother notes that it used to be part of "the plantation," which is now "Gone With the Wind." In the backseat, she and the grandchildren eat lunch. The Grandmother does not allow them to throw their trash out the window, though they want to. John Wesley and June Star begin to fight, and the Grandmother asks if telling them a story would stop their fighting.

O'Connor portrays more mundane family conflicts, painting a picture of the family members as each selfish and small-minded in their own way. The Grandmother sees her grandchildren as disrespectful and ignorant of what it means to be "good." Meanwhile her own fixation on the plantation from her past shows how nostalgia colors her entire worldview, and her reference to "Gone With the Wind" suggests that the more "moral" past she misses was an ideal that never existed in the first place, and was in fact based on racism and even slavery.

The Grandmother describes herself being courted, when she was younger, by Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden, who was a "good-looking man and a gentleman." Each Saturday, he brought her a watermelon with his initials carved into it: "E. A. T." One Saturday, the Grandmother explains, she never got the watermelon, because it had been found by a black boy who saw the letters "E. A. T." on it and ate it. John Wesley laughs at the story, but June Star is not amused: she says that she wouldn't have married a man just because he brought her watermelons. The Grandmother laments that marrying him would have been a good decision, because he bought Coca-Cola stock early on and had only recently died a rich man.

The Grandmother's story also shows her nostalgia for what she sees as a simpler and better time. Her reflection—that she should have married the man who died rich off Coca-Cola stock—makes it clear that worldly concerns are more important to her than spiritual ones (or even ideas of romantic love). The Grandmother once again shows the racism inherent in her worldview and longing for the "Old South," as she portrays the black "boy" in the story as just a simple and comic figure.

The family stops at The Tower, a filling station and dance hall, for barbecued sandwiches. The owner of the store is Red Sammy Butts, whose name was written on signs along the highway advertising his sandwiches and the fact that he is a veteran. Red Sam is lying on the ground under a truck when the family drives up. A monkey, chained to a nearby tree, scurries away and up the tree at their approach.

Though Red Sam later laments the same moral decay that the Grandmother sees in the world, he cruelly keeps a monkey chained to a tree. It quickly becomes apparent that everything Red Sam does—whether it's keeping a monkey at his gas station or advertising himself as a wholesome, virtuous veteran—is just a gimmick to get more money and customers.

The family enters The Tower, and Red Sam's wife takes their orders. Bailey's wife puts music on the jukebox, and the Grandmother asks Bailey if he wants to dance, but he ignores her. Bailey's wife puts on something faster, and June Star steps onto the dance floor and dances. Red Sam's wife asks jokingly if June Star would like to come be her daughter. June Star says she "wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" Red Sam's wife smiles politely and only says "Ain't she cute?" but the Grandmother asks June Star, "Aren't you ashamed?"

June Star's response—laughing at the idea of living in The Tower and vocally criticizing it to Red Sam's wife—is representative of the disrespectful attitude that the Grandmother sees in a younger generation. The Grandmother is hypocritical and "sinful" in her own way, but as we see here it's also *true that her grandchildren are rude and spoiled.*

Red Sam comes in and tells his wife to hurry up and fill their order. He sits down at a table near the family and says, "You can't win," wiping his sweaty face, and then says, "These days you don't know who to trust." The Grandmother agrees: "People are certainly not nice like they used to be." Red Sam tells her that the week before, two guys came in with a beat-up car and said they worked at the mill, and Red Sam let them charge the gas to the mill. The Grandmother says he is a "good man" for doing so. Red Sam's wife comes over, delivers the food, and agrees that nobody can be trusted these days.

Like The Grandmother, Red Sam is clearly a hypocrite: he chastises his wife for not working hard enough, and then takes a seat himself. He and the Grandmother agree on all kinds of cliché sayings about how times have changed. Red Sam tells a story clearly intending to make himself seem virtuous, and the Grandmother eagerly leaps to the conclusion that Red Sam is a "good man." This is an important aspect of O'Connor's theme of "goodness" in the story—just what makes a "good man?" At this point, the Grandmother thinks "goodness" means being polite, nice, respectful, and agreeing with her views on things. Red Sam meets all these criteria—at least around the Grandmother herself, as it seems that he's mostly just trying to butter up his customers.

The Grandmother asks if Red Sam and his wife have read about the Misfit. Red Sam's wife says that she wouldn't be surprised if the Misfit attacked their restaurant, but Red Sam silences her by saying, "That'll do," and he tells his wife to go get the family their drinks. "A good man is hard to find," says Red Sam. He laments that you could no longer leave your screen door unlocked. He and the Grandmother discuss how things used to be better, and the Grandmother explains that Europe was to blame—"the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money." Red Sam says that she is exactly right and that there's no point talking about it.

When Red Sam silences his wife for bringing up The Misfit, he reveals an unwillingness to confront the violence and hardship that exists in the world—instead, he would rather have a nice, self-righteous conversation about how the younger generation and Europe are no good. Tellingly, it's the hypocritical, farcical character of Red Sam who delivers the statement that gives the story its title—he says it as just a meaningless cliché, but in light of the violence and grace that is to come, the phrase becomes more meaningful and complex.

The family drives off. The Grandmother tells the others about a plantation nearby that she had visited once when she was younger. The house was lavish and ornate, and she remembers how to get there. Knowing that Bailey will not want to visit, the Grandmother lies, saying there was a secret panel somewhere in the house with silver hidden behind it. John Wesley and June Star, excited by the idea of the hidden panel, say eagerly that they want to see it. The Grandmother insists that it's nearby, but Bailey says, simply, "No." The kids throw a tantrum, kicking and shouting until Bailey says that they can go, though he insists that this is the one and only time they will do something like this. The Grandmother says they have to turn around and get on a dirt road about a mile back. Bailey groans.

Again, The Grandmother tries to manipulate her family into changing their plans. She openly lies here, but doesn't seem to even admit it to herself, instead assuming that what she is doing is for the good of everyone else. The family does not discuss things open-mindedly, but shouts and argues until someone gives in. Bailey isn't given much character in the story, but in general he seems weary and irritable, worn down by his mother's nagging and his children's rudeness. And yet he is also clearly not a very good son or father himself.

The Grandmother recounts more details of the house, and John Wesley speculates about the placement of the secret panel. But Bailey says that they can't go inside because people probably live there. John Wesley suggests that they sneak in, but Bailey's wife says no. The Grandmother thinks nostalgically back to the days without paved roads. After some driving down the dirt road, Bailey threatens to turn around. The Grandmother insists that it's not much farther, but then is so embarrassed by a "horrible thought" that suddenly comes to her that she jumps and knocks her valise, allowing the hidden cat to emerge and jump out onto Bailey's shoulder.

The tension between the parents (Bailey and his wife) and their children (June Star and John Wesley) shows a generational difference: the kids don't respect other people's privacy like their parents do. O'Connor escalates the story quickly, as these character studies of mundanity and hypocrisy quickly transition into something horrifying starting in the next few scenes.

Bailey swerves when the cat attacks him, and the car crashes. The grandchildren are knocked to the floor, Bailey's wife is thrown out the door clutching her baby, and the Grandmother is thrown into the front seat, her fancy **hat** partially destroyed. The car has rotated a full 360 degrees on its side, and now rests upright in a "gulch off the side of a road." The grandchildren shout that they have had an accident. The Grandmother hopes that she is injured so that Bailey will not be so angry with her. The horrible thought that made her jump, we learn, was that the house she had been describing was actually in Tennessee, hundreds of miles away, not Georgia.

Importantly, it is the Grandmother's petty self-centeredness that causes the crash: without manipulating the family into visiting the house she wanted to see, and without sneaking her cat into the car, there would have been no crash (and even if they had otherwise crashed, it wouldn't have been on a deserted back road). Even after the crash, all the Grandmother can think of is herself: she does not take the possibility of injury or death seriously, instead hoping that she is injured in order to get sympathy.

June Star is disappointed that nobody has been killed. The Grandmother clutches her side, lying when she says, "I believe I have injured an organ." Nobody responds. They are ten feet below the road, and behind the ditch are only woods. A few minutes later, they spot a car. The Grandmother waves her arms. The **car**, a "big black battered hearse-like automobile," approaches. The car comes to a stop above the family on the road. The driver looks down and watches for several minutes, then mutters something to the other two men in the car and they all get out.

June Star's reaction, too, reveals how un-seriously she treats the prospect of death or hardship. Clearly, the family does not appreciate that they could well have died. The Grandmother, becoming somehow even pettier in the face of danger, not only hopes that she is injured, but lies, saying that she is. It's clear that the accident is the Grandmother's "fault," but this is also an example of the story's theme of punishment and forgiveness, in which punishment often outweighs the crime—the Grandmother was hypocritical and manipulative, but a life-threatening car accident seems like too harsh of a "punishment" dealt to her by fate. The sudden appearance of the "hearse-like" car signals the dramatic shift in the story's tone, as it becomes much darker. A hearse is a vehicle for carrying a coffin to a funeral, and here it clearly represents death entering the story in a very real way.

One of the men is very young and fat, and he stands on one side of the family gawking and grinning. The other has khakis on, a coat, and a hat. He stands on the other side of the family. The driver then gets out of the car. He is older and "wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look." He isn't wearing a shirt, and is holding a hat and a gun. The other two men also have guns. The grandchildren scream, "We've had an ACCIDENT."

Everything suddenly gets more sinister with the arrival of the armed men, but the children are still totally self-absorbed and oblivious. The second half of the story now starts to mark the conflict between the petty, selfish world of the family and the harsh, meaningless reality of chaos and death.

The Grandmother has an odd sense that she has met the man with glasses before. His face seems familiar. The man carefully steps down from the road and says, "Good afternoon . . . I see you all had a little spill." The Grandmother claims they turned over twice, but the man corrects her that it was only once. He says they saw it happen. The man with glasses instructs one of his men, Hiram, to see if the car will run. John Wesley asks what he has a gun for, and the man with glasses asks Bailey's wife to collect and calm her children. "What are you telling US what to do for?" June Star demands.

Again, with the strangers, the Grandmother naturally lies to get sympathy, saying that the car flipped over twice. The man correcting her signifies the first small instance of the harsh truth cutting into her narrow world. The children's rudeness suddenly becomes more dangerous and foolish, as they treat these sinister, armed men as if they were harmless figures like Red Sam.

As Bailey attempts to explain their situation, the Grandmother interrupts, shouting, "You're the Misfit!" The man in glasses says that he is the Misfit, but that it would have been better if she had not recognized him. Bailey says something to the Grandmother that shocks everybody (but we never learn what). The Grandmother begins to cry. The Misfit's face turns red, and he says "Don't you get upset . . . I don't reckon he meant to talk to you that away." The Grandmother asks the Misfit if he would ever shoot an old lady. The Misfit says, "I would hate to have to."

The Grandmother, so excited to recognize the Misfit that she does not realize the threat he poses to her family, reveals herself once again to not take the prospect of violence or death seriously. Indeed, she is more upset by Bailey's cursing at her than she is at the prospect of being trapped and alone with a known murderer—concerned, as usual, only with appearances and respectability. Even after the Misfit identifies himself, the Grandmother insists that he would not shoot an old woman. She is stuck in a conventional sense of a "good," decent person, and does not appreciate what she is up against.

The Grandmother insists that she knows The Misfit is a "good man" and that she knows he comes from "nice people." He agrees, saying that "God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold." The Misfit tells the fat man, Bobby Lee, to keep an eye on the children. The Misfit comments on the nice weather, and the Grandmother agrees. The Grandmother says he should not call himself "the Misfit" because he must be good at heart. "Hush," Bailey demands, saying that he will handle it. Hiram says that the car will take half an hour to fix.

The Misfit, known to be a violent criminal, claims to come from a family of "good" people, making us consider again: where does goodness, or badness, come from? The Grandmother's cliché idea that good parents will raise good children is clearly wrong—or perhaps her idea of "goodness" isn't really goodness at all (it seems she didn't do a very good job of raising her children or grandchildren either). We do not know what made the Misfit the way he is.

The Misfit instructs Hiram and Bobby Lee to take Bailey and John Wesley over to the woods, telling Bailey that his men need to ask him something. Bailey says, "We're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is." The Grandmother tries to adjust her **hat** but it comes apart in her hands and falls to the ground. Hiram and Bobby Lee then lead Bailey and John Wesley toward the woods. As they reach the edge of the forest, Bailey says, "I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me." The Grandmother insists that he come back right then, but they disappear into the woods. The Grandmother desperately calls "Bailey Boy!" after him, and then repeats to the Misfit that she knows he must be a good man.

Only Bailey, who seems to be the most "normal" character in the family, although a totally ineffectual one, realizes the reality of the situation. The rest of the family members are still stuck in their everyday attitudes, which only violence will take them out of. Only when the Grandmother realizes that her son is about to be murdered does she cry out "Bailey Boy," which is the first indication of any affection for her family. It's also telling that first she tries to fix her hat—the symbol of her commitment to appearances and "respectability"—and it's only when it literally falls apart that she starts to see the harsh reality of her situation.

"I ain't a good man," the Misfit says, "but I ain't the worst in the world neither." He explains that he was always different than his brothers and sisters: whereas they could live their lives without ever questioning anything, he, the Misfit, always had to know why everything was the way it was. He apologizes for not having a shirt on in front of the women, explaining that the men buried the prison clothes they had on when they escaped and "borrowed these from some folks we met." The Grandmother offers an extra shirt from Bailey's suitcase.

The question of what makes someone "good" now comes front and center in the story, as the Misfit's amoral worldview comes up against the Grandmother's small-minded, traditional idea of goodness. She continues trying to be polite and respectable, offering the Misfit one of Bailey's shirts, while the Misfit is operating on a whole different level—he seemingly isn't concerned with goodness and badness at all, but only with why things are the way they are, and with fulfilling his own pleasures and desires. (Although it's also darkly ironic that he apologizes for being "disrespectful" in front of the women, when he's actually about to kill them.)

The Misfit keeps talking about his parents, explaining that his father had a bit of an edge, but never got in trouble with the authorities. "You could be honest too if you'd only try," the Grandmother states, "Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time." The Misfit agrees, saying that "somebody is always after you." The Grandmother asks if he prays. The Misfit says no.

The Grandmother keeps assuring the Misfit that he could be a good man, not realizing that he does not want to be "good." The Grandmother's ideals of convention, respectability, and politeness have no appeal to him—he is only interested in pursuing what he wants to do. The Misfit is essentially a nihilist figure of chaos (nihilists believe life has no meaning), but one still steeped in the tradition of the South, explaining his concerns about politeness and Christianity.

Two pistol shots are heard from the woods. The Grandmother glances around, shouting "Bailey Boy!" The Misfit speaks, saying that he's been a gospel singer, a member of the armed services, married twice, an undertaker, a railroad worker, a farmer, caught in a tornado, seen a man burned alive, and watched a woman flogged. "Pray, pray," the Grandmother says. The Misfit explains that he does not remember being a bad person, but then he did something wrong and was sent to prison, where he was "buried alive." The Grandmother tells him that's when he should have started to pray.

If it was unclear before, we now know that the Misfit is willing to murder members of the family—and he seemingly feels no guilt about the murders, but also takes no pleasure in them. The Misfit refers to himself as being "buried alive" in prison, suggesting that his current existence is after some kind of rebirth upon his escape from prison. He has seen all kinds of horrible things, and has moved beyond everyday life to a more nihilistic view of things, one totally unconcerned with traditional morality or even the value of other people's lives.

The Misfit describes prison: on his right was a wall, on his left was a wall, above him was a ceiling, and below him was a floor. He says that, despite trying, he has not been able to remember what he did wrong to get put in jail. The Grandmother suggests it might have been a mistake, but he says they had paperwork that showed it wasn't. She suggests that maybe he stole something, but he says, "Nobody had anything I wanted." The "head-doctor" of the prison told the Misfit that he had killed his own father, but the Misfit says that he remembers his father dying of the flu.

During the Misfit's time in prison, he was punished for a crime he couldn't remember committing. The punishment changed and confused the Misfit. Either his memory is distorted, or the doctor lied to him (or this is some twist on the Freudian idea of the Oedipal complex—wanting to kill one's father—as the doctor is suggested to be a psychoanalyst, and the Misfit may have just misinterpreted his words). Either way, it is clear that the Misfit feels he was punished beyond what he deserved. This fits into the theme of punishment and forgiveness, as the family is being "punished" for their selfishness and hypocrisy by being killed. Recognition of the unfairness of life seems to have contributed to the Misfit's rejection of morality.

The Grandmother says that if he prayed, "Jesus would help you." "That's right," the Misfit says. She asks why doesn't he pray. "I don't want no hep," he says, "I'm doing all right by myself." Bobby Lee and Hiram arrive back from the woods, one of them carrying the shirt that Bailey was wearing. The Misfit asks for the shirt and puts it on. The Misfit explains that he believes that "the crime don't matter," because eventually he will forget what he did and "just be punished for it." Bailey's wife begins to breathe heavily, and the Misfit asks her to accompany Bobby Lee and Hiram into the forest and "join your husband." Bailey's wife says, "Yes, thank you." June Star says that she doesn't want to hold Bobby Lee's hand because "he reminds me of a pig," but Bobby Lee pulls her by the arm toward the woods after Hiram and her mother.

The Misfit is not interested in prayer or God's forgiveness. From experience, he has come to believe that committing wrongs does not matter: punishments will come regardless, and then it will be as if it never happened. He sees the harsh reality of the universe and reacts to it by being harsh and cruel himself. O'Connor is a Catholic, and so clearly believes in a benevolent and powerful God, but she never denies the seeming randomness and cruelty of life—faith, for her, is a crucial, harsh thing, not something easy or comforting. June Star seemingly remains oblivious, or else clings to her self-absorption in the face of terror.

The Grandmother is now alone with the Misfit. She wants to tell him to pray, but she only says "Jesus. Jesus." The Misfit compares himself to Jesus: "It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me." The Misfit says that they never showed him the papers—now he always signs everything, so he can keep a copy, and so that he will know everything that he has done and be able to compare what he did to the punishment. "I call myself The Misfit," he says, "because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

The Misfit compares himself to Jesus, who in Christian theology was punished for all of humanity's sins, though he himself was sinless. The Misfit, for his part, believes that he did commit some crime, *but considers himself to be a similar martyr-like figure because he cannot* remember committing it. *The central idea of his relationship with punishment is made clear: "I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment." Suffering and the unfairness of the world has transformed the Misfit, made him into a hard and (by conventional standards) evil man. He gives an explanation for his name here, but we might also expand upon it and say that he is a "misfit" more than a "villain" because by his own standard of amorality, he isn't wicked at all—it's just that his morality doesn't "fit" in with that of the rest of humanity.*

There is a scream from the woods and another shot from a pistol. The Misfit asks if it seems fair to the Grandmother that one person can be punished so much while another is punished so little. The Grandmother cries out that she knows he has "good blood" and "wouldn't shoot a lady!" She says he ought not to shoot her, and tells him that she will give her all her money. The Misfit states that "there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip."

The Misfit, having seen past a sense of the world as a "fair" place, demands of the Grandmother whether she can understand why some are punished and others not. Essentially she is here clinging to her traditional ideas of morality and respectability (symbolized by the phrase "you wouldn't shoot a lady"), ideas that hinge on the world being an orderly and "fair" place. She is completely forced to confront the Misfit's universe now, however—a harsh and meaningless place.

Two more gunshots ring out from the forest. The Grandmother raises her head and shouts "Bailey Boy!" once again. The Misfit states that only Jesus could raise the dead, and that his doing so was a mistake. The Misfit says he believes that if Jesus is the Messiah, it's "nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him," but if Jesus is not the Messiah, "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." He says there's "no pleasure but meanness." The Grandmother suggests that maybe Jesus didn't raise the dead.

The Misfit describes his version of a meaningful life: "nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can." This goes directly against everything that the Grandmother—and society in general—believes makes a "good man." Instead, the Misfit does not strive to be a "good man" at all. The only meaning he can find is in violence and pursuing pleasure and power. The Grandmother feels everything she has based her life upon crumbling away in the face of violence, true nihilism, and her own mortality—she is now spiritually naked, and ready for her "moment of grace."

The Misfit says that he wish he had been there, to know whether Jesus really had raised the dead. He says, "If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." His voice almost cracks and for a moment the Grandmother feels her head clear. She says to the Misfit, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reaches out and touches him on the shoulder. The Misfit suddenly springs back and shoots her in the chest three times. Then he puts his gun down and cleans his glasses.

This is the story's climax, and the Grandmother's "moment of grace." By being directly confronted with violence and death, she has been transformed (even if just for a moment). Whereas for most of the story all the Grandmother could think about was self-preservation, and all she did was bicker with her family, now she not only feels love toward her own family, but treats the Misfit as her own son, forgiving him for all his wrongs and experiencing a more meaningful, powerful, and even holy kind of love. Of course, in O'Connor's harsh universe, this moment of grace does not mean a happy ending, and the Grandmother is punished for her act of reaching out being immediately shot. This tragic end only makes her epiphany seem even more powerful and vital.

Bobby Lee and Hiram return from the woods and look down at the Grandmother's body in the ditch. The Misfit tells them to put her body with the others. Then he picks up the cat, Pitty Sing. Bobby Lee says The Grandmother must have been "a talker." "She would of been a good woman," says the Misfit, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." "Some fun!" says Bobby Lee. "Shut up, Bobby Lee," the Misfit says, "It's no real pleasure in life."

After the "moment of grace," O'Connor ends with the Misfit and his followers alone in their harsh, nihilistic world. The Grandmother's body may never even be found, so she cannot depend on being identified as a "proper lady" as she had hoped—and her hat was destroyed anyway. Yet she achieved a kind of redemption in the moment of her death. As the Misfit says, having someone "there to shoot her" has made her into a "good woman" (that is, violence has brought her to a moment of grace). Here, finally, is a definition of goodness that even the Misfit will admit the reality of—the Grandmother's brief moment of true "goodness" in reaching out to the Misfit in love. The Grandmother was transformed by this violent ending, and the Misfit, too, may have been changed in some small way by the Grandmother's moment of grace. He chastises his henchman for suggesting that the murders were fun, even though earlier he had stated that there's "no pleasure but meanness." Now the Misfit states that there's "no real pleasure" at all. His worldview has been challenged by this moment of pure humanity (and even divinity), but we don't get to see how he reacts further than this—O'Connor remains brutal and realistic, and ends the dark story on a dark note.

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