# A Good Man Is Hard to Find Study Guide

## A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

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# Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" first appeared in the author's short story collection by the same name, which was published in 1955. Since then, it has become one of O'Connor's most highly regarded works of short fiction because it exhibits all the characteristics for which she is best known: a contrast of violent action with humorously and carefully drawn characters and a philosophy that underscores her devout Roman Catholic faith. Critics have admired the prose and the way O'Connor infuses the story with her Catholic belief about the role God's grace plays in the lives of ordinary people. The story is disturbing and humorous at the same time—a quality shared by many of O'Connor's other works, including her novels *Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away*.

Though the story begins innocently enough, O'Connor introduces the character of the Misfit, an escaped murderer who kills the entire family at the end of the story. Through this character, O'Connor explores the Christian concept of "grace"—that a divine pardon from God is available simply for the asking. In the story, it is the Grandmother—a petty, cantankerous, and overbearing individual—who attains grace at the moment of her death, when she reaches out to the Misfit and recognizes him as one of her own children. For O'Connor, God's grace is a force outside the character, something undeserved, an insight or moment of epiphany. Often, however, O'Connor's characters miss moments of opportunity to make some connection; their spiritual blindness keeps them from seeing truth.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the title story of O'Connor's first short story collection, and, therefore, often serves as an introduction to the rest of her fiction. The story is enjoyable for its humorous portrayal of a family embarking on a vacation; O'Connor has been unforgiving in her portrayal of these characters—they are not likable. However, in creating characters that elicit little sympathy from readers, O'Connor has carefully set the premise for her main argument: that grace is for everyone, even those who seem loathesome.

# Overview

The story begins with the grandmother trying to convince her family to cancel a trip to Florida, because of a vicious criminal who is on the lam somewhere in the Southern states. Everyone in her family ignores her except for her granddaughter, who mocks her. The family does take the trip and, in an ironic twist of fate, the father, who is grandmother's son, reluctantly agrees to take a fatal detour down a dirt road that grandmother insists leads to an old plantation she once visited. On this road, the cat that grandmother secretly brought along in the car attacks the father, causing an accident. While recovering from the accident and deciding what next step to take, the family is visited by the Misfit, the very criminal whom the grandmother feared meeting before the family began their trip.

The remainder of the short tale involves the interaction of the family with the Misfit and his sidekicks, leading to the death of every family member, but not before the grandmother and the Misfit share an epiphany about one another, altering each other's state of mind irrevocably.

# Author Biography

Although she produced relatively few works in her short lifetime of 39 years, Mary Flannery O'Connor is considered one of the most important short story writers of the twentieth century because of her strange but interesting characters, her violent plot elements, and her religious world view. O'Connor was a Roman Catholic writer who knew that most of her audience did not share her strict moral view of the world. She sought, however, to present a message of God's grace and presence in everyday life. Born in the "Bible Belt" Southern city of Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, O'Connor's region and upbringing influenced her fiction in her depiction of character, of conflict, and in her choice of themes.

O'Connor was the only child of wealthy parents and attended high school in Milledgeville, Georgia. Her father, Edward Francis O'Connor, died when she was sixteen from degenerative lupus, the same disease that later took her life. At the Georgia College for Women, O'Connor majored in social sciences and edited and wrote for school publications. She later received amaster's degree in writing from Iowa State University in 1947, using six of her stories as her master's thesis. After completing graduate school, O'Connor attended the prestigious Yaddo writers' colony in upstate New York in 1947-48 where she worked on her first novel *Wise Blood*. Moving to New York and then to Connecticut to live with good friends Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, O'Connor continued to work on her novel until she suffered her first attack of lupus, a chronic, autoimmune disease which causes inflammation of various parts of the body, such as the skin, joints, blood and internal organs. O'Connor then moved back to Milledgeville, where she lived the remainder of her life with her mother.

O'Connor wrote steadily through the 1950s. Her novel *Wise Blood*-was published in 1952, and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, a short story collection containing the well-known story by the same name, in 1955. A second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* came out in I960. The year of her death, 1964, saw the publication of *Three by Flannery O 'Connor* and another short story collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Most of her stories were originally published in periodicals such as *Accent*, *Mademoiselle*, *Esquire*, and *Critic*. She won three O. Henry Memorial Awards for her short stories, a Ford Foundation grant, a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant in literature, and two honorary doctor's degrees during her lifetime. After her death, her fiction won a National Book Award, and her collection of letters *The Habit of Being* won an award from the *Library Journal*.

O'Connor's health prevented her from traveling much, so she spent much of her time writing hundreds of letters to friends, family, and strangers. The collection of letters *The Habit of Being* reveals a great deal about O'Connor's compassionate, but often critical, personality. Besides her friendships and her correspondence, O'Connor helped her mother on their Georgia dairy farm Andalusia, painted with oils, and raised peacocks, birds that figure prominently and often symbolically in her fiction. She traveled when she could and presented lectures and speeches. She died on August 3, 1964, at the age of 39, from the effects of her disease and abdominal surgery associated with it; however,

her fiction lives on, appearing in anthologies, garnering critical attention, and continuing to astound readers with its depiction of the human condition.

# About the Author

Considered one of the most powerful voices of American literary fiction, Flannery O'Connor was born Mary Flannery O'Connor in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925. She grew up in an ardently Catholic family. In 1945, she graduated from Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College) in Milledgeville, and continued her studies through the graduate writing program at the University of Iowa. While still at Iowa, she published her first short story and, based on a portion of the manuscript of her first novel, Wise Blood, received a publisher's prize and admission to the artistic community at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York.

She was working on the novel and staying with the family of the poet Robert Fitzgerald and his wife Sally in rural Connecticut when she was stricken with lupus, the disease that had taken her father's life at age 41. Thereafter she returned to Milledgeville to live with her mother on the family farm until her death from complications from lupus on August 3, 1964, at age thirty-nine.

In her abbreviated writing life O'Connor published two novels, The Violent Bear It Away in addition to Wise Blood, and two collections of stories. The second collection, Everything That Rises Must Converge, was published shortly after her death. Another posthumous collection, The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (1971), won the National Book Award for fiction, and it has remained in print ever since. The recently published Best American Short Stories of the Century includes O'Connor's Greenleaf.

O'Connor's critical success as a writer belies the difficulty her work poses for many readers. Her stories contain a great deal of violence, and the two novels can appear harsh and amoral, elements which tend to overwhelm the moral compassion and comic style that O'Connor so gracefully weaves into her tales. O'Connor's explanation for the off-putting "grotesque" elements in her fiction was characteristically forthright:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural . . . . When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.

During her short career, Flannery O'Connor garnered numerous awards and honors.

They include the Kenyon Review Fellowship in Fiction, 1953; the National Institute of Arts and Letters grant in literature, in 1957; First Prize, in the O. Henry Memorial Awards, for Greenleaf in 1957, for Everything That Rises Must Converge in 1963, and for Revelation in 1965; a Doctorate of Literature from St. Mary's College in 1962, and one from Smith College in 1963; and a Henry H.

Bellaman Foundation special award, in 1964.

Posthumously, O'Connor also earned several accolades, including the National Book Award for The Complete Short Stories, in 1972; the Board Award from the National Critics Circle, a "Notable Book" citation from the Library Journal, the Bowdoin College Award and the Christopher Award, all for The Habit of Being: Letters, published in 1980.

To honor her talents, the library at Georgia State College for Women began a Flannery O'Connor collection soon after O'Connor's first publication in a national magazine, in 1946, and that collection still exists today.

The Special Collections at the Ina Dillard Russell Library at Georgia State College for Women is home to the Flannery O'Connor Collection, and the Department of English, Speech and Journalism at Georgia College is home of the Flannery O'Connor Bulletin.

# Plot Summary

O'Connor's story is told by a third person narrator, but the focus is on the Grandmother's perspective of events. Even though she complains that she would rather go to Tennessee than Florida for vacation, she packs herself (and secretly her cat, Pitty Sing) in the car with her son Bailey, his wife, and their children June Star, John Wesley, and the baby. In a comical instance of foreshadowing, she takes pains to dress properly in a dress and hat, so that if she were found dead on the highway everyone would recognize her as a lady.

When the family stops for lunch at Red Sammy Butts' barbecue place, the proprietor, a husky man, is insulted by June Star. Nevertheless, he and the Grandmother discuss the escaped murderer known as the Misfit. Noting that the world is increasingly a more dangerous and unfriendly place, Red Sammy tells the Grandmother that these days "A good man is hard to find." Back on the road, the Grandmother convinces her hen-pecked son to go out of their way so they can visit an old plantation she recalls from her childhood. The children second her suggestion when she mentions that the house contains secret passageways. Soon after Bailey turns down a dirt road "inaswirl of pink dust" with "his jaw as rigid as a horseshoe," the Grandmother realizes that the plantation is not in Georgia, where they are, but in Tennessee. This sudden realization causes her to upset Pitty Sing's basket. The cat leaps out onto Bailey's shoulder, and the surprise causes him to lose control of the car and roll it into a ditch.

No one is seriously hurt, and the children are inclined to view the accident as an adventure. Soon a car happens along the desolate stretch of road and the family believes the driver will stop and help them. As the driver makes his way down the embankment, the Grandmother thinks "his face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was." As soon as he starts to speak, however, she recognizes him as the infamous Misfit. He is accompanied by two other men; they are all carrying guns and are dressed in clothes that are clearly not their own. The first thing he wants to know is if the car will still run.

While the Misfit talks with the grandmother, his two accomplices, Hiram and Bobby Lee, take each member of the family off to the woods and shoot them. Soon the Misfit obtains Bailey's bright yellow shirt with blue parrots on it, and he and the Grandmother are alone. She tries to convince him that he is "not a bit common," in an effort to flatter him and spare her life. When it becomes clear that her words are having little effect on him, she becomes speechless for the first time in the story. "She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, 'Jesus, Jesus,' meaning Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing."

The Misfit's explanation for his behavior provides an opportunity for the self-centered Grandmother to reflect on her beliefs in the moments before he shoots her "three times through the chest." The Misfit explains that "Jesus thown everything off balance." In her final moment, the Grandmother reaches out and touches the Misfit, whispering "You're

one of my own children!." The Misfit's final commentary on the Grandmother is that "she would of been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor opens with the grandmother trying to convince her son and his family that they should not use their vacation time to go to Florida. The grandmother's name is never revealed. She lives with her son, Bailey and his wife and three children. She tells Bailey that a criminal called The Misfit has escaped from prison and his headed toward Florida. She advises him not to take his children in any direction where they could run into The Misfit. Bailey, who is reading the newspaper, does not pay attention to her. She turns her attention to the children's mother, who also remains unnamed throughout the story. She tells the mother that the children have already been to Florida, and they should see more of the country. The children's mother ignores her, but the couple's older boy, John Wesley, says that the grandmother should stay home if she does not want to go. June Star, the family's female child, says that grandmother would never stay home. The grandmother tries to scare the children by asking what they would do if the ran into The Misfit, but John Wesley just says he would smack the murderer in his face. June Star says the grandmother will go on the trip because she is afraid to miss anything and always goes wherever the family goes.

The next morning, the grandmother is the first one in the car. She has smuggled her cat, Pitty Sing, into the car by hiding him in a basket. She knows Bailey does not like to take the cat on trips. John Wesley and June Star sit on either side of her. As the family begins their journey, the grandmother writes down the mileage on the odometer because she thinks it will be interesting to know how far they have traveled. The children's mother has dressed casually for the trip and is wearing her hair tied in a green kerchief. The grandmother has dressed in a navy blue dress, white cotton gloves, and a straw hat. She is wearing fancy collars and cuffs and has pinned a spray of cloth violets to her neckline. She thinks that if they are in an accident, anyone who sees her dead body will know she was a lady.

The grandmother reminds Bailey of the speed limit and cautions him about patrolmen who hide behind signs and trees. She then turns her attention to the scenery, pointing out mountains and crops that she finds interesting. The children pass the time reading comic books while their mother sleeps. John Wesley comments that he is anxious to get through Georgia because there is nothing to look at. The grandmother is bothered by his statement and reminds him that he should not talk about his native state that way. Bailey says Georgia is a lousy state. June Star agrees. The grandmother lectures them, saying that when she was younger, children had respect for their elders and their native states. She then notices a young black child on a front porch as they pass by and says she would paint him if she were a painter.

The grandmother offers to take the baby. She makes faces at him and tries to play with him. After the children finish reading their comic books, they eat their packed lunches. The grandmother stops them from throwing their garbage out of the widows. John

Wesley and June Star play a game guessing what the clouds they see look like, but they quickly begin fighting and slapping each other.

The grandmother offers to tell them a story if they will keep quiet. She tells them about a man who once courted her. She said his name was Edgar Atkins Teagarden, and every Saturday he would bring her a watermelon with his initials carved into it. One Saturday a black boy ate the watermelon when he saw the initials: E.A.T. John Wesley laughs at the story, but June Star says she would never marry a man who only brought her a watermelon on Saturdays. The grandmother says she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden because he bought stock in Coca-Cola and eventually became a rich man.

The family stops at a restaurant called The Tower for barbecued sandwiches. Inside, the children's mother puts a dime in the nickelodeon and June Star begins to tap dance. The owner's wife says she is very cute and asks if June Star would like to be her little girl. June Star says she would never live in such a broken-down place. The grandmother is embarrassed. The owner of The Tower, Red Sammy, comes over to the family and talks to the grandmother. They agree that you cannot trust anyone anymore. They then talk about The Misfit. Red Sammy says that a good man is hard to find. The grandmother blames the state of the country on Europe, and Red Sammy agrees.

The family leaves. Once they are back on the road, the grandmother doses in the car, but is repeatedly woken up by the sound of her own snoring. She tells the family about a plantation that she had visited in the area when she was young. She remembers the road that led to the house. As she described the old plantation, she decides that she wants to see it again. She knows Bailey would never agree to such a detour, so she lies and says there was a secret panel in the house that held silver. John Wesley and June Star take the bait and immediately begin hounding their father to take them to the house. At first, he refuses, but they persist. Bailey finally agrees and says this will be the only time they are going to stop. The grandmother tells him that they have to turn around and drive down a dirt road they passed about a mile ago.

As they turn around, the grandmother tells them more about the beautiful house. Bailey reminds them that they do not know who lives there now and they are not allowed to go inside. John Wesley says he plans to sneak in a widow, but his mother tells them they will all stay in the car. They turn down the dirt road and it becomes a rough drive. The road has many sharp curves, hills, and dangerous embankments. Bailey is getting impatient. Suddenly the grandmother has a terrible realization. In horror and embarrassment, she kicks her feet into her valise. The valise moves, releasing Pitty Sing. The cat jumps onto Bailey's shoulder. The car turns over. The children fall to the floor and their mother and the baby are thrown out the door. The grandmother lands in the front seat next to Bailey.

The children scream in excitement about the accident. The grandmother hopes she is hurt so Bailey will not be too angry at her. The horrible thought that caused her to jump was the realization that the plantation was in Tennessee, not in Georgia.

Bailey throws the cat out of the window. No one is seriously hurt, but the mother has a broken shoulder. The children seem disappointed that no one has died. A car approaches carrying three men. A fat boy and another man get out, followed by the driver. The driver is an older man, wearing no shirt and jeans that are too tight. All three of them are carrying guns. The grandmother thinks that the driver looks familiar. The grandmother tells them that their car turned over twice, but the driver corrects her, saying they saw the accident and the car only turned over one time. John Wesley asks about the guns and the driver tells the children to stay with their mother. He says children make him nervous.

Bailey begins to ask for help, when suddenly the grandmother screams that she recognizes the man. He is The Misfit. The Misfit admits it is true and tells them the grandmother that she would have been better off if she had not recognized him. Bailey says something to his mother that shocks the family. She begins to cry. The Misfit tries to comfort her. The grandmother asks if he would shoot an old lady. He says he would not like to have to shoot one. She then tries to reason with The Misfit, telling him that he is a good man who comes from nice people. The Misfit agrees that his parents were fine people.

One of the men traveling with The Misfit, Hiram, says it will take a half an hour to fix the car. The Misfit tells him to take Bailey and John Wesley into the woods. John Wesley holds his father's hand and they walk toward the trees. Bailey screams to his mother to wait for him. The grandmother screams Bailey's name but finds herself looking at The Misfit. She pleads with him, telling him again that he is a good man. The Misfit says he is not good. He then apologizes for not wearing a shirt in front of the women. The children's mother screams, asking where they have taken Bailey. The Misfit ignores her and talks about his family. The grandmother tells him that he can be honest and asks if he prays. He says that he does not. They hear two shots and the grandmother screams out for Bailey. The Misfit continues to talk about his past. He says he has forgotten what he did that landed him in prison. A prison psychiatrist told him that he killed his father, but he does not believe it. The grandmother continues to urge him to pray. Hiram and the other man, Bobby Lee, return from the woods, carrying Bailey's shirt. The Misfit puts it on. The Misfit asks if the children's mother would like to join her husband. She agrees to go and thanks him. The mother, the baby, and June Star walk into the woods with Hiram and Bobby Lee. The grandmother is now alone with The Misfit. The Misfit talks about Jesus and the crimes he has committed. A scream is heard, followed by a gun shot. The grandmother starts crying to The Misfit that she knows he has good blood and would not shoot a lady. They hear two more gunshots and the grandmother raises her head and screams for Bailey. The Misfit says that Jesus was the only person that could raise the dead. He says there is no pleasure in anything but meanness. The Misfit says he wishes he could have been there when Jesus rose from the dead so he could know if the story was true. He thinks that if the story of Jesus is true, he wouldn't be the way he is. Then, "His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close 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 reaches up and touches him on the shoulder. He jumps back and shoots her three times in the chest. He then instructs his men to throw her body with the others. He picks up the cat. Bobby Lee remarks that the shooting was fun. The Misfit tells him to shut up and says "It's no real pleasure in life."

## Analysis

On the surface, Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a story about a family on a road trip that falls prey to a band of criminals. However, upon reflection, it becomes clear that the story is really about redemption and the unexpected ways it is found.

The characters in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" are killed because of a simple twist of fate. Their untimely death is foreshadowed in several ironic ways in the beginning of the story. This foreshadowing can be seen first when the grandmother is trying to convince Bailey to go to Tennessee instead of Florida. She says, "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." Her words turn out to be prophetic when they meet The Misfit. Ironically, the grandmother was right, even though she was not sincere in her warning and did not speak out of a genuine concern for the children. She was simply trying to force her son's family to take the vacation she favored.

Later, the grandmother's character provides foreshadowing of their fate again, when she dresses nicely in case they are in an accident. She wants people who see her dead body on the road to know she was a lady. By the end of the novel, it is clear that her dead, but well-dressed, body will indeed be eventually found by strangers. Perhaps the most ironic twist comes when she goes against her son's wishes and takes her cat on the trip. She fears if she leaves her pet it will die. Later the cat causes the accident that leads to the death of the entire family. It becomes the only living creature in the car to survive The Misfit.

Foreshadowing also comes later in the story, shortly after the accident. As the family watches the car driven by The Misfit approach, they hope the men inside will save them. However, the car is described in ominous terms. O'Connor calls it a black "hearse-like automobile."

The grandmother's character is shown to be a self-involved manipulator. She constantly tells her family about things they are not interested in, including the scenery on the trip. The reader is left with the assumption that she knows they do not care about her observations, yet she talks anyway, just to hear her own voice. She tries to manipulate her family into doing what she wants, including going to Tennessee. Although that plan fails, she later gets her way when Bailey reluctantly agrees to go to the old plantation house she has remembered. She knows Bailey does not want to go and the children will not find the real house very interesting, so she lies to the children about a secret panel to get them excited about the idea. She knows they will be able to badger Bailey into going. Later, she tries to use the same manipulation tactics on The Misfit. The

grandmother attempts in vain to convince him that he is a good man and he should pray. She is not really worried about his salvation. Instead, she wants to sway him in order to save her own life. Unlike her own family, the stranger sees through her charade and kills her.

O'Connor uses this short story to provide lessons about mistaken belief systems, religion, and salvation. The shallow and self-involved grandmother thinks she understands the Bible and is always quick to point out what she perceives as the failings of others. However, she employs no introspection to consider about her own actions. She lives an unexamined life, without ever really thinking about what she should pray for. She has a blind faith, with rigid rules about right and wrong, and only pays lip service to the idea of true devotion and salvation.

In contrast, The Misfit, endlessly examines and questions his own religious beliefs. In fact, he mentions that his father described him as the type of person who always questions things. The Misfit provides a direct contrast to the grandmother in that he lacks blind faith. He can not believe the story of Jesus because he was not there to witness the actual resurrection. He did not see Jesus with his own eyes, but he has witnessed evil, including seeing a man burnt alive and a woman flogged. Therefore, The Misfit decides he can only embrace what he has experienced and chooses a life of evil over a life of good.

Through the grandmother and The Misfit, O'Connor makes a case for thoughtful religious devotion. She seems to want to show that the Bible should not be taken too literally or accepted blindly and shallowly. Both characters are deeply flawed. The grandmother is a selfish liar and The Misfit is a murder. Yet, both feel they have an arguable case for their own brands of religion. The grandmother thinks Jesus can save The Misfit, and therefore also save her from being shot. The Misfit thinks Jesus has condemned him and made him a murderer, by not providing solid proof of his rising from the dead.

When The Misfit reveals his painful struggle for truth, the grandmother sees that he needs help. Her maternal instinct finally kicks in and she becomes unselfish as she tries to comfort him. She does not help The Misfit find salvation. Ironically, he gives it to her. Just before he kills her, the grandmother has a moment of clarity, when she sees The Misfit's true being and addresses him as one of her own children. For the first time in the story, she is shown as caring and compassionate. She dies with a smile on her face. It is the first time O'Connor portrays the grandmother as happy.

As the grandmother lies dead on the ground, The Misfit sees he changed her. He says she would have been a good woman if she had someone to "shoot her every minute of her life." The Misfit knows that it took the fear of violence and death to transform the old woman into a caring person. This turn of events makes him reexamine his life of crime. Just before killing the grandmother, he told her that only meanness brought him pleasure. Upon seeing her dead, he then says just the opposite: evil provides no real pleasure.

The grandmother lived mistakenly thinking that she was already saved and good, when she was actually very flawed. She thinks she can make The Misfit good, like her, if she can convince him to blindly accept her version of religion. The Misfit does not believe her. Instead, he sees her hypocrisy, yet chooses not to kill her with the rest of her family. He lets her live and only shoots her upon seeing goodness emerge in her for the first time. He is repelled by her genuine compassion and quickly kills her. Although she does not succeed in making The Misfit a necessarily "good man," she has finally become a good woman.

# Characters

## Bailey

Bailey is the son of the principaJ character in the story, the Grandmother, and is the father of June Star and John Wesley. He drives the car as the family embarks on their vacation. Bailey's major importance in the story is his relationship to other people, especially his mother. He allows her to boss him around and to convince him to go out of the way to visit an old house she remembers from her childhood, where the family is killed. Bailey seems unresponsive to his wife and children, allowing them to take advantage of him. Overall, Bailey, who wears a yellow shirt with blue parrots, perhaps symbolizing his cowardice, is a "flat" character.

## Bailey Boy

*See* Bailey

## Red Sammy Butts

Red Sammy Butts owns the barbecue restaurant called the Tower at which the family stops on their car trip. O' Connor describes him as fat with his stomach hanging over his khaki pants "like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt." Signs along the highway advertise his barbecue: "Try Red Sammy's Famous Barbecue. None like Famous Red Sammy's! Red Sam! The Fat Boy with the Happy Laugh. A Veteran! Red Sammy's Your Man!" He orders his wife around and engages in empty chatter with the Grandmother. Red Sammy's statement, "A good man is hard to find," in reference to the proliferation of crime and a nostalgia for the days when people did not have to lock their doors, becomes the title of the story.

## The Grandmother

The Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the story's principal character. Her religious epiphany at the story's end provides the philosophical thrust behind the narrative. By giving her no name other than Grandmother and crotchety conversation that provides much of the story's humor, O'Connor paints her as a tragically comic caricature, one that a reader can easily, but wrongly, feel superior to. She is selfish and pushy; in fact, her desire to see a house from her childhood results in the family's death at the end of the story. The story's primary action involves a family car trip on which they encounter an escaped criminal and his gang. If the Grandmother had not insisted they detour to see the old house, which, she realized too late was in Tennessee, not in the part of Georgia where they were, the family would have escaped the disaster. The Grandmother is critical of the children's mother, who is never named, and she dotes on her son Bailey although she treats him like a child. She demonstrates racist behavior by

calling a poor Black child "a pickaninny ... Wouldn't that make a picture, now?" and she reveals a superior moral attitude. In her conversation with the murderer, an escaped convict called the Misfit, the Grandmother says that she knows he is from "good people," as she tries to flatter him in order to save her own life. Her last words to him as she reaches out to touch his shoulder, "You're one of my own children," signify that she has experienced a final moment of grace. The Misfit shoots her three times, but her transcendence to grace is underscored by the fact that she died "with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky." Through herportrait of the Grandmother, O'Connor demonstrates her strong belief in the salvation of religion. Everyone's soul deserves to be saved, she is saying, no matter how impious their actions in life.

## The Misfit

The Misfit is an escaped murderer who kills the family at the end of the story and shoots the Grandmother three times in the chest. Described as wearing tan and white shoes, no socks, no shirt, he is an older man with glasses "that gave him a scholarly look." By his speech, readers can tell that he is rather uneducated. However, he speaks to the grandmother and the others with deliberate politeness. He remains calm throughout the scene as he instructs his two companions, Bobby Lee and Hiram, to take the family to the woods. He says to the Grandmother, "it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't reckernized me."

In the Misfit's conversation with the Grandmother about Jesus throwing "everything off balance, " O'Connor presents a view of a world out of balance. Just as the story's violence does not seem to match its comedy, the Misfit's life of punishment has not fit his crimes. In a long section of dialogue, the Misfit unburdens his soul to the Grandmother about his father's death, his own mistreatment, and his feelings about the world's injustices. He kills her when she calls him one of her "own babies." Although critics have interpreted the actions and words of the Misfit in many ways, one reading is that he brings the Grandmother to a moment of grace in which she makes an unselfish, religious connection with another human being, something she had been incapable of before that time. In his comment, "She would of been a good woman... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life," the Misfit seems to understand that her grace required an extreme situation. The Misfit, by helping the Grandmother understand her own mortality and connection with "all God's children," may actually be an unlikely—and evil— messenger from God.

## Red Sam

*See* Red Sammy Butts

## Red Sammy

*See* Red Sammy Butts

## June Star

June Star, the granddaughter of the principal character in the story, is rude, self-centered, and annoying. She argues with her brother John Wesley and seems disappointed when no one is killed in their car accident. When Red Sammy's wife asks her if she would like to live with them, June Star replies, "No I certainly wouldn't.... I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" She, like many of O'Connor's characters, serves as comic relief or as an example of realism.

## John Wesley

John Wesley, the eight-year-old grandson of the principal character of the story, is described as a "stocky child with glasses." He is portrayed as a kid with normal interests and actions. His enthusiasm to see the house his grandmother tells them about, mainly to explore the secret panel she says it contains, influences his father Bailey to make the fateful detour. John Wesley's name is undoubtedly an ironic reference to the English priest who was one of the founders of the Methodist church.

# Setting

The story is firmly set in the rural American South. The characters, particularly the grandmother, are imbued with classic Southern characteristics, and they display an intimate understanding of the landscape of which they are a part. As the family drives south from Georgia to Florida, the grandmother points out all along the way various things about the southern landscape—the kudzu, the plantations that are no more.

The most important point about the setting is that it is representative of the decay of the Old South; the fact that the children have disdain for the state of Georgia, as well as Tennessee, is held in sharp contrast to the pride that the grandmother displays for her native state. The setting allows for a backdrop against which O'Connor can contrast the old values of the South with the decaying sense of pride exhibited in younger generations.

# Social Concerns

A Good Man Is Hard to Find is about a Southern family that is about to embark on a road trip through the South. The Grandmother fears traveling because the Misfit, a criminal who has just escaped from prison is on the loose. When the family sets out, the grandmother convinces the family to veer off the main road to see an old plantation. When they do, the family has a minor accident and finds that they are stranded. While they are stranded, the Misfit appears with his gang and murders the entire family.

One of O'Connor's main social concerns was that of perceived societal barriers and disconnections. Throughout this short story, there are constant comparisons between those who "fit in" to society, as opposed to the "misfits" of the world. The Grandmother, as the primary character, is always pointing out the ways in which she and her family are different from others in society.

In the beginning of the story, the Grandmother speaks of the Misfit as a social pariah, implying that her own family is properly socialized. In reality, however, it is clear that the Grandmother's family is in fact not at all socially well adjusted. The Grandmother's son, Bailey Boy, has two children who are rude and lack respect for others, mirroring Bailey Boy's own lack of respect for his mother. Bailey Boy's entire family mocks the Grandmother's respect for tradition, unable to see the important connectivity that tradition lends to each generation. Yet the Grandmother also alienates herself from others, for she cannot understand that she too is connected to others of different race and class. Conversely, it is the Misfit of society, a known sociopath and murderer, who upholds traditional standards of politeness and respect, characteristics that the grandmother has tried to instill in her own son. When Bailey berates his mother, it is the Misfit who empathizes with the grandmother over her son's behavior, telling her that "sometimes a man says things he don't meant."

Yet, it is also the Misfit who has literally become a sociopath because he cannot create distinctions between himself and others.

The Misfit recognizes that he is no different from others in the world. He states that "[he] ain't a good man . . . . but [he] ain't the worst in the world neither." He even admits that he calls himself the Misfit "because [he] can't make what I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

While others create fictional barriers between themselves and others to explain away the unequal results meted out by fate, the Misfit cannot find an explanation for the vagaries of fate. Without any such delineations, the Misfit has literally lost his mind—he has become crazed by the amoralism that he recognizes in a world in which two people who are so connected can have such different fates.

Another social concern seems to be the hypocrisy of an Old South that clings to traditionalism over reality. In this story, it is the Grandmother who embodies an almost fanatical devotion to traditional thought.

Thus, as she prepares for the family trip to Florida, the grandmother takes care to dress like a lady. As the trip progresses, the grandmother reminds the children that in her time "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then." Yet, in the same breath, the grandmother exclaims over a black boy on the side of the road, calling him a "pickaninny" and thereby conjuring images of the Old South. Finally, in an almost portentous manner, it is the grandmother who points out the small graveyard amidst a long-gone plantation.

This small gravesite, with its five or six small graves, seems to mirror the family's own impending death.

Even the family's death at the hands of the Misfit is in some degree due to a tragic error based on a fascination with the traditional. When the grandmother recalls an old house she used to visit during her youth, she suggests that the family change their travel plans to visit the site, and even hints at a buried treasure in the house to pique the children's interest. Her insistence at seeing the house forces Bailey Boy to turn the car off the original road and on to a dirt road. It is only after the family has had an accident that the grandmother realizes that although she was first so certain of herself that "she recalled exactly which road to turn off at," she suddenly realizes that "the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee." Thus, the grandmother's insistence on an outmoded worldview literally leads her own family down a path to their deaths.

# Social Sensitivity

Flannery O'Connor was deeply concerned with the values and the direction of the youth of her time. She believed that Christ was no longer enough of a priority to the people of her generation. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is representative of O'Connor's concern for the priorities and values of the 1940s.

In exhibiting her concerns, O'Connor paints fairly broad caricatures of the family members in the stories, and of the Misfit as well. The children never show a moment of remorse; they are relentlessly obstinate and impertinent, and none too intuitive. The young girl, June Star, sees her father and brother taken away from the rest of the family and led into the woods. She hears two shots, and sees the young man who led her father and brother away return, holding her father's shirt in his hand. Even after witnessing this, when that same young man tries to lead her away with her mother, June Star spits out: "I don't want to hold hands with him . . . He reminds me of a pig." The young man does not lash out at the child; rather, he is ashamed by her harsh words, and he blushes and laughs in response. Of course, a few minutes later he kills June Star, so there is certainly a comeuppance in the end, one that is hugely out of proportion with any moral injustice June Star may have committed through her insolent behavior. O'Connor never allows the punishment to fit the crime—she hyperbolizes the punishment in a way that many readers take as cruel and unfitting. It is fiction, and what O'Connor is doing is not making a mockery of death but making a very loud statement about life.

Death is a democratizer, but it is also a way of showing the true nature of a person.

When faced with the ultimate stressful experience—death—how does each character respond? The answer to the question speaks volumes about the character of each person in life. The children go without a moment's comprehension about the way their words and actions affect others; the mother goes quietly; the father exhibits a near strength of character, but ultimately does nothing to try to save either himself or his family. It is only the grandmother who faces her death with a fierce hold on life; she comprehends the value of life and, in doing so, also has a flash of comprehension about the ultimate redemptive possibility inherent in all life.

In the last moments of her life, she sees the Misfit as her child, taking on a Jesus-like role as forgiver of sins. She knows he intends to kill her, yet she turns to him and embraces him as one of her own children.

Age extends the grace of forgiveness even as youth fails to reciprocate, until it is too late. O'Connor's hyperbole of grace in action belies a desire to teach the younger generations, in bold and bright strokes, of the importance of respect and tradition in the face of changing times.

At the end of the story, the question comes to the fore: could anything have saved the family, once they encountered the Misfit? Was it a matter of saying the right thing, or

doing the right thing to convince him not to kill them? At first glance, O'Connor seems to indicate that the answer to this question is no, that evil is as evil is and nothing can change the mind of someone bent on evil. While his compatriots are murdering the rest of the family, the Misfit carries on some debate with the grandmother about the nature of evil. After she hears a scream and a shot, indicating that her daughter-in-law and grandchildren are being killed, she pleads with the Misfit that "you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!" He responds, "Lady, . . . there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip," as though there had never been any real question that he would kill every one of them so as to leave no witness.

However, after this exchange, the Misfit does not immediately kill the Grandmother, and the reader is left in suspense as to what will happen to her. Is he hesitating? Will he kill her? Will he have mercy on her?

In a strange, startlingly original twist of fate, he does both. He expresses some remorse for the evil turns his life has taken, blaming his on his inability to understand God or to see him in the flesh. When the Grandmother sees in him a flush of salvation through his expressed regret, she reaches out to him. Shocked by the human touch, the Misfit recoils and fatally shoots her, almost involuntarily. He looks at her and sees her smiling at him in death, and he experiences a rush of understanding into her life. He sheds his glasses, and his eyes are "defenseless-looking." With his defenses down, he speaks of the grandmother in generous terms: "'She would have been a good woman,' The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.'" In his inarticulate manner of speaking, he is expressing a universal truth: that man, in the face of fear, often shows his truest face. That in affliction, we are all offered the opportunity for redemption.

# Techniques

O'Connor's writing style is generally plain on its surface, yet possesses an underlying irony, subtle foreshadowing, and surprise.

First and most obvious is the irony between the grandmother and the Misfit. On its face, the grandmother appears to be a "normal" Southern lady who upholds traditional Christianity. Yet, it quickly becomes clear that the grandmother is not necessarily honest or respectful, while the Misfit embodies all of these traits. There is also a certain amount of irony in the very title of the story. When Red Sammy speaks of a good man being hard to find, he implies that one can determine how good a man is by the type of car he drives, rather than looking at the quality of his soul. When discussing two men who cheated him out of some money, he states that "it was a beat-up car but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me." Meanwhile, it is the Misfit of society who seeks to look beyond superficialities. He states that "it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and [I'm] one of the latters."

O'Connor also uses a great deal of foreshadowing in her work. A careful reading of the story reveals early clues hinting at the family's ultimate demise. The Misfit is immediately brought to the forefront of the story when the Grandmother warns her son that "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it." It is also faintly ironic that when dressing for the trip, the grandmother is in fact preparing for her death. Finally, the car accident occurs in the town of Toombsboro, and the Misfit and his motley crew arrive in "a big black battered hearse-like automobile."

Finally, O'Connor herself speaks of the critical use of gesture in her works. The linchpin to "A Good Man is Hard to Find" lies in the element of surprise. This in turn relies upon a single action on the part of a character that is both reasonable and unreasonable. O'Connor states that "this would have to be an action or gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity." In this case, the critical gesture is when the Grandmother reaches out and literally transcends her limited Christian and Southern viewpoint to grasp the manner in which her fate is intertwined with that of the Misfit. In so doing, the Grandmother forces the reader to step beyond their similarly limited world. The reader is propelled, first by the shock of the Grandmother's acceptance, and then by her speedy and violent death almost at the moment of full realization. This horrifying, shocking end is in part, O'Connor's modus operandi.

By forcing her characters to confront the truth in a violently shocking manner, O'Connor reveals the truth about humanity's true ability to face itself. At the end we see that society, according to O'Connor, is often built on a foundation of half-truths that are only visible when torn away by a violent and horrific act. O'Connor herself states that she hopes that "the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-

filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become."

# Literary Qualities

In A Good Man Is Hard To Find, O'Connor writes from a third-person narrator, telling the story from the perspective of the Grandmother. The point of view straddles the line between limited omniscience and total omniscience. O'Connor lets the reader know whose story this is in the first two lines, "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind."

The omniscient narrator is limited in that she does not reveal any of the characters'—besides the Grandmother's—thoughts or states of mind but simply relates their words and actions.

O'Connor does provide background information about what happened just before the story started but, again, it is background provided only through the eyes of the Grandmother. In fact, the only action the reader learns about relates to the point of view of the grandmother: "Bailey didn't look up from his reading so she wheeled around then and faced the children's mother, a young woman in slacks . . ." And yet O'Connor never crosses the line to allow the Grandmother to actually narrate the story. The reader is kept at bay from any direct contact with the character's mind.

Throughout the story, O'Connor teeters between an omniscient and a limited omniscient narrator. The narrator will sometimes be explicit in describing the grandmother's motives:

She didn't intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself. Her son, Bailey, didn't like to arrive at a motel with a cat.

However, through much of the story the narrator simply describes the events as they happen, from a relatively objective standpoint. O'Connor's use of both totally omniscient and limited omniscience allows the reader to envision the story as it unfolds but limits the reader to the grandmother's view of the action. It is the grandmother who curses the family by warning about "The Misfit." It is the grandmother who gets the family lost and eventually killed. Seeing the story from a panoramic god's eye view, without the grandmother's thoughts, allows us to interpret what is happening while adding to the drama. Keeping the narrative objective allows the reader to make their own conclusions about what the characters are thinking, and allows a wider view into the psyches of the other characters. With an omniscient narrator, even though the reader attains more understanding of the grandmother's thoughts than the other characters, he is not clouded by the grandmother's rendition of each of the other characters. In the end, the reader is able to gain a greater grasp of all of the characters rather than concentrating on the faults and virtues of one person, thereby seeing the greater picture of the story as a whole.

O'Connor's story is rich with foreshadowing, both in the dialogue and in the description. From the first moment, the grandmother does not want to drive to Florida because the Misfit is on the lam from the police. The next thing the reader knows, the grandmother is dressed in her holiday finest for the drive, lest she die in an accident along the way. She has snuck the cat into the car, a detail that leaves room for speculation that the cat will come into play later in the story. The cat, of course, is the cause of the accident that leads to the family's fatal encounter with the Misfit. The car that the Misfit and his compatriots drive is a "big black battered hearse-like automobile," which symbolically tolls the death knell.

After the Misfit approaches the family, the son, John Wesley, sees a gun and asks, "What you got that gun for? . . . Whatcha gonna do with that gun?" The reader learns soon enough. O'Connor describes the woods behind the family as gaping "like a dark open mouth," creating a sinister backdrop for the events to come. Throughout the story, O'Connor allows suspense to build through foreshadowing, culminating in the moment that the Misfit kills the grandmother.

O'Connor has written a very dark tale; by infusing it with humor, however dark that humor may be, she humanizes both the horror of the situation and the characters within the situation. Through detail, O'Connor makes the reader laugh even as he/she are gasping in horror, surprisingly the reader with the undeniable confluence of humor and sorrow. Even the title is infused with humor: not only is a good man hard to find in this story, good men can only be discovered after performing acts of evil.

Other details provide humor. The grandmother has identified the Misfit, and her son Bailey is trying to wriggle out from under the family's death sentence. The grandmother does the only thing she knows to do: she tries to readjust her physical presence into a semblance of propriety and togetherness. However, as she attempts to adjust her hat brim, "it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground." The whole hat just fell apart, leaving her disheveled, and leaving the reader with a terrible foreboding of a general falling apart. In another part of the story, June Star is about to be carted off to her death and still manages to be full of vinegar: when the Misfit tells his friend to hold June Star's hand, she whines: "I don't want to hold hands with him . . . He reminds me of a pig." It is more of a guffaw than a laugh that might be emitted by the reader as he laughs at the child's audacity even as he knows her immediate fate, or possibly because he knows it.

There is a well-known saying that there is a narrow margin separating laughing and crying, and in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the two become inextricably intertwined.

# Thematic Overview

As a lay theologian and a devout Catholic immersed in Protestant Southern Culture, much of O'Connor's work centered on the place of Christian Mystery in both Southern culture and in society at large. O'Connor herself says of her writing that: much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable . . . The assumptions that underlie this use of it ... are those of central Christian mysteries . . . The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely.

O'Connor's portrayal of the grandmother in the story is representative of the superficiality of old-fashioned "godly" Christianity. The Grandmother, as traditional Southern women, takes a hypocritical position in which she is more concerned with appearances than reality. Thus, in preparing for her trip to Florida with her family, the grandmother dresses extravagantly in "a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print . . .

[so that] in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." Yet, despite her careful apparent preparation for death, we find later that the grandmother in fact only understands the superficial aspects of religion, without truly grasping its essence. When confronted with death at the hands of the Misfit, it quickly becomes apparent that the grandmother has in fact only a flimsy, superficial concept of religion that is not even as deep as that harbored by her killer. While the grandmother is steeped in the mere etiquette of death, it is the Misfit who wisely points out that "there never was a body that gave the undertaker a tip".

And while the Grandmother bases her opinions on limited experiences and an outdated world view, it is the Misfit who has actually experienced the world and has carefully contemplated religion and its meaning. When the Misfit questions the grandmother about her faith, the grandmother has no recourse but to call on a superficial social catechism, stating that the Misfit must have come from nice people, and could not have "bad blood." She is, in some respects, a pitiful figure, unable to grasp the true essence of a religion that has surrounded her for her entire life.

Intertwined with the theme of superficially embraced religion is another theme— that of grace and redemption. While the reader is initially put off by the grandmother's lack of true religious understanding, she is ultimately redeemed as the truth of the world is revealed to her in the moment of her death. This revelation comes when the Grandmother realizes that the Misfit, far from being a social pariah, is a reflection and extension of herself and everyone else in the world. The Misfit's true crime in life was his inability to create a false separation between himself and others— a separation that the majority of the world has adopted. His inability to create such barriers left him bereft of a lens through which to view the world. The Misfit, far from not fitting into society, is

the only member who truly senses his own connection with others—not the Grandmother who initially seems to "fit in".

Yet it is the Grandmother's impending death that forces her to see the connection between herself and the Misfit, the pickaninny she saw along the street, and everyone else from whom she has sought to distance herself in the past. Initially, she clings to her separateness. Thus, when Bailey Boy is shot to death and his shirt is removed, "the grandmother couldn't name what the shirt reminded her of." Yet later on, when the Misfit is wearing her son's shirt, the grandmother finally grasps the fact that she is connected to the Misfit, even when she could not find a connection with her own family. The Misfit, as grotesque as he initially appeared, is nothing more than a reflection of her own son, family, and society at large. At this moment, all artificial class and racial barriers are broken, and the Grandmother finally embraces reality by stepping out from behind the "blind" faith of apparent reality and into "true" reality.

Upon this realization, the grandmother commits an act of grace as she reaches out and touches the Misfit on the shoulder. This touch both symbolizes her oneness with the Misfit and seals her death in the process.

# Themes

## Prejudice vs. Tolerance

The Grandmother demonstrates racial and class prejudice through her words and actions. She is vain and selfish, and she believes that good character is a result of coming from "good people," an important concept in O'Connor's fiction. When she sees an African-American child without any clothes, she exclaims, "Oh look at the cute little pickaninny'" She continues, "Wouldn't that make a picture, now?" When her granddaughter comments on the child's lack of clothes, the Grandmother says, "He probably didn't have any___Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do." Believing that she came from a good family and from a time when "People did right," the Grandmother possesses a false sense of self-righteousness. She tells Red Sammy, a restaurant owner, that she believes that the United States' problems can be blamed on Europe. She says "the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money." In her ignorance of others' lifestyles and points of view, the Grandmother is one of O'Connor's numerous characters who flaunt their prejudice. Early in her encounter with the Misfit, she tries to flatter him, telling him that he does not look "common," and therefore could not be a "bad" person. A lifetime of prejudicial attitudes is erased, however, at the end of the story when she realizes her helplessness and the fact that discriminatory views such as hers are related to monstrous behavior like the Mistfit's. This moment is encapsulated in her epiphany: "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"

## God and Religion

Most of O'Connor's fiction involves God and religion in some way. She created characters and put them in situations which convey her message that human beings are trapped in their selfish, petty worlds and often overlook opportunities for understanding and connection; they miss out on love. Central to O'Connor's theology is the idea of grace, that God's love and forgiveness are available to people in everyday life. Some have defined grace in O'Connor's fiction as the moment in a human being's life when a power from the outside intervenes in a situation. O'Connor's stories almost always teach by negative example; her characters are often too selfish or unobservant to see the acts of grace in everyday experience. She used violence in her fiction to grab the characters' attention, because she believed that people needed to be coerced into noticing God's presence in the modern world. She shocked readers into understanding that people cannot survive alone in the world. As she said in *Mystery and Manners*, a collection of hernonfiction writing published after her death, grace is "simply a concern with the human reaction to that which, instant by instant, gives life to the soul. It is a concern with a realization that breeds charity and with the charity that breeds action." Charity, in this context, is a synonym for love; certainly, readers have noticed the absence of love in O'Connor's fiction. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" all of the characters—most obviously the Grandmother— are concerned only with their own wants and desires.

There is no real connection or love between them until they encounter the Misfit and his gang of murderers. When the Grandmother exclaims at the end, "You're one of my children!," she makes the first statement of connection in the story. At this point she receives grace as she understands her place in humanity. All are sinners in O'Connor's fiction, but all are capable of being saved.

## Violence and Cruelty

Much of O'Connor's fiction contains violence, which she claimed was necessary to get readers' attention. Her violence has a purpose, therefore; she claimed that the world in general would not notice God's presence unless something monumental occurred. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the Grandmother must be shocked out of her selfish and judgmental views by the barrel of a gun. Only when her entire family is murdered within earshot of her and when she faces her own death does she make a real connection with another human being. She says to the Misfit, "You're one of my own children!" and recognizes her own mortality, her own sinful-ness, and her relationship to other "children of God." O'Connor believed that God's grace often came into people's lives precisely when they are not looking for it. As she said in *Mystery and Manners*, her "subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil."

# Style

## Symbolism

Symbols, elements in a work of fiction that stand for something more profound or meaningful, allow writers to communicate complicated ideas to readers in a work that appears to be simple. O'Connor includes several symbols in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." For example, skies and weather are always symbolic to O'Connor, and she often uses such descriptions to reveal a character's state of mind. In another story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," O'Connor ends the story with a man being "chased" by an ominous thundercloud, because the man is feeling guilty for abandoning his mentally and physically challenged wife at a roadside diner. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the sky at the end of the story is cloudless and clear, indicating that the Grandmother has died with a clear vision of her place in the world. Another symbol in the story is the old house that the Grandmother insists on visiting. It represents the woman's habit of wanting to live in the past, in a time she believes people were more decent and better than they are today. However, the house is not where she thought it was—it was in Tennessee, not Georgia— a realization that symbolizes that one's perception of the past is often distorted. This focus on a distorted past leads the family directly to their ruin; they have been sidetracked by a past that did not exist.

## Point of View

O'Connor was extremely interested in point of view, and she was careful to keep her point of view consistent, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is told in third person, which means that it is not told directly by one of the characters involved in the action. The first sentence of the story indicates an "objective" narrator: "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida." However, die reader is privy to the Grandmother's thoughts and no one else's. This point of view is sometimes called "third person limited," in which the author reveals only one character's emotions and thoughts to the reader. Even the names of characters illustrate the story's point of view; Bailey's wife—the Grandmother's daughter-in-law— is referred to genencally as "the children's mother." This reveals tfiat the Grandmother thinks of her only in terms of being her son's wife and her grandchildren's mother. O'Connor is careful, however, not to enter completely into the Grandmother's thoughts; she keeps what is called "authorial distance." O'Connor is often praised for being "detached" in her narration, allowing readers to come to their own conclusions about the characters. Consistent with this idea of detachment is the fact that the Grandmother is never given a name in the story either, a technique that keeps readers from identifying too closely with her, or recognizing her as an individual. She is simply a "type" of person. This tactic allowed O'Connor to present characters who must be judged by their actions, rather than on some criteria that O'Connor would have deemed "less objective."

## Foreshadowing

Instances of foreshadowing, an indication of future events, occur several times in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Many writers of short fiction include few superfluous details; every detail contributes to an overall effect that the story intends to produce. Thus, certain descriptive phrases or dialogue in a story that first appear to have no special significance often take on new meaning in retrospect. In the first paragraph of the story, O'Connor introduces the Misfit, the murderer who eventually kills the family. Similarly, as the family prepares to embark on their vacation, the Grandmother plans her outfit with an eye toward tragedy. Dressed in a polka-dot dress trimmed with organdy and decorated by a spray of violets, "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." Later, as the family drives through the countryside, they pass a cotton field "with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it," a hint of approaching death for the six occupants of the car. Finally, as the Misfit and his gang approach, their car is described as "a big battered hearse-like automobile," a further indication that death will figure into the story.

## Irony

Irony is one of the most difficult elements to identify in a story because it is related to tone and the author's attitude toward the work. Irony is a literary device that is used to impart that things are not what they seem; the simple meanings of the story's words betray an idea that is actually contrary to what has been stated. "Ironic" is not the same as "sarcastic" or "coincidental." Irony can occur in situations in which things happen which are unexpected given the circumstances; an example of this is that a family embarks on a summer vacation and winds up murdered. Or irony can occur through dialogue when a character's words have a meaning other than that intended by the person who utters them. Finally, there is "dramatic irony," in which the reader understands something that the characters do not. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" O'Connor uses several kinds of irony to communicate her message about the human condition. At the beginning of the story, the Grandmother says "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." However, this is exactly what she does when she sidetracks the family to a desolate roadside. Verbal irony occurs after the car accident when June Star announces disappointedly, "But nobody's killed." The story's dramatic irony centers around the family's interaction with the Misfit, when readers understand the gravity of the situation yet the characters do not; Bailey states "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is."

## Structure

The story is structured to fall into two sections, each with a distinctive tone. The first half of the story, up until the car accident, is humorous and light After the accident, however, readers understand that a tragedy will occur. The tone turns dark, the subject matter becomes serious, and dialogue becomes more weighted with irony and symbolism. The

conversation about religion between the Grandmother and the Misfit is deeply philosophical and in stark contrast to the story's prior petty exchanges about old boyfriends or poor children. The story moves from being a portrait of an unremarkable family to being a dialogue one the themes of death, forgiveness and injustice.

## Tone

In a work of fiction, tone can be discerned from an author's choice of words and action. The tone of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" combines humor, detachment, irony, and seriousness. Throughout O'Connor's stories, readers confront humorous descriptions or situations, such as in this story when the narrator describes the children's mother as having "a face as broad and innocent as a cabbage... tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears." O'Connor approaches the characters in her story with detachment; in other words, her narrative voice does not help readers to become sympathetic to her characters. She presents them with all their faults and oddities so that readers may judge them honestly. Towards the end of the story, the tone turns more serious and tragic as the Misfit happens upon the family. O'Connor presents a situation in which average people confront a force of pure evil. The dark tone is established when the characters are unable to reason with the evil Misfit and must confront their own mortality.

# Historical Context

## The Civil Rights Movement

Fueled with the speeches of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and with the deaths of several African-American activists, the civil rights movement was at its peak in 1955. Just the year before, the Supreme Court of the United States had struck down legal segregation in schools in a landmark decision. In 1955, Rosa Parks of Montgomery, Alabama, made her heroic and famous decision not to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. This single action engendered a widespread bus boycott which catapulted its organizer, Martin Luther King, Jr., to national attention. Georgia, where O'Connor lived and set the story, was filled with racial tension. The Grandmother's attitudes toward African Americans typify the beliefs of many in the state at the time. When she tells June Star that "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do," she was expressing a sentiment many people in white society in 1955 held.

## The Era of the Automobile

The 1950s saw a significant increase in the number of cars on American roads, a result of post World War JJ economic prosperity. In 1955 motorcar sales passed the 7 million mark in the United States, Chevrolet introduced the V-8 engine, and President Eisenhower submitted a 10-year, $101 billion proposal to build a national highway system to Congress. Family vacations by car, like that in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" became common as Americans took to the highways and embraced the freedom and independence that automobiles provided. Although New York's Long Island Expressway opened in 1955, it was unable to handle the volume of traffic passing over it. As American society became more mobile and independent, the culture changed. Drive-in restaurants and movie theaters proliferated in the 1950s, as did roadside motels and suburban shopping malls. Cars are important to O'Connor's fiction as both an element of realism in her work and as a symbol for a shift in the way Americans think about themselves and their sense of place.

## The Silver Screen, the Small Screen, and Rock'n'Roll

American popular culture shifted dramatically during the 1950s. The new prosperity allowed increasing numbers of families to buy television sets, and it became a central form of family entertainment. Shows like *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best* presented an idealized and skewed picture of American life. Western movies, stories of good guys and bad guys like *The Lone Ranger*, reinforced the country's moral belief that crime does not pay. Many famous movies or musicals also debuted in the 1950s: *Oklahoma!*, Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Rebel without a Cause*, and *Blackboard Jungle*, many of which hinted at problems festering just under the surface of American life. Movies often showed a darker side of

American life, and many of the movies of the 1950s dealt with the social unrest that would break loose in the next decade. A new form of music, rock'n'roll, debuted in the mid-1950s. Entertainers such as Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and 'Bill Haley enjoyed tremendous popularity as they appealed to young people and often sang about issues that concerned them. Such overwhelming changes in many facets of American society prompt the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" to feel nostalgia for a lost past.

# Critical Overview

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the title selection of O'Connor's 1955 collection, has received a great deal of critical attention. The story serves as an excellent introduction to O'Connor's fiction because it contains all the elements that typify O'Connor's work: a combination of humor and horror, grotesque characters, and an opportunity for characters to accept God's grace. Critics were initially intrigued with O'Connor's use of violence in her stories, uncommon for a writer—not to mention a woman—in the 1950s and 1960s, yet they recognized her ability to draw characters with clarity and detachment. These traits caused critics to categorize O'Connor as a Southern Grotesque writer, similar to William Faulkner, who also wrote critically of his Southern heritage. However, these same critics were confused by her staunch Roman Catholic perspective, which was unusual for a writer in a region that was predominantly Baptist. O'Connor thought of herself as more of an outsider: not a Southern writer because of her Catholicism, and not a Catholic writer because of her Southern roots. Because her point of view is often theological, and because she fails to present a clear, straightforward moral, the message in her stones has often been misinterpreted.

Initial reaction to "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was positive. Caroline Gordon wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that the story was "characterized by precision, density and an almost alarming circumscription." Louis D. Rubin, Jr., in an essay entitled "Two Ladies of the South" recognized that O'Connor "is in essence a religious writer. Knowledge of good and evil is at the heart of her stories." In an essay published in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor wrote that the Grandmother had been interpreted as being a witch and the Misfit a fallen prophet, She says that "there are perhaps other ways than my own in which ["A Good Man Is Hard to Find"] could be read, but none other by which it could have been written." More recently, Russell Kirk wrote in an essay for *The World* that the Misfit is "the most forlorn and terrifying desperado in all Flannery's tales."

Miles Orvell's *Flannery O'Connor: An Introduction*, written in 1972, is an early introduction and commentary on her fiction. Josephine Hendin, in another work about the author, *The World of Flannery O'Connor*, says that there are two O'Connors: "the perfect daughter who lives in her mother's memory, the uncompromising Catholic O'Connor. . .and the more enigmatic writer of those strange and violent tales." Although some early reviewers were confused by O'Connor's fiction—she seemed to be making fun of religion—the large body of criticism on her work in the past three decades has converged on an accepted interpretation of her work. The New Critics, writers like Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom who dominated literary criticism in the 1950s promoted O'Connor's fiction, admiring the "intentionality" of her words: every element of the story worked to promote her desired effect. After O'Connor's death, the publication of her many letters in *Mystery and Manners* gave readers added insight through the author's own explanations of her work. In the book, O'Connor emphasizes the form of her stories: writes that the "form of a story gives it a meaning which any other form would change, and unless the student is able, in some degree, to apprehend the form, he will never apprehend anything else about the work."

Today O'Connor's place in the literary world is well established. She is appreciated for her complexity and her contradictions. Anthony DiRenzo's *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* tries to explain some of those contradictions. DiRenzo compares O'Connor's fiction to the medieval cathedrals that were adorned with the grotesque figures of the gargoyle. He says that if one wants to understand O'Connor, one must understand her mixing of the serious and sacred with the comic and the common. The humor in O'Connor keeps readers from crying. Many other studies are available, and the thirty or more years since O'Connor's death have given readers time to appreciate her powerful fiction.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton is an educator and the coordinator of the undergraduate writing center at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, she discusses O'Connor's story as a good example of the author's fiction.*

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is one of the most widely discussed of all Flannery O'Connor's stories. It also provides an excellent introduction to her work because it contains all the major ingredients characteristic of the remarkable literary legacy left by a woman who only lived to be thirty-nine years old and who was too ill to write in her last years. Readers who encounter O'Connor for the first time should be aware that she always identified herself as a Southern writer and as a Catholic writer and that her stories are always informed by these identities and beliefs.

As a Southerner, O'Connor draws on a rich tradition of humor and regional specific detail in her fiction. Beyond the comedic characters and precise rendering of their dialects, however, O'Connor's South is a place rich with myth and history. In two influential essays, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," and "The Regional Writer," now collected in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor argued that the best literature is always regional literature because good writing is always rooted in a sense of place, in "a shared past, a sense of alikeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light." She further claimed that among the regions in the United States, the South has produced the best writing because it has already "had its fall." Southern writers possess special insight, she said, because "we have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in merest of our country."

By the references to the fall and loss of innocence in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor meant the Civil War and the crisis of identity, guilt, and shame that accompanied it. Such an experience gave Southerners a richer, more complex sense of who they were and how they were connected to the land than their Northern counterparts had. O'Connor's characters tend to express some degree of confusion and ambivalence toward the South. The Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a good example. As James Gnmshaw points out, she is a southern stereotype in that she is cautious, devious, indirect, and afraid of the unfamiliar. She is also vain and obsessed with the trappings of class. In O'Connor's own words in a letter to writer John Hawkes, the Grandmother and other "old ladies exactly reflect the banalities of the society and the effect is comical rather than seriously evil."

As an unapologetically religious writer, O'Connor wrote stories informed by the particulars of her Catholic faith. Readers need not share her faith in order to appreciate her fiction, but it helps to be aware of the basic tenets of Catholicism that appear in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and her other stories. O'Connor's religious vision was sacramental; that is, she believed that Christ provides outward signs that confer grace on members of the church. In this view, an individual may not earn opportunities for

grace by good works, but he or she may turn away, like the Misfit does, from grace when it is offered. In O'Connor's fiction the outward sign of grace often appears as an act of violence. In a letter about "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor explained that her use of grace "can be violent or would have to compete with the kind of evil I can make concrete." O'Connor's fiction was always shaped by her beliefs in mystery, grace, redemption, and the devil. In an essay titled "Catholic Novelists," O'Connor explained that the Catholic writer's beliefs make him or her entirely free to observe and that "open and free observation is founded on our ultimate faith that the universe is meaningful, as the Church teaches."

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" pits the banal and superficial Grandmother against the malevolent Misfit. Although the story starts off as a satire of a typical family vacation, it becomes a tale of coldblooded murder as the focus narrows to the Misfit and the Grandmother. The story becomes, in O'Connor's words, "a duel of sorts between the Grandmother and her superficial beliefs and the Misfit's more profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action which set the world off balance for him." She also cautions readers that they "should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies." The struggle between the Misfit and the Grandmother is not confined to her efforts to save her own life but also takes the form of an argument about faith and belief. The Grandmother, who has chattered nonstop since the family left home, is gradually rendered mute in the face of the Misfit's assertions about Christ, and when she makes her only sincere gesture of the story, reaching out to touch him, the Misfit is threatened and horrified and shoots her three times through the chest. Before he shoots her, however, the Misfit offers a lengthy explanation for how he ended up where he is and why he believes what he does.

O'Connor uses the Misfit's deeply held and passionate convictions as a foil, or contrast, to the Grandmother's easy platitudes and cliches. The author is critical of the woman's empty reassurances that he is "a good man at heart" and if he would pray "Jesus would help" him. The Misfit, by contrast, devises his own challenging and rational way of looking at the world based on his belief that "Jesus thown everything off balance." The source of his stubborn non-belief is his insistence that everything be explained rationally. Because the Misfit did not see Christ performing any miracles, he cannot believe they ever happened. "The presence of a divine force operating outside the bounds of reason," in the words of Robert Brinkmeyer in an essay published in *The Art and Vision ofFlannery O 'Connor*, is what upset the balance of the universe. In other words, the Misfit cannot place his faith in something he cannot be rationally certain of, while the Grandmother continues to cling to a faith without an intellectual foundation or certainty of belief. The Misfit is incapable of wrapping himself around the paradox as O'Connor phrased it, "that you must believe in order to understand, not understand in order to believe."

As the paths of these two characters converge in the final moment of the story, they are both given opportunities for grace. When the Grandmother finally runs out of words and is left to mutter "Jesus" over and over, O'Connor is suggesting that she is moving toward a deeper awareness of her faith. Similarly, when the Misfit angrily pounds his fist into the ground and complains, "I wisht I had of been there. It ain't right I wasn't there

because if I had been there I would of known," we recognize his frustrated longing for faith. When he confesses, "If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now," the Grandmother has a moment of clarity and recognizes his twisted humanity as part of her own by calling him one of her children. In O'Connor's words, "The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering." The Grandmother realizes, O'Connor explained in a later essay, "that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far."

The Misfit has an opportunity to accept grace but recoils in horror at the Grandmother's gesture. In his parting words, however, he acknowledges how grace had worked through him to strengthen the woman's faith: "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Brinkmeyer points out that "the Misfit's 'preaching' to the Grandmother 'converts' her to Christ." The Misfit himself seems lost, as his dismissive words to Bobby Lee, "It's no real pleasure in life," indicate. O'Connor, however, had the last word on the Misfit and his future: "I don't want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story."

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following short essay, Clark discusses the moment of grace in O 'Connor's story, when the grandmother reaches out to touch the Misfit. Though O'Connor has repeatedly explained the ending to her story, many critics remain confused about her intentions, particularly those who do not agree with or understand her strict approach to religion.*

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is one of Flannery O'Connor's most discussed and most problematic short stories. The major difficulty involves the story's climax. Should the Grandmother's final act—her touching of the Misfit—be taken as a token of true, divine grace and spiritual insight? Or should the story be interpreted strictly as a naturalistic document? Perhaps the Grandmother achieves no spiritual insight. One can find critics on both sides of the argument. Since the issue is central to O'Connor's work at large, it is worth further examination. While this question may ultimately be impossible to resolve with certainty, further light can be shed upon this critical gesture.

In *Mystery and Manners*, O' Connor asserts that the Grandmother's final act is a "moment of grace." Critics, though, have not been convinced. While acknowledging Flannery O'Connor's reading, Madison Jones prefers to stress the "realistic explanation" of grace—a "naturalistic" grace which may be "spelled in lower case letters." Stanley Renner is also uncomfortable with the "religious" explanation and describes "the vague touch" on the Misfit's shoulder as "a parental blessing" or "the ceremonial dubbing of knighthood." Thus the Grandmother's response not so much reflects divine grace as it "touches her almost instinctive springs of sympathy and human kinship." Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain seem to see the Grandmother's final act, not as a transcendent spiritual experience, but as a "gesture of kinship," which comes from one whose "revelation, though limited, is adequate." And most recently, Kathleen Ochshorn has entered the fray in a most unequivocal manner, insisting that in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" "a world of propriety and illusion is laid low by wrath, not redeemed by grace." Rather than seeing the Grandmother's final act as an embodiment of spirituality, Ochshorn asserts that the touch expresses the grandmother's "final hope that her noblesse can alter her fate," an interpretation that renders the grandmother's final gesture as mundane, selfish, and in every sense unredeeming. These critical responses —especially Ochshorn's—are symptomatic of the reluctance to read the story in light of O'Connor's religious beliefs.

Should O'Connor's interpretation of the story be judged as wrong? Critics have an excellent authority for a subversive reading in D.H. Lawrence's well-known dictum: trust the tale, not the teller of the tale. Unless the tale itself can guide us in our interpretation, we are threatened with being like the people in Plato's cave, very inadequate interpreters of shadows on the wall. But there is another piece of evidence in the story which has been overlooked and which strengthens O'Connor's claim that the tale should be read in a theological context.

In an indispensable article several years ago, Hallman Bryant noted that there is no Timothy, Georgia, the setting for the encounter with Red Sammy. He argues persuasively that O'Connor is alluding to "the book in the New Testament which bears the same name"—that is, Paul's Epistle to Timothy. The evidence that Bryant presents leaves no doubt that O'Connor did indeed have the Bible in mind. As Bryant notes, several of Paul's teachings are especially germane to the story: the role of the husband (a negative judgment of Bailey, the Grandmother's son), for example, and strictures against hypocrisy and false religion (which are useful correctives to the family's, especially the Grandmother's, attitudes). However, Bryant glosses O'Connor's story only with reference to a single book of the Bible, Timothy I. But Timothy II can help explain the crux of the story, the touching of the Misfit; it provides a subtext for the central and problematic episode of O'Connor's story, the grandmother's moment of grace.

In his Second Epistle, Paul stresses to Timothy that true grace is associated with the charismatic tradition of the "laying on of hands":

I keep the memory of thy tears, and long to see thee again, so as to have my fill of joy when I receive fresh proof of thy sincere faith. That faith dwelt in thy grandmother Lois, and in thy mother, Eunice, before thee; I am fully persuaded that it dwells in thee too. That is why I would remind thee to fan the flame of that special grace which God kindled in thee, when my hands were laid upon thee.

True faith dwelt in Timothy's mother and grandmother and in Timothy too after Paul's hands were laid upon him. When the Grandmother of the story touches the Misfit, she replicates Paul's laying on of hands at the very moment she loses her artificiality and realizes that she and the Misfit are spiritual kin. Both events emphasize the grace which accompanies charismatic physical contact. Those critics who argue for a "realistic" interpretation of the story must ultimately acknowledge and account for O'Connor's biblical allusions. The details of the story, particularly the allusion to Timothy, emphasize that the Grandmother has undergone a personal experience that is significantly different from her normally artificial and spiritually dead self. Aside from whether God exists, such moments are real, and they have *de facto* been defined through history as "religious."

In a newly discovered and just recently published letter, O'Connor (in referring to *The Violent Bear It Away*) states the issue clearly and definitively: The novel "can only be understood in religious terms." The same is true of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." God's grace is not limited by one's religious orientation. Even the most tough-minded critic will acknowledge that all human beings— even the self-satisfied grandmother—have the potential to experience epiphanies, moments of psychological clarity, that could save them from the sour and life-denying restrictions that human beings may labor under. These are moments (from the clarifying moment of the ordinary life to the trance of the mystic) that historically we have come to define as religious.

In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor tells us quite directly that the inescapable threat of death shatters the Grandmother's complaisance and makes her look at the essential: "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace." Life is full of such moments—though perhaps rarely

on the crucial life-and-death plane of the Grandmother's experience. O'Connor believed that such moments come from God. Theology and art are not mutually exclusive. As O'Connor wrote in *Mystery and Manners*, "In the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense."

**Source:** Michael Clark, "Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find': The Moment of Grace," in *English Language Notes*, Volume XXIX, No. 2, December, 1991, pp. 66-9.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Ochshorn attempts to dispel some common misinterpretations of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find "-mainly that the grandmother was evil and the Misfit was misunderstood. Nevertheless, Ochshorn concedes that the grandmother's act of reaching out towards the Misfit was a last-ditch effort to save her own life.*

Flannery O'Connor was often shocked to find how people interpreted her stories. Some readers of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" believed the grandmother was evil, even a witch. Soon O'Connor set out, quite explicitly, in letters and lectures to detail the theology of the story and the importance of the grandmother as an agent of grace. In a letter to John Hawkes, she explained how violence and grace come together:

More than in the Devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted—such as the moment when the Grandmother realizes the Misfit is one of her own children. These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances.

When O'Connor speaks of her Catholicism and its expression in her fiction, she is clear-headed, eloquent, and convincing. In *Mystery and Manners*, the posthumous collection of her occasional prose, she claims the assumptions that underlie "A Good Man is Hard to Find" "are those of the central Christian mysteries. These are the assumptions to which a large part of the modern audience takes exception." O'Connor was upset with critics who were determined to count the dead bodies: "And in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies." For O'Connor, grace is "simply a concern with the human reaction to that which, instant by instant, gives life to the soul. It is a concern with a realization that breeds charity and with the charity that breeds action."

Flannery O'Connor was most sincere in her Catholicism and her view of its expression in her fiction. She was troubled that her readers often identified with the wrong characters or with the right characters for the wrong reasons. She felt readers "had a really sentimental attachment to The Misfit. But then a prophet gone wrong is almost always more interesting than your grandmother, and you have to let people take their pleasures where they find them." When she learned readers were identifying with Hazel Motes' rejection of Christ, O'Connor added a preface to the second edition of *Wise Blood* claiming Motes' integrity lay in his inability to shake the ragged figure of Christ from his mind. Generally O'Connor chalked up all the misreadings and confusion to the spiritual shortcomings of the modern reader: "Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental."

But the discrepancies between how O'Connor is often read and how she claimed she should be read cannot simply be explained by her theology of grace or by the lack of religious feeling among readers. Critical opinion over the years has tended to line up behind O'Connor's own explanations; however, O'Connor's analysis of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" still seems baffling and occasionally a critic has questioned the theology

of the fiction. Andre Bleikasten, focusing on O'Connor's novels, claimed that the truth of O'Connor's work is the truth of her art, not that of her church. Her fiction does refer to an implicit theology, but if we rely, as we should, on its testimony rather than on the author's comments, we shall have to admit that the Catholic orthodoxy of her work is at least debatable

And Frederick Asals recalls D. H. Lawrence's advice that a reader should trust the tale and not the teller. Of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Asals claims:

One can easily pass over her [O'Connor's] hope that the grandmother's final gesture to The Misfit might have begun a process which would "turn him into the prophet he was meant to become"; that, as she firmly says, is another story, and it would be a reckless piety indeed which would see it even suggested by the one we have.

Finally, any work of art must speak for itself, and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" speaks much louder than O'Connor's claims. It depicts evil with a power akin to Dostoevsky. Yet Dostoevsky presented holy innocence in characters like Sonia and Alyosha as well as evil in Smerdyakov and Raskolnikov. O'Connor focuses her story on what is sinister in The Misfit and satirical in the grandmother and her family. O'Connor is dark and negative in the modernist tradition, albeit with religious preoccupations. She depicts pure evil in The Misfit as he obliterates the whining grandmother and her clan. This fine story, one of O'Connor's best, derives much of its power from the anger and vengeance it expresses And that pile of dead bodies cannot be canceled out when the grandmother touches The Misfit.

Yet O'Connor is not diminished by the contradictions between her work and her explanation of her work; she is made richer. The fury that lights up her art keeps "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" from being reduced to a theological exercise. The complexity of this story in part explains its broad appeal to audiences who do not see the story as a parable of grace. Grace is the uneasy cloak O'Connor designed to cover and justify the violence in the story. The grace is a guise, a rationale that is not brought off. O'Connor's naive and deluded mothers and grandmothers are often brought low by a violent encounter that shakes them out of their petty superiorities and their would-be aristocratic and genteel trappings. They are forced to realize their vulnerability, their ridiculous condition.

The character of the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," for several reasons, contradicts any reading of her as an agent of grace. First, the grandmother's judgments of others are totally twisted. She pronounces Red Sammy Butts "a good man" despite the evidence he is a lazy slob who treats his wife like a slave. Throughout the story the grandmother is a full-blown agent of disaster, a Geiger counter for catastrophe. Her fuzzy fantasies about a southern mansion combined with some assistance from the smuggled cat manage to cause the car wreck. Then her pronouncement "You're The Misfit" seals their fate. The few pleasures in the story involve the grandmother's false sense of superiority. She chuckles over how a "nigger boy" ate the watermelon Mr. Teagarden (E.A.T.) had left for her when they were courting, and she wishes to paint a picture of the "cute little pickaninny" she sees standing, without pants, in the doorway of

a shack. Her pleasure and self-esteem increases directly in relation to the degree of superiority she manages to feel. Her limitations are so extreme that it seems impossible to imagine her thinking about anyone but herself, even for a moment.

Then the grandmother deals with The Misfit by appealing to his gentility. She keeps insisting he is a good man, from good people: "You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!" She waves her handkerchief and adjusts the broken brim on her hat, insisting she is a lady and should not be shot. In one of the more bizarre moments in the story, she suggests suburban propriety for what ails The Misfit: "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." Later, when she asks him to pray, she again appeals to the fact that she is a lady, and she adds, "I'll give you all the money I've got!" The contents of her purse seem an unlikely ransom when the rest of her family has already been shot.

O'Connor does say that the grandmother's head clears before she tells The Misfit "why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" and reaches out to touch him. But by that time he is wearing Bailey's shirt, the yellow one with the blue parrots. And more than extending grace, the grandmother appears to be insisting on what is not real or true, as she has throughout the story. The touch expresses her final hope that her noblesse can alter her fate. But when she wishes upon a Misfit, she is likely to be murdered.

In a sense, O'Connor admitted that the grace she saw in the grandmother's touch could not have run deep. In a letter to John Hawkes, she restated and edited The Misfit's remarks: "She would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life. True enough." Though O'Connor claims the grandmother's limitations do not prevent her from being an agent of Catholic grace, it seems a hard won and shaky grace indeed, dependent, as The Misfit says most precisely, on "somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." And in death the grandmother smiles up with a child's face, still without comprehension.

Despite their obvious differences, The Misfit and the grandmother are bound by their concern with appearances and superficial respectability. The Misfit reddens when Bailey curses at the grandmother and adds "I don't reckon he meant to talk to you thataway." He admits he would prefer not to shoot a lady. He appears embarrassed when the family huddles in front of him. He apologizes: "I'm sorry I don't have on a shirt before you ladies." The grandmother dresses for accidents; The Misfit, for murders. He gets Bailey's shirt from Bobby Lee.

The power The Misfit has in the story resides not only in his gun and his violent sidekicks. He is energized by his keenness, his experience, his knowledge of evil. Though he claims to be confused about the extent of his own guilt, his view of human nature is certainly more direct than the view of the grandmother and her family. He is the opposite of the children's mother, "whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage ...." He has been many different things, including a gospel singer and an undertaker. He has been in a tornado and even says he has seen a woman flogged. He

has the same "all or nothing" mentality of Flannery O'Connor herself, who said "I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy." The Misfit says of Christ:

"If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him No pleasure but meanness"

While O'Connor clearly feels Christ is all, The Misfit thinks he is managing fine without Him. When The Misfit shoots the grandmother he is recoiling from whatever grace she offers. He is rejecting not just any warmth conveyed in the touch, but also the revolting world she represents and the repulsive notion that he is her child. With good reason, The Misfit is unwilling to be adopted by this grandmother.

Essentially, the story is a stronger indictment of the grandmother and her pathetic view of life than of The Misfit. It is no accident that the grandmother and her entire crew are killed off in the story: this family vacation was doomed from the outset. And it is with no small degree of pleasure that O'Connor finishes off this family. Her fictional world is basically satirical, not theological. She casts a plain and cold eye on a sorry sight, a real world, and renders it mercilessly. A mean pleasure sustains the satire and nourishes the reader. Though The Misfit finally decides "it's no real pleasure in life," there is pleasure in this story.

A personal wrath oozes from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and from most of O'Connor's fiction. The wrath is O'Connor's strength and her idealism, her refusal to believe the world around her was all. But apparently her anger left her with guilt enough to cause her to insist on an impossible reading of her own story. In her version a moment of kindness mixed with a plea for mercy would carry the day and push the massacred clan into the background, minimizing the survival of The Misfit.

The story reveals the hidden Flannery O'Connor glimpsed by Katherine Anne Porter. Porter was struck by the discrepancy between O'Connor's appearance and her fiction and suggested that the famous self-portrait with the peacock revealed an inner Flannery:

Something you might not see on first or even second glance in that tenderly fresh-colored, young, smiling face; something she saw in herself, knew about herself, that she was trying to tell us in a way less personal, yet more vivid than words That portrait, I'm trying to say, looked like the girl who wrote those blood-curdling stones about human evil—NOT the living Flannery, whistling to her peacocks, showing off her delightfully freakish breed of chickens.

The force of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" speaks for an angry outsider, a person without illusions or sentimentality. The grandmother does not go to Florida, and O'Connor has her way. A world of propnety and illusion is laid low by wrath, not redeemed by grace.

**Source:** Kathleen G. Ochshorn, "A Cloak of Grace: Contradictions in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'," in *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol 18, No 1, Spring, 1990, pp. 113-17.

# Topics for Further Study

In the 1950s, automobiles became more accessible to many Americans, and people's mobility and freedom reached new proportions. O'Connor often used the automobile as a symbol in her writing. In addition to "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," read "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and "The Displaced Person" and discuss the importance of the automobile in those narratives.

Read about the Civil Rights Movement and some of the frustrations African Americans faced in the South during the 1950s and 1960s. Read another story from O'Connor's collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find called* "The Artificial Nigger." How does a racist lawn statue become a symbol for spiritual searching?

What seems to be O'Connor's position on racism?

Discuss how the tenets of Roman Catholicism are manifest in O'Connor's fiction. How does she interpret her own Catholic faith, and what does she expect her readers to understand about it?

Compare O'Connor's use of humor to Mark Twain's, especially in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

How do both of the writers use humor to present the harsh realities of the human condition?

# Compare and Contrast

**1955**: Racial tensions run high as the civil rights movement makes real changes in American society. Rosa Parks refuses to go to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Two Afncan-American leaders, Lamar D. Smith and George W. Lee, are killed

**1996**: Dozens of African-American churches, mostly in the South, burn down during the spring and summer months. Though the cause of some of the blazes is unknown, arson is suspected in many cases.

**1950**: According to crime statistics, approximately 7,000 murders were committed in the United States during the year.

**1994**: According to crime statistics, approximately 23,305 murders were committed during the year. Of these, 15,456 involved firearms.

**1955**: The U.S. census bureau reveals that the American population increased by 2.8 million, the largest 1-year advance on record. The generation born in the years between 1945 and 1960 are dubbed "The Baby Boomers."

**1990s**: The first Baby Boomers are turning 50, and the United States looks to ways to provide for the health care and social security of such a large number of aging individuals.

# What Do I Read Next?

O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, published in 1952, deals with religious themes, as does much of her work. The plot revolves around the character of Hazel Motes, a man obsessed with Jesus in ways that the Misfit is. Hazel becomes a preacher for the Church Without Christ. Like "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *Wise Blood* demonstrates O'Connor's vision of what happens to people who try to live their lives without any kind of spiritual presence.

No. 44, The *Mysterious Stranger*, by Mark Twain deals with religion in a humorous way.

*A Curtain of Green*, a collection of stories by Southern writer Eudora Welty. Also characterized as a "Southern Gothic" writer, Welty's fiction often deals with brutal themes as well.

Carson McCullers has helped to define Southern fiction. *A Member of the Wedding*, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* are three of her most highly regarded novels.

# Key Questions

1. Discuss the role of religion in O'Connor's work. What part, if any, does the Misfit play in religious imagery? In what ways might he be compared to the Devil? In what ways might that comparison be incomplete?

2. What do you consider to be the turning point or point of revelation for the grandmother?

3. Name several instances of irony in the story.

4. What significance does truth and/or reality hold for the characters in the story? Do the characters end with an increased awareness of reality at the end of the story?

# Topics for Discussion

1. Why does the Grandmother insist on wearing her nicest suit on the road trip with her family?

2. What is the significance of the Mis-fit's name?

3. What role does faith and religion play in this story?

4. Characterize the grandmother. Do you feel any sense of compassion for her? Why or why not?

5. What is the significance of the Misfit's response to the grandmother just before he kills her?

6. Characterize the Misfit. Do you think that the Misfit presents valid reasons for the violent way he lives his life? Is there ever an excuse for violence?

7. Explain how O'Connor uses her characters to comment on one another.

8. How would you describe the importance of family to each of the characters in the story?

9. What is the relationship between the grandmother and her grandchildren? Does this relationship surprise you?

10. What are some ways in which O'Connor infuses the story with humor?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How realistic is this story? What would make it more realistic?

2. Discuss O'Connor's use of detail in telling her story. How does this add to the story?

3. O'Connor sets her stories decisively in the American South. What is it about "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" that makes it a southern story?

4. How would you describe the relationship between the Misfit and the Grandmother? How does it change over the course of the story?

5. The Misfit explains that he cannot recall why he was put in jail the first time he went to prison, and that the crime written on his prison papers—that he killed his father—was not correct. Do you believe him? How often do you think that men are wrongly accused of a crime?

6. Is prison a salutary experience? Can it reform a person, or does it make the person more liable to commit more crime?

7. O'Connor is subtle with the issue of age versus youth. What are some of the problems or miscommunications that can exist due to age differences?

8. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of using an omniscient narrator?

# Literary Precedents

Flannery O'Connor was known to have been influenced by Nikolai Gogol and Nathaniel Hawthorne. She was also familiar with Allen and Caroline Tate's works, and with T. S. Eliot and Robert Perm Warren. While O'Connor's writing is not as verbose as William Faulkner's, her use of shocking events to evoke a point in her story similar to that used by Faulkner in "A Rose for Emily".

# Further Study

Asal, Frederick. *Flannery O'Connor The Imagination of Extremity*, University of Georgia Press, 1982.

Although the book discusses all her fiction, he devotes a section to "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a story that "dramatizes a world radically off balance." Posits that the story is a good example of O'Connor's comic treatment to violent material

Asal, Frederick, editor. "*A Good Man Is Hard to Find"-Women Writers, Texts and Contexts*, Rutgers University Press, 1993.

A useful book for those studying "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Similar to Norton Critical Editions, this books contains an introduction to the story, the text itself, and many critical essays that explore the story's possible meanings.

Baumgaertner, Jill P. *Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988.

Discusses primarily Flannery O'Connor's use of traditional Roman Catholic emblems in her fiction.

Coles, Robert. *Flannery O'Connor's South*, Louisiana State University Press, 1980.

This is a readable introduction to the author and her fiction, and as the title indicates, it focuses on her ties to her region.

Friedman, Melvin J., and Lewis A Lawson, editors *The Added Dimension*. *The Art and Mind ofFlannery O'Connor*, Fordham University Press, 1977.

This volume contains a number of landmark essays by critics and fellow writers about O'Connor's work, as well as an interview, and provides a good summary of the early criticism on O'Connor.

Friedman, Melvin J., and Beverly Lyon Clark, editors. *Critical Essays on Flannery O 'Connor*. G.K. Hall Publishing, 1985.

A diverse collection of essays about many aspects of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, from many well-known critics.

Grimshaw, Jr, James A. *The Flannery O'Connor Companion*, Greenwood Press, 1981.

Basic guide to O'Connor's works.

O'Connor, Flannery. *TheHabit of Being- Letters ofFlannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus, andGiroux, 1979.

Award-winning collection of Flannery O'Connor's letters to family, friends, and strangers.

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*Brinkmeyer*, Jr., Robert H. *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*, Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Gordon, Caroline "With a Glitter of Evil," *The New York Times Book Review*, June 12,1955, p. 5.

Despite their obvious differences, The Misfit and the grandmother are bound by their concern with appearances and superficial respectability,"

Hendm, Josephine. *The World of Flannery O'Connor*, Indiana University Press, 1970.

Kirk, Russell "Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque Face of God," in *The World and I*, Vol. 2, No 1, January, 1987, pp 429-33

O'Connor, Flannery. *Flannery O'Connor: Mystery and Manners*, edited by Robert Fitzgerald and Sally Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957.

Orvell, Miles *An Introduction to Flannery 0 'Connor*, University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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