

Dysfunctional Families: A Study in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is hard to Find" and "Good Country People"

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Abstract:

Flannery O'Connor is one of the great short stories writers of the twentieth century. She wrote about southern life. She reflects a theme that became well-known in most of the modern works, which is the dysfunctional family. It is the sense of vanity and disobedience that leads to dysfunctional families that became a modern age phenomena.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" one can find the self-reliant individual, the Baily, his kids and the grandmother. No one seems to pay any attention to the grandmother's fears or suggestions, it is only her cat that gives her the sense she is not alone. In 'Good Country People' O'Connor's other short story that deals with a prideful individual 'Joy Hopefull', with her fits of rage, she reveals an image of dysfunctional family. Challenging her mother who treats her as still a young child, Joy changes her name to Hulga. Breaking with her mother and the traditions, Hulga became an easy prey to a deceiving Bible salesman.

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"A Good Man is Hard to Find"

The impact of an author's life on his writing is huge. Though some may think that an author's childhood does not have large influence, yet it really plays a major role. In the works of Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), the autobiographical elements cannot be overlooked. Mary O'Connor was born in Savannah in 1925 and her parents were very devout Catholics. She was raised to live a Catholic lifestyle. She was educated at a local Parochial school and graduated

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in 1945 with Bachelors Arts in English and Social Sciences and received Master of Arts in Literature in 1947.¹ In 1950 Flannery O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus² (an incurable disease that affects the nervous system and joints) She wrote her first novel *Wise Blood*, in 1952, with it she won the Rinehart-Lowa Fiction Award and was accepted at Yaddo³. O'Connor spent most of her days writing till her early death in 1964 at the age of Thirty Nine.⁴

Though she wrote novels, yet she was best-known for her short stories, which appeared in collections like *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965). Mary O'Connor is a brilliant writer; her unique style of writing has a large part in her continued popularity. While growing up during the post-World War II in the United States, in a strict Roman Catholic family, she depicts her characters as fundamentalist Protestants. Her characters are severely spiritually or physically disturbed and have a tendency to be violent, arrogant and overly stupid.⁵

The Catholic lifestyle of O'Connor parents really affected her writings. On March 1925 Ann Garbett states:

"...O'Connor combined religious themes from her Roman Catholic vision with a comically realist characters from the rural Protestant South to create a fiction that is simultaneously serious and comic"⁶

O'Connor is regarded as one of the greatest supporters of Roman Catholic writings in the twentieth Century. The dysfunctional family headed most of the themes of her short stories. She also deals with matriarch families, families suffer from sense of vanity, disobedience.⁷ Due to the World Wars and the economic collapses, American people suffered from lack of moral values, religious crisis and deviation from social traditional standards, in which the darker side of Man is revealed. Committed authors usually believe they have a message to convey, they want modern man to be aware of the moral and religious decline through their literary works whether in poetry, drama, novels and even short stories.

A Good Man is Hard to Find (1953), is one of O'Connor's well-known short stories. It is a cynical tale, unpromising in the way it brings out human pettiness and manipulation. Flannery O'Connor wrote once: "The stories are hard but they are hard because there is

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nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism".⁸ A recurrent theme throughout her writings is that the action of divine grace in the horribly imperfect, often revolting, generally funny world of human beings. This theme is very much present in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Family relationships play an integral part in this story; the author shows how important the family is in critical situations.

Flannery O'Connor introduces fairly average family as a typical of dysfunctional family preparing for a vacation. The Grandmother is complaining about going on a road trip to Florida, she would rather visit friends in east Tennessee. She worries aloud to the rest of the family, Baily; her son, his wife, and their children about The Misfit, whom she has been reading about in the newspaper as a serial killer who has escaped and heading towards Florida. The Grandmother complains that you cannot trust anyone these days, but the Kids insisted that they go to Florida. On their way, the family's car flips, they assumed that the car driving slowly down the hill had come to help. They soon realized it was the Misfit, and that if the grandmother had not mentioned that she recognized them, the outcome of that day would have probably been different. The Misfit and his gang took the family members, one after the other to go into the woods to kill them. It was odd how the people agreed so easily to walk to their deaths, beginning with the son and grandson, and ending with the old lady.

The family represents the delusion perfection that many modern men have. O'Connor uses the first half of 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' to show her audience that the family is heading down a path of destruction due to their vanity.⁹ The old lady talks to her son Baily:

No look here, Bailey, see here, read this, here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did.¹⁰ (*A Good Man*, 137)

Actually, no one seems to pay any attention to her, they prefer that she stays at home. The kids claim that "she wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks...Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go" (*A Good Man*, 137). According to Fredrick Asals review on A "Good Man is Hard to Find" says, "the first half of the

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story serves a significant purpose as it informs the audience that the family's journey to Florida is only a mere empty movement through space".¹¹

The grandmother is the most important character in the story because she has a main role in the principal action. We learn more about her from her direct conversation with her son, Bailey, her grandchildren, and the Misfit killer. Through these conversations, we know that she is a lady raised from a traditional background. She is dressed so well so that when accident takes place, others will realise that she is a lady. In the car:

The old lady settled herself comfortably,...[she] had on 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. Her collars and cuffs were white organdie trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (*A Good Man*, 138)

This lady feels alone, her only son had a family of his own, her grandchildren are no kids anymore, it is only her cat; Pitty Sing, that gives her the sense that she is not alone. The literal interpretation of the grandmother portrays an elderly Southern woman attempting to maintain the proper and genteel values to the south. This old lady puts great attention to her appearance and her opinions. This importance is revealed at the beginning of their journey when the story compares the grandmother to a reflection of the past and to the daughter-in-law, as a reflection of the present.¹² It is clear that this is an image of dysfunctional family, in which the kids do not respect the old traditions of their old granny, The grandmother complains: "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then." (*A Good Man*, 139).

Ironically, this grandmother, who through the story, believes to have Christ-like love and respect to the traditional values, is actually rather silly old woman. She is presented as vain and racially prejudiced. She says once "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do" (*A Good Man*, 139).

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Seeking for a good man is really hard to find; Misfit surely stands for a symbol of evil, the grandmother's son, her daughter in – law and her grandchildren are not good enough to be called 'Good Man'. Even the grandmother herself cannot be categorized as 'Good Man' though she thought she is different. She pleads for her life in terms which betray her superficiality: "you wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" she asks. "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people" (*A Good Man*, 147).

The grandmother has been granted, at the very end of her life, a moment of Christ-like love that she is saved by divine grace. Immediately after her speech quoted above, she is described as half lying, half sitting "in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (*A Good Man*, 152)

But the author does not sentimentalize the old lady. The Misfit has the last word about her: "she would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life". (*A Good Man*, 153) That is to say, she would have been a good woman had she been constantly aware of her own mortality. But for most of her life she lacked that consciousness, and so, taking her for all in all, we cannot call her a good woman, though she may be saved. In O'Connor's world the environment becomes a projection of sadistic impulses and fears, this is the only path to safety. Paradoxically, to be destroyed is to be saved.

As "A Good Man is Hard to Find", O'Connor's 'Good Country People' is another short story in which she uses irony, controlled by comic sense to reveal the dysfunctional family in a modern world as it is. In 1955, O'Connor wrote "Good country People"; a short story deals repeatedly with a child's desire for autonomy. Joy Hopewell challenges her mother who still thinks of her as a child though she is thirty-two years old and highly educated. Mrs. Hopewell always excuses her daughter's rage because:

It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had

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never danced a step or had any – normal- good times. (*Country People*, 181)

By insisting on her own ugliness, Joy changes her given name to Hulga in order to create herself in her own image. Hulga is an atheist and has a PhD in philosophy and rejects her mother's Christian values. She deliberately cultivates a mean, unpleasant attitude just to spite her mother. But robbed of her wooden leg, which she sees as a symbol of unique power, she becomes pitifully dependent.

Hulga is disturbed by the accident that caused her to lose a leg. She's now forced to live with her mother and wear a prosthetic leg. Hulga resents this turn of events and treats her mother terribly. When a travelling Bible salesman named Manley Pointer visits the Hopewells, it becomes clear to him that Hulga's weakness is her intellectual vanity. He easily takes advantage of this and seduces her in a hay loft. In the end, Manley is revealed to be a con artist who is only interested in sex. He steals Hulga's prosthetic leg, leaving her trapped in the hay loft without any way of climbing down.

"Good Country People" is of Southern Gothic style which combine elements of the religious and the grotesque. O'Connor introduces irony into the story through the title "Good Country People", in which Mrs. Hopewell uses to describe herself and the character around her. Mrs. Hopewell realizes that: "...nothing is perfect and that in the Freemans she had good country people and that if, in this day and age, you good country people, you had better hang into them" (*Country People*, 282). It's clear however, that Mrs. Hopewell is not really of the "Good Country People" and her preoccupation with social status makes her something of a hypocrite. "Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack. She had hired the Freemans and she had kept them four year." (*Country People*, 281).

It is hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child is thirty-two and that for more than twenty years she had only one leg. It is difficult for a mother to see her daughter in her thirties and never danced a step or had any normal life. Joy had been shot in a hunting accident when she was ten; an incident beside her Ph.D makes her arrogant and rude. "Her name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and

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away from home, she had had it legally changed...to Hulga"(*Country People*, 283). Mrs. Hopewell hates the new name, telling her daughter that she has chosen "the ugliest name in any language" (*Country People*, 283). And she continues to call her Joy, in which the girl responds to it in a cold, mechanical way.

O'Connor uses two minor characters in the story, Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese and Carramae, as effective foils for the character of Hulga, their homey details of their lives serve as a vivid contrast to the airy, philosophical notions with which Hulga has isolated herself. Thinking she is smart, Hulga becomes the subject to Manley Pointer's lies. Manley Pointer is a country man who seals Bibles. He convinces Mrs. Hopewell as a good man by saying "for a Christian, the word of God ought to be in every room in the house besides in his heart. I know you're a Christian because I can see it in every line of your face" (*Country People*, 287).

Hulga's intellectual vanity is her downfall, at the beginning she does not trust anyone, and then the Bible salesman manages to deceive her. She discovers that the Bible books were hollow and "contained a pocket of flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it" , he gives her the blue box when she read it "THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE" (*Country People*, 299) , the cards have obscene pictures on its back, it is a shock for her and she drops the box. The man manages to take her wooden leg, she becomes completely dependent and she discovers that she is misled. Being so angry she says "You're a Christian! You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all – say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian..." (*Country People*, 299). He grabs the leg and the Bible then looks at her and says :

I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going...I've gotten a lot of interesting things, One time I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long. And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga, you ain't so smart" (*Country People*, 299)

O'Connor is well-known for her use of the grotesque and the bizarre to rivet a reader to her tales. Here the sudden revelation of

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Manley Pointer's malevolence is both dramatic and shocking but a fitting climax to a story whose protagonist, Hulga, makes a profession of dispelling illusions. The reader expects the confrontation between Hulga and Pointer to occur but is surprised by the role each ends up playing.

Conclusion:

What makes Flannery O'Connor's fiction so fascinating to the modern imagination is that her personal conflict reflects a major twentieth-century dilemma. The central struggle between parent and child, defined by the child's relative helplessness and anger is distinctive and parents who do not want to break away from the limits of the past.

O'Connor's fiction must satisfy the unconscious level of conflict as well as the moral dilemma. Flannery's Christian themes provide that double solution by submitting themselves to Christ, her characters acknowledge their powerlessness, yet share in the power of the parent-God.

O'Connor presents a struggle of an individual against a society which fragments social roles, and splits off the warmth, intimacy and mutual dependence from the community, which cultivate a sense of identity. Her characters with their struggles are like mirrors, they reflect the violence and tension of American life.

Notes:

1. Bard Gooch, *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*. (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 238.
2. lupus: an incurable disease that affects the nervous system and joints.
3. Yaddo: Is a retreat for artists in Saratoga Springs, New York.
4. Preston M. Browning, Jr.'s *Flannery O'Connor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1974), 56.
5. John A Garraty. "Mary Flannery O'Conner" *Dictionary of American Biography: Supplement seven*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 582.
6. Ann D. Garbett. "Wise Blood" *MasterPlots II: Women's Literature Series*. Vol. 6. Ed. Frank N. Nagill. (Pasadena, CA: Salem, 1995), 257.

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7. Sally & Robert Fitzgerald (ed.). "Flannery O'Conner" in *Mystery and Manners*. (New York: Noonday, 1970), 118.
8. (<http://www.amazon.com/letters-Flannery-O'Connor-Habit-Being/dp/BoooM54SQU/ref=si=book&qid>, p.90).
9. Louise Y Gossett, *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (Durham, N.C., 1965, 97).
10. Flannery O'Connor. *Flannery O'Conner Collected Works*. (New York: New American Library, 1953). All the quotes of the two stories are from this source.
11. Fredrick Asals. *Flannery O'Conner: The Imagination of Extremity*. (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 42.
12. Richard Giannone. *Flannery O'Conner and the Mystery of Love*. (New York: Fordham UP, 1999), 46.

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الاختلال الاسري: دراسة لقصص اوكونر القصيرة

جنان عبدالله شفيق

قسم الانكليزي / كلية الاداب/ جامعة الامام الصادق

المستخلص:

تعتبر فلانيري اوكونر واحدة من اعظم كاتبات القصص القصيرة في القرن العشرين. في قصصها القصيرة تعكس الكاتبة موضوعا اصبح مالوفا في اغلب الاعمال الحديثة وهو الاختلال الاسري. ان الشعور بالغرور والعقوق هو الذي يؤدي الى ذلك الاختلال الاسري الذي اصبح ظاهرة في العصر الحديث. في "من الصعب ان تجد انسانا صالحا" يستطيع المرء ان يجد شخصية الفرد العصامي متمثلة في بيلي, اولاده و كذلك في شخصية الجدة. لا يبدو ان احدا يعير اي اهتمام لمخاوف العجوز او مقترحاتها. ان قطتها فقط هي التي تعطيها الشعور انها ليست وحيدة. في "الريفيون الطيبون" قصة اوكونر القصيرة الثانية تدور الاحداث حول شخصية (جودي هوبفل) المتفردة المغرورة و نوبات غضبها كانعكاس لصورة الاختلال الاسري. عن طريق تحدي والدتها التي تعاملها كأنها مازالت طفل يافع, تقوم جودي بتغيير اسمها الى هولغا. عن طريق الانفصال عن عائلتها وتقاليد العائلة, تصبح اولغا فريسة سهلة لبائع اناجيل مخادع.