

Great Student

Professor Wood

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### A Good Grandma is Hard to Find

A boy drowns in a river while baptizing himself; a hermaphrodite represents the Body of Christ; a narcissist sees her lowly position in God's Kingdom ("Stories of Grace" 112). These characters, described by Dorothy Walters, were created by Flannery O' Connor, a Catholic American writer who strived "to startle the modern audience out of its overwhelming apathy and to reawaken its sense of the 'awful mystery' which pervades all human experience" (76 – 77). O' Connor continued to startle readers with this theme in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The reference to the good man is most likely from Jesus' words in Luke 6:45: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart" (NIV Study Bible). In "A Good Man," the heart of the grandma, who claims to be Christian, is shown to be evil through her values of manipulation, vanity, lying, bigotry, and selfishness, and O'Connor uses her to make this point: a false cloak of Christianity can lead to undoing, and it is possible to not understand Christianity until it's too late.

In O' Connor's "A Good Man," the first characteristic of the grandma to assault the reader is her manipulation when she tries to talk the family into changing their destination by saying, "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that on the loose," and "The children have been to Florida before" (1). She "craftily" uses the children to manipulate Bailey into taking a detour to see an old house, even though she knows "Bailey would not be

willing to lose any time" (4). The grandma's vanity is shown through her elaborate dress. She wears "her big black valise" with "white cotton gloves," organdy collars and cuffs, and "a bunch of white violets in the brim" of her hat because she wants to make sure "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a Lady" (1). The grandma's lying begins when she sneaks Pitty Sing into the car, even though Bailey doesn't "like to arrive at a motel with a cat" (1) She is later described as "not telling the truth but wishing that she were" when she says there is a secret panel in the old house (4). After the accident, she lies to the Misfit, a psychopath who believes there is "no pleasure but meanness," when she says he is a "good man...from good blood" (10). She continues to not represent Christianity by using the bigoted terms "pickaninny," "little riggers" (2), and "nigger" (3). Finally, in the most uncomfortable passages of the story, the grandma's selfishness is highlighted as she does not cry out for her family members who are slowly led to their violent deaths; instead, she pleads only for herself.

The grandma's values create a false cloak of Christianity that causes the accident and the family members' murders. After she remembers that the house, which is her manipulative ruse, is not in the state, the grandma does not show remorse; she finds the recollection "so embarrassing that she [turns] red in the face" (5). She then upsets "her valise in the corner. The instant the valise [moves]...the cat [springs] onto Bailey's shoulder," and the accident occurs (5). Thus, her manipulation, vanity, and lies cause the car to roll over so that everyone is in a state of shock by the time the Misfit arrives.

If good people bring good things out of the good stored in their hearts, then the grandma is not good. Only at the very end of the story does she seem to understand Christianity and have real compassion when she utters to the Misfit, "Why you're one of my

babies. You're one of my own children!" (10). After killing her, the Misfit explains: "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (11). It was only when she was facing eminent death that the grandma realized the true meaning of some of the things she had previously only given lip service to.

According to Walters, sinners in O' Connor's stories are of two categories: aggressively evil and victims of pride ("Stories of Grace" 106). Both types are in "A Good Man," where the aggressively evil Misfit clarifies the plight of the grandma, who is the victim of pride. The grandma's Christianity was a disguise throughout the story, and the evil in her heart brought about the undoing of her whole family. The grandma's epiphany at the end was not enough to save anyone, including herself. Thus, O' Connor successfully accomplished her goals of frightening the reader out of indifference and forcing contemplation of the "awful mystery" that pervades all of her short stories.

Works Cited

The NIV Study Bible. New International Version. Ed. Kenneth Barker. Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.

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