The “Other” Gender: Women as Villains or Nobodies in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* introduces the reader to an average, if not a bit quirky, family that sets out on a road trip to Florida and through an outrageous turn of events, is eventually faced with evil and must confront their own mortality. Most criticisms have primarily been focused on the Grandmother and the concept of grace. Of her, Doyle W. Walls has said that, “Violence serves as a catalyst to produce the Grandmother's moment of grace at the climax of the story, when the Grandmother 'makes the right gesture' to the Misfit” (44). The right gesture is, of course, when she reaches out the the man she recognizes as the serial killer known as “The Misfit” and calls him one of her own children. The Grandmother is such a controversial and interesting character in *A Good Man*, in fact, that critics often fail to examine the greater underlying issue: her role as a woman in juxtaposition with the masculine roles filled mainly by Bailey and The Misfit. I have yet to find any criticism that examines the portrayal of the feminine and matriarchal roles portrayed by the mother, the Grandmother, and June Star—feminine roles which show each woman as either a villain or a nobody. *A Good Man is Hard to Find* embraces Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, which illustrates how women are treated as the “other” gender. I intend to use Beauvoir's studies and examine how they relate to the things said, and even the things not said, within the text. I will also show animal and color symbolism within the text, both of which are somehow related to the feminine roles, to illustrate ways in which women are portrayed as the “lesser sex” while men fill the more important and useful roles. It becomes apparent through these examinations that it is actually a good woman that is hard, if not impossible, to find in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

The four women brought to life in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* play such a fascinating role. In every single instance, they are either a villain like the Grandmother or June Star, or a “nobody,” like the mother or Red Sammy's wife. The mother is so rarely mentioned throughout the text of the story that
readers will often forget that she even exists. She provides no opinions, input, and barely any dialogue
to either help or hinder the story. The mother is the epitome of a static character; unchanging and
uninteresting. Even as she is about to witness the murder of her own children, she is limp and follows
The Misfit willingly into the dark forest—never once stepping up to the plate and fighting for her own
children's lives. Likewise, Red Sammy's wife fades into the background of The Tower barbeque
restaurant the family stops at on their way to Florida. She tries to express an interest in June Star's
dancing and later in the conversation occurring about The Misfit, but both times she is dismissed by her
male superior, her husband Red Sammy, and she disappears back into the kitchen without saying
another word.

Who the “good man” mentioned in the title is could be debated to no end, but no matter the
conclusion, it is always, of course, a man. Nancy Nester's essay, published in *The Explicator*,
highlights ways in which Bailey is the often overlooked “good man” mentioned in the title of the story.
She believes that when the Grandmother reaches for the Misfit's shirt in the conclusion of the story, it is
only because he is clothed in the shirt Bailey had been wearing only moments before. “...the reader
who senses that as the Grandmother reaches for her son’s clothing, she—like the voice in the song [A
Good Man is Hard to Find; a popular song at the time the story was written that says, “A good man is
hard to find/You always get the other kind”—recognizes that goodness is to be found in the quotidian,
the commonplace. Indeed, the grandmother’s epiphany may be that goodness has been in her midst,
within her reach. The good man was one of her babies, one of her children. The good man was Bailey”
(127). I have no contention with this thesis; indeed, it is Bailey who puts up with the Grandmother's
nagging throughout the text of the story to a point of eliciting sympathy from the casual reader. Like
Bailey, The Misfit is often provided with excuses for behaving the way he does. Of him, William
Bonney said, “Although he is a murderer, the Misfit is the only character in *A Good Man is Hard to
Find* with any sense of what it means to ask morally serious questions about human experience, and
this quality makes his remotely connotative of the eternal experience, Christ, as the ambiguously
punctuated text cautiously indicates when the grandmother unwittingly calls her killer 'Jesus' just before her death, saying 'Jesus, you ought not shoot a lady” (347). Even his name, “The Misfit,” gives him an image as though he was never accepted, and the way he is at the time of the story is merely a product of a lifetime of not fitting in. The readers are given enough background about The Misfit's life to become interested and engaged with his character and to feel sympathy when he speaks of always running from the law.

The Misfit is also the only dynamic character created within the text of the story. His entrance into the lives of the family members begins with laments such as, “No pleasure but meanness.” He speaks of a disturbing past, hopping from job to job and spending a lot of time in the penitentiary with a “head-doctor” who told him that he shot his own father (The Misfit denies this, saying his father died from the epidemic flu). After The Misfit or one of his thugs have shot every member of the family in turn, he takes off his eyeglasses and cleans them with his shirt. When he puts them back on, it seems as though he has a new view of the world, stating in the dramatic and memorable final line of the story, “It's no real pleasure in life.” The sky could also be a symbol of The Misfit's state of heart. The first mention of it, shortly after the Grandmother recognizes The Misfit, states that, “Ain't a cloud in the sky...Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud either.” He would have to be feeling nothing to lead the lifestyle that he does.

The villainous women in the story, the Grandmother and June Star, do little to improve the feminine side of the story. The popularly-criticized Grandmother single-handedly causes the demise of her entire family by sneaking the cat into the car that causes an accident that puts them in the path of The Misfit, a dangerous killer on the loose. When The Misfit shows up, it is the Grandmother that blurts out that she recognizes him, giving him both a cause and a need to kill the entire family. The Grandmother is portrayed a hypocrite, proclaiming herself a good Christian woman while at the same time providing racist commentary on the “little pickaninny” standing without britches on the side of the road in the beginning of their road trip. It is also the Grandmother who points out the “five or six”
gravestones off the side of the road, an element of foreshadowing prior to the death of the six family members in the car. It should not go without notice, though, that it is the Grandmother who points out this landmark to the rest of the family, and it is of course her who brings about all of their untimely demises.

Similarly, June Star comes across as a spoiled, outspoken brat despite the Grandmother's obvious embarrassment at her behavior. She goes out of her way to show off by tap dancing in The Tower, Red Sammy's barbeque restaurant, but snaps as Red Sammy's wife when she makes a comment about how she'd like June Star to come be her little girl because of how cute she is. June Star responds rudely, “No I certainly wouldn't...I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!” Another situation when June Star speaks out of turn for a “young lady” is in the beginning of the story when she pokes fun of the Grandmother, saying, “She wouldn't stay home to be queen for a day...She wouldn't stay home for a million bucks. Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go.” To this, the Grandmother tells June Star to “remember that the next time you want me to curl your hair.” It is then noted that June Star says her hair is naturally curly, an observation that makes the little girl come across as a pretentious liar.

Many of the animals mentioned in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* have significant symbolism, all of which have been overlooked so far as my personal research shows. Most of these symbols have an interesting correlation to my study of O'Connor's representation of the feminine in a negative sense. The very first one, in fact, states that the mother was wearing a green head-kerchief “...that had two points on top like rabbit's ears.” The rabbit is a symbol of fecundity; the capacity of abundant fertility and production (Cirlot). Once the family is packed up in the car and ready to drive to Florida, the Grandmother is shown as settled into the back seat with her valise, or purse, “that looked like the head of a hippopotamus” in one corner of the car. Similar to the rabbit portrayed in the mother, the hippopotamus represents “fertility and water, and consequently...the mother principle” (Cirlot). In the final part of the story, right before the Grandmother is to meet her most unpleasant fate, she raises her
head “like a parched old turkey hen crying for water.” The Cirlot Dictionary of Symbols states that, “Souls of evildoers are reincarnates into birds of prey” (28). In sharp contrast to the animals paired with the women in the story, Bailey wears a shirt boasting a loud and bright parrot pattern—a shirt which, later, The Misfit will don. Brightly colored birds represent “the birds of the faithful” (Cirlot 28). At the end of the story, The Misfit reveals that his own father had called him “a different breed of dog.” Dogs are a faithful animal, a guardian to their owners; man's best friend, even. While the men are portrayed using positive animal symbols, the women are shown only for the traits that their society appreciates; fertile and matriarchal. The are never endowed with strength, courage, intelligence, or even helpfulness.

Similar symbols can be found in the colors that describe the characters with reference to their respective genders. First and foremost, we notice that the Grandmother is always mentioned wearing items of white clothing. White is a commonly noted symbol for purity and innocence; almost a sort of naiveté. The mother's aforementioned head-kerchief is green and is the only color of note the mother wears. Other than that head-kerchief, the mother is described with very bland and nondescript colors. Green has older connections to things of a devilish nature; it is the color of envy and is also linked to witchcraft. In the beginning of the story, June Star is said to have a “yellow head;” while we could assume the author was referring exclusively to her blonde hair, we cannot ignore the color yellow as a literary symbol for rotting, decay, violence, and even the approach of death. O'Connor using the color yellow to describe June Star is both a clever element of foreshadowing and a degrading commentary on her role as a female in the story. All of these women are clothed in colors that put them at a disadvantage to the men in the story. These colors are all mentioned in contrast to Bailey's shirt, a blue that evokes soothing feelings of calm and peace.

While many critics, like Jessica Hooten and Arthur F. Bethea, will say that the Grandmother had a spiritual experience of attaining grace in the moments before her murder, it can also be feasibly argued that she was only employing another defense tactic to save her own life. William Bonney stated
that, “O'Connor leaves the issue of the grandmother's spiritual state unsettled...by never making it plain whether the grandmother, [when] she perceives the Misfit suddenly as 'one of my own children,' is actually grasping the redemptive fact of her own moral kinship with the criminal, or whether the old woman is merely using one more manipulative ploy in order to avoid death” (348). His thesis does support the notion that she never saw the Misfit as “one of her own children,” or perhaps entertained the idea that he could be connected to her in some way. She only wanted him to spare her life, even though everyone she was supposed to have been loved was just brutally murdered just yards from where she sat.

After extensive examination, it becomes apparent that *A Good Man is Hard to Find* can very feasibly be examined from a feminist stand point. Time after time, the women are portrayed with an appalling amount of disrespect or disregard. O'Connor uses subtle yet significant clues to show the reader how women were treated as the “other” gender. Though the Grandmother is the main character in this story, it is important to also look at June Star, the mother, and Red Sammy’s wife in order to understand the full scope of the sexism portrayed. The animals all relate back to the feminine nature, and the symbols behind the colors also shed light on the women in a negative way. By taking note of these factors, readers will come to see that it is, in fact, a good *woman* who is hard, if not impossible, to find.

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Works Cited


