

A dirt road winds through a lush green landscape under a clear blue sky. The road is the central focus, curving from the bottom right towards the middle of the frame. The surrounding area is filled with dense green foliage, including tall grasses and various trees. The sky is a solid, clear blue, occupying the upper half of the image. The overall scene is bright and natural, suggesting a rural or wilderness setting.

“A GOOD MAN IS  
HARD TO FIND”

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

CRITICAL IDEAS  
FOR  
CLASSROOM USE

## Flannery O'Connor & Strange Morality in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a typical Flannery O'Connor story, which means it presents us with a strange moral system – one where integrity is found in immoral people and where hypocrisy and moral corruption seem magnetically attached to outwardly "good" people.

O'Connor's particular interest in Christian morality certainly undergirds this unusual moral system, but we don't have to read her work in specifically religious terms in order to take something of real interest away from these stories. Seen as a commentary on the discrepancy between an inner moral life and more outward, social or interpersonal morality, we can engage with O'Connor's fiction and its deep irony quite fully and directly. Such a discrepancy is often at the center of her stories, embodied by characters designed to illustrate the divide.

This is as true for "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as it is for her other stories. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" there are two kinds of people in the story, morally speaking: Those who know they are bad people and those who are bad people yet who persist in believing they are good.

The grandmother makes the mistake of thinking that her own moral qualities are self-evident. She dons a "pinned purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet" so that "[i]n case of an accident, anyone seeing her would know at once that she was a lady." Her larger moral sensibility is expressed here as superficial and unreflective *assertion*, not as fact born out by action. She *says* she is a good person, she commiserates with others about the fallen state of the world, yet she does not *do* good things.

The grandmother fails to challenge herself to ever ask if what she is doing is right or good or reckless. Instead, she rationalizes bad behavior. Not once does she apologize or admit to her flaws. In short, she is a person of no moral integrity. The values she espouses are not the source of her behavior – not by a long shot.

At least this is true until she meets The Misfit, a serial killer who the narrative presents as the sole figure in possession of some integrity.

This is a fascinating twist. The famous criminal who cannot remember his original crime is the only person who admits to his actual moral standing and lives honestly with it. His honesty does not make him a good person – he's a serial murderer after all – but it sets him apart from people like the grandmother in some interesting ways.

The Misfit is capable of bringing out the grandmother's humanity. Where she was judgmental and manipulative with her family, leading them through her own petty deceptions into the arms of a murderer, she becomes openly affectionate with The Misfit, offering him the kind of emotional solace that she never offers to her own son.

The Misfit has the power to save the grandmother, it seems. In essays on her own writing, O'Connor referred to The Misfit as a "prophet freak."

Those "prophet freaks," she wrote, "seem to carry an invisible burden and to fix us with eyes that remind us that we all bear some heavy responsibility whose nature we have forgotten. They see what we do not. They are prophetic figures, the result of outrage and not of geniality."

The Misfit reminds the grandmother of her burden and she rises to the occasion, but this change serves to highlight two things: she has not been acting according to her “heavy responsibility” up to this point in her life. And The Misfit is the figure who, in this moment of crisis, appears to act according to his principles without wavering, refusing to say that his is a good person.

The grandmother attempts to soften The Misfit. She says he is a “good man” and insists that he is “not a bit common.” But The Misfit refuses to compromise his moral vision and replies, “Nome, I ain’t a good man.” This moment is a stark contrast to Red Sammy’s immediate agreement with the grandmother when she says that he is a good man, despite his clearly unfeeling behavior and his bitter inability to act charitably. Red Sammy, like the grandmother, allows himself to believe that he is a good person, a morally upstanding person, but this belief is itself a moral failure in the context of the story.

Only the rigor of scrupulous and honest self-reflection can produce true integrity in an individual in Flannery O’Connor’s world. But this honest self-assessment does not automatically make a person “good.” Thus we are presented with a moral system where we have two kinds of bad people – and no good people.

It is a fallen world, just like the grandmother says it is. But she is wrong to think that she and Red Sammy are exceptions. Rather, they are the typical example of a social mentality that accepts lip-service as a replacement for values, speech in place of action. Those who step outside of society’s boundaries – like The Misfit and many other memorable O’Connor characters – attain a sense of the “invisible burden” that is placed on them. They grapple with it. Their struggle may not lead them to glory or expiation, but it puts them in a category of their own, set apart from certain hypocrisies and starkly aware of their own failings.

It’s not exactly a pretty picture that O’Connor is painting for us with this moral system, but it gives us something to think about.