

INVESTIGATING THE THEME OF THE SHORT STORY ENTITLED “A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND” BY FLANNERY O’CONNOR

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the complex themes in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" aiming to reveal the narrative's inherent complexity. The main focus is on the central themes of morality and the elusive nature of goodness. O'Connor's extraordinary literary skills, characterized by a distinctive narrative style and technique, are carefully examined to reveal a wide range of characters. Each of these characters grapples with the balance between virtue and moral compromise during what initially seems like an ordinary family trip. At the forefront of this exploration is the grandmother, who is elevated to protagonist status. His flawed moral beliefs and unwavering sense of righteousness become important forces that shape the events that occur. Using a multidimensional analytical approach, this research integrates elements of Southern Gothic literature and religious symbolism to enrich our understanding of O'Connor's storytelling. The findings and discussions section hones in on key themes, including Violence and Grace, Goodness, Punishment and Forgiveness, Familial Conflict and Familial Love, and Moral Decay. The analysis illuminates how the narrative utilizes violence for transformative effects, navigates the ambiguity of goodness, portrays the power of forgiveness amid harsh realities, depicts familial love emerging amidst conflict, and examines perceptions of moral decline. Through such a comprehensive exploration, this study not only deepens our appreciation of O'Connor's thematic choices but also provides insight into the complexity of human nature. This emphasizes the challenges inherent in the pursuit of goodness and moral integrity. The article concludes by highlighting the enduring relevance of “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” encouraging readers to reflect on the timeless themes of morality and the complexity of the human condition.

Keywords: American Literature, Intrinsic Elements, Short Story, Theme

I. Introduction

American literature plays an important role in telling American history. This report summarizes the country's ongoing dialogue with its past, present and future and serves as a

reflective mirror to the evolving narrative. Through various literary forms such as poetry, short stories, dramas, novels, and essays, American literature chronicles a variety of themes, from religious fervor in the colonial era to celebrations of emotional individualism in the Romantic era and sharp social conditions criticism of the realist movement. Each era in American literature adds a new layer to the ongoing conversation about national identity, societal values, and the complexity of the human condition. Throughout its history, American literature has witnessed significant development and transformation in response to the unique characteristics and events of each era. These periods provided a platform for writers, inspiring them to create literary works that reflected the spirit of their times and contributed to the broader discourse on American culture and society.

1. Early American and Colonial Period (Before 1776):

The post-Revolutionary era saw the birth of a new nation and a strong desire to define its identity. Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" became a call for independence, while Thomas Jefferson's eloquent articulation of democratic ideals in the Declaration of Independence laid the foundation for future literary exploration. Writers grappled with the challenges and promises emerging in the republic, using literature as a means of political and cultural expression, reflecting, critiquing, and shaping the political landscape and cultural identity of the United States through their works.

2. Origins of Democratic and Revolutionary Writers (1776-1820):

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3. Romantic Period (1828-1860):

As the country expanded westward, a sense of wonder and idealism permeated American literature during the Romantic period. Washington Irving's stories, including "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," capture the mystique of the American landscape. Meanwhile, transcendentalist thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau championed individualism and a deep connection with nature. In contrast, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville explored the dark aspects of the human soul in works such as "The Scarlet Letter" and "Moby-Dick," addressing themes of guilt, sin, and moral ambiguity, as well as the psychological conflicts that drive human behavior.

4. The Rise of Realism (1860s-1890s):

The aftermath of the Civil War and the challenges of Reconstruction prompted a shift toward realism in literature. The challenges of Reconstruction involved complex social, political, and economic issues, including the reintegration of Southern states, the rights of newly freed African Americans, and the rebuilding of the South. Mark Twain, with his masterpiece "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," provided an honest depiction of Southern society and human nature, while Henry James, in novels such as "The Portrait of a Lady," delved into the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, reflecting the changing dynamics of postwar America.

5. Period of Modernism and Experimentation (1914-1945):

The early 20th century brought major changes in American society, which were reflected in literature through the Modernist movement. It refers to profound changes in American society, including the impact of World War I, the economic changes of the 1920s and the Great Depression, technological advances, changing social roles, and new psychological and philosophical ideas. F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" captures the excesses and disillusionments of the Jazz Age. TS Eliot's poetry and William Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness narratives reflect the fragmented and often chaotic nature of a world grappling with war, technological progress, and social change.

6. The Contemporary Period (1945-Present):

After World War II, American literature entered a period of unprecedented diversity and experimentation. The Beat Generation, led by writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, challenged societal norms and embraced spontaneity. The Civil Rights Movement inspired the great works of James Baldwin and Maya Angelou, which dealt with race and identity. In the decades that followed, the voices of Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo, and Jhumpa Lahiri contributed to a mosaic of perspectives, exploring the complexities of American identity, history, and culture that highlights how American identity is not monolithic but is influenced by race, ethnicity, gender, class, and personal history.

These six periods summarize the dynamic evolution of American literature, showing how writers grappled with the complexities of their times and contributed to the nation's rich literary heritage.

A short story is a concise work of fiction that intentionally limits its narrative scope to focus on a single storyline, character, or theme. This form of storytelling differs from the broader nature of the novel, which allows for complex exploration and development of various storylines and characters. The essence of the short story lies in its ability to convey a complete and impactful narrative in a limited space, usually ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand words. This brevity requires careful selection of details and skillful use of language in order to convey the essence of the story effectively. Given their limited length, short stories demand a

high degree of precision and economy of words from their writers. The concise nature of these narratives allows for intense, focused exploration of a particular idea or moment, providing the reader with a concentrated literary experience. But this brevity does not detract from the richness of the story; instead, it forces the writer to craft a powerful and resonant narrative. Writers are challenged to create a well-defined atmosphere or setting that contributes significantly to the overall impact of the story. The flexibility of the short story format is reflected in its wide variety of styles, tones, and genres. Short stories can range from slice-of-life realism to the realm of fantasy, from conveying humorous anecdotes to deep explorations of the human condition. Despite their compact size, short stories serve as a powerful means of literary expression. These stories leave a lasting impression on readers, capable of encapsulating universal truths, evoking deep emotions, and provoking contemplation—all within the framework of concise yet resonant short narratives.

Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a great exploration of human nature, morality and the unpredictability of fate. Set in South America, the story begins with a seemingly ordinary family embarking on a road trip. The matriarch, the grandmother, becomes the focal point when her desire to visit the old plantation plunges the family into a realm of profound moral consequences.

The grandmother's character is very noteworthy. He embodies a complex mix of superficial morality and underlying selfishness. O'Connor uses the grandmother's weakness to comment on broader themes of moral hypocrisy and the challenges of discerning true goodness. The journey takes an unpleasant turn when the family encounters The Misfit, an outlaw on the run, leading to the confrontation that forms the center of the narrative. The title, "A Good Man is Hard to Find", sums up the story's central theme, which points to the dearth of true moral character in the world. O'Connor skillfully uses Southern Gothic elements, infusing the narrative with foreboding and dark humor. The interactions between the family and The Misfit unfold with suspense, and the story takes unexpected turns that challenge conventional notions of morality and redemption.

Religious symbolism is another important aspect of this story. The grandmother's pleas to The Misfit, her acknowledgment of The Misfit's humanity, and The Misfit's own existential reflections provide layers of theological inquiry. The narrative raises deep questions about the nature of good and evil, divine grace, and the complexities of human redemption. O'Connor's narrative technique is characterized by precise language, vivid imagery, and a keen understanding of the human spirit. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a testament to his ability to create compelling characters and narratives that resonate with readers on a profound and often unsettling level. The lasting impact of this story lies in its ability to provoke thought, challenge assumptions, and explain the moral ambiguities that shape human experience.

II. Methods

In this article, to analyze the theme of the short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, author used the qualitative method with a multidimensional analytical approach. This method focuses on exploring the subjective meanings, points of view, and experiences of individuals or groups. Qualitative research is often used in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and literature, where the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior, culture, or texts. Mason (2002) emphasizes that qualitative methods allow people to investigate various aspects of the social world and analyze them directly, which means arguments are used to explain how things work in a particular context.

As for the multidimensional analytical approach, it examines a subject or problem from multiple perspectives and considers multiple dimensions to gain a comprehensive understanding. It is a method that recognizes the complexity of the subject matter and aims to capture its nuances by integrating diverse factors and points of view.

In the context of literary analysis, such as the exploration of short stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, a multidimensional analysis approach can include several aspects:

1. Character Analysis
2. Literary Techniques
3. Thematic Exploration
4. Historical and Cultural Context
5. Reader Response

By adopting a multidimensional analytical approach, scholars and readers can engage with a text at a deeper level, appreciating its complexity and richness. This method allows for a more holistic interpretation by considering the interplay of multiple elements such as psychological motivations, socio-cultural contexts, moral dilemmas, and symbolic meanings. By exploring these multiple dimensions, this approach provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of a literary work, as it goes beyond surface-level analysis to uncover the underlying themes, contradictions, and messages in the text. This deeper engagement helps reveal how the various elements of a story work together to reflect the complexities of human nature, society, and existence.

The data used in this article for analysis is the short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, accessed through AmericanLiterature.com on December 22, 2023. The story is worthy of analysis because it explores profound themes such as morality, grace, and redemption, depicted through complex characters and a gripping narrative. The analysis was conducted using qualitative methods with a multidimensional approach, examining the story from multiple perspectives—psychological, sociocultural, moral, and symbolic. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the motivations of the characters, the influences of

their environment, and the deeper philosophical questions O'Connor raises, providing a nuanced interpretation of the text's themes.

III. Findings and Discussion

After reading the short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" in its entirety, thematic analysis reveals that the story explores morality, grace, and redemption. The story highlights the tension between good and evil, focusing on the grandmother's potential to atone for her sins in her final moments. The story also examines the influence of social norms and personal beliefs on the character's actions, ultimately reflecting existential questions and the possibility of transformation. The following are the results of the theme analysis of the short story found by the author:

1. Violence and Grace

At the story's end, the Misfit says of the Grandmother, "She would of been a good woman.....if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Flannery O'Connor explores the idea that violence, while not redemptive, has a transformative effect. The characters, especially the grandmother, initially act in their own interests without considering morality or religion. However, when faced with violence and imminent death, the Grandmother experiences an unexpected moment of grace, showing a more authentic and spiritual side as she attempts to comfort the Misfit. In O'Connor's Christian tradition, grace represents God's unmerited mercy, symbolizing divine enlightenment that transcends the harshness of life. Despite the transformative power of grace, O'Connor's world remains harsh, showing that moments of true realization often come with suffering, violence, and death. This narrative underscores the role of violence in prompting a profound spiritual awakening in characters embedded in everyday superficiality and self-interest.

2. Goodness

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor explores the complexities of goodness through characters with diverse moral perspectives. Despite the Misfit's brutal actions, the Grandmother insists on her inherent goodness, prompting reflection on whether virtue is rooted in internal character or external deeds. O'Connor introduces ambiguity through an ironic model of goodness, challenging the notion of objective standards. The Misfit's existence further complicates the search for definitive answers, and O'Connor's narrative encourages reflection on the complex and ambiguous nature of moral concepts, encouraging readers to grapple with the profound mysteries of existence.

3. Punishment and Forgiveness

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor explores the themes of punishment and forgiveness through dialogue between Granny and Misfit. The Misfit questions the justice of punishment in a seemingly unfair world, and the Grandmother inadvertently causes the death

of her family. O'Connor presents a harsh Christian worldview in which forgiveness, although challenging, briefly touches his characters. Granny forgives Misfit, only gaining grace moments before her death. However, these actions subtly influence Misfit, challenging his nihilistic perspective and highlighting the eternal value and power of forgiveness amidst the harsh and complicated complexities of the world.

4. Familial conflict and Familial love

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor depicts a world of family conflict where true love within a family emerges only in the face of violence and death. Everyday quarrels and conflicts dominate, family members often ignore and ridicule each other's wishes. True familial love becomes real only with the appearance of violence; for example the screams of Bailey's wife when facing danger. Surprisingly, this love extends to Misfit, as the Grandmother reaches out to him as if he were her own child. O'Connor argues that violence has the power to reveal underlying familial love, beyond everyday disputes. This concept takes on a broader Christian aspect as Granny expresses a sense of unity with all of humanity through her compassion for Misfit.

5. Moral Decay

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the title signals Grandma's perception of moral decline. She recalls a time when finding a good man was easier, comparing it to the violence her family faced after a car accident. The story depicts the tension between modern nihilism and traditional morality, with Granny and Red Sam expressing concern about changing values. The Misfit personifies this nihilism, rejecting conventional morals and considering himself beyond their reach. His disregard for traditional morality defines him as a true "misfit", challenging conventional views of right and wrong.

IV. Conclusion

The article emphasizes the significance of American literature in reflecting the nation's history and evolving narrative through various literary forms. It sets the stage for exploring complex themes within Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." A qualitative method with a multidimensional analytical approach is employed to analyze the short story, focusing on subjective meanings and experiences. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the text by examining multiple perspectives. The analysis reveals key themes such as Violence and Grace, Goodness, Punishment and Forgiveness, Familial Conflict and Love, and Moral Decay. O'Connor's narrative illustrates how violence can lead to transformative moments of grace, particularly through the character of the grandmother, highlighting the complexities of morality and human nature.

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