



# Defining Goodness: An Exploration of Morality in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

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**Abstract-** In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, Flannery O'Connor grapples with the concept of goodness, questioning whether it is determined by social norms, religious grace, or self-awareness. The characters in the story, particularly the Grandmother and the Misfit, embody contradictions that challenge conventional ideas of morality. Through a series of darkly ironic events, O'Connor suggests that true goodness may be rooted in self-awareness, humility, and grace, rather than superficial respectability. This paper examines these qualities and their significance, highlighting O'Connor's use of Southern Gothic elements to convey the often complex and unexpected nature of redemption and moral understanding. This paper employs ethical and moral literary criticism to analyze the tension between outward virtue and internal transformation, offering a nuanced reading of goodness in O'Connor's world.

**Index Terms-** Southern Gothic Elements, Ethical Literary Criticism, Goodness, and Moral Literary Criticism.

## I. Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) is a compelling short story that explores the theme of moral goodness through the actions and interactions of its characters. The story follows a family on a road trip that turns deadly after an encounter with an escaped convict known as the Misfit. The narrative's central tension revolves around questions of morality and the irony of grace, challenging the reader to reconsider what it means to be "a good person." O'Connor complicates these questions through characters who defy simplistic moral categorization.

The Grandmother, despite her pious facade, is manipulative and self-serving, while the Misfit, a confessed murderer, demonstrates a disturbing clarity about human nature and morality. This paper investigates how O'Connor defines goodness in the story, using the interplay between the Grandmother and the Misfit as a focal point. O'Connor uses the framework of Southern Gothic literature to reveal the superficiality of conventional moral standards and to suggest that true goodness lies in humility, self-awareness, and moments of genuine grace. Drawing on ethical and moral literary criticism, it explores how crisis moments reveal deeper truths about morality. The analysis also engages with relevant scholarship and briefly compares thematic



resonances in another O'Connor short story, *Revelation*, to provide further insight into her moral universe.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES**

Previous research on O'Connor's work has often focused on her use of grotesque characters and themes of religious grace. Critics like Dorothy Walters and Michael Kreyling argue that O'Connor's characters often experience profound moments of spiritual revelation amid violence and suffering. Flannery O'Connor's writing is deeply influenced by her Roman Catholic worldview, particularly the concept of divine grace. Ethical and moral criticism—especially as applied to religious fiction—provides an effective lens through which to evaluate her work.

This framework allows for the analysis of not only character behavior but also the underlying philosophical and spiritual assertions made in the narrative. Scholars such as Dorothy Walters (1990) and Michael Kreyling (2001) emphasize O'Connor's use of grotesque figures and violent episodes to dramatize moments of spiritual reckoning. Walters identifies the Grandmother's transformation at the story's end as an ironic form of grace—a concept that challenges readers to see past surface behaviors. Kreyling, meanwhile, interprets the Misfit's existential musings as evidence of O'Connor's investment in redemption, even when conveyed through darkness.

In *Revelation*, another of O'Connor's stories, a similar tension exists. The character of Mrs. Turpin experiences a moment of shocking self-awareness after a confrontation with a seemingly deranged girl, which forces her to reconsider her perceived moral superiority. Like the Grandmother, Mrs. Turpin's spiritual epiphany arises not from pious living but from an unexpected, even humiliating encounter with another human being. These thematic parallels underscore O'Connor's recurrent challenge to socially endorsed morality, making it clear that her fiction operates within a consistent ethical paradigm that privileges grace over propriety.

Thus, ethical criticism helps bring to the fore the central irony in O'Connor's work: that the truly "good" person is not necessarily the socially respectable one, but the one who recognizes their own moral poverty and opens themselves, however briefly, to transformation.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study utilizes close reading as its primary method of analysis, examining the symbolic and thematic weight of the interactions between the Grandmother and the Misfit. By interpreting character motivations, dialogue, and narrative structure, the paper explores how O'Connor embeds ethical dilemmas within her fiction. Supplementary to this, a moral literary critical approach—concerned with virtue,



intention, and grace—is employed. Secondary sources and critical interpretations of O'Connor's religious and moral views provide contextual depth, helping to situate her work within broader literary and ethical debates.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

At the story's outset, the Grandmother appears as the moral compass of the family, invoking social respectability, nostalgia for the Old South, and religious language. However, her actions betray a self-serving nature: she hides her cat, dresses elegantly "so that anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know she was a lady," and manipulates the family's travel route for her own desires. Her understanding of goodness is thus performative, rooted in appearances rather than ethical substance.

Her moral posture unravels as the story progresses. When confronted by the Misfit, she attempts to save herself by appealing to his supposed gentility, exclaiming that he doesn't look like someone who would shoot a lady. Her desperation betrays a shallow concept of morality—one based on class and gender norms rather than spiritual or ethical insight.

In stark contrast, the Misfit, while a murderer, speaks with startling clarity about the absence of moral order. He tells the Grandmother, "I found out the crime don't matter... it's no real pleasure in life."

His nihilistic worldview is unsettling, yet he is also the character most directly engaged with philosophical and theological questions. He confesses doubt about Jesus raising the dead, but acknowledges that if Christ did, then everything in life changes. This line exposes his spiritual struggle—he is a man who cannot believe, and thus cannot be saved, but is aware of what belief would require of him.

The Misfit's reflection that the Grandmother "would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" is O'Connor's ironic thesis. It suggests that only in facing mortality do we drop pretenses and engage in honest, vulnerable self-reflection.

In her final moment, the Grandmother reaches out and touches the Misfit, calling him "one of my own children." This act, whether read as delusional or revelatory, signifies a moment of transcendent grace. She steps outside her self-interest and recognizes the Misfit's shared humanity. O'Connor frames this as the Grandmother's only truly good act—one that is spontaneous, empathetic, and devoid of artifice.

This moment aligns with O'Connor's belief that grace is both terrible and transformative. It is not something earned by virtue or reputation but given freely, often in moments of suffering. The Misfit, meanwhile, is shaken by this gesture, and



although he proceeds to kill her, he confesses afterward, “It’s no real pleasure in life,” hinting at the disturbance her grace has left within him.

## V. RESULTS

The analysis reveals that O’Connor characterizes goodness as a complex, often paradoxical quality. The Grandmother, who presents herself as a paragon of traditional Southern values, fails to embody true goodness until her final moments, suggesting that goodness requires a deep self-awareness rather than adherence to social conventions. The Misfit, on the other hand, while openly violent and cynical, displays a brutal honesty that contrasts sharply with the Grandmother’s hypocrisy. This juxtaposition challenges the reader to see goodness as rooted not in societal roles but in the capacity for self-reflection and vulnerability.

## VI. DISCUSSION

O’Connor’s story subverts traditional ideas of goodness. The Grandmother is initially portrayed as self-righteous and manipulative, with her concept of “goodness” rooted in superficial qualities like social respectability. However, when faced with her mortality at the hands of the Misfit, she experiences a profound moment of connection, reaching out and calling him “one of her own children.” This final act, seemingly one of grace and compassion, is the only moment in which she transcends her self-centeredness and shows genuine empathy. O’Connor uses this transformation to illustrate the idea that goodness requires humility and grace, often in the most unlikely situations. The Misfit’s character further challenges the concept of goodness. Although he is a criminal, he displays a stark honesty and self-awareness, admitting his lack of belief and grappling openly with existential questions. His statement, “She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life,” highlights O’Connor’s ironic suggestion that goodness may only emerge under duress, pushing one to confront the depths of their own nature.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find* offers a stark meditation on the nature of goodness. Through the Grandmother’s superficial piety and the Misfit’s existential lucidity, the story undermines traditional moral dichotomies. Goodness, O’Connor suggests, is not a fixed trait nor a matter of social status, but an elusive quality often revealed in moments of crisis and grace.

This reading, grounded in ethical criticism, affirms that O’Connor’s characters are vessels for theological and moral reflection. The Grandmother’s final moment exemplifies genuine goodness—not because she has lived well, but because she finally sees clearly. And while the Misfit does not achieve redemption, his encounter with grace leaves an indelible mark.



O'Connor's fiction, including *Revelation*, consistently portrays goodness as deeply entwined with humility and recognition of shared human fallibility. In doing so, she calls her readers not to seek moral certainty, but to remain open to the mystery and possibility of grace.

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