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# *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

A Collection of Short Stories

by

**Flannery O'Connor**  
**1955**



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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The rural southern U.S. is the setting for this famous collection of short stories by one of the greatest practitioners of the form. She does not often give exact locations, state or town names, but most of these stories take place in a rural landscape and many—though not all—of the main characters are women. Other stories take place in small and mid-sized towns, at a college graduation, and in a city. The title.....

### THEMES

Most of O'Connor's stories investigate and illuminate the moment of greatest desire and dread in a simple character's life. She has often been understood as a deeply Christian writer, interested in how the traditions of Christianity have played out in the southern U.S. in the lives of everyday people. She is a writer working in the tradition of "Southern Gothic": those writers who addressed the decline of.....

### MOOD

O'Connor's narrators are quite similar. They are omniscient and informed and a tiny bit wry—especially when depicting children, for example, as in the title story. The voice has a hint of the traditional story-teller in it, with unique phrasings and sharp descriptions. The narrator of each story spends a great deal of time depicting a character's thinking, often sympathetically. Also, the narrator tends to.....

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah Georgia on March 25, 1925, to Regina and Edward Francis O'Connor. The family moved to her mother's hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia, when Flannery was eleven, due to her father's illness—he had lupus, the same disease that Flannery died of twenty-eight years later. He died when she was fifteen. Flannery attended the Georgia State College for Women, in Milledgeville, and then went to graduate school in Iowa, at the State University in Iowa City—their renown creative writing program.

"The Germanium" (1946) was her first published story, and in 1947 she won a prize for a draft of her first novel, *Wise Blood*, which was finally published to high acclaim in 1952. After Iowa, she.....

### LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Flannery considered herself a "Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness." Issues of religious belief are foremost in all her works. They are Georgia stories, of estrangement, epiphany, and she preferred to phrase it, "a moment of grace." Others termed her work the "mystery of personality"—especially applied to this collection, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. The stories are of violence and ethical confusion, often featuring female main characters and important female secondary characters. Like her other work, there are reflections on the landscape, and a primitive, almost grotesque struggle for significance. Flannery herself considered her stories "comic," and claimed to laugh and laugh as she reread them.

She was a relentless re-writer, going over her stories again and again and refining them to perfection. She studied the New Critics of the forties, fifties, and sixties, especially Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Their ideas on story structure influenced her tremendously, and her stories follow .....

## SHORT STORY SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

### A Good Man is Hard to Find

#### CHARACTERS

**The Grandmother** - An old lady with old fashioned ideas and manners. The grandmother is directive, talkative, a bit silly, and full of herself. She also can be manipulative. She considers herself a good person, and a kind one, and she loves her family, but is also selfish—though she wouldn't see herself this way. She is not very aware.

**Bailey** - The old woman's son. He is impatient with her, a bit silly himself, and angry a lot of the time. He wants to be in charge, but has a limited grip on things.

**The mother** - The wife of Bailey. She is a young mother who is doing what all young mothers do. She watches

her kids, more or less, and is a bit vacant. As a character, she is not especially filled out.

**John Wesley and June Star** - The children, both of them little smart-asses. They are wild, will say just about anything, and are relentless whiners. They fight, manipulate their parents to get their way, and make fun of the grandmother often.

**The Misfit** - An escaped convict who looks 'educated,' and apparently killed his own father. He is gray-haired, smart—and chillingly exact. He is also polite, and can kill without much remorse.

**Hiram and Bobby Lee** - The Misfit's cohorts. They are younger, and do as he tells them.

## CONFLICT

The family is going on a vacation while an escaped convict is loose in the same area. The grandmother is constantly trying to direct the trip, and directs them onto a deserted road, where they have an accident when her cat jumps out of its basket.

**Protagonist and Antagonist** - No one in this story is particularly appealing or sympathetic. The grandmother is the focal point, and she does have a revelation towards the end. The Misfit is clearly an adversary—he kills the whole family. But good and evil are not entirely distinct here: this is what makes these stories so compelling.

**Climax** - The grandmother recognizes one of the men who stops at the scene of the accident as The Misfit. He says that it is too bad for the family that she recognized him.

**Outcome** - The entire family is shot and killed, the grandmother last. She tries to save herself, but only annoys the Misfit further.

## SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The family is planning a vacation in Florida, but the grandmother points out that there is an escaped murderer loose there, and she wouldn't take her family to such a place! She wants to go to east Tennessee. Her son, Bailey, tells her she can stay home, then. The children roll their eyes at her—they know she can't stand to be left behind. She tells June Star not to be so smart.

The next morning she is first in the car. She is smartly dressed (so they know she is a lady if there is an accident and she dies) and has her cat hidden in a basket at her feet, so Bailey won't see—he won't like her bringing the cat. She sits in the back between John Wesley and June Star. Their mother is still dressed in her slacks with a kerchief tied around her head. She is holding the baby.

The grandmother warns her son not to drive too fast, and she points out the sights to everyone—it's a pretty day. The children say Georgia is ugly, and she tells them they should be proud of their native state—children were more respectful in her time. She sees a Negro child standing in the door of a shack; she tells everyone to look at the cute pickaninny and says she would paint that picture if she could, it was so cute. The children point out that the child was wearing no pants—the grandmother says he probably doesn't have any, being that he is poor and doesn't have lots of things like they do.

She holds the baby, points out a plantation grave yard, they eat their lunch, and play a guessing game—what do the clouds look like? But John Wesley and June star get in a fight. The old woman tells a story about one of her suitors, long ago, who used to bring her a watermelon every Saturday—and he became a rich man. She should've married him.

They stop for lunch at a roadside place, The Tower. The owner, a man with a pot belly named Red Sammy, is working on a truck and his wife, a tall burnt woman, takes their order. The mother plays the juke box, and then June Star tap dances on the dance floor. Red Sammy's wife says she's cute: "Would you like to come be my little girl?" June Star says "No, I certainly wouldn't," and the woman grins again, this time strained. The grandmother tells June Star that she should be ashamed of herself, talking like that.

Red Sammy comes in and talks to them—after he tells his wife to hustle with their food—and he and the grandmother have a discussion about how folks are different now and how a good man is hard to find. She tells him that he is a good man—she can tell. The wife brings the food and agrees that you can't trust anyone, not anyone at all—she's looking at her husband. When they talk about The Misfit, she exclaims that he would come right here, she wouldn't be surprised at all. Her husband tells her to shush and the old lady says that Europe is to blame for all the problems nowadays—the way they act over there.

They get back in the car and drive on. After a while, the grandmother thinks she remembers a plantation she once visited in this area. She suggests they go and the more she talks about it the more she wants to go. Bailey says no. She tells the children that the house had a secret panel—even though it really didn't. Sure enough, the children harass their father: they want to see the secret panel, they never get to see anything, the baby starts fussing, and Bailey pulls over. Ok, he says, Just this once, and don't ask again. The grandmother tells him the road leading to the plantation is a mile back and he turns the car around.

It's a dirt road. It twists and turns and doesn't look well traveled, though the scenery is pretty. Bailey threatens to turn around if the house doesn't show up soon. Then the grandmother suddenly remembers: that house was in Tennessee. She reddens, and shifts her feet and upsets the cat, who jumps up onto Bailey's neck and he loses control of the car and they roll over off the road and the mother and the baby fall out. Everyone is all right—the mom has a broken shoulder, that's all—and the children are delighted with all the fuss. June Star is disappointed that no one was killed. She watches the grandmother crawl out of the car, her clothes and hat all disarranged.

They are all shaken, and the grandmother thinks she has internal injuries. There is a dark woods nearby, and they are below the road. They see a car coming, in the distance, and the grandmother gets up and waves for help. The car comes slowly, and then it stops. There are three men: two younger ones, and the driver. They all get out slowly and look down, and they all have guns. The driver doesn't have a shirt, and wears glasses. The children tell him they turned over twice, and he corrects them: he saw the whole thing, and they turned over once. He is solemn. Too calm. And doesn't move to help. When John Wesley asks about the gun, the man tells the mother to keep her children with her, and quiet. June Star sasses him, and the grandmother shrieks that he's The Misfit, she recognizes him! Bailey cusses her out, and the man tells her that it would have been better for them all if she hadn't noticed.

The grandmother tells him that he wouldn't dare shoot a lady, and also tells him that he must come from good people—she can tell. He shouldn't call himself The Misfit, she says it doesn't sound good. The Misfit says it's a beautiful day, and Bailey decides he's going to take over and tells everybody to hush up. The Misfit tells Bobby Lee to take Bailey and his son over to the woods and take care of them. Bailey objects, goes, and then at the edge of the woods shouts back that he'll just be a minute. The old lady tells him to come back right this instant. Then she tells The Misfit, again, that he must be good people, not common, and he tells her that his own daddy said he was different from other people. He apologizes for not having a shirt on in front of the ladies. The grandmother says that he might find one in Bailey's suitcase, and he says he'll look, but doesn't move. The mother asks where her husband is, and The Misfit tells them that his dad was a "card" and knew how to avoid the authorities. The grandmother tells him that he could be honest, if he tried. He could have a nice life. She asks him if he prays. They hear pistol shots in the woods, and he says no, he doesn't pray, though he used to be a gospel singer. He's been many things, been in the service, too, even seen a woman flogged.

The grandmother tells him to pray. He says he was a good boy, did nothing wrong, and then something happened and he found himself in prison. The grandmother says Pray, pray. He says they told him he killed his daddy. He doesn't remember, but they had the papers on him. He doesn't want to pray, says he does fine on his own.

The other men come back, bringing Bailey's shirt, which The Misfit puts on. He says the crime don't matter, they just punish you the same. He asks the mother if she and the girl would like to go into the woods and she says yes, please, and June Star says Hiram reminds her of a pig and he drags her off, too.

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother mutters Jesus, Jesus, and he tells her that Jesus just threw the world off balance, that's all. The Misfit tells her that you should sign all papers yourself and keep copies, so they can't pull anything over on you. They hear a scream and more shots from the woods. The grandmother repeats all her pleas, and tells him he can have all her money. She calls for Bailey. The Misfit says that if Jesus is right, you have to follow him, but if he's wrong, you have to do all the meanness you can, because there's pleasure in meanness. She says that maybe Jesus didn't raise the dead—she's half senseless. He says he wishes he wouldn't been there, so he'd know just what Jesus did.

The grandmother sees the man's face close to hers, and he is about to cry. She mummurs that he is one of her own children, one of her babies—The Misfit springs back like she'd bit him and shoots her three times in the chest.

The other men come back and the three look down at her in her pool of blood in the ditch—she has a smile on her face. The Misfit tells the others to put her in the woods with the rest of them. He says that she would have been a good woman, if there was someone there to shoot her every minute of her life. "Some fun!" says Bobby Lee. The Misfit says there is no real pleasure in life.

## Notes

This is Flannery O'Connor's most anthologized story, the most popular of her works by far. Like many of her stories, it involves the characters' personal religious beliefs, and pulls on their deepest desires and fears. Many of the characters approach stereotype—the grandmother is a talkative old lady with not much sense, a standard stereotype. She has some strong beliefs, though, and is not the only silly person in the story. Bailey, the children, and Red Sammy all seem rather ridiculous at moments—and very human. The Misfit is an interesting character, and the choice of a theological discussion at the scene of a multiple murder is ironic, at the least.

The plot is linear and standard. The set up is clear: if they go to Florida, they are in danger. All the details are there, including the cat. Only the end is a little surprising. The grandmother seems to understand and have sympathy for The Misfit, and he is not happy to have shot her—he realizes what a miserable existence he leads.

## THEMES

The theological discussion at the end of the story, between the grandmother and The Misfit, has gotten a lot of attention from critics. Is she serious about him being her child? Does he really believe in Jesus' miracles, since he believes there is no pleasure in life? Religious beliefs, invoked only at a moment of dire need are nothing like the beliefs that people live by—or are sudden realizations the actual crux of religious belief? There might not be any direct answers to these questions, but there is plenty of room for discussion.

The "good man" of the title reverberates off the "good woman" of the last lines. The grandmother would have been a good woman, if. . . During the earlier course of the story, the term "good man" is used quite loosely: the grandmother calls just about anyone she wants to please a "good man." She bemoans, with others, the lack of any real respect or goodness in the present day—people make this complaint all the time. At the same time, she lies, and manipulates, and is generally a pain to everyone—she gets her entire family killed. At the same time, The Misfit does have some points: do punishments fit crimes? What is "good"? And what did Jesus really do, exactly?

The questions this story brings up are complex. Some other themes might involve the significance of landscape, the disjointed conversation (people seem unable to listen to each other), and the levels of deceit that various characters display.

## The River

## CHARACTERS

**Harry** - A little boy, five-years-old. He is often sent to baby-sitters, while his parents are having parties and hangovers. He is a curious child, still not sure of the world's limits and possibilities. He is simple, and somewhat

trusting—in many ways, a typical little boy.

**Mrs. Connin** - She is, for the first time, Harry's baby-sitter. She has several other children, and a penchant for healing preachers. She is nice to Harry, and indignant when she learns about his worthless parents.

**Reverend Bevel Summers** - The healing preacher. He is very young, and doesn't like to be referred to as a healer, but a preacher. He is anxious, however, for people to join him in the "river of Christ."

**Mr. Paradise** - An older man in the town who goes to all the prayer/healing meetings, but has gotten cynical. He still goes, and makes sarcastic comments. But he is interested in seeing good acts, and tries to look after Harry when he goes off on his own.

## CONFLICT

Harry, a curious child, somewhat neglected, is left to his own devices. He has ideas, after his encounter with the preacher. Harry looks for a comfortable place for himself in the river.

**Protagonist and Antagonist** - Harry is certainly the protagonist, and the antagonists may be his parents (who don't take care of him very well), or Mr. Paradise (who accidentally chases him into the river), or Mrs. Connin (who puts ideas in his head).

**Climax** - When Harry goes into the river, will he find what he is looking for and how far will it take him?

**Outcome** - After deciding that there is no peace to putting his head under water (it pushes him back and makes him choke) he is startled by Mr. Paradise, who is actually coming to pull him out. Harry puts his head under one more time—trying to get away from the scary man who is coming after him—and the river current pulls him under and he finds the weird peace of the flowing water. And drowns.

## SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

A child stands limp in the middle of the living room at six in the morning, his father getting him ready for the baby-sitter who's come to get him. It's cold, and the father is impatient. The mother is sick. The father says he won't expect the boy back until 8 or 9. Mrs. Connin says they are going to see the Reverend Bevel Summers, and that they may be back late. The father almost forgets to say good bye to the boy.

Mrs. Connin and the boy leave. She tells him to wipe his nose, but he has no handkerchief and so she uses hers and gives it to him. She asks him his name. "Bevel," he says. Well, she says this is quite a coincidence, since that is also the preacher's name. She says her husband is away at a government hospital, doesn't believe in faith healers. Bevel says he is hungry, and she says she'll fix him something when they get to her house. She takes him on her lap, and they both fall asleep.

After walking a half mile to her house, Bevel discovers that she has three boys and a tall girl, all bigger than him. Inside, they watch him, and he looks at the pictures on the wall. There's a man with a face like a bare cliff—Mrs. Connin says that is Mr. Connin. There's another picture of a man with long hair and gold on his head, sawing a board. Before he can ask who that is, the boys want him to go outside, but not really in a friendly way. He goes, cautiously, having been beat up by bigger boys before.

These suddenly seem a little more cautious themselves. They take him over to a spot where he can smell animals and hear some grunting. One of the bigger boys says, "She'd kill us," and instead of dumping Bevel in the pig pen, they persuade him that he should loosen a board on the bottom and peek inside. He does, but a big pig comes rushing out and barrels over him and runs all over the place and under the flimsy house and Mrs. Connin is mad but it takes her a long time to calm Bevel down and tell him he is all right. He won't even look at that pig again, the one she says looks like Mr. Paradise who always comes to spoil the healings.

They all walk to the river together, Bevel holding Mrs. Connin's hand—he liked her, and had already found out from her this morning that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. He'd thought Jesus Christ was

a swear word. She'd shown him a pretty picture book of bible stories, belonging to her great grandma and published in 1932. It was her most prized possession. When she wasn't looking, he stuffed it in his coat with the handkerchief.

The little group is almost late to the ceremony with the Reverend Bevel—it has already started. People stand around, and a young man stands with his pants rolled up, in the river. He starts to preach, saying how he doesn't heal people. If they are there for that, he doesn't do it. He's here to bring them into the River of the Life, the River of Love, the river of pain where they can leave all their troubles with the blood of Jesus. He wants to bring them to Jesus. Only then can they be healed. Bevel watches, and watches the sky and hills. A couple of people wade into the river, and a man says that they haven't changed none, they aren't getting healed. The preacher says again that he never promised that. Another man goes in, comes out. A woman says she's seen the preacher heal people. Then Mrs. Connin says that this boy here has a mother who is sick, and he could be baptized—probably hasn't been. The preacher takes Bevel and stands in the river with him, all serious. Bevel puts his head on the man's shoulder and doesn't really know what the man is saying, but he says he wants to be baptized. Then he could go in the river. The preacher dunks his head and he is surprised. He does it again. Mrs. Connin says not to forget the mama. Then Bevel says yeah, his mama hasn't got up yet, she has a *hangover*—and Mr. Paradise laughs out loud, Sure, cure *that*.

It's late when Mrs. Connin brings him home, and there is a party going on. She tells them that Bevel was a good boy. Bevel? his mother says. She is on the couch, dressed in tight black pants and high heels. Mrs. Cronnin says yes, same as the preacher, and the preacher baptized him, too. The mother is angry—the nerve! Then Mrs. Cronnin says they also prayed for her, Bevel's mother, to be healed from her affliction—and then she leaves without taking any money, in disgust.

The boy, whose name is Harry, doesn't say much about what happened when his mother questions him. She wants to know what they said about her. She finds the book and the handkerchief in his wet coat, and some of her guests look at the book and exclaim that is it very valuable, an old book like that. Harry goes to bed.

When Harry wakes up the next morning the house is all closed up dark but it is not early and there are still ashtrays and stuff left over from the party. His parents, he knows, won't be up for a long time. He looks for food in the refrigerator and overturns some ashtrays, and looks for his book—it's gone. His shoes are still damp, and looking at them gives him an idea.

He took a token and some Life Savers out of his mother's pocket book, and gets on the trolley line and follows all the paths he took yesterday with Mrs. Cronnin to get to the meeting on the river. He gets a little lost, and Mr. Paradise sees him and follows him, thinking something is not right. The old man loses sight of Harry. But Harry finds the river, and goes in. He doesn't see the man, but looks over the landscape and the river and decides he will baptize himself this time.

But the river won't have him. It keeps shoving him back up, choking him. He thinks it is all a trick, just another trick, and this is no special river, no special kingdom under there. He splashes, mad, and Mr. Paradise sees him and comes after him. But the man reminds him of the horrible pig and he leaps under one more time and the river takes him this time, in the current, shoves him down and takes him just like he thought, gentle, and his fear leaves him.

The old man searches and searches and finally comes up down-stream, empty-handed, like a sad, ancient sea monster.

## Notes

This story is a standard, child-viewpoint, O'Connor story. Harry is a typical child, with some slightly atypical things going on around him. It would be unfair to say that this is the story of a neglected child who finds, unfortunately, solace in the river. Perhaps it reflects the everyday lives and everyday mishaps that regular people encounter. Tragic, yes, but simply a part of living in an imperfect world.

After all, Harry does feel that he finds the peace he wanted. He is too young to realize what death is, and is so fascinated by nature, and then the bizarre promise of the preacher, that he is perfectly willing to go along, to search for what he wants and satisfy his curiosity. The tragedy may belong to Mr. Paradise (again, note her use of naming) who is a cynic, and maybe rightly so: he sees a young boy drown, and he intended to save him—in quite a different way than the preacher intended to save him. Is, then, Harry actually "saved"?

## **THEMES**

Religion in young lives is a recurring theme in O'Connor's fiction. All kinds of visions, connections, and desires are played out in the minds of those too young to understand the possible motives and results. Rather than count this a tragedy, or a travesty, it is suggested that religion is very real to young people, that they crave or at least connect with the idea of the supernatural, the order of good/evil, and the idea of a grand paternal figure. O'Connor's fiction is often sighted as "bizarre" for its religious depictions, but she saw her intent as reflective—in a positive way—of the living fact of religion and the interest it stirred in people, how it affected their lives at a very basic level.

Misunderstanding is at the forefront of this story. Harry does not know that he is killing himself. He doesn't know who Jesus is, and doesn't understand what he is doing when he takes Bevel's name. He also doesn't know that Mr. Paradise is trying to save him from drowning. The preacher does not want to be misunderstood as only a healer, and Harry's mother does not understand what the baptism means to Harry. The missed connections are what drive the plot of the story: even the pig incident lends power to what happens to Harry at the last moment.

Also in this story, we see the writer's reliance on hints—and the use of brand names. O'Connor was one of the first writers to use brand names in her stories, and she places them with exacting intent. Harry takes a roll of Life Savers with him to the river. The irony is quite direct. ....

The other stories are outlined in the same manner in the complete study guide.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss a theme common to many of the stories, and distinguish the treatment of it in each story.
2. Chose a favorite story and explain why it strikes you as notable.
3. Explain the religious beliefs of one or more characters.
4. Compare and contrast two stories—possibly two that have similar main characters (a child, a farm owner).
5. Discuss O'Connor's use of secondary characters.
6. What ethical concerns are brought up in these texts?
7. How does the collection work as a whole?
8. How has WWII affected the people in these stories?

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