Redemption Through Suffering: O’Connor Finds the Good

In Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard To Find,” the main character’s awakening from shallow self-centeredness to Christ-like compassion exemplifies the Christian writer’s belief in redemption, or grace, occurring as a result of suffering. It is only after the main character experiences true violence and horror that she shakes off the mantle of ill-conceived prejudices to experience true enlightenment and connection to God. O’Connor’s fervent religious belief and need to make sense of her own suffering—due to a debilitating illness—are the driving forces behind this theme.

The author’s spiritual beliefs and her illness are entwined to drive the author’s belief in the redemptive power of suffering. Flannery O’Connor was born into an old and distinguished Southern family. Unlike most of her fellow Georgians at the time, she was a “cradle Catholic” born into a faith handed down from her Irish ancestry. When she was diagnosed with Lupus at the age of twenty-six, her faith was truly tested and forged: “As she injected herself with ACTH and learned to walk on her fragile bones, she was converted to the religion she already believed in and her imitation of Christ began” (Elie 193). Because of her illness, she retired to a farm in rural Georgia, and her life was composed primarily of the bird farm, writing and her faith. It is no wonder that this life view infused her work as she once stated, “It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it” (Elie 265). Endurance
was something the author knew well as she battled Lupus from the age of twenty-six until her death at thirty-nine. During that time, the author would lose much of her hair and keep a bloated “moon-face” due to steroids and battle bouts of constant pain. The writer saw her own pain as purifying and redemptive, much like the pain of Christ was for the purification and redemption of the world: “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross” (Baumgaertner 7).

In “A Good Man Is Hard To Find,” the reader learns that the main character (grandmother) is a self-seeking, somewhat childish woman seemingly without depth. More than anything, she is a good Southern lady concerned with appearances. This is evidenced when she chooses to dress formally for the trip complete with hat so that, “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (O’Connor 406). That the grandmother is more concerned with how people perceive her—even dead—than with what happens to her after death is O’Connor’s comment on her spiritual condition. In her review of O’Connor’s religious themes, Thelma Shinn asserts that unlike the cliché of the physically afflicted or “grotesque” being equated with sin or violence, in O’Connor’s work often the opposite is the case. O’Connor, because of her own illness, saw physical afflictions as the presence of God and “grotesque” was to her a spiritual affliction: “they are so completely part of the physical world that they simply cannot comprehend the spiritual world—they either ignore its existence or misinterpret its meaning” (Shinn 62). As the journey of the grandmother continues, the reader sees evidence of just how self-centered and lacking in empathy she is. After the car accident, she focuses on only the issues concerning how she is perceived (not being found out for being mistaken about the side trip she insisted on and not being reprimanded for bringing the cat), rather than the injuries of her daughter-in-law and welfare of her family. Though she has
been shown to be self-seeking, the grandmother is not portrayed as mean-spirited. She is child-like and is struggling to find her place in the world and in her family. To O’Connor, she is a child of God who has lost her direction and therefore a sympathetic soul in need of guidance. Baumgaertner wrote that the writer was “realistic about human nature and its ability to resist grace” (6). O’Connor used her writing as a means of conveying her religious beliefs with the hope of “enlightening” a needful audience: “O’Connor’s conviction that our age is deaf and blind to truth appears in all her writings. How to reach a handicapped generation is her constant concern” (Baumgaertner 6). O’Connor first shows us the lack of spiritual concern in the grandmother so that we are more acutely aware of the shift that occurs when the character receives “redemption” or clarity as a result of her suffering.

The suffering in the story comes at the hand of a serial killer named The Misfit. The grandmother bargains for her own life as her family is systematically led into the woods and killed. In making her case to spare her life, she again relies on her superficial beliefs to bring out the “good” in the killer. She states that he is at heart good because, “I can just look at you and tell” and “You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people” (O’Connor 412). In her essay, Lienard relates how the grandmother’s use of good is superficial and self-righteous: “Their goodness depends on a normative, societal definition; it is empty, and meaningless” (283). Her foolish-ness is made ironic by the fact that while the Misfit is ordering her family murdered and is listening and responding to her arguments—he is being exceedingly polite and well spoken. Their exchange becomes a theological debate with the grandmother extolling the Misfit to pray and “find Jesus.” Again, this is ironic because O’Connor has shown the grandmother to be a person of lost or lacking “faith.” This is the author emphasizing her character’s flaws to better illustrate the change that is about to occur. The Misfit
has given thought to the subject of Jesus and simplifies the situation down to believe and give up worldly pursuits to follow him, or don’t believe and enjoy the baser pleasures of life: “His persona enables him to escape from his own suffering. The goodness in him has been covered by a skillfully staged meanness” (Lienard 284). With each pistol report that screams the death of another family member, the grandmother loses more of her grip on her previously held beliefs. She gives up on her old notions of good and desperately offers money to the Misfit to spare her life. Then, realizing her death is imminent, she loses her strength and sinks down to the ground in defeat – suffering has stripped away her previously held beliefs.

The Misfit continues speaking of his wish to know the truth about Jesus, and his own mask slips enough for the grandmother to truly see him in her moment of surrender: “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (O’Connor 415). In her compassion, the grandmother reaches to touch the killer who recoils from her touch as though under attack: “The gesture of the grandmother has stirred a humanity that he can’t accept, having always forcefully claimed independence” (Lienard 284). In that one moment (that O’Connor has called the “moment of grace”), the grandmother is no longer thinking of herself, she is no longer a victim, she has received grace and understanding and is connected to God. It is in this moment that she and The Misfit shift roles. Her compassion is torture to her killer as it forces him to see the possibility of a redemptive view of life in opposition to his current beliefs. He notes that the grandmother would have been a good person if someone had been there to threaten her every minute of her life, which reflects O’Connor’s belief that “redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute irrevocable sacrifice” (Shinn 59).

In conclusion, the grandmother’s finding grace (or redemption) only after experiencing extreme suffering and horror has a direct correlation to O’Connor’s own belief that such
suffering is necessary for religious understanding or conversion. Baumgaertner states “She identified “conversion” – that is, a “character’s changing” – as the only real subject of good literature.” The author’s years of suffering the pain and degradation of her disease caused her to identify strongly with the suffering of Christ. In her beliefs, the reason for Christ’s pain and suffering was the redemption of mankind, thus suffering had a greater purpose. Since her own pain and suffering was ever-present in varying degrees, it is no wonder that the author was drawn to finding meaning in it. The grandmother’s suffering resulted in her being freed from her superficial beliefs and she became an instrument of grace and compassion. Witnessing this “conversion” caused The Misfit to suffer the futility of his belief in nothing but cruelty and possibly begin his own path to salvation. The author made sense of her own suffering by identifying it as marking her with a special Christ-like understanding and obligation. That obligation was to convey her beliefs through her stories and perhaps affect a few conversions of her own. Through this, Flannery O’Connor managed to find the “good” in her suffering and conveyed her conviction that it – or anyone’s – need not be in vain.


