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Sides of a Coin

Can a human being be both evil and kind? In “A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’ Connor, the author suggests immorality versus morality is less identifiable than society and individuals within society would think. The two main characters, The Grandmother and The Misfit, both display the qualities of good and evil. In the story, whenever the two were confronted, they were able to see both sides of themselves, displaying how every individual is neither fully good nor bad without often realizing what extreme they follow until confronted with conflict.

Flannery O’ Connor lets the reader see how The Grandmother has some positive traits deep deep inside. The Grandmother is described as somebody who tries to teach morals, “Children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else” (9). She looks down to Jade to suggest to him how he should behave instead of being disrespectful to his home state. The author also characterizes The Grandmother as a lady who has affection and love towards her cat, “She didn’t intend to leave the cat alone in the house for three days because he would miss her, and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and asphyxiate himself” (7). The Grandmother has morals and shows goodness when she worries about her cat before leaving to Florida.

In the beginning of the story, it is easy to categorize The Grandmother as a “good” person, but, throughout the story, one can see her character falling short. The Grandmother
changed her perspective by showing how selfish and self-centered she uses the children in order to get what she wants. For example, “It would be very educational for them” (17). The grandmother wanted to go see the old plantation, and she knew that her son was not going to go out of his way to take her, so she said it would be good for the children, using education as an excuse. According to “The Good, the bad, and the angry: An experimental study on the heterogeneity of people’s (dis) honest behavior,” a report by Helene Barcelo and Valerio Capraro, “People oftentimes make decisions within a dynamic setting in which they know that they will have a chance to lie or tell the truth, but they do not initially know the exact material consequences of these actions” (Barcelo 9). Every action The Grandmother took had a consequence that she had not predicted. Her egocentrism led her to act impulsively and not think about what she was saying or doing. The only way The Grandmother could change her behavior in the trip was by altering her actions. The Grandmother was only worrying about herself at that time. The author describes The Grandmother as a person who is constantly manipulating her family in order to get what she wants and forcing them to do what she thinks is best. As a result, The Grandmother takes her family into danger with her selfishness.

The author brings in The Misfit, who can be characterized as both good and evil as well. The Misfit is someone with manners who approaches The Grandmother and her family as soon as they have the crash. The misfit showed generosity and kindness. At the beginning, The Misfit seems to just want to help them out by getting their car fixed and letting them go, “Try their car and see will it run, Hiram” (21). The Misfit showed no intention of hurting anybody, but, when The Grandmother tells him she recognizes him, the situation soon changes. Even though The Misfit is someone who everyone fears, the act of kindness she was showing at first showed his good side.
Through The Misfit’s blood, there was evil that was unjustified and morally wrong. According to “Human Behavior and the Social Environment: The Vulnerability, Risk and Resilience Model,” an academic journal by Audrey L. Begun, “A poor fit may be a product of dysfunctional aspects of the social context and it may define the nature of interactions between the person and the environment: it could reflect a dysfunctional relationship between the elements” (Begun 28). The Misfit might have been a person with lack of skills. The story says he had nice parents, but it seems that they were not with him through his life. The Misfit’s behavior could be based upon a lack of knowledge, leading him to do act that he thought were right or not completely wrong. The Misfit could have found himself with unmet needs, resulting in killing people and being disruptive to the ones that had done no harm to him. In beginning of the story, The Misfit had escaped prison, where he was being held for assassinating his father. The Misfit is accused of an awful act, of killing his own family member. The Misfit claimed himself he was not a good person, “Nome, I ain’t a good man” (25). The Misfit knew he had engaged in actions that categorized him as an unmoral person and was capable of immorality. Aliraza Javiad wrote an article stating that, “Evil arises when the subject turns inward, isolates herself. Exalts her own power of choice, failing to acknowledge the prior claim of the shared human world in which her very own existence is grounded… it is only to the extent that human beings choose to linger in this opposition that they become evil…” (Javiad 5). The Misfit, just like any human, was overcome by personal traits. People can be immoral once matters become too personal because, in their own head, they may believe what they are doing is just, even if that does not match with the just definition of the rest of the world.

The Misfit and The Grandmother were both people who had bad behavior, but they had a background on why they would act like that. According to “Unethical Behavioral Finance: Why
Good People Do Bad Things,” a journal by Ronald F. Duska, “It is important to note that this acting badly or unethically is not always explainable simply in terms of sheer greed or blatant selfishness” (Duska 26). There is typically a reason behind one’s actions. There is more to someone having bad behaviors that can put others in danger or cause harm. Ronald F. Duska wrote in the journal of Financial and Ethical Service Professionals:

Behavioral ethics can explain factors that lead good people to do the wrong thing, and many lists have been generated to explain that phenomenon. While there is a great deal of overlap describing those factors, in order to simplify the issue, I have come up with a list that considers some of the most obvious factors leading good people to do bad things. The list is not exhaustive, but it points out what I take to be some major reasons behind good people doing bad things. A few years ago, to help people remember the items of the list I came up with the acronym WISARD. WISARD describes the following ways of going wrong: (1) weakness of will, (2) ignorance, (3) slippery slope, (4) arrogance, (5) rationalization, and (6) docility. (Duska 26)

In the story, both The Misfit and The Grandmother show weakness of will by feeling that they should not do bad things but in carrying out these negative actions anyway. There was ignorance and arrogance seen by The Grandmother when she was not sure about the location of the building as well as her attitude towards her son’s wife. The grandmother leads her family into The Misfit’s hands on accident, which is known as a slippery slope. Both characters engaged in harmful behaviors that they rationalized. Their reactions made it clear how they both had moments of goodness, but were in the habit of acting selfishly, which often happens to everyone in society.
The way one sees the world can be interpreted on how the world sees them. Neither, The Grandmother or The Misfit were born good nor evil. They each had their own experiences that led them to become who they were. Just like the little says, indeed “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” There are people in the world who act more selflessly and justly as well as people who act more rashly and with little regard for others. Every individual has the potential for goodness and for evil, and rarely is an individual purely on one side or the other. Only in facing conflict, is an individual able to understand which extreme they often follow, and conflict can either lead to growth and change or, as in the case with both The Grandmother and The Misfit, can display weaknesses in one’s character that further a cycle of negativity and extreme behavior.
Works Cited


O’ Connor, Flannery. “A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories.”