Summary and Analysis "A Good Is Hard to find

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" illustrates many of the techniques and themes which were to characterize the typical O'Connor story. Since she was limited by her illness to short and infrequent trips away from the farm, O'Connor learned to draw upon the resources at hand for the subject matter of her stories. These resources included the people around her, her reading material, which consisted of various books and periodicals which came to Andalusia, and an assortment of local and regional newspapers. Several critics have pointed out the influence of regional and local newspaper stories on O'Connor's fiction. The Misfit, the pathological killer who murders an entire family in this story, was apparently fabricated from newspaper accounts of two criminals who had terrorized the Atlanta area in the early 1950s; Red Sammy Butts, according to another critic, may have been based on a local "good ole boy" who had made good and returned to Milledgeville each year, on the occasion of his birthday, to attend a banquet in his honor, hosted by the local merchants.

O'Connor's treatment of the characters in this story reinforces her view of man as a fallen creature. Briefly, the story depicts the destruction of an altogether too normal family by three escaped convicts. The thematic climax of the story involves an offer of grace and the grandmother's acceptance of that gift as a result of the epiphany she experiences just before her death. The events which lead to that climax, however, generate much of the interest of the story.

The reader's first view of the family is one designed to illustrate the disrespect and dissension which characterize the family's relationships with one another. The grandmother's vanity and self-centered attitude are made apparent in the first three lines of the story. Rather than acquiesce to the family's plan for a trip to Florida, she wishes to visit some of her **"connections"** in east Tennessee. In the next line, one learns that Bailey is her only son, a bit of information which prevents a possible misreading of the grandmother's last earthly words, **"You're one of my children,"** and thereby prevents the reader from missing the action of grace at the end of the story. In her attempt to get the family to go to Tennessee rather than to Florida, the grandmother uses the news story of the escaped murderer, the Misfit, to try to scare Bailey into changing his mind. Although Bailey does not answer her (thereby showing a complete lack of respect for her), the incident provides an ironic foreshadowing to the end of the story.

When Bailey fails to respond to her pressure, the grandmother attempts to get her daughter-in-law, a dull young woman with a face **"as broad and innocent as a cabbage,"** to help her convince Bailey to go to Tennessee rather than Florida because the children, John Wesley and June Star, have not yet visited Tennessee. Bailey's wife also ignores the plea, but the non-vocal disrespect of the parents finds voice through the children.

Their conduct toward the grandmother emphasizes the disrespect which is characteristic of the entire family.

When the family leaves for Florida the next morning, the grandmother, against Bailey's express order forbidding it, smuggles the family cat, Pitty Sing, into the car with her because she fears it would miss her too much, or that it would accidentally asphyxiate itself if left behind. The cat does survive; ironically, however, it is responsible for the auto accident which leads to the family's death, and, contrary to the grandmother's view of her importance to the cat, it befriends the man who murders the entire family. The cat alone survives.

The events leading up to the death scene itself are designed by O'Connor to display the foibles of the family and to create a sense of foreboding. Shortly after leaving Atlanta, the family passes Stone Mountain, a gigantic outcropping upon which are carved, in bas -relief, images of the long-dead heroes of an equally dead Confederacy. The grandmother, dressed so that **"in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady,"** carefully writes down the mileage of the car in anticipation of her return home. She indulges in back-seat driving, acts as a tour guide, and attempts — by citing the conduct of children in *her* time — to chastise John Wesley and June Star for their rude remarks concerning "their native states and their parents and everything else." Her fraudulent propriety is immediately undercut, however, when she calls the children's attention to a **"cute little pickaninny"** (a black child) standing in the door of a shack they are passing. When June Star observes the child's lack of britches, the grandmother explains that "**little niggers in the country don't have the things we do."**

As the children return to their comic books, we are given a number of life-versus-death images which prepare us' for the coming catastrophe. The grandmother takes the baby from its mother, and we see the contrast between the thin, leathery face of old age and the smooth bland face of the baby. Immediately thereafter, the car passes **"an old family burying ground,"** and the grandmother points out the five or six graves in it — a number equal to the occupants of the car — and mentions that it belonged to a plantation which, in response to John Wesley's question concerning its present location, has "**Gone With the Wind,"** an answer that is doubly ironic insofar as it recalls the death of the Old South.

The children, after they finish eating the food which they brought along with them, begin to bicker, so the grandmother quiets them by telling them a story of her early courtship days. The story, which emphasizes the grandmother's failure to marry a man named Teagarden, who each Saturday afternoon brought her a watermelon, reveals both her and June Star's concern for material well being. When June Star suggests that she would not marry a man who brought her only watermelons, the grandmother responds by replying that Mr. Teagarden purchased Coca-Cola stock and died a rich man (For O'Connor, Coca-Cola, which was patented by a Georgia druggist, represented the height of crass commercialism.)

In addition to June Star and the grandmother, we learn that Red Sammy Butts and his wife are also concerned with the pursuit of material gain. Red Sammy regrets having allowed "**two fellers**" to charge gas; his wife is certain that the Misfit will "**attact**" the restaurant if he hears there is any money in the cash register.

The scene at The Tower cafe appears to have been designed to illustrate the depths of self-interest into which the characters have fallen. There seems to be reason, however, to suspect that the scene was created with more than surface details in mind. In an address to a group of writing students, O'Connor commented, **"The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation."**

On one level, then, The Tower may be seen as the biblical Tower where the sons of Adam had their tongues confused "**that they may not understand one another's speech."** On another level, The Tower functions as a low-class greasy spoon, where the characters attempt to display their "good manners" in order to conceal their lack of concern for their fellow man. There does seem to be an inability on the part of the characters to enter into any meaningful conversation; the grandmother irritates her son by asking if he wants to dance when his wife plays "**Tennessee Waltz"** on the nickelodeon — which costs a dime; June Star, who has just performed a tap routine, displays her lack of manners by insulting Red Sammy's wife with the comment, "I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks." The grand-mother, Red Sammy, and his wife discuss the evil nature of the times and decide that, although they themselves may be good people, "a good man is hard to find." By concluding that Europe is entirely to blame for the way things are now, they successfully avoid any responsibility for the human condition.

As the family leaves The Tower, the children are again attracted to the gray monkey which attracted their attention when they first arrived. Members of the ape family have long been used in Christian art to symbolize sin, malice, cunning, and lust, and have also been used to symbolize the slothful soul of man in its blindness, greed, and sinfulness. O'Connor could hardly have selected a better symbol to epitomize the group of people gathered at The Tower than this monkey, sitting in a Chinaberry tree biting fleas between its teeth, a totally self-centered animal.

The grandmother, having fallen asleep shortly after leaving the restaurant, awakens just outside "**Toomsboro**" (in reality, an actual small town near Milledgeville; for purposes of the story, it functions effectively as a foreshadowing of the family's fate), where she initiates the events that will lead to the death of the family. Recalling a plantation which she visited as a young girl and which she wishes to visit again, the grandmother succeeds in getting her way by **"craftily, not telling the truth but wishing she were,"** informing the children of a secret panel located in the house. They pester Bailey into visiting the place by kicking, screaming, and making general nuisances of themselves. It is only after they have turned down a dirt road that "**looked as if no one had traveled on it in months"** that the grandmother remembers that the house was *not* in Georgia but in

Tennessee.

Agitated by her recollection and fearful of Bailey's anger when he discovers her error, the grandmother jumps up and knocks over the valise which has been covering the box in which she has been secreting the forbidden cat. The cat, freed from confinement, springs onto Bailey's shoulder and remains clinging there as the car goes off the road and overturns. The children appear overjoyed at the accident, and June Star shows a complete lack of compassion for her injured mother and the shocked state of the other members of the family by announcing with disappointment, **"But nobody's killed."**

As if in answer to the mother's hope for a passing car, **"a big black battered hearselike automobile"** appears on the top of a hill some distance away. The grandmother, by standing and waving to attract the attention of the people in the approaching car, brings down upon the family the Misfit and his two companions. It is also her identification of the Misfit which apparently causes him to decide that the family should be killed.

From this point onward, the story concerns itself with the methodical murder of the family, and more importantly insofar as an encounter is characteristic of much of O'Connor's fiction with the exchange between the Misfit and the grandmother This is an exchange which leads to her moment of epiphany.

In an address to a group of students, O'Connor noted that the grandmother "**is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death."** She also noted that **"the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for the Misfit's nor is her capacity for grace equal to his";** and finally the grandmother realizes even in her limited way that she **"is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of mystery which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been prattling about so far."**

It is during this confrontation that the grandmother, like the Apostle Peter, denies three times what she knows to be true when she insists that the Misfit is "a good man." The Misfit himself squelches her attempts to gain his favor by commenting **"Nome. I ain't a good man."** While displaying a degree of good manners fully the equal of those shown by the other characters in the story, the Misfit carries on a dialogue with the grandmother while his two companions, at his command, take the remainder of the family off into the woods and shoot them.

During this dialogue with the grandmother, we learn that the Misfit's father had early recognized in him an individual who would have to know "**why it [life] is,"** and we learn that the Misfit has pondered the human condition and has reached certain conclusions concerning his experience with life. (Because of this introspection and philosophical struggling, his capacity for grace is greater than that of the hypo-critical, shallow grandmother.) We learn that the Misfit has been unable to reconcile himself to the punishment he has undergone and that he has found incomprehensible the explanations of a psychiatrist (modern man's priestly substitute and a frequent target for O'Connor's satire), who has suggested that his actions are an attempt to kill his

father. For him, the crime committed is of no matter "because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it."

The grandmother's attempt to use religion as a means of escaping the death which has come to other members of her family proves to be completely unsuccessful because the Misfit, having weighed the evidence available to him, has arrived at a very definite conclusion about Jesus: "'Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,' he said and his voice had become almost a snarl."

In a final attempt to save herself, the grandmother is even willing to concede that "Maybe He didn't raise the dead," but the Misfit has already reached his conclusion. **"I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't . . . if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now."** The Misfit, lacking the side into which he might have thrust his hand (the "proof" offered to the biblical Doubting Thomas), has clearly decided against the Christian ethic.

Finally, the grandmother's head clears for an instant, and she makes what O'Connor has called *the right gesture* and reaches out for the Misfit while commenting**, "You're one of my babies. You're one of my own children."** The grandmother's epiphany involves her recognition that the Misfit is, in some way, a product of the hypocritical attitudes and hollow actions which she and others like her have held and taken. They have given only lip service to spiritual concepts and have concerned themselves with the gratification of their physical and material desires in this life. The Misfit, then, represents this attitude carried to the extreme. He rejects their hypocrisy by dismissing that which they hold to be of little worth (a spiritual view of life) and concentrates on the gratification of the passions. For him, **"It's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left."**

Having been touched by grace and having recognized that she is in some way responsible for the Misfit's present condition, the grandmother, now capable of something other than concern for herself, reaches out to him in a gesture of sympathy and love. As she touches the Misfit's shoulder, he shoots her three times through the chest. As though to emphasize the changed condition of the grandmother, O'Connor provides a description of the dead body, which seems to have been designed to convey the impression that the grandmother has indeed "**become as a little child,**" a biblical admonition given to those who would obtain salvation. She "half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky."

Interestingly, the Misfit himself also appears to have experienced an epiphany as a result of these events. He — who has declared that there is **"no pleasure but meanness"** — decides after having committed the ultimate meanness, **"It's no real pleasure in life."** This final apparent rejection of his previous view makes little sense unless one accepts

O'Connor's comment on his possible future: "I don't want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard seed, will grow into a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become." Thus, it appears that the Misfit may have been conceived as another one of the O'Connor characters (for example, Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tumwater — both of whom commit murders in an attempt to reject an involvement with Christ) whose "integrity lies in [their] not being . . . able to get rid of the ragged figure [Christ] who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind" (O'Connor's Preface to the second edition of *Wise Blood*).

It is interesting to note that O'Connor includes information in the story that makes possible an alternative explanation for the grandmother's final actions in much the manner of Hawthorne, one of her favorite authors. It is not until after the accident that any part of Bailey's costume is described. At that point, we learn that he had on a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it. Following Bailey's murder by Hiram and Bobby Lee, the Misfits companions, the shirt is given to the Misfit, who dons it. Significantly, the grandmother **"couldn't name what the shirt reminded her of";** obviously, it reminded her of her son — thus, her rationale for saying, **"Why, you're one of my babies." Thus, for the individual who finds "the action of grace"** to be an inappropriate foundation upon which to base an explanation of the grandmother's conduct, it is indeed possible to argue that the grandmother, in her dizzy and panicstricken state, literally mistakes the Misfit for one of her own children.

Although "A **Good Man Is Hard to Find"** is an early work in the O'Connor canon, it contains many of the elements which come to characterize the majority of her short works of fiction. Most of her stories contain an individual who has a strong feeling of self-confidence or feels that he has lived in such a way that his conduct cannot be questioned. As did the Greek tragedians, O'Connor appears to look upon these characters as being in a state of hubris (a condition characterized by overbearing pride and a sense of being beyond the rule of fate) and sees them as being ripe for catastrophe. Thus, in story after story, these individuals are brought to a crisis point in their lives, and they see their self-confidence destroyed by events, or else they experience a moment of grace which causes them to reevaluate their past lives and to see the world in a new and spiritual light. In like manner, many of the stories end in violence because O'Connor felt that it frequently took violence to awaken the selfsatisfied individual to the shortcomings of life.