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Animal Symbolism in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

The fate of the family in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” does not match the first impressions that some readers may have of the story based on the first few paragraphs. The initial tone of the story may feel like that of a comedic family movie to those who are more familiar with the latter. Because of this chance parallel, the sudden car accident and eventual murder of the protagonist family has the potential to catch the reader off guard. However, specific details surrounding certain furry side characters provide the reader with a vague foresight into events that are yet to unfold, allowing him or her to prepare for this sudden shift in the relatively slow and straightforward pace of storytelling. At the same time, these animal caricatures continue to represent the fatal flaws of the grandmother and her family until the very moment of their individual passing.

A strong symbolic character in the narrative is the “gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree” (O’Connor 473). Many parallels can be drawn between the behavior that the grandmother exhibits throughout the story and the attributes of this monkey. In general, most monkeys make quick, rash decisions and tend to be selfish. Monkeys also posses the ability to engage with other monkeys socially, though that engagement tends to be limited to some primitive variation of bragging. In short, monkeys care highly about their image in their monkey society and like to show off to improve that image. These generic attributes of monkeys are strong features of the grandmother’s personality. One example is in the well-orchestrated outfit which the grandmother equips for the trip to Florida, complete with white cotton gloves, a navy blue straw hat adorned with flowers, and a petal-laced dress so that “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady” (O’Connor 471). She also talks early on about “her connections in east Tennessee” (O’Connor 470), and how she would much rather visit them than go to Florida – how she would much rather visit people like her than people in Florida. These details reinforce the idea that the grandmother’s priorities are comparable to that of a social primate.

This particular monkey is also chained to a chinaberry tree and leads an apparently relaxed life as is noted by the narrator stating that the monkey “was busy catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy” (O’Connor 474). There are two important symbolic artifacts that are offered by these details. Firstly, the description of the monkey’s mannerisms in carefully consuming the fleas can be interpreted as referencing both the grandmother’s ladylike grace and her seemingly easy life provided as a result of her apparent dependence on her son. Second, the type of tree that the monkey is chained to is crucial. Chinaberry trees are an invasive species of tree that was originally introduced to North American in southern states as a decorative foliage. The fact that the monkey is bound to this tree is symbolic of the grandmother’s immoveable attachment to the old south, when chinaberries were simply ornamental and not considered grand weeds, and her refusal to change her outdated behavior. Right up until the very end, the grandmother was sturdy in projecting her ideal image as a fragile yet beneficially witty southern lady, just as a monkey would screech and beat on his chest to project his dominance. Perhaps this stubbornness the ultimate reason for the death of her and her family.

The other major theriomorphic symbol in the story is the grandmother’s cherished cat Pitty Sing. Just as figurative connections are drawn between the demeanor of the monkey and that of the grandmother, the same is done between the feline’s situation and that of the family as a whole. Early on in the story, as the family is loading into their vehicle with the grandmother awaiting them, it is stated that under a black valise “she is hiding a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it” (O’Connor 471). As easily and apparently quietly as the grandmother is able to tame the cat, stuff it into a dark cage, and bring it along she is able to fill the car with the family, while putting up with her attitude, to be shuttled off unknowingly to their demise. As the family later travels to an old plantation via a winding dirt road, the grandmother, flustered, startles Pitty Sing with her feet, causing the cat to jump out and catalyze the car accident that would ultimately trap all of them. This unchecked and rather rash action, causing pain to Pitty Sing, foreshadows a similar mistake that the grandmother makes that would cause the whole family great pain, which is when she foolishly exclaimed “’You’re The Mistfit!’… ‘I recognized you at once’ (O’Connor 477)! After a further long series of unfortunate events involving the family, the grandmother eventually gives up on pleading for her family’s safety in order to show herself as a lady worth sparing. This betrayal likely does not go unfelt by the rest of the family, causing great grief before their ends. Considering that the predicament in general is the fault of the grandmother, it is sensible that the family may want to realign their allegiance against the grandmother with their captor. Though the family perishes before any such event occurs, this is symbolized through Pitty Sing, who, at the very end of the story “was rubbing itself against his leg” (O’Connor 481).

**Works Cited**

O’Connor, Flannery. “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” *The Norton Introduction to Literature*.

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