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

Throughout history, humans have kept various animals close by their sides as pets, companions, or servants. As storytelling has developed, these relationships were eventually used for expressing a deeper meaning about other characters in a narrative. The distinct qualities of a particular animal, or that animal’s allegiance to a specific human, allow a creative writer to subtly describe the personalities and histories of his or her characters. Flanner O’Connor is such a writer and is well known for her careful implementation of furry side-characters that serve an alternate role. In her work “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” animal characters are included to assist in providing the reader with a succinct understanding the personalities and situations of the main characters: a cranky monkey and an easily scared cat.

Early on in the story, as the family walks into The Tower to eat, the reader is introduced to a “gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree” (O’Connor 416). This monkey servers as personification of the personality of the grandmother, as her actions throughout the story are comparable to a monkey’s mannerisms. In general, most monkeys make quick, rash decisions and tend to be selfish. Like humans, monkeys are also capable of limited socialization, though any communication is generally limited to a primitive bragging. These generic attributes of monkeys are strong features of the grandmother’s personality. For example, the grandmother goes to exaggerated lengths to ensure that she is seen as a most proper southern belle by composing an outfit complete with white cotton gloves, a navy-blue straw hat adorned with flowers, and a petal-laced dress. This is done simply for the vain reason of “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady” (O’Connor 414). She also talks early on about “her connections in east Tennessee” (O’Connor 413), 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.

Just as much meaning lies in how the monkey is portrayed in the story. The monkey “was busy catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy” (O’Connor 417), which shows how the monkey is living relaxed and gracefully. This is parallel to the grandmother’s lifestyle, as she lives carefree with a dependence on her son, doing whatever she wants with a ladylike stance and having all things go her way. Additionally, the monkey is chained specifically to a chinaberry tree. In the days of the old South, the chinaberry tree was introduced as a decorative an ornamental plant and was cherished as such. However, the plant became an invasive species near the beginning of the twentieth century and was then seen as more of a pestilent plant than a decoration. The monkey’s bondage to this foliage that was once seen as beautiful in the grandmother’s time symbolizes her attachment to the past, and how she constantly pretends that things still work as they did in her time. Finally, until the moment she is shot by The Misfit, she stubbornly projects how delicate she is as a harmless southern lady. She repeatedly presses this ideal and cries while doing so, just as a monkey would scream, shout, and pound it’s chest to prove it was the alpha. This selfishness becomes the ultimate reason for the death of her and her family.

The other 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 throughout the story between the disposition of the feline companion and the situation 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 413). So easily is the grandmother able to tame the cat, stuff it into a dark cage, and bring it along for the ride. Just as easily though is she able to fill the car with the family who puts up with her attitude only to be shuttled off unwittingly 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 421). After further 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 deaths. 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 425).

**Works Cited**

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

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