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O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

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O'Connor's A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

While much attention has been paid to the scene between the Grandmother and the Misfit at the climax of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," only passing attention has been paid to a scene early in the story where the Grandmother makes comments from the car about "the cute little pickaninny," and no explication to date has revealed the Christian mystery behind the Southern manners in the scene.¹ In this crucial passage, through the use of biblical allusion, O'Connor allows the Grandmother the chance to reveal her essential self and prepares the reader for the climax of the story.

It is O'Connor's strategy to "embody mystery through manners." The mystery is "our position on earth"; the manners are "those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal the central mystery."² J. J. Quinn refers to manners and mystery as O'Connor's "two key words":

In manners, one finds the history and ritual of a place and a people; the external, surface story and gesture that can, in her fiction, be caught in "the Southern idiom" – the very accent anchoring a history. Housed in manners is mystery. The triple dimension of mystery illuminates the context of manners. It embraces the total human condition in the crucial experience of fictional characters. It reveals spiritual insights from those material, earthly encounters that define the person.³

Quinn treats manners first because that is what we see first; inside manners, one finds mystery. The Protestant South provides the manners; the Scripture common to most there (even, according to O'Connor, to the "ignorant" as well as the "educated") provides the mystery.⁴

Violence serves as a catalyst to produce the Grandmother's moment of grace at the climax of the story, when the Grandmother "makes the right gesture" to the Misfit.⁵ However, before the Grandmother's world is shaken by violence, she fails to make "the right gesture" when she sees – or fails to see – the black child. The Grandmother has just been lecturing her grandchildren concerning "respect": respect for "native states," for "parents," and for "everything else." Then she immediately reveals her essential self by calling the boy a "cute little pickaninny." The narrator refers to the boy as a "Negro child," and the tone is contrasted effectively. In response to June Star's observation that the boy "didn't have any britches on," the Grandmother says that the child, "probably didn't have any," going on to explain that, "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" (119). The brief scene concerning the black child and the Grandmother alludes directly to Scripture – Matthew 25:31-46 – a passage in which Jesus mentions the separation of the "sheep" from the "goats," the sheep having clothed him when they found him naked, and administered aid in several other ways. The "righteous," the goats, try to defend themselves by claiming never to have seen Jesus naked (as well as hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, or in prison). Jesus responds by saying that "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." The goats are then told to depart "into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" because they failed, for example, to clothe one of the least of these.

Concerning the boy's state of nakedness we know only what June Star reports: he is not wearing "britches." A young child in a diaper would be common enough to preclude any comment by a discerning child like June Star concerning the absence of pants. It seems safe to assume that the child was at least half naked, from the waist down, or totally naked, which would at least call for June Star's comment about the absence of britches, since a child from a "decent" or – better yet – a "good" family would wear britches in order to cover his genitals. The boy's nakedness becomes more apparent in contrast to the Grandmother's attention to her own clothing, something that is obviously very important to her. The reader can not help noticing how almost each article of clothing mentioned contains some white or is white. Her clothing defines her as "a lady" (118). But the Grandmother, who comments on the black child's state of nakedness, does so as if Christ had said, "I was naked and ye painted a cute little picture of me."

While the Grandmother is commenting on "little niggers in the country" who "don't have things like we do," that is, while she is dividing the haves (the white ladies and gentlemen) from the have-nots (the "niggers"), the Son of Man is dividing the sheep from the goats. She is being sent to the Misfit devil and his angel thugs, Hiram and Bobby Lee.

Obviously, the child is not Christ himself. The child is, on the literal level, a naked, or semi-naked, black child. But the black child in the American South during the time of this story would be considered, within that society, "one of the least of these" on the anagogical level.

Reading on the literal level alone, one might conclude that the black child's poverty speaks of nothing more than the Grandmother's social responsibility. But such a limited interpretation does not adequately consider O'Connor's anagogical aims. O'Connor draws not only the line between human and human, the Grandmother and the "Pickaninny," but also the line between human and God, the Grandmother and Jesus Christ. These two lines – the horizontal one of manners and the vertical one of mystery – intersect on the ground in the concrete images of fiction, and O'Connor's use of Scripture allows her readers "to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation."⁶ The Grandmother-"Pickaninny" scene in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and Matthew 25:31-46 intersect in just such a way.

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NOTES

1. Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 119. All further references to this work appear in the text.

2. Flannery O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature," *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 124. All further references to nonfiction prose by O'Connor are from this volume.

3. J. J. Quinn, "A Reading of Flannery O'Connor," *Thought* 48 (1973): 520.

4. O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," pp. 202-03.

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5. O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," p. 112.
6. O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," pp. 72-73.