

Questions and Proposals about “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

I’m going to start with some pretty obvious questions—meaning, questions you’re probably already asking. These are offered mainly to help you clarify your thinking about this strange and troubling story.

1. What is wrong with the Misfit? Go over the last pages of the story, beginning on p. 128, and study the Misfit’s account of himself and his actions. As a thinker, he seems at times very clear, very incisive—and, at other times, terribly confused. Do you agree that at times he seems clear? Provide your own account of the Misfit, an account of his account, if you will.
2. This is a corollary to the question above: What do you think the Misfit means by the formulation, “No pleasure but meanness”? He says this twice, on the top of p. 132 and in the very last line. Is the formulation simply the ranting of the criminally insane, or is there discernment here? And if there is discernment, what is the logic that informs it?
3. What is happening to the Grandmother in that final moment before the Misfit shoots her? In the Noonday edition many of us are working with, the moment falls on p. 132, near the bottom of the page. She says, to the Misfit, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children.” Then she reaches out to touch him on the shoulder—and the Misfit shoots her three times through the chest. Just before this, O’Connor writes that the grandmother’s head “cleared for an instant.” What has it cleared for her to see?
4. What is the tone of this story? Tone, for those of you who haven’t encountered the term as it relates to literature, is typically defined as the attitude the narrator or speaker holds towards his or her subject matter. Remember: the narrator isn’t the same thing as the author. The narrator is the intelligence telling the story. This intelligence is not unlike a deific intelligence—he/she shapes the world of the story and everything you can know about it. What is this narrator’s (creator’s) attitude towards his/her creation? If s/he is a trustworthy guide, how is s/he trustworthy? Is his/her ambition a moral one? Does she have a lesson she wants to teach us? What is the lesson?
5. This is a slightly weird question—but let’s give it a try. Let’s say you’ve just finished the story and are going to make a picture of it. You have all the art-utensils you could ever possibly want. What would the picture look like? What would the scale be like, of the figures to the landscape, of the land to the sky, etc? Would the picture be “realistic”? Would the characters look like “real” people? And if the picture isn’t realistic in style, how does it look instead?

6. This is a corollary to the question above, and it draws on the stylistic term O'Connor granted to her fiction, which is "the grotesque." I have been reading and teaching O'Connor for several years now and for the life of me I have never figured out precisely what she means by the term—which is probably a good thing. In any event, if we take this provocative stylistic description, "the grotesque," and measure it against these strange and provocative stories, we may learn something. What follows, then, is a remark made by O'Connor about literature that turns ultimately on this term, "the grotesque."

"It's considered an absolute necessity these days for writers to have compassion. Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without. It is a quality which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense it is always safe for anybody to use. Usually I think what is meant by compassion is that the writer excuses all human weakness because it is human. The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything. Certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgment in it will have an ascendancy over feeling."
(“The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” from Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, The Noonday Press, 1962, p. 43)

A head-ful, that one. What do you think O'Connor means here? What do you think is meant by the term "grotesque"? (You don't need to have a degree in literature to answer the question—all you need is familiarity with O'Connor's stories.) Secondly, do you think the reward ultimately offered by "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is more an "intellectual" or "moral" one than a "feeling" one? (The question could be asked of any of O'Connor's stories.) What, for O'Connor, is wrong with (mere) feeling? It seems that what she wants her reader ultimately to do upon closing her stories is think and judge—the way one might, perhaps, after hearing a parable. Do you think her stories succeed at this? Why, why not?

Questions about "Good Country People"

As was true for "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the first few questions in the following set will ask you to revisit the story's final, critical scene, so as to clarify your understanding as to what is actually going on it. Then will come a set of questions that approach the story more obliquely, even philosophically or theologically—and hopefully at least one of these questions will help you get a handle on this story.

1. Go back to the long final scene in which Joy/Hulga and Manley Pointer are alone with each other. In the Noonday edition of *The Complete Short Stories*—the edition most of us are working with—this scene begins on the top of page 285. Study the dialogue, and study also the effect of Joy/Hulga’s and Manley’s physical encounters (two kisses, essentially) on Joy/Hulga. Something is changing in Joy/Hulga. We could think of both the Misfit and Manley Pointer as teachers of a kind. What does Manley Pointer have to teach Joy/Hulga, through his words, or maybe just through his example? How does he *foil* her; how, indeed, does her make a *perfect* foil for her? Lastly, when he takes her leg from her, what else is he taking as well?

2. This story could be studied under many applications, and to great reward. You could look at it theologically; you could look at it as a study of class consciousness in the Southeastern United States in the middle of the 20th century; you could study it as kind of philosophical debate between a nihilistic world view (Heidegger is in this story) and a Christian one (Malebranche is in this story.) But it’s also a story about parents and their children. What does it have to teach us about being someone’s child; what does it have to teach us about being someone’s parent?

3. In her letters, O’Connor repeatedly declared that she didn’t think about point of view in the composition of her stories. (She said it “hung her up” in the composition of her novels, but not in her stories.) I wonder if this wasn’t O’Connor’s round-about way of showing off; for to my mind, O’Connor thought about point of view all the time—and to brilliant, often devastating effect. Point of view, for those of you who haven’t encountered the term before, is basically the consciousness from which a given story is told. Even though “Good Country People” is told, at first glance, from the third person point of view—meaning, from an “objective” consciousness “outside” those of its characters—“he said, she said” and so forth—O’Connor has made sure to bias that “objective” point of view so that it occasionally, and very forcefully, represents the opinions and beliefs of, in particular, Mrs. Hopewell and Joy/Hulga.

Go back and study the point of view management in the first pages of the story. Whose “point of view” is being privileged here? Does the point of view remain consistent throughout the story, or does it change? Note as well that the story does not end in Joy/Hulga’s point of view. It ends in Mrs. Hopewell’s and Mrs. Freeman’s point of view. Why has O’Connor ushered them out again to conclude the story, rather than conclude it with Joy/Hulga abandoned in her loft? Whose vision reigns in this story? Following from this, could we think of this as a story about the problems that ensue when one person’s point of view dominates those of others?

4. What should we make of the quotations O'Connor has included in her story? Can they be looked to as clues to the story's larger themes? Try it out. At one point, exasperated at the limits of her mother's un-intellectual mind—and, it would seem, shot through with a desperate kind of despair she is not aware of—Joy cries out a quote from Malebranche: “We are not our own light! We are not our own light!” (p. 276). How is this wisdom played out across the story? (For those of you wanting to know the contents of Malebranche's philosophy, check out the following website: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/malebranche>. I will say, though, that I don't feel you need to know anything about him to form connections between this one of his remarks—if indeed he ever wrote it—and the story.) Or how about the verse from Scripture spoken by Manley Pointer during his dinner at the Hopewell's: “He who loseth his life shall find it.” This, as you know, is Matthew 10:39; and the teaching actually reads: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” Who loses his/her life in this story? *Do* they lose it? *Do* they find it?

5. In *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, the collection in which the two stories we'll be talking about on Monday first appeared, O'Connor enclosed the following epigraph. It comes from St. Cyril of Jerusalem, and it reads as follows: “THE DRAGON IS BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, WATCHING THOSE WHO PASS. BEWARE LEST HE DEVOUR YOU. WE GO TO THE FATHER OF SOULS, BUT IT IS NECESSARY TO PASS BY THE DRAGON.” How do you think both “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People” bear out this warning?

6. Those of you who have been reading O'Connor's letters will know that O'Connor considered “Good Country People” a kind of self-portrait. (See *The Habit of Being*, p. 106, and p. 158.) What do you make of this information? What does the information reveal to you about the relationship of O'Connor's life to her fiction, in particular about the relationship of her intellectualism to her life in Milledgeville; about her relationship to her mother; and about her relationship to “good country people”?

7. Who takes care of Joy/Hulga in this story? It would seem that no one does, nor ever has. How does her author take care of her? Does her author take good care of her? Has she, by the end of the story, done Joy/Hulga a good turn? Lastly, what do you think O'Connor would say about this question? Maybe she'd say that “taking care” of her characters was never really her job. Maybe she'd say her job was something else. What do you think?

8. In a letter to “A” dated 4 April 1958, O'Connor writes: “All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc. Thoughts?”