



Saint Misfit

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Korbyn Peebles employs the archetypal figure of the saint to examine the Misfit, a famously troubling character from Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Through this character, Peebles argues, O'Connor cautions against the sort of redemptive suffering often celebrated in Christendom. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

SAINTS HAVE A DECORATED HISTORY with their holy deeds. In Catholic practice, their actions are a model for all who follow them—often ending in martyrdom—and ultimately shape the relationship between the secular world and the entire church body. In Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor seems to use this concept of sainthood to criticize not only the relationship between Catholicism and its devout followers, but any religion that might share the same regard for redemptive suffering. She presents the Misfit as a figure of extremity to condemn the equally zealous and commonly praised martyrs and aesthetics of the past, reflecting on how their fanatical repulsion of earthly values commonly did more to damage society than it did to instill everlasting good.

O'Connor doesn't compare the Misfit to just any saint however, but instead directly parallels him to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Misfit's dialogue itself speaks volumes on his representation to Christ, and his actions contrastingly express O'Connor's criticism of this sort of radicalism:

"Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. They never shown me my papers. . . . I call myself the Misfit because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment" (243-44).

These few words go far in setting up O'Connor's correlation between the Misfit and Christ, specifically in two ways. Firstly, it explicitly expresses that the Misfit sees himself like Christ—"it was the same case with Him as with me" (243)—and secondly, it conveys the sort of innocence that the Misfit feels towards his crimes: "I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment" (244). Both Christ and the Misfit have been wrongly accused of crimes they believe they did not commit; however, O'Connor portrays the Misfit as almost delusional throughout the short story in a way that causes doubt in the reader, especially when the Misfit claims that he truly is innocent of the accusations made against him. Likewise, O'Connor also criticizes Christ's legitimacy. How can we know that Christ was not as deranged as the Misfit in his missions? It seems that there is no sure way to affirm the intended ends of either man's actions. O'Connor wants others to analyze Christ just like they did the Misfit, without assuming legitimacy on the sole premise that Jesus was divine.

The Misfit's response to his mistreatment seems excessive—he kills off an entire family alongside other insidious acts—but he is quick draw a line dividing himself from Christ: "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead" (244). He does this not in reverence of Christ's miraculous work, however, but rather to chastise it:

“[Jesus] shouldn’t have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but thow 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.” (244)

O’Connor brings light to this sort of paradox in Jesus’s story: if the epitome of Christendom is to transcend the earthly world to the City of God, then it seems almost torturous for Jesus to raise anyone from the dead, stealing away the peace and joy that comes with the heavenly afterlife of his followers. Extending this notion even further, we can say that it is harrowing of God to even let us live in this world separated from Him in the first place. This apocalyptic idea that encourages death and apathy toward the world, rather than participation in the world today because of its temporality, is what O’Connor vehemently rebukes in religion. The Misfit is ironical because he represents Jesus and, at the same time, he and his disciples slaughter an entire family. It is the encouragement of not only apathy but the suffering and violence religion precipitates that O’Connor challenges with her short story. The final lines of the story exemplify this reverence for violence that religion holds: “‘She would have been a good woman,’ the Misfit said, ‘if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life’” (245). Yet again, the affirmation of death and violence that is shown in the Misfit can also be seen across the Bible: David killing Goliath, Samson pulling down the pillars he was chained to on the crowd watching, and even Jesus’s own crucifixion. Saying that these moments of violence and suffering had value is at the same time affirming their part in society. O’Connor tries to show this extremity with her character of the Misfit to provide a reason to contest these often considered “admirable” deeds of the Bible.

The grandmother, throughout the work, is also symbolic and represents not only the often sheepish followers of Christ, but also a sort of condemnation from God himself. This dichotomy is heavy

within the dense commentary of the grandmother. Upon the Misfit's arrival, the grandmother thinks to herself, "His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was," to not only describe the narrative plot in greater detail, but to also express the idea of the Misfit's likeness to Christ (238). The grandmother is on one hand the most humbled of servants to Christ, struggling to understand His place and her own in the entire spectrum of Christendom and the world. She follows Jesus like many do but does not truly know who it is she follows and overlooks the perverse acceptance of redemptive suffering. In another light, she comes to speak as God himself to the Misfit and criticizes his radical behavior. Assuming that God had once know his son and the people who follow in his likeness, O'Connor believes their emphasis on obscene self-sacrifice and other violent tendencies has made them blind to the true word of God, and accordingly that God has forgotten who it was that he had made them to be. After conversation between the two towards the end of the short story, the grandmother comes to recognize the Misfit: "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder" (245). Taking the role as the devout believer, we can see the absolute adoration and care the grandmother's tone takes right after she realizes Jesus through the Misfit. Like a mother nurturing her child is the intimate relationship of the radical suffering for God. In similar fashion we see God still accepting those who are like the Misfit, overzealous contortionists of God's desires. O'Connor makes clear through these lines that those who go against God are not forgotten or even considered less than His children. Even though God may disapprove of some fanatical followers, He still loves and cares for them unconditionally.

Godliness is next to compassion for oneself, others, and the world. O'Connor stresses that religion should not condone redemptive suffering or apathy for the City of Man. Christendom's radical

focus on death and idolization of those who suffer creates an atmosphere that breeds violence and stunts growth in human advancement; it allows for its followers to live in a stupor waiting for death to bring them to paradise, or alternatively engage in harmful activities that damage themselves and the world around them. O'Connor implores the reader to suppress this sort of irrationality that is often a byproduct of religion, and instead exist in moderation between the divine and the earthly; she ultimately asks the reader to not become a saint. ►►

►► WORK CITED

O'CONNOR, FLANNERY. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *50 Great Short Stories*, edited by Milton Crane, Bantam, 1983, pp. 229-44.