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Killer Stories

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The Anatomy Of The Misfit: Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard To Find':
Flannery O'Connor's character The Misfit from the story "*A Good Man Is Hard To Find*" demonstrates how the Misfits struggle to craft his morals in life can lead to resentment toward higher powers, due to these powers guiding humans to rely on faith rather than tangible knowledge. This is done by showcasing The Misfits descent from prophetism into nihilism as a result of his own belief abandonment, to which O'Connor comments on as being a product of the world and its absurdities in regard to both blind and disingenuous faith. This leads to the Misfit killing as his own form of escapism or divinity, in its own right, illustrated by the Misfit (a personification of corrupted divinity) exterminating what he too sees as corrupt, such as the Grandmother character who doesn't follow God honestly. Before delving into anything else, we must first examine the Misfits collapse of morality. With no guideline, such as the divine God, there is an overwhelming ache of having no guidance. In this, the Misfit is left to craft his own morals, but with his inability to detach from God in a healthier way, is led down the path of corruption. He resents this, which is clear in his dialogue, as he speaks as if he was pushed to do this, having no choice, as God, knowing the Misfit he created, would know what the Misfit needed to be given in order to stop taking lives. In all of this, the Misfit is told to pray. Pray, pray, and after that, pray some more. "Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray . . .'" (O'Connor).

This is a direct reflection on the Church's tendencies to fall into blind faith and not often thoughtfully interact with questions of those who want to believe in totality, as a defense from what they feel is sacrilegious questioning. "(...) claiming that one of the central morals of the story is the difficulty of our discerning what justice requires." (Flint). There is a great and unlooked after divide between those who have blind faith and those who wish to but cannot. That divide burns in the questioning. Those with blind faith simply trust their God, their Father, and believe in him like a family member they've always known, knowing his heart as he supposedly knows theirs, and trusting that. However, those who cannot do this also treat God like a family member. One they have never known before, and want to get to know, but for some reason are unable to speak comfortably with. This can lead to resentment. In the Misfits case, he resents being reduced by his own belief abandonment and world views. He says nothing matters, even after killing. His tone is tired throughout Flannery's piece as if he has been searching for a very long time. As if he is a lost child, or sheep rather, in search of its shepherd. This is the root of the Misfits resentment towards any higher power, and the irritation it curates in his being, as he feels suspended in a time not made for him. The Misfit is a human who refuses the limits of his own humanity, even being shown to try to embody the divine if he finds he cannot reach it: ""Yes'm," The Misfit said as if he agreed. "Jesus thrown 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." (O'Connor). The ambiguity faith requires to be executed properly is a requirement the Misfit rejects due to the uncertainty of it. The Misfits mental journey of traveling through the borders of divinity and nihilism revolves around his want to better establish order on the world that has shown, to the Misfit, to be terribly indecisive, inconsistent, and inherently absurd; as some believers, such as the Grandmother character are

weak in their ability to follow God's teachings honestly, but strong in their ability to preserve their reputation by placing a falsified veneer of their person. The Misfit proves this veneer to be fragile when he threatens the Grandmother's life and she turns to being a better vision of God as a survival method and not from genuinity, even calling The Misfit "One of her babies" to try to worm her way out of death's belly. "Indeed he is one of her babies; for her lack of values is his lack as well." (Bandy). The significance between the Grandmother referring to the Misfit as one of her babies, lies in the connection the Church proclaims, one stating that all humans are brothers and sisters. Intertwined. In rejecting this, the Misfit further emphasizes his alienation and separation from God, and other people, in way of his inherent thinking. This links back to the Misfits aforementioned descent and the relationship between this descent, and the descent of those who have blind faith. These descents differ in terms of what they descend into. The Misfit descends into chaos, the believers descend only further into God. The Misfit utilizes the barbaric act of killing in order to validate his beliefs by taking the lives of others, and having no divine savior reach out to him, which reiterates his point of nothing mattering. Killing, in regards to the Misfit, can be construed as a form of divinity in its sheer and raw desperation—killing being the peak of the Misfits nihilism. "“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw 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. No pleasure but meanness,”” (O’Connor). This builds into the stories themes of morality, human nature, God’s nature, and the questioning of it all. The Misfit gradually goes from seeking meaning to completely rejecting the notion of it entirely. The Misfits belief abandonment stems directly from

his feeling of being forsaken by God inherently due to God's seeming unwillingness to interact with the Misfit directly, tell him the mysteries of the world, and God's own nature and divinity. This leaves the Misfit searching through other sources such as taking up odd jobs, and managements of his time in order to try to reach closer to what he is seeking. "I was a gospel singer for a while," The Misfit said. "I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet," and he looked up at the children's mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; "I even seen a woman flogged," he said. (O'Connor). This use of imagery vividly illustrates The Misfit's pipeline from searching so genuinely for divinity, not finding it, and then descending into madness as he ravishingly digs through human bodies, nature, love, death, and homicide to try to tear through the disconnect he is having with God and find the answers he so desperately has devoted his life to finding. The Misfit even kills the Grandmother initially because he is past the point of no return, and wants to eviscerate her before she has a chance to report him to authorities after recognizing him. The point of no return however, was never an action, but a mindset. "Destruction is finally the only act of affirmation available to the nihilist, his defiance of certain defeat. Like Sisyphus, he has his moment of bleak glory as he watches his stone roll down the mountainside." (Bandy) "The emptiness in the soul of the Misfit is not an absence of religious faith (as the Grandmother naively sees it), but his lack of any kind of faith at all." (Bandy). This is significant because it shows his desperation for a kind of clairvoyance or personal connection to God. He wishes to essentially be a 'chosen one' that God speaks to, proving his realness. However, this does not work and leaves the Misfit, once viable as a vessel of potential prophetism with his intense knowledge of theology and biblical matters, to turn to

nihilism. A dangerous and destructive form of nihilism of the murderous persuasion. He says there is no meaning besides killing people, only using it as a tool to pass time and live in rebellion as nothing matters to him regardless of what he does. In doing this the Misfit is retreating to empty primality. The only contrast is that for the Misfit his reach for God, his Father, is done in way of destruction as a response to the world, which in his view, is noted as being meaningless and absent of anything making it worthwhile. So killing is what he turns to. Widely known as the illest, most self damning, form of sin. This reinforces the argument of the Misfit's descent from prophetism to extreme nihilism. Just as God is known to have all the qualities of deserving one's love—his purity, his love, his safety, his promises, the question arises of: Are humans as deserving, and if not, then why were they made in the first place? Is this search and illustrated fight against one's own free will to find God just a strenuous path plagued by stumbling in the dark constructed from not understanding and fueled by self resentment that then spills onto God himself. The Misfit may also be a representation of the Devil, another creature denied from the heavens. There are noticeable similarities: The destructive nihilism, the title rather than a name, and the knowledge of the intricacies of biblical topics. This begs the question of what are some sinners, the damned, truly, if not the remains of love God forgot to give, or did not know how to. This reveals another keystone element to the Misfit. As he is a testament in his inability to remove himself from God. Rather than seek out other divinities that he *can* interact with such as the ocean and its depths, familial bonds everlasting, or even love, etc. Though the Misfit has sought these things out generalistically, it has all been a form of a means-to-an-end, to express his willing mission to connect with God through those things. Through removing himself from the humane art of assigning your life various meanings when you cannot find one in books such as the Bible, the Misfit further dislodges from his humanity,

and from himself, far before he plunges a knife into someone else. ““Nome, I ain’t a good man,” The Misfit said” (O’Connor). This demonstrates what being estranged from faith can do to someone in fundamental need of a savior, a figure to attach all of one's hopes to. To take a step back, and examine the Church as a separate entity from God, we see a place of worship, community, warmth, and escapism. This is a kind of place most people crave, even if they are not religious. The feeling of being a piece that fits into a grand puzzle and being surrounded by other matching pieces that also contribute to the grander whole of serving a divine being that is said to be like a Father figure. A family. There are many parts of religion that the Misfit could’ve been demanding. All the aforementioned aspects of the Church could all be small pieces of the pleasure and certainty he was truly in search of rather than the displeasure of having none of it at all. In trying to avoid such displeasure, he instead looks to killing as a form of his own study and escapism. Through killing he is still desperately looking for meaning, to which he does not find. Through killing he is making himself a spectacle to God. Through killing he is escaping the tragedies of the lack of his own morality by destroying pieces of what irks him. What irks him is the world God created, the ways of it, what he sees as flaws, etc. What irks him is the lies of it all, how humans behave in the name of God, and how they deceive, and contort the Bible and its meanings. The Misfit is constructed to be one who sees the truth beyond it all, but just refuses to accept it, as it is not enough to satiate him. He wants more. So he tears away at everything. It is said that we are all sinners in some way. This notion calls for a judgement of God, in turned tables. A severe questioning is brought up by O’Connor with the nature of her story here. Is God, an existential being, capable of understanding human beings, or are human beings incapable of reaching God on this physical mortal plain? Regardless of what the answer turns out to be, there is a grand disconnect of which both beings have trouble crossing. The Misfit is a cautionary tale

bred from this disconnect, demonstrating what can happen when one tries to do the impossible which is consciously attempting to break such a celestial barrier. What the neglect, disheartenment, and resentment can all build up to when one hyper-focuses on this goal, letting it consume him, leaving everything else behind, even themselves, in search of God's true physical touch. In closing, the Misfit is a testamental observatory of a character, one whose reach for the divine, in totality, is sabotaged by the constraints of his own being. His alienation morally, and existentially, fueling his name. However, he is honest with himself, something many cannot do. A contrast to the Grandmothers falsified salvation. He says he cannot make his actions fit and align with punishments he's received. "I call myself The Misfit," he said, "because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment." (O'Connor). "Even those of us willing to acknowledge our guilt are usually poor judges of what punishment we deserve for our misdeeds." (Flint). This is important because it reflects on his intentions, to show the misalignment between the world and a higher power. This structure is unsatisfying for the Misfit, and has been for a very long time, and in trying to fix it, The Misfit has instead become unconstructed himself. He is a reminder to look inward upon oneself to remember to not let yourself be consumed by unsatisfying rejection, and to learn to move on to find what else aligns with you. Killing, in its intensity, matches with the intensity of the Misfit's grandiose distaste with the world he is forced to live in. The Misfit says, pertaining to being witness to Jesus' miracles : "(...)The Misfit said. "I wish I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of *known*. (...) if I had of been there I would've known and I wouldn't be like I am now.'" (O'Connor). The Misfit will forever be stuck in this cycle, frustratingly crucifying himself and the world until he gets an answer that may never come to fruition. A lost hungry sheep personified. - *Mia Doreen George*

Works Cited:

Source #1:

Flint, Thomas P. *On The Significance Of The Civil War References in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard To Find"*. *Renascence*, vol. 70 no. 2, March 2018, pp. 119–128.

Source #2:

Bandy, Stephen. "One of My Babies: The Misfit and the Grandmother." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1996, pp. 107–118.

Source #3:

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, Harcourt Brace, 1955, pp. 1–21.