

---

## Existential Problems in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'

Existentialism proposed the idea that one is a “free agent” in determining their own development through acts of one’s own free will and self-judgement. In Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” existentialist principles are embodied by the Misfit who lives by his own value system and interpretation of morality that influences his decisions, actions, and perspectives in life. That being said, the term ‘moral’ does not necessarily mean ‘good’ since ‘goodness’ is subjective to an individual’s own moral compass and their view of morality—it is wholly a matter of perspective and how one weighs both ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ Misfit’s own perception of ‘morality’ is merely through his view of what is ‘right,’ but not what is socially accepted as right: his actions are determined based on what ‘feels’ right. He conceptualizes morality through the view that his punishment is disproportionate to his crime and that committing crime does not matter because it is a societal construct, as is punishment too. Misfit’s worldview is best understood and interpreted as a fundamentally existentialist one: he defines himself by his free will and does what he wants to do in the realm of his own moral compass, he is interested in the human condition and why societal constructs are the way they are, and is intrigued in creating his own essence through his version of justice.

The way Misfit perceives free will is based on what he wants and he feels is ‘right’ in the moment through which he defines his own moral compass. His existentialist view of his life experiences can be encapsulated in the way he “don’t see no sun but don’t see no cloud either” (239). This quote is a metaphor that illustrates his view of how he perceives both ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’ and ‘good’ and ‘evil’ on the spectrum of neutrality rather than a spectrum of binaries; he emphasized neither one nor the other and views both in neutral terms. Since Misfit identifies with ‘good’ and ‘evil’ based on his own flawed perception of what is moral, he has no control on when he decides to commit a crime or an act of ‘goodness,’ but only when he wants to or ‘feels’ compelled to do so. For instance, in the middle of the narrative, the Misfit requests his henchmen to kill Bailey because the Misfit is ‘angry’ with Bailey’s use of profanity towards the old lady: “The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened. ‘Lady,’ he said, ‘don’t you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don’t mean. I don’t reckon he meant to talk to you thataway’” (238). In this scene, it shows that his moral compass is skewed because he shows some compassion for the old lady, but on the other hand, he encourages Bailey’s expedient execution. The Misfit’s inherent contradictions are further emphasized when his tone is juxtaposed against that of Bailey’s. The Misfit says in a polite, casual way if Bailey “would...mind stepping back in them woods there with [the henchmen]” while Bailey reacts in a frightened, dumbfounded way, “we’re in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is” (239). This juxtaposition serves to underline the Misfit’s even-handed view of life and death as he is about to have Bailey executed, in contrast

---

### Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

to Bailey who feels what is at stake in the relationship between life and death as he faces his own mortality. Evidently, the Misfit is fundamentally an existentialist, as he governs himself by the law of his own free will.

As someone who behaves in an existential way, the Misfit wants to understand the constructs of society in order to comprehend his own existence. Throughout the narrative, he delves into the implications of 'crime' and punishment, 'good' and 'evil,' and 'life' and 'death' without holding himself accountable to the social norms of these constructs. After Bailey is executed, the Misfit describes to the old lady how his own father had once perceived him: "My Daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and his boy is one of the latter. He's going to be into everything!'" (239). This quote encapsulates the Misfit's inherent interest in 'everything' to do with the primary elements of the human condition. Also, the father's prophecy that the Misfit would 'be into everything' rings true in the narrative as the Misfit describes how he "was a gospel singer for a while...been in the arms 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 onct...even seen a woman flogged" (240). The Misfit has had many diverse life experiences, between which he does not prefer any over the other and he does not attribute any value over the other, whether they are beautiful or horrible, the value is in the experience itself and nothing more. The way the Misfit sees his life experiences is existentialist insofar as 'life' and 'death,' 'crime' and 'punishment,' and 'good' and 'evil' have been played out in front of his eyes and yet, he gains nothing from this except experience. From all of his experiences, the Misfit's philosophy is centered around the simple lesson: "I found out that crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it" (241). The Misfit's belief that 'crime don't matter' and that no matter how severe or petty the crime is, the punishment remains the same because fundamentally, he does not believe in the construct of crime so therefore he does not understand the logic of punishment and the reason behind punishment having to 'fit the crime.' Although the Misfit seems that he has tried to understand societal constructs, he cannot because, in existentialist fashion, he does not have the ability or the desire to understand life in binaries, but only in gray.

Like an existentialist, the Misfit seeks to develop his own essence through his need to implement justice in the style he feels urged to, regardless of whether or not it conforms to society. At the end of the story, the Misfit explains an incongruous idea: "...you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you'll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't being treated right" (241). For someone who cannot conceptualize reasons to abide societal constructs, it is contradictory that the Misfit 'sign[s]

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

everything he does and keep[s] a copy of it.' This contradiction highlights that the Misfit does understand society's flawed system which does not always follow the rules it has made. Thus, the Misfit understands that the justice system is also flawed because he feels the need to 'check and balance' his own perception of 'crime' and 'punishment' with society's view. For the Misfit, 'crime' and 'punishment' is a matter of perception, which he explores in his allusion to Jesus: "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" (241). This allusion to Jesus illustrates that the Misfit, like Jesus, had no 'proof' to defend himself against society's judgement. The Misfit feels the justice system is fundamentally unfair and has always been so, even to Jesus. The Misfit therefore, sees it as his duty to make his own justice because society cannot—in making his own justice, he is creating his own essence. Before he kills the old lady, he pronounces his own essence: "I call myself the Misfit...because I can't make for all I done wrong for what all I gone through in punishment" (241). Labelling himself 'the Misfit,' is symbolic of him declaring that he is the master of his own essence, not anybody else. When he says 'I can't make what all I done wrong for what all I gone in punishment,' he is describing how he commit crimes to balance the punishment he has already received. He is so obliged to his own justice that even when he kills the old lady, he sees her as another 'check and balance' in his own justice system: "It's no real pleasure in life" (242). The way the Misfit creates his own essence is his most existentialist quality, as he sees himself as his own bringer of justice without any guidance except his own moral compass.

Overall, the Misfit's own view of 'crime' and 'punishment,' 'good' and 'evil,' and 'life' and 'death' is that of an existentialist one: he delineates his free will based on what he 'feels' is 'right,' he wants to understand and create his own existence by comprehending the function of societal constructs as they relate to his own self-determination, and he creates and fulfills his own essence by becoming an executor of justice. Throughout the narrative, the Misfit has no sense of control when he 'feels' like doing 'good' or committing 'evil.' He does, however, refer to the societal system as to how 'crime' and 'punishment' is judged, but he is not able to comprehend nor does he want to abide society's judgement. He does not see 'good' and 'evil' as opposites on either end of the spectrum but impartial, as creating 'experiences' to fulfill his essence is merely dependent on his own moral compass. Thus, Misfit's own theory of 'check and balance' is a cyclical problem instituted on itself: he establishes his own essence by creating and enacting 'experiences' to shape his worldview—he commits crimes he interprets as justice—but he finds no satisfaction, 'no real pleasure' in these acts, because to him, 'crime' and 'punishment' and 'good' and 'evil' are not opposed, they are equivalent—equally a matter of perception.

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**