Time Flies: or How Hospitable the South Is

In Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a lively family embarks on a trip fueled by foreboding images. Masterfully, O'Connor displays a crisp slice of Southern life. However, this picture of 1950s pastoral America is tainted with numerous sinister descriptions. An accident befalls the family of six on a back road as they head through rural Georgia. Their lives forever changed by the accident, the family feels the sting of change. At the same time, American society was also undergoing an alteration. The characters are pitted against an America embarking upon progressive policies, with social status giving birth to new class structures. Therefore, O'Connor's main concern is with the icon of the ordinary American. She proves that inordinate darkness hides behind the countenance of apple pie and baseball. Through the foreshadowing images and characters in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor creates a powerful commentary concerning the dark qualities of America's changing South.

A close examination of the work reveals that the family's journey is doomed from the genesis. One of O'Connor's stronger forewarning images is demonstrated when the grandmother wears an outfit so ostentatious that if she were to have an accident "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (O'Connor 385). Almost as if she were dressing for her funeral, the grandmother's display of flashy apparel provides a robust allusion of the hubris to come. Unfortunately, the grandmother has not realized that there is no dignity in death. For the grandmother to have the thought of an accident crossing her mind, O'Connor certainly alludes to the misfortune that befalls them down the road.

However, one could argue that the grandmother's attire is not foreshadowing, but a beautiful description of a Southern bell. During the 1950s, a Georgian woman was to be prim and proper at all times, her grace never fleeting. S. J. McCown argues that O'Connor has simply fashioned characters "with all the strength of mind, prejudices, [and] fears... which go to make a Southerner" (256). There is certainly no doubt that O'Connor wishes to present the perfect picture of a wholesome Southern family. But her main drive is to hint at the fallen social members to come. By presenting the grandmother in a brazen light, the contrast between the classic Southern grandmother and the gritty Southern Misfit would distinctly shine during the work's conclusion.

Another incidence of foreshadowing comes when the family stops at The Tower. Warning the family that the American dream stands on the brink of destruction, Red Sam tells the crowd, "These days you don't know who to trust" (O'Connor 387). The idyllic picture of the American character was certainly stronger in the early 1900s, but times forced changes upon society. Families moved to cities, poverty began to rise, and a taste of the materialistic 1980s slowly emerged. Stanley Renner contends that the grandmother's conversation with Red Sam "reawakens in the grandmother's mind her dream of lost paradise" (234). However, O'Connor proves that living in the past while not adapting to changing social norms can be dangerous. As the family would find out, trust can be misplaced.

Even Red Sammy is considered an evil and sinister image. Once the family enters The Tower, they sit in a "long dark room" as Red Sam joins them, wiping "his sweating red face" (O'Connor 387). Mingling a dark color with the crimson color of Satan, interesting imagery can be detected

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through this colorful character. C. R. Kropf concedes to this claim when he states that Red Sam "presides over his 'famous barbecue' and a 'burnt-brown' wife" (192). Cleverly, blatant images of burnt bodies and hellish flames become associated with Red Sam's diner. But if Red Sam represents the devil, why warn the family of the dangers lurking in the common man? Spiritually, it is believed that the devil tests his victims. Red Sam provides a warning concerning the dangers of the past. His test lies in whether or not the family heeds his advice.

In some instances, O'Connor writes more blatantly when foreshadowing the family's demise. Having taken a nap, the grandmother awakens "outside of Toombsboro" (O'Connor 388). Probably the darkest of all the images in the work, the word 'tomb' leers in the face of the reader. To be sure, the grandmother laments and dreams of better times. Renner suggests that the grandmother's dream of a better American life is "pointedly associated with death," for it is outside Toombsboro where she reminisces about a slave plantation (234). The reader senses the irony when comparing the family's America to that of the slave society upon which their country was built. Symbolizing both the death of the American dream and the forthcoming death of the family, Toombsboro undoubtedly sounds a threatening timbre.

In another instance of dark serenity, O'Connor suggests that dwelling in the past can be deadly. When the grandmother describes a house she had visited in her youth, she tells how the house "had six white columns across the front" (O'Connor 388). Truly, the columns symbolize the six occupants of the automobile. And when they turn back towards the house, the six occupants trek towards the past, rather than marching onwards. Dark imagery is demonstrated by the "fact that the house, its six columns corresponding to the six occupants of the car, is not there" (Kropf 192). Just as the columns disappeared due to the reckless nature of time, so also must the family.

Another instance of imagery that foreshadows destruction is illustrated through the family's car. The automobile contains an innocent babe, a quiet mother, the rigid Bailey, exasperating children, and an overbearing grandmother. This generational circus provides unrefined conflicts as the age brackets collide. Carter Martin suggests that "the overwhelming irony of the boredom and tension is [not cured by] a coming into love and harmony, but sudden death" (212). Martin simply concludes that the friction of time caused the many conflicting feelings. Infatuated with the past, the grandmother tempts the young children with her remarkable stories. Solidly stuck in the present, Bailey continually guides the car and wife further from the grandmother's principles. However, it is only through their deaths that unity is found.

The healing decade of the 1950s could be felt in numerous aspects of the story. World War II had just ended, and America was again rising to a pristine social and economic position. Irony emerges in the work as the grandmother "discuss [es] better times" with Red Sam (O'Connor 388). A decade of destruction involving two world conflicts is not to be looked upon as 'better times.' However, the only important thing to this Southern grandmother was the emergence of the civil rights movement. Frederick Asals explains that the grandmother's attitudes about Europe and blacks "all expose the automatic racism of the postwar South in those years immediately preceding the civil rights movement" (238). To her, sunny times occurred when slavery ran rampant, oppression leading the way. As long as class structures did not change, the global wars did not matter to the haughty Southern woman.

Through the universal dread of the grave, the ominous visage of horror can be plainly detected. Towards the beginning of the family's trip, they pass "a large cotton field with five or six graves

fenced in the middle of it, like a small island" (O'Connor 386). Obviously referring to the six lives in the car, O'Connor sets the initial tone of the piece. Further foreshadowing is exposed when the grandmother states that the graveyard "belonged to the plantation" (O'Connor 386). Again, one notices a paradox between what constitutes 'better times.' By attaching death to a slave plantation, O'Connor wishes for the connotation to be dreadful and sad. But the grandmother does not see the plantation as having any dark overtones. For her, a heritage of cruelty and coercion stands as the keystone to Southern culture. Almost sardonic, O'Connor wishes to correct this misconception of Southern life.

The careful setting created by O'Connor leads the reader to believe that the family's attempt to relive the past brings them further into hell. The most common tint associated with hell, demons, and the devil is the color red. This significance is concretely shown when the family car overturns "in a red depression with the dust-coated trees looking down on them" (389). Representing the demons in hell, the trees are covered in dust that symbolizes ashes. Ergo, it is interesting to note that after His death, Jesus descended into hell to obtain the keys of life. Martin takes note of the setting and explains that when the grandmother reaches out towards The Misfit, she "accept[s] him as her own, as Christ accepted sinners" (211). No matter what, Jesus Christ accepts humanity, just as the grandmother should have accepted the metamorphosis of mores.

The piece's conclusion works best at revealing the staunch nature of the shifting period. After hearing the slaughter of her family emanate from the woods, the grandmother wants "to tell him [The Misfit] that he must pray" (O'Connor 393). The grandmother is only concerned with herself until the end, when she finally realizes how to care for others. Growing up surrounded by slaves, she had no pity on those that society deemed to be in a lower class. However, she suddenly perceives the error of her ways. The walls of prejudice that once stood before the elderly woman are broken, and she glimpses the fading good in her austere race. W. S. Marks insists that "it is only death, however, that speaks loudly enough to convince man of his foolish self-deceptions" (182). Knowing she is about to die, the grandmother suddenly thinks clearly for the first time in her life.

Although appearing abundant in ideal, the American spirit is actually extremely rare. In a Southerner's own mind, a prim and proud demeanor is cast over his heritage. But oftentimes, he forgets that change occurs for a reason. At times, frictions are provoked, but there is still no reason to live in the past. For behind every smile, gesture, and virtuous deed that a man does, goodness is fleeting. Too much trust in the past deposits excessive reliance on the present. Clearly, this fact leads to the untimely downfall of O'Connor's stock Southern family.

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