

The Violent Redemption Theme in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

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Flannery O'Connor is one of the representative figures of American Southern writers. Being recognized as the most outstanding writer of the American South after Faulkner, she has great influence in the literary world. Her works are always shrouded in a strange and grotesque atmosphere and full of death as well as religious metaphors. The protagonists are a series of American Southern freaks struggling with the crisis of spiritual belief. The protagonists of her novel *A Good Man is Hard to Find* are a hypocritical believer in the world of sinners and a lost man suffering in the midst of real sin, thus O'Connor uses the highest form of violence—death to bring ultimate redemption to them. In people's conception, violence and redemption are often opposite to each other, but O'Connor uses bloody and violent plots to explore the theme of religious salvation, integrating and unifying the two contrary concepts to form her unique and profound violent redemption writing.

Keywords: O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, violent redemption

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor is recognized as the most prominent writer of the American South since William Faulkner. Violence and redemption are usually two opposite concepts, but in O'Connor's novels, she often uses violence as a means to let the protagonist accomplish ultimate redemption or be redeemed, integrating and unifying the two contrary factors to form her unique violent redemption theme. In *A Good Man is Hard to Find*—her representative short novel, both of the protagonists are painfully lost in a world full of sinners, then O'Connor uses the highest form of violence—death to bring them to ultimate redemption. Therefore, this thesis takes this novel as an example to analyze the process of the two protagonists' soul salvation under the drive of violence, so as to explore the themes of religion analysis and violent redemption in O'Connor's works.

Violent Redemption in O'Connor's Works

The redemption theme in O'Connor's works revolves around the violent crucifixion, which can be studied from following aspects. Firstly, due to various crimes of contemporary people that derived from the original sin, O'Connor believes that it is necessary for the hypocritical believers and cruel murderers who have lost their morals and beliefs to suffer. What's more, only the threat of violence and death can make them realize the darkness of their own human nature, and thus explores the possibility to receive the redemption. Secondly, O'Connor's plotting is unconsciously influenced by the traditional Bible literature. "The course of redemption ranges from the accumulation of sin, violent suffering and epiphany to the coming of grace, which fits the

classic U-curve in Bible proposed by Frye. In the final return of characters' human nature, O'Connor gives the them infinite possibilities for self-realization and self-transcendence, responding to her belief-supremacy writing principle" (薛卉, 2018, p. 39).

O'Connor prefers to explore the necessity of violent redemption through the portrayal of a series of sinful hypocritical believers, who can only get rid of their sins by realizing them. According to O'Connor, the sins of people in the world are mainly divided into two types: selfish "good person" and merciless demon". Conceit and other easily overlooked but deeply rooted traits make people unaware of them but boast of their excellent qualities as "good person". The Grandmother is the representative of this group in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. As for the Misfit, he takes revenge on the society through merciless killing, trying to awaken the God and keep the social order for God. They are both sinners in need of redemption.

The World of Sinners Before Violent Redemption

In the short novel, O'Connor shows us a world of sinners where a good man is hard to find. There are hypocritical believers and miserable lost fugitives. These two groups are represented respectively by the two protagonists of the short novel—the grandmother and the Misfit.

The Hypocritical Believer in the World of Sinners

In the story, there is a group of people who consider themselves as the rare good people in such a world where a good man is hard to find. However, the evil qualities hidden in these so-called good people such as arrogance, selfishness, hypocrisy, ignorance are as terrible as the Misfit's crime. What's worse, those people indulge in their illusion without realizing it and never reflect on themselves. Instead, they often consider themselves as good people and boast of their so-called good virtues. The Grandmother is a representative of these so-called good people.

Firstly, the Grandmother is such a peacockish person that even when she was dying she was still unwilling to be honest. At the beginning of the story, O'Connor uses a paragraph to describe the Grandmother's dressing. It seems that the Grandmother is an elegant and noble madam, but the reason why she dressed up exquisitely is that she wants to be considered as a lady if there is an accident.

Secondly, she pretends to be cultivated and considerate but actually she is a selfish and cowardly person. The Grandmother insisted on traveling with her cat but didn't take good care of it, which caused the subsequent accidents and brought death to the whole family. What's more, she persuaded her son through a lie to take the whole family to where she wants to go, but she misremembered the place and didn't dare admit it, which finally brought death to the whole family. Even when the Misfit shoots her son and her grandchildren, the Grandmother is nearly indifferent to their death and only cares about how to save her own life. In order to please the Misfit and begs him to spare her life, the Grandmother said she could tell at a glance that the Misfit was a good man.

Thirdly, she pretends to have an exquisite taste but it reveals her essence as a typical American southern bourgeoisie. When their car passed a black child, she didn't care that the black child is too poor to wear trousers, instead she thought the beautiful scene is just like a landscape painting. What's worse, the grandmother use an offensive word "pickaninny" to call the kid and observe him just like an animal in the zoo. Not only did she fail

to realize the poverty and racial discrimination suffered by black people, but she appreciates other people's misery.

Last but not least, her faith in Jesus is also false. Throughout the story, the Grandmother has mentioned Jesus and pray several times, but all for her own purposes. "Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray..." (O'Connor, 1993, p. 8). It seems that she has a devout religion and follows God unconditionally, but actually she is trying to touch the Misfit so that he would stop killing and spares her life. However, when she realizes that the Misfit is going to kill her, she found herself saying, "Jesus. Jesus," which sounded as if she might be cursing (O'Connor, 1993, p. 9). When the Grandmother realized that God would not come to save her, she tore off her veil of Christianity and began to curse God.

In summary, the Grandmother is totally a haughty, selfish, hypocritical and ignorant person. Everything she did is to benefit and boast of herself. She relished her possessions and so-called virtues, reveled in the superiority of class and race, but was indifferent to the suffering of people around her.

The Painful Lost in the Real Sin World

It seems that the Misfit is such a murderous and vicious criminal that he killed the Grandmother's whole family. However, he is actually a much more religious and honest person than the Grandmother.

He used to be a normal man who lived in civilized society. O'Connor described that "God never made a finer woman than his mother and his daddy's heart was pure gold" (O'Connor, 1993, p. 10). As for himself, he said that he was never a bad boy in his memory and he used to be a member of choir, which means that he had devout religious beliefs in the past. Unfortunately, The Misfit was falsely accused of murdering his father and sent to prison.

The injustice of the whole society made the Misfit feel the indifference of human beings and the cruelty of the world. He does not understand why the law punishes some inculpable people severely while some guilty people escape the law. The cruel reality and the absurd society have tortured his spirit and soul, so he no longer believed in religion and faith, and thought that it is Jesus who thrown everything off balance. Finally, the Misfit becomes an enemy of the society and starts to take revenge on the world, which includes killing the grandmother's family in a brutal way. He went against God's will through this, trying to awaken the attention of Jesus and hoping that Jesus would restore the order in the world as well as people's faith in religion.

At the same time, out of the worship of God, he began to imitate God and play the role of God, trying to fill the vacancy of his own faith. Therefore, he regards his own will as the truth, and began to act recklessly to express his dissatisfaction with the unjust society. In the short novel, he escaped from the prison and robbed other people's clothes and car. What's worse, he brutally deprived the poor family of their lives at will. He plays the role of God in the society where God is dead and fights the evils in his own way.

As a result, The Misfit has very complicated feelings towards God. On the one hand, he has a crisis of faith because of the unjust society in which God is dead, so he wants to use his own violence to awaken God and to witness the moment of Jesus' coming to rebuild his faith, even though he may face God's punishment. On the other hand, he wants to play the role of God himself to fill the gap in his faith. He believes that Might is right, so he tries to maintain the functioning of society by his own criterion and resist the evils of the society in

which God is dead. Ultimately, in his own confusion and pull, he becomes a painfully marginal lost man in the society, longing for salvation but knowing that he cannot save himself.

Ultimate Salvation after Violent Redemption

As it mentioned above, O'Connor shows a world of sinners in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Both the Grandmother and the Misfit commit original sin. Although the former always considers herself as good person, she is actually a cold, selfish and vain person, while the latter is cruel, cold and inhuman. They are sinners in need of redemption, so O'Connor conducts the violent redemption of the two characters in the end of the story.

Violence and redemption seem to be two opposite concepts, it is widely recognized that violence can only make things get worse, so how can it be connected with redemption?

The True Believer after Ultimate Salvation

According to O'Connor, for those so-called hypocritical good people, the key to salvation is to be aware of their own sins. Only by seeing their own sins can they have a sense of repentance and guilt, and then achieve ultimate redemption. "O'Connor also believes that sinners themselves will not confess and repent by themselves, only when using violence to give them a fatal blow, challenging and destroying their original ideas, can these so-called good people realize their sins, so as to accept God's favor and redeem themselves" (孙丽丽, 2005, p. 87).

Under the threat of death, the grandmother discovers that she is a untruthful believer. As it mentioned in the end of the story, when the grandmother realized later that the Misfit is determined to kill her and her prayer is useless, she began to curse the Jesus because Jesus didn't save her life. It is at this moment that she realizes she has a hypocritical belief. Death is so violent for her that she realizes her original sin and receives God's redemption.

The Misfit's muzzle awakens her pity and sympathy, the Grandmother becomes the embodiment of God. She murmured, "'Why you're not one of my babies. You're one of my own children!'" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder" (O'Connor, 1993, p. 11). Even though the Misfit is going to murder her, she still consider him as one of the suffering people in this world of sinner. She is moved by the Misfit's unfair treatment as well as his struggles in faith and regards him as her own kid, caring for him with God-like fraternity. She wants to give her love to the Misfit just like a mother, trying to touch him and bring him out of trouble.

However, the Misfit is shocked by her epiphany, he "sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (O'Connor, 1993, p. 27). At the end of her life, the Grandmother sat in a dignified manner, which resembles the sitting posture of Jesus' crucifixion, smiling, looking up at the sky like a child. Before death, she is detached from the past external material pleasures and helps other people as well as herself with a sincere heart. Physical death is not the end of life, on the contrary, the grandmother's death is her religious self-redemption. She breaks through the cage of secular world, uses sincerity to touch the Misfit, and shows him the way of self-redemption. Thus, "she becomes a true believer of God and receives ultimate salvation, possessing permanent peace and joy" (贾婷 & 张岚, 2011, p. 38).

The Lonely Atoner in the Dreary World

As for the Misfit, although he is a victim of the highly materialistic and faithless society, he kills the whole family brutally and is suffering from his faith crisis, so he needs to be redeemed. As it mentioned above, the Misfit is longing for redemption but knowing that he cannot save himself. Therefore, O'Connor uses the Grandmother's death to conduct his violent redemption.

Before killing the Grandmother's family, the Misfit thought that killing was the only pleasure in the world. He took revenge on this society by killing, through which he tries to force God to appear.

As O'Connor pointed out in a letter to her friend, "Enlightenment is a gift from God, but it requires self-denial to obtain it" (O'Connor, 1979, p. 33). Whether it is the grandmother or the Misfit, their acceptance of Enlightenment and salvation are both based on the denial of their past selves, their past knowledge and experiences. The grandmother realizes her original sin, and for the Misfit, the enlightenment is the moment when he no longer thinks killing is fun.

After the epiphany of the Grandmother, the Misfit saw the coming moment of Jesus that he has been longing for. So he believes in the existence of Jesus again and rebuilds his faith. Thus in the end, when his friend says killing has some fun, he replies, "It's no real pleasure in life" (O'Connor, 1993, p. 11). However, his past killings has already broken the Ten Commandments of Christianity. His breaking of the commandments leaves him to spend the rest of his life repenting. At the same time, he realizes that the Grandmother has been redeemed and liberated. However, after losing the only pleasure in the world—killing, he has to flee in this boring and collapsed world during his rest life. In a sense, the death of the Grandmother brought spiritual salvation to the Misfit. He no longer struggles with his crisis of faith and realizes his guilt of indiscriminate kills, which he needs to pay off for his remorseful and lonely rest life.

Conclusion

A Good Man is Hard to Find is one of O'Connor's most representative short novels, each member of the family in the story has his or her own original sin. Violence puts the characters to the edge of life and death, but through which they get the possibility of soul salvation after painful struggles. O'Connor's novels vividly depict a series of Southern American freaks who are struggling with religion crisis. She uses death to give the characters redemption, forming her unique violent redemption writing. Her violent and bloody writing style gives readers a strong shock, forcing them to set their sights on their own internal spiritual world and lead to self-reflection.

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