Purifying the 1920s Southern American Society: The Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

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ABSTRACT

Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) criticizes the experience of human's isolation, vanity, and disillusionment in Southern America under political instability, dictatorial regime, hypocrisy of the church and high number of poverty that can lead to the crisis of faith and humanity in people's life. By presenting the violence, horror, and emotional freak in the story, O'Connor wishes that the characters can come to their self-realization upon their faith and humanity. This paper finds out that the portrayal of grotesque character in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" can be seen as a mechanism to purify the Southern American society in the twentieth century that has already been far away from their religious belief.

Keywords: *Flannery O'Connor, grotesque, purification, Southern America*

INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor is an American writer, who was born in Savannah, Georgia. In terms of writing, she is well-known with her simplicity, wit, and masterful reproduction of the colloquial speech of her native south (McMichael, 1997, p. 1929). However, her most well-known writing style is the use of the grotesque characters. Grotesque is a character having the qualities of bizarre, incongruous, ugly, unnatural, fantastic, abnormal (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 257). On her famous masterpiece Holman and Harmon say the following:

In her novel *Wise Blood*, in which she used the setting of rural Tennessee to examine the character of a backwoods preacher both innocent and demonic, victim and assailant, who created a church without Christ, where violence substituted for religious faith...They are filled with wry comedy and examples of satanic evil, and they are often concerned with what she called "the redemptive act" and a pervading "sense of mystery which cannot be accounted for by human formula" (McMichael, p. 1929).

One of Flannery O'Connor's works using the element of grotesque is "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953), highlighting the dark side of human faith and belief, and set in Southern America. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" tells about a family consists of a grandmother, Bailey, Bailey's wife, and their children that has a road trip to Florida. The grandmother at first does not want to go there because there is The Misfit but she finally joins them by wearing a navy blue dress and hat with flowers, so people will see her as a lady if she gets an accident. In the middle of the trip, there are three men carrying gun get out from the car. The grandmother recognizes one of them as The Misfit, a good man who turns to be an evil man and anti-Christ. Because she is afraid of him, she said to him that he is a good man and asks him to pray to Jesus. The Misfit said that he knows he is not a good man or the worst man either, and that he never prays but he used to be a gospel singer. Finally, she hears the gunshots and starts crying.

By presenting the violence, horror, and emotional freak in the story, O'Connor's wants to provide readers with moral and religious values alike. In fact, most characters

in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" are ignorant, selfish, hypocrite, and evil who can finally come to their self-realization after undergone the process of grotesque. That is why this paper examines how the portrayal of grotesque characters in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" can be seen as a mechanism to purify Southern American Society in twentieth century that has already been far away from their religious belief.

THE CONCEPT OF THE GROTESQUE

With the end of the war in the twentieth century, America had undergone political instability and economic depression but the country was able to be optimistic, as proven in their involvement in the international politics as a leading position (Wagner, 2003, p.332). However, the high number of violence cannot be avoided, for instance John F. Kennedy was shot dead in Dallas, Texas, in 1963. Malcolm X, a leader of the Black Muslims, was assassinated in 1965, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were both killed in 1968 (Wagner, 2003, p.333). Seeing the condition in Southern part of America for instance, there happened political instability, repression under dictatorial regime, the hypocrisy of the church, and high number of poverty. This chaotic conditions led to the feelings of meaningless, isolation, duplicity, anxiety, and disillusionment that lead to the crisis of faith in people's life. Therefore, these poor feelings and experience were often embraced by the writer, like O'Connor, by showing the grotesque character in their works in order to present the dark side of human life.

The grotesque in South fiction refers to the character that is characterized by physical deformity, such as a cripple, dwarf, deaf-mute, blind man, or an androgynous adolescent, or mentally ill, like idiot, madman, half-wit, psychotic a subnormal or an abnormal figure (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 257). Martin Foss cited properly by Haar believes that "in times of chaos men return to a magic form of art, using the demoniac aspects of life for their stories and plays: sickness, insanity, death; but they turn them into grotesque means for laughter, in order to regain their inner balance" (Haar, p.9).

Grotesque is a term applied to a decorative art in sculpture painting, and architecture, characterized by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions of the natural to the point of absurdity, ugliness, or caricature. By extension, grotesque is applied to anything having the qualities of grotesque art: bizarre, incongruous, ugly, unnatural, fantastic, abnormal. In this sense, grotesque uses the merging of the comic and tragic resulting from our loss of faith in the moral universe essential to tragedy and in a rational social order essential to comedy (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 257).

There are some reasons why the grotesque is very well known in Southern part of American literature. First, grotesque is used due to South's pervading feelings of defeat and frustration. Haar argues that

Unlike other parts of the country, has known what it means to suffer great defeat; consequently, the Southerner has a great sense o f the complexities of human existence. Such complexities no doubt are reflected in the literature of the grotesque (Haar, p.10).

Second, according to Haar, Southern part of America is not only the most religious or conservative part of the country but also the nation with a high number of atheist.

It is the region where the Bible still tends to be interpreted literally and 86 percent of the population, who identified themselves as Protestants, professed that they believe in the existence of the Devil. It is also the region where as a study conducted in the 1950s revealed—the nation smallest margin of tolerance was registered toward such "dissenters" as atheists (Haar, p.14).

The grotesque is different with gothic, but both concepts can be used interchangeable. Gothic literature emerges in the Northern America while grotesque is in

the Southern America. Although both gothic hero and grotesque characters are primarily anti-social, both of them have different setting, most gothic literatures take place outside of society, like in a nightmare setting, while the grotesque takes place within society in the daylight setting of ordinary communal activity.

GROTESQUE AS PURIFICATION OF SOUTHERN AMERICAN SOCIETY IN "A HARD GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND"

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" tells about a family consists of a grandmother, Bailey, Bailey's wife, and their children that has a road trip to Florida. At first, the grandmother does not want to go there because there is The Misfit. However, she finally joins them by wearing a navy blue dress and hat with flowers, so people will see her as a lady when she gets an accident. In the car, it can be seen how the grandmother is treated by the family, especially the children who do not really respect her. In the middle of their trip, there are three men carrying gun get out from the car. The grandmother recognizes one of them as The Misfit. Because she is afraid of him, she said that he is a good man and asks him to pray. The Misfit replies her by saying he knows he is not a good man or the worst man either, he never prays but he used to be a gospel singer. She finally hears the gunshots and starts crying.

Actually, the representation of grandmother and The Misfit in "*A Good Man is Hard to Find"* can be the best example of the grotesque characters. The grandmother is characterized as a hypocrite because she is a Christian in name only. She is also characterized as a selfish person who only focuses on pleasing herself, maintaining her pride and appearance in society, so she can be respected by other as a lady.

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady (McMichael, 1997, p.1931).

Related to her spiritual belief, she is depicted as a person who is in a dilemma, whether she should believe in Christ or not. In fact, when her life is in a danger, the grandmother directly remembers the grace of Jesus that can save her life. According to Campos and Franco, death is the most significant aspects in Christian, all human beings are destined to die, ironically, no one is ready to die (2007, p.219). Therefore, she prays to Jesus to get His salvation.

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods. She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, "Jesus, Jesus," meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing (G. McMichael, p.1939).

Through the emptiness of faith in the grandmother heart, Flannery O'Connor uses it to criticize the current condition of South American people. A political instability, repression under dictatorial regime and high number of poverty force them to live under the feeling of meaningless, isolation, duplicity, anxiety, and disillusionment that can lead them to the crisis of their faith.

In this story, Flannery O'Connor also presents another grotesque character which is The Misfit. He is portrayed as a common good man who turns to be an evil man and

anti-Christ because of the injustice situation experienced by him. In this case, he is jailed because of killing his father although he does not know the truth, whether he has already killed his father or not. Ironically, he compares himself to Jesus who never commits any crimes. He believes that he is similar to Jesus, the different is that The Misfit has the paper on him showing his criminal record. Therefore, when the grandmother has already realized and found the grace of Jesus, The Misfit remains the same; he still denies the grace of Jesus in his life and chooses to shoot the grandmother. His action in shooting the grandmother depicts his rejection to any kind of affection due to the fact that he has already experienced the injustice treatment in his life and losing his beloved family.

God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold (McMichael, p.1937)

"Do you ever pray?" she asked (G. McMichael, p.1938).

He shook his head. All she saw was the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades, "Nome," he said.

"I was a gospel singer for a while,"

"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. Of course," he said (G. McMichael, p,1939).

The worst thing is that he murders people in order to fulfill his pleasure.

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and shoot staring. "You're The Misfit!" she said. "I recognized you at once!"

"Yes'm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, "but it would have been between for all of you, lady, if you hadn't rekernized me" (G. McMichael, p.1936).

It is very important for O'Connor to dramatize the evil portrayal of The Misfit in order to awaken the spiritual consent of others, like what happen to the grandmother. When she faces her death, she is saying in the name of Jesus, finding His mercy and grace in order to redeem her sin and save her from the death. By acknowledging her mistake because she always focuses on the worldly material, like appearance, pride, or respect, O' Connor wants to say that this is the way remission is given to the grandmother, so she can die with a full of grace. In this case, she wants the readers to focus more on the effect of grace to the old lady's soul, not on the murdering scene.

The Misfit, as representative of the dark side of society, becomes a medium for the Grandmother's redemption. Feeley (1982, 18) argues that the criminal's words about the Grandmother, after killing her, "She would have been a good woman id it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" it demonstrate that he is able to understand violence's impact, as an act capable of ending old lady's alienation and bringing her back to reality and thus transforming her from a lady to a good woman (Glauks, 220).

O'Connor's idea in arguing that the grandmother has already experienced the grace of Jesus is similar to Christian point of view in believing that suffering and pain are prerogative right for the earthly life. "Yet, there are several ways to experience them, as for instance by means of physical and mental illness and other type of pain which, undoubtedly, devastate human being" (Glauks, 223). In the end, by revealing their desperation, alienation, and lacking of spiritual belief, or the characteristics of American society after post war era, O'Connor wants to show how their attitudes are thus purified. By showing the grotesque character, they can go back and believe in the name of God, get a remission and die with a full of grace.

CONCLUSION

After the war and the great depression, disillusionment, desperation, lack of spiritual belief were obvious in people's attitude towards life. By presenting the violence, horror, and emotional freak in the story, the characteristics of grotesque character, O'Connor wants to provide both moral and religious values on it. Actually, the aims of O'Connor in purifying the attitude of people at that time is achieved through her grotesque character, in this case is the grandmother and The Misfit. By dramatizing the evil of The Misfit, the grandmother who is ignorant, selfish, and hypocrite can come to the self-realization on the grace of Jesus in her life. It can be seen how the grandmother can experience the spiritual change after undergoing the process of grotesque experiences, although The Misfit remains the same, he is as evil as before.

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