

An Analysis of Flannery O'Connor's Salvation Thoughts in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

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Abstract: Flannery O'Connor is one of the greatest writers in American South, and her works are full of religious traditions and southern literary flavor. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is the representative one among all her works. In this work, Flannery O'Connor explores religious thirst, spiritual ballast, rational knowledge, crisis in belief and other themes, which are thought-provoking. This thesis starts with the basic content and research situation of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, explaining the origin of her religious belief, analyzing the characters' confusion and struggles, revealing the social reality in the United States, and discussing the way to salvation.

Keywords: Salvation thoughts, Spiritual crisis, Sin

1. Introduction

With the abundance of literary studies, a better understanding of the thoughts in literary works provides ways for people to understand the novel deeply. This thesis explores the thoughts of salvation in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* from four parts. The first part is an introduction, followed by a literature review. The second part explains the origin of O'Connor's salvation thoughts. The third part analyzes the salvation of grandmother and Misfit in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and reveals the salvation thoughts. The final part is conclusion.

Flannery O'Connor, born in 1925 and died in 1964. She was born in Savannah, Georgia, the central area of the "Bible Belt". Flannery O'Connor spent her childhood there, which had a profound influence on O'Connor's career. O'Connor is the author of two novels, 32 short stories, and numerous book and film reviews. Through her works, she helps countless confused people to find the lost belief. A. L. Rowse once said that she "probably the greatest literary writer of our time" [2]. Nowadays, Flannery O'Connor has been recognized as one of the best female writers in the south of America, and she is one of the spokesmen of American literature.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find is a short story, and it is one of Flannery O'Connor's most representative works. The story began on an ordinary day. Bailey family prepared to drive to Florida on vacation, but grandmother had a selfish idea. She wanted to go to Tennessee but not Florida. Unfortunately, an accident happened on the way. The whole family was stuck in that ditch, so they met the escaped prisoner Misfit and his accomplices. Finally, Misfit killed grandmother. In the face of death, both grandmother and Misfit found the right way to achieve salvation.

Foreign scholars, especially those in America started very early to do research on *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and its author Flannery O'Connor. Therefore, foreign studies were profound and comprehensive. Evaluations of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* could be seen in newspapers and magazines after it was published in the United States in 1955. Later, religion, women and other issues had been further studied. Taking a panoramic view of all studies, religion, femininity and southern renaissance were main stream of scholars' studies. Among them, Thelma j. Shinn's Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace and Bob Dowell's The Moment of Grace in The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor began to discuss O'Connor's religious views by combining violence with salvation. Over time, researches on O'Connor and her works have been enriched from different perspectives.

At home, the researches on O'Connor and her works were in a preliminary stage with few literatures and achievements. In 1979, O'Connor's short stories were translated into Chinese by Tu Zhen and published by Shang Hai Yi Wen publishing house. In 2010, Xin Cheng publishing house introduced the full copyright of O'Connor's works, and then all O'Connor's novels were translated into Chinese. Till 2019, there are more than 150 papers about *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in CNKI. Fang Hanquan

interprets *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* from comedy, violence, death and salvation. Sun Lili [2] thinks that original sin is an important point in her thesis *An Analysis of Original Sin in O'Connor's Short Stories*. Jiang Minrong's thesis *A Biblical Perspective on Grandmother's Soul Salvation in A Good Man Is Hard to Find* reveals grandmother's way to achieve salvation from the view of original sin and salvation. As time goes by, scholars' researches on O'Connor and her works were gradually enriched, and perspectives of research are gradually increased. In addition to religion, feminism and literature of the American South, race attracted more attention. The researches on O'Connor and her works are increasing in China, but there is a lot of room for improvement.

2. Origin of O'Connor's Salvation Thoughts

The origin of O'Connor's salvation thoughts is closely related to the religious tradition and the southern environment. Religious tradition is the origin of O'Connor's salvation thoughts and creative inspiration. At the same time, Flannery O'Connor grew up in southern America, so her works have a typical style of southern literature.

Religion is a kind of cultural phenomenon that appears when the human society develops to a certain historical stage, and it plays a vital role in the development of society and the progress of human civilization. The American south, where Flannery O'Connor lived, has strong religious atmosphere. That made her deeply be influenced by the Catholic belief from an early age. This leads to original sin, a very important concept in Christian theology and doctrine. Original sin refers to the Christian belief that people are sinful from birth. Adam and Eve break their covenant with God and eat the fruits from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This kind of disobedience leads to sin. It also leads to guilt and shame. The authoritative interpretation of original sin comes from the ancient God-father St. Augustine. He believes that the imbalance between man and God comes from the original sin of man, which is the root of all sins of man. The essence of original sin is that "man looks upon himself as his light" instead of God. The free will of man is a kind of twisted will. It refuses to give God the necessary trust, but puts man himself above God, and attempts to replace God with man himself. The root of the sin is the deviation from the standard of human creation and the usurpation of the supreme position of God. This sin of arrogance has been in the blood since Adam's rebellion against God. "Original sin is the inescapable nature of humanity. It has been most evident since the Enlightenment, when the worship of science and reason makes people be cocky and leads to a gradual loss of respect and obedience to God." [3]

Another theme closely related to sin in the Bible is salvation. "As a Christian theological term, redemption refers to the deliverance of Christians from sin." [4] The premise of salvation is sin, which destroys the relationship between human and God, and leads to the estrangement between them. At the same time, people's original sin and their living situation indicate that people completely lose the possibility of saving themselves. People who have abandoned their beliefs always believe in people's self-improvement, and they believe that human's perfection can be achieved by their own efforts. However, without exception, no one can achieve the completeness of the spiritual world, and people can only feel powerless and lost, because there is nothing for their souls to rely on. Sin makes people indulge in egocentric world and leads to all kinds of absurdity and weirdness. But in the darkness, there is always the light of God's grace through the darkness. The light makes the confused people regain the sober understanding of themselves and thus return to the right way. This idea lays the foundation of the Christian thoughts and theories, and it is the starting point and key point of the Christian doctrine. People need to be saved, because they all have "sinned and fallen short of glory of God" [5]. "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in relation to that." [6] O'Connor argues that Catholic writers' works are based on religious belief, particularly from three aspects: degeneracy, salvation and judgment. Salvation is the eternal theme of O'Connor's novels. These religious traditions are the origin of O'Connor's salvation thoughts, and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is a typical story to show O'Connor's salvation thoughts.

Literature of the American South is a kind of serious and tragic literature that appeared in southern America after the American Civil War. Before the Civil War, plantation economy was the main economy in southern America. White farmers obtained enormous economic benefits by slave's labor, thus enjoying the aristocratic life. They not only enjoyed the luxury houses, sumptuous dresses, elegant social life, but also received a good education and explored the recent progress in science and culture. The superior and comfortable life contributed to the unique memory in southern America. After the Civil War, "the improvement of blacks' status undoubtedly had a serious impact on the old aristocracy" [7]. The collapse of the White Supremacism announced the subversion of the social class structure and hierarchy in the

southern America. With the rapid development of economy, family relations and social structure began to fall apart. Under the torrent of materialism, egoism, money worship and moral barrier appeared one by one. Religion lost constraint force of morality and comfort of spirits. It just became an empty shell. After the 20th century, southern writers began to recall the past southern people's deeds in their own unique way, to record the hard history, to write the cultural traditions in southern America. They worked on waking others up with their salvation thoughts. They emphasized family ethics, religious believes and moral values. They had a strong estrangement and repulsion to industrial civilization. All of these were literary features in the south. Flannery O'Connor was also one of the representative writers of the southern America. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* also shows the literary features in the south.

3. Salvation in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

Misfit and grandmother are two main characters in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Misfit expresses his doubts about God by doing evil. Grandmother is the epitome of the modern people who live in the money-oriented society. She is selfish and hypocritical. At the end of the story, grandmother wakes up, and she shows her concern to Misfit. She is saved by God. Grandmother's death also touches Misfit, he feels pitiful for grandmother, and he also achieves salvation.

The spiritual development of Misfit is the process of getting rid of his confusion, finding the true answer and achieving salvation. Originally, Misfit is just a child full of curiosity about the world. An unjust punishment makes him feel very confused, then he begins to question the law, society and God. In the meantime, he does a lot of wrong things. Finally, he is touched by grandmother. Then his spiritual development finished. He is saved and found the right way.

O'Connor introduces Misfit at the beginning of her novel. Misfit is a wanted murderer. He is a freak in modern western society. Misfit destroys the society, but he is also the victim of the "normal social order". He seems meek and speaks softly, but in fact, he is very cruel. All the time he lives in contradiction and pain, so he can not feel the joy of life. In Misfit's eyes, religion has no significance, and it can't solve any practical problems. He has never been treated properly. When he was a child, his father didn't treat him very well, because he asked many questions. He was a curious man and tried to find the true meaning of life on his own. Doubts make him think positively, he begins to think about the unfair society rationally. The more he calls in question the belief, the more he pays attention to it. Doubts are the prelude of salvation. He tried almost everything. "I been most everything, been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twice married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado..."[8]. He was framed by others, so he got an unjust punishment. He did not even know why he had been sent to prison. He was told that he killed his father. Actually, he knew the truth — his father died of The Great Influenza. If that was true, he was just a victim. In the prison, he was completely lost, and his life had no aim or meaning. The unfairness of society and law forced him to commit a crime. He could not bear the pain of inner emptiness, so he tried to find existence feeling and conceal his emptiness by killing people. He didn't want to get anything by killing others, because he knew nobody else had what he wanted. He never prayed or believed in God, because he lived in a non-center world. In his heart, he had never been kindly treated by God, and his world had been destroyed by the reality completely. He used to feel that someone was after him, but he had no idea about who was after him and why he did that. "“Turn to the right, it was a wall,” The Misfit said, looking up again at the cloudless sky. “Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done, lady.”” [8] Misfit was at a loss and gave up all his hope. He said that Jesus had turned everything upside down. “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...” [8]. Misfit did all kinds of evil deeds to force God to work, just because he did not believe in Christ. When Misfit lost his belief and his soul, he was already on a path where there's no turning back. He tried all kinds of experiences. He lived all kinds of lives and even murder and arson. He used extreme cruelty to test whether God is "just" and "balanced". Misfit stood for the freak who has experienced the disaster of war and spiritual disillusionment in Southern America. Misfit tried to explain everything with reason, but finally all his attempts went to naught. What he faced was a world that was always chaotic and unreasonable. However, Misfit has courage to question, to think, to face, to pursue his belief.

Before killing grandmother and her family, Misfit believed that killing was the only pleasure in the world. However, after grandmother and her family died, everything became different. His accomplice told him that killing people is fun, but he denied his accomplice and told him: "There's no real pleasure in life." To a certain extent, these dialogues reflect Misfit's inner change. His conscience has been lost for a long time, but now "he has a trace of sympathy in his heart" [9]. "“She would of been a good woman,"

The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.'" [8] He knew although grandmother died, she was saved, and he also understood that death brought salvation to grandmother. Grandmother was saved, but Misfit still needed to live hard in this world after he lost the only pleasure — killing. However, in a sense, Misfit was saved.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, grandmother is a complex and memorable character. She is a selfish woman. At the beginning of the story, she tried to persuade her son to go to another place for vacation. In fact, she had a secret in her heart that she wanted to visit her old friend in Tennessee. Before traveling, grandmother knew that Bailey did not like to stay with a cat, but she still secretly took it into the car and found a highfalutin and humane reason that she didn't want the cat to stay at home alone for three days, otherwise she would miss it very much, and she was worried that it might ignite the gas and died accidentally. Along the way, although grandmother did not steer, she controlled the direction according to her own will. While on the road, she suddenly wanted to visit the old plantation, but she did not speak frankly. In order to achieve this purpose, she deliberately incited the emotions of her grandchildren. She said that in the old plantation in Georgia (actually in Tennessee). "She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden." [8] The house was so beautiful that the children were so attracted, so they demanded to go there. Eventually, grandmother was satisfied too. On the dirt road to the plantation, grandmother suddenly remembered that the plantation was not in Georgia but in Tennessee. Because she remembered the place incorrectly, she was so nervous and stamped her foot in haste. As a result, she hit the valise next to her. That made the newspaper shake, so the cat was frightened, and it bounced to Bailey's shoulder, causing the accident. At this time, grandmother curled up under the fender of the car, ridiculously hoping that she would be injured, so she could get sympathy from her son, and her son would not vent anger on her immediately. Moreover, she decided not to tell her family that the real location of the plantation was in Tennessee. After they met Misfit, grandmother's children and grandchildren were shot one after another. At this moment, grandmother wanted Misfit to pray with her to get God's forgiveness. The purpose of her prayer was not to protect her children or grandchildren but to save herself. She even intended to use all her money to offer a bribe to Misfit. Misfit felt unimaginable because he believed that no one would give tips to a murderer. All these proved that grandmother was very selfish.

Grandmother is hypocritical and funny. Another reason she chose Tennessee was that she insisted that her choice, Tennessee, was a civilized land, Tennessee represented her conscience and was a place where children could get education and broaden their horizons. In addition, the murderer Misfit escaped from the federal prison, and he was running towards Florida. Grandmother did not want to take her children to such a dangerous place on vacation. She felt that if she did that, she would be uneasy. O'Connor's description of the old grandmother is also reflected in her dress. "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..." [8]. Grandmother's purpose is if an accident happened, anyone saw her death on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. The grandmother always wanted to dress herself up as an elegant, educated and civilized person. This fully reflects the extreme vanity, the shallowness and distortion of a middle-class woman. She only cared about her image and regarded it as the most important moral standard. On the way, grandmother kept lamenting that people are certainly not as good as before and a good man is hard to find to highlight her superiority and the education that she had. All these really show the shallowness and hypocrisy of the grandmother.

When she faced Misfit, she already knew she was in danger. She tried many methods. First of all, she tried to remind Misfit that she is a lady and a gentleman should not shoot at the lady. The first method is invalid. Secondly, she tried to remind Misfit of his family. Although Misfit admitted that he was born in the best family in the world, he was still unmoved. Finally, although the grandmother did not believe in God, she tried to preach to Misfit and gave Misfit all her money. But all her efforts were in vain. Ordinarily, her words were just hot air, and she threw her religious belief out of winds. When she faced death, she finally remembered God and Jesus, and persuaded Misfit to pray with her together. But in fact, she did not really believe Christ. Therefore, she prayed again and again, but it did not work. After listening to Misfit's views on Jesus, she felt so dizzy and fell into a ditch with her legs twisted under her. She began to doubt that maybe Jesus could not raise the dead. Of course, Misfit did not give an affirmative answer. He said he also did not know because he was not there, if he had been there, he would not be like how he is now. At this time, grandmother's head cleared suddenly. "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!'" [8] And when she reached out to touch him, three bullets shot into her chest one after another.

Grandmother showed her love for Misfit before she died, and she even called the murderer “son” and reached out to touch him. O’Connor explained that the gesture made by grandmother made the story meaningful: it showed that grandmother realized that she should be responsible for the person in front of her and used relative relationship to connect with him. In other words, before grandmother’s death, her behavior is undoubtedly the result of accepting the salvation of God. Only by God can she sympathize the murder Misfit. The image of grandmother's death reveals the mystery of the religious allegory. In a sense, it is a very vivid portrayal of the Bible about people entering heaven after death. In the ditch, she half sat and half lay in a pool of blood with her legs twisted under her like a child’s, and her face smiled towards the cloudless sky. This image is consistent with the image that Jesus said, “no one can enter the heaven if he does not admit God’s kingdom like a child.” [10] Obviously, the death of the grandmother shows that she has accepted the salvation of God.

4. Conclusion

This thesis is mainly discussing the thoughts of salvation in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Flannery O'Connor's creation period was in the 1950s and 1960s. American society was enjoying the material prosperity after the Second World War. Under the illusion of peace and prosperity, it is the desolation of people's spiritual world. The modern people get trapped in the spiritual wasteland, so they need to be saved. O’Connor’s writing is a dialogue with an era. She finds beliefs for the empty people; ways for the confused people; cures for the modern society. Analyzing *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, we could understand her salvation thoughts and the theme of the novel deeply. This thesis will enrich the research on O’Connor and provide a way for readers to understand Flannery O’Connor’s works, as well as literature of the American South.

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