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A Good Literary Theory Is Easy To Find

Thomas C. Foster's How to Read Literature Like A Professor is filled with many interesting theories and ideas about the ways literature pushes readers to think more critically about poems, novels, and short stories they read. Although Foster's book may be dry at times, he still has very accurate and factual information. Many of these same theories appear in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." O'Connor's short story is full of these important literary elements and theories. The most noticeable are geography, irony and foreshadowing, quests, and vampires.

Geography plays an important role in O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The story is mainly about a family (and one kooky grandma) that decides to go to Florida for vacation. Foster's claim that "when writers send characters south, it's so they can run amok" (Foster, 171) is very noticeable in the story. The characters are travelling from their native Atlanta, Georgia to an unknown destination in Florida (O'Connor, 447). Florida is *south* of Georgia, so you know from the beginning that problems are to be expected ahead. Another Foster claim that is seen in the story is the meaning of valleys. When the family crashes their car, they end up in a ditch (O'Connor, 452). Low areas like valleys and ditches often contain "swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, and death" (Foster, 173). So when the family crashes their automobile into the ditch (O'Connor, 452), a good reader

can assume that something unpleasant is going to happen to them—in this case death.

Geography is a very important element in literature, and is very meaningful in O'Connor's short story.

Although not one of Foster's strongest arguments, irony is very present in this short story. Especially in the form of foreshadowing. The story is literally dripping with irony and foreshadowing to the families death; and as Foster said, "irony trumps everything" (Foster, 234). In the beginning, the grandma writes down the mileage (55,890 miles) the car has to see how many miles they travelled when they get back (O'Connor, 447). Ironically, she will never find out as she will die at the end. Another ironic example is the cat in the story. The grandma takes the cat because she is afraid it will accidentally asphyxiate itself (O'Connor, 447). Not only does the cat cause the accident that leads to the family's death, but *befriends* the man who killed the entire family (O'Connor, 459). Other examples include "they passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it" (O'Connor, 448); and when the Misfit's car pulls up it is described as a "big-black battered hearse like automobile" (O'Connor, 453). There are even more foreshadowing references to the family's death throughout the story. O'Connor loves to use descriptive irony numerous times throughout the story.

One could argue that the family in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" is on a quest. What may start out as an dysfunctional family vacation turns into something a lot more serious. Foster states in his book, "the real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge" (Foster, 3). This very noticeable in the story with the grandma. She originally starts off as a very selfish individual, but by the end of the story she ends up finding the ability to see others with compassion and understanding, especially when she calls the Misfit "one [her] own children" (O'Connor, 459).

Ironically, when this revelation occurs she is then killed by the Misfit. So one could say the family in O'Connor's story is on a quest. A quest to find grandma's understanding for other people. A quest that gets them all killed.

Foster's theory of vampires is also present in O'Connor's short story. As Foster says, "...you don't need fangs and a cape to be a vampire" (Foster, 19). One may consider that the grandma is a vampire, and there is a lot of evidence to back up this claim. He mentions a vampire could be "an older figure representing corrupt, outworn values" (Foster, 19), and this describes the grandma perfectly. The grandma is very selfish person in this story, and has little to no love or affection for her fellow family members. It becomes very obvious towards the end of the story, when she only pleads for *her* life. She is also the one that caused everyone to be killed (as she brought the cat and recognized the Misfit). But some could even argue that the entire family (especially the kids) are vampires. The fact that June was disappointed that no one was killed (O'Connor, 453), and that the children were almost in delight they had an accident (O'Connor, 452) gives evidence they could also be possible vampires. But it is mainly the grandma is the main vampire in this story. She may redeem herself at the end of the story, but by that time it was too late.

Four of Foster's theories translate well to Flannery O'Connor's story. Foster's arguments/ideas of the symbolic/thematic importance of geography, irony/foreshadowing, quests, and vampires are exemplified well throughout the short story. These key literary elements really fit well with the O'Connor's message in the story, which is how people can find salvation and redemption in the most of unlikeliest of places. By using some of Foster's

theories, a reader can find a lot more about a story than they originally did when they first read it.

Work Cited

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

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O'Connor, Flannery R. "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. 11th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012. 446-59. Print