

VIOLENCE IN “A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND”: THE FACES OF MARGINALITY

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ABSTRACT: In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find, Flannery O’Connor depicts a contemporary society, in which the characters’ behaviors are terribly similar to those habits and attitudes of the real world Marginality, disrespect, aggressions, either psychological or physical, and crimes cohabit, side by side, with citizens who attempt to live their lives not only under the precepts of the Ethics and the Moral, but to live according to the principles of human dignity. The type of violence that O’Connor presents in her narratives goes beyond the limits of the physical level, when it is observed on the psychological level as well, either as a shadow that permeates the quotidian of the social environment, or as a feeling of anguish, hurt, suffering, and fear that dominates men under the expectation of violation or imminent death. In this context, this work investigates violence’s constitutive elements in O’Connor’s short stories, under the perspective of the Philosophy of Law, demonstrating the chaotic universe constructed in the discourses which reveal society’s conflicts.

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In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor depicts a contemporary society, in which the characters' behaviors are terribly similar to those habits and attitudes of the real world. The verisimilitude established in the short story shocks the reader who feels himself threatened by the violence expressed in terms of hijacking, aggression, murder, mental and physical torture, in which the criminal's sadism is suggestive of animal brutality. Marginality, disrespect, and crime coexist, side by side, among citizens who seek to pattern their lives not only on ethics and morality, but also on living within the patterns of human dignity. The kind of violence O'Connor presents goes beyond the boundaries of the physical level, when it is equally exercised on the psychological level, either as a shadow of fear that contaminates the everyday social environment or as experiences of suffering, pain, anguish, and terror which are present in the expectation of violation and imminent death. In this context, this essay investigates the elements of O'Connor's story, under the perspective of the philosophy of the Law and the concepts of psychoanalysis, demonstrating the chaotic universe constructed through the discourses which reveal the conflicts existent in society.

Flannery O'Connor presents, in her narrative, characters whose behaviors reflect the society in which they inhabit. The proper title of the story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," which, by the way, entitles the work of a collection of short stories, is suggestive of the author's interest in unveiling the human nature, related to the dichotomous vision of good and evil. According to Plato, all types of knowledge are, invariably, united to the concept of goodness. For the philosopher, there is no way to understand the meaning of good, unless through a

long and arduous journey. Yet, it is known that, in the world which was primarily created by God, only goodness existed, and it was the endemic man's uncontrolled desire for the tree of knowledge that led him to lose the prerogatives of the paradisiacal state. Man's primal nature of goodness and innocence was substituted for a complex one, which has been a challenge to human understanding throughout time. As a result of man's disobedience, the universe reserved for him reflects his fallacies; consequently, to the notion of goodness was incorporated its dichotomous opposition: evil. Dualism constitutes, then, a characteristic of the human nature.

In Flannery O'Connor, the idea of a world in which good and evil cohabit, side by side, is imperative. The author, however, impresses in her narrative a notion of a redemptive force, denominated by her as a moment of grace. In this idea it is embedded a sense of religious and social responsibility that surpasses the duty that each man has towards himself; the commitment to his fellow creatures. In this way, O'Connor's characters find understanding when they are able to see themselves responsible for their fellowmen, under a Christian perspective of fraternity and love.

In recognizing the use of violence in modern fiction, O'Connor affirms (1988) that violence is strangely capable of bringing her characters back to reality and of preparing them to accept a moment of grace. The author believes that violence is not an end in itself, but an extreme situation, which reveals the nature of man. Violence, she explains, can be used either for good or for evil purposes. Man under pressure, involved in a situation of violence, reveals the necessary qualities to take with himself to eternity.

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor presents a story of a family of six, who, while on vacation on a trip to Florida, suffer a car accident and are hijacked by a convict, the

Misfit, who had escaped from prison. The Grandmother, her son Bailey, his wife and three children are the members of this characteristically common southern family, who find themselves under an extremely stressful situation, when they see themselves facing imminent death. In the car, there is also the family's cat that the Grandmother takes hidden in her basket, which unexpectedly jumps from the hidden place and frightens Bailey, who loses control of the car.

To O'Connor (1988, p. 14), death is the most significant position life offers Christians. Undoubtedly, death is the most ironic aspect of life, since all human beings are destined to die, although no one is ready to it. Certainly the heroine of the story, the Grandmother, wishes to see this moment postponed indefinitely, as any other human being does. Nevertheless, the old lady witnesses the extermination of all the members of her family, one by one, children and adults, and is aware of her imminent death, as she would be the next to be killed. She tries in all ways to convince the criminal to spare her life and comes up with an unexpected act, when she tells the assassin that he is one of her own children. However, as Campos (2004, p.15) highlights, the Grandmother's behavior reveals how distant she is from the real world. Her knowledge of human evilness and marginality was restricted to television and newspaper news. The old lady finds herself protected and safe in her domestic environment, a condition characteristic of children and old-aged people. In this way, when the accident happens, the children euphorically exclaim, "We've had an ACCIDENT! and are ready to celebrate the adventurous event, and simultaneously feel disappointed and promptly lament that no one has been killed.

On the other hand, yet similarly to the children's reaction, the Grandmother is concerned about showing that she has been injured, to avoid suffering any kind of reprimand from

her family. Her next flaw is to recognize the Misfit, as she childishly tells the man she has seen his pictures in the newspapers, to which the criminal replies: “but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of reckernized me” (p.22). The Grandmother helps, thus, to sign the death sentence of all her family. A grotesque figure, the old lady illustrates that old people do not become wiser as they grow older. They do become, similar, maybe to children, inoffensive and ignorant, in terms of relative innocence. In commenting about her own work, O’Connor says that when the Grandmother finds herself alone with the Misfit, she recognizes, although limitedly, her responsibility towards the man who is in front of her. She also understands that they are united by ties of kinship which have their origin in the mystery she begins to unveil (1988, p. 17). Under the perspective of grace under pressure, O’Connor’s short stories present much violence, in which evil seems to be necessary for the achievement of a spiritual understanding. The Misfit and his accomplices offer the ideal stressful occasion to awaken the old lady to an understanding of her own social responsibility.

They, as representatives of the dark side of society, become the instruments for the Grandmother’s redemption. Feeley (1982, p. 18) argues that the criminal’s words about the Grandmother, after killing her, “She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (p. 29), demonstrate that he is able to understand violence’s impact, as an act capable of ending the old lady’s alienation and bringing her back to reality, and thus transforming her from a lady to a good woman. In portraying a world in which good and evil are intertwined, without taking into account to what extent each of these values is covert or distorted by the human mind, O’Connor also considers their different levels, that is, the existence of more or less good or evil

in each being. She still suggests the possibility of changing of attitude, of achieving a moment of grace, translated in terms of man's recognition of his duties to his own self, to his fellowmen, and to the universe. The Grandmother's gesture illustrates the author's belief in good and evil as being the unequivocal reality which overcomes evil. Nevertheless, this reality is weakened by human evil. Good and evil, the author explains, seem to be united at the spine in every culture, and that the social is superior to the merely personal (1988, p. 200).

On the other hand, analyzing the Grandmother's behavior and recognizing her equivocal attitudes, the author herself explains, on her commentaries about the story, that the old lady is not a bad person; otherwise, she would not have been given the opportunity of achieving a moment of epiphany.

When O'Connor comments on the several critical readings on "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in which some readers believe that the Grandmother is a figure of evil, conferring to the Misfit a morality superior to the old lady's, the author agrees that the lady is a hypocritical soul, that her wisdom is not a match to the Misfit, and that not even her capacity to understand the meaning of the state of grace is equal to his (Charters, 1987). However, the author concludes, the reader who approaches the text without preconceptions feels that the Grandmother achieves, in the narrative, a special triumph which, instinctively, is not attributed to someone with a felonious character. O'Connor makes it clear that the narrative's focus is not on the murders, but on the effect of grace on the old lady's soul. Concerning the author's own arguments, the reader cannot avoid questioning if there is really the need of violence for recognizing a moment of grace; if an error is necessary for the perception of rightness, and darkness to seeing light.

When one analyzes the Grandmother's attitudes and recognizes her equivocations, one gets to the conclusion that her behavior and those of the members of her family are considered normal by the social patterns, since her anxieties do not affect directly her fellow creatures and do not constitute an aggression to society. They simply represent the daily attitudes of a common Southern middle class family, who have anxieties, desires, and conflicts. The children of the family fight, disobey, demand, play and dispute among themselves and with the Grandmother, who also uses whatever artifices she has to conquer what she wants; the mother, well described by O'Connor, as an amorphous and submissive figure, quite comic, "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green headkerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears" (p. 9); and the father, Bailey, a quiet man, passive and without authority. It is important to highlight that among all the characters, Bailey and the two older children have names, June Star and John Wesley; the old lady is simply the Grandmother and the wife, "the children's mother." O'Connor is careful in naming inclusively the cat, Pitty Sing, the Misfit and his two men, emphasizing, in this manner, the unimportant condition of the two women, similar in rank, perhaps, to the baby's, voiceless and cared for.

On the other hand, when they find themselves in the accident, the members of the family hope for an aid, but, ironically, help comes invested of assault to insecurity and to human dignity. The car that stops to aid them is driven by a fugitive and two other criminals, who seeing themselves freed from prison, insinuate into society, spreading fear and anxiety to the common people who feel themselves under constant threat. The so dreamed vacation ends up in anguish and terror. Bobby Lee and Hiram, the Misfit's partners, coldly kill the father, the

baby, the mother, and the two children, at the command of the fugitive. The grandmother, who witnesses the massacre of the whole family, is killed with three shots to the chest, by the Misfit himself. The only one to escape from the felony is the cat, Pitty Sing. The murderer has it in his arms, as he orders his men to put the Grandmother's body next to the others.

Ironically, the Grandmother dies with her legs crossed under her like a child's. The image of her dead figure reminds that of a harmless and innocent being, awaiting protection. The Grandmother's description is tragic and significantly ironic, as O'Connor portrays her smiling to the clear sky, without clouds, suggestive of an unproblematic and harmonious environment. "The grandmother half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (p. 29). Paradoxically, as Paulson (1988) remarks, the grandmother's puerile position is achieved through suffering and pain. The above passage reinforces the idea of how marginality is impregnated in any social environment and how its inhabitants see themselves obliged to live situations of fear, anxiety, and threat.

Under a Christian point of view, as the author conceives, the grandmother experiences a moment of a state of grace when she recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children. Nevertheless, the irony persists in the narrative by the ambivalent idea that is contended in the suggestion of salvation and epiphany through the acceptance of marginality, which is indirectly implied in suffering and pain. It is known that suffering and pain are prerogatives of the earthly life. Yet, there are several ways to experience them, as for instance by means of physical and mental illness and other types of pain which, undoubtedly, devastate human beings. To accept aggressiveness and criminality as social prerogatives is synonymous to

misunderstanding and distortion of the social, Christian and natural Laws, as well as of the court orders.

Greco and Galvão (1999), speaking of culpability, assume that:

All human conduct possesses two simultaneous and indissoluble aspects. One is external, which expresses a behavior apt to modify the naturalistic world; and the other is internal, translated by the psychic movement necessary for the elaboration of volition. The Law has as objective to value the human conduct, and, since it is impossible to conceive it apart from its psychic element, it is necessary to recognize the interest of the Law in the freedom to want. Thus, the concept of free will emphasizes the power of the individual to act in another way, that is, as he should. (p. 362).

According to Greco (2005, p. 430), the culpability, that is, the censorship which falls on a typically illicit conduct, is individual, since man is a being that possesses his own identity, being this the reason why there is no human being like the other. In speaking of culpability, Greco explains that all the facts, internal or external, must be taken into account, in order to verify if the agent, under the conditions he finds himself and in which the action is contextualized, could act in any other manner.

The Misfit is extremely conscious about the real, concrete, and physical world. When the Grandmother tells him that the wrecked car had capsized twice, the assassin corrects her saying that it had happened only once. For him, there is no pleasure in life, but meanness and malice only. As such, he lives and behaves with what life offers him. He kills as a choice. To assault and kill are habits that this psychopathic man sees himself obliged to execute.

According to Ochshorn (1990), the power that the Misfit exercises in the narrative is not restricted to his gun and violent strokes. His energy derives from his cunning, experience and knowledge of evil. For Ochshorn, the fact that the Misfit shoots the old lady after her offer to him of a gesture of fraternity demonstrates the criminal's rejection to any kind of affection and also to a possible involvement with her and with all that she represents in society: family ties, affection, religion, beliefs, licit attitudes, in accordance to what is prescribed by Law. O'Connor's world is satirical, not theological. She presents a society under a real and cold perspective, deprived of illusory ornaments. The panorama she paints is in black and white, without mercy, terribly close to the contemporary world that man well knows, fears, and loves; a world that humans try to picture in a different color, in the best possible way, conscious of a shadow that haunts all, colorless and without definition of the moment of threat, yet present and frightful.

What is astonishing in Flannery O'Connor is her capacity to present, side by side, a tragic-comic vision of the human behavior, represented in a mangle of ignorance, misunderstanding, rebellion, passivity, grotesqueness, and aggressiveness. In a social environment considered "safe," men live and experience insecurity, alienation, and marginality. These three elements, which result from a social context, are interrelated as links of the same chain. Alienation belongs indistinctly to all men, the good and the evil, the innocent and the guilty; in one as a form of defense, on the other as rebellion. There is, however, a little of each in both.

Insecurity seems to consume those who have to protect themselves from aggressions, from felon and criminal violence. Insecurity originates, also, as a constant threat, which leads the honest citizen to enclose himself within his own domestic site. Insecurity, ironically, is also part of the conviviality among

aggressors, who see themselves as preys of their own attitudes, to be captured instantly at any moment. Thus, a vicious cycle unwinds, in which the first crime leads to others, where victims and aggressors live situations of anxiety and insecurity, when both become preys subject to be exterminated. The difference consists of the contraposition between the victim's innocence and the agent's trickery and fraud. The Misfit's behavior is characterized by the conscience and free-will to exterminate one by one.

Welzel (2005, p. 204) asserts that all conscious action is conducted by the decision of the action, that is, by the conscience of what is desired – the intellectual moment – and by the decision concerning the will to do it – the volitional moment. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the Grandmother's naiveté leads the murderer to exterminate all the members of the family, from the youngest to the oldest. Not even the baby is spared, though he could not speak and recognize anyone. Marginality is spread all over, present in all social classes and environments. The protagonist of marginality extends it, indistinctively, to all human beings, either as concrete victims or as spectators who suffer the torments and terrors of violence.

In the light of this, violence in big to small cities and the population's feeling of insecurity are moving indications and factors for the need of a radical transformation of the urban areas. The fictitious as well as the real social condition is complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical. Men in society, as they experience, each day, more complex and uncontrollable situations of marginality, become unable to distinguish the truly frightening types of violence as well as to identify the real enemy or the aggressor. The need to point out the authorship of the violent deeds falls mainly upon the economically hypo-sufficient population. Nowadays, the poor neighborhoods are stigmatized and their inhabitants are considered the barbarous

ones, ready to attack the honest citizen. Such vision, built up mainly by the media, is at least discriminatory and preconceived, since the people who live in slums are not necessarily more dangerous and violent than the ones who inhabit in other sections of a city. They are, in truth, more exposed to violence due to their unfavorable social and economic condition (Pedrazzini, 2006). They certainly are victims, who adopt certain mechanisms of survival which are responsible for disseminating a negative image in relation to a world that offers them few chances of survival.

In such a context, prison is no longer synonymous to a criminal's confinement, but has become a confinement for honest people, who see themselves obliged to build walls of protection around their homes. On one side, the honest citizens are imprisoned in their houses, dependent on an overly protected consumer universe. On the other, the dishonest citizens, who stroll aimlessly in the streets, suspect of illicit behaviors, under the pan-optic and all powerful eyes of the police (Davis, 1990).

O'Connor's work, thus, functions as a paradigmatic indictment of the chaotic reality, mirror of civilization's wilderness, where criminals are ironically aggressors and victims, products of social oppression, corruption, intolerance, and exclusion. Such types of violence transform men into frightened beings who react impetuously under the minimal obstacle and threat.

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RESUMO: Em "A Goodman Is Hard to Find", Flannery O'Connor retrata uma sociedade contemporânea, cujos comportamentos de suas personagens assemelham-se, terrivelmente, às atitudes e hábitos do mundo real. Marginalidade, agressões, desrespeito e crimes coabitam, lado a

lado, com cidadãos que buscam não somente pautar suas vidas na ética e na moral, mas também desfrutar a vida dentro dos padrões da dignidade humana. A violência apresentada por O'Connor ultrapassa os limites do plano físico, quando é exercida igualmente no nível psicológico, seja como sombra de medo que paira no cotidiano do ambiente social, seja como experiência da própria vivência do sofrimento, da dor, da angústia e do terror que se instauram na expectativa de violação e morte iminente. Nesse contexto, este trabalho investiga os elementos constitutivos de violência no conto de O'Connor, sob a luz da filosofia do Direito, demonstrando o universo caótico que se constrói nos discursos reveladores dos conflitos existentes numa sociedade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Flannery O'Connor; comportamentos; sociedade; marginalidade; violência; Direito e Literatura.

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