

In his book *The Literary 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets of All Time*, Daniel S. Burt surmises:

At the core of O'Connor's artistry is the struggle to achieve significance and meaning in a ["modernist"] world of disbelief that undermines relationships and defines individuals not as spiritual beings but as animals and automatons. To awaken her readers to larger possibilities of the spirit, O'Connor arranges a grotesque and often violent disruption of the ordinary and the expected. She contended that "mine is a comic art, but that does not detract from its seriousness," and she argued, "A serious fiction writer describes an action only to reveal a mystery." ...In one of her most acclaimed short stories, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," a southern family's complacency and self-centered blindness are shattered through the agency of a homicidal maniac called the Misfit. Seen by the author as an agent of the Devil, the Misfit nonetheless prompts a redemptive act on the part of the family's self-centered grandmother and provides her appropriate epitaph: "She would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

However, not all critics agree that the work is so hope-filled. Despite O'Connor's indication that the grandmother experiences a "special kind of triumph" and enjoys a sudden accession to grace, critics such as Stanley Renner argue that such an interpretation is "not supported by the logic of [the story's] own content." According to Renner, knowing what to make of the grandmother is the key to understanding the story: "Is she the heroine, as the author apparently regarded her, or the villain, as other readers have found her?" As Renner argues, "Indeed, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" seems to invite the reader to hold the grandmother responsible for The Misfit...what the grandmother represents has somehow produced what the Misfit represents...the story holds her responsible for a substantial share of the disorder it portrays." Ultimately, Renner goes so far as to suggest a certain nobility in The Misfit's actions: "...his response to the inevitable failure of human beings to live up to their ideal of goodness is to kill them, thus purifying the world of falsehood to make it good."

What do you think? Is the grandmother a hero or a villain? In a 1-paragraph critical response, take a position on this issue. Consider how O'Connor uses literary elements characterization, point of view, figurative language, and selection of detail to develop this all-important character.