

Violence as the Road to Transformation: O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explicate the function of violence and its relation to the possible epiphany and transformation trajectory in Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." I would first remodel the Greimassian semiotic method to analyze the expressions and functions of violence in the narrative, especially, in the concepts, behaviors and responses of the two main characters—the grandmother and The Misfit. I would argue that, in this story, the function of violence helps build up a discrete trajectory of passion modes and delineate a possible mental transformation of the two main characters. Secondly, the grandmother's possible transformation process after the car accident and the following violent massacre of the Bailey family will be discussed. Finally, I would take the violent performance in O'Connor's story as a strategic application, which O'Connor adopts to help reveal the grandmother's and the Misfit's concepts constructed loosely upon a layer of culturally set religious and secular beliefs. This culturally embedded reality (which mistakes manners as morals and faith) incurs the very destruction of its groundwork, dilutes the violence resulted from social maladjustment, and furthermore, diminishes the shock behind the downfall of a family.

Keywords : Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," A. J. Greimas, semiotics, narrative, transformation trajectory, violence

暴力為轉換之徑：論歐康諾〈好人難尋〉

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摘 要

本文將探討歐康諾短篇小說〈好人難尋〉中，暴力的功能與暴力和故事最終可能發生的突然醒悟的關係。本文將透過對葛萊瑪符號學模組的改寫，對歐康諾故事中的敘事結構進行分析，探討歐康諾敘事裡的種種暴力行為、語言表現、以及其功能運用，特別是故事中兩位主要人物——祖母和「不適者」——對於暴力的觀念、行為與回應態度。其次，本文將探討祖母在車禍後與全家遭滅門殺害時，可能面臨的認知與情感態度的轉換。最後，將指出歐康諾運用暴力的出現做為突顯祖母和「不適者」這兩位主要人物背後所呈現的現實，並探討宗教與文化如何形塑出人物的認知，以及在敘事中，歐康諾如何藉由人物的行為與觀點堆疊出暴力結果，但是也同時在暴力殺戮終顯時，因而削減暴力敘事的驚駭。

關鍵詞：歐康諾，〈好人難尋〉，葛萊瑪，符號學，敘事，轉換歷程，暴力

Violence as the Road to Transformation: O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

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I. Introduction: The Controversy over the Religious Signification

American Southern woman writer Flannery O'Connor (1925~1964) is famous for her direct comment on her own writings. A native of Georgia, she writes short stories and novels situated on the Southern landscape. She pictures her characters vividly and frankly in great resemblance to those living around her in the "Christ-haunted" world of manners and morals.¹ O'Connor was frequently asked to delineate and comment on her own works. Most of the times, she would illuminate her readers by highlighting the religious implications, which she believed to be the very force and stimulant of her writing. She is always eager in pointing out to her reader the hidden meaning and the religious message of a salvation in the devastated South where, both in her opinions and as depicted in her works, the faith in religion

¹ When talking about the inspiration and the primal setting for her stories, O'Connor frankly pointed out, "Somewhere is better than anywhere," (O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," *Mystery and Manners*, p. 200) and of course, this somewhere was always the South. She wrote, "The fiction writer finds in time, if not at once, that he cannot proceed at all if he cuts himself off from the sights and sounds that have developed a life of their own in his senses. The novelist is concerned with the mystery of personality, and you cannot say much that is significant about this mystery unless the characters you create exist with the marks of a believable society about them." (*Mystery and Manners*, p.198)

In 1951, when she was only twenty-six, O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus erythematosus, a disease that had taken her father's life in 1941, and the disease left her an invalid in her thirties. Her illness took away her health gradually and confined her to living with her mother at the small Milledgeville farm in Georgia, and "For the rest of her life, the next thirteen years, O'Connor lived with her mother at Andalusia, their farm home, a few miles outside Milledgeville on the road to Eatonton." (Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*, p. 7) However, the local materials finally turn out to be the very supply of her writing resources. She called the South a "Christ-haunted" world and this world becomes the fountain home of most of her unique but sometimes grotesque characters.

wears out gradually. Therefore, O'Connor always believes that she has to fight her way out among the noises of non-believers in a direct or indirect response to the critiques that picked out the "wrong" side of her stories. She would make a clearance of those disquiets and look at them with a strict and stern face that accepts no stray interpretations of religious significance. And all the responses, explanations, and comments she made in her lectures are mostly pivoted upon the question of whether God's grace is received by her characters at the end of the stories.

This strong attitude to direct the interpretation of her works is typically what O'Connor would like to preserve. This is part of the reason why many critics find her too "dominating." She is always well prepared to fight for her belief and tries every possible method to force her way out of an "unfriendly circumstances." Both the depiction of her grotesque stories and her interpretations and comments on the possible religious implications her stories might incur demonstrate such a persuading yet unrelenting persistence and approach to the reader. Certainly, Flannery O'Connor could always demonstrate that there is God everywhere in her works and that His grace is flashed behind every scene in most of her stories; however, what troubles most critics who sympathize with O'Connor's standpoints might not be the same as that questions those who disbelieve in her talk of religion and belief. Because it is the process and the violence that is being questioned, not the grace of God or the revelation of it

The controversy over the violence and religious belief² presented in O'Connor's fictions has a long history since the publication of the stories. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor's title story³ of her 1955

² Unlike most authors, Flannery O'Connor usually takes a strong stance in defending her own work and keeps reminding her reader the religious implication and designation behind her writing. And she simply tells her reader how they should interpret her work. She writes, "One of the most disheartening circumstances that the Catholic novelist has to contend with is that he has no large audience he can count on to understand his work. The general intelligent reader today is not a believer." ("Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," *Mystery and Manners*, p. 181) Moreover, her correspondences with her friends, her lectures, and her remarks are more than often recited by her critics to support this religious zealous. But there are still some critics who would not succumb to this woman writer's preach of religious interpretation and use her own works to challenge her interpretation: "Criticism of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, under the spell of the writer's occasional comments, has been unusually susceptible to interpretations based on Christian dogma." (Stephen C. Bandy, " 'One of My Babies': The Misfit and the Grandmother," p. 107)

³ This title story was previously published in *Modern Writing I* in 1953. (Whitt, *Understanding*

collection, is such a text that accumulates critical ambiguities. This widely anthologized story is significant especially in its representation of O'Connor's grotesque penchant in the narrative and in the textual delineation of religious elements. The violence in this story raises hot debates among critics on issues of grace and violence, and the intertwining threads of spiritual grace and physical violence keep bouncing incessantly within various minds: "This ['A Good Man Is Hard to Find'] is perhaps O'Connor's most famous story, ...the most violent, the most psychologically harrowing to read, the most apparently godless, and, I would add, the most unremitting in its insistence on the reality of bodily grace" (Thornton 128).

The violence is there inviting the possible reader's attention to the wrestling question of the existence of God's grace, and the responses vary. Debra Lynn Thornton is positive in her affirmation of O'Connor's use of violence as the revelation and invitation of God's grace; however, not all critics are so sympathetic towards O'Connor's writing strategy. Stephen C. Bandy, on the contrary, after closely studying this short story, points out: "No wishful search for evidence of grace or for epiphanies of salvation, by author or reader, can soften the harsh truth of 'A Good Man Is Hard To Find.' Its message is profoundly pessimistic and in fact subversive to the doctrines of grace and charity, despite heroic efforts to disguise that fact" (Bandy 107).

It seems that O'Connor has set a gadget there in her story, and it intrigues two different understandings and interpretations. And it is always a matter of belief, just as Bandy would assure us: "None of O'Connor's stories has been more energetically theologized" than this one, and "for the true believer there can be no further discussion" (Bandy 107). The dilemma is: if the reader would like to prescribe his/her position as a true believer, there is really no space for him/her to argue, nor can he/she question the signification revealed within the narrative. Nevertheless, if the reader would detain his or her religious belief, and contemplate the possibility between violence and grace, will there be a contradictory answer waiting to be revealed?

While reading O'Connor's stories, the critics as well as the readers usually find themselves in such an ambiguous situation of tormenting between the two forces: the pursuit of the meaning through textual

interpretation and the drag towards the author's interpretation. Usually the second choice wins, because finding supporting evidences for O'Connor's quick and sharp snap for her story's ending seems to be a safe and satisfactory route for the reading quest. This is the reason why the critics' controversy can never settle down. Actually, for a long time, D. H. Laurence's advice—"trust the art, but not the artist"—is the most referred sentence as the excuse⁴ and justification when the critics of the opposite camp would like to resist O'Connor's "authentic voice." In a sense, O'Connor's strong stance and her voice do reach the ears of her reader and believers. But this also hampers the possibility of allowing her work to be read in another light. However, the initiation that Roland Barthes proposed in textual reading—"the author is dead"—might offer us a new chance to re-read O'Connor's story in spite of the piled-up authentic, religious and psychological interpretations.

When studying "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," critics like to interpret the moment that the grandmother reaches out her hand towards The Misfit as a moment of grace, and thus conclude that this gesture will become an epiphany that leads The Misfit upward to God's grace. But others would argue that the grandmother does not show any sign of repent, nor does her last gesture a touch of God's grace. However, I believe, with a semiotic analysis of the narrative, the questions could be approached and interpreted from a different perspective. In this paper, I would first analyze the textual narrative of this story, and furthermore, figure out a special set of semiotic modulations to offer an alternative interpretation of the fictional arrangement of violence and massacre.

From a semiotic viewpoint of textual analysis, the use of violence in a story is never a pure literary, accidental event. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the title story of O'Connor's collection of stories bearing the same name, exemplifies how unruly violence could play in a world where people of no great faults die without any decent reasons. There are seven people who died in this collection and the title story contains six of them. The violence that O'Connor considers to be well equipped with religious meaning sends a whole family, three adults, two children, and a baby, into

⁴ As many of his predecessors, Stephen C. Bandy also uses this maxim to start the proceeding of his analysis in "'One of my Babies': The Misfit and the Grandmother." (107)

death without any delay in the narrative. Death is easy and weightless as depicted distantly by an unemotional narrator and the play of violence becomes a suggestion of the ending of a farce that life is to bear. Literally, the violence that causes so many deaths signifies the brutality embedded in man, but as signifiers drift, meanings disseminate and the mystery behind glitters through the interstices. At the cultural and symbolic level, this violence ceases to be a mere vicious act, and through the process of virtualization, the actants, those who enact actions, are allowed a chance of realization.

While setting up the epistemological framework of the semiotic modulations of the narrative, Greimas and Fontanille analyze the state of the subject of the narrative in terms of modalities. Through the interactions and transformations of these modalities, the subject might obtain a certain kind of cognition. Moreover, the linguistic and cultural relativity within the narrative can also be revealed through the analysis of the various modalities. According to Greimas and Fontanille, the main function of a textual narrative is to delineate a world of existential simulacra where the flow of actions signifies and constructs a higher level of cultural and symbolic signification. Hence Greimas and Fontanille conclude that only when the subject of the narrative can take on actions, that is, when the subject is an actant, can he gain a certain sense of cognition of the existential world of textual simulacra. Moreover, this actant has to go through a process of thymic "sensitization" (an existential transformation trajectory) to really feel, sense, or touch things through the body, and then there is the possibility for this actant to reach the stage of existential development. Till then, "the universe of cognitive forms" might arise before him (Greimas and Fontanille xxi).

In the following discussion, based upon the semiotic modulations of Greimas and Fontanille, I will focus my analysis and interpretation on the existential trajectories that the two main characters in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"—the grandmother and The Misfit—go through, especially on the transforming stages they experience during the very critical moment. First, I will take the family trip to Florida as a transformation trajectory for the grandmother, and thus divide the whole narrative into four different existential phases as the major transition stages that the grandmother experiences throughout the narrative. Second, I will focus on the analysis

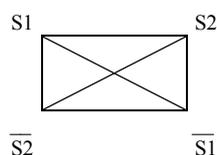
and interpretation of the two types⁵ of violence in the narrative—the physical violence of the massacre of the Bailey Family and the verbal violence that constructs the framework and creates the tension of the narrative. Third, I would interpret and analyze the characters' existential procedures so as to see whether the debatable transformation of the main characters is possible and could be justified.

II. The Journey Downward: From Blindness into Death —A Process of Semiotic Existence

According to Greimas and Fontanille, the development of an emotional state and existence can always be represented through a semiotic square of actions and, therefore, be precisely analyzed. Greimas and Fontanille's model of passions is adopted from the famous Greimassian semiotic square which aims in modifying and providing interpretations to the possible activities of human beings. This Greimassian semiotic model is composed of two types of binary opposition: the contradiction and contrariety.⁶ In the modeling process, the narrative will thus be analyzed through these pairs of binary axiological structures. When the narrative text is put under this semiotic analysis, the significance behind the narrative, which is always

⁵ Violence as an expression and demonstration of force and status can be found in various forms—visible or invisible. In this paper, I would only discuss two kinds of violence—verbal and physical. The actual physical violence presented in the Bailey family's massacre is often discussed. However, the verbal violence in the narrative, whether it is expressed in bad words, with malicious intention, or in the form of direct rebuttal, silent rejection, even intended negligence, deserves our careful and critical observation and discussion in the textual interpretation in respect of narratological analysis. In this paper, other forms and contents of violence, such as those resulted from the social, cultural, political, ideological, or economical, will only appear as hidden causes of the verbal and the physical expressions.

⁶ Usually the Greimassian semiotic model can be applied to much more complicated situations and therefore, develop into a series of squares, and there are three generations of categorical terms and thus three types of diagrams which possess a little variation to each other. The following diagram is the very basic presentation of the semiotic square. The elementary structure of signification in the following diagram is defined firstly as a relation between at least two oppositions:



latent in the text, will have a chance to emerge. In this approach, the content of the signifier will receive the most observation and analysis. As Paul J. Perron points out in his introduction to the Greimassian square, "The main object of the theory of the semiotic square is to articulate the substance of the content (in Hjelmslev's terms) and therein constitute the form of content" (Greimas and Courtés xxviii). The study of the content that the text implies builds upon a close relation of the referring literary language and the referred natural and ideological world, and hence would help interpret the worldview and value judgments that the text contrives to reveal, since "[t]he role of actantial syntax is therefore to convert into a narrative doing the fundamental semantics that constitute the message of narrative and determine its anthropological function." This syntax enables one to grasp, through the simulacrum of a 'scene' that dramatizes them, the unconscious crystallizing processes of subjectivity" (Greimas and Courtés xxviii).

This "unconscious crystallizing process of subjectivity" is fabricated through the fictional scenes. In respect of this process, the narrative delineation that deals with actions and incidents will be the focal point of textual scrutiny. In the Greimassian square, this subjectivity, performed and represented through the actant, will always be procured through the actantial questing and wrestling with two existential structures—the being-able-to-do and the having-to-do modal structures.⁷ In making an explanation and demonstration of how the relation of the natural phenomena and the literal narrative can conjoin together in a semiotic square, Greimas defines the relation between the literal narrative and the natural world as two semiotic systems which correlate and overdetermine each other in the signification. Hence, through the double binary pairs of contrast and contradiction, Greimassian model deals not only with the world of emotion and action, but also with the world of competence and performance. The trajectory of a

⁷ Being-able-to-do and having-to-do are two basic modal structures that an actant will go through in his quest of the different existential stages. These two structures in its complementary process relate to the realization and actualization functions and transformations. In the following sections, I will draw a few remodeled Greimassian semiotic diagrams (with certain changes and differences in the structure of the diagram, the sequence of the developmental process, and the interpretation) to demonstrate the two modal structures and functions, and try to illuminate the actantial acquisition of the subjectivity. With the help of these remodeled diagrams and the overdetermination of the modal structures, I will also offer an alternative interpretation of O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

narrative actant can thus be transformed into a process of value questing and of desire fulfillment. And furthermore, the seemingly discontinuous transformation of passions, desires and actions, of the actants will all form into a process of existence.

When confronted with a major or sudden event in life, most people will not conduct themselves as they usually do. However, sudden events often accelerate the germination of their realization.⁸ According to Greimas and Fontanille, the subject-actant will go through four different existential stages in his/her transformational trajectory in the narrative. These four stages are: the potentialization, the virtualization, the actualization, and the realization. Before reaching the realization stage, the subject-actant should undergo the actualization stage so as to gain a further understanding about him/herself and complete the existential trajectory with a different realization. The potential phase, therefore, contains the critical moment that helps make the subject-actant's transformation possible. The potential state in the Greimassian model is the state of the subject-actant's conscious or unconscious understanding of the world, namely, the cognitive mapping that the subject-actant preserves before he begins his existential trajectory. The potential state thus occupies the preliminary stage of the subject's existential development. I would like to point out that the position of this stage is of great importance, for it can be revisited by the subject-actant after the actualization stage. This revisit will give new light to the subject-actant's interpretation of the cognitive mapping and therefore, brings forth the subject-actant's possible final state of realization. The potential stage, situated between the states of actualization and realization in the Greimassian model, contains an imploding force that helps the subject move towards his transformation and realization. However, I could not agree with Greimas and Fontanille's interpretation on the sequence of transformation trajectory.

Greimas and Fontanille believe that the most common series of roles of the subject-actant is limited to three roles, and the developmental process is: first, the virtualized, then, the actualized and finally, the realized. Since the potential phase is the original state of the subject-actant, I suggest we take it

⁸ Believing in this kind of revelation at the fatal moment, O'Connor reaches her conclusion that it is necessary for her storyteller, the narrator, to usually adopt a certain outside force to fulfill the violent stroke that threatens her characters.

as the fundamental, the primary situation from which the subject-actant begins his/her existential journey in the narrative. However, I disagree with Greimas and Fontanille on their fixed interpretation of the developmental process. The concept that any subject-actant's developmental process is universally the same should be challenged because of its limitations when applied to various narratives. I would like to point out here that the developmental process of the subject-actant provided by Greimas and Fontanille cannot, and should not be taken as the only process a subject-actant should go through in any narrative, as Greimas and Fontanille demonstrate in *The Semiotics of Passions*. I firmly believe that the subject-actant's transformation trajectory should not be confined within a fixed sequencing, since every subject-actant's existential experiences will differ according to his/her own characteristic traits and the various narrative fabrications and structuralization of textual events that he/she encounters in the narrative.

In this paper, I divide the grandmother's transition phases according to the four Greimassian transformation simulacra, because the strengths of Greimas and Fontanille's model lie in its clarification, structuralization and interpretation of the existential trajectory of the subject-actant in the narrative; however, I am also demonstrating in this paper a different developmental process of the subject-actant with several remodeled illustrations of the grandmother's transition and transformation in the narrative. Therefore, the settings, the developmental process and the several diagrams of the four transition phases in this paper are not a "pure" application of Greimas and Fontanille's model, but a "variation," a "remodeling," a "transformation" of it.

O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a story about a family trip. It begins with the paternal proposal of a trip to Florida, and ends with the family massacre out of the main road, not even half way to their destination. The family members—a married couple with two kids, a baby and the grandmother—set out to enjoy a trip of materiality and entertainment but encounter their mortality before they even have a chance to recognize it. The nameless characters⁹ bear close relation to ordinary figures in everyday

⁹ This is not common in O'Connor's stories. She always gives her fictional characters proper names that match well to their roles and identities. In this story, the two Bailey children and The Misfit's

life. The mother is depicted as a woman with innocent cabbage face who has no time to dress up but roughly circles a green handkerchief around her head. The grandmother is a domineering matriarch who keeps offering suggestions, raising issues and making conversation most of the time in the narrative. The father is only given a nickname “Bailey Boy,” as his mother calls him. The function of this naming strategy, in respect of the semiotic signifying process, emphasizes the symbolic level of significance and at the same time implies the possible ignorance, misunderstanding, and misjudgment of the characters as their names, the signifiers of their identities, are missing.

“The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida,” the story begins, “She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind.”¹⁰ “Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you you read it. I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did” (352). The grandmother’s protest is a ruse. It undergoes as a reminder of the possible danger that a trip to Florida might incur, but in fact the grandmother merely appeals to danger and conscience at the face value. While trying to dissuade her son from taking the same direction, the grandmother suggests that they take a trip to Tennessee instead. But since no one in the family takes her advice, they begin their trip to Florida the next day with the grandmother well dressed and ready in the car in the early morning. On their way South, the grandmother persuades Bailey Boy to detour, so that they could see an old mansion on the road. The moment the grandmother remembers that the mansion is not in Georgia, but in Tennessee, an accident occurs. No one is really injured, but the first to come to their aid is the car driven by The Misfit. The Misfit has all the Bailey family (Baily Boy, his wife, his daughter June Star, his son John Wesley, and a baby) except the grandmother killed by his henchmen. In the meantime, the grandmother

henchmen have their names and even the grandmother’s cat, which accidentally clutches to Bailey Boy’s back and causes the car accident, has a name “Pitty Sing.”

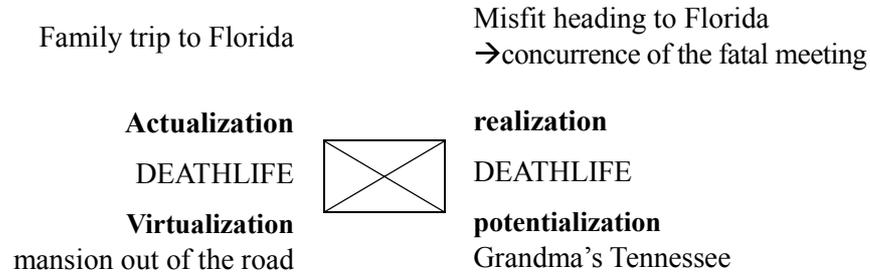
¹⁰ Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” *An Introduction to Fiction*. Kennedy and Gioia, eds. New York, 1999. P.352. Hereafter, only page numbers will be given to the quotations from this text.

tries her wit out to win The Misfit's compassion and pity. But when at last the grandmother believes that her ruse works and reaches out her hand trying to touch The Misfit's shoulder, he shoots her dead.

A happy family trip to the south finally turns out to be a journey to death. How Bailey family meets with The Misfit is the kernel of the narrative, because through the narrative process the main characters' development in each of the modes of existence will be revealed. I will divide the narrative of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" into four different sections of existential phases so as to construct a Greimassian model of existential simulacra: the realization, the potentialization, the virtualization, and the actualization.

The semiotic diagram contains the following four different states of existence: (1) the initial stage of realization: the grandmother's noticing of The Misfit's heading towards Florida. Although this is merely the grandmother's ruse to divert her son's plan to Florida, the grandmother does actually reveal a menacing possibility to the future danger, (2) the potentialization phase: the ante-bellum values of lineage and gentility, the vanishing system of beliefs inherited from the Southern culture and religious concepts that are cherished by the grandmother belong to this group. As a data base of the past experience and heritage, this phase offers several implications of the social and cultural elements that make up the stature of the grandmother and thus can serve to explain the grandmother's real temperance, traits, and character, (3) the phase of virtualization: at this phase, the potential competence of the characters will be projected unto other vicarious objects so that the mere awareness or even non-awareness of one's socially and culturally constructed cognition and concept of the world will be demonstrated through vicarious experience, (4) the phase of actualization: this is the final stage of the existential taxonomy. The main characters have to face the last stroke of fate, and thus to be initiated into a quite different stage of understanding. After the potential stage and the virtual stage of development, the subjects would now reach towards the phase of realization and transformation, no matter whether they do accept or realize it.

The following diagram can thus represent the blocked event of the Bailey family's trip to Florida:



In the very beginning of the story the grandmother's warning words foreshadow the interlocking forces of Death and Life. This semi-realization of the danger will keep lurking in the narrative. The grandmother has her private and personal reason for visiting Tennessee her hometown. But she skillfully avoids naming her target, and only manages to reach her goal by warning the family the possible danger of the trip to Florida. As the narrative shows, the grandmother's strange association of The Misfit and his crime with the Bailey family's security and her conscience proves to be correct. Whether consciously or unconsciously the grandmother has already predicted the possible meeting with The Misfit. However, her potential destination is situated on the other direction. She aims to visit Tennessee, her hometown, with a certain intention to pick up the memory of the old days. She never has the chance to do this. But ironically she fulfills the process of the homecoming ritual by arousing her grandchildren's desire to find the hidden treasure in the non-existent off-the-road plantation mansion and finally meets with the actualization of her journey to death—the eternal home.

The third stage of the existential modulation functions to provide the subject with the need for a change in direction. Therefore, this potentialization phase of the glories, gentility, and the vanishing value system that the grandmother's hometown stands for can have a chance to find its outlet. This is what the grandmother would like to "show" to and "educate" the grandchildren. This is the phase that contains something different from what the grandchildren are imbued with by the modern commercialized cultural and value system. The old plantation mansion in the grandmother's broken memory will be the best demonstration that a grandmother can show

to her grandchildren. This mansion is the very incarnation of her beliefs and the fountain of her self-respect and righteousness. She even makes a little lie on the hidden treasure, so as to entice her two grandchildren's curiosity. However, this detour really completes a homecoming journey. The search for a non-existent mansion brings forth their meeting with The Misfit and his henchmen. The virtualization stage of the grandmother's superficial beliefs in lineage, gentility, and the antebellum Southern value system now confronts a challenge. The religious non-believer Misfit, keeping the Southern gentility in appearance, challenges and denies the real substance of the religious miracle and faith.

The narrative gives the grandmother a complete development in the different phases as far as the semiotic models of conjunction and disjunction are concerned. Viewed from the hindsight gained through the Greimassian model and the semiotic signification analysis, the Bailey family's journey to Florida is thus menaced with the shadow of death from the beginning. However, the narrative also promises a hidden lesson of existential awareness combined with the bitter sting of conceptual transformation.

III. The Flowing of Significance: Verbal Violence

The massacre in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is usually the focus of the critical debate as the violence of grace is concerned. However, I would like to point out here a very specific feature often neglected by the critics: except the physical violence, the very violent stroke of death, the narrative of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is full of verbal violence. As violent acts are important in respect to the possible revelation of grace, verbal violence should also be taken seriously, for verbal expression is the very constructive texture of a narrative. If only the violent event (the family massacre) is taken into consideration, this kind of narrative analysis, without doubt, would be seriously flawed, since the major part of the textual significance would thus be left out as the narrative style and the characters' conversations are neglected.

People not only communicate with language, but also use language to demonstrate their power over others and fulfill their personal wish. Language, therefore, can be a tool of communication and a weapon of destruction. It can be used to hurt the feelings and to discourage the wishes

and ambitions of others. It can express distress, resentment and even hatred. The language that hurts demonstrates the power of verbal violence. In the Bailey family, language usually fails to serve as a tool to communicate but turns out to be a sign¹¹ of further implications: a second level signifier. It represents the speaker's present state of mood and refers to the second level—his/her inner feelings and unconscious desire, and leaves the third level meta-linguistic system of signification to the understanding of the probing reader of the narrative. In the Bailey family, one sends out a message but receives no immediate response, or instead, has retorts and obnoxious value judgments in return. Though failing to fulfill the first level function in the daily communication, the verbal message still has its referentiality in the second and third level function of signification.

The language usage and function adopted by the Bailey family indicate a discord within the family members and further reveal their inner world of discontent. For instance, the grandmother's utterance always degenerates into a kind of cacophony and receives no attention from the family members, and sometimes it is totally ignored so that the grandmother will receive no response at all. Before the Bailey family encounters their lethal terminators in the car accident, the existential stage of virtual verbal violence is repeatedly acted out at home, on the road, and in the Red Sammy Butts's small barbeque store. The frequent flow of discontent and dissatisfaction emerges freely from the family conversation, as if this kind of verbal

¹¹ With respect to the semiotics of sign systems derived from Saussure, Hjelmslev, and Barthes, the signifying function of language as a sign system consists of two elementary parts: the expression part and the content part. The signification of a sign system is obtained through the related function of the expression part and the content part. Adopting the layered semiotic model of the signifying system established by Roland Barthes in *Elements of Semiology*, I would categorize the signifying process of a language sign into three different levels. This three-level model of the language signifying process consists of three signifying systems: the first level signification belongs to the function of the reality, the second level signification is the function of denotation and the third level signification refers to the domain of the social and cultural space of connotation. In the first level sign system, the language sign as a signifier is related to the signified content-meaning which belongs to the signifying function in reality. In the second level signifying system, the previous expression and content-meaning of the language sign will get transformed into a new signifier and develops into a second signifying system where denotation functions. The second sign system will further develop into a third level system of signification where the connotation functions. This new sign system is an extension of the previous denotative sign system of the individual and refers to a broadened content-meaning (connotation) which belongs to the realm of the social, cultural and ideological. See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.

violence is but a rehearsal of their daily activities.

In the very beginning, the grandmother's advice of not going to Florida, though demonstrated with her demanding gesture and raising sound, is ignored by her son, who buries his head over the orange sports section of the Journal. He gives her no response, and has no intention to attend to her underlying tone that demands a change of destinations. While the grandmother tries to turn to her daughter-in-law for help and protests that visiting some more different places might be of better education for the children, her daughter-in-law takes no notice of her words, either.

Although the grandmother tires hard to persuade and reason with her son and her daughter-in-law respectively, there is no sign of any communication. Silence is the only answer. But the children's responses are different. The eight-year-old boy, John Wesley, says to her, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?" And the little girl, June Star, responds to John Wesley's remark and makes her comment without even directly facing and talking to the grandmother: "She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day. She wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks," June Star said, "Afraid She'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go" (352). The children stand by their parents' determination to go to Florida and in a childish directness dissuading her to go with them and laughing at her not being able to act on her own but depending on them.

In fact, John Wesley's and June Star's remarks reveal more of the modern commercial culture than of a clear consciousness and word choice of their own. John Wesley's remark is a direct response to the grandmother's not wishing to go to Florida; however, June Star's is a copy from a popular radio program¹² that she might have heard with her mother. Nevertheless,

¹² June Star's remarks are from a popular broadcasting program of the time. Margaret Earley Whitt points out, "O'Connor provides June Star with a popular radio show for an allusion: "She wouldn't stay home to be queen for a day" nor "for a million bucks" (*Understanding Flannery O'Connor* 137). Whitt suggests, "Although the overemotional television show "Queen for a Day" premiered in 1956, a radio show with the same format began in 1945. . . . June Star knows her radio, but she seems ignorant of the tales and stereotypes of her region" (44-5). In a sense, June Star's familiarity with the radio show is a proof of the prevalence of the modern commercial value system in the younger generations. The value system of the traditional South, which the grandmother believes, would be quite different. However, the grandmother's teachings and preachments cannot match the influence of the radio programs over the younger generations.

the conversation the grandmother has with her grandchildren, when compared to the silent response she obtains from the children's parents, is full of sound and sarcasm. Since Bailey Boy and his wife say nothing to stop or reproach the children's bluntness, it seems that the children's words are more or less consented by their parents, or at least, the manners and style of expressions are of no great concern to their parents. As the parents are tired of arguing with the grandmother, the children take turns to fulfill the duty for their parents.

On their way to Florida, the Bailey family stops at the Red Sam's to have a light lunch. While waiting for their order, the mother plays "The Tennessee Waltz" on the nickelodeon. The grandmother says that tune always makes her want to dance and asks Bailey if he would like to dance, "but he only glared at her" (355). This is the second time in the story that Bailey Boy with the same silent mode rejects his mother's suggestion. Red Sam's wife, watching June Star's tap, tries to have some little talk with this little girl: "Would you like to come be my little girl?" "No I certainly wouldn't," June Star said. "I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" (355) Seeing all this, the grandmother reproaches the little girl for being rude. It seems that the grandmother is the only one who emphasizes manners and gentility in the Bailey family.

The actualization of physical violence terminates life; however, the virtual verbal violence humiliates and curtails the possibilities of human communication and expression of love and sympathy. The verbal violence among the family members foreshadows the lack of communication, passion, goodwill, and understanding. This virtual violence of discontent will finally clutter up to lurk behind the actualization of the chaotic massacre as a demonstration of the lack of family and companion love.

The Bailey children's habitual retorts and their parents' reluctance to respond to the grandmother's words grow out of control in June Star's rejection of the proprietress's polite, inviting words at Red Sam's, and at last develop into Bailey Boy's curse to his mother when she recognizes and points out the escaped convict—The Misfit. In contrast to the actualization stage of the real world disorder and malignancy represented by the Misfit and his henchmen, this phase of verbal violence virtualization illustrates the mutilating force of language. The Bailey family's verbal violence, which mimics the commercial language and the modern value systems, serves in

the narrative syntax as a virtual miniature of the devouring force of blind malice in the real modern world.

What Bailey Boy exclaims desperately while stepping on his road to death might best define this mal-communication stage of the modern world: "'Listen,' Bailey began, 'we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is,' and his voice cracked" (359). This is really a terrible predicament to which people in the modern world are confined, and it is true that nobody really wants to **listen** to others. The Misfit only talks to the grandmother, but he does not listen to her advice. The Misfit keeps talking about his doubts and disbeliefs in humanity and religion, but determines to accept nobody's words or advices except his own reasoning. The grandmother talks and demands, but no family members really listen to her needs. The Bailey children talk and retort, but no one, except the grandmother, listens to them and give them directions. Bailey Boy refuses to answer any of his mother's words, whether they are questions, protests or suggestions, and when he finally tries to "talk," no one listens to him and his voice "cracked"—it fails to reach out and communicate. And in the whole narrative, Bailey's wife has no words at all. Red Sam's wife talks, but her husband twice stops her and asks her to leave and hurry up with the lunch order. "Nobody realizes what it is," as Bailey Boy ironically points out in the end, because people, isolated within their own world, fail to communicate. The first level pragmatic function that language provides as communicating meanings in the everyday life is hampered. People keep talking to others, but only themselves are the targets and the receivers of their words. The pragmatic dimension of language signs thus is often put into oblivion and fails to reach their receivers in their speech acts.

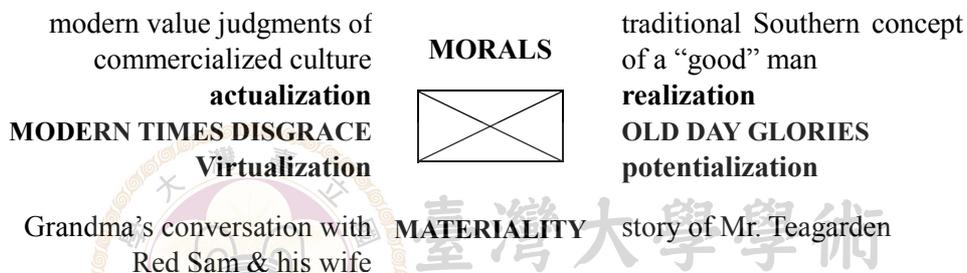
June Star's repetition of the "one million bucks" is also an important signifier. It refers to the modern "grids" that popular culture formulates throughout the widespread broadcasting media. This explains the reason why only the grandmother stands to hiss the girl and warns her of her bad manners, but June Star's parents take no notice of her rudeness as usual. It is obvious that Bailey Boy and his wife belong to the new generation that happily forsake the old teachings and embrace the new capitalist world. However, Red Sam's wife's disapproval of June Star's language would rank her with the same group of the old grandmother's camp, who still cling a little bit to the old days' glory and manners. The old good days were gone

and the good manners and gentility could no longer be found in the Bailey family. Nor could the merits of a “good” man be found in the family life. If June Star should feel ashamed of her slashing honesty, her parents, who keep allowing her to repeat what she has learned from a radio program without reminding her of its aggressive inferences, should also feel ashamed. However, Bailey Boy and his wife see this happened time and again but make no sign of chastising or disciplining their young girl. These two situations plainly reveal the kind of verbal violence that happens in the Bailey family, and the different cultural and value judgments that the old and young generations embrace. These narrative incidents serve well as the virtual counterpart of the final actual violence, the physical violence executed by The Misfit. With no extended feelings and compassion towards the others, both verbal violence and physical violence, whether virtual or actual in the semiotic modulations, generate disgraceful manners and vicious results.

With respect to the semiotic analysis of the model existence, June Star’s retorts further emit a great significance of the popular worldview. It is not merely a practice of language game or a form of communication that is worth noting, but the universal element that behind the enunciation that counts. What lingering behind the child’s materialistic and snobbish contempt of poverty and underdevelopment is the popular culture that is fast changing. The worship of materiality and money behind the words of June Star would then become clear, when viewed from the perspective of a material oriented culture. The old conventions of the grandmother’s time would then become out of date tirades and therefore, receive no attention. The economic values of the society have already incorporated into June Star’s concept of human life and behavior, although her worldview expressed through her words might not represent her independent individual values. On the contrary, the grandmother, Red Sam, and his wife belong to the “transgressions,” but only when where manners and morals are concerned. For the sake of conversation and memory of the traditional South, they all share their high respect of gentility without really reflecting upon the genuine meaning of a “good” man. The good old days are remembered, as in their talk, because they would like to apply it to their benefits. The grandmother’s judgment of her previous suitor Mr. Teagarden is a good example: this Mr. Teagarden “was a very good looking man and a gentleman,” and “had bought

Coca-Cola stock when it first came out and that he had died only a few years ago, a very wealthy man" (354). The grandmother's comments on Mr. Teagarden remind us of her concept of a "good" man—good looking and wealthy. She does not forget to mention the economic values that a probable marriage to Mr. Teagarden might bring forth. Missing a marriage with a "good" gentleman might mean the missing of all the possible financial benefits.

The grandmother's concept of a "good" man can thus be categorized as the following diagram:



However, it will take the grandmother her life to realize what a "good" man really means.

IV. The Search for Trust and Faith—the Potential and Virtual Phases

The grandmother's vague understanding of an escaped convict heading towards Florida and the Bailey family's small, trivial fights in language make up the pre-realization and the virtual stages of the narrative existential simulacra. The narrative that delineates the Bailey family on the road—from leaving home till the car accident—contains the clues and fragments needed to patch up the grandmother's (and also part of the other Bailey family members') cognitive mapping. In this phase, the old South encounters the new South. The little black boy in the roadside shack, which the grandmother happily points out as if finding an extraordinary object on the road, brings back the old South—the tradition of manners and the values of lineage and gentility:

“Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. “Wouldn’t that make a picture, now?” She asked and they all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved. “He didn’t have any britches on,” June Star said. “He probably didn’t have any,” the grandmother explained. “Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do. If I could paint, I’d paint that picture,” she said. The children exchanged comic books. (353)

The appearance of the black boy reflects to the grandmother the ante-bellum glories and manners that keep her a self-respect lady. She is proud of her lineage, manners, and gentility, and would assume without doubt the role to pass the tradition to her grandchildren. June Star immediately admits her surprise to notice that the black boy has no pants on. This remark proves to the grandmother that she has the right to take chance educating her grandchildren, “Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do.”

Although a child, June Star is a product of the new South. She is not familiar with the traditional Southern concept of class and race. If June Star’s surprise and alarm represent the direct value judgment of the commercial world, the grandmother’s teaching and self-complacency, the old South. It is not merely the poverty of the blacks that attracts her eyes, it is the collected memory of the white supremacy over those Negroes that makes her feel content and would like to keep this spectacle in mind. What lies behind the “cute little pickaninny with no britches on” is the hidden self-complacency that she is of good lineage and that she does own something, or even many things, that the poor, lower Negroes, do not have. The grandmother’s complacency leads us back to the old South where colors and classes are more important than the financial status one enjoys. And not just a moment ago before her pointing out the little black boy, she comments on John Wesley’s disdainful remarks on the poor states of her hometown Tennessee and his Georgia:

“Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground,” John Wesley said,
 “and Georgia is a lousy state too.”
 “You said it,” June Star said.

"In my time, children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then." (353)

The grandmother's reasoning actually goes with the social and ideological value judgment of her times, which is quite different from what June Star and her brother John Wesley represent. So neither of them pays any attention to the grandmother's exclamation that if she could paint, she'd paint that picture of the little boy. To the younger materiality-oriented generation, poverty is not a spectacle but a stain. For them, a state, which promises no economic prosperity, is worthless, and similarly, the painting of a poor little black boy is certainly of not much value. Such a painting might reveal some hidden glories of the past to the grandmother; however, it loses its charm with the grandchildren.

The grandmother, as a representative of the old South, assumes the responsibility in passing down the heritage. She plays a geography teacher and admires the view of their hometown. She plays a history teacher commenting on the financial and class status of the Negroes and patiently pointing to the children the roadside family burying ground belonged to the plantation. She even acts as anecdote orator, relating her past romance with the moral and cultural lessons to the children. All these role-plays patch up the grandmother's memories. It was a time that she deserved to be treated as a lady and that as a white she enjoyed the privilege that the Negroes were deprived of: "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do." She is a lady, and she would always remind others that she is one. Therefore, she must dress up for the trip. With her white gloves, navy blue straw sailor hat, a navy blue dress, a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet pinned on her dress neckline, she secretly enjoys the thought that "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (353).

The anecdote of her suitor Mr. Teagarden crowns the old day memories with the traditional Southern courtship of a lady; however, the mixture of a hue of materiality and modern value judgment in the tradition-embedded anecdote raises a certain conflict. June Star says that she would never marry any gentleman who only brings her a watermelon as a gift every Saturday. Her comments bring forth the grandmother's further lament: Mr.

Teagarden was not only a gentleman but also wealthy! This lament tints the simple representation of courting with modern value judgment—it is a sigh more for the loss of the fortune than for the loss of a gentleman suitor. This sigh indicates a departure from what she proclaims the very founding stone of her upbringing and the principles that she sticks to, and thus becomes a germination that implies her secret clinging and coping to the new modern social norms and value judgment.

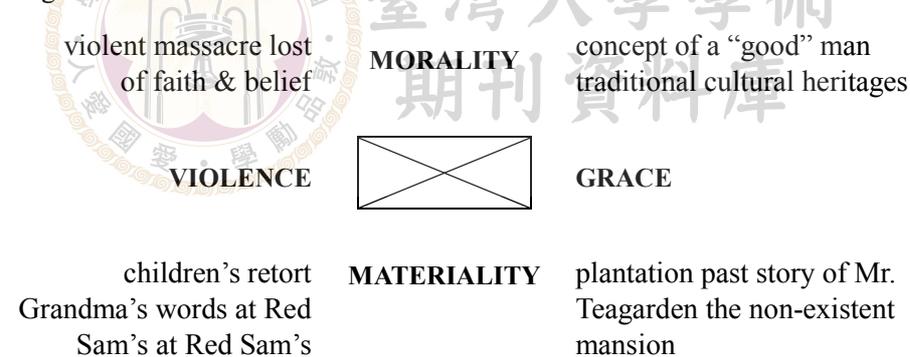
This inclination is again emphasized as the grandmother tries to entice her grandchildren to visit the old plantation. She visited the old plantation when she was a young lady. She remembers the magnificent house: “The house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks 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” (356). The grandiosity the grandmother added to the old plantation mansion and the romantic courting atmosphere mesmerize no one but herself. However, the more she recalls the house and the old days, the more she desires to pay a visit to it. “She knew that Bailey would not be willing to lose any time looking at an old house,” so she craftily tells a lie about the hidden treasure within the old mansion. This strategy works. The children begin yelling, screaming and kicking while the grandmother murmurs, “It would be very educational for them” (356). The father at last gives up to this turmoil and for the first time the grandmother has her will.

In this phase, the grandmother’s memories and nostalgia towards the past culture and old hometown occupy the main stage of the potentialization. The grandmother’s cognitive mapping of the world is totally based upon the ante-bellum South. Her understanding of the circumstances around her reflects the traditional Southern culture. Nevertheless, the old Southern culture background is already at risk while confronted with the monetary system of the modern world. Although the grandmother keeps reminding her son’s family and everyone the glorious past, she is now like a history. The bygone days and her memory about it can no longer attract any attention. June Star and Wesley belong to the new generation that know nothing much about the past, and her son and daughter-in-law could not care less about her advice and beliefs. Her son always keeps silent and rejects any conversation with her, and her daughter-in-law is never a lady in her eyes because even when they were out for a trip, “The children’s mother still had

on slacks and still had her hair tied up in a green kerchief" as usual. The grandmother's memory and judgment is not suitable even at Red Sam's broken store.

Ironically, the past history has to concede to the monetary system so as to bring itself back to the "eyes" of its viewers. The old mansion is not worthy of a visit except that hidden treasure. The old mansion, standing behind the grandmother representing a grand and magnificent historical past, is worthy of a visit because its hidden treasure is valuable in the modern world. But actually, for the grandmother, she'd rather believe that its grandeur—the representation and symbol of the prestige and power of the plantation days—would not fail her to her son's family, when they arrive at it, view it, and find out the truth. However, the value of the mansion depends upon what the eyes could see—whether it is judged from the grandmother's or the younger generations' eyes.

The existential phases of the grandmother's potentialization and virtualization as delineated in the narrative can be illustrated in the following diagram:



V. The Violence Actualized—A Process towards Transformation

As the Bailey family's car finally turns to the dirt road, climbing up and down into the hilly ground in search of the grand mansion, the grandmother suddenly remembers that "the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee" (357). This shocking fact brings forth the bad luck to the whole family. The instant the grandmother realizes her mistake, her feet jumps up and kicks over the valise where the family cat Pitty Sing is

hidden, and the cat springs onto Bailey's shoulder and causes the car to turn over. Everyone is shocked but not injured, and the children are yelling and screaming in a frenzy of delight: "We've had an ACCIDENT!" (357) The Misfit and his henchmen are the first to arrive at the scene after the car accident. The grandmother recognizes The Misfit immediately. While The Misfit orders his henchmen to execute Bailey, John Wesley, the mother, June Stars, and the baby, the grandmother keeps her unsuccessful conversation with The Misfit and tries every chance to ask for an escape from death. The Misfit, at the mean time, wrestles with his own personal question of God and belief, keeping the grandmother as the only confidant that he can let out his secrets and vengeance.

In this scene, the previous virtual verbal violence turns to be the actualized violent stroke of death. The verbal discord of the Bailey children though heard at the beginning is soon settled down because The Misfit demands the mother to take care of and discipline her children: "Lady, would you mind calling them children to sit down by you? Children make me nervous" (358). As an outside force, the Misfit redirects the paternal rights of instructing and educating their youngsters to the mother. For the first time in the story, the demand of order and obedience is observed. The grandmother now recovers from the shock of the car accident and recognizes The Misfit. However, this great mistake incurs not The Misfit's rage but her son's: "Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened. 'Lady,' he said, 'don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he do[es]n't mean. I don't reckon he meant to talk to you that way'" (359).

The Misfit once again takes a hand in the Bailey family chores and resolves the mother-son discord by appealing to the norms of the old cultural tradition. This gesture makes the grandmother believe that he might treat her differently because he knows the Southern cultural norms and she is a lady. The grandmother mistakes The Misfit's gentleness towards an old woman as a sign of his recognition of the social and cultural norms. She quickly makes every effort to tell The Misfit that he is a "good" man and that he has no common blood. She parallels good manners and nobility in blood to the standard qualification of a "good" man. However, her appeal to the norms does not work, because The Misfit cares about manners but not

morals.

In the grandmother's superficial understanding, the appearance and manners no wonder are the best representation for these traits, hence the judgment can be made at the first sight. The grandmother not only clings to the banal worldview without a bit of self-consciousness but also claims her supremacy over others in making judgments. For the grandmother, the virtual appearance and the potential acknowledgment of the cultural and social norms equal to the realization and actualization of the much deeper religious, class, and ideological beliefs and concepts of the Southern tradition. In the grandmother's world, the axis of the reality and the axis of the cognitive become one. In the grandmother's system of value judgment, only appearance counts. What can be seen is to be believed. That is the reason why she has to dress up for the car trip to Florida, for "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (353). For her, appearance is the only thing that counts, living or dead.

Though the grandmother tries hard to save her life, her talent can never match The Misfits. Nor does her understanding of Christianity more precise or deeper than an ordinary person. She is no match for The Misfit in metaphysical thoughts. Therefore, she never gets a chance to coax him out of his religious nihilism, nor can she use any words or conversation to persuade him not to kill her. She trusts no one, just like The Misfit. She believes in appearance and The Misfit also has the same penchant for believing what he sees.

However, trust in God is never a task of seeing, and in religion, trust does not come from appearance, but spiritual understanding and faith. Faith has no root in the grandmother's and The Misfit's layer of reality. Judging from appearance, the grandmother takes everything in face value. She tells The Misfit that he is not an evil person because she can "see" by her eyes. She believes that she can "see" the difference and distinguish a "good" man from a "bad" one. She has no idea that the judgment she forms and cherishes is just a borrowed yet shallow concept of the social and cultural norms. Her old traditional Southern discipline and common sense tell her that good manners and polite language towards a lady, especially an old one, show a man's good education and excellent breed that qualify him to be a "good" man. As Miles Orvell points out, "The Misfit evinces a

distinguishing gentility of manner, which the old lady, with her desperate equation of manners and morals, mistakes for goodness” (Orvell 119).

Foreseeing what strategy his mother is resorting to, Bailey intends to cut in and, for the first time, wants to take control of the situation. But it is too late. His fate is doomed, and with this understanding of his approaching death and his responsibility to his mother, Bailey finally gives his mother an impassioned message: “I’ll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!” (360) Facing her son’s death, the grandmother keeps coaxing the Misfit:

“I just know you’re a good man,” she said desperately. “You’re not a bit common!”

“Nome, I ain’t a good man.” (360)

Since the grandmother is confined within the superficial judgment on appearance and manners, she can get no further except appeal to what she is familiar with. However, The Misfit knows himself better and would not concede to abide by the norms. The grandmother has no idea that The Misfit believes himself a sacrifice to the social and political rules and for such an escaped convict, there is no social justice—he would rather set up his own rules. He trusts no one and is gratified with taking no help:

“If you would pray,” the old lady said, “Jesus would help you.”

“That’s right,” The Misfit said.

“Well then, why don’t you pray?” she asked trembling with delight suddenly.

“I don’t want no help,” he said. “I’m doing all right by myself.”

(361)

When The Misfit condescends to her advice on praying, the grandmother fancies that this is the chance. If the social norms cannot work, at least, religion may stand a chance to convert such a man as The Misfit. As all the other family members are dead now, the grandmother sees this as the only hope she can count on and she would keep reminding him the good that praying might bring forth. However, just as the grandmother is taking

religion as the final salvation to this convict and also as the last hope of her escape from death, The Misfit tells her that he needs no help. Religion is no quick salvation to The Misfit because he sees no points in praying for help. The life in the penitentiary has taught him the lesson:

Jesus [threw] 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.... I call myself The Misfit because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment. (362)

He believes in nothing unless he himself bears witness to it. The Misfit has his own philosophy of independence and free will. He questions the miracle of Jesus' raising of Lazarus. Total submission to an almighty God without "seeing" the miracle is ridiculous to him. Living in a world full of "injustice" that threatens to set him up and pen him in, The Misfit learns his lesson: seeing is believing.

For The Misfit, there are only two roads open in front of him: "If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but [throw] away everything and follow Him," (362) because you believe in Him, and "if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him" (362). And the latter is the case with The Misfit. He would believe no miracles and his solution is: you have no one else but yourself to trust in and turn to, so you squander everything there in life, for there's no salvation nor hope on earth. Nevertheless, The Misfit sinks again into his own pondering and raises the doubt himself:

"I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had been there I would [have] known. Listen Lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would [have] known and I wouldn't be like I am now." His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. (362)

What *The Misfit* reveals is not just his doubt in religion but the very trait in his personality—he just cannot submit to God and God’s grace without proving its true existence himself. As a child, *The Misfit* is never a pliant sheep that abides by the social rules without questioning the reason and justification of them first. He tells the grandmother, “My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. ‘You know,’ Daddy said, ‘it’s some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it’s others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He’s going to be into everything!’” (360) *The Misfit*’s father knows him and he knows this, too. If what *The Misfit* abhors is the lack of proof in believing, the complete submission to God and the total oblivion of one’s own control and determination towards life without probing first into the reason of it is the very root of his disobedience. *The Misfit* has his own lament and his own puzzle to solve. His lack of chance to witness the existence of God’s miracle holds the critical clue to his non-believing.

Underneath the apparent nihilism and open denial of Christ’s miracle in his raising of the dead, *The Misfit* might still have a secret yearning for believing in God. This is what the grandmother “sees” at the last moment of her life. Even when *The Misfit* denies God’s miracle, and blames God for driving the world out of balance, he has not totally denied and abandoned the yearning. If he really disbelieves, there is no need for him to curse God for making the world a mass, nor is it necessary to protest that he would have believed in Him if he were there on the spot to witness the miracle. There is the perplexed mind dangling between the mysterious truth and the fact based on appearance. *The Misfit* does, in a certain sense, share with the grandmother something in common: they both judge by appearance. They both believe in what they “see.” They believe in what their eyes can see rather than what their minds’ eyes can perceive. *The Misfit*, at the symbolical level, is the child of the grandmother. The grandmother, in a certain sense, unknowingly but correctly reveals the same characteristic in cajoling *The Misfit*: “Listen, you shouldn’t call yourself *The Misfit* because I know you’re a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell” (359). Although the grandmother is just using this lip service to coax *The Misfit* out so as to save her own life, she ironically parallels herself with *The Misfit* as she emphasizes how she uses her “eyes” to see, to look at *The Misfit* and tell what kind of person he is.

But as if in a magic instance, the grandmother finally has the sudden insight to see through The Misfit's rumbling monologue and her head "cleared for an instant." For a moment, she is in an empathy and understands his troubled life and his will to vengeance: "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 children!'" (362) Forsaking her previous superficial social norms and categories of a good man, the grandmother jumps to another phase of understanding. She is no longer the shallow selfish old woman that demands the obedience and acceptance of the family members and others. She understands for a moment the doubts The Misfit is trying to release. The transformation of her existential development from the potential and virtual stages is shown in this trembling moment. The grandmother, therefore, extends her momentous realization to The Misfit. She actualizes this understanding of the human predicament by including The Misfit as "one of her children," and stretching out her hand to touch The Misfit on the shoulder. However, without any understanding of this miracle in action, The Misfit rejects the grandmother's sharing gesture of the concomitant recognition of humanity and love. He shoots her three times through the chest. This ends the grandmother's life and her function as a revelation of the transformation process to The Misfit.

VI. Violence as the Initiation of Transformation

The grandmother's final gesture of a graceful touch bears the seed of transformation. The Misfit is offered a chance to share the initial but final communion with the grandmother through this gesture of acknowledgement. No one is perfect, and imperfection does not exclude one from receiving redemption. The Misfit says that the grandmother would be a good woman if there were someone who shoots her every minute all her life. He shoots her, and he makes her dying a "good" woman. As Gary Sloan points out: "The Misfit forces the grandmother to think. After momentary skepticism—'Maybe He didn't raise the dead'—she is primed for her moment of grace, connects with The Misfit, and dies redeemed. Treated as a catalyst for the grandmother's epiphany, The Misfit is a fruitful device" (Sloan 119-20). The Misfit triggers off the death machine and forces the grandmother to admit her imperfection and her resemblance with him: she is no better than he is. But

at the last minute she broadens her mind to embrace this convict and his malignancy. She is offered the chance to “see” at the crucial moment that human beings are not perfect and even evil doings might be forgiven and redeemed while the act of compassion presents itself.

The imminent death, the sting of violence, forces and elevates her to see things beyond their appearance and looks into the spiritual. Although her benignant gesture brings forth her death, the significance of this gesture does not stop on the spot. The Misfit knows the grandmother: she is a domineering old woman who clings to clichés and social norms without any sense of self-consciousness. He believes that the approaching death forces her to face her true self—the dark side of her character: “She would [have] been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (363). And this practical understanding of the apparent and the physical is what The Misfit counts on. However, the textual narration permits more than what the significant moment presents. There is a chance of transformation for The Misfit.

The Misfit this time really attends the crucial moment in person. He is forced to take action while the grandmother stretches out her hand and calls him “one of her babies” (362). It is her final touch of compassion that shocks The Misfit. Her reach towards The Misfit is a gesture acknowledging that they are of the same breed. But The Misfit never reckons himself as one of those ordinary people with doubtful faith and superficial judgments. So he spontaneously shoots her dead to avoid the touch and the contamination. The grandmother is not a true believer, and The Misfit knows this. He would not believe in God, because he was not there to witness the miracle; however, this time he can bear witness to the grandmother’s ceremonial gesture of compassion. Will it make any difference to him? The narrative leaves much space for The Misfit and the reader to meditate.¹³ While analyzing the possible flow of the narrative significance in the existential phases and semiotic modulations, Greimas and Fontanille point out: “It is by means of the perceiving body that the world is

¹³ O’Connor’s comment on her own story is: “I don’t want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that’s another story.” (“On Her Own Work,” *Mystery and Manners* p. 112-3)

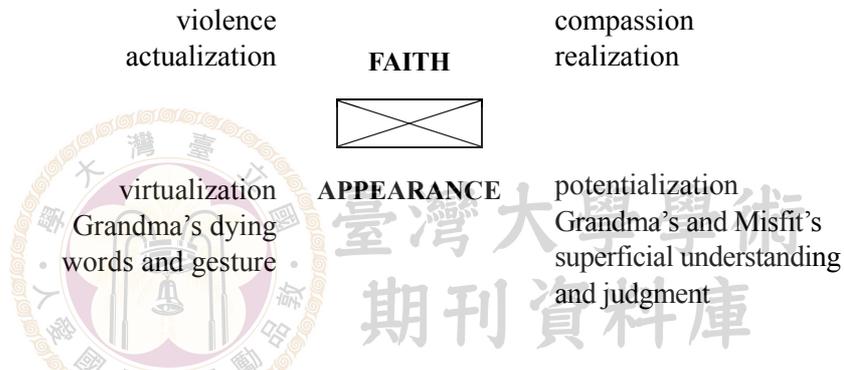
transformed into meaning (into language), that the exteroceptive figures are internalized, and that figurativity can be envisaged as the subject's mode of thinking" (Greimas and Fontanille xxi). What the grandmother perceives as the fatal moment approaching is this kind of thinking that might get perceived and transformed into her own cognitive mapping. Through the grandmother's stretching hand, The Misfit is also given a chance of initiation. However, only when he can internalize this message and reach his transformation stage, can he really enjoy the moment of enlightenment.

Some critics assume that the grandmother's reach towards The Misfit shows no sign of her repent. This kind of premise has its ground because the grandmother's selfishness and superficiality is well demonstrated in the narrative. But since this gesture happens after the grandmother's seeing The Misfit's distorted face and has temporarily imagined that she sees the tears that are going to fall from his eyes, then, her reaching out of her hand to him might bear a sense of pity and sympathy. The grandmother is selfish and bossy, but she is not a woman who pays no attention to others' feelings. Just like The Misfit, who tries to save her face and comfort her feelings by persuading her that the bad words Bailey said to her do not show his true feelings, the grandmother, too, possesses that sense of compassion that really sees into the troubled condition other people are in. So previously in the Red Sam's, she would not be hesitate to reprimand June Star for her rude reply to Red Sam's wife. The grandmother's final gesture, however, is far from innocent, nor purely originated from a selfish thought.

The Misfit, unlike the grandmother who never really thinks about God and her faith in Him, ponders on such questions frequently. In fact, this is the very kernel of his problem. If the grandmother never in her life really knows how to be a "good" woman until facing her own fatal moment, The Misfit, on the contrary, always gives his thought on it. For The Misfit, the belief in Christ is a matter of life and death, as Miles Orvell notes: "It is a violent logic, and it draws so sharp a line between the total commitment of faith and the total commitment of disbelief that there is no middle course" (Orvell 133). This makes the grandmother's death full of significance in the end of this violent story. The death appearance of the grandmother may not accord with her own imagination as dying like a lady, but she gives out her hand to embrace The Misfit with compassion. What the grandmother's death brings forth will now become a hint for The Misfit and a chance for

him to “see” beyond the appearance and fact. It is The Misfit, not the grandmother, who is allowed the chance to transform after the narrative ends. At this critical moment, it is not the grandmother’s words that carry the light of grace, but her gesture that throws open her heart to accept The Misfit, as if he were her son, her baby. In appearance, The Misfit wearing her son’s sports shirt may “look” like her son, and in reality, they both believe in appearance. This belief in appearance makes The Misfit more like her son.

The grandmother’s existential trajectory and the possible following transformation phase of The Misfit can thus be illustrated as the following:



There is always a chance in the flowing of the significance as Greimas emphasizes in his analysis of the semiotic square of passions. In the Greimassian model, the potential stage can sometimes on the very transit moment be situated between the actualization and the realization stage (Greimas and Fontanille 25-6). Thus, the potentialization stage, I would like to point out, preserves the power of transformation. Since the subject-actant could make a detour by returning to the potentialization stage instead of moving forward directly from the virtualization to the actualization, I suggest that we take the potentialization stage as an ambiguous stage. Hence, by virtue of its pivotal position, it preserves the opportunities to develop into different forms, according to the subject-actant’s trajectory. Transformations, consequently, could be viewed as the results of different understandings that the subject-actant obtains at the potentialization stage.

While The Misfit shoots the grandmother to death, he is working

towards his new recognition of the world. It is his vicious action that helps make the grandmother's transformation and realization possible. Without any self-consciousness of their roles in the Bailey family car accident, The Misfit and his henchmen become the unwilling instruments of the narrative and help make the existential transformation possible to the self-centered grandmother. However, the violent act brings forth not violence, nor revenge, but a signifying gesture, which keeps flowing in the network of meaning and significance.

In a certain sense, the germination phase of The Misfit's realization converges with the stroke of the grandmother's death.¹⁴ He sees clearly the grandmother's drawbacks, and he reveals his viewpoint bitterly yet truly by saying sarcastically after the grandmother's death: "She would [have] been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (363). The grandmother has no great moral defects, however, as The Misfit clearly sees, and she only needs someone to keep reminding her to abandon her superficial concepts of manners and religion. A threatening violence might be the way to transformation: it forces the grandmother to forget momentarily her banal beliefs of clichés, her selfishness, and her domineering attitudes. But since she has no chance to die over and over again as The Misfit sarcastically comments, the grandmother obtains no self-knowledge at the end of her life. Although in The Misfit's sudden twisted face, she sees a flash of possibility that a miracle might take time to work out.

The grandmother never obtains a complete understanding of herself, even at the moment of her death. She has no talent for the philosophical thinking of religion, and nor does she have the gift of seeing her own selfishness behind her behaviors. Religious faith and belief, if not empty terms, are just pertaining to their surface values in her shallow understanding. The Misfit, on the contrary, reaches his disbelief by a much more

¹⁴ I would like to emphasize that in this story, the realization stage of the grandmother is not the same as that of the narrator's. The narrator could bear the grace of God in mind while making the narrative full of religious signification, and adding colors to the aura of the violent scene. However, an escape from the family massacre might be the very practical idea the old grandmother preserves. As to The Misfit, this mass killing does not bring him much joy but complex and contradictory feelings towards life and faith. His understanding is also different from that of the narrator's and that of the grandmother's.

complicated reasoning of mental rejection. However, the grandmother's words and gesture might gradually turn to become a certain transcendental force that elevates his mental maturity beyond the superficial understanding and reasoning of faith and belief. The germination of this transformation is hidden within the ending conversation between The Misfit and Bobby Lee:

“Some fun!” Bobby Lee said.

“Shut up, Bobby Lee,” The Misfit said. “It’s no real pleasure in life.” (363)

The Misfit tells the grandmother that his fun and pleasure in life is gained through his misdeeds and violence towards others. But now the anti-social behavior can no longer bring forth the fun that he previously confirmed. The violence done to the grandmother becomes a stain of sarcasm. He chastises the social injustice and adopts anti-social behaviors as his method of challenge and protest, but the death of the old grandmother repeats once more what he distains—the social injustice done to a person who claims to do nothing seriously wrong. And ironically the grandmother dies because she intends to include The Misfit as one of her breed and her outstretching hand expresses a gesture of compassion.

Starting from a family plan of a vacation in Florida, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” ends when the family is extinguished. The “supposed to be fun” detour from the highway turns out to be the road to death. None of the family would suspect that listening to the grandmother's suggestion would come to such an end, though actually the grandmother's words are seldom worthy of listening. The verbal violence occurred repeatedly but received no prohibition within the family mimics the physical violence of the real world that The Misfit and his henchmen resort to. Violence, in its various forms, can be found everywhere in the narrative and can only stop while its power emerges and its damage painfully acknowledged. The violence of words could only portray vaguely the virtual territory of human beings' vicious thoughts towards each other; however, the violence of action claims the harvest of the hatred that has long been heading nowhere. The extinction of the Bailey family does not prove they are sinners, for they are merely in a bad luck to have the car accident, and then, it happens that The

Misfit and his men are the first to find them. Even the grandmother is not so much responsible for the death of the Bailey family. The setting of this plot foils the violence and transcends the vindictive malice into a certain kind of transformational process. Violence happens, but does not necessarily have a reason, and sometimes, violence does not incur more violence. The transformation moment occurs while a person can finally start out from breaking the mode of virtual existence, to enter his realization stage of existence.



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