

Destiny Hicks

English 102-004

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Undone at the Seams

Susan Glaspell's isolated Minnie Wright and Flannery O'Connor's devious Misfit compare in more ways than one. In fact, the two characters share similar stories and situations across the pages. This is possibly due to the similar motives of the two authors. Although Trifles is a century-old play, it still contains an intriguing story about a gospel singer 'gone bad.' "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" contains a similar theme and structure but with more religious undertones. However, Minnie Wright and The Misfit find themselves in a life-changing situation that revolves around murder.

Both The Misfit and Minnie suffer from injustice in their pasts. Minnie is remembered fondly as a young gospel singer who "used to wear pretty clothes[,] and be lively" (Glaspell 749). John Wright has changed Minnie by restricting her access to the outside world. He has cut off all communication to others, and he has a violent nature. This is exemplified most clearly when Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale discover the broken hinge on the birdcage. Mrs. Hale comments that John Wright was "[l]ike a raw wind that gets to the bone" (752). Similarly, The Misfit comes from a past of good, legitimate work. He tells the grandmother "[he's] been most everything. Been in the arm service,...been an undertaker, been with the railroads, [and] plowed Mother Earth" (O'Connor 415). Yet, despite his innocence, The Misfit is thrown behind bars for

a crime he cannot remember and “[is] buried alive” (415). He claims that he was punished unjustly when he tells the grandmother “[i]t was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what [he] had done was kill [his] daddy but [he] known that for a lie” (416). The Misfit believes that the harsh punishment was a ‘misfit’ for the crime he did not even commit, and justly renames himself. This symbolizes his fall from good graces: subsequently he throws away his morals and adopts a new code to live by.

Due to these respective injustices, each character commits a murder to try to rebalance the scales. Minnie ties a noose around her husband’s neck and hangs him, causing his neck to snap like the neck of her canary, which John had previously snapped in his hands. Similarly, The Misfit shoots the grandmother so that he can feel fulfilled, as he believes that someone else should have to die as pension for his years in the penitentiary. Both The Misfit and Minnie Wright get away with their crimes with the aid of their allies. The Misfit travels with his henchmen Bobby Lee and Hiram, who take care of most of his dirty work for him. Minnie is aided by Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who work together to try to hide the bird carcass when the men come home: “Mrs. Hale gets the evidence into the pocket of her coat just before the men return” (Grose, par. 15).

In both cases, the coconspirators help since they feel that they have been in similar circumstances. For example, in Trifles, the women silently show their support for Minnie’s murder to speak out against the oppression that men have over women. Mrs. Hale expresses her own personal feeling of isolation when she tells Mrs. Peters that “[women] live close together and [they] live far apart. [They] all go through the same things” (Glaspell 754). Through this conversation between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, “Susan Glaspell confronts a social problem that was to become a dominant theme in much of her later work, ‘the confining environments that

frustrate the full development of human potential' (Gilbert and Gubar 1389)" (Grose, par. 1). In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Hiram, Bobby Lee, and The Misfit are all escaped convicts. Realistically, they bond over the crimes they committed and the harsh conditions of prison, and feel the sense of fraternity that such difficult circumstances breed in men who have those experiences in common.

Ironically, Minnie's story ends with her behind bars, whereas The Misfit's story does not begin until he has gone to the penitentiary. However, both characters are metaphorically imprisoned throughout the whole of their stories. The Misfit has religious doubts that cause him confusion. He claims that Jesus had "thown everything off balance" when he resurrected people from the dead, so The Misfit considers it his job to restore the balance (O'Connor 416). He has accepted and even embraced his role as the 'anti-Christ', but he still maintains that it brings him "no real pleasure in life" (418). If Trifles is pared down to the situations Minnie is in, Minnie has simply gone from one dark, loveless cell to another. John Wright had forced her into isolation for years, but when she finally kills him as an act of retribution, she is condemned to rot in jail. For her, the only escapes in life are her preserves and sewing. She requests that the women bring her the apron she uses, which Mrs. Peters explains is "just to [help Minnie] feel more natural" (Glaspell 749). Additionally, a single jar of preserves survives the harsh winter conditions much like Minnie survives the frost of John's heart. Mrs. Hale tells Mrs. Peters to bring it to Minnie and "[t]ell her [it is] all right" (754). The jar symbolizes the hope that Minnie has towards the rest of her life now that John is not in it.

With the burdens of the poor circumstances of life, the gospel singers had some sort of influence from God to keep them going. The Misfit is depicted as both a Christ-like figure as well as an anti-Christ, whereas Minnie's past showed her dedication to the church: "Minnie

would wear a white dress with blue ribbons and [stand] in the choir and [sing]” (754). The white dress is symbolic of Minnie’s innocence and purity while the ribbons represent her vow to God and the church. This is how the women choose to remember Minnie, showing how influential it is to be a Christian, and how integral Minnie’s religion was to her and those around her.

Conversely, in O’Connor’s story, “The Misfit can be seen as O’Connor’s scourge, a prophetic figure who raises the question of evil and redemption by Christ to a largely unbelieving audience in a stark and violent fashion” (Desmond, par. 6). The grandmother attempts to convince him not to kill her by calling him a good Christian. After she touches him, he recoils before hurriedly shooting her three times. He then takes off his glasses and says “[s]he would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (O’Connor 418). This symbolizes his godly ability to look deeply into her soul and see her for who she really is. The story ends with the seemingly contradictory notion that “[f]or The Misfit, evil may, in the end, through the grace of charity, bring about his ultimate good” (Desmond, par. 18). This implies that somehow his malevolent nature and unseemly actions actually aid the general good.

The settings of the two stories also serve to establish a common theme within the texts. In Trifles, the play takes place during the frigid months of winter. The cold, dormant weather symbolizes the loveless marriage that Minnie Wright was trapped in. The frosty wind is symbolic of John Wright’s icy wrath, and the fire in the town does little to penetrate the chill. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the family travels from their nameless home town and makes a few stops on the way to their vacation in Florida. After the car accident, the ditch that the family falls into represents their open graves. Interestingly, the story never explicitly describes a time of year or of day for the setting, much like it is never specified exactly where The Misfit’s origins lie. The lack of setting serves to add to the aura of mystery that underlies the story.

While The Misfit establishes himself to be all-seeing and all-knowing, Minnie Wright knows nothing of the town outside of her home, and never purports to be educated, let alone omniscient. The house is quiet since there is a lack of children and no view of the road, so Minnie Wright is trapped and unable to escape. She is stunted in her social growth even further when the women of the town never come to see her. Mrs. Hale feels remorse at never coming to see her old friend because “it’s down in a hollow and [she doesn’t] see the road” from the window (Glaspell 752). Contrarily, when The Misfit approaches the trapped family after the accident, the grandmother exclaims “[they] turned over twice” (O’Connor 412). The Misfit, however, immediately and caustically corrects the grandmother by saying that the car only turned over once, causing her to fall silent.

While Minnie feels the justice of her crime, The Misfit shows some regret after he kills the grandmother. At the end of the story, he removes his glasses and “The Misfit’s eyes [are] red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking” (418). Inside, he knows that what he did was wrong, but he still believes it was unavoidable. In an earlier statement of his, he even blamed Jesus, claiming that he was forcing him to commit crimes. He claims he is forced by Jesus’ resurrections to balance the scales of life and death, but he does not relish any joy from the situation. Divergently, Minnie seems to have found her peace after her husband’s murder. When she simply asked for preserves and an apron, she shows her lack of concern for what happens to her next, and her satisfaction and sense of righteousness in what she did.

It must also be argued that The Misfit is as much of a victim as Minnie is. Although he is considered a criminal, “[if one] consider[s] [T]he Misfit in the light of O’Connor’s view of the role of the prophet, [one] see[s] that he is not a monster, but a tragic figure, the victim of what O’Connor regarded as a profound misunderstanding of the relation between humanity and God”

(Hendricks, par. 1). His enemy, unlike Minnie's, is God, who is considered good-willed and omnipotent. The Misfit cannot fight or kill his enemy, but he can try to oppose Him by doing ill-intended things. It does not mean that The Misfit necessarily wants to do these things, but he feels forced to: a chained wolf would bite off its own foot for a means of escape.

Many of Flannery O'Connor's stories were religious in nature. She later describes The Misfit as her 'spoiled prophet' in a letter, showing that "she was deeply interested in the role of the prophet" (par. 2). O'Connor was committed to "a 'prophetic vision of history,' the view that human history is the story of humanity's relation to God" (par. 2). "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is prevalently religious in nature: the characters play roles of good or evil based mostly on their religious morals and commitment to their faith. However, Susan Glaspell's Trifles instead depicts oppression of women, and mostly doles out "good versus evil" roles based on the Wright's situation, which also happens to be along gender lines. From the beginning of the play, "[t]he men patronize [the women] and gently ridicule their concerns while the women themselves, at least at the outset, characterize their activity in the house as relatively unimportant" (Holstein, par. 4). The women serve to play a major role in the story, unbeknownst to the patronizing men. They save Minnie, and thus solidify the trend of gender-disposition matches in the play.

The grandmother is similar to the Sheriff, County Attorney, and Mr. Hale of Glaspell's play. Putting herself in Mrs. Wright's shoes, Mrs. Hale says, "[she]'d hate to have men coming into [her] kitchen, snooping around and criticizing" (Glaspell 748). Comparably to how the investigative men search through Minnie's home, the grandmother pokes and prods at The Misfit's past. She attempts to appeal to his Christianity by calling him a good man and preaching to him about Jesus. Mrs. Peters replies that "it's no more than [the men's] duty" to dig

around for evidence (748). The grandmother, in a similar fashion, has deemed it her duty to convert The Misfit, and guide him to what she considers a healthy, Christian life. Although she is not a good Christian by all means, she encourages The Misfit to accept God into his sinful life. She tells him that “[i]f [he] would pray, Jesus would help [him]” (O’Connor 416). Ironically, The Misfit serves to be the Christ of the story, like Minnie becomes the victim. In this way, true justice is served by both characters.

While Minnie Wright comes undone at the ‘seams’, The Misfit struggles to keep himself composed while he fights his inner conflicts. Both characters suffer from grievous circumstances, causing them to react in sinful ways. Although Glaspell and O’Connor may have different ideas towards predominant themes in life, their stories continue to be relatable to today. While the women of the town ‘knot’ their pact to Minnie and promise ‘not’ to tell anyone of her guilt, the Misfit’s henchmen are along for the ride. Both Minnie Wright and The Misfit have only just begun their journeys to Utopia.

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