

Individualism in O'Connor's *A Good Man's Hard To Find*

In Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the main character, Mr. Shiftlet, asks a primary philosophical question, "What is a man?" (O'Connor 175). Like the other characters in O'Connor's short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, Mr. Shiftlet defines a human being as primarily an autonomous individual. O'Connor worries that this extreme individualism leaves people as self-focused wanderers without community who use others as means to their own ends. For O'Connor, this individualism is the cause for much of the rottenness in the world.

First, many of the characters consider themselves of primary importance. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mrs. Crater has forgotten her humble place as a creature within creation, and she stands proudly watching Mr. Shiftlet with "her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun" (173). This self-righteous pose is common in O'Connor's short stories. For example, Mrs. Shortley of "The Displaced Person" walks up a hill with "her arms [...] folded" and she "ignore[s] the white afternoon sun" (285). These postures are signs of the truly backward individual, who closes herself off with this posture, defiantly assured of her own merit. The grandmother in the story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" exemplifies this self-focus and self-righteousness; she initiates every problem in the story from the first sentence: "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida" (137). Disregarding the desires of her family, the grandmother prioritizes her desire to stay home.

Focusing on the self leads the characters to treat those around them as means to their own selfish ends. For example, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," while Mrs. Crater interviews Mr. Shiftlet, he thinks about the car he is going to steal. Conversely, when Mr. Shiftlet asks rhetorically about the nature and purpose of human beings, Mrs. Crater wonders "if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house" (175). Here, she does not even consider him by name but refers to him by his handicap. Rather than considering each other as subjects, the two individuals objectify each other. This Buberian I-It relationship, which individualism purports, disconnects them from each other.

Moreover, once people have been degraded to objects by the individual, community holds no value. Wandering from community to community, Mr. Shiftlet exemplifies this void. He lists his miscellaneous jobs, revealing his instrumental relationship to communities:

He had been a gospel singer, a foreman on the railroad, an assistant in an undertaking parlor, and he had come over the radio for three months with Uncle Roy and his Red Creek Wranglers. He said he had fought and bled in the Arm Service of his country and visited every foreign land and that everywhere he had seen people that didn't care if they did a thing one way or another. (175)

The misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" shares a similar list of odd jobs: "I was a gospel singer for a while. [...] I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad [...] been an undertaker [...] been with the railroads" (149). The overlap seems too stark to be coincidental; although the Misfit and Mr. Shiftlet are not the same person, they represent the same character: the lost individual who relates to the community through constantly shifting roles. While both characters seek self-fulfillment, Charles Taylor notes in *Sources of the Self* that "the primacy of self-fulfillment reproduces and reinforces [...] negative consequences. [...] Community affiliations [...] all take second place" (507). Thus, because they lack any commitment to other human beings, the characters fail to fulfill themselves with communal roles or steady jobs.

At the climax of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet's individuality causes him extreme discomfort when he marries the mentally handicapped daughter of Mrs. Crater, Lucynell. During the marriage

procedure, he "began twisting his neck in his collar. He looked morose and bitter as if he had been insulted while someone held him" (180). The service in the Ordinary's office distresses him. His twisting neck indicates that suffocating. Considering his views on individuality, marriage is the antithesis, since according to Catholic theology, the sacrament makes two persons into one.

Because Mr. Shiftlet defines human beings primarily as autonomous individuals, he must rid himself of his new wife as quickly as possible. He drops her off at "The Hot Spot," an obvious allusion to hell, but leaving her there actually damns him to hell. Lucynell still remains innocent. As the boy behind the counter notes, "She looks like an angel of Gawd" (181). Mr. Shiftlet cannot see this; he calls her a hitchhiker and abandons her as such. To divide himself from his wife, Mr. Shiftlet must lie about their identities. He removes their selfhoods as he tries to maintain his individuality. Twentieth-century Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac writes, "Destruction of unity is a corruption of truth" (77). Therefore, as Mr. Shiftlet destroys his union with his wife, he also disassembles reality.

Only after being on the road for a while does Mr. Shiftlet start to feel the emptiness of Lucynell's presence. Of course, he tries to justify his depression: "There were times when Mr. Shiftlet preferred not to be alone. He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker" (182). The irony of the first sentence is that it should be rarer to want to be alone than vice versa. His reasoning in the second sentence is more comical but also more terrible. He wants to fulfill his "responsibility" as a car owner, though he recently dismissed his true responsibility as a husband. His identity should not be defined as a "car owner"; as with his list of occupations. Mr. Shiftlet tries to find purpose in his new revocable role. Moreover, through this insight into Mr. Shiftlet's thoughts, O'Connor notes that even the self-damning individual needs community.

The story ends with a sign that reads like the title: "The life you save may be your own." For O'Connor, a Catholic, the only way to save your life is to lose it. In Matthew 10:39 Jesus says, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." O'Connor delves into this paradox in several of the short stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. For instance, the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" loses her earthly life, but in the last moment when she renounces her individualism, she may also be finding spiritual life. In contrast, Mr. Shiftlet may have found his life as an individual on the open road, but he has also lost his spiritual life by succumbing to such individualism.

Hooten, Jessica. "Individualism in O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*." *The Explicator* 66.4 (2008): 197+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 27 Apr. 2012.