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A Good Title Is Hard To Find

Everybody has natural instincts: Natural instincts to breathe, to sleep, to eat when you are hungry, and whether you know it or not, a natural instinct to pick up sophisticated meanings, symbols, and themes in literature. However, just because you can pick up on these things, does not necessarily mean you do it well. Just like you need to practice to get better at a sport, you need to practice your analytical skills. Practicing these skills will help you pick up on things with more ease—and what better way to practice than to read a book specifically about that? Thomas C. Foster’s book, How to Read Literature Like a Professor gives us many theories to look about while reading different literature which helps you look for more complex meanings throughout the text. Theories that Foster argues to be true can be applied to Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” where you see a grandmother who appears to be so sweet end up being not-so-sweet when you take another look.

A family of six took a vacation from their home in Georgia to Florida.Everybody wants to go to Florida except the grandmother—so they went to Florida. Since this trip means the family is going to travel south, Foster argues that things may get a little disorderly. Foster says that,” writers send characters south so they can run amok,” (Foster, 171). While on their way to Florida the kids slap each other (O’Connor, 3) they get in a car wreck, (O’Connor, 7) and meet an escaped prisoner—The Misfit—who murders every single one of them. Ultimately they could’ve gone to Tennessee like the grandmother wanted and things would have turned out differently because they would not be going south, but since they are, and they act while on their way there is chaotic, especially with The Misfit, Foster’s argument runs true.

We understand that this family is going on a vacation, but they’re also going on a quest (or at least the grandmother is). They’re headed on a trip of what they believe to be filled with relaxation and family fun. Foster argues that every trip is a quest and that this family vacation is no exception. Foster claims that, “questers are so often young,” (Foster 3). Obviously the grandmother isn’t exactly young; however, she’s immature and selfish as if she were. Foster also states that, “the real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge,” (Foster, 3). This is why he believes that questers should be young, and why it works for old granny. Because she does not act her age and is so immature (you can see this by the way she acts when she preserves her own life instead of saving her family) she’s looking for an understanding on how to change her ugly inside—whether she knows it or not. You see this understanding when she realizes she is not such a “lady” after all when she’s with The Misfit. She says, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!” (O’Connor, 11). Referring to his as one of her own kids shoes that she is now able to see others with compassion and understanding—a complete transformation from her character at the beginning of the story. Since they are going on a trip, and that the ‘quester’ finds self-knowledge, O’Connor’s story can be called a quest.

Foster sheds light on a deeper way to view meals in literature, which ultimately helps you understand the dinner with Red Sammy and the family of six in O’Connor’s story. Foster says that while eating a meal with someone they, “share [their] death,” (Foster, 14). Knowing this, and what happens after eating barbeque sandwiches at Red Sammy’s you see the significance in this “last supper.” They are celebrating their life right before it’s over. The family is the ones to actually eat while Red Sammy and his wife just talk with them. This meal symbolizes their death. Since Red and his wife do not join in on the communion, in the end they save their life. You can also get something from the food that they’re eating. Since they are barbeque sandwiches, a casual meal, sloppy, quick, you can see that they aren’t aware of their fate because if they were, they would not have sandwiches as their last hoo-rah. You can clearly see how Foster’s thoughts about communion are accurate and applicable when O’Connor writes her dinner scene in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

While all of this is happening, we should look at the weather for a more thorough analysis. Foster tells us that the weather—along with everything else—has a purpose and means more than what you see on the surface. Foster says that “when travelers find sunshine in the south, they also encounter curious and sometimes dangerous ideas,” (Foster, 170). Obviously the curious ideas occurred when the grandmother wanted to go look down the dirt road and made the children want to go too. This idea goes hand-in-hand with the weather that O’Conner says is “cloudless” (O’Connor, 13) and a “neither too hot nor too cold,” (O’Connor, 2). There are no clouds outside (so obviously they find sunshine) and they go explore a dirt road? You would assume that the day would be wonderful and could not get any better; that the rest of their day would be perfect just like the weather.

Right?

**Wrong.**

Being murdered and thrown into a ditch is not your average “beautiful day,” (O’Connor, 12) Foster later on tells us that, “irony trumps everything,” (Foster, 235). This means that any of his theories could be present, for this instance weather, and that everything he has said about weather is now wrong because it is instead ironic. So the weather being very nice would normally call for a nice day to follow it up, but that is where the irony comes into play.

With all of these theories, Foster has helped us realize our sixth sense—literary analysis. By giving us a guide to follow, we can become seasoned in the art of dissecting literature. By understanding Foster’s theories we understand the bigger picture and can read more critically—ultimately making reading less of a chore and more enjoyable.