

The Forgiveness Factor In The Lives Of Two Literary Grandmothers

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Abstract

The Christian principle of forgiveness plays a pivotal role in the lives of various literary characters. Having, or not having, the ability to forgive others affects the happiness and sense of fulfillment in such characters as Katherine Porter's title character in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"¹ and Flannery O'Connor's grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."² These grandmothers' differing attitudes toward God and the practice of forgiveness in their dying moments offer credence to the biblical teaching that one must be able to forgive if she wishes to be forgiven.³ While each grandmother appears to be a staunch Christian, details of the way each faces her death reveal a marked difference in the sincerity of her belief in God and His forgiveness principle. Calling on God in times of stress is not enough to ensure delivery from such situations; the death experience of each grandmother illustrates the necessity of calling on Him with genuine Christian belief, trust, and motivation.

Introduction

Both grandmothers have much in common before they abruptly find themselves staring at certain death. For each, her strong-willed nature sets in motion a chain of events through which she daily attacks life in an effort to control her situation and the people close to her. These matriarchs will not be appeased by the efforts of their adult children to reduce the burdens the grandmothers have borne for a lifetime of providing for their families amidst various periods of adversity. As each grandmother faces death, one does so with a spirit of spitefulness and indignation against God because she feels He has deserted her when she needs Him most; the other uses a religious façade to try to persuade her killer to change his mind about killing her. As a result of the epiphany this grandmother experiences during her desperate efforts to save her own life, she reaches out to her killer in genuine Christian love, knowing he will surely kill her yet forgiving him anyway, just as Christ forgave those who crucified Him on Golgotha.⁴ One grandmother fades away into a dying gloom, while the other falls into a ditch and dies, looking up into a cloudless blue sky. The childlike, smiling expression on her lifeless countenance suggests she has finally approached her Master with the faith of a little child. Clearly, their

¹ Katherine A. Porter, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*, 10th ed. Ed. X. J. Kennedy & Dana Gioia (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007), 76-82.

² Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*, 10th ed. Ed. X. J. Kennedy & Dana Gioia (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007), 358-368.

³ Matthew 6:14.

⁴ Luke 23:34.

dying words mark a distinct difference in their attitudes as they prepare to leave this earthly realm. Granny Weatherall casts aside her faith as she rails against God when she demands a sign from Him and feels He has deserted her: “I’ll never forgive it.”⁵ O’Connor’s grandmother, on the other hand, experiences a genuine Christian transformation when she realizes her killer also has a soul: “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children.”⁶ This grandmother lets Christ speak through her with her allusion to His words that encourage His followers to come to Him with the faith of a little child.⁷

Similarities

To understand the differences in the attitudes of these dying grandmothers, we must look at the similarities in the details of their lives. First, egocentricity consumes both, each desiring to control her own destiny, as well as the lives of those around her. After George jilts Ellen Weatherall, she pushes forward to find another man to marry and to father her children. During each phase of her adult life, she refuses to yield to adversity as noted in her deathbed reverie, when she recalls all the cooking, sewing, fencing, tending the sick (both animals and people) she has done. Even after her husband John dies, Ellen continues to “weather all” of life’s complications, feeling quite smug in her ability to take control when necessary: “Well, I didn’t do so badly, did I?”⁸ O’Connor’s grandmother is also extremely controlling by nature. Despite the fact that her son Bailey is graciously providing her a place to live with his family, she cleverly attempts to control every decision he and his wife make when they are not considering her wishes. Ironically, her controlling nature leads to the violent death of each family member, including herself, when she manages to change the direction of their vacation. Her cunning efforts to alter the family’s destination in order to avoid an encounter with the escaped murderers led by The Misfit, are to no avail. If she had not hidden her cat in the car against Bailey’s wishes, Bailey would not have wrecked the car when the cat jumped onto his shoulders. Furthermore, if she had not directed Bailey to turn down the wrong road to find the house she wanted to visit, the family’s path would not have placed them directly on course with the murderers. The egocentric nature that consumes these calculating grandmothers pervades each new detail revealed in their thoughts and actions along the way to their inevitable death.

Selfish and opinionated, these grandmothers are concerned about themselves above all others. Both feel a certain entitlement because they have spent so much of their lives serving their children. Now, each grandmother expects that satisfying her wishes should be the primary goal of everyone else in her family. Granny Weatherall’s dutiful daughter Cornelia devotes herself entirely to trying to make the dying Granny comfortable in her last moments; however, Granny cannot be satisfied and snaps back in response to Cornelia’s question:

“What’d you say, Mother?”

⁵ Porter, 82.

⁶ O’Connor, 367.

⁷ Mark 10:14.

⁸ Porter, 78.

“Can’t a body think, I’d like to know?... [G]o away and don’t whisper.”⁹

In her conversation with Red Sammy about the two “fellers” who stole gas from him at his barbecue place, the other grandmother’s opinions about the general populace are summed up in her comment that “[p]eople are certainly not nice like they used to be.”¹⁰ The grandmother’s negative comment evokes the title phrase in Red Sammy’s response, “A good man is hard to find,’...‘Everything is getting terrible.”¹¹ While these grandmothers should be thankful for their many blessings, selfish negativity is the predominant attitude in their thoughts.

Granny Weatherall and the grandmother also share the trait of persistence, as noted earlier in the significance of Granny’s last name. Ellen Weatherall is unyielding in her relentless determination to conquer every obstacle thrown into her path: the jilting by George; the birthing of her children; the early deaths of her husband, her favorite child, Hapsy, and Hapsy’s baby; the sickness of others; her own personal illnesses; and the grueling work of keeping the farm going. Just as persistent is the grandmother who is intent on changing the direction of the family vacation in order to avoid an encounter with the escaped murderers reported to be heading to Florida also. When the grandmother realizes her son and daughter-in-law are not interested in going to Tennessee instead of Florida, she cleverly invents a story about a house with secret passageways to entice her spoiled, ill-mannered grandchildren to whine and scream until their father turns the car around to look for the dirt road that leads to the intriguing old house with its secret panels. Unfortunately, they never reach the house because the grandmother jumps involuntarily when she suddenly realizes that she has given her son the wrong directions. In a chain reaction with dire consequences, the cat hidden in a basket at the grandmother’s feet jumps out and onto Bailey’s shoulders, causing him to overturn the car and land in a deep ditch. The grandmother’s persistence in taking the cat on the trip against Bailey’s orders has led to this catastrophic event that will eventually turn into a gruesome murder scene.

This incident also serves as a typical example of the confusion each elderly grandmother experiences before her death. Because memory loss is quite common as people age, we are not surprised to see the confusion these grandmothers exhibit in their respective circumstances. The grandmother’s confusion about the location of the house she wants to visit is one of the most crucial details causing the tragic outcome for her family. Similarly, following Granny Weatherall’s confused state of mind challenges the first time reader as Granny’s memories quickly dart from one period of her life to another. Porter’s visual images of fog “marching...like an army of ghosts...[and] a smoky cloud from hell that moved and crept in [Granny’s] head . . .”¹² masterfully create the overwhelming state of confusion that engulfs Granny on her deathbed. Sadly, Granny’s bewilderment continues without much relief.

One of the most important commonalities between the two grandmothers is the point that each one considers herself a staunch, respectable Christian. Granny’s thoughts reveal her

⁹Ibid., 77.

¹⁰ O’Connor, 361.

¹¹ Ibid., 361.

¹² Porter, 79.

familiarity with Father Connally and “her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who [have] cleared a straight road to God for her.”¹³ As she recalls on her deathbed that her first jilting took place at the wedding altar of her church, she thanks God for helping her through her difficult life: “Hail, Mary, full of grace.”¹⁴ Even as she is slipping away, she cries out to God, asking for a sign at the last moment before her death. O’Connor’s grandmother is also familiar with God and the teachings of His Son Jesus, evinced in her life-changing conversation with the murderous Misfit when he and his cronies come upon the distraught family climbing out of their wrecked car on the lonely dirt road in Georgia. The grandmother’s traveling outfit implies that she attends church, for she is wearing church clothes typical of the women of her age, locale, and time period: “white cotton gloves[,]...navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print[,]” white organdy, lace-trimmed collars and cuffs, and “a purple spray of cloth violets” pinned to her dress. “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.”¹⁵ Outwardly, these grandmothers are respectable “Christian” matriarchs.

Differences

While Granny and the other grandmother are very much alike, their dying words clearly distinguish them from each other. During the early stage of Granny’s deathbed reverie, she feels “easy about her soul,”¹⁶ rejoicing in her special connection to God through her favorite saints. However, her thoughts about God in her dying moments, combined with her thoughts about “[s]omething not given back”¹⁷ after the jilting by her fiancé George, undermine Granny’s confidence in the well-being of her soul. As she is charging Cornelia “to find George” to “[t]ell him [Granny has been] given back everything he took away and more,”¹⁸ Granny experiences a profound sense that something is missing: “Oh, no, oh, God, no, there was something else besides the house and the man and the children. Oh, surely they were not all? What was it?”¹⁹ This implication that Granny’s soul is not as secure as she wants to believe becomes more palpable in the final description of her death:

[H]er body was now only a deeper mass of shadow in an endless darkness and this darkness would curl around the light and swallow it up. God give a sign!

For the second time there was no sign...She could not remember any other sorrow because this grief wiped them all away. Oh, no, there’s nothing more cruel than this—I’ll never forgive it.²⁰

¹³Ibid., 80.

¹⁴Ibid., 79.

¹⁵O’Connor, 359.

¹⁶Porter, 80.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 82.

Where is the “Blessed Assurance”²¹ Granny should be singing in anticipation of her joining those special saints after her last breath?

Ironically, the other grandmother faces a horribly violent death, yet her dying words reveal a much different attitude toward God and her killer, The Misfit. When the grandmother fervently exhorts The Misfit to pray to Jesus, she is obviously taking desperate measures to save her own life, not his. Having seen each of her family members taken into the nearby woods to be shot to death, the grandmother knows she will be the next victim if she does not use her clever wits. Rather than reacting hysterically, as might be expected, the grandmother continues her efforts to control this terrible situation, which she has brought upon herself through her own controlling nature. In the middle of her persistent, desperate attempts to save her life by telling The Misfit he is “ ‘a good man’ ”²² and that she knows he “ ‘wouldn’t shoot a lady,’ ”²³ the grandmother suddenly sees this hardened killer from a new perspective: “...the grandmother’s head clear[s] for an instant. She [sees The Misfit’s] face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmur[s], ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’ ”²⁴ The grandmother has finally experienced the grace she has pretended to know from Christ by actually extending His grace to The Misfit through her own forgiveness of the certain death The Misfit is about to impart to her. Despite the gruesome description of this tragic murder scene, hope abounds in the sight of “the grandmother who half [sits] and half [lies] in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.”²⁵ Once a bossy old woman with nothing but disdain for others, this grandmother has been transformed in her moment of death into the epitome of Christian love, faith, and hope. She reaches out to The Misfit in genuine Christian love, she shows the faith of a little child, and she instills hope in the reader for the transformation of The Misfit “into the prophet he was meant to become.”²⁶ As noted by O’Connor,

The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely.

...

[As her head clears for an instant,]... she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship

²¹ Frances J. Crosby, “Blessed Assurance.” *Timeless Truths Free Online Library*.

http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Blessed_Assurance/ .

²²O’Connor, 364.

²³Ibid., 367.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 368.

²⁶Flannery O’Connor, “Excerpt from “On Her Own Work’: The Element of Suspense in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.”” *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*, 10th ed. Ed. X. J. Kennedy & Dana Gioia (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007), 398.

which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far.²⁷

Even *The Misfit* recognizes the “amazing grace”²⁸ expressed through the grandmother’s uncharacteristic act of forgiveness: “ ‘She would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.’ ”²⁹ The dying words of the grandmother pass forward the Christian principle of forgiveness as a stark contrast to the bitterness expressed by Granny Weatherall’s statement about not being able to forgive God.

The unmistakable difference in the lives of these fictional grandmothers is the level of their ability to release feelings of bitterness and animosity toward those who have wronged them. Because Granny Weatherall refuses to forgive George, and even worse God, she cannot “embrace [the] peace, hope, gratitude and joy” that can result from “embracing forgiveness.”³⁰ The young Ellen experiences an excruciating blow to her narcissistic ego when her fiancé jilts her on what is supposed to be their wedding day. This wound festers within her soul for sixty years until her unforgiving nature rejects even God. Granny Weatherall’s attitude toward others as she faces death is a classic example of the situation described by Piderman in answer to the question, “What are the effects of holding a grudge?”³¹ The unforgiving person

may pay the price repeatedly by bringing anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. [Her] life may become so wrapped up in the wrong that [she] can’t enjoy the present. [She] may become depressed or anxious. [She] may feel that [her] life lacks meaning or purpose, or that [she is] at odds with [her] spiritual beliefs. [She] may lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others.³²

Granny displays all of these negative effects in her deathbed experience. She is unappreciative of the efforts of her doctor, priest, and family to attend to her needs in her dying moments and is, thus, disconnected from their love and concern. She is so consumed with being wronged in her jilting experience and life’s ensuing hardships that she cannot enjoy the comfort of knowing her loved ones are all around to support her in these final moments. She realizes something is missing even though she is sending George the message that she has gotten everything back that he took from her in the jilting. Finally, she is anxious about her spiritual state, disconnected not only from her loved ones but also from God.

O’Connor’s grandmother, on the other hand, experiences the grace that comes from being able to forgive the one who will kill her. Before her experience with *The Misfit*, she may have been one of the many who just recite “The Lord’s Prayer,” with no real consideration of the

²⁷Ibid., 397.

²⁸ John Newton, “‘Amazing Grace’ Lyrics.” http://www.constitution.org/col/amazing_grace.htm (accessed May 29, 2010).

²⁹ O’Connor, “Good Man,” 368.

³⁰ Mayo Clinic Staff. “Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges and bitterness.” <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/> (accessed May 28, 2010).

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

significance of the words “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”³³ However, just as Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery because he felt God was using them as a means of saving the Israelites from starvation many years later,³⁴ the grandmother’s epiphany helps her realize she has been placed directly in the path of The Misfit to offer him the saving grace that he can receive only from his acceptance of Jesus’ sacrifice for his sins. Her forgiveness of The Misfit mirrors Jesus’ forgiveness of those who crucified Him on the cross of Golgotha as well as those who crucify Him daily through their words and actions of skepticism. A devout Catholic herself, O’Connor expresses the burden she feels for the contemporary world:

I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure; the only thing that makes the Church endure is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems to be a fact that you suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in [this story].³⁵

Though the grandmother has apparently been a superficial Christian for most of her life, in her final act she follows Paul’s exhortation to the Christians at Colossus:

¹²Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;

¹³Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*.³⁶

When the grandmother urges the Misfit to pray to Jesus as a means of distracting him from his murderous intentions, she finds herself engaged in an intense conversation with a tortured soul, one who wishes he could be different: “ ‘I wasn’t there [to see Jesus raise the dead] so I can’t say He didn’t ...I wish I had of been there...It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady,...if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.’ ”³⁷ Punctuated with his pounding fist on the ground and his high-pitched voice on the verge of cracking, The Misfit bares his soul to the grandmother with such anguish that she forgets her own dilemma for the moment. Unexpectedly, she finds herself feeling compassion and some semblance of understanding for this escaped convict, the same man for whom she has felt such loathing and disdain heretofore. Although her gesture of reaching out to The Misfit—speaking to him as Jesus would have spoken—results in her immediate death, the grandmother dies with a sense of peace that comes only from the feeling of being one with God. Her faith in God and love for her fellowman have been expressed so profoundly that the reader cannot avoid

³³“The Lord’s Prayer” words (traditional). http://www.lords-prayer-words.com/lord_traditional_king_james.html (accessed May 28, 2010).

³⁴ Genesis 50:20.

³⁵ Flannery O’Connor, “On Her Catholic Faith.” *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing*, 10th ed. Ed. X. J. Kennedy & Dana Gioia (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007), 399.

³⁶Colossians 3.

³⁷ O’Connor, “Good Man,” 367.

hoping The Misfit's encounter with the grandmother will prompt him to turn his life around and to surrender to the ultimate Force that can make a "good man" of him.

Unfortunately, Granny Weatherall's unforgiving attitude leaves the reader with a sense of despair and "[s]omething not given back."³⁸ Her arrogance in being "strong enough for everything"³⁹ and her false assurance in "her secret...understanding with a few favorite saints"⁴⁰ lead to her inability to relinquish control of her life to God. Rather than seeking God's guidance and allowing Him to lead her into eternity, she holds onto life tenaciously until she can no longer continue. "[C]urled down within herself,...her body [is] now only a deeper mass of shadow in an endless darkness and this darkness [curls] around the light and swallow[s] it up."⁴¹ In a final defiant gesture of maintaining supreme control of her life, she takes a deep breath and blows out the "blue light from Cornelia's lampshade,"⁴² thus, deciding for herself when she will die.

Conclusion

While not many people take pleasure in the prospect of facing death, the way a person approaches his or her last moments on earth often reveals the authenticity of the person's beliefs or faith in God. Considering the cruel nature of this world, including such harshness and violence as experienced by Granny Weatherall and the other grandmother, there is a great "need to see, hear, tell, and feel more stories of the power of love and forgiveness."⁴³ The contrast between the level of forgiveness in the heart of each of these literary grandmothers stresses the need for teaching the Christian principle of forgiveness through example, just as Christ did when He prayed on the cross, " 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.'"⁴⁴ Only this kind of forgiveness can help people to release the anger and bitterness that can rob them of all joy for the rest of their lives. Such freedom allows people to go on with life.⁴⁵ They can be grateful for their blessings, and they can bless others with their spirit of love and forgiveness. Finally, those of the Christian faith must remember Jesus' words: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."⁴⁶ The spirit of forgiveness exemplified by the grandmother toward The Misfit is the kind of forgiveness that has prompted families of school shooting victims, such as the Amish children killed in October of 2006, to forgive the perpetrators of these horrible crimes. Showalter comments on this incredible attitude of forgiveness,

³⁸ Porter, 80.

³⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁴¹ Ibid., 82.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Showalter, 2.

⁴⁴ Luke 23:34.

⁴⁵ Mayo, 2.

⁴⁶ Matthew 6:14-15.

Through this tragedy in a one-room schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, the Amish, in particular, showed us the results of nearly 500 years of educating the human heart [to forgive as Jesus does].... The grandfather of some of the victims was overheard admonishing young boys, "We must not think evil of this man,"...[N]early half of those in attendance at [shooter] Charles Roberts' funeral were Amish.⁴⁷

When dealing with the harsh realities of life, the Christian teaching of forgiveness is crucial to one's accepting and loving the unlovable. The only hope of survival for the "misfits" in this world is that they can learn to forgive others, even themselves, by following the examples set by those around them who are able to love and forgive them first.

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⁴⁷ Showalter, 1.