

Flannery O'Connor: Fiction as Theological Parable

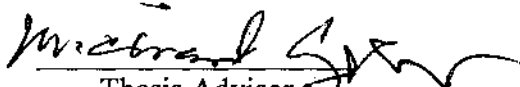
Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2008

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Flannery O'Connor wrote over two dozen short stories and two novels in her short lifetime. In addition, O'Connor also wrote at length about her fiction. Her nonfiction—letters, essays, and lectures—display an insistence on correct interpretation; these works contend that there is only one true meaning of her fiction work. While many writers are unconcerned with interpretation, even eliciting reader response through the intentionally vague, O'Connor's nonfiction offers itself as a guide to interpreting her fiction. In reading her nonfiction, it becomes clear that she intends to guide the reader to find divine mystery, or religious inspiration. Because of this religious intent and structure in her work, O'Connor's fiction seems to mimic the form of parable. Parable, in the theological sense, is an attempt to relate a religious meaning through the vehicle of a metaphor which implies a higher meaning within the use of a commonplace, or realistic tale. Violence in O'Connor's writing, a central theme in much of the body of criticism about her work, is simply a device used by O'Connor to create what theologian Sallie TeSelle calls the "crack" in a parable—the extraordinary or shocking turn a story takes which indicates to the reader the presence of the divine. TeSelle's concept of parable as spiritual communication allows for analysis of O'Connor's works in relation to biblical parables. O'Connor's fiction is structured as TeSelle suggests a parable ought to be, each work combining aspects of the secular and religious worlds.

Flannery O'Connor was well aware of the critical trends of her time. She knew that New Critics who read her work would look at the text in itself, out of the context of her other writing, or her religious background. A prominent New Critic, W.K. Wimsatt

wrote in his work, "The Intentional Fallacy," that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (Wimsatt, 468). But, O'Connor made her intent well known in a conscious effort to defend it, and while it might not be useful as judgement for her fiction's success, it should play a large role in analyzing meaning. Ted Spivey, in "Flannery O'Connor, the New Criticism, and Deconstruction," writes about O'Connor in relation to her understanding of New Criticism,

The New Critics, of course, minimized the role of biographical facts in criticism, but unless one understands O'Connor's involvement in intellectual concerns and influences on her work stemming from a variety of texts, there is danger that she will be seen as no more than a writer in the southern Gothic tradition, or, at best, as a novelist of manners who gave a Gothic twist to social satire. (Spivey, 274)

Spivey indicates that since O'Connor was aware of the dominance of New Criticism in her lifetime, she actively wrote about her work to deflect such interpretations. In his article, "Flannery O'Connor's Quest for a Critic," he writes about his correspondence with O'Connor and her concern with finding a critic to correctly interpret her works. O'Connor believed that if a New Critical understanding was perpetuated, her works were likely to miss their mark.

In reading her work as Christian, this essay joins by far the largest sector of criticism about O'Connor's fiction. Religious criticism of O'Connor's fiction ranges from allegorical interpretation to attempts to explain symbolism, to wider readings about redemption and grace. Critics often attempt to reconcile the quantity of violence in

O'Connor's works by its redemptive quality. Betsy Bolton, in 1997, wrote one such response relating a character's capacity for violence as relative to his necessity for saving grace (91). Rose Bowen, in her 1985 article "Baptism by Inversion" argues that violence serves as an allegory to baptism, and that the grace offered after the inverted baptism is similar to grace given to a participant in a baptismal rite (98). Arthur F. Kinney writes of O'Connor's grace, ". . . [it] is an early stage of cognizance—what Augustine calls the "divine imprint" on the soul that is a kind of homing instinct, a sense of vocation whether accepted or not. . ." (78). Anne Marie Mallon, Mary Buzan, and Thelma Shinn all view grace and religion through the specific acts of characters in O'Connor's stories. Few critics, however, examine authorial intent as specifically aimed at the conversion of the reader. We know that this is O'Connor's purpose. O'Connor writes in a letter to a friend that, "My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (HB, 92). Utilizing the work of TeSelle, this paper seeks to examine O'Connor's stories as parables through analysis and comparison to the parables of Jesus.

In her nonfiction—her essays, lectures, and letters—O'Connor repeatedly insists that forefront in her work and her life is a Christian world view, a view which expands beyond life in the body, into the life of the eternal soul. She writes,

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered around our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken half-way or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction. (MM, 32)

Reading deeper into her correspondences, lectures, and essays, a devout image is revealed. O'Connor wrote time and again about her intent. Letter after letter, she defended her Christian characters. In essays, she spoke of herself as a Christian writer. O'Connor studied theology and regularly attended mass. Recognizing that O'Connor wrote to a secular audience from a Christian perspective, it seems somewhat foolish to disregard authorial intent of the work.

As Spivey suggested, many readers respond to O'Connor's fiction by labeling it Southern Gothic. Inclusion in this body of work means that O'Connor uses irony, dark comedy, grotesquery and violence to explore the changing social situation of the American South. While this is true of O'Connor's fiction, it only scrapes the surface of her intent for her stories. Social concerns, manners, and morals are secondary to her concern with spiritual insights. New readers grapple with the apparent disconnect formed by their understanding of O'Connor as devoutly Catholic and the presence of what might be seen as gratuitous violence in her work. She uses violence in her writing to create opportunity for grace. She wrote of her characters,

. . . [I]n my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning [them] to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit to the Christian view of the world. (MM, 112)

This opportunity comes to characters who, like her readers, are often without faith,

through purposely shocking, appalling violent acts. O'Connor uses this device to call attention to what she sees as lacking in the secular and quotidian world through her stories, and relates it to the reader.

O'Connor's writing is intended specifically for the nonbelievers, with the intent of creating a realization of disharmony in reason. This disharmony is the "crack" in the commonplace which signifies divine mystery. O'Connor's intent, using her writing to share her religion with the larger community of nonbelievers, could then be seen as near prophetic. The opportunity for grace through the vehicle of violence in this context might clearly indicate O'Connor's concern with the salvation of souls, despite her seemingly detached narration. Violence done to the fictional bodies of O'Connor's characters is justified by salvation from spiritual violence for the souls of her readers and somehow loses its more shocking qualities. Her fiction, then, beyond being interpreted as Christian, would seem to acquire the likeness of parable, with the direct intent of teaching the reader a moral lesson. In this sense, use of violence is simply a device used by O'Connor to create the need for a deeper understanding.

A parable, as defined by TeSelle, is an extended metaphor which "sees 'religious' matters in 'secular' terms" (TeSelle, 3). TeSelle stresses the distinction between allegory and metaphor. Metaphor is both the literal vehicle and the transcendent comparison. Allegory is translucent, the story only holds meaning in terms of comparison; metaphor holds meaning in two realms. It includes "both dimensions—the secular and the religious, our world and God's love" (TeSelle, 5). TeSelle advocates a Christian theology which uses parables; she argues that the form is "always concerned with how the gospel can be 'translated' or understood—grasped—by people" (TeSelle,

7). The dual meaning of the parable deals most concretely in the realm of the every day human world. This is the realm, according to TeSelle, which is all that can be reasonably understood and concretely examined. The other part of the parable deals in the world of the divine. Since humans are unable to unlock through language a structural understanding of the divine, it is understood instead by metaphor. TeSelle writes that parables are “open-ended, expanding ordinary meaning so that from a careful analysis of the parable, we learn a new thing, are shocked into a new awareness” (TeSelle, 13). TeSelle quotes Robert W. Funk in a concise description of the need for a theology of parables in the post-modern world,

It appears that history has brought theological language full circle: having begun with the poetry of parable, metaphor, simile and aphorism, it seems that theology is being thrust back upon the language of its infancy. The reason may be that just as faith could not be pre-supposed then, it cannot be presupposed now. In such a context the redeeming word must lay its own foundation: by its power as word it must be able to bring that world into being in which faith is possible, indeed necessary. Only then is it possible for theology to extrapolate conceptually from faith’s experience of the world as redeemed. . . . (TeSelle, 24)

Biblical parables serve a specific purpose, similar to O’Connor’s own intent in writing. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus taught his followers through use of parables as a fulfillment of a previous scriptural prophecy. This scripture, Ps. 78:2, says, “I will open my mouth in story/ drawing lessons from old.” The New American Bible, a Catholic translation, notes that the word “story” in the translated text specifically meant a

story of comparison, one with a hidden meaning. Matthew tackles the foundational reason for Jesus' parables. Jesus' disciples were the only people during his lifetime privy to what is known as the "Messianic secret," the idea that Jesus was the son of God, sent to redeem fallen man. In Matt. 13:10 and following, Jesus speaks to the reason for teaching in parables,

Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted... This is why I speak to them in parables, because "they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand." Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says, "You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted and I heal them."

While people of Jesus' time were able to understand the secular moral structure of parables, they were less likely to embrace Jesus' message about God as specifically related to their own lives. Similarly, H.W. Fowler in Fowler's Modern English Usage writes that the intent of parable is to "enlighten a hearer by submitting to him a case in which he apparently has no direct concern, and upon which, therefore a disinterested judgment may be elicited from him" (Fowler, 359). Jesus' New Testament parables relate a moral meaning about the relationship between man and God without speaking directly of God. Historically, this perhaps had to do with Jesus' critical audience. At the time that it is believed that Jesus was delivering his message, most people would not have

easily accepted that he was a true prophet, much less the actual son of God. Parables, then, were a tool used to teach a moral lesson through metaphor, without revealing a precise, specific meaning. Just as it is said that Christ revealed his meaning in his death and resurrection, O'Connor's meaning is revealed in her letters and essays. In O'Connor's parables, as in Jesus', metaphor reveals a meaningful story, as TeSelle puts it, "a genuine metaphor, not translatable into concepts. . .with 'cracks' opening into mystery" (TeSelle, 67). These "cracks" give pause to the reader, according to TeSelle, they "bring about new insight by framing the ordinary in an extraordinary context. That is to say, the certain shock to the imagination is seeing the familiar in a new way" (TeSelle, 77). This shock is the central purpose of parable. Religious conversion is not the immediate goal of parable. Instead, parable seeks to plant a seed of mystery, from which faith would grow.

O'Connor's audience is in some ways equally as critical as Jesus' may have been. While she may not have been crucified for speaking directly to her audience's relationship with God, she certainly would have lost literary credibility for it. To reach her intellectual, modern, and largely unreligious audience, O'Connor could not write inspirational stories to inspire the faithful. Instead, she was faced with the task of instilling in her post-modern readers a sense of mystery, the spark which she believed would become faith. This spark, or mystery, is the same as TeSelle's "crack" in that it is a point of transcendence, a flicker of the divine within the concrete.

Of course, Flannery O'Connor's stories differ from parables in their literary texture. She was a highly sophisticated writer, versed both in the contemporary intellectual culture of her day and in complex theology and philosophy. O'Connor is

known to have read and marked up the theological works of Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Jacques Maritain, to name a few. She had a background in fiction, including that of Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Dostoyevsky, Chekov, Gogol, Hawthorne, Flaubert, Kafka, Conrad, and Henry James. Unlike Jesus' parables, O'Connor's stories are complex narratives with developed, complex characters. Her stories reflect the traditions of Southern Gothic and literary realism. While biblical parables are short, simple stories, O'Connor's stories are dense, full of developmental details and dialogue. Rather than form, O'Connor's fictions resemble parable in the way they communicate spiritual meaning.

What O'Connor delivered to her audience of nonbelievers was intended to serve the purpose of parables for the twentieth century. While modern readers easily pass by simple biblical parables, O'Connor's stories engage the modern reader. Says O'Connor in her essay, "The Fiction Writer and His Country,"

I have heard it said that the belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the story-teller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery. (MM, 31)

TcSelle speaks briefly of O'Connor in the section of her book devoted to modern parable theology in the form of the story. She writes that O'Connor uses "what we have called the metaphorical method, taking the human in all its particularity and mundanity as one partner in associations to move beyond the human—but in such a way that that human is

never left behind” (TeSelle, 137). Putting TeSelle’s briefly suggested theory into practice, this paper will examine both Jesus’ parables and, in comparison, O’Connor’s stories.

Luke 10:29-37 tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus speaks in this parable of a man who is robbed and injured during a journey. The traveler is passed by by a Levite and a priest, men of faith who would have been expected to help him. Jesus’ followers lived in a society that was openly prejudiced and hostile to Samaritans, but it was a man of this ethnic background who stopped and saved the traveler. The parable, in terms familiar to people of Jesus’ time relates a realistic story. What is unexpected is both the behavior of the religious men who pass by the traveler and the unexpected kind deeds of the Samaritan. It is this mystery which alludes to a greater meaning in the parable, and which would lead listeners to seek meaning.

Similarly, O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” tells the story of injured travelers. A family on vacation takes a wrong turn and is involved in an accident. Each member of the family is self-involved. The grandmother, who seeks to present herself as a pious woman, is an obvious hypocrite. Unbeknownst to the rest of her family, she has brought her cat along for the trip. When the cat escapes its captivity in the car, it causes a wreck which becomes the family’s demise. The grandmother’s actions in the early part of the story foreshadow the family’s demise. The grandmother makes sure that she is dressed as a lady in case of an accident. She also speaks fearfully of a convict who she does not know but has seen on television. After her family is involved in a car crash, this very convict and his cronies stop to help her family. The grandmother further dooms her family by announcing that she recognizes the convict, known as the Misfit. He kills the

grandmother and her family so that she does not reveal him. Before her execution, the grandmother says to the Misfit, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (O’Connor, 152). Readers unfamiliar with O’Connor’s faith often fail to understand this exclamation; it is the “crack” in the story which moves from the secular to the religious. The story ends in the grandmother’s death and readers often struggle to come to terms with O’Connor’s message. It is this struggle which is the goal of a successful parable. Critics familiar with religion in O’Connor’s work commonly interpret the grandmother’s cry as her moment of grace. The grandmother progresses from simply looking the part of the Christian to playing the part. Like the traveler in the Good Samaritan story, the grandmother has realized that it is impossible for a human to judge another human based on preconceived notions. Violence—the execution of her family and her own impending execution—is simply used as a device in the story to create the “crack,” or mystery. Without the use of violence to incite the unexpected, the story would lose its metaphoric meaning. The larger religious purpose depends on the unexpected—the formation of mystery—which is essence of parable form.

Both parables speak to the reader’s prejudices. They teach through secular and religious terms the message of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Matt. 7:1-5 says, “Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged. . .” Matt. 5:43-48 speaks of loving your enemy, “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. . .” These are the lessons learned by the traveler in Jesus’ parable, O’Connor’s grandmother, and through these characters, these lessons are also absorbed by the reader.

Jesus’ parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13:6-9 is about a man who has a fig

tree which will not bear fruit. The man has waited three years for the tree to bear fruit, and when it does not, he instructs his gardener to remove the tree. Instead of following orders, the gardener asks the man to have patience. The gardener says that he will fertilize the tree and cultivate the soil around it so that it might bear fruit in the next year—if not, then the gardener agrees to cut it down. This is a fairly straightforward story, but the “crack” is in the actions of the gardener. If a tree is barren, the audience wonders why the gardener would hesitate to remove it. This “crack” signifies the entrance of the second meaning in the metaphor, the purpose of the parable. The religious meaning, God’s patience with sinners, creates a full understanding of the metaphor.

Thematically similar to the parable of the barren fig tree, Flannery O’Connor’s “Greenleaf” is the story of Mrs. May, her sons, her farm help, and a bull. Mrs. May awakens one night to find a bull outside her window. The bull belongs to the sons of her hired help, a man named Mr. Greenleaf. Mrs. May is a proud woman, and like many of O’Connor’s characters, she has vast misconceptions about her own virtues. She judges Mr. Greenleaf’s religious wife and family as lower class, even though they are successful and happy. Mrs. May’s own miserable sons are grown men who still live with her and drain her. When Mrs. May confronts Mr. Greenleaf about the bull, he replies, “Done already been here three days” (O’Connor, 503). This sends Mrs. May into fits. She insists that the presence of the bull will disrupt the breeding schedule of her own livestock. She demands that Mr. Greenleaf deal with the bull immediately. When Mr. Greenleaf fails to follow her orders, Mrs. May travels to the Greenleaf sons’ house to demand that they take it away. She leaves a note when they aren’t home, stating that if

the bull isn't retrieved within the day, it will be shot in the morning. The farmhand who takes the note tells Mrs. May that the bull is unwanted, and that she should go ahead and shoot it. Once again, Mrs. May becomes furious saying, "—pass the butter—so they don't want that bull. . . so they simply turn him loose and let somebody else worry about getting rid of him for them. How do you like that? I'm the victim. I've always been the victim" (O'Connor, 516). When Mrs. May relates the story to her sons, one of them says to her, "Why Mamma, ain't you ashamed to shoot an old bull that ain't done nothing but give you a little scrub strain in your head?" (O'Connor, 517). In the morning, Mrs. May awakes resolved to kill the bull. She gathers Mr. Greenleaf and his gun, and they head out to the pasture in her car. Mr. Greenleaf protests killing his sons' bull, but Mrs. May demands it. As Mr. Greenleaf approaches the bull, he tries to scare it off, and Mrs. May decides to drive her car closer so that she can insist that the bull is killed. By the time she reaches the part of the pasture where the bull and Mr. Greenleaf had been, however, the bull and Mr. Greenleaf have disappeared. As Mrs. May waits on the hood of her car, the bull emerges from the woods and charges her. At the end of the story, Mrs. May is gored by the bull and Mr. Greenleaf shoots the animal while its horns are still pierced through Mrs. May. The last line of the story says, "She did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (O'Connor, 524).

The "crack" of this parable is the moment of violence. Like the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," it is indicated that Mrs. May reaches some sort of discovery at the moment of her death. The unexpected element once again begs the

reader to create greater meaning. The metaphor is built on the life of Mrs. May and her encounter with the bull; mystery enters the picture in the form of her fateful encounter with the bull. The new awareness which rises from the story is similar to the awareness which rises from the parable of the barren fig tree. Mrs. May is like the orchard owner, she is quick to judge, and impatient with her dealings. Mr. Greenleaf, like the gardener advocates patience. Mrs. May's own sons are surprised at her rush to kill the bull, indicating that the notion is indeed rash. Instead of taking Mr. Greenleaf's advice and letting the bull leave of its own accord, Mrs. May takes impatient action, ending in her death. While unlike the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," it is unclear what Mrs. May's "last discovery" was, but it is implied that she may have come to realize the brashness of her actions.

One of the most well known biblical parables is that of the prodigal son. The story, in Luke 15:11-24, tells of a young man who decides to leave home. Before leaving, the son demands that his father give him his share of inheritance, and the father agrees. The son leaves home and spends his money in "a life of dissipation." After losing all of his money, the son takes a job, but is unable to support himself and is starving. The son recalls that workers on his father's land are fed well, so he resolves to return home and ask his father to employ him. The son rehearses a speech in which he apologizes to his father and insists that he is unworthy to be treated as a son, but wishes only to seek employment. As soon as the father sees the son on the road, however, he rushes to greet him, clothes him in a robe, shoes and a ring, and throws him a party, complete with a fattened calf. The unexpected aspect of this story is the father's response to the son's return home. The son has mistreated his father and spent his inheritance

carelessly, yet the father does not punish him, but instead showers him with rich gifts.

The “crack” in the story appears in attempting to decipher the father’s behavior.

Observing the story as a religious metaphor, it becomes apparent that the message is of forgiveness. The audience wonders at the act of the father, but realizes that his act is one of charity. Charity, then, and forgiveness present the aspect of the divine mystery which is present in the religious realm of the metaphor.

Another story of leaving home, Flannery O’Connor’s second and final novel, The Violent Bear it Away, was published in 1960 and is the third person omniscient life story of Francis M. Tarwater. Unlike “Greenleaf” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” The Violent Bear it Away is a long work, dealing explicitly with Christianity. Characters deal with the presence and absence of God and Satan. According to O’Connor, the main character’s quest is to find his path as a prophet (Gianonne, 255). Despite the religious content, however, the main focus of the work is still in the secular world. Francis Tarwater lives and acts in the very human world, and his struggles are darkly realistic. The work repeatedly pulls in religion, but never attests to the correctness of the character’s actions. Unlike most parables, however, the work contains many unexpected shocks, multiple “cracks” into the religious realm. These unexpected moments, rather than being an outright vindication of religion, subtly breach the religious realm.

The present tense action of the story occurs within a short timeframe while Francis is fourteen; the narration freely uses flashback to tell his entire life story. In his childhood with his Great Uncle Mason, Francis Tarwater had only once seen the city, and lived his entire life a recluse on a primitive farm. Through most of the story, the events occurring in Francis’ present take the back burner to his reflections of his childhood and

stories told to him by his caretaker. These flashbacks and stories occur in no specific order, causing the story to feel disjointed, like a puzzle slowly coming together. This sophisticated device allows O'Connor to hold the attention of her audience while believably telling a string of unexpected stories, through the guise of Francis' memory. The events of the present tense story begin at the death of Francis Tarwater's great uncle and caretaker, Mason Tarwater. Mason Tarwater believed himself a Christian prophet in his life, and Francis Tarwater was raised to believe the same. Mason Tarwater prophesied that Francis would follow him in his work as a prophet, and at Mason's death, Francis sits, expecting the voice of God to be revealed to him.

Mason Tarwater's life is recalled by Francis in series of remembered interactions and stories. One of Mason Tarwater's earliest stories of his young life is about his beginnings as a prophet. In a city, Mason Tarwater stood on the street corner, prophesying the sun burning the sins away from the entire city, and the souls of the wicked burning in hell. Mason Tarwater reports to Francis that his blood was burned by a vision of the sun, and it is revealed to him that he should seek salvation for others, not destruction. While this incident is a revelation for the character of Mason, it is not intended as a break into the world of the divine for the reader. Instead, modern readers will probably view this as an indication of Mason's fanaticism and take this description of the divine simply as character development.

Mason Tarwater's interactions with his secular and resentful nephew, Rayber, are also retold through Francis' recollection of Mason's stories. When Rayber was a young child, Mason Tarwater attempted to kidnap him from his non-believing parents and save his soul. However, Rayber, at 7, was too old to take to the salvation, and rejected him.

The two remained estranged until Mason found that 24-year old Rayber was raising his dead sister's son, Francis. Mason gained entrance to Rayber's house by saying that he was dying, but intended to baptize his young great nephew. Though Rayber seemed to be hospitable to him, Mason soon realized that Rayber was not actually interested in his company, but had taken advantage of his presence to write about him in a magazine, psychoanalyzing Mason, and claiming that he was crazy and self-obsessed. Rayber writes that Mason believed himself a prophet only out of insanity and a need for recognition. While this incident is humiliating to Mason, it is telling of the secular character, Rayber. Readers who find themselves approving of Rayber's secular views as rational and therefore agreeable are shocked to find that the character they identified with could be so cold and cruel. This "crack" leaves readers unsure of whom to side with, creating a sense of mystery. Mason then takes Francis, and raises him at Powderhead, the old deserted farm. Mason tells Francis before his death that it would be Francis' life's mission to continue his work when he died.

In one of the first unexpected cracks of the present tense narration, Francis burns down the farmhouse and hitches a ride out of the country after the death of his great uncle. This unexpected and hasty decision, which goes against his provider's last wishes, shows the reader that like the prodigal son, Francis has started down the wrong path. Rayber is an anti-religious and desperately unhappy man. When Francis shows up at Rayber's doorstep, Rayber takes him in and makes it his personal project to reform his religious fanaticism, and deliver him into a secular lifestyle. Rayber is raising his young, developmentally disabled son, and Francis is strangely afraid of the child. When Francis attends a local church service, Rayber realizes that Francis is still inclined to be

sympathetic to religion. Rayber takes Francis to a lodge near Powderhead, the old farm, to collect his thoughts. Here, Francis drowns Rayber's only child in the lake in response to a voice in his head which tells him to do so. Francis' action and Rayber's staggeringly detached reaction to the drowning are equally unsettling. The readers realize that though they can identify with Rayber, something must be quite out of place. O'Connor explains this mystery in a letter to a student she corresponded with, saying that Rayber

. . . did love [his son, Bishop] but throughout the book he was fighting his inherited tendency to mystical love. He had the idea that his love could be contained in Bishop but that if Bishop were gone, there would be nothing to contain it and he would then love everything and specifically Christ.

The point where Tarwater is drowning Bishop is the point where he has to choose. He makes the Satanic choice, and the inability to feel the pain of his loss is the immediate result. (HB, 484)

This interpretation is not immediately clear to the unreligious reader, but this isn't detrimental to the intent of the parable. O'Connor's sense of mystery is delivered in the unexpected action, not in doctrinal pronouncements. Later, though, in the same letter, she writes that though it is apparent that there are multiple interpretations, "There is still an authority to say which interpretation is right" (HB, 485). This added dimension of intent both clarifies meaning and solidifies the message of the parable.

The most unsettling and unexpected event in the story occurs when Francis runs away from the scene of the baptism and hitches a ride with a blonde man in a lavender car. The man gives Francis drugs and rapes him. This scene is another of the shocking moments in the novel, both to Francis and to the reader. Readers often search for

meaning in this section of the book. O'Connor's letters respond to several inquiries about this section in particular. Francis, upon returning to Powderhead and realizing that another person had indeed given his great uncle a proper burial, burns down the forest and his "friend" with it. Francis determines that he will change his life, and work as a prophet to bring salvation to the city.

While there are clearly aspects of both the secular and the religious in O'Connor's The Violent Bear it Away, the explicit and literal religious content never overreaches its metaphorical use; it is part of the story, never instructing the reader outright. In this way, O'Connor is able to speak to nonbelievers about religion without imposing religion directly onto them. Like the story of the Prodigal Son, Francis Tarwater's journey ends in an unexpected homecoming. O'Connor uses violence as a vehicle throughout the story to move Francis' actions, but in the end, it is the unexpected violence of the rape which spurs his homecoming and acceptance of his calling. The story is an extended metaphor driven by Francis' life and acceptance of his destiny. The unexpected ending, Francis' return to the divine, causes quite a stir in the critical realm.

Many critics attempt to deal with this "crack" in O'Connor's parable outside the intended meaning. In her letters, O'Connor snarls at psychological interpretations of her characters in The Violent Bear it Away, as readers attempt to take her characters out of Biblical context for analysis in the secular world. Says O'Connor, "Tarwater's call is real. . . . [H]is true vocation is to answer it. Tarwater is not sick or crazy but really called to be a prophet — a vocation I take seriously, though the modern reader is not likely to" (Giannone, 255). Suzanne Morrow Paulson's psychological analysis of The Violent Bear it Away is in many ways similar to the interpretation O'Connor balked at in her own

lifetime. Paulson analyzes two of the characters of the story as false prophets. She argues that the false prophets destroy the main character's inner self by attempting to create a double of themselves in him. She argues that the main conflict of the character is the violence of the divided self. This is obviously not O'Connor's intent, but it illustrates clearly that O'Connor is indeed successful in creating the unexpected, the "crack" which modern readers feel compelled to tackle and understand.

Modern parables, metaphors which seek to create a connection between secular life and religious understanding, must "crack" into divine mystery with great art and literary skill. Flannery O'Connor's nonfiction makes it clear that her intent was indeed to send a religious message, and her fiction met post-modern standards with divine understanding. If, as Robert W. Funk suggested, theological language has indeed come full circle and the need for parable is as great as it was in the time of Jesus, O'Connor's parables, both technically sound and divinely inspired, seem to fit the bill.

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