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Religion and Reality: Literature and Prophecy in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

Senior Paper

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In 1960 Flannery O'Connor published her second and final novel, *The Violent Bear it Away*. Like O'Connor's other works, the novel is steeped in religious themes and symbolism. It centers around Francis Tarwater, a young man who struggles between two conflicting destinies: that of a prophet and that of an educated secular man. Francis' great uncle Mason raises Francis in the country according to heavily Christian fundamentalist ideals. Francis never knows anything different, and so when Mason dies suddenly, and Francis' other uncle Rayber takes Francis in, the boy is suddenly faced with two different lifestyles that are fundamentally opposed. Unlike Mason, Rayber wishes to educate Francis according to a secular lifestyle, and he sees religion as a dangerous cult of the unenlightened.

At its publication, the novel was not nearly as well-received by critics or general audiences as O'Connor's other works. The violent nature of the novel and the depiction of "backwoods fundamentalists," as literary critic William Shea calls them, turned many readers off. Scholars have been examining the religious nature of O'Connor's work for decades, and the reception of this novel was particularly polarizing. Although virtually all critics agree that O'Connor's work was heavily influenced by her position as a devout Roman Catholic living in the Protestant South, O'Connor's letters indicate, and critics such as Karl Martin agree, that the connection goes deeper than that. Along with her religious views, O'Connor's struggle with lupus strongly parallels the struggles of protagonist Francis Tarwater, as he journeys from a simple country boy to a Christian prophet. Many of the trials that Francis encounters throughout the novel are very similar to struggles that O'Connor faced in her own life. Both the author and her creation Francis deal with the death of a close family member, personal physical and emotional pain, and pressures from people around them to conform to a secular lifestyle. Through her writing, it is clear that O'Connor viewed herself as a kind of literary prophet, and by

comparing the grotesquerie of the fictional Francis Tarwater with the reality of O'Connor's own life, readers can see how O'Connor wrote much more of herself and her own life into her final novel than in any other of her works. In this thesis, I will explore the idea that Flannery O'Connor was not only an accomplished writer and theologian but also a self-proclaimed prophet, using her literature as a means to deliver her message about religion to her audience.

While readers cannot assume that the opinions of the narrator are representative of O'Connor's own opinions, her well-known devotion to her faith lend credence to the notion that her own religious views have been infused with the novel's story. Marshall Bruce Gentry, in his book *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque* states that *The Violent Bear it Away* is O'Connor's "most consistently religious work" (142). The novel presents some of O'Connor's most stark and controversial religious views, and her portrayal of Christian characters provides an interesting look into the mind of the author. According to the narrator, "[Francis'] uncle had taught him Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment" (4). This is referred to as "good education" by the narrator, who goes on to say that Mason "rescued [Francis] from his only other connection, old Tarwater's nephew, a schoolteacher who had no child of his own at the time and wanted this one of his dead sister's to raise according to his own ideas" (4). The "ideas" that the schoolteacher (Rayber) wants to raise Francis according to are secular in nature, a stark contrast to what Mason wishes for Francis. These ideas were so dangerous, that, according to the narrator, "the Lord Himself had rescued the old man" by sending Mason a vision telling him to "fly with the orphan boy to the farthest part of the backwoods and raise him up to justify his

Redemption” (4-5). The heavily Christian slant on these statements given by the narrator indicate a bias from the narrator, and likely the author herself.

Another form of religious zeal that is present throughout the novel are the evangelicals who hold revivals. These “backwoods fundamentalists,” as historian John Hayes calls them, would have been somewhat relatable to O’Connor’s Catholic audience, because their zeal and adherence to more classical ideas about religion were more in line with Catholic ideals than the modern Protestant ideals that permeated society. Hayes posits that O’Connor saw her position in “the Bible Belt” (a term used by O’Connor herself, as well as many others to describe the region of the South where religion, particularly Protestantism, plays a significant role in society) as a way to challenge the views of the Protestant South by writing from her own unique theological perspective and employing elements of “folk religion,” which was mainly found among the poor rural populations in the South. O’Connor thought Catholics would feel more of a kinship with these “backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists” than they would with more secular Protestants (54). John Hayes further articulates this insight by clarifying that the “backwoods fundamentalists” portrayed in the novel are characters that, because they are also protestants, also attempt to reduce any alienation that the rest of her audience, the majority of which is comprised of Southern Protestants, might feel as well. In the novel, Rayber and Francis attend a revival in which a child evangelical preaches. During the revival, O’Connor reveals Rayber’s feelings about the child preacher: “another child exploited” (124). Rayber goes on to lament what he considers to be the loss of true childhood to the tyranny of religion: “It was the thought of a child’s mind warped, of a child led away from reality that always enraged him” (125). However, Catholics like O’Connor involve children in religion from the beginning of their lives. Baptisms in the Catholic Church take place in infancy, and so Catholic audiences would have

taken issue with Rayber's insinuation that indoctrinating children into the church is somehow morally reprehensible. This religious contextualization supports the notion that O'Connor sees Rayber and his secular ideas as the main villain of the story, and O'Connor disagrees with the notion that modernity and secular education are above devout faith.

In addition to the challenges brought on by a secular society, according to the novel, there are two kinds of troubles that befall prophets: "those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean," a process which O'Connor refers to as "learn[ing] by fire" (5). The contention between the devoutly Catholic O'Connor and the Protestant society in which she lived is, to her, the "trifling" trouble from the world. She dealt with this by writing highly religious works that were, as she describes in her collection of essays titled *Mystery and Manners*, meant to "reach beyond the limitations of human intellect" (ch. 5). O'Connor believed that her art would reveal something about the human situation that theologians must then acknowledge. "The theologian," O'Connor writes, "is interested specifically in the modern novel because there he sees reflected the man of our time, the unbeliever, who is nevertheless grappling in a desperate and usually honest way with the intense problems of the spirit" (ch. 5). Another significant worldly trial that O'Connor dealt with while writing this novel was the growing instability of her publishing company. Between 1955 and 1958, three of O'Connor's editors at Harcourt Publishing resigned, and O'Connor complained that their replacements "[didn't] know anything about literature" (*Habit of Being* ch.3). This troubled O'Connor because without a proper and cooperative publishing company, O'Connor would not be able to distribute her work to as wide an audience, diminishing the impact her message would have on the population.

For O'Connor, her lupus diagnosis in 1952 could be considered a trial from the Lord. If readers accept that Flannery O'Connor believed this to be the case, then it follows that her disease is intended to cleanse and purify her, much like the divine trials intended to "burn the prophet clean" in the novel. Although it would be a disservice to the author to assume that her disease and its ravaging effects on her body had little effect on her work, an interview, cited in Marion Montgomery's *Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home*, quotes O'Connor as saying, "The disease is of no consequence to my writing since for that I use my head and not my feet" (17). As is often the case when someone is faced with a terminal illness, however, the psychological effects of facing one's own mortality must have some implications. In O'Connor's case, these implications are seen in her craft. Authors' lives and own personalities are never completely separate from their writing, and to assume that O'Connor's impending death had no impact on her writing is to dismiss vital elements of her work and life.

In the novel, readers can see these impacts in O'Connor's description of the two kinds of trials that prophets like Francis Tarwater face. These trials begin before Mason dies, and some of them are a result of Francis' own internal struggle with his prophetic destiny. When Francis travels with Mason to a lawyer's office in the city, he comes to the conclusion that the city is a place of evil. Francis notices that the eyes of city folk "didn't grab at you like the eyes of country people" (26). In the city, people take no notice of those who surround them, and in Francis' eyes that means these people are "hastening away from the Lord God Almighty" (27). Here, Francis encounters an internal trial: he finds himself enjoying his time in this city populated by secular non-believers. Another subtle indicator that Francis struggles with his destiny to become a prophet is that while he knows that the city needs a prophet, he relegates the duty to his great-

uncle, rather than taking on the responsibility himself, claiming that he has not yet been specifically called by the Lord to take up the duties of a prophet.

Francis' encounter with the city is representative of O'Connor's experiences in a highly Protestant and increasingly secular society. O'Connor writes about these experiences in her letters, which were published posthumously in *Habit of Being*. In 1958, O'Connor wrote a letter to "A," in which she describes an afternoon where she had lunch with some friends and a couple professors from North Carolina. While eating, the subject of death came up in conversation. It was discussed, O'Connor describes, "the way that death is discussed at dinner tables, as if it were a funny subject" (*Habit of Being*). In the letter, O'Connor relays Katherine Anne Porter's thoughts on the subject:

She said she thought it was very nice to believe that we would all meet in heaven and she rather hoped we would but she didn't really know. She wished she knew who exactly was in charge of this universe, and where she was going. She would be glad to go where she was expected if she knew. (ch. 3)

O'Connor makes no statement about whether or not she speaks up about Porter's remarks, but she does note in her letter that the whole conversation "was a little coy and a little wistful but there was a terrible need evident underneath it" (ch. 3). It is clear from this letter that O'Connor is aware of the lack of devout faith in her peers and in the larger society surrounding her, and in an essay published in *Mystery and Manners*, she claims that Christianity has devolved so far in the South that "the word Christian...has come to mean anyone with a golden heart" (ch. 5).

O'Connor therefore sought to create a type of fiction for Catholics that was "undeniably theirs, but which will also be understood and cherished by the rest of our countrymen" (ch. 5).

O'Connor explains that a lack of substantial Catholic fiction leads to "an impoverishment of the

imagination,” which then causes “an impoverishment of the religious life as well” (ch. 5). This fear of a spiritual poverty is what leads O’Connor to write fiction that is heavily driven by religious themes, such as the journey to prophethood that Francis undertakes.

O’Connor’s tone when indicating that there was a “terrible need” for something parallels Francis’ idea that the people of the city also have a great need for some religious guidance. O’Connor uses her writing as a way to react to this need and counteract the influence of Southern Protestants. According to John D’Arcy May in his article, “Catholic Fundamentalism? Some Implications of *Dominus Iesus* for Dialogue and Peacemaking,” Catholic fundamentalism is about the “rationalizing of traditional certainties in the face of pluralism and change” (1). In the mid-century South, the role of religion in society was changing. People were becoming more secular and the church was beginning to split into pluralist sects, further dividing Christianity (Roland 10). With the Church facing the ever-growing issue of modernity and secularism, the fundamentalist ways of the past held more and more appeal for Catholics like O’Connor. Her writing embraces this form of religious zeal, and Francis’ great uncle and mentor Mason treats his religious extremism as a freedom rather than a burden. He says to Francis, ““You were born into bondage and baptized into freedom, into the death of the Lord”” (20). Francis finds truth in his great-uncles words, and “he would feel that he had escaped some mysterious prison. He could even smell his freedom, pine-scented, coming out of the woods” (20). However, Francis’ freedom comes with doubts as well, and he would “feel a sullenness creeping over him, a slow warm rising resentment that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord” (20-21). Francis’ own doubts become one of the trials that he must overcome, willingly or not, on his path to becoming a prophet.

Other trials that prophets face come from inside the prophets themselves, and Francis and Flannery both must deal with their own internal deformities. Literary critic Gilbert Muller writes that “in the fictive landscape which she created, Flannery O’Connor’s grotesques--deformed in body and soul alike--wrangle with ultimate problems which also must have beset their creator” (2). As early as the first page, O’Connor gives readers a clear picture of the internal and external turmoil that will plague Francis Tarwater. The novel opens with fourteen-year-old Francis dealing with the death of his great uncle and guardian Mason. Already, this scene is a powerful introduction to Francis’ character, but it is even more potent when the reader knows that O’Connor lost her own father to lupus, the same disease that ravaged her own body as she wrote *The Violent Bear it Away*. Although O’Connor was close with both of her parents, her mother Regina’s ideas that Flannery should be a proper Southern lady put somewhat of a strain on the relationship between the two, and O’Connor was much closer with her father, Ed. Brad Gooch, in his biography *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O’Connor*, quotes an unnamed family friend who explains the difference between Flannery’s parents: “Ed would not have put the kind of pressure on her that Regina did. He liked her just as she was” (27). Gooch describes Ed as “a conspirator in [Flannery’s] childhood fantasy, wishing sometimes to be a writer himself” (27). He suffered from lupus, and spent the later part of his life living with his wife’s family after becoming too infirmed to work. His death in 1941 left O’Connor devastated, and Gooch writes that O’Connor rarely talked about her father after his death. However, “she would often keep a discreet silence about subjects that mattered to her the most, beginning with her relationship with her father. Her very silence was a stolid marker of its depth” (71). O’Connor’s close relationship with her father provided a way for O’Connor to reveal her own deformities. Gooch quotes O’Connor in a letter to Betty Hester: “I am never likely to romanticize him because I carry around most of his faults

as well as his tastes” (41). O’Connor’s awareness of her own faults is what allows her to write fiction which portrays flawed characters so authentically. In addition, despite what Gooch says, O’Connor was not completely silent about things that mattered to her. Her messages about the subjects that concerned her the most are abundantly evident in her works of fiction.

Readers can see evidence of how the loss of O’Connor’s father affected her in most of her works, which often feature a distinct lack of fathers and husbands. However, in *The Violent Bear it Away*, O’Connor describes the loss of Francis’ main father-figure Mason, and the accompanying grief, in raw detail that is noticeably absent in her other works, in which the dead fathers and husbands are usually simply not present. When Mason dies suddenly, Francis is saddled with the task of burying Mason, a man who has spent the majority of Francis’ life indoctrinating the boy with a fanatical religious education. Much like O’Connor, Francis eagerly embraces this faith, which is much more fundamentalist than the religion of the rest of the population. However, Francis is unable to give Mason a proper burial because “the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave” just half a day after Mason dies, and a neighbor named Buford “had to finish it and drag the body away from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of the Savior at the head of the grave” (3). This passage shows that while Francis is deeply troubled by the loss of his great-uncle, his own actions prevent him from doing what O’Connor views as his Christian duty to his deceased family member. Here, O’Connor gives the reader their first glimpse of Francis’ self-destructive tendency to attempt to subvert the will of the divine, the first in a series of attempts that will ultimately fail. Francis’ hesitation represents a deformity of his soul. He has spent his entire life enthusiastically immersed in his great-uncle’s teachings, and yet from the character’s introduction, it is clear from his actions that Francis will struggle with his faith.

Francis also faces trials in the form of his family's self-serving attempts to mold him as a child. Both Mason and Rayber attempt to raise Francis only after each man fails to raise another child in their respective lifestyles. Francis is Mason's second attempt at converting a family member to the life of a religious zealot, his first attempt being Rayber. When Rayber was seven, Mason "had kidnapped him...and had taken him to the backwoods and baptized him and instructed him in the facts of his Redemption, but the instruction had lasted only for a few years," and Rayber eventually strayed from Mason's path when Rayber's father reclaims his son (7). Rayber implies that Francis will be something of a stand-in for his own intellectually disabled son, whom Rayber feels he cannot help. He explains to Francis: "All the things that I would do for him—if it were any use—I'll do for you," (92). Both Mason and Rayber want to raise Francis in a way that each of them considers ideal. For O'Connor, Mason's religious ideal is certainly better than Rayber's secular one, but in order for Francis to truly appreciate his life as a prophet, he must first suffer and be burnt clean, so that his revelation at the end of the novel has the impact on the reader that O'Connor intended.

The two forms of opposition that Francis face are similar to archetypes found in morality plays. Jill P. Baumgaertner expands on this idea in her book *Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring*. Dr. Baumgaertner explores the relationship between the violent and grotesque revelations in Flannery O'Connor's work and the theological aspects of these revelations. According to Baumgaertner, O'Connor's novel is heavily allegorical with Christian mythology, and "in fact," she writes, "the struggle for control and power within and among this trinity of characters pushes this novel into the realm of Christian myth" (142). O'Connor refutes critics' claims that the novel is too allegorical to Christian myth, and she claims that her novel is just allegorical enough, and intentionally so. Baumgaertner quotes O'Connor: "I wanted to get across

the fact that the great Uncle (old Tarwater) is the Christian -- a sort of crypto-Catholic -- and that the school teacher (Rayber) is the typical modern man” (141-142). For O’Connor, this alone is enough to make Rayber the villain. Farrell O’Gorman in his book *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* explains that O’Connor detested fields of study such as sociology and psychology, because to her, they were pseudosciences. In the novel, Rayber is a schoolteacher, and a clear satirization of O’Connor’s feelings toward social sciences (O’Gorman 39). Not only is Rayber a secular man but he is also a man of science. Francis is presented with the two opposing lifestyles of Rayber and Mason, and it is then up to Francis to choose which man’s ideology to accept and follow. That there is no clear villain in the story aside from the Devil himself gives the reader the chance to decide for themselves whether Francis made the right decision. Although it is clear that O’Connor believes Francis chose correctly to follow in his Christian great uncle’s steps, the ambiguity of the characters invite the reader to engage in a certain level of introspection, since O’Connor leaves it up to readers to decide how they feel about either Mason or Rayber.

According to Marshall Gentry in *Flannery O’Connor’s Religion of the Grotesque*, “The grotesquerie of the O’Connor character is usually a result of the degradation of an ideal, rather than merely a departure from an ideal...and this ideal provides the standard by which a character is to be understood” (ii). For O’Connor, the degradation of her ideal came when she was faced with her own mortality. Frequently in her letters, O’Connor references her disease and its limitations with a kind of dismissal that indicates she is not bothered by her circumstances, but a closer examination of these letters shows differently. For example, in 1960, O’Connor’s disease had worsened and she was spending more and more time in doctors’ offices and hospitals. In one letter to Cecil Dawkins, dated 30 April 1960 she wryly recounts how doctors tested her over and

over, looking for a cause of swelling in her feet, and instead they found “everything that was not responsible...so I figure we have accomplished something anyway” (ch. 3). The tone of her letters indicates an underlying frustration with her condition that she was loathe to admit outright. In another instance a month before, she writes to Maryat Lee: “I am in bed, confined, with the epizootic and taking two-toned pills so whilst confined I have occupied the occasion reading Euripides’ *Alcestis*” (ch.3). O’Connor calls the play “pretty untragic” because there is only one death, and even that character doesn’t remain dead. There is sarcasm evident in her tone, and a morbid fascination with death, especially considering she is bedridden due to an illness she knows is terminal.

Francis’ degradation manifested at his great-uncle’s death, though it likely was present before the novel started. The reader can see Francis’ degradation in the form of the trials that he faces throughout his life. Some of these are the “trifling” worldly trials, but some are more internal in nature. The internal trials come from the Lord and are meant to purify the spirit through suffering. For Francis, these trials begin before Mason dies, and some of them are a result of Francis’ own internal struggle with his prophetic destiny, for example, when Mason and Francis travel to the city and Francis consciously decides not to be the prophet, despite acknowledging the evilness of the city. However, other internal trials that Francis face are even more directly linked to the divine suffering meant to burn Francis clean and prepare him for the life of a prophet. Throughout the novel, Francis often hears a voice inside his head. At first, this voice is referred to as a “stranger,” and then later as a “friend” or “mentor.” The first time that Tarwater hears this voice is when Mason dies. Tarwater begins to dig the grave for Mason, but the voice in Francis’ head tells him that Mason “was crazy all along,” and that Francis’ was never being considered as a prophet by God (37-38). This voice fuels the doubt and hesitation

that Francis had exhibited before Mason dies, and it is this voice's influence that convinces Francis to shirk the basic duty of burying Mason properly. Not only does O'Connor show that this is a more internal trial, but the supernatural nature of this voice is emphasized by the fact that in the novel, the dialogue between Francis and the voice is written without quotation marks. The influence the voice has on Francis to forsake Mason's wishes for a Christian burial indicates to the reader that the voice is either some supernatural villain or a manifestation of Francis' own doubts.

O'Connor never mentions in the novel who the voice is, but in a 1959 letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor states, "I certainly do mean Tarwater's friend to be the Devil" (*Habit of Being* ch. 3). The influence of the Devil himself is the ultimate trial for any Christian to face, and Tarwater must endure his trial in order to become a prophet. The influence of the devil becomes even stronger as the novel progresses, and in the final chapter, the Devil is no longer a voice in Francis' head, but rather a physical threat. In the final moments of the novel, Francis attempts to make his way back to his deceased uncle's home to begin a new life, in which he believes he will be in charge of his own decisions and actions. However, as he makes his way down the highway on foot, a car stops, and the driver silently offers Francis a ride. Before long, however, Francis is overcome with an otherworldly sense of dread, and the narrator begins to refer to the driver as "the stranger," implying that he is a physical manifestation of the voice of the Devil that has been in Francis' head for the entirety of the novel. Once this stranger has drugged Francis and left him bound, unconscious, naked, and propped on a log, the narrator states that "[the stranger's] delicate skin had acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood" (231).

Whatever specifically transpired between this demonic stranger and the unconscious Francis, the stranger obviously left the scene with more vitality, and Francis is abandoned with less.

Referring back to the divine trials that are meant to burn the prophet clean, it is evident that in these moments, the Devil has stripped Francis of all his will to fight, leaving him as a blank slate, ready to accept his destiny. When Francis awakens from this attack, he finally does realize that his destiny is inevitable. O'Connor writes: "He knew that he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation...[His eyes] looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of a prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (233). After overcoming the ultimate trial in the form of an attack by the Devil himself, Francis is burned as clean as he can be, and he makes the decision to become a prophet.

As of the novel's 1960 publication, O'Connor had been suffering with her own divine trial, in the form of Lupus, for nine years. The news of her disease would have been shocking to O'Connor, and Tarwater's struggle with his own faith easily mirrors the struggle that O'Connor must have surely grappled with after her diagnosis. Frequently in her letters, O'Connor references fellow novelist Katherine Anne Porter, who had been working on a novel for 27 years. This fact gave O'Connor nightmares, and in 1958, she writes that "Miss Katherine Anne and her 27 years have been giving me nightmares" (ch.3). O'Connor laments how terrible it must be to spend twenty-seven years on a project that just will not come together. "This is what I hope I will be spared," she remarks (ch.3). By 1958, when O'Connor was making these remarks, *The Violent Bear it Away* was still a year from publication, and O'Connor's disease was getting worse, preventing travel and causing her significant physical pain. Francis struggles to accept his

own mortality, as well as that of his uncle, much the way that O'Connor grappled with her own impending death. Toward the middle of the novel, Francis also attempts to forsake both Mason's and Rayber's influence on him by stating that neither men have had an effect on his life or his choices. This statement contradicts the outcome of the novel, since Francis does in fact fulfill his uncle's claim that Francis will become a prophet and baptize Bishop. This contradiction reinforces the idea that O'Connor believed in the inevitability of God's will and His predetermined path for Francis, despite both Francis' own will and the influence of outside sources.

In the novel, Rayber's intellectually disabled son, Bishop, represents another of the trials that Francis must overcome. Bishop personifies both the fallacy of Rayber's ideal that education will be the savior of the secularists and Francis' difficulty in bringing religion to the unenlightened masses. Francis can barely stand to look Bishop in the eyes for the majority of the novel, despite the fact that Francis knows from Mason's teachings that he is meant to baptize the boy. Mason tells Francis directly that if Mason hasn't baptized Bishop by the time he dies, then Francis must complete the task. He states that the baptism "will be the first mission the Lord sends you" (9). Rayber, however, believes that baptizing a child incapable of making his own decision is a form of evil, and he is vehemently against the idea of anyone baptizing his son. Even though he knows that Mason is dead, he remains paranoid, at one point grabbing Francis and shouting, "Is this one of his [Mason's] tricks? Is he out there waiting to sneak in a window and baptize Bishop while you're in here baiting me?" (89). However, as much as Rayber despises the idea of allowing his son to be tainted with a baptism, he equally loathes the idea of being stuck with a son who is incapable of becoming as enlightened a man as Rayber wishes him to be. Francis observes in Rayber's "red and pained" face that "the child might have been a

deformed part of himself that had been accidentally revealed” (93). Francis’s observations are accurate in the sense that Bishop’s intellectual deficiency represents the flaw in Rayber’s ideology: man cannot achieve total happiness on knowledge alone because there are those to which empirical knowledge is inaccessible.

For Rayber, Bishop represents the limits of enlightened living; he’s not intelligent enough to take in all the knowledge that Rayber wishes to pass on, yet he’s too innocent and childlike to realize his own shortcomings. Bishop also holds Rayber back in his attempted education of Francis, since, while Rayber is trying to show Francis around the city, he is constantly having to keep track of the easily distracted Bishop, making it hard for Rayber to reign in the resistant Francis. Bishop then becomes more of a hindrance than a true son in Rayber’s eyes, and Rayber’s frustration with his son borders on outright disdain. Rayber sees his son “as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God, but that Bishop was he had no doubt” (113). For Rayber, the true fallacy of living in total secularism is that God is inescapable, and though for Francis, this inescapability becomes freeing in the end, for Rayber, it is never anything but a nuisance, since Bishop cannot be educated to Rayber’s standards.

Rayber’s paranoid outburst about Mason scheming to baptize Bishop provides Francis with the realization that “the schoolteacher was no more than a decoy the old man had set up to lure him to the city to do his unfinished business” (89). Francis’s apprehension of Bishop grows, therefore, as does his resistance to religion. This resistance is again shown when Rayber takes Francis and Bishop out to eat. Francis is apprehensive of the city food, “pushing the food around his plate before he ate it and putting each forkful in his mouth as if he suspected it was poisoned” (116). Francis suspects that the food, like the rest of everything his uncle Rayber presents him

with, is poisoned with secularism. Francis refuses to embrace Rayber's lifestyle, even as his grip on his previous fundamentalist lifestyle slips away from him in the face of the influences of the people around him that seem to discourage the fundamentalist Christian lifestyle that he has known. Bishop is one of the major unwitting influences, and Francis believes that he will never get used to being around Bishop, and he struggles to even look the boy in the eye. O'Connor even writes that Francis's reaction to Bishop is somewhat like a serpent, stating, "when [Francis] was aware of [Bishop's] being near, he would draw himself up like a snake ready to strike and hiss, 'Git!'" (112). This comparison of Francis to a serpent is interesting because it subtly shows the reader the influence of the devil on Francis. Francis's destiny is to baptize this boy, and yet his revulsion of Bishop is such that it, in a sense, brings out the Devil in Francis.

Bishop is a representation of the struggle between Francis' destiny to become a prophet and the ever-present influence of secularism, and what Francis is really expressing with his revulsion for Bishop is that he will never get used to living in a world in which fundamentalism is not wholly accepted by the masses. Bishop's inadequate intelligence and his overt friendliness are a source of discomfort for Francis, because they do not fit in the dichotomy of good and evil that he has come to know. Bishop is the only character that Francis encounters on a regular basis who is unable to tell Francis exactly what he should do. This leaves Francis to make the decision for himself, and Bishop's intellectual disability makes that decision even harder for Francis, because Bishop's condition makes it so that Francis cannot see Bishop as either good or evil. Prior to coming into contact with Rayber and Bishop after Mason's death, Francis's entire life was spent away from civilization, immersed in his great-uncle's religious teachings. Francis's one encounter with the city as a child was skewed by his great-uncle's vehement proclamations that the city was evil and required the aid of a devout prophet to save it. Francis's aversion to

Bishop, and his repeated refusals to look the boy in the eye, therefore show the reader that Francis struggles to reconcile his history and predetermined future to become a prophet with the pull of the secular lifestyle that the city and his uncle represent.

Despite his hesitation to immediately and wholeheartedly accept his destiny as a prophet, Francis does show more inclination toward his religious destiny than he does to Rayber's secular life. On two separate occasions, Francis encounters the phrase "Unless ye be born again, ye shall not have everlasting life" (109, 123). Both instances occur while Francis and Rayber look upon the same banner for a tent revival featuring child evangelicals. The first time that Francis encounters the banner, he is then subsequently approached by Bishop and recoils and hisses like a snake. The second time, however, just before Francis notices the phrase on the banner again, Rayber catches him staring longingly into a store window. Rayber is initially excited that Francis is finally showing desire for something, but his excitement quickly turns to frustrated disappointment when he realizes that Francis was staring into the window of a closed bakery, apparently desiring a loaf of bread. The reader can understand Rayber's frustration since bread has always been a symbol for the flesh of Christ. That Francis experiences this desire just before his second encounter with the heavily religious sentiment shows Francis's inclination and innate desire to accept religion despite Rayber's influence. O'Connor's portrayal of good and evil presented in this novel is perhaps the clearest in those two moments when Francis is compared to a serpent and then he subsequently stares longingly at a loaf of bread he cannot attain. John Hawkes, in his article "Flannery O'Connor's Devil" quotes O'Connor as saying, "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times" (397). Hawkes goes on to

say that, “the point is that in the most vigorously moral of writers the actual creation of fiction seems often to depend on the immoral impulse” (398). Francis’s immoral impulse is simultaneously internal and external; his own desire to be free of his deceased great-uncle’s teachings coupled with the external influence of Rayber’s attempts to secularize him. Bishop’s character acts as a tangible representation of this impulse for both Rayber and Francis. Rayber sees Bishop as a personal and symbolic shortcoming, and Francis sees Bishop as a hideous burden that he does not wish to baptize.

Francis also shows an increasing tolerance, and even tentative acceptance of Bishop as the novel progresses. At one point, Francis even attempts to baptize the boy, seeming to be in a trance as he does so. Rayber notices what Francis is about to do, however, and he intervenes, but observes that afterward, Francis stares into his own face reflected in the water, and “his lips moved as if he were speaking silently to the face forming in the pool” (146). What Rayber sees as the true nature of Francis’s “affliction,” however is actually the beginning signs of Francis accepting his destiny as a prophet. Francis still has a long way to go before he is ready to consciously accept this destiny, as evidenced by the occasional but powerful influence of the voice of the devil in Francis’s mind. The voice comes to Francis at one point while he is thinking that he’d rather drown Bishop than baptize him. Francis sees a face forming in the water. “Drown him then, the face appeared to say” (165). Francis appears appalled at the demonic stranger’s words despite having expressed the same sentiment on at least two separate occasions, and has made no attempt to hide his revulsion toward Bishop from Rayber, saying that he’d “as soon baptize a dog than [Bishop]” (144). In addition to Francis’s earlier attempted baptism, he also does Bishop a reluctant, but religiously significant, favor when he ties the boy’s shoes (156). Paying attention to the feet, in particular washing the feet, has been a sign of reverence for

Christians since Biblical days, and Francis's willingness to tie the child's shoes, particularly when up until that point Francis had been unable to stand even looking at the child, shows a significant step for Francis toward accepting his divine destiny. In addition to his earlier trance and the tying of Bishop's shoes, Francis also unwittingly admits aloud the inevitability of his future when he exclaims, "I never ast to come here...I never ast for that lake to be set down in front of me," after a woman warns Francis to stay out of trouble (157).

Francis doesn't know it yet, but before the end of the novel, he will come to terms with the things he never asked for and will accept his duty as a prophet on his own. Dr. Karl Martin, a professor of literature at Point Loma Nazarene University, explores the nature of prophets within O'Connor's work in his article "Flannery O'Connor's Prophetic Imagination," and asserts that O'Connor, in her writing, was "concerned with confronting her audience with what she understood to be biblical truth" (45). The "truth" in the case of this novel being that secularism and a life corrupted with "oppression, greed, and rugged individualism of a new society in which the powerful could destroy the weak" was the gravest issue facing society "because the people had forgotten Yahweh" (42-43). O'Connor saw this issue in the society that surrounded her, and she responded with a novel about a prophet that was, in O'Connor's own view, inherently prophetic in nature.

Although Francis is fated to become a prophet no matter the challenges he faces, his struggles as a result of his own doubts, his family, and even the influence of Satan himself allow O'Connor to emphasize the inevitability of that destiny. It is a well-known fact that O'Connor was devoutly religious, and Francis' story is an allegorical, if somewhat exaggerated, tale that mirrors the struggle Christians face in their own lives. Even more specifically, the struggles that Francis face in many ways directly parallel O'Connor's own struggles with the lupus that killed

her father and later herself. In order to accept his destiny, Francis must accept that he is destined to become a prophet in spite of his own doubts, his uncle Rayber's attempts to secularize him, and the Devil's constant influence. Similarly, O'Connor must persevere in her journey to write meaningful Christian literature in the face of her own pain and suffering. In the end, Francis does overcome all of these challenges embraces prophethood. O'Connor's message of hope in a novel full of pain and suffering gives readers a certain insight into the mind and struggles of the author herself, and simultaneously raise questions about the ability of literature to act as prophecy when authors see themselves as prophets. Further study into the notion of O'Connor's views on the novel as a form of personal and public evangelism could yield even more insight into the connection between the modern novel and even other forms of storytelling, such as films, television shows, or even video games. Content creators of today strive to reach as wide an audience as possible, and though in part this desire to reach many people is motivated by money, the messages behind the stories that people consume cannot be ignored. The very different man of our own time reflected in these stories would interest modern theologians in the same way that literary characters of O'Connor's time were interesting to her as a reflection of her own society.

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