

ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

The Violent Bear It Away (1960)



Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

The worst critics are discussed at the end of this document.

“THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY (the kingdom of heaven, that is.)” (O'Connor, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, 9 April 1959) “This is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward.” (O'Connor, Letter, 4 August 1962)

In *The Violent Bear It Away* belief in God is represented by baptism. O'Connor's “spokesman” is an old farmer so intense in his faith that he goes to comically violent extremes to baptize members of his family. Old Tarwater's adversary is his nephew Rayber, an atheist schoolteacher in the City. In O'Connor's story “The Barber” Rayber is a college professor and liberal Democrat who slugs his barber for disagreeing with him. In this novel Rayber and the old Christian fight over “saving” the orphan boy Tarwater, fourteen, in a traditional conflict between the corrupt World and the transcendent Spirit. The old farmer “snatched the baby from under the schoolteacher's nose” and baptized and raised him to become a prophet. Years before he had kidnapped the schoolteacher, who rebelled. The image of the old prophet kidnapper snatching children to “bear them away” and baptize them gives a comic dimension to the story characteristic of O'Connor. “He proceeded about the Lord's business like an experienced crook.”

Old Tarwater was not called by the Lord to be a prophet so he called himself to be one. Nevertheless, he is moved by the Holy Spirit. His prophesying is mostly ranting in the Wilderness, but his main prophecy comes true. He knows that when he dies his corpse will be too weighty for the boy to “bear it away” to a grave and so he tells him to roll his dead body down the stairs. In a contrast to *As I Lay Dying* the old man

makes a point of not asking to be carted off and buried in his family plot. One of the visual comic touches is the hat of young Tarwater, pulled down low over his eyes. "He followed his uncle's custom of never taking off his hat except in bed." This foreshadows his eventually following his uncle's prophecy that he will become a prophet and baptize the retarded child of the schoolteacher.

The story opens with a long periodic sentence that introduces Old Tarwater as a corpse and frames the action of the whole novel: He died at the breakfast table and the boy Tarwater leaves him sitting there while he finishes eating, then he goes out to the still and gets drunk before he finishes digging the grave—a grotesque response. He sets fire to the place and assumes that he has burned the body, but a poor black neighbor buries the old man "in a decent and Christian way" and marks the grave with a cross. The narrative returns to this situation in the end, making it circular like Modernist novels such as Faulkner's *I Lay Dying* (1930), in which most of the narrative is about carting a corpse to the grave. O'Connor is more fluid than Faulkner in her many time shifts back and forth that tell the story more effectively than a purely chronological narrative. Her allegorical dimension and the quality of her Expressionism in style and techniques elevates her writing far above the category "southern gothic." Her religious vision is the opposite of gothic, which reduces everything to meaningless chance.

In this novel the white boy's drunken negligence identifies his perspective as unreliable. Tarwater is a mix of pine tar and water used as a medicine since the Middle Ages, is considered quackery by physicians, but is used by psychic mediums to ward off evil. The image of tarwater suggests darkening by pollution. This applies to the old prophet as well, since all humans are sinful by nature and need the purification symbolized by baptism. The old man is "a prophet with a still," not a paragon of virtue. "When he couldn't stand the Lord one instant longer, he got drunk, prophet or no prophet." As the only acting parent, the old man sets an example that contributes to the boy's rebellion against him.

The boy Tarwater was born in an auto wreck, the only child of a mother "unmarried and shameless." At fourteen he is a mean son of a bitch--pointedly unlike Huck Finn. Before he quits digging the grave to get drunk like Pap Finn, the boy worries that his uncle the schoolteacher will try to take possession of the farm, a clearing in the Wilderness. Tarwater recalls the schoolteacher in the City slamming his door on the old prophet when he came to baptize the teacher's idiot child. "He hoped to God, he told the stranger digging the grave along with him now," that he would not have to kill the schoolteacher.

Who is this mysterious "stranger"? By juxtaposing a memory with the present, O'Connor elides the schoolteacher into the "stranger" helping him dig the grave of the Christian. This stranger simply appears. He has not been introduced in the narrative because he is a spirit. He is Satan, conventionally a mysterious stranger as in Hawthorne and Twain. He argues against Jesus, calls the old Christian crazy, incites the boy to drunkenness, arson and murder, yet says "there ain't no such thing as a devil. I can tell you that from my own self-experience." Tarwater will learn otherwise. Like Satan in this scene, his homosexual rapist at the end of the novel is wearing a panama hat.

The schoolteacher has characteristics typical of liberal academics during the late 20th century who led the crusade to purge religion from schools and everywhere else in society--an elite minority who (1) deprived the majority of their constitutional rights to free speech and religious expression, (2) imposed the cultural totalitarianism called Political Correctness, and (3) in effect established Atheism as a state religion. The schoolteacher claims to be rational but is irrational in his Atheist dogmatism since he cannot prove that God does not exist. His bigotry is arrogant, his censorship of God in the schools is egomania, his moral relativism is evil: "It was as if the schoolteacher, like the devil, could take on any look that suited him." The schoolteacher had got his own sister her first lover "because he thought it would contribute to her *self-confidence*." She died in a wreck. "The schoolteacher had led his sister into evil."

The liberal teacher is so confined by the abstractions in his own head that he does not see or hear well. He wears glasses and a hearing aid. As a true liberal, the schoolteacher simply turns off his hearing to anything he does not want to hear. He makes mechanical stock responses "The boy had the thought that his head ran by electricity." The schoolteacher's only child (and his student) is a dimwit. He is so disappointed in what he has produced that he almost drowns his little son. "The child might have been a deformed part of

himself that had been accidentally revealed.” The old Christian farmer at least contributed to the community by producing corn and whiskey. The atheist schoolteacher produces dimwits.

Tarwater is saved by pretending to already be a dimwit. “The boy knew that escaping school was the surest sign of his election.” The truant officer was “the devil’s emissary.” Once when he visited the City he realized that “this place was evil.” From a tall building he looks down “into the pit of the street” as if it is the pit of Hell. Tarwater believes he is a prophet of God who has not yet been called. He vows to return to the City “with fire in his eyes” when he gets the call. Meanwhile, however, as a rebellious teenager he welcomes the death of the old man as an emancipation from moral responsibility: “Now I can do anything I want to,” he said, softening the stranger’s voice.”

The self-righteous boy is speaking in the voice of Satan, who has told him getting drunk is a blessing from God. “He began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance.” Satan agrees with the schoolteacher that Tarwater could have been a “city slicker” if the old man had not stopped his progress. Satan persuades the drunken boy that God has blessed him with freedom from Jesus: “He has given you your release. That old man was the stone before your door and the Lord has rolled it away.” Arguing that the boy can be his own Savior, the devil promotes the modern fallacy of deifying the Self.

Tarwater opens himself to Satan when he gets drunk. He dishonors the old man by trying to burn his body rather than giving him a decent Christian burial just as the old man knew the schoolteacher would do. He sets fire to the house and abandons it, heading for the City. O’Connor deploys archetypal settings in the tradition of Hawthorne: The fertile farmland is the Garden of the heart in contrast to the barren City dominated by machines, materialism and abstractions of the Head dissociated from Nature that are personified in the schoolteacher. This symbolism affirms agrarian pastoralism in the tradition of Jefferson and Faulkner. The corruption of an innocent country youth in the City is one of the oldest themes in literature, extending back to ancient Greece.

Tarwater hitchhikes a ride to the City in a machine driven by a traveling salesman whose advice is a perversion of Christian love. He “loves” his customers only in order to sell them something. Whenever one dies he thanks God because “that’s one less to remember.” His name Meeks is an ironic reference to the biblical prophecy that “The meek shall inherit the earth.” When the glow of the City appears ahead, Tarwater thinks they are going the wrong way. He thinks the glow is the fire he just set, a fire prompted by Satan and evoking Hell. The City is a moral Hell, as in Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” The boy is turned around and going the wrong way. When he realizes his confusion, he says he is still waking up.

The boy feels compelled to contact his uncle the schoolteacher as his “only blood connection.” He has an inflated respect for the schoolteacher in reaction against the old man’s condemnation: “He knows a heap... I don’t reckon it’s anything he don’t know.” The old man counters, “That’s his trouble. He thinks if it’s something he can’t know then somebody smarter than him can tell him about it and he can know it just the same. And if you were to go there, the first thing he would do would be to test your head and tell you what you were thinking and how come you were thinking it and what you ought to be thinking instead. And before long you wouldn’t belong to your self no more, you would belong to him.” These are traits that writers have criticized in schoolteachers since Washington Irving depicted Ichabod Crane in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819): (1) presuming that humans can know everything, (2) reducing knowledge to information, (3) rejecting spirituality, (4) scorning traditional beliefs, (5) typing individuals in sociological categories, (6) advocating foolish theories, (7) posturing as superior to others, (8) censoring dissent, (9) imposing totalitarian thought control as in Political Correctness.

The persecution of the old Christian farmer by the schoolteacher is an allegory of the atheist campaign against God and Christians in the American education system. The schoolteacher has published a “study” of the farmer in an education magazine calling him a social “type” that is going “extinct”—expressing the prejudice of atheists. The schoolteacher is supported by the government, as represented by his marriage to a social worker and by the doctor who commits the old Christian to an asylum for four years: “The doctor had said he was not only crazy but dangerous and they had taken him to the asylum in a strait jacket.” The

old man was released only after he stopped “prophesying on the ward.” Currently in the U.S. military troops can be punished for expressing belief in God.

When the old man kidnapped the schoolteacher from his drunken mother--his own sister--he baptized him. “He made him understand that his true father was the Lord.” Although he later rebelled, the schoolteacher could not forget what the old farmer had taught him. “I planted a seed in him and it was there for good.” On the farm, away from the City in “the clearing,” the Garden of the heart, the child grew healthier: “His sallow face had become bright in four days.” He did not want to leave the farm. “The schoolteacher had spent four days in the clearing because his mother had not missed him for three days.” When he got taken back to the City he ran away and tried to find his way back to the farm. “The light had left his eyes.” When he was fourteen, the same age as Tarwater now, he was glad when his parents were killed in a car accident along with the mother of Tarwater, who was born in the wreck. He was glad because he wanted to be free, but he invited the old Christian farmer, his uncle, to come and live with him because “He was the only person in the schoolteacher’s life who had ever taken two steps out of his way in his behalf.” Yet the schoolteacher betrays his only benefactor.

After the old man baptizes the baby Tarwater, the schoolteacher kicks him out: “I’m sorry, Uncle. You can’t live with me and ruin another child’s life.... He’s going to be his own saviour. He’s going to be free!” The schoolteacher blames the old man for teaching him to believe in God, which “ruined” his life because it makes him uncomfortable in his atheism: “You infected me with your idiot hopes.” Although in fact he was very happy on the farm as a boy, as an adult the schoolteacher is an urban atheist who now associates the farm with people who believe in God. Consequently, he claims he was abused as a child. “It was the thought of a child’s mind warped, of a child led away from reality, that always enraged him, bringing back to him his own childhood’s seduction.” In the scene when he hears a child evangelist preach, “He felt the taste of his own childhood pain laid again on his tongue like a bitter wafer.” The wafer is Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Believers accept suffering in life as a necessary and educational bearing of a cross in imitation of Christ. The liberal schoolteacher refuses to swallow it.

After the old man kidnaps Tarwater, the schoolteacher comes out to the farm to take him back and the old man shoots him in the leg and one ear. While campaigning for the presidency, Barack Obama referred to rural people who “cling to their guns and religion.” The old man represents all those Christians who will indeed use their guns to defend their religion. Violence “bears it away.” The schoolteacher never tried again. According to the old man, “If he had really wanted you back, he could have got you... He could have had the law out here after me or got me put back in the asylum... It was because he found you a heap of trouble. He wanted it all in his head. You can’t change a child’s pants in your head.” The schoolteacher prefers living in his head to living in reality, he wears a hearing aid he turns off when he doesn’t like what he hears, yet he accuses the old farmer of not living in reality. Tilling the soil and raising a child are more real than publishing articles insulting people for their belief in God.

The schoolteacher married a social worker, a “welfare-woman” who changed the pants of the baby Tarwater. Her ecclesiastical name, Bernice Bishop, is ironic for an implicit atheist. “Bishop” suggests that in the modern world belief in government welfare is replacing belief in God. Christian charity is extended to everyone—love thy neighbor—whereas liberal charity as embodied in this welfare Bishop is unreliable and selective. She abandons Tarwater. When her own offspring proves to be a dimwit, she abandons him too. The schoolteacher keeps a picture of her on the mantel in her pink room: “‘That’s my wife,’ he said, ‘but she doesn’t live with us anymore’.” The welfare woman who presumes to judge and govern other families does not sustain her own. Later we are told that the schoolteacher “got rid of his wife,” leaving us to speculate about why these two liberals could not get along. “She would not divorce him for fear she would be given custody of the child.” She demands that Bishop be placed in an institution and she rejects Tarwater because she does not like his face. To her his face looks like he has “insane convictions” and “she would have been bound to destroy the arrogant look on it.” She is a totalitarian liberal representing the government who will abuse anyone who resists PC indoctrination.

The boy Tarwater goes to the City to seek the Truth, to determine how much to believe what the old man preached, “as if he were shifting the burden of Truth like a cross on his back.” But he is going the wrong way and to the wrong teacher. The fire he set to burn the old man is evidence that he is following the

promptings of Satan. He has “soot-colored eyes.” As put by the salesman Meeks, “And now you’re coming to town to run to doom with the rest of us, huh?” He sees lots of signs in the City “advertising some remedy or other,” like the billboard of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg in *The Great Gatsby*--false hopes. People are investing their faith in things, especially cars, as Hazel Motes does in *Wise Blood*. “I know everything but the machines,” Tarwater said. He is awestruck by the ability of Meeks to take apart a telephone and put it back together, a machine he associates with evil—black and “coiled” like a snake. Reluctantly, he uses the phone to call his uncle the schoolteacher, with “his face rigid as if he were afraid that the Lord might be about to speak to him over the machine.” When he realizes that his call is answered by the dimwit child, “He stood there blankly as if he had received a revelation he could not yet decipher.”

In a sense the Lord did speak to Tarwater, for the dimwit child is “the least of these, my brethren,” as Christ said. He is named Bishop, associating him with religious faith--a Christ-evoking figure, a test of charity and a moral mirror like Bartleby in Melville’s story, Benjy in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, and the retarded son in Porter’s “He.” Bishop is the most pathetic because he is murdered. After this novel was published in 1960 the U.S. Supreme Court legalized aborting “unwanted children.” The schoolteacher almost drowns Bishop, resents feeling guilty and blames the religious influence of the old man for his inability to rid himself of the nuisance. When the boy Tarwater arrives at his house the schoolteacher has to put on his glasses and his hearing aid, artificial devices that mediate perceptions like an ideology, like the minister’s black veil in the Hawthorne story. O’Connor wrote, “I believe and the Church teaches that God is as present in the idiot boy as in the genius.” (Letter, 6 September 1955) “In my novel I have a child—the school teacher’s boy—whom I aim to have a kind of Christ image, though a better way to think of it is probably just as a kind of redemptive figure.” (Letter, 28 December 1956)

Confronting the schoolteacher, young Tarwater begins to feel the influence of old Tarwater like a spirit he is trying to escape, urging him to baptize the dimwit child. “It’s a blessing he’s dead at last,” says the schoolteacher. But just then the dimwit child shambles into the room and young Tarwater feels obligated. “Then the revolution came... He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet.” But he resents losing his freedom and rebels against the gospel as foolish. “Suddenly he knew that the child *recognized* him, that the old man himself had primed him from on high that here was the forced servant of God come to see that he was born again. The little boy was sticking out his hand to touch him. ‘Git!’ Tarwater screamed. His arm shot out like a whip and knocked the hand away”... In literature of the South, a whip evokes a slave overseer. Young Tarwater feels that to follow his calling will be to give up his freedom and become a slave to Jesus. Instead, he wants to be his own master. His revulsion toward the dimwit child is comparable to the revulsion of racist slave masters toward blacks, evoking the history of racial segregation. ‘I won’t have anything to do with him!’ he shouted.” Even the schoolteacher feels the reality of the spirit: “Rayber had never, even when old Tarwater had lived under his roof, been so conscious of the old’s man’s presence.”

The schoolteacher tries to suppress belief in God within himself as well as in society, but when he gets exasperated he exclaims, “God only knows what the old fool has told you and taught you.... God only knows!... He filled your head with God knows what rot!” Contradicting himself, the schoolteacher is more irrational than the old man he had sent to a mental asylum in a strait jacket. He feels “something tighten around him like an invisible strait jacket.” He sees himself in the boy Tarwater: “The face before him was his own, but the eyes were not his own.” In trying to kill belief in God in the boy, he is also trying to purge it in himself. The boy asks him, “What you wired for?... Does your head light up?... Do you think in the box...or do you think in your head?” The schoolteacher’s hearing aid is a metaphor of the mechanical thinking that later came to be called Political Correctness: “After the old man shot me I began to lose my hearing.” Even his feelings are mechanical responses. He “heard his own heart, magnified by the hearing aid, suddenly begin to pound like the works of a gigantic machine in his chest.”

The schoolteacher walks the boy around the City explaining its machinery. He suggests that if the boy does as he is told, when he turns sixteen he might have a car of his own. They pass a pentecostal tabernacle featuring the “Carmodys for Christ.” Later we see that the Carmodys are in the car mode. They are not inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are driving a salvation machine. They are salesmen like Meeks, preaching love for the money. As in *Wise Blood* the City is full of fake prophets. Like them the schoolteacher is a fake

healer. He wants to subject Tarwater to a series of tests in order to “ferret to the center of the emotional infection.” A ferret is a variety of polecat that squirms around a lot and usually has red eyes like a demon. The schoolteacher considers the boy sick because he believes in God, he keeps failing to persuade him of anything and so he retreats into “studying” him, an epitome of ineffectual academics.

Ironically, the dimwit child is the one who transforms Tarwater. “Bishop looked like the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence.” He embodies the old man’s prophecy that the boy Tarwater would baptize him. He is pure soul. He is also like a conscience, and Tarwater is possessed by Satan. That is why he hates the child and eventually drowns him. Bishop is always “creeping up to touch him and when the boy was aware of his being near, he would draw himself up like a snake ready to strike and hiss, ‘Git!’” Tarwater’s reaction is analogous to that of liberal academics toward God in the schools.

Rayber the schoolteacher is complex, not simply a caricature of the atheist liberal academic. “He had not conquered the problem of Bishop. He had only learned to live with it and had learned too that he could not live without it.” In his rational mind where he tries to live all the time, he too is like Meeks the salesman, in that he knew the value of love and “how it could be used.” Bishop has no value to him. He cannot use him. “He’s just a mistake of nature.” Bishop merely signifies “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.” His reference to God is facetious, an example of how atheists often refer to God in order to disparage faith—as an idiot. Or as the equivalent of the Easter Bunny. The schoolteacher sees himself as smarter than God. Yet he also “knew that he was the stuff of which fanatics and madmen are made... He kept himself on a very narrow line between madness and emptiness.”

When the doctor told him that Bishop was born an idiot, the schoolteacher “hissed” like a snake or a demon, rejecting the child in his heart. He overvalues head knowledge. Yet at times, against his will, he is overtaken by “a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity. It was only a touch of the curse that lay in his blood.” Ironically, it is evidence that he has a soul. He attributes his experience of spiritual love—agape—to a merely physical cause, his genetic inheritance. “It began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated.” Spiritual love “would cause him to make a fool of himself.” This love was strong enough to overcome his selfishness and induce reverence. It was a “love that terrified him—powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise”—of God.

Ironically, the schoolteacher insists that belief in God is a threat to living a full life, yet he resists faith “at the cost of a full life.” He “kept belief from gaining control over him by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline. He did not look at anything too long...” Careful observation of Nature might persuade him that, after all, there must be a Creator. Careful thought might change his mind, but the atheist mind is closed. He puts on his ideological eyeglasses and turns off his hearing aid.

The atheist liberal sees himself as noble in his nihilism. “He recognized that in silent ways he lived an heroic life.... He intended to lurch toward emptiness”—in literary history toward atheist Naturalism, Existentialism, and Postmodernism. The inhumane amorality of atheism is expressed by young Tarwater in the Italian restaurant when he mocks the dimwit child: “He eats like a hog and he don’t think no more than a hog and when he dies, he’ll rot like a hog.... The only difference between me and you and a hog is me and you can calculate, but there ain’t any difference between him and one.” This is what a human amounts to without God. The schoolteacher calls the boy “pig-headed.” But like the woman in O’Connor’s hilarious story “Revelation,” he sees neither the hog nor the devil in himself.

The schoolteacher is made still more complex by his resemblance to both the old Tarwater and to the young Tarwater: Looking at the boy, Rayber saw “the set thrust of a jaw very like his own.” Similar characteristics among the three are pointed out repeatedly, linking them in a psychological allegory of salvation comparable to *The Scarlet Letter*. Rayber is parallel to Chillingworth, a rationalist who claims to be a healer, an unpardonable sinner in the service of Satan. He makes a vindictive “study” of his rival old man Tarwater, much as Chillingworth tortures the young Dimmesdale, taking his revenge by reducing the Christian to a type that he claims is going extinct. The old man rages that Rayber tried to steal his soul, in

comic allusive contrast to the guilty silence of the weakling Dimmesdale. The soul of the young Tarwater has already been stolen by Satan and he tells Rayber to go to Hell.

The boy contrasts with but is also parallel to Hester Prynne: Both are alienated young sinners who rebel against God and society but eventually attain salvation and become prophets. Hester seduces her minister in the Wilderness, the boy is raped in the Wilderness; Hester commits adultery, the boy commits murder; Hester is stigmatized by the scarlet letter, the boy is stigmatized for believing in God; Hester does good works, the boy does evil until he gets raped. The dimwit child is parallel to Pearl in being a test and representing the soul. The schoolteacher wants to drown him, the boy does. Satan prevails in the modern world. As in *The Scarlet Letter*, the major characters in *The Violent Bear It Away* are both individuals and allegorical concepts—representing the soul, the sinner, the devil, the preacher of God. The universal themes of conflict between Good and Evil and the quest for salvation are especially powerful in O'Connor.

One night the boy walks out into the City. The schoolteacher follows him, using his hat to identify him in the dark. The hat sits on the head, making it a natural symbol of beliefs, like the “steeple-crowned” hats of the Puritans at the opening of *The Scarlet Letter*. O'Connor was appalled by a student who tried to make a symbol out of the hat worn by the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Nevertheless, in this novel, the boy's hat is pointedly an indication of his identity. When he leans out the window in a tall building in the City to look down into the “pit” of the street, his hat falls off and he loses it—a hat like that worn by his great-uncle the prophet. Losing his hat suggests losing his faith in the old man and hence his confidence in his identity. When he stops and looks in the window of a bakery at a loaf of bread, Rayber thinks the boy is literally hungry, whereas instead he seems to be craving “the bread of life”—salvation. Confirming this point the boy then goes into the pentecostal tabernacle where the Carmodys are exploiting their little girl as a preacher. Mrs. Carmody, a Protestant, tells the audience, “I was a missionary in Rome where minds are still chained in priestly darkness.” This is a joke. Protestantism was a reform movement against the Catholic Church for being mercenary, but Protestants like the Carmodys are mercenary fakes.

The little girl is not a fraud, “she was only exploited.” As the schoolteacher watches her through the window he recalls when his father came to the farm and took him back to the City after old Tarwater had kidnapped and baptized him. He had been truly “born again,” but his atheist father destroyed his faith. The little girl prophet makes eye contact with the furtive schoolteacher through the window, inspiring him to become a prophet of atheism like Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*. “He had a vision of himself moving like an avenging angel through the world, gathering up all the children that the Lord, not Herod, had slain.” The liberal schoolteacher will take over the world and correct the wrongs of God. He deludes himself into thinking that he has won over the little girl simply by looking at her, epitomizing the self-righteousness of liberal academics, but he is shocked when she points toward him and shrieks, “I see a damned soul before my eyes! I see a dead man Jesus hasn't raised. His head is in the window but his ear is deaf to the Holy Word!” Deaf indeed. The would-be prophet of atheism counters the little girl prophet of God by turning off his hearing aid and hiding in the dark.

The next day the schoolteacher takes the boy Tarwater and little Bishop to the natural history museum in the park at the center of the City. There is a comparable episode in the same location in *Wise Blood*. The schoolteacher notes that the park resembles the clearing of the Tarwater farm—the archetypal Garden of the heart. Bishop climbs into his lap and “his hated love gripped him and held him in a vise. He should have known better than to let the child onto his lap.” He tries not to feel love “with a supreme effort of his will.” If he could “refuse to feel it, he would be a free man.” His selfish desire to be free of responsibility once provoked him to drown little Bishop. He took the child to the ocean and held him under water “not looking down at what he was doing but up.” His motive is the same as that of many liberals who rationalize abortion as merciful but refuse to look at pictures of abortions or at the news of abortion mills selling body parts of aborted babies. In “raising consciousness” Feminists reduced the issue to a woman's freedom and made abortion Politically Correct. Hester Prynne at one point is on the verge of killing Pearl. At the last minute before little Bishop drowns, the schoolteacher “envisioned his life without the child” and realizes that he would be lonely without a soul.

At the center of the park is a “circle with a fountain in the middle of it. Water rushed from the mouth of a stone lion's head into a shallow pool.” In Hawthorne fountains are a motif, a recurrent icon representing

the eternal Spirit, most explicitly in "The Vision of the Fountain." O'Connor's fountain is in a circle in the center of the park, implying that access to the eternal Spirit is in the heart. Attaining the center of being is a goal of the individuation process toward psychological wholeness and the circle is an archetypal image of perfection. The lion is a traditional symbol of power. Bishop climbs into the fountain, further identifying both with the Spirit. The boy Tarwater feels compelled by the spirit of old Tarwater to go and baptize the child, turning the fountain into a baptismal font sacred to God. He sees the child reduced to "a spot of light"—a soul. But the schoolteacher snatches the child away from the fountain: "He felt that he had just saved the boy from committing some enormous indignity." This is the worst the schoolteacher can say of baptism, or commitment to belief in God, that it is undignified—an affront to his own ego. The child howls in protest and cries, but the atheist liberal maintains his dignity.

Rayber the schoolteacher takes the boys on an excursion to a lake in the countryside. He lies to Tarwater saying they are going on a fishing trip, whereas in fact this is a step toward taking the boy back to revisit the burned farmhouse in the clearing: "His irrational fears and impulses would burst out and [I] would be there to explain them to him." They stay in a cheap motel called the Cherokee Lodge, evoking the Wilderness. The woman at the reception desk sees the schoolteacher as part wild and part mechanical. "He was in bad need of a haircut and his eyes had a peculiar look—like something human trapped in a switch box." She sees the dimwit child in a way that links him to old Tarwater the prophet: "He looked like an old man." When the child touches young Tarwater's hand the boy reacts as he does to the continuing spiritual influence of the old man: "Git away and quit bothering me!" The woman at the desk reprimands him for his disrespect, "looking at him fiercely as if he had profaned the holy." She anticipates his evil: "Whatever devil's work you mean to do, don't do it here."

The conflict in the boy Tarwater between Satan and the spirit of the old man is dramatized when after scorning the dimwit child, he stops and ties the child's shoes for him. He ties his shoes yet he intends to drown him. "'You can't just say NO,' he said. 'You got to do NO. You got to show it. You got to show you mean it by doing it.'" The schoolteacher could not drown the dimwit child, even though he wanted to. The boy Tarwater considers the schoolteacher a cowardly hypocrite. He intends to escape his own conflict by drowning little Bishop so he will no longer feel compelled to baptize him. That will "make an end of it." He thinks murder will assure his freedom. He intends to prove to the schoolteacher that he has integrity as a true atheist by acting on his convictions. The schoolteacher represents all the liberal academics who refuse to consider the moral consequences of their atheism in the real world. Atheism denies moral accountability and thereby encourages murder. O'Connor is carrying on a major theme of T. S. Eliot, that in both Europe and America during the 19th century, the popular deification of Self by Romantics such as Emerson and Margaret Fuller led to the rise of atheist tyrants.

The ideological eyeglasses of the schoolteacher keep "his little eyes protected." As an atheist he does not see the soul of his little son, he sees only a dimwit. Tarwater sees a dimwit with a soul demanding that he "begin at once the life the old man had prepared him for." When he wrote on the motel sign-in card, it was "in an old man's meticulous hand." And when he walked in the City "he had looked to the side and seen his own form alongside him in a store window, transparent as a snakeskin. It moved beside him like some violent ghost who had already crossed over and was reproaching him from the other side." He is haunted by the spirit of the old man, functioning in him as a conscience despite the dominance of the devil. The flesh is sinful, hence associated with a snake. In death a Christian sloughs off the flesh like a snakeskin and becomes pure spirit. The boy Tarwater has been deceived by Satan due to pride, like Eve. He wants to be free—his own God. "He would have fallen but for the wise voice that sustained him—the stranger who had kept him company while he dug his uncle's grave."

The first scene at the fountain in the park is rendered from the schoolteacher's point of view. The second renders the experience of the boy Tarwater: "They had walked deeper into the park and he began to feel again the approach of mystery." Deeper into the park is deeper into his heart. As soon as the dimwit child sees the fountain he runs to it "like something released from a cage." This recalls the observant woman at the reception desk who thought the schoolteacher looked like "something human trapped in a switch box." The liberal is unable to think outside the box of Political Correctness, whereas the boy Tarwater sees the child as a soul: "A blinding brightness fell on the lion's tangled marble head and gilded the stream of water rushing from his mouth. Then the light, falling more gently, rested like a hand on the child's white head...."

The old man might have been lurking near, holding his breath, waiting for the baptism.” In Christian symbolism Christ is the light. Here the “hand” of golden light on the head of the child is His. “Suffer the little children to come unto me,” He said. He silences Satan: “His friend was silent as if in the felt presence, he dared not raise his voice.” Jesus prevails: “At each step the boy exerted a force backward [the influence of Satan] but he continued nevertheless to move toward the pool.”

But then the schoolteacher grabs the child and carries him away. Tarwater remains conflicted, as imaged in his reflection in the fountain, “where a wavering face seemed trying to form itself.” His face is “cross-shaped” but his eyes have “a look of starvation.” He is starving for salvation, “the bread of life.” The sunlight falling on the head of the child in the fountain at the perfect moment was a sign to him from Jesus. The schoolteacher did not see it of course. Like most liberal academics he has the literal mind of an atheist. To atheists every paranormal sign is merely a coincidence or an hallucination.

Tarwater allows himself to be persuaded by Satan the deceiver: “Well, that’s your sign, his friend said—the sun coming out from under a cloud and falling on the head of a dimwit. Something that could happen fifty times a day without no one being the wiser. And it took the schoolteacher to save you and just in time.” Satan appeals to his reason dissociated from his heart and to his egotism. Ironically, Satan believes in God. The schoolteacher is more faithless than the Devil. Satan claims that God is disconnected from human beings and indifferent to them (as in Deism and theistic Naturalism). Perversely, he tries to persuade Tarwater that he is the only true Savior by parroting Jesus: “I’ll never desert you.”

Out on the lake in a boat, Tarwater fishes. He remarks that it would be no great loss if Bishop drowned. The schoolteacher—the father—agrees and remembers trying to drown him. “‘In a hundred years people may have learned enough to put them to sleep when they’re born.’ Something appeared to be working on the boy’s face, struggling there, some war between agreement and outrage”—between an atheist who does not believe in the soul, and a Christian who does. The atheist schoolteacher is advocating a policy carried out in the concentration camps of the Nazis. As a timid liberal he rationalizes his totalitarianism and lacks the courage to be forthrightly fascist: “My guts are in my head.”

The schoolteacher is angered when the boy is not impressed by flying machines. “A buzzard can fly,” says Tarwater. The schoolteacher reveals his reductive dehumanizing rationalism when he condescends to the country boy, “I can read you like a book!” The boy’s response is to vomit over the side of the boat. His inner conflict has made him nauseous, but the schoolteacher misreads him like a PC liberal analyzing a text, supposing that he himself was the cause by making the boy feel guilty for resisting him. “You’ll feel better now.” The schoolteacher is unconscious of contradicting himself when he exclaims, “‘God boy...you need help. You need to be saved... And I’m the one who can save you’.” Having deified himself and presumed to replace God, with his hat turned down all around “he looked like a fanatical country preacher.” The atheist liberal is just as dogmatic as any other fanatic. “The boy looked at him fiercely. ‘Why don’t you shut your big mouth?’ he said. ‘Why don’t you pull that plug out of your ear and turn yourself off?’” Finally, the boy jumps out of the boat.

Ashore again, the schoolteacher leaves the boy and takes Bishop for a ride. He visits the clearing of the old man’s farm. As they get close, “Bishop jumped up and down, squealing and making unintelligible noises of delight.” The schoolteacher recalls when the old man first showed him the farm and told him that it would be his one day, “He remembered that his heart had expanded unbelievably.” By now, however, he has become a City man dissociated from Nature and the heart. To him the forest around the farm is “alien.” He sees it only in terms of potential use, just as he sees his dimwit son. “Quickly he reduced the whole wood in probable board feet into a college education for the boy.” When he sees the ashes of the farm house he recalls returning from the City after his father had destroyed his religious faith and denouncing the old man as a crazy liar full of crap. He had burned him in his rage just as the boy Tarwater had apparently burned him in literal fire. But now “a dreaded sense of loss came over him” similar to the dread that kept him from drowning Bishop. “His mind turned on the problem of Tarwater as if his own and not only the boy’s salvation depended on his solving it.”

The schoolteacher resents Bishop, just as he resents the idea that he has a soul and is subject to God. “He might have been commanding a small animal he was successfully training.” He resents the “sinister”

feeling that he too is “still a child waiting on Christ.” He wanted to drown Bishop but he knew “that his own stability depended on the little boy’s presence. He could control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus in Bishop... The “terrifying love” that overwhelms his resistance at times is spiritual love—agape. To the schoolteacher his dimwit child is evidence that he cares about somebody other than himself. He gets angry at teenage dancers in the lodge for their reaction to the child, yet his own attitude is essentially the same: “Their look was shocked and affronted as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before they were allowed to see it.” The liberal claims to love humanity but he does not even love his own offspring consistently if they are too inconvenient.

The schoolteacher accuses Tarwater of still being under the influence of his great-uncle the old Christian prophet. Tarwater’s reply echoes one of the most famous parables of Jesus—the sower of seed, the sower of the Word of God: “‘It’s you the seed fell in,’ he said. ‘It ain’t a thing you can do about it. It fell on bad ground but it fell in deep. With me,’ he said proudly, ‘it fell on rock and the wind carried it away.’ The schoolteacher contradicts himself again: “‘Goddam you!... It fell in us both alike. The difference is that I know it’s in me and I keep it under control. I weed it out but you’re too blind to know it’s in you’.” Jesus embodies the Word of God. The schoolteacher admits that the seed—the Word—is within him, hence Jesus is within him. He chooses to “weed out” Jesus. He tells the boy, “Until you get rid of this compulsion to baptize Bishop, you’ll never make any progress toward being a normal person.” The schoolteacher’s goal is to make everyone “normal,” that is, to make them conform to his own beliefs. Later in the 20th century the concept of Politically Correct replaced “normal.” The liberal schoolteacher insists that the boy be like him, but when the student insists on being himself, the schoolteacher “saw with perfect clarity that the only feeling he had for this boy was hate. He loathed the very sight of him.”

Ironically, when the boy guides the dimwit child out the door, the schoolteacher projects himself. He imagines that Tarwater intended “to make a slave of the child. Bishop would be at his command like a faithful dog. Instead of avoiding him, he planned to control him, to show who was master. And I will not permit that, he said. If anyone controlled Bishop, it would be himself.” O’Connor’s ironies are as sharp and perfectly sustained as those in Twain and Stephen Crane. While the boy sits with the child in the boat out on the lake, working up the nerve to drown him, the schoolteacher is thinking about how to get rid of them both. “He might put Bishop in an institution for a few weeks.” His atheism has made him a liberal cynic who does not give a damn about anybody: “Life had never been good enough to him for him to wince at its destruction. He told himself that he was indifferent even to his own dissolution. It seemed to him that this indifference was the most that human dignity could achieve... To feel nothing was peace.”

The schoolteacher has become a virtual machine: “Then an instant before the cataclysm, he grabbed the metal box of the hearing aid as if he were clawing his heart.... The machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free.” He is hearing his child bellow. “What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle.... He continued to feel nothing.” When he chose to “weed out” Jesus, he rejected love. “He intended to lurch toward emptiness.” The schoolteacher has already realized that if he loses Bishop his conflict between self and agape will become overwhelming. When he realizes that his child is dead and that he has succeeded in suppressing all feeling “he collapsed.” Having proved himself unwilling to cope with his own child he cannot hope to cope with the entire “idiot world.” Having lost his soul, he will now lurch toward emptiness and suicide. Observers later in the century said the same about English departments.

The motif of lethal machines from the City continues when Tarwater hitchhikes a ride in a “skeletal” auto-transit truck “carrying four automobiles packed in it like bullets.” The boy is in shock and almost immediately confesses to the driver, “I drowned a boy.” The driver is so detached he says, “Just one?” His lack of feeling or interest in reporting a murder is evidence of urban amorality like the schoolteacher’s lack of feeling. The driver does not care about others and is like the public in wanting only to be entertained so he can stay awake. It does not matter to him whether a murder is fictional or real. Tarwater explains to the driver that he baptized the child without meaning to do it. “I only meant to drown him.” In professing his atheism Tarwater credits the schoolteacher for influencing him to commit the murder, saying he “knows everything...but that don’t keep him from being a fool. He can’t do nothing. All he can do is figure it out. He’s got this wired head... I know everything he knows, only I can do something about it. I did.” Atheism

reduces Tarwater to an animal, as suggested when he says he's going back to the farm and sleep in a stall. He killed the child because "I had to prove I wasn't no prophet." He wants to be free to be selfish and take possession of the farm. "Now it's all mine."

Tarwater threw up his dinner, as his spiritual hunger makes physical food repulsive. "It's like being empty is a thing in my stomach and it don't allow nothing else to come down in there. If I ate...I would throw it up." When the truck driver pulls over to sleep, Tarwater feels as if he is being watched by an "inner eye" identified with "the truth." His conscience, or the Holy Spirit, prompts him to dream of the drowning. "By his side, standing like a guide in the boat, was his faithful friend, lean, shadow-like, who had counseled him in both country and city." Now his "mentor," Satan is identified with the "shadow," the dark repressed side of the self in Jungian psychology. "Be a man, his friend counseled, be a man. It's only one dimwit you have to drown." His eyes are violet, a color associated with the demonic and by T. S. Eliot with evils of the modern City in "The Waste Land." The presence of Jesus is implied by the evocation of a celestial peacock, O'Connor's recurrent symbol of Jesus: "The sky was dotted with fixed tranquil eyes like the spread tail of some celestial night bird." While the boy is gazing up at the sky, the child climbs onto his back—another sign from Jesus. Tarwater drowns the child to get him off his back spiritually and literally. In his nightmare he jerks around like "He might have been Jonah clinging wildly to the whale's tongue." Here he is compared to the prophet who also disobeyed God.

In his tortured sleep, Tarwater "grappled with the air as if he had been flung like a fish on the shores of the dead without lungs to breathe there." The fish is a recognition symbol in early Christianity that recurs throughout the novel, beginning with the eyes of the old prophet "like two fish." As he did when drowning the child, at the end of his nightmare "the defeated boy cried out the words of baptism, shuddered and opened his eyes. He heard the sibilant oaths of his friend fading away on the darkness." Satan fades away because Jesus has prevailed: (1) Bishop gets baptized; (2) atheism is defeated; (3) the child is saved from Satan and from the schoolteacher; (4) Tarwater is functioning as a prophet even against his will. Bishop is baptized through the grace of God, which is irresistible. Paradoxically the innocent child is saved by getting killed. The words of baptism were put in Tarwater's mouth originally by the old prophet who taught him and are prompted here by Jesus, who remains within him as the Word. This scene is a follow-up to the one at the fountain in the park, where Jesus gave Tarwater a sign that prompted him against his will to try to baptize the child. Then the schoolteacher takes the child away from Tarwater, whereas this time Tarwater takes the child away from the schoolteacher—and from Satan.

Nevertheless, Tarwater is still resisting Jesus: "Deliberately, forcefully, he closed the inner eye that had witnessed his dream." The auto-transit driver, who comes from Detroit and is in the car mode, kicks the boy out of his truck—a "gigantic monster" like the whale that swallowed Jonah. Tarwater heads for the farm in the clearing to claim it as his own, "where he could begin to live his life as he had elected it." The word "elected" contrasts his erring free will to true salvation—"election" by Jesus. At this point he is still like the schoolteacher in refusing to believe in God, except that his "inner eye" remained "rigidly open." He returns home "tried in the fire of his refusal," supposing that his free will has prevailed, that he has escaped the "mad shadow of Jesus." Like the schoolteacher he wants to be his own God. "When he was a child he had several times, experimentally, commanded the sun to stand still," but he did not learn from his failures. By now he thinks he was mad to have ever considered himself a prophet.

As an atheist murderer, Tarwater feels a rapport with the liberal schoolteacher. "He began to realize that he had not adequately appreciated the schoolteacher when he had the opportunity." He makes a "talismán" of the corkscrew-bottleopener the schoolteacher gave him. On his walk back to the farm he stops to buy a drink at a filling station, where he is confronted by a large woman, a friend of his great-uncle the prophet. She has heard from the local blacks that Tarwater did not bury his great-uncle and burned down his house: "It shames the dead." She forces Tarwater to "answer for his freedom," as Jesus eventually will. "A tremor went through him. His soul plunged deep within itself to hear the voice of his mentor at its most profound depths. He opened his mouth to overwhelm the woman and to his horror what rushed from his lips, like the shriek of a bat, was an obscenity he had overheard once at a fair." He humiliates himself by responding to the truth in the spirit of his mentor Satan.

He trudges on down the road toward the farm and a car stops beside him. He gladly accepts a ride from a stranger “without looking at the driver.” The car is “lavender and cream-colored.” The driver is wearing a lavender shirt and a panama hat, like Satan early in the novel: “There was something familiar to him in the look of the stranger but he could not place where he had seen him before.” Lavender is popularly associated with gays. “His eyes were the same color as his shirt and were ringed with heavy black lashes.” He asks Tarwater if he lives around here and the boy answers “Not on this road.” The stranger gets him to smoke a cigarette and Tarwater “hung it in the corner of his mouth, exactly as the man’s was hung.” Then the stranger seduces him into getting drunk on whiskey, just as Satan did at the beginning of the novel. The boy says, “It’s better than the Bread of Life!” “The liquid had a deep barely concealed bitterness...and he perceived that the stranger was watching him with what might be a leer.” The whiskey makes him feel “pleasantly deprived of responsibility or of the need for any effort to justify his actions.” Getting drunk makes him feel good about his amorality. He feels free, like the homosexual who is about to rape him. The tone of the scene is critical of the rape, not of the sexual orientation.

The rapist takes “the boy’s hat for a souvenir and also the corkscrew-bottleopener.” Tarwater wakes up naked and screwed—violently opened. His rape illustrates social consequences of the amoral selfishness preached by liberals represented by the schoolteacher who gave him the opener. Now his eyes are being opened. “His eyes looked small and seedlike as if while he was asleep, they had been lifted out, scorched, and dropped back into his head.” Seedlike eyes suggest that he is now seeing from the perspective of the seed planted by old Tarwater the prophet. His atheism is gone like his hat. He is so outraged that he sets fire to “the evil ground.” He burns “every spot the stranger could have touched.” He now resembles his great-uncle the prophet who raged about the need for purification by fire. He returns to the farm knowing that “his destiny forced him on to a final revelation.” St. Paul was a violent man responsible for the deaths of innocent Christians before Jesus struck him blind for three days to convert him. One of O’Connor’s major themes is that the grace of God often comes through violence.

Jesus can turn evil into good. The raped country boy retreats from the City back to the farm, where the call of a woodthrush moves him like “a key turned in the boy’s heart.” Here in the country there are ripening berries and smells of honeysuckle and pine. The City is built for machines and turns people into machines, like the schoolteacher with his PC hearing aid, the Carmodys and the driver of the auto-transit truck from Detroit. Tarwater recalls the old prophet deriving “the greatest satisfaction” from surveying his house and his growing corn. “He might have been Moses glimpsing the promised land... The corn the old man had left planted was up about a foot and moved in wavering lines of green across the field.” The nostalgic boy then comes upon the charred remnants of the house he burned down, with two chimneys left standing “like grieving figures guarding the blackened ground between them... The clearing was burned free of all that had ever oppressed him. No cross was there to say that this was ground that the Lord still held. What he looked out upon was the sign of a broken covenant.”

Some atheist critics who want to deny the existence of Satan refer to him in this novel as merely an “inner voice,” but Tarwater senses that “someone stood behind him... The presence was as pervasive as an odor, a warm sweet body of air encircling him, a violent shadow hanging around his shoulders.” Satan urges him to go take possession of the farm: “Now we can take it over together, just you and me.” This time the boy is not seduced. “He shook himself free fiercely.” He sets fire to “all the bushes he was moving away from, until he had made a rising wall of fire between him and the grinning presence. He glared through the flames and his spirits rose as he saw that his adversary would soon be consumed in a roaring blaze.” The allusion to Moses recalls that God gave him the Ten Commandments from a burning bush and the burning of Satan prefigures Jesus casting Satan into the lake of fire at the end of time.

Near the burned house he comes upon the black neighbor Buford sitting on a mule, “looking down at him with a scorn that could penetrate any surface.” Tarwater sees that the grave he stopped digging for the old man was completed and a cross placed at its head. “Buford said, ‘It’s owing to me he’s resting there. I buried him while you were laid out drunk. It’s owing to me his corn has been plowed. It’s owing to me the sign of his Savior is over his head.’” The white boy has been shamed by his black good neighbor. Buford rides away and Tarwater has a vision of a large crowd being fed loaves and fishes from a basket, one of the most famous miracles performed by Jesus. The motif of his spiritual hunger reaches a climax as he sees the

old man waiting to be fed and is aware that he has the same hunger. “His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied.”

Tarwater feels the call to join the ancient line of prophets who had shared his spiritual hunger, “whose lives were chosen to sustain it.” One of the trees in the woods bursts into flame. “The boy’s breath went out to meet it. He knew that this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him.” He throws himself down on top of the old man’s grave and hears the command to go and “warn the children of God... The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood. When finally he raised himself, the burning bush had disappeared.” He smears a handful of dirt from the old man’s grave on his forehead and goes off to be a prophet “the way Buford had gone.” Anticipating persecution by atheists like the schoolteacher, he heads “toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.”

WORST CRITICS

Many reviews of *The Violent Bear It Away* validate O’Connor’s statement that Rayber the schoolteacher “is the typical modern man.” Modern reviewers identified with him. At the *New Statesman*: the book “concerns the struggles of the schoolmaster first to help the boy to escape the obsessional madness of the old man and then to save himself and his son from the boy.” For another example, the *Times Literary Supplement* sympathized with Rayber in having to deal with an idiot son and with his “spiritually-warped” nephew. The worst academic critics agree: “One can easily see why the tendency—even, to some extent, the need—of modern readers would be to identify with the ‘emancipated’ [atheist] Rayber and not with the fanatical [Christian] old man.... Rayber’s [is] the story of the sensitive youth who repudiates...the old-fashioned illusion, piety, and prejudice of his family and hometown congregation and grows up into freedom and knowledge.” Critic contradicts herself: “As for the notion of Rayber as ‘typical modern man’—one has plenty of one’s own scorn to heap on such an idea, and the casual arrogance of the phrase itself tells its own tale.” (Martha Stephens, *The Question of Flannery O’Connor*: 101, 129).

Josephine Hendin epitomizes the bigotry of Political Correctness. She turns off her hearing aid at the outset, explicitly refusing to consider the meanings of the novel: “I propose to view her fiction not for the dogma it illustrates, but for the themes it suggests.” She seems to think it is possible to separate the meanings of a work from its themes. But she does not discuss the themes of the novel either, only themes it “suggests” to her. Dismissing all the meanings of the novel as “dogma,” she substitutes her atheist feelings about it. With selective perception she calls the schoolteacher “tender” and “compassionate” despite his trying to drown his own child—a detail she disregards. She reduces the meaning of this religious novel to mere sexual repression and claims that the boy Tarwater regresses rather than developing spiritually: “Tarwater blots out his disturbing sexual encounter by resuming his childhood obedience to the old prophet.” Subjectivity, falsehoods and intellectual cowardice are characteristic of literary analysis by PC liberal academics. (Josephine Hendin, *The World of Flannery O’Connor*: 17, 43)

Many critics of the book are PC liberal schoolteachers like Rayber: Martha Stephens does not like religious writing or allegory and faults O’Connor for not having her own limitations. Suzanne Morrow Paulson believes that Tarwater preaching Christianity is “perverse.” Stephens, Paulson, Shloss, and Hendin repeatedly identify themselves with the perspective of Satan. Frederick Asals admits that the stranger is “demonic, but...his destruction is a violent repudiation of an essential part of the boy”—Asals sees Satan as more “essential” than God. Frederick Karl considers Satan “a countering parent,” not the devil as thought by the “God-crazed boy.” Karl says the homosexual rapist is “a surrogate father of sorts.” J. A. Bryant calls the rape a “seduction.” Algene Ballif indulges in wishful thinking by imagining that the novel is a “fantasy of homosexual incest”!

Professor Karl applauds atheism as “self-choice and self-appointed function” (as exemplified by the rapist). Harold Bloom defines atheism as “fighting to be humanly free.” Bloom is the most comical of these critics because he takes the schoolteacher so personally, calling the character “an aesthetic disaster, whose defects in representation alone keep the book from making a strong third with Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*.” Walter Allen reduces the novel vaguely to a “confrontation between religion and skepticism [atheism]...as ways of life.” Melvin J. Friedman reduces Satan to “a voice

which follows him around almost like his conscience in reverse.” To him the novel is not even religious, but merely affirms a “balance between the ‘grotesques’ and the workaday world.”

The ideological glasses worn by atheist liberals are blind to spiritual content. “Several years ago a friend of mine in a writing class at Iowa wrote me that his workshop had read and discussed the first chapter of this novel...and the discussion revolved around who the voice was. Only one thought it was the Devil. The rest of them thought it was a voice of light, there to liberate Tarwater from that ‘horrible old man’.” (O’Connor letter to John Hawkes, 26 December 1959)

O’Connor experienced the decadent trend in education as early as the 1950s. Her schoolteacher is her prophecy of pervasive corruption. The PC schoolteachers quoted above are evidence of how right she was. By the 1980s atheist liberals like these had turned off their hearing aids to any beliefs but their own. Grotesque academic liberals far outnumber the grotesques in O’Connor’s fiction.

Michael Hollister (2017)