

33 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Violent Bear It Away (1960)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

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

“Francis Marion Tarwater [is] tarred with the brush of sin and redeemed by the water of baptism... Little by little... Tarwater senses the sterility of Rayber’s point of view and he taunts him for his scientism by referring to his hearing aid and asking, ‘Do you think in the box...or do you think in your head?’... Rayber is a more horrible reincarnation of Hulga, the female Ph.D., and self-professed scientist in Miss O’Connor’s short story ‘Good Country People.’ Like Hulga he claims that he believes in nothing but the scientifically demonstrable, and they both discover that those who claim to have no illusions have the most. Rayber thinks of himself as the supreme rationalist.... True knowledge is intuitive, emotional as well as intellectual, not clinical and aseptic....

Many aspects of her writing which have puzzled critics—her directness of phrasing, her reduction of character and setting to essentials, her avoidance of any hint of sentimentalizing—can now be understood as the direct consequence of the application to art of what might be called a ‘violent’ view of reality. It is not really violent, but must only seem so to those accustomed to taking ambiguous positions or rationalizing all committed points of view away in Rayber terms.... If she omits all the trivial acts of her main characters to concentrate on their important decisions and actions, it is because she wants to make her readers see to the essence of things, not stop at the outside.... It is the typical and essential which interest her, not the unique of abnormal psychology nor the encyclopedic detail of photographic realism.”

P. Albert Duhamel

“Flannery O’Connor’s Violent View of Reality”
The Catholic World, CXC (1960)

“*The Violent Bear It Away* not only comments on the absurdities committed in the contemporary world by those who have eyes and ears but neither see nor hear; it also comments on the way of faith as a progressive journey. As those who awaken to the full responsibility of the Christian vocation know, the response to the invitation can vary or progress from violent rejection to a grudging and, finally, to a willing acceptance. *Submission, as well as deliberate choice or rejection is a response of a free creature.*” [Italics added]

Sister M. Simon Nolde

“*The Violent Bear It Away: A Study in Imagery*”
Xavier University Studies (Spring 1962) 194

“It is the best example in Flannery O’Connor’s work of the transplantation-prophecy-return motif; in fact, the novel is divided into three parts which correspond neatly to the three phrases. In the first section, Tarwater prepares to leave home, after the death of his great-uncle, to join his uncle Rayber. The long middle section is the strange working out of the prophecy which ends in Tarwater’s baptism-drowning of Rayber’s idiot son, Bishop. The final section is the return to Powderhead....

Tarwater is another authentically American boy, in the tradition of Huck Finn and the young Ike McCaslin, who goes through a typically American initiation before he can become a man. His ‘education’ and character formation are intimately linked to Flannery O’Connor’s South... ‘a breeding ground for prophets.’ Tarwater’s confused attempts at converting Rayber and baptizing Bishop can easily be likened to Ike McCaslin’s ambivalent feelings about the bear hunt in Faulkner’s *The Bear* or more cautiously to Huck’s uncertainty about Jim’s destiny in Twain’s novel. In each case the spiritual resolution which turns the boy into a man is crucial.

The link with Faulkner has already been pointed out by several reviewers of *The Violent Bear It Away*. Vivian Mercier writing in the *Hudson Review* (Autumn 1960) has said that 'all the characters are Faulknerian grotesques, including the idiot's atheist father.' Louis D. Rubin had earlier pointed out similarities between the Bundrens of *As I Lay Dying* and Flannery O'Connor's characters in the Autumn 1955 edition of the *Sewanee Review*. It can be pointed out convincingly, I think, that the burial complications in *The Violent Bear It Away* are at least related to the funeral procession in *As I Lay Dying*. Tarwater's great-uncle had insisted that he be given Christian burial rites. Tarwater, prompted by a voice which follows him around almost like his conscience in reverse, decides to set fire to the house which contains the great-uncle's corpse.

Upon his return to Powderhead in the third part of the novel, he discovers that despite his efforts the uncle was granted proper burial through the unexpected intervention of a Negro, Buford. In a curious way the novel gains a kind of structure through the repeated references to the burial in much the same way that *As I Lay Dying* is constructed about the journey to Jefferson with the corpse of Addie Bundren. In both novels there is also an elaborate series of observers who pass judgment on the proceedings and form a consensus to counterbalance the eccentricities of the participants in the action. Tarwater's behavior is viewed with some surprise by a salesman who offers him a ride on his way to Rayber's house. A truck driver serves a similar function as Tarwater makes his way back to Powderhead. Another observer, Buford, is waiting for him there to condemn him for failing to give his great-uncle a Christian burial. We get this balance between the 'grotesques' and the workaday world."

Melvin J. Friedman
"Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction"
English Journal LI
(April 1962) 233-43

"The prophet Marion Tarwater was a moonshiner and given to drunkenness at times.... It is the genius of Miss O'Connor's Christian realism that her characters who are touched with Holiness reveal their human frailties and foibles too.... What Miss O'Connor's humor so upsets is the smug, comfortable, self-satisfaction, and/or, equally, the sentimental self-pity of...our secular day...with compassion for her villains along with her heroes.... Miss O'Connor's art is committed to religious revolution against a secular world."

Brainard Cheney
"Miss O'Connor Creates Unusual Humor out of Ordinary Sin"
Sewanee Review LXXXI (1963)

"I am told that Stelzmann's interpretation of the novel received the enthusiastic approval of Miss O'Connor herself... Stelzmann sees the struggle within Tarwater as being one between an unwillingness to accept the mission of prophecy to the ungodly, and loyalty to the spiritual conviction that the old man had sought to instill within him. The voice which throughout the novel argues with the youth, telling him that the old man's ideas were false and that he need not heed them, Stelzmann asserts was that of the Devil. The schoolteacher Rayber is seen as the weak-willed, spiritually impotent spokesman for modernity, seeking, in the name of rationality, to nullify the boy's spiritual consciousness. When the boy realizes that in drowning Bishop he has fulfilled the mission of baptism, and learns that he has not cremated the old great-uncle after all, his religious integrity reasserts itself, he defies the counsel of the Devil, and takes up the prophetic burden as his great-uncle had hoped."

Rainulf A. Stelzmann
"Shock and Orthodoxy: An Interpretation of Flannery O'Connor's Novels and Short Stories"
Xavier University Studies II (March 1963) 4-21
paraphrased by Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

"Miss O'Connor's skill as an artist lies in her ability to endow each of Tarwater's teachers with an individual voice which, while personal and idiosyncratic, yet expresses the attitude of a class in the dialect appropriate to that class. Tarwater proves to be an apt pupil. His sensitive ear and skeptical mind help him to ascertain the meaning and value of the different dialects and to combine them in creating his own language. The pattern of the novel as the communication of an oral tradition to a skeptical discipline is

established by means of a linguistic device in the opening paragraphs of the story. We find a recurrent phrase setting the tone both of the narrative and of Tarwater's mentality....

Although old Tarwater is engaged in a quest for transcendent truth, he prefers concrete expressions to abstractions—after the manner of Christ and the prophets who spoke of heaven in parables... His comparisons, even when not Biblical, have a poetic precision and succinctness of imagery that convey their meaning immediately.... Occasionally the old man coins words or uses words in new ways that add to the vivid quality of his rhetoric. 'He opened the door with all that house full of paper-trash behind him...' The 'paper-trash' is all the printed paraphernalia of modern education, the dead letter of knowledge deprived of the living testimony.... Rayber is as capable of rhetoric as old Tarwater, but his imagery is almost entirely made up of abstractions. He has a flair for speaking in generalities and avoiding specifics [characteristic of literary criticism by politically correct liberals].

The structure of his sentences suggests that old Tarwater is right when he accuses Rayber of trying to turn people, and the rest of reality as well, into pieces of information to store away under the control of the mind. This approach to truth reduces living things to 'paper-trash,' so that the schoolteacher even boasts to his nephew: 'I can read you like a book!'.... Like his great-uncle [Tarwater] has a gift for coining meaningful new words... These coinages tend to turn abstractions into concretions. Actually what the boy achieves in his language is a kind of synthesis of the methods of the rival uncles. He puts the abstract, philosophical ideas that Rayber enshrines in vague and generalized language into the concrete idiom of the old uncle's dialect. 'He's like a hog...' When Rayber hears his own ideas shorn of their customary rhetoric, he finds them repulsive, but they remain compelling for young Tarwater... To prove his power to rise above mere words, he determines to drown the idiot child. But the power of words is not broken, for as the child dies, Tarwater pronounces the formula of Baptism."

Sister Jeremy, C.S.J.
"The Violent Bear It Away: A Linguistic Education"
Renascence XVII (1964)

"In *The Violent Bear It Away* the world outside the God-intoxicated hardly exists at all, is almost without relevance to them. The novel begins with the death of Francis Marion Tarwater's great-uncle on his patch of ground in a forest almost entirely cut off from civilization. Tarwater is a boy of fourteen...The boy rebels against the doom the old man has placed upon him and in a spirit of inquiry seeks out his cousin, a schoolmaster and an angry atheist, in the neighboring town.

Rayber, who has himself as a boy been under the old man's thrall and believes his life to have been ruined in consequence, welcomes Tarwater almost as a lost son. But the boy is suspicious and will not commit himself. The novel is a confrontation between religion and skepticism [atheism], though both in a non-intellectual sense, as ways of life; and it becomes apparent that Rayber, for all his furious repudiations of the old prophet, is as much his child as Tarwater is. In the end Tarwater goes back to the patch of cultivated land in the forest and hears his call...

The circumstances of his environment and upbringing, to say nothing of his creator's original vision, set Tarwater apart as a special case. He is his great-uncle born again, and though he is a boy he is not to be confused with the child as Noble Savage, the human being uncorrupted by society. He has no kinship with Huckleberry Finn, in whose being the child as Noble Savage first makes his appearance in American fiction. Similarly, he has no kinship with Salinger's Holden Caulfield."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in the United States
(Dutton 1965) 308-09

"*The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), is Miss O'Connor's masterpiece. It tells the terrible initiation of a reluctant prophet.... The adolescent prophet is Francis Marion Tarwater (his name is as richly symbolic as Hazel Motes's: Francis Marion is the 'old swamp fox' of the Revolutionary War, tarwater is a discredited folk cure-all).... *The Violent* is...about Vocation and the prophet's necessary stage of resistance to Vocation (from Moses' pleading his speech defect to Jonah's taking flight)... The analogy with Bible prophets is made again and again.... The old man is simultaneously 'Jonah, Ezekiel, Daniel, he was at that

moment all of them—the swallowed, the lowered, the enclosed’; arriving at Rayber’s house, young Tarwater is similarly transformed’....

The secular antagonist, George F. Rayber (raper?), young Tarwater’s uncle...is Satanic, taking on, ‘like the devil,’ any look that suited him, but he is a *monk* of Satan, controlling the family curse of violence and madness in his blood (‘he was the stuff of which fanatics and madmen are made’) by ‘a rigid ascetic discipline,’ by rationality and good works. His mad barefoot pursuit of young Tarwater through the streets of the town is a penitential pilgrimage; more than Tarwater, *Rayber* looks ‘like a fanatical country preacher,’ and young Tarwater tells him perceptively (my italics): ‘It’s *you* the seed fell in.’

Rayber’s idiot son, Bishop, is less a character than a sacrament: young Tarwater has been commanded by his great-uncle to begin his ministry by baptizing Bishop... The novel’s other important character is Satan. He first appears as a skeptical voice in young Tarwater’s drunken head, then as a vision of a friendly stranger in a panama hat; he returns as a voice to direct the drowning of Bishop; he appears in the flesh at the end of the novel to drug and rape young Tarwater...

The Violent, like *Wise Blood*, is tightly unified by symbolism. The principal unifying symbol is burning... A second important symbol, balancing judgment with mercy, is spiritual feeding... The bread symbolized by the old man’s belly is ‘the bread of life,’ Jesus, and young Tarwater decides that he is ‘not hungry for the bread of life’.... As the old man’s belly is the bread, his eyes are the fishes.... The other important symbol...is Bishop, the holy idiot.... The woman who runs the resort where the murderous baptism occurs makes Bishop’s sacramental nature explicit...and glares at [young Tarwater] fiercely, ‘as if he had profaned the holy’...

The narrative structure of *The Violent* is perfectly shaped; there are no loose ends... The novel unfolds the motifs of the opening sentence inexorably, from the first drunkenness to the final drugged drunkenness and transformation. Even the sodomic rape, not much appreciated by reviewers, is right and inevitable: it is at once the ultimate violation of the untouchable anointed of the Lord, a naturalistic explanation for the shaman’s spirit possession, and a shocking and effective metaphor for seizure by divine purpose. (Yeats makes a similar use of rape in ‘Leda and the Swan.’)...

Old Tarwater’s instructions for his burial read like the best Twain (‘Get two boards and set them down the steps and start me rolling and dig where I stop and don’t let me roll over into it until it’s deep enough.’) ... Rayber sees himself ‘divided in two—a violent and a rational self’.... [However], divine purpose is not answerable to human reason.... For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.’ [I Corinthians 3:19] Old Tarwater, taken to the insane asylum in a strait-jacket for his wild prophesying, is God’s Fool, and young Tarwater’s vision of following ‘the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus’ hinges on the same paradox: Jesus’ way is mad only by ‘the wisdom of this world.’

Protestant Fundamentalism is thus Miss O’Connor’s metaphor, in literary terms, for Roman Catholic truth (in theological terms, this reflects ecumenicism)... [She said] ‘I’m not interested in the sects as sects; I’m concerned with the religious individual, the backwoods prophet. Old Tarwater is the hero of *The Violent Bear It Away*, and I’m right behind him 100 per cent.’”

Stanley Edgar Hyman
Flannery O’Connor
(U Minnesota 1966) 39

“For Tarwater’s soul a titanic battle is waged—between the posthumous influence of the great-uncle (a God-obsessed man, if there ever was one) and a living uncle, Rayber, a psychologist who had years ago thrown off the great-uncle’s soul hunger (he thinks) and has now ‘saved’ himself by psychology, technology, and other modern conveniences. In this stern warfare Rayber...is aided by the voice of a ‘stranger,’ who later becomes a ‘friend,’ speaking to Tarwater’s own soul, which offers all the conventional, sophisticated arguments against the old man’s apostolic ‘charge.’ That this is meant to be the voice of the Devil seems fairly obvious, though of course the ‘friend’ tries to persuade Tarwater that the Devil doesn’t exist... Tarwater is even subjected to the final indignity of rape by the Devil in the guise of a

cruising homosexual. But at the end...he has a vision of his great-uncle being fed with the multitude on the loaves and fishes and realizes at last that it is only such food which will satisfy his own insatiable hunger.”

Robert Drake
Flannery O'Connor
(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 34-35

“[A] quotation from Saint Matthew [is] used as an epigraph of her brilliant work, *The Violent Bear It Away*... In all her fiction the way to salvation is dangerous, thorny, rocky, and devious, but there is this distinction, that her heroes put their own barriers in the way of achieving it... The violence exists *within* the three characters... Rayber, rather pathetically but also comically, opposes the old time religion with the new rationalism.... [Italics added]

In these extremely unorthodox circumstances, the acts of the young man must be violent, must appear to be ‘diabolic,’ though they are at most the consequence of two basic drives: [1] his desire to remain free of ‘the box’ (the hearing-aid, which he associates with Rayber’s ‘enlightenment’) ‘outside’ his head, and [2] his resistance to the late great-uncle’s pressures.... O’Connor proves that the urge to religious action is present in all men: even in Rayber, who makes a fetish of proving his evangelically obsessed uncle mad; even in the idiot boy, who rides to his baptism on Tarwater’s back....

O’Connor is dramatizing...the intrinsic necessity for grace in the human personality. The figure of Jesus haunts almost all of her characters. They are, half the time, violently opposed to Him (or, in His image, opposed to some elder who has tried to force His necessity upon them), because they cannot see beyond themselves to a transcendent existence.... This clarity of vision comes in part from Miss O’Connor’s having herself had a satisfactory explanation of these religious drives, and therefore being in a position to portray the violent acts of those who possess the drives but are unable to define goals or direct energies toward them.... Violence, in this setting assumes a religious meaning.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
“The Search for Redemption: Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction”
The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor
eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 41-45

“For [T. S.] Eliot the collapse of faith in the western world has made us all hollow men, but Flannery O’Connor shows faith alive and glowing in the fanatical compulsions of the Bible Belt prophets.... Much of the dramatic tension that makes Flannery O’Connor’s fiction so gripping and memorable lies in the insight into religious experience afforded her by her double heritage as both Catholic and Southerner. The two forms of orthodoxy—[1] the primitive fundamentalism of her region, [2] the Roman Catholicism of her faith—work sometimes with and sometimes against each other in a literary counterpoint that has enabled her to create some of the most distinguished and exciting fiction of her time....

The little girl evangelist preached a sermon about God’s love.... Without love the needs of the soul are capable of being met only by wrath and violence. The violent do indeed bear it away....The youth’s [Tarwater’s] spiritual integrity, invulnerable to the schoolmaster’s complacent scientific rationalism, could have been directed toward love instead of wrath, had such love been offered him.... In a world in which ‘faith supported by love’ cannot survive the attack of secular materialism, only faith achieved through hatred is possible. Because there is no one in young Tarwater’s world to instruct him in God’s love, he can be won back to faith only through the passionate hatred involved in the effort to drown the boy Bishop.... His struggle would appear to be to avoid his destined task, much as the characters in Greek tragedy do, and the moral would seem to be that it cannot be done.... Tarwater is not *fated* to take up the old man’s burden of prophecy; he does so because the world, and not fate [and *not* the grace of God?], compels him to do it. We can also say that he is redeemed—but at a hideous price in suffering....

For the schoolteacher, emotion is something to be avoided, because it negates reason.... Wherever Rayber is portrayed as the modern rationalist attempting to reason Tarwater away from his mission, the satire is ruthless and devastating.... His reliance upon behavioral psychology is a device on his part to

avoid emotional involvement in human relationships. Emotionalism, passion, violence; these are what Rayber most abhors, because he recognizes that within himself lies the latent capacity for all three.... It is the schoolteacher's fear of the emotion of love that prevents him from being able to help Tarwater. He will not give in to the irrational, the emotional; he is afraid of it. Yet it was precisely the little girl's message of a God of love that had almost broken the spell of [his] fanaticism... Listening to the little girl, he had forgotten his sophisticated rationalism and had given away to an emotional response: 'Come away with me! he silently implored, and I'll teach you the truth, I'll save you, beautiful child!'"

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
"Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt"
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 60-67

"*The Violent Bear It Away* and *I'll Take My Stand* [1930] share a similar purpose, 'to aid the South in its reorientation and in a return to its true philosophy,' as well as many common attitudes.... Though the essays of the *Fugitives* may represent somewhat the matrix from which Flannery O'Connor's vision developed, she certainly intended much more than to update the concerns of a generation ago by substituting scientism for industrialism.... O'Connor has brought together a multiplicity of meanings under tension... O'Connor is attempting to do for her readers what the prophets did for their chosen people, enlarge their vision of reality....

Tarwater is always presented in a way which simultaneously suggests his more general significance like a character in a morality play. Like Everyman he responds only to his last name and the name suggests that he, like all men, was tarred by the brush of original sin and redeemed by the waters of baptism.... Like Everyman, Tarwater dislikes facing up to unpleasant realities.... Like Everyman he dreams of living with rights and privileges but without responsibilities....

Tarwater stands for man, a creature neither wholly bad nor entirely good.... He drowns Bishop but baptizes him at the same time. By the one action he makes his commitment to the prophetic view of history and demonstrates his superiority to the schoolteacher.... True vision is vouchsafed only to the violent [believers] like Tarwater and his great-uncle because they are people of feeling who come to recognize the inadequacy of the merely rationalistic.... Tarwater's hunger is a symbol of that insatiable element in human nature which finds here no lasting home.... The closer he comes to Powderhead, the more insistent his hunger becomes....

The great-uncle, Mason Tarwater, and the schoolteacher-uncle, Rayber, are...fully realized individuals within the terms of the novel, but about them also cluster a group of attitudes symbolizing...opposing philosophies... The schoolteacher failed...because at critical moments 'he could never take action.' The great-uncle...carried the day because he always preferred doing to talking.... For the great-uncle the danger in the schoolteacher's view of reality was that it tried to quantify everything.... By Bishop's death Rayber is revealed as a man incapable of action or feeling, limited to a surface view of reality and, like his half-vision, only half a man."

P. Albert Duhamel
"The Novelist as Prophet"
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 89, 93-103

"On Rayber the novel is merciless in venting a spleen whose malice is reserved for those who inhabit a world that is utterly desacralized. With all the heartless inhumanity of his psychological gadgetry—his charts and graphs and I.Q. tests—his is a 'headpiece filled with straw.' 'He's full of nothing,' says Old Tarwater...[Rayber saying] to me, 'Uncle, you're a type that's almost extinct!' He is a hollow man... He is frightened of love... Old Tarwater had regarded Rayber's idiot son as 'precious in the sight of the Lord,' despite his incompetence—but, to the child's father, he is simply 'a mistake of nature'.... Sterile rationalism is often, by some stroke of irony, doubled back upon its own essential incompetence (as in the Mrs. McIntyre of 'The Displaced Person,' or Hulga Hopewell of 'Good Country People,' or the Sheppard of 'The Lame Shall Enter First'.")

Nathan A. Scott, Jr.
"Flannery O'Connor's Testimony: The Pressure of Glory"

“[Old Tarwater] mirrors Flannery O’Connor’s own convictions about religion... The old uncle accepts mystery, particularly the mystery of suffering, just as the Old Testament prophets did.... The sun imagery throughout the story is the eye of God watching how His creatures carry out His will.... The [young] Tarwater who goes off to bring salvation to the sleeping city as the book closes is not the materialist of the opening chapters. Even The Misfit has more faith than Tarwater when the book begins. But he is quite a different person because of having lived at his uncle’s house in the city, where already he starts to exercise his gift by telling Rayber that in him, baptized, the seed has fallen on bad ground. Rayber, sensing no need of Redemption, is content to be ‘born again’ through his own intelligence.... [Young Tarwater’s] vision at the grave of his uncle wherein the real significance of Christ as the Bread of Life rushes in upon him seals his determination.”

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.
“Flannery O’Connor, a Realist of Distances”
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 179-81

“The atheists are of several types: [1] those who reject Christianity as a dangerous myth which interferes with the psychological and social adjustment of the individual—Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* and Sheppard in ‘The Lame Shall Enter First’; [2] those who reject Christianity on the basis of existentialist philosophical positions that lead them to belief only in nothingness—Hulga Hopewell in ‘Good Country People,’ and Hazel Motes in the early chapters of *Wise Blood*; and [3] those who reject Christianity because of a proud belief in their capability to find a new Jesus compatible with their own needs—Enoch Emery in *Wise Blood*.... Rayber...has willingly chosen ‘the condition of the Pharisee...the way of rationalism’.... Rayber proudly controls his emotions; the lifeless and mechanistic quality of his rationalism is symbolized by his hearing aid, which allows him to silence the word of God... The hearing aid represents Rayber’s attempt to transfer the center of his understanding from his heart to his head....

Rayber becomes deliberately an unholy, secular saint, controlling his violent blood ‘by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline,’ sleeping in a narrow bed, eating frugally, and believing devotedly in his choice of emptiness rather than madness.... Bishop becomes for him a substitute for Christ.... Rayber’s analysis is a complete inversion of the Christian scheme of redemption... The salvation he envisions will be effected, not by baptism or spiritual ministry, but by medical and social rehabilitation.... His mission of secular conversion is not only as funny as his uncle’s monomania to baptize—but is so ludicrously carried out that it leads him into a wasteland of dark alleys, garbage cans, and unidentifiable filth....

Sociologists...attempt to solve highly complex human problems through oversimplified formulas of behavior.... Rayber is an automaton who deals with his own relatives as he would the hypothetical characters set in motion by textbook problems.... Rayber manipulates even his very real and urgent love [for Bishop] so that it has no resemblance to Christian charity... At the death of his son his own dehumanization descends upon him like damnation itself, like the terrible speed of God’s justice prophesied by his uncle....

By far the most extensive use of the satanic character appears in *The Violent Bear It Away*, in which the devil assumes a role quite similar to that of the bad angel in a medieval morality play, appearing throughout the novel to offer evil counsel to Tarwater in hopes of claiming his soul. Like his medieval counterpart, this devil gains a hearing through Tarwater’s own weakness... As Bishop is illuminated by a sudden shaft of light breaking from the clouds, the voice [of Satan] is significantly absent: ‘His friend was silent as if in the felt presence [of Jesus], he dared not raise his voice’....

Tarwater remains torn between his attraction to the Holy and his attraction to and dependence upon the voice of the devil. At one point he calls upon the devil when an old woman near Powderhead scorns him for having deserted his dead great-uncle’s body.... He knows evil only intellectually until he drowns Bishop and is violated by the homosexual.... The devil appears in the flesh as the driver of a ‘lavender and cream-colored car’ who stops his car to give Tarwater a ride.... Like the devouring satanic figure in ‘Good Country People,’ this homosexual carries away tokens of his conquest—Tarwater’s hat and the corkscrew bottle-opener given to him by Rayber.... The objects carried away symbolize...his former self in its

inability to say no to the devil and yes to the demands of God... It is Tarwater's insistence upon performance pursuant to belief that causes him to reject his uncle Rayber....

Lucette Carmody, the child, is [a] principal figure... The topic of her sermon is love, the love and charity of God which Flannery O'Connor chooses to call grace. Lucette's eloquent sermon comes at the center of the novel, and, along with Mason Tarwater's fervidly religious harangues, it represents the most significant vocal expression of the Christian values that inform the entire novel.... Rayber's wife repudiates her role as mother to Bishop and prefers to promote the welfare of anonymous destitute children abroad.... Old Tarwater's role as prophet is not shabby, idle, and shallow, but truly apocalyptic... [His]...message is essentially that of Lucette Carmody except for its uniquely masculine tone.... The validity of old Mason Tarwater's role is established at the end of the novel when his nephew finally surrenders himself to the duties that the old man had expected of him and prepared him for.... The woods are a place of retreat from the secular world of Rayber, and the sun represents, as it traditionally does, the light of God."

Carter W. Martin
The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt U 1968) 55-60, 77-81, 100-103, 126-27

"Tarwater blots out his disturbing sexual encounter by resuming his childhood obedience to the old prophet. O'Connor's novels are...about the impossibility of growing up, the destruction of hope..." [This is a Politically Correct liberal schoolteacher more dimwitted than the child Bishop.]

Josephine Hendin
The World of Flannery O'Connor
(Indiana U 1970) 43

"*The Violent Bear It Away* is clearly Miss O'Connor's greatest single accomplishment, but so richly is it compacted with symbols which function both intrinsically and allusively that it continues to be misunderstood... A mason builds with stone; thus Marion Tarwater's fundamentalism is a reminder of the petrine [St. Peter] basis of faith. The name Tarwater calls attention to the cleansing purgative power of water... Francis Marion Tarwater, like Haze Motes, passes from a desire not to believe, through a violent attempt at repudiation, and finally into a ritualistic cleansing which leads to an acceptance as violent as his former denial.... Francis and Rayber [?] are finally brought through the operations of mercy and of grace to the salvation neither of them seeks and both attempt to deny....

Old Tarwater's mission [is] to tell of God's justice and the boy's mission to tell of His mercy.... Francis takes the advice of his 'friend,' at first a projection of himself and later a separate entity, who turns out, at last, to be his 'adversary' [Satan]... Francis drowns Bishop to prove to Rayber that he can act and to prove to himself that he will not baptize the boy.... Rayber prepares himself to overcome the pain he knows is his due and collapses only when he realizes that it will not come.... The rape is not dramatized, but its effects on Francis are to scorch his eyes and to prepare him for the final revelation....

At the end of the book it is night again as Francis sets out for the city, fully aware at last of his mission. He burns the spot where he had been violated and, rushing to the road, discovers that 'it was the home road, ground that had been familiar to him since his infancy but now...looked like strange and alien country.' Advancing toward his former home, he burns the woods, his material legacy, and places a wall of fire between himself and his 'friend,' whom he finally recognizes as his 'adversary'.... Francis recognizes his bestial nature, that part of man guided by the archfiend, and severs himself from it....

After Francis realizes he has failed to cremate Mason Tarwater, he has a vision of the multitude feeding upon the multiplied loaves and fishes, a thought which had once repulsed him. He sees his uncle waiting to be fed, and suddenly his own hunger ceases to be a pain and becomes a tide... Feeling the tide lifting and turning him, Francis whirls toward the line of trees, Miss O'Connor's ubiquitous image of revelation. There, in an image almost precisely like the one seen by O. E. Parker at the climax of the brilliant later story 'Parker's Back,' Francis sees his final sign: 'Rising and spreading in the night, a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame. 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

an instant speak to him.' He throws himself to the ground and hears, at last, the command: 'GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY'....

With the vigor and majesty of an Old Testament vision, Miss O'Connor has dramatized the birth of a prophet... Francis's experience is at one with mankind's experience; the tide rises within him 'from the blood of Abel,' the first biblical sacrifice to man's innate evil. The fire he sets to exorcise his devil is the same flame with which Daniel, Elijah, and Moses communed... His rebirth is clearly symbolized: he awakes naked and lacking his hat and his corkscrew, vestiges of his previous identity. His burned eyes see a 'strange and alien country,' though it is the home road he walks. Just as the early Christians were a 'peculiar people,' so Tarwater is alien and homeless; the biblical parallel suggests that, like the New Testament Christians, he will evangelize the Gentiles, never returning to an earthly home."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 83-91

"Her second novel is precise and subtle in its main themes. Several critics have disagreed and found the novel confused, but usually this has resulted from the critic's offering an inadequate interpretation and then criticizing the book for not always fitting it. This happens especially when the novel is schematized into a morality play. The fourteen-year-old protagonist...is seen as an allegorical Everyman who must choose between good and evil angels. The good angel is Mason Tarwater, the boy's great-uncle, a backwoods prophet who raises his nephew to be his successor and impresses upon him the central aim of a Christian, to be redeemed in Christ. The evil angel is the boy's uncle, George Rayber, the...rationalistic schoolteacher who tries to save the boy from superstition and suffering by helping him to renounce his religious upbringing. There is much validity to this scheme... But the main difficulties with the scheme are that neither alternative is simple and that the progress of young Tarwater involves a great deal more than his finally choosing the right one....

Tarwater was not initially opposed to becoming a prophet, providing that the role was sufficiently awe-inspiring.... Believing that God had special plans for him, young Tarwater would walk in the woods, futilely waiting for a bush to flame up as a sign.... He would hunger continuously for something that the world could not adequately provide.... He feared salvation as complete self-destruction, and he set out to escape it by an aggressive defiance and self-assertion.... In his carpings at Rayber and in his weak attempts to ignore the idiot, Bishop, he tried for awhile to avoid the whole issue of his calling, to ease out of his dilemma by keeping his eyes fixed on the surface of things.... When the demonic voice in his head told him that his choice 'ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or *you*,' this voice of the devil and his unconscious desires was not completely wrong. It was insidiously lying when it denied the existence of the devil and opposed Jesus to one's essential self, but it was right in making explicit the basic conflict within young Tarwater, the conflict between fulfillment in Jesus and the apparent self-sufficiency of estrangement, which is actually the choice of the devil....

Rayber is a compulsive rationalist who...is trying desperately to overcome the effects that the old man had on him when he was seven years old. He is trying to become a complete philistine, to eliminate his irrational impulses, and to explain away his spiritual desires as madness instilled in him at an impressionable age. Since he is struggling to achieve emptiness, he is clearly not a flat symbol for rationalism or secularism: he is a secondary protagonist undergoing a struggle similar to young Tarwater's, except that he is more advanced in his renunciation of belief. These complexities make the character more interesting, more pathetic, even a little more sympathetic; he is not completely a comic fool, since he is aware of the struggle and some of the issues. But they do not make him or his way of life more admirable, for he is still a coward and a self-deluding egoist....a false prophet of sociology and education.... He regarded young Tarwater as an object to he possessed....and as a disciple to be properly molded....

O'Connor sees the old man as basically right in his faith... The world had abandoned its savior, and it did seem well on the way to destroying itself one way or another.... 'Old Tarwater is the hero'; 'I'm right behind him 100 per cent'....[O'Connor] Yet he is often petty, arrogant, vindictive, and selfish; he is 'a prophet with a still'... At best, he is a fallen angel.... The old man was a powerful and sometimes violent

prophet of Jesus, but at times he saw his vocation from the self-righteous position of the elect, and he saw himself as the scourge of God, vengefully commanding punishment on all who would not listen to him.... A secular world has forced the true believer and prophet into grotesquely extreme reactions against it. Since all other men are reasonable, moderate infidels, the prophet seems—and even becomes—a madman. So, old Tarwater's religion is sound, but his manifestations of it are distorted by cultural influences over which he has no control. Perhaps in the Middle Ages he would have been a saint instead of a partly comic, partly destructive, largely correct fundamentalist.... He is the hero of the novel because he is in travail and, despite his repeated lapses, triumphs over himself, not once but many times.... To see what Miss O'Connor has done with old Tarwater is to see that the novel is not confused but carefully patterned, and it is also to see how her Christian humanism culminates in her most ambitious work....

The use of the multiplied loaves and fishes to represent salvation is quite appropriate to the fat old man whose stomach rose above the top of the coffin like 'over-leavened bread,' an image which suggests both his earthiness and his real desire for the bread of life.... The bread of life symbolizes the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, and it promises the resurrection of the faithful.... His essential self was most fully completed when he admitted his dependency and weakness and did not assert claims against God.... He...became a more centered character, even with a rude, awesome dignity. He became a true prophet, elevated in character and spirit when cast down....

The involuntary baptizing does not show that Tarwater was...predestined; it shows rather that his spiritual conflict could not be solved so easily... [He] increasingly progressed from the aggressive murderer to the passive victim, even while he tried futilely to assert himself and his independence.... The defeat of the proud and independent hero generated the birth of his spiritual, dependent self. This double pattern of comic birth out of tragic defeat is central to almost all of Miss O'Connor's work... Several commentators have objected to the rape as unnecessary sensationalism, but it is quite functional. Not only does it complete the parallels with the first journey, but it also pushes the humiliation of this self-righteously ascetic boy into self-disgust....

As he arrived home in despair, he discovered that even his first act of defiance, his cremation of the great-uncle, had been a failure, since a Negro neighbor had buried the old man before the boy woke from his drunken sleep and set fire to the house. Defeated in his rebellion, he at last admitted his hunger for the bread of life... Then, in the fire he had set as a last violent protest against the evil that had raped him and the darkness that was enveloping him, he saw his sign.... The fiery sign did not come as the burning bush Tarwater once expected to confirm his majesty and power; it came as the 'red-gold tree of fire,' Christ's rood-tree, to singe his eyes and consume his old self in God's burning mercy.... Tarwater did not merely yield to a calling he had always understood; he came to understand more fully the nature of all true prophets, to understand the relationship of glory and abasement....

The commentators who have claimed that Tarwater lacks freedom in accepting his calling...neglect to see that a series of revelations, made possible by the boy's experiences, makes him able to accept that calling. And such revelations, more than any action resulting from them, are the main achievements of many of Miss O'Connor's characters. In her stories, grace is most often enlightenment, especially about oneself; and...it is the fulfillment of a character's nature....

We must not exaggerate the worth of what Tarwater had lost: a comic arrogance, petulance, anxiety, anger, egotism, and perhaps something of a sarcastic wit. To value these qualities more than Tarwater's transformation is modern sentimentalism, like wishing that Milton's Satan had won the heavenly battle because he was wittier and more energetic than Milton's God... Moreover...the final image of him implies power, will, firmness... Tarwater does not represent an ideal of Christian humanism, but then the prophet never does."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 115-128, 130-34

"Miss O'Connor spent eight years in writing this novel, and the theme which emerges from the tight triangular conflict between Tarwater, his great-uncle, and his uncle is perfectly delineated. As the author

remarked: 'I wanted to get across the fact that the great-uncle (old Tarwater) is the Christian—a sort of crypto-Catholic—and that the schoolteacher (Rayber) is the typical modern man. The boy (young Tarwater) has to choose which one, which way, he wants to follow'.... Throughout the novel Francis Marion Tarwater is doubly alienated: first from the fanaticism of his great uncle, a prophet who had lived in the world for otherworldly ends; and from his uncle, a militant atheist who lives in and for the world.... The narrative, convoluted and fugue-like, works inexorably forward toward the center of mystery, which is Bishop himself, a child blessed in his idiocy and sacramental....

Throughout the novel, authorial omniscience is refined to the point where it becomes a private joke involving the writer and the reader, because the first sentence provides information which Tarwater never knows until the end of his quest. Tarwater...sets the shack on fire, thinking that his great-uncle's corpse is still inside.... All Tarwater's subsequent actions are based on the assumption that he can enact a complete renunciation of the old man.... But assisting the boy in his renunciation is his stranger-friend, who is one of the most foreboding and electrifying devils in contemporary literature. It is the stranger's voice which guides Tarwater's renunciation at every stage in his journey. By turns he reveals himself in several avatars: he is Meeks, the copper-flue salesman, an apostle of free enterprise whose preachings effectively exclude any truths about the spirit; he is the malevolent old man whom Tarwater encounters in the park following an incident in which he almost baptizes Bishop; and he is the pale young driver in the panama hat who drugs and sexually violates Tarwater...

Old Tarwater was amazed by the Lord's wisdom in creating Bishop dim-witted so as to protect him from the corruption of Rayber, and he transfers his obsession with this unspeakable mystery to Tarwater by charging him with the duty of baptizing Bishop... Tarwater, attempting to adjure his mission, reacts to Bishop with the blind fury of renunciation... Trying to exert his free will and to avoid his apostolic destiny, he adopts a philosophy of violent and impulsive action designed to assert his independence...in tense opposition to grace, which is a power constantly working through Nature but not controlling it, since Tarwater's salvation is never certain. He is free to work out his own destiny...

Eventually he accepts the burden of his apostolic mission, which partakes of a tradition traceable to John the Baptist....a fanatic ...who came out of the wilderness... Both Tarwaters reenact the broad configuration of John's mission. Old Mason Tarwater, like John, was a type of violent protagonist, literally forged by the fiery finger of the Lord... Only at the conclusion of the novel does Tarwater, by receiving a direct command from God, recognize the need to force the heavenly city upon the secular city."

Gilbert H. Muller

Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 61-66

"*The Violent Bear It Away*...has a fine, farcical beginning and an awesome ending... O'Connor uses juxtaposed narrative perspectives to illuminate the inner dimensions of certain actions or events.... During an outing in the park, Rayber, Tarwater, and Bishop are sitting on a bench near a fountain. Of what ensues we are ultimately given three slightly—but significantly—different accounts. Chapter six...is written from [1] Rayber's point of view.... In chapter eight, [2] Tarwater...remembers the episode at the fountain, but with certain details given an emphasis different from the one Rayber gave them. In particular, Tarwater senses a more spiritually intimate significance in the sunlight on Bishop's head and the felt presence of old Tarwater.... [3] Tarwater's stranger friend—who was silenced temporarily during this moment—then offers his own view, the third, of the episode at the fountain....

It does remain a question to Tarwater himself, until the very end of the book, precisely whether such 'signs' as the sunlight on Bishop's head are just that—signs—or whether they are mere psychological aberrations and accidental illusions.... Tarwater is to get several of the 'right kind' of signs, but it is the logic of divine calling that unless the prophet is, within himself, at the right stage of the journey, the signs don't signify....

This technique of suspending the narration of a key episode over several points of view is found in the treatment of the background history of the characters as well... Thus certain key events and situations in the lives of the characters...the reader finds told and retold from different angles [Modernism], and with

different interpretations put upon them.... Old Mason Tarwater's abduction of Rayber when the latter was a child, Rayber's return to old Tarwater at his parents' death, the marriage of Tarwater's parents, Tarwater's birth, Tarwater's baptism by Mason and Rayber's comical counter-baptism, old Mason's abduction of Tarwater, Rayber's attempted rescue of Tarwater and his being shot in the ear... The total effect is that of a statue being rotated on a pedestal: with each turn, the observer perceives some new plane, some new relationship between the planes, until at last the whole pattern takes shape in the clarity of its meaning....

The structure of *The Violent Bear It Away* is based upon an alternation of past time and present time; the action in the present time centers on Tarwater's baptism of Bishop, while the historical context, which gives meaning to this action, and from which the proper meaning must itself be wrested, is supplied by the past events in the interrelated lives of Tarwater, old Tarwater, and Rayber.... The effect is similar to that achieved by Faulkner in, for example, *Absalom, Absalom!* Or, better, in part two of *The Sound and the Fury*, where a present action (Quentin's last day, ending in his suicide) gains its meaning from a retelling of certain obsessive events in the history of his family, events which are rotated through the narrative consciousness of other characters in the other parts of the book. In another respect, the structure of *The Violent Bear It Away* bears a close resemblance to *As I Lay Dying*, for both suspend over a week's length a narrative dealing with contorted family relations and the burial of a focal character. In O'Connor's novel, of course, the suspension is within Tarwater's mind only... Young Tarwater's resistance to Mason's indoctrination repeats the pattern of Hazel Motes's resistance to his calling in *Wise Blood*. Learning from old Tarwater that his baptism into freedom is through the death of Jesus Christ, Tarwater, like Hazel, rebels in his heart...

What distinguishes the Rayber type is a desperate liberal zeal, a predictably thwarted sexual or married life, and an impulse toward self-martyrdom. The nemesis of supernatural values also suffers from an inability to act effectively, in whatever role.... Rayber's disease, his disunity, results from the separation of the head from the heart. Moreover, the space inside his head is grotesquely hypertrophied—a condition (or metaphor) consonant with his overdeveloped rationalism.... The two attitudes toward Nature stand in stark opposition: Rayber's is the acquisitive, destructive, possessive one; Bishop's is the respectful, admiring, Adamic one—the least berry being the occasion for a ceremony of innocence.... Bishop thus joins that odd file of American literary idiots—including Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*...all of whom serve...as a repository of whatever good remains.... Rayber had learned through his attempted drowning of Bishop that 'his own stability depended on the little boy's presence'... 'If anything happened to the child, he would have to face [spiritual love] in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child'.... O'Connor uses...dreams of Rayber to foreshadow [his fate].... Rayber's point of view...becomes tantamount to the devil's point of view...

The drowning is the central action in the novel; everything leads up to it, and only in its aftermath is the meaning of the novel revealed. Even in the description of Tarwater's first contact with Bishop, it is foreshadowed: when the former calls Rayber, Bishop answers the phone and Tarwater hears over the line 'a kind of bubbling noise, the kind of noise someone would make who was struggling to breathe in water'.... Face to face with the child, the prophet realizes '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.' Not as the conqueror, then, but as the 'forced servant of God' does Tarwater look into Bishop's eyes—eyes that in their resemblance to old Tarwater's make present the old man's force of prophecy and grotesquely conjure an image of Bishop as 'the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence'....

Passively witnessing what he knows now is the drowning of his son, Rayber becomes himself an accomplice in the act... Rayber's anesthetization of his feelings, his separation of head from heart, has been successful, but at the cost of near total dehumanization. Not, however, quite total, for his collapse at the end must be taken as a feeling reaction to his failure to react, and, as such, may initiate some process of spiritual renewal... In drowning Bishop, Tarwater not only symbolically renounces his great-uncle's command to baptize the idiot child; in the face of Rayber's own earlier failed attempt to drown Bishop, he is also asserting his equal renunciation of Rayber's ineffectuality.... But the decisive act—in which he drowns Bishop while pronouncing the baptismal words over him—itself undermines the boy. He does NO, but he says YES. Ravaged by the conflict of wills within him, Tarwater cannot, try as he will, will a unity of being.... 'He might have been Jonah clinging wildly to the whale's tongue'....

What resolves that conflict—acting as an unholy catalyst—is the sexual violation of Tarwater by the stranger who gives him a ride... The identity of the stranger is not of course a secret: his lavender eyes and panama hat echo the description of the Miltonically deceptive, subtle reasoner in chapter one. There he had seemed to emerge from Tarwater's own divided consciousness, but his later malign physical incarnation would seem to suggest the persistence and potency of evil in O'Connor's world.... This sodomic rape by a plundering devil...is made decisive without annihilating the aesthetic tension in the book...We do not...have to believe in the devil in order to 'believe' in the devil who violates Tarwater. Whoever it was that did it, it was a devilish thing to do....

Before the rape, the boy's self-confidence is high, his control of the world is certain. But just such self-delusion about man's true place in the world preconditions...the inevitable Fall, the unavoidable assertion of reality.... The scene is comparable to the sudden gratuitous destruction of Hazel Motes's car... And Tarwater, in turn, enacts his own ritual purification—burning first the evil ground of his seduction.... There is a logic to the rape—not, certainly, because Tarwater deserves it but because it is axiomatic that, one way or another, innocence is destroyed. And we can understand how it might prepare the boy for the confirming vision that comes to him soon after....

In the last chapter of the novel, Tarwater completes the circle of his journey and returns to Powderhead. From thence he will start out again for the city in fulfillment of his true calling. It is as perfectly written a last chapter as one could hope for, and almost every sentence is resonant with the accumulated themes and images of the book.... The name [Powderhead] suggests its potential as a source of energy... As with the conclusion of *Wise Blood*, it leaves one with a feeling of completion and, at the same time, a feeling of open-endedness."

Miles Orvell

Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 99-103, 106, 108-15, 117, 121, 123, 125

"Young Tarwater, like Hazel, is the product of a backwoods evangelistic tradition.... Tarwater, like Hazel, has consciously rejected his destiny; he too is a fugitive from the Lord.... Each clings to vestiges of his former identity, even while renouncing it. Tarwater, like Hazel, wears his hat at all times as a badge of identity.... He wears...overalls and old man's drawers.... Spiritual hunger is emphasized through many references to food.... On the road and in the city, both [Haze and Tarwater]...encounter the characteristic depravities of modern society.... The image of sight, the primary metaphor in *Wise Blood*, is also emphasized in *The Violent Bear It Away*.... *Each character's eyes correspond to his inner spiritual state* [Italics added] The eyes of the devil...are first hidden under a broad hat, but ultimately Tarwater sees that they are violet-colored, as are those of the rapist later... When Tarwater has at last embraced his role of God's emissary, his eyes are those of the prophet, singed and 'black in their deep sockets'....

In each story, the reversal of conscious intent is effected through a series of violent acts... Initially, the 'fugitive' himself commits an act of violence: each [Haze and Tarwater] performs a ritual murder to free himself for the events to come. Next, each is subjected himself to a violation of person or property. The final issue is an abrupt transformation of purpose, and the disciple is sealed through a dramatic act to the service of his calling.... Hazel chooses the course of expiation through self-mortification, thus withdrawing from the world of man into the realm of the spirit. Tarwater opts for the role of inspired preacher, the angry awakener of the sleeping city.... O'Connor's affinity with Hawthorne is here evident, for once more she offers us a 'multiple choice' in interpretation of character.... Tarwater can be seen in various lights as harmless relic of a lost age, as a madman, or as a true prophet called of God....

Rayber is guilty of the sin which so concerned Hawthorne, the violation of the human heart. He is like Chillingworth, who scrutinizes Dimmesdale with the detachment of a scientist coldly examining a specimen.... Blinded by his futile reliance on collected data as an approach to truth, he has lost the sense of oneness with humanity...in the sacred family of God.... Rayber has thrown in his lot with modern psychological theories which reject the ancient law and substitute subconscious motives for spiritual drives... Rayber's electric hearing aid emphasizes his abdication of the human for the mechanical approach; he is, indeed, 'a man trapped in a switch box'.... Bishop...is, Rayber insists, a mistake of

Nature—an irrefutable argument against the existence of a benevolent deity. Yet, clearly, Rayber's deep affection for the idiot boy, inexplicable in terms of logic, implies a corresponding love of God for his creation, including its malformed and deficient members as well as those who are normal... The obviously deformed call attention to themselves as oddities within the human family, yet they manifest in actuality merely exaggerations or extensions of the imperfections that mark all God's creatures....

The drowning of Bishop is itself a literal realization of the symbolic significance of the ritual: baptism symbolizes the death of the old self so that a new self may be born... Tarwater's own youthful innocence serves to relieve him somewhat of culpability.... The...ethical implications are outweighed by what is thereby attained in the growth of young Tarwater's character.... The dramatic end of Bishop also refutes Rayber's claim that 'Nothing ever happens to that kind of child,' and it reinforces young Tarwater's boast that he can 'make something happen'.... The voice he hears is that of the devil, and the devil plays many roles in the story. He appears as Meeks, the copper clue salesman...and as the lavender-shirted driver... He asserts that there is, in fact, no devil at all... When Tarwater hesitates in the boat with Bishop, the voice urges him on, hissing: 'It's only one dimwit you have to drown'....

In the car of the rapist...the cloying sweetness suggests the aura of moral corruption which surrounds the vampirish driver.... In the seduction scene, the devil...proceeds exactly as the old man had warned.... Tarwater's furious setting fire to the place where the rape occurs is a forceful act of ritual purification... Three times young Tarwater sets fire to his surroundings... In the third act of arson, he seeks to destroy the devil himself.... At this moment, when Tarwater so violently rejects the devil and his spiritual temptations, he at last receives the sign he has so long awaited....

He discovers the fresh grave-mound and realizes that the old man has triumphed in respect to his last wish as in everything else.... Tarwater marks his own forehead with earth from the new grave; this act indicates a sharing of the old man's identity (a token tribute to the prophet in death) and an acceptance of the prophetic role cast upon him.... Next, the boy has a great vision of the heavenly throngs feeding on the blessed loaves and fishes, with his granduncle in their midst. Turning to the treeline, Tarwater sees a tree blazing in red gold flame; he knows that 'this was the fire that...had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him.' The call comes, unmistakable and clear... He is now, in a literal sense, the prophet out of the wilderness."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 90-101

"She was very much aware of facing an audience essentially hostile to her assumptions about human life, and she did not expect—nor, one sometimes thinks, did she even desire—easy acceptance from it. She said that what she wanted to do was to restore the reader's 'sense of evil,' and she obviously did not expect that he would wholly enjoy it.... That is not to say that there is not considerable unanimity about O'Connor at the present time—one reads and hears a great many expressions of happily uncomplicated admiration. Even so, it would seem that *the more interesting appraisals* [italics added] are coming...from those [like me] who have deeply ambivalent feelings to express about this writer..." [The atheism of this hostile critic is evident in her reducing religious faith to "assumptions about human life." Her political correctness and incompetence are evident in her reducing literary analysis to the expression of her "feelings."]

Martha Stephens
The Question of Flannery O'Connor
(LSU 1973) 3-4

"Tarwater...is a type of the criminal-compulsive [sounds like Rayber] in that he, like Hazel Motes and The Misfit, is caught on the horns of the faith-doubt dilemma and is able to free himself only through commission of an act which constitutes... 'spiritual crime'.... The struggle of the...protagonist to avoid his calling [is like] that of Moses and Jonah... Divine purpose will have its way with man, even though man's reason or his will would have it otherwise.... Tarwater is aided by a friendly 'stranger,' who appears in various disguises, real and fancied, and who is actually both Tarwater's alter ego and the devil.... The

stranger taunts Tarwater with the observation that true prophets receive from the Lord an unmistakable sign of their election... The stranger must discredit the boy's great-uncle...

Rayber is himself haunted by childhood memories of a pastoral paradise where he first learned that his life counted because of the love of a Savior....and then submit[ed] to baptism. The impression left by this experience is so indelible that Rayber can never entirely shake off the prophet's influence... Rayber tells his uncle that he will not permit him to 'ruin another child's life. This one is going to be brought up to live in the real world,' he declares. *'He's going to be his own savior. He's going to be free!'* [italics added]... Rayber imposes upon himself the strictest kind of discipline, countering the old man's religious fanaticism with an emotional asceticism and a rationalistic fanaticism of his own, by means of which he hopes to control the irrational side of his nature.... Whatever Rayber may know of love, he has learned from his primitive fundamentalist uncle and not from his secularized 'civilized' father.... Good positivist that he is, Rayber understands love clinically and therapeutically and, as such, considers it to be valuable and useful. What frightens him is a love that man can not manipulate or control... 'love without reason'...

The boy, by nature extremely independent, finds the suggestion that his freedom is not self-generated a source of nagging irritation.... The boy approaches his uncle [Rayber] with a mixture of wonder and dread. For the old man's warning that, with Rayber, his very selfhood would be in jeopardy has been too often repeated to be ignored... Tarwater finds, upon entering his uncle's house, that he is scrutinized by 'two small drill-like eyes,' seemingly intent upon boring to the very depths of his soul.' Instinctively, young Tarwater draws away from this creature who strikes him as being a kind of mechanical man, with his 'black-rimmed glasses' and his electrical hearing aid—a device increasingly referred to in the novel as 'the machine'.... Rayber begins to try to win the boy's confidence and to free him from what he considers the bondage of 'false guilt' and ignorance in which the old prophet had left him.... Frustrated in his efforts to apply his advanced educational theories to his idiot son, he sees in his nephew a chance both to redeem the past and to shape a human life after a pattern of his own design....

While Tarwater fights his inner battle to resolve the conflict between that part of himself which is repelled by the call to prophecy and that part which cannot deny the old man's commission, another battle takes place in which Tarwater's will is pitted against Rayber's... Old Tarwater had believed that in Rayber the power of mind, of the Idea, was grown so rampant as made it inevitable that he should entrap and shrink to nothingness the selfhood of anyone on whom he might chance to fasten. Rayber is...presented as a kind of monster of abstract intellect, capable of peering 'through the actual insignificant boy...to an image of him that he held fully developed in his mind'.... To Rayber the boy's every action exhibits an independence which could only have been acquired from the old man—'not a constructive independence but one that was irrational, backwoods, and ignorant'....

Thinking of himself as an emancipated modern man, totally divested of religious belief, and capable, through the most rigorous application of will power, of controlling what seems to him an irrational psychic undertow, Rayber is...a victim of his own intellectual habits which cause him to substitute thought for life. This was the old man's most perceptive observation regarding his nephew, that he lives, as Rayber himself admits, with his 'guts in [his] head,' and that this condition renders him incapable of acting: ...He could only get everything inside his head and grind it to nothing'....

Rayber, who had himself once attempted to drown the child and had discovered that he was incapable of the deed, lies in bed, silently acquiescing in the death of his son... 'To feel nothing was peace'.... All he desires is for the world to be consumed, and at the thought his own destruction he feels utter indifference.... Rayber's ruthless control of his emotions brings him at last that freedom from the irrational undertow for which he has so long striven; but, to his dismay, he discovers that to feel nothing is not peace but horror....alone in an utter void.... Having trod for years the razor's edge between madness and emptiness, he finds at last that the old man (through Tarwater) has beaten him again...

[Tarwater] accepts a ride with a stranger whom we recognize as Tarwater's faithful friend the devil, now in the guise of a city slicker homosexual.... It is evident that Tarwater, as he so often boasts, makes things happen and is empowered to act.... Though the drowning appears to be evidence of Tarwater's having succumbed at last to the demonic promptings of his 'friend'...it is just this willingness to act as a 'self-

responsible' agent, to run the risk of damnation if need be, that makes Tarwater a fit vessel for...God'.... Standing motionless before the piercing, judging eyes of the Negro Buford, and recognizing in the grave with its cross a sign of the faith he has, unconsciously, held all his life, Tarwater undergoes a transforming mystical experience—that 'final revelation' in which he sees a multitude, among whom is the old man, being fed from a 'single basket'."

Preston M. Browning, Jr.
Flannery O'Connor
(Southern Illinois U 1974) 72-97

"The central dramatic metaphor, linking the three principal characters of the novel—Mason, Rayber, and Tarwater—is taken appropriately from the New Testament parable of the Sower. It is Mason who has sown the seed of God's word in both his nephew and his grandnephew.... And because Mason is a prophet of the New Covenant, the word that he plants in Tarwater's heart is a radical hunger for the bread of life. In Rayber the effect of the seed is a chronic impulse to love that is ironically stimulated by the presence of his idiot child.... Rayber is certainly bad ground, but the word had fallen 'in deep' only as a sterile, lasting goad, hardly as a fertile germ.... The seed that was sown on apparently worthy soil yields only transitory sprouts of love that are easily choked by the cockles of Rayber's disbelief, his positivistic reluctance to admit the possibility of mystery.... Tarwater[']s lack of experience of the world's capacity to inflict evil and his adolescent desire to have his own way conspired within him to repress the growth of the seed... The seed that Tarwater ultimately allows to sprout is his free acceptance of the prophetic call...the kernel of Mason's teaching, a hunger for the 'bread of life'..."

The love that arises only in Bishop's presence can be contained only within [Rayber's] blasphemous thoughts about the image the child was created in... The baptism-drowning is...the compulsive effect of the seed's deep impregnation of Tarwater; by no means a free act on his part, and therefore certainly no signal of his personal acceptance of the prophet's role; the baptism-drowning is an abiding reminder to Tarwater that grace can seize even one's demented efforts to deny it.... When he is violated by the homosexual stranger and experiences personally for the first time the evil that prophets are born to rail against, it is his eyes that are burned clean, an ironic fulfillment of Mason's prophecy to Rayber, but similar to Mason's own unexpected early purification by the Lord... During his hieratic prostration over Mason's grave, [Tarwater] inadvertently acknowledges his passage from the Old Covenant to the New—from a God present in burning bush and arrested sun to a world in which the ordinary may erupt with extraordinary significance. He hears once again Mason's command, but where the old man had said 'justice,' Tarwater's memory substitutes 'mercy'."

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 137-38, 140-42, 146-49

"[Tarwater] is almost certainly mad.... The novel presents Tarwater as the...victim of psychological determinism. Prophecy is not of positive value but is merely an obsession inculcated in youth".... [Within her own "limits of inference," this critic agrees with the atheist Rayber.]

Carol Shloss
Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference
(LSU 1980) 85, 97

"She uses the biblical paradigm of the call of a prophet to explore the mystery of man's freedom to accept or reject his destiny under God.... The last of the prophets, John the Baptist, overshadows the story.... Tarwater has his own notion of the way the Lord should communicate with him; slowly he realizes that God speaks to man through the created world.... It takes violence to convince Tarwater that the Lord speaks in human voices and by human actions.... [The boy's] desire to attain his great-uncle's freedom, yet unwillingness to attain it in the Lord's way, is the central conflict in the novel—a conflict which is wholly interior.... After Old Mason's death, Tarwater goes to Rayber to test out the upbringing which the old man had given him by matching it against Rayber's rationalism. But it is an uneven conflict, for the seeds of the old man's teaching are deep in both of them....

Tarwater's decision to embrace the life which God has destined for him is hastened by violence, both the violence which he perpetrates by drowning Bishop and the homosexual violence which is done to him. In none of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is her belief in the power of violence to return one to reality more forcefully demonstrated. In the drowning of Bishop and the rape of Tarwater by a stranger, she makes concrete the spiritual power of violence which, in both these instances, brings good out of evil.... Like the Misfit, Tarwater attempts to make his decision for or against the Lord 'without homage.' The rape recalls him to the reality of his creaturehood....

The novel is so constructed that Tarwater believes throughout that he has burned his uncle's body. He thinks he has given this definite sign of his rebellion against the designs of the Lord which the old man communicated to him.... When Tarwater returns to Powderhead to live out his denial, he expects to find old Mason's ashes scattered to the winds, 'the sign of the broken covenant.' Instead, he finds 'a newly mounded grave,' with a rough cross at its head, and he knows that the Lord's covenant with Mason is still intact because of the selfless concern of an old Negro. Even though violence has prepared him to know and accept his destiny, it is love which convinces him... Tarwater is appointed to warn God's people of 'the terrible speed of mercy.' The merciful act of Buford Munson, rather than 'wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts,' is for Tarwater the definitive sign of his election....

Rayber's dependence on eyeglasses and on his hearing aid (the old man had shot him in the ear when he attempted to reclaim Tarwater) suggests the technological screen between himself and the world around him.... denying everything which his intellect cannot grasp.... The schoolteacher's hard-won freedom is subject to only one irrational influence—his love for his idiot child, Bishop.... If the child is symbolic of one part of Rayber's nature, the affective part, it is significant that he is an idiot, for the entire story communicates the belief that love is not subject to reason; it reaches beyond reason to supernatural faith. Rayber's conflict between living a full life and living a strictly rational life comes to a climax when, at Cherokee Lodge, a run-down lake resort, he hears Bishop's cry and knows that Tarwater is drowning the boy.... The affective part of his nature is irrevocably lost when Bishop dies....

By her symbolic use of hunger, silence, and spiritual terrain, Flannery O'Connor explores the great mystery of man's life: the mystery of human freedom. Against Rayber's clinical analysis of Tarwater's 'obsessive compulsion' are arraigned symbolic expressions of man's knowledge of his destiny. The three symbols are woven throughout the narrative. Mysterious [1] hunger grips the boy as he leaves Powderhead; implacable [2] silence surrounds him as he stands at Rayber's door; when he steps over his uncle's threshold, [3] a country he does not wish to enter lies ahead of every step. As the novel progresses, the symbols unite. His hunger grows until it becomes 'an insistent silent force inside him, a silence akin to the silence outside'.... After Tarwater embraces the destiny which alone can free him, the three symbols of his vocation unite to confirm his faith in his destiny: 'He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide.... he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth'....

Three times...the devil speaks to Tarwater from a source outside his own mind, using a human voice.... Typical of the devil's method, the stranger's first counsel is to do good.... But soon the stranger begins to insinuate...that Tarwater is a fool to believe the old man's teaching... Satan's cleverest wile is to convince people that he doesn't exist.... Tarwater begins to feel that he was 'just now meeting himself'.... The devil carefully leads Tarwater to think of his rebellion against the Lord's command as self-assertion, as freedom: Jesus or you....

Three times in the story [Satan] takes flesh and becomes a person whom Tarwater encounters; a thread of description identifies him with the voice in Tarwater's mind. [1] Meeks, the copper-flue salesman who gives Tarwater a ride to the city, instructs him in the wisdom of the world.... That he personifies the devil is suggested by his sharp face and broad-brimmed stiff gray hat, and his being referred to as 'the stranger.' [2] In the park scene later...he walks deep into the woods and sits on a bench near a man 'of a generally gray appearance.' A description of the man indicates a physical link with Meeks: 'Be like me, young fellow,' the stranger said... [3] The homosexual who offers Tarwater a ride, drugs him, and rapes him is the devil in his most chilling guise.... After the shock of this attack, Tarwater shudders 'convulsively' when he perceives the stranger's voice in his mind again....

It is fitting that both Rayber, who considers Bishop a horrible mistake of Nature, and Tarwater, who considers him unworthy of a prophet's attention, are overwhelmed with love for the child when each performs the humble service of tying his shoes.... Through Rayber's dream...O'Connor presents symbolically the theme of the novel. After his evening of following Tarwater through the city streets and alleys to the pentecostal tabernacle, Rayber dreams that he is chasing Tarwater 'through an interminable alley that twisted suddenly back on itself and reversed the roles of pursuer and pursued.' In the dream, the boy overtakes him, gives him a thunderous blow on the head, and disappears. Besides foreshadowing the end of the novel, the dream suggests that Rayber realizes that old Mason's teaching is pursuing him again in the person of young Tarwater....

Rayber's struggle is not only to convince the boy to choose *his* way; it is also to remain convinced of the wisdom of his choice....At various times, Rayber shows by a barely perceptible physical movement that a longing 'like an undertow in his blood [is] dragging him backwards to what he knew to be madness.' The novel demonstrates his freedom to resist this 'undertow,' just as it demonstrates Tarwater's freedom to accept it.... Both the actuality of Christian belief and the truth of man's freedom to accept or reject such belief are illuminated starkly in this tale of prophets and their descendants."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Fordham U 1982) 154-171

"*The Violent Bear It Away* [is] populated almost entirely by divided characters and doppelgangers. The rending struggle within young Tarwater which is the burden of the book is resolved not in an act of reintegration but in a ritual exorcism, a self-purification by fire that consumes the grinning 'friend' who has shadowed him from the start. That friend [Satan] is of course overtly presented as demonic, but he also embodies the rational, skeptical, rebellious, ironic side of Tarwater, and his destruction is a violent repudiation of *an essential part* of the boy [Satan?!]. Tarwater achieves at the end a singleness of self and purpose, but the cost of that achievement is appalling." [Italics added]

Frederick Asals
"The Double"
Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982)

"*The Violent Bear It Away*, which appeared in 1960, further enhanced her reputation, both for better and for worse. The people who appreciated what she was doing, and how well she was doing it, found it masterly, a finer book by far than *Wise Blood*. Those who had hated the stories, hated the new novel equally. It was just as complex and demanding as *Wise Blood*, but it was neither as funny nor as grotesque. It was, if anything, even more violent and unsettling in its denouement, and its religious challenge was more open. As had been the case with the first novel, one of the chief characters, old Mason Tarwater (who, although he dies on the first page, is a tremendous presence throughout the book) was seen mistakenly by some critics and readers as plain crazy. The author, however, privately confirmed him as in her view basically in the right, and declared herself to be behind him one hundred percent....

If the old man suggests a red-clay John the Baptizer, an uncompromising voice bellowing in wilderness, the boy seems reminiscent of a sulky Jonah, stubbornly refusing to follow his vocation until he is forced to a final choice.... The underlying premise of the whole...is the author's belief, reflected in the old man, that baptism in Christ is a matter of life and death. Of the fearsome events in this novel, she wrote, 'I don't set out to be more drastic, but this happens automatically. If I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I know that for the larger percentage of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore I have to imbue this action with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery. I have to distort the look of the thing in order to represent as I see them both the mystery and the fact'....

[O'Conner's] peculiar strengths—her ability to convey real religious conviction, and the equal force of an individual's inner impulse to refuse and oppose it, and her dramatization of such conflict—are evident throughout, as are the wild humor and withering irony that characterize all her work, and the ambiguity which lends it much of its fascination. The novel is finely constructed. Architecture, joinery, and details of language and dialogue are superb. There is hardly a misplaced or unneeded word. Portraiture is memorable,

and her painterly descriptions of the settings for the action mysteriously suggest a battleground for supernatural combat in which all of Nature, as well, is taking part as witness. The world of the spirit and the world of matter, the invisible and the visible, she forcefully suggests, are inseparable.”

Sally Fitzgerald

Introduction

Three by Flannery O'Connor
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xviii-xx

“She has reassembled many of her by now familiar materials: the implicit and explicit violence of those who live intensely; the family that recalls the House of Atreus, lines of hatred and love which are *indistinguishable* [!]... The conception is grand for a novel so deeply *provincial* [!]... Between his fulfillment of his great-uncle’s mission and his return to the property, Tarwater is picked up and raped by a *passing motorist* [Satan!]... An extended *incest* [?] pattern is also apparent: all those wifeless and motherless men grouping, then consuming each other, culminating in the rape of the final scenes. That passing motorist [rapist], a *surrogate father* of sorts for Tarwater [!]...” [Italics added]

Frederick R. Karl

American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 231-33

“Flannery O’Connor’s masterwork, *The Violent Bear It Away*, ends with the fourteen-year-old Tarwater marching towards the city of destruction, where his own career as prophet is to be suffered.... In Flannery O’Connor’s fierce vision, the children of God, all of us, always are asleep in the outward life. Young Tarwater...is, in clinical terms a borderline schizophrenic, subject to auditory hallucinations in which he hears the advice of an imaginary friend who is overtly the Christian Devil.... *The Violent Bear It Away* is a fiction of preternatural power, and not a religious tract. Rayber...is 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*.... We wince at his unlikely verbal mixture of popular sociology and confused psychology... [This critic is wincing at the satire of schoolteachers like himself.]

We remember *The Violent Bear It Away* for its two prophets, and particularly young Tarwater, who might be called a Gnostic [Gnosticism is this critic’s theology] version of Huckleberry Finn. What makes us free is the Gnosis, according to the most ancient of heresies. O’Connor, who insisted upon her Catholic orthodoxy, necessarily believed that what makes us free is baptism in Christ... We are moved by Tarwater because of his recalcitrance, because he is the Huck Finn of visionaries [Huck lights out for the Wilderness in the end to escape civilization, whereas Tarwater heads for the City to fight the Devil]...”

Harold Bloom, ed.

Flannery O'Connor

(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1986) 1-4, 8

“In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the second novel, Mason...snuffs out his grand-nephew’s hopes to develop beyond adolescence into an independent self responsible to the community. [This critic sees the prophet of God as evil and inferior to the atheist schoolteacher like herself.] The pattern in the stories of a child’s identity eclipsed by a parent’s will is here represented in its most vivid form by the fate of Francis Tarwater. The novel ends as Francis mirrors the behavior of his uncle, who believes himself a prophet. Francis becomes like the ‘jagged shadow’ that leads him toward the perverse [!] ‘goal’ of perpetuating his granduncle’s will.... [This critic believes preaching Christianity is “perverse.”]

Suzanne Morrow Paulson

Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 110

“O’Connor set great store by this work, and more than one critic has since declared it to be her masterpiece. At any rate, by the time it appeared her readers, at least some of them, had learned, as she had hoped they might, to look behind the comic, cartoonlike surface of her narratives for the action that she had meant them to take seriously. Here the action was the way of God’s grace with fallen mankind in a world all but dominated by the devil, and she demonstrated that way with another story of a prophet, Francis

Marion Tarwater, who was blind to the nature of the hound that was pursuing him. Tarwater, an orphan aged fourteen, has lived most of his life at Powderhead, a 'gaunt two-story shack' in the middle of a corn patch. There his great-uncle, a self-proclaimed prophet and recluse much given to violence, has provided him with Christian instruction and named him his successor. The elder Tarwater has also provided his nephew with specific instructions for his own burial (ten feet deep with a cross above) and directed him, as a first assignment in his career as a prophet, to baptize a mentally retarded cousin then living in the city with his agnostic schoolteacher father.

Tarwater does not resist taking the role of prophet, but he considers his great-uncle a madman and an unreliable teacher and plans to begin his own career with a more appropriate project than baptizing an idiot. Consequently, he disregards the burial instructions and sets out for the city, determined to disregard the assignment as well. In his rebelliousness he is abetted by a mysterious stranger (presumably the devil) who appears from time to time with advice and suggestions to support his defection. Accordingly, when circumstances that Tarwater does not understand dictate that willy-nilly he encounter the child, whom he has tried desperately to avoid, he proceeds to drown him—in the process, however, inadvertently saying the words of baptism.

At this point, still failing to recognize the persistent action of grace in his life, he heads back to Powderland to begin again, once more encounters the devil, this time in the guise of a homosexual seducer, and at last recognizes his enemy. Now more furiously the prophet than his great-uncle ever was, he sets fire to the thicket where the seduction [rape] took place, receives a vision of Christ feeding the five thousand, and prepares to return to the somnolent city, this time as the violent agent of God's mercy."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 152-53

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)