

REBUTTAL TO CRITICISM

The Violent Bear It Away (1960)

Flannery O' Connor

(1925-1964)

Many reviews of *The Violent Bear It Away* validate O'Connor's statement that Rayber the Atheist 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. Feminist 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: The Feminist Martha Stephens does not like religious writing or allegory and faults O'Connor for not having her own limitations. Likewise 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.

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