

ANALYSIS

“The River” (1953)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

“The cynicism of Mr. Paradise in regard to...miracles is indicated when Mrs. Connin, the babysitter who takes Harry to the river, says that Mr. Paradise, suffering from a cancer over his ear, ‘always comes [to healing] to show he ain’t been healed.’ At the healing he expresses his belief that Bevel Summers is more interested in the collection plate than in the health of the sick, and he guffaws with delight when Harry wants the preacher to pray for his mother, who is sick with a hangover. Furthermore, Mr. Paradise is specifically associated with pigs, which function throughout the story, as they do biblically, as symbols of spiritual uncleanness. At Mrs. Connin’s house Harry is traumatically frightened by pigs which trample him as they escape from the pen.... Mr. Paradise appears to him ‘like a giant pig’...

The mother is sick...spiritually as well as physically; not only is her child shabby and neglected, but he is deprived of love and is so accustomed to hearing such general profanity that he ‘thought Jesus Christ was a word like “oh” or “damn” or “god,” or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime.’ Mrs. Connin cares for the child all day at her own home and takes him to a prayer healing at the river, where he is baptized. When Harry is returned to his parents, another party is in progress, those attending laughingly ridicule the prayer healing, Harry’s baptism, and the book the child brings home, *The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve*... When his mother questions Harry, she is concerned only about the ‘lies’ he might have told about her. The dialogue between them twice describes her figuratively as on top of the river while the child is under it... The child, because of his baptism, participates in the river of life while his mother does not.”

Carter W. Martin

The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 46-47, 53-54

“[In 1955] Miss O’Connor published five of her best stories, including ‘The River,’ in which a miserably neglected child walks into a river thinking it will take him to ‘the Kingdom of Christ’.... [He] is a holy innocent; his salvation is sure.... He is saved from his terrible parents and from old Mr. Paradise, and spiritually, he is saved by his faith—childish though it is—in ‘the river of life’....

[O’Connor] names her monster, or dragon, and again associates him with the automobile. Old Mr. Paradise, a scoffer who is said to look like a hog and then like an ‘ancient water monster,’ is first seen sitting on the bumper of his car at a faith-healing meeting. Later the child Harry Ashfield walks into the river, hoping to be swept away to the Kingdom of Christ, as the young preacher Bevel Summers had promised, but the river will not take him. Mr. Paradise’s shout and his piglike appearance drive the boy farther into the water; after Harry has been swept away, Mr. Paradise, who had failed to ‘save’ the boy, occasionally surfaced in the water ‘like some ancient water monster and stood empty-handed, staring with his dull eyes as far down the river line as he could see’... An emblem of man’s reliance upon the mechanical...Paradise judges everything in material terms. His rough call interrupts the faith-healing service: ‘Pass the hat and give this kid his money. That’s what he’s here for’....

The scene at the river where Harry is baptized suggests John the Baptist’s ministry, for Bevel Summers, like John, denies that he has healing or redemptive powers.... Harry identifies with him, insisting that his name is Bevel also. Even before he meets the preacher, the boy assumes a new identity.... When he does return to his parents’ apartment, Harry reveals one of Miss O’Connor’s recurrent signs of grace, sight through a single eye: ‘one of Bevel’s eyes was closed and the other, half closed.’ (The one-eyed hawk and the owl with one eye open embody the same meaning in *Wise Blood*.).... Stealing carfare and slipping away from home, the boy returns to the river... The water does not take him away until, hearing a shout, he turns his head and sees ‘something like a giant pig bounding after him... Borne away from Mr. Paradise,

Harry/Bevel is saved both from his nutty parents (as Miss O'Connor once called them) and from the candy-cane blandishments of the old secularist, who follows children into the woods."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 28-29, 31, 62-63, 72, 144

"The Reverend Bevel Summers, who preaches at the river gathering, insists repeatedly that he cannot heal the sick and the immersions in the muddy water will not heal them: 'If you just come to see can you leave your pain in the river, you ain't come for Jesus. You can't leave your pain in the river,' he said. 'I never told nobody that.' Nevertheless, some of the believers insist that he is a healer... The preacher still maintains that the water will not heal them, that 'there ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus's blood,' and that only in that River of pain can they be saved. Yet many of the people cannot accept these unaided demands of faith and need a miracle worker to sustain them. Thus, they have something in common with Mr. Paradise, the old unbeliever who mocks Summers for not curing cancer.

The distinction between superstition and faith helps to clarify the ending of the story in which the four- or five-year-old child, who is practically ignored by his parents, drowns himself trying to find the Kingdom of Christ in the river. Insofar as he has been baptized and has finally found a home and his Father, his drowning is a real spiritual passage.... The child drowns himself because, in his loneliness and longing, he cannot differentiate between the River of Life and the literal river, between faith and superstition. In seeking Christ under the water, he resembles those people who wish to lay their pain in the muddy river, because they, too, are lonely and anxious."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 66-67

"Young Harry Ashfield...is a child who suffers emotional and spiritual privation in an alcoholic and atheistic family. He is initiated into the context of Christianity by his babysitter, who shows him a book entitled *The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve* and who takes him to a faith-healing at the river. After he is baptized by the preacher in the river, Harry is told that he is now a member of the Elect. But his parents mock their son's spiritual encounter. The next morning Harry returns to the river, which he now associates with the River of Life, and forces himself beneath its surface, thus beginning his journey toward a more promising country.... The crisis of faith which Harry Ashfield experiences...represents a passage through the dark night of the soul....

As soon as the boy learns that the preacher's name is Bevel Summers, he appropriates the forename and convinces his new babysitter of the remarkable coincidence.... As he is playing with the babysitter's children, Harry-Bevel is tempted to remove a board in the pig pen; an enraged shoat attacks him, roots him into the ground, and chases him in a panic to the house.... When Mrs. Connin reads to him from the book about Jesus, he encounters a picture which he finds unusually impressive: ...one of the carpenter driving a crowd of pigs out of a man.... [One pig] was 'longlegged and humpbacked and part of one of his ears had been bitten off'; it reminds Mrs. Connin of a certain Mr. Paradise, who has a cancerous deformity on his ear. Thus, when Harry-Bevel encounters Mr. Paradise at the faith healing, he is terrified by the old man, whose grotesque appearance reminds him of the [pig]. Mr. Paradise...is the incarnation of the devil. As a confirmed disbeliever, he symbolizes all forces of evil; he stands in opposition to the young preacher, whom he ridicules. His name is ironical, because he offers a false paradise. The significance of the bulge on his temple is not overlooked by the preacher, who cries, 'Believe Jesus or the Devil!'

At the conclusion of the story Mr. Paradise follows the boy to the river, carrying with him an enormous peppermint stick with which he plans to seduce the child. Ironically he propels Harry-Bevel away from the world of evil toward his ultimate destination; when the boy, already standing in the river, turns toward the shore, he sees 'something like a giant pig bounding after him, shaking a red and white club and shouting.' The boy submerges in fright, and as he drifts toward unconsciousness and death, the old anxieties disappear; he is now on his way to the perfect kingdom, for the Tempter of Souls has been overcome.

It is evident that the swine imagery—connecting the live shoat [pig], the illustration of Jesus harrowing pigs from a man, and the demonic figure of Mr. Paradise—is designed to establish the forces of evil and disbelief which Harry-Bevel encounters during his quest. Juxtaposed against these sinister forces is a set of more obvious ancillary relationships: the boy's literal identification with the evangelist and his increasing awareness of Christ which culminates in a literal acceptance of His kingdom. Because he has been baptized, Harry partakes of Christ by identifying himself with the preacher, who is a surrogate of Christ, and in immersing himself in the blood-red river, which is the River of Life.

Thus the climax of Harry's journey reveals that to rise above the alienated and the estranged requires a transcending leap of faith. All the action preceding the climax elucidates the process whereby human beings, estranged from the common world and perplexed by the unknown, penetrate a larger world in order to leave the absurd one behind."

Gilbert H. Muller
Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 57-60

"Perhaps the best-known of the O'Connor child-protagonist stories... The child, self-named 'Bevel,' moves from a profane world in which everything is a joke to a sacred world in which he 'counts'.... Nothing is a joke; all is real. As real as the warmth of the woman holding him on her lap while he eats breakfast is the story she reads to him, *The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve*. He learns that a carpenter named Jesus Christ made him, and he realizes the carpenter's power when he sees a picture of him 'driving a crowd of pigs out of a man'...like the one which had just terrified him. By the time he arrives at the river the child is completely at home in the milieu of the sacred....

But Bevel cannot deal with symbolism.... 'I'll go under the river'.... When he awakens...the next morning, he looks for his 'Jesus' book, but it is gone. Deprived of that tangible link with the other world he has discovered, he seems about to lapse back into his everyday world as he dumps ash trays on the floor and explores the refrigerator.... After wandering around the apartment aimlessly, the child lies down on the floor and studies his feet which he holds up in the air. 'His shoes were still damp and he began to think about the river.' One watches the world of the sacred absorb his consciousness as 'very slowly, his expression changed as if he were gradually seeing appear what he didn't know he'd been looking for'....

From the picture in the Bible story book and his own experience, Bevel associates evil with pigs.... At the story's close, it is the sight of this old man 'like a giant pig bounding after him'...which makes him 'plunge under' for the final time. Bevel is intuitively repelled by evil and drawn toward the sacred. Bevel's parents represent extreme secularism; the preacher represents the extreme of the sacred. Between them stands Mrs. Connin, part of both worlds... She accepts both visible and invisible reality.... Although extremely practical, she never loses her spiritual perspective... At the story's end, she returns the boy, newly baptized, to the apartment where his parents are having a party and announces that the preacher has prayed for the child's mother to be healed. The announcement is greeted with derision... 'Then, without taking the money, she turned and shut the door behind her.' Her repudiation of mammon recalls Christ's command to his apostles to wipe the dust from their feet on the thresholds of those homes which do not accept them."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 132-34

"I would guess that the deadpan seriousness of Harry's ruminations, while amusing to very few [note the belittling tone], would be a good deal more amusing to certain believers in Christ than to most nonbelievers. And the amusement would take the form of a 'knowing' smile: the real 'joke' is on his parents, on Dr. Sladewall, on those who think 'Jesus Christ' is an expletive."

Miles Orvell
Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Tulane U 1972) 175-76

“The child (who calls himself Bevel) is exposed to the constant exploitations of a corrupt society. His parents neglect him, farming him out to unfamiliar baby-sitters while they sleep off the hangovers which inevitably follow their evening socializings. On mornings when no hired attendant appears, the child is left to fend for himself. He breakfasts on leftovers from the parties of the night before, anchovy and crackers washed down by stale gingerale. The parents neglect of the physical well-being of their child is paralleled by their unconcern for his spiritual welfare. Seeing a picture of Jesus for the first time, he fails to recognize Him. Ignorant of the basic principles of religious instruction, he does not even know the meaning of the act of baptism.

His parents are unconcerned but not brutal, for their neglect is a result of indifference rather than of active malevolence. At the baby-sitter’s, the boy experiences a more active form of exploitation. The other children trick him into letting the hog out of his pen, and the animal pursues the terrified child, butting and mauling him until he escapes to the house. These devilish urchins seem to share with the Misfit the conviction that there is no pleasure in the world except in meanness. After their cruel trick on the unsuspecting visitor, they feel better. ‘Their stern faces didn’t brighten any but they seemed to become less taut, as if some great need had been partly satisfied.’

The most sinister of the child’s attackers is, of course, Mr. Paradise, the unbeliever. A conspicuous scoffer at the claims of the country preacher, Mr. Paradise pursues the child with a depraved intention. Paradise bounds into the water after the boy ‘like a giant pig.’ For...man, rejecting the divine principle, reduces himself to the level of the beast. The Reverend Bevel Summers warned that man must choose either Jesus or the devil (his message strongly resembles those of both the Misfit and Hazel Motes); and Mr. Paradise, who has renounced the former, clearly is committed to the latter.

The irony of the child’s response to the sermon is that he accepts at full value the literal truth of the preacher’s statements. The Reverend Bevel Summers proclaims that the river moves ‘toward the kingdom of Christ.’ ‘There ain’t but one river, and that’s the River of Life, made out of Jesus’ Blood. That’s the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus’ Blood, you people!’ The child perceives that the preacher is serious about his message, despite the fact that, for his parents, life is a meaningless jest in which man is reduced to a nonentity and human existence has no more purpose than a continuing round of cocktail parties.

For the preacher, life has a purposeful relation to a divine principle which resides outside the human sphere; but the child responds only to the literal level of the preacher’s assertions. As a result, the course of his action is clear: he rejects his parents, his home (he takes no suitcase because there is nothing there he wants) and, in fact, the world. He sets out to baptize himself, ‘to keep on going this time until he found the kingdom of Christ in the river.’ O’Connor has observed that young Bevel’s ‘peculiar desire to find the kingdom of Christ’ represents the ‘working of grace for him.’ And, since he dies in a state of grace (no conscious act of suicide is committed), he is eligible for direct admission to that kingdom which he seeks: ‘Bevel hasn’t reached the age of reason; therefore he can’t commit suicide. He comes to a good end. He’s saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death. He’s been baptized and so he goes to his Maker; this is a good end.’ Mr. Paradise, his would-be attacker, is left stranded in the earthly stream, ‘like some ancient water monster’ out of a world anterior to the incarnation and the blessing of grace.

O’Connor thus asserts that the child’s death, though shocking, is preferable to the meaningless, corrupt existences of those who surround him. He is dying into life; theirs, the futile death-in-life. Better that the spirit should find its release through violent transformation than endure the living hell of exile from the divine center. The lesson is a difficult one for the modern [atheist] reader to accept, for the question inevitably arises as to whether or not one can be sure that the act carried significance beyond that of the futile destruction of an unfortunate child-victim. [This critic disregards the significant destructive effects of neglectful modern parents.] Once again, salvation seems to carry a rather high price tag [like responsible parenting]; but, in the author’s eyes at least, redemption is well worth the cost.”

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O’Connor
(Twayne 1973) 74-76

“In ‘The River,’ the Reverend Bevel Summers, explaining the effects of baptism to Harry Ashfield, assures him, ‘You won’t be the same again.... You’ll count.’ Through this simple but suggestive statement the story delineates for the reader as well the ambience within which he ‘counts,’ and it is obviously not merely baptism as magical immersion or even fundamentalist sacrament that makes the difference, as theological overinterpretation of ‘The River’ so often implies. The preacher is far from simplistic in his explanation of the rite or of the significance of the river itself. He begins with a clear rejection of the self-centered concern with healing that has obviously led to Mr. Paradise’s cynicism. ‘If you ain’t come for Jesus, you ain’t come for me,’ he insists. ‘If you just come to see can you leave your pain in the river, you ain’t come for Jesus. You can’t leave your pain in the river.... I never told nobody that.’

The river and its rite are unequivocally symbolic. ‘Listen to what I got to say, you people,’ the preacher shouts, ‘There ain’t but one river and that’s the River of Life, made out of Jesus’ Blood. That’s the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus’ Blood, you people!’ The river of life that one enters through baptism is the way of love and faith and pain that leads to the Kingdom of Christ. And the reason why the baptized Harry counts is precisely because the atmosphere of belief provided by Mrs. Connin and the Reverend Bevel Summers offers a total vision of life; Harry is introduced to meaning that his parents’ hedonism and sophistication are incapable of providing. One counts, the story announces, where concern is ultimate.

The two souvenirs that Harry preserves from the day in the country are emblematic of the integral concern that Mrs. Connin has shown him—‘a red and blue flowered handkerchief’ for his body and *The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve* for his spirit. The description of Mrs. Connin and the procession of her family with Harry to the river attest to the child’s rite of passage from abandonment to total care. Mrs. Connin looms before Harry like ‘a speckled skeleton’; when she falls asleep on the bus, she whistles and blows ‘like a musical skeleton.’ And the procession made by the children and Mrs. Connin looks ‘like the skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the highway.’

The allusions to death and possibly also to the ark foreshadow the ending of the story, but more importantly they emphasize the process of Harry’s passage through death to life that is at the heart of the story. He must leave the meaninglessness of his parents’ apartment in order to count, and death in the guise of Mrs. Connin is the agent of his passage. She is of course the one who mentions and naively accepts the name that Harry takes as his title of passage—Bevel. For he has heard her refer to the Reverend Bevel Summers as a healer; and thus impishly, but with a wisdom beyond his years, he takes the name of the man who will heal him of his hunger for concern and who could possibly make even his mother well.

The desire to ‘count’ permanently—as Harry never has in the ‘ashfield’ of his parents’ urban apartment—ultimately shapes his decision to return to the country and the river of life. The tonal contrast that names country over city as the place where Harry ‘counts’ is drawn principally in terms of color and related contrasts. The difference is by no means a facile distinction between good and evil; rather, in the country there is the clarity of recognizable contrast. In the apartment everything is dark and gray, even the sun appears pale, ‘stained gray by the glass.’ The apartment is dark during the day because its adult inhabitants are night people; the family name indicates its characteristic desolation. Moreover, everything there is a joke: his mother’s ‘illness’ is a hangover; even Jesus Christ, Harry would have thought formerly, ‘was a word like “oh” or “damn” or “God,” or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime.’ The country, on the other hand, is all oranges, greens, and yellows; the sun is a ‘white Sunday sun.’ Even though Mr. Paradise and the shoats roam the countryside, they stand in clear contrast to the preacher, Mrs. Connin, and the natural setting. Color sharpens meaning...

Miles Orvell...misses altogether the story’s brilliant application of generally accepted learning theory and reflects inadequate appreciation of the tonal differentiation between city and country. What is unmistakably important in any interpretive process is how the ‘world of the work’ is understood by the protagonist, because it is through the eyes of the protagonist that *we* see his world... Harry’s grasp of the preacher’s language...equates image and reality because this is the mode of preliterate apprehension. Suicide is obviously beyond Harry’s intention; being in the water—more precisely, being received by the water—is what makes him count. (At home, when his mother had pulled him to a sitting position to question him about the preacher, the emptiness of her gesture and presumably of life with his parents is

expressed in the reversal of the image: 'he felt as if he had been drawn up from under the river.') The paradox of the story is that Harry's experience of the river yields a birth of reason inasmuch as 'the river wouldn't have him.' Its persistent rejection forces him to stop and think that 'it's another joke, it's just another joke.'

Then he sees Mr. Paradise. Harry knows enough about hogs from his frightening experience at Mrs. Connin's to appreciate Jesus' having to drive the 'crowd of pigs out of a man,' and Mr. Paradise with the 'purple bulge on his left temple' favors the shoat with an ear bitten off that has already scared Harry half to death. It is thus his fear of the evil Mr. Paradise, 'like a giant pig bounding after him,' and his effort to escape him that lead ironically to a happy death. Complete acceptance by the river is of course Harry's ultimate concern."

John R. May

The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 64-67

"Harry...thinks that 'Jesus Christ' is a way of swearing and that pigs are 'small fat pink animals with curly tails and round grinning faces and bow ties'... [He] has derived his childish notions of life from a secularized culture.... The emptiness that impels him is localized in his immediate environment...the parental indifference that leads to [his death].... Her urban scenes [are] ugly to the point of revulsion...the distant city 'like a cluster of warts on the side of the mountain'... O'Connor's baptisms in 'The River' and *The Violent Bear It Away*...become literal deaths, but they continue to carry distinct overtones of redemption....which reveals itself in the instinctual desire of her baptized children to seek 'the Kingdom of Christ in the river.' That desire is only apparently confused, for the actual river meets the transcendent 'Kingdom of Christ' exactly at the horizon line of death. What is shocking in such actions...is not their confusion, but, on the contrary, their literal precision."

Frederick Asals

Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 14-15, 66, 68, 77-78, 227

Michael Hollister (2016)