

A Good Man is Hard to Find

Flannery O'Connor seems to place us in an Augustinian world in this fiction, similar to the one in Walker Percy's novel Lancelot. The concept of inherited original sin appears in several places in **A Good Man is Hard to Find**: in The Misfit's description of his own father as a con-artist who managed to evade the law and also in the off-handed rudeness of the grandmother & her granddaughter June Star's conversations. Augustine's belief that knowledge derives from memory occurs as well. There is failure of memory in The Misfit's inability to remember the offense that landed him in the penitentiary the first time; false memory in the grandmother's location of the mystery house in Georgia rather than in Tennessee; and true memory in her recognition of The Misfit and her ultimate acknowledgement of him as her son (though not in a literal, biological sense since Bailey is her only son). The fatalism of double predestination plays out in the grandmother's initial belief that they'll run into The Misfit on their trip to Florida (although she goes along anyway, due to her fallen nature), Red Sammy's wife's corroboration of that fear and The Misfit's statement that Jesus' existence requires either salvation or damnation. Flannery's scenario is a hospital for sinners, by no means a school for saints. Even the Christian mediocrity that modern theologians accuse Augustine of perpetuating, with his doctrine of redemption by grace alone, is fully at play here. When the grandmother's family faces death, not one of them assists each other and none shows remorse for their own failings. Amazingly, June Star actually insults the man who has just shot her father and older brother and is about to kill her mother, her baby brother and June Star, herself. The closest these characters come to repentance is in the grandmother's bargaining for her life.

In Walker Percy's novel the main character, Lancelot, sets out to prove the existence of God through discovery of a pure evil. Flannery presents us with the evil, but it's difficult to see the grace. A priest friend, who often sits at the bedsides of the dying, holding their hands and listening to their stories or confessions, says that most people discover that they have a spiritual life about 20 minutes

before they die. And the work of a lifetime happens in those few minutes. The conversation between the grandmother and The Misfit shows how that might play out. She begins by bargaining for her life, using flattery to appeal to him, much like we might flatter God with our requests. She begs him to pray, hoping for a conversion, although it's not clear that she herself is praying. Again, rather than transforming herself, she expects God to somehow change. At the end she claims him for her son, touches him, and he shoots her three times in the chest, a Trinitarian symbol. She dies, sitting like a child, smiling as if at heaven. In a sense, recognizing him as her child re-names The Misfit.

“She would of been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

This seems a way of saying that only face-to-face with death could the grandmother perceive the world accurately: that we're all related and we find our salvation not as individuals, but in community.

The most curious feature of this story to me is that some characters, including the grandmother (who is arguably the main character) are unnamed. We know them by their functions or relationships, rather than by their Christian names. There are 12 human characters in the story and we know the Christian names of only 6: Bailey, John Wesley, June Star, Red Sammy, Hiram and Bobby Lee. Interestingly, none have last names (or family names). The characters identified by relationship are the grandmother, the children's mother, the baby and Red Sammy's wife. The pickaninny/Negro child and The Misfit are called only by their functions. What does it mean to have a given name in this story? What's the significance of the lack of family names, the absence of community even within the three families of this story? How significant is the distinction between being known through your relationships as opposed to being known by your function in society? Are any of these names the ones that the Good Shepherd uses to call his sheep? Does the grandmother become the Good Shepherd when she calls The Misfit “one of my own children”? Do we always kill those who become Christ to us, transforming our relationships to ourselves and to the world?

Wise Blood

In **Wise Blood**, Flannery O'Connor's characterization resembles Diane Arbus' photography during the 1960s. Arbus intentionally disturbs us with representations of the grotesque and abject: giants, dwarves, fire-eaters, overweight and unattractive transvestites, sado-masochistic encounters, half-dressed female impersonators and random other varieties of disability. Most of her subjects peer from the photographs full on, so that we're forced to acknowledge them as both human and deformed. Her titles rarely name her subjects. Rather, she describes the scene so that we know the people only symbolically, perhaps protecting their identities. Yet their emotional states speak volumes. The images often reveal self-loathing, sometimes yearning, never joy. The effect is to objectify the subjects while defining the viewer as simultaneously subject and voyeur. Likewise, Flannery's characters, who constantly violate the southern creed of manners shapes faith (a parody of *lex orandi, lex credendi*), evokes a similar response. Her narrative voice is third-person, distanced and impersonal, not omniscient. Yet the reader knows far too much about these characters. They reveal shameful aspects of our natures that we'd prefer not to recognize.

Flannery sets two characters in opposition, both of whom know things instinctively, or hear voices guiding them: in other words have wise blood. Enoch Emery inherits his mysticism from his father, a petty criminal, while Hazel Motes' skips a generation, coming from his grandfather, an itinerant preacher. Both attempt to escape their heritage as prophets. Flannery references Jonah, who ran from his calling, although Enoch's behavior also recalls Jeremiah, who was drawn to prophesy against his will, knowing that he would be punished. Enoch produces Haze's new Jesus in a bizarre parody of eternal life: a shrunken and mummified man. Ultimately he trades his humanity, crippled as it is, for the mask of a

gorilla and its false power to intimidate and control. He becomes the beast. So intent on removing the mote from his neighbors' eyes, Haze fails to see the beam in his own. Like Balaam, he sets out to proclaim one message and reverses direction. Haze transforms into a parody of St. Paul's conversion. Fulfilling Asa Hawks' empty threat to blind himself for Jesus, Haze dies blind, in imitation of Solace Layfield's death. Set up by Hoover Shoats to be Haze's lookalike in life, Solace also represents what he doesn't believe. Both he and Haze die victims of self-righteous violence: Solace at Haze's hands, a sacrifice for their vision of the Church without Christ, and Haze at the hands of the authorities and Mrs. Flood, named perhaps after Noah and God's first destruction of our hopelessly fallen world. Hoover's religious name, Onnie Jay Holy, mocks both the Latin nomenclature for religious (Onnie Jay is pig latin for Johnnie) and the Southern propensity for childish middle names.

Does Flannery present us with a character to emulate? The vapid women Haze meets are as reflexively cruel as he is intentionally self-righteous: the women on the train mock, Haze's mother beats him, Leora Watts torments, waitresses insult, Sabbath Lily and Mrs. Flood manipulate. The men either reveal themselves as false (Haze's father and grandfather fear death, Asa Watts fakes blindness, Hoover Shoats pretends to be a preacher, Solace Layfield imitates Haze) or driven by single-mindedness (Haze's father and grandfather, Enoch's father, Haze and Enoch themselves). Where is Jesus in this incarnation of humanity's worst possible attributes? Can anyone get past their narcissism and idolatry to see Christ in each other? Haze comes closest when he mutilates himself to pay for having failed to see. If, for the most part, her characters cannot or will not see, what is Flannery saying about us as readers, and about humanity in general?

Wise Blood – Part 2

In **Wise Blood**, Flannery O'Connor creates a character, Hazel Motes, who embodies the postmodern theory of deconstruction. Haze is a preacher in a Church Without Christ. His actions and speech, rather than reflecting the usual representations of a Christian evangelist, skew our vision of what constitutes preaching. Yet his fellow characters in the novel universally recognize him as a preacher. His mode of dress (in a shiny dark blue suit and fierce hat, alternately black or white) labels him. His obsession with sin and his search for salvation (in a woman or a good car) label him. His apocalyptic eschatology labels him. The discipline and the self-mutilation that he underwent as a child (after having seen a nude woman at a freak show) and as an adult (after having killed Solace Layfield) point toward a medieval monastic sensibility perhaps best embodied in St. Dominic's practices. Interestingly, he also shares his theology of atonement with St. Dominic as well as his spirituality of gyrovague and preacher. Atonement theology took precedence over incarnation theology beginning with Anselm's feudal honor model, although Flannery describes the Calvinist version, known as penal substitution. In both theology and practice, Haze consistently utilizes the same modes of imaging Christianity that he claims to deconstruct. Like all artists who do so, he loses authority, and cannot escape his destiny, trapped within the model whose efficacy he denies.

No one recognizes Haze as anything more (or less) than a preacher. 'Some preacher put his mark on you,' says Asa Hawks. The taxi driver tells him that preachers do not keep company with Mrs. Leora Watts. Hoover Shoats, a.k.a. Onnie Jay Holy transforms Haze's 'Church Without Christ' into the 'Holy Church of Christ Without Christ'. There is truly no escaping this Jesus, as Haze's grandfather warned him. Jesus hunts you down, in a perverse mockery of Psalm 139:

Lord, you have searched me out and known me;
 you know my sitting down and my rising up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.
 You trace my journeys and my resting-places
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Indeed, there is not a word on my lips,
 but you, O Lord, know it altogether.
 You press upon me behind and before
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is so high that I cannot attain to it.
Where can I go then from your Spirit?
where can I flee from your presence?
If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will lead me
and your right hand hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me,
and the light around me turn to night,"
Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day;
darkness and light to you are both alike.

Anselm, a monastic theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury, set out to prove the existence of God in the simplest possible way, using the old scholastic model of Augustine. He began with a work called the *Monologium*, or Monologue, then decided to use the ontological argument alone in his *Proslogion*, or Dialogue. Interestingly, his Dialogue reads more like a soliloquy. It reflects a conversation between the soul and God and so its questioning is highly introspective. Anselm begins in a pure contemplation of being and ends with the goodness, justice, mercy, creativity, love and joy of God. Haze also follows an introspective path, although his ontological argument leads to differently expressed conclusions. For me this raises the question of agency.

Flannery presents us with two characters who are in certain ways twins: Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery. Both young men, Enoch 18 and Haze in his early 20s, are on a quest for the Holy Grail. Enoch is driven by his heart, his wise blood, and Haze by his head. Both rebel against their human destiny. Are they agents or merely objects? Do their ends reflect the conclusion of a series of free choices or rather the inevitable outcome of the characters that Flannery initially paints (beastly, in Enoch's case and Christ-haunted in Haze's)? Ultimately, this is an issue of character development. If there is no true transformation, but simply the effects of entropy on static beings, then Flannery has in some way shifted the paradigm of the novel, as well as that of faith. And if part of what she's about here is a postmodern deconstruction of either fiction or faith, this is key to her success.

The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South

In her essays Flannery consistently returns to a set of themes around sense of place, the rational secularization of modern life, prophecy, characterization of the grotesque and man's need to create Christ where He is no longer perceived to exist. I want to examine these five qualities, following her order of presentation, as she expresses them in her speech at Georgetown University.

The Catholic novel that fails is one in which there is no genuine sense of place and in which feeling is by that much diminished. Its action occurs in an abstracted setting. It could be anywhere or nowhere.

Our concept of sense of place involves geographical cues, topography, dialect and time. The London in Charles Dickens' novel **Martin Chuzzlewit**, for example, is not the same London as that of T.S. Eliot's **Four Quartets**, yet both present us with immediately recognizable Londons. Authors invoke place, as Flannery notes by negative means, to embody action, as well as to provide tone color and economy of detail. Whether or not the reader has actually visited England, the name London connotes history and tradition, aristocracy, economic power, a particular merger of church and state, pomp and circumstance, etc. The writer need not provide these references as our imaginations fill in the internal geography. We draw conclusions about the types of characters to be found in that landscape, and even perhaps the sorts and limits of plot. Clearly, authentic detail stems from the writer's own lived experiences, their senses, their places. But in certain cases the landscape itself becomes a character in the fiction. This is clearly seen in the Bronte sisters' novels, where the brooding, isolated and dangerous Yorkshire moors set up relationships between the characters that not only appear inevitable but also require that particular setting. Could Flannery set her fiction in a place other than the South and still retain its credibility? Is the South integral to her art?

To be great story-tellers, we need something to measure ourselves against, and this is what we conspicuously lack in this age. Men judge themselves now by what they find themselves doing.

As she often does, Flannery obliquely references a monastic distinction. St. Benedict, whose **Rule** still governs most Western monasteries, identifies four types of monks: cenobites, anchorites, sarabaites and gyrovagues. His **Rule** is written for the first type, the cenobites, who live in

community. Benedict respects the anchorites (hermits) as having been so long in community that they acquired sufficient wisdom to avoid the temptations of a truly solitary life. The gyrovagues wander from monastery to monastery, abusing hospitality, never committing to a particular place, nor learning obedience to a rule of life, an abbot and a community. The original Franciscan and Dominican vocation reflects this gyrovague spirituality. Benedict finds the sarabaites worst and most dangerous of all. He calls them detestable liars before God. Like the gyrovagues they have no stability, but worse still, they define good by what they like. They each have their own personal interpretation of Scripture. Flannery presents us with gyrovagues (preachers and prophets) and sarabaites (fakes and mockers) in her fiction. Does she see her audience as sarabaites? Does she find the modern world so far out of kilter that we no longer have true saints (cenobites and anchorites) as in the past?

Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than it is if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac. Both of these kinds of knowledge are necessary, but in the last four or five centuries we in the Church have over-emphasized the abstract and consequently impoverished our imagination and our capacity for prophetic insight.

Here Flannery expresses the difference between the rational, scholastic method of theology best exemplified by the medieval Dominican monk St. Thomas Aquinas, and the speculative, allegorical method best expressed during the Middle Ages by the Cistercian (a reformed Benedictine order) monk St. Bernard of Clairvaux. It parallels the division between head and heart, body and soul, humankind's physical and spiritual natures. During the Middle Ages Benedictine abbeys saw a flowering of mysticism, while the Dominicans led Inquisitions. Both of these events represent extreme positions of the two polarities.

Flannery describes how modern people cut themselves off from their own lives through mediation of their experiences by rational thought. We limit what we can perceive in nature by what our minds allow us to believe. We see what we expect to see. Our senses return to us a projection of ourselves rather than the true other. If this is the case, how can modern people perceive God through their senses at all, since God is other, not a narcissistic projection of the self? Have we so overloaded our senses with advertising that we are resistant to the divine, like a diabetic becomes

insulin-resistant? Does Flannery mean that we readers must not only willingly suspend our disbelief, but that we also must willingly suspend our rational minds in order to perceive the truly real?

In the novelist's case prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, distances in the qualitative sense, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the modern instances of the grotesque. But to the eye of the general reader, these prophet-heroes are freaks. The public invariably approaches them from the standpoint of abnormal psychology.

Walter Brueggeman refers to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures as poets, not predictors of the future per se, but visionaries calling their people to see what might be, either positive or negative. Prophets are typically reviled, in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Christ considers Himself a prophet and each time He calls the people to the table, to true practice, they try to push Him off a cliff, run Him out of town, kill Him. The prophet's vocation is not easy, not ever wanted, often fought and, when finally submitted to, not always gracefully. Only the false prophets enjoy fame, as Christ tells us in the Beatitudes. From a historical perspective, how are Flannery's grotesques any different from prophets in all times? Does society invariably consider its true prophets freaks, abnormal and dangerous? Is the vocation of prophecy by definition a mixed blessing?

It is interesting that as belief in the divinity of Christ decreases, there seems to be a pre-occupation with Christ-figures in our fiction. What is pushed to the back of the mind makes its way forward somehow. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature, for it is the business of the artist to reveal what haunts us.

Orthodox theology states that Christ is both fully human and fully divine, His dual natures inseparable, a mystery. Since the Enlightenment popular faith has rationalized the historical Jesus, eliminating His divine nature and portraying Him as a prophet and teacher of morals but not a Savior, no longer Christ. Yet we cannot escape the need for a divine Savior. Despite our educational

and technological advancement we have not achieved moral perfection. On the contrary, our current technology supports immorality on a grander scale than ever before. In the 20th century we declared God dead, but our literature belies us.

Neurologists believe that our brains are hardwired for spiritual experiences and that those experiences exhibit common physiological characteristics, regardless of the specific details of our faith. So the physical response of a Buddhist meditating matches that of a Christian practicing Centering Prayer. This implies that we are not capable of eliminating the experience of God. We will always be Christ-haunted in spiritual and physical senses. As we suppress Christ in a spiritual way, He reappears as a physical shadow. Our shadow sides tend to be more dangerous, typically either unconscious or subconscious. Does this mean that the Christ-figures in our lives and literature are also more dangerous, being unrecognizable and unacknowledged by us? Will we focus on the passion of Christ without accepting His incarnation, life on earth, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit? Will our experience of the divine become exclusively transcendent (God above) rather than an interplay between transcendence and immanence (God within)? How does Flannery represent God as transcendent and God as immanent?

The Displaced Person

In her story **The Displaced Person**, Flannery O'Connor presents Christ incarnated in Mr. Guizac, a Polish refugee from World War II. Along with his family, he comes to live and work on Mrs. McIntyre's failing plantation. Mrs. McIntyre has survived a succession of husbands ultimately revealed as false (the Judge was poor, not rich; Mr. Crooms was insane and Mr. McIntyre a drunkard) and tenant farmers (Garrits, Ringfields and Collinses) in the final analysis acknowledged as shiftless. She tolerates religion, but puts her true faith in hard work, a Pelagian view. Struggling to make a living with her farm and dairy, she hopes to find some relief from the lazy, cheating Mr. Shortley and the remnant of a tribe of moody, unpredictable Negroes (Astor and Sulk). When she discovers that Mr. Guizac not only works hard, but efficiently, the possibility of financial success tempts her. Her greed drives her to work him harder and the inevitable comparisons between the Guizac and Shortley families, as well as with Astor and Sulk, set the stage for gossip and pathological jealousy. Mr. Guizac, acting from a combination of compassion and his different cultural outlook, challenges the most fundamental taboo of the South: miscegenation. The plot follows inevitably. Mrs. McIntyre's hesitation to act, her unwillingness to let go the key to wealth, creates a parallel situation to one in Shakespeare: the destruction caused by Hamlet's ambivalence over his mother's incest.

Mrs. McIntyre unconsciously recognizes Mr. Guizac as Christ for the first time in conversation with Mrs. Shortley.

“But at last I'm saved!” Mrs. McIntyre said. “One fellow's misery is the other fellow's gain. That man there,” and she pointed where the Displaced Person had disappeared, “- he has to work! He wants to work!” She turned to Mrs. Shortley with her bright, wrinkled face. “That man is my salvation!” she said. (page 294)

In conversation with Father Flynn she confuses the two, claiming him a second time.

Mrs. McIntyre's face assumed a set puritanical expression and she reddened. Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother. “It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go,” she said. “I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world.”

The old man didn't seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail. “The Transfiguration,” he murmured.

She had no idea what he was talking about. “Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place,” she said, giving him a hard look.

The cock lowered his tail and began to pick grass.

“He didn't have to come in the first place,” she repeated, emphasizing each word.

The old man smiled absently. “He came to redeem us,” he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go. (page 317)

A third time, perhaps as a Trinitarian reference, and also in conversation with Father Flynn, Mrs. McIntyre astutely connects Mr. Guizac with Christ's incarnation.

“As far as I'm concerned,” she said and glared at him fiercely, “Christ was just another D.P.” (page 320)

Here Flannery anticipates Vatican II's new focus on the historical Jesus, Christ's human nature, as well as its return to the theology of the early Church, which emphasized immanence over transcendence and incarnation over atonement. While the Orthodox eastern churches consistently maintained a sense of immanence (Christ with us and in us), the Catholic western churches shifted in after the fall of Rome to transcendence (Christ above us and beyond our reach). Flannery clearly portrays Mr. Guizac as suffering in the Passion of Christ, with Mr. Shortley as Pilate setting the stage, while the other characters (Mrs. McIntyre, Astor and Sulk) conspire as Peter in betrayal. In her version of the Passion we all recognize our complicity in Christ's death. And, like His disciples, we flee. This stands in direct opposition to Mel Gibson's film version, which presents the passion as an historical act with specific individual people as culpable (unfortunately, Gibson pins guilt on the Jews as opposed to the Roman authorities). Ultimately, Gibson's film sentimentalizes the Passion. While we certainly see Christ's suffering for us, we fail to see that we each cause Christ to suffer whenever we destroy, through our words and actions or in our failures to speak and act, another human being, who is the image of Christ.

Flannery begins and ends her story with the peacock, traditionally a symbol of resurrection and immortality in iconography. Father Flynn connects the peacock with the transfiguration, the moment on Mount Tabor, in Galilee, when the disciples Peter, James and John recognize Jesus as the Christ, the beloved Son of God (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36; 2Peter 1:16-18). They experience a vision of Moses and Elijah, both prophets and types of Christ, who were translated directly to heaven as opposed to dying. They hear the voice of God. Peter suggests building three tabernacles (a type of tent) to shelter Moses, Elijah and Jesus. A famous 20th century Italian architect, Berlucci, who designed many of the churches in Israel/Palestine, created the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. It resembles three tabernacles attached to each other. The stained glass window above the altar has two peacocks, with tails spread. The alabaster in the other windows has a peacock tail motif. Was Flannery aware of this iconic connection between the transfiguration and resurrection? Does she play on Mrs. McIntyre as Peter, both in recognizing Mr. Guizac as Christ and later standing in silence as the tractor crushes him to death? Is the final scene an emblem of the communion of saints, where Christ welcomes into eternal life even His betrayers?

Revelation

In *Little Gidding*, the final poem of his **Four Quartets**, T.S. Eliot presents a conversation with the ghost of Dante Aligheri, using a modified *terza rima*, the poetic scheme of Dante's **Divine Comedy**. The section of Eliot's poem ends with Dante list of 'the gifts reserved for age', referring both to physical age and spiritual maturity. The last of these three gifts is

the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
When you must move in measure, like a dancer. (*Little Gidding*, II:138-146)

Eliot's view of the refining fire includes the reluctant burning away of one's virtues, as well as the sinner's eager embracing of God's painful grace in expectation of being cleansed from vice. The process of purgation delivers the penitent from the consequences of their sins (justification) and redeems them from the sins themselves (sanctification). In Dante's *Purgatory*, souls subject themselves to various physical manifestations of the virtue corresponding to their besetting sin. For example, on the first cornice of Pride, the repentant circle the mountain, crawling low in a position of humility and bearing heavy burdens on their backs, while praying the Lord's Prayer.

This image of the refiner's fire appears in the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and also in the parables and sayings of the Gospels. In Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus describes weeds growing among the good grain. God allows this until the harvest, when the reapers separate chaff from wheat, burning the first and gathering the last into the barn. Later, in Matthew 23:1-36, Jesus rails against the Scribes and Pharisees, who tithe but have no justice, mercy or faith, or who wear symbols of righteousness, while inside are full of greed and self-indulgence. He compares them to the whitewashed tombs in the Hinnom Valley (Ge'henna) just outside of Jerusalem. Shining brightly in the sun, they are full of the filth of hypocrisy and lawlessness. In Matthew 25:1-46, Jesus describes the Judgement, where sheep are separated from goats, who must depart into the eternal fire. Modern readings of these texts assume that each soul contains elements of wheat and weeds, sheep and goats, humility and hypocrisy. Like precious metal, they are refined through fire. The refiner knows that the impurities are removed when their own image appears in the metal. Correspondingly, the soul's time in Purgatory is complete when it reflects Christ's perfect image, rather than its own flawed one.

In *Revelation*, Mrs. Turpin epitomizes the folk who believe they follow Christ, while judging others falsely. She fantasizes choosing her particular incarnation, allowed by Jesus to be 'white-trash or a nigger or ugly' (p. 637), in an echo of Origen's speculative theology of the pre-existence of souls. Mrs. Turpin creates a hierarchy of humanity, paralleling Dante's circles of Hell in the *Inferno*. She bases her schema on a combination of social class and perceived virtue.

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, but not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (p. 636)

She announces her gratitude that she's not like others, not a tax-collector or sinner.

When I think of all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different!' (p. 644)

Mary Grace, the angel sent to warn Mrs. Turpin of impending doom, speaks twice in the story: "I have ears," (p. 643) and "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," (p. 646). Her first statement reflects Jesus' comments about those with eyes who cannot see or ears yet cannot hear. He often ends His parables with an admonition: Let those with ears hear. Mary Grace's actual message from God to Mrs. Turpin identifies her as a beast rather than the angelic soul of her fantasy.

Flannery ends her story with a description of the communion of saints climbing upward through the circles of Hell, over the mountain of Purgatory and into Paradise. Mrs. Turpin's ultimate revelation is her vision of that pilgrimage where the last are first and the first last.

Bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (p. 654)

Is her story a recreation of **The Divine Comedy**? Is Mary Grace a Lazarus figure in the parable of the rich man and the beggar (Dives and Lazarus)? Is the intensification of praise ("You so sweet", then "You the sweetest lady I know", and "You the sweetest white lady I know") an echo of Eliot?

A Circle in the Fire

Many of Flannery O'Connor's stories involve travel, which can equate to pilgrimage or exile. Pilgrimage evokes free choice and intent, while exile evokes despair and enforcement. In her story **A Circle in the Fire**, Flannery presents three young men (Powell Boyd, Garfield Smith and W.T. Harper) who parallel the three young men from the **Book of Daniel** (Azariah, Hananiah and Mishael). The Book of Daniel contains two Deuterocanonical sections, both from the Greek Bible (Septuagint), and used in the Roman Catholic Church's lectionary, although not commonly used in Protestant denominations. The Cantic of the Three Young Men appears as a cantic in the Divine Office, for Morning Prayer or Matins, and so would be regularly sung in Catholic worship. Chances are Flannery was familiar with it from her days in Catholic Grammar School. The Cantic is a song of praise and glory to God from all of creation, similar to St. Francis' blessing. The three young men, who are more often called by their Babylonian names (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) sing this longest of all canticles while they dance in the center of a fiery furnace, protected by an angel who moistens them so that not a hair on their bodies is burned.

The **Book of Daniel** describes events in the life of Israel while in exile in Babylon. After the destruction of Solomon's Temple, Nebuchadnezzar carried all of the symbols of God's presence, as well as the royal families of Israel, off to slavery in Babylon. Psalm 137 indicates the extent of this devastation and loss to the Jewish people.

- 1 By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion.
- 2 As for our harps, we hung them up on the trees in the midst of that land.
- 3 For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
- 4 How shall we sing the Lord's song upon an alien soil?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill.
- 6 Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
- 7 Remember the days of Jerusalem, O Lord, against the people of Edom, who said, "Down with it! down with it! even to the ground!"
- 8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy the one who pays you back for what you have done to us!
- 9 Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock!

In this state of mind, the Israelites are expected to worship a golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar, the Chaldean king, has constructed. The God of Israel strictly forbids idolatry. Furthermore, the Israelites probably attribute their defeat and subsequent exile to the idolatry of previous kings of Israel. So Azariah and his companions see this temptation to secure a position in Chaldean society as

a test of their faith. And they choose to be thrown into the fiery furnace, knowing that Adonai would either rescue them or they would die there.

Powell, the leader of the three boys in Flannery's story, returns to Mrs. Cope's farm, in a sort of pilgrimage to his idyllic childhood home. Although he never owned the farm he considered it his own. Taken into exile when his father, Mrs. Cope's hired hand, left for Florida, Powell can talk only of the farm and the horses. He reverses the story of Azariah both by traveling in the opposite direction and in creating the fiery furnace that he and his friends dance in. Mrs. Cope functions as Nebuchadnezzar, with her demands for decorum, cleanliness and obedience. Her idol is the insurance policy (where your treasure is, there your heart is also). Her greatest fears are personal injury lawsuits, Sally Virginia's corruption and fire. The boys challenge all three potentials for devastating loss. Flannery foreshadows their dance in a circle of fire in three ways: a visual circle of ownership, casual smoking and the refusal of meat sacrificed to idols.

Powell sat down on the edge of one of the chairs and looked as if he were trying to enclose the whole place in one encircling stare. (p. 238)

The large boy was stretched out in the hammock with his wrists crossed under his head and the cigarette stub in the center of his mouth. He spit it out in an arc just as Mrs. Cope came around the corner of the house with a plate of crackers. She stopped instantly as if a snake had been slung in her path. "Ashfield!" she said. "Please pick that up. I'm afraid of fires." (p. 238)

They did not ask for food but Mrs. Cope could tell that they wanted it. "All I have is some cold guinea," she said. "Would you boys like some guinea and some sandwiches?"

"I wouldn't eat nothing bald-headed like a guinea," the little boy said. "I would eat a chicken or a turkey but not no guinea."

"Dog wouldn't eat one of them," the large boy said. (p. 240)

The notes indicate that Flannery likely intended the dancing in the fire to reflect the story of the three young men in **The Book of Daniel** (p. 1267). Yet she reverses the characters and plot. The three young men make a pilgrimage to the farm and set their own fire. Mrs. Cope, who represents Nebuchadnezzar, ends the story in exile, her misery equated to that of the Negroes, taken captive from Africa. The boys refuse to let her re-name them (Powell, not J.C. and Gawfield, not Ashfield), ignore her rules and decline to worship her idols. By failing to recognize her authority, they evade captivity completely. Is Flannery commenting on Scripture here as well as on modern society? Does this story illustrate the psychological connection between victim and oppressor, where each requires the other to survive and victims become oppressors when they gain power? Is freedom achieved by creating circumstances that could destroy us, so that we must risk our lives in order to save them?

Parker's Back

In her story *Parker's Back* Flannery O'Connor sets two characters in opposition: Sarah Ruth Cates, the daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, and Obadiah Elihue Parker, a young man fleeing God. He refuses to own his name, insisting on O.E., instead. Obadiah means slave, or servant, of the Lord, and the shortest book in the Hebrew Scriptures (so short it has a single chapter), is the one associated with this minor post-exilic prophet. Obadiah's vision is split into two sections. The first part is a diatribe against Edom, a tiny country so close in language and culture to Israel that it was hardly distinctive. Her crime was pride, and following the ancient doctrine of retribution, she will be brought low and punished for her destruction of Judah. This *oracle against the nations* genre appears also in the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The second half of the Book of Obadiah describes a utopian vision of the lands that Judah and Israel will then possess. It includes imagery of fire:

The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau stubble;
They shall burn them and consume them,
and there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau;
for the Lord has spoken. (Obadiah 18)

Immediately following the Book of Obadiah is another short book, of the prophet Jonah. Flannery quotes four books of the Bible in this story, all from the Hebrew Scriptures: Exodus (p. 665), Ecclesiastes (p. 660), Jonah (p. 672) and Jeremiah (p. 674). The reference from Exodus is to Moses and the burning bush. Moses was on the run from God, living incognito in Midian after killing an Egyptian man. It took a burning bush to get his attention, just as running the tractor into the tree got O.E.'s attention. God tells Moses to take off his shoes (O.E.'s are blown off him) because he's standing on holy ground. The quote from the very beginning of Ecclesiastes, comes from Sarah Ruth, in reference to his tattoos: 'Vanity of vanities'. Although Ecclesiastes was attributed to Solomon, its language and content place it between 300 and 200 B.C.E., its writer a teacher, not a king. Its tone is skeptical and pessimistic, full of paradox and with a focus that a contemporary Palestinian Christian preacher referred to as 'the Gospel of the Obvious':

When clouds are full, they empty rain upon the earth;
whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. (Ecclesiastes 11:3)

Like O.E., both Jonah and Jeremiah are reluctant prophets. The reference to Jeremiah also comes from the pregnant Sarah Ruth, on seeing the Byzantine icon of Christ on Parker's back.

For long ago you broke your yoke
and burst your bonds.
and you said, "I will not serve!"

On every high hill
and under every green tree
you sprawled and played the whore. (Jeremiah 2:20)

This passage plays on idolatry as adultery, a metaphor frequently found in the prophets. Both were forms of mixing. Adultery was contingent on the marital status of the woman alone and a violation of the husband's property rights. Sex with another man mixed their seed in her womb, so that any resulting children mixed lines. Idolatry was also a mixing, or cutting, of the praise, thanksgiving and honor due only to God, making all your future worship impure.

Sarah Ruth's baptismal heritage includes mixing as well. Sarah, mother of Isaac and wife to Abraham, allowed her servant Hagar to provide Abraham an earlier heir, Ishmael, claimed as the tribe originating Islam. Ruth the Moabite follows her widowed mother-in-law Naomi back to Bethlehem and contrives to marry Boaz, a kinsman of her dead husband, to provide security for them both. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all model the *chesed* (at once loving-kindness, mercy, piety and grace) of God. Ruth is a forebear of Mary, and Naomi's greeting on her return to Bethlehem is the same as Mary's complaint while holding Christ's body in Station XIII of the Stations of the Cross:

She said to them:
"Call me no longer Naomi (which means pleasant),
call me Mara (which means bitter),
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." (Ruth 1:20)

When the Lord sends Jonah to Nineveh, he turns and runs in the opposite direction. Going down to Joppa, the modern Jaffa, a great port city on the Mediterranean, he boards a ship for Tarshish. Interestingly, Joppa was the traditional landing site for pilgrims to the Holy Land up until the 20th century. God creates a great storm. Fearing for their lives, the sailors cast lots to discover who brought the evil among them. Jonah is discovered and admits that he worships the Lord of the Hebrews, causing even greater terror among the sailors. So they cast him overboard to ensure that they don't also fall under God's justice. Swallowed by a whale, Jonah ends up safe on shore in Israel after three days in its belly (considered a type of Christ's descent into Hell and resurrection after the third day). He goes to Nineveh to prophesy, believing that it will be in vain and great risk to his life. The people of Nineveh listen and truly repent, an unusual event in the Hebrew Scriptures. God saves them and Jonah, humiliated because he expected to see the destruction of Nineveh, sulks.

Does Flannery play on God's pursuit of Jonah with the tattoo of Christ on Parker's back?
Does Sarah Ruth's reaction mirror Jonah's surprise in Nineveh? Are Obadiah's tears Jonah's sorrow?

Everything That Rises Must Converge

This story is unique in using a proposition from physical science, as opposed to Scripture or theology. The title comes from the writings of a modern French Jesuit: paleontologist, theologian and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. His theological writings were banned until after his death in 1955, possibly because they applied the lessons of evolution to the human soul and verged on heresy, reflecting the hermetic thought that resurged in popularity among the artistic, literary and intellectual movements of the early 20th century. Teilhard's theory of noosphere and convergence is similar to Origen's speculation that, concurrent with the creation of a finite material world, God had also created a fixed number of souls, initially perfect. In time all of those souls had fallen, mainly out of satiety, boredom with perfection. Some fell quite far and became demons. Others fell into a middle ground and incarnated as humans. A few fell only a short distance and were the angels. Only Christ's soul freely choose to remain good and therefore could be incarnated as Savior. Teilhard, studying evolution, noted that even species starting from unrelated points and developing in divergent ways tended to converge. For example, both insects and birds developed wings, achieved flight and converged in the air. Applied to theology, this theory implies that our souls will converge with the divine as we work out our salvation through development of our human capacities.

Flannery O'Connor applies Teilhard's lens to the contemporary social condition in the US, most particularly to the South of the Civil Rights movement. Mainly led by clergy who took Christ's incarnation and the Jewish prophetic tradition seriously, the movement led to social and legal acknowledgement of a theological truth: the equal dignity and worth of every human being. In one sense, then, integration of the buses, central to Flannery's story, proves Teilhard. But as always with Flannery, things are not so simple. Although on a superficial level we see the convergence of black and white on the bus, each individual exists in juxtaposed isolation from each other. No true human connections emerge and the plot moves towards explosion: the Negro woman's rage, striking Julian's mother with her purse; Julian's mother's stroke and Julian's final explosion of grief. Flannery develops her characters, refusing to allow us to see them as mere illustrations of a doctrine: angels, humans or demons. The closing line of the story reverses our expectations: "The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow." Flannery's suggests hermetic poet W.B. Yeats' dream of chaos and entropy (*The Second Coming*), rather than his vision of evolution and completion (*There*).

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (*The Second Coming*)

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
There all the serpent-tails are bit,
There all the gyres converge in one,
There all the planets drop in the Sun. (*There, from Supernatural Songs*)

Flannery presents a mother who is innocent to the end, acting from her heart yet caught in a cruel philosophy of class and race, ultimately lacking in conviction. By contrast Julian idolizes reason (as opposed to intuition) and modernity (as opposed to tradition), exhibiting passionate intensity at its worst. Technically correct, he lacks compassion. Reversing the roles of parent and child, he's unable to recognize his love for, and need of, his mother until she's dead. These two characters embody Flannery's favorite oppositions of head and heart, scholasticism and humanism. In the end, neither defeats the other. Julian's mother dies and Julian is bereft.

In the Book of Genesis, Adam gives worth to God's creation by naming each creature. In Flannery's story only three people are named: Julian, the protagonist, Carver, the young black boy who mirrors Julian, and Caroline, the black servant of Julian's mother's youth who appears only in her dying memory. Writers use various techniques to invest their characters with dignity, to bring them to life. Naming occurs indirectly, in telling details of behavior or appearance. Is Flannery's irony and wit a form of love? Do her negative brushstrokes draw our attention away from even worse aspects of her characters? Has she achieved the monastic virtue of humility: knowing herself for exactly what she is and knowing others for exactly what they are, both mortal and gifted, so with unique and infinite value in the eyes of their Creator?

The Lamé Shall Enter First

Flannery O'Connor presents an apocalyptic vision of a world where the Pelagian theology of salvation by good works and free choice bumps up against the utter depravity of St. Augustine's worst nightmare: a boy who does evil for the sheer pleasure of it. Of the three main characters in the story (Sheppard, the father; Norton, his son; and Rufus Johnson, the prodigal), only Rufus sees himself clearly. During their first interview in the reformatory, Johnson revealed his grasp of human nature to Sheppard.

Johnson looked at him stonily. "I ain't asked for no explanation," he said. "I already know why I do what I do."

"Well good!" Sheppard said. "Suppose you tell me what's made you do the things you've done?"

A black sheen appeared in the boy's eyes. "Satan," he said. "He has me in his power." (p. 600).

Sheppard's assumption that Johnson's anti-social behavior is psychological compensation for his clubfoot utterly misses the point of humanity's fallen nature. Even Johnson's refusal of the new shoe fails to warn Sheppard. At their farewell he reveals that his deformed foot is a cross of glory.

"I lie and steal because I'm good at it! My foot don't have a thing to do with it! The lamé shall enter first! The halt'll be gathered together. When I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me, not that lying stinking atheist" (p. 631)

Johnson also perceives both Norton clearly. He recognizes an innocent child, teaches him about Jesus and protects him from Sheppard's accusation that he learned theft rather than generosity.

"No he ain't," Johnson said. "I was the one lifted it. He only watched. He can't sully himself. It don't make any difference about me. I'm going to hell anyway." (p. 626)

Johnson's relationship with Sheppard is more complex. He begins by correctly identifying that Sheppard, although an atheist, sees himself as a sort of savior, in the religion of good works.

When he was gone, Johnson raised his head and looked at Norton. The child looked back at him bleakly. "God, kid," Johnson said in a cracked voice, "how do you stand it?" His face was stiff with outrage. "He thinks he's Jesus Christ." (p. 609)

Curiously, he references the Sermon on the Mount. After demanding that Norton serve him a meal on first arriving at Sheppard's house, Johnson humiliates Norton. He eats in his bed and makes a mess, while Norton stoically watches. Then Johnson acknowledges his likeness to Sheppard.

When he finished, he wiped his hands on the sheet and gave Norton a long appraising stare. He appeared to have been softened by the service. "You're his kid all right," he said. "You got the same stupid face."

The child stood there stolidly as if he had not heard.

“He don’t know his left hand from his right,” Johnson said with a hoarse pleasure in his voice. (p. 604)

After the Beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel comes a set of elucidations of the old covenant demands, where Jesus overturns the letter of the law and goes for the original intent, the spirit. Concerning almsgiving, He says:

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1-4)

Sheppard, who should be caring for his own son, in their shared grief over the loss of Norton’s mother, nurtures instead a boy whose grandfather’s apocalyptic eschatology drives him to beat Johnson, then abandon him. He doesn’t know which of his hands is the one giving alms. Sheppard leaps at the opportunity to adopt Johnson legally, hoping the boy’s grandfather is dead.

“Naw,” Johnson said, “he ain’t dropped dead. I wisht he had.”
“Well where is he?” Sheppard muttered.
“He’s gone with a remnant to the hills,” Johnson said. “Him and some others. They’re going to bury some Bibles in a cave and take two of different kinds of animals and all like that. Like Noah. Only this time it’s going to be fire, not flood.” (p. 607)

Later, when Sheppard demands that Johnson put away the Bible and think for himself, Johnson names Sheppard:

Johnson’s eyes snapped. He backed his chair a little way from the table. “Satan has you in his power,” he said. “Not only me. You, too.” (p. 627)

And Sheppard finally sees the truth, too late to save the life of his son Norton.

He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. (p. 632)

The names Norton and Sheppard could be either surnames or given names. The narrator uses them as if they were baptismal names, however. Although Sheppard addresses Johnson by his baptismal name (Rufus), the narrator uses only Johnson, as if he were the only adult in the story. Is this a reversal of the Parable of the Prodigal Son? Is Norton’s relationship to his father actually one of generosity and forgiveness? Is Norton truly the only character who’s saved, as Johnson claims?

The Violent Bear it Away

Flannery O'Connor takes her title from the section of Matthew's Gospel describing Jesus' response to John the Baptist, when in prison. Although he did not know the time or mechanism, John surely knew that he would be put to death, as the Hebrew vocation of prophet is tenuous, at best. Jesus returns a message to his cousin, barely 6 months older, which will reveal Him as the Messiah. Jesus claims that His day is one of violence, rather than peace, one where people cannot perceive their true state of affairs or respond appropriately to the prophets:

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,
‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”
(Matthew 11:16-19)

Jesus not only foretells John's death and His own, but warns His disciples that they, too, will share in the suffering of the prophets. Oddly, for all of the concern with baptism and salvation in this novel, most of Flannery's Biblical references come from the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than the Christian. The notes include 19 Scriptural references, including 5 from the Torah (or Pentateuch), 6 from the Prophets, 6 from the Historical writings, 3 from the Gospels and 1 from the Book of Revelation. Several have multiple sources in the Hebrew Scriptures, creating overlap between the Prophetic and Historical Books. In addition she refers to Greek mythology, the desert ascetics of the early Church and a few evangelical hymn texts. Her focus on the Hebrew Scriptures implies a paradigm of righteous and persecuted prophets who fail, more often than not, to attract the attention of God's people. Their messages speak of fire, burning and cleansing, their visions warn of judgement.

Prophets are counter-cultural and Flannery opposes Mason and Francis Tarwater, with their rural qualities and simple literal faith, to Rayber. Also a prophet, he is urban, highly educated, stoic and agnostic. Rayber tries to disbelieve, but Christ woos him. Utterly against his will, he loves his idiot son with an emotion as overpowering as the fire driving Mason and Francis to prophesy.

He had known by that time that his own stability depended on the little boy's presence. He could control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus in Bishop, but if anything happened to the child, he would have to face it in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child. He had thought what he would have to do if anything happened to Bishop....He would have to anesthetize his life....He felt a sinister pull on his consciousness, the familiar undertow of expectation, as if he were still a child waiting on Christ. (pp. 442-443)

Reality reverses expectation. Rayber remembers his earlier failed attempt to drown Bishop in a lake and even admits it to Francis. Providing Francis with the opportunity to drown Bishop, he sends the two of them out in the boat together at night. He fears Francis will baptize Bishop, a ceremony Rayber finds humiliating and deceptive rather than purely meaningless. Francis, on the other hand, wants to drown Bishop and fears that he will baptize him, instead. In the end he does both and Rayber's response to Bishop's death reveals the depth of his own death in life.

He did not move. He remained absolutely still, wooden, expressionless, as the machine picked up the sounds of some fierce sustained struggle in the distance....The machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free....The one thing he knew, the one thing he was certain of was that no cry must escape him....He remained standing woodenly at the window....What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle....He knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that he had baptized the child even as he drowned him...He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed. (p. 456)

In a sort of parallel to Francis' arrogance, which prevents him from recognizing Satan in the stranger's voice whispering in his ear, Rayber sees himself as Jesus, a dangerous deception.

“God boy,” he said, “you need help. You need to be saved right here now from the old man and everything he stands for. And I'm the one who can save you.” With his hat turned down all around he looked like a fanatical country preacher. (p. 438)

Rayber is no more capable of saving another human than his enlightened psychology is capable of explaining his urge to love, to return to Christ. His excitement at the thought of Mason resembles that of lover for beloved. Perhaps his inability to love Christ stems from his stunted relationships: parents, sibling, wife and child. The desert ascetics, prophets and pole-sitters, whom Rayber claims as his ancestors, knew that to love as God loved meant first loving humanity.

The novel imitates Nathaniel Hawthorne's structure in **The Scarlet Letter**, another tale of love stunted by Puritanical religious fervor. Both books contain 12 chapters. Flannery adds a Trinitarian aspect: an introduction of thesis/antithesis in Section 1 (Chapters 1-3), exposition in Section 2 which climaxes in Bishop's death at the end of Chapter 9, and denouement in Section 3. Does she intend this reference? Hawthorne's novel ends with the revelation of a fiery brand, stigmata of sorts. Are Francis' singed eyes a parallel? Judas betrays and Peter denies Jesus, the one they both love. Do we inevitably kill those we love, as Oscar Wilde claims, if cowards, with a kiss, and if brave, with a sword? And is the converse true—can we assume that those we have killed we therefore love?

The Violent Bear it Away - Reprise

Flannery's characters in this novel reflect an interesting brand of American Protestantism. Clearly Mason and Francis Tarwater follow the Roman Catholic precept of infant baptism, which did not originate with the Early Church. A later accretion, it addressed the high infant mortality rate when doctrine around salvation formalized to require baptism. Many of the Protestant reformers, with the notable exceptions of Luther and Cranmer, discredited infant baptism. Returning to the practices of the Early Church, where valid baptism accompanied a mature declaration of faith, they reduced the seven sacraments to either two (baptism and the Lord's Supper) or three (baptism, the Lord's Supper and confession). Confirmation disappeared, and the English Puritans wrote polemical tracts against the belief that unbaptized infants were damned, as well as critiques of the impossible vows assumed by godparents.

On the continent, a few sects, such as the Anabaptists, actually rebaptized adults. Anabaptists left their heritage in Amish, Mennonite and Quaker communities. Opposition to infant baptism included the charge that it coerced and God does not operate by force. Anabaptists also followed the Early Church practice of refusing military service, avoiding the shedding of blood. They were extreme pacifists and because of their practice of re-baptizing and their refusal of military service, were systematically and severely persecuted as heretics by both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches, and executed for treason by the state. Modern followers of their tradition reject the death penalty and work in peace and justice ministries. In a 1955 letter to A., Flannery writes in strong terms about her opposition to force.

The Church is a mystical body which cannot, does not, believe in the use of force (in the sense of forcing conscience, denying the rights of conscience, etc. I know all her hair-raising history, of course, but principle must be separated from policy. I in principle do not believe in the use of force, but I might well find myself using it, in which case I would have to convict myself of sin. I believe and the Church teaches that God is as present in the idiot boy as in the genius....The only force I believe in is prayer (pp. 952-953).

Rayber's resistance to baptism for his son Bishop reflects a similar understanding. When Mason Tarwater showed up on Rayber's doorstep with Francis insisting that the Lord Jesus Christ sent him to baptize Bishop and that either he or Francis would accomplish it, Rayber countered:

“Listen,” he said, and the boy heard his taut voice turn low with a kind of subdued intensity, a passion equal and opposite to the old man's, “he'll never be baptized—just as a matter of principle, nothing else. As a gesture of human dignity, he'll never be baptized.” (p. 351)

Despite the oddity of his insistence on infant baptism, Mason Tarwater follows the reform pattern of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) and faith alone (Solafidianism). Consistent with the Calvinist

theology that eventually became the doctrine of most mainline Protestant churches (Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and the various national reform denominations), Mason reiterates a particularly Zwinglian tenet: we have no right to question God.

“You get away from here!” the nephew shouted, losing control of his voice. “Ask the Lord why He made him an idiot in the first place, uncle. Tell him I want to know why!”

The boy's heart was beating so fast he was afraid it was going to gallop out of his chest and disappear forever. He was head and shoulders out of the shrubbery.

“Yours not to ask!” the old man shouted. “Yours not to question the mind of the Lord God Almighty. Yours not to grind the Lord into your head and spit out a number!” (p. 351).

In Zwingli's eyes, it was not merely useless to question God but downright wrong. His doctrine of salvation was particularly inclusive, to avoid limiting God. Another of Flannery's letters offers Abraham as our prototype of a reasonable man in God's eyes: “willing to sacrifice his son and thereby show that he is in the image of God Who sacrifices His Son.” (p. 968) Rayber, in his own eyes the consummate reasonable man, performs two parodies of this sacrifice: first, when he fails to kidnap Francis back from his uncle and later in the unsuccessful drowning attempt with Bishop.

Flannery mentions a comment of George Clay's, relating her writing to a modern re-telling of the Old Testament, as the characters' relations are directly with God rather than with other people (p. 963). Again, this parallels the Protestant belief that humans require no other mediators than Christ. Intercessory prayer by priests on behalf of the dead, or by saints (especially by the Blessed Virgin Mary) on behalf of the living, is not only ineffective but harmful, as it interferes with the soul's direct communication with God through Christ. Most Protestants felt that God gave all humanity, not merely the clergy, vocations. Reform congregations participated in worship, prayer, preaching and prophecy, just as Mason educates Francis to listen for his own calling. Interestingly, a Catholic priest reviewing Flannery's collection **A Good Man is Hard to Find** in 1955 commented that despite her Catholic convictions, her “sensitivity appeared to be Lutheran” (p. 960). She disagreed.

Flannery's characters do live out a peculiarly Protestant theology, and Luther was one of the few Protestant theologians to retain infant baptism and the sacrament of confirmation. Her own systematic theological study centers on Roman Catholics. Do her characters' functional theologies stem from her observations? Is her practice Catholic but her theology Protestant? Is modern American culture so thoroughly Protestant that these distinctions are no longer possible?