

CHRISTIAN REALISM, NOMINALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM EXPOSED BY FLANNERY O'CONNOR IN HER NOVEL "THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY"

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Abstract

*Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was born in Savannah, Georgia into a devoutly Catholic Family. When She was fifteen, her father died of lupus - the same disease that was later to take her life. After she and her mother moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, she attended Georgia State College for Women, where she majored in sociology. She went on to graduate school at the University of Iowa, earning her Master's degree there, then spent time in a writers' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. She befriended and was encouraged by many writers of the day, including Robert Lowell. After five years of intensive labor and multiple revisions, she published her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952. The novel received great critical acclaim, though many readers found it grotesque and distasteful. In 1951 she was diagnosed with lupus, at which time she moved back to Milledgeville so her mother could care for her. Knowing that her time was probably short, she gave herself to writing and produced one more novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960).*

Keyword: *Baptism, Fundamentalism, Jesus Christ, Salvation, Heaven, Rationalism, Violence, Sin.*

Introduction

The Violent Bear It Away, published in New York in 1960, is Flannery O'Connor's darkly humorous Gothic novel about a Southern boy's spiritual awakening. It charts the spiritual and physical journey of fourteen-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater, raised by his great-uncle in the backwoods (place) of Alabama to be a prophet. Tarwater travels to the city, where he struggles against the need to deny his spiritual inheritance and the call of God. O'Connor paints a gruesome picture of Southern life and religious fundamentalism and parodies the blind self-assurances of modern secular thinking. The novel is unsettling because it offers no easy truths; its hero is an unlikable boy who learns that doing God's work causes violence, unreason, even madness. It is not, as might be expected, a parody of religious fanaticism, but a psychological study of the mysterious, frightening, and sometimes offensive nature of the religious calling. Stark religious symbolism and Biblical allusions unite to explore themes of spiritual hunger, faith versus reason, and the battle for the soul. O'Connor wrote the novel over eight years while suffering from lupus, publishing the first chapter as a story, "*You Can't Be any Poorer than Dead*," in 1955. Her last major work to be published in her lifetime, *The Violent Bear It Away* contains elements found in much of O'Connor's fiction.

The main action of *The Violent Bear It Away* is simple and occurs over seven days, but much of the novel consists of flashbacks that recall incidents in the lives of the main characters. This novel is divided into three sections, each covering a period in Francis Marion Tarwater's journey of spiritual self-discovery. As events are brought to mind through the memories of various individuals, the author provides insight into their psychological and spiritual natures, reveals the motivations behind their actions, and offers an intimate family history clouded by personal feelings, religious and intellectual beliefs, and emotional confusion.

“The Violent Bear It Away”

The Violent Bear It Away is a novel published in the 1960 by American author Flannery O'Connor. It is the second and final novel that she published. The first chapter of the novel was published as the story “*You Can't Be Any Poorer than Dead*” in the journal *New World Writing*, Volume 8 in October 1955. It is the story of Francis Tarwater, a fourteen-year-old boy who is trying to escape his destiny: the life of a prophet. Like most of O'Connor stories, the novel is filled with Catholic themes and dark images, making it a classic example of Southern Gothic literature. Flannery O'Connor was a devout Catholic, and *The Violent Bear it Away* reflects her religious beliefs. It is filled with religious imagery and themes, ranging from the power of passion to the dominance of destiny. O'Connor explained that in her stories violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Christians believe the imperfect is made perfect, people are saved by Jesus Christ.

This crucial shift in terms defines the dilemmas that both Tarwater and Rayber see themselves facing: a life of commitment to Christ or one of individual freedom and self-sufficiency. Indeed the concept of freedom is crucial to the novel, with two basic interpretations of the term defining the choices facing Tarwater and Rayber. On the one hand there is personal freedom, to act on one's own and to do what one wants; on the other there is Old Tarwater's type of freedom to be free in Christ and thus free from the grasp of the devil. Old Tarwater articulates this choice to his nephew: “You were born into bondage and baptized into freedom, into the death of the lord, into the death of the lord Jesus Christ” (VIBA,39,20). The story meant to reveal the destructive evil of personal freedom and the constructive necessity of freedom in Christ focusing on the struggle of Rayber and Tarwater. Through describing their efforts to achieve freedom the narrator means to the utter worthlessness of everything except one's relationship to Christ and in the end to celebrate the fundamentalist hero and his vision.

Both Tarwater and Rayber came under the strong fundamentalist influence of Old Tarwater During their childhoods, and both are later haunted by his vision to be free in Christ, not from Christ When They set out in life on their own. Old Tarwater has instilled in him a fundamentalist understanding of the world and history, beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment. Old Tarwater had schooled him in the evils that befall prophets; in those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the lord and burn the prophet clean; for he himself had been burned clean and burned clean again. He had learned by fire, Tarwater sees it as a sure sign of his election that while other children suffer through school, he is “left free for the pursuit of wisdom, the companions of his spirit Abel and Enoch and Noah and Job, Abraham and Moses, King David and Solomon, and all the prophets, from Elijah who escaped death, to John whose severed head struck terror from a dish” (VBIA,4,5,17)

Rayber's education by Old Tarwater was much briefer, but nonetheless significant. When Rayber was seven, Old Tarwater baptized him and instructed him in God's ways. Old Tarwater made sure that Rayber learned what he needed to in the four days the boy was and not the simpleton in town and that he would have to lead a secret life in Jesus until the day came when he would be able to bring the rest of his family around to repentance “He had made him understand that on the last day it would be his destiny to rise in glory in the lord Jesus” (VBIA,64).

If Rayber defeats Old Tarwater and his fundamentalism and a man who has lost his soul Tarwater believes that he achieves such a victory when he drowns Bishop. Although the words of baptism slip from his mouth as he drowns the boy, Tarwater sees them as just that a slip, their significance reversed by the violent murder. He views the drowning as the ultimate rejection of Old Tarwater and the beginning of his life of complete personal freedom.

Conclusion

The violence of the fundamentalist vision its distortion, its willfulness, its single-mindedness that closes off a good deal of reality, its lack of charity is thus affirmed in its opposition to the demonic voice, the taker of souls. Moreover, the violence of fundamentalism is shown to be necessary in the struggle for spiritual salvation. Given the fierceness of modern rationalism and

the tenacity of individual freedom, violence, the novel says the only way to propel people to look beyond their narrow visions. The title of the novel (drawn from Matthew 11: 12, From the day of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away) indicates it is the violent fundamentalist, whose fierce commitment to Christ carries them beyond a life centered in the here and now, who bear away the kingdom of heaven.

The power of the narrative voice and its message is overwhelming in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and there is very little resistance to it. The ideal of Christian charity, significant to O'Connor's Catholic vision and present in a number of her works as a counterforce to fundamentalist rage, receives very little emphasis. The character who seems to suggest a more charitable and less extreme form of Christian vigor Buford Munson is a minor character whose presence does little to alter the fundamentalist thrust of the novel. Buford, who chides Tarwater for his failure to bury his great-uncle and who completes the task when Tarwater leaves, can merely back away, impressed, from the consuming power of Tarwater's vision at the end of novel.

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