

Quest for infinite love argumentative essay

[Environment](#), [Water](#)



Abstract

Harry Ashfield and Danny Gospel languish in empty, meaningless lives. Both experience “ tipping points” that inspire them to seek the Kingdom of God. Rejecting their pasts, they embark on spiritual journeys that lead them to sublimate everything to their quests for salvation. What follows are uniquely intimate and personal experiences that bring them to an understanding of salvation and the healing love of God.

Seeking Salvation in ‘ The River’ and ‘ Danny Gospel’

For Christians, salvation is a product of constant striving for a boundless and divine source of love. It is a spiritual phenomenon in perpetual motion. In Flannery O’Connor’s *The River* and David Athey’s *Danny Gospel*, salvation is a quest that sets Harry Ashfield and Danny Gospel on unique spiritual paths. For Harry, who’s never known love, baptism is his route to a better world. For Danny, the quest for love takes him on a wild and seemingly aimless journey that reflects the penitent’s tortured and winding search for God. Worldly concerns are stripped away as both are compelled to follow their destinies. Salvation comes after an intimate and highly personal journey.

O’Connor’s Harry Ashfield gives us an image of the lost soul responding to a powerfully felt but imperfectly understood yearning. For him, the act of baptism is more than a rebirth into Christ; it is a manifestation of his desire for a spiritual cleansing, which must lead to a new identity, a new form. “ The story of the baptism of the young boy Harry Ashfield by the fundamentalist preacher bespeaks the mystery of original sin and the human desire to overcome alienation and selfish betrayal” (Kilcourse, 135). Harry

gradually awakens from his alienation and isolation to the understanding that he's striving toward something he knows instinctively is far better. Kilcourse interprets the water color that the babysitter, Mrs. Connin, considers while waiting for the boy to be the representation of an unsettled life. The picture's "black lines crossing into broken panes of violent colors" are a reflection of the boy's chaotic existence. When we discover that Harry doesn't recognize Jesus in the other picture, O'Connor has set the stage for Harry's transformation. His road to salvation will be less a cleansing of sins and more of a personal evolution.

After his baptism, Harry goes so far as to change his name in celebration of the gift of life he has received. We are left with the impression that Harry's experience has been spiritually liberating and powerfully renewing. He adopts the name "Bevel" in honor of the preacher, Bevel Summers, who baptizes Harry into the faith, a reputed healer whom Mrs. Connin told him was no ordinary preacher (Kirk, 111). His new name is significant on several levels: it is a word describing something a carpenter does. It also suggests a transformative space, such as the beveled surface Harry traverses from the bank down to the river, from his old life to salvation (Ibid, 111). Of course, it is in the river that Harry's metamorphosis takes place, where he leaves behind the formless existence of life with his neglectful family, a kind of spiritual limbo or purgatory. Harry has had to learn it all from the ground up, having known neither parental love nor the saving grace of God's love.

The morning after his baptism, Harry carries out an angry rejection of the life he has shed. Emptying ashtrays on the floor, he smears the cigarette ash

into the carpet, bringing to mind Christ's physical rejection of worldly things in driving the money lenders from the temple. But there is a far more important rejection/acceptance to come. Having acquired a new understanding of himself and his search for God, Harry experiences an epiphany. As he lies on his back, looking at the shoes that were made damp during his spiritual birth in the life-giving waters of the river, Harry understands that the resolution of all his problems, to all the distress and anxiety of his life, lies in the river. " With excellent untutored logic, he reasons that he won't have to return to the deadly lovelessness of his parents' apartment if he plunges himself into the waters wherein, as Summers told him, there is life" (McMullen & Peede, 200). O'Connor gives us a truly poignant example of " childlike" faith, in which Harry determines that if he returns to the river and remains under the water, he will take his place among those who are counted. By submerging himself in the " river of pain" as the preacher called it, Harry will bring his journey to an end. He will have achieved salvation (Lewis, 171).

For Harry, there's only one place left to go. Having become " Bevel," he has symbolically crossed his own River Jordan. If by being baptized he partook of the blood of Jesus, he decides he can become one with God by becoming one with the river. " There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' blood," the preacher assured him (O'Connor, 162). Jesus' blood is the source of salvation, and the red water of the river, where the red clay earth and the light of the Sun come together, is where he will find " the Kingdom of Christ" (Ibid, 170). And so Harry walks resolutely into the waters of salvation. Rejecting the " temptation" of Mr. Paradise, Harry embraces his

spiritual destiny at last. Ultimately, his new-found identity was salvation itself. There was no question as which path he would follow. “ Believe Jesus or the devil!” the preacher had exhorted, and Harry/Bevel takes him at his word. Salvation is his at last.

The notion of quest lies at the heart of Danny Gospel as well. Properly speaking it is a vision quest. Inspired by the specter of a beautiful woman, Danny sets off on a journey for happiness and fulfillment. It’s a “ shaggy dog” story that originates with a tantalizing precursor of Heaven, a taste of salvation that Danny will search far and wide to capture. The second the mysterious woman disappears in front of him, Danny feels compelled to search for her. As he sets out on his strange odyssey, he has an agreeable yet indefinable feeling of contentment. The Bible is replete with stories of men pushed to search for something they don’t understand, even things they find strange, inexplicable and frightening. The quest is a rejection of the rational and orderly and the embracing of feeling and instinct. It’s a dreamlike state, which Irwin writes encompasses “ complex moments of encounter and manifestation that surpass the constraints of purely rational thought, because dreaming engages...deeper and more subtle potentials” (Irwin, 1994).

The story of the Magi offers a well-known example of individuals whose lives are mysteriously rerouted. The story tells us they were drawn to find something that had been foretold, something uncertain but powerful enough to risk a long and perilous journey. Danny is in this tradition: he doesn’t comprehend what’s happening to him, he just knows it feels right somehow.

Thoroughly captivated, he feels that his “ life was like a favorite book now turning to the happiest chapters. And I imagined a heavenly wedding, and everything in the world was like the first day of creation, as if every death specter that had plunged into me since baptism had been kissed clean away” (Athey, 2008). Just as the river had cleansed Harry Ashfield, Danny is purged of lifelessness. And just as Harry sought his own route to the Kingdom of Christ, Danny sets off to realize the promise of his own redemption.

Danny recognizes the insignificance of his former life, the one he now knows he is turning away from. “ At the age of twenty-five, I felt lost and worthless, walking in circles, day after day, enduring the sweet old ladies, the traipsing college girls, and the whims of every sort of weather” (Athey, 2008).

Everything changed that morning the woman in white appeared in his bedroom. Having set out after her, he contemplates returning to work and the relative comforts of his day-to-day existence. All he must do is deny the kiss of the strange woman. But it occurs to Danny that his strange new compulsion will not permit him to stop: there’s no turning back now; his life lies ahead of him. “‘Salvage?’ I whispered as I sped down the road. ‘ What’s left to salvage?’” (Ibid). As he ponders the answer to this question, he looks up and sees a flock of birds wheeling overhead, as though it were a flight of angels portending mystery. The setting suddenly inspires Danny to sing his favorite spiritual: “ I got wings, you got wings. All of God’s children got wings. When I get to heaven, gonna put on my wings. I’m gonna fly all over God’s heaven” (Ibid). Danny now has his wings with which to seek after his salvation.

Danny Gospel isn't a contrite tale told with head bowed, in a quiet and reverent voice. Athey's storytelling is boisterous and exuberant, even controversial – it's fitting because this is not a " meek" subject. Passion plays are never tidy or neatly appointed phenomena, and passion is what consumes Danny. The passion he experiences in the wake of his luminous vision is a reckless thing that won't be stemmed. It is very much akin to being in love: for good or bad, nothing will prevent it being played out. Indeed, love is what's at stake. Like Harry Ashfield searching for the perfect love of God out of the wasteland that was his parent's home, Danny is literally looking everywhere for love. As Athey stated in a *Writer's Digest* interview, Danny is a Quixote, a character who is " sort of like Dante, a pilgrim stumbling toward ultimate love" (*Writer's Digest*, 2008).

Athey would have us understand that finding salvation is a messy business. There is no more personal or subjective experience. A priest or minister may preach about salvation as a kind of objective spiritual touchstone or point of reference but can never know what it means to the individual on a purely emotional level. Harry Ashfield and Danny Gospel both pursue the true light according to the dictates of their consciences and their strong emotional investment in finding something meaningful and lasting. Temporal concerns fall away as both come to see that salvation is a state of grace that holds no place for the worldly.

References

- Athey, D. *Danny Gospel*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers. 2008.
- Friedman, M. J. *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery*

O'Connor. New York, N. Y: Fordham University Press. 1977.

Irwin, L. ' Dreams, Theory, and Culture: The Plains Vision Quest Paradigm.'
American Indian Quarterly. 18. 1994.

Kilcourse, G. Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination: A World with
Everything Off Balance. Mahwah, N. J: Paulist Press. 2001.

Kirk, C. A. Critical Companion to Flannery O'Connor: A Literary Reference to
Her Life and Work. New York, N. Y: Facts on File. 2008.

McMullen, J. H. and Peede, J. P. Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor:
Sacrament, Sacramental and the Sacred in her Fiction. Macon, GA: Mercer
University Press. 2007.

O'Connor, F. ' The River.' Collected Works. New York, N. Y: Library of
America. 1988.

Writer's Digest. Novel Journey: David Athey Interview. 2008.