

# Flannery o'connor's narratives on death



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## Death's Inevitable and Merciful Grasp

Flannery O'Connor is noted for her stories about religion. "The River" presents fundamentalists, blasphemers, individuals with no interest in faith, and, in Harry/Bevel, a personality living in utterly ignorant innocence concerning faith. A major concern for O'Connor during this story is spiritual content and also the extent to that a person has to perceive the complexities of spiritual dogma thought to be religious. Throughout the story, O'Connor utilizes her southern background and religious beliefs to portray the controversial aspects of Christianity through the depiction of the death and salvation of Harry, importance of faith, and the questions of morality raised.

To assert that O'Connor owed a great deal to Southern fundamentalists is not to deny the significance of her Catholicism. Certainly O'Connor's Catholicism was the primary shaping force in her thought and vision; but existing alongside it in her consciousness was a profound respect for and identification with Southern fundamentalists. The tension between these two systems of belief, together with that resulting from the secularism of her Southern heritage, in large part explains the great power of her fiction. At the heart of O'Connor's best work, "one finds a violent wrenching of extremes not only between secular and divine, but also between two diametrically opposed systems of faith" (Brinkmeyer Jr. 2). For obvious reasons, O'Connor's fictional style is much less explicit than that of most evangelical preachers. Yet her underlying strategies of shock and distortion are very similar to the evangelist's in terms of technique and intention. Like the preacher, O'Connor seeks (on one level) to unsettle her audience's rational sensibilities, to make her readers both admit their limitations and

see the necessity of making a choice for or against Christ. To convey her Catholic vision, " O'Connor turned not to the pieties of ordinary religious fiction (" pious trash" she once called it) but to the severe techniques of the fundamentalist preachers of her homeland who sought in their sermons to manipulate their audiences so that they became consumed by the spirit" (Brinkmeyer Jr. 4). " The River" is best understood if approached from O'Connor's scriptural reading of the story. Since her faithless readers would not know that Jesus' death makes any difference, O'Connor shows how the tragic destruction of a child of our time participates in a death that bestows the newness of life and Schenck finds that only O'Connor's belief in the Catholic doctrine of the innocence of children, " can turn this story into one of salvation, and that belief is surely not shared by all readers." (Zornado 6) Even believers might question Harry's innocence ... he resembles most O'Connor characters who ... " dupe themselves by creating a new identity based on a false understanding of language" (Zornado 8). When critics sympathetic to O'Connor's own reading of her work approach these stories, they have claimed that the ceremonial imagery operates as positive signifiers that directly represent, in a mysterious form of spiritual regeneration, the mysteries of the redemptive power of Christ. However, as O'Connor well knew, the ceremonial imagery, the religious sign systems employed in the text do not and cannot embody the sacraments. The literary representation of baptism functions as an outward literary sign of an outward ceremonial sign meant to embody the invisible inward workings of grace. What this means is this: The reader's experience of O'Connor's attempt to " document" baptism, " is not unlike entering a hall of mirrors." (Zornado 9) Which is the real one and which the simulacrum? Baptism is experienced in <https://assignbuster.com/flannery-oconnors-narratives-on-death/>

the flesh, the ritual proper is nevertheless once removed from one's own senses because it exists as a visible ritual meant to communicate invisible things. Harry received grace by faith and his desire to be clean and start anew.

In "The River," the family name of "Ashfield" stands in stark contrast to the natural environment where the boy seeks and finds his death, "the strange woods that he has never seen before—the woods a symbol of the mystery of religion,—and the muddy river in which he seeks the love he has never known" (Garson 7). As a ritual, the baptism in "The River" symbolizes connectedness on various levels. Baptismal rites are closely connected to initiation and death rites; O'Connor clearly draws on this interrelatedness by replicating the first baptism in the later scene of Bevel's drowning. The rite of baptism makes use of water, which has biblical symbolic meanings, for instance to the passage from death to life through the Red Sea, as well as wider references, as for instance to the waters of life in the womb. "Critical readings of the baptism scene in "The River" generally focus on its religious meanings, often examining it as a specific Roman Catholic sacrament" (Visser 12). As "The River" enters the later stages of its story, much depends on Mrs. Connin's ability to convince the Ashfields of the transformational meaning of the boy's baptism. However, the pervasive mood among the party-makers is uninterested boredom. Mrs. Connin's attempted explanation of the boy's new identity may be regarded as a cultural performance, which Alexander describes as "the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation". As a cultural performance, Mrs. Connin's speech fails

because it falls on deaf ears. " The evaluative standard of cultural performance is not truth or accuracy, but " felicitous" and " infelicitous" (Visser 15) From this perspective, the truth value of Mrs. Connin's religious notions is not the point, but the fact that her explanation of the boy's ritual experience as a passage to a new social identity is rejected. The reading experience of witnessing this infelicitous cultural performance increases our awareness that in the Ashfields's barren mindset, there is no connection possible between the boy's new experience and his home situation.

" The River" remains an early example of O'Connor's power as a writer. In the story O'Connor weaves a narrative that draws its energy from the combination of her theological sensibility and her philosophic skepticism. The result is a short story dense in its weave of biblical allusions, Protestant Southern Baptist traditions and life and death imagery. The story represents what might be considered a " stress test" of the relationship between faith and morality: Harry/Bevel's desire for baptism also reads as a desire for death and Harry/Bevel's death reads as a desire for peace, relief, love. The ending of the story challenges both Protestant and Roman Catholic definitions of baptism that remain external to the narrative, and at the same time leaves Harry/Bevel's fate so over-determined as to make it seem almost ambiguous." The River" exemplifies the tense relationship in O'Connor's own literary sensibility, " between the notions of art as positive incarnation and her intuitive suspicion that mystery could only be communicated negatively" (Zornado 14). O'Connor says as much in a letter when she writes, " Its almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively" (Habit 144). Incidents of trickery and

deception can also be observed in the short story, the River. In this story, not only does Harry misconstrue the concept of God and Baptism, he also utilizes forms of trickery and deception. This can be observed in the first scene when he lies to the babysitter informing her that his name is Bevel. Later, he deceives his baby sitter again when he steals her most valued and prized possession- the Christian children's book and family heirloom. " He had managed to get the book inside his inner lining without her seeing him... now it made his coat hang down a little farther on one side than the other" (The River). The trickery and deception by Harry indicates that his lies and thievery are his shortcomings and his fall from grace. Although Harry was just a child, he also falls victim to his own trickery or misunderstanding, " Like the other characters Harry had faults that indicate the plural dynamics of good and evil not only in people but greater society" (Robinson 13). Further, to suggest that his baptism provides a hopeful conclusion to " The River" reveals more of a particular reader's perspective on baptism than the story actually provides. For example, the death imagery surrounding Mrs. Connin, the river, the preacher, and baptism itself undermine any possible reading that Harry/Bevel " has gone to a better place." Certainly, from a New Testament perspective, baptism represents a literal death of the old self and a rebirth of one's spiritual existence. This might help explain the plentiful death imagery that wends its way through the story, and by contrast, the lack of any substantive life imagery at the story's end. For instance, though Mrs. Connin clearly has more sympathy for Harry/Bevel's needs as a child, she is also associated with death. After picking him up, almost saving him from the dead cigarette butts and leftover debris from his parents' house, Mrs. Connin takes him to her house, providing food and some fake

mothering. Nevertheless, the ease with which he deceives her reveals a simple yet fundamental oversight. She does not know his name. Later, on the bus, “ she lay her head back and as he watched, gradually her eyes closed and her mouth fell open to show a few long scattered teeth, some gold and some darker than her face; she began to whistle and blow like a musical skeleton” (“ The River”). Mrs. Connin’s catering takes on a decidedly superficial aspect, suggesting negligence, but of the kind she had grown cleverly accustomed to, situating the child in such a way that she could catch up on her sleep, never considering that her fatigue might encroach on her ability to care for him. Her inattention here suggests yet another moment of abandonment the child has suffered, first from his parents, now by her. In a sense, she asks the child to take care of himself, to not leave her lap, “ while she blows like a comic, smiling prefigurement of his death” (Zornado 25)

By the end,“ The River” leaves the reader bewildered, beating against a thematic current flowing in two contradictory directions at once: We are pulled by our own preconceptions of baptism—encouraged in part by O’Connor’s own authorial comments suggesting the efficacious release baptism offers, which leaves the reader with a reductive conclusion: Harry/Bevel is better off dead. At the same time our moral and theological compass spins out of control by the simple, bare fact of Harry Ashfield’s death-by-misunderstanding. How can the story support, thematically or otherwise, that Harry’s death is a benefit to him? Yet can a Christian dare to presume otherwise? O’Connor’s attempt at a sacramental narrative dramatizes his struggle—and our own—between intellectual knowledge and

the ineffable mystery found only through experience. If the story succeeds at all, it does so as a kind of aphorism: The story demands a misreading of the manners of baptism, and cautions the reader at the same time against such an endeavor.

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