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A Lesson in the Garden of Good and Evil

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Flannery O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, revolves around a young boy named Tarwater. Throughout the novel, Tarwater struggles to choose between the old domineering ways of his backwoods, ignorant, great-uncle Mason Tarwater, and the more modern ideology of his city dwelling, well educated, uncle George Rayber. After Mason's death, Tarwater may choose Mason's prophetic interest and baptize Rayber's invalid son, Bishop, or choose Rayber's secular path to personal freedom. The child's name, the combination of "tar" and "water," acts as a physical representation of Tarwater's alternatives. He can follow the black, sticky path Mason's skewed, overzealous religion has laid before him, or he can try the clear, personal, refreshing freedom Rayber's secular beliefs may offer. O'Connor's stories always have a religious agenda and display O'Connor's own devoutness. In effect, O'Connor's readership tends to apply a positive association to Christian characters. In this case, however, Mason is associated with God, yet he is a negative character; likewise, Rayber is an atheist, yet his character is more positive. It is important to note that here these associations are related to Mason and Rayber's influence of young Tarwater rather than an association meant to judge the morality of the character. Tarwater's story is one that encompasses more than a religious choice: his dilemma is also very humanistic. Young Tarwater is influenced by both modern and old-fashioned values alike. O'Connor encourages this multiple-choice reading by making the religious lines in this story hazy. It is not clear who is good and who is evil. Ultimately, the reader is carried along with Tarwater on his journey as he, and the reader, must decide whether Mason or Rayber is better for his well being. The argument, then, is bounded by a religious read and a non-religious read. Since most critics focus on religion when discussing O'Connor's novels, it is necessary to explore the humanistic perspective. Additionally, the non-religious discussion of the novel will focus on the quality of influence on the young child by Mason and Rayber rather than Tarwater's final decision.

Tarwater's choice is just as much a personal one as it is a spiritual one. Most critics categorize Mason as a true prophet and Rayber as an ineffectual scientist. Furthermore, they claim that Tarwater embraces his fate, following Mason's prophetic footsteps, when he baptizes Rayber's son Bishop. However, Bishop's baptism is actually a murder and therefore cannot be read as an act of God. Richard Giannone writes that "Tarwater dedicates himself to God..." and that "...the mark on Tarwater's head dis-

tinguishes him as a person of God..." (151). O'Connor's narrator, however, offers the audience a different insight into Tarwater's righteousness: "In the darkest, most private part of his soul, hanging upsidedown like a sleeping bat, was the certain, undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life" (342). Giannone also writes, "[t]he headstrong boy is too weak to be loved and too afraid to love..." until he is mentally broken by the rape at the end of the novel (151). It is more likely that Tarwater is incapable of being a prophet rather than he is incapable of being loved, for love is a human response. Furthermore, it is an emotion that is both spiritual and intellectual, sacred and secular, and therefore, could have been offered by either Mason or Rayber. However, only Rayber offers anything close to love. In essence, young Tarwater is simply searching for a way out of complete solitude; he has a strong desire to belong, and that desire can be fulfilled with love. While Mason may think he is offering the greatest love of all, through Christ, he actually provides Tarwater with a skewed perspective of religion that will turn him away from not only Mason but also from God.

O'Connor works carefully by giving Rayber and Mason positive and negative qualities, respectively, to invert our typical associations within her fiction. For example, Mason, who is a negative influence on the child, is associated with God. O'Connor reinforces the inversion by portraying Rayber as a positive influence, a good father figure with a positive personal religion. O'Connor appropriately tags Mason with a negative presence, even a satanic one, and portrays him as a bad influence on young Tarwater by making him a failed father figure and equipping him with a negative and manipulating religious agenda. That is not to say that O'Connor approves of Rayber's secular vision, but Mason's approach has left a bad taste for God on young Tarwater's spiritual palate. It cannot be easily argued that O'Connor supported an atheist and damned a Christian, but it can be argued that Mason's atrocious and violent "Truth" is more damaging, in every way, than Rayber's. As a result, Rayber is the best alternative for the child's well-being.

Mason Tarwater's "strange and terrifying" (343) religion has ruined any aspirations Tarwater had of becoming a true prophet, thus, also tainting his hopes of belonging to Jesus. Mason's zeal has enlightened Tarwater but not in the way Mason had hoped. Tarwater has come to believe that Mason's command to baptize Bishop is a trick: "The school-teacher was no more than a decoy the old man had set up to lure him to the city to do his unfinished business" (387). Tarwater is sadly disappointed that his great-uncle has instilled hatred for his uncle in him on the grounds of revenge. This betrayal destroys Tarwater's faith in Mason and his supposed employer, Jesus. Mason's failure, though, is appropriate if he is read as a false prophet.

Mason loads his "Truth" on impressionable Tarwater, who "shift[s] the burden... like a cross on his back" (379). Mason's influence has done nothing but harden young Tarwater, who has become "mean looking" (426). It seems that Tarwater should be safe in his haven of Powderhead with no temptations to bring him close to evil. But Mason is his only stimulus and his prophetic calling has interfered with his raising an individual. Tarwater recognizes his impending loss of self and tries to fight it: "He [Jesus] don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me" (335). Sadly though, while Tarwater may outwardly appear to reject Mason's control, he has been so psychologically damaged that he questions his rebellion: "he had a [. . .] forboding that he was about to step into a trap laid for him by the old man" (385). Tarwater is afraid that if he doesn't comply with the prophet's commands, he will suffer God's wrath since Mason has divulged certain violent stories from the Old Testament meant to scare Tarwater into doing Mason's work. As Rayber explains, "children are cursed with believing" (376). At least Rayber is not so disillusioned that he cannot provide a good home for Tarwater: "He was not afraid of love in general. He knew the value of it and how it could be used. He had seen it transform in cases where nothing else had worked" (401). There is no evidence that Mason is capable of love, a condition necessary to raise a mentally healthy child. Still, because Rayber is associated with the modern man, an embodiment of intellect, and a city dweller, experienced O'Connor readers tend to read him as a negative character.

It is easy to condemn Rayber if, as Mason does, we criticize his belief system. Mason mostly despises Rayber's choice to replace spirituality with education. Mason defines Rayber's academic endeavors as "planting traps around the house and watching him [Mason] fall into them" (331). He sees academia as completely sinful and allows his personal bitterness towards Rayber to develop into a prophetic quest rooted in revenge:

The stench of his [Rayber's] behavior had reached heaven and the Lord Himself had rescued the old man. He had sent him a rage of vision, had told him to fly with the orphan boy to the farthest part of the backwoods and raise him up to justify his Redemption. The Lord had assured him a long life and he had snatched the baby from under the schoolteacher's nose and taken him to live in the clearing, Powderhead, that he had title to for his lifetime (332).

Even though Rayber is associated with the city, usually a place of evil in O'Connor's fiction, it is actually Mason who is a negative image.

But will young Tarwater be able to decipher between good and evil now that his perception has been polluted by old Tarwater's skewed perspectives?

Mason Tarwater's death releases young Tarwater into the metaphorical middle of the forked tree both he and Rayber encounter on Mason's land making the metaphor a reality. One trunk symbolizes Mason Tarwater's religious fervor and the other Rayber's atheistic indifference: "He stopped with a hand on either trunk, he leaned forward through the fork and looked out at an expanse of crimson sky" (474). The crimson sky is appropriate because red is associated with heat, symbolizing the burn Mason's pressure has left on Tarwater even posthumously. It is a strong color that conjures up a range of seemingly conflicting emotions from passionate love to violence and warfare. Red is representative of both passion and the Devil. His hands touching both sides of the tree symbolize the physical lingering of Mason's ranting and the newfound opportunity available in Rayber. "The boy would go either his way or old Tarwater's and he was determined to save him for the better course. Although Tarwater claimed to believe nothing the old man had taught him, Rayber could see clearly that there was still a backdrag of belief and fear in him keeping his responses locked" (402). When Tarwater first meets Rayber after Mason's death, "he began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle [Mason] had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance" (353). So it is Rayber, not Mason, who offers Tarwater freedom and a more loving environment. Although Mason claimed that salvation provided freedom and love, he was wrong—his methods were too controlling.

While most criticism defends Mason and labels him as a true prophet, the reader cannot easily trust or sympathize with Mason because he is negative and violent towards young Tarwater. Sympathy is difficult since Mason's treatment of Tarwater is akin to the abuse a sadistic father would give to his son. Mason's abuse is often inspired by Tarwater's occasional rationality, especially when it disproves his great-uncle's uncompromising agenda. This first item on Mason's to-do list requires Tarwater to provide Mason with a proper burial. Mason leaves Tarwater explicit directions on how to dispose of his body when he is gone. In doing so, he subjects Tarwater to inappropriate situations, such as the boy seeing his relative sitting in his own coffin. When Tarwater reminds Mason that "The dead don't bother with particulars," speaking of the way in which he will be buried, Mason "grab[s] the front of his overalls and pull[s] him up against the side of the box and glare[s] into his pale face. 'The world was made for the dead,'" he growls, "and he release[s] him with a laugh" (339). Though Tarwater only shows a "slight quiver" his defensive words make clear he feels attacked: "The schoolteacher is my uncle. The only

blood connection with good sense I'll have and a living man and if I wanted to go to him, I'd go" (339). Sadly, Tarwater uses the same revengeful manipulation that Mason has used against him. Tarwater knows mentioning anything positive about Rayber will threaten Mason's plan. Mason needs Tarwater to complete his task of baptizing Bishop against Rayber's wishes when he is gone, a task that cannot be completed if Tarwater likes Rayber.

Mason's intention was to raise a prophet, but that intention was generated by the desire to revenge Rayber, not by devoutness to God, or most importantly, not because of his love for Tarwater:

His uncle never seemed to be aware of the importance of the way he had been born, only of how he had been born again. He would often ask him why he thought the Lord had rescued him out of the womb of a whore and let him see the light of day at all, and then why, having done it once, He had gone and done it again, allowing him to be baptized by his great-uncle into the death of Christ, and then having done it twice, gone on and done it a third time, allowing him to be rescued by his great-uncle from the schoolteacher and brought to the backwoods and given a chance to be brought up according to the truth. It was because, his uncle said, the Lord meant him to be trained for a prophet, even though he was a bastard, and to take his great-uncle's place when he died (356).

Mason's uncaring ways are, at least, consistent; he took the child by force without caring about Tarwater's family. After Mason discovers that Rayber has blasphemed his prophetic calling by saying that "he called himself" (341), he decides to kidnap the child and brainwash him into completing his mission, which is to baptize Bishop against his father's wishes. Mason's influence becomes negative when he no longer cares about Tarwater's well-being. Once he is in control of Tarwater, he takes no interest in his person, abilities, wants or desires. So, Rayber is correct when he tells Tarwater that "old men are selfish. You got to expect the least out of them" (356). When Mason begins to feel that he is losing his power over Tarwater "he would wander into the woods and leave Tarwater alone in the clearing, occasionally for days, while he thrashed out his peace with the Lord" (334, emphasis added). Mason's physical abandonment parallels his emotional abandonment of the boy.

Mason exploits Tarwater's unfortunate past, such as his parent's abandonment of him, in order to make the child dependent on God, and on Mason as a narrator of God's will. However, Mason schools Tarwater

as a replacement for himself, thus offering Tarwater nothing outside of his skewed direction. Mason positions himself as Tarwater's savior, claiming, "you were born into bondage and baptized into freedom" (342). Mason considers himself a liberator because he is the one who baptized Tarwater; notice that Mason gives no credit to God. However, Mason's freedom fosters "not a constructive independence but one that was irrational, backwoods, and ignorant" (393). Thus, Mason's freedom is false; he makes Tarwater think that being a prophet will free him but really, it will only enslave him to Mason's tradition. Mason's corrupt manipulation inflicted on Tarwater what Rayber calls a "false guilt" (463). Mason tries to encourage Tarwater's cooperation by making him feel guilty, but Tarwater feels indifferent to Mason's belief because he hasn't experienced any benefit. Instead, "the child would feel a sullenness...a slow warm rising resentment that his freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord" (342). Since Tarwater only knows Mason's version of Jesus, he has no way of knowing if it is true or not. So he resents his freedom, Mason, and Jesus in one sweeping breath. His encounter with religious freedom will later ruin his chances of individual freedom, which Rayber can offer him. Who can blame the boy for not wanting to accept another version of freedom when the first one turns out to be more enslaving than iron shackles? Thus, Mason's negativity has actually turned Tarwater away from religion. Tarwater is just as much afraid of Mason's religion as he is afraid of him. But, of course, O'Connor must have an opposing force. To parallel Mason's abusive, controlling, violent, and stifling fatherhood, she introduces Rayber.

Rayber is sympathetic, understanding, gentle, and giving. Rayber, much like Tarwater, must work to resist the old man's psychological damage. Rayber's sympathy is intensified by his own experience with the wicked ways of old Tarwater, and his empathy is strong enough to outlast young Tarwater's defiant attitude. Rayber's father-like treatment of Tarwater is perhaps the best example of his positive influence. He knows how lucky Tarwater is to have escaped "out from under the old man" and is delighted to offer him "a chance to develop into a useful man, a chance to use [his] talents, to do what [he] want[s] to do and not what he [Mason] wanted—whatever idiocy it was" (389). Rayber's desire to fix Tarwater's broken mindset is just as strong as old Tarwater's desire to keep it. However, the question is not who wants Tarwater's devotion more, but who is a better provider, both emotionally and physically, for the child. Tarwater receives from Rayber more love in one sentence than he ever experienced from Mason when Rayber offers to his nephew what he does to his own son Bishop: "All the things that I would do for him. . . I'll do for you," he said. . . 'I'm so glad to have you here'" (389). In a very fatherly scene, Rayber sits "by the side of the bed where, still dressed, the

boy had fallen. He had sat there, his eyes shining, like a man who sits before a treasure he is not yet convinced is real” (391). Rayber conveys excitement that Mason is incapable of feeling: “He had realized with an intense stab of joy that his nephew looked enough like him to be his son” (391). Tarwater is still blackened from Mason’s impression, though, and rejects Rayber’s love. However, Rayber practices unconditional love and remains determined to soften the boy. He even tells him “‘Listen, listen Frankie, you’re not alone any more. You have a friend. You have more than a friend now.’ He swallowed. ‘You have a father’” (397). Rayber encourages Tarwater to talk about his troubles and offers to share his burden. He tells Tarwater “You need to be saved right here and now from the old man and everything he stands for. And I’m the one who can save you” (438, emphasis added). This is probably Rayber’s worst mistake. The word ‘save’ scares Tarwater so badly that “he threw himself out of the boat and swam away” (439). Tarwater recalls the agony of being saved, and does not trust Rayber to free him or to save him.

Mason and Rayber offer two very different saviors. Rayber’s ideology is not defined in terms of Christianity or any religion for that matter. Rather, his belief system revolves around his own will power. Rayber tells Mason, “I’ve straightened the tangle you made. Straightened it by pure will power. I’ve made myself straight” (377). Just as with Tarwater, Mason’s bad seed has warped Rayber’s spiritual growth. Rather, Rayber “settled on a rational” approach to life and relies on “the great dignity of man” to save him. While this may be problematic, Rayber and Tarwater’s perception of religion has been so horribly altered that neither of them could have a successful relationship with Jesus, not because they cannot be loved, or because they cannot love, but because they both associate religion with Mason, not Jesus. Rayber identifies with Tarwater and tries to make Mason’s influence a common thread between them: “‘I remember the first time I ever saw him,’ he said, ‘I was six or seven. I was out in the yard playing and all of a sudden I felt something between me and the sun. Him’” (436). If Mason was supposed to be read as a good character, he would be associated with light, not darkness. Rayber continues: “‘I looked up and there he was, those mad fish-colored eyes looking down at me’” (436). Again, we can tell a lot about Mason by his associations: the eyes are read as a window to the soul, and Mason’s are not clear. Rayber says, “‘Do you know what he said to me—a seven year old child?’ . . . ‘Listen boy,’ he said, ‘the Lord Jesus Christ sent me to find you. You have to be born again.’” The narrator then reports that “He laughed, glaring at the boy with his furious blistered-looking eyes” (436, emphasis added). Like Tarwater, Rayber, as a young child, buys Mason’s sales pitch:

I believed him. For five or six years. I had nothing else but that. I waited on the Lord Jesus. I thought I'd been born again and that everything was going to be different or was different already because the Lord Jesus had a great interest in me (436).

Rayber explains his belief to Tarwater in hopes that it will appeal to his damaged faith in mankind: "I am born once and no more. What I can see and do for myself and my fellowman in this life is all of my portion and I'm content with it. It's enough to be a man" (437).

For Mason, a man cannot contain the abundant power of Jesus Christ. Mason represents the feared, vengeful God of the Old Testament complete with fire and brimstone. This sort of an image does not appeal to a child, especially when presented by "a bull-like old man with a short head set directly into his shoulders and silver protruding eyes that looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads" (335). Mason's religion is more like a "morbid impulse" than it is a comforting moral value (412). Mason's religion is so unattractive because he instills fear in those he breathes it upon. Tarwater is almost forced to carry out his great-uncle's wishes because he is scared of what will happen if he does not: "When Jonah dallied, he was cast three days in a belly of darkness and vomited up in the place of his mission" (430). This type of motivation is damaging and dysfunctional, as we can see in Tarwater's demented perceptions. Tarwater senses that the religion Mason offers him is tainted. He fears being "torn by hunger like the old man" (343) and prefers if any religion was to come, it will be "a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath" (343, emphasis added). That Mason's teachings are false seems so obviously true here.

Their associations with God or the Devil reinforce Rayber and Mason's spiritual differences, respectively. Mason Tarwater is repeatedly surrounded by fire. Mason thinks his duty is to instruct Tarwater "in the hard facts of serving the Lord":

The old man, who said he was a prophet, had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself [...] He had schooled 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.

He proclaimed from the midst of his fury that he would see the sun burst in blood and fire and while he raged and waited, it rose every morning, calm and contained [...] as if not only the world, but the Lord Himself had failed to hear the prophet's message [...] His own blood had been burned dry [...] (332).

Mason is heavily associated with fire and the color red. When the symbolism is coupled with his violent and vindictive personality, Mason becomes more of an evil presence than a Godly one. Because of his schooling, Tarwater "expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts. He had expected this to happen as soon as his great-uncle died" (343). Mason is said to have eyes covered in "a net of red threads" and "one square red hand," which resembles a hoof-like body part, an idea associated with the Devil. It is because of Mason's devilish attitude that Tarwater "felt a terrible disappointment" and "a dread that it was true" (342). O'Connor forces the reader to doubt Mason's credibility as a true prophet on the first page of her novel. In the second paragraph she provokes doubt again by making Mason's relationship to Tarwater unknown: "The old man had been Tarwater's great-uncle, or said he was" (331). The audience is not sure if he is believable or not. Again O'Connor uses doubt in the old man's self-proclamation "who said he was a prophet" (332). Rayber is able to punish Mason for his abuse by publicly casting him out of the prophetic in an article he publishes about Mason. Mason feels betrayed when he learns that his stay with Rayber was actually an attempt to collect psychological data on Mason for Rayber's article. Rayber publishes and flaunts the article. Mason reads, "this fixation of being called by the Lord had its origin in security. He needed assurance of a call and so he called himself. . . .When the old man looked up, the schoolteacher smiled" (378), probably because he knew he had psychoanalyzed old Tarwater correctly and also because he had successfully punished him for his control over Rayber as a child. Mason's reaction to the embarrassment is severe:

For the length of a minute, he [Mason] could not move. He felt he was tied hand and foot inside the school teacher's head, a space as bare and neat as the cell in the asylum, and was shrinking, drying up to fit it. His eyeballs swerved from side to side as if he were pinned in a strait jacket again. Jonah, Ezekiel, Daniel, he was at that moment all of them—the swallowed, the lowered, the enclosed (378).

Rayber's God-like qualities are manifested in his good works, however, more so than his ability to cast Satan-like Mason out of his elitist thinking.

The most convincing proof that Rayber is associated with God is the fact that he sacrifices Bishop, his only son. Perhaps this is because "Bishop looked like the old man grown backwards" (400). When Rayber takes the boys to the hotel with the lake, he is subconsciously aware that Bishop will drown in his baptism and the prophecy will be fulfilled. As the tension builds between Tarwater and Rayber the reader feels the pressure. O'Connor's skillful use of foreshadowing adds to the intensity. The lady who works the desk warns Rayber "but anybody gets drowned, that's their lookout" (426). She also warns Tarwater, "Whatever devil's work you mean to do, don't do it here" (427). It is as if she knows who has sent Tarwater to baptize the child, and it is Mason's plot she calls "devil's work" (427). On the opposite side, Rayber is described in a more positive light, even though his spiritual being may be as dark as night.

Rayber is said to have "outraged righteousness" when he comes to rescue Tarwater. The most telling section though is when O'Connor describes, "both their faces," Rayber's and his wife's, "were scratched and bleeding from thorn bushes" (333, emphasis added). It is quite difficult to argue that blood on the face as caused by thorns is not a reference to Jesus, and thus, a positive association for Rayber, but critics do it more often than one would think.

Preston Browning's quote is a perfect representation of the usual interpretation of O'Connor's novel: "the only righteous persons discovered here are old Mason Tarwater and his great-nephew Francis Tarwater and they are indeed violent, though not, I think, totally insane as a number of critics . . . would have us believe" (73). Miles Orvell supports that Browning's "pro-Mason" reading is not the only one possible:

. . . O'Connor is willing to let the reader . . . entertain some doubt as to [Mason's] authority. . . and it is a successful strategy, forcing the reader to hold in abeyance his judgment and letting the emerging conflict within Tarwater between his great uncle and Rayber gain in intensity before the reader's own commitment is made (103).

Orvell's interpretation offers more flexibility than Browning's as it at least allows the reader to doubt the prophet. Orvell is correct in comparing Tarwater's choice to our own. Tarwater's choice is far more complex than the reader's yet strangely similar because he is essentially choosing between God and the devil, between good and evil. The reader, too, is choosing between Rayber and Mason, who represent good and evil. The choice between good and evil is where most of the religious criticism of

The Violent Bear It Away hovers. However, it is not sufficient to argue for religion or against religion; we must argue for Tarwater or against Tarwater. One path will lead to his destruction, while the other one will lead to his salvation, whether it be spiritual or not. Richard Giannone agrees: "If we consider only the supernatural origin of the prophet's word, we miss the very human person and predicament that are the stuff of O'Connor's art" (119). O'Connor "offers us a multiple choice in interpretation of character. . . . Tarwater can be seen in various lights as a harmless relic of a lost age, as a madman, or as a true prophet called of God" (Walters 93-94). Therefore, the interpretation becomes quite problematic: how can one find evidence that Mason is indeed called by God? Only by faith can readers believe this interpretation. Preston Browning agrees:

. . . nowhere does she [O'Connor] suggest that all men either do or should possess that inclination toward religious faith with the intensity and ferocity of some of her driven, half-crazed protagonists. . . . and though Miss O'Connor admitted that she considered him [Mason] the hero of [the work] and that she was 'right behind him 100 percent[,] I find nothing in the novel or in her statements about it which implies that she intended him to be taken as the model of the Christian life (87).

O'Connor says she "wanted to get across the fact that the great Uncle is the Christian—a sort of crypto-Catholic—and that the school teacher is the typical modern man. The boy has to choose which one, which way, he wants to follow. It's a matter of vocation" (qtd. in Walters 94).

Critics argue that this story is not about the human predicament, but that it is about prophets, and both Mason and Tarwater are prophets. The basis for such an argument, for critics like Orvell, is that Tarwater fulfills the prophecy when he baptizes Bishop. However, it is very possible, and at the same time debatable, that Tarwater intended to drown, not baptize the child. Tarwater executes the physical rights of the baptism but drowns Bishop without the verbal ceremony Mason has taught him. In fact, O'Connor shows Tarwater in a complete struggle not to utter the words, for it is then that the prophecy will be fulfilled. It is not until much later that Tarwater blurts out the ceremonial baptism. Consequently, Bishop's murder symbolizes Tarwater's choice to drown the suffocating influence of Mason Tarwater. Yet, Tarwater's psychological damage is so vast and so deeply rooted that he must say those words. He tries to hold them down but he has been trained since he can remember to complete Mason's work. His choice is one that cannot change his path. Sadly, Tarwater ultimately loses to what he had desperately fought against.

A religious interpretation of this novel, which would label Mason and young Tarwater as prophets of God, provides no insight into the analysis of Tarwater's character because Tarwater's choice is more personal than religious. This story is not about the search for God or faith or truth or salvation. It is about a search for self and Tarwater needs help in this search; he must decide who can help him more, Rayber or Mason. O'Connor masks her familial plot in a religious one making it seem all to similar to her other work. However, her message here is much different than any of her other stories. In this case, Tarwater's choice between Mason and Rayber is a life choice for his physical well-being, since Mason has already corrupted his spiritual condition. This call to disregard the religious agenda of O'Connor may come as a shock to traditional critics. However, modern readers tend to pity Tarwater and despise Mason's dominance. The only character left to favor, then, is Rayber:

[He] seems to [be a representation] of the classic, now almost mythic growing up stories of the modern age: the story of the sensitive youth who repudiates, usually with considerable emotional anguish, what he considers to be the old-fashioned religious illusion, piety, and prejudice of his family and hometown congregation and grows up into freedom and knowledge and commitment of a very different sort (Stephens 101).

Stephens is right about Rayber, but she should have included Tarwater and the modern reader in this statement as well.

From a modern reader's perspective, modern in the terms of religious freedoms at least, it is amazing that O'Connor was able to write with the pen of her own Catholic history while appealing to a venturing spirituality, one that cries for freedom and knowledge through the removal of traditional ink. Her ability to transcend time with her writing is proven in that *The Violent Bear it Away* has the amazing potential to simultaneously appeal to both traditional and modern readers, just as Tarwater's choice is bounded by Mason's traditions and Rayber's modernity. To suggest that Mason's mad ways are excused because of his Christianity would lend justification to any abuser who has set foot in a church. To me, the boy's choice is like choosing between tar and water—there's only one clear alternative.

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