Chapter IV

THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY
The Violent Bear It Away is O'Connor's second and last novel. The novel was, like Wise Blood, a painstaking effort that took five years to complete. Many of the themes found in the first novel continue to be present, including the futility of secular society and the inability of those who are chosen to escape the grace of God. The second novel goes beyond the first, however, in that the reception of grace extends to accepting a calling, painful though it may be. To the author, that calling is directed toward the transformation of society – something O'Connor sought to accomplish through her fiction. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy published it on 8 February 1960, the culmination of a writing activity that had occupied O'Connor intermittently since 1952. She included the first chapter, entitled “You Can’t Be Any Poorer than Dead,” as part of her successful application for the Kenyon Review Fellowship in the fall of 1952, and it was published as a story in New World Writing in October 1955. In 1954, she wrote to the Robert Lowells, “I’m writing a novel but it’s so bad at present that I’m writing a lot of stories so as not to have to look at it.”

When the novel finally did appear O’Connor already knew “hints of things to come.” An early response in Library Journal notes the novel’s lack of “convincing action that would carry the “macabre tale to a successful conclusion.” However, what is worth noting in the review is the librarian’s recognition, for O’Connor, of a future still worth considering; she adds to her response: “Recommended only for those libraries that want a complete collection of all potentially important young American writers.”

O’Connor’s tale, so long in the spinning, is a short novel of just over 200 pages. As in the previous fiction, it is the subject matter that perplexes her reviewers: This is a
book about prophets and baptism. Among others, the characters include a fourteen-
year-old would-be prophet, Francis Marion Tarwater, who fights the promised call and
its coming certainty; a voice that is "stranger" (352) and becomes "friend" (353), who
bedevils Tarwater's thoughts and directs his actions; the deceased great-uncle, Old
Mason Tarwater, who spends his life as a proclaimed prophet; the schoolteacher –
uncle Rayber, who actively denies the past and future prophets their due; and Rayber's
idiot child Bishop, who is the focus of the novel's action. Young Tarwater must baptize
the child because old Tarwater has failed to do so.

The New Yorker, in a two-sentence paragraph, calls the novel "a dark, ingrown
Gothic tale," while the Times Literary Supplement broke off midway in its review with
a determination that O'Connor's "sophisticated pessimism creates a number of
unrewarding moral culs-de-sac." Both comments showed no awareness of the title's
importance to the novel's action. On the other hand, the New Republic's Frank Warnke
decided that O'Connor's primary concern was with "the misery of man without God,"
but he, too, did not pursue the title's implications. In a letter to a friend, O'Connor
reports that she has taken the title "from the Douay, also Confraternity versions" of the
Bible.

The Douay or the Rheims-Douay Version was translated from the Latin
Vulgate, with serious efforts to compare the Latin with Hebrew and Greek at the
English College at Douay in 1609 for the Old Testament and at the English College at
Rheims in 1582 for the New Testament. O'Connor's title comes from the last portion
of Matthew 11:12: "...and from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of
heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." Notes to the verse in the 1850 Douay state:

"[The kingdom of heaven] is not to be obtained but by main force, by using violence upon ourselves, by mortification and penance, and resisting our perverse inclinations. . . . That is, the kingdom of heaven is to be obtained by mortification, penance, poverty, and those practices of austerity which John, by word and example, pointed out." 8

The note indicates that the only means of entering the kingdom of heaven is by main force, but the source of the violence is not clear in the note. The violence could be self-induced violence. In the case of the latter, the violence is cast upon the violent, intimating those who would be predisposed to or prepared for receiving violence. These people would then bear or tolerate the violence necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven. Tarwater is such an example. Further, the chosen person need not be violent, as exampled in the calls of the Old Testament prophets where violence comes down from above, and is not self-induced; rather, the kingdom of heaven suffers or permits this violence to happen. Rayber has not had the ongoing exposure to violence for the Lord’s sake or preparation to receive more violence, but he cannot shake conclusively its low murmur.

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. 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 novel is divided into three sections, each covering a period in Francis Marion Tarwater’s journey of spiritual self-discovery.

The story begins when Francis Marion Tarwater is fourteen years old. His great-uncle, Mason Tarwater, who had raised him from childhood, has just died at the age of eighty-four, a fanatically religious old man who considered himself a prophet and lived in a Southern backwoods farm called Powderhead. The story begins at the breakfast table, where he dies of a stroke. Though he is dead, he remains a central character throughout the text.

Upon his great-uncle’s death, Tarwater must go through the stages of doubt and rejection. He debates fiercely with “the voice” succumbing to its diabolical urging to dismiss the three essential requests of old Mason Tarwater: to bury him in the ground, to put the sign of the cross over his head, and to baptize Bishop, the idiot boy. Tarwater cannot, however, simply ignore those directions; he is driven to annihilate them. Tarwater is stock O'Connor material, the kind of character that most interests her: if he does not believe in the whole Christian orthodox message, then he has no choice but to deny it fervently and fight it indefatigably. In a letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor makes clear her position: “I certainly do mean Tarwater’s friend to be the Devil.”

As Tarwater (he prefers this to Francis) digs a hole to bury the old man, he reminisces about his life up to that point - what his great-uncle had told him about his own parents (his mother and grandmother had died in a car crash during which he had been born); how the old man had rescued him from being raised by his uncle, a
schoolteacher named Rayber, and taken him into the backwoods to train him to be a prophet and deliver him from schooling; how the schoolteacher had tried to get the boy back, bringing with him a social worker he had later married, and who gave him one idiot child (the great-uncle had coached Tarwater to act insane so the social worker would despair of forcing him to go to school; the fact that the old man shot the schoolteacher in the leg and the ear had also factored into the situation); and how they had once visited the city to try to get a will changed so the land on which they lived would go to young Tarwater rather than Rayber, though the attempt was unsuccessful.

As Tarwater digs the hole, making very little progress in the hard earth, he argues with himself about whether or not he should pay any attention to his crazy great-uncle. When a local black couple comes to get their jugs filled from the still, Tarwater goes into the woods and gets himself thoroughly drunk while the man digs the grave and buries the old man. When Buford Munson, the black man, comes to find him, he gives him his liquor and then burns the house down believing he is also burning his great-uncle's body and thus denying him his chance for Resurrection. He then hitchhikes into the city with a salesman named Meeks, intending to find his uncle the schoolteacher.

Thus, Tarwater burns the grounds and the house, believing he has burnt the old man as well. Without a physical 200-pound body to put in the ground, a cross need not be erected. The young Tarwater can then go to the city to visit the uncle whom the old man had spent the youth's lifetime denigrating. He can go see the idiot Bishop that he has no intention of baptizing. By showing up and standing firm, Tarwater can laugh in the face of the old man's belief, the old man's prophecy, and his own predicted destiny.
Tarwater knows what his great-uncle looked like when he was making his peace with the Lord: “He would look as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe” (334). The wheels of light, the beasts with wings of fire, and the four heads in each direction are a description of Ezekiel’s vision. The biblical prophet saw a beast with four heads each of man, lion, ox, and eagle, connected by wings, and all afire: “Their appearance was like that of burning coals of fire . . . . a bright fire” (Ezekiel 1:13). When the rage of the old man’s vision is noticeable to Tarwater, he is satisfied with being a prophet himself; in fact, he eagerly would say, “Here I am, Lord, ready!” (334).

What Tarwater cannot comprehend or tolerate from the old man or from his God is the length of time between those rages, when life goes on placidly or routinely, when no visible sign of the call exists. Old Tarwater had identified the “Elijah and Elisha” (356) relationship he had with his grandnephew, so when Tarwater is setting fire to the property and house, the reference to the old man’s ascension is the first of several blatant Elijah references: “[Tarwater] could hear [the body] moving up through the black night like a whirling chariot” (361), and when Tarwater arrives at Rayber’s and reports the old man’s death, the uncle asks, “Did the Lord arrive for him in a chariot of fire?” (386). When Elijah departed this planet, he had been walking beside Elisha, to whom he had thrown his mantle: “They went on, talking as they went, and suddenly there appeared chariots of fire and horses of fire which separated them one from the other, and Elijah was carried up in the whirlwind to heaven” (2 Kings 2: 11).
Old Tarwater’s adventures spanned three generations. He tried to save his sister, his sister’s son, and his sister’s grandson in succession. He identified himself with the patriarchs Jonah, Ezekiel, and Daniel and claimed to have saved his grand-nephew from a schoolroom run by women and given him the more desirable companionship of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Abraham, King David, and Solomon. He had raised the boy without women or any knowledge of them other than that they are all whores except for Bernice Bishop, the welfare woman, who was too ridiculous even to achieve that status. Through the old prophet’s eyes, the boy was able to see all of reality, all of history from Adam’s expulsion from the garden through the presidency of Herbert Hoover to the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment.

For old Tarwater, who called himself a prophet, the call had come “in his early youth” (332), and he had gone to the city “to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that has abandoned its Saviour” (332). The modern world is no more ready for a prophet today than the ancient world was in the times of Jonah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. However, biblical prophets were at length understood and acknowledged for their warnings, while modern prophets, such as old Mason Tarwater, are considered crazed and need to be institutionalized. As a young prophet, his “whore” sister (355) had him committed to an asylum. Old Tarwaterr, after four years, learned that the way out is “to stop prophesying on the ward” (369).

The old man learned caution while in the asylum, which helped him execute his plan to baptize seven-year-old Rayber, but he did not get smarter in the ways of the world as the years passed. His vision remained unchanged for the baptism of his family
members. After the wreck, when Rayber took in his dead sister’s child, young Tarwater, the old man appeared at Rayber’s home. Living three months at his nephew’s house, old Tarwater woke to the discovery that Rayber had been “creeping into his soul by the back door” (331). The article on his uncle that Rayber wrote for his schoolteacher magazine so infuriated the old man that he never forgave his nephew. Most especially, old Tarwater was dumbfounded that Rayber would so miss the concept of the prophet and how one comes to be called. Rayber assigned the vocation to the would-be prophet himself. O’Connor’s repetition of Rayber’s folly is paramount in understanding the mystery that is essential to the book. That a prophet could or would call himself is beyond ludicrous to the old man:

“Called myself!” the old man would hiss, “called myself!” This so enraged him that half the time he could do nothing but repeat it. “Called myself. I called myself. I, Mason Tarwater, called myself! Called myself to be beaten and tied up. Called myself to be spit on and snickered at. Called myself to be struck down in my pride. Called myself to be torn by the Lord’s eye. Listen boy, he would say and grab the child by the straps of his overalls and shake him slowly, “even the mercy of the Lord burns.” (341-342)

O’Connor makes her point well; no one chooses to be a prophet. O’Connor’s choice for old Tarwater’s first name, “Mason,” suggests the organization of men who bond in the name of the fatherhood of God. No one invites to join, but Masons enter the brotherhood by requesting members to sponsor them. Ironically, to become a Mason, then, a person will call himself. A “Mason” is also a craftsman, who creates with stone, brick, concrete block, or some other substantive building material.
Tarwater leaves for the city in search of Rayber, believing he has rebelled against his great-uncle’s wishes. He gets a ride into the city with an opportunistic copper flue salesman named Meeks, who suggests to Tarwater that his great-uncle may have misled him. Meeks is described as a “stranger” and “friend” – one indication that he is among the several incarnations of the devil that the boy encounters (and one of the three that drive him). The salesman is driven by his love of money, but he claims he loves the people to whom he sells. His discussions about love and technology suggest that his views parody those of George Rayber. Meeks hopes to take advantage of Tarwater’s backwoods innocence for his own profit. Tarwater has other things on his mind, however. The memory of the fire he has set is strong as he gazes at the night sky bright with the lights of the city:

“Look,” Tarwater said suddenly, sitting forward, his face close to the windshield, “we’re headed in the wrong direction. We’re going back where we came from. There’s the fire again. There’s the fire we left!”

Ahead of them in the sky there was a faint glow, steady, and not made by lightning. “That’s the same fire we came from!” the boy said in a high voice.

“Boy, you must be nuts,” the salesman said. “That’s the city we’re coming to. That’s the glow from the city lights. I reckon this is your first trip anywhere.”

“You’re turned around,” the child said, “it’s the same fire.” (362)
As Tarwater rides in the car, he thinks about some of the things his great-uncle had told him about Rayber. He remembers that the old man had taken Rayber away from his parents for four days when the boy was seven years old (Rayber’s mother, the old man’s sister, was too drunk to notice her son was gone), baptized him and told him about the Lord. Later, Mason’s sister had him committed to an asylum for four years, and Rayber had eventually rejected what old Mason had told him. When Rayber’s sister (Tarwater’s mother) and mother (Mason’s sister) had died in the car crash, Rayber had told old Mason about it and the old man had come to live with his nephew in order to make sure that he would not corrupt the newborn baby (Tarwater). He had quickly baptized Tarwater with a bottle of water beside his crib, but Rayber only mocked him. Then he had stolen the baby and taken him away.

Tarwater feels he is going in the wrong direction, running from one fire straight into another one; in a sense that is exactly what he is doing, but it is, of course, directly to his destiny as the baptizer that he is running, which is not the wrong direction at all, but the right one. The boy walks through the world looking for symbols, signs that he has been called and that God has a destiny for him greater than the mission his great-uncle gave him: the baptism of an idiot child. He does not want his first mission, much less his life purpose, to be “to baptize a dim-witted child” (335).

When Meeks arrives in town with his passenger, he suggests that Tarwater call his uncle. Tarwater has never seen a phone before and does not know how to use it, but Meeks helps him. Rayber’s idiot son answers the phone and says nothing, so Meeks drops Tarwater on Rayber’s doorstep. Meeks reaches across him and opens the car
door. "So long, son . . . . if you get real hungry by next week, you can contact me from that card and we might make a deal" (384). Tarwater sits on his uncle's front steps before letting anyone know of his arrival. Through this pattern of imagery also O'Connor expresses the emotional life of a character in terms of the way he sees the world. When he arrives at his uncle's house:

He did not look up at the sky but he was unpleasantly aware of the stars. They seemed to be holes in his skull through which some distant unmoving light was watching him. It was as if he were alone in the presence of an immense silent eye. He had an intense desire to make himself known to the schoolteacher at once, to tell him what he had done and why and to be congratulated by him. (385)

His eyes began to burn in his fierce fragile face. A new energy seized him:

"He's dead . . . You couldn't be any deader than he was. He's reduced to ashes. He didn't even have a cross set up over him. If it's anything left of him, the buzzards wouldn't have it and the bones the dogs'll carried off. That's how dead he was" (387).

He gets impatient, however, and knocks on the door, rousing the inhabitants. Rayber, who is almost deaf because of the time Mason shot him, answers the door then puts on his hearing aid. He is glad to see Tarwater because now he will have the opportunity to undo all that Mason had done in training the boy. He holds Tarwater's arm tightly and peers into his face as if he were beginning to see a solution, one that intrigued him with its symmetry and rightness: "It's a perfect irony . . . . a perfect irony that should have taken care of the matter in that way. He got what he deserved." (388). The boy's pride swells:
“I done the needful,” he said.
“Everything he touched he warped,” the schoolteacher said.
“He lived a long and useless life and he did you a great injustice. It’s a blessing he’s dead at last. You could have had everything and you’ve had nothing. All that can be changed now. Now you belong to someone who can help you and understand you.” His eyes were alight with pleasure. “It’s not too late for me to made a man of you!” (388)

Thus, for him to be hungry will be for him to desire the will of God, to accept his calling as a prophet. At the exact moment that Tarwater meets Bishop and receives his calling, O’Connor connects the issue of sovereignty with being fed:

He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. His black pupils, glassy and still, reflected depth on depth his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf. (388-89)

He rejects the vision, however, screaming that he will have nothing to do with the child. At first Rayber is excited by the prospect of correcting the ideas the old man had inculcated into his nephew. He quickly finds that the boy is incorrigible, but remains determined to change him. They spend time walking all over the city, but Tarwater is largely unresponsive. He still avoids the idiot boy Bishop as much as possible.
One night, Tarwater steals out of the house to attend a religious gathering he has seen advertised. Rayber follows him through the city to the revival meeting, where a young girl named Lucette preaches about Christ’s coming and asks the audience for money so her parents can continue their missionary work. While O’Connor uses comic dress and exaggerated language and gestures in the young girl’s delivery and style: “Listen you people!” (413), her message is allegedly one of Christian harmony. The harmony she preaches, however, is not the harmony that either Tarwater or Rayber felt in his life. Tarwater listened uncomfortably from inside the tabernacle, and Rayber, who has followed Tarwater through the night to the revival meeting, hovers outside a window.

As he hides outside in the bushes and listens to Lucette, Rayber recalls his own dysfunctional childhood. The disenchanted Rayber knows she was “not a fraud” (411), but when Lucette identifies Rayber as, “I see a damned soul before my eye! I see a dead man Jesus has not raised. His head is in the window but his ear is deaf to the Holy Word!” (415), he blocks that message by literally making himself deaf to her words by turning off his hearing aid and echoes old Tarwater’s words when she says to him, “The Word of God is a burning Word to burn you clean” (414). Rayber believes she is exploited by adults, and her exploitation makes him recall his own childhood.

Rayber peeks in through the window and become increasingly angry as he thought of the way his uncle had exploited his innocence and that of his young nephew. When a prepubescent girl gets up and starts to preach, he sees another object of religious exploitation and wishes he could take the girl aside and cure her of all the
notions that other have pumped into her head. As she preaches however, she began to
stare directly at Rayber and confront him about his lost condition. After the meeting is
over, Rayber waits for Tarwater outside and the two return home. Though Tarwater
claims he only went to the meeting to spit at it, he is unusually reserved and more
submissive than Rayber has ever seen him, though Rayber is so angry he does not even
notice the change in the boy. One morning Rayber decides to take Tarwater to a natural
history museum to teach him about evolution and science. On the way they stop for a
while in a park near the museum. A “Kind of Island” (431), a memory of the pastoral
within the urban, the park reminds both Rayber and Tarwater of Powerhead. Their
experiences of it are reported – Tarwater’s in a flashback – from each one’s point of
view. This memorial recollection of Powderhead become transbustantial as Tarwater’s
experience of the park continues; the spirit that makes Powderhead itself inhabits this
space, too. Tarwater feel “a hush in his blood and a stillness in the atmosphere as if the
air were being purged for the approach of revelation” (431).

Rayber stops to tie Bishop’s laces and is suddenly gripped with an
uncontrollable love for the boy. He remembers an incident in which he tried to drown
his son but could not, changing his mind at the last moment because he could not
imagine life without the boy. The three of them continue walking and as Rayber and
Tarwater speak angrily, Bishop walks toward a fountain where water falls from the
mouth of a marble lion, and he gallops toward it:

The child stood grinning in the pool, lifting his feet slowly up
and down as if he liked the feel of the wet seeping into his shoes.
The sun, which had been tacking from cloud to Cloud, emerged
above the fountain. A blinding brightness fell on the lion’s tangled marble head and gilded the stream of water rushing from his mouth. Then the light, falling more gently, rested like a hand on the child’s white head. His face might have been a mirror where the sun had stopped to watch its reflection. (432)

Tarwater moves to baptize him, but Rayber snatches the boy away at the last moment, realizing what his nephew is trying to do. Frustrated by his inability to cure Tarwater, Rayber decides to take him back to Powderhead so he can shock him into facing his past and thus get through to him. He tells Tarwater they are going on a fishing trip, and that is, of course, when he does his fishing for Bishop’s soul—in the waters of the lake in which he both drowns and baptizes the child. The fish Tarwater associated with life after deaths are caught in the waters of baptism. These waters also have the ability to quench Tarwater’s profound thirst, but he decides not to drink from them. After the drowning Tarwater’s thirst becomes unassuageable. He drinks at a well, but because he is not drinking living water his thirst returns almost immediately. At this point, before he has fully confronted evil in the guise of the stranger in the car, Tarwater still insists that the drowning is intentional, and the baptism accidental— that because he did not intend to baptize, the words of baptism did not “count.” “The words just came out of themselves . . . but it didn’t mean anything” (458).

In denying the effect of the words of the sacrament, Tarwater is attempting to negate the efficacy of the baptism, but in so doing, he unintentionally reveals his sacramentalist inclinations. Water is, of course, only half of the sacrament. Without the words, “I baptized you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” there would be no baptism. Tarwater attempts unsuccessfully to align himself
with Rayber, for whom words are rational necessities only and contain no mystery. The old man had feared Rayber’s tendency to translate all experience into “dead words” (19), which is dramatically different from the living word, the Word of God which the child evangelist preaches.

"'My Word is coming,'" she said, turning back to face the glare, "'my word is coming from the house of David, the king.'"

She began again in a dirge-like tone. "Jesus came on cold straw, Jesus was warmed by the breath of an ox. 'Who is this?' the world said, 'who is this blue-cold child and this woman, plain as the winter? Is this the Word of God, this blue-cold child? Is this His will, this plain winter-woman?" (413)

This Word of God is sometimes even silent. Hardon notes that “not only what [Christ] said, but what he did not say, his silence, was revealing.”11 The stranger’s voice which tempts Tarwater insists contrarily that God’s silence is proof of God’s distance and non-involvement in human affairs. “The Lord was not studying about you, don’t know you exist, and wouldn’t do a thing about it if He did. You’re alone in the world, with only yourself to ask or thank or judge” (433). Rayber echoes these words when he attempts to teach Tarwater independence from God and intellectual self-sufficiency. “I’m the one who can save you’ (438), Rayber said. In listening to Rayber, in modelling himself on the self-made man, Tarwater ostensibly abandons his calling to be a prophet of God, but his actions belie his stated inclinations. As he says, “I knew what I thought when I did it and when I got ready to do it, I didn’t talk no words. I did it” (171). Significantly, walking through the streets of the city with Bishop and Rayber, Tarwater had felt the silence speak to him. The silence had told him to baptize the
child. At the end of the novel he heeds the words “as silent as seeds opening one at a
time in his blood” (478). The silence speaks, the drowning saves, the fire purifies and
destroys, the cross tortures and redeems. Tarwater once again sets out toward the city,
this time to shout the Word of God to those who are sleeping, to those who will
probably never hear him.

Several days later, after Rayber delivers a lecture on baptism as an “empty act”
(450), Tarwater takes Bishop for a boat ride. Here, with Rayber resting inside the
Cherokee Lodge, the tow of them are physically alone when the drowning and the
baptism occur: Bishop climbs onto Tarwater’s back and hangs on “like a large crab,”
while Tarwater sinks “backwards into the waters as if the whole bank were pulling him
down” (462). Whether Tarwater frees himself from Bishop’s grasp who then sinks into
the water by accident, or whether he deliberately drowns Bishop is not stated in the
narrative, but up to this point Tarwater has followed the advice of “the voice” who is
present with him in the boat and strongly encouraged him to drown the boy.

As Bishop goes under water, “in a high raw voice the defeated boy cried out the
words of baptism, shuddered, and opened his eyes” (463). O’Connor chooses the word
“defeated boy cried out the words of baptism, shuddered, and opened his eyes” (463).
O’Connor chooses the word “defeated” to describe the now broken Tarwater; he has
capitulated to a power he cannot understand. He has done the deed that the old man
ordained him to do. And violence is inherent in both the action, the drowning, and in
the actor, who delivers the words of baptism. The crux of the novel resides in this
moment of baptism.
O'Connor was aware that baptism did not carry the weight of importance for a majority of her readers, so she had to distort the event: “I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel – its language, its structure, its action.” For O'Connor, the distortion and the exaggeration of this central Christian sacrament exist in the novel because of her belief. Tarwater will be forced to recognize his role as a prophet after he has admitted to himself that he baptized Bishop. His involuntary action will precede his conceptualization of that act – the exact opposite of Rayber, who is most comfortable when his actions follow and support his statement of belief. Ironically, in his unintentional act of baptism, Tarwater does indeed use the words he scorns. For him word and act are ultimately unified and simultaneous.

Tarwater, who had eaten little in the city, has a huge meal at the lodge. He also shows some unexpected kindness to Bishop by tying his shoe. During the stay at the lodge, Tarwater's friend visits him repeatedly, and Tarwater recognizes that this voice's demand for a sign from God is what has kept Tarwater from baptizing Bishop. Tarwater tells his friend that he would have drowned Bishop in the fountain rather than baptize him, and his friend approves of such an action, saying he should do it to prove that he was not going to baptize the boy. Later Rayber takes Tarwater fishing and tells him how he tried to drown Bishop and also tells Tarwater that he wants to save him. Tarwater, after his heavy meal, vomits into the lake, leaves the boat, and swims to shore, abandoning Rayber in the boat, he strips himself of all but the hat, which he
pulls "tight down on his head so that it would not possibly come off" (439). That afternoon Rayber and Tarwater go fishing, and the school teacher tried to get the boy to talk about his experiences with the old man. Rayber admits once having tried to drown Bishop, and Tarwater accused him of lacking guts. When Rayber tells Tarwater he is the only one who can cure him of what the old man had done to him, the boy takes his clothes off, jumps into the water, and swims ashore. Rayber then throws the clothes into the lake; he has bought the boy new clothes and figures one stage in his transformation was getting him to dress properly. When he gets back to the motels he finds Tarwater wearing the new clothes and staring at Bishop. He then takes Bishop for a ride and leaves the sullen youth to his own devices. The ride takes them to Powerhead. As Rayber and Bishop approach the burned-out homestead, Rayber feels such powerful emotions that he is sure he will never be able to take Tarwater there the next day as he had planned. He remembered when he and his wife-to-be had come there to take Tarwater back when the boy was only seven, but the welfare worker had been so shocked by the hardened face on the boy that she had refused to have him.

When Rayber and Bishop get back to the motel, Rayber decides to be honest with Tarwater. He offers to let the boy baptize Bishop on the spot using a glass of water in the restaurant, or else to fight off his great-uncle's influence for the rest of his life the way Rayber himself has had to do. Tarwater has no response, but then takes Bishop out into the lake in a boat, baptizes him, and drowns him, then heads for the opposite shore, going back in the direction of Powerhead. Rayber, much to his shame, feels nothing at the loss of his son.
Rayber’s memory of his parents’ reactions to him is malevolent neglect. During Lucette Carmody’s castigation of him, he reflects on his father’s words to his uncle: “His mother wants him back, Mason. I don’t know why. For my part you could have him but you know how she is” (410), to which old Mason could only spew: “A drunken whore” (410). So when Rayber’s wife, “twice his age” (334) Bernice Bishop, deserted him and her idiot child namesake, Bishop, Rayber opted not to follow his own parents’ lead. Instead, he sacrificed himself and his worldly luxuries for the life of the modern ascetic and would-be scholar. Mystery does not exist in his world, for education makes all things understood. The name O’Connor selects for him is a corruption of “rabbi,” which means teacher, Rayber’s calling, one to which he does call himself. By virtue of its nature, mystery must be a part of the prophet’s life; Rayber cannot accept this perspective.

Rayber’s love for Bishop is “love without reason” and as such marks the beginning of a more intense, uncontrolled love that is “like an avalanche [which] covered everything his reason hated” (401). In a letter to a student, O’Connor explains what she means by this passage: “He had the idea that his love could be contained in Bishop but that if Bishop were gone, there would be nothing to contain it and he would then love everything and specifically Christ.”13 When Tarwater drowns Bishop, according to O’Connor, Rayber makes the “Satanic choice.”14 Rayer, who is not present at the drowning, but knows instinctively that Tarwater has baptized Bishop even as he drowns him, waits for the pain to begin, but nothing happens, “and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed” (456).
Rayber's response is beyond despair - his collapse signals that he knows his life does not work, all his book knowledge is of no assistance to him at this point. O'Connor leaves Rayber at this crossroad in the novel, but she hints in a letter that "his collapse then may indicate that he is not going to be able to sustain his choice - but that is another book maybe."\(^{15}\) Frederick Asals is content with letting Rayber be trapped in "the nothing of his emancipated ego."\(^{16}\) O'Connor's forceful position maintains that mystery and a belief in it must exist in the world, for without it, and with only nothing, life is unbearable. The Roman Ritual states that "if the child is in danger of death, it is to be baptized without delay."\(^{17}\) In *The Violent Bear It Away* O'Connor plays with a strange reversal of this statement: the child is in danger of being baptized, so he is drowned after some delay. But Tarwater finally helps himself, and he pronounces the words of baptism as the child goes under the water. This theme of baptism informs the entire book and is developed in the image patterns of water and fish, and the motif of thirst, which becomes particularly urgent in the last part of the novel.

According to Saint Augustine: "Baptism does not depend on the merits of those by whom it is administered, but in its own sanctity and truth, *on account of Him by whom it has been instituted.*"\(^{18}\) In denying the effect of the words of the sacrament, Tarwater is attempting to negate the efficacy of the baptism, but in so doing he unintentionally reveals his sacramentalist inclinations. Water is, of course, only half of the sacrament. In the presence of another stranger, the truck driver, Tarwater relives the drowning of Bishop. "Sitting upright and rigid the cab of the trunk, his muscles began to jerk, his arms flailed, his mouth opened to make ways for cries that would not come."
His pale face twitched and grimaced. He might have been Jonah clinging wildly to the whale's tongue" (462). Tarwater is suffocating, sinking, in reliving the drowning he himself was drowning – and in a peculiar sense, he is reliving his own baptism. That Tarwater baptizes Bishop for the wrong reason is of no consequence to the act itself. As Miles Orvell says, "He does NO, but he says YES."¹⁹ Rayber had attempted to drown the child at one time, but he could not finally carry through, and he dragged the child out of the water to be resuscitated. Tarwater drowns the child, but chooses at the last minute to save him eternally.

Tarwater hitchhikes back to Powderhead with a trucker, whom he tells he has drowned Bishop and thus proven he is not a prophet. He admits, though, that he also baptized him accidentally since there is no such thing as being born again. When the driver pulls over for a nap, Tarwater dreams of the death of the boy, and we discover that the words of baptism were forced from his throat like Jonah being expelled from the stomach of the whale. Figuring that he has now purged himself of his great uncle's influence, he intends to return to Powerhead, rebuild the house, and live life the way he wants it.

While Tarwater is in the city, he also begins to experience "strangeness in his stomach, a peculiar hunger" (430). Rayber notices it from the beginning, but he does not associate it with anything spiritual: "Something in [Tarwater's] very look, something starved in it, seemed to feed on [Rayber]" (402). Tarwater records the cost of what he considers each meal to be worth (but he never asks the actual cost), so he can repay Rayber, not wanting to be "beholden" to him (403). When Tawater stops and
stares through a bakery window, Rayber notices once again that he has “the face of 
someone starving who sees a meal he can’t reach laid out before him” (406), but 
Rayber is disappointed to discover that it is only a solitary loaf of bread. To Rayber, 
this is “a false alarm” (407), but to Tarwater, the bread is a reminder of his great-
uncle’s message that “Jesus is the bread of life” (342), which echoes Jesus’ own words: 
“And Jesus said to them: I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger: 
and he that believeth in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

The truck driver gives Tarwater a sandwich but Tarwater complains that his 
stomach does not allow anything inside it. After the truck driver drops him off he tries 
to buy a cold drink from a woman who ran a grocery near Powehead and knew his uncle. Having heard of his failure to bury old Tarwater, she refuses to serve him, and 
rebukes him for setting fire to the house. Involuntarily shouting an obscenity at her, he moves down the road to hitch a ride home. He is picked by a homosexual driving a lavender and cream car, who offers him marijuana and whiskey. When the boy passes out, the homosexual turns off the road, rapes the boy, and steals the bottle opener and corkscrew Rayber gave him. Feeling defiled when he wakes, the boy sets fire to the 
grove where he has been used and abandoned and goes towards his great-uncle’s grave. Lying on it, pressing his face to it, he hears the command: “GO WARN THE 
CHILDREN OF GOD . . . OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (478). Smearing 
his forehead with earth from old Tarwater’s grave, he moves toward the city to obey 
the command. It is important for Tarwater to learn that he does not have complete 
control of his destiny. He can make choices, good and bad, but finally what happens to
him, the way people respond to him and act upon him, the direction God leads him, are beyond his control. This is a truth the rape painfully demonstrates to him. Kathleen Feeley has said that with this event Tarwater “learns that being acted upon, as well as acting, is an intrinsic part of living. His passivity in the violent evil that is perpetrated on him renders that evil no less real, just as his willing only subconsciously the words of baptism in no way negates their reality.” Tarwater wants to negate this spiritual hunger, but it clearly grips him. He cannot be satiated with literal food anymore than he can avoid baptizing Bishop. Each literal meal that Tarwater eats form this point on is almost painful to him and less than satisfying. He remains hungry, ravenous. After the baptism, when the driver of the lavender and cream-coloured car offers him some whisky, Tarwater’s response is that it is “better than the Bread of Life!” (471). The acceptance of the Bread of Life and his full spiritual awareness of hunger do not come until his moment of violence back at Powerhead:

He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. (478).

That moment for Tarwater – when he sees the “red-gold tree of fire” and knows that it is the same fire that had “encircled Daniel . . . raised Elijah . . . spoken to Moses” (478) – finally arrives when he can freely say “Here I am, Lord, ready!” (334). Tarwater tries to find food in Rayber’s negation of belief. But like the breakfast cereal that Rayber dispenses, “shavings out of a cardboard box” (430). Rayber’s agnosticism leaves
Tarwater unsatisfied. He cannot even take it seriously until he has drifted far enough away from the teachings of Old Tarwater to look to Rayber with something starved in his eyes. Still, the sight of a loaf of bread in a bakery's window stops him in his tracks. These pangs gradually become more and more frequent until Tarwater is constantly hungry:

Since the breakfast he had finished sitting in the presence of his uncle's corpse, he had not been satisfied by food, and his hunger had become like an insistent silent force inside him, a silence inside akin to the silence outside, as if the grand trap left him barely an inch to move in, barely an inch in which to keep himself inviolate. (430)

The idea of Christ as the Bread of Life and recurring images of loaves and fishes serve to deepen this theme. At the end of the novel, Tarwater has a vision of a multitude – his great-uncle among its number – being fed loaves and fishes by Christ from a single basket.

Of course, the cross contains its own double meaning. An instrument of torture, it is also the sign of salvation. The old man speaks often “of the sweat and stink of the cross” (334). After his great-uncle's death, Tarwater decides not to set up a cross on his grave. “I'll be too wore out to set up any cross. I ain't bothering with trifles” (338), he says, in intentional blasphemy. The stranger argues that the cross would rot by judgment Day any way. But in spite of his intentions, Tarwater has been marked by the sign of the cross forever. When his great-uncle tells him about this baptism, “the boy would move this thin shoulder blades irritably as if he were shifting the burden of Truth like a cross on his back” (379).
Later when he is drunk, "his cheek bones protruded, narrow and thin like the arms of a cross" (360). When he discovers the cross which Buford Munson has set up one the grave, despite the boy's own intentions of not burying his great-uncle under the sign of the cross, he appears to stare "downward at the cross as if they followed below the surface of the earth to where its roots encircled all the dead" (477). The implication is that the love of the cross is infused in Tarwater's soul at his baptism, and there is nothing he can do to rid himself of it. Hardon explains the phenomenon of sacramental character this way:

There is something so mysteriously transcendent about three of the sacraments that they radically and permanently change the person who receives them by an immutable participation in Christ's priesthood. He remains unalterably baptized, or confirmed, or ordained, no matter what else may happen to his holiness in the sight of God. He thus retains an enduring substratum of union with God that needs only to be activated to rise from its dormant state.21

Rayber continually fights this substratum of union with God. He experiences uncontrollable rushes of love for Bishop – "horrifying love" (401), he calls it:

It was love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. And it only began with Bishop. It began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated" (401).
As a result, Rayber views himself as divided into two parts, the violent and the rational. His violent side loves; his rational side does not. In like manner he established a dichotomy between baptism and intelligence, thus linking baptism with violence, prefiguring Tarwater’s action on Bishop. Tarwater himself had experienced two separate baptisms – one performed on his buttocks in parody of the rite by Rayber. Asals calls this latter “a demonic consecration which, like a promissory note, will be collected many pages later by the homosexual rapist.” These two baptisms represent Tarwater’s eventual alternative choices. In fact, in attempting to deny the efficacy of the old man’s baptism, he almost necessitates the rape, which will in its own violent way allow him to receive revelation.

Tarwater is complex and hard to define, mirroring the complexity of the novel’s theme and handling. The name “Tarwater” links two disparate elements, one black and impenetrable, one cleansing. The boy is at once a prophet from the wilderness and a confused backwoods boy who is spiritually hungry; the constant references in the book to his physical hunger underscore this. He appears naive, but his rejection of the modern world and its trappings is clear and articulate. He attempts to reject his uncle’s spiritual legacy, but he cannot. He struggles between doing the devil’s work and God’s, finding that the latter’s teaching is fraught with violence and unreason. He is violent, and a great deal of violence is done to him – he sets fire to a house, he murders a boy, he is raped. He is the prophet Elisha who succeeds his great-uncle, a latter-day Elijah; he is St. Christopher as he baptizes, then drowns, his cousin; he is John the Baptist come to show the way. At the end of the novel he unwittingly performs the action that
confirms his status as a prophet, and he finally accepts his role as a messenger of God.

Tarwater also believes that if he is sent on a mission from God it would be to do more than to baptize an idiot boy, thinking about how Moses struck water from a rock. The two events that signify Tarwater's spiritual denial, and then rebirth, involve fire – at the beginning he sets his great-uncle's house ablaze, and at the end he sets fire to the forest before assuming the mantle of a prophet. Early on in the novel, Tarwater mistakes the lights of the city for fire. The fire of purification is also used to describe old Tarwater, who "learned by fire," and who tells Rayber that his great-nephew will burn the schoolteacher’s eyes clean. Tarwater also imagines that God will talk to him as he did to Moses, from a burning bush, which does happen in his final vision. It is significant; too, that even the name Tarwater unites these central elements of fire and water.

The images of the loaves and fishes are related to fire and water; loaves are baked over fire and fish come from water. The fish might be viewed as symbolic of the human soul (Christ is the "fisher of men"), and only Christ, as the Bread of Life, can satisfy the human soul. Rayber takes Tarwater to a natural history museum to show him how humans are descended from fish. And the drowning incident takes place on the fishing trip. Images of loaves include the bread in the bakery that Tarwater stares at longingly, and the sandwich given to him by the truck driver that he cannot eat, because his hunger, like his thirst, is also uncontrollable. This is both a spiritual and physical phenomenon that is heavily emblematic, and finally, at the end of the novel, Tarwater begins to understand it:

The boy remained standing there, his still eyes reflecting the field the Negro had crossed. It seemed to him no longer empty
but peopled with a multitude. Everywhere, he saw dim figures seated on the slope and as he gazed he saw that from a single basket the throng was being fed. His eyes searched the crowd for a long time as if he could not find the one he was looking for. Then he saw him. The old man was lowering himself to the ground. When he was down and his bulk had settled, he leaned forward, his face turned toward the basket, impatiently following its progress toward him. (477-478)

There are descriptions and references throughout the novel to eyes, which reveal a great deal about people’s characters and beliefs. Rayber wears glasses, mirroring his spiritual blindness; Tarwater’s eyes at the end are “scorched” (473), “singed” (478), – purified; the stranger who rapes Tarwater has lavender eyes, signaling the fact that he is the devil and old Tarwater’s eyes are described as having eyes that “looked like two fish straining to get out of a net of red threads” (335), and Tarwater is deeply attracted by them. When Rayber visits the farm with Bishop, the child’s eyes, a focus of heaven, reflected “the ravaged scene across the field” and “a dreaded sense of loss (comes) over him” (445).

When he lets Bishop be drowned by Tarwater, Rayber also is waiting for judgment, “for all the world to be turned into a burnt spot between two chimneys” (454). And when Tarwater finally went goes to Powderhead, he looks across to the house from that same vantage point of the forked tree and sees “the sign of a broken covenant. The place is forsaken and his own” (475). Bishop’s eyes are described as “two pools of light” (344). On the other hand, Tarwater remembers Rayber’s eyes where “knowledge moved like tree reflections in a pond where far below the surface
shadows a snake may glide and disappear” (365). Although Rayber and Tarwater may appear to be opposites, they are more alike than either one would ever admit. Rayber realizes that he cannot look Bishop in the eye without experiencing irresistible love, so he feels that likewise Tarwater needs to train himself to look Bishop in the eye in order to consciously resist baptizing him. Rayber’s choice is between love and reason; Tarwater’s is between baptism and drowning. Love and baptism are inextricably linked.

O’Connor frequently said that for the hard of hearing one must shout. Rayber, for one, had often chosen silence, switching off his hearing aid when he wanted uncomfortable truths to be excluded. In our last glimpse of him he has just turned his hearing aid on to capture Bishop’s bellowing as he is drowned. “The machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free” (456), O’Connor writes. The truth is bellowed-shouted-to him before descending to silence. Frederick Asals has observed that Rayber, in committing himself to rationalism, embraces a “travesty of Christianity,” one in which the importance of the law is paramount. Rayber’s school-teacherly role, Asals contends, echoes Galatians 3:24-24: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”

Tarwater finds this reward for serving God disappointing in the extreme: “Had the bush flamed for Moses, the sun stood still for Joshua, the lions turned aside before Daniel only to prophesy the bread of life? Jesus?” (342). He even feels he can smell
his freedom, pine-scented, coming out of the woods, until the old man will continue:

"You were born into bondage and baptized into freedom, into the death of the Lord, into the death of the Lord Jesus Christ" (342), the old man had said. Tarwater's refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ, to recognize that his freedom lies in obedience to Him, is the central problem of the narrative and accounts for his initial lack of a spiritual appetite: "In the darkest, most private part of his soul, hanging upside down like a sleeping bat, was the certain, undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life" (342). He realizes, however, that his great-uncle's prediction that he will become a prophet must entail acquiring this hunger:

...what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life. (343)

In a letter in which she discusses the title of the novel, O'Connor speaks of "the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands."24 The stranger's voice, in whatever guise it appears, is completely self-centred. It gives of itself to no one. During the rare times it urges moral choices upon Tarwater, it goes one iota beyond the minimum requirements of the law:

And as for Judgment Day, the stranger said, every day Judgment Day. Ain't you old enough to have learnt the yet for yourself? Don't everything you do, everything you have ever done, work itself out right or wrong before your eye and usually before the sun has set? (359)
Tarwater has discovered already that civil law is insurmountable. On a trip to the city with his great-uncle, he had visited lawyer after lawyer, his great-uncle arguing with each one of them about the entailment of his property. Tarwater had cried, "My Lord! . . . Ain't you got any sense? They all tell you the same thing. It's only one law and it's nothing you can do about it. I got sense enough to get that; why ain't you?"

Civil law, like God's law, cannot be changed. It is rigid and immutable. Tarwater had asked his great-uncle why, after he had been kidnapped, Rayber had not repeatedly tried to reclaim him:

"Why didn't he bring the law out here and get me back?" he had asked. "You want to know why?" his uncle said. "Well I'll tell you why. I'll tell you exactly why. It was because he found you a heap of trouble. He wanted it all in his head. You can't change a child's pants in your head." (378)

Rayber will neither go beyond the requirements of the law to reclaim the child, nor will he use the civil law to get him back. Only love can motivate him so to act. That the gospel of love in Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the law is a Christian common place - but it is one which Rayber has not yet committed himself to. O'Connor's choice of the name "Tarwater" suggests some of the difficulties the character encounters. Tar and Water do not mix. Tarwater's struggle is to accept ultimately his destiny, to integrate his resistant dark tar with the healing water of baptism, so that he heeds the command: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (478), spoken to him in capital letters. Tarwater encounters many false prophets along the way, beginning with the stranger in his various guises - at first a voice in his own mind, telling him, "It ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or
you” (354), and later manifested as the salesman Meeks who says, “Nobody owes nobody nothing” (362). The old man in the park where Tarwater almost succeeds in baptizing Bishop preaches a similar message: “Be like me, young fellow . . . . don’t let no jackasses tell you what to do” (433). Then there is the evil man who represents the anti-sacramental, in which the outward and visible signs of whiskey and cigarettes represent his inner corruption. After Tarwater, desperately thirsty, has drunk enough whiskey to put himself into a coma, the stranger rapes him. Tarwater’s great-uncle had correctly prophesied: “You are the kind of boy . . . . that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask you your bidnis. You had better mind how you take up with strangers.” And keep your bidnis to yourself” (367).

The most complex false prophet, however, is Rayber. He said he was a prophet too, a prophet of life insurance, for every right-thinking Christian, he said, knew that it was his Christian duty to protect his family and provide for them in the event of the unexpected. The schoolteacher, with Tarwater blood in him, at least had his father’s strain diluted: “Good blood flows in his veins . . . . And good blood knew the Lord and there ain’t a thing he can do about having it. There ain’t a way in the world he can get rid of it” (368).

One day the old man’s sister had worked a perfidy on him. He had been in the habit of going on Wednesday afternoon because on that afternoon the husband played a golf game and he could find her alone. On this particular Wednesday, she did not open the door but he knew she was inside because he heard footsteps. He beat on the door to
warn her and when she would not open it, he began to shout, for her and for all who would hear. With no one to hear but the boy, he flailed his arms and roared:

"Ignore the Lord Jesus as long as you can! Spit out the bread of life and sicken on honey. Whom work beckons, to work! Whom blood to blood! Whom lust to lust! Make haste, make haste. Fly faster and faster. Spin yourselves in a frenzy, the time is short! The Lord is preparing a prophet. The Lord is preparing a prophet with fire in his hand and eye and the prophet is moving toward the city with his warning. The prophet is coming with the Lord’s message. ‘Go warn the children of God,’ saith the Lord, ‘of the terrible speed of justice.’ Who will be left? Who will be left when the Lord’s mercy strikes?” (368)

Rayber preaches the gospel of freedom to be one’s own saviour. The biblical warning against false prophets is found in Matthew 7:15-20:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

According to the old man, the fruit that Rayber brings forth is dry and seedless. After living with him for awhile, the old man had concluded that Rayber’s interest in his family history was not a good sign. “The old man had thought this interest in his forebears would bear fruit, but what it bore, what it bore, stench and shame, are dead
words. What it bore was a dry and seedless fruit, incapable even of rotting, dead from
the beginning” (341). An outward manifestation of this metaphor is Bishop, whose
mental development is arrested, who cannot speck, and who ends up at the bottom of
the lake. Although Tarwater never completes the burial of his great uncle, he chooses a
spot under a fig tree for the burial site, thus providing the emblem for the biblical
passage about the difference between the true and the false prophets. The old man had
certainly brought forth good fruit, figs from figs, not thistles from figs. He had
understood freedom in a way Rayber never has – and a way Tarwater must learn
through painful means. But Tarwater finally reveals himself as the good fruit that his
great-uncle has brought forth.

Whereas Rayber, the schoolteacher, had led his sister into evil, with success,
old Tarwater had made every attempt to lead his own sister to repentance, without
success. Through one means or another, he had managed to keep up with her after she
had run away from Powderhead; but even after she had got married, she would not
listen to any word that had to do with her salvation. He had twice been thrown out of
her house by her husband – each time with the assistance of the police because the
husband was a man of no force – but the Lord had prompted him constantly to go back,
even in the face of going to jail.

Tarwater had resisted his great-uncle’s image of heaven as a place to receive the
Bread of Life, Jesus Christ: “The boy would have a hideous vision of himself sitting
forever with his great-uncle on a green bank, full and sick, staring at a broken fish and
a multiplied loaf” (369). The old man had explained to him that he was not taking him
on that trip for pleasure but because the Lord had sent him to do it, to see that he is
born again and instructs in his Redemption.

In four days the old man taught him what is necessary to know and baptized
him. He made him understand that his true father is the Lord and not the simpleton in
town and that he would have to lead a secret life in Jesus until the day came when he
will be able to bring the rest of his family around to repentance. He made him
understand that on the last day it would be his destiny to rise in glory in the Lord Jesus.
The boy sighed at this. The old man considered it his master stroke. He said, “I never
come to live with you. I come to die!” (375). The boy’s face remained unmoved – “Yes
.... and you had told him a bare-face lie. You never had no intention of dying”:

“I was sixty-nine years of age,” his uncle said. “I could have
died the next day as well as not. No man knows the hour of his
death. I didn’t have my life in front of me. It was not a lie, it was
only a speculation. I told him, I said, ‘I may live two months or
two days.’ And I had on my clothes that I bought to be buried
in-all new.”

“Ain’t it that same suit you got on now?” the boy asked
indignantly, pointing to the threadbare knee. “Ain’t it that one
you got on yourself right now?” (375)

His great-uncle had not been in the nephew’s house ten minutes before he had
baptized Tarwater. They had gone into the room where the crib was with Tarwater in it
and as the old man looked at him for the first time – “a wizened grey faced scrawny
sleeping baby” – the voice of the Lord had come to him and said, “HERE IS THE
PROPHET TO TAKE YOUR PLACE. BAPTIZE HIM” (376). After this incident, old
Tarwater promised Rayber, "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN" (379). Rayber and his wife had a mentally disabled child, Bishop, whom Rayber had taken care of on his own after his wife left him. Mason tried and failed to kidnap Bishop, and Rayber refused to let the old man baptize Bishop, so the old man ordered Francis Marion to finish the job.

*The Violent Bear It Away* delivers two symbolic alternatives for the reader: choose the way of Tarwater, which is less choice than a violence racked upon its chosen, or the way of Rayber, the ultimate torture because it yields only nothing disguised as free will. Richard Giannone sums it up this way: "The Lamb of God, not the laboratory . . . takes away the sins of the world. To suffer in the O'Conner world means to suffer because of God or to live in absurdity."25

O'Connor connects her fictional characters to biblical figures early on when she establishes the identity of old Mason Tarwater and details his preparation of Francis Marion Tarwater to receive the call: "He was let 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 form a dish" (340). The violence that O'Connor dwells on in this novel is far removed from any "national conviction" that "violent action" of the poor is worthy of her consideration; rather, she deals with an older, far more provocative violence, and her source, repeatedly, is biblical. Like most of O'Connor's stories, the novel is filled with Catholic themes and dark images, making it a classic example of Southern Gothic literature, and reflects her religious beliefs. It is a
novel of initiation, and is filled with religious imagery and themes, ranging from the power of passion to the dominance of destiny. The most obvious theme is the idea that destiny and religion dominate over the secular. O’Connor illustrates this well, demonstrating the power of Tarwater’s destiny as it dominates every obstacle in its way; the drowning of Bishop is transformed to a baptism, Tarwater’s rape turns to revelation, and the secular Rayber fails in every way.

O’Connor creates a world in *The Violent Bear It Away* in which, in the end, only Rayber, representative of the modern world, sees the prophet as expendable, insane, or obsessed. He assumes a modern everyman role and becomes the most vehement of antagonists. On the other hand, young Tarwater and pertinent minor characters serve to validate the old man’s position. First among the minor characters, Buford Munson, the black neighbour, stops by for some liquor on the day the old man dies and does the job that Tarwater is supposed to do: “[He] had to finish [digging the hole] and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at eh head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up” (331).

Munson accepts the old man as prophet, as though there was nothing out of the ordinary in his behavior. When he tries to rouse the drunken young Tarwater, he implores for the old man’s sake: “He deserves to lie in a grave that fits him . . . . He was deep in this life; he was deep in Jesus’ misery” (360). Munson’s daughter, who worked for Rayber’s mother at the old man’s suggestion, cooperated with his scheme of spiriting away the young Rayber to Powderhead.
Many critics have referred to an allegoric and emblematic resonance in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Martha Stephens stops short of calling the novel an allegory, but she does observe that it contains an "extensively developed allegorized conflict which . . . forms a link . . . [with] the religious literature of the distant past." 27 In his provocative study, *Flannery O'Connor's South*, Robert Coles calls Tarwater and Rayber "emblematic figures." 28 The Christian, the Modern Man, the Boy – these could be characters from a morality play, or archetypes from mythology. In fact, the struggle for control and power within and among this trinity of characters pushes the novel into the realm of Christian myth. John R. May has observed that "from a hermeneutic perspective, *The Violent Bear It Away* is perhaps O'Connor's most 'complete' work – the one in which [word] fully illuminates the meaning." 29
REFERENCES


7. The Douay (Rheims-Douay) Version of the Bible is the one most commonly used by Catholics in English-speaking countries, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary* (New York: The Gilmary Society, 1941) 308.


10. John Hardon, in *The Catholic Catechism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 505, says, “Through the symbolic action of washing with water and the use of appropriate ritual words, the baptized person is cleansed of all his sins and incorporated into Christ.”


