

# FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND THE PROBLEM OF BAPTISM

## Sectarian Controversies in 'The River'

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THE COURSE OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY literature in the USA was irrevocably changed by the emergence of a loosely knit group of writers which eventually became known as the Southern Renaissance (Renaissance). Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, this brilliant coterie, which included William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren and Katherine Anne Porter, moved the South's literary focus away from its nostalgic longing for a lost culture after the Civil War towards a direct confrontation with the Modernism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In the wake of this group, US writers with roots still very much in the Old South, such as Flannery O'Connor, found a new literary vocabulary with which to address their lives.

Born in the port city of Savannah, Georgia in 1925, Flannery O'Connor threw herself into academic work and writing of every sort. Eventually schooled by such older contemporaries as Robert Penn Warren and John Crowe Ransom at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she quickly came into her own after the Second World War with a brilliant series of short stories and novels that demonstrated a modern Roman Catholic writer's sensibilities, never losing her core focus on the moral and spiritual dimension of her material. In 1951 she was diagnosed with a disease of the immune system, lupus, which confined her to her ancestral home of Andalusia in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she continued to write until her untimely death on 3 August 1964. Thomas Merton eulogized her as one of the rarest literary talents comparing her less to moderns such as Hemingway and Sartre and more to 'someone like Sophocles'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Flannery O'Connor—A Prose Elegy', in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), 161.

With the recent publication of such works as Brad Gooch's definitive biography *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor* and O'Connor's own *A Prayer Journal*, the field of O'Connor studies continues to branch out into new areas of reflection and research, particularly in relation to her sacramental understanding of her faith. It has become a commonplace observation among literary critics that O'Connor's Catholic theological perspective is more often expressed obliquely than overtly. While some works, such as 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost' or even 'The Displaced Person' (in which a priest makes several appearances) are quite direct in their attention to this perspective, many of her other short stories are much more nuanced in presenting what O'Connor would call the 'action of grace'.

O'Connor herself was quite aware of both the problems and the temptations faced by a Catholic writer living in a world that is now only 'Christ-haunted'.<sup>2</sup> Throughout her life she explored these from one perspective or another in individual stories, and even occasionally provided something of a synthesis of her vision of faith and art in pieces such as her trenchantly crafted essay, 'The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South' (853–864). There, she tries to delineate how to be a Catholic writer addressing a Protestant audience and, especially, how to be a *Southern* writer speaking to a national US literary audience that all too often deprecates the Southern regional experience as merely gothic or grotesque. This was, indeed, one of her life-long trials: to be Catholic and Southern without being treated as sectarian or provincial.

One of the finest examples of O'Connor's work is the tragicomic short story entitled 'The River'. It covers two days in the life of a boy, Harry Ashfield, who is taken by his Pentecostal nanny down to the local river where a young preacher, Reverend Summers, mistakenly thinks the child is seeking baptism. What the preacher fails to realise is that the highly metaphorical language of his riverside sermon is understood by the naïve Harry as a literal description of what would happen to him after baptism. On the following day, Harry recalls the preacher's invitation to 'lay your pain in that River and get rid of it' and proceeds to return to the river alone. There, as he wildly and happily rushes into the strong current, he hopes to be freed of all his sufferings and meet Jesus; in the end, we see the child slip into the river's undertow, never to be seen again. The tragicomic tale, so typical of O'Connor's double-edged storytelling technique, has become one of her most controversial yet popular stories.

<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 818 (subsequent references given in the text).

It is rare in O'Connor's works to find two theological perspectives in a direct and open conflict that plays itself out in front of the reader; it is all the more unusual that with this story her thoughtful, consistent attempt to resolve that conflict generates such a diversity of critical interpretations. My concern for a 'right reading' of 'The River' goes beyond what I think are the two disjunctive interpretations that seem to have developed over the years since its



Flannery O'Connor

publication. The first of these two schools of thought, which I would call the 'attenuated' comic vision, would maintain that Harry Ashfield finally does obtain his spiritual freedom because of his baptism down at the river: in terms of the Catholicism of the time, the child does enter Paradise. The other camp of interpreters (many of whom follow the distinguished Yale University critic Harold Bloom's critique of O'Connor as a Gnostic and a backwoods Manichaeon) read the story as dominated by the desperate tones of pre-adolescent self-destruction and parental neglect.<sup>3</sup> Ralph C. Wood accurately identifies this trend when he perceptively writes that some readers cannot get any further than seeing Harry Ashfield's death as 'a pathetic act of suicide, a final despairing escape from his parental world'.<sup>4</sup> Wood rejects the view that this emotional foundling loses his life after misunderstanding the utterly misguided preaching of Reverend Summers.

Yet, I think we must always come back to O'Connor's unbending vision of this story as being profoundly *comic*, because the child *does* enter the realm of Paradise at his death, but not because of the baptism intended by the Reverend Summers. It may be helpful at this point to recall that O'Connor's understanding of the comic reaches back, on the one hand, to the so-called 'High Comedy' of the Greeks—which emphasized the use of parody, sarcasm and social commentary—and, on the other hand, to the

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, 'Introduction', in *Modern Critical Views: Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 1–8.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph C. Wood, 'The Scandalous Baptism of Harry Ashfield: Flannery O'Connor's "The River"', in *Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor: Sacrament, Sacramental, and the Sacred in Her Fiction*, edited by Joanne Halleran McMullen and Jon Parish Peede (Macon: Mercer UP, 2007), 189–204, here 201.

late medieval and Renaissance view of writers such as Dante, who saw comedy ultimately in terms of a character's journey from spiritual loss to spiritual enlightenment and redemption. What sets this tale apart from others is that O'Connor not only accomplishes the literary feat of giving it a comic ending, as grace penetrates its grotesque world of cigarette butts, agnosticism and cancer, but also offers a critique of one fundamentalist view of baptism while simultaneously fashioning an attractive alternative theological view of the sacrament. And it is for this reason, in part, that the story comes across to us as both so unrelentingly grim and still comic.

Many critics have tried to resolve the tensions of this story—usually unsuccessfully. However, as O'Connor herself once stated in an interview: 'He comes to a good end. He's saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death.'<sup>5</sup> Certainly, I do not want to suggest that because O'Connor says the tale is comic, it must be so. Simply because O'Connor was an ardent advocate of her Catholic faith in the hostile environment of the US South does not mean that this story successfully embodies any particular sacramental understanding of baptism.

What O'Connor's story needs, at least in my way of thinking, is a re-examination of one of its key elements. I would suggest phrasing the question as follows: what is the specifically Catholic and sacramental understanding of the baptism given to Harry Ashfield that calls into question the validity of the baptism at the river administered by the Reverend Summers? Or, stated in a slightly different way, how does Harry's baptism, invalid in its own terms, actually end up saving his soul according to the Catholic understanding of the time?

In my reading, O'Connor's theology of baptism really unfolds in two simultaneous ways. On the one hand, Harry Ashfield goes through a ritual of river baptism that is invalid according to the norms any reader would associate with the Reverend Summers and the theological tradition he represents (although he does not know this). On the other hand, O'Connor legitimately maintains the comic, salvific character of the story by strongly indicating a different view: that the baptism is, in fact, Catholic in nature, even if it is conferred by a Protestant minister. In this crucial distinction lies, I think, the key to interpreting the story. It makes sense of the death of Harry Ashfield as a truly comic finale rather than a tragic or pathetic spiritual event that leaves essentially unresolved the central question of Harry Ashfield's end as either a heavenly success or an earthly disaster.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary M. Magee, *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987), 58.

To come to terms with the first part of this argument—that O'Connor deliberately sets before us a baptism that is invalid according to Reverend Summers's own evangelical norms—we need to make a theological distinction common to the type of Protestantism that we find in this story. It does not specify the precise denominational affiliation of the Reverend Bevel Summers, or Mrs Connin (the nanny who accompanies Harry Ashfield down to the river and who approves of Reverend Summers's activities). But the sermon the preacher gives and the images he employs in his evangelism show that he represents the broadly popular brand of Baptist fundamentalist theology that has been influential in the southern United States for more than 150 years.

William H. Brackney, professor of religion at Baylor University, explains the distinction between what is called 'paedobaptism' (infant baptism) and 'believer's baptism'. A number of Christian traditions, including Anabaptists and Baptists, reject the baptism of infants because the Church is defined essentially as the gathering of the faithfully professed. Familiar scriptural texts are used to affirm that 'if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Romans 10:9). Baptism becomes an 'ordinance' of the Church expressing a conversion to grace and true belief in the gospel that has already been accomplished. As Brackney states:

Baptists have been criticized because their rejection of infant baptism appears to have no place for children in an adult or believers' church. Instead of baptizing young children and infants, Baptists prefer to dedicate children to the Lord in a public church service where the parents and the members of the church are called upon to live exemplary lives before children, and to teach them the ways of the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of 'The River', this means that O'Connor is constructing an event that would have no religious or sacramental validity for Reverend Summers himself. But understanding it along the lines of Catholic teaching resolves what one critic calls the 'theologically puzzling' story without pressing the credulity of the reader.<sup>7</sup> In particular, I think there are two moments in the story which tend to support the interpretation that O'Connor saw Harry Ashfield as experiencing infant baptism, such

<sup>6</sup> William H. Brackney, *Doing Baptism Baptist Style: Believer's Baptism* (Brentwood: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2001), available at <http://www.baptisthistory.org/pamphlets/baptism.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> A. R. Coulthard, 'Flannery O'Connor's Deadly Conversions', *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, 13 (1984), 87–97, here 90.

as a very young child would receive in the Roman Catholic Church, and that this occurs in spite of what are presumably the objectives of the Reverend Bevel Summers: to baptize a young boy who believes in his heart and confesses with his lips that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. Reverend Summers, unknowingly and unwittingly, confers the sacrament as understood from O'Connor's Catholic perspective.

The first of these moments occurs when Harry's age is given in the story as 'four or five years' (155). This affirms that nothing Harry does at the river could be an expression of a personal commitment to Jesus: he is simply too young to be a recipient of 'believer's baptism'. In the second moment, the Reverend Bevel Summers asks Harry a number of questions regarding the effects of water baptism, and Harry's responses unambiguously reflect the mind of a very young child who is incapable of distinguishing literal reality from symbolic religious form. Harry is completely unfocused about the grave event that is to befall him, in a manner typical of O'Connor's wry humour. When the preacher asks Harry if he has ever been baptized, the child simply responds, 'What's that?' (165). Later, when he is told that he will soon enter the Kingdom of God, he thinks to himself, 'I won't go back to the apartment then, I'll go under the river' (165). Clearly, Harry's baptism, if it is baptism, is not 'believer's baptism', since he lacks both conversion and personal belief.

Although there are no clear sources for this story's baptismal motif, it may prove helpful at this point to consider at least a small number of



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*Creek baptism at Morehead, Kentucky, in 1940*

texts relating to baptism and concerns about the spiritual welfare of infants that O'Connor would have undoubtedly known. What follows, then, is a brief examination of some sources which may have prompted her to approach the as she did in this story. They can all be found mentioned elsewhere in the corpus of her works, most especially in her letters and longer lectures. By touching upon them, I hope to provide a broader context in which to understand why O'Connor would insist on structuring the baptism of Harry Ashfield in terms of the Catholicism of her time.

From a literary and imaginative perspective, O'Connor's short story seems to be very much in touch with a work to which she referred again and again in her letters and lectures: Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. In particular, canto 4 of the *Inferno* provides an explicit source which concerns itself with the exact topic of 'The River': the eternal spiritual disposition of infants and small children. At this point in the poetic narrative of his journey through the Underworld, Dante the Pilgrim and Virgil enter into the realm of limbo. The relevant text from Dante is as follows:

My master began: 'You do not ask about  
the souls you see? I want you to know,  
before you venture farther,  
  
they did not sin. Though they have merit,  
that is not enough, for they were unbaptized,  
denied the gateway to the faith that you profess ....'<sup>8</sup>

In this text, Virgil reminds Dante the Pilgrim that, although these infants and children have committed no personal sins, they have not received the sacrament of baptism, which is 'the doorway of faith'. In the popular imagination of US Catholics in the 1940s and 1950s, limbo was a point of endless discussion: what would be the eternal disposition of the souls of infants and young children who were never sacramentally baptized. O'Connor's short story neatly brings together the poetic insight of Dante and this contemporary theological concern about baptism.

A second source which would have undoubtedly helped to orientate O'Connor's beliefs was the teaching of the Council of Trent, an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church which we know that O'Connor read and studied in some detail throughout her life. In its decrees from the seventh session of 1547, Trent confronted the widely popular

<sup>8</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000), canto 4, ll. 31–36.



*Limbo, illustration to Dante, Inferno, canto 4, by William Blake*

Reformist doctrine denying the efficacy of infant baptism. The council unambiguously set out the Catholic position in session 7, canon 13:

If anyone shall say that children, because they have not the act of believing, are not after receiving baptism to be numbered among the faithful, and that for this reason they are to be re-baptized when they have reached the years of discretion—*anathema sit*.<sup>9</sup>

Here, as with the discussion of limbo, O'Connor follows a very conventional line of belief which is reflected in the theological perspective of 'The River'. Perhaps it should be noted at this point that while O'Connor was certainly conversant with the theological trends in Catholic thinking that emerged after the Second World War, in regard to the particular question of infant baptism, she does not follow them.<sup>10</sup>

A third source for O'Connor's story is, of course, the Bible, to which she returned again and again in her writings and letters. Many critics have carefully documented O'Connor's reliance on Christian scripture

<sup>9</sup> 'Canons on the Sacrament of Baptism', in Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, translated by Roy J. Deferrari, 30th edn (Fitzwilliam: Loreto, 1954), 264.

<sup>10</sup> The October 2011 conference at Loyola University, *Revelation and Convergence: Flannery O'Connor among the Philosophers and Theologians*, was quite noteworthy in the number of scholarly papers which set out O'Connor's interest in contemporary Catholic theology.



as the moral background for her stories, and in 'The River' this is particularly obvious.<sup>11</sup> There is a reference to the Book of Revelation in the closing sentence of 'The River'. Mr Paradise, the garage-owner and a religious sceptic, pursues Harry Ashfield down into the river in an attempt to save the child from drowning. However, he fails to catch Harry, who is quickly swept away by the current to his death. Mr Paradise, a wholly worldly figure symbolic of the secularised ethos that Harry is fleeing, simply stands on the riverbed, 'like some ancient water monster ... empty-handed' (171). Harry's escape from the sinful world, evading Mr Paradise's attempt to 'save' him in worldly terms, is complete as he passes through death into the Kingdom of Christ. His infant baptism assures the reader theologically that he will enter Heaven and will most certainly 'count', as the Reverend Summers puts it, in that Kingdom.

In a letter of 24 August 1956, O'Connor asks how one can 'document the sacrament of Baptism?????' (1001). The obvious answer is that it cannot be done, because grace is invisible, both in its presence and action. At best, it can be indirectly known through its effects, which may be manifested as visible gestures or spoken words. Throughout her life and writings, however, she was continually probing the meaning of that 'moment of grace', which both adults and children can experience. For example, when the Grandmother in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' has a moment of mental clarity shortly before her violent death, she sees herself and her faults as they truly are because of the workings of grace (152). Or, in a more overtly comic story entitled simply 'Revelation', the protagonist, Ruby Turpin, has a visionary insight concerning the procession of all the elect marching helter-skelter into the Kingdom of Heaven (653–654).

Harry Ashfield, of course, could not have had a moment of grace like this because of his youth. Nor could one anticipate a time when his parents might be motivated to present him for baptism. When she hears about his baptism at the end of the day from the nanny, Mrs Connin, Harry's mother indignantly begins to scream, 'Well the nerve!' (166). O'Connor's opportunistic Catholic baptism of Harry addresses what was clearly a widespread cultural concern among Catholics of her time with the definitive answer that Harry Ashfield would *not* end up in limbo, but in Heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, Ga: U. of Georgia P, 1982), 77.

In writing this controversial story about a young child's unintentional death, O'Connor assures the reader that grace has, indeed, touched his life and soul by constructing a baptismal scenario whose overt fundamentalist form belies a clear-cut Catholic sacramental value. In so doing, she provides her child protagonist with as sure a place in Heaven as the literature of the twentieth century could convey. At its deepest layer of meaning, then, O'Connor reminds us that the only thing more valuable than life itself in this earthly kingdom is life eternal in the Kingdom to come.

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