To my Mom and Dad
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, my instructors, and my friends.
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Flannery O’Connor’s fiction is frequently regarded as a prime example of the dubiously-titled ‘Southern Gothic’ literary genre, in addition to the works of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams – to name just a few. Additionally, O’Connor’s steadfast devotion to Catholicism has reinforced the common perception that most of her stories – if not influenced entirely by the gruesome imagination frequently attributed to Southern writers – display little more than the expected literary tropes and techniques of any given ‘backwoods theologian,’ a stubborn and pessimistic spinster. Frequently, her portrayals of peculiar characters enduring debilitating physical infirmities and encountering extremely violent deaths have been perceived by critics and the public alike as little more than morbid religious allegories or stark representations of violence for its own sake.

This essay focuses specifically on O’Connor’s second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and O’Connor’s use of grotesque realism as a social commentary on the many changes facing America – and, more concretely for O’Connor, the American South – during the early to mid-twentieth century. O’Connor’s contemporary critics and public alike misjudged the author’s aim in a variety of ways, from their confusion over the story’s intended protagonist to their
misinterpretation of the violence in the narrative as merely sensationalistic. The significance of the social commentary in O’Connor’s book was not fully appreciated until many years later.

In this essay, I rely upon Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, sociological studies from David Reisman, Herbert Marcuse, and James Agee, and critical literary analyses from Frederick Asals, Robert Brinkmeyer, and Sally Fitzgerald, to argue that O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* is not merely another morbid tale from a Southern writer; it is, in fact, an in-depth examination of some of the most essential conflicts stemming from the inception of modernity in this country.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Though Flannery O’Connor is frequently categorized both as a Catholic novelist and as paradigmatic of the so-called Southern Gothic genre, most critics and scholars have relied upon these labels in a manner that poses each as a sort of accusation, rather than a descriptive characterization of her work. The release of O’Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952, began this “initial rush to oversimplify” her work (*Three* xiii). As Sally Fitzgerald points out in the introduction to *Three by Flannery O’Connor* – a compilation of *Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away,* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* – critics were inclined “in light of their own prejudices and preconceptions, to see her as another chronicler of southern grotesqueries or, more often, to use a term she loathed: another ‘Southern Gothic’ writer, an eccentric writing about eccentrics” (xiv).

The arbitrary classification of O’Connor’s work as Southern Gothic is supported more so by her efforts to examine the South as distinctly separate and different from the national culture at large. Although she sometimes contradicts herself in her attacks on Northern secular intellectualism, this aim in itself reflects an interest in American culture as a whole. Therefore, we can gain some insight into the social commentary manifested in her work through an examination of O’Connor’s portrayal of the South as a singular part in relation to the whole of American society.

Though one of the main focal points of this paper is to argue that O’Connor is not only a Southern Catholic novelist, it would be entirely short-sighted to claim that her religion had no influence whatsoever upon her work. Her lifelong devotion to, and struggle with, the strictures of the Catholic faith – and her family’s unwavering devotion to it – undoubtedly colored O’Connor’s perception of the world. Specifically, though, it shaped her reading of the drastic
changes facing America – manifested most concretely for her in the South – during the early to mid-twentieth century.

In her study of O’Connor’s life and work, Dorothy Walters describes O’Connor as “an austere and – at times – avenging angel . . . executing judgment in wild and violent forms of retribution. Only those survive who transcend or are transformed by the radical disasters to which they are exposed” (21). Though this image of O’Connor as an ‘avenging angel’ draws a vivid correlation between O’Connor’s approach to writing and a deeply entrenched religiosity, it is crucial to understand that the violent ‘judgment’ that O’Connor doles out so frequently stems not just from a standpoint of rigid Catholic reckoning. Her verdicts also act as a social commentary that relies upon the images and language associated with Christianity to examine the unraveling of the integrity of American individualism and, most indicatively to O’Connor, the loss of the singular identity – flaws and all – of the American South. Fitzgerald also acknowledges in the introduction to *Three* that “in the wars between generations…O’Connor is not particularly on the side of the young, despite the maddening foibles, and even evils, of the old; she deals out justice with an even hand” (xxv); as we will see, this so-called ‘war between the generations’ manifests in many different ways in O’Connor’s work, and can also be understood as a social commentary of sorts along the lines of the sociological studies of such diverse mid-century figures as James Agee, David Reisman, and Herbert Marcuse.

Flannery O’Connor was very much aware of the assumptions and preconceptions that her audiences – scholars, critics, and the public alike – formed regarding her work. Because O’Connor did not view her faith as a deciding factor in her art, she in no way intended to pander to the typical Catholic reader any more than she would change her message to appeal to a broader, irreligious audience. Fitzgerald claims that O’Connor’s genuine “sympathy for sincere
Protestants, and even for vividly subjective Christians, is manifest in her work;” on the other hand, though, O’Connor was quite “intolerant of distortions” (Three xxi). Indeed, O’Connor clearly had the least amount of patience for false prophets: both those who distorted the word of God for their own material gain, and the cadre of secular intellectuals who claimed science as the one (and only) true belief.

In Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose – a collection of O’Connor’s writings edited by Sally Fitzgerald and first published in 1969 – O’Connor states that “one of the most disheartening circumstances that the Catholic novelist has to contend with is that he has no large audience he can count on to understand his work. The general intelligent reader today is not a believer” (181). Thus, even though O’Connor openly embraced the importance of religion in her life – and constantly defended the compatibility of her faith with ‘serious’ writing – she knew that her work ran the risk of misinterpretation at the hands of a largely secular audience. Conversely, O’Connor found that readers who identified themselves first and foremost as Catholics proved to be just as unreliable as those who claimed no faith at all: she claimed that the Catholic reader “is so busy looking for something that fits his needs, and shows him in the best possible light, that he will find suspect anything that doesn’t serve such purposes” (Mystery 182).

Still others attribute the inherent ‘pessimism’ of O’Connor’s work to a harsh judgment of human nature that exceeds the typical rigidities of Catholicism: according to these critics, the world according to Flannery O’Connor is “a world of pain dominated by the crucified, not the resurrected Christ, given over to sharp suffering and sudden death” (Asals 202). Some misinterpretations of O’Connor’s stories have rested on the assumption that the fatal flaw in her art exists within her “stubborn refusal to see any good, any beauty or dignity or meaning, in ordinary human life on earth” (Stephens 9). Additionally, critics have attested that “a good
indication of what must be called O’Connor’s contempt for ordinary human life is the loathing with which she apparently contemplated the human body” (Stephens 10). Clearly, this misreading of O’Connor’s aim aligns the physical disfigurements and deformities so common in her work to stereotypical Southern Gothic morbidities or fanatical faith-laden human sacrifices, rather than objectively examining them as literary tropes. However, as Jon Bacon points out in *Flannery O’Connor and Cold War Culture*, “in portraying her rural characters as freaks and misfits, O’Connor allied herself with those who called attention to the representational inadequacy of the pastoral myth. She suggested that Americans could no longer base their national identity on a belief in pastoral innocence” (38-39).

In *The Question of Flannery O’Connor*, Martha Stephens claims that even though O’Connor’s interpretations of the “delusions, the weaknesses, the hypocrisy – in short, the bad – in human nature” are both credible and convincing, she adds that “what is false in her work springs from her failure to see that though man is all the things herein implied, he is not only these things – and the total picture of human society that emerges from her work as a whole is one that is difficult to accept” (14). The mistake that Stephens makes in this assessment of O’Connor’s work is to presume that this bodily destruction – and, of course, the graphic and sometimes deadly violence that causes it – is the only message offered in these texts. It is my claim, then, that O’Connor’s approach to storytelling – which can be easily misinterpreted as a pessimistic vision of violence for its own sake – is a means to a different end: the use of grotesque realism is an analysis of and commentary on the human condition in the America of the mid-twentieth century.
CHAPTER 2
FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND THE GROTESQUE

In *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor states that “the novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural.” O’Connor posits that it may be necessary for the Christian writer “to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience;” she succinctly analogizes this effort by stating that “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (33-34).

At the same time, though, O’Connor acknowledged that resorting to these ‘violent literary means’ to get her point across to a “hostile audience” risked alienating most Catholic readers, since this particular writing style would rely heavily upon “images and actions [that] may seem exaggerated and distorted to the Catholic mind” (*Mystery* 185).

In O’Connor’s essay, “The Regional Writer,” she states that, by the middle of the twentieth century, the identity of the South was “obscured and in doubt. In the past, the things that have seemed to many to make us ourselves have been very obvious things, but now no account of nostalgia can make us believe they will characterize us much longer” (*Mystery* 57). O’Connor clearly believed that these labels of “grotesque” and “Southern Gothic,” which scholars and critics so frequently pinned onto the work of any author originating from below the Mason-Dixon line, were indicative primarily of the snobbish, stubborn short-sightedness of the stereotypical Northern intellectual. In response to this perceived hasty generalization, O’Connor observed that “a great deal of serious modern fiction” originating in the South contained a “quality about it that is generally described, in a pejorative sense, as grotesque.” She claimed not to be too terribly surprised by this assumption, since she had observed that “anything that comes
out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (*Mystery* 40).

The parallel O’Connor suggests here is an inversion of the perception of ‘grotesque’ and ‘realistic’ depending upon the regional affiliations of both the author and the audience. O’Connor believes – perhaps rightfully so – that a Southern author’s ‘realistic’ vision may be dismissed as Southern Gothic schlock by a Northern critic, while that same Southern author’s attempt to represent the truly grotesque may be perceived as normal, natural, or even banal, by the same (Northern) reader. As we will see upon a close examination of *The Violent Bear It Away*, the confusion of O’Connor’s public and critics alike regarding characterizations of both Mason and Rayber Tarwater are two of the most vivid examples of this misunderstanding.

In addition to the problematic binary between grotesque and realistic, though, both O’Connor and her critics draw several other dichotomies between the North and the South: mainstream/eccentric; decadent/puritanical, godless/devout. O’Connor frequently discusses the ambivalence with which she approaches these audiences of the extreme – decoratively devout Catholics and godless (i.e., Northern) intellectuals alike. She claimed that although the author creating a character may not perceive anything abnormal about the character – or, at least, nothing “more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is” – the audience will certainly consider the character to be grotesque. Accordingly, in a tone that is (typically) defensive, O’Connor stated that when she is asked why Southern authors tend to focus on “freaks,” she says that it is “because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological” (*Mystery* 44). Though this statement suggests that O’Connor believed the South’s deep-seated faith somehow makes its citizens more perceptive of the true nature of
man than secularized Northerners, she also believed that humanity in general was “all grotesque, and I don’t think the Southerner is any more grotesque than anyone else” (*Mystery* 233).

In another acerbic passage from *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor curtly states that “Southern identity is not really connected with mockingbirds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads” (*Mystery* 57). This declaration – included in “The Regional Writer” – is perhaps the most stunning example of O’Connor’s belief that the South will inevitably be distorted in the minds of a Northern audience. In Robert Coles’ *Flannery O’Connor’s South*, he claims that – by the autumn of 1960, when O’Connor made this assertion – she “had plenty of reason …to believe herself thoroughly misunderstood” (Coles 3).

The ‘reason’ to which Coles refers is, most likely, the critical reception of her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, which was published in early 1960. Fitzgerald claims that the novel “further enhanced [O’Connor’s] reputation, both for better and for worse…it was just as complex and demanding as *Wise Blood,*” but, additionally, it was “even more violent and unsettling in its denouement” (xviii-xix). Frank Warnke’s review of the book for *New Republic*, which declared that the novel was “one of crankiness and provincialism,” is indicative of the reaction of most Northern audiences at the time of its release (Whitt 87). More recent criticism has noted, however, that the primary reason behind this lukewarm (and sometimes hostile) critical reception stems from O’Connor’s contemporary critics and public muddying their own attempts to understand the work by “offering an inadequate interpretation of [the novel] and then criticizing the book for not always fitting it” (Eggenschwiler 115). This, they argue, may be the reason why O’Connor’s contemporary readers accused both the novel and the author herself of being ‘confused’. The real confusion, though, stemmed from the fact that these readers “seemed
hardly even to suspect that old Tarwater was drawn as a sympathetic figure, and they therefore tended to view Rayber, not the boy, as the protagonist” (Stephens 101). O’Connor anticipated these types of misinterpretations for most of her work, but did so most astutely for The Violent Bear It Away. In Habit of Being – a collection of O’Connor’s correspondences with friends and publishing associates, edited by Sally Fitzgerald and published in 1969 – O’Connor tells friend and fellow Southern writer Cecil Dawkins that her editor hailed The Violent Bear It Away as “the best thing I’ve ever done. The most I am willing to say is that it has taken more doing than anything else I’ve done. I dread all the misunderstandings of my intentions” (340). Likewise, in a letter to her friend “A,” O’Connor states that she expected the novel “to be pounced on and torn limb from limb. Nevertheless, I am pleased with it myself” (Habit 342).

Afterwards, in another letter to “A,” dated February of 1960, O’Connor recalls – with her usual caustic wit – the interview that led to the Time review of The Violent Bear It Away. She states that the magazine “sent two men down from Atlanta, one to take pictures and the other to ask questions sent from the New York office” [emphasis added]; O’Connor recalls that the photographer “took about a million pictures, in all of which I am sure I looked like Bishop [the retarded child in Violent]. They will select the one that looks most like Bishop”. She continues, stating that the reporter persistently asked O’Connor to “characterize myself so he would have something to write down. Are you a Southern writer? What kind of Catholic are you? All I did for an hour was stammer and stutter. Not only will I look like Bishop, but I will sound like him if he could talk” (Habit 374). Although O’Connor prepared herself for the worst and had already “resigned to the fact that I am going to be the book’s greatest admirer” (Habit 344), she could not have foreseen the professional and personal attack volleyed at her in the form of Time’s scathing review of Violent, which was published in the periodical’s February 29th, 1960 issue.
The review, entitled “God-Intoxicated Hillbillies,” could have easily been written by a prototype of Rayber himself. The opening sentence identifies O’Connor as “a retiring, bookish spinster who dabbles in the variants of sin and salvation like some self-tutored backwoods theologian” (Time). The review condescendingly refers to her family farm in rural Georgia (“which she rarely leaves”), and – in an appallingly inappropriate move – raises the issue of her battle with lupus. Thus, her isolated homestead and chronic illness – embodiments of the Southern Gothic at their most concrete – are presented as evidence of O’Connor’s “relative immobility,” a phrase doubtlessly indicative of Northerners’ perception of Southerners as backwards, stubborn, and stagnant. The reviewer claims, however, that even O’Connor’s “immobility” does not hinder her efforts to “visit remote and dreadful places of the human spirit” through her fiction (Time).

Furthermore, the review declares that The Violent Bear it Away is a “horror story of faith” in which “the characters are for or against God with a kind of vindictiveness that…must make even Him uneasy” (Time). Though the misguided evaluation asserts that – despite her intentions – O’Connor’s “handling of God-drunk backwoodsmen… seldom seems to rise above an ironic jape,” the closing sentence of the review clearly illustrates her contemporary audience’s misreading of the narrative’s central character. In an assessment that curiously poses both Rayber and young Tarwater as the veritable victims of the old man’s wiles, the review claims that “it is this suggestion of the secure believer poking bitter fun at the confused and bedeviled that lingers in the mind after the tale is ended – rather than the occasional flashes of pity that alone make such a story bearable” (Time). Of course, O’Connor soon learned of the hostile
review; she stated that “I would have been a little uneasy had Time liked the book, but I do regret their making it and me sound so unhealthy-sounding” (Habit 376). O’Connor was, understandably, troubled by the review: “A full medical report. Lupus makes the news. That was really a sickening review and in very bad taste” (Habit 378).

Overall, O’Connor’s effort in Violent to bring the question of faith into mass publication was just as ill-received by the predominantly non-believing public as it had been scorned and dismissed by critics. Walters argues that since O’Connor believed that a “set of once universally assumed beliefs has faded dangerously from the modern consciousness,” she was required to create her ‘large, startling figures’ to remind society that “man’s rejection or ignoring of his traditional spiritual heritage does not diminish its validity nor relieve him of his inner responsibility to fulfill its demands” (35). O’Connor’s objective, then, must have been to illustrate – through violence – “the nature of that obligation and the consequences of its denial” (Walters 35). Additionally, in Flannery O’Connor and the Imagination of Extremity, O’Connor scholar Frederick Asals states that the popular conception of O’Connor’s portrayal of the Almighty throughout most of her fiction – “a God who reveals Himself only in our pain, and who reveals Himself in order to demand all from us” – was bound to perplex and aggravate her largely secular audience (229). Clearly, this particular approach either did not sit well with the majority of her critics and audiences, or continued to be misinterpreted and maligned; Violent is, perhaps, the most vivid example of this dilemma.
In the essay entitled “Catholic Novelists” in Mystery and Manners, O’Connor claims that the “main concern of the fiction writer is with mystery as it is incarnated in human life” (176). Since an exploration of mystery and mysticism inherently has spiritual – though not necessarily religious – implications, O’Connor asserts that even though a writer’s artistic concerns may overlap with their personal beliefs, this does not necessarily lead to a conflict of interests. She states that “there is no reason why fixed dogma should fix anything that the writer sees in the world. On the contrary, dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality” (Mystery 178).

Likewise, as she reflected on the central act of The Violent Bear It Away, O’Connor states that “I know that for the larger percentage of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore I have to imbue this action with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery. I have to distort the look of the thing in order to represent, as I see them, both the mystery and the fact” (180).

Consequently, in The Violent Bear It Away, one of the most complex configurations of mystery conflicting with secular intellectualism is embodied in Mason Tarwater. The critical and popular reaction to this character is only the first example of the misinterpretations of O’Connor’s novel presented in this paper, but it is certainly one of the most relevant miscommunications between author and audience. Though O’Connor supported Mason “100 per cent,” readers attributed his prophecy to dementia, not divine guidance. According to some critics, the old man “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 94). O’Connor acknowledges the complications inherent in the construction of a character such as Mason in a passage from Mystery and Manners:
When you write about backwoods prophets, it is very difficult to get across to the modern reader that you take these people seriously, that you are not making fun of them, but that their concerns are your own and, in your judgment, central to human life. It is almost inconceivable to this reader that such could be the case (204).

Her vocal support for Mason – and, perhaps more accurately, the Southerners who even slightly resemble Mason in their religious fervor – attests to Fitzgerald’s claim that O’Connor’s “concern for the people she wrote about was at bottom of the utmost seriousness, and sprang from a kind of tough-minded respect for them and their dignity as human beings, and a hope for them born of austere and uncondescending charity” (Three xviii).

Though O’Connor goes to great lengths to underscore the importance of self-sufficiency and individualism to Mason – and, thereby, Francis Tarwater – it is important to understand that the self-imposed alienation which the old man so feverishly attempts to impart on the young boy is also, in a sense, a means of ensuring conformity. Just as he accuses Rayber of wanting to capture the boy and confine him to ‘his own head,’ Mason is – in a similar fashion – ignoring Tarwater’s own will through his efforts to prepare the boy for his inherited role as a prophet.

In The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character, David Reisman posits that most modern societies can be categorized into three different types depending on the unique manner by which each society elects to “enforce conformity and mold social character” (32). Reisman repeatedly refers to the South as an anomaly within the larger American society of its day; he argues that, by and large, modern Americans, residing outside of the South, “lack feudal traditions, a strong established church . . . believe themselves to be pragmatic. . . [and] on the whole . . . they tend to be optimistic for themselves, their children . . . and their country” (xxx). Therefore, he asserts, “southern rural groups, Negros and poor whites” are indicative of “the remnants of tradition-directed types” in this country (Reisman 32). Reisman defines both
individuals and societies dependent upon tradition-direction as those which display “a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to follow tradition” (8).

These remarks are also supported by the observations presented in James Agee’s earlier documentary book, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941). In a chapter of this book focusing specifically upon the poor Southern tenant-farmers with whom both Agee and photographer Walter Evans lived for several months, Agee observes that the farmers’ labor in the fields – performed as a matter of survival – is “undertaken without choice or the thought of chance of choice, taught forward from father to son” (320). The main difference, though – a difference which will become more significant to my analysis here – between Agee’s farming families and the tasks undertaken at Powderhead is, of course, the fact that Mason’s lifelong vocation is not focused on agriculture, but prophecy.

Mason seeks refuge for himself and Francis from the outside world through their existence within the pastoral realm of Powderhead. The landscape surrounding the rural farmhouse frequently takes on the topography of a biblical setting, at times resembling an Edenic garden, before shifting into a proverbial sea of fire. The most important feature of Powderhead, though, is its utter isolation from the outer world. Mason’s secluded plot of land “was not simply off the dirt road but off the wagon track and footpath, and the nearest neighbors, colored not white, still had to walk through the woods, pushing plum branches out of their way to get to it” (Three 130). The location of their homestead indicates not only the old man’s self-imposed alienation, but also his status among the uneducated poor in the deep South. Mason and Francis subsist on the crops and livestock on the farm; it appears that the only other source of income for the two is the old man’s barter system – he distributes moonshine (and refills jugs) for the black sharecroppers nearby in exchange for goods or help in his fields. Thus, Powderhead provides a
sanctuary of sorts for these two, separated entirely from the godless and impure inhabitants of the
city.

Mason and Francis survive in a world that is, for the most part, insulated and isolated from the threat of external (i.e., modern) evils. Though the two share a meager existence, the old man teaches Tarwater the basics: “Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment” (Three 125). The majority of Mason’s instructional time and effort, though, is spent attempting to prepare the boy for the Lord’s calling as a true prophet of God. The dual dangers that a prophet must face are major focal points in Mason’s lectures to Francis: “the evils that befall prophets” are divided into “those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean” (Three 126). Accordingly, Mason is compelled to share this knowledge with the boy, since the old man himself “had been burned clean . . . He had learned by fire” (126). Since Mason believes that his own existence is both righteous and true – particularly in comparison to his heathen nephew Rayber’s way of life – he intends for young Tarwater to grow up in an identical manner, and to follow in the old man’s footsteps, since Mason believes himself to be a prophet of Christ too. To assert this point, Mason often pushed the boy to consider:

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 by 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 (Three 147).
Both Reisman and Agee agree that the children of these *tradition-directed* societies learn more than just rudimentary labor skills from older generations; they also assume the behavioral traits of their caretakers. Accordingly, in a section entitled ‘Parental Role in the Stage of Tradition-Direction,’ Reisman attests that in *tradition-directed* societies, “children can be prepared at an early age to assume an adult role. Adult roles are almost unchanging from generation to generation, and . . . children begin very early to learn how to act like adults simply by watching adults around them” (38-39). Similarly, Agee asserts that poor Southerners “learn the work they will spend their lives doing, chiefly of their parents, and from their parents and from the immediate world they take their conduct, their morality, and their mental and emotional and spiritual key” (Agee 295). The cohesion between these sociological studies and O’Connor’s portrayal of Mason and Tarwater strongly suggest that, even though Northern readers found this pair to be grotesque, they are actually in close conformity with sociological views of individuals belonging to a particular socioeconomic stratum in the South.

Furthermore, Reisman claims that the increasingly pervasive *other-directed* nature of modern societies is rejected and resented by some *tradition-directed* societies, particularly in the South, and that this resentment is “culturally supported both by the old-timers and by the long memory of the past which is present to all in rural and small-town areas . . . . Nevertheless, the ‘moralizers’ [i.e., Mason Tarwater and his ilk] . . . do not feel secure – the weight of the urban world outside is against them” (34). In *Violent*, O’Connor crafts an incident remarkably similar in scope to this illustration of deep-seated distrust and contempt amongst these inhabitants of the poor, rural South toward outsiders – not only most Northerners, but well-to-do, educated Southerners as well. Rayber recalls that he and a “welfare woman” – who, for a brief time thereafter, became his wife and the mother of Bishop – traveled out to Powderhead to “rescue”
young Tarwater from Mason’s “kidnapping”. The altercation that followed led not only to Rayber’s deafness and subsequent reliance on a hearing aid (Mason shot off his ear), but would have been the first indication of the already-inherent stubborn individualism that Mason had implanted in Tarwater, had Rayber only paid attention to what the woman told him about the expression on young Tarwater’s face:

It was not simply that the child was dirty, thin, and gray; it was that its expression had no more changed when the gun went off than the old man’s had. This had affected her deeply . . . . [T]he child’s look had frozen her . . . . It had, she said, the look of an adult, not of a child, and of an adult with immovable insane convictions. Its face was like the face she had seen in some medieval paintings where the martyr’s limbs are being sawed off and his expression says he is being deprived of nothing essential . . . . The face for her had expressed the depth of human perversity, the deadly sin of rejecting defiantly one’s own obvious good (Three 229-30).

Consequently, Rayber and the welfare woman leave Tarwater to the old man, and he educates the boy in the ways of prophecy.

In addition to his sermons, though, Mason Tarwater spends an inordinate amount of time and energy preparing for his own death. More specifically, it seems fair to say that Mason spends just as much time contemplating the details of his own burial as he does ‘educating’ Francis in the ways of the Lord’s prophecy; accordingly, then, these two endeavors are inextricably linked. Since O’Connor’s audience learns from the first page of the novel that the old man has already expired, some critics have argued that Mason’s demise is one of the most significant aspects of this character in the narrative. In fact, the first sentence of the novel – hailed by modern critics as being among the top 100 best opening lines for a novel – centers on this very issue:

Francis Marion Tarwater’s uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it 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 Savior at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep
the dogs from digging it up (Three 125).

Though young Tarwater has always been somewhat stubborn and dismissive of the end-
all importance of a proper Christian burial for his great uncle, one of his first interactions with
the voice of the ‘stranger’ – which later becomes young Tarwater’s ‘friend’— suggests that
Tarwater “‘weren’t anything to [Mason] but something that would grow up big enough to bury
him when the time came and now that he’s dead, he’s shut of you’” (Three 149). The stranger
emphasizes that the only “principle” Mason intended to impart on Tarwater was ensure that “you
would be fit when the time came to bury him so he would have a cross to mark where he was at”
(149). Tarwater recalls that, in response to his aggressive interrogation regarding the pomp and
circumstance surrounding a proper burial, Mason explains that “‘the world was made for the
dead. Think of all the dead there are . . . . There’s a million times more dead than living and the
dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive’” (Three 132). Eventually, though,
Mason’s enigmatic reasoning for a proper burial is not enough to keep Tarwater from denying
the old man his last request.

As Marshall Gentry points out in Flannery O’Connor’s Religion of the Grotesque, “old
Tarwater is obsessed with his own death, but not because he fears death; he simply wants to
make sure that Tarwater buries him properly” (146). The old man attempts, on several
occasions, to convey the importance of this sacrament to his young nephew – and to convince
Francis that he is the only person that Mason trusts with this all-important task:

‘Listen…I never asked much of you. I taken you and raised you and
saved you from that ass in town and now all I’m asking in return is when I
die to get me in the ground where the dead belong and set up a cross over
me to show I’m there. That’s all in the world I’m asking you to do’
(Three 131).
In *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O’Connor*, David Eggenschwiler states that Mason Tarwater’s “preoccupation with his burial, the burden of which he placed on the boy” is the most vivid example of the old man’s pride (120). Mason’s extreme distrust of Rayber manifests itself most clearly in his staunch refusal to ask the schoolteacher to claim responsibility for the task: “‘He’d burn me . . . . He’d have me cremated in an oven and scatter my ashes. He don’t believe in the Resurrection. He don’t believe in the bread of life’” (132). According to Eggenschwiler, O’Connor pokes fun at the old man for his fixation on this procedure, but not necessarily at the rite itself: “His concern for last things is not entirely satirized, but the egoism in his concern for personal salvation often is” (121). This, too, is made clear through Mason’s declaration that “‘burying the dead right may be the only honor you ever do yourself. I brought you out here to raise you a Christian, and more than a Christian, a prophet!’ he hollered, ‘and the burden of it will be on you!’” (*Three* 132). Thus, young Tarwater’s initial reaction – to torch the house, where he believes the body of his great uncle remains seated at the breakfast table where he died – is a significant indication of the beginning of the boy’s rebellion, grotesque transformation, and subsequent self-discovery.

In her study of O’Connor’s life and work, Dorothy Walters claims that since the societal norm at this time was that of religious apathy, “those who are zealous in their spiritual commitments are themselves labeled grotesque by an ‘uninvolved’ society. Old Tarwater and his nephew . . . appear grotesque in the eyes of an indifferent world” (32). This analysis parallels Reisman’s assessment that “in societies in which tradition-direction is the dominant mode of ensuring conformity,” the actions of an individual who “might have become at a later historical stage an innovator or rebel, whose belonging, as such, is marginal and problematic, is drawn instead into roles like those of the shaman or sorcerer” – or prophet (12). On the other hand,
critics have suggested that O’Connor’s declaration of agreement with, and steadfast support of, old Tarwater may very well be an endorsement of the old man “in a struggle with himself as with unbelievers” (Eggenschwiler 117-18).

Perhaps this touches on a point of interest in our discussion of O’Connor’s work, and the debate over its inspiration and interpretation. Though O’Connor was “a sophisticated, highly educated, and thoroughly rational person,” she refused to adopt a mentality that would have required her to “turn the South’s ‘old-time’ religion into a big joke for ‘them’ up there, the northern cognoscenti, or nearer at hand, those belonging to the South’s secular salons” (Coles 65). Even though O’Connor clearly and frequently pokes fun at – and, sometimes, blatantly ridicules – the members of these affiliations, her embodiment of such intellectual characters also demonstrates the ambivalent nature of her relationship with faith and logic. Therefore, as Robert Brinkmeyer states in *The Art and Vision of Flannery O’Connor*, the development of these intellectual characters aided O’Connor in an effort to manifest “that part of herself tending toward the intellectual endeavor, exploring and exposing it in different situations and environments” (144). Brinkmeyer concludes that an illustration of the fact that O’Connor “feared in herself the power of the intellect to overpower faith . . . is suggested not only by her own harsh comments on herself but in the ferocious judgments in her fiction leveled against her intellectual characters by the narrative consciousness” (144).

Though her lifelong devotion to the Catholic faith is undeniable, it is clear that O’Connor “possessed, primarily through her thorough grounding in the Bible and her enthusiastic southern identity (southern culture’s being underpinned by biblical thought), a restless and probing skepticism that critiqued society as well as self” (Brinkmeyer 31-32). That is to say, O’Connor’s novel may have frequently taken the form of what could be interpreted as a religious allegory,
but these creations – under the surface of baptism, crucifixion, and prophecy – also expressed a critique of society and an examination of the individual that reached far beyond the sanctimony of a church sermon. Though the clash between rationalism and religion – further embodied through the dissonance between the North and the South, respectively – is a complex struggle unto itself, it is also representative of the conflict between public and private, society and the individual, and the divided self.

For O’Connor, the concept of the individual resisting the conformity of society at large was symbolic of all these struggles. As is indicated in her work, this individualistic image became synonymous with the image of the South; that is to say, the manifestations of the individual’s struggle to resist conformity at the hands of society at large mirror, for the most part, the South’s struggle to cling to a past (both historically and religiously) which was quickly becoming obsolete in the early to mid-twentieth century. Even O’Connor acquiesced that her homeland was losing its grip on the religious devotion of past generations. In “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” she claims that “it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted . . . the Southerner who isn’t convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God” (Mystery 44-45). Throughout The Violent Bear It Away, the character that most consistently demonstrates this suspicion and fear is Rayber, the atheistic schoolteacher.
Thus, despite the assumption of her contemporary audiences, O’Connor did not intend to create Rayber as the protagonist of the story; in fact, her creation of the schoolteacher as a dramatic, but believable, representation of the secular man proved to be the most challenging aspect of drafting the novel for O’Connor. In a letter to her editor, dated April 18, 1959, O’Connor claims that Rayber “has been the difficulty all along. I’ll never manage to get him as alive as Tarwater and the old man, but I can certainly improve on him” (*Habit* 327); later, in another correspondence, she would claim that she “had no trouble writing the first chapter and the last thirty pages; I spent most of the seven years on Rayber” (353). Though O’Connor appears to question her own ability to create Rayber as a plausible portrayal of a non-believing intellectual, the deep-seated conflicts manifested in his divided self also suggest that she did not intend for him simply to be a “flat symbol for rationalism or secularism” either (Eggenschwiler 115).

Insofar as Rayber’s hearing aid “emphasizes his abdication of the human for the mechanical approach,” it also serves as an external manifestation of his intellectual affinity for “modern psychological theories . . . which substitute subconscious motives for spiritual drives” (Walters 94). In fact, the hearing aid is the crucial link between Rayber and O’Connor’s signature grotesquerie; whereas Bishop’s retardation is considered ‘positively grotesque’ (Gentry 152) – in that it preserves his innocence and humanity – Rayber’s infirmity is negatively grotesque, as he manipulates this mechanical device to select and control his perception of reality. On several occasions throughout the novel, Rayber turns off his hearing aid and “retires
into a mock heaven of peaceful silence,” rather than confront situations that challenge his “mechanistic faith” (Asals 181).

When Tarwater reunites with Rayber, the boy is simultaneously fascinated and revolted by the device. When the boy sees Rayber “plug something into his ear,” which is connected by a cord to a metal box, the boy speculates “for an instant . . . that his head ran by electricity” (175). Therefore, just as Rayber’s perception of Tarwater is muddied by his fixation on the boy’s ‘backwoods’ background – just as much, perhaps, as he is distracted by Tarwater’s potential, rather than the present predicament – Tarwater frequently views Rayber as little more than an extension of the odd machinery “plugged in” to his head; as far as Tarwater is concerned, “his uncle’s face might have been only an appendage to [the hearing aid]” (187). Once Tarwater realizes that the hearing aid is, in fact, a point of weakness for the schoolteacher, he targets Rayber repeatedly, mocking his dependence on the contraption: “‘What you wired for?’ he drawled. ‘Does your head light up?’” (186). Also, in one of the more tense confrontations between the two, Tarwater provocatively inquires, “‘Do you think in the box, or do you think in your head?’” (187). Perhaps young Tarwater is not aware of the multifaceted implications of such a query, but O’Connor’s intended message is not lost on recent critical responses to the boy’s dismissive attitude.

In fact, two of the more significant scenarios in the narrative in which Rayber deliberately disconnects from the external world by switching off his hearing aid are brought about by Tarwater’s presence. The first of these occurs when Rayber realizes that Tarwater is sneaking out of the house to embark on a midnight journey through the city. Rayber turns off the aid as he follows Tarwater, “pursuing the dim figure as if in a dream” (196). Of course, Tarwater and Rayber eventually arrive at the revival where O’Connor introduces another
grotesque child character: Lucette Carmody. During her sermon to the crowd, the crippled child evangelist proclaims that the “damned soul” before her – Rayber, peering in through a window – “‘is deaf to the Holy Word!’” (205). Again, the words of a child carry a multitude of meanings, and Rayber quite literally becomes deaf to Carmody’s words of prophecy by turning off his hearing aid, “groping fiercely about him, slapping at his coat pockets, his head, his chest, not able to find the switch that would cut off the voice. Then . . . he snapped it. A silent dark relief enclosed him like shelter after a tormenting wind” (205).

Additionally, Rayber turns off the hearing aid in anticipation of Tarwater’s ‘baptism’ of Bishop. He has left his son under Tarwater’s care and, when the pair does not promptly return from their trip out on the lake, he begins to consider his life without Bishop in a torturously conflicted self-analysis. When Rayber instinctually switches the aid on again, grabbing “the metal box of the hearing aid as if he were clawing his heart. The quiet was broken by an unmistakable bellow” (242). He realizes that Tarwater is drowning his son, “as the machine picked up the sounds of some fierce sustained struggle in the distance . . . . The machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free” (242). Rayber’s dependence on the contraption as a filter for reality is in many ways indicative of a “technological screen” between himself and the world around him (Feeley 162); above and beyond this, though, it is also the most dramatic demonstration of Rayber’s dehumanization (Stephens 130).

Thus, Rayber exists as, among other things, the embodiment of one of the evils which Mason warns Francis he will inevitably encounter as a prophet of Christ. Mason emphasizes the importance of his charity and sacrifice on Francis’ behalf by reminding the boy of the path his life could have taken if he had been raised by his uncle in the city: “If the schoolteacher had got
hold of him, right now he would have been in school, one among many, indistinguishable from the herd” (Three 134). Mason’s disavowal of public education – rife with the conforming tendencies of socialization – stands in sharp contrast to Rayber’s responsibility as a schoolteacher (i.e., his instrumental role in downplaying individualism and cultivating solidarity among the masses). Furthermore, Mason claims, “in the schoolteacher’s head, [Francis] would be laid out in parts and numbers . . . every living thing that had passed through the nephew’s eyes into his head was turned by his brain into a book or a paper or a chart” (Three 134).

Mason declares – in staunch defense of the virtue of his decision to, essentially, kidnap young Tarwater from Rayber when the boy was very young – “I saved you to be free, your own self . . . and not a piece of information inside his head. If you were living with him . . . you’d be going to school.” Accordingly, we learn that “the boy knew that escaping school was the surest sign of his election,” because “while other children his age were herded together in a room to cut out paper pumpkins under the direction of a woman, he was left free for the pursuit of wisdom” (Three 133). Although Mason has never truly given young Tarwater any other option, the old man prides himself on his ability to guide the boy along a righteous path; Rayber, on the other hand, abandoned his ‘destiny’ years ago.

Rayber strives for emotional emptiness in an effort to “eliminate his irrational impulses, and to explain away his spiritual desires as madness instilled in him at an impressionable age” (Eggenschwiler 116). Rayber’s need to cure himself can be directly related to his reliance upon psychoanalytic theory, the public education system, and a disavowal of individualism in favor of the conformity of the modern age (i.e., the North). The schoolteacher is painfully aware of this schism within himself; he feels “afflicted with a peculiar chilling clarity of mind in which he saw himself divided in two – a violent and a rational self” (Three 207). Rayber’s violent self
manifests through his ties to the old man (and, therefore, Tarwater), and his “hated love” of his retarded son, Bishop.

In an effort to “bring the violence of his fundamentalism under rational control” (Brinkmeyer 123), Rayber inflicts a strangely secularized and modern asceticism upon himself in his attempt to both disavow and distance himself from his past. Ultimately, though, Rayber “was not deceived that this was a whole or full life, he only knew that it was the way his life had to be lived if it were going to have any dignity at all”. Rayber realizes that “the stuff of which fanatics and madmen are made” that is buried deep within him has the potential to erupt under certain circumstances; thus, he has made a very conscious effort to turn “his destiny as if with his bare will” (Three 193). Though he has, for the most part, managed to quell this violent, irrational side – both through his distance from the old man and the repression of his affection for Bishop – Tarwater’s appearance on his doorstep exacerbates Rayber’s already intolerable situation.

This is illustrated most profoundly in one of the many arguments between Rayber and Tarwater: when Rayber claims that Mason still controls the boy from beyond the grave, and that Tarwater is completely unaware of “what makes you do the things you do,” the boy lashes out that, “It’s you the seed fell in . . . It ain’t a thing you can do about it. It fell on bad ground but it fell in deep. With me . . . it fell on rock and the wind carried it away.” Rayber, on the other hand, maintains that “it fell in us both alike. The difference is that I know it’s in me and I keep it under control. I weed it out but you’re too blind to know it’s in you” (Three 236).

Of course, since Rayber prides himself on his psychoanalytic prowess, he believes that – in addition to the fact that he survived a similar attempt by Mason to shape him into a prophet – he understands the boy completely and can save him from his ‘ignorant backwoods’ ways. In The Art and Vision of Flannery O’Connor, Robert Brinkmeyer observes that Rayber has very
little concern or use for other individuals, “except in how he can engineer their lives to be more like his – lives of rationalism. Guided by his own insight into human psychology, he believes he thoroughly understands all others” (121). During one of his many slanderous assaults upon Rayber, Mason pointed out that if Tarwater ever felt so inclined to seek out his uncle in the city, “the first thing he would do would be to test your head and tell you what you were thinking and how come you were thinking it and what you ought to be thinking instead. And before long you wouldn’t belong to yourself no more, you would belong to him” (Three 157). Clearly, the old man’s concern (and contempt) for Rayber’s ways aligns the schoolteacher’s reliance upon Freudian theory with the conformity and loss of individuality that Mason – and, thereby, Reisman’s “old timers” – both scorns and fears.

True to the old man’s word, once Tarwater flees Powderhead and finds Rayber in the city, the schoolteacher reassures him that the old man “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” (Three 177; emphasis added). When Rayber takes Tarwater and Bishop on the ill-fated vacation to the lakeside lodge, Rayber predicts that his planned day trip to Powderhead will elicit Tarwater’s “irrational fears and impulses,” and that Rayber, “sympathetic, knowing, uniquely able to understand – would be there to explain them to him” (Three 213). In one of O’Connor’s supposed jabs at Freudian theory and psychoanalysis, Rayber hypothesizes that the boy is “eaten up with false guilt” (226) over his rash decision to burn his home (with Mason’s body still inside), rather than burying his great uncle in the manner which he had been instructed. Rayber is convinced that even though Tarwater may attempt to deny that this is the
case, the boy “could not escape knowing that there was someone who knew exactly what went on inside him and who understood it for the good reason that it was understandable” (Three 233).

Clearly, Rayber views Tarwater as a “problem to be solved” (Brinkmeyer 121); believing that “the old man had made a wreck of the boy and that what was called for was a monumental job of reconstruction” (Three 183). Rayber revels in his thoughts of the boy’s future, “except when every now and then the boy’s actual face would lodge in the path of a plan” (229).

Rayber’s desire to educate Tarwater – so that the boy can one day take his place as “an intelligent man in the world,” (190) – is frequently distracted by the image of the “actual insignificant boy before him” (177). When he finally realizes, though, that the damage the old man has wrought on Tarwater is irreparable, he no longer feels “any challenge to rehabilitate him. All he wanted now was to get rid of him” (240). The fact that Rayber essentially gives up on Tarwater long before Tarwater ever ‘baptizes’ (i.e., drowns) Bishop should come as no real surprise, though, considering the ambivalence with which Rayber regards his own son.

Rayber’s initial intentions to “help” Tarwater are rooted in several distinctive motivating factors: not only would Tarwater be a pet project, of sorts, through which Rayber could hone his skills in psychoanalysis, but he could also impart on the boy all the education and intellectual stimulation he has been unable to share with his retarded son Bishop; an added bonus, one may assume, would be an avenging one-upmanship directed at his dead uncle Mason. When Rayber is reunited with Tarwater for the first time in twelve years since his unsuccessful attempt to retrieve the child from his uncle’s homestead, Rayber vows that he will remedy the damage done to the boy by Mason – he will “make it up to him now, to lavish on him everything he would have lavished on his own child if he had had one who would have known the difference” (184).
Aside from Rayber’s hearing aid, Bishop’s mental retardation is perhaps the most concrete manifestation of grotesque realism in a single character in the novel. While some critics could – and, from the implications of the *Time* review, did – dismiss the ‘idiot child’ as yet another example of Southern Gothicism in *Violent*, Bishop plays an extremely important part not only in the narrative and plot development, but in the message of the novel overall. Critics willing to scratch the surface of this tangent of the story have unearthed several analyses of the significance of Bishop to O’Connor’s social commentary, most directly through Rayber’s ambivalence toward his son.

Mason’s initial attempt to baptize Bishop is halted by an irate Rayber. The schoolteacher insists that the old man could “slosh water on him for the rest of his life and he’d still be an idiot. Five years old for all eternity, useless forever.” Rayber argues, ironically enough, that he will not allow Mason to perform the rite “as a matter of human dignity” (143). According to Edward Kessler in *Flannery O’Connor and the Language of the Apocalypse*, Rayber believes that his son is “useless” because the child “clearly has no prospect of becoming a fully developed, rational” person. Kessler goes so far as to suggest that “though Rayber never uses the word, Bishop is a candidate for euthanasia . . . with Bishop removed from his life, Rayber could hope to be free of the irrational love that tempts him” (65).

Rayber acknowledges these feelings of affection only to himself, and outwardly dismisses Bishop’s affliction as “an irrefutable argument against the existence of a benevolent deity” (Walters 95). However, as Asals argues, if Bishop’s handicap is “a manifestation of the reality of the Fall – he first appears in the novel gnawing on a brown apple core – it is at the same time the preserver of his incorruptibility” (Asals 170). Thus, in similar ways, Bishop and
Tarwater are connected: while Mason (and, subsequently, Rayber) strives to influence Tarwater and shape him in their own image, both Rayber and Mason view Bishop as a stalemate of sorts. Rayber views Mason’s attempts to baptize the child as ultimately futile, yet Mason knows that Bishop’s stunted intellect is Rayber’s biggest frustration.

It certainly is not by chance, then, that Bishop’s ‘idiocy’ represents a more sympathetic grotesquerie in comparison to Rayber’s grotesque hearing aid. Indeed, as Marshall Gentry argues in *Flannery O’Connor’s Religion of the Grotesque*, Bishop signifies “Rayber’s one link to the positive grotesque, and even as Rayber ridicules the idea of God, he links God to Bishop” (153). For instance, we learn that Rayber’s perceives his son as “an $x$ signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt. The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution” (*Three* 192). According to Martha Stephens in *The Question of Flannery O’Connor*, this is O’Connor’s means to express the idea that the loss of faith inevitably leads “to a paralysis of the emotions; the atheist opts for the dignity of emotional death as against what he sees as the insanity of belief” (130).

Rayber experiences what he presumes are the symptoms of this so-called insanity during “the moments when with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love” of and for his son; he spontaneously experiences a “morbid surge of the love that terrified him – powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal” (*Three* 192). According to Gentry, these emotional responses serve as indicators to the atheistic Rayber that “he is constantly on the verge of returning to religious belief, to the purposeless love that Bishop inspires, and that what would force his crucial decision would be the loss of Bishop” (Gentry 153). Indeed, Rayber
acknowledges that “his own stability depended on the little boy’s presence” (230), and any attempt he makes to envision his life without Bishop inevitably inspires “a moment of complete terror” (209); although Rayber can “control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus on Bishop,” if anything were to happen to his son, “he would have to face [his terrifying love] in itself” (230). Therefore, by allowing Tarwater to drown the child – thereby becoming complicit in the death of his own son – Rayber simultaneously “relieves himself of the crutch that prevents his collapse toward religiosity” (Gentry 154).

Though Bishop’s mental handicap may have been read as Southern Gothic stock, the act of drowning the child stunned O’Connor’s contemporary readers and critics almost as much as the assault on Tarwater at the end of the novel. Still modern critics argue that Bishop’s presence, and death, signifies “at the heart of the story, an abiding theological paradox” (Walters 95). This becomes all the more meaningful, Walters argues, as one realizes that while “the obviously deformed call attention to themselves as oddities within the human family . . . . they manifest in actuality merely as exaggerations or extensions of the imperfections that mark all God’s creatures” (96); thus, according to Gentry, Rayber “deserves criticism precisely because he fails to see the positive qualities in the grotesque” (14).

While Bishop’s affliction may have been more noticeable in its outward manifestation and left the boy vulnerable to destruction by others, Rayber’s grotesquerie – indicated externally by the hearing aid, but pervasive throughout his being – is sustained by technology and is therefore ultimately self-destructive. Rayber has convinced himself that “indifference was the most that human dignity could achieve, and . . . he felt that he had achieved it. To feel nothing was peace” (Three 241). Later, when Rayber realizes “with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his own heart,” that Tarwater has drowned Bishop (243), he expects his loss
to bring about some sort of revelatory moment. Rayber awaits the wave of “raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due . . . so that he could ignore it”; however, Rayber “continue[s] to feel nothing . . . and it was not until he realized that there would be no pain that he collapsed” (Three 243). Brinkmeyer suggests that Rayber’s ultimate self-destruction stems from this comprehension that “so withdrawn from life has he become, that he has won…But in winning he is left with exactly what his life has become – nothing – and contrary to his earlier belief, feeling nothing is not peace” (126).
CHAPTER 7
FREUD AND THE PATHOLOGY OF RELIGION

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud asserts that religion confines individual freedom, “this play of choice and adaptation,” insofar as it “imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering . . . . religion succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis. But hardly anything more” (36). This notion that religion, rather than cultivating the sense of individualism that Mason so firmly endorses, instead acts as a veritable breeding ground for collective neuroses is especially helpful to our discussion here. Reisman argued that tradition-directed societies rely on long-standing customs within the group to maintain conformity; to the secular intellectual, then, religion is just as much of a mechanism geared toward a brainwashed herd mentality as ‘old-timers’ (such as Mason) argue that public education – and modernization in general – acts to strip individuals of their autonomy in favor of the greater good.

Conversely, Freud argues that the most important step in the “process of civilization” is “the aim of creating a unity out of the individual human beings” (105). Freud states that this endeavor is bound to clash with the other primary urge within each individual, which strives to obtain “personal happiness,” (i.e., independence). Thus, he asserts, these two “urges . . . must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of individual and cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other and mutually dispute the ground” (Freud 106). In a passage from *Habit of Being*, we learn that O’Connor admitted to possessing “quite a respect for Freud, when he isn’t made into a philosopher” (491). This too, I believe, is indicative of O’Connor’s own internal struggle with faith and logic, which plays out in *Violent* through Rayber’s resistance to spirituality, and his eventual destruction at the hands of his own ‘emotional paralysis.’

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Curiously, Rayber criticizes Mason’s “brand of independence” because it is “not a constructive independence but one that was irrational, backwoods, and ignorant” (185); presumably, then, Rayber’s ideal of a ‘constructive independence’ aligns with Freud’s notion of the shifting balance of power between individual and community. Freud suggests that the “replacement of power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization” (49), and that this is a necessary transaction, since civilized man must “exchange a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security” (73). This suggests, of course, that an unwillingness to do so classifies one as uncivilized, and Rayber – let alone O’Connor’s “intellectual” audience – certainly perceive Mason (and young Tarwater) as coarse anachronisms and therefore troublesome obstacles along the path of total modernization, for both the North and the South. As Bacon points out, Rayber “has little patience for nonconformity, whether willful, like Tarwater’s, or innate, like Bishop’s” (100). In either case, though, nonconformity is indicative of a ‘brand of independence’ an individualism which Rayber abhors, and “this disregard for individuality aligns him with the forces from outside the South that seemed to diminish its identity” (Bacon 100).

Even though O’Connor clearly did not perceive Mason Tarwater as a religious fanatic, some of her readers certainly did; therefore, this largely secular audience most likely misinterpreted the significance of Mason’s institutionalization. According to the old man, his own sister – who claimed that Mason was “not only crazy but dangerous” – conspired with doctors to have him committed: “‘Ezekiel was in the pit for forty days,’ he would say, ‘but I was in it for four years,’ and he would stop at that point and warn Tarwater that the servants of the Lord Jesus could expect the worst” (Three 160). Oddly, as the narrator points out, Mason’s extended stay in the asylum was not due to an in-depth rehabilitation program of any kind; on the
contrary, “it had taken him four years to understand that the way for him to get out was to stop prophesying on the ward” (Three 160). Thus, in an extremely subtle point in the narrative, O’Connor suggests not only that religious devotion is inevitably immune to medical (and, therefore, technological) intervention, but that ‘true believers’ are persistent enough to overcome adversity from both psychologists and scientists alike.

O’Connor’s irreligious audience members – especially those who regarded faithful followers of the Church with a sort of condescending contempt – must have been disturbed by this notion; in fact, the portrayal of Mason as a subversive trickster – not a “holy” man – must have contributed to the audience’s perception of the old man as the story’s antagonist. In this same vein of pathologizing religiosity, then, Rayber focuses his attention squarely upon the task of forcing Tarwater to understand that “his urge to baptize the child was a kind of sickness” – an infection, no doubt, passed from the old man to the young boy (213). Therefore, just as Walters argues that Mason’s religious fervor during a time period of widespread (and accepted) apathy toward the strictures of religiosity influenced audiences’ perception of both Mason and Tarwater as grotesque, Rayber likens the Tarwaters’ faith to a disease in need of treatment. Rayber realizes that Mason’s time in the mental institution did not “cure” the old man, but is nonetheless insistent that he can cure the young boy.

In one of his many failed attempts to undermine Mason’s teachings, Rayber insists that the old man’s “fixation of being called by the Lord had its origin in insecurity. He needed the assurance of a call, and so he called himself” (134). Later, Rayber condescendingly assesses that “all such people have in life . . . is the conviction they’ll rise again” (190). Thus, O’Connor shapes Rayber as an embodiment of the secular man who endorses psychoanalysis completely, and adopts its ‘clinical bias’ – which she defines as the “prejudice that sees everything strange as
a case study in the abnormal” (Mystery 165). Additionally, as Rayber attempts to express his complete comprehension of the boy’s inner turmoil, he explains to Tarwater that “there’s a part of your mind that works all the time, that you’re not aware of yourself. Things go on in it. All sorts of things you don’t know about” (224). Time and time again, though, Tarwater rejects Rayber’s theories, informing his uncle that he “never came [to see Rayber] for no school lesson. . . . I ain’t worried what my underhead is doing” (225).

Nevertheless, Rayber ultimately fails in his interactions with Mason – who was, quite literally, a case study for Rayber’s article in the “schoolteacher magazine” – and young Tarwater (whom Rayber initially envisions as his potential successor) to convince them of the significance of subconscious drives, or to cure them of their backwoods theology. O’Connor’s audience may have perceived Mason and Tarwater as sick or even insane – just as Rayber’s attempt at asceticism is intended to achieve emotional paralysis – but as Agee notes in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men in his appraisal of “psychological education,” “it needs to be remembered that a neurosis can be valuable; also that ‘adjustment’ to a sick and insane environment is of itself not ‘health’ but sickness and insanity” (310).
CHAPTER 8
CONFORMITY AND ‘TRUE’ FREEDOM

Thus, O’Connor’s portrayal of Rayber as a secular (i.e., public) schoolteacher – which, according to Reisman, acts as “a proxy parent whose power has . . . increased as a consequence of the shift to other-direction” (57) – parallels Agee’s assessment of the role of public education in America during the mid-twentieth century. Rather than cultivating the “potentiality of the human race” which Agee states is “born again . . . in every child,” the public education system acts instead as “the very property of the world’s misunderstanding” (289-290). In a parallel that is especially useful to our discussion regarding the intersections of modernization, technology, and the public sphere, Agee regards the mechanisms of public education as the “spectacle of innocence, of defenselessness, of all human hope, brought steadily in each year by the millions into the machineries of the teachings of the world” (290). Rather than preparing future generations by aiding in their comprehension of “their own dignity in existence…to live and to take part toward the creation of a world in which good living will be possible,” Agee states that the education system is “indeed, all but entirely unsuccessful even within its own ‘scales’ of ‘value’” (Agee 294).

O’Connor constructs Rayber as an embodiment of the “type of modern man who recognizes spirit in himself but who fails to recognize a being outside himself whom he can adore as Creator and Lord”; therefore, O’Connor posits, “he has become his own ultimate concern” (Mystery 159). I believe that this remark provides an interesting parallel to Freud’s observation that modern man has nearly acquired the characteristics – specifically, omnipotence and omniscience – that in the past were reserved only for deities. Freud posits that, because of this, modern man “has almost become a god himself . . . Man has, as it were, become a kind of
prosthetic God” (44), although this development itself leads to an irrepressible feeling of discontent (44-5).

If, as Freud suggests, the tripartite source of human suffering stems “from our own body . . . from the external world . . . and finally from our relations to other men,” and that “the suffering that comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other” (26), then Tarwater only becomes fully cognizant of the extent of the external world’s impact on himself after being raped by the sinister Stranger. Though the boy’s grotesque transformation begins the instant he ignores his great uncle’s request of a proper Christian burial – opting instead to leave Powderhead for the city – the horrific encounter with the driver of the lavender and cream-colored car is O’Connor’s “most forceful [demonstration of her] belief in the power of violence to return one to reality” (Feeley 160). Yet O’Connor insists that “it is always assumed that this violence is a bad thing and meant to be an end in itself. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself” (Mystery 113). Furthermore, O’Connor claims, distortion “is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the . . . novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal” (162). Though at the conclusion of the novel, Tarwater is once again leaving Powderhead in order to descend “to the dark city with a prophetic message to which no one will listen” (Asals 227), O’Connor states that Tarwater “must of course not live to realize his mission, but die to realize it. The children of God I daresay will dispatch him pretty quick” (342). Instead, O’Connor posits, she is not “saying that he has a great mission or that God’s solutions for the problems or our particular world are prophets like Tarwater . . . [his] mission might only be to baptize a few more idiots” (Habit 342).
In Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque, Edward Kessler notes that, in O'Connor’s work, “the emphasis falls not upon evil as a sort of opposite and equal number to good, but on sin understood as . . . a defection from the good . . . the basis of sin is precisely a turning away from true freedom into false freedom” (63). The concept of freedom, then, stands as one of the central conflicts in the novel, and each key character presents their own interpretation of it. Additionally, Brinkmeyer suggests that Rayber’s idea of freedom is synonymous with control, “controlling one’s emotions and actions and controlling other people, by bringing everything to bear under the fierce rule of rational thinking” (120). Rayber’s freedom “is largely empty of content. It amounts to a kind of brave self-sufficiency in which there is no higher good than the assertion of one’s autonomy. Freedom for Rayber is its own end” (Kessler 64); essentially, then, Rayber’s perception of freedom is, in fact, “the ultimate torture because it yields only nothing disguised as free will” (Whitt 107).

Conversely, the voice of the stranger – which as O’Connor bluntly states, “I certainly do mean Tarwater’s friend to be the Devil” (Habit 367) – proclaims “a celebration of complete and individual freedom, with the self free from all constraints and control by others” (Brinkmeyer 124). The stranger tells Tarwater “‘you can do one of two things. One of them, not both…You can do one thing or you can do the opposite’. ‘Jesus or the devil,’ the boy said. ‘No no no,’ the stranger said . . . ‘It ain’t Jesus or the devil. It’s Jesus or you’” (Three 146). Therefore, as Kessler suggests, the struggle within young Tarwater is “not so much between the opposing views of old Tarwater and Rayber as it is between self-sufficiency and submission” (Kessler 66).

Therefore, in O’Connor’s The Violent Bear It Away the contact made between these two extremes – be it self-sufficiency and submission, faith and rationality, individualism and conformity, or the spiritual and social worlds – manifests within the realm of the grotesque. In
One Dimensional Man, Herbert Marcuse claims that “under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it . . . threatens the smooth operation of the whole” (2). Rayber’s general contempt for the ‘backwoods’ ways of his rural relatives illustrates this notion quite clearly – as does the misinterpretation by O’Connor’s audience that Mason was, in fact, the intended antagonist of the story.

Though Mason and young Tarwater’s religious fervor appears grotesque to this secular audience, the grotesquerie manifested in Rayber’s hearing aid denotes his fatal flaw as a dependence upon technology; Marcuse’s sociological interpretation mirrors O’Connor’s own judgment, as he asserts that “today, domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but as technology” (158). Marcuse also claims that “the distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those which demand liberation . . . while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society” (7). Rayber’s hearing aid enables him to selectively allow and omit signals of change and conflict coming from the world around him – that is to say, the ‘suffocation’ of some in favor of a so-called ‘liberation’ for all; undoubtedly, this represents one of Flannery O’Connor’s most critical observations regarding the confinement and distortions that such technological advances pose for American society, in the name of modernity.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sara Williams was born in 1982, and has lived in Gainesville, Florida, since she was a child. She earned her bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Florida in 2005, and attended graduate school there from 2006 to 2008.