

The Violent Bear It Away Study Guide

The Violent Bear It Away by Flannery O'Connor

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Plot Summary

“The Violent Bear It Away” is a Southern Gothic novel by Flannery O’Connor, taking place in Tennessee in 1952. When the novel opens, fourteen year-old Francis Marion Tarwater begins to bury his great-uncle, Marion, who has raised him in the backwoods. Marion, an extraordinarily religious man who believed himself to be a prophet of God, and brought up Tarwater with the same belief –that he, too, is to be a prophet. But while Tarwater struggles to bury his uncle, a strange voice begins to speak to him in his head, telling him it would be easier to walk away from the expectations of his uncle, and of others, rather than to carry them out. Tarwater, who has lived his life doing exactly as he is told, gets drunk instead, and burns his uncle’s house to the ground, believing his uncle’s body to still be inside. While Tarwater is drunk, a local black man and friend of Marion’s, Buford Munson, has buried the old man in Christian fashion.

Tarwater journeys to the city to escape his destiny, and to meet his estranged uncle, Rayber. Rayber had originally been tasked with rearing Tarwater, but Marion, living with Rayber at the time, kidnapped the infant to raise him in the backwoods. Tarwater had been born following a car accident which claimed the lives of his unwed mother and grandparents, leaving Rayber the obvious choice for raising Tarwater. Rayber, however, intended to raise Tarwater as an atheist, in a purely secular fashion, which did not sit well with Marion. When Rayber goes to retrieve the infant Tarwater, Marion shoots him in the leg and in the ear, leading to near-deafness for Rayber. Rayber himself had nearly been baptized by Marion as a boy, and utterly hates Marion for it. When Tarwater appears on Rayber’s doorstep, Rayber is thrilled that he will have a chance to give Tarwater a normal life, and pull one over on the old uncle.

From the start, Rayber struggles with Tarwater, trying to shake his religious upbringing from him, but has little success. He manages to convince Tarwater that the only true way to be born again is to start one’s life over in a different direction. Tarwater agrees with this notion, as he is trying to run away from his destiny, which includes a call from Marion before death to baptize Rayber’s young, simple-minded son, Bishop. Rayber, frustrated by the lack of progress he is making with Tarwater, decides to bring him back to his home in the backwoods, to confront him with the truth, there. While staying at a nearby lake in preparation for the final leg of the trip, the voice in Tarwater’s head, which has been telling him to drown, rather than baptize Bishop, overwhelms him –and he does so. But as he drowns Bishop, he says the words of baptism automatically. He then turns to head back home, where he catches a ride with a young man who gets him stoned and drunk, rapes him, and leaves him in the woods. Tarwater burns the spot in which he was raped, sets the woods on fire as he goes, and returns to the place of his upbringing. There, he learns that Buford has given his uncle a Christian burial, destroying the only thing Tarwater believed prevented him from becoming a prophet. As the novel ends, he heads to the city once more, to fulfill his destiny as a prophet.



Part 1, Chapter 1

Summary

The novel is prefaced with a quote from the Bible, from the Book of Matthew, 11:12: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away."

Part 1, Chapter 1 – The novel begins in 1952 with the drunken, 14-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater being unable to finish digging a grave for his great-uncle, Mason. Buford Munson, a local black man, has to complete the Christian burial, unbeknownst to Tarwater. Tarwater's uncle, dead at 84, had provided for Tarwater and educated him in everything from math and history to religion.

Tarwater's uncle had taken him in as a baby to avoid Tarwater being brought up by his nephew, a schoolteacher. Mason had been living with his nephew, Rayber, when he discovered that his nephew was using him as a source of study for a magazine article. Infuriated, he leaves with the baby Mason. Rayber, Francis Tarwater's uncle, originally tried to get the baby Francis back, showing up with welfare woman Bernice Bishop to make his case. Mason shoots Rayber in the leg with his shotgun, and takes off a chunk of Rayber's right ear, leading to deafness. Rayber and the welfare woman, though she is twice his age, later get married and have one son, named Bishop, who turns out to be slow.

They live together for 14 years at his home, Powderhead, during which time the old uncle explains he is a prophet for God, and one day expects that Tarwater, too, will hear the Lord's voice and become a prophet. Mason, when younger, had gone out to warn people in the city of the dangers of turning away from Christ, of the destruction that awaited them. However, following a vision of a pointed finger, Mason discovers that his own soul is destroyed and cleansed, and not the world itself. He therefore goes out to preach redemption rather than destruction. He ingrains in Francis expectancy for the Second Coming and Judgment Day.

While raising Francis Tarwater, Mason often leaves him outside in the woods for days, so that Francis might have visions or hear voices. Mason also gives Tarwater the task of baptizing Bishop, should Mason die before he has the chance. This, Mason explains, will be Tarwater's first mission. Tarwater disagrees, believing God has other things in store for him.

With his uncle dead, Tarwater begins to make plans for how he will handle Powderhead, from the crops to where fences are located. As he does this, a voice inside his head begins to argue with Tarwater, telling him that Rayburn truly owns the property. The strange voice dictates that Tarwater bury his uncle before anything else. The burial hole must be ten feet deep, according to Mason, and Mason doesn't mind if he is buried without a coffin, for he knows it may be a struggle to bury him inside one. Apart from the



burial being ten feet down, Mason also requests a Cross as his tombstone. It will be a burden for him to accomplish, Mason affirms. Once, both Marion and Tarwater see Rayber and Bishop in public, but Marion refuses to steal the child to baptize him, saying that God has not yet ordered him to do so.

Tarwater reflects on never having been to school, and living out with his uncle. His uncle had impressed upon the truant officer that Tarwater was simple, and the truant officer thought it best to leave Tarwater in peace, during which time Marion becomes Tarwater's teacher in all things, especially in religion. Marion has nothing but anger and disdain toward his nephew, for the magazine article regards Marion as being insecure, and inventing a calling for himself, which to Mason, is blasphemous and cruel. The article causes Tarwater to become distrustful of his uncle, Rayber.

Tarwater, as he is digging his uncle's grave, hears the voice again, which is dubbed "the stranger". The stranger's voice becomes Tarwater's own voice, saying that Tarwater can now do anything he wants to. Having difficulty digging, the stranger also insists to Tarwater that the dead are more trouble than the living. While traveling with his uncle in the city to see about unentailing some property, an unsuccessful errand, Tarwater comes to the opinion that all the living people there are evil. He insists Marion behave like a prophet, but Marion counters that he is only in the city on business. Tarwater believes he himself will one day return to the city as a prophet to set it astir. Marion brings Tarwater to Rayber's house, and Tarwater comes to understand that Rayber will somehow be part of his destiny. While Tarwater hides in the bushes, Marion confronts Rayber and says he is there to baptize Bishop. Rayber tells Tarwater to leave or he'll go back to the asylum.

Tarwater's voice, whom he begins to refer to as his "friend" as well as "the stranger", encourages Tarwater not to finish burying Marion, for the dead take what they can get. There's no need for a cross, either, the voice explains, for it will surely rot by Judgment Day. The voice tells Tarwater that people can only do one thing or the other, and never both. Tarwater likens this to Jesus and the Devil, but the voice says there is no such thing as a devil, but that it is only Jesus and Tarwater, Jesus and the self. The voice tells Tarwater that prophets are only good for someone who is an ass or a whore. Tarwater knows that he himself was born shortly after his mother was in a car-wreck with his grandparents, and his mother was not married. Tarwater believes that this is proof that God has plans for him, that he was not killed in the crash.

As Tarwater discusses whores with the voice, Buford and a black woman walk up, seeking alcohol from the old man's still, and discover that Marion is dead. The woman is saddened and begins mourning, for she says she has seen the old man's spirit and has been predicting his death. Tarwater goes to get Buford and the woman some mash from the still, and the voice encourages Tarwater to drink it himself, which he does – and he drinks so much he passes out, only to be awakened by Buford, who urges the Christian burial be completed. Tarwater tells Buford not to bother him, and Buford agrees that that will be Tarwater's problem, that nobody will bother with him. Tarwater passes out again, and wakes up in the middle of the night. He sets the house of Powderhead on fire, believing his uncle's body to be inside, and heads out to the highway. There, he



hitches a ride with a copper flue salesman traveling to the city. Tarwater mistakes the city for the burning house from its glow, but the salesman tells him otherwise.

Analysis

“The Violent Bear It Away” is a Southern Gothic novel by Flannery O’Connor which critically examines ideas about, and tenets of, destiny, religion, and secularism through the journey of 14-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater in his attempt to escape his own destiny.

Francis Tarwater has been raised by his great-uncle, Marion, who believes he is a prophet for God, and believes that his great-nephew will likewise become a prophet. Young Tarwater is skeptical about this, although he does not challenge the faith in which his uncle rears him. Marion’s brand of Christianity is devout and firebrand, fundamental in the most literal sense. Interestingly enough, though Marion places religion before all else, he does indeed give Tarwater a basic, yet surprisingly broad education, which ranges from literacy to mathematics. This imbues Tarwater with a semblance of intelligence, enough to get by in the world, but Marion always brings things back around to Tarwater’s intended destiny as a prophet for God.

Tarwater needs a sign to begin his journey, according to Marion. A voice in Tarwater’s head urges him to quit the burial of Marion and to strike out on his own, to do what he wants, to live his own life. The voice clearly distinguishes for Tarwater that he has two choices – to live for Jesus or to live for himself. There is no in-between. He can either try to live a good life, or do what he wants. The voice that Tarwater hears is the voice of the Devil, though Tarwater does not recognize it as such in the rush of freedom brought about by his uncle’s death.

Tarwater’s act of straying from what he believes he has been called to do is brought about by his decision to get drunk, and not bury his uncle as promised. By not burying his uncle, he takes his first step away from his uncle, and from his supposed destiny. If he cannot keep this most personal promise to his uncle of a Christian burial, there is no way he can be called to be a prophet. He then strikes out on his own, with vague intentions about going to the city to see what there is to see and to determine whether or not he will be called for any purpose at all.

From the very start, Tarwater’s shirking of his destiny indicates that free will may have greater sway in things. O’Connor indicates this possibility (at first) by making it seem that avoiding destiny is as simple as walking away from it, much the way that in the Greek story of Oedipus, the eponymous character attempts to avoid his own foreseen destiny by running away from it. Tarwater intends to run away to the city, the very place that Marion avoided at all costs, due in no small part to the fact that Rayber lives there. If the city is the epitome of all that is wrong in the world to Marion, then Rayber is the epitome of all that is wrong with men. Yet, there appears to be little reason for Marion to hate Rayber so.



Vocabulary

redemption, bedraggled, querulous, trifle, emissary, unentailed, indignation, liable, convulsively



Part 1, Chapter 2 – Part 1, Chapter 3

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 2 – Tarwater must contact his only living blood-relation, he tells the copper flue salesman, Meeks. Meeks believes that Tarwater must be fleeing a horrible backwoods situation, and offers to bring Tarwater directly to his uncle's, but Tarwater refuses. Tarwater plans to see his uncle in the daytime, and not so as to be beholden or studied for an article. Meeks tries to impress upon Tarwater the value and importance of hard work. Hard work, and loving thy neighbor, make the world go round, he argues.

Tarwater, meanwhile, tries to remember what he can of Marion and Marion's sister, who had Marion put into an asylum for the insane for four years. Marion was released when he learned how to stop prophesying, and he used this experience to exercise caution in the world. This is why he resorted to kidnapping Rayber as a child to baptize him and set him toward God. His mother sent for him, and Rayber tried to come back a week later, but became lost in the woods for days until the State Highway Patrol found him and brought him back to the city. But as Rayber grew, he was told that Marion is crazy, and he came to believe it. Following the death of Tarwater's mother and grandparents, Marion had gone to live with Rayber and had baptized Tarwater there within ten minutes of arriving. It was looking at baby Tarwater that Marion understood that Tarwater would one day take his place as prophet. Rayber, however, mocked Marion by baptizing Tarwater's bottom as well. It was then that Marion knew he must raise Tarwater on his own. Rayber goes on to tell Tarwater that there is no savior but oneself. Apart from the encounter that ended with a shotgun, Rayber never made a serious attempt to get Francis Tarwater back because he had a child with Bernice Bishop, the welfare woman, instead.

Tarwater, meanwhile, continues to tell Meeks he wants to wait for daylight to see his uncle. Meeks tells Tarwater that he did the same thing at his age, running away from home –and then expands upon the importance of honest, hard work, and not having to learn the hard way. Tarwater explains that his uncle taught him everything except machines, and this uncle was a prophet. Tarwater explains that he'll have to wait and see what happens for himself. They stop at a gas station, during which time Meeks calls his girl. He then walks Tarwater through the process of calling Rayber, but Tarwater doesn't understand it. Meeks then decides to bring Tarwater directly to his uncle's house. He gives his contact information to Tarwater, and as he leaves, thinks no good will come of Tarwater.

Part 1, Chapter 3 – Tarwater waits on the doorstep of his uncle's house in the dark. He eventually summons the courage to knock. Rayber comes to the door, and explains he is deaf, and retrieves a hearing-aid. Tarwater explains that Marion is dead and burned because Marion was too big to bury. At first, Rayber believes it is one of the old man's tricks, but then realizes that Tarwater is being absolutely honest. Rayber thinks it is a fitting end to Marion. Rayber also tells Tarwater that he has had nothing, and now can



have everything – and he will make a man out of Tarwater, and they will make up for lost time. He tells Tarwater that coming out from under the old man is like coming into the light from darkness. Tarwater then sees Bishop, who Rayber explains is simple-minded, kind, and harmless. But when Bishop tries to touch Tarwater, clearly remembering him from long ago, Tarwater vows he will have nothing to do with Bishop.

Analysis

In the first few chapters of the second part of “The Violent Bear It Away”, Tarwater decides to seek out his Uncle Rayber. In what proves to be an important encounter – one which Tarwater doesn’t think twice about – Tarwater is picked up by a traveling salesman named Meeks. Meeks has had to learn much the hard way through his life, and he has come to the conclusion that two very important ideas are intrinsic to the world working. There is the Judeo-Christian ideal of loving one’s neighbor and that honest, hard work is the way to live. Meeks represents true Christianity and responsible citizenship: to live one’s life as well as can be done, and to help others where it can be done. Interestingly, Meeks will appear to be something of a middle ground between the firebrand Christianity of Marion, and the cold, secularism and atheism of Rayber.

However, evidence appears to be stacking up against Marion, in favor of Rayber. Like Tarwater, Rayber was taken to Powderhead by Marion in the attempt to baptize him in the faith, and to push him in the direction of prophesy. Rayber resents Marion for this, and the extreme secular extents to which Rayber has moved appear largely justified, given Marion’s actions. However, certain things Rayber has done – such as using his uncle in an article that shames him, as well as mocking his uncle’s faith to his face – smack more of arrogance and cruelty than the desire to put bad memories behind him. To a large degree, Rayber sees much of himself in Tarwater, and realizes that he has the ability to not only turn Tarwater’s life around, but to pull one over on his dead uncle by turning Tarwater away from Christianity.

The one difficulty in the equation, however, proves to be Bishop, the simple-minded son of Rayber. The reader will recall that Tarwater has been charged by Marion with the baptism of Bishop, for it will not happen otherwise. Rayber will refuse to let it be done. Suddenly, Tarwater is confronted with the object of his destiny – Bishop. He will now have to struggle with whether or not to baptize Bishop. This also keeps Tarwater from getting closer to Rayber, for Bishop stands between them. As it turns out, Bishop will become central to Tarwater’s future.

Vocabulary

evasive, beholden, exasperation, perfidy, contentiously, impudence, obstinately, stupefied, palpable, immune, foreboding, adversary,



Part 2, Chapter 4 – Part 2, Chapter 7

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 7 – Rayber is overjoyed to have Tarwater with him, not only to turn his life around, but because Tarwater looks enough like Rayber to be his son. Within four days, Rayber's enthusiasm for turning around Tarwater's life has passed. He has been trying to get Tarwater to read and wear new clothes, with the result being that Tarwater looked like he wanted to leave. Rayber begins spending nights with his hearing aid on so if the boy attempts to leave, he can stop him. He finally decides to bring the boy breakfast in bed, and get to know him. Tarwater is amused by the fact that the room he is staying in is pink, and Rayber reveals his wife – who no longer lives with him – had chosen it. Rayber tries to keep his patience with Tarwater, knowing what his upbringing has been like. He tells Tarwater that the old man has done an injustice to him, filling his head with rot. He goes on to explain why the hearing device is necessary, stemming from Marion having shot him. He knows that only Tarwater can truly change himself.

Rayber goes on to tell Tarwater that he has a father now. Tarwater says he is only a fatherless son of a whore, and that he doesn't intend to stay at Rayber's house, for he has only come to find out a few things. The boy insists he does not need Rayber's help, but Rayber insists. He travels throughout the city with Bishop and Tarwater for several days, visiting everything from art galleries to movie theaters to stores with escalators. Only in two places does Tarwater show any interest in things. The first is when he sees a new, red car, and wonders if he'll own one when he is sixteen. The second is when they pass a church. Rayber explains that the only thing people who go to church have is the expectation that they will rise again. Rayber says they will never rise again. He tries to give Tarwater some aptitude tests, but Tarwater refuses to take them.

Rayber notices that Tarwater takes interest in Bishop, because Bishop reminds Tarwater of Marion, though at a much younger age. He understands that Tarwater is seeking a sense of belonging, of some kind of love, and this, Rayber believes, is an affliction that has doomed the family. Rayber does his best not to love his son, but merely to exist with him, for the way his son turns out he believes to be a mistake of nature. He denies himself pleasures, sleeping in an iron bed and working in a straight-backed chair. He wants to live his life with dignity and not be beholden to things like love. Love is only useful at best, Rayber believes. He wonders, then, how to be able to reach Tarwater. While eating at an Italian restaurant, Tarwater declares his food is only fit for a hog, and that he and Rayber are all hogs, and will rot like hogs when they die. The only difference, he contends, is that people can do math. That night, Tarwater leaves home, and Rayber goes after him.

Part 2, Chapter 5 – Rayber follows Tarwater, seeing the boy trying to decide which way to go. He heads directly toward the city, to a shabby neighborhood, and then to a run-down business district. The boy looks in through a darkened window, and Rayber can see Tarwater's face reflected on the glass, and realizes that there is something within



that Tarwater wants, but cannot have. When Tarwater moves on, Rayber goes to see what caught his attention, and discovers it is only a loaf of bread in a bakery.

Tarwater continues on, ultimately heading into the church seen earlier in their travels throughout the city. Rayber watches through the window in anger, believing all of the children within are being taken advantage of, and will not have a normal life. The preacher is introducing Mr. and Mrs. Carmody, who have brought their daughter, Lucette, with them all over the world. It causes Rayber to have flashbacks of trying to escape his uncle's woodland farm at Powderhead. Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Carmody talk about their missionary work done in China and in Africa.

Their daughter, they explain, originally began to preach at the age of 6. She is now about 11 or 12 years of age. Rayber becomes enraged at the parents as the girl begins to preach. He compares the girl to a bird made blind to sing better. The girl then looks at him briefly, before continuing on. She speaks of God's love, of knowing Christ, and coming judgment. She looks at Rayber, who in his mind wants to take the girl away and teach her truth. She moves toward him, no longer addressing the audience, telling them that she sees a damned soul, unraised by Jesus, seeing them but not hearing the Holy Word. Rayber ducks out of sight. The girl continues speaking, urging him to be saved in the Lord's fire rather than perishing in his own.

Rayber decides to leave, but as he does, Tarwater comes outside. He appears relieved to see Rayber, who grabs him by the shoulder and brings him home. Tarwater says he only went to the revival to spit on it. Rayber isn't so sure. His rage brings to mind angry memories of the past, such as when the doctors explained that at least Bishop had his health, if not all his mental faculties. Yet Rayber is blind to the realization –until it is too late –that he has a chance to reach Tarwater on a deeper level that night.

Part 2, Chapter 6 – Only the next day does Rayber realize he has missed an opportunity with Tarwater. They, and Bishop, go walking in the city again, but neither of them says anything about the night before. They head toward a museum, but stop to rest in a park. Bishop climbs into Rayber's lap, and he struggles with fatherly love for his son. It is revealed that Rayber once wanted to bring Bishop to the beach to drown him, making it appear an accident. He attempts to drown the boy, nearly succeeding, but then has second thoughts when the boy's body is pulled out to sea. He shouts and draws people to him, and he pulls his son to the beach. A man in the gathering crowd administers artificial respiration, and the boy survives.

Rayber tells Tarwater that he is far more intelligent than he thinks, for he has broken through the ceiling the old man had set for him, simply by coming to the city on his own. He tells Tarwater that their uncle Marion is not worth their hate, but only their pity. As they move through the park, Bishop jumps into a fountain, and watches as Tarwater approaches the child to baptize him. Rayber snatches Bishop out of the fountain before it can be done, realizing that baptizing Bishop must be what the old man has implanted in Tarwater's mind. He knows now he cannot reason with the boy, but can only confront him with such force and strength as to show Tarwater the error of Marion's ways, to shock him into the truth. Rayber vows to cure Tarwater, or know the reason why.



Part 2, Chapter 7 – Thirty miles from Powderhead, near a lake, Rayber rents a room at the Cherokee Lodge for the night. He intends to force Tarwater to confront his past, to shock Tarwater with what he has done, all under the pretense of a fishing trip. Most immediate, Rayber wants to impress upon Tarwater the understanding that the urge to baptize is a sickness. While signing in for the night, Tarwater nearly causes a scene when the receptionist assumes he is Rayber's son, and Rayber tells her that he is his. Tarwater makes a great show of crossing out his name in the registry. It gives Rayber the feeling that the plan is already doomed to fail. The receptionist sees a dark streak in Tarwater, believing he is up to something, or intends to do the devil's work, which she hopes he will not carry out at the lodge or the lake. She looks at the boy's signature, where he has written "Francis Marion Tarwater. Powderhead, Tennessee. NOT HIS SON."

Analysis

As more of Rayber's character and history is revealed, the less and less upstanding he seems. At first, his secular approach to life, coupled with his atheism, are limited to an anti-Christian bias –including outright mockery of his uncle. But more and more seems troublesome about Rayber, from his desire to suppress his fatherly affections for his son, to his desire to keep the passion of love in check, to the terrifying revelation that Rayber once tried to drown Bishop. This makes the fiery Christian preaching of Marion seem the more appealing. While Marion may have kidnapped Rayber as a child, and later absconded with Tarwater, he never tried to hurt either child. Rayber, on the other hand, tried to drown his own son. Indeed, Rayber's attitude toward his son – that he is a "mistake of nature" – has horrible moral implications for Rayber's character as a person. Here, the reader should reflect on Meeks – a good Christian who seeks to live a good, responsible life, and to help others.

Tarwater's wanderings throughout the city at night also serve to confuse Rayber. Rayber, who is not faithful, and not of the faith, cannot understand why Tarwater stares longingly through a glass window at a loaf of bread in a bakery. This act becomes symbolic of the Bread of Life – seen, but not reached – by Tarwater. Later, in the church window, the Bread of Life will be seen, but not heard, by Rayber. The Bread of Life is Truth, the Word of God, and the hunger it fills is a hunger of the body that cannot be filled by food. Ironically, as it is later borne out, Tarwater fully understands what the Bread of Life is, and is avoiding it as he is avoiding his destiny, for the two are intertwined as prophets are to preach the Truth – of redemption and salvation.

However, the secularist thoughts, atheism, and influence of the devilish voice in Tarwater's head are all having a greater and greater effect on him. His comparison of human beings as hogs who can do math, but still rot the same, should not be missed. There is little that separates humankind from animals, and hogs are among those animals treated with the most disdain by people. Likewise, in the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus cleanses a man of possession by driving the invading demons into a group of swine, which then killed themselves by running off a cliff. That Tarwater should compare people to hogs demonstrates just how far he is from his upbringing.



The evil thoughts that have plagued Tarwater's mind, together with his avoidance of food, affect the boy physically, though Tarwater himself does not notice it. Likewise, there is a sense that something is not quite right about the boy, discerned only by those with faith. Such a premonition of the evil that is infecting Tarwater is noticed by the receptionist at the Cherokee Lodge, who believes the boy will bring about some devilish end, and hopes that it will not be at the lake that such an end occurs.

Vocabulary

poised, calamity, morbid, recalcitrant, obtruded, intransigently, insidious, chirruped, doggedly, furtive, interminable, bereaved,



Part 2, Chapter 8 – Part 2, Chapter 9

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 8 – After lunch, Rayber, Bishop, and Tarwater head out on a boat to fish on the lake. Tarwater feels as if a grand trap is about to fall on him, brought about by absolute silence. He thinks Rayber is of no significance, and insults his own intelligence. He knows he could have baptized Bishop countless times, but has refused to do so for fear of being lost in the silence.

Tarwater's voice – the strange friend – has suggested that the silence is the absence of a sign, that Tarwater is waiting for a sign of some kind. If Tarwater is a prophet, the voice explains, he deserves to be treated like one. God, the voice asserts, has never bothered to try. Since burying his uncle, Tarwater has constantly felt hungry, Hunger, the voice contends, is not a sign. The voice further contends that baptism is a madness that will drive Tarwater all his life, and he'll never be saved from it. In the park at the fountain, Tarwater insists he wasn't going to baptize, but drown Bishop –and the voice tells him to do it. It is only the intervention of Rayber that stops him. In the park, Tarwater later comes across an old man who tells him not to let anyone tell him what to do. The voice contends this is a coincidence of importance, that God does not care for Tarwater, does not even know Tarwater exists, and Tarwater must only rely on himself, and the voice. The voice tells Tarwater he will never leave him. Seeing the lake reminds Tarwater that he has something that must be done.

Only Tarwater and Rayber head out on the boat while the woman who runs the Lodge watches Bishop. Tarwater says it would be no loss if the boy were to drown, and Rayber remarks that in perhaps a hundred years, people will put such children down when they are born. He tells Tarwater he once tried to drown Bishop, but his nerves gave out. Tarwater tells Rayber he didn't have the guts, and Rayber counters that Tarwater doesn't have the guts to overcome Marion without Rayber's help. Rayber confesses that it was his uncle's eyes, which reminded him of fish eyes, that got to him. But unlike Tarwater, Rayber has resisted Marion for all his life. But being baptized has left a lasting scar on Rayber, so he has refused to have Bishop baptized. He changes the subject by telling Tarwater they will go on a plane ride in a few weeks, that it is the greatest engineering achievement of man. Tarwater, who was up in a plane at a county fair, is unimpressed. Rayber tells Tarwater that he will grow up to be a freak if he doesn't let himself be helped away from his uncle's upbringing, that he is eaten up with false guilt. He tells Tarwater that he will end up like Marion. Tarwater responds by taking off his overalls and jumping out of the boat, swimming away, and Rayber knows he has touched a nerve. He thrusts the boy's overalls into the water. When Rayber returns to the room at the Lodge, he sees Tarwater wearing the new clothes he has purchased for him.

Part 2, Chapter 9 – As Rayber happily considers having an effect on Tarwater, he thinks about how his own wife will not divorce him for fear of having to have custody of Bishop.



She now lives in Japan. She has pressured Rayber to put the child in an institution, but he has refused because Bishop keeps Rayber's love in check. Rayber and Bishop go for a drive into the country, toward Powderhead. He sees the blackened ruins of the house, and is seized by memories once more, so he leaves. He knows he cannot go back there, even just to bring Tarwater, and so has ruined his plan. He decides to confront the boy as he did in the boat, but to not let up. At a gas station on the way back to the Lodge, Rayber buys Tarwater a combination corkscrew-bottle opener. Back at the Lodge, Tarwater thanks him for it, but says he has no use for it. They decide to go down for dinner.

While waiting for food, Rayber tells Tarwater he no longer intends to tell Tarwater what to do, but merely to lay out the facts before him. Rayber tells Tarwater the old man is still in him, but Tarwater disagrees. He believes the old man is in Rayber deeper than in himself. Rayber counters that the difference is that he knows it is in him, and controls it, while Rayber refuses to even acknowledge it. Until Tarwater does away with the notion of baptizing Bishop, Tarwater will never be a normal person. He goes on to say that Tarwater has two solutions before him. Baptism, he continues, is an empty act, that to be truly reborn, a person must remake himself. He gives Tarwater permission to baptize Bishop right that instant to get it out of his head. Tarwater refuses, so Rayber presents the second option –to baptize himself, so to speak, to start down a new path in life. Rayber himself as done this, but Tarwater says that they are nothing alike, that he can pull the roots of his upbringing out on his own. Deciding he wants some time alone, Rayber allows Tarwater to bring Bishop out on the boat. He has the suspicion that Tarwater seeks to control Bishop, the way the old man controlled Tarwater. While they are gone, Rayber decides to issue Tarwater an ultimatum: he will cooperate and get on with his life in the right direction, or he is not allowed to come back with him and Bishop. It grows dark, and Rayber begins to worry. He plugs in his hearing aid to discern the sound of bellowing. He realizes Tarwater is both baptizing and drowning Bishop. He knows that Tarwater will have a dark fate. Rayber feels nothing, despite the fact that his son is drowning, and faints.

Analysis

The disturbing way that Rayber approaches life and issues of the human condition continue to make themselves apparent. Apart from nearly drowning his son and calling his son a mistake, Rayber believes that all babies born with some defect should be put to death. Such a statement even startles Tarwater. But Rayber realizes he has the opportunity to make progress with Tarwater, not by appealing to reason, but by confronting him with the shocking truth of things –a shock therapy, in certain respects.

Rayber's efforts at shock therapy have the effect of driving Tarwater to act, but it is action which Rayber does not expect. Unbeknownst to Rayber, though he can attempt reason and shock and various other ways of getting through to Tarwater, the truth of that which is unseen is something that Rayber does not recognize. There is a God, there is a Devil, and the Devil is inside Tarwater's head, urging him to live for himself. The voices that Rayber refuses to believe in are telling Tarwater to drown, rather than



baptize, Bishop. But Rayber, because he has convinced himself that there cannot possibly be anything beyond the physical world and the short and limited duration of human life, believes that all problems –through one course or another –can be solved. Here, the reader is reminded that the problem of dealing with an intellectually-disabled baby, according to Rayber, may be solved by killing the baby.

However, Rayber does not recognize that he himself represents the opposite extreme of Marion's brand of Christianity. Rayber's attempts to pull Tarwater from one extreme to the other ultimately backfire. Just as soon as Rayber believes he is making progress, Tarwater goes out in a boat with Bishop, after which time he proceeds to drown Bishop. As a result, the one time that Rayber might be inclined to show some kind of emotion – at knowing that his son is being drowned –he can only faint at the fact that he feels nothing at all. He has come so far opposite his uncle Marion, and has shut out love in his life to so great an extent, that he cannot feel anything at all for his son.

Vocabulary

voraciously, solemnly, anesthetize, volition, affronted, omniscient



Part 3

Summary

Part 3, Chapter 10 – Tarwater is picked up along the road not far from the lake by an auto-transit truck driver, who only picks up Tarwater so Tarwater will talk and keep him awake. Tarwater responds that he only wants to go as far as 56. The driver asks why Tarwater's pants are wet, and Tarwater responds that he has just drowned and baptized a boy, though the baptism was accidental, because the words just came out. The boy explains he is going home, that he never should have left, except he had to prove he wasn't a prophet. The driver believes Tarwater is making everything up, and encourages him to keep talking. Tarwater tells him he is not hungry, and then tells him he is hungry – but not for the bread of life. The driver offers Tarwater a sandwich, but Tarwater won't eat it, saying he'll only throw it back up. Tarwater goes on to curse himself for having burned his uncle in the house, rather than pulling his uncle outside to burn, because now he'll have to sleep in the stalls and rebuild a house. The driver concludes that Tarwater must be slow, and says that everyone in the South belongs in an insane asylum, and that he won't see any other sane people until he gets back to Detroit. He pulls over to take a nap. Tarwater reflects on the voice telling him to drown Bishop, that once it is done, there is no going back. Tarwater shakes the driver awake, who orders him to get out. Tarwater hopes by sundown he'll be home again, and will live his life the way he wants, making good on his refusal to be a prophet.

Part 3, Chapter 11 – Tarwater tries to eat some of the sandwich given to him by the truck driver, but he almost throws up, so he stops eating it. He continues on his journey through the morning, knowing that he is forever separated from Jesus and being a prophet by the act of drowning Bishop. He considers his accidental baptizing of the child, but it does not bother him too much. As he travels, the sight of the sun, and the light, disturb him, and he wishes he could order the sun away. He stops at a house full of black children to take some water from their well, exchanging the sandwich for a drink. The clean water seems shocking to his system, and will not slake his thirst. He catches sight of his own haggard reflection in the water, and it startles him enough to keep him moving on.

At the intersection of 56 is a small store and gas station he and Marion had traded at from time to time, run by a large black woman. The woman says she is disappointed in what Tarwater has done, for news of the burning has spread. She tells him it shames the dead. He leaves and catches a ride further up with a haggard-looking young man. He gives Tarwater what he calls a special kind of cigarette –presumably marijuana –and then gives Tarwater a bottle of whiskey, which he opens with the combination corkscrew-bottle opener. Tarwater's thirst rages, and he continues to drink, telling the man driving that it is better than the Bread of Life. Tarwater soon passes out, and the man drives him to a secluded spot, where he rapes him, takes his hat and his corkscrew, and leaves him. The man emerges from the woods looking somehow healthier. When Tarwater wakes up, he is naked except for his shoes, and his clothes



are piled neatly to the side. He dresses so quickly he puts on some of his clothes backwards, covers the area where he was laying with leaves, burns it, and continues on through the woods, lighting bushes on fire as he goes. Eventually, he comes to the road that leads to home, and knows he must continue on for a final revelation.

Part 3, Chapter 12 – Tarwater returns to the clearing, to the forked tree at the edge through which Marion used to look at his home and property. The voice tells Tarwater that now they can be alone together, forever, and Tarwater burns the tree. Moving on, he sees Buford working the land, and goes to see him, hoping for dinner –but becomes nauseous at the thought. Still he continues on –to find a grave with a Cross above it. Buford tells Tarwater that he gave Marion a Christian burial, no thanks to Tarwater. Buford looks at Tarwater, and sees the only thing truly alive about Tarwater are his eyes. It is beginning to get dark, and almost as if Buford can sense there is something very wrong about Tarwater, Buford leaves. Meanwhile, a thin line of fire is spreading out in the woods, and he has a vision of a burning bush, and hears a voice telling him to go and earn the children of God about the terrible speed of mercy. Because Buford has buried Marion in a Christian way, there is nothing stopping Tarwater from heading out to be a prophet.

Analysis

As Tarwater concludes his journey, the Greek story of Oedipus is revisited. Oedipus, seeking to avoid the destiny that has been foretold for him, flees to escape it, only to run right into it. The desire to avoid destiny, to do everything he can to get away from it, only brings Tarwater full-circle, straight into fulfilling his destiny. This comes about by two important ways. First, Tarwater's intention is to drown Bishop, not baptize the boy –but as he drowns Bishop, Tarwater baptizes him, as has been ingrained in him. The first task given to him by Marion has been completed. Returning to Powderhead, Tarwater is stunned to find his uncle buried in a Christian fashion, something Tarwater refused to do in order to avoid his uncle's prophecy, thereby completing the second task given to him by his uncle.

Accordingly, the corruption of Tarwater's soul is manifested in his physical appearance, noted by children and by Tarwater himself in his own reflection. Tarwater's recklessness also leads to him being taken advantage of, as the second driver he hitches a ride with on the way home gets him stoned and drunk in order to rape him. O'Connor makes a careful note of stating that this driver looks healthier upon leaving the woods, being either a metaphorical or literal manifestation of the Devil –that the Devil works to convince people of their own freedom, when in reality, he is manipulating them to serve his own ends. It is that power he thrives off of and feeds off of. Such is the case with Tarwater, who has been corrupted but also made pliant: doing evil will bring about more evil.

Indeed, his own sins have pushed him towards his destiny, towards redemption, toward forgiveness through the act of preaching. He has had a hunger in him, and a thirst, that can only be brought to settling by Truth. And the Truth that Tarwater feels called to



preach is not destruction or of hellfire, but of forgiveness, of mercy. Fire has cleansed the violent, and now the violent must bear away the Truth. Nevertheless, what remains to be seen is how Tarwater will fare in this new role, returning to the city where the father of the murdered Bishop lives, and what may happen should Rayber run into Tarwater.

Vocabulary

diffuseness, intermittent, simultaneously, declivity, sibilant, premonition, languidly



Characters

Tarwater

Francis Marion Tarwater, most frequently referred to throughout Fallery O'Connor's novel "The Violent Bear It Away" is a fourteen year-old boy who serves as the book's central character. He is neither protagonist nor antagonist, though at times he does fall into one category or the other. Born following a car accident which kills his mother and his grandparents, Tarwater is taken to live with his uncle, Rayber, in the city. At the same time, Rayber's own uncle, Tarwater's great-uncle, Marion, lives with them as well. Marion, a firebrand Christian, becomes enraged that he becomes the center of a disparaging article Rayber has written, and so he leaves with the baby Tarwater to raise him in the backwoods at the old family property, Powderhead.

Marion raises Tarwater with the belief that Tarwater will become a prophet for God, as Marion himself has been. Tarwater is skeptical, but has no choice other than to listen to Marion. Before Marion dies, he tasks Tarwater with baptizing Rayber's young son, Bishop, and giving Marion a proper Christian burial, after which time Tarwater can follow his destiny to become a prophet. But after Marion dies, and Tarwater is digging the grave as instructed, the Devil in the form of a voice inside Tarwater's head encourages him to live for himself, and not to do as the old man demands. Tarwater decides to get drunk instead of finishing the burial, ultimately lighting his house on fire with the intent of burning his uncle's body, thereby being able to flee his destiny.

Tarwater travels to the city to stay with his uncle and to await a sign about what he is supposed to do. Rayber is delighted, hoping to give Tarwater a normal life, and get him away from religion altogether. But no matter what Rayber does, he cannot get through to Tarwater. The voice in Tarwater's head, however, urges Tarwater not to baptize Bishop, as instructed, but to drown him instead, which Tarwater ultimately does, though he baptizes Bishop as well as drowns him. Tarwater then flees toward home, and catches a ride with a strange young man who ends up getting Tarwater drunk, raping him, and leaving him. When Tarwater comes to, he burns the spot on which he was raped, and sets fire to the woods around him. He comes back to the old family property to discover that Marion has been buried by Buford Munson, a kind black neighbor who was friendly with Marion. Tarwater realizes that everything he has done to avoid his destiny has led to it –and in the fires he has set, he understands that his soul has been scorched clean, and he heads back to the city to serve as a prophet for God.

Marion Tarwater

Marion Tarwater is the great-uncle of Francis Marion Tarwater, and the uncle of Rayber Tarwater. Marion is an energetic, firebrand Christian who believes he is a prophet for God. He is in his eighties when he dies, and his life's work has been to bring up a prophet to replace him. Years before the novel, he attempts to do this with Rayber as a



child, but Rayber refuses, ultimately becoming an atheist and embracing secularism. Marion, who later lives with Rayber, discovers that Rayber has been given guardianship of Tarwater following the death of Tarwater's mother and grandparents. Marion decides to abscond with Tarwater, to raise him in the backwoods at the old family property, Powderhead. There, Marion gives Tarwater a general education in everything from math to history, but focuses on preparing Tarwater for prophesy. Marion gives Tarwater two major tasks which must be overcome to be a prophet: First, Tarwater must baptize Rayber's young son, Bishop; and second, Tarwater must give Marion a Christian burial when Marion dies. It is, however, ultimately Buford Munson that buries Marion when Tarwater gets drunk instead of carrying out his appointed task.

Rayber Tarwater

Rayber Tarwater is the twenty-four year-old nephew of Marion Tarwater, and is the uncle of Francis Tarwater. Rayber is a schoolteacher, who places emphasis on reason above all else in life. He is an atheist, and avowedly so. As a child, Marion attempted to impart his beliefs on Rayber, but Rayber refused, and ultimately went in the exact opposite direction. When Rayber is given guardianship of Tarwater, following the death of Tarwater's mother and grandparents in a car accident, he also takes in Marion, deciding to use him in a disparaging article about religious belief and sanity. When Rayber openly mocks Christianity, Marion decides to leave with baby Tarwater. Rayber attempts to get Tarwater back with the assistance of welfare worker Bernice Bishop, but is shot in the leg and in the ear by Marion, causing Rayber to become mostly deaf. He must thus use a hearing-aid from thereon.

Rayber later marries Bernice, and they have an intellectually-disabled son, whom Bernice wants nothing to do with, and Rayber attempts to drown once. Rayber fights hard to keep his paternal affection for his son in check, for he feels that love is useless except in terms of being a means to an end. When Marion dies, and Tarwater shows up at the door, Rayber is delighted, hoping to give Tarwater a normal life and pull one over on Marion. However, Rayber's attempts to bring Tarwater around to his way of thinking and living all fail, and end disastrously when Tarwater both baptizes and drowns Bishop. Rayber, who is stunned that he can feel nothing at the death of his son, only faints.

Bishop

Bishop is the young, intellectually-disabled son of Rayber Tarwater and his wife, Bernice. Bishop is friendly and unassuming, unaware that his own father considers him a mistake of nature. Rayber believes all babies born like Bishop should be put to death. Indeed, Rayber attempts to drown Bishop at the beach once, but loses his nerve in the end. Ultimately, Bishop is baptized and drowned by Tarwater at the lake near Cherokee Lodge.



Buford Munson

Buford Munson is a black friend and neighbor of Marion Tarwater, though Francis Tarwater's disdain and racial attitudes toward Buford are clear. Buford is a kind, decent, and deeply Christian man. He is horrified by Tarwater's actions regarding Marion, so Buford himself ensures that Marion has a Christian burial. When Tarwater returns to Powderhead, Buford can almost sense that there is something not right, perhaps even evil, about the boy, and he decides to leave rather than stay around and talk to Tarwater.

The Voice

The Voice, often referred to as "the strange voice", "the stranger", and later as the "friendly voice", speaks to Tarwater in his head. The voice is that of Satan, urging Tarwater to live for himself rather than for Jesus. True freedom, the voice asserts, is doing whatever one wants. It is also the voice that goads Tarwater into getting drunk and refusing to complete a Christian burial for Marion, and later goads Tarwater into drowning Bishop.

Meeks

Meeks is a traveling salesman whose business is in copper products. He is passing through Tennessee when he gives Tarwater a lift into the city to Rayber's house. Meeks is a kind, responsible, and good man, having learned much the hard way when he was younger. A Christian, he attempts to explain to Tarwater that hard work, and loving thy neighbor, are the two principle components that make the world work right. Meeks, who seems to have mastered a perfect blend of both faith and reason, attempts to get Tarwater to see the light, but Tarwater merely dismisses Meeks as a ride to the city, and nothing more.

Bernice Bishop

Bernice Bishop is the estranged wife of Rayber Tarwater, and is twice his age. Originally a welfare case worker who attempts to assist Rayber in getting Francis Tarwater back, the two end up married and having a son, Bishop. Because Bishop is intellectually disabled, Bernice wants nothing to do with him, and leaves, refusing to grant a divorce to Rayber for fear of being saddled with custody of Rayber. She is so determined to avoid this that she moves to Japan.

Truck Driver

A truck driver gives Tarwater a lift from the lake near Cherokee Lodge towards Powderhead. The truck driver is sleepy, and only picks up Tarwater in the hopes that Tarwater will talk and keep him awake. From Detroit, the driver thinks Tarwater's stories



about drowning Bishop are nothing more than stories, and stereotypical Southern craziness. After pulling over to take a nap, Tarwater shakes the driver awake, who then angered, orders Tarwater out.

The Rapist

Following his brief ride with the truck driver, a pale, haggard-looking young man gives Tarwater a lift toward Powderhead. The young man gives Tarwater marijuana and alcohol, causing Tarwater to pass out. The young man then drives Tarwater to some isolated woods, rapes him, and leaves him. When the young man emerges from the woods, according to the narrator, he looks healthier. It is given to understand that the rapist is metaphorical for, or is the Devil, who thrives on evil and abuse.



Objects/Places

Cross

A Cross is requested by Marion to be placed at the head of his grave in accordance with Christian custom. The Cross will be a part of Marion's overall Christian burial, which Tarwater refuses to complete at the insistence of the voice. The voice encourages Tarwater to dispense with the Cross, for it will do nothing but rot by Judgment Day. In a sense, this becomes metaphorical for the actions of the Devil, who seeks to undermine the efforts of Christ.

Matches

Matches are carried by Tarwater throughout the novel. He uses them to light fires, including the fire that burns down the house at Powderhead. He uses them to set fire to the patch of ground on which he is raped, and uses them to create a torch which is then taken to set a large swath of the woods near Powderhead on fire.

Hearing Aid

A hearing aid is worn by Rayber throughout the novel, for Rayber is nearly deaf following having his ear shot off at point-blank range by Marion some years before. Rayber depends heavily on the hearing aid, using it to hear Tarwater sneak out of the house at night. Tarwater finds the hearing aid to be a source of mockery and amusement, and believes that the device tells Rayber what to do.

Telephone

A telephone is used by Meeks to call his girlfriend at a gas station after picking up Tarwater. Meeks attempts to get Tarwater to call Rayber, to make sure he knows he is on the way, but Tarwater has no idea how to use a phone at all. This is emblematic of Tarwater's upbringing. A telephone is among the simplest devices for people to use, having been around for decades prior to the novel –and it is something that Tarwater has no clue about.

Alcohol

Alcohol appears in numerous forms throughout the novel, from mash to whiskey, and it is consumed by Tarwater in copious amounts to the point that his drunkenness enables him to be raped. Marion preaches against, and strongly condemns alcohol, though he makes it to sell to others. It is the voice that first coaxes Tarwater to drink.



New Clothes

New clothes are purchased by Rayber for Tarwater, with two intents. First, Rayber wishes for Tarwater to have a decent set of clothes, and to dispense with the grubby old overalls he wears, which are a part of his life in the backwoods. Second, Rayber believes that a new set of clothes will hold true to the old maxim that clothes make the man, thus giving Tarwater a fresh lease on life –a new, and better life.

Fire

Fire proves to be an important object and symbol in the novel. Fire serves as both an element of destruction, and an element of cleansing. Tarwater destroys Powderhead, as well as the spot where he is raped and much of the surrounding woodland, by way of fire. Yet, fire also serves to be a force of cleansing in conjunction with the name of the novel, “The Violent Bear It Away”, taken from a passage in the Bible (Matthew 11:12). Here, there are two possible interpretations. First, evil in all its forms is at constant war with God and Heaven, and only those who understand and believe in the love of God – those “violent” with faith –can overcome this evil, directly or indirectly, and bear it away. Second, those who have been blind to the Truth will suddenly have it revealed to them through the grace of God, and will bear away this Truth to witness it to the world.

Bread

Bread is a food source that has spiritually Christian connotations in the novel. People are hungry for Truth, and only the Bread of Life –the Word of God –can handle this kind of spiritual hunger. Throughout the novel, Tarwater tries to slake his thirst and hunger with regular food and alcohol –things of this world –but is never satisfied. Only the Bread of Life can satisfy the longings that Tarwater has.

Tennessee

Tennessee serves to be the main setting for the novel “The Violent Bear It Away” by Flannery O’Connor. Tennessee is a state in the United States, and is a part of the American South. Tennessee proves to be the only real setting for the novel, as Powderhead, the city, and Cherokee Lodge and nearby lake are all fictional settings. Northerners tend to have serious disdain and contempt for the South in the novel, made apparent by the truck driver from Detroit. He believes the only normal people there are will be in Detroit, and that everyone in the South is crazy in some way, shape, or form – and so he does not take seriously Tarwater’s account of drowning Bishop.



Powderhead

Powderhead is a fictional river in the backwoods of Tennessee, several dozen miles from the city, and serves as the eponymous name of the ancestral land and house of the Tarwaters. The Powderhead property consists of a main house, and some outbuildings, including animal stalls, surrounded by farmed land, further surrounded by woodland. Upon the death of Tarwater's mother and grandparents, the land and house are willed to Rayber, though it is Marion who lives on the property with Tarwater. When Marion dies, Tarwater burns down the house, and later returns to burn much more of the woodland around the house.

The City

The city and its suburbs prove to be the fictional residence of Rayber and his son, Bishop. It is in the city that Marion believes all the ills and evils of mankind have come together, and he avoids the city as though it was a plague, venturing into the city only when absolutely necessary. Following Marion's death, Tarwater goes to the city to live with Rayber, hoping to avoid his foretold destiny, and only to return to the city at the very end of the novel in fulfillment of his destiny as a prophet.

The Bakery

The bakery is located in the city, and is regarded by Tarwater late at night. He looks in through the window of the bakery at a loaf of bread, which Rayber doesn't think twice about. In reality, the bread represents the Truth –the Bread of Life –which Tarwater does not understand yet that he is hungry for, and cannot reach, for he is avoiding his own destiny. The bakery thus becomes metaphorical for Heaven, for Light, which Tarwater cannot yet reach.

The Church

The church is located in the city, and is the scene of a night meeting of Christian faithful who gather together to hear preaching by Christian missionaries. Tarwater attends this meeting to, in his own words, "spit on it", while Rayber watches through the window. The scene is loaded with symbolism, which should not be missed by the reader. Light emanates from the church in the darkness of the city, and it is a light which Rayber is drawn to, but does not understand. It references John 1:5 in the Bible, which references the Light shining in the darkness, but the darkness being unable to either understand or overcome the Light –which is very true of Rayber, and very true about Tarwater, initially. This is further expanded by the accusation of the twelve year-old girl who preaches that Rayber, the man in the window, sees, but does not hear (understand) the Truth. The church itself, likewise, proves to be a light in the darkness of the city.



Cherokee Lodge and Lake

Cherokee Lodge and Lake is where Rayber brings Tarwater and Bishop for a few days, presumably on a fishing trip. It is where Rayber intends to launch his plan to bring Tarwater back to Powderhead, to confront him with the truth about Marion being crazy and the idea of religion being fantasy. It is at the lodge and lake that Rayber comes closest to bringing Tarwater into the fold, but also proves to be the linchpin to propel Tarwater to his destiny by both drowning, and baptizing, Bishop.



Themes

Destiny

Destiny –and, by extension, purpose –form the central component and theme of the novel “The Violent Bear It Away” by Flannery O’Connor. Destiny –the idea that a person has an ultimate purpose, task to perform, or end in life –is all-encompassing in Tarwater’s life. Tarwater is brought up with the belief that his destiny is to become a prophet in the footsteps of his Uncle Marion, with the eventual result being that he will replace Marion to continue on the work of spreading the Truth of God. It is also Tarwater’s destiny to baptize his younger cousin, Bishop.

Tarwater, however, is skeptical that he will be called to be a prophet. He does not believe, either, that destiny is something set in stone. Just because something appears to be the case, doesn’t make it so. This nagging doubt is further compounded by the voice, which encourages Tarwater to live for himself, rather than for Jesus. If Tarwater lives for Jesus, he’ll be saddled with baptizing and preaching for the rest of his life. Tarwater decides to rebel against the destiny intended for him, both by refusing to grant Marion a Christian burial, and by intending to drown Bishop. In so doing, Tarwater resembles the Greek character of Oedipus, who likewise sought to outrun his own destiny, and the historian and philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel, who was raised Christian, to turn against the faith years later.

However, the idea that destiny is destiny means that destiny cannot be overcome no matter how far one runs or seeks to avoid it. Oedipus, by running away, sets in motion the events for his own destiny to be fulfilled –as is the case with Tarwater. Everything he does ultimately leads him to his destiny –for he accidentally baptizes Bishop as he drowns him, and Buford has given Marion a Christian burial. Returning home, Tarwater is confronted with his destiny, and so returns to preach, embracing the faith he once spurned. Hegel was much the same way –by railing against Christianity, he came to understand, and embrace it, becoming an ardent defender of the faith in the end.

Faith and Reason

Faith and reason form a prominent, and overarching theme in the novel “The Violent Bear It Away” by Flannery O’Connor. In the novel, faith and reason are pitted against one another from the first, being considered incompatible with one another, and mutually exclusive with one another, by both Marion and Rayber. Marion, a fiery Christian, believes reason does little good for men, if any, while Rayber believes there is nothing good about religion at all –especially Christianity. O’Connor objectively considers both faith and reason in her novel through Tarwater, Marion, and Rayber, but ultimately comes down on the side of faith, and approves of the idea that faith and reason can be compatible.



When the novel begins, it appears as if Marion is nothing more than mentally-imbalanced, though devoutly religious, elderly man. He seems quite closed-minded about much of the world (for example, his ride in a plane with Tarwater does not impress him at all, and Tarwater's inability to operate a telephone makes him something of a Luddite –those who are suspicious of, or oppose outright technology and engineering advances of any kind). He condescendingly refers to Rayber as “that schoolteacher”, believing that all of Rayber's education and knowledge do nothing for him without faith.

Rayber, however, believes that faith is nonsense, and that there is no such thing as being born again, or being Resurrected. He believes that Tarwater's upbringing has stunted his growth. While Marion's way of bringing up a child can be considered backwoods, it should not be missed that Rayber, well-educated, secular, and atheist, nearly drowned his own son, changing his mind only after it was nearly too late. Had there been no one else on the beach to administer CPR, Bishop would be dead. Rayber, for all his learnedness, believes that love is a bad thing, and that disabled babies should be killed –and it is clear that O'Connor especially comes down hard on atheism and secularism.

Only in Meeks does O'Connor truly establish a symbiotic compatibility of faith and reason. Meeks's two laws for the world –to love thy neighbor and work hard –are Christian values, and his knowledge about the world itself comes through personal experience. Meeks is in the world, but not of the world –and his humility and faithfulness are utterly ignored by Tarwater.

Christian Symbolism

Christian symbolism forms a critically important aspect of the novel “The Violent Bear It Away” by Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor's novel clearly comes down on the side of faith when pitted against reason, though it speaks admiringly of a compatible faith-reason relationship (see the theme “Faith and Reason”) as well. The novel is therefore replete with Christian references, symbolism to demonstrate these points, and a direct quote from the Bible which gives the novel its name.

In the novel, there is a longing, described as a hunger, that Tarwater endures. No food or alcohol can handle this hunger, and it becomes apparent that the food Tarwater is seeking is not of the physical realm, but something deeper, and something spiritual. He is seeking the Bread of Life (the Word of God), which becomes clear in the scene where he stares at a loaf of bread through a bakery window, but cannot reach it. His reflection can be seen, and the point is obvious: he himself is standing in the way of himself to satisfying this hunger. This is also apparent in the scene where Rayber watches preaching through the church window, and though the language and meaning are apparent and clear for the reader to understand, Rayber does not understand it at all. The church provides a source of light in the city of darkness, and the preaching girl speaks of people who see the truth, but do not hear it, do not understand it –the way that John 1:15 speaks of the Darkness not understanding or being able to overcome the



Light. Furthermore, Rayber is unable to overcome the seeds of Christianity, of light, that have been implanted in the world, and in Tarwater, no matter how hard he tries.

The Bible also gives the novel its name, through the quote from Matthew 11:15, that “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away.” There are various ways to interpret the name of the novel and its significance, but there are two that are more apparent than the others. The first incorporates the understanding that evil, in all its forms, is constantly warring with God and Heaven, and only those who understand and believe in the power and love of God –those “violent” with this faith –can overcome evil, directly or indirectly, and bear it away. The second interpretation involves those who have been blind to the Truth that suddenly have the Truth revealed to them through the grace of God, and will bear away this Truth in witnessing it to the world.

Duality

Duality is a major motif in the novel “The Violent Bear It Away” by Flannery O’Connor. Duality –the idea of two alternatives – comes into play in various places in the novel, in terms of absolutes, the number two, and two either mutually-exclusive, or compatible, alternatives. All of these instances of duality revolve, in some way, around Tarwater and his destiny to become a prophet.

From the very first, duality appears in the form of absolutes. There is good, and there is evil. The voice in Tarwater’s head tells Tarwater that he can either be for Jesus, or for himself. There is no middle-ground. Nevertheless, compatible duality can be seen in the form of Meeks, who is not only Christian, but has clear reason about things. Indeed, it can be said that his faith and reason strengthen each other in Meeks. Yet, even Meeks has decided for Jesus, and not himself, as his responsible nature will not allow him to be for himself. By extent, being for oneself rather than Jesus is to be for the Devil. Additionally, there is the duality of faith and reason itself, wherein for Meeks the two are compatible, but for Rayber, they are not (see the theme Faith and Reason).

Duality also exists in the number two, in terms of quantifying absolutes. There are two figures which seek the souls of men –there is the True Savior, Jesus Christ, and there is the false savior, Satan. Meeks has two rules that make the world go round –to love thy neighbor, and to work hard. Tarwater has grown up with two family histories being given to him –one of Creation, and the other of Rayber, who in Marion’s eyes, must at many points symbolize the Devil. Likewise, Rayber is one of two children brought into the world by his parents. His sister, Tarwater’s mother, is deemed a whore by Marion, and Rayber is referred to as “that schoolteacher” by Marion, which is an insult and demeaning term coming from Marion. Indeed, a person can live only one life of two – either in pursuit of the Truth, or in pursuit of nothing.



Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “The Violent Bear It Away” by Flannery O’Connor. Family is incredibly important in the South, both as an institution and as a value, for family is where a person’s history begins, family is reputation, and family is meant to last against all other things, when all other things fail. This is especially true in the novel for Tarwater, especially given the polar opposites of Marion’s Christianity and Rayber’s atheism.

When Tarwater’s unmarried mother and grandparents die, Tarwater –an illegitimate child –is nevertheless taken in by Rayber, because he is family. While Rayber has no emotional compunction for the child, the child is still family, and family is a strong bond. Indeed, even Marion, who refers to Tarwater’s mother repeatedly as a whore, has a vested interest in the child as a matter of family and as a matter of religion. Indeed, there is a brief struggle over the child, which culminates in Marion shooting Rayber in the leg, and shooting off Rayber’s ear.

Unfortunately, family also has its limitations, as evidenced by the fact that Marion is willing to nearly kill a member of his own family, despite all that has happened between he and Rayber. Rayber, likewise, invites Marion to live with him not for charity or family kindness, but out of desire to study a crazy family member for exploitation in a magazine article. Rayber’s own shortcomings with familial instinct come by way of his desire to refuse to love his son, his attempt to drown his son, and his inability to feel anything at all at the death of his son.

Style

Point of View

Flannery O'Connor tells her novel "The Violent Bear It Away" from the third-person omniscient perspective. The novel is told in this way for at least two primary reasons. First, the third-person perspective allows O'Connor to relate the story from the points of view of Tarwater and Rayber, focusing on one or the other where needed. While the reader is fully aware of the actions and thoughts of both Tarwater and Rayber, neither is fully aware of the other. This omniscience affords the reader the ability to understand things the way they truly are, rather than be subjected to the personal opinions and points of view of Tarwater and Rayber. The objectivity of the narrator further allows the reader to draw independent conclusions and opinions about the novel, apart from Rayber and Tarwater.

Setting

Flannery O'Connor sets her novel "The Violent Bear It Away" in the state of Tennessee, but in a fictional region and city, which serve to be metaphorical. Tennessee is a part of the regional American South, rural and deeply religious. Such a place proves perfect for the story O'Connor tells, about religious destiny, and makes possible characters as diverse as the fiery and devout Marion, and the atheist Rayber. The fictional backwoods, family land, and city used in the story are themselves fictitious, but used to metaphorical effect. The ancestral family land and region are indicative of history, family history, and Southern Christianity, and serve as home for Tarwater -the place where he is reared. The city, in the mind of Marion, and in the text of the novel, becomes the epitome of all that is wrong in the world, for evil manifests there en masse. It is why Marion avoids the city as much as possible, and why Tarwater ventures there to spread word of God's mercy.

Language and Meaning

Flannery O'Connor tells her novel "The Violent Bear It Away" in language that is simple and straightforward. The messages of her book, dealing with faith and religion, are incredibly important, and so these are established as clearly as possible, by way of straightforward language. This also adds credence to the establishment of the idea of characters in the novel –and people in the real world –seeing Truth, but not understanding it. Through the story, and through the language employed, O'Connor wants nothing to stop the reader from being exposed to the idea of Truth, and the messages in her novel. Nevertheless, even her simple descriptions are deeply-rooted in theology and faith, and they are clearly apparent to those with even a basic understanding of the Bible or Christianity.

Structure

Flannery O'Connor divides her novel into three main parts, preceded by a Biblical quote (Matthew 11:12) which gives name to the novel. The three main parts are further subdivided into individual chapters, arranged linearly from one through twelve. Part 1 of the novel mainly revolves around Tarwater's upbringing and his relationship with his uncle, who believes that Tarwater will become a prophet. Part 2 of the novel mainly revolves around Tarwater's relationship with Rayber, and Rayber's attempts to get religion out of Tarwater. Part 3 deals with Tarwater on his own, and his return to destiny. As such, the three parts of the novel may be seen as a complete journey as well. Part 1 has to do with leaving; Part 2 has to do with learning; Part 3 has to do with returning. Like Oedipus, Tarwater comes full-circle to do that which has tried to avoid.



Quotes

He had been called in his early youth and had set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Savior.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

Importance: The narrator here explains Marion in a few words that sums up his existence. Marion believes he is a preacher and prophet, sent to spread the Truth of God and warn of the dangers of turning away from God. This also establishes the city as a source of great evil, and the destiny of Tarwater to follow in the footsteps of his Uncle Marion.

He don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me.

-- Tarwater (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 14)

Importance: While Marion insists that Tarwater will become a prophet like him, explaining that it is Tarwater's destiny, Tarwater is very skeptical of this. He believes that God either has other things in mind for him, or nothing at all in particular as of yet in mind for him. This demonstrates that while Tarwater has faith, his is not the same brand as his uncle's, and demonstrates that Tarwater is more anxious to leave Powderhead on his own, rather than as a prophet.

You can do one thing or you can do the opposite... It ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or you.

-- The Voice (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 151)

Importance: Here, the Devil, in the form of the voice in Tarwater's head, begins to manipulate the boy by telling him that it isn't a question of siding with Jesus or the Devil, but a difference of doing what he wants to do, or doing as Jesus says he must. The Devil here attempts to distinguish himself from evil, and from selfishness -which begins to wear away at Tarwater's faith.

Meeks was telling him about the value of work. He said that it had been his personal experience that if you wanted to get ahead, you had to work. He said this was the law of life and it was no way around it because it was inscribed on the human heart like love they neighbor. He said these two laws were the team that worked together to make the world go round and that any individual who wanted to be a success and win the pursuit of happiness, that was all he needed to know.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 2 paragraph 6)

Importance: O'Connor establishes the idea early on that faith and reason can be compatible, and can complement one another, through the person of Meeks. His knowledge is based on Christian faith and experiential reason, and he is a good man. However, Tarwater is looking neither for reason, nor for faith, and so dismisses entirely Meeks and his two rules for living -of loving they neighbor, and working hard. Happiness



is found in the blend of faith and reason, love and work, and doing good for one another, Meeks contends -but Tarwater does not heed him.

It's not too late for me to make a man of you!
-- Rayber (Part 1, Chapter 3 paragraph 19)

Importance: When Tarwater shows up at Rayber's doorstep, Rayber is thrilled. He believes that he can give Tarwater a normal life, and get one over on Marion as well -by bringing the boy away from religion. Rayber believes that he knows the correct way to bring up a man, and exclaims so when Tarwater comes to stay with him.

It was apparent from everything he did and said exactly who had brought him up. At every turn an almost uncontrollable fury would rise in Rayber at the brand of independence the old man had wrought –not a constructive independence but one that was irrational, backwoods, and ignorant.
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 4 paragraph 8)

Importance: The narrator describes how Rayber quickly becomes disillusioned with his task -after only four days of having Tarwater in the city. The things that Marion have taught Tarwater seem to have been deeply instilled in, and absorbed by the boy without him realizing it. Sure enough, the boy is independent, but it is the wrong kind of independence, which exasperates and infuriates Rayber.

He did you a terrible injustice,” Rayber said, wishing impress this on him as often as he could. “He kept you from having a normal life, from getting a decent education. He filled your head with God knows what rot!
-- Rayber (Part 2, Chapter 4 paragraph 14)

Importance: Rayber's first attempt to handle Tarwater is to approach the boy with reason, repetitively -coming at Tarwater with reason in a near dogmatic fashion. But slowly, Rayber's own patience begins to deteriorate, as repetitive reasoning does little to get through to Tarwater. His reasoning becomes more and more desperate, as the transition is made between wanting to give Tarwater a better life, to nearly arguing with Tarwater that Marion has stunted his intellectual growth.

Tarwater's face was strangely lit from the window he was standing before. Rayber watched curiously for a few moments. It looked to him like the face of someone starving who sees a meal he can't reach laid out before him.
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 5 paragraph 11)

Importance: In one of the most telling segments of the book, Tarwater is looking for signs, and for a way to handle his hunger, and he comes across bread in a bakery window. He cannot reach the bread, and his reflection is in his way along with the glass. Symbolically, Tarwater has a spiritual hunger that only the Bread of Life -the Word of God -can satisfy. What is blocking Tarwater is himself.



He saw it all now. The old man had transferred his fixation to the boy, had left him with the notion that he must baptize Bishop or suffer some terrible consequence.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 6 paragraph 26)

Importance: Rayber comes to understand that at least one of the things impairing Tarwater is Tarwater's desire to baptize Bishop, a task assigned him by Marion. Rayber rightly concludes that Bishop is part of what is on Tarwater's mind -but incorrectly concludes why.

It was as no boy he returned. He returned tried in the fire of his refusal, with all the old man's fancies burnt out of him, with the old man's madness smothered for good, so that there was never any chance it would break out in him.

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 11 paragraph 3)

Importance: Tarwater returns to his family's backwoods land, Powderhead, determined to scorch it clean by fire, along with any trace of the old man that remains. He does not ever want to be reminded of Marion or Marion's prophecies, so he does his best to expunge Marion from his mind by destroying the physical landscape around him -by cleansing it by fire. But it is in the fire that Tarwater will come to realize his destiny.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the theme of faith and reason in the novel "The Violent Bear It Away" by Flannery O'Connor. How are faith and reason portrayed in the novel? When faith and reason meet, are they at odds with one another, or is coexistence between the two possible? Which does O'Connor come down on the side of? Why? Do you agree or disagree with O'Connor's conclusion? Why or why not?

Topic 2

According to much of his family, Marion is a crazy, backwoods religious zealot. Do you believe that Marion is crazy, or merely a religious firebrand? How does he compare to the character of Rayber? Can Rayber be considered normal? Why or why not? Between Marion and Rayber, which do you believe is the more normal? Why?

Topic 3

"The Violent Bear It Away" draws its name from the Biblical passage, Matthew 11:12: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." Why do you believe O'Connor chose to name her novel so? Support your claim using evidence from the novel.

Topic 4

The character of Bishop proves to be something of a crossroads for Tarwater -either as a way to meet his destiny, or avoid it. What happens? How does this affect Tarwater as a result?

Topic 5

Discuss the Christian symbolism found in the novel. Find and detail three elements of Christian symbolism in the novel, and explain how they factor into the plot of the novel.

Topic 6

Destiny is a major and overarching theme in the novel. What is destiny? What is Tarwater's supposed destiny? How does Tarwater attempt to handle his own destiny? Is he successful? Why or why not?



Topic 7

The voice in Tarwater's head contends that living life is not a matter of choosing between Jesus and the Devil, but choosing between Jesus and the self. Why is this a false, and dangerous claim the voice makes? How does it ultimately affect Tarwater? How does O'Connor handle the claim the voice makes?