

## 光明照黑暗：論「暴取天國」之暴力

許惠芬<sup>1</sup>

### 摘要

奧康納的「暴取天國」已被公認為美國文學的經典，描述一個男孩對於接受或拒絕先知使命之掙扎。此小說出版於 1960 年，表現奧康納身為美國南方小說家的特質，善於描繪畸零人的奇異視野。對於她作品的評論，皆著重在宗教主題及黑暗人物的層面。本研究欲探討此作品中暴力的深層意涵。與這位準先知相關的暴力帶來巨變，促成他心靈的成長及意識的蛻變。對 Mason 和 Rayber 而言，暴力是脅迫他人屈服己見的手段。對 Tarwater 而言，暴力成就自我的提昇，改變自私自利的想法進而與世界和諧相連。本研究內容主要探討暴力的兩種差異面貌。第一部分分析暴力的摧毀性，由 Mason 和 Rayber 所展現。第二部分討論主角 Tarwater 經歷暴力事件後得到利益他人的意識。本研究顯示，暴力可以具正向之處在於將之導向內在的自我而非外在的他人。暴力的轉化力量照亮並扭轉奧康納的黯淡世界，釐清一般對暴力的誤解。

**關鍵詞：**暴力、招喚、受洗、心靈蛻變

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<sup>1</sup> 國立臺中科技大學應用英語系講師  
通訊作者：許惠芬，E-mail: oscar@nutc.edu.tw

### **Bringing Light to Darkness: Violence in *The Violent Bear It Away***

Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* is a story about a boy's struggle against his ordained identity as a prophet. It is generally recognized as a landmark in American literature and the author is considered an outstanding Southern writer with a prophetic vision. As a devout Catholic, she infuses religious fervor into her works and populates them with the characters of religious morbidity. The title of this novel comes from the Rheims-Douay translation of the Bible, Matthew 11:12: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." This controversial sentence invites debates on whether violence is a desirable or passive way to ensure the triumph of divinity in this materialistic world. J. Ramey Michaels (2010) indicates that the ambiguous point of this sentence lies in whether the kingdom of heaven suffers violence passively, or it imposes violence deliberately to awaken people from their sins: "Biblical scholars have long debated whether the first clause in Greek is passive or middle voice. Does the kingdom of heaven 'suffer violence' or does it 'exercise violence' as it breaks into a sinful world?" (p.64) Michaels further claims that for O'Connor, violence can be sacred, for it is the fate of the redeemed to seize the kingdom and make it their own out of their hunger for the bread of life: "violence to O'Connor is (or can be) sacred violence, for it is the fate of the redeemed, those whose number Tarwater is about to join" (p.64).

O'Connor scholars agree that for her, violence is a permissible and inevitable means to reach divinity and awaken the ignorant people in the secular world. Predominant in her fictional world is the conflict between the sacred and secular, and violence is the way to purge unbelief and doubt. When her fiction becomes the tool of her ideological propaganda, critical voices of disapproval arise. Harold Bloom (1986) felt it a regret that "O'Connor would have bequeathed us stronger novels and stories of the eminence of Faulkner's, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness" (p.8). Echoing Bloom, Frederick Asals (1982) claims that her characters are incapable of flexible development with their religiously rigid self-definitions. For Joyce Carol Oates (1973), her stark distinction of the divine and diabolical is difficult for readers to absorb into a recognizable world. Christina Bieber Lake (2010) even regards her use of violence as another kind of violence an author throws against readers: "there is what could be called the writer's violence against her readers. . . . I'm currently calling this O'Connor's 'shock and awe' campaign, and it is best typified by her use of the grotesque as an assault on the readers' expectation" (p.27). From the historical perspective, O'Connor's obsession with violence and sense

of destruction are related to her era, a time of terror spanning World War II and the Cold War (Katz, 1974). Her recourse to violence and destruction is to shout religious truth to the deaf world and shock it into submission. Bloom (1986) remarked that her creation of freaks highlights the pathos of displacement. Confronted with the choice between divinity and secularism, her characters of grotesque experience madness, violence and even death to gain the triumph of the Holy. *The Violent Bear It Away* is the very text to highlight these features of grotesqueness and violence.

After the 9/11 terrorist attack, the critics who focused on the dark side of her works should reconsider their approaches. In a conference held in 2006, “Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism: An Academic Conference on Violence and Grace,” the issue of violence prevalent in her fiction was emphasized together with her prophetic vision of madness in religious fanaticism. In A. D. Renzo’s (2010) opinion, it’s significant to reexamine her works in a post 9/11 America where “militant fundamentalism” runs rampant (5). While her protagonists in *The Violent Bear It Away* wrestle with and waver between the literal and figurative interpretations of the Bible, religious terrorists today execute mass destruction in the name of God. The violence of terrorist massacre seems justified through the literal interpretation of the Bible, especially *The Book of Revelation*, which features “spiteful curses” and “gloating delight in bloodshed” (8). There is no denying that religious fundamentalism pervades her world and that violence as she portrays is inseparable from grace. “In my own stories,” O’Connor (1969) once declared, “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (p.112). Her embrace of violence inevitably justifies the literal interpretation of her works. Therefore, how to interpret violence in *The Violent Bear It Away* from some other angle than religious orthodoxy is important. Her conception of violence and grace, in fact, can be transcended to point to something higher, just as St. Augustine disapproves of the literal interpretation of violence in the Apocalypse but reads it as symbolism. For St. Augustine, the Revelation’s cosmic battle between good and evil happens in every believer’s soul here and now, not the end of time (Renzo, 2010). Inspired by St. Augustine’s searching for a text’s allegorical meaning beyond a literal one, this study explores O’Connor’s violence in a symbolic way, focusing on two different aspects embodied respectively by Tarwater’s two uncles and Tarwater himself. The violence of the former forms a contrast with that of the latter. His two uncles’ strategy of violence strengthens their ego boundary and fortifies egotistic consciousness, while Tarwater’s violence breaks the limits of selfhood and achieves the transformation of consciousness so that the alienated self is united with the world. The justification of

violent attack and murder in the name of God should not be the annotation of *The Violent Bear It Away*. If the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, the kingdom is the individual psyche, and the violence is the unyielding force to extirpate the inherent fear and desire. Once the removal of the two obstacles is achieved, the kingdom of heaven is restored with the new consciousness of altruism.

As O'Connor (1979) revealed, the whole action of *The Violent Bear It Away* centers around Tarwater's "selfish will against all that the little lake (the baptismal font) and the bread stand for" (p.387). The critical moment when Tarwater envisions the Communion of the Saints justifies O'Connor's assertion that "this book is a very minor hymn to the Eucharist" (p.387). The vision of the messianic banquet is inseparable from the harsh trials Tarwater undergoes. His desire for freedom and autonomy is obstructed by the paternal authority. His great uncle, Mason, and his uncle, Raber, represent irreconcilable values of the Holy and the disbelief in it. Rayber epitomizes the secular worldview, advocating the rationality of human behavior to change and control the world while Mason is a religious fundamentalist and hermit believing that he had received a direct revelation from God. As Kelly S. Gerald (2013) remarked, Mason and Rayber highlight the contrast between a sacred and a secular worldview. Tarwater must choose his way out, and herein lies his severe trial. Seen in this light, he represents every one of us instead of a grotesque Southern character. His oscillation between two contradictory values reflects the struggling between rationality and intuition. While rationality warns about the unknowable and mysterious realm, intuition urges the leap of faith to answer the spiritual call. He demonstrates the potential of benefiting the world through "violence," the literal meaning of which can be transcended to signal something sublime. Violence goes beyond the physical power to destroy or defeat as displayed by the religious terrorists in both Eastern and Western countries. It points to a metaphysical force to activate spiritual awakening. More than a shocking means for O'Connor to reveal divinity, violence is a metaphor of fear and desire, the fear of external influence and desire for freedom and autonomy.

Examining the symbolic meanings of violence relocates the alienated individual in the grand setting of archetypes. To detect the common features of an archetypal character overthrows the darkness of Tarwater's life. From this perspective, Tarwater is not merely a Southern freak but one of the seekers for the meaning of life. O'Connor once said, "No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell" (as cited in Schleifer, p.83). Tarwater's quest for his identity is such a story, which involves no slaying of real monsters but the eradication of invisible

foes. Fear and desire are the dragon forces that chain him to a life of doubt and immobility, while his inner psyche is the battlefield where the two opposing values of sacredness and secularism wage a fierce war. His struggle between religious faith and secular doubt reflects the universal quest for the meaning of life. For Tarwater, the faith of redemption and Jesus as the bread of life propels him to undertake the role of a prophet. Unbelief and doubt, on the other hand, allures him to seek a free and wayward life. The battle between the two ends up the triumph of faith. He comes to realize that the meaning of his life lies in serving the ignorant people, awakening them from sin and guiding them to live a spiritual life. To be a real prophet, he has to first overcome inner trials and then complete the transformation of consciousness. His identity is changed from an aloof and cynical observer to an active participant in society. Through the transformative power of violence, he develops spiritual kinship with other people.

### **Destructive Force of Violence**

The Tarwaters live with violence, exerting it both physically and mentally to assert the meaning of their lives. While Mason and Rayber threaten and force others to embrace their ideology by violence, Tarwater leads violence inward to eradicate doubt and strengthen faith. Mason resorts to violence to safeguard and perpetuate his religious belief, with Tarwater and Rayber being the victims. He forces Tarwater and Rayber to embrace his religious vision, which in turn evokes their violent responses. Rayber fiercely denounces Mason's faith and his exploitation, preferring a life of isolation and freedom. Tarwater burns Mason's house and murders Bishop as the starkest rejection of Mason's teaching. Rayber's violence is imposed on Bishop and Tarwater, in physical and mental forms respectively. His violence directed toward Bishop torments him with guilt and later reinforces Tarwater's motive of drowning Bishop. On the other hand, his violence to Tarwater is a coercion meant to sustain his self-righteousness. Rayber's self-appointed role as a child savior also meets with Tarwater's violent rejection. His intention to save Tarwater from Mason's religious influence is futile, and his ideals of rationality and freedom are despised by Tarwater as intellectual impotence. As Mason fails to influence Rayber, Rayber tries in vain to shape Tarwater into his ideological successor. The two patriarchs' violence fails to subject their targets to their will but elicits more violence in the form of murder and rebellion.

Mason's violence ends up destroying the familial relationship. When Rayber and the welfare woman come to Mason's backwoods to take Tarwater back for normal

education, he shoots him in the ear and leg, leaving him permanently deaf. This violence shocks the couple into submission, prohibiting them from coming again to claim the right of raising the boy. As Rayber later confesses to Tarwater, he cannot get him back because he may risk his life in confronting the mad old man: “After the old man shot me I began to lose my hearing. I didn’t have a gun when I went to get you back. If I had stayed he would have killed me and I wouldn’t have done you any good” (O’Connor, 1975, p. 626). He justifies his abandoning Tarwater by insisting that he is no fool to make a senseless sacrifice since Mason is mad. His rationality knows better than to fight with a mad man, but he promises that he will make up for the past years by helping Tarwater lead a normal life and discard the religious stuff fed by Mason: “He was a mad man. The time when I can do you good is beginning now, and I want to help you. I want to make up for all those years” (O’Connor, 1975, p. 627). What Mason treasures as a holy mission is regarded by Rayber as madness. Educating Tarwater as a prophet with the task of baptizing is crazy and morbid. Religious frenzy drives Mason to frighten Rayber away by violence. As Tarwater is the sole inheritor and practitioner of his religious belief, Mason cannot have him corrupted by Rayber’s secular values. The violence he hurls on Rayber shows his determination to shape the boy into the way he desires without contamination from Rayber’s secular thoughts. Herein also lies Mason’s metaphysical form of violence, which is manifest in his forcing Tarwater to take the role of a prophet. The preordained identity disturbs and distresses Tarwater to such an extent that he burns Mason’s house and body for revenge. Because of Mason’s violence, Rayber must wear a hearing aid for the rest of his life. His ruthless attack deepens Rayber’s hatred of religious fundamentalism and his rage over child exploitation. To get rid of Mason’s influence by denying his faith becomes his lifelong obsession. Violence on the part of Mason succeeds in fighting back his enemy but fails in making his faith accepted. After this incident, Rayber considers him hopelessly mad and dangerously corrosive, with innocent children like Tarwater falling prey to his idiosyncrasy. Likewise, Tarwater questions the validity of his great uncle’s faith and is torn between doubt and belief. Mason’s violence destroys familial connection and intimacy. For Rayber, the once beloved uncle becomes a mortal enemy; for Tarwater, the great uncle he is supposed to show gratitude turns out the source of his stress and anxiety.

Violence runs rampant in the Tarwater family. Not only is Mason controlled by it but Rayber is driven by it to kill his own son. The unrealized murder signifies his desire to regain a rational and autonomous life without any external interference. As Rayber relates, he “did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt” (O’Connor, 1975, p. 632). This

ironic comment of sacrilege explains Rayber's attempt of killing Bishop, whom he regards as God's mirror image. The way he wants to get rid of the concept of God parallels his wish to relieve the burden of raising an idiot son. For Rayber, rationality is the hallmark of humanity, and freedom means the control of everything through intellect (Huelin, 2012). In his eyes, Bishop epitomizes irrationality beyond the control of rationality. The idiot child even reminds him of Mason: "Bishop looked like the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence" (O'Connor, 1975, p. 631). Although he considers Bishop a mistake of nature, there are some moments when he feels overwhelmed by irrational love toward him, which is a repugnant emotion that he tries hard to suppress: "the moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days and trembling for his sanity" (O'Connor, 1975, p. 632). He wants Bishop to disappear so that he won't feel a morbid surge of love toward him or anything in this world. The existence of Bishop threatens his rationality, just as God and His mysterious creation pose a challenge to his sanity. As he harbors an unspeakable wish to do away with Bishop, he feels no sorrow when he is informed of his death: "He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed" (O'Connor, 1975, p. 684).

Rayber's apathetic response to his son's death signals his denial of God's unconditional love and the need of redemption. It's also a gesture of his unbelief and rebellion against Mason's faith. Besides the physical violence thrust at his son, he imposes on Tarwater another kind of violence by instilling in him the value of rationality so that Tarwater becomes his adopted son and intellectual follower. He accuses Mason of depriving Tarwater of having a normal life and decent education. Rejecting Mason's religious belief, he claims himself a savior of exploited children. His rationality finds a powerful expression in the argument that "[t]he great dignity of man is his ability to say: I am born once and no more. What I can see and do for myself and my fellowman in this life is all of my portion and I'm content with it. It's enough to be a man" (O'Connor, 1975, p.666). Rayber's assertion denies the need of redemption by emphasizing the importance of living just once to its fullest extent. With his intellectual detachment, Rayber traces Mason's religious fanaticism to a psychological problem and publicizes his views in a journal: "This fixation of being called by the Lord had its origin in insecurity. He [Mason] needed the assurance of a call and so he called himself (O'Connor, 1975, p.611). His practical mind judges his idiot child to be the useless person unworthy of any effort for salvation: "You 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" (O'Connor, 1975, p. 585). In his eyes, Bishop is not only a mistake about which no logical explanation is possible but also a pretext for his rage and anguish against God. Rayber's self-claimed identity as a child savior and disciplined intellect doesn't help him live a happy life. Like Mason, he falls into the trap of violence, wreaking havoc on Tarwater's and his own life.

The destructive force of violence in this family centers around Bishop. Unknowingly, the innocent child pulls the family members into doubt, despair and destruction. For Rayber, Bishop is a mysterious curse that torments him for the rest of his life. Yet for Mason, Bishop is a gift representing God's mercy and redemption. The encounter of the two patriarchs' scientific and religious values results in Tarwater's violent baptism, which leads to his mental transformation and enlightenment as discussed in the following section.

### **Transformative Power of Violence**

Tarwater is a typical O'Connor character torn between faith and doubt. The deflation of his grandiosity brings forth his altruistic potentiality. He has to overcome the inherent fear and desire so that his ego boundary is broken and his connection with the world is established. The violence encircling him triggers his vision of the messianic banquet and the consequent eradication of egotism. Violence ignites his enlightenment and thereby gives his life a positive twist. His violence is unique in the way that its target is the self instead of others, as O'Connor (1979) remarked: "This is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward" (p.486). The word "inward" highlights the transformative power of violence in this novel. For Tarwater, violence signals his fear of paternal authority and desire of freedom. Although he imposes violence on Bishop and inanimate objects like Mason's house and Powderhead woods, the main target is his self and the purpose is to define who he is and where he belongs. The violent baptism of Bishop is an act of disobedience to God and his uncles. Drowning Bishop, accidental or deliberate, denies the need of God for a new life (Giannone, 2012). He interrogates the meaning of baptizing as follows:

The Lord out of dust had created him [Tarwater], had made him blood and nerve and mind, had made him to bleed and weep and think, and set him in a world of loss and fire to baptize one idiot child that he need not have created in the first place and to cry out a gospel just as foolish. He tried to shout, "NO!" but it was like trying to shout in his sleep. The sound was saturated in silence, lost. (O'Connor, 1975, p.680)



The baptism as ordained by Mason is to redeem the incorruptible child instead of killing him. Tarwater refuses the obligation to Bishop, Mason, and God with the murder, rejecting the call to baptize and prophesy (Huelin, 2012). This violent act not only mocks the mission appointed by Mason and initiated by God Himself, but also challenges Rayber's rationality. As Rayber confesses, there was once a time when he had an impulse to drown Bishop, but rationality returned in time to check this impulse. For Rayber, the existence of an idiot son is the greatest mystery beyond his intellectual control. While the desire to eradicate the irrational and useless dwells in his head only, Tarwater enacts it, succeeding in where Rayber fails. Seen from this light, the drowning implies Tarwater's triumph over his bookish uncle, who is paralyzed by intellect: "I can do something. I ain't like you. All you can do is think what you would have done if you had done it. Not me, I can do it. I can act" (O'Connor, 1975, p.680).

Yet, the violence of the baptismal drowning is ironic in the way that the killing is meant to redeem and save the victim. To make for the rebirth of Bishop, the killing of his body is necessary. The violent way of completing this task has its origin in the New Testament. According to Michaels (2010), baptism is a violent sacrament, which can be viewed as a kind of burial or a narrow escape of drowning in waters that evoke the memory of Noah's flood. Tarwater baptizes and drowns Bishop, echoing the sacrament of burying to redeem the victim. The moment he sees Bishop, he suddenly has a vision that he has been called by God to baptize the boy. Seemingly a cruel murder of the innocent, the baptizing is a mysterious act with compassion and mercy working behind it. Tarwater once shows brotherly love for the deficient child by tying his shoes and putting hands on his shoulder. Other factors that activate this baptism include Tarwater's nagging hunger, the sun shining on Bishop's head as he stands in a shallow pool in the city park, and the little lake by the Cherokee lodge. Tarwater's unquenchable hunger, the sunlight, the pool in the city and the serene lake are inscrutable powers working together to propel him to complete the pre-ordained task left by Mason.

In Gerald's (2013) opinion, the violence that Tarwater has imposed on Bishop and that has been performed upon him ignites his spiritual awakening. After the baptism, he returns to Powderhead to start a free new life. However, on his way back home, he is raped by a homosexual stranger. The rapist's violence purges his heart clean so that he accepts his identity as a prophet. As the turning point of his life, this violent incident clears his doubt about divinity and triggers in him a crucial vision of the hunger for the bread of life: "He knew that he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked

hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again” (O’Connor, 1975, p.701). The rape is the darkest moment of his life, equivalent to Prophet Jonah’s engulfment in the belly of the whale. It is this great suffering that causes his rebirth as a prophet, just like Jonah expelled from the mouth of the whale. Jonah’s refusal of the call parallels Tarwater’s preference of freedom over spreading God’s message. As Richard Giannone (2012) remarked, Jonah is Tarwater’s precursor. The trial of Jonah swallowed by a whale provides the model for Tarwater’s confinement in the car driven by the homosexual criminal. Either the whale belly or the car is the pit for the disobedient prophets to learn the lesson of mercy and repentance. After the terrible trial, they become true servants of the Lord.

Before his enlightenment, Tarwater is ambivalent about refusing or accepting the call, as a love and hatred complex arises in his companionship with Bishop. The initial shunning and the final murder of Bishop represent Tarwater’s rejection of the call as a prophet. Yet, he is answering the call when he executes part of the rite of baptism at the critical moment. After the drowning, he feels that he has regained the power of freedom: “since his great-uncle’s death, he had lived the lifetime of a man. It was a no boy that he returned. He returned tried in the fire of his refusal, with all the old man’s fancies burnt out of him, with all the old man’s madness smothered for good, so that there was never any chance it would break out in him” (O’Connor, 1975, p.692). On the other hand, he becomes aware that it’s his egotism that works behind his rejection of the call. He drowns Bishop to cut off spiritual kinship with Mason. The murder also forces him to acknowledge his insolence and ingratitude toward Rayber: “He began to realize that he had not adequately appreciated the schoolteacher while he had the opportunity. . . . He returned the corkscrew-bottle opener to his pocket and held it there in his hand as if henceforth it would be his talisman” (O’Connor, 1975, p. 695). After the murder, he becomes sober to see into his true nature, realizing that the desire of freedom from paternal authority leads to his horrible crime. The stony heart of the once recalcitrant boy is softened together with a deflated sense of self-inflation.

Susan Srigley (2004) traces Tarwater’s violence to its source, identifying it as the intention to “separate oneself from others through an illusion of and desire for autonomy or independence” (p.94). The drowning of Bishop is to wipe out the object of his call so that he regains his freedom and autonomy. However, such a grand illusion is pierced by the rape incident. In Scott Huelin’s (2012) view, Tarwater’s rape by the stranger is a moment of divine grace to shatter his illusion of autonomy and self-sufficiency. It opens his heart to acknowledge the existence of sin and suffering

and the need of grace and redemption. Once the illusion of autonomy is cleared, he is released from the previously egotistic consciousness. The pain of his “traumatized body” serves as a mentor of his soul, teaching him that “the world does not fit into the confines of his personal will or rationalizations” (Giannone, 2012, p.25). Aware of his limitations in conceiving God, he submits to His power and repents by burying his face in the dirt before Mason’s grave, which resembles Job lamenting in dust and ashes. Without the darkness of violence, there won’t be the consequent light of the vision of Christ and the loaves and fishes:

The old man was lowering himself to the ground. When he was down and his bulk had settled, he leaned forward, his face turned toward the basket, impatiently following its progress toward him. The boy too leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man’s and that nothing on earth would fill him. His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied. (O’Connor, 1975, p.705)

This mysterious vision of redemption leads to Tarwater’s realization that the real source of his hunger is the hunger for spiritual nourishment from Christ represented as the “bread of life.” As Jesus claims, the bread is his flesh for the life of the world: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54). Based on this claim, eating the bread of life is not cannibalism but a metaphor of the spiritual hunger of the poor and needy like Tarwater.

Without the vision of the messianic banquet, there won’t be Tarwater’s final triumph over his invisible friend. As he approaches the old homestead, he again hears the taunting voice that has been telling him to reject his calling: “That’s all a prophet is good for—to admit that somebody else is an ass or a whore” (O’Connor, 1975, p.589). But this time, after experiencing the trials, he knows better than falling prey to its seduction. The recurring inner voice torments him with the secular values as opposed to the sacred ones. The violence of burning Powderhead woods signifies his determination to shake off his former self and discard the worldly values. For him, the fire equals the burning bush from which God called Moses: “There, rising and spreading in the night, a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame. The boy’s breath went out to meet it. He knew that this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him” (O’Connor, 1975, p.705). In Asals’ opinion (1982), the setting of the fire is a “ritual exorcism,” a self-purification to terminate his double self (p.109). The destruction of this grinning friend is a violent repudiation of an essential part of himself, the part that embodies

his rational, rebellious, and skeptical self. After the violent banishment, he achieves a singleness of self and purpose, and a harmonious union with the world. From the moment of his repentance to the vision of the bread of life, a new prophet is born with the hope of an exalted life.

Equipped with the new consciousness, Tarwater now returns to the city populated by ignorant people to bestow on them the divine message. Once his devilish friend is banished from his mind, he hears a voice telling him to warn God's children of the terrible speed of mercy and his eyes become the true eyes of a prophet: "He threw himself to the ground and with his face against the dirt of the grace, he heard the command. GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY. The words were as silent as seed opening one at a time in his blood" (O'Connor, 1975, p.705). Undaunted and resolute, he leaves Powderhead behind him and sets his face toward the city, giving himself to the life of a prophet of God: "His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited them but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (O'Connor, 1975, p.706).

The triumph of Tarwater's spiritual journey lies in the begetting of the altruistic consciousness based on ascetic self-discipline. As Srigley (2012) remarks, O'Connor's asceticism often appears or feels violent as it requires the restraint of individual will for the greater good of others. The self-sacrifice is not an "annihilation of the self" but the discipline of self-interest, the so-called "violence of love" deeply grounded in the Christian idea of serving the other (p.190). Without this sublime ideal, Tarwater wouldn't answer the call and confront the threat of death. The key factor of his transformation from an egotistic loner to a devoted prophet is the vision of Holy Communion, which he cannot attain without the previous violence and suffering. According to Srigley (2012), this vision reveals the divine truth of human interconnectedness. The feast of bread and fish shared by the living and dead implies "the abundance of love flowing from divine plentitude" (p.187). Tarwater's enlightenment is triggered by this vision, in which his spiritual hunger finds ultimate solution. The enlightened mind recognizes the necessity of human interdependence and the restraint of selfish will for communal welfare. The vision of communion breaks his ego boundary, expanding his selfish consciousness to include the desires of others. The former crave for his freedom and autonomy is dissolved; in its instead is the awareness that true fulfillment for the personal lies in the communal. The messianic banquet reveals the message of divine love extending both to the personal and the communal, to human beings dead and alive. It is the awakening of this brotherly love that transforms Tarwater into a devoted prophet.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the two contrasting aspects of violence in *The Violent Bear It Away* pierces O'Connor's dark world with a light of hope. It is not just a religious story in the 20<sup>th</sup> century American south. Tarwater is like each of us with the power to answer the call, triumph over the challenges and gain the reward of life. In each individual psyche dwells a dragon force that chains the altruistic impulse. What one needs is to summon the spiritual violence to release it. When violence is directed inward, there will arise invincible determination and courage to overcome fear and activate mental transformation. The battlefield where violence exerts its power should not be a real geographical site but the inner psyche of each person. Tarwater is the model of violence directed in a positive way, as he succeeds in breaking the ego boundary to merge with his society. The violent incidents in which he is involved help him banish his fear and desire so that his altruistic potential can benefit his society. The way he leaves his old world of seclusion for a state of being saturated with brotherly love reveals the truth that violence can be the inner strength to pull one's self out of the despair of unbelief. While religious terrorism exalts hatred and dismembers the world by raining literal destruction in God's name, Tarwater's violence functions to liberate his old self from the confinement of egotism toward social commitment.

Violence has subtle meanings in this novel. For Tarwater, it precedes his spiritual awakening as death to resurrection. The violent baptism and rape are the darkest moments in his life, also a sign of his spiritual death. The violent burning of Powderhead woods, in contrast, is the ascent and resurrection of his life, rekindling in him the consciousness of human interconnectedness. Tarwater has to first experience the anguish of conflicting values and then learn to choose the right path. His life reflects the wavering moments when the inner voice is drowned by the external noise and leaves us at a loss of what to do and where to go. At this critical point of life, violence is indispensable in liberating us from the dragon force of doubt and disbelief. *The Violent Bear It Away* shows that violence in the name of serving God or instilling one's ideological values causes destruction and suffering. When imposed on others to make them succumb as Mason and Raber do, violence becomes a destructive monster. Transcended from the literal meaning, violence is an ascetic discipline to eradicate egotism and achieve spiritual communion with the world.

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## Bringing Light to Darkness: Violence in *The Violent Bear It Away*

Hui-Fen Hsu<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Recognized as a landmark in American literature, Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* describes a boy's struggle of accepting or refusing his call as a prophet. Published in 1960, this novel exhibits O'Connor's unique style as a Southern writer interested in the grotesque characters and their peculiar vision. While most critics discuss her religious theme and dark characters, this paper explores the subtle implications of violence to shed a new light into her dark world. The violence correlated with the prospective prophet leads to his spiritual growth and mental transformation. For the other members of his family, violence is a strategy to shock people into submission. But for Tarwater, it is an overwhelming power to sublimate and transform his egotistic self into harmonious union with the world. This paper deals with these two contrasting aspects of violence. The first part illustrates the destructive force of violence as exerted by Mason and Rayber. The second part analyzes the altruistic consciousness Tarwater gains after he experiences violent incidents. This study reveals that violence can be positive only in the way that it is directed inward toward one's self rather than outward towards others. The transformative power of violence gives O'Connor's stark world a bright turn and clarifies the misconceptions about violence.

**Keywords: violence, call, baptism, spiritual transformation**

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of Applied English, National Taichung University of Science and Technology  
Corresponding Author: Hui-Fen Hsu, E-mail: oscar@nutc.edu.tw