

# THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY

by Flannery O'Connor



## THE AUTHOR

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was born in Savannah, Georgia into a devoutly Catholic family. When she was fifteen, her father died of lupus - the same disease that was later to take her life. After she and her mother moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, she attended Georgia State College for Women, where she majored in sociology. She went on to graduate school at the University of Iowa, earning her Master's degree there, then spent time in a writers' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. She befriended and was encouraged by many writers of the day, including Robert Lowell. After five years of intensive labor and multiple revisions, she published her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952. The novel received great critical acclaim, though many readers found it grotesque and distasteful. In 1951 she was diagnosed with lupus, at which time she moved back to Milledgeville so her mother could care for her. Knowing that her time was probably short, she gave herself to writing and produced one more novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and thirty-one short stories. She won several O. Henry prizes for her short stories, a National Book Award, and even some honorary doctorates, and by the time of her death was considered to be among the great Southern writers of the twentieth century. She died of lupus at the age of 39.

*The Violent Bear It Away*, her second and last novel, was, like *Wise Blood*, a painstaking effort that took five years to complete. Many of the themes found in the first novel continue to be present, including the futility of secular society and the inability of those who are chosen to escape the grace of God. The second novel goes beyond the first, however, in that the reception of grace extends to accepting a calling, painful though it may be. To the author, that calling is directed toward the transformation of society - something O'Connor sought to accomplish through her fiction.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins when Francis Marion Tarwater is fourteen years old. His great-uncle, Mason Tarwater, who has raised him from childhood, has just died at the age of eighty-four. As Tarwater (he prefers this to Francis) digs a hole to bury the old man, he reminisces about his life

up to that point - what his great-uncle had told him about his own parents (his mother and grandmother had died in a car crash during which he had been born); how the old man had rescued him from being raised by his uncle, a schoolteacher named Rayber, and taken him into the backwoods to train him to be a prophet and deliver him from schooling; how the schoolteacher had tried to get the boy back, bringing with him a social worker he had later married, and who gave him one idiot child (the great-uncle had coached Tarwater to act insane so the social worker would despair of forcing him to go to school; the fact that the old man shot the schoolteacher in the leg and the ear had also factored into the situation); and how they had once visited the city to try to get a will changed so the land on which they lived would go to young Tarwater rather than Rayber (the attempt was unsuccessful). As Tarwater digs the hole, making very little progress in the hard earth, he argues with himself about whether or not he should pay any attention to his crazy great-uncle. When a local black couple come to get their jugs filled from the still, Tarwater goes into the woods and gets himself thoroughly drunk while the man digs the grave and buries the old man. When Buford Munson, the black man, comes to find him, he gives him his liquor then burns the house down with the body in it and hitchhikes into the city with a salesman named Meeks, intending to find his uncle the schoolteacher.

As Tarwater rides in the car, he thinks about some of the things his great-uncle had told him about Rayber. He remembers that the old man had taken Rayber away from his parents for four days when the boy was seven years old (Rayber's mother, the old man's sister, was too drunk to notice her son was gone), baptized him and told him about the Lord. Later, Mason's sister had him committed to an asylum for four years, and Rayber had eventually rejected what old Mason had told him. When Rayber's sister (Tarwater's mother) and mother (Mason's sister) had died in the car crash, Rayber had told old Mason about it and the old man had come to live with his nephew in order to make sure that he would not corrupt the newborn baby (Tarwater). He had quickly baptized Tarwater with a bottle of water beside his crib, but Rayber only mocked him. Then he had stolen the baby and taken him away. When Meeks arrives in town with his passenger, he suggests that Tarwater call his uncle. Tarwater has never seen a phone before and doesn't know how to use it, but Meeks helps him. Rayber's idiot son answer the phone and says nothing, so Meeks drops Tarwater on Rayber's doorstep, where he sits down to wait until morning. He gets impatient, however, and knocks on the door, rousing the inhabitants. Rayber, who is almost deaf because of the time Mason shot him, answers the door then puts on his hearing aid. He is glad to see Tarwater because now he will have the opportunity to undo all that Mason had done in training the boy. Then Tarwater sees Rayber's idiot son Bishop and suddenly has a vision that he has been called by God to baptize the boy and embark on his work as a prophet. He rejects the vision, however, screaming that he will have nothing to do with the child.

At first Rayber is excited by the prospect of correcting the ideas the old man had inculcated into his nephew. He quickly finds that the boy is incorrigible, but remains determined to change him. They spend time walking all over the city, but Tarwater is largely unresponsive. He still avoids the idiot boy Bishop as much as possible. Then, on the fourth night, Tarwater walks out of the house in the middle of the night. Rayber follows him in his bare feet and pajamas, hoping to gain some insight into the boy's personality and desires. He is disappointed when Tarwater winds up at a late-night Pentecostal storefront meeting. Rayber peeks in through the window and becomes increasingly angry as he thinks of the way his uncle had exploited his innocence and that of his young nephew. When a prepubescent girl gets up and starts to preach, he sees another object of religious exploitation and wishes he could take the girl aside and cure her of all the

notions that others have pumped into her head. As she preaches, however, she begins to stare directly at Rayber and confront him about his lost condition. After the meeting is over, Rayber waits for Tarwater outside and the two return home. Though Tarwater claims he only went to the meeting to spit at it, he is unusually reserved and more submissive than Rayber has ever seen him, though Rayber is so angry he doesn't even notice the change in the boy. The next day Tarwater is his usual sullen self. Rayber intends to take him and Bishop to the local natural history museum to show them their fish ancestors, but on the way they stop in the park. Rayber feels an irrational wave of love for his son come over him and remembers the time he tried to drown him at the beach, but had been unable to do so. Bishop then runs to a fountain and jumps in. Tarwater follows him and has an almost irresistible compulsion to baptize the boy as his great-uncle told him to do, but turns away and resists. Since Bishop's clothes and shoes are now soaking wet, they return home without seeing the museum. Rayber is now more determined than ever to cure Tarwater of what old Mason has done to him.

In order to cure Tarwater, Rayber decides to take him back to Powderhead where he had been raised. He thinks the boy might be able to talk about his trauma if he sees what he did - the burned cabin, and then Rayber will be able to help him. They stop on the way at the Cherokee Lodge, an old warehouse converted into a motel. It is by a lake, and Tarwater is again filled with ideas of baptizing young Bishop. For the first time he shows compassion for the deficient child by tying his shoes for him. That afternoon Rayber and Tarwater go fishing, and the schoolteacher tries to get the boy to talk about his experiences with the old man. Rayber admits once having tried to drown Bishop, and Tarwater accuses him of lacking guts. When Rayber tells Tarwater he is the only one who can cure him of what the old man had done to him, the boy takes his clothes off, jumps into the water, and swims ashore. Rayber then throws the clothes into the lake; he had bought the boy new clothes and figures one stage in his transformation was getting him to dress properly. When he gets back to the motel he finds Tarwater wearing the new clothes and staring at Bishop. He then takes Bishop for a ride and leaves the sullen youth to his own devices. The ride takes them to Powderhead. As Rayber and Bishop approach the burned-out homestead, Rayber feels such powerful emotions that he is sure he will never be able to take Tarwater there the next day as he had planned. He remembers when he and his wife-to-be had come there to take Tarwater back when the boy was only seven, but the welfare worker had been so shocked by the hardened face on the boy that she had refused to have him. When Rayber and Bishop get back to the motel, Rayber decides to be honest with Tarwater. He offers to let the boy baptize Bishop on the spot using a glass of water in the restaurant, or else to fight off his great-uncle's influence for the rest of his life the way Rayber himself has had to do. Tarwater has no response, but then takes Bishop out into the lake in a boat, baptizes him, and drowns him, then heads for the opposite shore, going back in the direction of Powderhead. Rayber, much to his shame, feels nothing at the loss of his son.

A truck driver picks up Tarwater, who is hitchhiking back to Powderhead. He tells the driver that he had drowned the boy, but only baptized him accidentally, since there is no such thing as being born again. When the driver pulls over for a nap, Tarwater dreams of the death of the boy, and we discover that the words of baptism were forced from his throat like Jonah being expelled from the stomach of the whale. Figuring that he has now purged himself of his great-uncle's influence, he intends to return to Powderhead, rebuild the house, and live life the way he wants it. After the truck driver drops him off, he stops by a Negro cabin and gets a drink of water, but it doesn't satisfy him. He is then picked up by a man in a fancy car. The man offers

him cigarettes and liquor, but the liquor is drugged. The man then carries Tarwater into the woods and rapes him, then steals his hat and the corkscrew he had been given by Rayber. When Tarwater wakes up and realizes what has happened to him, he burns everything in the evil place and heads for home, his eyes the eyes of a prophet. As he approaches the old homestead he again hears the inner voice that had been telling him to reject his calling. He sets a fire to separate himself from the voice and heads toward the clearing. When he gets there he finds Buford Munson, who had been keeping the farm going while Tarwater had been away. When he sees the cross on his great-uncle's grave he has a vision of Christ and the loaves and fishes; then he realizes the real source of his hunger. The fire he set seems to him like the burning bush from which God called Moses, and he hears a voice telling him to warn God's children of the terrible speed of mercy. He then leaves Powderhead behind him and sets his face toward the city, giving himself to the life of a prophet of God.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Francis Marion Tarwater - The protagonist, he is an orphan boy raised by his crazy great-uncle to be a prophet.
- Mason Tarwater - The great-uncle who raised Francis until he died at the age of eighty-four. He made his living by running an illegal still and doing subsistence farming.
- George Rayber - The protagonist's uncle and the old man's nephew, he is a schoolteacher who tried to study the old man and wanted to educate the orphan boy, but the old man stole him away. Tarwater goes to his house after his great-uncle dies.
- Bernice Bishop - The welfare woman Rayber married; she gave him one idiot child, but left him when he refused to put the boy in an institution.
- Bishop Rayber - A mentally deficient boy; Tarwater was told by his great-uncle that it was his calling as a prophet to baptize him. He does so, drowning him in the process.
- Buford Munson - A black man who digs a grave for Tarwater's great-uncle because the soil was too hard for the fourteen-year-old boy to dig.
- Meeks - A copper flue salesman with whom Tarwater hitchhikes into the city after his great-uncle's death.

## **NOTABLE QUOTATIONS**

“He had sent him a rage of vision, had told him to fly with the orphan boy to the farthest part of the backwoods and raise him up to justify his Redemption.” (ch.1, p.126)

“The boy sensed that this was the heart of his great-uncle's madness, this hunger, and what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life.” (ch.1, p.135)

“It ain’t Jesus or the devil. It’s Jesus or *you*.” (Tarwater’s thoughts, ch.1, p.146)

“I’m sorry, uncle. You can’t live with me and ruin another child’s life. This one is going to be brought up to live in the real world. He’s going to be his own saviour. He’s going to be free!” (Rayber, ch.2, p.165)

“The prophet I raise up out of this boy will burn your eyes clean.” (Mason Tarwater, ch.2, p.168)

“The Lord out of dust had created him, 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 all to baptize one idiot child that He need not have created in the first place and to cry out a gospel just as foolish.” (Tarwater’s thoughts, ch.3, p.177-178)

“I’m no fool. I don’t believe in senseless sacrifice. A dead man is not going to do you any good, don’t you know that?” (Rayber, ch.4, p.187)

“The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution, except at the moments when with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love. Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man’s walk of a starling crossing the sidewalk. If without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him - powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal.” (Rayber’s thoughts, ch.4, p.192)

“He felt the taste of his own childhood pain laid on his tongue like a bitter wafer.” (Rayber’s thoughts, ch.5, p.202)

“Children are cursed with believing.” (Rayber, ch.8, p.224)

“The 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.” (Rayber, ch.8, p.225)

“He had known by that time that his own stability depended on the little boy’s presence. He could control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus in Bishop, but if anything happened to the child, he would have to face it in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child.” (Rayber’s thoughts, ch.9, p.230)

“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.” (ch.9, p.243)

“When I come to eat, I ain’t hungry. It’s like being empty is a thing in my stomach and it don’t allow nothing else to come down in there. If I ate it, I would throw up.” (Tarwater, ch.10, p.249)

“By sundown he would be there, by sundown he would be where he could begin to live his life as he had elected it, and where, for the rest of his days, he would make good his refusal.” (Tarwater’s thoughts, ch.10, p.253)

“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.” (Tarwater’s thoughts, ch.12, p.266)

“Go warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy.” (ch.12, p.267)

“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.” (ch.12, p.267)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions*, he said, “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee.” To what extent does Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* support Augustine’s thesis? Use details from the novel to support your analysis.
2. Flannery O’Connor, in explaining a Christian approach to fiction, said, “The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience.” Discuss the extent to which this idea of writing for a hostile audience is evident in Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*. What distortions of modern life is she seeking to bring out by distorting them further? Be specific.
3. In explaining her use of weird and bizarre characters in her stories, Flannery O’Connor once said, “When you assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large startling figures.” Discuss the extent to which this explanation enables you to appreciate more fully the strangeness of the characters found in *The Violent Bear It Away*.

4. Flannery O'Connor once said, "I am interested in making a good case for distortion because I am coming to believe that it is the only way to make people see." What do you think she meant by this statement? Apply the principle enunciated in the quotation to her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. How does the distortion in the novel help the reader to see more clearly? Be specific.
5. Discuss the significance of food in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. Why is young Tarwater so often unable to eat? Be sure to comment on the vision of the Feeding of the Five Thousand near the end of the book in connection with this imagery.
6. Flannery O'Connor was very critical of the secularism of post-World War II American society. In her second and last novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, that critique is centered in the character of George Rayber, the protagonist's schoolteacher uncle. What does the character of the schoolteacher tell us about O'Connor's assessment of the society in which she lived? How effective do you find her critique?
7. On several occasions in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* the protagonist is compared to Jonah. To what extent is this comparison valid? What aspects of the life of Jonah are manifested in the life of Francis Marion Tarwater? What is the underlying theme that O'Connor is seeking to bring out through this comparison?
8. The title of Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* is taken from Matthew 11:12 - "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away" (Douay Version). Discuss the appropriateness of the title and the verse from which it was drawn to the subject matter of the story. What connections do you see between the words of Jesus and the account of young Tarwater? Be sure to go beyond the obvious truth that the novel contains a lot of violence in your analysis.
9. When asked about the title she chose for her second novel, Flannery O'Connor alluded to the explanation of Matthew 11:12 by Thomas Aquinas: "the violent Christ is here talking about represent those ascetics who strain against mere nature." In what ways does young Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away* "strain against mere nature"? In contrast, how does his uncle Rayber refuse to do so? What manner of life is O'Connor advocating through this contrast?
10. When asked about the title she chose for her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, Flannery O'Connor alluded to the explanation of Matthew 11:12 by Thomas Aquinas: "the violent Christ is here talking about represent those ascetics who strain against mere nature." To what extent does the novel advocate asceticism? What kind of asceticism does it promote? Does the author's approach reflect a Catholic understanding of salvation, or one that Protestants can readily espouse as well? Support your analysis with details from the novel.

11. Discuss the imagery of baptism as it appears in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. Besides the fact that the redemptive nature of baptism stems naturally from the author's Catholic background, consider the relationship of the sacrament to matters of cleansing and calling, as well as the frequently-made contrast with the act of drowning.
12. As a Roman Catholic, Flannery O'Connor saw the sacraments as central to the life of the spirit. Examine the sacramental references in *The Violent Bear It Away* and discuss their significance to the themes of the novel. Pay particular attention, not only to the references to baptism, but also to the many uses of bread and water, the elements at the heart of the sacraments.
13. In Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, young Tarwater has been called to be a prophet. According to O'Connor, what is the role of the prophet? Is her conception of the calling a biblical one? Remember that the context from which O'Connor draws her imagery is the Old Testament.
14. The fiction of Flannery O'Connor has often been described as a persistent illustration of the reality of irresistible grace. To what extent is this theme visible in her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*? Consider particularly the life of the protagonist as it is described in the story.
15. Only those who are in sin are in need of redemptive grace. Those who see themselves as having no sin have no need for redemption. In what ways is this basic truth demonstrated in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*? Choose specific characters through whom the author illustrates the importance of awareness of one's lost condition in order for one to be open to the grace of God.
16. Psychologist Elizabeth Simonsen, writing about Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, said, "Maybe I see schizophrenia because the idea of a world with wandering prophets is particularly threatening; maybe the idea of a world riddled with psychopaths wandering around acting out of faulty brain chemistry is somehow less frightening than a world of prophets acting out God's will." One of the targets of O'Connor's social criticism in the novel is the psychological establishment. Why do psychologists - and most people - prefer a world explained by "faulty brain chemistry" rather than one with people "acting out the will of God"? Why is the latter more frightening than the former? Why does this conclusion rightly open the social science establishment to the author's criticism?
17. In Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, Mason Tarwater leaves a message in his journal for his nephew Rayber. The message, referring to young Tarwater, says, "The prophet I will raise up out of this boy will burn your eyes clean." Do the old man's words come true? Does Tarwater ever open Rayber's eyes? Why or why not?
18. At the end of Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, the protagonist hears a voice saying, "Go warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy." What is the significance of these words? Discuss the meaning of the novel's final message in the light of what has gone before in the story.

19. Compare the imagery associated with eyes and seeing found in Flannery O'Connor's two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. In which novel is the image more prominent? Does the author use the image the same way in both stories? What is its connection to the major themes of the novels?
20. Discuss the use of biblical imagery in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. Choose three major images taken from Scripture and explain their significance to the major ideas found in the novel.
21. To what extent is the conflict between Tarwater and his uncle Rayber in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* a symbol of the battle between the sacred and the secular in the modern world? How effectively do the two characters symbolize the two conflicting forces they represent? Use details from the novel to support your analysis.
22. Discuss the use of time in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. The author engages in multiple flashbacks that often threaten to confuse the reader. What is the purpose of jumping around in time so frequently? What is O'Connor saying about time and eternity and about the limitations of our viewpoint as we look at our own lives?
23. Compare the symbolism of physical deformity found in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. Her use of the grotesque is not intended merely to attract attention or to provide comedy by means of the bizarre. What do you think the author is saying through the repeated appearances of severely handicapped characters? Are these characters intended to have broader implications for her view of society?
24. On several occasions in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, the protagonist has conversations with a voice. What is that voice intended to represent? Is it his inner self against which he is arguing? Is it an influence he is seeking to avoid? Is it a source of temptation, perhaps even satanic? Discuss the significance of these inner dialogues to the plot and themes of the novel.
25. To what extent is Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* centered on the conflict between science and religion? Which does O'Connor believe to be the source of truth? How does she build her argument? Do you find it convincing? Is it biblical? Support your analysis with specific details and quotations from the book.
26. In Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, both Mason Tarwater and George Rayber are interested in the redemption of the protagonist, but their ideas of redemption are quite different. What do these two father-figures consider redemption to be? How successful are they in inculcating their ideas into young Tarwater? How do their efforts communicate the major themes of the novel?

27. In one of her letters, Flannery O'Connor wrote the following words: "The Liberal approach is that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own unaided efforts. Therefore, evil in this light is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc., and all mysteries will eventually be cleared up. Judgment is out of place because man is not responsible." Relate the characters of George Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* and Hazel Motes (during his rebellious phase) in *Wise Blood* to this description. What does O'Connor see as the dangers of this worldview? How do these characters demonstrate these dangers in extreme and graphic ways?
  
28. Compare and contrast the two father-figures who influence young Tarwater in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. What kinds of fatherhood are represented by Mason Tarwater and George Rayber? What is O'Connor trying to say about the characteristics of good fathers? How do these characteristics cohere with the themes of the novel?