

Flannery O'Connor's "The River"

A Psychoanalytic Study

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Flannery O'Connor's reputation as a literary force of the twentieth century has, by the ever-increasing number of her readers, been growing despite her untimely death in 1964. One of her short stories, "The River"(1953), was written, according to her friend and publisher Robert Giroux, during a period when she was at her best ("...she wrote better and better. Starting late in 1952 with 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'...she turned out one beauty after another, including 'The River'...").¹ It is, therefore, my purpose to render a psychoanalytic discussion of this story which is ~~so~~ artfully replete with seemingly strange and cryptic characters and events. I will attempt to incorporate those psychological aspects which are the most significant in providing a literary understanding of the work.

Dramatically, "The River" consists of five scenes, the first of which is the apartment where the young boy, nameless at first, lives. Immediately the story's dominant emotions, tension and anxiety, are evident. The father is hurriedly dressing the child, first "pulling" him into his coat, then "pushing" him toward the door where Mrs. Connin, the baby sitter, is waiting to take him to her house for the day. In his haste the father allows the child's arm to be hung in the sleeve, and when Mrs. Connin notices "He ain't fixed right," the father mutters "Well then for Christ's sake fix him. It's six o'clock in the morning." The only reference to the mother in this opening scene is "a toneless voice" which calls from the bedroom "Bring me an ice pack."

THIS IS NOT AN EMOTION

Thus the "problem" is clearly focused. The young child ("four or five") is the emotionally neglected product of two parents wrapped up in their own narcissism (they are in the middle of a party when the child returns later), and Miss O'Connor's initial description of the boy as seeming "mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out" is noteworthy. Besides revealing

¹ Robert Giroux, The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p.xii of his introduction. All subsequent references to the story are taken from this collection.

for the first time the animal imagery which permeates this story, it portrays the child as one who stoically understands (he later tells the preacher that his mother has a hangover) that he "does not count" to his parents. This feeling of rejection, occurring when it does in the boy's life, causes a void, an abyss of stored psychic energy with no one (at home) from whom he can receive any gratification. Obviously, he will search elsewhere.

In Mrs. Connin he finds a mother substitute. She is, however, given the physical appearance of a skeleton, a grotesquely comical reversal of what the child's oedipal wishes would consider ideal. While they ride the trolley to her house, Mrs. Connin sleeps, and in highly sexual imagery Miss O'Connor again paints a distorted picture of the child's love object. Mrs. Connin leans back and her mouth falls open. The boy, naturally curious, looks in, only to see "a few long scattered teeth, some gold and some darker than her face; she began to whistle and blow like a musical skeleton." Characteristically, the boy accepts Mrs. Connin as she is, and within a minute he joins her in slumber.

This brief, transitional scene has one extremely significant incident which further illuminates the reader's perception of the boy's motives and actions. Mrs. Connin, having expressed an admiration for The Reverend Bevel Summers, who is to preach at a nearby healing ceremony, asks the child (whose name we now learn is Harry Ashfield) his first name. He lies, claiming that his name is Bevel, and Mrs. Connin is shocked, "...looking down at him as if he had become a marvel to her." The implication here is clear. Bevel (the child) knows well the way Mrs. Connin will respond to such a "coincidence," and, true to character, he plays it down emotionally, repeating his "name" to confirm it both in Mrs. Connin's and his own mind. However, his real motivation is just as disguised as his name. He learns from Mrs. Connin that her husband is away in a hospital, and thus we have a classic example

And
what is a
"bevel"?

of overdetermination of the oedipal complex. Having thus been accepted as an adult in Mrs. Connin's eyes, the child becomes "Bevel" for the rest of his very short life.

Similarly, his newly acquired adult status brings about a seemingly odd but easily accountable behavior if the reader keeps role reversal in mind. The scene now shifts to Mrs. Connin's house where, upon seeing the family dog, Bevel acts "out of character" by attempting to jump on its tail. This sudden act of aggression is, however, a re-enactment of his own rough treatment at the hands of his father (note again the opening scene), only now the dog is the victim. Fortunately for the hound, it also is "experienced" and moves itself out of danger.

Two other psychoanalytically significant events take place in this scene. Mrs. Connin, shocked that Bevel doesn't know who Jesus Christ is, reads to him from an old family religion book, one, she says, she "wouldn't part with...for nothing on earth." Nothing, however, is all it does take since Bevel sneaks the book into the lining of his coat when Mrs. Connin is not looking. This act of aggression, seemingly directed against Mrs. Connin, is actually against his parents who, he reasons, "joked a lot where he lived" instead of telling him the truth. It is Jesus, not some "doctor named Sladewell," who made him. Indeed, he learns, through Mrs. Connin, that "you found out more when you left where you lived." Her telling him that every word of the little book is "the gospel truth" creates a temptation (tension) which again causes him to seek immediate gratification. Bevel succeeds, then, in making Jesus, a father substitute, as much a part of him as possible. The last action of his life is to be his attempt to make himself a part of Jesus.

Bevel's encounter with the hog is just as noteworthy. His previous conception of the animal's appearance ("...he had seen a pig in a book and knew they were small fat pink animals

Any symbolism here?

He could steal other things like the book?

with curly tails and round grinning faces and bow ties.") is graphically changed when Mrs. Connin's three boys play a trick on him. Knowing that he is too small to climb the hog pen, they instruct Bevel to remove a loose bottom board so that he can get a good look at the "pigs." Immediately upon obliging the boys, he stares into "another face, gray, wet, and sour," the face of a hog which knocks him down, butts him forward, then chases him, causing him to scream all the way back to the house. It is another misconception, another tension, another "joke." We do not realize, however, until the end of the story just how indelibly branded into Bevel's unconscious this scene is; he later fears his would-be rescuer, Mr. Paradise, likening the man's appearance to a "giant pig bounding after him."

The next scene, probably the ~~most~~ ^{ONE} pivotal in the entire story, is the healing at the river. Although the Connin children accompany their mother to the ceremony, it is Bevel who basks in the spotlight when Mrs. Connin tells the audience his name. Once again he releases more of his bottled-up psychic energy, repeating his name in a "loud and jaunty voice." It is all fun up to the point when the preacher takes Bevel into his arms to baptize him. Bevel seeks approval from the preacher by putting his face close up and exaggerating still another proclamation of his name. The preacher doesn't smile, and we then see a repeat of the mother substitution motif when, symbolically, Bevel quickly replies "My mother named me that." Again, of course, the "mother" is Mrs. Connin who, by her expressed approval of Bevel (the preacher), gives Bevel (the child) an identity, a name, at least, that has value.

It is the preacher, though, who gives Bevel the impetus to satiate his still unsatisfied desire to find his "good" father. Although the child has failed to win the affection of the preacher, he is offered the chance of a lifetime through baptism. He can, the preacher tells him, "go to the Kingdom of Christ...by the deep river of life." Bevel now knows of a place where he belongs ("you'll

Check the pig imagery again. There are a number of other references you can interpret the pattern.

count"), and he eagerly accepts his opportunity, deciding that he "won't go back to the apartment then...;" he will "go under the river." We learn at this point in the story that Bevel has understood his mother's "sickness" all along, even though he has kept his awareness silent until now. The mother's earlier request for the ice pack arouses Mrs. Connin's curiosity, and the father tells her that the illness is a mystery. Now, when Mrs. Connin asks the preacher to pray for the child's mother, and the Reverend expresses the same curiosity, Bevel does not hesitate to speak the truth. It ends the scene on a somewhat comic note since Mr. Paradise, a local cynic and non-believer (he has not been healed of a growth over his ear), finds great amusement in the child's innocent disruption of the service's sanctity. His amusement, however, is to be short lived.

When Mrs. Connin returns the child that night, she shows her contempt for the mother who is again immersed in alcohol. Bevel reverts to his mute, "sheep-like" demeanor in his parents' presence. He is not part of them any more as this brief, transitional scene reveals; his ego has been built and buttressed by Mrs. Connin, the preacher, and, soon, Jesus himself. After he goes to bed, his mother, guilt ridden because of Mrs. Connin's blatant disdain for the obvious lack of parental care, tries to ask Bevel what "lies" he told the preacher during the baptism. Her appearance ⁱⁿ to the boy's eyes is most revealing as to the way he, like Mrs. Connin, regards his mother. Her face is a "pale oval," devoid of any features, "and her bitter breath covered his face." His only response to her is that he is not the same now, and, of course, that he "counts." The mother's guilt, though, quickly ebbs, and she rejoins the party, clearly suggesting again the child's ego deprivation for the sake of her own narcissism. Only now, it does not matter.

He wakes not particularly early the next day, but his parents are not up to serve him. Besides helping himself to some party

What does
show
about
drug-taking?

Why?

leftovers, he performs his last act of aggression against his parents; he empties two ashtrays on the floor, "rubbing the ashes carefully into the rug with his finger." Miss O'Connor then lets the reader actually see the denouement occur in Bevel's mind:

Very slowly, his expression changed as if he were gradually seeing appear what he didn't know he'd been looking for. Then all of a sudden he knew what he wanted to do.

Stealing a trolley token and half a package of Life Savers (more of Miss O'Connor's grim touch of comedy since he is to drown momentarily), he heads off, not intending "to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river." It is Mr. Paradise who, seeing the boy walking alone down to the river, senses something might be wrong. Taking a peppermint stick along as a possible bribe for the child, Mr. Paradise follows Bevel.

It becomes apparent that Mr. Paradise symbolizes the boy's father offering too little too late. Interestingly, when the boy does see the candy, he interprets it not as a gift, but a threat of physical harm. Hence, we see the IMPRECISE cathexis, based on his previous experiences, that Bevel feels when he sees the charging Mr. Paradise as "a giant pig bounding after him, shaking a red and white club and shouting." Bevel, of course, succeeds in getting "under the river", or, from a psychoanalytic view, back into the womb (being completely inundated in water). It is Mr. Paradise now who, as the story ends, knows the feeling of standing alone, "empty-handed, staring with his dull eyes...."

Thus, in "The River" Flannery O'Connor opens and closes the curtain to a drama focusing on the inner workings of a loveless child in a bleak and dismal world. Just as distorted, grotesque, and even humorous the characters

What about this in relation to the boy's last name?

appear, there yet emerges a tragedy, if not in a classical sense, then certainly in a psychoanalytic one. Here is a casebook example of the neglected child and the result of all his wayward searching for the parents he sees but does not have. Bevel's motives and actions are indeed emblematic of the child victimized by his very presence on earth and his desire to escape the world which has incarcerated him.

BT

AL,

This is a fine job well. It could be made more convincing by answering a few of my marginal questions and integrating the answers into the pattern.

You've written the argument well, and since you're discussing identity, perhaps an occasional quote from Erikson would corroborate points you make and lend authority to them.

Well done.

Ajh

