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Christ in the Daily Life: A critique of Flannery O'Connor's "The River"

There is a schism amongst the critics who have responded to Flannery O'Connor's story "The River"—those who take a secular approach, and those who study it with a religious lens. Appreciating these separate views enlightens one's understanding of O'Connor's story, but neither side fully accounts for the meaning behind the lack of Christ's influence in the characters' lives. Secular critics particularly elaborate upon social norms and societal influence. They approach baptism analytically, seeing it as a social ritual and not as a spiritual experience. Non-secular critics share some similar views on baptism—some view it as the end of a journey to Christ, while others view it as a doorway to redemption. Gregory Schweers in "Flannery O'Connor and the Problem of Baptism" merges the secular and religious views in writing about how Harry's baptism could be classified as more of an accidental baptism than as a "believer's baptism" (Schweers 69). Like preceding critics, however, Schweers interprets Christ as being the end goal of a mortal journey, rather than being a potential figure in one's daily life. To discover the Christian values in "The River," readers need to see Christ not as something to be achieved, but rather as a Savior who helps all individuals in their daily lives. O'Connor shows the need for a relationship with Christ by emphasizing a lack of His presence in the daily lives of the characters. By acknowledging the lack of the characters' relationship with Christ in the story, we can gain new insights on the story's lessons of healing and redemption.

O'Connor wrote each of her works of literature with Christian views both of having faith and of finding redemption. In "The River," O'Connor focuses heavily on baptism and the necessity for redemption. She does this by illustrating the life of a lost boy who finds hope in Christ through the hand of his babysitter. He pursues this feeling of hope until the very end, when he gives himself completely to the redeeming ordinance of baptism. Her story does pursue baptism as a means for redemption, but it also shows the misconceptions surrounding it. In pondering on the meanings found within O'Connor's story, the greatness of Christ is discovered. Readers will understand that the hope that Christ has to offer not only redeems a fallen soul, but has the power to effect greater change.

"The River," as interpreted by many critics, is not only a symbolic journey of a boy on his way to find salvation, but also can be viewed secularly as a story of one who longs to belong in a meaningful community. By understanding the story with this critique, one can see how disappointed Harry was in his current life and how the knowledge he received about this religious venture had the potential to change it. This change begins upon hearing that he's going to visit a preacher who heals people. Harry introduces himself to his babysitter, Mrs. Connin, as Bevel, using the preacher's name. The secular critique states that this is done because he wants to belong to a life that "counts," or somewhere he feels he belongs; as such, Harry pursues the teachings of the preacher and gets baptized. Fellow critic Peter Ingrao interprets Harry's choice in baptism as a way of social acceptance and states,

The river's refusal to "have" Bevel must be crushing to him since it emphasizes his inability to find either communal belonging or personal reinvention. Bevel does not

intend suicide in entering the river but rather to enter a life in which he will "count" personally and communally. (Ingrao 86)

Ingrao is suggesting that the only way Harry will "count" is by entering the river; there is no other way to find "communal belonging or personal reinvention." In making this comment,

Ingrao urges us to believe that the baptism was a result solely from a social construct rather than a religious one. Fellow critic Irene Visser elaborates more about this when she writes,

The first phase of social dramas is the overt and public breach of normal social relations... In "The River," the breach phase of the central social drama is the little boy's unexpected baptism in the river, which separates the boy from his familial background and transgresses its norms. (Visser 145)

According to Visser, the change of Harry's name breaches his familial norm, which foreshadows his choice to run away from home to baptize himself. This action shows his desire to escape his family and emphasizes his longing to have a meaningful identity. Secular arguments such as Ingrao's and Visser's establish the psychological motivation behind Harry's actions, but because they ignore religious interpretation, they fail to address how Harry's growing understanding of religion could have improved his life. Instead, they focus on how this social desire to be accepted led to his death.

Secular interpretations to O'Connor's writing provide unique insight into the story, but the arguments of those who drastically swing towards religious views also add different and valid arguments. O'Connor herself wrote the story with religious intentions and meanings: she says that Harry "comes to a good end" because he escapes his "nutty parents" who never would have led him down a path towards salvation, but instead would keep him in a life without Christ

(Schweers 68). Although O'Connor was Catholic, her stories tend to avoid holding closely to any one particular denomination, and this allows religious critics to read and apply their own beliefs to "The River." Because of this, religious views ranging from Manichaeism to Protestantism are involved in the literary critiques (Graybill; Schweers). Most religious critics, however, approach "The River" as Christians, and though they're caught up in debates of effective baptisms and fatal conversions, a few find the hope of grace in life's journey toward joy (Schweers; Coulthard; Desmond).

In his article "Flannery O'Connor and the Rich Red River of Jesus' Blood," John D. Chapin brings the perspective that "The River" is an "extended metaphor of conversion to the Christian faith" (Chapin 30). He proves this by explaining the symbolism portrayed, and comparing the scenes described in the story to the situations that occur, and which are necessary in receiving a Christian conversion. He claims that the hunger Harry feels is "no mere reference to physical hunger" and explains that it is a spiritual hunger for the redemption of a sinner's soul (Chapin 31). He continues to talk about the children's scripture book that Mrs. Connin shows Harry, and claims that it is through his exposure to the book that he gets his first taste of spiritual hunger satisfied. Chapin then shows how one must avoid the devil (shown through the pig and Mr. Paradise), journey the narrow path (when the group travels to the river), receive redemption (seen in Harry's first baptism), return to the world (when Harry is back home at his apartment with his parents), and then truly surrender to the Kingdom of Christ (exampled by Harry's death). By understanding these metaphors, we can grasp O'Connor's message that Christ belongs in the everyday; however, Chapin uses the metaphors to argue that Harry, who represents all sinners,

enters the Kingdom of Christ only after he dies in the river. Chapin has a good analysis but he misses the point that one can develop a lifelong relationship with Christ.

Gregory Schweers blends the secular and religious approaches in analyzing Harry's actions, but, similar to Chapin and Visser, he is blind to the potential each individual has to include Christ in their daily lives. Schweers examines Harry's death through the lens of several Christian denominations, pointing out that the characters and religion reflected in the story are a mixture of multiple churches' doctrines and practices. All these denominations share a belief in Christ, but Schweers chooses to overlook Christ and instead focus on how the differing beliefs in salvation affect Harry's fate. He argues that, according to a Catholic point-of-view, Harry is saved in the end and welcomed into Paradise if he's baptized as a believer, despite his gross misinterpretation of the preacher's words (Schweers 68); Schweers also points out, however, that the preacher's teachings are not Catholic in nature but rather Baptist or Protestant, and in this sense there is no need for the young Harry to be baptized at all (Schweers 68-69). Harry throws himself into the river for no reason in the end.

This jumble of beliefs creates an interesting paradox in the story: Harry is both saved and not saved, according to one's interpretation and understanding of the religious beliefs conveyed. If we view the story from a Protestant perspective, Harry is saved because he is too young to understand doctrine and be held accountable for his actions. But the fact that the preacher—himself likely a Protestant—goes ahead and baptizes Harry despite his age suggests that Harry's innocence (or ignorance, if one prefers) isn't a factor in his chances for salvation. Reading the story with a Catholic viewpoint further confuses things, because Harry ought to be redeemed after his baptism—but he isn't baptized as a believer, and thus his baptism shouldn't

count as a redeeming ordinance. Harry is too young to have genuine faith in Christ, and so is too young for faith to save his soul. Does this mean Harry is damned, sentenced to either Hell or Purgatory, and his death in the end is neither successful baptism nor intentional suicide? Probably not. A five-year-old's misunderstanding over the meaning of baptism won't damn him in the eyes of a loving God. Schweers sets up this deep examination of Harry's baptism so he can get to the true heart of his argument, one that considers the ending of the story comedic rather than tragic, according to Dante's and the Ancient Greeks' definitions of comedy. It's here that he steps away from a purely Christian approach and incorporates secular ideas. It's also here that we take a closer look at his initial analysis and bring up our own interpretation of the story.

Schweers believes that the religion portrayed in the story is a blend of non-denominational Christian ideas, but his understanding of Harry's baptism(s) and paradoxical salvation leaves out the one paramount thing all those Christian denominations have in common: Christ.

Reading "The River" at least requires us to consider its Christian teachings, and considering its Christian teachings means we also have to consider Christ. Christ as teacher invited all to follow Him and implored His followers to "become as a little child" (3 Nephi 11:31; *KJV* Luke 18:17). Christ as Savior not only said that He came to save all but plead with His Father to "forgive [those who] know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Harry is most certainly included in that salvation and forgiveness, even if he is a little young to perfectly understand the doctrine. When we observe the times Christ is involved in the story as well as when O'Connor intentionally leaves Him out—and determine what the author wanted to tell us—then one's religious perspective on salvation doesn't matter, because all will understand what O'Connor was trying to say about the importance of having a vested relationship with Christ.

O'Connor subtly hints at Christ's presence throughout the narrative, and this is likely the reason so many critics and readers gloss over Christ in everyday life and see Him only at the end of the mortal journey. This isn't a mistake on the author's part. O'Connor wanted to communicate that Christ is here with us, but many of us fail to recognize Him. If we interpret "The River" as a story not just about a confused little boy drowning in the river so he can reach the Kingdom of God, but as a story about the struggles of every human being's journey through mortality, then the passing glimpses of Christ are not arbitrary Christian references but powerful symbols of Christ's helping hands. O'Connor summed up the trials of humanity and the spiritual quest from damnation to salvation, the universal human goal to progress from evil to good and ignorant to enlightened in a matter of pages (Chapin 30).

O'Connor writes her story as if Christ is present, yet only alluded to, because the characters themselves are without His attributes: we particularly see examples of this in the way the characters discuss baptism and pressure Harry to be baptized without fully explaining the reasoning behind it. Mrs. Connin, as a devout follower of the preacher, first introduces the idea of baptism to Harry, insisting that it's the only way for him to be saved. Both the preacher's and Mrs. Connin's focus is centered solely on baptism and its saving power, but they fail to teach why and how baptism exists. They don't teach Harry that baptism is done because Christ made it possible for us to receive forgiveness of our mistakes; rather, they only say that it will save him. They fail to elaborate on the teachings of Christ, and set their sole interest in getting Harry baptized. Due to their actions Harry takes his understanding of their teachings literally and baptizes himself. He immerses himself in the river and finally drowns because he doesn't understand baptism. This lack of Christ is critical to Harry personally because he eventually dies

due to not understanding who Christ is. This type of ending for the story shows a clear picture that, though one can claim they have the way to salvation, it's through our everyday actions and behavior that Christ can be found.

Additionally, acknowledging Christ in the everyday helps us through our trials. Harry beginning to find hope and spiritual satisfaction after coming into contact with Christ serves as a metaphor for Christian conversion. Harry's dysfunctional family leads to him yearning for goodness, which makes him receptive to a message about Christ. His irresponsible parents pushing him onto Mrs. Connin for the day also acts as the impetus for Harry being introduced to Christ, which changes his life. "When he had asked Mrs. Connin who the man in the sheet in the picture over her bed was, she had looked at him a while with her mouth open. Then she had said, "That's Jesus," and she had kept on looking at him" (O'Connor 163). This shows that growth can come through our trials, for if Harry had not needed Mrs. Connin to babysit him, he would have never come to learn about Christ. Harry's gratitude for Mrs. Connin's intervention is further expounded on when he observes that, "You found out more when you left where you lived" (O'Connor 163). By stepping outside of his apartment—and metaphorically outside his comfort zone—he has the opportunity for more growing experiences. Through this theme, one can come to the conclusion that it is through trials that we are made into followers of Christ, because we have the opportunity to learn more about Him and see why we need His help. He is the source of all goodness and offers to save us if we, in turn, give ourselves over to Him. This is all too real with Harry, as he finally gives his life in his journey to find Christ. Through this metaphorical lesson, we can see that one can start the redemptive process of healing as soon as they turn to Christ.

Although O'Connor was sharing a message about the necessity of Christ in mortality, we find Him best in the story mainly by noticing where He is lacking in the characters' actions. It is as if there is a big hole in each of the characters and that hole is the place where Christ would be. Harry's parents are an excellent example of this, as the only relationship they have with Christ is to use His name as exclamations with a causal and irreverent meaning. Through this, they not only take the Lord's name in vain but also give no real meaning or purpose to the use of Christ's name, His mission, or teachings (O'Connor 157). This shows that Harry's family, and even Harry himself at first, considered Jesus Christ to be nothing more than a word to be used in however a way they could. Their lives revolve around money, alcohol, and social status. For example, Harry's mother is upset when she finds out that Harry was baptized and she is publicly humiliated when she learns that the preacher prayed for her to be healed from her "affliction." Later she comes into Harry's room and almost demands for Harry to tell what the "dolt of a preacher" said about her (O'Connor 170). She couldn't care less about her son's experience and only wants to know what other people think about her. Religion is a joke to her. The joke is expanded when we take a look at perhaps the most striking symbolism in this scene: the book they take away from Harry. That book was how Harry first came to know about Christ, but the adults in his apartment see it only for its monetary and not spiritual value. Learning of Christ is comical to them. By taking away the book they are taking away the means by which Harry has built his relationship with Christ. The fact that they want to sell the book shows that they are willing to sell their relationship with Christ, if it means greater temporal wealth. This obsession with the material world in all aspects shows how one's life without Christ is void of any real connections. Christ is present in the parents' lives only as a swear word—their actions don't

reflect any relationship with Him, and this impacts Harry so severely that he leaves home. As such, Harry's parents can be viewed metaphorically as the worldly society in which he lives.

Mrs. Connin is the character most likely to have a personal relationship with Christ, but even she falls prey to seeking societal acceptance over seeking Christ. Throughout the story she only shows interest in healings and displays of devotion such as sermons, but not in Christ Himself. She has moments when she shows genuine Christlike charity, such as when she blows Harry's nose, feeds him, helps him to calm down, teaches him about Christ through her picture book, and takes him to the river to get baptized. However, these actions might also speak of hypocrisy that she would show her kindness so long as it helped to build her own credibility and heavenly recognition. By showing Harry the book about Christ, she emphasizes her family's connection to the book and how it was "something to have" (O'Connor 163). When describing the preacher and the sermon, she only talks about the healings and how good of a preacher he is; at the river with Harry, she speaks out to impress the onlookers that Harry—or "Bevel"—has the same name as the preacher. She also asks that the preacher heal the mother of her "affliction," but she becomes embarrassed when she learns that the mother only has a hangover (O'Connor 168-169). Later, she is cold towards Harry's parents, and ends up leaving their apartment abruptly when Harry's parents mock her (O'Connor 170). She often is seeking attention, but it rarely comes from a love for Christ or a seeking to come closer to Him; instead, she seems to come down to a societal attention-seeker herself at times.

O'Connor wrote of Harry, his parents, and Mrs. Connin as representatives of those in the middle of a spiritual journey towards God, and their differing responses to that journey teach of its dangers. The symbolisms of those dangers are fraught throughout the story: the temptations of

curiosity and hunger; the mockery and degradation of religion; the sins of pride, slothfulness, lust, gluttony, and greed; and especially the perils of ignorance, sign-seeking, and the blind leading the blind. In between these dangers, however, O'Connor has interwoven symbols of sincere religiosity—such as Mrs. Connin's tender care of Harry and Harry's budding fascination with a Christian world in which parents care for their children and each individual "counts" and has a place. He exhibits this fascination by innocently hiding Mrs. Connin's scripture book under his jacket, next to his heart (O'Connor 163). Furthermore, we see these symbols in the trek from the Connins' house to the riverside, where hopeful followers have gathered for baptism, some to be healed and some to come nearer to God.

We've seen evidence of Christ's presence in Mrs. Connin's charity and the humility of the preacher's followers, but the greatest symbol of His constant presence is found in the scenery of the riverside. The sun beams down on the gathering, and it stains the river red (O'Connor 164). Harry doesn't need to go under the water's surface to find Christ, nor does he need to be baptized to "count." Christ is there before Harry is baptized, having been—in a way—shining down on him from the beginning, every day of Harry's life. Harry acknowledging his baptism would mean he understands Christ's presence in his life, but because, as Mrs. Connin tells him, Christ made Harry along with everyone else, Harry already "counts" in Christ's eyes. It was the people who failed to fully recognize Christ and accept His aid in their daily quests that made Harry think he was unimportant. Through Harry learning that he "counts" in Christ, he is able to find the hope he needs to make a change and return to the river in accordance with the preacher's teachings.

The preacher's sermon is O'Connor's opportunity to talk about the importance of recognizing Christ every day, but she highlights this by pointing out that many people believe

that Christ is only found at the end of the spiritual journey. The preacher talks about laying troubles in the river and then watching "[them] move away toward the Kingdom of Christ," yet he does not give any suggestions as to how one would go about doing such a feat (O'Connor 165). In no way does he imply a daily need to change. No admonitions to repent, just lay your sins and pain in the river like some kind of stain to wash off, never to be washed again. The preacher tries to teach his audience by saying, "You can't leave your pain in the river, I never told nobody that", yet he contradicts his own words when he says, "you people with trouble, lay it in that River" (O'Connor 165). It is as if his declarations are a one-time commitment, which does not support true and lasting change to righteousness. Not only that, but when the preacher mentions the "Kingdom of Christ," he is always talking about some object so far away that one can only reach it by dying. In this kind of preaching, the audience is made up of sign-seekers who want to watch people be healed, some even backing up the preacher with stories of healings. Instead of showing a daily need for and a daily relationship with Christ, the preacher unintentionally confuses his congregation, as exemplified by Harry, and teaches them to think that healing and faith are only found by baptism.

Healing—especially supernatural or faith healing—plays a curious role in "The River."

We see the need for it not only in those devotedly waiting by the riverbank but in those who continue without Christ in their lives and are in need of spiritual healing, or redemption, as well.

Mr. Paradise stands in most obvious need of this healing: he has a cancerous growth over his ear, and it seems he's found that baptism cannot cure it. Rather than seek professional medical assistance or view this experience as spiritually enlightening and faith-building, Mr. Paradise

broods over the failure of the Christian God to heal him and sets about to destroy the faith of others.

Since O'Connor intentionally wrote about Christian grace in her stories, it's safe to assume that she didn't take a pessimistic view of religion and determined to prove its hopes false. Mr. Paradise's character might exist to show the detrimental and potentially life-destroying effects of denying a God of miracles and the failure to understand the healing process. Though Mr. Paradise laughs at religion's inability to save people, he himself fails to save Harry from the river's current in the end of the story; and though he shows off his tumor as proof God couldn't heal him, his bitterness towards and denial of Christ have prevented him from moving on to other possibilities or growing from the experience. Thus, he's prevented himself from healing either physically or spiritually.

To focus specifically on the main character, Harry doesn't need to be physically but spiritually healed: he needs to be told that he "counts" and that his lot in life isn't determined by his negligent parents. As someone with the potential to have Christ help him every day, Harry is not bound by the material heritage his family has given him. Just as those who undertake baptism are subject to a symbolic death, burial, and resurrection to a new life, encountering Christ in the everyday means that one can constantly change and grow to be better.

O'Connor writing the late afternoon sun as a symbol of the Son of God during Harry's baptism intentionally reflects the universality of God's love and strengthening grace. That grace would of course be available to Harry—and to any others who take advantage of it—to better themselves and their lives, regardless of where they began. That's the role grace plays in our lives. We can change our fate. We can constantly move towards progression, healing, and

perfection. Just as grace becomes available to us by Christ's sacrifice and our symbolic (and, in Harry's case, literal) death-by-baptism, however, this change is not without a price. It involves uncomfortable, often painful, growing experiences.

Unlike Mr. Paradise, Harry understands the necessity of this discomfort and continuously forces himself under the river's surface so he can fully take advantage of God's grace, albeit according to his limited, five-year-old understanding. O'Connor's choice of a river as the road to grace was no mistake, either: the healing that comes through grace is progressive but also cyclical, like repeating ripples in the surface of water after one throws a stone in the current. We see this in Harry's trust in Mrs. Connin compared to his trust in his parents, in his budding, naïve excitement to learn more about Jesus the Carpenter and baptism in the river; we also see it in the steps back he takes when he's tempted by the pig, laughs at the preacher, and is crushed by his mother's ignorance that he now "counts." Like the metaphorical journey O'Connor intended to portray, Harry moves forward in being healed but is also set back by moments which allow us to see just how much he needs that healing. His healing process is ultimately cyclical. Harry is tempted. Harry is baptized. Harry drowns in the river. Harry makes it to the Kingdom of Christ. The cyclical healing process is not unique to his situation. Christ returns, but with His scars. Mr. Paradise is not cured of his cancer. It's each individual's choices that determine whether they receive that strengthening grace. Despite the cyclical, messy nature of healing, O'Connor was getting a profound point across: those who reject the healing power of Christ in their lives are never healed and remain bitter, while those who are willing to undertake the arduous healing process with Christ's help are, eventually, healed. Mankind's best hope and interest lie in accepting Christ in their daily lives.

Recognizing that Christ's redeeming power is not a destination but a process will enable the reader to see that Harry's life is void of His influence, and as such, the reader will come to understand why O'Connor chose to end this story with Harry's death. Had Harry continued to live, he would have remained with negligent parents who never would have taught him about Christ. If he had lived with a daily influence of Christ in his life then he wouldn't have needed to die: he could have found redemptive, healing grace in faith. Because this was not the case, his life was so devoid of hope that his only freedom was found in giving his life to Christ, which Harry interpreted as going under the river in "baptism." Readers would be confused about the necessity of Harry's death if they don't understand that his future life would be hopeless. The freedom that we all long to have is not only found in the destination of salvation but also in the journey that is shared with Christ. A life without Christ is a dark and troublesome one, as portrayed in "The River," and understanding this will allow the reader to more clearly see the meaning behind "The River" and the rest of O'Connor's stories.

Noting why O'Connor had Christ lacking at certain parts in the story helps us realize the importance of having Christ with us every day. Many critics who read "The River" focus on either social acceptance or redeeming baptism as the main point of the story, but they overlook the role Christ plays, even in His absence. Harry was motivated by a social desire to "count," as well as a spiritual hunger, but we add that Harry could have found satisfaction by finding Christ in his daily life, rather than with his death. The grace Harry would have had access to could have helped him overcome the problems inherent in his family situation. O'Connor wrote Harry's story as a metaphor for a spiritual journey towards grace and redemption, and she intended the reader to learn that Christ is with individuals over the course of that journey, not just at the end.

Utilizing this same perspective to evaluate O'Connor's other works could help readers see beyond deadly conversions and hypocritical religion to a deeper meaning of Christ's role as Saviour. As O'Connor would agree, we believe that the journey through life to God is difficult, but we don't have to undergo it alone: Christ is there to help and heal us along the way.

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