

Reading As a Quest for the Divine: The Redemptive Model of Literary Analysis

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Different methods of critical analysis can add rich layers of meaning to one's grasp of literature, but some, like the Freudian approach which sees phallic symbols instead of lamp-posts, or deconstruction, which sees nothing (or, conversely, allows everything) can restrict rather than enlighten. Recently I was browsing through a freshman lit text and noted as missing what I did not expect to find: any mention, in its survey of major critical approaches, of a biblical model. And yet no other pattern fits so well, accounts so comprehensively for the interactive elements of fiction. After all, the very genre mirrors the way in which God has ordered the human story. Plot, with its beginning, middle, and end, and the suspense that attends these motions (though in contemporary fiction plot is usually deemphasized, with the story line being more like a perforation) certainly reflects the way a life moves through time. An omniscient point of view testifies to the way God sees all, knows all. Characters—successful ones—are like real people in their complexity—composites of good and evil. They are like real people in that they must suffer—their author in God-like fashion makes them to suffer—and their trials improve or destroy them. The fact that writers work from purpose and design (even when their works declare absurdity), that readers seek to understand larger meanings, testifies to the thematic nature of existence, what the poet William Blake expressed as seeing the world in a grain of sand.

Flannery O'Connor profoundly understood the spiritual dimension of literature, writing in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" that fiction is "so very much an incarnational act." By this she meant "that in fiction every idea—even the most exalted and mysterious—must take a physical form. If the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the material world, even at its humblest or most sordid, can be a sign of the Divine life."¹

Examining the divine aspect further, one sees in O'Connor's writing the concept of a moment of grace or reckoning, a notion fundamental to her work wherein certain characters—those who are, shall we say, elect—are offered (mostly through violent means) the redemptive moment by which they gain true self-knowledge and can thus

1 Ragen, Brian Abel. *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus* (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1989), p. 1.

know God. The grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” is a perfect example of the character seized by grace. Threatened at gunpoint by an escaped convict, the grandmother is unrobed of her self-righteousness and shallow religion and is led to the profound recognition that she is herself a misfit (the name of her murderer, to whom she cries out, “Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!”). Her conversion, true to Christ's requirement that one become as a little child in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven, accompanies her death: “...the grandmother half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.”

The Misfit, a predator devoid of grace, typifies the character in O'Connor's fiction whose day of salvation is long past and who therefore *cannot* believe. (The Calvinist themes in the Catholic O'Connor's work are striking, for the doctrines of predestination, total depravity, and redemption are very strong.) Speaking of Christ raising the dead, he says to the grandmother:

“I wisht I had of been there”, he said, hitting the ground with his fist. “It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady”, he said in a high voice, “if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now.”

This concept of transformation, which constitutes the core of what I am calling the redemptive model of analysis, can be applied with great usefulness to many literary works. For my purpose here of offering what I believe is a workable and fruitful approach to interpreting literature, I have selected a sample of commonly-anthologized or otherwise well-known works, ones I often use in my English class.

But first it might be asked, why all the bother? Why fool with critical analysis when one can simply curl up with a good book and let the world go by? The answer lies in God's requirement that we walk circumspectly, a word that denotes caution to avoid danger. A good reader is an active reader who seeks to understand what values, what vision of life are implied by a literary work. One reads, as C.S. Lewis said, to “enlarge one's being.” But for the Christian who seeks to love the Lord with his mind, there remains the danger of intellectual adultery. Can one remain pure in heart and accept gratuitous sex and violence? Can he love God's law and be unfazed by novels that glory in profanity or the ridicule of Christian religion? The answer is not necessarily to shun books that contain offensive elements (see my article, “[The Glory of Books: A Guide for Home Schoolers](#)”),² though certainly some books should be shunned right out of *Books in Print*, but rather to read with discernment whereby one can glorify God by approving “things that are excellent” and rejecting false philosophy. (Here I am speaking of works of serious literary merit, not crass commercial fiction. Lawrence Perrine's classic text, *Structure, Sound and Sense*, well defines these distinctions.) For this and other reasons, it is crucial that the Christian have a Scriptural framework for comprehending and appreciating

2 *Contra Mundum* 1, Fall 1991, pp. 34-35.

literature. Certainly traditional critical methods—historical, textual, and others—have served and continue to serve well. But in our day when absolute meanings are largely despised and subjectivity reigns, the believer must gird his mind with wisdom and knowledge from God that he might go on believing—even (especially) when reading books.

Determining a fictional character's response to the test of grace is the basis for the redemptive model. Three possibilities are offered, with each suggesting a particular vision of reality or world view as reflected in the story: defeat, partial defeat, and redemption.

Sometimes a character cannot bear the weight of knowledge and is crushed by it. Such a character may be described as defeated. Depending on the story's tone and other factors, a character's downfall can indicate the author's cynical, negative world view. Young Goodman Brown in Nathaniel Hawthorne's story by that title loses his Faith (which happens to be his wife's name) and lives the rest of his days as a bitter, lonely man. In this story, all the characters (most of whom are upright, pious Puritans) deny their faith by participating in a witch's meeting in the forest (although Hawthorne leaves open the possibility that Goodman Brown's journey through the forest is but a dream or delusion), thus suggesting that the Puritan guilt (Hawthorne's ancestor was a judge at the Salem trials) cannot be absolved—nor, it is implied, can any man's, unless Hawthorne is suggesting that for one to go on living as a hollow, faithless man is the punishment for guilt and therefore a kind of absolution. The story, for all its archetypal mystery and strangeness, its psychological insights and force of language, reveals no Savior and finds no relief in the atonement.

Two other stories that signify the protagonist's defeat are Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" and Anne Tyler's "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters." The reader might find it profitable to get a copy of these stories and examine them for the effect of self-knowledge on the protagonists, then draw wider generalizations about the human condition. In the first instance, a deluded and pitiful elderly woman is exposed and shattered, suggesting such themes as the alienation of the aged, the cruelty and outright indifference of society, etc. In the second, a young divorcee named Bet is driven by difficult circumstances to put her retarded son in a mental institution. So great is her pain (which comprehends the pain of her son as well as her own loss) that she decides to withdraw from life emotionally and become a spectator. The story's tone, plot and imagery suggest the awful weight of existence in a universe seen as empty. Indeed, Bet's brokenness, sorrow, and resignation fully reflect her lost condition and spiritual poverty. In this sense is the story "true" and has power to move. Again, to articulate a world view, to hold it against the light of God's Word, is the reader's calling. Unbeknownst to Bet (and presumably to Tyler), God inhabits and governs the universe; His Son, the High Priest, is indeed "touched with the feeling of our infirmities."

Gregor in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" exemplifies the partially defeated character. In this famous surrealist tale wherein a man awakens to find he has turned into a giant beetle, the world is shown as unsafe, a world where human love is capricious, turning

easily into cruelty, and where materialistic values prevail over spiritual. But despite bleak reality and his reduction to a loathsome bug who perishes at the end of the story, Gregor ascends, drawn by some distant, ideal music (“Am I a beast that music should move me so?” Gregor cries out upon hearing his sister play her violin. Scuttling across the floor to be nearer, he risks his life at the hands of his horrified family and guests). Such longing, transmuted by the author into his fictive world, is the *sensucht* spoken of by C.S. Lewis; the heart's hunger for God. Thus, while Kafka suggests “the world was never meant for one as beautiful as you,” as Don McLean sang of Vincent Van Gogh in “Starry Night” but which could as easily be the idealistic, unloved Gregor, *The Metamorphosis* affirms the existence of a higher plane with its attendant values of justice and goodness and beauty. The world in which we live and move and have our being Kafka knows to be a fallen world, but he knows not that God is with us, that His kingdom is with men.

Sometimes the protagonist's defeat will suggest not a cynical world view but a moral order as in *Macbeth*. To violate the laws of God is to invite certain destruction. Shakespeare's plays are well-grounded in this precept; likewise, those of the ancient Greeks—*Oedipus*, for instance. Our sympathy for the fallen hero is mingled with fear in the apprehension that human beings are not autonomous but subject to the dread judgments of a Higher Order (perceived as Fate to the Greeks), resulting in the sense of relief Aristotle called *catharsis*: Sin has been punished and order restored. For a fuller treatment of tragedy (where the dramatic movement is from fortune to ruin) as opposed to comedy (where the protagonist ascends from the lowly to the lofty), I recommend Gene Veith's excellent book *Reading Between the Lines*.

The redeemed character is one who is positively changed through suffering, through the mysterious workings of divinity (whether acknowledged or not). Such is the case with the central characters in one of my favorite short stories, “A Small Good Thing” by Raymond Carver. A man and woman must weather the ordeal of their son Scotty's accident (he was hit by a car) and subsequent death following a coma from which he never awoke. When making quick stops by their house from the hospital, they are tormented by an anonymous caller whose weird, threatening utterances add heavily to their distress. At the end, after their son's death, the couple figures out that the caller is a baker from whom the wife had ordered a birthday cake for Scotty but from whom she had failed, due to the terrible events, to pick up. Filled with murderous rage, Howard and Ann drive at midnight to the bakery where they confront the man who works all night to make cakes for other people's celebrations while he remains alone. The story's conclusion brings the characters together in a wonderful and sacramental way as they find forgiveness and shelter in the breaking and eating of bread.

Faulkner's “Barn Burning” is another powerfully redemptive story where a young boy must choose between loyalty to his cold, wolfish, criminally-minded father and obedience to his conscience. The boy's decision to defy his father and sound the warning that his “Pap” is going to burn the boss's barn causes the boy great anguish of soul but leads to his deliverance.

Many other examples could be cited but the point is that the author whose central character finds salvation, even in the face of loss and pain, is looking out a window onto plains of mercy. Such a literary work in my view most closely mirrors reality and is the most satisfying. That Poppa John in Larry Woiwode's novel by that name arises from his beast-like alcoholic state to behold the Man of Sorrows touches me deeply; that he is so overwhelmed with his own unworthiness and sin that he tries to take his own life brings into view the shocking force of Christ's love realized; that he is saved both physically and spiritually by the God from whom he had sought to hide as a professional actor and through the numbing effects of alcohol, parallels the drama of grace as it is enacted in real human beings to transform them forever.

Finally, I should hasten to add that not all characters in literary fiction fit these patterns. Phoenix Jackson, that legendary ancient of Eudora Welty's charming story "A Worn Path", changes never (which is the point of the story) and experiences no epiphanies, but a dogged devotion to her ailing little grandson compels her to follow a path along the Natchez Trace to town for medicine, year after year even when her eyes are dim and she forgets what she came for. It's a good thing the elements of fiction don't always match up to the prescriptions assigned them because art by nature transcends all attempts to chart and measure and solve and circumscribe it. To read critically is not to think mathematically but neither does it mean letting reason fly while relying on purely subjective responses. Rather, it is to say when encountering any expression of the divine in books or anywhere else, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high; I cannot attain unto it." But with all our mind and heart we can surely reach.