FATHERHOOD AND SONHOOD IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S *THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY*

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Flannery O’Connor’s second and final novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, published in 1960, took the writer a grueling seven years to complete as she struggled to bring the book to perfection. The story that finally emerged bore some striking similarities to her first novel, *Wise Blood*, published over a decade before. Central to both works is O’Connor’s never-ending commitment to “teach man his dishonor” (qtd. in Hewitt vii). In both novels, the protagonist vainly struggles to deny the reality of Christ. In both novels, the protagonist tries to put his needs over others and over the will of God. And, finally, in both novels, the protagonist must be humbled to open the way for a Christian grace.

Yet, although the novels have similar plots, *The Violent Bear It Away* ultimately commits itself down a different path than *Wise Blood*. For one, it is significant that in *The Violent Bear It Away* the protagonist is a youth, Francis Tarwater.¹ Indeed, the bulk of the novel looks specifically at conflicts between the young Tarwater and his two father-figures: his great-uncle Mason Tarwater and his uncle Rayber. Both father-figures try to influence Tarwater’s relationship with God and with his destiny to become a prophet. And it is God that is the book’s third, supreme parental figure. God

¹ Hereafter the essay will refer to Francis Tarwater as simply Tarwater.
overshadows the will of all the main characters in this novel, and it is a return to God, like the prodigal son’s return to his father in the New Testament, that will ultimately redeem Tarwater by the novel’s end. It is this redemption that prompts some critics, such as Christina Lake, to assert, “In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O’Connor consciously strains herself for the positive” (142).² Perhaps the most positive aspect in this book is that in Tarwater’s final return to the grace of God, he is able to continue a life in grace as a prophet, potentially preaching the “truth” of God’s mercy to the world, whereas Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* may be redeemed by the end of the book but dies unable to carry God’s message to the world.

Alongside the centrality of the religious themes in the *The Violent Bear It Away*, O’Connor’s novel gives us access to her vision of the ideal father and son. Published in the beginning of the turbulent 1960s, *The Violent Bear It Away* speaks to its time. Written during a decade when males in America were challenging the boundaries of traditional norms of masculine propriety, where men started to care “temporarily about [themselves]” (qtd. in Kimmel 161), *The Violent Bear It Away* responds to the times, stressing the need for a more meaningful relationship between the family and society. The novel also emphasizes a more meaningful relationship between the family and the world than the one possible through consumerism and naked reason. Like The Misfit in O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” who is unable to find verifiable proof of God and so becomes evil, O’Connor in *The Violent Bear It Away* shows what society can become if it loses touch with God, the Father. And *The Violent Bear It Away* shows

² Marilyn Arnold makes the same argument in “Flannery O’Connor’s Reluctant Compromise with Mercy” (27).
O’Connor’s assertion that it is the business of fathers to direct their sons away from the secular evils of the modern world and to emphasize the importance of God and responsibilities in life. Yet, the book does not present a clear model of fatherhood.

Certainly Rayber, with his selfish, atheist, and secular dogmas, does not represent the best example of fatherhood. At the same time, the more positive role model, Mason, is only more positive by degree. Mason does direct Tarwater to live a life under God-as-father, but Mason’s own parenting style proves problematic, especially in the manner by which he controls Tarwater’s life. Still, the book ultimately stresses that a father should not seek power for himself, but for the spiritual needs of the child. Likewise, a son, upon receiving a religious upbringing, must not reject his father figure and God for an impossible and unproductive dream of selfish independence. Ultimately, central to both O’Connor’s vision of a son and a father is that whatever relationship they have should be directed at the ultimate father, God.
Fathers and Sons in Mid-Century America

In order to better understand the paternal and filial vision in *The Violent Bear It Away*, a reader should comprehend the context in which O’Connor writes her novel, and the importance of this time for O’Connor’s presentation of fathers and sons. While America had witnessed a revolution in the father’s role with his family before—namely, moving from a father-centered relationship in eighteenth-century America to a mother-centered one in the nineteenth century—around the turn of the twentieth century, the role of fathers shifted once more. The postwar economic boom in the United States expedited a process already in motion throughout the earlier part of the century whereby the middle class was ever more influenced by a secular consumerism. Furthermore, fathers were growing more skeptical of women’s prior monopoly over the raising of children. Under the pressure of both these factors, the role of the father and of the son would change drastically in the twentieth century. Reclamation of paternal control over their sons marked one of the most important changes in the relationship between fathers and sons at

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3 See especially Joseph Pleck’s essay “Men in Domestic Settings” for a historical survey of fatherhood in America and a more detailed discussion of the rise of the “separate spheres” for women and men in the 19th century. The important idea here, however, is not that the father lost power, but that his role changed. Whereas the father prior especially to the Victorian period would be an actor in the raising of his child, the father during the mid to later 19th century was largely pushed out of such an intimate role, in favor of female control over education, moral development, and child rearing: the father needed “to play a formal, distant role” (Cross 43). The father earned income and was an uninvolved patriarch.
the beginning of the 1900s: paternal control specifically plays an important role in *The Violent Bear It Away* since the book lacks significant mother figures. Entering the twentieth century, fathers, newly skeptical of the Victorian-order control women had over raising children, especially sons, “felt that they needed to wrest control over socialization and get more actively involved themselves [in family life]” (Kimmel 115). A bevy of psychological and social literature emerged at this time that reasserted the need for a male figure in the life of a son for fear that a son lacking a father figure may become effeminate or, worse, homosexual. This renewed emphasis on male-centered relationships as a bulwark against the feminine was furthermore accompanied by the rise in fraternal organizations, the renewed emphasis on single-sex schools, and even the acceptance of the “savage” son, who needed freedom and acceptance to live out his vivaciousness aggressively in youth (Kimmel 220).

This last idea of an active, even violent male youth becomes particularly important as the twentieth century continues, for just as a vivacious youth is seen as desirable to ensure the masculinity of sons, so consumerism further places importance on a young, independent lifestyle. The emphasis on consumerism had its roots in the later nineteenth century, but takes off in earnest by the early part of the twentieth century. As Bill Osgerby argues, “the ‘traditional’ middle class with its emphasis on family life, the work ethic, moderation and probity – had been a powerful force, but by the 1920s was already losing some of its authority as American capitalism steadily prioritized consumption, leisure and immediate gratification” (3). While consumerism certainly emphasized these self-serving qualities, perhaps even more significant, “youth was a pre-eminent theme” (Osgerby 35). Many men looked to a time of less responsibility in their
own childhood, a time when they did not have all the duties of adulthood and fatherhood. Many men now strived to continue living a life of less responsibility, a life of privilege and acquisition. Fatherhood was less something to be longed for to many men by the first decades of the twentieth century: these men wanted instead their independence. And as the decades progressed, the importance of consumerism in America only increased, interrupted only by the Depression and World War II; yet, with peace in 1945, both consumerism and the father’s control of the household headed for a collision with the baby-boom generation.

While fathers had already asserted their masculinity during the war and Depression years, as Michael Kimmel asserts, “[the WWII veteran fathers] faced a postwar world of limited opportunities and shrinking possibilities”; at the same time, “[i]n the increasingly suburban postwar world, fathers embodied masculinity” (163-64). This contradiction led to a number of problems reflected in The Violent Bear It Away. Fathers began to waver in their traditional role as head of the household, at least as it now existed in a culture less traditional than before, a culture increasingly suburban, a culture of consumerism, and a culture of gratification. As Gary Cross argues in Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity,

The curious nostalgia for an earlier mode of fathering pointed to a much larger problem—the ambiguity and confusion about what fathers were to do in a postwar home and, even more, about what it meant to grow up male. Parents’ Magazine in 1945 told fathers to make themselves “acceptable” to their offspring. To win their hearts, you must “keep yourself huggable” and to be kind and gentle if you expect your children
to be also. [...] Hygeia asked fathers not to toughen up on their boys and instead let them set the agenda for play and warned that love and respect for the modern father came not from his asserting authority but from “pleasurable contacts with his children.” (59)

Although the father was warned not to get “too involved” (Kimmel 176), the ideal father in the fifties became increasingly a pal to his child; gone was the patriarch who directed his son’s educational and moral upbringing; gone even was the distant patriarch of the Victorian period. The role of the father, in this novel society, often fell to finding a certain niche with a child through which to establish the role of father-as-pal, a role that had not before been emphasized as fervently in American culture. And this niche also represented something more than a way a father could ingratiate himself to his son: the pal-father also wanted to replay his own childhood. These fathers were “men trying to be boys” (Cross 82). This father-as-pal figure would emerge importantly in The Violent Bear It Away with Tarwater’s Uncle Rayber, who tries to manipulate Tarwater, getting close to the boy by trying to become his pal in instances such as taking Tarwater to museums and out to eat. Rayber’s drive to win Tarwater over with the interesting nature of his life belies Rayber’s insecurity with his position of as a father.

While the twentieth century saw the role of fathers shift, what it meant to be a son changed as well. As many fathers shifted from patriarchs to pals, many sons shifted from obedient children to rebels. Fathers may have been trained by this time to foster their boys’ “savage” behavior in order to ensure the inculcation of a sure masculinity, but, as Cross argues, “boys might never transcend their ‘barbarian stage’”—in effect, these boys may never grow to fully accept the mature, civilized culture around them (93). And in a
culture that more and more emphasized the importance of youth, the drive to grow up diminished even more for many young boys. Literature and film began to adopt the trope of the youth-as-rebel into their art form, notably with *Catcher in the Rye* and *Rebel Without a Cause* (Cross 93). This rebel—or as Kimmel calls him, the rebellious nonconformist—“represented sexual and interpersonal power, control over himself and his environment” (Kimmel 175). Cross sees a similar assertion of self: “Alienated youth, beginning in the late 1940s, rejected affluent society as boring and ‘endeavor’ as pointless and saw the ‘emptiness of love,’ preferring the ‘role of the detached observer and commentator.’” These young men rejected the father and the path to fatherhood on principle, a heroic if ultimately empty ‘no’” (95). This youthful rejection of the father and assertion of the prerogative of youth features prominently in *The Violent Bear It Away*: for in the first chapter of the novel, after Mason’s death, when Tarwater is confronted with the novel responsibility to bury Mason and accept God, Tarwater’s “Stranger”—an evil alter-ego who arrives to guide Tarwater after Mason dies— instructs Tarwater that, “It aint Jesus or the devil. It’s Jesus or you” (CW 354). Like many of the boys in the mid-twentieth century, Tarwater, by acquiescing to the Stranger, thus rejects his calling to responsibility. And it is exactly this youthful and, for O’Connor pseudo-masculine, assertion of “no” that *The Violent Bear It Away* will attack most vehemently.

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4 It is interesting that culture around the same time not only confronts the same topic but nearly in the same language: in *On the Waterfront* [1954], a priest questions Marlon Brando’s character, Malloy, about “where he stands”—Brando answers, “Me, I’m with me” (Kimmel 180).
Mason and Tarwater: The Question of a Traditional Father-figure

The first and most significant human father-figure for Tarwater is his great-uncle Mason Tarwater. Mason comes closest to exemplifying a traditional early American model of fatherhood where the father plays an intimate and primary role in the moral upbringing and education of the child. Yet, here, Mason surpasses simply delineating a supporting role for a woman in his household: Mason household excludes all women from young Tarwater’s life. As Suzanne Paulson argues, for Mason “any woman in the novel […] represents sin as well as death” (122). Indeed, the few moments Mason speaks of women in the text, his attitudes towards them frequently are derogatory: Mason tells Tarwater that his own sister had been a “whore” (CW 355); of Tarwater’s dead mother, Tarwater learns from Mason that she was “unmarried and shameless” (CW 355). Although with less invective, Mason even has a low opinion of his nephew Rayber’s wife, Bernice Bishop, who Mason sees as only a practical supplement Rayber’s lack of parenting skill:

“[Rayber] had to change [the child Bishop’s] pants and he done it,”

Tarwater muttered.

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5 It is worth noting that Mason (indeed all the characters in the book) cannot be presented as entirely reliable narrators. Conflicting interests lie between all the major characters, and most of what the reader learns throughout the novel comes from their perspectives.
“He had the welfare woman-woman do it for him,” [Mason] said. “She had to be good for something, but you can bet she ain’t still around there. Bernice Bishop!” he said as if he found this the most idiot name in the language. (CW 380)

Importantly, Bernice Bishop, in her occupation as a welfare woman, ultimately represents the sort of social control of youth that Mason violently rejects in his upbringing of Tarwater. And this is the most important strategy for Mason’s parenting of Tarwater: resistance to social control. Mason literally steals Tarwater away from society in order to raise the child in the service of God.

The salient issue of Mason’s misogyny and his absence of women and potentially calls into question whether Mason does indeed represent a positive male role model for Tarwater—or whether he truly represents a traditional father-figure. While men indeed sought to remove women from their supposed monopoly over socializing children in the early twentieth-century, women still would play a crucial role even in this traditional father-figure’s family as a keeper of the home and as support for the father, doing much of grunt work of parenting young children. Mason, by raising Tarwater on his own, may ensure that Tarwater is not dominated by a controlling mother, but he also precludes the ability of Tarwater to connect to a more “positive” mother as well. Instead, as Robert Donahoo argues, Mason has to become “the mother-substitute” (100). Donahoo even goes so far as to show how Mason himself, in the absence of significant female figures in the text, represents a sort of feminine figure himself: Mason has become an “other” by living away from society; Mason’s progressing idea of Christianity even becomes
feminine by dreaming of a heaven where he is fed “bread of life” (100). Donahoo stresses that despite these feminine characteristics, Mason’s outward image “remains male,” and thus Mason represents “O’Connor’s symbol of the balanced union of female and male” (100). Donahoo’s argument is convincing; yet, however potentially feminine some of Mason’s characteristics may be, he still is the primary masculine father-figure to Tarwater throughout the child’s life. Furthermore, O’Connor is famous for creating very masculine prose, stories, and characters—and for apparently having little public respect for mid-twentieth-century feminism—her work often does present male characters whose aggressive masculinity needs to be humbled—and who need to accept a female/feminizing influence in their life, however minimal. Thus, though Mason may represent this traditional father-figure, the novel questions how well Mason’s role works without a mother-figure present for Tarwater.

In order, thus, to get a better view of Mason’s role as a traditional father-figure, a reader must understand the circumstances leading to Tarwater’s abduction. Unlike his supposedly licentious sister, Mason believes devoutly in Jesus and, when “prompted by the Lord,” makes it his early business to inveigh against his sister’s immoral lifestyle, hoping to “lead her to repentance,” even if it means prophesizing on her front steps (CW 367). Yet, such demonstrations only lead to Mason’s first setback as a prophet: Mason’s sister eventually traps Mason while he seeks to save her and succeeds in having Mason committed to a mental asylum. After his release from the asylum, Mason makes his first

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6 Donahoo alternatively argues that Rayber is a markedly patriarchal figure who tries to control others in his world, especially a trait prominent in the scene with Lucette whom he wants to rescue.

7 See especially “The Enduring Chill,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and “Everything That Rises Must Converge” to find examples of male characters who are presented critically for rejecting or abusing a feminine—often motherly—presence in their lives.
attempt to kidnap a child family member and attempts to raise the child in the service of Jesus—in this attempt, his sister’s son, Rayber. This change of strategy is a significant alteration in Mason: he has moved from a position as the agitator, trying to force an adult to adopt a moral system she has already rejected, to a novel position as a father. And Mason’s idea of fatherhood is intricately tied to his desire to raise children in a life apart from the corrupt secularization of his sister’s community, to guide the child to what is, in his view, the proper moral system, one he believes mandated by God. Thus, when Mason succeeds in capturing Rayber and taking him to Powderhead, he baptizes Rayber and teaches him in the ways of following Jesus, much as he would later do with Tarwater. This position of father as moral/religious-teacher again harkens back to the early-American father who had responsibility for the education and moral upbringing of the child. Yet, after three days away from home, during which time “[Rayber’s] mother had not missed him,” she eventually realizes Rayber’s disappearance and has her husband retrieve the young Rayber (CW 371). Yet, as a product of his instruction, Mason knows Rayber “would never be the same boy again” (CW 371). Unfortunately, the young Rayber can only make some unsuccessful attempts to return to Mason after his father takes him home. And Rayber does not again see Mason until his parents and sister die in a car wreck.

Considering that Rayber turned out to become the secular, unbelieving antagonist in the novel, a reader might expect that his childhood abduction may have had the decisive negative effect on the young Rayber. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that Rayber already had a poor home-life before Mason came into his life. From what information the reader gets from Mason’s account, which is potentially problematic, not
only did Rayber’s mother prove a negative moral role-model and not even miss Rayber for three days after Mason stole him as a child, but Rayber also had a poor father. Indeed, as Mason later explains to Tarwater, well after Mason and Rayber have lost any affinity with each other,

> It was not to be wondered at, the old man would say, that the schoolteacher [Rayber] was no better than he was with such a father as he had. The man, an insurance salesman, wore a straw hat on the side of his head and smoked a cigar when you told him his soul was in danger, he offered to sell you a policy against contingency. He said he was a prophet too, a prophet of life insurance. (CW 367)

Rayber’s parents thus reject morality and live lives based on self-fulfillment and capitalism. Such a selfish lifestyle apparently then passes down to Rayber’s sister (Tarwater’s mother) as well, whom Rayber eventually sets up with her future husband in order to “contribute to her self confidence” (CW 366). For O’Connor parenting must be a selfless act. It is not so for Rayber’s parents. Thus, as Mason explains, when Rayber’s parents eventually die, “nobody was gladder than he was” (CW 372). Thus, while Mason may not represent the most ideal father—he kidnaps Rayber and he rejects mother-figures—Rayber’s parents certainly did not fare much better in their positions.

The reader also must question why Mason’s abduction of Rayber goes so wrong as to produce his own antagonist. In the same vein, why does Mason’s abduction of Tarwater go another direction, by leading eventually to Tarwater recognizing Mason’s prophesy at the end of the novel—vindicating Mason’s parenting and religious beliefs, to some extent? Perhaps one answer lies right under the reader’s nose: Rayber’s biological
parents still lived and Tarwater’s did not. Even Rayber realizes this difference when, years after Mason’s failed abduction, and right after the car crash that kills Tarwater’s mother and leads to the suicide of his father: “[Tarwater’s father] had shot himself after the accident, which was a relief to the schoolteacher for he wanted to bring up the baby himself” (CW 366). Only after the death of Tarwater’s parents can Rayber step in as the father-figure in Tarwater’s life—and the same years before when Mason stole Rayber. It is Rayber’s biological father who returns Rayber to his home as a kid. Thus, O’Connor seems to suggest that however bad the parents may be, stealing a child away from the biological, legitimate parents is not justifiable insofar as the parenting can be improved. Stealing a child will not ultimately will not work.

Despite this complication, the death of Tarwater’s parents in a car accident opens the way for an outside paternal authority to raise the child and places Tarwater in the hands of his uncle Rayber, who sets to raising the child in his own beliefs, rejecting God-as-Father. Further, Rayber invites Mason to come back to live with him and Tarwater. Although Rayber displays early signs of his desire to reject Christ, Mason believes Rayber called him back because Rayber struggles internally with the truth of God-as-father. As Mason tells Tarwater later, “The truth was even if [Rayber’s parents] told him not to believe what I had told him, he couldn’t forget it. He never could forget that there was a chance that that simpleton [his biological father] was not his only father” (CW 372). This line is important. O’Connor frames Rayber’s rejection of religion not just through a denial of a traditional doctrine, but as a rejection of the supreme father. And now a father himself, Rayber wishes to transfer his ideology to his newfound child, Tarwater. Immediately when Mason comes to live with him, Rayber, skeptical of
Mason’s intentions, tells him, “[Tarwater] is going to be brought up to live in the real world. He’s going to brought up to expect exactly what he can do for himself. He’s going to be his own savior. He’s going to be free” (CW 375). Hence, the problems Rayber has in accepting himself as God’s child translates into a refusal of Christian salvation for his own child. Unable to accept grace for himself, Rayber as a father seeks to impede Tarwater’s ability to seek it. What Rayber cannot see is that his actions do not make Tarwater free; instead, they restrain him. Rayber is, in effect, trying to extend his own moral doctrine, one without basis. He thus treads dangerously close to Hazel Motes’ “Church Without Christ” from Wise Blood: both characters want control over their existence. Yet, whereas Hazel tries to recruit followers, Rayber wants to father one.

Seeing the selfish intentions of Rayber, Mason begins to realize that he must take Tarwater away from the secular self-centeredness of Rayber and raise the boy to see God as his true father. Yet, Mason is only called to action when Rayber makes one more effort to control Mason through secularism, an attempt to control that rejects both God’s and Mason’s fatherhood. The event that triggers Mason to steal Tarwater away from Rayber occurs when Rayber publishes a study of Mason in hopes of proving his independence from his uncle. When completed, Rayber gives the article to Mason without telling him what the piece is about. Yet Mason soon uncovers that he is the subject of the article. Finally, Mason understands he cannot convince Rayber of the truth of Jesus, for the article represents an effort by Rayber to control not only Mason but also God. Ironically, Rayber writes in the article, “[Mason’s] fixation on being called by the Lord had its origin in insecurity” (CW 378). Yet, ultimately, the paper is a product of Rayber’s own insecurity, his own inability to accept that he God as his Father. And in
order to deny his highest Father, Rayber attempts to control his father on earth: as Mason mentions to Tarwater earlier in the novel, “[Rayber] loved me like a daddy” (CW 375). Thus Rayber’s article represents a double rejection of a paternal superiority: both of God and of Mason. In order to subvert the influence of his fathers, Rayber puts his trust, as Susan Srigely shows, only in the “scientific method”—Rayber has sought “freedom from Mason Tarwater’s control […] with education” (106, 109). And the expression of his education is a scientific study of Mason.

Mason must now act as a moral father-figure in lieu of Rayber and remove Tarwater from the toxic environment of Rayber’s home and away to Powderhead in order to raise the child morally and “in the freedom of the Lord Jesus Christ” (CW 379). Mason does this, so he tells Tarwater, in response to an earlier calling by God to “HERE IS THE PROPHET [Tarwater] TO TAKE TO YOUR PLACE. BAPTISE HIM” (CW 376). Thus, a significant difference lies between these two parenting goals that also touches on some of the key changes in fatherhood and sonhood in the twentieth century. Rayber elects himself as father and emphasizes the importance of the son over the father, which corresponds to the recorded increase in importance of youth in the twentieth century where the son increasingly sets the agenda and questions authority. Yet, this inverted relationship has no place in Mason’s parenting, where he himself remains the son of the Lord, following what he believes is His will and where he represents a necessary moral teacher to Tarwater, directing the boy down the same path to a life lived as a son. This is Mason’s primary goal: Tarwater must learn that living is to live under an assertive, traditional father who uses his power to direct a child towards a moral path—indeed a path to prophesy.
Once Mason brings Tarwater to Powderhead, Rayber makes one impotent attempt to reclaim Tarwater, arriving at Powderhead with the welfare woman he later marries, an attempt that will apparently reinforce Mason’s claim to the child. Yet, this attempt leads only to Mason wounding Rayber in the ear with a shotgun blast, a wound that symbolically reinforces Rayber’s inability to hear the truth of his higher Father. The act also represents Mason’s chief success in claiming a dependent whom he can raise in the service of Jesus. Unlike Rayber’s father, Tarwater’s father is dead. Thus, Rayber, while not the biological father of Tarwater, falls onto the state to fulfill his legal claim to Tarwater and so arrives at the Powderhead with the welfare woman. It is also significant, too, that a woman represents the state, showing the inherent feminine touch of social control that attempts to undo the natural, religious, and moreover masculine father-centered order. And so Mason must throw off the welfare woman as he must throw off Rayber, both of who only represent their secular professions. With the ultimate failure of Rayber and the schoolteacher to reintegrate Tarwater back into secular society, Mason has in effect solidified his claim to the son he has been seeking all along and can go about raising Tarwater in the service of God, his Father.

Finally with a son he can raise, Mason goes about teaching Tarwater to become a prophet in the service of Jesus; yet, Mason does not represent the perfect role model for Tarwater that he assumes he is. For while the reader can see hints of a passive resistance in Tarwater to Mason’s teachings throughout the beginning of the novel, once Mason dies, Tarwater will resist the two charges left to him by Mason: to give Mason a Christian burial and to baptize Rayber’s mentally handicapped son, Bishop. This resistance derives
both from Mason’s style of teaching and from Tarwater’s inherited inclination to question authority, especially paternal authority. As Mason tells Tarwater once,

with the devil having such a heavy role in [Tarwater’s] beginning, it was little wonder that he should have an eye on the boy and keep him under close surveillance during his time on earth, in order that the soul he had helped call into being might serve him forever in hell […] that devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride […] you have better mind how you take up with strangers. (CW 367)

This passage is especially interesting in light of how Tarwater will eventually be humbled by the end of the book: raped by a stranger from whom Tarwater has accepted a smoke and a drink and a ride. Despite the deep religious significance of Mason’s warning to Tarwater, Mason’s speech is primarily about bad parenting. The devil—sin—brought Tarwater into this world, and he will have to work twice as hard to resist the temptation to give into sin and disobey his heavenly Father. In effect, Mason blames Tarwater’s mother for having a bastard. For Mason, as well as O’Connor, even a corrupt conception signals troubles not just for parenting, but for the child. Yet, on another side, Mason’s own aggressive parenting style is also attacked by the devil. Mason has not been the best example of morality himself: the stranger tells Tarwater, “[Mason’s] the only prophet I ever heard of making liquor for a living” and “all your life you’ve been tricked by the old man” (CW 358, 359). Thus, while Tarwater may have the innate proclivity to resist paternal authority, Mason’s hypocrisy—simultaneously attacking the use of alcohol and making it—and his questionable parenting methods also open the way for critique.
Other motivations still lie behind Tarwater’s resistance to his uncle. Probably the most important reason, though, especially in light of the crisis surrounding youth in the 1950s, is that Tarwater does not merely want to follow God, his father, but wants God to give him a path worth following. He believes he should receive, namely, preferential treatment from God. For instance, when Mason tells Tarwater that his first mission when Mason dies will be to baptize the mentally handicapped Bishop, Tarwater, disgusted by such an apparently boring task, responds, “‘Oh, no it won’t be’ […] ‘[God] don’t mean for me to finish up you leavings. He has other things in mind for me.’ And he thought of Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit” (CW 335).

Many critics have interpreted Tarwater’s desire to be like Daniel or Moses as a spiritual arrogance: for instance, J. Ramsey Michaels argues, “[A]bove all, [Tarwater] wants a sign that, contrary to his fears, his prophetic career will be ‘remarkable’ […] not ‘unremarkable’ as he knows in the end it will be” (62-63). But even given the important spiritual nature of Tarwater’s conceit, however, Tarwater’s desire for an interesting, “remarkable,” calling strikes back to what Cross shows in Men To Boys. Fathers in the 1950s were “‘to make themselves acceptable’ to their offspring”—they were to let the sons “set the agenda for play.” While prophesizing Jesus Christ may not be play no matter the calling, Tarwater still expects something from God, from his Father. Tarwater wants God to make Himself acceptable to Tarwater, not the other way around. Tarwater wants to do what he wants to do, not what God his father wants him to do. Mason recognizes this, and chides Tarwater: “It is no part of your job to think for the Lord” (CW 335). Tarwater must come to understand that a mission to baptize another child of God is
an important spiritual calling, not simply a boring duty; as Lake asserts, “Tarwater must realize that his calling is highest because it is lowest” (158). Yet, in the same way, Tarwater must learn he should not reject the will of his fathers, both Mason on earth and God above.

Tarwater ultimately reject his fathers, however, and proceed down a path to attain what he believes is spiritual independence. Thus, when Mason finally dies, Tarwater hesitates to bury his surrogate father. Soon, a “stranger’s voice” starts trying to convince Tarwater that he alone is important, that he owes nothing to the now deceased Mason, and that Tarwater should worry about himself, not God or others. It is significant that this voice is described as a “stranger”—O’Connor appears to emphasize a connection between Mason’s warning to Tarwater about the evil of strangers and this new stranger’s voice, representing the devil no less, that urges to reject the precepts of Mason. And Tarwater is receptive to the stranger’s message, and so burns down the house at Powderhead while Mason’s body remains still inside. By refusing to give his father a decent Christian burial, Tarwater has not just denied paternal authority but he has also rejected, as Srigley argues, his “responsibilities for others” (114). Tarwater’s dissatisfaction with what he saw as a boring calling—to bury an old man and baptize a dumb child—that degenerated into a revolt against paternal authority now finally represents a rebellion against a person’s responsibilities for others. By rejecting paternal authority, Tarwater has rejected responsibility, humility, and the most important Christian precept: to love one another.
Rayber and Tarwater: A Slow Return to the Father

Given the opposition in philosophy between Mason and Rayber, a reader might expect Rayber’s approach to fatherhood to be an exact foil of Mason’s. Yet *The Violent Bear It Away* does not present such any such Manichean view, and readers can at times struggle to detail differences between Mason’s and Rayber’s approach to Tarwater. Certainly, these two father-figures for Tarwater have different views of the world, but, at the same time, both they both ultimately want “to impress upon young Tarwater their vision of reality” (Srigley 105). Furthermore, both men significantly remove women from their homes, again showing an over-aggressive allegiance to the mid-twentieth-century reaction to feminizing socialization. Nevertheless, key differences between the two men’s fathering exist, and these differences are intimately tied into the difference between the two men’s perceptions of God as a Father. Mason accepts what he understands as his role under God and has lived his life in His service as a “holy man in evil times” (Giannone 150). On the other hand, Rayber has lived most of his life denying God-as-Father; for him, the purpose of life should be found not in obedience to God’s will and human love, but in reason. Rayber has built rationality as a buffer to God and Christian faith. To Rayber, anything that challenges his sense of reason must be avoided. Such a will dominates his parenting and leads him, as John Desmond describes, to be “a
case of arrested development” (143). In a very real sense, Rayber has never really grown up: he still lives a youthful rebellion against God, Mason, and even his parents.

Therefore, when Tarwater arrives on his doorstep after burning down Powderhead, Rayber is in no real position to be a father-figure for Tarwater, and, though both boy and man spend a week in conflict, the reader can see the resolution as preordained: Tarwater will come to realize Rayber is a poor substitute for a father and leave. Rayber’s parenting further plays an even more important role, however, in paving the way for Tarwater’s realization of grace and his final return to God the Father.

Readers may be tempted to read Tarwater, after he has left Powderhead and rejected a life in God’s service, as a Rayber prototype. After all, Rayber too left Mason’s care after being stolen away. Tarwater, like Rayber, has returned to the city, indeed to the exact same house in which Rayber lives. Even more, both have rejected God. But the sort of reading that sees Rayber and Tarwater as the same is fallacious. For Tarwater cares little for Rayber’s reliance on reasoning, and where Rayber finds independence through education, Tarwater prides himself on having avoided education and knows “that escaping school was the surest sign of his election” (CW 340). Tarwater’s abandonment of Powderhead and his refusal to submit to God’s will represent, as Steve Olson shows, a greater struggle “to create an independent self” (41). Srigley sees the same motivation in Tarwater, showing that Tarwater does not just have a specific problem with religion, but moreover a simple “resistance to external control” (105). Both critics thus emphasize the underlying theme of Tarwater’s rebellion: resistance to any control. Rayber represents a resistance to God, again like Hazel Motes from Wise Blood, but he is perfectly willing to submit to incorporeal reason. Overall, Rayber’s resistance stays limited. His is a focused
resistance to God as Father. Tarwater denies not only God as an authority figure, but will not be receptive to Rayber’s authority either.

A decisive difference in parental authority between Rayber’s and Mason’s parenting appears quite early when Tarwater arrives in the suburbs. It is Tarwater who chooses to go to Rayber, to make him a father-figure, whereas Mason, through his actions (and what he believes to be a mandate by God), made himself a father over Tarwater. Thus, while Rayber will try to influence Tarwater, attempt to mold the boy into his son, in many ways Rayber has again failed before he even begun. It is not his will but Tarwater’s that begins their relationship anew after Mason’s death. Hence, when Tarwater announces to Rayber that “My great-uncle is dead and burnt, just like you would have burnt him yourself,” Rayber can only make some incredulous statements before asking Tarwater, “How did you get here? How did you know this was where you belonged?” (CW 386-87). In his bewilderment, Rayber proclaims to Tarwater his inability to take Tarwater away from Mason. Though he believed Tarwater should be with him, unlike Mason, Rayber lacked the will to act on his beliefs.

But Rayber’s opening questions have even greater significance behind them, for they leave Tarwater “stunned” (CW 387). While the questions do show Rayber’s inherent inability for action, they also are an attempt by Rayber to reclaim lost authority over Tarwater: if Tarwater belonged with Rayber all along, then it was his duty to come to Rayber’s home, not necessarily Rayber’s duty to retrieve him. Furthermore, Rayber’s belief that Tarwater “knew” he “belonged” with him challenges Tarwater’s expression of agency in choosing to leave Powderhead and arrive in the city. In Rayber’s formulation, Tarwater is not as independent as he thought. Understandably, this attempt at control
makes Tarwater, already skeptical of authority, nervous, and soon Rayber makes an even larger mistake. Thrown off by Tarwater’s stunned reaction, Rayber begins to believe Tarwater has lied about Mason’s death. He asks Tarwater, “Is this one of [Mason’s] tricks? Is he out there waiting to sneak in a window to baptize Bishop while you’re out here baiting me?” (CW 387). These questions, apart from showing an alarming lack of trust in Tarwater by Rayber, only reemphasize that Tarwater has not attained the sort of independence that he has been seeking, and he realizes “with terrible clarity […] that the schoolteacher was no more than a decoy the old man had set up to lure him to the city to do his unfinished business” (CW 387). Just as Rayber fails terribly in his first encounter with Tarwater as father, so Tarwater realizes that he has not been successful in ridding himself of Mason’s control. Thus, the relationship between Tarwater and Rayber starts off on poisonous footing: Rayber wants the control that has eluded him his entire life; Tarwater wants desperately to avoid any control, except his own control over his life.

Rayber’s fight to gain control and Tarwater’s desire to escape any control centers on Bishop. The mentally handicapped child of Rayber and the welfare woman (now gone), Bishop has deep significance in The Violent Bear It Away, especially for understanding the book’s presentation of fatherhood and sonhood. Interpreted by critics as “a figure for the presence of God” (Detweiler 5) and as a “grotesque” (Lake 147), Bishop stands as the largest “obstacle to Tarwater and his freedom” (Srigley 123). Bishop impacts both Rayber and Tarwater differently. It is ultimately in their behavior to Bishop that Rayber and Tarwater will determine their own relationship to each other as father and son, as well as their relationship to God.
For Rayber, Bishop at once represents both an enigma and an abomination. He also represents the irrational will of God as father, which Rayber rejects. Rayber does not appreciate the role Bishop plays in the world:

[Rayber’s] normal way of looking on Bishop was as an $x$ signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt. The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution, except at the moments with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love. 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. (CW 401)

Thus, a reader can see that Rayber is certainly not ignorant of Bishop’s importance—as a matter of fact, just the opposite. It is Bishop’s importance that stands out most vividly to Rayber. Because Bishop cannot think rationally, his life has no “solution” or purpose. Rayber therefore logically must reject this “$x$.” Rayber in rejecting Bishop as son is rejecting his role as father, and this is not only a problem for O’Connor, but for any model of fatherhood generally. The industrial father may have had to work away from home, leaving the rearing of children to the mother, but such a father should not wholly reject the diminished responsibilities of fatherhood. And both the traditional model of
fatherhood and the twentieth century model also emphasized a relationship with one’s son. Rayber rejects his fatherhood of Bishop.

In rejecting his son, Rayber also rejects God, his Father. For, as Rayber admits, Bishop was surely “formed in the image and likeness of God.” Thus, Rayber’s rebellion against God-as-Father has necessitated a rejection of Bishop as his son, for his son does not fit into the rational world Rayber has constructed around himself. In opposition to stark rationality, Bishop represents love, a love that does not fit into Rayber’s rationally, but a love that must be nurtured and fathered nonetheless. While the reader does not get a clear perspective of Mason’s feelings for Bishop, Mason, in contrast to Rayber, at least recognizes Bishop’s role in the world and seeks to baptize him—recognize him as part of God’s creation and therefore something, to some degree, holy. Yet, for Rayber, this “horrifying love” exemplified through Bishop is not something to be celebrated as Bishop’s father or even as a human being; instead, this love is something that must be pushed away. The fact that Rayber experiences love for his son only stresses the underlying dishonesty of Rayber’s fathering. He does have the capacity to love. He innately wants to. But refuses it. In doing so, Rayber abandons the role of a genuine father. He cares only for himself, and in doing so, Rayber best represents the sort of fatherhood emphasized by a secular commercialism, concerned only with x’s and y’s, not with genuine human responsibility. Significantly, as Lake asserts, “When Rayber feels this love for Bishop, he is tempted to love the world […] a love that will lead him to God” (157). Yet, Rayber is only concerned with personal gratification. He recognizes no power more important than himself and what he can work out rationally. Simply put,
because Rayber cannot be a son, because he cannot accept God-as-Father, he cannot
himself be a father to Bishop.

As Rayber’s rebellion against a divine paternal authority damages Rayber’s
ability to be a good father himself, Tarwater too has an intense struggle with Bishop. Not
only does Bishop still represent in essence the love of God, but for Tarwater, Bishop
serves as a constant reminder of his calling to Christian prophesy. Although Rayber tells
Tarwater to “forget Bishop exists,” he cannot (CW 403). Tarwater can shout at Bishop.
He can look away from Bishop’s eyes. Nevertheless, Tarwater still cannot truly ignore
Bishop. Tarwater continues his refusal to follow such a dull calling as baptizing Bishop.
Thus, Tarwater’s main conflict in the book becomes his struggle with Rayber’s child, not
Rayber himself. This leads to an interesting progression of events whereby Rayber is
consumed by trying to convince Tarwater to become, in essence, his replacement son for
Bishop; meanwhile, Tarwater ignores Rayber’s attempts. Rayber is not a decisive figure
to Tarwater, not somebody Tarwater ultimately respects. Every attempt by Rayber to
establish his authority only emphasizes his lack of it: he must secretly tail Tarwater as he
sneaks away to visit a church. Rayber vainly tries to pique Tarwater’s interest in secular
culture by taking him to museums. He seems here to be corresponding to mid-century
role of the father as somebody who is a pal—the museums will be a neat and new
experience to Tarwater, making the father and boy closer. Rayber even takes Tarwater
dining at different foreign restaurants every night—with the ultimate effect that Tarwater
does not feel he has eaten enough. Every attempt by Rayber fails to control Tarwater.
Tarwater is preoccupied with trying to escape his calling, a calling he is constantly
reminded of by Bishop.
One of O’Connor’s clearest critiques of Rayber’s control, and indeed of the aggressive masculinity of Mason as well, comes when Rayber follows Tarwater one night when Tarwater visits a church to watch a presentation by a returning missionary, a young girl named Lucette. Lucette, in the context of *The Violent Bear It Away*, represents perhaps the most positive example of a child living in moral service to Jesus and the community. And as she prepares to talk to the church about her life in God’s service, Lucette importantly stands with her mother and father. The parents represent many different significant factors for the book. For one, the presence of the mother implicitly critiques the absence of such figures in the homes of Rayber and Mason. Both parents are necessary for the raising of a child in the service of their heavenly father. Secondly, the preacher who introduces Lucette to the congregation leaves the reader little doubt as to the importance parenting has in Lucette’s positive life: “Lucette travels with her mother and daddy and I want you to meet them because a mother and daddy have to be unselfish to share their only child with the world” (CW 409). Where the preacher stresses the need for an unselfish parenting—in that it seems parents should not pursue raising children in their own interests, but instead they should raise them in God’s interests (i.e. missionary service for Lucette)—to Rayber this approach represents only parental abuse. Rayber’s misunderstanding of Lucette’s parents comes after remembering the occasion where his father retrieved him from Mason’s farm as a child after Mason had stolen him from home. Whereas both of Lucette’s parents care genuinely for their child, Rayber’s father, according to Rayber’s recollection, seems only apathetic about Rayber: “His mother wants him back, Mason. I don’t know why. For my part you could have him but you know how she is” (CW 410). This reminiscence shows
that Rayber’s desire to “free” Lucette as potentially a desire to “free” his own childhood, a interpretation only emphasized further in a following passage: “[Lucette] believed it, she was locked tight in it, chained hand and foot, exactly as he had been, exactly as only a child could be. He felt the taste of his own childhood pain laid again on his tongue like a butter wafer” (CW 412). Thus, Rayber transfers onto Lucette his memory of his own problems. He must believe her “to be exploited” (CW 411). To Rayber, Lucette, who tells the congregation of Jesus’s love and redemptive power, is not a positive role model, but a troubled youth who must be rescued. This distortion of the truth gives Rayber a sense of power that belies Rayber’s relationship with Tarwater as well. Rayber does not want Tarwater to find his own existence. He does not want to be the opposite of Mason’s parenting style and give Tarwater a choice between God and secularism. Rayber wants Tarwater to affirm Rayber’s own insecurity in his life. Such parenting is the opposite of the unselfish behavior spoken of by the minister.

Another decisive moment of change in the relationship between Rayber, Tarwater, and Bishop occurs when Rayber brings them to a park. When Bishop runs into a pool of water under a fountain, Tarwater sees a “blinding brightness [fall] on the lion’s tangled marble head and [gild] the stream of water rushing from his mouth. Then the light, falling more gently, [rests] like a hand on [Bishop’s] white head” (CW 432). Interpreting this display of light and water as a sign, Tarwater rushes for Bishop, whom Rayber snatches away before Tarwater can reach him. Confessing to his demon “stranger” afterwards, Tarwater says, “I wasn’t going to baptize him. [...] I’d drown him first” (CW 433). Yet, Rayber entirely misreads the event: he believes Tarwater meant to baptize Bishop. Rayber believes he sees clearly now that Mason “had left transferred his
fixation to the boy, had left him with the notion that he must baptize Bishop or suffer some terrible consequence” (CW 421). While this scene changes the direction of the novel, pushing Rayber to start the chain of actions that eventually lead to Bishop’s death and Tarwater’s redemption, Rayber has only further demonstrated his inability to understand the situation. He still struggles to “cure” Tarwater of his interest in God and of Mason’s dying mission to him. What he cannot understand is that Tarwater already does not care for Rayber’s intervention.

Thus, Rayber makes one more vain attempt to control Tarwater: taking him and Bishop to a lake house—the Cherokee Lodge—that lies near Powderhead. From there, Rayber will take Tarwater to Powderhead in hopes that upon seeing his old home with Mason, Tarwater’s “irrational fears and impulses would burst out and his uncle [Rayber]—sympathetic, knowing, uniquely able to understand—would be there to explain them to him” (CW 423). However, Rayber does not make this trip for Tarwater, as much as to make a protégé. He does not, as with Bishop, want to take Tarwater for himself, by only wants Tarwater in his life in so far as he lives by his understanding of the world. Yet, Tarwater only rejects Rayber. When Rayber signs in at the Cherokee Lodge, he tells the attendant to sign in Bishop and Tarwater as “his” (CW 425). Rayber’s attempt to entrench himself as the father again fails. Tarwater rejects Rayber as his father and takes the room card from the attendant, writing his name separately from Rayber’s. After this act of defiance, when Rayber tells Tarwater to carry bags up the stairs, his voice has only “a remnant of authority” (CW 426). Even Rayber now acts with diminished confidence. He knows he cannot be Tarwater’s father.
Yet, if he has succeeded in rejecting the authority of Rayber, Tarwater sets out to violently reject his position of God’s son; yet, just as Rayber is ineffective in his rebellion against God by trying to become Tarwater’s father, so Tarwater will be ineffective in establishing his own independence from God. Still Tarwater tries to reject his calling to baptize Bishop, a charge passed to him by his father-figure Mason, and, supposedly, God. Tarwater now believes he has discovered how he can act out his resistance towards the past paternal control by Mason and the current under God: he will drown Bishop in the lake at Cherokee Lodge. Despite some last-minute attempts by Rayber to convince Tarwater of the lunacy of following God—during which time the readers are privy to the irony that Tarwater already has no desire to follow God—Tarwater finally takes Bishop alone out to the lake and drowns him. What is interesting about Tarwater’s action is that the drowning pairs Tarwater and Rayber together. Like Tarwater, Rayber had actually attempted to drown Bishop once before in the ocean but stopped at the last moment. Unlike Tarwater who would carry the drowning to a “successful” conclusion, Rayber realized that he could not escape God through destroying Bishop’s life. Rayber knew that, no matter how much Bishop revolted him, he needed Bishop and “if anything happened to the child, he would have to face [his terrifying love] in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child” (CW 442). Thus, Rayber finally shows his apathy for Bishop: Rayber keeps Bishop alive only to prevent his death from reminding Rayber of the inevitable relationship each human has to God.

The drowning that would thus have represented a sort of Pyrrhic victory for Rayber does so as well for Tarwater—but for different reasons. For Tarwater, in a trance, “defeated” by a reddening sky, utters the baptismal rites over Bishop’s drowning body
(CW 463). Tarwater tries to believe that the baptism “was an accident and nothing more” and that “He had no said NO, he had done it” (CW 465). But the baptismal rebirth has outdone Tarwater’s intention to destroy life. Tarwater now displays signs that his rebellion is failing as he returns to Powderhead. Probably Tarwater’s insecurity in his rebellion can be seen most clearly in his continued assertion that he “ain’t hungry for the bread of life” (CW 459). Tarwater makes this claim to the anonymous bus driver Tarwater hitches a ride with as he escapes from the Cherokee lodge, and he also makes a similar statement to the car driver who picks him up the next day. In fact, to this second driver, who eventually assaults him, Tarwater ironically proclaims that the drugged food he receives is “better than the Bread of Life” (CW 471). The bread of life had been an important concept in Mason’s moral and religious instruction of Tarwater: by “eating” the bread of life one recognizes one’s place as the son of God and shows oneself willing to do His work in life. Indeed, a prophet must eat the bread of life. Yet, eating bread does not fit into the job description Tarwater wants as a prophet and son of God. Again, he wants Old Testament excitement, and, to Tarwater, “the thought of ‘eating the bread of life’ is not so much violent […] as demeaning, something to be ashamed of, and yes, boring” (Michaels 60). It is this boring sonhood to God that Tarwater wants to reject in drowning Bishop instead of baptizing him, but he fails. And so Tarwater must go on fruitlessly asserting his lack of need for the bread of life while he remains hungry. What Tarwater does not understand—or is not yet open to understanding—is that his hunger is, in fact, only going to be sated by the bread of life.

And the ability to accept the bread of life, and his sonhood to God, comes by violent means to Tarwater. Ignorant of the second driver’s intentions, Tarwater eats the
drugged food the driver gives him. The drugs knock Tarwater unconscious, and the car driver drives the car to a remote woods where he takes Tarwater in the forest and rapes him. Critics have interpreted this rape in many ways—as a punishment by God, or revenge by the devil, or as an act showing Tarwater the importance of the feminine. Giannone, for instance, sees in the rape in terms of fatherhood:

Rape makes [Tarwater] experience what the reader has known from the first sentence of the novel: he is no an independent doer and blameless defier of Mason’s orders. No longer is Tarwater wise in his rebellion. On the contrary, he has been in bondage, tied by a lavender handkerchief of amour proper. He is stupid because he has lived in Satan’s deception, and he is profane because his liberty is made possible by the obscene sacrifice of Bishop’s body […] To shake off this airy caress, Tarwater must repent of self-adoration. (146)

As Gianonne argues, the rape demonstrates to Tarwater the stupidity of his rebellion against God as Father. The reader can remember—as Tarwater should have—the precise warning Mason, as his father, gave Tarwater to avoid strangers, drinks and cigarettes, all of which specifically lead to Tarwater’s rape. Tarwater has been proved in the rape to be a dependent of God’s will. He cannot live a life of selfish behavior, which would turn out as hedonistic and sterile as the homosexual rape that just occurred. Tarwater must return to God and accept him as Father.

Thus, when Tarwater returns to Powderhead, he comes home to return to God, and sets about preparing himself for grace. He burns underbrush, destroying the stranger’s voice that is now his enemy. He sees Mason’s grave and learns from Buford
that his fire did not succeed in destroying the old man’s body, which Buford later buried in the Christian way. Shown now that even his genesis of rebellion failed, Tarwater sees off in the distance across Powderhead’s field that all around are “figures seated on the slope and […] from a basket the throng was being fed” (CW 477). Tarwater further sees Mason among the throng. The final view of Mason suggests that Mason has reached Christian redemption, and, despite his problematic parenting of Tarwater, he represents a positive role model. Thus recognizing his purpose in life, Tarwater “felt his hunger no longer as a pain but a tide” and finally Tarwater hears a disembodied “command,” supposedly from God: “GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (CW 478). Thus, the novel suggests that Tarwater may embark on a life similar to Mason’s, who emphasizing the “burning” nature of God’s mercy earlier in the novel. Still, the book certainly does not provide specifics on whether Tarwater ultimately succeeds in his life as a prophet. Nonetheless, this Tarwater, now redeemed from his violent baptism of Bishop, must prepare the children of God for the bread of life. Tarwater has finally accepted his role as a child of God, and must dedicate his life as a father-figure, in a sense in loco parentis, to the people in this world. Unlike Rayber who could not be a son of God and so could not be a successful father on earth, only now, when Tarwater has accepted his position as God’s son, can Tarwater himself be a father.
Conclusion

*The Violent Bear It Away* is a book intimately concerned with fatherhood. The book emphasizes first and foremost to readers that any parenting on earth must be directed towards the divine. Furthermore, speaking against the more son-centered fatherhood increasingly common in mid-twentieth century America, the book, in stressing the divine so ardently, emphasizes the need for father-centered relationships, yet relationships that are not inherently selfish. Yet, God-as-father must play the supreme role not only for sons, but for fathers—since all are children under God. In both these lights, he book portrays Mason in a more positive light because he, unlike Rayber, acts under God, a point emphasized by Mason’s presence in Tarwater’s final redemptive vision. Yet, the book also problematizes both father-figures for their refusal to include a mother figure in Tarwater’s life, a critique especially prominent in the episode with Lucette. This critique is especially significant in light of the fact that fathers in the twentieth century were trying to reclaim the parenting of sons from mothers, who had been more dominant in the late nineteenth century. The book hence cautions that both the father and mother are necessary for the most positive development of a child. Here, though, Mason ultimately gets the better of Rayber by opening the way to, as Donahoo well emphasizes, a more feminine understanding of Christianity—an understanding that
emphasizes the communal aspect of the “bread of life” over the aggressive witness of Old Testament prophets. It is Tarwater, who tries to reject God and live a life of selfishness, the sort of lifestyle increasingly prevalent during mid-twentieth-century America, who must be humbled by his own acts and finally return to God and accept the “bread of life.” The book is then harshly critical, most importantly, of a self-centered existence, especially an existence that privileges the son over the father. Rayber, who represents the prime example of such a son, only exists by seeing love as terrifying and only refrains from murdering his mentally handicapped son because he would have to love the world. It is Rayber’s very life, not Tarwater’s drowning of Bishop, that stands as the true horror in this novel. Immoral and selfish, he acts egoistically as a parent whereas Mason, representing a traditional style of fathering, places humility and moral/religious codes first in relationship with his surrogate son, Tarwater. Ultimately, The Violent Bear It Away represents a resounding shot-across-the-bow of then-contemporary America: O’Connor warns father and sons alike to recognize God as their father, live humbly, and live a life filled with Christian love.
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