Visions and Revisions: Reading Flannery O'Connor's "The River" as an Amendment to T. S. Eliot's Critique of Modernity

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot and Flannery O'Connor are known as critics of modernity. A comparison, via close reading, of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the work that established Eliot's reputation as the poet who captures the emptiness of modern life, and one of O'Connor's most remarkable short stories, "The River," reveals that the similarities between the two writers' critiques go far beyond a common dislike of contemporary society. "The River" can be read as O'Connor powerfully employing and reaffirming all of the specific elements of Eliot's anti-modern lament: Her story, like the poem, portrays a world where people are faceless, uncaring masses that don't connect yet constantly judge, inducing anxiety and paralysis in the protagonist. "The River" furthermore aligns with "Prufrock" by linking superficial modern culture to the city and showing a loss of meaning, sincerity, and belief that leads the respective protagonists to feel that they do not matter. However, O'Connor does not simply apply Eliot's ideas; her critique of modernity, while agreeing with the poet's principles, is arguably both more radical and more effective. Whereas the modern tedium—the endless repetition of trivial tasks—never ends for Prufrock, O'Connor's child-protagonist Bevel manages to escape it by drowning, and the readers being urged to accept this,

in the logic of the narrative, as a triumph, can be seen as a more consequential attack on modern life than Eliot's.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, T. S. Eliot, modernity, critique, close reading

T. S. Eliot praised Flannery O'Connor as having "an uncanny talent of high order," adding: "but my nerves are just not strong enough to take much of a disturbance" (as cited in Kirk, 1995, p. 182). The poet's statement may sound like a mere entertaining soundbite, perhaps tongue-in-cheek. In fact, there is more truth in this offhand comment than one might think. On the one hand, the two writers share some outlooks and interests. On the other, O'Connor is, it could be argued, considerably more cruel and radical in both effect and underlying philosophy (which is quite remarkable, given that *The Waste Land* and its predecessors are among the darker works of the twentieth century). This paper will bring to light how one of O'Connor's short stories, "The River," demonstrates both aspects. The story from 1955 can be read as building on—and amplifying—the critique of modernity, modern life, and modern man that Eliot presented in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Generally, both writers are known for their resistance towards the modern world, which Eliot regarded as a "totality" (Menand, 1996, p. 557) that encompasses social relations, values, the political sphere, art, industry, commerce, etc. O'Connor, similarly, saw a complex of "'Progress' and the attendant forces of materialism, science and technology," which she resisted with an "unwavering commitment" (Prown, 1988, p. 2). The two writers' distaste for the modern has been described as being concerned with what is missing or distorted. According to Louis Menand (1996, p. 555), "Eliot criticized modern life for its lack of a coherent moral ground and for

the idiosyncratic and makeshift value systems it produced." O'Connor, for whom the "necessity to resist the alienating forces of modernity" was "a matter as urgent as life or death," is said to have believed "the seemingly chaotic, absurd and often ridiculous aspects of modern existence stem largely from the sense of emptiness" (Prown, 1988, p. 2).

A comparison of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The River" demonstrates that the parallels go much further, and that there are crucial differences. Just like the poem, the southern writer's short story highlights the lack of community and care in urban society, the superficiality of the culture, the inability of the individual to be or do anything that means something, and the absence of a belief in anything bigger than oneself. Yet, while Eliot's speaker essentially gives up, resorting to self-mockery, O'Connor's protagonist finds a way out, which, paradoxically, makes the story more brutal, because the price he has to pay is one that even most critics of modernity would regard as too horrible. Hence, Eliot gives us something like a Sisyphus rolling his rock up the hill in a perpetual modernist misery, whereas the only possible analogies for what O'Connor is doing must be Christian; her main character sacrifices his life to escape the same modernist misery for something else.

In "The River," four or five-year-old, neglected Harry Ashfield, who lives with his dysfunctional family in a city in the American South, wants to "count" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 33). His new babysitter Mrs. Connin, an evangelical Christian, takes him to the nearby river and the charismatic young Reverend Bevel Summers, who is preaching there. The prospect so excites Harry that he tells both Mrs. Connin and Rev. Summers that his name is Bevel too. He is baptized in the river, but even though this makes a big impression on "Bevel," the pathos-laden ceremony turns awkward when the "affliction" of the mother that the preacher attempts to pray away at

the boy's request turns out to be a "hangover" (p. 30). The child's home life does not get better either, so he suddenly decides to "go under the river" (p. 30) himself and find "the Kingdom of Christ" there for real this time, without an intermediary (p. 35). All alone in the countryside except for a "Mr. Paradise" who might have secretly followed him to molest him, "Bevel" drowns in the process, with Mr. Paradise trying in vain to rescue him (p. 36).

The criticisms inherent in the story show some remarkable parallels to Eliot's "Prufrock," the famous fragmentary 1915 poem in which the eponymous speaker introduces his unknown companion to the idle chatter and "yellow fog" of the modern city, laments the ageing process and, most of all, expresses both his wish to "dare," to "presume," to address "an overwhelming question," and his inability to do so. The most obvious connection is of course the desire for meaning; both protagonists want to matter in a society where nobody does. Prufrock seeks to "murder and create" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1400), which David Spurr (1984) interprets as destroying existing structures to build new ones (pp. 1-22); Bevel/Harry too wants to destroy the structures of his existence and "count." Yet, while this similarity is crucial and will have to be revisited later when the different fates of the two characters are discussed, there are other, more basic links.

The first is that both texts present a world that is devoid of community, a world that has masses of people but no meaningful connection, a world where nobody cares. Prufrock's environment is not made up of individuals—we never hear a single name; his love interest is not even a "she," but "one, settling on a pillow or throwing off a shawl" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1402). Using metonymy, Eliot has his speaker meet "faces" instead of people (p. 1400), hear "voices" instead of having conversations with human beings (p. 1400), and encounter "arms" that "are braceleted and white and bare" instead of actual women (p. 1401). In "The River," young Bevel's family is

referred to in terms that are just as impersonal. This is the first time someone speaks, characteristically to highlight one of the boy's shortcomings: "'He ain't fixed right,' a *loud voice* said from the hall" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 19; emphasis mine). Mrs. Ashfield's first utterance is reported in a manner that does not make her look any warmer: "A *toneless voice* called from the bedroom, 'Bring me an icepack'" (p. 20; emphasis mine). It is as if, like Eliot, O'Connor wanted to stress that these are not people, but carriers of sounds—sounds of reproach mostly, cruel or needy. Mrs. Connin, meanwhile, is introduced as a "speckled skeleton" that "is looming in" (p. 19), suggesting that while the Ashfields are the worst, the inhumanity of society is a general problem. The babysitter with her evangelical Christianity and Reverend Summers, after all, turn out to represent false promises in the story: Bevel knows "not to fool with preachers anymore" (p. 35) at the end, by which time Mrs. Connin has already left him behind, after being mocked by his parents.

The emptiness of the people, their lack of any meaningful essence in both Eliot's and O'Connor's world is reflected in their communication, which manages to be stale and vicious at the same time. Prufrock, memorably, takes his companion through "Streets that follow like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1399). If a discussion between friends or lovers is the first thing that comes to the speaker's mind as a simile for "half-deserted streets" in a "cheap" area of a polluted, soulless town (p. 1399), his experience with communication cannot be good. Bevel has had a similar experience: For example, Mr. Ashfield, when paying the babysitter who just told him his wife got healed, lazily takes aim at both the wife's alcohol problem and Mrs. Connin's class and faith. His passive-aggressive comments are as insidious as they are tedious: "'Go on, go on,' he said, 'I want to hear more about [my wife's] affliction. The exact nature of it has escaped...' He waved the bill . . .

'Healing by prayer is mightily inexpensive'" (O'Connor, 2016, pp. 31-32).

With all this talk going on, it is significant that hardly anybody ever speaks to J. Alfred Prufrock or Harry "Bevel" Ashfield. Though surrounded by people, the two are utterly alone—several scholars suggest that even Prufrock's "you," the companion addressed in the poem, is not another person but another part of the speaker's conflicted mind (Drew, 1949, p. 34; Riquelme, 1991, p. 156): "The 'you and I' . . . are divided parts of Prufrock's own nature" (Perrine, 1983, p. 765). The many city dwellers Prufrock encounters never talk to him (except in his imagination, in a line by his love interest that the speaker brings up as a hypothetical future possibility: "That is not what I meant, at all" [Eliot, 1998, p. 1402]). Bevel is similarly ignored by the world, which in this case means the main fixtures in his life, his parents. When sending his son on his way with Mrs. Connin, the father mostly just addresses the sitter: "for Christ's sake fix him" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 19). When, later on, Bevel's curious name-change comes out and the young reader's Bible that the boy took from Mrs. Connin is found, the assembled party shares exclamations but does not really address the child right next to them: "Whoever heard of anyone named Bevel?", "That's valuable," "That's a collector's item" (pp. 31-32). In what is a powerful metaphor for the communication style and the relationship of the parents and the son, Mrs. Ashfield "held the book too high for him to reach and began to read it" (p. 32). The presence of human beings does not entail connection, care, or kindness.

When Bevel is addressed, he seems genuinely shocked. Upon his father saying "Good-by," for instance, he reacts like this: "'Good-by,' the little boy said and jumped as if he had been shot" (p. 32). This already hints at the fact that in both texts, other people are not just empty and uncaring—they are a threat. Prufrock always feels the

need to put on a mask or "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1400). He feels being judged all the time, and, full of anxiety, expects to fall short of expectations: "They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin'" (p. 1400). Eliot, in a famous passage, uses unambiguously violent imagery to show how seriously the opinions of others torment the speaker:

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
> The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
> Then how should I begin . . . (pp. 1400-1401)

Norms and expectations have turned Prufrock into a nervous wreck, which he puts thusly: "And in short, I was afraid" (p. 1401). He is passive and helpless; linking himself to the ineffectual, "ridiculous" Polonius (p. 1402), he knows that he will never "Disturb the universe" (p. 1400). Bevel is in a similar state. O'Connor, in her trademark bluntness, stresses his passivity when we meet him for the first time: "He seemed mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out" (2016, p. 20). When Reverend Summers informs the boy there is a chance he will "count," he is "too shocked to cry" (p. 30). Hurt by his mother's reproaches, such as "What lies have you been telling today, honey" (p. 32), he has learned to shut down and dissociate from reality to keep the pain away: "He . . . heard her voice from a long way, as if he were under the river" (p. 32).

It can be argued that the people in "The River" pose an even greater threat and are more vicious than in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." For one thing, the casual cruelty of Mrs. Connin's children, whom Bevel meets when he stops at her place on the way to the river, goes beyond anything that Eliot comes up with. This effect is heightened by the fact that, at this time, the world of the well-

meaning Mrs. Connin and her promises of spiritual healing still appear as a possible alternative to the atheist world of the Ashfields. The children, calmly judging Bevel like Eliot's "faces" by holding a "conference on the porch" (p. 22),[1] set a trap for the boy by faking "kindness" (p. 23), so that he is attacked by a pig (only fear of their mother keeps them from doing worse things to their guest). O'Connor's masterful description of the group's reaction to their act once again links surveillance to cruelty: "The three Connins watched from where they were . . . Their stern faces didn't brighten any but they seemed to become less taut, as if some great need had been partly satisfied" (p. 24). The visceral, quasi-reptilian brutality that does not have any motivation outside itself—no money, status, or jealousy is involved here—, that does not even serve a function beyond silencing an urge to see pain, is much scarier than a calculated crime out of revenge or greed. It is also not personal, which in a way makes it a more 'modern' sort of brutality: unlike an individual dislike that can be classified, analyzed, and perhaps addressed, this threat is faceless and amorphous, similar to the impersonal "eyes," "arms," and "voices" that torment Prufrock so in mass society.

The ending is another element that makes O'Connor's story appear even more radical than Eliot's poem in terms of showing how alone the protagonist really is, and in terms of disabusing us of the notion that humans care about each other. No one, not his parents, not the babysitter, not the church, is with Bevel when he dies—except for big Mr. Paradise, a skeptic who was present as a mocking bystander at Reverend Summers's "healings" before. But Mr. Paradise

[1] Repetition allows O'Connor to emphasize how much the feeling of being *watched* by others forms an essential component of the threat, just like in "Prufrock:" "The three boys watched him while he unbuttoned the coat and took it off. Then they watched him hang it on the bed post and then they stood, watching the coat" (2016, p. 22).

is probably not there now because he is worried or wants to help. As he follows the boy at a distance, takes a red-and-white peppermint stick with him, and sits "half hidden in the bushes" (p. 35) to watch Bevel, it does not look like he has the best of intentions; Irene Visser (2016) is certain the man is "intent on molesting the child" (p. 153). In the end, the only one who is interested in the protagonist is interested in him because he wants to abuse him: this is a cruel twist on the meaning of the word "care." And if the best of all the people, the one that tries to save him (the drowning boy notices "something like a giant pig bounding after him, shaking a red and white club and shouting" [O'Connor, 2016, p. 36]) is a child molester, one can't help feeling that O'Connor wants to suggest Sartre had a point when he wrote "Hell is—other people" (1989, p. 45).

The term "hell" is actually quite apt here. Both Eliot and O'Connor make it rather explicit that their main characters, living in a kind of vegetative state among the others, are metaphorically dead and stuck in hell. "Prufrock" begins with an epigraph that quotes Dante's *Inferno* in the original Italian. Dante's speaker is in hell and informs the (visiting) listener that he will tell him his story now, but only because it is clear that neither of them will leave (Eliot, 1998, p. 1399). Since what follows is the story of a man ostensibly told to another person, we must conclude Prufrock is saying through the epigraph that he is in hell and will remain there. "There is no resurrection from the death which has undone him," summarizes J. Hillis Miller (1965, p. 139). Allusions to death abound in the text, like in the passage where the speaker links himself to the dead Lazarus coming back to life: "Would it have been worth while/. . . To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead . . .'" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1402). The context—a series of what-ifs and regrets about missed opportunities and failures to act—and the grammar make it clear that Prufrock is not expressing a real possibility here, but instead laments

that he didn't, and by definition cannot, follow the Biblical Lazarus's example. He is (spiritually) dead forever, and in hell.

Flannery O'Connor symbolically likens Bevel's existence to death as well, and not in a way that sounds like heaven. Irene Visser (2016) observes, for example, that "Mrs. Connin's skeletal hand that caught him when his father pushed him out the door" is "one of the story's death motifs, highlighting the boy's vulnerability and lack of parental care" (p. 153). Furthermore, it is telling how often the child is presented as if sleeping or tranquilized. Near the river, "Bevel's eyes followed drowsily the slow circles of two silent birds revolving high in the air" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 27). At home, the boy "had seemed to be going to sleep on his feet, his head drooping farther and farther forward" (p. 31). Being summoned by his mother, he "automatically shifted his direction toward her without opening his eyes any farther" (p. 32). O'Connor will be well aware that in Greek mythology, sleep and death are brothers. Similar to Prufrock, Bevel appears like an automaton, certainly not alive in the way the term is commonly understood.

Overall, thus, "The River" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" give us a world where people are faceless, uncaring masses that don't connect with each other yet constantly demand and judge, inducing extreme anxiety and paralysis. Now one might wonder why this is supposed to constitute a critique of modernity, specifically. An answer can be given even without recourse to biography and the well-documented anti-modern stances of the two authors, and without recourse to treatises demonstrating that the transformation of small communities into faceless society and the resulting alienation are modern phenomena. Eliot and O'Connor link the above-mentioned problems so explicitly to the perhaps most outstanding symbol of modernity, the city, that it is impossible to conclude they are just commenting on human nature rather than on specific historical and

social constellations and developments.

Eliot frames Prufrock's account with a long description of the setting, as if to hammer home where exactly his hell is located and what its cornerstones are, and this setting is as unmistakably urban as it is unpleasant. The "half-deserted streets" are home to "one-night cheap hotels" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1399); sad and sordid, these dwellings hint that there will be no love in the supposed "Love Song." The general lifelessness and the spiritual death that will emerge as a theme are already apparent in the city imagery too—the "evening is spread out against" the urban sky "Like a patient etherised upon a table" (p. 1399). Yellow fog is evoked repeatedly, reminiscent of pollution ("soot" from "chimneys" is mentioned concomitantly) and cigarette smoke (pp. 1399-1400).

Although it seems unlikely in a short story that has, after all, less access to symbols and metaphors than a poem, Flannery O'Connor maligns the city just as elaborately, style-wise. "Outside the gray morning was blocked off on either side by the unlit empty buildings" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 20), reads like something Prufrock might say, and reflects—with its depressing lack of color and light, the absence of opportunities suggested by the blocking-off, the mood of oppression resulting from the looming buildings, and the emptiness—the major themes of the story in a nutshell. Another description marks the city even more unmistakably as a disease, as a deformity that should not be there, as something that devalues the surrounding area: "Behind, in the distance, the city rose like a cluster of warts on the side of the mountain" (p. 27). The simile and the rest of the imagery demonstrate that while the countryside and its more pre-modern aspects, like religious fundamentalism, are no solution, the city, where Bevel resides and which his parents call home, is the origin of his problems.

A second decidedly modern issue that both texts are concerned with is the loss of meaning. In Prufrock's world and Bevel's family, there is nothing greater than oneself, nothing that one could be in awe of or believe in, so life is just a tepid, endless series of separate and trivial activities, without anything that would hold these activities together and infuse them with importance. Prufrock declares he has "known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,/I have measured out my life in coffee spoons" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1400). Kitchen utensils that hold only a little and get used again and again for the same mundane task, not comprehensive ideas, belief systems or dreams, are the lens through which the speaker views his existence. He obsessively name-drops symbols of the recurring activities that fill his days, until the readers themselves feel trapped in a maddening loop of banalities: "the taking of toast and tea" (p. 1400), "tea and cakes and ices," "the cups, the marmalade, the tea" (p. 1401), "the novels," the "tea cups" (p. 1402). In such a loop, time subjectively expands into an eternal boredom that seems positively threatening if highlighted in the way Eliot does it: "And indeed there will be time/. . . There will be time, there will be time/. . . There will be time" (p. 1400). Also, in such a loop nothing can ever make a difference. When Prufrock announces that there is "time yet for a hundred indecisions,/And for a hundred visions and revisions" (p. 1400), the grand "visions" sound hopeful, but they are replaced by "revisions," which evoke incremental changes, going in circles, and a lack of conviction in one's work. And even these revisions are "revisions which a minute will reverse" (p. 1400). To add meaning to the cakes and ices seems impossible; the loop is closed.

In "The River," Bevel, even though he is only four or five years old, is stuck in a similarly tepid routine. It is obvious that Mrs. Connin is only the last in a long series of babysitters. The child's home life is marked by the smell of "dead cigarette butts" (O'Connor,

2016, p. 19), his mother staying in bed or "lying on half the sofa" (p. 31), "her bitter breath" covering his face (p. 33), and other couples coming over for idle chatter. Bevel's attempt at infusing meaning, his "revision"—the baptism—is one which a minute does reverse, as it fails to have any impact on his parents (apart from hilarity), and convinces him that Reverend Summers must be a charlatan.

Most importantly, the Ashfields are utterly superficial. The banality of existence that Eliot symbolized with objects is represented by the conversational style here. Nothing is ever taken seriously in the family, nothing matters. "Where he lived everything was a joke" (p. 29), the narrator reports more than once, "They joked a lot where he lived" (p. 25). The mocking, ironic stance as default world outlook has so influenced Bevel that he cannot easily imagine another one, one of awe or serious reflection for instance. When the preacher begins the baptism procedure, Bevel automatically assumes this is another laughing matter, and only slowly does it dawn on him that for other people, some things might actually have meaning and value:

> Bevel rolled his eye in a comical way and thrust his face forward, close to the preacher's. "My name is Bevvvuuuuul," he said in a loud deep voice and let the tip of his tongue slide across his mouth. The preacher didn't smile. . . Bevel grasped the back of the preacher's collar and held it tightly. The grin had already disappeared from his face. He had the sudden feeling that this was not a joke. . . From the preacher's face, he knew immediately that nothing the preacher said or did was a joke. (pp. 29-30)

Approaches to life and culture in Prufrock's world are as shallow as in the Ashfield home. The only difference is that Eliot uses the realm of art, not Christianity, to expose the vacuousness. His speaker repeatedly reports on a scene that presumably happens in some kind of salon he visits: "In the room the women come and go/Talking of

Michelangelo" (Eliot, 1998, pp. 1399-1400). Here, the grand master and the glorious art he represents are reduced to material for small talk—to joking matter, perhaps. The clumsy rhyme and rhythm, making the painter and the situation sound artless, indicate that the women's discussion is not particularly deep and intellectual; besides, since the participants come and go, most will only hear and contribute brief soundbites. Michelangelo does not seem to warrant much attention; he is just another conversation topic at a party. He has lost the luster that he once clearly had, and this can again be read as a commentary on modernity. After all, for Walter Benjamin, one of the most important characteristics of the twentieth century was precisely that art, in the age of mechanical reproduction, had lost its "aura" (2007, p. 223). The Michelangelo passages are one more way for Eliot to say that there is nothing left that means anything anymore—and "The River," though much less of a meditation on the possibilities of artistic creation than the poem, also has scenes that link the shallowness of the Ashfields to both art and modernity. The family does not even bother with the old masters anymore and has instead an abstract watercolor, "black lines crossing into broken planes of violent color" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 19), on the wall. As the only object in the apartment mentioned in the long description of the babysitter picking up Bevel, it must be somewhat emblematic of the Ashfields. Mrs. Connin, who is problematic herself but a lesser evil compared to the boy's parents, whose money she refuses when they mock her, is not impressed: "I wouldn't have paid for that . . . I would have drew it myself," she says, before correcting herself: "I wouldn't have drew it" (p. 20). The artwork has no aura, there is no meaning in this house, she seems to suggest.

Consequently, what experts have identified as the major theme of Eliot's poem—the "emptiness of life without belief" (Matthiessen, 1959, p. 99), the "disease of loss of conviction, of loss

of faith in the meaning of life" (Brooks & Warren, 1964, p. 396)—also constitutes an important part of O'Connor's message. "The River" and its famously Catholic author are, as hinted above, just more explicit than early Eliot about what kind of belief it is that is tragically gone, and what could potentially produce the meaning that is absent from Prufrock's, Bevel's, and modern life. The little boy's unusually complete lack of knowledge of religion and Jesus Christ is foregrounded so massively that one can only conclude it is a shortcoming that must be causally related to Bevel's sad existence. This is an impression that is strengthened by the fact that the principal creators of his misery, the parents, will be the ones that kept God away from him. At Mrs. Connin's place, the limited third-person narrator gives us the child's perspective: "Bevel turned . . . to a colored picture over the bed of a man wearing a white sheet. He had long hair and a gold circle around his head . . . He was going to ask who that was . . ." (O'Connor, 2016, p. 23). Bevel's obliviousness in matters of religion is presented comically: "He found out this morning that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. Before he had thought it had been a doctor named Sladewall, a fat man with a yellow mustache" (p. 25). Bevel's lack of knowledge becomes an element of the 'grotesque' that O'Connor's Southern Gothic is known for. O'Connor shows the boy as someone for whom, before Mrs. Connin, "Jesus Christ was a word like 'oh' or 'damn' or 'God'" (p. 25)—which implies, hilariously, grotesquely and shockingly at the same time, that God, even after learning about Jesus, is *still* a random swear word. All this stands out, sending the message that it must matter. What is more, the new religious knowledge does not only matter, but clearly appears positive: "It occurred to him that he was lucky this time," Bevel is shown as thinking, "You found out more when you left where you lived" (p. 25).

The inadequacy of a concrete manifestation of religion on earth, the preacher and his effect-laden shenanigans, does not disprove this, as the ending of the story ultimately demonstrates. But since the ending depends so much on another element of the author's commentary on modern life, the desire to "count," this element needs to be discussed first.

Actually, it is again both protagonists, Bevel and Prufrock, who want to be persons that matter and do something that matters, and desperately feel that currently this is not the case. When Reverend Summers dangles the prospect of change in front of the child, saying "You won't be the same again," "You'll count," and asks "Do you want that?" (p. 30), the answer is a resounding "Yes" (p. 30). This is not even the first time Bevel expresses his wish to transform his deficient self: "Will he heal me?" he asks when Mrs. Connin tells him that they are going to see the preacher (p. 21). J. Alfred Prufrock feels similarly inadequate. As if to make it abundantly plain that nobody should mistake his report from the frontlines of modern life as the statements of a legitimate spokesperson, he says, "I am no prophet" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1401). Also, he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (p. 1402), from which the reader can infer that he considers even to be compared to one of the most notorious failures of world literature as too much of an honor—Hamlet's medieval mucking-up of things was at least part of a grand drama that had the world hold its breath, while modern Prufrock's is just pathetic. Instead of fighting injustice and betrayal, he is reduced to questions like "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" (p. 1403). That does not mean, however, that he has never longed to count, to do something that makes a difference. In fact, one of the poem's most striking features is the repetition of the speaker's desire to "dare" (p. 1400), to "spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways" (p. 1401), to "have squeezed the universe into a ball" (p. 1402).

The parallels between the yearnings of the two protagonists do not end here. Both texts contain passages that see the dream to matter cruelly shattered by a single comment from the "other people" whose significance was analyzed above. Prufrock can see his female love interest cut his grand pronouncements of bravery off with "That is not it at all" in his mind (p. 1402); Mrs. Ashfield wipes out the effect Bevel hoped to achieve from changing his name by establishing to Mrs. Connin that "His name is Harry." She also effectively erases any impact of the baptism by stating "Well the nerve!" when the babysitter proudly reports on the preacher's actions (O'Connor, 2016, p. 31). More interestingly, the two authors equally rely on water imagery to elaborate on the longing.

Deep water—the sea, the river—is the imagined locus of another world that is the complete opposite of the empty, meaningless one that the protagonists inhabit. Prufrock thinks an existence as a crab at the bottom of the ocean would be appropriate for him: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1401). While this is partly self-criticism (sideward-moving crabs are reminiscent of Polonius again, and with its "ragged claws," the animal hardly sounds noble), it also expresses a need, and a deep yearning. After all, sea creatures "delight spontaneously in their natural environment" (Drew 1949, p. 35). They are in a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings rather than at odds with them, and those animals are not burdened by a constant anxiety resulting from self-doubt, outside expectations, or questions of meaning. Being one with the ancient unchanging sea would mean that modern fragmentation and alienation cease to exist.

Moreover, as Elizabeth Drew (1949) points out, the sea is also a "primordial symbol of creation and destruction" (p. 35), and thus a fitting canvas for Prufrock to project his wish to "murder and create" on. The sea's "vital energies" (p. 36) contrast with the tedious taking

of toast and tea. Eliot uses mermaids, who live in the sea and, like it, are exciting, seductive and dangerous, to express the speaker's desire for a more vital world: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each/. . . I have seen them riding seaward on the waves" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1403). They are in sight, but out of reach.

All in all, water imagery offers the most radical contrast to the "aridity of a sterile . . . culture" (Hart, 1986, p. 235), precisely the kind of contrast that O'Connor is looking to establish as well. It is no accident that the story bears the title "The River." The "broad orange stream" that Mrs. Connin takes Bevel to in order to be baptized becomes the center of the story. Everything about it is different from what the child knows (the description of the city as a cluster of warts contains the river with the "low red and gold grove" nearby as a beautiful Other [O'Connor, 2016, p. 27]). The river is the scene of a veritable spectacle—the young preacher is charismatic with his loud and soft and musical voice singing of the "rich red river of Jesus' blood" (p. 27), and what is a baptism if not a murder of the old to create the new? The river is loaded with meaning: "the River of Faith, the River of Life, the River of Love," exclaims Reverend Summers (p. 27). Like Prufrock, Bevel is led to believe that the water is a counterpoint to the life he has experienced; the preacher promises "you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it" (p. 27). Hence, the boy's yearning is completely focused on the stream. "Yes," he thinks, "I won't go back to the apartment then, I'll go under the river" (p. 30).

For Prufrock the underwater realm remains a dream. As Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (1964) write, he cannot "awaken from his meaningless existence" (p. 394). Bevel, on the other hand, quite literally does not return to the apartment at the end, and goes under the river instead—and this, finally, is the all-important difference between the two works. If one takes an unbiased

look at the language of the final passage, there can be no doubt that O'Connor suggests Bevel *succeeds;* he does manage to leave his meaningless existence behind. The narrator presents a story of struggle, where initial frustration is replaced by triumph and then relief:

> The river wouldn't have him. He tried again and came up choking. . . He thought how far he had come for nothing and he began to hit and splash and kick the filthy river. . . He gave one low cry of pain and indignation. Then he . . . plunged under once and this time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise: then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him. (O'Connor, 2016, pp. 35-36)

Taking the passage seriously, one has to say it sends the message that Bevel is finally free from anxiety; aided by kind forces, he has 'arrived.' However, Bevel is dead (really dead, as opposed to the metaphorical death described earlier). Readers and critics are faced with the problem that they are expected to accept that the death, by drowning, of a child—a child that has no friends, has suffered a lot, and is pursued by a child molester in his final hour—is good news because the child has "found the Kingdom of Christ in the river" (p. 35; this is how the narrator describes Bevel's goal). This will give even the most ardent Christians and the loudest critics of the society Bevel wanted to leave some pause. One could try to explain the problem away by claiming there is no good news implied, as the limited third-person narrator gives us only the subjective relief of a small boy that is sadly deluded, and we have to separate this from the objective truth as regards the drowning, which is tragic. That, however, would not do the story justice, as the subjective perspective

and experience of the child (just like Prufrock's subjective perspective and experience) is the whole point of the narrative, and has to be taken as relevant. One does not have to go as far as Ralph C. Wood (2008), who sees "a supremely happy ending to a supremely happy story" (p. 12), but Bevel has to be understood as someone who successfully escapes a life of emptiness. Flannery O'Connor herself reportedly clarified that because it gets him into heaven, the boy's drowning is a crucial achievement (Peede, 2007, p. 11).

One cannot stress enough how different this treatment of death is, in terms of effect, from what T. S. Eliot is doing. Bevel's death changes everything. It shocks the readers—if they share Wood's and O'Connor's sense of triumph or not—into thinking. It is unquestionably the climax of the story in the truest sense of the word. In contrast, ageing Prufrock's real death, a discussion of which does come up in the poem, does not change anything and its mention does not stand out from the rest. In fact, it is easy to miss. Prufrock has a vision of his final hour: "And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat and snicker" (Eliot, 1998, p. 1401). Death is just some kind of lackey here who is ready to serve and laughs at "the slightly ridiculous guest" (Brooks & Warren, 1964, p. 393). Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have found the right words for the signal this passage sends: "Even Prufrock's death will lack dignity and meaning" (1964, p. 393). Prufrock's future death, and its discussion, are an anticlimax. They fit organically into the narrative of tedium and emptiness. They are, in a way, as tepid as Prufrock's life.

There is a consequence. If the two authors' shared goal indeed is to make us see that (modern) life, or at least the kind of life Prufrock and Bevel live, is hell, then, O'Connor is arguably more successful. Paradoxically, the fact that Bevel is made to look victorious while Prufrock is not turns the boy's world into a more terrible one than the man's. After all, if an author signals that the voluntary

violent death of a child—a child she has made us feel close to in the preceding pages—is a cause for happiness or relief, then readers, atheist and Christian alike, will feel that the life the child was forced to inhabit must have been one of pure horror. Add to this the discomfort from having to choose between a stark, cruel worldview far removed from the comforting pieties of people basically being good and life being what you make it (O'Connor's Catholicism, which is necessary to see Bevel as saved), and the view that Bevel simply died, for nothing (which is the only possible interpretation if you do not believe in heaven), and the readers' little personal hell is complete. There is nothing tepid about the experience of reading about Bevel's world, while Eliot's readers feel less tormented.

Eliot does attempt to raise the stakes in a way O'Connor does, by suggesting that the reader is part of the inescapable emptiness. One strategy involves the epigraph; here, the speaker (a stand-in for Prufrock) and the listener (us) are *both* in hell, after all. Interestingly, another one, at the very end, involves drowning. The speaker states:

> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (Eliot, 1998, p. 1403)

Suddenly, the obsessively self-absorbed Prufrock switches from the "I" that dominated the poem to "we" and "us," so what is going on in his sad world is supposed to be happening to the readers as well. But, in contrast to Bevel's drowning, this one is once again only metaphorical. Donald Heiney (1958) convincingly argues the three lines mean that "although escape into the nirvana of sensualism . . . is temporarily successful, . . . mundane affairs press in upon us and we are recalled to conventional life" (p. 484). Hence, the drowning here is just one more way of communicating the tedium of everyday existence. This does not have the urgency and power of O'Connor's

ending. It does not add much.

Many more differences between the two texts could be mentioned: Eliot's poem is about ageing; Bevel never gets to age. O'Connor, with her portrayal of the Ashfields and the Connins, is interested in class and class differences, whereas Eliot does not seem to care about this, with Prufrock, the "symbol of a wealthy young man" (Anderson & Walton 1939, p. 234), the "modern intellectual" (Blair et al., 1966, p. 1046) taking up all the space as if there was nothing else. "The River" is a study of the American South, while Prufrock's story could take place anywhere in the so-called civilized world. Yet, all that does not change the fact that fundamentally, the two works are about the same thing. They present a critique of a (modern) world that is without community, care, meaning, and belief. In such an empty existence, the most fundamental problem is not to save one's soul but to find it in the first place. That Bevel, on top of everything else, saves his in the end, does not negate the problem. In contrast to Prufrock, he manages to accomplish what everyone in this world yearns for—to "murder" (himself) and "create" (a new life in heaven, presumably)—but, like the violence inherent in the metaphor, this victory is not one that lets us sleep easily. Many readers will be disturbed more by it than by Prufrock's infinite loop of cakes and ices. O'Connor's final departure from the Eliotian model allows her to make a more radical case for the horrors of Eliot's modernist hell than the poet himself.

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