

The Prophet as Storyteller

BY CHRISTINA BIEBER

**With a razor sharp and winsome sense of humor,
Flannery O'Connor was one of America's finest prophets.
Like Nathan, who confronted King David through artful
storytelling, she understood the power of fiction to
engage the ethical imagination and deliver a much-
needed emotional jolt.**

You don't have to read too far into the book of Genesis to understand why the Puritans were so anxious about stories. Everything is going fine in the Garden of Eden until a crafty storyteller shows up. "Did God really say that you couldn't eat that fruit without dying? Well, you won't die; let me tell you how it will be. Taste that fruit and you will have a fantastic experience—your eyes will be opened and you will be like God!" The rest, as they say, is history.

Since the fall of man begins with a tall tale, it's no wonder that the Puritans equated storytelling with lying. The belief that fiction and poetry could only corrupt people was so pronounced that the British poet Sir Philip Sidney felt compelled to publish his famous "Apology for Poetry" in the late sixteenth century. Sidney defends the poet from the charge of lying, for he does not work to "tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not—without which we will say that Nathan lied in his speech ... to David."¹

Whether you buy all of Sidney's reasoning here or not, his appeal to the Biblical account of the prophet Nathan is compelling. David had been deep in sin, covering up his adulterous affair with Bathsheba by plotting against her husband Uriah. Knowing that David would have to swallow his pride and admit to a lot, Nathan thought it best to take an indirect

approach in confronting David. He told a story. He told David about a rich man who had everything he could want but still stole a cherished lamb from a poor man. Nathan added some heart-wrenching detail, including the fact that this little lamb “used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him” (2 Samuel 12:3). You can imagine Nathan watching David and waiting for his story to engage David’s emotions and moral sensibility. It worked. The scriptures record that “David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!’” (2 Samuel 12:5). After this pronouncement, there is nowhere for David to hide when Nathan makes the analogy complete by accusing him: “You are the man!”

Nathan knew more than the facts about David’s sin. He knew about human psychology – that something happens in a sinful heart and in a sinful world that makes people callous. We are good at lying to ourselves. We grow to accept what we have done, excuse it, make up new worlds of personal morality, and move through life as unconvicted as a stone. Nathan knew he had to do more than speak words that David could have twisted around and rejected. He had to give him a picture to show him that the moral truth he had violated is one that he would automatically and easily apply to everyone else’s case. In short, Nathan had to use his prophetic imagination in order to stimulate David’s moral imagination.

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann explains why the prophet needs more than knowledge of right and wrong. As individuals and a society we become numb to the bad choices we have made and are no longer able to see our sin. Prophets understand *how* people change. They understand “the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life.”² In other words, prophets know that we do not need better understanding – we need a jolt. This is why Flannery O’Connor would have loved Brueggemann’s book. O’Connor, a twentieth century Catholic writer, was one of America’s finest storytelling prophets. She believed that fiction, because it engages the imagination, is the only way to penetrate into this deep numbness of society. Like biblical prophecy, her fiction worked on two levels: first, it illuminated the extent of the current social crisis via art’s most basic revelatory tool: defamiliarization. She used the grotesque to make what is truly perverse actually *appear* perverse. Second, O’Connor acted prophetically by telling one story more often than any other: a hardheaded, misguided character who makes the David-like discovery of “I am that man!” And she did it all with a razor sharp and winsome sense of humor.

O’Connor knew that America of the ‘40s and ‘50s, like today, was badly in need of a prophet. And the spiritual sickness she saw in secular America was of the same type that she saw in many of our mainline churches. In a letter O’Connor explained that “if you live today you

breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe."³ While American society kept the name of God, He was essentially co-opted, emptied of His powerful otherness, and denied His role as one who reveals. God was turned into a symbol of man's moral convictions and his imaginative power, and then ignored.

A trenchant and philosophically minded social critic, O'Connor traced the loss back at least as far as Ralph Waldo Emerson. She saw Emerson as America's best example of Protestantism run amuck. Son of a Boston minister and educated at Harvard, Emerson became a Unitarian minister and the leading voice for transcendentalism. He believed that humans could elevate themselves by the power of their imagination—that God *is* humanity, not essentially separate or other from us. In Emerson's famous "Divinity School Address" he argued that Jesus was just an example that we should follow (but not slavishly imitate) because he understood that "God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World."⁴ In her critique of this shameless substitution of God with humanity, Flannery O'Connor focused on the moment in 1832 when Emerson decided to remove the bread and wine from the Eucharist because they were just symbols and unnecessary for true worship. When Emerson did this, O'Connor explained, "an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken."⁵

"Vaporization" is precisely the right word. What had been substantial—the historical incarnation of Christ, His death for our atonement, and His present work through the Church—dissolved into mere moral conviction. Jesus became a symbol. Without the core of right beliefs, the shell of right behavior cannot last long. And the proof is in the pudding: as the nineteenth century became the twentieth, America increasingly became a place where anything goes. Jesus became just another consumer option. And we had grown so used to worshiping ourselves instead of God that we could no longer see the degradation any more than we could see the air we breathe.

And so steps in the prophet. O'Connor used the force of her imagination to show a numbed America what it had become. Her most famous articulation of how the storyteller reveals these truths comes from her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country." She explains that the fiction

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writer has to shock her audience to make her vision apparent because “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures” (CW, 805-6). O’Connor’s first novella, *Wise Blood*, presents America in this startling way through the degraded city of the fictitious Taulkinham. In Taulkinham people act like animals, and the only thing they worship is their own desires as reflected in America’s newest God: capitalism. Jesus is sold on the streets as readily as automobiles and with the same flashy language of a peddler selling a worthless potato peeler. Onnie Jay Holy is one of these salesmen. For just a dollar you can join his church in which “you can absolutely trust” because, as Holy says, “‘it’s based on the Bible. Yes sir! It’s based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted. That’s right,’ he said, ‘just the way Jesus would have done it’” (CW, 87). It’s easy to see O’Connor’s resounding critique of the excesses of Protestantism. When it becomes every person for him or herself in a consumer society, the crisis is at a height—even in the Church. It is the living death that, Brueggemann says, is “manifested in alienation, loss of patrimony, and questing for new satiations that can never satisfy, and we are driven to the ultimate consumerism of consuming each other.”⁶

To her prophetic rendering of America’s spiritual degradation in *Wise Blood*, O’Connor adds the comic drama of her protagonist, Hazel Motes. His name points to the story’s central themes; he has a mote in his eye, but his story will reveal the plank in our own. Haze grew up in a solidly Christian (if somewhat misguided) home, but now he wants to leave all that, become modern, and be rid of Jesus by living a life of sin. He wants to believe that he can live the consumer’s lie: that he can do whatever he wants without consequence. He hooks up with a prostitute (“What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts” [CW, 31]), shacks up with a hypocritical preacher’s daughter, and begins to proclaim the “Church Without Christ”—O’Connor’s jab at mainline Protestant denominations. But try as he might, Haze cannot accept a life of sin with the complacency with which everyone else accepts it. Haze is the first manifestation of a character type that O’Connor would turn to again: the reluctant prophet. In spite of himself, Haze can’t get rid of Jesus. Haze’s “wise blood” teaches him that how he lives and what he believes does matter, and that this is not a world where anything goes. But the numbness of consumer society is so pervasive that he needs something strong to snap him out of it. And we need something, too—an emotional jolt.

As often as not in O’Connor’s fiction, that jolt is the reality of death. As Brueggemann points out, since death is really what society numbs itself to, death is what the prophet must proclaim. The prophet must “*speaks metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us*, and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with the

candor born of anguish and passion.”⁷⁷ When Haze’s illicit lover cradles a shriveled mummified corpse known as the “new jesus” in her arms like a baby, the perversion of it all finally hits Haze. This real dead body and what it symbolizes connect for him, and hopefully, for us. In a moment of prophetic passion Haze takes the corpse and smashes it against the wall. You can imagine Haze saying to himself, “This world is not right! We are substituting man for God and death for life. This life is a living death! Man cannot save himself!” Haze finally loses the mote in his eye, and O’Connor hopes that we lose the plank in our own.

O’Connor’s use of narrative to illustrate what American society is actually worshipping was just one way that she hoped to open readers’ eyes. She also told and retold stories that featured people who made the same sort of personal discovery that David made when Nathan visited him. A typical hardheaded character that O’Connor created to be like David—and like us—is Ruby Turpin from the story “Revelation.” Ruby is a southern white landowner who is proud of her property and her social standing. Like David, Ruby has become so self-satisfied and self-serving that she cannot see anything wrong with herself but can easily dole out judgments on others.

The story begins in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. It is one of those places that should remind Ruby that the frailty of the body is one way in which all people are equal before God, and that she is decidedly *not* God and should not try to usurp Him. But Ruby misses that insight and begins mentally to put everyone in his or her “place.” She goes around the room and identifies a “white trash” woman, a pleasant woman, an ugly girl (who “acts ugly” which is even worse in her world), and “niggers.” She recalls how she would “occupy herself at night naming the classes of people” and imagine what she would have chosen to be if she weren’t herself. She even imagines a conversation with Jesus at her creation in which she smartes back at Him and demands the social rank she believes she deserves. If Jesus would have allowed her only two places, “nigger or white-trash,” she would have pleaded with Him for another option. When He refused, “she would have said, ‘All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one.’ And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (CW, 636). Ruby Turpin’s imagination is clearly stunted. She cannot see herself clearly and, therefore, has no room in her tightly-constructed hierarchy for a true other to teach her anything. Like David who acted toward Uriah only to advance himself, Ruby goes about her business on her farms, never having a genuine thought about the “white-trash and common” who work for her. She is completely numb and needs someone to wake her up.

David had Nathan; Ruby Turpin gets an ugly girl symbolically named Mary Grace. Mary Grace is a disgruntled college student who is in the doctor’s waiting room with everyone else. She could not help but hear Ruby’s

assessment that the white-trash she knows are even a step below her *hogs* because “our hogs are not dirty and they don’t stink ... their feet never touch the ground” (CW, 638). Ruby clearly thinks that *her* feet never touch the ground. Hearing enough, Mary Grace explodes and hurls a book at Ruby, begins to choke her, and whispers, “Go back to hell where you came

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from, you old wart hog” (CW, 646). The words stick. The analogy penetrates. The proclamation has the same force upon her as Nathan’s had on David: “you are that man!” And in this outrageous confrontation from a total outsider Ruby recognizes that she, too, has

heard the voice of God. Back on her farm she begins to direct angry, but for the first time, authentic, questions at God. “What do you send me a message like that for? ... How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” (CW, 652).

Flannery O’Connor knew that it is the unique province of the imagination to make us see by analogy who we truly are. The prophet’s primary role as storyteller is *to displace us in order to put us in our place*, to remind us that we are the *created* and not the *Creator*. The prophet knows that revelation of self must precede any revelation from (or of) God. O’Connor emphasizes this truth in “Revelation” by comparing Ruby’s self-revelation with Job’s. Job starts out blaming God and ends up with nothing to say. And so it is with Ruby Turpin, who also confronts God:

“Go on,” she yelled, “call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on the top. There’ll still be a top and bottom!”

A garbled echo returned to her.

A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, “Who do you think you are?”

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood.

She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it. (CW, 653)

When the question with which Ruby accuses God returns back to her—

"Who do you think *you* are?" –she is speechless. The large and mysterious otherness of God makes her own smallness all too apparent. For the first time in her life, Ruby sees herself put in *her* place.

The revelation continues as Ruby Turpin's correct self-estimation forces her to recognize that she is in no position to judge others. In the story's final scene she imagines a heavenly ascension that is ordered the reverse way from the way she would have ordered it. The "respectable" are going up last. And although her prejudices have not been completely removed from her, Ruby does see something entirely new: the virtues of the "respectable" are not virtues at all. "She could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away" (CW, 654). It is Ruby Turpin's face that is shocked and altered as her "virtues" burn away in the heat of this stunning revelation.

The prophet knows that stories have power. A story is an event that finds its way into our hearts and not just our heads. Because we inhabit stories, every now and then a crucial one can hit us—even when our backs are turned. O'Connor may have hoped for too much in hoping that we could see ourselves in her Ruby Turpins, but then again, prophets have a long history of being ignored. Thank God that fact has never stopped them before.

NOTES

1 Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, edited by Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), 168.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xxiii.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 949. I will refer to this volume by the abbreviation CW.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 113.

5 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1969), 161.

6 Brueggemann, 46.

7 Ibid.



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