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Sacred Encounters: Fostering the Religious Imagination through Literature

Abstract

Literature can be a powerful lens through which we can encounter the sacred, inviting us to experience mystery, opening our awareness to deeper meaning in the midst of the ordinary, and beckoning us to a sense of greater inter-connectedness with the world we live in. In a word, literature can speak the language of the religious imagination. Using examples from the works of Flannery O'Connor, Alice Walker, and TS Eliot, this paper explores the potential of literature for fostering the religious imagination.

Introduction

Literature can be a window into the imagination which invites wonder-filled journeying toward mystery, profound revelation of the numinous, and ardent yearning for connection to the mystical insofar as it embodies the human search for meaning, encounter, and wholeness. Literary critic Edward Hirsch suggests, there is an “aura of sacred practice that accompanies true poetic creation,” which “honors” both the rational and the more than rational, carrying “the burden of mystery” and illuminating “an experience that takes us to the very heart of being.”¹ In effect, literature can be an invitation to the religious imagination, to see, as Richard Cote points out, “the sacred is in the profane” as “an in-depth reserve of meaning” in human experience, making us aware of its “transcendent character.”²

In this paper, I argue that literature can be a catalyst for fostering the religious imagination, offering new ways of seeing through different angles of vision and inviting new ways of imagining through different lenses of viewing. This paper explores how literature can cultivate the analogical imagination which sees through the lens of sacrament, grace, and mystery as exemplified by Flannery O'Connor's short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” It examines the potential of literature to unmask illusions through the dialectical imagination which looks through the critical lens of resistance, suspicion, and the recovery of dangerous memory as found in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Finally, it looks at how literature can break-open the prophetic imagination which incorporates the dialectical yet sees beyond it through both the critical and constructive lenses of truthful criticizing and hopeful energizing as represented by T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland*. Thus, this paper suggests that literature can be religiously educative, inviting us to wrestle with the language of mystery, paradox, and ambiguity.

¹ Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (NY: Harcourt, 1999), xiii.

² Richard Cote, *Lazarus! Come Out!: Why Faith Needs Imagination* (Ottawa, Canada: Novalis, 2003), 89.

Methodology

This study employs the methodologies of literary criticism and philosophical hermeneutics to investigate the meaning of literary texts and their significance for religious education. As such, this study offers a humanistic inquiry into the religious meaning of literature and its implications for cultivating the religious imagination. The study engages the literary critical method of close reading. As Francine Prose notes, close reading allows the reader to “trace patterns” and “make connections” by paying close attention to the words and phrases authors use in constructing their texts.³ Close reading allows for breaking open the meaning of texts through the analysis of language. At the same time, philosophical hermeneutics invites what Gadamer calls “a fusion of horizons” between the horizon of the reader and that of the author, opening up further meaning of the text and its implications for present circumstances.⁴ Together, these literature-based methodologies allow an investigation of literary texts that invites an exploration of their religious and educational significance for fostering the religious imagination.

The Sacramental Imagination of Flannery O’Connor

The short fiction of Flannery O’Connor provides a window into what David Tracy calls the “analogical imagination,” offering a sacramental vision of the world.⁵ O’Connor finds grace in the midst of the ordinary, the outrageous, and even the grotesque. As Tracy points out, it is precisely from within the concrete and the particular that the analogical imagination operates, reaching both deep down within and beyond our own particularity through analogy, symbol, and metaphor to encounter the other’s “hard concreteness.”⁶ It is in the encounter with this “hard concreteness” that mystery is revealed, mediating divine presence and uncovering the depths of meaning from within human experience. We encounter the mystery of God in openness to the other if we can imagine analogically, revealing new ways of seeing that allow us to discover the “graced reality” of the world metaphorically, symbolically, and sacramentally.

Deborah Lynn Thornton argues that O’Connor sees through a “hermeneutics of the incarnation” in which “grace is extended through the unwitting encounter and the unlikely character.”⁷ Such is the hermeneutic of “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” about a well-meaning yet manipulative grandmother who unwittingly leads her family to their deaths at the hands of an escaped convict. Here, O’Connor presents what Judith Wynne calls a “sacramental irony” where O’Connor uses who we think we ought to be to reveal who we really are. It is in this irony that grace is revealed as an invitation to encounter the divine where “shocking encounters with grace are the result of characters being themselves in full force,” where “the core and the surface

³ Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer* (NY: Harper, 2006), 6.

⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (NY: Continuum, 2004), 301.

⁵ See David Tracy, “Presidential Address: The Catholic Analogical Imagination,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 32 (1977), 234-244.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Debra Lynn Thornton, “The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor: Grace and the Body in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1999), 1-4.

merge” as “a character is briefly transfigured, and altered forever.”⁸ As Tracy insists, “Grace comes as both gift and threat. As gift, grace can turn one completely around into a transformed life of freedom. Yet, grace can also come as threat by casting a harsh light on what we have done to ourselves and our willingness to destroy any reality, even Ultimate reality, if we cannot master it.”⁹ For O’Connor, grace, is both gift and threat, inviting a response not only on the part of the characters who inhabit the imaginative landscape of her fiction, but also on the part of readers who imaginatively enter into that landscape and encounter their own humanity, only to have it revealed back to them in all its “hard concreteness.”

In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” this “hard concreteness” appears in the form of an escaped convict simply and namelessly designated as “the Misfit” who stops to “rescue” the also nameless “grandmother” and her family after their car falls into a ditch during a road-trip as the result of an accident of which ironically she herself was the catalyst. This “sacramental irony” is furthered by the fact that both the Misfit and the grandmother seem to suffer from what John Shea calls a “fettered imagination,”¹⁰ an image of reality based in the self-preoccupied fantasy of tolerable fictions, seeing the other as an extension of self and not truly as other, and viewing external reality as an object to be manipulated through the narrow focus of rational certainty.

For both the grandmother and the Misfit, the world is expected to conform to their own narrowly confined expectations of certitude, leaving little room for wonder, mystery, and grace. For the grandmother, the world is neatly divided into certain types of people: “good” people and “common” people. She sees herself among the good people and dresses the part accordingly complete with white gloves, dress, and hat, ironically to make sure that “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.”¹¹ From her standpoint the world of appearance, manners, and other people’s perception is the “real world,” the world of her fettered imagination which accepts convention, appearance, and “good breeding” as the mark of “good people.” Even as her family is systematically being killed in the woods by the Misfits’ accomplices, the grandmother carries on an almost surreal conversation with the Misfit in which she repeatedly tells him “I know you’re a good man... You’re not a bit common.” She cannot or will not imagine a world beyond her own narrow categories. She persists in her self-righteousness and manipulation which cannot admit the reality around her, telling the Misfit “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people.”¹²

Yet, like the grandmother, the Misfit also has a fettered imagination which locks him into a narrow way of seeing. He is a prisoner, even out of jail. “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead. . . If He did what He said then it’s nothing for you do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you

⁸ Judith Wynne, “The Sacramental Irony of Flannery O’Connor,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 35.

⁹ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (NY: Harper Row, 1987), 75.

¹⁰ John Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults* (NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 10-11.

¹¹ Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, 128

got left the best way you can-by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.”¹³

The Misfit cannot tolerate ambiguity beyond the narrow categories of his own fettered imagination which limits God to the dichotomous categories of either/or. When the grandmother timidly suggests “Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” the Misfit responds with the full force of his fettered imagination: “‘I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t...I wish’t I had of been there,’ he said hitting the ground with his fist. ‘It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known.’”¹⁴ Here, Richard Giannone suggests the Misfit’s imagination is “manacled to unbelief.” It is “unbelief born of pure reason” which “boxes him in,” leaving him frozen, unable “to move beyond a maddening, disabling rationality.”¹⁵

For O’Connor, it is at this moment that grace is extended in the encounter with the “hard concreteness” of the other. Both the Misfit and the grandmother become agents of grace for one another in a sacramental moment of confession. For the grandmother, the encounter with the other transforms her, allowing her to see the other as other for the first time. As the Misfit’s “twisted face” came “close to her own as if he were going to cry. She murmured ‘Why, you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children.’” In a profoundly sacramental gesture of blessing, healing, and forgiveness “She reached out and touched him on the shoulder” just before he shot her.¹⁶ As Giannone observes, for O’Connor, “the body is a place of God’s acting in us, where God’s action is revealed.” On the one hand, “physical dread” when faced with her own bodily death “teaches the grandmother’s soul how to be free, free to love” even amidst the grotesque, the twisted, and the darkness. On the other hand, “her hand of mercy points the way out of the walls sealing the Misfit in the dark of self-hatred and unbelief.” Here, grace is still both gift and threat whereby the grandmother’s “benevolence exposes her captor’s inability to say yes to her yes.”¹⁷ Thus, O’Connor underscores that while grace is always offered it is not always received, reminding us of the profound role that human freedom plays in the midst of “shocking encounters with grace” through the unexpected, the outrageous, and even the grotesque.

The Dialectical Imagination of Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*

In her novel *The Color Purple* Alice Walker adopts a “hermeneutics of suspicion” which offers a mode of questioning resistance. Here, Walker represents what David Tracy calls the “dialectical imagination” which seeks to “unmask illusions,” challenge all certitudes, and “be suspicious of all claims to a vision of the whole.”¹⁸ Through a series of letters to God, the protagonist Celie struggles to find her own voice as an African-American woman, living in a sub-culture dominated by African-American males within a wider culture of male domination.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ O’Connor, 131-132.

¹⁵ Richard Giannone, “Dark Night, Dark Faith: Hazel Motes, The Misfit, and Francis Marion Tarwater,” in *Dark Faith: New Essays on Flannery O’Connor’s The Violent Bear it Away*, ed. Susan Srigley (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 18.

¹⁶ O’Connor, 132.

¹⁷ Giannone, 18-19.

¹⁸ Tracy, “Presidential Address,” 237.

As Carolyn Williams suggests these letters represent Celie's attempt to find her own language, her own "narrative authority," beyond "the patriarchal chain of authorization."¹⁹

Beginning to question inherited, patriarchal categories, Celie engages the dialectics of race and gender. In an epistolary shift, she begins to address her sister Nettie instead of God with the realization that "the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown."²⁰ As she comes to question her past and an abusive relationship with her stepfather, she begins to re-imagine God. Through her relationship with blues singer Shug Avery, Celie comes to a different understanding of who God might be. As a blues singer, Shug represents what Ralph Ellison calls the "art of ambiguity," that is an "impulse" to keep painful memory alive, while "squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" that lets one transcend it without forgetfulness.²¹ Here, Diane Scholl argues Walker's revisionist theology presents a "womanist Gospel" that derives its power not only from African-American folklore with its "heightened sense of paradox and of a subversive dialectic" of dangerous memory, but also from Gospel parables "punctuated by ironic reversals and rife with a subversive principle of contradiction and mystery."²²

This dialectic opens up new imaginative space for Celie, who, by the end of the novel, comes to the realization that God is beyond the limited categorizations she has inherited: "Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God."²³ This imaginative breakthrough represents the dynamics of the dialectical imagination in all its liberating power. As Maxine Greene notes, "by finding her imagination Celie has found a way out of oppression. She is beginning to look through her own eyes, name in her own voice her lived world."²⁴ Claiming the power of her own imagination, Celie claims her own power. Finding the power to ask her own questions, she claims her own voice. And, trusting in the power of her own narrative, she reclaims herself.

The Prophetic Imagination in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*

T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* also fosters the religious imagination through the lens of the prophetic imagination which holds in creative tension both the critical lens of the dialectical imagination with its hermeneutics of suspicion and the re-constructive lens of prophetic re-imagining with its hermeneutics of retrieval. As Walter Brueggemann notes, the prophetic imagination involves both a criticizing pathos and an energizing hope. Brueggemann emphasizes, "the task of the prophetic imagination is to cut through the numbness" by offering "symbols that are adequate to confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial."²⁵ It brings "public expression" to the collective experience of

¹⁹ Carolyn Williams, "Trying to do without God: The Revision of Epistolary Address in *The Color Purple*," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Color Purple*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000), 88.

²⁰ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1982), 164.

²¹ Quoted in Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America* (NY: Routledge, 1999), 43.

²² Diane Scholl, "With Ears to Hear and Eyes to See: Alice Walker's Parable *The Color Purple*," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Color Purple*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2000), 115.

²³ Walker, 242.

²⁴ Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995), 25.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 59.

terror, grief, and fear. And it speaks “metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us” as the result of structures of power, domination, and control.²⁶

The Wasteland speaks the language of the prophetic imagination, confronting the “horror and massiveness of the experience” of numbness which shaped modern consciousness after the First World War, bringing “public expression” to the terror, grief, and fear that gripped the modern imagination, and speaking “metaphorically but concretely” about the “deathliness” that still hangs over the modern and even postmodern world.²⁷ *The Wasteland* offers a prophetic lens through which to see the world anew. It is poetry which is intended to disturb, to unsettle, or in Maria Harris’ words, “to shake the moorings from and de-familiarize the old.”²⁸ It is poetry made to shock our sensibilities. As Edward Hirsch notes, it is “a poem without a fixed center,” containing fragmented “scenes and vignettes from a wide variety of times and places: agitated scraps of conversations, parodies, inter-textual allusions, unattributed and often broken quotations, a medley of radically shifting languages,” and “a disturbing cacophony of voices.”²⁹ In *The Wasteland*, Eliot adopts a poetic style of resistance that resists style itself to invite us into the landscape of the unfamiliar, the unimagined, and the unreal:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.³⁰

Here, Eliot speaks the language of lament, which as Brueggemann points out, is the language of the prophet who speaks “with the candor born of anguish and passion.” It is language that signals that “the end of the royal fantasy is very near,” a disturbing pathos that upsets the “royal consciousness” of those in power who seek to maintain the status quo.³¹ Eliot laments the “numbness” of the modern condition, giving voice to the deep grief of those who are its victims, and speaking of the “deathliness” that leads to this condition. Like the Hebrew prophets, Eliot walks us through the “stony rubbish” of the unreal city, to deeply lament over the destructive power and alienation that the “royal program” can bring, fed by a “management mentality,” a mentality that ultimately leads to the barrenness and emptiness of the modern wasteland.³²

Yet, also like the Hebrew prophets, in the midst of destruction, Eliot offers a message of hope, giving voice to the yearning for renewal, restoration, and relief. In the last section, entitled “What the Thunder said,” Eliot evokes the image from Ezekiel of the valley of dry bones as a metaphor for the barrenness of the wasteland; but also, like Ezekiel, he brings a prophetic vision of restoration which, for him, is imaged through the life-giving power of water. Here, Eliot

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Michael North (NY: W.W. Norton, 2001), 23.

²⁸ Maria Harris, “Art and Religious Education: A Conversation,” *Religious Education* 83, no. 3 (1988), 458.

²⁹ Hirsch, 141.

³⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, lines 61-63.

³¹ Brueggemann, 45.

³² *Ibid.*

brings what Walter Brueggemann calls “the language of hope and the ethos of amazement,”³³ offering symbols of hope that allow us to see the world in a renewed way. It is a deeply spiritual quest, where the modern wasteland thirsts for refreshment and renewal. Eliot uses images of the sacred to evoke this sense, including the sacred river Ganges, a line from the Upanishad’s “Fable of the Thunder,” and the legend of the Fisher King who will restore the barren land and who serves as a symbol of divine life with both Christian and pre-Christian associations.³⁴ Thus, Eliot offers a language of “amazement,” where the old is made new through both a retrieval of sacred memory and a prophetic re-imagining through symbol, image, and metaphor.

Conclusion

In many ways, literature can foster the religious imagination by inviting sacred encounters. Whether through the sacramental fiction of Flannery O’Connor, the subversive dialectics of Alice Walker, or the disturbingly prophetic poetry of T.S. Eliot, literature can open up new ways of seeing, new ways of thinking, and new ways of imagining through the eyes of the other. Such encounters often challenge, disturb, and move us in ways that break open the religious imagination. Using literature in the context of teaching religion can invite what Kieran Scott calls “prophetic education,” which requires “posing and opening up new perspectives.”³⁵ It is an education not only comfortable with, but that encourages wrestling with paradox, mystery, and ambiguity. And, ultimately, it is an education that fosters new perspectives that challenge us to see more analogically, to think more dialectically, and to imagine more prophetically. Such is the challenge that literature can offer, thus opening up new imaginative spaces for sacred encounters with the other.

³³ Brueggemann, 65.

³⁴ *The Wasteland*, Norton Critical Edition, 25.

³⁵ Kieran Scott, “Continuity and Change in Religious Education: Building on the Past, Re-Imagining the Future,” in *Critical Issues in Religious Education*, ed. Oliver Brennan (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), 88.

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