



## IMMERSION INTO WATER: SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM IN O'CONNOR'S "THE RIVER"

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### ABSTRACT

*In Christian concept water has a power to cleanse the world from its sins. Water symbolizes the spiritual cleansing that comes with the acceptance of God's offer of salvation. It can be the source of eternal life. In Christianity, baptism represents birth by water. In every Christian Churches we can see this ceremony to attain the Kingdom of God. Baptism signifies the death of the sinful life and the rebirth in Jesus Christ. It helps us to liberate ourselves from the sin which separate us from God and lead us to the union with Him. Water in baptism, washes our dirt and fills the emptiness in us. As baptism in Christianity symbolizes the burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through baptism one can identify himself with the death and resurrection of Jesus. One can bury his old ways of life and can start a new life through baptism. This paper is an attempt to study Flannery O'Connor's short story "The River" in the light of Christian baptism. Mrs. Connin, a babysitter, leads Harry Ashfield, a five year old boy to a healing at the river. While they reaches the river, the preacher gives the message that there is only one river, 'The River of Life' and it is made from the blood of Jesus Christ. We can lay our sufferings and pain in this river of life and can gain the Kingdom of Christ. The boy is attracted by his preaching and baptize himself in the river. Here he is participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ not only in the spiritual sense, but also in the literal sense. His belief is that by losing his life, he can attain the Kingdom of God.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Baptism, death, burial, immersion, resurrection, rebirth, Kingdom of God.*

### INTRODUCTION

We can see Christian motifs throughout the writings of Flannery O'Connor. She expresses her knowledge about God through the stories in Bible. She uses untraditional methods to depict her experience with God. "The River" is a most puzzling story by O'Connor, taken from her collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and tells the story of a four or five year old child Harry Ashfield. His life is totally changed by the influence of a babysitter Mrs. Connin who introduced him a new world of spirituality. While he was living with his parents, he was in a world of total confusion. The day with Mrs. Connin provides him with new insights. "When he had asked Mrs. Connin who the man in the sheet in the picture over her bed was, she had looked at him a while with her mouth open. Then she had said, "That's Jesus," and she had kept on looking at him" (CW 160). By introducing Jesus to Harry, she gives him the first lesson of religion that he has been made by this carpenter. Mrs. Connin leads him to a river from where he listens the words of the preacher, "All the rivers come from that one River and go back to it like it was the ocean sea and if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that's the River that was made to carry sin" (CW 162). After hearing the message of Bevel Summers in the river he wishes to lay his pains and sorrows in the real river of life which is made from the blood of Jesus Christ. To attain the Kingdom of Heaven he wishes to be



baptised in the river and he drowns himself. This study is an attempt to depict the significance of Christian baptism in "The River".

In every religion water has a special place in their spirituality and belief. In Hinduism water is believed to have cleansing powers. Hindus consider rivers as sacred and relate them to physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being. In Muslim religion also water is related to purifying and cleansing and to approach God in prayer they should be ritually purified. Baptism is considered as a rite of admission into Christianity. The real source of the living water is Jesus and he offers salvation and eternal life to those who believes in Him. "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you" (Ezekiel 36:25). We can see the instruction given to Nicodemus by Jesus in the Bible about the need of being born again. Jesus tells him that in order to get salvation he should be born again by water. The word baptism is derived from a Greek concept of "baptisma" which means washing. It is like the Jewish purification ritual called *Tvilah*. Here also we can see that the ritual is performed by immersing the individual in water. While we go through the history of Christian Churches we can see that baptism is essential to be a believer. "As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized? He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him" (Acts 8:36-38). Baptism is a symbol of surrendering completely to Jesus. Most Christians consider baptism as a step to salvation. It is a way to get closer to Christ. A Catholic dictionary explores that baptism is conferred "as a result of washing with water accomplished by the words 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost'" (Attwater 45).

"Very Truly, I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit" (John 3:5). The Bible scholars interpret that this idea of being born again by water is baptism. In Christian churches baptism is considered as one's proclamation of his belief in Christ. In early days baptism is called as immersion because the Baptist dips the whole body under water. By the immersion of water or by baptism we are symbolically participating in the death, burial, resurrection of Jesus. We can see that Jesus himself undergoes baptism. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him" (Mark 1:9). The entrance into the water in baptism represents our identification of Christ's death in cross, his burial in the tomb and his resurrection from the dead. "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12).

Baptism is a symbol to show the world that we love, trust and put our hope in Christ. We get knowledge about the life giving water from Holy Bible. "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Thus water in Bible represents the cleansing of the sinner and the source of eternal life. From New Testament we get the idea that baptism comes after repentance and belief. "Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

From The Bible we know that there was a promise by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their descendants would inherit a land given to them by God himself. But generation after generation passed until the time was right to inherit the Promised Land called Canaan. To reach this land they had to pass through slavery, plagues, and stay in the wilderness for forty years. At last they had to cross a river to reach the land flowing with milk and honey, the Promised Land Canaan. But they could reach the land by the grace of God and the promise became reality. Like that Christians are looking for a distant promised land called Heaven and travel through the wilderness of life with an expectation to reach the land. "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews 11:16). In the light of this Bible passage, theologians say that to attain this heavenly reward, the Promised Land we have to cross the river of death. When we analyze the story in

this new light we can understand that Harry is also eager to reach this Promised Land called heaven passes through the river and immerses himself in water for a new life in Christ.

In the beginning of the story the child is described as neglected, pitiful and pitiable creature. We know that his physical, emotional and spiritual well-being has been neglected by his parents. "Sustenance in the form of healthy food and drink are not available to him in this deathlike place. To make them new, he has torn what he has into pieces" (Kirk 110). The Ashfields are partygoers and party-givers who stay out late and sleep in late. Their refrigerator is filled with leftover cocktail snacks, and their tables are littered with over-full ashtrays. They are philosophical materialists who taught their son that he is the product of mere natural causes. This is the reason why Harry believes that Dr. Sladewall made him.

Mrs. Connin is a God fearing woman who is ready to receive God into her life. But in contrast Harry's parents enjoy their life by going one party to another. Harry has the desire to be recognized as a person. He is unhappy in his home and longs to connect himself with someone else other than his parents. His lack of knowledge about Jesus is an indication of his parents' lack of faith. When Harry's mother hears the news that he is baptized by Bevel Summers she is displeased. His father shows no interest to hear the news. He said, "I want to hear more about her affliction .... The exact nature of it has escaped .... Healing by prayer is mighty inexpensive" (CW 167). His parents does not show any interest in him. When he breaks some toys, they just replace them. While they were in bed, he makes breakfast himself. Thus he was unhappy when he was with his parents. His parents mocks him for his spiritual encounter.

Harry wishes to identify himself with the evangelist. The influence of the evangelist increased his awareness of Christ and it leads him to the literal acceptance of His Kingdom. Estranged from the material world he rises above the worldly requirements and attracted towards the unknown. He leaves the absurd world behind to accept and penetrate into the real and larger world. To enter into the Kingdom of Christ, the River of Life, he immersed himself in the blood-red river of Jesus Christ. He drawn toward the sacred and repelled by the evil. Though his parents represents extremes of secularism, his motivator Bevel represents the extreme of the sacred. Harry's parents' neglect of his physical well-being signifies their lack of concern for his spiritual welfare. When he first see the picture of Jesus Christ, he cannot identify it. This incident shows that he didn't get the basic religious instruction from his parents. While we read the story we can see that Harry does not know the meaning of baptism also. Though his parents are not cruel, they are indifferent.

Mrs. Connin is the rescuer of the everlasting life of the soul of Harry. She is the person who introduces the child to his first knowledge of Jesus. In Catholic baptismal ceremony there should be a baptismal sponsor who must vow to take on the role of spiritual guardian and agrees to raise the child in the Catholic faith. Here Mrs. Connin acts the role of a baptismal sponsor for Harry's baptismal rite. Mrs. Connin understands the fact that human love alone cannot satisfy the boy. She realizes that his hunger is for spiritual satisfaction and it can be fulfilled only by the love of God. Thus she makes him to realize that he is not the accidental product of an undirected natural process, but God is his creator.

The journey of Harry with Mrs. Connin's family to the river is described as follows. "They looked like the skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the highway. The white Sunday sun followed at a little distance, climbing fast through a scum of gray cloud as if it meant to overtake them" (CW 159). This procession is Harry's passage from abandonment to total care. Here in this passage we can have some allusions to death. This alludes Harry's death through baptism in the river for a better life in Christ. Harry realizes that he can respond to God's call only by separating himself from his family, his possessions, and his self-image.

In the view of Harry's parents, life is meaningless and there is no purpose for human existence other than continuous cocktail parties. But in the view of preacher Bevel, life has a purposeful relation to the divine being. By receiving the instruction of the preacher in a literal level Harry rejects his parents, his home and this material world to find the Kingdom of Heaven in the river. As he hasn't reach the age of reason his drowning is not a conscious act of suicide. He dies in a state of grace and is eligible for the direct admission to the Kingdom of Christ. By baptizing himself he goes to his Maker. Thus his death is for a good life with

Christ. Thus the assurance given by Bevel Summers comes to reality, "You won't be the same again...You'll count...You count now ... you didn't even count before" (CW 165).

When Mrs. Connin asks Harry his name, he answers her that his name is Bevel. His name change symbolises his wish to change his ways through a new road. We can see his baptism as a symbol to denote his character change, a means to move through the ways of God. While Harry introducing himself as Bevel, O'Connor symbolizes his rebirth in Christ. It denotes that he is now ripe for his belief. It is a practice to give new name in baptismal ceremony to signify the rebirth of the child. As an enlightened soul he wishes to go into an unfamiliarised world of happiness. He is ready to take the name Bevel permanently because he is not interested to live with his parents in their apartment and decides to return to the river of life. We get the description of the apartment in the story, "the apartment was still dark... The sun came in palely, stained gray by the glass .... The apartment was silent except for the faint humming of the refrigerator" (CW 168). The apartment is represented as dark during the day time which signifies that all the adult inhabitants of the apartment are night people. The family name 'Ashfield' also denotes the gloomy atmosphere. The illness of Harry's mother is symbolic of the damned situation of the family. So Harry realizes that it is a necessity to escape from his home, the world of darkness. Thus he moves to the country which represents life.

Harry sees Mr Paradise when he was there in the faith healing in the river. In this first encounter Harry is terrified by the old man. Mr. Paradise has a grotesque appearance and has a cancerous deformity on his ear. He is really an incarnation of devil. He is a disbeliever and he ridicules the preacher. In an ironic way his name reminds us a false paradise. Harry understands that Mr. Paradise can destroy faith. But Bevel Summers, the preacher, calls his audience to make a total act of belief. When Bevel pulls him into water, Mr. Paradise produces a loud laugh. Then Harry identifies Mr. Paradise as a satanic presence. Bevel Summers insists his listeners that their intentions in coming to the river must be pure and they should come there to seek Jesus and not mere to rid themselves of worldly pain. He declares that if healing is occur, not he but Jesus' blood will effect it. As Harry wishes to accept good than evil, he received the call of the preacher to eternal life as the real call from God. "If I baptize you... you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?" (CW 165). After his baptism Bevel Summers tells him that he is now the member of the Elect.

At the end of the story while Harry drowns himself in water, Mr. Paradise jumps into the water to save him, but the current of water drags him further deep into the water and he is unable to do it. His suicidal act is an escape from his parental world. "He intended not to fool with preachers anymore but to baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river. He didn't mean to waste any more time. He put his head under the water at once and pushed forward" (CW 170). At last Harry achieves his goal, the Kingdom of Christ through baptism. He was striving for salvation throughout his life. Through death in Christ, he has obtained salvation and the grace of God. His death is the beginning of his life with God as he wishes to live with God than with his parents. His soul is purified by the water in the river in baptism and attained the heavenly reward. As he is swimming away from Mr. Paradise he is really moved towards the paradise which is the Kingdom of God he seeks. He wishes to stay under the water permanently. "He sees the kingdom under the river as a desirable alternative to the wasteland in which he lives .... The world created for the child by his parents was not only heathen, it was without love or sincerity" (Martin 108).

Harry had not intended to commit suicide. By hearing the message of the preacher he decides to immerse himself in the river of life or being received by the water is his intention. As the boy wishes to be saved by Christ, we can say that his baptism in the river is a Catholic baptism by which we participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Though he is not fully aware of the effects of baptism, Harry understands that God can satisfy his hunger for love, concern and care. He knows the fact that only Christ can provide meaning to his life. It is his epiphany that he desires meaning in life by the Grace of God. He intends to go under water to be born again and he fights his best. "The river wouldn't have him. He tried again and came up, choking .... He had had to fight with something that pushed him back in the face" (CW 171).

We can consider the drowning of Harry as a spiritual passage as he found his real home. As he was suffering from loneliness and longing, he couldn't differentiate between the River of Life and the literal river. He wishes to lay his pain in the muddy river and seeks Christ under the water. The irony in the story is that Harry accepts the sermon of Bevel Summers at full value. He responds to the preaching as accepting the literal truth of the statement that lay down the pains and sufferings in the river of Jesus Christ.

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