

# The Modern Expression of Prophet in Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back"

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**Abstract**—As one of the last works written by Flannery O'Connor, the Southern American writer, "Parker's Back" tells a story about the spiritual quest of a tattoo enthusiast, Parker. Research on this short story does not abound compared with that on O'Connor's other representative works, and in the corpus of it, great attention is often focused on tattooing and Parker's conversion. Since O'Connor's works are featured by prophet-like figures, this paper sheds light on Parker's identity as a prophet in O'Connor's southern context. Two parts will be covered. In the first part, some connections are explored between the protagonist in the story and the Old Testament prophets. The second part demonstrates Parker's southern grotesqueness as a prophet. Hopefully, this paper can provide a relatively different perspective and moreover enrich corresponding research.

**Keywords**—Flannery O'Connor; "Parker's Back"; prophet; the southern grotesque

## I. INTRODUCTION

Born in Georgia, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) is a Southern writer and essayist. Her works include two novels, thirty-two short stories as well as lots of reviews and commentaries. With the short stories immediately recognized as classics after publication, she is estimated as one of the greatest Southern writers after William Faulkner, receiving several awards like Kenyon fellowships (1953, 1954), a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant (1957), several O'Henry awards. (DePace, 28).

As "an anomaly among post-World War II authors" (Ibid, 25), O'Connor's works are featured by religious themes and grotesque figures, which is closely related to her life experience. As a Catholic in the Protestant South, she is acutely aware of the conflicts of faith. Therefore, doubts towards and different opinions on religion can be found in her works. As for the origin of grotesque figures, it should be traced back to the tradition of Southern gothic. Also, haunted by lupus throughout her life, her outlook on life and death is profound. She prefers characterizing those people with physical or mental disabilities and strange bodies. There is no exception that these characters will receive Grace or Revelation in a violent situation, even at the expense of life. Therefore, redemption through violence becomes an enduring theme in O'Connor's works.

"Parker's Back" as one of the writer's final works did not receive much attention, and the research on it mainly revolved around the theme of tattooing and the protagonist's conversion. Different from the novel *Wise Blood* or the famous short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", "Parker's Back" seemed not to be favored by critics. However, the amusing elements like "slapstick, jokes, puns" make this work "an earthy, Chaucer-like story in its humor and seriousness". (Mayer, 126) In this short story, Parker and his wife stand on the two ends of a polarity. Parker, indulged in womanizing and tattooing, is seemingly irreligious; ironically, he is attracted by Sarah Ruth, a plain woman with rigid faith and ascetic lifestyle. It can be expected that their married life is fraught with conflicts and complaints. Driven by an urge to please his wife, Parker always wants to tattoo a biblical image on his back which will be irresistible to Sarah Ruth in his mind. In a violent accident, a whim occurs to him and he has a tattoo of Christ on his back. Nevertheless, this image becomes the evidence of idolatry in Sarah Ruth's eyes, and at the end he is helplessly driven out of home by his wife.

Previous research on this story can be divided into three perspectives, the religious meanings, the secular implications, or the combination of both. Through exploring two pairs of binary oppositions, embodiment vs. spirit, the visible vs. the invisible, Dennis Patrick Slattery discussed the relationship between image and faith. He argued that a biblical image as an icon "reveals the intimate relationship of God to man", (Slattery, 120) and Parker's tattoo of Christ manifests the invisible from the visible. In this case, Slattery justified the holy revelation received by Parker while Sarah Ruth as an iconoclast "has no space for grace." (Ibid, 123) Although from the theological perspective like Slattery's research, Coulthard regarded Parker's tattooing as a thread running through his conversion. As far as he was concerned, this transformation was "from willful sensualist to humble martyr". (70) Apart from the religious meanings, secular implications manifested in tattoos were discussed by David R. Mayer and Brian Yothers. In his article, Mayer first demonstrated the traditional meanings of tattooing in some societies, especially Japan, and then analyzed three motives of Parker's tattooing, including self-awareness, faith in Christ as well as personal attraction. Similar to Mayer, Yothers puts his focus on tattooing, but what made his research different was that he discovered the "redemptive power of art" of the arabesque. (111) He made a comparative

study of the arabesque between O'Connor's "Parker's Back" and the works of her forbears, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Yothers thought that the arabesque as a form of visual arts was embodied in Parker's pursuit of tattooing and constituted his identity. As for the third category which was a combination of theological and secular implications, Robert A. Jackson explored the influence of Manichean reflected in this story. And the secular terms were manifested in the connections of Faulkner and O'Connor's Southern region in their works. If Jackson justified Sarah Ruth's rigid belief by introducing Manichean thoughts, Bleikasten made the similar effect through explaining the controversies over the usage of image within Christianity. Psychoanalysis underpinned his argument that Parker's tattooed body was the byword for "identity crisis." (Bleikasten, 11) Moreover, he argued that "what Sarah represents is precisely what Parker lacks" in his conversion to be a true Christian. (Ibid, 15) As for the prophet-type characters in this short story, Jackson pointed out that Parker was "an obedient prophet" by comparing him with some Old Testament prophets. (27) Fang and Zhang did an archetypal analysis between Parker and Moses. Nevertheless, Parker's grotesque traits as a prophet was not fully demonstrated or even ignored in these researches.

It can be seen that the research on "Parker's Back" so far does not match the work's abundant implications, secular and religious. This paper will explore Parker's identity as a prophet from two aspects, his resemblances to Old Testament prophets and his grotesqueness as a prophet; more specifically, Parker's unpopularity and reluctance in the first part, and his grotesqueness reflected by his speech and body redemption in the second part.

## II. THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET REVISITED IN "PARKER'S BACK"

In the Old Testament, prophets as the intermediary between God and his people play an important role. They cannot only foretell the future, but also "proclaim(ed) the word of God, the violation of the covenant by his contemporaries with a judgment of doom for the unrepentant and a message of hope in God's final victory." (Rabe, 126) However, such a bridge can never be easily built in that on the one hand, it is difficult for those prophets to win his people's trust, and on the other hand, there are some prophets who are reluctant to accept his fate as a prophet. This kind of unpopularity and reluctance find an echo in "Parker's Back". First and foremost, Parker's unpopularity is reflected in the unequal relationship between his wife and him; secondly, his identity as a reluctant prophet finds proof in a contradiction that he tends to avoid his fate which is inescapable.

### A. Parker as an Unwanted Prophet

In the Old Testament, the central place is "undoubtedly occupied by prophets." (qtd. in Rowley, 1) However, these heavyweights always encounter distrust and rejection from his people, which is metaphorically comparable to Parker's unequal relationship with his wife, Sarah Ruth.

In their relationship, Parker is the one who passionately strives to win Sarah Ruth's heart and please her, which is, however, rewarded with the girl's inconceivable indifference. From the time when they first meet to the end of the story, Sarah Ruth almost never change her attitude towards Parker. At the beginning, when Parker pretends to have his hands hurt to attract Sarah's attention, he is ruthlessly greeted with a slap by his bride-to-be. This kind of physical rejection runs throughout the story. It is noteworthy that Parker's first impression of Sarah is "a tall raw-boned girl with a broom." (The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor, 512) Broom becomes Sarah's powerful tool to get rid of Parker. When he visits her for the second time, Sarah shows her coldness again. "The girl did nothing to acknowledge his presence. He might have been a stray pig or goat that had wandered into the yard and she too tired to take up the broom and send it off." (Ibid, 515) It can be seen that Sarah's attitude towards Parker is not a matter about affection or distaste but unconcern since she is even tired of getting rid of him. Here broom is an important image in that at the end Sarah Ruth uses exactly this broom to thrash Parker. Apart from this kind of bodily rejection, Sarah also utters some rejection words. When Parker shows his tattoos which he take pride in, Sarah directly refuses it, "Don't tell me, I don't like it. I ain't got any use for it." (Ibid, 512) These behaviors and words remind us of the Israelites' disobedience to the prophets' warning against evil things. They always reject their prophets' admonition indifferently.

Although Parker's relationship with Sarah Ruth has nothing to do with good or evil, Parker's initiative along with Ruth's rejection is comparable to the prophet-Israelites relationship in the Old Testament.

### B. Parker as a Reluctant Prophet

In the reluctant-prophet-featured narrative, there always exists a tension that on the one hand the prophets are unwilling to shoulder the responsibility, while on the other hand they do not have another choice but to accept their destiny. This is also the contradiction faced by Parker.

The Old Testament tells us that when Moses is informed of his sacred career as a prophet, his immediate response does not please God. Moses first doubts that the Israelites will not listen to him and then makes excuses that he is "slow of speech and tongue." (Exodus, 4:10) In the similar case, Jonah "ran away from the Lord" in the hope of shunning his fate when God's word comes to him. (Jonah, 1:3) However, God is "not subject to human whims and preferences." (Tischler, 208) The reluctant prophets can never succeed in escaping from God.

When it comes to "Parker's Back", the prophet identity of Parker is revealed by his name. Parker's full name is Obadiah Elihue Parker. It is intriguing that in the Old Testament, Obadiah and Elihu are two of the minor prophets. Although these two characters share no difference with Parker in life experience, a sense of sacred profundity has been endowed on Parker. However, Parker is prone to use the abbreviation, O. E. to stand for Obadiah Elihue. When asked about his full name by Sarah Ruth, he shows the fact

that he does not want to mention it. "You can just call me O.E or Parker. Don't nobody call me by my name." (The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor, 517) Later, he even threatens Sarah Ruth, "If you call me that aloud, I'll bust your head open." (Ibid, 517) It seems that what haunts Parker is not the abhorrence towards his name but a kind of fear that his name will be overheard by a ubiquitous being. Like Moses and Jonah, Parker does not want to accept his destiny as a prophet.

It is known that God's choice can never be changed by human will, and Parker's identity as predestined will not be altered in any circumstances. In an accident, his tractor crashes into a tree, and what follows is a fire. Among the mess, the first thing stands out is his shoes, "quickly being eaten by the fire." (Ibid, 520) It is safe to say that the fire-eaten shoes are symbolic. Not coincidentally, Moses receives the epiphany in a fire-eaten bush and he is asked by God to take off his shoes. In this case, Parker is the modern version of Moses since he is also struck by the revelation in a fire-related scene. After that, it suddenly occurs to Parker that "there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and there was nothing he could do about it." (Ibid, 521) We have good reasons to believe that Parker has been forced to face his destiny as a prophet. What's more, when later he chooses to have Christ tattooed on his back, he conceives great awe, even fear. "He wanted to go look at the picture again but at the same time he did not want to." (Ibid, 523) It can be seen that the confirmation of his identity is accompanied by a contradictory emotion, that is, helplessness and fear under the facade of reluctance.

### III. THE SOUTHERN GROTESQUE PROPHET

In Bible, prophets inform his people of messages from God, and these messages are concerned with people's integrity and faith. In "Parker's Back", the identity of a prophet is tinged with grotesqueness in Miss O'Connor's southern context. His speech or act does not mean to correct people's behavior or improve their morality; on the contrary, his image is distorted and it seems that he should be the one to be saved. As a significant characteristic of the Southern grotesque, the mode of distortion "presents simultaneously an image of man's incompleteness and what he ought to be." (Presley, 40) By adding the grotesqueness into the characterization of Parker, O'Connor shows the alienation of a modern prophet; therefore, Parker becomes "a displaced person" who is struggling with God and his belief in God. (Blackwell, 104)

#### A. Parker's Prophetic Speech

In "Parker's Back", what constitute Parker's prophetic speech are three parts, his inverse prophecy, blasphemy, and the silence. This is an abnormal way to depict the disintegration of Parker's speech as a prophet.

First and foremost, unlike those biblical predecessors, Parker always utters a prophecy that is contrary to reality, which is fully represented in his attitude towards his wife. Indulged in womanizing, at the very beginning, he plans "never to get himself tied up legally." (The Complete Stories

of Flannery O'Connor, 511) When he meets Sarah Ruth who is plain and even ugly, he foretells that he will have nothing to do with this woman, which is obviously not the truth. After the first visit, he promises Sarah Ruth that he will pick up peaches for her the next day, but actually he has no intention to do that. What is intriguing is that "the next day he found himself doing it." (Ibid, 516) In this case, a double inversion is formed by Parker's utterance. More specifically, what he wants and what really happens are disintegrated. It seems that Parker is like a puppet at the mercy of an invisible power. This kind of sacred power is in tension with Parker's will as an individual person. In addition, Parker's speech is fraught with seemingly blasphemy. When he pretends to be hurt, he hollers in an exaggerated way, "Jesus Christ in hell! Jesus God Almighty damn! God dammit to hell!" (Ibid, 511) This kind of oath cannot attest to his unfaithfulness; it can only be inferred that his inner faith and speech are not unified. He does not resort to seemingly faithful speech to assert his faith.

In front of Sarah Ruth, Parker is easily rendered speechless and silent, and it seems that he is more like a listener than a talker, which is inconsistent with a prophet's responsibilities. When his bride-to-be shows contempt to his tattoos, he "remained for almost five minutes, looking agape at the dark door she had entered." This description implies his five-minute silence which reveals that he is unable to defend for what he believes. Another instance is that Parker always plays a role of listener when Sarah Ruth talks about "what the judgment seat of God would be like for him if he didn't change his ways." (Ibid, 519) Under the veil of silence is Parker's helplessness since he has almost lost the ability to voice his opinions. In such a context, what defines Parker's identity as a modern prophet is the deprivation of appropriate speech. These abnormal verbal expressions altogether characterize Parker's grotesqueness as a prophet.

#### B. The Bodily Redemption

Body as a recurring motif in Southern writers' works is also embodied in Parker's pursuit of tattooing. However, behind this kind of corporeal craze, it is Parker's incompleteness of spirituality.

Parker takes a fancy to tattooing when he is only fourteen, and after that, he never ceases having tattoos on his body. As a youth who is "as ordinary as a loaf of bread," he resorts to tattooing to save himself from banality. (Ibid, 513) Except for his back, his body is fully covered with various images, including anchors, crossed rifles, a tiger, a panther, a cobra, etc. Later, he finds out that his tattoos are helpful for attracting girls. In this case, he gains satisfaction and his life is all about tattooing. "The only reason he worked at all was to pay for more tattoos." (Ibid, 513) Unfortunately, he gradually is seized by "a huge dissatisfaction" in that the space on his body for tattoos has decreased. (Ibid, 514) As Odom points out, this reveals "emptiness underneath". (183) In Parker's endless pursuit of tattooing, his identity as a prophet is disintegrated. What he is seeking is what he lacks; thus, his fully tattooed body represents his incompleteness in spirituality. At the end of the story, Parker's tattoo of Christ on his back does not bring any praises from Sarah Ruth but

her abuses. His pose of leaning against the tree and crying like a baby tells us that his body redemption fails to save him from banality and dissatisfaction. Both the way of bodily redemption and the tragic failure reveals that Parker is not a traditional version of prophet, but a modern and grotesque prophet.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on the characterization of a modern prophet in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Parker's Back". The protagonist, Parker both has some traits similar to the Old Testament forebears and a tinge of grotesqueness congruent with the author's creation style.

In the first part, the similarities between Parker and some Old Testament prophets are discussed. The first point is that Parker is an unwanted prophet. In his relationship with his wife, he always takes the initiative to please his wife, which is, however, rewarded with enduring indifference. Also, bearing resemblances to Moses and Jonah, Parker is also a reluctant prophet. He does not want to confront with his destiny as a prophet, but under the invisible force, he has no other choice but to accept his identity.

The second part is concerned about Parker's prophetic identity in the context of the Southern grotesque. Both his speech and the way of redemption deviate from the biblical references. In the first place, his speech is featured by inverse speech, blasphemy and silence, all of which show that his identity as a prophet is disintegrated. In addition, his love for tattooing represents his body redemption. He wants to save himself from the banality of life and marriage, but the more he pursues, the greater his incompleteness will be. In a word, his lack of appropriate speech and the failure of body redemption contribute to the distortion of his prophetic identity.

By focusing on a prophet-like character in one of O'Connor's short story, this paper establishes a connection between the characterization of biblical prophets and the Southern grotesque. Hopefully, this paper can make some modest contributions to the research on Flannery O'Connor.

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