

# Limning the Landscape of Religious Narrative Morality, Dramatization, and Verticality

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## **Limning the Landscape of Religious Narrative: Morality, Dramatization, and Verticality**

*"The grandmother said she would tell them a story if they would keep quiet. When she told a story, she rolled her eyes and waved her head and was very dramatic..."*

-Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

### **Stories and Their Interpretation**

Good teachers, like grandparents, know how a well-crafted story can captivate the imagination of even the "squirreliest" of children. In fact, whether on a road trip or around a campfire, adults and children all love hearing a good story. For most, however, fiction, film, and music long-ago replaced oral tradition as the primary medium for the conveyance of story. Whether read, told, written, heard, or viewed, utilizing contemporary forms of narratives to teach religious education provides an opportunity for what Hans Georg Gadamer deemed a "fusion of horizons": new perspectives and rules that open up through the fusion of two different texts/narratives (1989, 306). Groome (1980) and Harris (1987) have acknowledged as such, long calling for the utilization of stories and story-telling as ways to promote "the religious imagination" and the development of "new ways of seeing." According to Gadamer: "(o)nly the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening of our own experience of the world" (1977, 15). Choosing religious stories and narrative forms that appeal to the cultural life-world of the students offer even greater potency for a "fusion of horizons"--fusing the religious world-view of the story with the cultural world view of the student(s).

For most religious traditions, scriptural narratives form the *prima facie* stories for conveying identity and belief. And yet, if religious educators only utilize scriptural narratives, they risk falling short of engaging the world-view of their students. On the other hand, drawing too liberally from the stories of culture, fails in tapping into the spiritual and moral worldview contained within the religious tradition the religious educator represents. In this case, religious educators are open to the charge of whether and how such cultural narratives are indeed "religious." The intersection of narrative forms, religious belief, and student culture therefore raises important theoretical and practical questions for religious educators when utilizing contemporary religious narratives. First, what is the power within stories that elicit the mulling over of identity, place, and purpose (the fusion of a story's horizon with our own)? Secondly, what essential elements must be within narratives for them to be considered "religious" (the fusion of the story's horizon with that of a religious tradition)? The second of these questions forms the practical goal of this article--to develop criteria useful for religious educators in evaluating the "religiousness" of short stories, film, and emerging forms of narrative. Consequently, this article: 1) establishes a cross-disciplinarian conceptual framework for the comparison of "religiousness," and 2) utilizes and tests this framework in extrapolating and comparing the "religiousness" of two non-scriptural narratives: Andre Dubus' "A Father's Story" and Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Discerning the *boundaries* and *intersections* between revelation and narrative is both a literary and theological task. On the one hand, it is important to discern the *narrative structures* within writings considered revelation (a literary task), and on the other, to determine the *revelatory qualities* within narrative and identify whether they may or may not be considered "religious" (a theological task). Furthermore, because religiosity involves more than content or form but also belief and action, a philosophical analysis will help clarify conceptual distinctions concerning religious *belief* and moral *action*; two goals of religious educators in utilizing narrative. Consequently, in developing a framework useful for the analysis of the "religiousness" of narrative, this section draws upon the work of four theorists: literary theorist Northrup Frye, theologian Avery Dulles, and philosophers William Sweet and Walter Feinberg.

In his essay on the double vision of language, Northrup Frye contrasts a literal-historical logic with the paradoxical and metaphorical logic he believes is inherent in biblical narratives (1991, 3-21). A literal-historical logic is premised based on linking logical explanations with descriptive sense experiences. Its goal is to ascertain certain principles and indisputable facts for the advancing and reifying of religious belief. Frye argues that applying this type of logic to scripture fails by its own criteria because it lacks the historical proof that science and historical studies demand. Forcing scriptural narratives to fit the methods of science, works as a compelling dialectic only for those that share similar psychological sympathies with those seeking to use scriptural narratives to assert and reinforce dogma.

Instead Frye argues that scriptural narratives are fundamentally mythic and metaphorical: a logic that immerses the reader in the physical and sensual world of the metaphor. The goal in utilizing the sensually metaphorical however is not to prove, but rather, to provide a qualitative experience in which mystery and meaning can be pursued. Deeming this approach "imaginative literalism," Frye believes that such an approach, like the experience of faith itself, is premised upon the continuous paradoxical reality of human existence (physical and metaphysical). Frye distinguishes "imaginative literalism" from other metaphorical approaches to non-religious narratives on the basis of the vision of spiritual life that scriptural narrative forwards: "... (Scriptural) myths become, as purely literary myths cannot, myths to *live by*; its metaphors become, as purely literary metaphors cannot, metaphors to *live in*. This transforming power is sometimes called kerygma or proclamation." (1991, 17-18)

Theologian Avery Dulles's study on the symbolic structure of revelation shares with Frye an interest in the symbolic nature of religious communication. In his argument Dulles draws on Michael Polanyi's distinctions between two kinds of knowing: *objective* forms of knowledge and *participatory* forms of knowledge (1980, 51-73). Whereas objective knowledge is obtained by observation and abstraction from the world, participatory forms of knowledge involve personal knowledge of other human beings' interiority and must rely on the interpretation of the *signs* others give us--words and gestures. An interpretive process attends to these symbols and acts, desiring to understand their purpose and complex meaning from *within* the author's/others' world-view rather than from outside. The symbols themselves are generated by the author/other, and are meant to draw the listener into the space of meaning that they create. Such symbolic communication can only speak to the outside listener if they are *lured* into the interpretive

participation within that space of meaning. The purpose of participating in the interpretation is to understand the reality to which they point.

Dulles argues that *symbolic participatory knowledge* serves as an apt *medium of revelation* through the sharing of three key characteristics; both are transformative, both impact actions, and both introduce the interpreter/receiver to realms of knowledge inaccessible to mere logic. First, citing the impact symbolism can have in psychotherapy as well as religious conversion, Dulles maintains that symbol and revelation can move and reorient an individual's reference point for self-understanding and volitional direction. Secondly, symbolic participatory knowledge and revelation both impact the commitments and activities of those who participate in their interpretation/reception including religious based social movements (e.g. Martin, 2008). Lastly, because symbolic knowledge and revelation are multivalent, meaning is both revealed as well as concealed (thereby alluding categorical thought).

Philosopher of Religion William Sweet makes a distinction between the *descriptive* elements of religious belief and its *expressive* elements (2007, 41-64). Sweet locates the cognitive content of religious belief with the descriptive (or empirical) element stating, "...they are uttered in order to affirm or assert something...they make claims about things the believer believes to be the case." (45) Descriptive elements make claims of truth and falsehood according to a religious tradition. Sweet argues, however, that it is *expressive* (or interpretive) dimensions of religious belief that "enliven" and bring a richer or deeper meaning to descriptive elements. Sweet defines the expressive element as "express (ing) one's disposition or one's commitment to a view of life and (to) show how the believer has understood the world." (46) It is this dimension of religious belief that reveals a belief to be properly religious. Thus, according to Sweet what makes a belief religious is not just its subject matter (descriptive)--but whether and how it influences a person's activity (expressive).

Philosopher of Education Walter Feinberg focuses on three functions of religious stories: *consolidation*, *extension*, and *constitution* (2004, 1-19). While consolidation is concerned with identifying boundaries between the religious tradition and others, extension is concerned with the relationship between that religious tradition and others. Religious stories that function as consolidation are concerned with the distinctiveness of a religion, providing a special status, and making an essential division expressed in terms of saved/unsaved, pure/impure, and enlightened/unenlightened. Religious stories that function as extension stories focus on expanding a group's moral horizon's extending them to members of other groups (in an ecumenical way and/or an imperial way). Concerning the *constitutive* function Feinberg writes, "To say that religious stories constitute a morality is to say that they create something that is in fact different from stories that are not religious." (13) While such stories stress morals, they define and give glimpses of these morals in ways *unique* to religion. The example Feinberg utilizes for illustrating the constitutive function of religious stories is the Garden of Eden and how it constitutes the virtue of humility in a distinctively religious way. According to Feinberg, religious humility arises from an awareness of one's utter dependency and contingency upon the creator. Thus, unlike consolidation which directs one to the belief itself, or extension which solidifies the extension of religious identity, constitution is concerned with the *way a belief is held*.

Synthesizing and extracting the insights of Frye, Dulles, Sweet and Feinberg, offers characteristics helpful in identifying and assessing the religiousness of stories. The following three characteristics, advanced as criteria for determining the "religiousness" of stories, are offered as a flexible framework for analyzing and classifying the religiousness of stories. These three characteristics are the *constitutive moral code criteria*, the *dramatic expressive criteria*, and the *vertical criteria*.

The first characteristic a religious narrative contains is a reference, however veiled in symbolism, to an *identifiable religious moral code*. Drawing especially on Feinberg's *constitutive* function, this characteristic combines a focus on the identification of a religious moral code (the *what*) with an emphasis on the *quality of how* the moral code is held and lived out. According to Feinberg's constitutive function, what is distinctive about religious stories is their ability to constitute a different quality of morality than other stories; to give glimpses of a morality unique to religion. This uniqueness is certainly built upon a distinctive content/code but also, and perhaps more importantly, becomes concretely understood when it impacts the life of the believer. Because religious stories are narratives and not catechism, the author's are free to explore and utilize the narrative form not for the purpose of doctrinal clarification (as a sort of doctrine repackaged within narrative form), but rather, to illustrate how the religious moral code is *qualitatively* held by the character(s) who hold it. I identify this characteristic as *the constitutive moral code criteria*.

The second characteristic draws upon Sweet; religious narratives *dramatize a character(s) disposition/intention toward acting out of the religious moral code*. Because narratives offer a window into the subjective life of a character's inner deliberations, readers are given access to see and interpret the *expressive* element of religious belief. What is important is not the clarity of doctrinal content, or how perfect/flawed the character(s) live it out. Rather, what makes this characteristic significant is its focus on the *dynamic relationship between the character's inner attitude toward the moral code and their evolving actions in reference to it*. This characteristic draws the audience in as we view the shifting inner landscape of a character and how it serves to rearrange the choices and actions of their exterior lives. As we participate in interpreting and judging such choices, we are invited to consider our own lives and choices in relationship to the characters. We oftentimes connect powerfully with those stories and characters that remind us of our own lives; such characters are us and such stories become our stories. I identify this as the *dramatic expressive criteria*.

The last characteristic of a religious story is that *it contains a reference to a metaphysical reality beyond the physical--namely the reality of a transcendent God*. As both Dulles and Frye remind us, metaphorical and symbolic logic, while being grounded in the organic and sensual, lures the reader into realms of knowledge not possible through linear logic. Symbolic expressions of the divine may draw on biblical/religious representations whose meanings may not always be readily apparent but whose symbolism draws us in at an unconscious level. The narrative form and drama within which these symbolic representations occur, draws us into a depth of abstraction and contemplation intensely personal. Thus, the story acts as a sort of stage or medium, through which the divine drama and reality can be witnessed, interpreted, and

encountered. At best, the symbols and narratives hang with us hauntingly--drawing us to a conversion of thought and action through our contemplation of the divine. I identify this last characteristic as the *vertical criteria*.

## **Limning the Landscape: Applying the Characteristics**

The previous characteristics developed are meant to be used for the purpose of identifying and analyzing the religiousness of non-scriptural but religious narrative forms. To test their explanatory utility this section uses them to analyze Andre Dubus' "A Father's Story" and Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Because of space limitations this analysis assumes a reader's familiarity with each narrative thereby containing itself to an application of the above forwarded characteristics.

### **Characteristic #1: Constitutive Moral Code Criterion**

In much of the early part of "A Father's Story" Andre Dubus deftly details the fractured history and emotional texture of the life of Luke Ripley. He is a divorced father of three sons and one daughter. His best friend is a Catholic priest with whom he talks of faith and longing ("Belief is believing in God; faith is believing that God believes in you"). We hear of why his marriage fell apart and what his reflection on it and love are. We also learn of Luke's perspective on the Church and his faith in it and God. What the early part of the story clearly establishes is a religious moral framework that Luke evaluates his life in relationship to--a clear fulfillment of the first characteristic. The story's moral climax, however, comes 2/3 through the story when this moral code is seriously put to the test.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" O'Connor describes how the sympathetic antics and hypocrisies of a Grandmother lead a family to an importune meeting with an escaped trio of convicts. The story begins innocently with a humorous view into the conversations and relational dynamics of a family car ride; it ends with the brutal shooting of the family led by the dark but introspective convict who calls himself "The Misfit." The reference of a religious moral code occurs at the conclusion of the story when the Grandmother in desperate fear for her life, refers to prayer, Jesus, and goodness in a brief but revealing conversation with "The Misfit." Although at first glance the references seem superficial and expedient, the questions that remain following the brutal slaying of the family, beckon a deeper reading and interpretation of these religious moral references. Although the Grandmother insists that "The Misfit" is a good man who with prayer could avoid the path of violence and destruction, "The Misfit" takes the Grandmother's questions in a profoundly existential direction. Concurrent to the systematic killing of the rest of the family occurring just out of sight in the woods, "The Misfit" carries on a surreal conversation with the Grandmother. Crucial details about his life as well as why he believes he is the way he is become clear. Within the explanation of his actions, it is obvious that he has a profound understanding of the Christian message of redemption and divine love, but equally as obvious that he has never had an experience of this love upon which to base a change of action upon. "The Misfit" believes if he ever had received such unconditional love, rather than the violence and abuse he seems to have grown up with, he would not be the way he is. Questions of earthly

and divine justice are raised through "The Misfit's" profound engagement with the religious moral code the Grandmother forwards as the vehicle of being good.

## **Characteristic #2: Dramatic Expressive Criterion**

Like O'Connor, Andre Dubus uses violence as a way to illuminate and dramatize religious questions. In "A Father's Story" Luke's college aged daughter Jennifer arrives home following an evening out drinking with friends to reveal that she has hit a person on the road and left them to die. In surely one of the most dramatic scenes of the story Luke hovers over the body of the boy his daughter hit and feels for life. With full awareness that God is watching, Luke compares himself to Cain (Where is your brother?) and Job (suffering without reason)--stating that he is not sure which he is closer to (murder/Cain or absurd suffering/Job). Should he save the boy and therefore condemn his daughter? Or, should he save his daughter, and therefore condemn his soul? Luke does what he knows he would do the moment he heard that his daughter hit someone: he fails to report the accident, and furthermore, covers up his daughter's crime through crashing the car she had used, in front of the church the next morning on the way to Mass. As Luke sees it, he is confronted with one of the most perplexing of moral quandaries: should he choose truth and justice, and thereby insist his daughter turn herself in, or love, and thereby seek to protect his daughter from the suffering that will no doubt ensue for her? Luke chooses love--and in one of the most haunting conclusions, directly confronts and is confronted by God for his choice.

In a "Good Man is Hard to Find," an impending act of meaningless violence serves as the catalyst for a religious conversation between two of the unlikeliest characters; the self-centered Grandmother and the vicious "Misfit." While the Grandmother cries out for her lost son, the theological musings of "The Misfit" on Jesus' Resurrection reveals his own desire yet impotency to do good. In a moment of clarity unrivaled in her long life, the Grandmother sees the neglected and fragile "Misfit" as God might. Crying out, "Why you're one of my babies... You're one of my own children!" she reaches out in compassion to touch "The Misfit." Although this selfless and compassionate act may have saved her soul, it also ended her life as it triggered a knee-jerk reaction from "The Misfit" who "sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest." Although such a shocking ending leaves the reader unsettled, it appears that the Grandmother finally saw, with the help of grace, her good man.

## **Characteristic #3: Vertical Criterion**

Did Luke's action covering up his daughter's crime damage his soul irreparably? This is a question left for the reader to decipher. Luke, however, takes it up directly with God in the last half-page of "A Father's Story." Defending his action as that of "the father of a girl," Luke argues that had God had a daughter He could not of borne her Passion. The closing lines of the dialogue raise profound theological and spiritual questions for Luke and the reader: "So, He says, you love her more than you love Me. I love her more than I love truth. Then you love in weakness, He says. As You love me, I say...." These lines convey a character, like Job and Jacob, profoundly and deeply engaged with the mystery and meaning of God. For the discerning reader, it also raises provocative questions about the Trinitarian God who "loves us in weakness." The vertical

criterion of this narrative is demonstrated most powerfully by the capacity of such questions to linger and haunt our religious imagination long after the reading concludes.

In "A Good Man" the juxtaposition of the Grandmother's act of compassion with the violent response of "The Misfit" leaves the casual reader with more confusion than clarity. What does such a violent ending suggest about God? In this story grace enters abruptly through the unexpected compassion the Grandmother offers "The Misfit." It is unearned and, as we are reminded by "The Misfit," might not have occurred had a gun not been pointed at the Grandmother's head. Despite "The Misfit's" instinctual reaction, the reader is left with some hope that "The Misfit" may one day live up to the grace-infused vision of goodness the Grandmother had of him. In his conversation with the Grandmother he demonstrates a longing to see the Risen Christ ("if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now") and by the end seems to be disgusted with the nihilism that has led him to the violence and meanness of his killing ("It's no real pleasure in life"). Despite the dark ending, this narrative holds up hope that God's grace, always looming as a force outside the characters, may indeed strike the undeserving "Misfit" as it did the cantankerous Grandmother. Anything is possible for the God, who in the words of "The Misfit" "Thrown everything off balance" by raising the dead.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has identified three characteristics contained in religious narratives: the religious moral code criterion, the dramatic expressive criterion, and the vertical criterion. Taken together, I argue they make up the key elements that limn the landscape of a religious narrative. Like the elements of a garden's landscape (stone, earth, and water), these three characteristics overlap with one another adding layers to the richness of religious meaning drawn from the landscape as a whole. In the previous analysis, these characteristics served to highlight key "religious" elements of "A Father's Story" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Do these characteristics help identify and explain the religious elements of these narratives? While each narrative fulfilled each criterion and can properly be identified as a religious narrative, the utility of the characteristics with these stories comes in their ability to explain and analyze the religious elements of the narrative. For religious educators, however, these characteristics/criteria provide pragmatic tools for wading into the cacophony of contemporary culture to identify promising narratives and narrative forms for the purpose of teaching religious education. Further application to other short stories, film, and emerging forms of narrative can only help further refine and clarify these useful criteria.

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