



An Analysis of Religious Images in Flannery O'Connor's Novel *Wise Blood*

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Abstract

Speaking of the Southern Women's writing of the 20th century, Flannery O'Connor would be on the top of the list. After two novels and thirty-two stories, Flannery O'Connor, a Roman Catholic living in the American South, passed away of disease at the age of 39. Since her first novel *Wise Blood* which was published in 1952, her influence on literature and art has steadily been increasing—she won numerous awards in her not long life. According to McFarland,

Thinking is that the realm of the Holy interpenetrates this world and affects it. It is the workings of this mystery that she was most concerned with demonstrating in her fiction. By her own explanation, the grotesquerie of her stories is directly related to her Christian perspective.

Wise Blood was surely embedded in her religious views and reflected her unique writing style—the use of violence and bizarre characters, and the theological meaning, later to become its strength. Thus, the author tries to present the notions above in this paper, which is divided into five parts. The first part is an introduction of Flannery O'Connor; the second part is a brief analysis of Flannery O'Connor's writing style. The third part focuses on the Christian cultural context of the novel, and the next part presents religious views of O'Connor through two characters: Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery. The last part is conclusion.

Key words: Flannery O'Connor; *Wise Blood*; Christian perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) is one of the greatest Southern writers in American literature. As a pious Catholic writer, she insists that the chaotic modern world should be responsible for all the crimes, sins as well as religious paralysis. *Wise Blood* is O'Connor's first novel, which vividly demonstrates her concern about modern people who have fallen into their sins. Through this novel, she illustrates her point of view that men are born evil and only God can save people by the depiction of two characters, Hazel Notes and Enoch Emery. The two characters are put into the same scenario of religious crisis and their spiritual quests are compared according to their different characteristics and beliefs. Through contrast and comparison, O'Connor presents her religious views to the readers.

1. AN INTRODUCTION OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor (March 25, 1925-August 3, 1964) was an American novelist, short-story writer and essayist. As an important voice in American literature, O'Connor wrote two novels and 32 short stories, as well as a number of reviews and commentaries. She was a Southern writer who often wrote in a Southern Gothic style and relied heavily on regional settings and grotesque characters. O'Connor's writing also reflected her own Roman Catholic faith, and frequently examined questions of morality and ethics.

She gained numerous awards in her lifetime. In 1952 her novel *Wise Blood* was published and in the following year she won the Kenyon Review Fellowship. In 1954 she was reappointed as a Kenyon Fellow and won second prize in the O. Henry awards for her story *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. In 1955, O'Connor's first short story collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to*

Find, is published. It also receives rave reviews. In 1957 she received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant and she won first prize in the O. Henry awards for "Greenleaf." By this time, her style of natural realism had been firmly established. Her characters and landscapes are recognizable and they all act with motives that correspond to them. Her stories often had ironic endings that seemed "to mock or deny both conventions and commonly accepted human values." In 1963 she won second prize in the O. Henry Awards for "Everything That Rises Must Converge". Near the end of 1963, O'Connor was ill again. The next year, she passed away at the age of 39. That same year she again won a third O. Henry Awards for "Revelation" and seven years after her death, *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* were published and won the National Book Award.

2. FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND HER WRITING STYLE

Living with a fatal disease, O'Connor was more sensitive to the meanings of life. In all her writings, the human spirit and how it related to God and vice versa was always her main concern. Though there are some critics arguing that Flannery O'Connor belongs to the Southern Gothic tradition, O'Connor dislikes the term "Southern gothic", insisting on a difference between the gothic and the grotesque: the Gothic simply entertains; the grotesque makes a moral point, which depends on the comic and the terrible—combining the monster and the clown. When the befuddled Enoch puts on the Conga costume, we see an example of the monster-clown, the fierce looking are propelled by a country bumpkin. "Like the caricaturist, who uses exaggeration and distortion in order to emphasize the character of his subject, O'Connor created bizarre character of extreme situations in order to attain deeper kinds of realism".

Here are some more examples. Asa Hawks has the expression of a grinning mandrill. Enoch looks like a friendly hound dog with light mange. A woman on the steps looks at Haze with "bright flea eyes." The museum guard, in a uniform like Haze's, looks like a "dried-up spider stuck there": These are some of O'Connor's grotesques. Often bodily imperfection is a way of making moral deficiency more dramatic. The grotesque may produce the emotion of terror in the reader as we recognize our own potential involvement with evil, just as the gargoyles were meant to remind worshippers of their own original sin.

O'Connor has another take on the grotesque that is very important to understand. Many of her characters are grotesque in a Christian sense. These are everyday, middle-class people who are neither sinners nor saints. Their sins remain uncovered until a crisis effects exposure. Their initial fault is the lack of faith. The actual

grotesqueness is apathy. In "Greenleaf," for example, O'Connor's narrator describes a character: "She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe that any of it was true." This woman belongs to what the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard described as "Christendom," the culture of nominal Christians, which he contrasts with New Testament Christianity.

Many of O'Connor's nominal Christians are quite satisfied with themselves because they believe themselves to be respectably pious. On the other hand, because of the world's apathy, those who are zealous are looked down upon as grotesques by the world. Hazel Motes, is a prime example. Of course, the way hard believers express their commitment is often highly comic, as when Haze dons a preacher's outfit but insists that he does not believe. His conversion comes after the destruction of his ridiculous car, a material icon that he thinks "justifies" him. O'Connor's ultimate finding is that we are all grotesque—we are all imperfect reflections of a divine ideal.

3. CULTURAL CONTEXT OF WISE BLOOD

As Du Bois (1990) declared that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color-line. Racial conflict would indeed roil the American nation during the American century. While much of the racial violence would strafe O'Connor's own native region, she discerned a far worse evil gnawing at the modern soul—a cancer devouring not only the American nation but the entire western world. She saw racism as by a single species belonging to a far more pernicious genus of evil. "If you live today, you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church it's the gas you breathe." Writing to a post-Christian age, she knew that her fiction would have to embody the Gospel's own standalone, its unremitting offense to all who have ears to hear and eyes to see, but whose deafness requires the raised voice and whose blindness demands large and startling figures. Like all of our great writers, O'Connor sought to alter our vision and thus to transform our lives. She wanted to reorder our loves to the love of God—or at least to enable our recognition of their terrible disorder.

O'Connor sees the Church as one of the places where the dark horror resides. For her, however, the Church is not one among many human associations, destined to fail like all the others. Scrofulous and sclerotic though it is, the Church cannot be decay into final decrepitude and death. It remains the corpus of the reigning and returning Christ. Hence O'Connor's further affirmation:

I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endurable; the only thing that makes the Church endurable is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. (CW, 924)

The Catholics who believe, perhaps rightly, that Flannery O'Connor will eventually be declared, if not a saint, then surely a doctor of the Church, one of its official teachers. The case for O'Connor's eminence as a theologian of the imagination could well be made by way of the following declaration made to Betty Hester,

I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and physically real are, then I will know what God is. We know these laws as we see them, not as God sees them. For me, it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified.... The resurrection of Christ seems the high point in the law of nature.

Well in advance of her time, she knew that we are free at last and blessedly so, of the Enlightenment chimera called "timeless and placeless truth," as if we could view the world standing above time and space, determining the truth autonomously for ourselves and thus controlling it for our own purposes. Truth is indeed universal because every single truth is related to all others, but we do not determine truth, much less control it, for our individual selves. We know and speak and write the Truth only as we are sustained by convictional communities and shared narratives.

In her preface to a second edition of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor writes that for some, Haze's "integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author, Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to." The ragged figure is the Christ who haunts Haze; secularists think that such "haunting" is physiologically damaging. Unlike many modern writers who claim that God has turned his back on man, O'Connor believes that the opposite is true.

Like Emily Dickinson, she told the truth whole but also "slant"—i.e., she wrote from an unapologetic bias of vision. "If I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified by anything or to enjoy anything." She wanted not chiefly to entertain and to edify but to convert her readers.

4. RELIGIOUS IMAGES IN WISE BLOOD

In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, there are two seekers: Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery. The first seeks religious truths, the second pleasure. Both seekers encounter false prophets: Hoover Shoats, his prophet clone, and Asa Hawks. They also encounter the deadness of the world, the deadness of the City of Man, the Secular City. Enoch embraces the city; Haze despises it.

4.1 Enoch Emery

Enoch's name obviously evokes the biblical character of the same name. In Genesis 5:24, we learn what little available information exists for Enoch: "Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away."

At the end of chapter twelve of *Wise Blood*, Enoch Emery, having donned a stolen gorilla costume, frightens a couple who sees him and then disappears from the remainder of the story. No other significant character in this book simply disappears with any explanation. Asa Hawks moves away. Hoover Shoats has gone home, only to have his hired prophet murdered by Haze Motes. These disappearances make sense, but why does Enoch simply drop off the page?

Unlike the other heretics that populate this novel, Enoch can be seen as becoming a new creature. After stealing the gorilla costume, he takes his old clothes and buries them, suggesting death and burial of his old person. Enoch becomes, literally, a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), indeed a new species from all appearances. Enoch looks at first to Haze for his redemption, culminating in his stealing a "new Jesus" for Haze's new church. This "new Jesus," a stolen mummy that has fascinated Enoch throughout the story, seems a great idea to the young man as he brings it to Haze, yet it proves to be dead. It is only after that realization that Enoch shifts his attention to the faux gorilla. Stalking (and apparently attacking) a man in order to abscond with his ape suit is not to be seen as an untroubled analogue to Christian conversion. Nor is that crime to be seen as evidence of walking "faithfully with God".

4.2 Hazel Motes

Hazel Motes, the main character in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, leads readers on a captivating journey through his post-war life in the 1950s. Through his trial and struggles, O'Connor constructs a world of deceit among truth seekers, rampant hypocrisy, and unmitigated insanity. Hazel Motes, whose name is derived from the famous passage in Mathew about removing the plank from one's own eye before noticing the mote in another's as representation of Hazel Motes' accusatory and hypocritical nature, finds himself as a loss after returning from war, searching for truth when the beliefs he held so hardly seem to shattered before him. The car is used as a symbol of Hazel Motes' spirituality when he comes in contact with Essex for the first time, when the Essex first came of the manufacturing line, when the car breaks down, and when the car is finally destroyed.

In chapter one, O'Connor writes of Hazel's Christian childhood in which Hazel associates his cramped berth on the train with memories of entrapment from his youth. Hazel thinks back to "the first coffin he had seen with someone in it," which belongs to his grandfather:

His grandfather had been a circuit preacher, a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger. When it was time to bury him, they shut the top of his box down and he didn't make a move.

The grandfather is a powerful influence on Hazel, imprinting Hazel's consciousness with the image of a traveling evangelist who preaches from the nose of an automobile. O'Connor writes that Hazel "knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher"; Hazel has not only a profession to pursue but also a prototype to model himself on. Hazel's associations of entrapment with Christianity and automobiles prove meaningful throughout the novel as he embarks upon his own career as a "preacher" and develops a relationship with his own car. Indeed, Hazel seems to want to become the antithesis of his own grandfather by preaching the blasphemous tenets of his own "Church Without Christ" from the nose of his Essex automobile.

Complicating Hazel's confused conceptions of entrapment, sin, and Christianity is the episode involving the Melsy carnival, at which Hazel and his father pay to see a woman lying in a coffin. Hazel's father has a lustful reaction to the woman; he says "Had one of them built into ever' casket...be a heap ready to go sooner" (p.32). Haze's "shut-mouthed" mother, who O'Connor describes as having a "cross-shaped face," senses Haze's guilt when he returns home (pp.32-33). Telling him that "Jesus died to redeem you," she whips him with a stick, leaving him with a "nameless unplaced guilt" (p.33). The actions of his parents leave Motes unable to distinguish what is good and Christian from what is forbidden and evil. He associates his grandfather with Christianity but also entrapment; he associates entrapment with the carnival episode, in which his father treated the woman as desirable but after which Hazel was made to feel guilty.

Hazel Motes' Christian upbringing continues to be significant in later chapters of *Wise Blood*. Several characters notice an inherent goodness in Hazel that shows through despite his determination to deny it. The FROSTY BOTTLE waitress, who says, "I know a clean boy when I see one," warns the "nice boy" Hazel to stay away from Enoch, lest he be corrupted by the "goddamned son of a bitch" (pp.46-47). Hazel responds, "I am clean," making it evident that he means something different by the word "clean." Near the end of the book, Mrs. Flood notes Motes' Christian-like ways: "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things. You must have been lying to me when you named your fine church. I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't some kind of agent of the pope or got some connection with something funny" (p.116). Motes, even in trying to become a living negation of his grandfather's principles, cannot escape his Christian origins.

4.3 The Essex and Hazel Motes

Hazel Motes, in the beginning of the story, searches for a car at a dealership called "Slade's for the Latest." The

mangled car parallels Haze's spirituality the first time he sees it. He asks the young boy how much the car will cost. The young man responds by telling him, "Jesus Christ on the cross. Christ nailed." The price the boy expects Motes to pay is his soul, which is humanity's price for redemption through Christ's self-offering on the cross. Motes' soul, however, is in no state to be given away, much like this car. His spirituality, represented by the car he purchases, is dilapidated and tired. He barter with the owner of the lot, purchasing the car for what he thinks is a more affordable price: fifty dollars. Later in the story, Motes finds himself in a car with Sabbath Hawks, a sex-hungry teenager looking to seduce him. Her nymphomania is likely the result of being a victim of sexual abuse, possibly incest, in her past. She tells him she is a bastard child, sending Motes reeling. He cannot comprehend how Sabbath's father, Asa Hawks, a seemingly good Christian man, could have a bastard child. Sabbath continues to explain the woes of life she sees as void of salvation, but Motes cannot recover from the shock. His understanding of spirituality abruptly changes before him, breaking down. Stunned, he notices the hypocrisy in Asa. His car, at this same time breaks down, unable to move.

The car, as a symbol, reveals Motes' denial of his spirit's poor quality. He is broken down, still denying that there is anything wrong with the state of his soul. He tells the man that the car was "built by people with their eyes open that knew where they were at" (p.125). Ironically, Motes is blind to the fact that this is just as untrue for his car as it is for his soul. His sense of spirituality was self-constructed, blindly creating a lie of spirituality. Then, the gas man gives Mote's care a push with his truck to make it start. Haze, unable to admit the true condition of his car, or his soul, tells the man that this car can, "get [him] anywhere [he] wanted to go"(Ibid.). The man responds by telling him that "get some folks somewhere." The man's cryptic response seems simple, but he is passing a great judgment on more than just the state of Motes' car, but also the state of Motes' soul. He is saying that his soul is on a journey somewhere unpredictable and undesirable.

Later, in what is one of the most shocking and seemingly insane points of the story, Motes stalks a "Prophet" man, because he is preaching Motes' message without sincerely believing it. In a heart racing scene of insanity, Motes flattens this false prophet with his car, leaving stains of blood on the hood (p.206, 207). This is not the first time spiritual carnage has been reaped from the hood of Motes' car. Whenever he would go out to preach, he would stand on the hood of his car, telling spiritual lies and spreading philosophies that lead only to spiritual death. Motes' sermon on the hood is like his Essex engine, so full of noise. The next day, Motes takes his car to a service station to have the water and oil put in his engine. The boy working at the station tells Motes there is a leak in his engine, creating a problem. Motes, in denial, says, "The car is just beginning its life. A lightning

bolt couldn't stop it!" (p.209). Motes thinks his soul and his beliefs are indestructible and impenetrable. Little does he know that he will soon have his beliefs turned upside-down once again.

About five miles down the road from the service station, Motes is pulled over by a police officer. After an aggressive verbal altercation with the officer, he admits he does not have a license. In response, the patrolman pushes Motes' car into a ravine. As Motes watches his car fall, his lies of spirituality, too, crash. Motes is devastated, totaled. As his spirituality falls apart before him, just like his Essex, he has little left to live for. In another shocking event, he returns to his apartment and blinds himself with quicklime.

Throughout the entirety of O'Connor's novel, Motes' life parallels the Essex up until the end. In a scene close to the end of the story, Motes' landlady says to him, "I'm as good, Mr. Motes, not believing in Jesus as a many a one that does." After serious consideration, Motes responds, "You're better, if you believed in Jesus, you wouldn't be so good" (p.225). She takes this as a compliment; however, Motes means that people without Christ think they are good, as he has been claiming the entire story about his car, while Christians know they are bad and need Jesus for salvation. O'Connor gives Motes wise blood; it's too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. When Motes' car and spirituality were destroyed and he was left with nothing, which left room for Jesus to come into his life and radically transform his way of thinking once again.

CONCLUSION

As an avowedly Christian writer, O'Connor is interested in faith, theology, and philosophy. She used to read St.

Thomas Aquinas for bedtime reading. On her bedside table was a breviary, a missal, and a Bible. She wrote the way she did, she said, because she was a Roman Catholic. Her faith was an intense commitment. On the Eucharist, she commented: "If it were only a symbol, I'd say to hell with it." A more extended comment:

I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction.

She adds,

I have heard I said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writhing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.

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