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The Theatre of the Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

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Yoo, Jihun. "The Theatre of the Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood.*" *Studies in English Language & Literature* 49.4 (2023): 111-128. Flannery O'Connor is an American author known for her distinctive and influential contributions to Southern Gothic literature. Especially, her exploration of the South's complex history and her examination of moral and religious questions continue to be studied and admired by scholars and readers alike. This paper provides an analysis of the themes, characters, and style in *Wise Blood*, highlighting the unique vision and style of O'Connor. In particular, this essay will explore the intersecting themes of grotesque and comedy, as well as religious and moral undertones in *Wise Blood*. In addition, this essay will investigate how the grotesque and religion are interchangeably used while the notions of blindness and vision are inextricably tied together in *Wise Blood*. (Dong-Eui University)

Key Words: Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, grotesque, religion, blindness, vision, truth

I. Introduction

While a great deal of perceptive criticism has been written on the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, no one has fully explored intersecting elements of religion and the grotesque which appear frequently in her work. Of course with a writer like O'Connor—so glued to the landscape, so conscious of the concrete—any attempt to apply abstract theological doctrines to her fiction is very feeble criticism indeed.

Probably more than any other "Catholic" writer, particularly Graham Greene, Francois Mauriac and others who often deal in thesis fiction, O'Connor is aware of the "concrete underside of theology" which she invades with "alacrity in her attempts to recover the holy" (McCullagh 12). Much of the criticism of O'Connor's *Wise Blood* has centered around her themes. For the most part, such criticism has illustrated and therefore confirmed, through analyses of her fiction, what O'Connor has said about herself: that as a writer she is orthodox Christian (specifically Catholic), that her major theme in fiction is the redemption of man by Christ, and that she depicts the grotesque in society.

But the critics have ignored a significant point of her personal philosophy that appears as a motif in her fiction: that "material prosperity has had ill effects on man's spiritual wellbeing" (Littlefield, Jr. 121). It is basic to the grotesqueness in modern society, it stunts man's spiritual growth, and it makes man's salvation more difficult, if not possible. *Wise Blood* is her longest and most significant rendering of these ideas although they clearly appear in many of her other works.

Nearly all critical evaluation of Flannery O'Connor's 1952 novel, *Wise Blood* includes some discussion of the "arduous process of composition" (Maus 53) that the author engaged in during the roughly half-dozen years it took to complete the book. Additionally, almost all of the criticism addresses the sizable amount of commentary and additional explication that O'Connor produced after the book's publication. O'Connor felt compelled both to disagree with those among her critics who compartmentalized her work as part of the "southern" or "Southern Gothic" traditions and make explicit the Catholic themes that take precedence in her personal evaluation of her work. In the essays and addresses posthumously collected and published in *Mystery and Manners* and in her extensive correspondence O'Connor spent the remaining twelve years of her life clarifying her earlier works to a critical audience which tried consistency to fit her writing into a number of categories that she felt were inaccurate, inappropriate, or simply wrong. O'Connor believed that it was her Catholicism which prompted her to describe the world as a bizarre and

sinister dream: "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the shapes eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (Lawson 137).

O'Connor's early fiction—the six stories prepared for her master's thesis at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and stories like "The Geranium" that were published before *Wise Blood*—reflects "the humor and the elements of the grotesque" (Ellis 79) that inform her later, mature works. From a literary point of view, *Wise Blood* is an "ironic study in pathology" (Satterfield 33) rather than, as so many critics claim, a novel of redemption. The main character, Hazel Motes, is exposed early in life to a fundamentalist religion that is a kind of virulent infection he is unable to shake off; his Christ-obsession drives him throughout the novel and compels him to make an ironic Christ-like sacrifice of his own life (the other characters, minor and grotesque, are more distorted and perverted than "saved" by their religion.

In 1962, when *Wise Blood* reached the age of ten, O'Connor countered the early reviewers' opinion of the novel by saying that it was a comic novel about a Christian manger lui, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about life and death. With this clarification, critics have since highlighted the general comic effect of the grotesque in O'Connor's writings, and her reputation as an ironist has been secured. The most common critical approach has been to juxtapose her grotesque scenes of Georgia life against O'Connor's devout Catholic background, and examine the humor implicit in the exaggerated counterpoint. On the thematic level, the grotesque is seen as a social or religious aberration, and the comic as a regional element on the level of character, the comic is regarded as O'Connor's device to present the "paradoxical proportions of belief and action" (Rath 251) represented by her characters.

O'Connor's career as a writer is usually discussed as if it began with *Wise Blood*. Certainly that novel, published in 1952, is her first work of real importance; but almost forgotten in the "blaze of greater achievement" (Asals 181) have been those few stories which in effect make up her apprentice work. O'Connor herself thought

only one of them ("A Stroke of Good Fortune") worth reprinting, and then only after revision; another ("The Train") extensively rewritten, formed the basis for Chapter 1 of *Wise Blood*, although it was apparently not originally conceived as part of any longer creation.

Offering itself as the most grotesque work in all of Southern fiction, O'Connor's *Wise Blood* is a novel only in the widest possible sense of the word. It is a prose fiction of considerable length, but beyond that requirement none of the standard elements of the novel is to be found. The development of character, the exploration of character interaction, and the development of plot are unimportant. Such action as occurs is often without motivation, leads nowhere, and is almost always absurd. Any resemblance to the world of objective reality is certainly incidental. Yet, when these things are said, the book still remains one of the most impressive creations of the school of the Grotesque, or school of Southern Gothic.

Wise Blood is a novel which draws upon an eclectic group of influences: humors and black comedy, Greek tragedy, and the traditions of the romance and of the grotesque. One critic has pointed out many elements of Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), which O'Connor read while writing *Wise Blood*. Her grotesque treatment of death and coffins certainly recalls William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), one of her favorite novels. Her reading of the Oedipus cycle at this time probably accounts for the striking visual imagery in *Wise Blood*, and there are, as well, many thematic parallels between the novel and the ancient drama. That the book is rewarding despite its unconventionality can be attributed to the author's singular vision and style. Her style, it follows, is effective only if it serves her intension. She was uninterested in the felicities of the art of conventional fiction, and felt completely free to use "absurdity, paradox, and illogicality" (Lawson 137), if those were the only media which would carry her vision. Unlike Chul Won's article--Violence and Ethics of Flannery O'Connor--which focuses on revealing the ethical significance in O'Connor's grotesque figures and representations of violence and diverging from Geum Hee Park's article--Carnival-grotesque Narrative in

O'Connor's *Wise Blood*--that studies *Wise Blood* in the Bakhtinian perspective of the carnival-grotesque narrative, this essay will explore the themes of grotesque and comedy, as well as the religious and moral undertones in *Wise Blood.* More particularly, this essay will investigate how the grotesque and religion are interchangeably used while the notions of blindness and vision are inextricably tied together in *Wise Blood*.

II. The Engagement of Religion and the Grotesque

O'Connor, who was probably her own best critic, thought as herself as an inheritor of the romance tradition as employed by Hawthorne and spoke of combining in *Wise Blood* the "dark and divisive romance-novel with the comic-grotesque tradition" (Feeley 105). Like Oedipus, the main character of *Wise Blood*, Hazel is engaged in a flight from truth that also seems like a quest for it, a flight/quest that may be seem both as a heroic attempt to escape one's fate and as an attempt rooted in some deep, mysterious, natural faith, to discover the meaning of true obedience to God. Early in his life, O'Connor's protagonist, Hazel, associates religion with sin, guilt, and atonement. Coming from a religious family in Eastrod, Tennessee—his grandfather a traveling preacher—Hazel's young sensibilities get shocked when he accompanies his father to a circus, where he slips past a baker for a minimal fee of fifteen cents and views an example of erotic scene for profit, a woman in a box, line with black cloth:

> All he could see were the backs of men. He climbed upon a bench and looked over their heads. They were looking into a lowered place where something white was lying, squirming a little. For a second he thought it was a skinned animal and then he saw it was a woman. She was fat and had a face like an ordinary woman except there was a mole on the corner of her lip, that moved when she grinned, and one on her side. (58)

Though the excited, male audience senses erotic pleasure in the squirming woman, Hazel feels appalled, especially when he spies his father among the gawkers: “Had one of them there built unto ever’ casket . . . [and] a heap ready to go sooner,” remarks Hazel’s dad (58).

Unconsciously, already Hazel has begun to equate sexual arousal with the wages of sin and death. The reader gains few glimpses into Hazel’s thoughts: the dream-images that Hazel experiences on the train when he imagines his relatives in their coffins, the memories Hazel retains from watching the spectacle of the naked woman in the coffin at the carnival, who reminds him of a skinned animal, with his black-gowned mother afterwards perceiving his sense of sin. Miss O’Connor takes very little time sketching the background of Hazel. His mother “wore black all the time and her dresses were longer than other women’s. She had a cross-shaped face and hair pulled close to her head” (58). Also, his grandfather is mentioned as “a circuit preacher, who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger” (14) These two people are representatives of the guilt-obsessed culture which terrified Hazel so completely as a child that he had walked in shoes filled with stones. When her son returns from the circus, Hazel’s mother, dressed in back and with “a cross-shaped face” (59) promptly greets him with a stick. “What you seen?” (59), she repeats, though her question seems rhetorical, for in her omniscience—as a symbolic agent of God—Hazel’s mother already knows that her son cast his eyes upon impurity. After being hit across the legs the writhing stick that his mother wields, Hazel immediately forgets “the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him” (59). As penance, the next day he goes into the woods and fills his shoes with stones and small rocks; then placing the shoes back on his feet, Hazel walks in them a mile. Searching for a sign from God, O’Connor’s protagonist thinks, “That ought to satisfy Him,” but to Hazel’s dismay, “nothing happen[s]” (60), not even a small stone falling from the sky to mark that God had paid any attention. Though never having told his mother about the squirming vision at the circus, nonetheless, Hazel resolves himself to the inevitable

beating. Indeed, the hero of *Wise Blood* feels compelled to do further penance to atone for his crime of "vision."

With such familial and cultural influences, Hazel early decides upon two courses of action: he will be a preacher, but he will avoid Jesus Christ, in his mind, "a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown" (16). In his reasoning, if he can successfully deny Christ, then he can also deny man's original sign: "There was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgement because there wasn't the first two" (101). From the start, Hazel is aggressively defining himself as a non-believer and the world as a place without Jesus. He declares himself as such to the women he meets on the train, and to the first person with whom he talks in the city, a taxi driver, he says, "Listen . . . get this: I don't believe in anything" (28). Everyone he meets hears some version of this declaration.

> Well, I preach the Church Without Christ. I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I'll tell you it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption. (101)

Since O'Connor's main purpose in *Wise Blood* was to warn against defective spiritual vision, it seems almost inescapable that one of the most effective themes of the book is that of religion and the grotesque which are interchangeably used. Its first sentence describes the demobilized Hazel, on his way to Taulkinham, sitting at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, suggesting at once his intensity and the possibility that his sight may be impaired. Physical sight becomes associated with spiritual vision soon afterward, when we are told that Hazel had used his mother's glasses to read the Bible. He had taken the glasses with him when he was drafted, and he had put them on the first time that he had felt he was being led into

temptation, to preach to his tempters. Before he was discharged, "he had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there" (18).

On his second night in Taulkinham, Hazel meets a "blind" street preacher, an incident that allowed O'Connor to establish a grotesque paradox that continues throughout the novel. The "blind" preacher, Asa Hawks, and his daughter move off down the street, and Hazel, in his obsession to taunt the preacher about his beliefs, walks across the street against the light, endangering his life and angering the policeman there. When the policeman sarcastically inquires if Hazel knows the purpose of the signal lights, Hazel replies he didn't see it. Here again Hazel's obsession with religious delusion, to the exclusion of everything else in the world around him, is suggested by his defective and inattentive sight. Before Hazel attempts to flee the city, he murders Solace Layfield, whose Puritan name suggests what he represents. At that moment, the true prophet, Solace Layfield, who works for the confidence man Hoover Shoats, is introduced. The night after his seduction, Hazel follows Solace home. When the two cars reach the countryside, Hazel demolishes the car by forcing it off the road, and Solace, uninjured, comes back to the window of Hazel's car. Hazel then runs Solace down with his car to kill him. Right before Hazel kills Solace, Hazel tells Solace, "Two things I can't stand . . . a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is. You shouldn't ever have tampered with me if you didn't want what you got" (206).

Once Hazel has tricked himself into various sins that will make him unable to avoid Jesus, the rest of his actions in the novel all serve to prepare Hazel for his final revelation to himself that, because of his sins, he cannot avoid Jesus. Near the end of the novel he tells himself that he is leaving Taulkinham for another city in which to spread his Church Without Christ, but on his way to his new city he virtually stops himself: "He drove very fast out onto the highway, but once he had gone a few miles, he had the sense that he was not gaining ground" (209). And soon "he had the sense that the road was really slipping back under him" (209). Then a patrol car appears behind Hazel as if Hazel had called it up from deep in his psyche,

and the patrolman stops Hazel not because he broke a law but because of this physical characteristics; the patrolman explains why he stopped Hazel by saying, "I just don't like your face" (210). Hazel uses this most unlikely of characters to bring about a transformation within himself that would be extremely difficult if Hazel were fully conscious of the fact that he is transforming himself. Hazel returns to his apartment, blinds himself with lye, and starts wearing barbed wire around his chest and walking with rocks in his shoes. From one point of view, Hazel is most grotesque and most isolated at this point; certainly he seems unaware of this landlady and of his neighbors in the boarding house. Hazel's decision to blind himself is one of the significant moments of the novel displaying Hazel's grotesque action.

The major characters—Hazel Motes, Enoch Emory, Asa Hawks, Sabbath Lily Hawks, Hoover Shoats, Mrs. Flood—all have one thing in common; they are all motivated by (false) religion in grotesque ways. Hazel meets a succession of false religionists and we are intended to measure the sincerity of his convictions against the hypocrisy of theirs. We can conclude that Enoch among the hypocrites, but as will be shown later, Enoch is every bit as sincere as Hazel (he was worshipping the new Jesus, even though he did not know what it was, before he heard Hazel preach). The significant thing here is that the division of characters according to the way in which martial prosperity affects their motives: the latter pursue it as an end while the former use it (though often symbolically) as a means to an end.

Early in the novel the reader finds a man selling potato peelers on the street. He draws a crowd and offers his bargain to them. The Asa Hawks and his daughter Sabbath Lily appear on the scene. She is handing out pamphlets that says "Jesus Calls You" (one is reminded here of the Uncle Sam posters), and he is begging, using religion as his persuader: "Help a blind preacher. If you won't repent, give up a nickel" (36). Of course, Hawks is an ex-evangelist of sorts who ten years before had promised his congregation to blind himself to justify his belief in Jesus. But his nerve had failed. Since that time he has faked blindness, which he sues to gain sympathy in begging. Here obviously is a man whose sense of spiritual purpose is

distorted. Sabbath Lily Hawks helps her father beg by handing out pamphlets. She is a fifteen-year-old bastard who spouts perverted scriptures ("A bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (116). And tells gruesome tales about Jesus's visitation of horrible punishment on the sinful and licentious (just as herself are). She tells Hazel, "I am a bastard and a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven as we all know, but I have this personality that makes boys follow me" (117).

Through Sabbath, O'Connor makes significant commentary on one aspect of this society: the panacean approach to moral and spiritual problems. And here we see the humorous and the series, the normal and the abnormal—in short, the grotesque. Hoover Shoats, alias Onnie J. Holy, sees this panacean approach to spiritual problems as a money-making gimmick. He knows that Hazel's Church Without Christ is an idea to capitalize upon, and he wants to form a business partnership with Hazel. One night when Hazel begins to lose his crowd, Shoats steps in and begins to pre-selling technique of selling himself: "I'm an artist-type. If you wand to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it sweet" (157). Then he gives a testimonial about what the Prophet (Hazel) has done for him. He follows that with the "something-for-nothing" technique: "I'm not selling a thing, I'm giving something away" (150). Shoats then preaches the value of the Church of Christ Without Christ. Like any good salesman, he tries to create faith in his product and make it appealing: "[Y]ou can absolutely trust this church—it's based on the Bible" (152-53). Each member can "interpit" the Bible anyway he chooses. The church is also "up-to-date" (153). Shoats then asks for the dollar it takes to become a member.

In contrast to Hazel, Enoch claims to be larger than he is. His awareness that he has "wise blood" like his daddy is a mockery of his ignorance and self-deception. O'Connor makes it clear that Enoch is in the tradition of tall talk:

> His blood was more sensitive than any other part of him; it wrote doom all through him, except possibly in his brain, and the result was that his tongue, which edged out every few minutes to test his fever blister, knew more than he did. (129)

A bohemian peeping Tom and a kleptomaniac, Enoch apprehends Jesus in the figure of his father: "My daddy looks just like Jesus," (47) he tells Asa Hawks, the rustic mock-Christ figure in the story, "His hair hangs to his shoulders. Only difference is he's got a scar across his chin" (47). Unlike Hazel, Enoch searches for the new Jesus with the conviction that you (Hazel) "act like you think you got wiser blood than anybody else . . . but you ain't! I'm the one has it. Not you, Me" (55). So, with the foppish wisdom of his blood, he decides to steal the shrunken human mummy from the museum and offer it as the new Jesus to Haze. It is grotesque that Enoch enters the scene of the novel at a sales pitch for potato peelers on the sidewalk, and when we leave him he remains motionless in a stolen gorilla suit, perched on a rock just off the highway and staring "over the valley at the uneven skyline of the city" (200). He survives his search without being converted. The blighted nirvana of his restless spirit in its swift passage into obscure oblivion comes as the closest approximation to the success of the Taulkinham community in its thwarted quest for a workable god. The most visible symbol of this passage is Enoch's regression toward an affected apehood.

Enoch has finally tracked down his totem in Gonna the Gorilla, a man dressed in an ape-suit whose job it is to sake hands with children under movie marquees. The urge to possess the ape-suit now replaces Enoch's obsession with the new Jesus. Discovering where Gonna will stop next on his tour of theaters, he hides in the star's van, murders the man in the ape-suit and jumps out of the van with his treasure at the outskirts of the city. As with Hazel, murder means getting rid of the old self, though Enoch is unconscious of what he is doing in trading his clothes for the animal skin: "Burying his clothes was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he would' need them any more" (198). Enoch de-evolves, from primitive man back to ape hood his which he finally basks: "No gorilla in existence, whether in the jungles of Africa or California, or in New York City in the finest apartment in the world, was happier at that moment than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it" (199-200). But Enoch is again denied epiphany. All

along, he has been searching for a friend. Spurned by Hazel, he now approaches a pair of lovers looking at the city skyline, confident in his new identity, hand outstretched in friendship. But when the couple catch a glimpse of him, they flee screaming. Our last view is of a forlorn gorilla sitting on the rock that the lovers have abandoned and staring across the valley as Hazel does at his moment of revelation. As discussed, one of the most prominent themes of the book is that of religion and the grotesque which are interchangeably used.

III. Dramatic Irony: Blindness, Vision and (Ironic) Truth

With the theme of the grotesque concluded, the theme of blindness and vision continues, to end, as it had begun, the novel. Marked not only by their libidinous appetites but also by their penchant for violence, O'Connor's low life characters, ironically, posses supreme powers, especially powers involving vision. Though ignorant, even ugly, some of O'Connor's characters in *Wise Blood* reveal important truths about themselves and others, demonstrating their capacity for vision, despite their tendency to embark on perilous journeys in pursuit of truth's opposite. In *Wise Blood*, this dramatic irony is directly related to O'Connor's theory of man's conflicting wills and is specified by her frequent use of "verbal and dramatic irony." (McDermott 163). Many of the names in *Wise Blood* have an ironic truth. Hazel has motes in his eyes, Hawks is predatory, his daughter is a stained and wilted Sabbath Lily, Hoover Shoats alias Holy is an unholy pig, Solace takes solace in Jesus as he is dying, and Mrs. Flood evokes the generation of the Flood which was corrupt in God's sight. Mrs. Flood is as avaricious and grudging as if she had once owned the earth and been dispossessed of it. Hazel's point of view dominates most of *Wise Blood*, but after he blinds himself we see through the eyes of Mrs. Flood, his landlady. Mrs. Flood, Haze's landlady, pursues materialistic gains as an end. She plans to take advantage of Hazel's blindness and asceticism. Since he has no use for

money, she plans to marry him in order to get control of his government pension. Mrs. Flood has a materialist world view that parallels Hazel's at the time he preached that "it was not right to believe anything you couldn't see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth" (208). When she sociably asks Hazel what he us going to do with a bucket of lime he is carrying and he answers, "Blind myself" (212). She begins to meditate, but censors herself when the thoughts become too uncomfortable:

> A woman like her, who was so clear-sighted, could never stand to be blind. If she had to be blind she would rather be dead. It occurred to her suddenly that when she was dead she would be blind too. She stared in front of her intensely, facing this for the first time. She recalled the phrase, 'eternal death,' that preachers used, but she cleared it out of her mind immediately with no more change of expression than the cat. She was not religious or morbid, for which every day she thanked her stars. (213)

For Hazel, *Wise Blood*'s protagonist, religion becomes the vehicle that drives him on his "journey into falsehood, and, paradoxically, toward truth" (Paige 326). Hazel, is an example of the "complete artistic freedom" (Lawson 137) which O'Connor allowed herself. Uninterested in creating a rounded character, she concentrated instead upon constructing a caricature whose flatness continually reminds us that he is unreal. To the charge that such a technique weakened her fiction, O'Connor would have replied that any other technique would weaken her vision. She had no interest in Hazel as a human being; he was conceived, and his creator would have insisted that he remain, as an exemplum, as a vehicle whose attitudes and actions would personify a spiritual view which she wished to reveal.

In fact, Hazel appears to have been originally conceived as a person whose transformation from a state of "self-confident spiritual blindness" to a condition of "redemptive awareness" (Burns 148) that parallels that of Sophocles' Oedipus. Although Hazel's decisive wills are, for the most part, logically worked out, problems arises: not one other character in the novel works on Hazel's actions, and,

to some extent at least, a successful action depends on reinforcement from the outside the self. Hazel himself is obviously “one-sided, rigid, jerky in motion,” as much “automation” (Byars 276) as man; in addition, O’Connor arranges encounters for him with identical freaks. Hazel does not operate in a self-satisfied vacuum; he interacts with everyone he meets, challenging their assumptions. He continues to expect responses from others and to be upset by the actions that they offer in rebuttal. Asa Hawks, on first meeting with Hazel, says, “I can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice” (46). In fact, everyone he meets recognizes immediately that the direction Hazel is moving in is toward, not away from, Jesus. Enoch Emery, who purses him through the city attempting to make a connection with him, finally responds to being rebuffed by saying, “I knew when I first seen you you didn’t have nobody nor nothing but Jesus” (54). Sabbath, the daughter of Hawks, who follows and seduces him, finally shouts in anger, “I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil, . . . I seen you wouldn’t never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus” (188). Even Hazel’s landlady, who repeatedly comes down on the side of comfort, sees his Jesus-hunger in Hazel and says, “You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn’t do these foolish things” (229). Unlike others, she comes to admit that his blindness as a source of his intrinsic vision:

> To her, the blind man had the look of seeing something. His face had a peculiar pushing look, as if it were going forward after something it could just distinguish in the distance. Even when he was sitting motionless in a chair, his face had the look of straining toward something. (218)

As such, blindness and vision are intricately tied together, unable, linguistically and theologically to stand alone. Hazel, in positioning Jesus as a lie, can do so only in the context of Jesus as truth. Paradoxically, denial is an expression of faith and truth. The other characters, each in his or her own way, recognize that Hazel, so obsessed with the non-existence of Jesus, is in reality obsessed with the existence of

Jesus. The strength of his faith is in direct relation to the intensity of his denials. There is a sense in which Hazel himself understands the terms; the issue is not muddy for him. He recognizes that belief and non-belief are of a piece when he says, blasphemy is "the way to the truth . . . and there's no other way whether you understand it or not "(152). The truth, as Hazel understands it, requires an absolute one to one correspondence, no halfway measures. The truth is the exact opposite, the total negation of Jesus, sin, redemption. This becomes clear when, having slipped into metaphor, calling for a "new jesus" to "take the place of Jesus" (193), he is chagrined to find others taking his works literally and asking him where this new Jesus is, where he can be found. Hazels responds in frustration, "I'm going to preach a new church—the church of truth without Jesus Christ" (51). There is no substitute for Jesus; there is only Jesus or not Jesus. What Hazel does not understand, though, at least no until late in the novel, is the inseparability of Jesus and not-Jesus, the term and its negation. This is something he does not understand on a rational or verbal level, but something his "wise blood" does understand, and the definitions he formats through his actions are at odds with those he creates with his words, or appear to be.

In a way, people other than Sabbath Lily had noticed Hazel's eyes. The woman on the train, Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, had also scrutinized them: "Their settings were so deep that they seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere and she leaned across the space that separated the two seats, trying to see into them" (4). Trying to see into Hazel's eyes is repeated when Hazel's landlady is fascinated by his self-inflicted blindness and his other punishments of the body. She asks why he walks with rocks in his shoes, and when he answers, that he must pay, she persist, "But what have you got to show that you're paying for?" (226) Fully conscious now of the paradoxical truth of Christ words, Hazel answers, "Mind your business . . . You can't see" (226). From then on, the landlady is obsessed with his scarred eye sockets, and after his murder by the two policemen the novel ends with a description of her final attempt to fathom them: "She sat staring with her eyes

shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness, until he was the pin point of light" (236). O'Connor thought that such a specific vantage point suggested the themes which she worked. Her statement is borne out by the fact that *Wise Blood* begins and ends with a memento mori: "The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seem to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared" (235). As discussed, blindness and vision are intricately tied together. Ironically, many characters in the novel posses powers involving vision.

IV. Conclusion

O'Connor, being a Catholic writer, incorporates Catholic themes of redemption into her work. O'Connor disregards abstract theological doctrines, as she focuses on the concrete and physical aspects of her storytelling. O'Connor's career as a writer is often discussed starting with *Wise Blood*, and she spent significant time clarifying her work through essays and addresses. Comic elements are regarded as O'Connor's way of presenting the paradoxical proportions of belief and action in her characters. Character development, plot progression, and character interactions are deemed unimportant in comparison to these thematic elements.

In fact, the grotesque is seen as a social or religious aberration, stunting spiritual growth and making salvation more difficult. *Wise Blood* is described as a prose fiction without conforming to the standard elements of a traditional novel. As discussed above, *Wise Blood* explores the themes of grotesque and comedy, as well as the religious and moral undertones within the text. O'Connor's main purpose in *Wise Blood* was to warn against defective spiritual vision, it seems almost inescapable that one of the most effective themes of the book is that of religion and the grotesque. In *Wise Blood*, the protagonist, Hazel, aggressively defines himself as

a non-believer from the start, associating religion with sin, guilt, and atonement. Hazel's search for a sign from God proves futile, further questioning his beliefs. Since The influence of Hazel's familial and cultural background is highlighted, as well as his decision to become a preacher while avoiding Jesus Christ. O'Connor's protagonist, Hazel, associates religion with sin, guilt, and atonement. In conclusion, most of the major characters including, Hazel, all have one thing in common; they are all motivated by (false)religion in grotesque ways. In fact, the theme of blindness and vision continues as with the notions of blindness and vision are intricately tied together in *Wise Blood*.

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