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Senior Literature Seminar

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The Mote in Hazel's Eye: The Blurred Vision of Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood

While some authors start writing their novels with a full outline in mind, Flannery O'Connor's first novel, Wise Blood, began with a short story written for the Writers' Workshop at Iowa State in December 1946. This short story, titled "The Train," was inspired when O'Connor was on a train going home for Christmas. She recalls, "There was a Tennessee boy on it in uniform who was much taken up worrying the porter about how the berths were made up" (qtd in Gooch 134). Then, O'Connor wrote Wise Blood's larger story as a part of her masters' thesis, but upon hearing about a cash award for a novel written by a Writers' Workshop student, O'Connor began working on the novel that would eventually come from this story. The resulting product, Wise Blood, left my Senior Seminar class moved, but confused. Wise Blood's main plotline revolves around Hazel Motes, a man so jaded by religion that he decides to form the Church Without Christ, preaching that everyone is clean if Jesus doesn't exist. However, a significant portion of the novel is dedicated to the antics of Enoch Emery, a teenage zoo employee who becomes quickly attached to Hazel. He steals a mummy to serve as the "new jesus" Hazel preaches and later becomes completely fascinated by a man in a gorilla suit. While Hazel's story ends with his death after coming to terms with his faith, Enoch's story ends with him in a gorilla suit, trying to shake the hands of whoever he encounters. We weren't sure how Enoch's subplot related to Hazel's, or what was really going on in Enoch's story at all. Since Wise Blood began as a story written for a school

requirement, I would like to explore how this unique beginning might have affected O'Connor's blurred vision for the novel and how it might account for the novel's seemingly disjointed nature.

In my own experience taking creative writing classes at school, I've learned the importance of writing for form, knowing my audience, and writing what I know. Writing a whimsical, half-finished novel for myself proved to be very different from writing a short story that needed to be specifically ten pages with believable content, knowing that eight other students and a professor would be giving me face-to-face critiques on my work. For this reason, I believe O'Connor's short stories having been written for a class rather than for publication might have made a significant difference in her content and style. This seems especially likely since O'Connor was writing for people from a culture she was not familiar with. O'Connor was taking the Writers' Workshop while going to school in Iowa City, 900 miles from her hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia. After staying in her own hometown for her undergraduate studies, going to graduate school in a different state may have disoriented O'Connor. In the most accurate biography of her life to date, biographer Brad Gooch writes of this time in O'Connor's life, "Far from her extended family, and speaking a [Southern] dialect routinely treated as a foreign language, she experienced an acute ache" (120). O'Connor was surrounded by an alien culture. Her homesickness bled through in the first short story she published while in Iowa, "The Geranium". In this story, a man called Old Dudley regrets his decision to move to New York with his daughter. He misses his home back in the South so desperately that "[there] wasn't much he could think of to think about that didn't [make] his throat [draw taut]" (CS 3). In a letter to her friend Maryat Lee, O'Connor says, "I couldn't have written a story about *my* being homesick... no experience of mine as far as old men and slums went" (qtd in Gooch 125). O'Connor took her experiences and emotions and translated them on the page to create a fictional story, a technique she also used in writing "The Train." O'Connor began graduate

school in the fall of 1945, and by the spring of 1946, war veterans on the GI Bill were flooding into Iowa City. Hence, it's unsurprising that "The Train" was a story inspired by a real encounter with a veteran on board a train and fictionalized.

Although O'Connor later develops Hazel's character into one obsessed with preaching the "Church Without Christ" in her novel Wise Blood, it is possible that "The Train" bears no mention of religion because of the audience O'Connor was writing for. During each class, two students would read a story they had written. Of the critiques given during these classes, Paul Engle, then the director of the Writers' Workshop program, says, "The students are quite merciless in criticizing each other's work" (123). O'Connor was undoubtedly conscious of her Southern roots – Paul Engle had such difficulty understanding her Georgian accent upon first meeting her that she had to write down what she wanted to say in order to have it conveyed to him (117) – and besides being from the South, she was also a woman, of which there weren't many in the 1945 Writers' Workshop. O'Connor's first reading during a workshop is recollected by a fellow female classmate as quiet, and the classmate noted that O'Connor became embarrassed quickly to the point of turning red. The men in the class weren't kind to O'Connor, judging her as soon as they heard her thick Southern accent (126). Considering all of these factors, it's understandable that O'Connor would choose to leave religion out of a short story written for the class; after all, writing about her faith might only have sealed her classmates' opinions that she was nothing but a Bible-beating country girl. Therefore, while the focus of Wise Blood is on Hazel's faith, the focus of "The Train" was on Hazel's interest in a train porter—much safer territory.

Once O'Connor's work emerges from the classroom setting, she writes more freely about religion. The commentary on faith that forms the main theme of Wise Blood comes as a result of O'Connor's personal faith in Jesus Christ. O'Connor was raised Catholic and continued to be a

devout Catholic throughout her life. While studying in Iowa City, O'Connor found comfort for her homesickness at St Mary's Catholic Church. Although she did not know anyone else in the congregation even after having attended the church daily, just going to morning masses at the church made her feel "at home" (Gooch 121). O'Connor's religious beliefs show up in various ways in all of her writing: "In her fiction, in book reviews, in lectures and essays, and in her letters, O'Connor always seems likely to slip in a conviction about this or that point of theology" (Gentry 123). Therefore, it is out of the ordinary for O'Connor to have neglected to give the Hazel in "The Train" any viewpoint on faith and may be best attributed to O'Connor's self-consciousness about the themes of her work when writing for her Iowa State classmates.

As "The Train" made its transition from a standalone story to be critiqued by classmates to the first chapter of a novel, O'Connor developed the character of Hazel Motes and his intentions on the train much further. Discovering who Hazel Motes would become by writing him, O'Connor began to layer his motivating conflict so that, like the novel's protagonist, the novel's audience is also in the dark. As mentioned above, the main emphasis of "The Train" is Hazel's preoccupation with the porter rather than establishing his character as someone concerned with being clean in the eyes of God, which is the focus of Wise Blood's opening chapter. In "The Train," Hazel is haunted by someone he knew back in his hometown of Eastrod, Tennessee – specifically, an African-American man named Cash. He believes the porter on the train resembles Cash so strongly that the porter must be related to Cash. On a first reading, Hazel seems delusional; on a closer reading, the strange belief suggests Hazel's ache for home. O'Connor writes, "Cash had a son run away. It happened before Haze's time. Even so, the porter would know Eastrod" (CS 56). Hazel goes up to the porter and tells him he's from Eastrod, "'Eastrod, Tennessee; ain't you ever heard of Eastrod?'" To Hazel's confusion, the porter replies, "I'm from Chicago" (CS 57). Hazel turns this piece of

information over in his mind, and yet later when he runs into the porter, he is struck by the idea that the porter has to be Cash himself. He calls the porter “Cash” and the porter tries to get away from him, which only makes Hazel think that it is Cash’s son after all and that he just doesn’t want to be reminded of the father he ran away from.

The different focal points of “The Train” and Wise Blood blur the novel’s focus for the reader, creating a stubbornly self-contradicting character that we must read against. In both the original short story and the later novel, Hazel keeps himself in the dark because of his strong convictions despite all indications towards the opposite being true – in “The Train,” about the porter’s actual identity, and in Wise Blood, about the existence of Jesus Christ. In “The Train,” O’Connor emphasizes Hazel’s refusal to acknowledge that the porter is not someone he knows by literally putting Hazel in the dark. When Hazel gets into his berth in the train, O’Connor writes, “[He] wanted the light off; he wanted it dark. He reached up without turning and felt for the button and snapped it and the darkness sank down on him and then faded a little with light from the aisle that came in through the foot of space not closed. He wanted it all dark, he didn’t want it diluted” (CS 61). As soon as Hazel thinks this, he hears the porter’s footsteps and is flooded by thoughts of Cash and Eastrod. While a similar scene takes place in Wise Blood, throughout the novel, the idea of being kept in the dark is expanded to Hazel’s vision. Hazel has kept only two items from home throughout his years in the army: a Bible and his mother’s glasses, the latter of which he kept “in case his vision should ever become dim” (19). However, the reason Hazel has kept his mother’s glasses is not because he was close to her; in fact, his mother plays a large role in warping his vision of religion. At one point, when Hazel remembers how his mother inflicted physical punishment on him as a child, he recalls her saying to him, ““Jesus died to redeem you” (59). In James McCullagh’s article “Symbolism and the Religious Aesthetic: Flannery O’Connor’s Wise

Blood,” he mentions Hazel’s usage of his mother’s glasses during a time in the army when he tells his fellow soldiers that he will not go to the brothel with them. Of this instance, McCullagh says, “Haze sees Christ and other alternatives with his mother’s eyes... He has confused her with Christ and must eliminate his dependency on her vision” (47). As a result of how Hazel was raised, he believes that being redeemed comes with a side of physical pain, an idea that accounts for his self-inflicted torture at the end of the novel.

When I said to understand Wise Blood, one must read against the narrative, I meant more than Haze’s being “unreliable.” O’Connor structures the novel in part, by Haze’s finding the truth by losing his way, so she deliberately blinds the reader, also. Taking the idea of Hazel in darkness in “The Train” even further in the final version of Hazel’s story in Wise Blood, O’Connor centers the novel on Hazel’s inability to see, first figuratively and then literally. A probable reason for this theme comes from Matthew 7:3-5 in the Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible, which says:

And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own eye? Or how sayest thou to thy brother: Let me cast the mote out of thy eye; and behold a beam is in thy own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam in thy own eye, and then shalt thou see to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.

Sure enough, while Hazel’s last name in “The Train” is “Wickers” and in another short story, “The Heart of the Park,” his last name is “Weaver”, in Wise Blood, O’Connor changes it to “Motes” and she reiterates throughout the novel the difficulty Hazel has with seeing the truth. Hazel cannot understand why people believe in the existence of God. Early on in the novel, he encounters a “blind” preacher named Asa Hawks and appears to be both fascinated and disgusted by Hawks’s blindness. When Hazel tells Asa that he does not believe Jesus exists and that he is going to throw Asa’s tracts into some bushes, Asa taunts him by calling out, “I can see more than you! You got

eyes and see not, ears and hear not, but you'll have to see some time” (50). Asa quotes these words almost exactly from Jeremiah 5:21, which says, “Hear, O foolish people, and without understanding: who have eyes, and see not: and ears, and hear not.” However, Hazel acts as though he is not swayed by Asa’s words. He addresses the crowd of people hurrying by, telling them they are clean, but not through Jesus Christ; by way of explanation, he says, ““Don’t I know what exists and what don’t? Don’t I have eyes in my head? Am I a blind man?”” (51) He believes that if Jesus was real, then he wouldn’t be clean; therefore, since he chooses to believe Jesus is not real, he has no reason to repent (87). Hazel Motes keeps himself in the dark just as Hazel Wickers does by holding on to the belief that being able to physically see gives one a better understanding of the world.

Confusing the reader even further, O’Connor makes Hazel self-conscious of his backward approach to truth. At the same time, Asa’s apparent blindness bothers Hazel on a spiritual level. He asks Asa, ““If Jesus cured blind men, how come you don’t get Him to cure you?”” (107) Hazel’s attempt at pure unbelief is diluted by his obvious obsession with the seemingly religious Asa Hawks. When, towards the end of the novel, Hazel discovers that Asa isn’t blind at all, the revelation shakes Hazel to the core. O’Connor, almost in a metanarrative scene, plays on the theme of being kept in the dark by showing Hazel sneak into Asa’s dark bedroom, then strike a match, holding it up to Asa’s face. O’Connor writes, “The two sets of eyes looked at each other as long as the match lasted; Haze’s expressions seemed to open onto a deeper blankness and reflect something and then close again” (162). After this discovery, Hazel experiences a downward spiral that includes killing a man who looks like him and losing his greatest possession – his car. Having hit rock bottom, Hazel buys a sack of quicklime and blinds himself for reasons his landlady Mrs. Flood cannot understand. However, by way of Hazel’s words and actions after he blinds himself,

O'Connor seems to suggest that through Hazel's blindness, he can finally see. He tells Mrs. Flood that he's not clean, indicating that he has come to believe that Jesus is real.

So, as a reader of Sophocles and T.S. Eliot, I could see Hazel's story in Wise Blood clearly. I get it: the blind now see. But, O'Connor's vision for the novel as a whole is not as obvious. Some things seem to have been lost in adaptation from short story to novel form. For example, the subplot about Enoch Emery seems to have little relation to Hazel's story on a surface level because it is disconnected from the overarching thematic structure of vision. O'Connor wrote several short stories involving Enoch, including "The Peeler," "Enoch and the Gorilla," and "The Heart of the Park". While "The Peeler" goes on to be adapted into a rather significant scene in Wise Blood – the scene in which Hazel, Emory, and Asa Hawks first meet, the story of "Enoch and the Gorilla" has little thematic relevance to Hazel's story in Wise Blood. The review "Beyond the Peacock: Psychosexual Symbolism in Flannery O'Connor and Alice Walker's Southern Landscape," written by Nagueyalti Warren, suggests that this short story, which does not change much when it's adapted into scenes in the novel, comments on race and sex (62). Interwoven with the plotline of Hazel's spiritual development is a story about Enoch's confrontation with black sexuality as his encounter with a man in a gorilla suit inspires him to steal said suit, leave his old life, and "[embrace] the black sexual prototype" (Warren 64), a choice that leads to his ultimate happiness (CS 115). While Warren's is an interesting commentary through the use of metaphor, no one in our class sessions could intuit Enoch's fixation on the gorilla suit. In the movie version of Wise Blood, Enoch, played by Dan Shor, is an earnest, bumbling sort of character who mainly provides comic relief. While the novel's version of Enoch does not share the movie version's wide-eyed innocence, the essence of Enoch's naiveté seems to come from his obsession with guileless animals, which parallels Hazel's obsession with Christ. One way to understand this is to cast it in the light

of two contrasting beliefs; that is, Darwinism, represented by Enoch, and Christianity, represented by Hazel. However, the two parallel plots still feel too distantly connected to allow them to form a cohesive whole. Even as I say the parallel between Darwinism and Christianity, the thought feels too ingenious.

Further suggesting that O'Connor's vision for Wise Blood may have been blurred is her only other novel, The Violent Bear It Away. The plot of her second novel is fairly straightforward: a teenage boy's fanatical Christian great-uncle passes away so he goes to live with his atheist uncle. The boy, who was anointed by his great-uncle to be a prophet, struggles between the extremes of diehard belief and non-belief and finds himself in life-changing situations on his path to coming to terms with what he himself truly believes. With such a stark difference in the clarity of the two novels, I believe the disjointed feel of Wise Blood may have been a result of it being O'Connor's first published novel but is more likely because its beginnings were several short stories. In a letter O'Connor wrote to Elizabeth McKee inquiring about a literary agent, she says about Wise Blood,

I have been on the novel a year and a half and will probably be two more years finishing it. The first chapter appeared as a short story, "The Train," in the Spring 1948 issue of the *Sewanee Review*. The fourth chapter ["The Peeler"] will be printed in a new quarterly to appear in the fall, *American Letters*. I have another chapter ["The Heart of the Park"] which I have sent to *Partisan Review* and which I expect to be returned... The novel, except for isolated chapters, is in no condition to be sent to you at this point. (HOB 4)

I found it intriguing that while O'Connor already had specific positions for each chapter, it was not every chapter of the novel that could function as a short story, but only a select few. However, even before the novel was published, O'Connor was responding to criticism about the direction of her novel. She writes to John Selby, the editor-in-chief at Rinehart, "I am not writing a

conventional novel... I do not feel that rewriting has obscured the direction. I feel it has given whatever direction is now present” (HOB 10). Hence, it seems that O’Connor would not have agreed with me that Wise Blood was disjointed. She wrote the novel with a specific purpose and did not appreciate being told that the novel’s direction was unclear.

O’Connor’s claim that she was not writing a conventional novel has a lot to do with the fact that she was not a conventional writer. To her, any fiction writing was simply story-writing with no distinctions between different genres, as she clarifies in Mystery & Manners, to make distinctions between “the technique of the short story” and “the technique of the novel” was to create limitations for one’s self (MM 67). Since O’Connor did not believe in following others’ rules about how to write a novel, the confusing nature of Wise Blood might simply have been her rebellion against what was considered a proper novel. To Selby, she writes, “I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not be persuaded to do otherwise. The finished book, though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters you have now” (HOB 10). I find it admirable that O’Connor wrote without caring if her style matched that of contemporaries such as Ernest Hemingway and J.D. Salinger. She knew what she wanted and was not willing to sacrifice her purpose and direction for the novel even if it meant increasing the chances of its publication. At the same time, considering her second novel’s much more linear plot, I wonder if she really meant for Wise Blood to turn out as difficult to understand as it did.

Ultimately, it does seem that the two distinct plotlines in Wise Blood, that of Hazel and that of Enoch, which converge only for a few chapters in the novel before going their separate ways for good, and which end with one character having closure with his faith and another left wandering around in a gorilla costume, could have been a result of the two characters beginning

with little relation. Even though Hazel's character appears in two of the chapters involving Enoch, Hazel's last name is different in each of these chapters, which seems to indicate that Enoch was the main character in these chapters and Hazel was just there to support his development. As O'Connor spent many years working on this novel, her vision might have changed over these years from one in which her chapters could work as standalone stories to one where the novel would be connected by Hazel and Enoch, and she might have ended up with a double vision of sorts, telling the stories of both Hazel Motes, a man who needed to be blind to see, and Enoch Emery, a man who needed to step into a gorilla suit to be happy.

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