Wise Blood

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Flannery O’Connor holds a unique place in literature for one reason: She is the only author whose stories are so good that they appear in every standard anthology, but who also is explicit about her goal of confronting her readers with the claims of the Christian faith. Thus, when we discuss *Wise Blood*, or any of her other stories, we are not left in any doubt about her overall meaning or what she is attempting to achieve. Instead we must focus on how she achieves it, and on the meanings behind her symbols and images.

O’Connor makes people angry for one of two reasons. Christians often hate her because of her use of graphic violence and freakish characters. Non-Christians often hate her because her Christianity is in your face. But for all those who can get over these moronic objections, Christian and non-Christian alike, O’Connor’s art holds a high place for her craftsmanship, stunning imagination, unbelievable sense of humor, and unwavering drive to confront us with the truth about ourselves and the world in which we live.

Most readers of O’Connor are aware of her three essays, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” and “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction.” If you are not, then you should read them if you want to understand O’Connor. In these essays O’Connor spells out her artistic vision, with the same kind of humor and surprise she uses in her fiction. In summary, she says that to the deaf you shout, and to the blind you draw in large figures. She believes modern man to be deaf and blind to the reality of God in the world, and she intentionally uses shock to grab the reader’s attention. She says that her aim is to jolt readers hard enough to make them see *grace*, which is ever present and everywhere in the world. When asked why southern writers use so many freaks in their stories her reply is that it is because they can still recognize one.

O’Connor always realizes the grace moment in her stories through the use of an epiphany, some kind of sudden, eye-opening, shock-producing revelation in which the main character sees the truth about himself. There is an epiphany in every story, because in her fiction the epiphany is the central device toward which the plot always leads.

There are numerous familiar symbols that appear over and over in O’Connor’s stories. (These, by the way, are limited to only two novels and 28 short stories. O’Connor died of Lupus at the age of 39 after a long and debilitating battle with the disease.) First among the symbols is the central presence of one or more freaks. All her characters are bizarre, and rarely, if ever, does she develop a character who is to O’Connor a normal healthy person, although she has plenty of characters who think themselves normal and healthy. There is no use complaining about how weird her characters are. That is exactly like complaining that there are so many deserts and mountains in McCarthy novels. It is what she *does*, and like it or not, she has told us her reasons for doing it. A second recurrent set of symbols is the sun and moon, which both appear in virtually every story she wrote. These two celestial bodies are symbolic of heaven, and thus God, and are always described in great detail, with a variety of moods, characteristics, and even personalities. With these heavenly bodies she is symbolizing everything from sin to judgment to ignorance to grace to love. Third, every story is flooded with references to color. There are always strong uses of red, green, blue, yellow, orange and purple. Separately and distinctly, there are strong uses of gray, white and black. It is often difficult to figure out the symbolism going on with her colors, but is it obvious that the symbolism is there.

Turning now to *Wise Blood*, the obvious symbol running through this novel is sight. The first two words are Hazel, an eye color, and Motes, “mote” being the KJV Bible term used for the speck in the eye in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 7:3. Hazel Motes is *looking* out a window, and off we go from there. References to sight, seeing, glasses, looking and blindness are on every page.

Hazel Motes hates Jesus and declares himself clean (hysterically at random to people he meets), having nothing to be redeemed out of. He wants to destroy Jesus and the Church. He tries blasphemy, eventually realizing the bad logic: if one is to blaspheme, there must be a God there to be blasphemed. He wants to start the Church Without Christ, declaring that he will find a new jesus.

Initially, Motes is spiritually blind, but he can see. So he can see, but he can’t See. After blinding himself and realizing that he is not clean, he can’t see, but he can See. His epiphany occurs when the patrolman pushes his car in the ditch and his plan to deny Christ by going city to city preaching the Church Without Christ is thwarted. He has his epiphany and realizes he is not clean. He says he has to pay, so he walks with rocks in his shoes and wears barbed wire. His method of pursuing redemption is perverse, but he is working his way toward God.

His initial denials of Jesus are so bizarre that the reader immediately knows that he is not clean after all and does need redemption. When Motes chooses self-mortification to secure redemption, his methods are so obviously perverse that the reader is led further to ask, What would be the right way to seek God?, thus opening the way to the reader’s entrance into grace.

Motes’ landlady says he must believe, or he wouldn’t be doing these things, which is true, although Motes doesn’t realize it. That it is true is proved by his belief that he needs to pay. He has already figured out the logic of this position, so if he has to pay there must be Someone to receive the payment.

The landlady also tells the truth by pointing out that Motes is taking the easy way out: “It’s easier to bleed than it is to sweat, Mr. Motes.” Anyone can bleed instantly. But the discipline of learning to be a disciple takes sweat. Alas, Motes will die before he learns this important lesson. In my view this is what makes him a tragic hero.

Asa Hawks is a fake blind man and charlatan. He claims he can’t see when he can see, but he can’t See. (O’Connor has loads of fun with these multiplying ironic layers of blindness.) As a false preacher he reinforces the need for redemption from our wickedness. His sight blindness is fake, but his spiritual blindness is real.

Enoch Emory claims to have the wise blood, denying that Motes has it. In fact, he exhibits clear symptoms of insanity. He acts strangely, has premonitions of things that are about to happen, thinks he can use shoe polish to disguise himself as black, and goes on his obsessive sequence each afternoon from work to the milkshake to the pool to the animals to the museum. He is fixated on the shrunken man. His idea is to supply the shrunken man as Motes’ new jesus. The shrunken man is O’Connor’s symbol for modern man, who is shrunken because he has lost his sense of being created in God’s image and now exists only to make money. Thus, Emory proposes we worship the shrunken man, or in other words, make gods of our shrunken selves, which is exactly what O’Connor argues we have done. Why would he propose this? Because he is crazy. Only a crazy man would propose to make a new jesus out of a shrunken man. Motes wants nothing to do with him, because from the beginning Motes is sincere and recognizes stupidity, insanity and fraud when he sees it. Motes beholds the shrunken man in his room while looking through his mother’s glasses, a symbol for seeing the truth. The sight is shocking, and the symbolic shrunken man, which is full of trash, gets thrown out in the rain as trash. By this act Motes is indicating that though he hasn’t reconciled with the truth yet, he does know that worshiping a shrunken man is not it.

There are loads of quotes relating to sight and blindness with the landlady at the end. She feels she is being cheated and only wants his money, paralleling the shrunken man/20th century wealth-seeking, wealth-consuming animal theme. She is blocked in her attempts to figure Motes out and is at the beginning unable to begin, because though she peers into Motes’ ruined eyes, he has obtained Sight through his epiphany, while she remains Blind to the truth of her own need for redemption. The irony here is that she feels cheated of something but can’t put her finger on it. The truth is that she is being cheated: She is being cheated out of the Greatest Treasure, the pearl of great price, but it is she who is cheating herself because of her spiritual blindness.

I will conclude with a few illuminating quotes about *Wise Blood* from O’Connor’s letters.

4 May 1955: Recently I talked in Macon (nobody had every heard tell of me of course) and it was announced in the paper the next day that I was a “writer of the realistic school.” I presume the lady came to this conclusion from looking at the cover of the drugstore edition of *Wise Blood*. In a few weeks I am going to talk to some more ladies in Macon and I am going to clear up that detail. I am interested in making a good case for distortion, as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see.

18 May 1955: Everybody who has read Wise Blood thinks I am a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I am a hillbilly Thomist.

20 October 1955: There is a story in the Mentor thing called “We’re all Guests” by George Clay. I don’t know him but he has written me some letters about my stuff, the first one being about “Good Country People,” which he though very successful. I asked him to read the rest and recently he has written me about that. He said *WB* bored him and exasperated him because H. Motes was not human enough to sustain his interest and he thought “A Good Man,” “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and “A Circle in the Fire” were substantially marred by the “religious reference that didn’t fit in.” About *WB* I think he is in a sense correct but of course he doesn’t know what he is talking about about the others. However, his interesting comment was that the best of my work sounded like the Old Testament would sound if it were being written today – in as much (partly) as the character’s relation is directly with God, rather than with other people. He points out, correctly, that it is hard to sustain the reader’s interest in a character like that unless he is very human. I am trying to make this new novel more human, less farcical. A great strain for me.