Grotesque Faith and the Road to Absolution

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Grotesque Faith and the Road to Absolution

A Thesis Submitted to the Robert E. Cock Honors College
as Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts in English

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Introduction

Flannery O'Connor, a critically acclaimed Southern Gothic writer of frequently anthologized short stories, wrote only two novels: Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away. In each of these novels, O'Connor, a self-described “devout Catholic,” surprises her readers with her protagonists—young men who are bent on rejecting religious compulsions. After close readings of these works and analysis of O'Connor's own biography, readers quickly become confused about the recurring theme of rejection of Christ. This confusion is further complicated by grotesque images in the text as well as violent actions perpetrated by different characters, then intensified by reclamation and attempts at absolution for both protagonists. Following consideration of O'Connor's biography, several essays of expert criticism and a closer look at both of these novels, it is clear that O'Connor's goal in publishing these gruesome works is to criticize other Catholics and to impress upon all readers the true importance and cost of redemption.

The Author

Flannery O'Connor is often described by critics and professors as a sickly, fanatically Christian loner. This assertion is unsurprising given the fact that O'Connor is, to some degree, all of these things. Born into a long line of Irish Catholics in Georgia in 1925, O'Connor received limited exposure to the non-Catholic world in her youth. She attended only Catholic and Parochial schools before beginning college nearby, at which time she elected to live at home. She led a highly solitary life as an intellectual only child, and accounts of her personality provide a mixed portrait: some describe O'Connor as quiet and disagreeable while others remember her as a normal child. Regardless, she had few close friends throughout her youth and early adulthood, leading to an air of awkwardness which rejected traditional Southern niceties, yet cultivated an intellectual spirit. O'Connor was first published in 1946 at the age of 21, and her

Throughout her life and publications, O'Connor regularly attended Catholic services. During a stint at Yaddo Artist Colony in 1948, O'Connor found that she opposed the "liberal, pseudo-intellectual near-Communist" tendencies of many Yaddo participants (Simmons 13). In response to this discomfort, O'Connor moved in with two new friends, the Fitzgeralds, a young, devout Catholic couple who embraced and encouraged her faith.

In 1950, O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus (Simmons xi), the disease which killed her father. That year, she returned to Midgeville, Georgia to visit her mother Regina on holiday, but was in too frail a condition to return to the Fitzgeralds' and lived at home until her death in 1964. Despite her frailty and near-confinement, O'Connor made an effort to attend mass regularly, participating in daily services while she completed *Wise Blood*. Throughout the fourteen years following her diagnosis, O'Connor attended events around the country following the release of her works, and she [Flannery] gave many speeches and made many appearances at numerous functions, demonstrating a passionate commitment to her work.

In a speech called "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," which O'Connor gave at least fifteen times, she indicated that as she could not find any "Catholic writing that presented the message of Christ in a realistic way that readers could recognize," suggesting that she did so with her own work (Simmons 26). The question that many fans come to after reviewing her biography, however, is how a woman as committed to Catholicism as Flannery O'Connor can come to paint so grotesque a portrait of Christianity as she does in *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. Each of these texts portrays a young man who, despite a devout family tradition and intentions to champion Christianity, rejects his faith. Their attempts to free themselves of the Christian spirit and eventually their reclamation of that same spirit are
gruesome, visceral and violent. This doubt seems uncharacteristic of each character, begging the question of how they emerged in O'Connor's writing.

While O'Connor is often portrayed as an unwavering Catholic, she admits in correspondence with her friend Betty Hester that she experienced spiritual doubts, but that she "relied on God to help her overcome them" (Simmons 31). Although O'Connor is Catholic, the protagonists in these two novels are both evangelical Protestants. Protestantism, a tradition throughout the South where O'Connor grew up, is obviously not as linear or ritualized as Catholicism, although both possess similar undertones and celebrate Christ. These similarities suggest that each protagonist is, in some sense, a piece of O'Connor, exploring her own doubts in faith as well as humanity's need for redemption and God's grace in Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away.

The tone found in each of these novels is delivered as if from a disinterested yet omniscient narrator, and the violent nature of each book's contents is a tough pill to swallow, especially for people who adhere to and celebrate the Christian faith. O'Connor admitted that her work was not created to appease anyone, least of all Catholics who she believed were looking for "raw Instant Uplift" rather than commentary on how the world truly exists and how God permeates the mundane aspects of everyday life (Simmons 47). Richard Oxman goes on to note that, "The pleasantness of politically correct respectability has zero to do with man's need for redemption in Flannery's eyes" (Simmons 47), suggesting that the goal of this work was to impress upon readers the significance of redemption in human life rather than to entrance them with a socially acceptable narrative. In Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, O'Connor notes that,

There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has

[3]
forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has
forgotten the price of restoration (O’Connor 48)

This quote exemplifies O’Connor’s criticism of individuals seeking a “raw Instant Uplift”; all
readers and authors want to see protagonists’ redemption after they fall, but do not recognize
that redemption itself has consequences. It impresses this lesson not just upon non-believers,
but also upon Christian readers who are, in fact, looking for instant salvation, a “raw Instant
Uplift.” Much the same as a reader might not recognize the grave danger of a devil-character in
a story, he or she will not recognize that redemption always has a price, although it may not
seem so at first. These lines also impress upon any reader that despite O’Connor’s own doubt
in her faith from time to time, she is still able to recognize what is for her of ultimate importance:
redemption.

O’Connor saw it as her mission as both an author and a Catholic to impress upon
readers her message and views about faith. That said, most of her readers—family and friends
included—missed O’Connor’s point in works such as Wise Blood (Simmons 43). Furthermore,
the radical, vivid nature of these works was decried by both conservative Southerners and
Catholics. O’Connor largely dismissed these objections, attributing reactions among Catholics
to “their weak faith, their laziness, and their being too busy looking for something ‘obscene’ to
see that it is often the works they consider obscene that are ‘permeated with a Christian spirit’”
(47). That is, the texts that pull the reader the furthest away from what is polite, respectable,
and good also provide the opportunity for the Christian ideology to intervene, save the day, and
return the reader to a perfect, fictive utopia. In this sense, O’Connor is not criticizing the
Christian spirit, but rather allowing to claim the most unlikely of people, championing the moral
and spiritual values of her fellow Christians.

Considering all that we know about Flannery O’Connor as an individual, how do Wise
Blood and The Violent Bear It Away change, challenge, or support our understanding of her?
She was, indeed, a devout Catholic, a bit of a loner, and rather frail, but we have also
discovered that she was introspective and came to her own understanding of her faith. Furthermore, O'Connor disagreed with the blasé Catholicism which permeated the attitudes of her contemporaries. As novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away* are not challenging, vulgar reads for the sake of obscenity, but rather, as O'Connor suggested before her death, are “permeated with a Christian spirit” (47) and provide a real example for readers to follow, making the case for redemption and impressing it upon her audience.

These novels are a statement about mankind’s desperate need for salvation, and the complexities of trying to resist faith once it has inhabited one’s body. O’Connor seems to inject a little bit of herself into each of these protagonists through their youth, imperfection, self-imposed social alienation, and doubt in faith. Each protagonist is dissimilar enough from her so as not to seem to be a mirror, but also seems to reflect her own experience. O’Connor once stated, “I write to discover what I know,” (Goodreads) and it would seem that these books are also part of a journey toward coming to some conclusions about the nature of faith, reclamation, and what might have happened if she had not turned away from doubt.

**Rejection**

Both *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away* utilize a similar narrative structure which parallels, yet differentiates itself from, O’Connor’s own experience with religious doubt. Each novel follows a young, male protagonist through a critical moment of spiritual doubt followed by attempts at rejecting the faith which has been imposed upon him by an older male relative. Rejection is, in both cases, accompanied by disdain for faith and a traumatic event which prods the protagonist to try to reclaim his faith and achieve redemption.

*Wise Blood* follows the character Hazel “Haze” Motes into the city of Taulkinham after he returns from serving in the military. In a flashback, the reader encounters the spiritually intact, fully faithful Haze: he recounts being drafted into the army at eighteen years old, despite
wanting to be a preacher like his grandfather. Haze recalls that his grandfather traveled around
Georgia in an old Ford, and describes his compelling presence: “Every fourth Saturday he had
driven into Eastrod as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell, and he was shouting
before he had the car door open. People gathered around his Ford because he seemed to dare
them to” (15). It is no surprise, then, that Haze was entranced by his grandfather’s presence,
calling to the people of Eastrod to be saved. This absorption is only amplified by his
grandfather’s use of Haze as an example in a sermon, reminding everyone that “Jesus would
die ten million deaths before He would let [Haze] lose his soul” (16).

Haze’s grandfather goes on to remind Haze that Jesus will not ever leave his soul because he has been redeemed for his sins. This redemption seems to be an integral part of Haze’s mentality; he recalls, “There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin. He knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher” (16). This statement seems to make no sense on first reading—why would a devout young man want to avoid Jesus? Haze is possessed by a desire to avoid redemption even here—he does not want to be possessed by Jesus, and thus, is determined not to sin so that Jesus need not bother with him. Despite his devotion to his faith, Haze sees continued redemption by a foreign entity to be avoided rather than revered.

This strange obsession with faith exists even when Haze departs Eastrod for the army, determined to “get back in a few months, uncorrupted” (17). Haze is determined to resist evil, and to desert the army after four months if it was not finished with him. The only two items he takes with him represent his efforts against evil: a Bible and his deceased mother’s silver-rimmed glasses. Haze notes, “He had gone to a country school where he had learned to read and write but that it was wiser not to; the Bible was the only book he read. He didn’t read it often but when he did he wore his mother’s glasses” (17). These lines suggest that the only things that matter to Haze as he departs for the army are those which connect him more deeply to his faith, the word of God, and the conduit through which he experiences the Word, but also
that his primary goal is to resist evil, and the need for Jesus’ redemption. Furthermore, the significance of these glasses once belonging to Haze’s mother is significant—the reader’s only encounter with her comes after Haze’s surreptitious viewing of an adult show, during which she punishes him for what he saw and forces him to pay penance. Symbolically, Haze is seeing through his mother’s eyes, quick to assess sin and exact punishment for it, avoiding evil once more.

Haze’s strange determination is repeated in his intentions to reject sin while he is enlisted in the army. He remembers,

He meant to tell anyone in the army who invited him to sin that he was from Eastrod, Tennessee, and that he meant to get back there and stay back there, that he was going to be a preacher of the gospel and that he wasn’t going to have his soul damned by the government or by any foreign place it sent him to. (17)

This recollection suggests that Haze believes that he, as a believer, is above any sin, and that his soul is pure and untarnished. These sentiments are put to the test a few weeks into boot camp, and Haze obediently puts on his mother’s glasses and tries to deliver his prepared speech against sin, “but his voice cracked and he didn’t finished....His friends told him that nobody was interested in his goddam soul” (18). It is in this moment that the critical change begins; despite donning his mother’s glasses, through which he can see and reaffirm his faith, Haze is not able to recite his lines about becoming a preacher and wanting an untarnished soul, to which his peers remind him that his soul is his own concern, suggesting that it [his soul] is not pure to begin with.

After his monumental failure, Haze recalls that it “took a long time to believe them because he wanted to believe them. All he wanted was to believe them and get rid of it once and for all...to get rid of it without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of to evil” (18). Whereas before, the army was rife with temptations of Evil, Haze believes that if his soul doesn’t matter, he cannot become evil, thus not needing to be saved by Christ. During his time in the
army. Haze begins to believe that he has, in fact, been converted into nothing: “He had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there” (18). This attitude considers Haze’s faith and Jesus’ redemption as parasites to be gotten rid of, but he departs the army believing that he is “uncorrupted,” and that there is no evil in his soul.

It is not until Haze returns to his home in Eastrod that he realizes that he has rejected his faith. Despite great anticipation and preparations, Haze returns to his home and finds it decrepit, dark, and falling apart. He begins to comprehend at this point that “[the house] was only a shell, that there was nothing here but the skeleton of a house” (20). His home seems to be an allegory for his own faith and self—Haze returns home, expecting to find a life full of the earnest faith he possessed four years previously, but finds that the world has changed while he was gone, and that he is a shell of the God-fearing man he once was.

Haze’s attitude throughout this flashback as well as the rest of the novel seems to be completely oriented to his beliefs about redemption. In his youth, Haze is told by his grandfather that Jesus died for his soul and that no matter how nasty a being he might be, Jesus lives inside of him and will never let him go. Haze fears this connection, trying not to sin or be tempted by evil so that Jesus will stay far away from him, and so that he need not be redeemed.

The rejection of his belief in faith is gradual, and initially Haze must consciously convince himself that his peers are right and that no one cares about his soul. Haze must check periodically to make sure “nothing [is] there,” and by the time he returns home to find that he is the shell of the man he once was, his faith seems to have evaporated entirely. Haze believes he is nothing, and that faith or lack thereof has no impact on him—but his comparison of himself and his home to their previous spiritual states indicate that he still acknowledges to that which he has rejected for not being “true.”

In contrast to Hazel Motes, The Violent Bear It Away’s Francis Marion Tarwater’s—referred to as “Tarwater” in the text—rejection of faith does not seem to be so much a search for
nothingness; rather, it is a quest for truth. Following the death of Mason Tarwater, Tarwater's
great uncle, he (Tarwater) waits to be called by God, as Mason had promised he would.
Instead, Tarwater feels a tremor and is inhabited by the voice which he comes to call the
stranger or his “friend.” The stranger's intentions are unclear throughout the novel—is it the
voice of Tarwater's emerging conscience, or perhaps of the devil sitting on one of his
shoulders? The stranger gives Tarwater advice, counsels him, and encourages him to do
tings that he does not have the courage to do without guidance. The voice of the stranger
counters the lessons taught to Tarwater by his great-uncle, who kidnapns him and takes him to
Powderhead, a remote farm, to make him a prophet.

The reader learns early on that Tarwater has lived in complete isolation for fourteen
years, completely dependent upon Mason not only for food and shelter, but also for any
education. Tarwater impresses this upon the reader when he recalls, “His uncle had said he
was seventy years of age at the time he had rescued and undertaken to bring him up; he was
eighty-four when he died. Tarwater figured this made his own age fourteen” (4). This revelation
suggests that the most essential parts of Tarwater's own self—right down to his age—have
been defined by his uncle, making him vulnerable to the suggestions of the stranger. The
stranger asks him: “how do you know the education he give you is true to the facts?.... Nothing
but that old man's word and it ought to be obvious to you by now that he was crazy” (46).
Regardless of whether or not Mason was crazy, this declaration calls into question what and
who is shaping Francis' feelings about cremation, the Calling, burying his grandfather, and his
cousin, in addition to his beliefs that he himself is a prophet.

Similar to Haze, the process of Tarwater's attempt to reject his faith is a gradual,
somewhat-subliminal one. At first, the stranger encourages Tarwater to burn his great-uncle's
body rather than burying it as he wished, despite Mason's insistence that cremation is an evil
process. Tarwater ignores him initially, but begins to listen when the stranger asks, “Ain't you in
all your fourteen years of supporting his foolishness fed up and sick to the roof of your mouth
with Jesus? My Lord and Saviour, the stranger sighed, I am if you ain’t” (39). This begins to call into question the relevance of Tarwater’s convictions now that Mason has passed, which is amplified when the stranger adds, “That’s all a prophet is good for—to admit somebody else is an ass or a whore” (40). These lines suggest that a prophet is only good for talking about the world as he sees it, but that doesn’t mean that there is any special knowing involved, and that perhaps a prophet is, in fact, ordinary.

In the midst of his confusion about Mason and waiting for the Call, Tarwater elects to further test the boundaries of what Mason said, and drinks from his still, an act that was forbidden to him. Tarwater is completely conscious of this and notes as he drinks, “A burning arm slid down Tarwater’s throat as if the devil were already reaching inside him to finger his soul” (45). The stranger persuades Tarwater to drink more, adding that “[People] wouldn’t have been near so glad they were Redeemed if they hadn’t had that liquor in them” (45). Finally, when Tarwater is drunk, the stranger voices several points that seem to enable Tarwater to reject his faith: “how do you know the education he give you is true to the facts?....Nothing but that old man’s word and it ought to be obvious to you by now that he was crazy. And as for Judgment Day, the stranger said, every day is Judgment Day” (46). These words empower Tarwater to question the reality that Mason has constructed and deflate grandiose ideas about Judgment and prophecy. Emboldened, he stumbles back to Powderhead and sets the house on fire, departing to the city to find his uncle (whom Mason initially stole Tarwater from) and seeking the truth which he believes exists outside of religion.

**Faltering Resolve**

Just as both Haze and Tarwater have critical moments that define their rejection of Christianity in these novels, so too can the reader identify a definitive moment in which each protagonist’s rejection of his faith falters. For Haze, this moment emerges during the arrival of
the new jesus. Haze first encounters this effigy when Enoch Emery forces him to go to the museum near the zoo. Haze’s reaction to the shrunken corpse with which Enoch is fixated is visceral—a complete physical rejection of what he is seeing. Halfway through the novel, Enoch steals the corpse from the museum and takes it to Haze so that it may be the new jesus for Haze’s Church Without Christ.

As soon as the new jesus has been stolen and before its physical delivery to Haze’s apartment, he [Haze] develops a sudden and persistent cough. He recalls, “Earlier that morning... he had felt as if he were about to be caught by a complete consumption in his chest; it had seemed to be growing hollow all night...and he had kept hearing his coughs as if they came from a distance” (186). These lines associate the coming of the new jesus with Haze’s own personal sickness, developing as if “from a distance” and eventually striking him in the apartment. This suggests to the reader that something is soon to inhabit Haze, as has the cough.

When Enoch arrives to deliver the new jesus to Haze, he encounters Sabbath, the daughter of Asa Hawkes, a false preacher, who is taken with Haze. When Enoch arrives, Haze has just resolved to leave Sabbath and Taulkinham behind to preach and start over in a new city. As he is packing his things into his duffel bag, he rediscovers the black Bible and his mother’s glasses sitting at its bottom. Setting the glasses atop his nose, Haze gazes into a mirror and his own face transforms into that of his mother, a spiritual woman whose glasses were used to read the Bible and to see evil.

After Haze sees his face transform, Sabbath enters the room clutching the new jesus. Sabbath is a living reminder of the faith that just confronted Haze in the mirror; she is a woman, like his mother, who so quickly saw and punished evil. While Sabbath is talking to the new jesus about its “Daddy,” Haze, he snatches the body away from her and throws it against the wall, decapitating it. After popping its head off, Haze throws the body out of the door leading to nothing from his room. He must not only get rid of the image of his faith, he must first destroy it
and put it beyond any repair or recollection. Furthermore, he must take it away from Sabbath, whom he now associates with the image of his mother in the mirror and punishment for evil actions surrounding him.

Sabbath exclaims at this point, "I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil" (189). This line points to the fact that Haze has torn himself away from faith once more, despite its presence in his bedroom through his mother's glasses. It is as if he must atone for his remembrance of his mother and the Bible, as well as for the existence of the new Jesus, with this one violent act of desecrating a corpse. Despite the fact that the body can do him no harm, Haze expels it from his home, in a demonstration of anger toward his faltering disbelief.

In The Violent Bear It Away, Tarwater experiences a physical rather than mental moment of faltering disbelief the day after he sneaks away in the night to listen to a child prophesy at a church. While in the park with his cousin Bishop and his uncle Rayber, Tarwater is tempted by Mason's mission: to baptize Bishop. Bishop represents not only the temptation of Mason's mission, but is also a physical mirror of Mason himself, with the same eyes and hair. In this scene, Bishop breaks away from Rayber's hold and runs to play in a fountain in the middle of the park. This moment provides Tarwater with the ultimate opportunity to complete Mason's mission and be done with his great-uncle once and for all, and to accept his lot as a prophet.

O'Connor recounts this incident from Rayber's perspective so as to capture the physical manifestation of Tarwater's faltering rejection of Mason's ideals. After watching Bishop jump into the fountain, Rayber sees that Tarwater is arrested in the middle of a step. His eyes were on the child in the pool but they burned as if he beheld some terrible compelling vision....He seemed to be drawn toward the child in the water but to be pulling back, exerting an almost equal pressure away from what attracted him. (145)
These snapshots of action are startling, because Rayber is witnessing the dissolution of Tarwater’s resolve to forget everything about his great-uncle. Rayber prevents the baptism from happening by pulling Bishop out of the fountain before Tarwater can reach him. It is at that moment that Rayber identifies what Tarwater is experiencing as a compulsion to complete Mason’s mission.

After this incident, Rayber takes both Tarwater and Bishop to the Cherokee Lodge, at which time Tarwater seems to try to correct himself for faltering in his abstinence from faith. The woman checking them in asks Tarwater, “Whose boy are you?” (156), to which he responds with a malevolent look. Startled by his expression, the receptionist responds by saying, “Whatever devil’s work you mean to do, don’t do it here” (156). Rounding on her, Tarwater counters: “You can’t just say NO….You got to do NO. You got to show it. You got to show you mean it by doing it. You got to show you’re not going to do one thing by doing another. You got to make an end of it. One way or another” (157). This statement is an attempt to demonstrate Tarwater’s own separateness from what Mason wants him to do, during which Tarwater admits that he has got to show that he’s “not going to do one thing by doing another” (157); that is, he has to demonstrate that he will not falter and give in to baptism, and that he means to perform the one action that will prevent that from being possible—killing Bishop.

**Conflict**

In each of these novels, the protagonist’s attempts to maintain his resolve after faltering in his rejection are followed by a character conflict which eventually leads him to the reclamation of his faith. In *Wise Blood*, just before Enoch brings him the new jesus, Haze encounters his adversary, Hoover Shoats, and a tall, gaunt man in a blue suit named Solace Layfield whom Hoover has hired to preach to spite Haze and with whom Haze is destined to conflict. The physical resemblance of Solace and Haze is undeniable, and forces Haze to see himself: “He
had never pictured himself that way before. The man he saw was hollow-chested and carried his neck thrust forward and his arms down by his side" (167). This development of self-awareness is entirely new for Haze, and creates in him an internal crisis.

This crisis comes to a head after the arrival of the new Jesus when Haze follows Solace and rams the back of his [Solace’s] car with his own Essex on a lonely country road. After Solace’s car rolls into a ditch, he and Haze stand face-to-face, yet Haze will not immediately answer when he is asked what he wants. Solace says, “what you want? Quit just looking at me. Say what you want” (205), to which Haze responds, “You ain’t true...What do you get up on top of a car and say you don’t believe in what you believe in for?” (205). Haze continues to accuse Solace of believing in Jesus and insists that he take off his suit and hat. Solace begins to flee, removing his clothing as he runs, but before he can do as Haze insists, Haze runs him over with the Essex, and backs over him for good measure.

Haze’s fury throughout this exchange is mysterious, though he watches Solace die as he lies on the road. Finally, Haze admits, “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). This line inspires a number of questions, most importantly regarding why Solace infuriates Haze merely by existing. Clearly, he is angry about Solace’s misrepresentation of himself, but he is also angry about his mockery. But what has Solace mocked? The Church Without Christ, or Haze himself? It seems on the surface that Haze’s anger is about Solace actually believing in Jesus, but rather than arguing with his beliefs, Haze runs him over with his car repeatedly. It seems that Haze is most upset that his image is being used by someone misrepresenting himself, saying that he doesn’t believe in Jesus when he truly does. Furthermore, because this man physically represents Haze, it is possible that Haze is angry that this might suggest that he too, truly believes in Jesus.

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the conflict that Tarwater experiences is within himself, between the two sides of his mind: Rayber and Mason. This conflict develops fully while
Tarwater and Rayber sit in a boat fishing, and Rayber confesses to trying to drown Bishop. Tarwater responds by stating that, “You didn’t have the guts... [Mason] always told me you couldn’t do nothing, couldn’t act” (169). Rayber challenges Tarwater’s newfound sense of freedom from faith, saying, “I’ve resisted [Mason]. I’ve done that. What have you done?..... are you quite sure you’ve overcome him? I doubt it. I think you’re chained to him right now” (169).

Despite Tarwater’s insistence that he “come to fish” (170) and that he doesn’t want to talk about his great-uncle, Rayber recounts meeting Mason for the first time, and explains the appeal of faith as well as the appeal of his uncle’s mad eyes. During Rayber’s explanation, Tarwater shifts uncomfortably and seems to listen “as if behind a wall” (170). Rayber explains that children are “cursed with believing” and that the subconscious can believe things without the active mind’s permission. Tarwater continues to resist his uncle’s analysis, saying, “I come to fish. I ain’t worried what my underhead is doing” (171).

Next, Tarwater asks whether or not Rayber has had Bishop baptized, and as Rayber explains that he hasn’t and why not, “The boy only stared at him, his eyes filmed with a dull cast of nausea” (172). After Tarwater pretends to be interested in talking about something else, Rayber says, “He’s warped your whole life.... You’re going to grow up to be a freak if you don’t let yourself be helped. You still believe all that crap he taught you” (173-4). In response, Tarwater vomits violently into the lake, and Rayber says, “You need to be saved right here now from the old man and everything he stands for. And I’m the one who can save you” (174). The conflict of this scene is rooted in Rayber’s insistence that Mason’s ideology still occupies Tarwater, and that he cannot truly live a rational life without leaving “all that crap” behind. The conflict is rooted between Tarwater’s subconscious (inhabited by Mason), which he is determined to repress, and his active mind, which he has trained to reject faith. This battle is continuing, however clandestinely, yet Tarwater seems to be unwilling to take action.

After leaving the lake, Rayber lies in the cabin and listens as Tarwater and Bishop head off toward the water once more. The conflict between Rayber’s ideology and the vestiges of
Mason's dogma come to a head when Rayber hears bellowing and knows that Tarwater is drowning his cousin, Bishop, in an attempt to make it impossible for him to baptize him and fulfill Mason's mission.

**Punishment**

In their efforts to distance themselves from faith, both Haze and Tarwater commit one of the most grievous sins: murder. These actions seem to be the climax of each novel, but the true apex comes shortly after each man's crime. Structuring the narrative in this manner suggests to the reader that perhaps each protagonist isn't so much an actor upon which we should focus, but rather an object being acted upon. In the case of both Haze and Tarwater, a mysterious stranger enacts retribution for their sins on a lonely country road.

When *Wise Blood'*s Haze wakes up in an alley the morning after killing Solace, he decides once more to leave Taulkinham to preach the Church Without Christ in a new city, and stops at a filling station to have the Essex looked over. Haze decides to tell the boy working at the filling station of his plans and follows him around, “Telling him what it was right to believe.... [Haze] said he had only a few days ago believed in blasphemy as the way to salvation, but that you couldn't even believe in that because then you were believing in something to blaspheme” (208). The boy largely ignores Haze, but he continues on, determined to make his point.

As Haze begins to drive away from the city and onto the highway, he begins to sense that he is not getting very far. O'Connor notes that “Shacks and filling stations and road camps and 666 signs passed him, and...even a sign that said, 'Jesus Died for YOU,' which he saw and deliberately did not read” (209). All of these seem to be omens for what is ahead of Haze—they are reminders of his past, declamations of his actions and evil ways, and a reminder of the faith that he is so eager to be rid of.

Five miles away from Taulkinham, a black police car pulls Haze over. The officer offers no rationale for stopping Haze aside from "I just don't like your face....Where's your license?" to
which Haze responds, “I don’t like your face either…and I don’t have a license” (210). Rather enigmatically, the patrolman says in a kind voice, “Well…I don’t reckon you need one” (210) and directs Haze to drive to the top of the next hill, telling him, “I want you to see the view from up there, puttiest view you ever did see” (210). When both men arrive at the top of the hill, the patrolman asks Haze to get out of the car, saying, “Now maybe you better had get out…I think you could see better if you was out” (210). While Haze looks at the broken, rather unremarkable landscape, the patrolman pushes the Essex over the embankment and off the edge of the hill, tumbling down until it lands on its top. Following his mysterious previous statement about needing a license, the patrolman only says, “Them that don’t have a car, don’t need a license,” in a similar enigmatic tone.

The significance of the Essex is unquestionable: Haze has never demonstrated any fondness toward another human being, but constantly defends his beaten-up, rat-colored car, insisting that it is a “good car” with a long life ahead of it. The car also signifies Haze’s mission to preach the Church Without Christ, and without it, he cannot follow in his grandfather’s footsteps. It is the only means of beginning a new life in a new city, and without it, Haze is condemned to remain in Taulkinham for the rest of his life. Losing the Essex is akin to punishment for his actions, particularly rejecting his faith in Jesus.

The patrolman’s action taken against Haze is acutely felt: he sinks to his knees, and does not speak. This instance is attributed more detail than any moment of potential emotion throughout the rest of the novel: the reader feels incredulous about what the policeman is doing. After the car is lost, Haze feels dejected, and O’Connor dedicates an entire paragraph to his visible, palpable despair. Haze says nothing in response to the patrolman’s questions, and begins to walk back to the city. Upon returning, he stops in a supply store and buys himself a bucket of quicklime.

In contrast to Haze, the reader reencounters The Violent Bear It Away’s Tarwater on the side of the road near the Cherokee Lodge, already out in the country. O’Connor’s description of
him is bestial, noting that Tarwater is “at the side of the road, slightly crouched, his head turned expectantly, his eyes for an instant lit red like the eyes of rabbits and deer that streak across the highway at night in the path of speeding cars” (207). Despite his animal appearance, a passing auto-transit truck driver stops to give Tarwater a ride, needing someone to talk to keep him awake. Tarwater tells the driver his destination, and the driver notes that “There were queer ups and downs in [Tarwater’s] voice as if he were using it for the first time after some momentous failure” (208).

Expecting entertainment, the driver demands that Tarwater start talking, to which he replies, “I never wasted my life talking. I always done something” (208), but when the driver asks what he has done lately, Tarwater cannot admit to his actions. Instead, Tarwater fixates on other details before confessing to drowning a boy. Then he says almost accidentally, as if saying it will rid his body of its reality, “I baptized him” (209). Tarwater goes on to explain the accident, insisting that “The words just come out of themselves but it don’t mean nothing. You can’t be born again” (209). He explains to the driver that he’s proven that he isn’t a prophet by drowning Bishop, and that he isn’t hungry for the bread of life. Perplexed by what seems to be hysteria, the driver stops the truck and kicks Tarwater out, forcing him to walk the remaining miles to Powderhead.

Tarwater’s confession demonstrates a number of things about his person. First and foremost, he is still stubbornly convinced that he is able to reject Mason’s will, God’s will. He is also attempting to imbibe Rayber’s ideology, saying things like “You can’t be born again.” It also reveals that he shows no remorse for his actions, and believes that they were necessary to prove that he isn’t a prophet, although this does beg the question of to whom he is proving his non-prophet status.

The ultimate instance of Tarwater’s punishment comes, however, in the form of a man in a lavender and cream-colored car who offers him a ride. Tarwater notices upon looking at the man that “an unpleasant sensation that he could not place came over him” (227). This driver is
lanky and older, wearing a lavender shirt, black suit, and a panama hat, smoking a cigarette. His hair is yellow, and his eyes are lavender. The peculiar-looking man asks where Tarwater lives, to which he responds, “Not on this road.... [I’m going to] where I live....I’m in charge there now” (227). After this exchange, the driver gives Tarwater his “special” cigarette to smoke and a bottle of whiskey. Tarwater uses a gift given to him by Rayber, a corkscrew, to open it. The combination of the cigarette and drugged whiskey cause Tarwater to fall asleep in the car’s passenger seat.

The man in lavender next checks to make sure that Tarwater is asleep before carrying him into the woods. While O’Connor never states it explicitly, this is when the audience understands that Tarwater is raped. O’Connor notes that when he leaves Tarwater in the woods, the driver’s “delicate skin had acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood” (231). This demonic portrayal of the driver suggests that Tarwater has been punished for something. He has been simultaneously disempowered and stripped of any innocence he still possessed after murdering Bishop.

It seems that both Haze and Tarwater are punished in some manner after they commit murder in a last attempt to push away faith. The timing and similar structure of each narrative suggest that this is not a coincidence—rather, both men are reaping punishment for their actions. In both cases, power is taken away from the protagonist, hinting that the only entity that truly has power is that which they tried to reject: God.

Reclamation

Each of these novels might have ended there—O’Connor has certainly demonstrated the violent consequences that may follow rejecting one’s faith. Instead, O’Connor chooses to continue on, to answer the question looming in readers’ minds: now what? It is at this point that
readers begin to wonder, 'can these men be redeemed?' 'What is the price for redemption?' and, 'If they are redeemed, can they accept it?'

*Wise Blood* follows a rather unusual path, assigning its narration to a new character. Rather than providing the reader with an introspective, intimate understanding of Haze's psyche during the months following his blinding himself, O'Connor shifts narration to Mrs. Flood, the landlady. Mrs. Flood's narration seems to serve two functions: first, to account for what happens following Haze's punishment, and second, to replicate the entire novel in a single chapter to truly impress upon the reader O'Connor's point.

Haze returns to Mrs. Flood's house with a bucket of quicklime, and when she asks him what he plans to do with it, he responds simply, "Blind myself" (212). Reflecting on his decision, Mrs. Flood concludes that, "A woman like her, who was so clear-sighted, could never stand to be blind," before concluding that Haze must be insane, for why else would a person blind him or herself, doomed not to enjoy life anymore (213)?

Blind, Haze begins to limp and begins to spend his days sitting on Mrs. Flood's porch with her. One day on the porch, Mrs. Flood talks to him as she always does, not receiving responses, as is Haze's custom, and she says, "I don't have [a religious] streak. I believe what's right today is wrong tomorrow and that the time to enjoy yourself is now so long as you let others do the same. I'm as good, Mr. Motes...not believing in Jesus as a many a one that does" (225). Surprising her, Haze leans forward to say, "You're better....If you believed in Jesus, you wouldn't be so good" (225). Mrs. Flood takes Haze's remark as a compliment, although it seems to be deliberately enigmatic. In reality, Haze is suggesting that if she believed in Jesus, she would be a sinner by virtue of her belief, because she could not compare to His perfection.

Through Mrs. Flood's narrative, the reader learns that not only has Haze blinded himself, but that he is also walking with glass and gravel in his shoes and is wrapping barbed wire around his chest under his shirt. One evening, she asks him why he walks on rocks, to which
he responds, “To pay” (226). When asked what for, he says, “It don’t make any difference for what… I’m paying… Mind your business… You can’t see” (226). Later, when she asks Haze why he has wrapped barbed wire around his chest, he says simply, “I’m not clean” (228). When Mrs. Flood offers a washwoman, he responds by saying, “That’s not the kind of clean” (228). Finally confronting Haze about his behavior, she insists, “You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn’t do these foolish things,” to which he replies dismissively, “I ain’t treatin’ with you” (229).

While Haze will not admit to what he is doing, it seems that his purpose is to become what Asa Hawkes could not be: a true, blind, committed prophet. He has given up the Church Without Christ, however, with no excuse but having “no time” (225). Is it possible that Haze has committed to paying penance for his actions? It would seem so. He has been forced to relinquish the symbol of his ideals—the Essex—and is determined to live a “true” life as a real blind man.

In her own way, Mrs. Flood has dedicated herself to taking advantage of Haze, much the same as he previously dedicated himself to the belief that there is no Jesus Christ, and later, to his idea of the “truth.” By the end of the chapter, however, much the same as Haze, Mrs. Flood seems to have experienced a mental and emotional journey and even seems to love Haze, where before she despised him. It is this love that affects her as she watches him leave and die.

Whereas Haze burns away his sight with quicklime, in The Violent Bear It Away, Tarwater burns the ground where he is raped. He wakes up naked, with his wrists tied together, and kicks the ground where he has lain and sets it ablaze. As he runs away from the fire toward the road, he begins to slow, and realizes that, “He could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation…. [His eyes] looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again” (233). Something essential about Tarwater has changed at this point, and there is a clear sense of progress. It
seems that after setting fire to the clearing where he was raped, he has set forth in another
direction with a new look in his eyes that filters reality through the mind of a prophet.

As Tarwater walks closer to Powderhead, he becomes more aware of the world
surrounding him. O'Connor writes, "His senses were stunned and his thoughts too seemed suspended" (236). At the top of the Powderhead clearing, Tarwater grieves over the ruins of his home, now an empty expanse. The stranger returns to his conscience here, saying, "Go down and take it....It's ours. We've won it" (237). Tarwater reacts by physically shaking, sensing the presence of the stranger as "pervasive as an odor, a warm sweet body of air encircling him, a violet shadow hanging around his shoulders" (237). The use of the word "violet" in particular calls to memory Tarwater's rapist and the story's devil-figure, perhaps triggering an understanding in him that to act on the words of the stranger will lead him toward punishment once more. At this point, Tarwater sets fire to a tree branch and uses it to set fire to the forest surrounding the clearing, burning away all temptation of evil.

Buford Munson, the man who wanted Tarwater to bury Mason, waits on the other side of the clearing. On the ground near Buford, Tarwater sees a sight that freezes him: a "grave, freshly mounded" (240), wherein lies Mason's body. It is in this moment that Tarwater realizes that he has failed to defy Mason at all. He may have burned Powderhead, he may have run away to the city, but he baptized Bishop and Mason has been buried. It is at this moment that Tarwater is called, finally, to be a prophet, and we seem him truly reclaiming his faith, whether or not he wants to do so:

He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. (242)

Tarwater's reaction is visceral, lifting him, moving him, causing him to throw himself to the ground. And so, his first command comes: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE
TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (242). Tarwater follows this command, for the choice of whether or not to do so is no longer there. He departs Powderhead with the burning woods behind him as he heads back to the city. There, he will find the Children of God and warn them of the mercy which he has experienced.

Conclusion

Regardless of many themes in both Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, it is clear that faith is O'Connor's primary subject of interest. That said, in a biography entitled Flannery O'Connor, Melissa Simpson asserts that, “O'Connor's faith was simply part of who she was, not a framework upon which she could prop her plots, themes, symbols and characters” (52). Juxtaposing this statement with O'Connor's poignant, “I write to discover what I know,” we can conclude that rather than simply writing a story to share her faith with nonbelievers, O'Connor is writing Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away to elucidate her faith and to share it with other Christians.

This seems to be a jump of logic at first, but consider the nature of each story: rather than punishing a nonbeliever for not seeing the importance of God, O'Connor has elected to consider the reality of the most grievous sin—accepting Christ into one's heart, and then rejecting him. If she is attempting to discern her own faith, O'Connor uses these texts to explore the potential consequences for her own doubt in her faith. Both Haze and Tarwater are young, highly individualistic characters, much the same as she. These protagonists explore the possibilities of what might have happened if O'Connor had not rediscovered God, plumbing a foreign, frightening, blasphemous world on her behalf. This is a message of warning to readers, but particularly other Christians, that punishment of some sort will fall upon those who do not see the way of God.

O'Connor published these novels eight years apart, although they deal with strikingly similar themes. Why write two different books with similar ideas and structures several years
apart? As previously mentioned, O'Connor's message was neither received nor acknowledged appropriately by her friends, family, the Church, or readers at large. The Catholic Church as well as many Christians blacklisted *Wise Blood*, calling it a "steamy dime novel" (Simmons 43). Therefore, readers will notice that while *Wise Blood* and its message are whispered and ambiguous suggestions of the importance of obeying that which ultimately controls you, *The Violent Bear It Away* screams its purpose in the reader's face: you must accept your calling, because eventually, you will be driven to succumb anyway.

Passive, third-person voice is used throughout *Wise Blood*, lending itself to ambiguity. For example, after the patrolman pushes the Essex off the road, Haze is described in detail: "His face didn't change and he didn't turn it toward the patrolman. It seemed to be concentrated in space" (212). Rather than utilizing this opportunity to characterize Haze's anguish, O'Connor chooses to describe how he exists in space, in relation to the rest of the world, implying the passivity present throughout the rest of the text. In contrast, the voice used in *The Violent Bear It Away* is active and employs almost exclusively first-person voice, although it is not always Tarwater's. We gain knowledge of his past through his own reflection, and any time that passive voice is used, O'Connor employs it to establish the scene—reflections and conclusions are all relayed through characters.

It is also significant to note that O'Connor's narrative structure follows a similar trajectory in each of these novels which is unfamiliar to her readers, perhaps leading to confusion about what is going on in *Wise Blood* and leading to clarification in *The Violent Bear It Away*. In traditional narrative, a single event contributes to rising action, culminating in a climax, followed by falling action and a conclusion. O'Connor incorporates a series of false climaxes in each of these novels which lead to the ultimate—and unexpected—climax, followed by penance and a quest for absolution.

In each piece, rising action creates suspense in the form of flashbacks and movement into a new city, followed by a plateau in which the protagonist is establishing himself as a
person who has rejected his faith. Finally, after some time, each man falters in his disbelief and must fight to maintain his rejection, marking the first false climax. For Haze, this is the scene with his mother's glasses, while Tarwater experiences this when Bishop plays in the fountain. Next, each protagonist commits a murder in an attempt to maintain control over his spiritual beliefs, but this is yet another false climax. For O'Connor, the real climax deals with the true theme of each novel: man's need for redemption. As such, both Haze and Bishop are punished for their actions, leading to reclamation of faith and redemption. While this narrative structure is somewhat complex for many readers, it lends itself well to an audience seeking immediate release of emotion following an especially intense climax. Instead, readers are forced to develop an emotional eagerness for some impending catharsis, but are actually stunned by the gruesome punishment each man receives.

This violence seems unnecessary, and for lack of a better term, to be "overkill." O'Connor argued on behalf of the necessity of such violence in an essay entitled "The Fiction Writer and His Country," stating, "you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures" (34). This line explains her need for images described as "grotesque," petitioning for their necessity to reach a disenchanted audience that is spiritually numb—"man needs to be 'struck' by mercy; God must overpower him" (Shinn 58). Furthermore "[Haze and Tarwater's] violence is directed toward the physical world; they are destroying the body to save the soul" (Shinn 62), and the soul is, of course, the most essential part of human life for a Christian like O'Connor.

Arguably, O'Connor is employing all of these techniques to draw readers' attention to the dire consequences of rejecting faith and the importance of accepting it—but why? Recall her quote from Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose. We [readers] demand a redemptive act for those who have fallen…but we forget the price of redemption. Therefore, O'Connor's ultimate message is that regardless of whether or not you believe yourself to have been "saved" by God, you are not exempt from sin, and although you may be redeemed by your faith, you
may lose a part of yourself along the way. These characters are “judged, victimized, made to appear only as absurd entities of the flesh” (Hawkes 399), that is, they are punished before they are redeemed, knocked down several rungs on the proverbial ladder, and depleted of their own arrogance.

For O’Connor, absolution of sin is easy to idealize, and people of faith lazily label themselves as “redeemed,” but redemption is not realized until penance has been paid, and God’s Grace has been given. In “Flannery O’Connor and the Fiction of Grace,” Arthur F. Kinney notes that “grace [is not] dramatized as a dazzling joy....Rather, it can come in an act of random violence, a forceful incident, a blinding pain” (71). This quote expands O’Connor’s final word on the matter of redemption: ultimately, we will all be absolved, and no matter how undeserving we are, or how grotesque our restoration, the terrible speed of God’s mercy cannot be avoided.

**Works Cited**


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