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Senior Literature Seminar

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Nothing but the Blood of Jesus? : O'Connor's Critique of Protestantism in *Wise Blood*

For my pardon, this I see,

Nothing but the blood of Jesus;

For my cleansing this my plea,

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

--- Robert Lowry

Published in 1949, Flannery O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, satirizes not Christianity itself, but rather man's twisted practice of the faith that O'Connor held so dear. O'Connor, a devout Roman Catholic living in the Bible Belt, writes to critique the heresy, hypocrisy, and apathy that pervaded the lives of Protestants in the South—a region that O'Connor describes as “hardly Christ-centered” but “most certainly Christ-haunted” (*Mystery and Manners* 44)ⁱ. O'Connor portrays the characters in *Wise Blood* as Protestants, non-Christians, or the nihilistic protagonist and hero himself, Hazel Motes, who in his rejection of the gospel, founds the Church of Christ without Christ, acting as its first preacher. My discussion on the distorted gospel messages found in this novel will focus on two preachers: Asa Hawks and Hazel Motes. Hawks practices Christianity as a hypocritical performance. In contrast, for nearly the entire novel Hazel Motes practices nihilism, completely rejecting the gospel, until the last chapter when he reverts to Christianity, adding his own form of extreme penance to his faith. O'Connor portrays

these freakish but realistic characters to shock, creating unease in her readers. Writing as a Roman Catholic in the South, O'Connor was attempting, I think, to make specific critiques of Protestantism as opposed to Catholicism. The central issue O'Connor satirizes throughout *Wise Blood* is the danger of adding man-made doctrine or subtracting Biblical truth from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Protestant and Catholic dichotomy, apparent in the final chapter of *Wise Blood*, displays itself in the dialogue between the self-blinded, but converted Christian, Hazel Motes and his landlady, Mrs. Flood. The lack of understanding between Protestants and Catholics prevails as a theme in several of O'Connor's writings, the most striking parallel to the dialogue between Mrs. Flood and Hazel being a scene in O'Connor's short story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." In this story, two protestant boys come to visit the narrator's two older Catholic cousins, Susan and Joanne. O'Connor juxtaposes the teenagers as each pair sings a song representative of their faith, for the boys, it is the gospel hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross" and for the girls, it is the liturgical, Latin "*Tantum Ergo*"ⁱⁱ a Eucharistic hymn of praise (Richert, *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, 240-241.). While both are songs of adoration in remembrance of Jesus's sacrifice, the girls respond to the Protestant anthem with flippant laughter and the boys show similar disrespect to the Latin lyrics of the "*Tantum Ergo*" by saying "That must be Jew singing" (*A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, 241). The conversation between Mrs. Flood and Hazel portrays the same disregard and discrimination for another's beliefs that is displayed in *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*. After the unwarranted destruction of Hazel's prized car, the one physical object in his possession that gave him a sense of control, the distraught Hazel purchases lime which he then uses to blind himself. As with the Apostle Paul, such a violent action serves as a marker of Hazel's conversion to Christianity. Nonetheless, Mrs. Flood discovers him taking part in other actions

not typical of a Protestant believer redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. She first finds Hazel attempting to serve penance by walking with rock-filled shoes. This practice appalls her. When Mrs. Flood asks Hazel why he puts rocks in his shoes, he harshly, but simply replies, “to pay” (*Wise Blood* 226)ⁱⁱⁱ. Mrs. Flood pushes him to explain further what exactly he is paying for. “It don’t make any difference for what,” Hazel responds, “I’m paying” (226). His use of the present progressive tense for this last statement is crucial, indicating that Hazel views this payment as ongoing and continual. To him, the self-mutilation serves as an outward, physical sign of inward contrition for his sins. Mrs. Flood finds such penance heathen. Her repulsion at his physical suffering by penance only increases when she discovers the barbed wire wrapped tightly around his chest. To this practice, she emphatically repeats these phrases twice: “It’s not natural” and “People have quit doing it” (*WB* 228). Her statements imply that to Protestants, such a ritual is not acceptable; Protestants have quit practicing penance since the Reformation;^{iv} it is unwarranted, unnecessary. Mrs. Flood exclaims, “There’s no reason for it.” But, for Hazel, a reason most certainly exists; he replies, “I’m not clean” (*WB* 228). However, for Protestants, is not Jesus’s blood alone the vehicle for cleansing humankind of their sins? As we sing in our old hymn, “For my pardon this I see/ Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” Jesus’s death on the cross for our salvation lies at the core of Protestant doctrine. Hazel’s burned eye sockets and the barbed wire wrapped around his chest sends the appalled Mrs. Flood into a stream of accusations, calling Hazel “some kind of agent of the pope or [that he] got some connection with something funny” (*WB* 229). From Mrs. Flood’s perspective, Hazel is not behaving like a good Christian should; to her, and to many readers, he most certainly does not behave in a manner worthy of a “protestant saint,” which is what O’Connor calls Hazel in her discussion of *Wise Blood* (*Habit of Being* 69)^v.

At the end of *Wise Blood*, the dialogue between Mrs. Flood and Hazel unsettles us Protestant readers. How can O'Connor possess the audacity to refer to Hazel Motes as a "protestant saint" when following his supposed conversion, he practices self-mutilation "to pay" for his own uncleanness and sins? In "'If Jesus Existed I Wouldn't Be Clean': Self-Torture in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" Brian Ingraffia seems to doubt O'Connor's claim in regards to Hazel, disagreeing that Hazel is a saint of any sort: "Hazel's faith in the end is not more mature, but rather a repetition of his childhood religiosity" (79). Ingraffia believes that O'Connor meant what she said when she claimed Hazel's redemption. However, he explains that while O'Connor valued asceticism, it is a practice neither valued nor encouraged in Protestant American circles. (Ingraffia 82). Through his Protestant lens, Ingraffia continues by criticizing the Catholic theology that obviously influences O'Connor's writing. Ingraffia states, "Hazel's actions are motivated by feelings of guilt and represent his desire to pay for his sins, I cannot agree that in terms of orthodox or at least Protestant theology that Hazel is shown to be redeemed" (82). Thus, according to Ingraffia, Hazel's attempts "to pay" by inflicting harm upon himself refute the gospel message and make O'Connor's claim to Hazel's conversion void.

I disagree with Ingraffia on this point of the validity of Hazel's conversion. I believe O'Connor uses the last chapter in *Wise Blood* to address the conflicting ideologies between Protestants and Catholics in regards to the roles of works and the sacraments in one's salvation. The disparity in beliefs in regards to what is essential for salvation has existed for centuries between these two branches of Christianity and served as the basis of the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant mantra proclaims: *sola gratia, sola fide*—by grace alone, through faith alone (Park). For Protestants, nothing more is to be added by man to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—not the practice of the seven sacraments, nor good works; as the old hymn says, "Nothing can for sin

atone/ Nothing but the blood of Jesus” (Lowry). O’Connor knew the difference in beliefs between Roman Catholics and Protestants. I believe she was very aware that people would read her assertion of Hazel Motes as a “protestant saint” and view his behavior at the end of the novel as a contradiction. There is irony in this portrayal, but is irony not the nature of satire? In holding to my view that this novel is a critique of Southern Protestantism, I agree with Ingraffia in the sense that O’Connor meant what she said when she claimed Hazel as the saint of *Wise Blood*. Though I disagree with his assertion that Hazel’s practice of self-mutilation completely disproves his salvation (*HOB* 69). Instead, the interaction between Mrs. Flood and Hazel at the conclusion of the novel satirizes the derogatory, Southern Protestant view of Catholicism and the importance Catholics place on the practice of the sacraments. It appears that Hazel, a protestant, is attempting to add his own man-made doctrine to salvation by placing his faith in his own works. Upon my first reading of the conclusion of *Wise Blood*, I, like Ingraffia, denied the conversion of Hazel Motes. Most literary analyses I studied either came to the same conclusion as Ingraffia’s and mine originally, or while admitting Hazel’s conversion, state that it is perverted and flawed, but a genuine conversion, nonetheless.

Since my first reading, I have come to change my conclusion in regards to the conversion of Hazel. This resulted from a deeper and more accurate understanding of how Catholics view the sacraments within their faith. Sacraments are defined as “an outward sign of something sacred” or an invisible truth (*Columbia Encyclopedia*). Furthermore, Roman Catholics hold the belief that “behind the sacramental rites...there is the saving act of Jesus Christ, communicated to the individual Catholic through the *performance of a symbolic ritual action* [emphasis mine]” (McKenzie 126). I learned that I, and I would suppose most Protestant readers of O’Connor, look at *Wise Blood* through a Protestant lens, viewing Catholicism’s and O’Connor’s emphasis

on sacraments as evidence of a works-based Christianity, as a “Jesus-plus-more” doctrine. However, this is not the case through the lens of the Catholic O’Connor. She, along with other Roman Catholics, uphold the sacraments in reverence and in such a way that they view them as manners and instruments to understand the mystery that is Jesus Christ. In fact, Roman Catholics hold the view that it is not the sacraments themselves that provide salvation. Rather, it is through the sacraments that believers truly experience their new life in Jesus and in which “its powers are initiated and sustained” (McKenzie 127). O’Connor would say she does believe she is saved by grace, but that the sacraments provide a way for her to tangibly experience that grace. Protestants, on the other hand, view the sacraments as superfluous, symbols and devoid of the actual presence of salvation (Sonheim 18 April 2017).

Ultimately, O’Connor questions the practice of *sole fide* and *sole gratia* in *Wise Blood*. Do Protestants really live as though “nothing but the blood” saves them? The characters in *Wise Blood* certainly do not. The man-made, doctrinal additions that the Catholic Church is often criticized for are what O’Connor seeks to criticize in Protestant practice. She does this by displaying various cases, including Hazel’s self-mutilation with barbed wire and rocks, which display Protestants’ man-made additions to the gospel despite their claims to the contrary. O’Connor further explains the problematic practice she sees in Protestantism in a 1959 letter written to John Hawkes, a professor at Harvard, as well as O’Connor’s counterpart as a writer of grotesque literature (Gooch 344-45). In the letter, O’Connor explains what she means by “wise blood”:

Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood; it’s too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people’s [Protestants] means of grace-- they have no sacraments. The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion,

something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically. (*HOB* 350)

This letter suggests O'Connor's belief that Protestantism's lack of sacraments creates a vacuum that Protestants attempt to fill with their own man-made dramatic gestures. Thus, I argue that Hazel's self-mutilation serves as an example of two things: the South's "do-it-yourself" religion as well as a representation of how Protestant's view Catholic's practice of rituals. Hazel sees his need for penance, but since he lacks the sacrament, he resorts to a ritual of his own creation involving the physical senses in order to work out his salvation. I believe Hazel's self-mutilation provides a platform for O'Connor to implicitly question whether the Catholics are the ones with the distorted theology in the South.

Likewise, O'Connor highlights the danger of Protestants' freedom in their personal interpretation of the Scripture and prayer, a danger especially relevant to street preacher, Asa Hawks. O'Connor discusses how this liberty of interpretation gives men freedom to add to the gospel and make it something that it was never intended to be. For example, the narrator explains that in his attempted self-blinding, Hawks "had been possessed of as many devils as were necessary to do it, but at that instant they disappeared...He [Hawks] fancied Jesus, Who had expelled them was standing there too, beckoning to him" (*WB* 110). This quote proves that it was the devil who inspired Hawks to consider blinding himself in the first place, not God. After his failed attempt to blind himself, Hawks chooses to live a continuous lie by faking his blindness in hopes that he can mooch off of those who believe his ruse. Essentially, he uses the gospel for profit. Hawks provides a prime example of not only hypocrisy, but also the potential

danger of misinterpretation that can result from Protestant freedom. In a letter to a friend named William Sessions, a Southern Baptist who later converted to Roman Catholicism, O'Connor discusses a questionable Protestant trait that she often saw. Their discourse specifically highlights Old Tarwater, another false prophet figure found in her novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. However, her statement here can be applied to Asa Hawks as well. O'Connor writes, "When the Protestant hears what he supposes to be the voice of the Lord, he follows it regardless of whether it runs counter to his church's teaching" (*HOB* 410). In other words, she questions one's ability to differentiate between the voice of the Lord and personal wishes and desires. Ultimately, this freedom in personal interpretation can lead to acts done as "God's will" that were nothing of the sort and instead, misrepresent Jesus Christ, as is the case with Asa Hawks.

Hawks and pre-conversion Hazel provide vivid examples in *Wise Blood* of theology-gone-wrong. Their man-made additions to or subtractions from the truth of the gospel represent practices of twisting Christianity. While both contort the gospel message, they each do it for different reasons. Hawks is a fraud, a hypocrite, and doesn't believe the message he preaches. In contrast, Haze, the "mirror image" of Hawks, swings to the complete other extreme (Duckworth 53). Hazel, rather than adding to Christianity in order to make it fit his needs, subtracts from it and rejects the existence of Jesus entirely. Hazel genuinely wants to believe what he preaches, even though he remains haunted by the presence of Jesus Christ in his life. This overwhelming presence that he cannot seem to shake is why he is drawn to the supposedly-blind, street preacher in the first place. James C. McCullagh, in his article "Symbolism and the Religious Aesthetic", indicates that "the boy is ready for help but puts his faith in a false savior" (55). The hypocrisy and mere playacting of Hawks that Hazel sees when he discovers that the blindness is a hoax drives him further into his rejection of Christ and deeper into nihilism.

For Hawks, his Christianity is a show, a performance. We find evidence of this in the spectacle he makes in attempting to blind himself. Though he fails to follow through with the blinding, Hawks maintains the fictitious role of a poor, blinded, street-preacher. The locations where he begs and evangelizes likewise represent the content of his message. One in front of a theater which indicates his words are a show; the second, amidst a crowd surrounding a potato-peeler vendor which indicates the message of Hawks—it is a gimmick. His message is this: “Help a blind preacher. If you won’t repent, give up a nickel. I can use it as good as you. Help a blind unemployed preacher. Wouldn’t you rather have me beg than preach?” (*WB* 36). This spiritless statement indicates complete insincerity and displays Hawks use of his false handicap and Christianity for selfish gain.

Hawks acts as a false prophet throughout the novel. His fault lies not in his failing to blind himself, but in his living a lie through his pretense of blindness. He is an imposter; however, he is not an imposter completely lacking in truth regarding Hazel’s life. Upon his first conversation with Hazel, Hawks observes that he hears “the urge for Jesus in his voice” (*WB* 46). Hawks later goes on to accurately predict the destiny of Hazel by saying, “you can’t run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact” (*WB* 47). The truth of Jesus’s existence and Hazel’s inability to avoid him are indeed realities that Hazel eventually accepts at the conclusion of the novel. Ultimately, what Hawks says to Hazel in regards to the character of God and Hazel’s relationship with him are true, but the truths come from a liar. Stuart Burns, in his article, “Freaks in a Circus Tent: Flannery O’Connor’s Christ Haunted Characters” describes Hawks as a “failed prophet” (4). Essentially, he claims that Hawks realizes what he should believe and what he failed to prove in his role as a preacher. He still has vision and he shares that with Haze and in doing so works as “an agent, but not a recipient of grace” (Burns 5). He acts as an “agent” by playing a

major role in Hazel's plunge into nihilism for it is his self-serving begging and preaching that Hazel loathes. Likewise, Hawks unintentionally serves as a reason that Hazel returns back to his faith in Jesus. For it is only after the destruction of his car and his discovery of Hawks's fraud that Hazel abandons his Church of Christ without Christ and returns to God, choosing to live a life of penance and submission.

Classified as one of O'Connor's freaks, the inner turmoil evident in Hazel throughout the novel demonstrates the effects of Southern Christian culture as well as the complexity that results from the disparity between Protestants and the Catholic minority. There are two areas of Hazel's life to be examined: the physical and the spiritual. Though the spiritual is more subtle, spiritual work is happening in Hazel throughout the entire novel. He wrestles with a Jesus that he wants to throw out, but simply cannot seem to avoid. I believe these two dynamics of Hazel's life are what O'Connor discusses when she says that to see a freak and understand him or her, one has to possess a "conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (*M&M* 44). Although Hazel preaches a message rejecting the presence of Christ, Christ is found throughout this entire novel. Despite his efforts to escape Jesus and take him out of his religious equation, Hazel sees Jesus everywhere through physical means. Hazel feels the working of Jesus on his soul, yet he fights against the tugs.

O'Connor explains how readers might respond to this dynamic of the spiritual turmoil within Hazel in *Wise Blood*. She understands that readers tend to admire Hazel for trying to escape so passionately the Christ that exists everywhere he turns in the South. However, for O'Connor, "his integrity lies in his not being able to...for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man" (*M&M* 114). In other words, for O'Connor, Hazel Motes is the hero of the story because he does not just accept the Protestant Christianity he has been

taught his entire life as truth. He wrestles with the hypocrisy and gracelessness he witnesses. He struggles with the manmade additions to Christianity that he sees played out in the lives of his mother, Asa Hawks, Hoover Shoates, and even Mrs. Flood. By accepting nihilism and attempting to remove Jesus from his religion and life, Hazel ultimately chooses to go against the common belief structure upheld by Southern culture. However, he never loses his sense of Jesus's presence. He is attentive to Jesus and returns to Him, recognizing the truth of his statement made earlier in denial, "If Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean" (*WB* 87). This recognition of uncleanness leads to his physical outward acts of contrition that Mrs. Flood witnesses in the final chapter of the novel.

In conclusion, we see O'Connor's critique of the danger of adding unbiblical doctrine as well as subtracting Jesus from Christianity. The title *Wise Blood* even satirizes the idea that practicing Protestants seek to add to Christ's sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins despite their claims that by his blood alone, they are saved. In this novel, O'Connor unabashedly criticizes the flaws she sees in the Church. In a letter regarding the censorship of Flannery O'Connor's writings, Sally Fitzgerald, editor of O'Connor's correspondence, tells Flannery's mother, Regina, "Flannery's loyalty to the church was strongly demonstrated throughout her life, and that fact alone gives her the right, really, to criticize what she felt deserved criticism...She always made people think, even if she didn't always make people comfortable" (Fitzgerald 1 May 1977). Flannery O'Connor did not preach sermons, she wrote stories and she wrote these stories to startle and to question those who practice a twisted form of Christianity in pursuit of selfish gain.

What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus;

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Notes

ⁱ Hereafter cited as *MM* throughout this paper.

ⁱⁱ **Tantum Ergo Sacramentum**

Down in adoration falling,
Lo! the sacred Host we hail;
Lo! o'er ancient forms departing,
newer rites of grace prevail;
faith for all defects supplying,
where the feeble senses fail.
To the everlasting Father,
and the Son who reigns on high,
with the Holy Ghost proceeding
forth from Each eternally,
be salvation, honor, blessing,
might and endless majesty. Amen.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hereafter cited as *WB* throughout this paper.

^{iv} Penance was one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church and often was practiced in confession to a priest. Protestants refused this practice since they believed that only God had the authority and a role in the forgiveness of sins (McKenzie 159). However, at this point in the essay, I am not trying to say that Hazel's exhibition of extreme penance, resembling self-flagellation, is a practice that Catholics condone or view as an acceptable practice today.

^v Hereafter cited as *HOB* throughout this paper.