

## The Deterioration of Self and Society in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

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Flannery O'Connor (1925 – 1964) is an American writer and essayist. An important voice in American literature, she wrote two novels and 32 short stories, as well as a number of reviews and commentaries. She is a Southern writer who often wrote in a Southern Gothic style and relied heavily on regional settings and grotesque characters. Her writing also reflected her own Roman Catholic faith, and frequently examined questions of morality and ethics.

*Wise Blood* is the first novel by O'Connor, published in 1952. The novel is assembled from several disparate stories first published in *Mademoiselle*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Partisan Review*. The first chapter is an expanded version of her Master's thesis, "The Train," and other chapters are reworked versions of "The Peeler," "The Heart of the Park," and "Enoch and the Gorilla." The novel concerns a returning World War II veteran who, haunted by a lifelong crisis of faith, resolves to form an anti-religious ministry in an eccentric Southern town. The novel received little critical attention when it first appeared, but has since come to be appreciated as a somewhat unique work of low comedy and high seriousness with enduring if disturbing religious themes. Though the fiction of O'Connor has most often been studied from theological or psychological perspectives, her work is deeply entrenched in, and reflective of, the culture of the mid-twentieth-century United States.

Religion offers individuals an alternative framework for understanding themselves and their society, providing them with the opportunity both to criticize the status quo and to envision some sort of achievable alternative. With this potentially subversive tradition in mind, it is re-approached the work of O'Connor to investigate her use of religion as a perspective from which to resist post-war consumerism. Other critics such as Jon Lance Bacon and Steve Pinkerton have preceded me in this field, providing seminal new historical studies that

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helped O'Connor criticism break free from its stagnating theological debates by resituating her work in the Cold War politics of her era. The primary concerns of O'Connor's evocation of religious life as an alternative to the detrimental effects of modern American culture (consumerism, cultural uniformity, deterioration of the familial and social ties, etc.).

O'Connor shares the sentiments regarding religion's capacity to provide an alternative framework whereby individuals can develop an image of themselves independently of popular culture, thereby allowing them to achieve a greater sense of freedom, and, to a limited extent, inspire a similar change in others.

The article also draws on critics who have resisted the traditional theological discourse of O'Connor studies. O'Connor provides an abundance of letters and prose asserting the Christian meaning of her work, and, while they can be useful for unpacking many of her texts, they have also limited the critical approaches that O'Connor scholarship has pursued, particularly in the realms of feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic theory. However, even from O'Connor's earliest critical reception, there have been dissenters who've questioned the persuasiveness of her religious claims. Hazel's conversion in *Wise Blood* is one area in particular where some critics have challenged O'Connor's religious interpretation of her own work. While the religious elements are all present, the nature of Hazel's conversion is rather ambiguous and could support any number of religious interpretations ranging from orthodox Catholic to a non theological reading or, at its most extreme, the novel could even be accused of sounding demonic, an argument John Hawkes made in "Flannery O'Connor's Devil." This tradition of reading the author against the grain has made clear that O'Connor's depiction of the Christian life, while able to provide an alternative framework that can be fruitful for personal development and social awareness, is often distorted by the literary form it takes. Christian charity, love of God, and fraternity, the ideals of Christian life, are often subordinated to the despotic narrator's desire to humble a society too conceited to recognize its need for supernatural aid. The narrator's moral condemnation produces damaged and alienated characters that fail to overcome the obstacles that O'Connor identifies in the opposing social structures (i.e. modern, secular life, existentialism, consumer Capitalism, etc.).

This paper consists of explicating the oppositional forces in *Wise Blood* that exist between post-war consumerism in America and O'Connor's depiction of a true Christian life. She uses the trope of wise blood to illustrate humanity's irrational nature. *Wise blood*, O'Connor says in *Collected Works*, "is something that enables you to go in the right direction after what you want" (920); it's an unconscious, instinctual force that not only directs one's actions, but also dictates one's goals. She associates wise blood with two emblematic figures in the novel, Hazel Motes and Emery Enoch. Hazel represents the internal and authentic religious desire in opposition to Enoch's parodic version, which consists of artificial desires implanted by external forces. In this oppositional model, O'Connor illustrates how the parodic version of wise blood, i.e. consumerism, dehumanizes and frustrates individuals who pursue its promise of fulfillment. She offers us the authentic version, i.e. salvation by the Christian faith, as an alternative that not only allows individuals to extricate themselves from the degrading effects of consumerism, but also provides freedom and fulfillment unattainable in any other way.

The works of Jon Lance Bacon, C. Wright Mills, Vance Packard, and Marshall McLuhan help to explain O'Connor's conception of wise blood and her critique of consumer society. O'Connor uses the concept of wise blood to illustrate how individuals, even under the best of circumstances, only possess a limited capacity for rationality and freedom. O'Connor privileges what she considers a subconscious desire for the transcendent truth of the Christian faith that she believes provides a freedom from the forms of this world as opposed to crass desires for earthly objects that sustain alienation and unfreedom. This article analyzes the misadventures of Enoch and illustrates how he debases his internal desires for community through consumerism. Enoch ultimately follows the advice of the advertising industry to its absurd limit, which he believes suggests that he become an ape, resulting in the frustration of his desire for companionship.

In *Wise Blood*, O'Connor attempts to debunk the kind of mentality that seeks to find a hard and fast correlation between joy and economic prosperity. For O'Connor poverty in United States is not a matter of physical want, suggesting that the discontent experienced by a large majority of Americans has little to do with their economic failures and successes. Instead, she feels that poverty, as it is handled by most serious writers, is a trope that provides a concrete social setting for authors to explore various aspects of social

discontent. The particular appeal of the poor for the fiction writer is existential not economic.

The poverty found in *Wise Blood* can be attributed to the existential emptiness of consumerism and the deterioration of traditional social institutions. O'Connor and many of her contemporaries believe that greater access to material goods without proper support from the right kind of social institutions will potentially hinder the average citizen's psychological and spiritual well-being; and this is especially true when advertisers prey on the weaknesses of consumers to make their products desirable.

One concern O'Connor shares with her contemporaries is the illusion of freedom created by modern, consumer capitalism. She challenges any narrowly constructed definition of freedom that predicates free action on access to and participation in the free exchange of goods and services in a market economy. She uses the concept of wise blood to investigate Enoch and Hazel's actions and evaluate them in accordance with a religious conception of freedom, which she ultimately derives from a Christian picture of salvation and the mystery of divine grace. John Lance Bacon's book *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture* suggests that this connection was more common than one might think. Bacon argues that various Christian sects as well as intellectuals of her era shared a common propensity for dissent and "were less likely to espouse a faith in the American way of life" (110).

As a novelist with theological concerns, O'Connor's voice is unique amongst the secular humanist critics of her era, because unlike her contemporaries, she believes the degradation of freedom should be considered not only as a cultural, economic, psychological, or socio-political issue but, ultimately, as a spiritual issue. Of course, she doesn't hesitate to draw on the secular humanist work of her contemporaries to illustrate how the media and advertising industry manipulate individuals; like them, she depicts the ideology that informs consumerism—its suggestively, its promise of self-actualization through materialism, its constant production of needs and satisfactions—as an illusion that impoverishes her characters' inner lives and manipulates their integrity or ability to act freely to the extent that there will no longer seem to be their own.

To this point, Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, adds that the "probing and manipulation" of individuals en masse "has seriously anti-humanistic implications. Much of it seems to represent

regress rather than progress for man in his long struggle to become a rational and self-guiding being" (6).

By positing freedom in terms of the ultimate destination of one's soul, O'Connor challenges readers of *Wise Blood* to demand a broader and more robust definition of what being free means: "freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen" (5).

By evaluating post-war America with the counter-cultural standards of Christian theology O'Connor is able to present the pervasive unfreedom that lurks just beneath the post-war economic bonanza. In addition to providing an alternative perspective on modern society, O'Connor believes that Christianity's prescriptive code of conduct will help insulate and protect individuals from the forces of modern, consumer culture that conspire to manipulate, exploit, and control their intimate lives.

It is to explicate the parodic or false conception of wise blood that O'Connor juxtaposes with a genuine, spiritual intuition or grace. Enoch, more than any other character, embodies the parodic version of wise blood, which O'Connor uses to satirize the aspirations of post-war consumer society and the deterioration of freedom therein. The false conception of wise blood that reduces Enoch's humanity to primitive animalism by the end of his story arc illustrates the pitfalls of consumerism and its inability to fulfill its explicit as well as implicit promises—namely, to remedy the alienating effects of modern society by promising to increase one's social desirability through the acquisition of material goods.

In *Wise Blood*, an unseen, ambiguous force influences much of the novel's action. O'Connor variously describes this force controlling her characters as if they were puppets being led about by ropes, scents, and dog whistles imperceptible to the senses. In the first chapter, the unseen force restrains Hazel "by a rope caught in the middle of his back and attached to the train ceiling" (12). Wise blood, as a concept, is never quite concretized; conceptually, it exists in a nebulous space between various forms of economic determinism and the mystery of divine grace; O'Connor depicts these forces as either hegemonic bondage or true, spiritual freedom. At various points in the novel, O'Connor clearly identifies wise blood with an unconscious, (ir) rational desire for salvation in Christ and redemption from sin.

O'Connor juxtaposes the Christian formulation of wise blood with a relatively powerful response to media images and advertising

that entice their audiences to engage in consumerism as a method for self-improvement. Since O'Connor clearly states that her ultimate reality is the incarnation, it becomes clear that when she associates wise blood with an instinctive responsiveness to advertising, she does so ironically, suggesting that it is a travesty of the Christian concept of grace.

Every character in the novel, like Enoch, struggles with self-improvement in one form or another. Enoch wants to become more likeable and socially integrated; others, like Hazel, want to be more independent and free; and some, like the Layfield-Shoates and the Asa-Sabbath Hawks duos, simply want to improve their economic status. O'Connor wants to illustrate how these desires are really just illusions that misdirect their longing for Salvation. But Enoch, more than any other character, cannot resist the persuasive ploys of the media and advertising industry. O'Connor believes the presentation of consumerism as an alternate route for personal and social fulfillment obscures religious truth. Starting with this question of the authentic and the artificial, one can begin to construe O'Connor's understanding of freedom.

In the end, one can only truly understand *Wise Blood* if understand the basic oppositions that structure its narrative. O'Connor ultimately wants to juxtapose Enoch's travestied version of wise blood with a Christian model; she wants to show her audience an alternative to the consumerism of secular culture and Enoch serves as a foil to help make her diamond shine. So if O'Connor wants to talk about freedom, she needs to show us unfreedom; if she wants to talk about community she needs to show us isolation and alienation; if she wants to evoke truth, she does so by way of illusion, and Enoch always serves the latter's purpose. Enoch would like to believe the editors at Life; him more than any other character would like to believe that prosperity will produce a literature of joy and contentment; but he need not look any further than his own life to understand that material affluence cannot improve the kind of existential poverty that O'Connor addresses. Without the meaningful social institutions and spiritual horizons that guard against hegemonic manipulation and exploitation, that fortify the individual's freedom beyond questions of fashion, greater access to material goods can only pacify human discontent. While the theological conception of wise blood that O'Connor advocates will help individuals understand his desires and make them

manifest, consumerism, as the secular parody of wise blood, mystifies the true nature of desire and will ultimately defer its realization.

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