

WISE BLOOD: A MYTHIC STUDY

SUBJECT: Modern Confessional Novel

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FOR: John Lyons

BY: Thomas Matchie

OUTLINE--a little comedy to go with
the tragedy of this paper

what's good about wise blood?

tidbits about myth-making

haze takes the stage

the blue knight in

a colorful carnival

possession of stolen goods

heart to heart talk

oedipus relived, or

back to the stone age

mummy rock, and

street clearance

big myth in review

ya, wise blood too...

ouch

let's run

what do you know!

damn the expense, i'll psy

whew.

it's real, man

The earliest work of Flannery O'Connor is a short novel published in 1952, Wise Blood. The book is often looked down upon. Walter Sullivan finds the characters in Wise Blood "too thin" and "too much alike." He also sees a technical problem with the structure, that is, it is "too full of loose ends."¹ Louis Rubin, on the other hand, points out the immaturity of its dialogue compared to the more precise and stark language of her later stories. For him, Hazel Motes, the hero of Wise Blood, is not believable, that is, "we never manage enough sympathy for him to make his struggle and his fall mean something."² It is true that Wise Blood does lack the character development of more sustained novels, and Miss O'Connor's use of language, a factor for which she is now most remembered, did improve with age. But in spite of the prematurity of Wise Blood, and even though Flannery O'Connor is probably, as Robert Drake points out, a better short story writer than she is a novelist,³ nevertheless, there is something about Wise Blood which, in the overall analysis, will not let it take a back seat to any of Miss O'Connor's writings. Indeed, there is something in it that singles it out as a particularly significant work of our times. Very probably, that "something" has to do with its mythic structure and content. James Fammham says that Hazel Motes is "a figure of gigantic proportion, a figure reminiscent of Milton's Satan."⁴ Other critics have found in Wise Blood a depth and breadth that makes it comparable to the works of Sophocles,⁵ Dante,⁶ and, as we shall see, Shakespeare. Our purpose in this paper is to analyze this novel as a mythic work of art and to compare it to other great mythic literature which it resembles. In short, Wise Blood is not like just any other novel. Caroline Gordon says that it has a frame of reference far larger than any individual. Indeed, for Miss Gordon, its vision is "Blakean."⁷ Sister Rose Alice adds that, though Flannery O'Connor is a Christian, the word "Christian" is too limited to encompass her study of human nature. Sister Rose connects Wise Blood with "the primordial struggle for survival" and says "it contains universal truths that can be restated endlessly yet always with profit to the reader."⁸ It is in this wider light, then, that we begin to look for the mythic basis of Flannery O'Connor's first work to see what keeps it in first place.

What, first of all, is myth as a constituent of any literature? Perhaps some general notions will help. Myth usually has to do with the externalization of forces in both the individual's conscious life (his ideas, imaginings,

feelings) as well as his unconscious life--that part of him which he may not be immediately aware. Carl Jung says that myth stirs in the reader's mind, within and beneath his conscious response, unconscious forces which he terms "primordial images," or archetypes. Archetypes he describes as "psychic residua or numberless experiences of the same types."⁹ Moreover, myth may excite forces not only within the individual, but those within the conscious and unconscious life of the community--a tribe, a clan, a nation, all men. Ideas and emotions that a group have shared over a long time give it a togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living. Wheelwright says: "Myth is the expression of a community mind which has enjoyed long natural growth, so that the sense of togetherness becomes patterned and semantically significant."¹⁰ Through myth, then, we can see positive or negative values which a particular people has developed, values which they cherish or deplore, but values which continually function in determining the lives of individual community members. It is in the light of such individual and community patterns that we must see myth operating in Wise Blood.

It is necessary now to isolate and define certain characteristics of myth which we can apply to a discussion of this subject in Miss O'Connor's novel. The first of these we have hinted at already, namely, that myth is an externalization, a visible and imaginative representation of psychic forces. Myth does not consist in a logical or conceptual explanation. Meaning in myth comes through a visible medium--a story or play. In fact, the principal art form of myth is drama, but painting, poetry, or narrative can be used to communicate the desired experience. A second characteristic of myth is that it involves a preternatural character. He must be of superhuman dimension--a god, an unconquerable hero, or some such figure. But he cannot be average; his qualities of personality must place him above the ordinary human creature. A third quality of significant myth logically concerns the action in which the hero partakes. This action or mythic event must ^{be} larger than life, that is, like the hero preternatural or supernatural. This action may take the form of a dream, a ritual, or a heroic episode. A final important element found in myth of major dimension is that of theme, that is, a message within the myth which controls the action and gives the story colossal importance. The theme makes the myth

relevant to survival, to happiness or glory. It is not just a central idea or point, but involves needs, wants, aspirations which are present as potential tendencies in virtually all men, or at least those with whom the myth is concerned.¹¹

The theme of myth, of course, is most crucial, for with it rises or falls the interpretation and, therefore, the significance of a particular myth. We might say the following about interpretation. The components of the myth--the represented situation, events, actors--may mean what they literally appear to mean or they may stand for something else conceivable by man. A mythic narrative, then, is usually susceptible of several interpretations, some on different levels, each of which is likely to contribute something to our understanding of the full significance of the story. Then we may ask: what makes a particular myth more significant than another? The importance of myths may be estimated in terms of the scope or intensity of the effects they have. One might ask if the myth is memorable or does it become the focus of rapt attention, excitement, wonder, thought, or talk? Does it elicit belief or faith in its essential validity or authenticity? A reader can also judge the effects of myth by its educational value. Does it guide conduct, orientate dispositions, effort, action? Finally, does the myth integrate or engender passionate participation toward some goal or end?¹² These are some of the questions we must ask ourselves of Wise Blood as we attempt to interpret its dramatic effects, its preternatural characters and events, indeed, the peculiar theme Miss O'Connor has chosen to embed with ⁱⁿ its narrative. Upon such an evaluation depends the novel's real value.

To appreciate Wise Blood, then, as myth, it is first necessary to see the extent to which it is dramatic, that is, a visible and imaginative representation. On reading this novel, we are immediately and curiously aware that on the surface it is absurd, violent, grotesque. Hazel Motes strikes us as a religious fanatic who blinds himself with lime when everything else in ^{is} his life fails. Indeed, for us this ^{is} far more a visual and emotional ~~rather~~ than a logical or conceptual experience. Flannery O'Connor herself said that she thought it necessary in fiction to dramatize, to render life rather than report it or "rattle on" in telling a story.¹³ In Wise Blood she does just this. Consider, for instance, Haze's conversation with the cab driver about the local prostitute on entering Taulkinham:

"I ain't any preacher," Haze said.

"Where'd you hear about her? She don't usually have no preachers for company. He did not disturb the position of the cigar when he spoke; he was able to speak on either side of it.

"I ain't any preacher," Haze said, frowning. "I only seen her name in the toilet."

"You look like a preacher," the driver said. "That hat looks like a preacher's hat."

"It ain't," Haze said, and leaned forward and gripped the back of the front seat. "It's just a hat.

"It ain't only the hat," the driver said. "It's a look in your face somewheres."

"Listen, Haze said, tilting the hat over one eye, "I'm not a preacher."

"I understand," the driver said, "It ain't anybody perfect on this green earth of God's, preachers nor nobody else. And you can tell people better how terrible sin is if you know from your personal experience."

Haze put his head in at the window, knocking the hat accidentally straight again. He seemed to have knocked his face straight too for it became completely expressionless. "Listen," he said, "get this: I don't believe in anything."

The driver took the stump of cigar out of his mouth. "Not in nothing at all?" he asked, leaving mouth open after the question.

"I don't have to say it but once to nobody," Haze said.

The driver closed his mouth and after a second he returned the piece of cigar to it. "That's the trouble with you preachers," he said. "You've all got too good to believe in anything," and he drove off with a look of disgust and righteousness. (21)¹⁴

This scene is a moving and vibrant cartoon. We can see the hat, the cigar, the different kind of motions, and they are telling. The language is curiously colloquial, intense, psychically revealing. Walter Sullivan notes that it is the lines, thoughts, gestures, clothes, and overall character portrayal that make Miss O'Connor vivid and memorable, and these are all here.¹⁵

Nor must we miss the dramatic structure of Wise Blood as a whole. Too long for a short story, and too short for a novel, this work seems to fall most naturally into the genre of a play. The opening chapter sets the comic though disturbing mood and tenor for the dramatic action, just as the closing fourteenth chapter resolves the catastrophe, that is, the violent

blinding which befalls Haze. Chapters two to thirteen contain the rising action in which the major characters--Enoch, the Hawks, Onnie Jay--are introduced and interact with Haze in order to define our hero and highlight his essential conflict. Enoch's movement toward "the thing" (50), and Haze's curiosity about the blind man add the suspense necessary to sustain the rising action. The inner and outer conflict of Haze, of course, is one of the central themes of the drama. Probably one of Miss O'Connor's greatest stage techniques, however, is the dramatic irony which she makes available only to the onlooker or omniscient reader. At one time, for instance, a woman innocently confronts Haze about his profession:

"What Church?" she asked.
He said the Church Without Christ.
"Protestant?" she asked suspiciously, "or something foreign?"
He said no mam, it was Protestant. (61)

Notice how Miss O'Connor accentuates the woman's speech by paraphrasing Haze's. Only we can appreciate the double and penetrating meaning of both of their statements, for his church is, indeed, foreign and protestant, but hardly in the sense she means. One can only chuckle at what he means by Protestant. What adds to the irony is what Merton calls Flannery's "ear for the offbeat poetry of inane speech."¹⁶ Robert Detweiler observes that the sequence of action in Wise Blood corresponds exactly with the workings of grace on Haze.¹⁷ How different from her other novel, The Violent Bear It Away, where the action criss-crosses in time according to the more mental associative pattern she employs there. That Wise Blood has dramatic, and therefore mythic possibilities, was demonstrated recently by its successful production on stage at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.¹⁸

Another quality of mythic literature is that it has a hero of preternatural proportion. He simply must not be ordinary. In one sense, Hazel Notes, the hero of Wise Blood, is not ordinary because he is stupid, uneducated, fanatic. But these qualities alone do not make him larger than life. Rather, Miss O'Connor ingeniously encircles Haze's presence with a kind of other-worldly air. Jane Hart would identify this glow with the "rich red-clay reality that surround and reinforces all her work."¹⁹ This strangeness is achieved with Haze in the way he dresses and the carnival atmosphere in which he walks, with the few highly select but telegraphic

items he possesses in the drama, and with the uncanny twist in everything he says or is said to him as he preaches his Church Without Christ. These are the factors which set Hazel Motes off, not just as an individual, but as a type, an everyman, a figure of colossal dimension who in some strange way embodies us all: The most obvious feature of the narrative which sets Haze apart is the suit he wears, a garment which "turned glare-blue" and "seemed to stiffen fiercely" (18) in the light. We recognize Haze throughout the drama as simply the "blue figure." For instance, at the park:

...The blue figure was still sitting there in the same position, He had the look of being held there, as if by an invisible hand, as if, if the hand lifted up, the figure would spring across the pool in one leap without the expression of his face changing once. (48)

Miss O'Connor uses blue with Haze much like the Pearl Poet uses green in "Gawain and the Green Knight." The color follows the character through the story and magnifies his powers and importance. At the end of Wise Blood two policemen discover the body of Haze in this way:

The other consulted his pad. "Blue and got on a blue suit and ain't paid his rent," he said.

"His suit ain't blue," he said.

"Yes it is blue," the first one said. "Quit pushing up so close to me. Get out and I'll show you it's blue."

"It might have been blue," the fatter one admitted. (125)

To the policemen Haze is obviously of little significance, but for us the tell-tale blue shines through the narrative to literally glorify his presence.

But blue is not the only color Miss O'Connor employs. Indeed, she surrounds Haze with a network of flashing colors which actually light him up. When our hero first gets off the train at Faulkinham he sees signs and lights that "moved up and down and blinked frantically" (20). It is not surprising that at one time Haze dreams of his father taking him to a carnival (38-39), for the whole narrative of Wise Blood is a kind of three-ring circus. But the glittering colors not only give Haze a preternatural hue, they function also in stark contrast to the grotesque actions of the novel (see below) which are also preternatural but not so beautiful. The first major character to join in the parade of colors is Mrs. Watts, "the friendliest bed in town!" (21) Indeed, she has a "white iron bed"

and a "pink nightgown" (22). Her tongue also has "a pink tip." The power of these colors to suggest something beyond the natural or the physical was pointed out by Paul Engel, the teacher of the author of Wise Blood at the University of Iowa:

Miss O'Connor brightens everything she touches.²⁰
The psychological penetration is acute and powerful.

Later we discover that Enoch, whose action parallels Haze's through the central part of the drama, has on "a yellowish white suit and a pinkish white shirt and his tie was the color of green peas" (27). At work he has on "a green uniform with yellow piping on the neck and sleeves and a yellow stripe down the outside of each leg" (46). Animals and machines also help to define Haze's strange atmosphere. At the zoo there are "yellow-eyed wolves" and an ape with a "small pink seat" (54). At the FROSTY BOTTLE--a name which may suggest strangeness or something beyond the natural--the waitress has on a "once-white uniform clotted with brown stains" (51). Then at "Walgreens" there is a "yellow and blue, glass and steel machine, belching popcorn" (75) near a fountain counter of "pink and white marble linoleum" (76). The pink, green, yellow, brown, and white colors form an unmistakable fabric which Miss O'Connor employs as a sort of mysterious backdrop for her tale. It is interesting that they all seem to come together at the end with the blue of Haze's suit, for the policemen who pick up Haze have, of all things, "yellow hair" (175).

The few "material" possessions of Haze also help to throw light on his preternatural or mystical stature. In the beginning he has a "black Bible" and a pair of "silver-rimmed spectacles" (17). The Bible he keeps because it "came from home" and the glasses "in case his vision should ever become dim" (18). Ordinarily a black Bible would mean nothing special, but black is used throughout Wise Blood in connection with evil, and here we suspect it ties Haze with some kind of biblical corruption that needs to be undone. Indeed, the themes of proper vision, symbolized by the spectacles, and what is biblically real play like a melody throughout the entire drama. Webster Schott observes that we know most about "the core-man inside the shell" in Miss O'Connor's writings through:

...what her characters see and how they see it, the color of their eyes and the reflections in them, their

visions in crisis or at the instant of death...²¹

That Haze's initial vision is warped we can glean from the way the people on the train look at him. The women squint and the porter winks. Or, more concretely, the owl at the zoo glares at him with an "eye that looked like a piece of mop sitting on an old rag" (55). Indeed, Haze's vision, dim at the onset of the novel, gets dimmer as the action moves on. Ironically, however, it is not until his vision dims to a "pin point of light" which goes "backwards to Bethlehem" (119) that he truly sees the meaning of biblical salvation. There is another of Haze's possessions that goes backwards, namely, his Essex. Again symbolic and ironic, it stands for our hero's Church Without Christ. It is in treating items like this car that Miss O'Connor is, what John Clarke calls "master of the pithy simile."²² It is, first of all, "rat-colored" (41). The wipers "made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in Church" (44). When Haze blows the horn three times it "makes no sound" (44). At one time the car "sounded as if the motor were dragging out the back" (48). That the mechanic will not touch it or charge for looking at it makes us leary of its presence. Finally, the policemen push the Essex over a cliff and it is destroyed. "Was you going anywheres?" they ask Haze, and he replies pathetically "No" (114). This is no ordinary car. It is preternatural, a mythic device which resonates on various levels. It may reflect the mechanization of religion, the futility of rejecting Christ, or simply Miss O'Connor's comic-tragic view of man. It is interesting that she portrays the car as very noisy, that is, clattering and dragging, but its silent horn suggest its impotency to in any way "toot" the Good News.

When Haze begins to preach, there is something about his language and the context of his language that also sets him off as an extraordinary figure.

Well, I preach the Church Without Christ. I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk, and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about the church and I'll tell you it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption. (60)

Many things can be said about this kind of talk. First, it simply is not ordinary, it is weird. Robert Detweiler points out that it creates the illusion of backwoods speech, but that it is a deliberate invention made to reflect the subjugation of the religious spirit to the individual ego

or selfish modes of existence.²³ Edgar Hyman adds that when Haze talks he always affirms the opposite.²⁴ The language of Haze, of course, varies in its flavor from the extremely self-possessed to the rather somber, "forlorn," and pathetic, as "I never ast him (to redeem me)," or "I don't want nothing but the truth!" (103) but some curious strangeness always seems to be present in what he says. We must also remember that what Haze says is often set off in peculiar ways by the language of the characters he talks to. There is the complete indifference, for instance, of Sabbath reading her letters from Mary when Haze is asking about the blind man, of the more humorous and ironic indifference of Mrs. Watts who, at least, recognizes Haze: "Momma don't care if you ain't a preacher" (23), or, finally, the blasphemous indifference of the woman at the Frosty Bottle: "Why should I give a goddam what you are?" (53) Jonathan Baumbach notes that in the evil world that Miss O'Connor pictures other acts of blasphemy simply pass unnoticed.²⁵ But there is more to it than this. The putting together of these different kinds of speech, the erroneously self-assured and the variously indifferent, have the effect of creating a curious kind of mystery, a kind of cry for help. Perhaps this kind of juxtaposition is what Josephine Jacobson refers to when she claims that O'Connor resembles Graham Greene in that she embodies in her language a kind of mystery of mercy.²⁶ There is another kind of idiom that Miss O'Connor pits against what Sr. Rose Alice calls the "senseless bravado"²⁷ of Haze, and that is the kind of statements to which Haze apparently does not listen, but which the reader must interpret as literally true, and which represents a disarming perception, either recognized or unrecognized, on the part of the speaker. Enoch, for instance, says: "I knew when I first seen you you didn't have nobody nor nothing but Jesus" (36), or Asa preaches to Haze: "Listen boy, you can't run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact" (32). There is nothing Haze can do about these remarks. They have a finality that is both revealing and concealing. They help define Haze's existence as they leave us wondering about our own. As Sr. Rose points out, this language is Blakean, that is, symbolic of the human condition itself, and represents typical inner projections of the human personality.²⁸ It is this combination of peculiar tone, dramatic irony, juxtaposition of idiom, and profound psychic exposure that isolate Haze as a preternatural and universal hero of mythic scope.

Once it is clear that Haze is an extraordinary individual, indeed, a

hero, we are ready to treat the preternatural, that is, the grotesque or violent acts in which he partakes or which are a reflection of him. The climax of the drama, of course, is Haze's violent blinding of himself. It comes at the end of chapter thirteen. To really appreciate the blinding we must see that it is encased, that is, immediately preceded and followed by dramatic situations described in somber and meditative language which catch what Jane Hart calls "the impact of strangeness with honest authenticity,"²⁹ and which help to define the blinding. Before the blinding we see Haze gazing into space. He has just lost his Essex, his church, which the policemen have pushed over a cliff. Miss O'Connor describes the scene:

∴∴∴His face seemed to reflect the entire distance
across the clearing and beyond, the entire distance
that extended from his eye to the blank gray sky
that went on depth after depth into space. (113-114)

Notice that the rhythm here is slow and steady, the vocabulary simple and repetitive, the mood melancholic but profound. This vision resembles a similar view Haze has of Eastrod (see below) in chapter one. That one, however, compared to this one, is empty. Then after the blinding we identify with Mrs. Flood, Haze's landlady, as she looks at Haze almost in awe. Described as a "clear-sighted" woman and one who "could never stand to be blind" (114), she is deeply moved by Haze's act and through it even begins to contemplate "the phrase 'eternal death' that preachers used" (115). Baumbach says that she feels cheated because she cannot possess his motives or contain in her head the secret of his behavior.³⁰ At any rate, the pervading spirit of these two seems to force us to think out the significance of this central act of the drama. We now seem to know, first, that Haze's vision, in contrast to that of the fake blind man who could not go this far, is real. It also appears obvious that Haze is another Oedipus whose real sight also came only after blindness. And we now surmise that what has happened here involves something equivalent to all Thebes, that is, us. This larger involvement is also clear from the cosmic scope of Haze's "epiphany" (quoted above) and from the fact that his spirit is immediately communicated to Mrs. Flood. One other observation strikes the careful reader. We are aware of the discrepancy between the kind of viewing Haze participated in before his blinding and the type he experiences now. Consider, for instance, how Miss O'Connor conveys to us what he saw at the swimming pool:

The woman was climbing out of the pool, chinning herself up on the side. First her face appeared, long and cadaverous, with a bandage-like bathing cap coming down almost to her eyes, and sharp teeth protruding from her mouth. Then she rose on her hands until a large foot and leg came up from behind her... (49)

We are struck here by the broken rhythms and the dismembered quality which accompany the voyeurism. In contrast to this secular act of sight, Haze's new vision has about it a transcendence and completeness that is unmistakable, the kind through which Miss O'Connor might be picturing the cosmic Christ.

A further understanding of Haze's blinding himself demands that we again go back before this violent act to three other violent or grotesque, indeed preternatural, acts which not only precede the blinding, but funnel into it, and help explain it. One is Enoch Emery's putting on of the gorilla suit, another is Sabbath Lily Hawks' cradling of the mummy, and finally there is Haze's running over Solace Layfield with the Essex. All these lead up to the climatic revelation we have just discussed. Jean Marie Kann says that violent action results in:

...a revelation, a striking disclosure, sometimes to the character, always to the reader. The revelation is actually more devastating than the physical violence which precedes it. A sense of mystery lives on--the mystery--the mystery of human nature, its context and its complexities.³¹

We have talked of this mystery surrounding the blinding; now to the physical acts before it, for the revelation, though more devastatingly violent than them, actually contains them. At this point it is necessary to understand another dramatic technique Miss O'Connor uses in portraying these three preparatory acts. It is a device employed by Charles Dickens in Great Expectations. In that novel, Pip, the hero, and who is about to be baked in lime by the grotesque figure Orlick, narrates the episode in the following way. Orlick is talking:

"You was always in Old Orlick's way since ever you you was a child. You goes out of his way this present night. He'll have no more of you. You're dead."

I felt that I had come to the brink of my grave. For a moment I looked wildly round my trap for any chance to escape; but there was none.

"Now wolf," said he, "afore I kill you like any

other beast--for I'll have a good look at you and a good goad at you. Oh, you enemy!"³²

For Dickens Orlick becomes the dramatic extension of Pip's worst self, the part he hates and which is connected with his base motives in becoming a gentleman. In Wise Blood Miss O'Connor does something very similar. Enoch, Sabbath, and Solace become the external manifestations of the part of Haze that rejects Jesus. And through them we experience some of the same fear, horror and moral evil that Dickens portrays in the above passage. Miss O'Connor's characters are simply more various and spread out through her dramatic novel.

The most extensive and intricately done extension of Hazel Motes is Enoch Emery. The identity of these two is established through Enoch's opposition, like Haze's, to the Bible--in this case, to Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy--and to the teaching of his daddy, who, incidentally, also had a "yeller ford" (51). Probably the best way to understand Enoch is through the image of a beast. Sabbath calls Haze "king of the beasts" (93), but it is Enoch who dramatizes this side of Haze. It is as a type of beast--"two part suspicion and one part lust" (104)--that Enoch's presence fills most of the central part of the drama, that is, chapters three, five, eight, eleven, and twelve. He is constantly on the move, first from the swimming pool and Frosty Bottle looking and talking brazenly with girls, then to the zoo and museum where his hatred for animals is accentuated by his intimacy with them, and finally to Haze's apartment to deliver the mummy and to the gorilla's truck where his vile hopes find their tragic realization. The narrative Miss O'Connor uses to treat Enoch is highly sensual, matching the earthiness of his existence. Enoch works at the zoo and we almost feel engaged as he takes Haze among the bears, wolves, monkeys, and birds. When Enoch takes Haze to the museum to show him the shrivelled man, we can almost smell that environment:

...They went into a dark hall. It was heavy with the odor of linoleum and creosote and another odor behind these two. The third one was an undersmell and Enoch couldn't name it as anything he had ever smelled before. (56)

The repetition of words here dealing with the sense of smell seem to envelope the reader like an odor. Enoch's language is also animal-like. "I'll be dog" (48), he says. At one time he stares dramatically, "sweating and purple"

at a cage and yells: "It's empty!" (55) suggesting the hollow quality of his whole approach to life. Baumbach sees in Enoch a symbol of the American success myth.³³ Miss O'Connor dramatizes this aspiration of Enoch's late in the book through his effort to take over Gongga's job, shaking hands with customers. Her picture of the gorilla is at once simple and complex, concrete and mystical:

...His growls were not so much loud as poisonous; they appeared to issue from a black heart. Enoch was terrified and if he had not been surrounded by children he would have run away. (93)

Though the gorilla humorously tells Enoch "You go to hell" (99) when he tries to take over the job, Enoch tragically kills the beast and assumes his post. Robert Drake says this event is symbolic of "evolution in reverse."³⁴ The tone of the narrative picturing Enoch's rise to power is subdued and there is in it an air of remoteness indicative of the pathetic nature of his story--- a story which is Miss O'Connor's answer to the fate of man in a Church Without Christ.

Some critics feel that the structure of Wise Blood is too loose. Hyman, for instance, says "the whole episode of Enoch and the gorilla suit is unrelated to Haze, and Enoch simply falls out of the book dressed as a gorilla."³⁵ Actually, on the symbolic level, Enoch's disappearance is well prepared for. One of the phrases that Enoch repeats several times is "knock you down" (29). He is afraid that that is what people will do to him, and, ironically, he is knocked down with a rock thrown by Haze. There is reason for this. Haze has "established himself at the heart of the city" (51), that is, he is associated with the corruption of human values through animal instincts that flourish in the city. Lawson says that for O'Connor the city is always a replica of Sodom.³⁶ It is here that his wise blood stirs "like a big nerve growing inside" (51). "Wise blood" means, of course, that he has gigantic impulses that do not correspond to his words. Enoch, we must remember, and in contrast to what Hyman says, is a double for Haze's unredeemed self, a self that is also mushrooming. It is this part of Haze that must be "knocked down" before he can be saved. Strangely enough, Haze himself hits Enoch "on the forehead" with a rock. Then Enoch:

...turned his head and saw a drop of blood on the

ground and as he looked at it he thought it widened like a little spring...and very faintly he could hear his blood beat, his secret blood, at the center of the city. (58)

The play on "blood" here is clear, and very likely Miss O'Connor is suggesting that for blood to be truly wise it must flow profusely at the heart of the city, that is, real life. At one time Haze encouraged Haze to find a "new Jesus," one "without blood to waste" (78). At another time Haze is described as having a face "cut out of the side of a rock" (51). Hyman associates all the rock imagery with Peter's Church.³⁷ It is fitting, then, that the false side of Haze be dismissed by hitting that side, Enoch, with a rock and making it bleed. This violent act prepares for Enoch's entry into the gorilla suit. We might also add that Enoch's comic-tragic departure, far from being a loose end, is organically connected to two other preternatural events, those involving Sabbath and Onnie Jay. The unobtrusive departure of Enoch is flanked dramatically by the obtrusive and sickly preaching of Onnie Jay Holy. And just before Enoch goes to the cage to assume his duties, he hands on the shrivelled man to Sabbath, now living with Haze. This apparently innocent gesture sets up three successive violent acts.

The second major preternatural event leading to Haze's blinding features Miss O'Connor's prize grotesque. Sabbath Lily Hawks is just what her name suggests. She moves in a supposedly religious atmosphere, she is mistaken for something innocent, but she is a predatory monster. James Farnham says that she is one way her inventor reflects the beauty of grace by showing the ugliness of its absence.³⁸ Miss O'Connor handles Sabbath ingeniously within the context of a family, the kind one might imagine in a Church Without Christ, and of which she is the feminine principle. We meet her first as a child of the fake blind man passing out pamphlets, but later we find she only uses him to prey on Haze with her "fast eye" (31). The physical description of Sabbath is clever. She has "a long face and short sharp nose" (25). Her eyes "glittered like two chips of green bottle glass" (26-27). These details suggest a distorted version of a virgin in a Byzantine icon. That Sabbath has some kind of relation to the Virgin Mary also comes through her letters addressed to Mary. Mary, a kind of Ann Landers, replies:

...Dear Sabbath: Light necking is acceptable, but I think your real problem is adjustment to the modern

world. Perhaps you ought to reexamine your religious life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in proper perspective and don't let it warf you. Read some books on Ethical culture. (67)

Sabbath, of course, could not be more "warfed," and the contrast strikes us immediately. The language of this letter is that of a newspaper. Its style and content are so different from anything we find in Wise Blood that we first laugh, and then cry as we realize that Miss O'Connor has managed the juxtaposition to accent its application not only to Sabbath but to us. Another technique the author uses to prepare for Sabbath's final preternatural act of cradling the mummy-baby is the family tale the child tells:

...this here man and woman killed this little baby. It was her own child but it was ugly and she never gave it any love...It didn't give her any peace after that though. Everything she looked at was that child. Jesus made it beautiful to haunt her. (32)

Notice how skillfully Miss O'Connor embodies in this anecdote the appropriate tone of innocence, the important theme of impulsive quest underlying the whole novel, and her characteristic jarring combination of the beautiful with the grotesque. Sabbath is also a bastard, a fact which testifies to her strange unnaturalness. The talk of bastardy in chapter seven throws a harsh quality over the whole makeup of this potentially tender and innocent girl, wife, and mother.

The family unit in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, says Webster Schott, "opens the trap to dysfunction and cataclysm."³⁹ There is no better example of this than the disastrous episode engendered when Enoch gives the shrivelled man wrapped in paper as though in a blanket to Sabbath Hawks, now the would-be wife of Haze. The unholy family is now complete--Haze, Sabbath, and the mummy. We must remember that Sabbath's place in the narrative is very different from Enoch's. He moves steadily through the drama. She flows in and out like different sized waves, now to tell a story, then to pop up with her provocative lines in the back of Haze's Essex. Her last appearance is different still. The method Miss O'Connor uses for the mummy episode is that of interior monologue. We feel an intimacy with the family, and yet we look at it from a distance, as though we are looking at ourselves, indeed, the whole human condition. The tone is solemn, the situation grotesque,

the effect is almost one of pathos:

...She pulled off the wet paper and let it fall on the floor; then she sat with a stunned look, staring at what was in her lap.

...She had never known anyone who looked like him before but there was something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried.

She held him up and began to examine him and after a minute her hands grew accustomed to the feel of his skin. Some of his hair had come undone and she brushed it back where it belonged, holding him in the crook of her arm and looking down into his squinched face. His mouth had been knocked a little to one side so that there was just a trace of a grin covering his terrified look. She began to rock him a little in her arm and a slight reflection of the same grin appeared on her own face. "Well I declare," she murmured, "you're right cute, ain't you?" (100-101)

There is a clever relationship worked into this scene between Haze as he appears with his hat being knocked around in the encounter with the cab driver which we quoted earlier and the mummy in Sabbath's arms. What makes this scene all the more effective is that Miss O'Connor immediately counters it with a violent family battle. Haze, sick, puts on his silver-rimmed glasses and discovers in Sabbath and the mummy "some dishonest plan" (102). Indeed, it reminds him of his own mother and her plans for him. So he "snatched the shrivelled body and threw it against a wall" (102). Detweiler says of Haze's ruining this Madonna-Child relationship that he symbolically throws out Jesus, but ironically destroys himself.⁴⁰ In our dramatic scheme, however, Haze destroys the part of himself which would reject the teaching of his mother and the authority of his heavenly father, indeed, the reality of the holy family. Louise Gossett says of our part in this kind of violence:

...A veneer of pretense covers most human relationships and masks people from their true selves. To peel back this veneer and reveal the twisted and demonic human below is the special function of violence in Miss O'Connor's fiction.⁴¹

At any rate, the event is perfectly timed, and it is intense. Haze is "naked" (102) before reality. Sabbath's line are, as usual, piercing and revealing: "I seen you wouldn't never have no fun or let nobody else because you didn't want nothing but Jesus" (102). He wants sleep, but she says: "You ain't going

to get none" (103). His wise blood, that is, "the truth" (103) he so ardently demands, has the best of him. And Flannery O'Connor has rendered all this existentially by projecting characteristic moods and actions right out of the heart of family life.

The third absurd but telling event Miss O'Connor chooses to dramatize the dark side of Haze, the one most immediate to his own grotesque blinding of himself, is one involving Onnie Jay Holy (Hoover Shoats). She chooses to portray him as a kind of Conradian double. "You and him twins?" (91) Sabbath asks Haze of Onnie. Haze thinks to himself that if he believed in praying he would have prayed for a disciple, and the implication is that he has one anyway. Onnie Jay preaches a "Holy Church Without Christ" (85) to give Haze a little competition. Though Haze objects ostensibly to the word "Holy," it is really his whole self in review that he cannot stand. Haze says: "If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll kill you" (91). Miss O'Connor is very careful with this grotesque. She introduces him late in the novel-- chapters nine and part of thirteen--and then employs him sparingly. We see him almost wholly through his dripping speeches which function as a foil for the stark and penetrating lines of Haze. For instance, Haze says: "You ain't true" (86). And Onnie replies:

"Friend, how can you say that?" Onnie Jay said.
"Why I was on the radio for three years with a program that give real religious experiences to the whole family. Didn't you ever listen to it--called Soulsease, a quarter hour of Mood, Melody and Mentality? I'm a real preacher, friend." (86)

Miss O'Connor detested sentimentality. Barnabas Davis says that she refused "to divinize man's life with sugary compassion."⁴² The technique she uses to expose it is really one Flaubert uses in Madame Bovary where the cliché-filled speech of Monsieur Lieuvain renders the worst in provincial bourgeois sentiment.⁴³ Finally, Haze's wise blood boils over and he violently kills not Onnie Jay, but his Prophet--the disease is spreading--Solace Layfield. Miss O'Connor's ability to give vitality to a grotesque event is obvious from this description of the end of the "heroic" deed.

...He backed over the body and then stopped and got out. The Essex stood half over the other Prophet as if it were pleased to guard what it had finally brought down. The man didn't look so much like Haze lying on

the ground on his face without his hat or suit on.
A lot of blood was coming out of him and forming a
puddle around his head. (lll)

The car reminds us of a live dragon standing over its prey. And notice how all the themes are here. It is as if Haze's former thinking and spirit, symbolized by his hat and suit, are all destroyed by the real blood (Christ's?) that begins to flow. What is most ironic is that Solace confesses to Haze as though to a priest that he failed his mother and father--again, themes that have haunted Haze and are now brought together as we near the climax of the drama. Miss O'Connor's sparse use of dialogue in this death scene with Solace is choice. "You shut up now" (lll), says Haze. And the man replies simply: "Jesus..."

Now we come to the subject of theme. Because the pattern of development in the story of Wise Blood resembles that of some of the greatest literature of all time, it is important that we gain some kind of a historical perspective on myth. Perhaps we can best deal with this problem by commenting on myth in three different eras--ancient Hebrew myth, Western Renaissance myth, and modern American myth. The early Hebrews were very fond of myth, and embodied in many kinds of concrete stories their beliefs about God, man, and the relationship between the two. Here was a nomadic unsophisticated people, poetic rather than speculative, and alive to the experience of the universe. The Hebrews were heirs to whole bodies of Babylonian stories and symbols which they used to narrate their own existential beliefs.⁴⁴ The first chapters of the Book of Genesis is a series of mythic stories designed to convey their thought and experiences about God and man to the world. Renaissance Europe, on the other hand, was less inclined to use myth to express what it thought to be true, or important. Shakespeare, for instance, had no great body of myth to draw upon when he wrote his plays. He wrote for a more philosophically orientated society, one which was inclined to reason and theorize about the nature of things than to relate poetically a particular experience. Wheelwright says that Shakespeare handled myth thematically, that is, he distributed it throughout his plays. Love and divine guidance seem to be the two mythic themes that Shakespeare employed--if not as themes at least in imagery or allusion--in all his plays, because they colored the popular conscience of the time.⁴⁵ We of the twentieth century, of course, live in a cultural wasteland. Our ear is very susceptible to different ideologies, but we have few significant

myths that are the product of our historical traditions and now serve to guide our thoughts and actions. Jerome Bruner says that the modern novel and its tendency to explore the psychological and intra-personal is a sign that modern man has not found externally any significant myth, and, therefore, he has delved into the depths of his own being in search of meaning and purpose.⁴⁶ In our own day authors like J. D. Salinger have endeavored to create significant myth. His Glass family, for instance, is an attempt to build a myth in relevant idiom around the Christian meaning of love.⁴⁷ He is concerned about a phoney world, not that we run from it, but that we reinterpret it in terms of compassion for those who make it up. Flannery O'Connor, of course, is a contemporary of Salinger and shares his problems of creating myth in modern America.

In spite of the differences in time and place of the myth-makers we have just mentioned, they all share a common Judeo-Christian heritage which function integrally in all their mythic literature. Indeed, their stories all involve the conscious and unconscious life--archtypes, if you will--of individuals and groups who have partaken of this tradition since the time of Abraham. One of the themes basic to the Judeo-Christian way of life is that of redemption. When it is present it seems to follow a five-fold pattern, namely

- 1 Disruption
- 2 Flight
- 3 Discovery
- 4 Repentance
- 5 Reunion

In Genesis, for example, the disobedience of Adam results in a disruption of man's relationship to God. Adam and Eve feel ashamed, their passions are loosed, they are dispelled from the garden. Their flight consists in hiding from God behind a tree and blaming the serpent. After God walks in the garden and discovers them, however, they discover themselves, that is, the meaning of good and evil, the cost of sin. The couple's repentance consists in things like the pains of childbirth or the hardship of earning a living. Nevertheless, all is not lost. God remains compassionate. He clothes the two and promises a redeemer to restore their essential loss after the fall which will reunite them once more to their God. The same pattern can be found in Shakespeare's Hamlet. This tragedy starts with a feeling of corruption in Denmark, for the king has killed Hamlet's father and married his mother. Hamlet flees this

disrupted situation in many ways. He feigns madness, deliberates suicide, runs to England. But eventually he returns to discover and face the cause of Denmark's malady. He accosts his mother and exposes the king. But there is penance to be done for the sin in the kingdom. Hamlet, himself both innocent and guilty, must atone through his own suffering and death. "Absent thee from felicity awhile," he tells Horatio, "to tell my story." The drama ends with the arrival of Fortinbras and reestablishment of harmony in the land. A very similar pattern can be found in J. D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey, published in New York in 1962. The first part of the novel depicts the disrupted world of college life--phoney professors and lazy students. Franny's flight is to a sentimental "Jesus prayer," which has an interesting Buddhist tinge. Her brother, Zooey, brings her down to reality by getting her to review her paranoid dreams and discover the real Jesus in Seymour's "Fat Lady." Repentance is not too clear in the novel, though Franny's agony and Seymour's death in the background seem to fill in this part of the mythic pattern. Reunion, that is, peace and order pervade the bedroom of Franny in the end as she apparently decides to live rather than theorize about the Christian life. We are now ready to treat the theme in Flannery O'Connor, for, indeed, the same five-fold pattern present in Genesis, Hamlet, and Franny and Zooey lurks beneath the structure of Wise Blood and gives it mythic depth.

Robert Drake claims that Miss O'Connor's principal distinction comes in the area of thematic treatment.⁴⁸ The opening chapter of Wise Blood is a surrealistic picture of what Christians call Original Sin, that is, the disorientation in Haze's society. Hazel Motes is on the train going to Eastrod, a name which suggests Eden and the fall. One of the women on the train has "a poisonous Eastern voice" (13). Haze wants his berth "all dark" and feels that "where he was lying was like a coffin" (15). Miss O'Connor tries to evoke various senses to acquaint us with this disharmony in man that she will treat throughout the novel. The sense of taste, for instance: Haze has "something in his throat like a sponge with an egg taste" (14). Or touch: Haze is returning from the army and feels inside a piece of shrapnel "rusting and poisoning him" (17). Another image which Miss O'Connor literally draws to concretize this notion of global sin is visual:

...He looked as if he were held by a rope caught in the middle of his back and attached to the train ceiling. (11)

Lewis Lawson says this image indicates that Miss O'Connor is using Haze as a puppet to personify a general spiritual condition.⁴⁹ Later in the novel Haze speaks more directly of this radical disruption in man:

..."If I was in sin I was in it before I ever committed any." (33)

"There's no person a whoremonger, who wasn't something worse first," Haze said. "That's not the sin, nor blasphemy. The sin came before them." (45)

During the book Haze will be whoremongering and blaspheming, for he wants "to be converted to nothing instead of to evil" (17). But beneath all Haze's personal sins Miss O'Connor never lets us forget that more fundamental disruption--"the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten had happened to him" (44)--which for her demands radical redemption. It is this feeling which chapter one imprints boldly on our minds. Of course, Haze would like to get out of his situation. Indeed, he has a "longing for home" (18) which causes him great misery. But he appears trapped. In his berth Miss O'Connor tells us "There was no window" (14) Hence, Haze can only gaze into space and wonder:

...Eastrod filled his head and then went out beyond and filled the space that stretched from the train across the empty darkening fields. (11)

Perhaps the key word in this dream-like vision is "empty." He will stare across space in a different way at the end of Wise Blood when he has accepted the redemption, but for now he can only say to the porter: "I'm sick!" (19)

Haze's flight in Wise Blood is really from the only one who can save him from the Fall--Jesus. The surrealism of chapter one, again, hints at his essential flight from reality. The porter is, no doubt, a Christ figure, the one who might help him into the "upper berth" (13). Haze ignores the porter when the latter tells him that if he wants to go home he is "on the wrong train" (10). At one time Haze actually knocks the porter down, but it is the porter who laughs. Then, though the porter claims he is from Chicago, Haze maintains that he is a "Parrum nigger" (11), that is, something he is not. As readers watching this strange interplay between Haze and the porter we feel that Haze is not only fleeing from reality, but that he is distorting it. Ironically, however, Haze can never really escape Jesus. Miss O'Connor cleverly tells us through Haze's reminiscences as a boy of his grandfather,

a radical country preacher with a yellow ford and "Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger" (15). Haze too, will pick up a car to preach with, and though he preaches that there is "no fall" and "no redemption" (60) and "Nothing matters but that Jesus don't exist" (33), we know from Miss O'Connor's comical description of his boyhood that Haze also has "a wild ragged figure" that moves "from tree to tree in the back of his mind" (16). J. O. Smith describes this situation as one of:

...Kierkegaardian anguish in the face of man's certitude and Kafkan anguish in the face of man's ignorance, the blending of the two impulses, toward fanatic certainty and toward pathetic, groping empiricism...It is the intention of the typical O'Connor story to initiate the unthinking grotesque into a vision of reality.⁵⁰

Indeed, it is Haze's simultaneous certitude of Christ and ignorance of him that makes his flight so interesting and revealing. Ironically, Haze's flight is also, then, a search. He knows that "to avoid Jesus is to avoid sin" (16), but this he can never do, though his quest is more subconscious and conscious. Hence, the "wise" blood. John Connolly points out that Miss O'Connor's genius is that she makes everyone reading this novel think positively by emphasizing the negative.⁵¹ In the drama everything is turned around or goes backwards. The holy family is unholy. Haze's Essex jumps backward. Enoch, Haze's alter-ego, goes back into an ape. The whole flight, therefore, is a comic-tragic inversion that ends fittingly in a vision going backwards, strangely enough, into a pin point of light.

One of the existential areas into which Haze flees is that of sexuality. In fact, Wise Blood contains Miss O'Connor's fullest treatment of this subject. It is important to realize, however, that Haze goes whoring "not for the sake of pleasure," but "to prove he didn't believe in sin since he practiced what they called it" (63). Webster Schott calls attention to the fact that Miss O'Connor was apparently never in love, since she denies all her characters the sensuality of sex.⁵² This is really unfair, for what she really dramatizes is a world which ignores its true distorted condition, and the sexual experience helps her to do this. Maurice Bassan says she reproduces the "blasted moral sensibility of her time."⁵³ Indeed, Miss O'Connor's method of handling sex is to have the reader experience, though from a distance, the same casual and confused perceptions that Haze has as he moves through the drama. Our hero

learns of Mrs. Watts, for instance, from the wall of a toilet. When he meets her there seems to be no moral difference between uttering obscenities and cutting her toenails. She is a comical character who fascinates us by donning Haze's hat and putting her hands on her hips just before they go to bed. But at the same time, with her "bold and penetrating stare" (22), she leaves us uneasy. She goads Haze, for instance: "You huntin' something?" (22) or "Momma don't mind if you ain't a preacher" (23). These statements are funny but for Haze they are disturbing. She makes him restless and dissatisfied. Later he thinks to himself:

...he had not been very successful with Mrs. Watts. When he finished, he was like something washed ashore on her. (36)

The truth is that with Mrs. Watts we feel "washed ashore." Haze experiences a similar but slightly different state of mind when he is girlwatching along with Enoch Emery at the swimming pool:

...he saw three women, all with their suits split, the pool full of people, and nobody paying them any mind. That was how the city was--always surprising him. He visited a whore when he felt like it but he was always being shocked by the looseness he saw in the open. (46)

The logic here strikes us as strangely our own--confused. But it forces a consideration of the place and maybe even the very existence of morality in the world. Barnabas points out that Wise Blood does not contrive to moralize or "get across" a religious message. It simply reflects what is real. Davis stresses the fact that Miss O'Connor refuses to animalize sexuality by separating it from its transcendence purpose.⁵⁴ Hence, her rather subtle and yet shocking treatment of sex. We see the same method behind Haze's buying a mechanical peeler to seduce Sabbath, an act which symbolizes the subjugation of person to object. It is all part of the flight. If Miss O'Connor is humorous, she merely accentuates the divine joke which results when we see the incongruity between what man might be and what he is.

After flight comes discovery, the third part of our theme. We have already discussed how Enoch, Sabbath, and Solace represent extensions of Haze, that is, parts of himself which he finally discovers. But for the real dynamics of discovery on Haze's part Miss O'Connor employs a special character, the blind man Asa Hawks. Lewis Lawson considers the theme of sight vs.

blindness the most effective one of the book. It is a theme that is made possible only through the progressive discovery by Haze that the supposed blind man, Asa, is really a fake, a religious "hawk," and a debaser of spirituality in the name of money. Only in knowing this does Haze find his true self, and himself become the true blind man. Because this discovery is gradual, Asa is placed symmetrically by Miss O'Connor in chapters three, six, and nine--the core of the drama. Robert McCown says that O'Connor has a genius for catching the psychological attitudes of her characters in brief, penetrating descriptions.⁵⁵ In chapter three we first meet Asa through such a description:

...He was a tall cadaverous man with a black suit and a black hat on. He had on dark glasses and his cheeks were streaked with lines that looked as if they had been painted on and had fainted. They gave him the expression of a grinning mandrill. (25)

Indeed, from the color, texture, lines, shapes and hue of this picture we cannot help but judge the man to be morally and spiritually decrepit. Our guess is further substantiated when Miss O'Connor casually injects into the narrative the image of a black one-eyed bear with lime on his back from a chickenhawk (70). Though Haze rejects Enoch and walks out on Sabbath, he is mysteriously attracted to Asa. He goes to live in the same apartment building, he dreams of being buried alive and then saved by the blind man, and one of his most sincere pleas in the whole novel is: "I've got to see that man" (50). In chapter six Haze discovers something of the origin of Asa's blindness. The blind man shows him a newspaper clipping which reads: "EVANGELIST PROMISES TO BLIND HIMSELF" (65), but Haze so that only the reader sees the other clipping: "EVANGELIST'S NERVE FAILS." This piece of irony is important because central to Haze's blinding is that his nerve does not fail. Finally, in chapter nine, Haze discovers what we already know. He sees the blind man with his glasses off; that is, he discovers that Asa is not blind--a finding which seals his own fate as it sets up the violent actions wherein Haze destroys those aspects of himself--Enoch, Sabbath, Solace--which he now sees but cannot bear. Margaret Meaders^{says} that we often forget how fully nourished on the Bible Miss O'Connor is.⁵⁶ Indeed, a proper understanding of Haze vs. the blind man, that is the discovery of reality behind appearances, demands a thorough knowledge of blindness as it is treated in the Gospels.

Miss O'Connor's treatment of Asa is a commentary in reverse of the faith of the true biblical blind man, and Haze comes to that kind of faith only by discovering the mote in his own eye.

The last two phases of the theme, repentance and reunion, are contained in chapter fourteen, that is, in the falling action of the play. Here the carnival atmosphere, full of color and intense action, is over. Now the rhythm is slow, the tone subdued, the dialogue sparse. Haze's repentance seems to catch the whole mood and spirit of the Ancient Mariner:

The other was a softer voice
As soft as honey dew;
Quoth he, "The man hath penance done,
And penance more will do.

Now Haze, as when he was a little boy, has rocks in his shoes. He seems to have found the meaning of rock, or church. He also wears barbed wire under his shirt. Lawson sees a parallel between Haze and St. Anthony of the Desert, for both use self-abasement to demonstrate the gulf between the human and the divine.⁵⁷ When Mrs. Flood says: "It's not natural" or "They've quit doing it" (122), he replies: "They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it." In one line Miss O'Connor pulls the Christian mystery of atonement into the present and disarms us with humor so we have to accept it. There is also a new tone in Haze's voice. Before he had said to the blind man: "Don't I have eyes in my head? Am I a blind man?" (34) Now the quality of mystery replaces his former self-assuredness when he says: "If there's no bottom in your eyes they hold more" (121). Haze doesn't preach anymore, though for the first time someone encourages him to do so. "Being blind wouldn't be a hindrance" (120), says Mrs. Flood. The fact is that his life is now his sermon. It is interesting that Mrs. Flood, whose name suggest purification and fullness, has now replaced the "harpy" (117), Sabbath, as the center of his family life. Not just after his money, Mrs. Flood is curiously attracted to Haze, grotesque as he may appear. Baumbach says that she experiences through Haze a kind of conversion, that is, a partial view of eternal love.⁵⁸ She says: "I got a place for you in my heart, Mr. Motes" (124). How different from the god-hawking attitude of Asa, Sabbath, and Onnie Jay. Haze now inspires compassion, the essence of the gospel. Mrs. Flood even suggests marriage:

...I would do it for a blind man and a sick one. If
we don't help each other, Mr. Motes, there's nobody

to help us," she said. "Nobody. The world is an empty place."

Here the themes of the opening chapter are reversed. Haze is sick, but not spiritually. He is blind, but not really. The world seems empty, like Enoch's cage, but somehow it is overflowing with love. All this is true because Haze sees sin for what it is and decides "To pay" (121).

The last note of the drama of Wise Blood is a harmonious one. In the place of the last remnants of violence, harsh dialogue, and indifference of the policemen who search for Haze the novel closes in a mood of peace, meditation, and deep communicative love. Death pervades the scene. Mrs. Flood had though she was being "courted by a corpse" (118), but now Haze, found alone in a ditch by the policemen and hit on the head by a billyclub, actually dies. "I can't imagine a story that doesn't end in death,"⁵⁹ said Flannery O'Connor. Or in another breath: "The creative action of the Christian is to prepare for his death in Christ."⁶⁰ Walter Sullivan comments:

...She did not think, as most of us do, that death is the worst thing that can happen to a human being. I do not mean that she held life cheap, but rather that she saw it in its grandest perspective.⁶¹

In the novel Haze is possessed with keeping coffins open--his brother's, his mother's, his own. Now he has become a kind of "new Jesus" himself, one for whom death is the only way to the fullness of life. The relation between Haze and the risen Jesus, of course, has been with us since the opening chapter of Wise Blood. On the train Haze mistook the porter, the "Parrum nigger," for a white figure in the dark and called out: "Jesus" (19). That name has also played like a rhapsody on our ears throughout the drama. But it is not until the end that the blasphemy of Haze; "My Jesus" (34), the cursing of the boy on the car: "Jesus nailed" (41), the sentimental sign on the road: "Jesus saves" (45), and the phoney preaching of the blind man: "Jesus loves you" (33) all take on new literal meaning. Indeed, the "SHIPPER-ROBE" (19) of chapter one, the garment of the empty tomb, now truly does "BELONG TO HAZEL NOTES." In chapter one also, the lady on the train said: "I guess you're going home" (9). Now Mrs. Flood says: "I see you've come home" (126). Indeed, he has, for his rent is paid and he is free. In the beginning Haze feared that he would "walk off in the dark...and drown." He does, with the "ragged figure" (16) in the back of his mind. The book

closes with Mrs. Flood's vision of the "pin point of light moving off in the darkness...to Bethlehem" (126). It is not Yeats' "slouching beast" that she sees, but the star of Christmas, newly born and peaceful, for the "king of the beast" (93) has been redeemed. Some say that Flannery O'Connor is evangelistic, that she is a religious propagandist. This is not true. She is apocalyptic, as chapter fourteen testifies. Robert Drake says: "She did see ultimately behind the veil of darkness and deformity and horror and saw there order and peace."⁶²

In reading Wise Blood as myth, it is important to go back and see as a whole, that is, at one glance, the diverse elements we have discussed--the drama, the hero, the events, the story. In a way the novel is simple, what Baumbach calls "the mythic journey which reenacts the redemption of the world."⁶³ But precisely because Wise Blood is mythic, it functions on many levels and admits of different interpretations according to our peculiar subjective response. In the introduction to the 1962 edition of Wise Blood O'Connor comments: "Wise Blood has reached the age of ten and is still alive."⁶⁴ It is our judgment that it will remain alive for the same reasons that Milton or Shakespeare remain alive, that is, it has that mythic depth that does excite wonder and talk, elicit belief, guide the conduct of individuals and groups who discover in it "the conscience of their race." Two things, however, we must always avoid with Flannery O'Connor, and this is especially true of Wise Blood. One is to reduce her to a regionalist, the other to dismiss her as orthodox Catholic. Walter Sullivan says that her "mythic impulse goes beyond geography."⁶⁵ And Miss O'Connor herself speaks of "making one country do for all."⁶⁶ Granville Hicks says that she got her material from the South and her vision from her Catholicism.⁶⁷ This is a fair estimate, for it explains how she can, in Davis' words, "make protestant fundamentalists her 'real believers.'"⁶⁸ But we must be careful about how we interpret her Catholicism. Schott claims that it is a kind that belongs to the time of the Inquisition.⁶⁹ No, for this is to miss the mythic underpinning. Robert Drake is closer when he says: "She was catholic in the oldest and truest sense of the word,"⁷⁰ that is, in much the same way as Shakespeare. Albert Griffith says that Miss O'Connor is a reproach to Catholics who are victims of a "parochial esthetic" or of "cultural insularity," or of "anyone who supposes the fiction writer ought to use fiction to prove the truth of his faith."⁷¹ What is

important--and this is the problem of this paper--is that Miss O'Connor is real. Hicks says: "She took a cold hard look at human beings and set down with marvelous precision what she saw."⁷² Thomas Merton says: "She was able to see all our failures and distortions mirrored in the more obvious madness of the South."⁷³ And whereas many have mistaken her realism for pessimism, Jean Marie Kann says: "Instead of leaving us hopeless she reflects the spirit of the earth, the cosmic Christ."⁷⁴ Perhaps an editorial in America puts it best:

The world of Miss O'Connor's creation is peopled, by and large, with stupid, stubborn, self-deceiving, men, women, and children--with white trash or, at best, half-trash...

...one of the most fascinating aspects of O'Connor is her ability to reflect one face of evil off another until you are brought to a vision of the limited but real good of each, and of the possibility of redemption for all.

...you may rise, and you may converge, but only at the cost of the agony of your own humiliation before the reality of God.⁷⁵

Wise Blood, then, is a religious novel, written by a Southern realist, who had enough romanticism in her bones to give new life to some old mythic patterns that we might better heed Mary's words: "A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and don't let it warf you."

FOOTNOTES

¹Walter Sullivan, "Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: Everything That Rises Must Converge," The Hollins Critic, II (September 1965), 2-3.

²Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor: A Note on Literary Fashions," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, II (Fall 1958), 14.

³Robert Drake, "The Harrowing Evangel of Flannery O'Connor," The Christian Century, LXXXI (September 30, 1964), 1202.

⁴James F. Farnham, "The Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor," America, CV (May 13, 1961), 281.

⁵Barnabas Davis, "Flannery O'Connor: Christian Belief in Recent Fiction," Listening (Autumn 1965), 6.

⁶Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York, 1965), p. xxxiii.

⁷Caroline Gordon, "Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, II (Fall 1958), 6.

⁸Sister Rose Alice, S.S.J., "Flannery O'Connor: Poet to the Outcast," Renascence, XVI (Spring 1964), 126.

⁹Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (New York, 1958), p. 1.

¹⁰Philip Wheelwright, "The Uses of Myth," The Modern Critical Spectrum, ed. Gerald and Nancy Goldberg (New York, 1962), p. 310.

¹¹Henry A. Murray, "Definitions of Myth," The Making of Myth, ed. Richard Ohmann (New York, 1962), pp. 1-18.

¹²Murray, pp. 18-37.

¹³Jean Marie Kenn, O.S.F., "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Catholic World, CCIV (December 1966), 155.

¹⁴The page numbers used in this paper are taken from Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1955).

¹⁵Sullivan, 3.

¹⁶Thomas Merton, Esprit, VIII (Winter 1964), 36.

¹⁷Robert Detweiler, "The Curse of Christ in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Comparative Literature Studies, III (No. 2 1966), 241.

¹⁸Wise Blood was adapted for the stage by Suzanne Bennet. Design and technical direction were handled by Ronald Engel.

¹⁹Jane Hart, "Strange Earth, The Stories of Flannery O'Connor," Georgia Review, XII (Summer 1958), 2167.

²⁰Kann, 154.

²¹Webster Schott, "Flannery O'Connor: Faith's Stepchild," Nation, CCI, (September 13, 1965), 143.

²²John J. Clarke, "The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor," Esprit, VIII (Winter 1964), 8.

²³Detweiler, 238.

²⁴Stanley Edgar Hyman, Flannery O'Connor (Minneapolis, 1966), p. 15.

²⁵Jonathan Baumbach, "The Acid of God's Grace: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Georgia Review, XVII (Fall 1963), 335.

²⁶Josephine Jacobson, "A Catholic Quartet," The Christian Scholar, XLVII (Summer 1964), 152.

²⁷Sister Rose Alice, 127.

²⁸Sister Rose Alice, 127.

- ²⁹Hart, 222.
- ³⁰Baumbach, 343.
- ³¹Karn, 158.
- ³²Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (Maryland, 1967), p. 436.
- ³³Baumbach, 340.
- ³⁴Robert Drake, Flannery O'Connor (Knoxville, 1966), p. 21.
- ³⁵Hyman, p. 14.
- ³⁶Lewis Lawson, "Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque: Wise Blood," Renaissance, XVII (Spring 1965), 146.
- ³⁷Hyman, p. 12.
- ³⁸Farnham, 280.
- ³⁹Schott, 142.
- ⁴⁰Detweiler, 244.
- ⁴¹Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (North Carolina, 1965), p. 79.
- ⁴²Davis, 12.
- ⁴³Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, ed. Paul De Mann (New York, 1965), p. 104.
- ⁴⁴Theodore H. Gaster, The Oldest Stories in the World (Boston, 1958).
- ⁴⁵Wheelwright, p. 319.

- ⁴⁶Jerome A. Bruner, "Myth and Identity," The Making of Myth, ed. Richard Ohmann (New York, 1962), p. 168.
- ⁴⁷"A Private World of Love and Death," Time (September 15, 1961), 84-90.
- ⁴⁸Drake, 1202.
- ⁴⁹Lawson, 137.
- ⁵⁰J. Oates Smith, "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," Thought, XLI (September 13, 1965), 549.
- ⁵¹John Connolly, "The Search," Esprit, VIII (Winter 1964), 68.
- ⁵²Schott, 143.
- ⁵³Maurice Bassan, "Flannery O'Connor's Way: Shock With Moral Intent," Renascence, XV (Summer 1963), 196.
- ⁵⁴Davis, 12.
- ⁵⁵Robert McCown, S.J., "Flannery O'Connor and the Reality of Sin," Catholic World, CLXXXVIII (January 1959), 288.
- ⁵⁶Margaret Inman Meaders, "Flannery O'Connor: 'Literary Witch,'" Colorado Quarterly, X (Spring 1962), 384.
- ⁵⁷Lawson, 145.
- ⁵⁸Baumbach, 344.
- ⁵⁹C. Ross Mullins, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor: An Interview," Jubilee, XI (June, 1963), 35.
- ⁶⁰Brainard Cheney, "Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for Her Country," Sewanee Review, LXXXI (Autumn 1963), 558.

- 61 Sullivan, 8.
- 62 Drake, 1202.
- 63 Baumbach, 344.
- 64 Flannery O'Connor, Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1962), p. 8.
- 65 Sullivan, 2.
- 66 Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," The Living Novel, ed. Granville Hicks (New York, 1957), p. 158.
- 67 Granville Hicks, "A Cold Hard Look at Humankind," Saturday Review, XLVIII (May 29, 1965), 23.
- 68 Davis, 13.
- 69 Schott, 143.
- 70 Drake, 1201.
- 71 Albert Griffith, "Flannery O'Connor," America, CXIII (November 27, 1965), 675.
- 72 Granville Hicks, "A Writer at Home with Her Heritage," Saturday Review, XLV (May 12, 1962), 23.
- 73 Merton, 36.
- 74 Kann, 159.
- 75 "God Breaks Through," (editorial), America, CXII (June 5, 1965), 822.

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