O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*:

Fictionalizing the Real, the Religious, and the Grotesque

The critical reception of Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* has been wide, varied, and yet at once quite narrow. Responses to *Wise Blood*’s simple structure, shocking characters, and multi-layered symbolism run the gamut but at the same exist within certain parameters that O’Connor seems to have personally established. Three categories of scholarship move to the foreground when considering O’Connor’s first novel: ecclesiastical, secular, and alternative readings. The religious readings quite obviously dominate the discussion of the action and characters of the novel, but even within this strand of research, Hazel’s actions and attitudes in relation to God, himself, and his community are interpreted in myriad ways. Certain articles, however, to the exclusion of O’Connor’s personal statements about *Wise Blood*, staunchly denounce the religious ideals which seem patent to most scholars in favor of a unique, secular humanist attitude towards O’Connor’s work. Though heavily centered on Haze’s actions as either salvific or non-, the conversation also veers into divergent discussions focused on race, community, or symbolism, and these outliers offer a great deal as regards a holistic view of *Wise Blood*. The paradoxically narrow yet variant responses to O’Connor remain fairly consistent from the sixties all the way to the articles published in the 2010s, as many scholars both
metaphorically and literally converse with each other through their articles. This review of O’Connor’s criticism extends all the way from 1962 to 2013 and attempts to connect these different sources which speak to one another, whether directly or not, and draw them all into what seems to be a sometimes intentional, sometimes inadvertent discussion on religion. Considering the voices of these scholars, I also offer my response to my fellow scholars based not only on the text of *Wise Blood* but also on O’Connor’s personal intentions for her work and her manner of writing in other arenas.

In his article “Flannery O’Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction,” Melvin Friedman both lays a framework for and actively participates in other *Wise Blood* scholarship. Though valuable for many reasons, this exposition of O’Connor’s upbringing was published only a decade after *Wise Blood* was written and two years prior to the Southern writer’s death. This nearness to O’Connor gives credence and power to Friedman’s thesis: O’Connor’s “place (the South), her religion (Catholicism), [and] her hobby (peacock raising) reinforce her stories and novels at every turn” (235). O’Connor’s violence, redemption-obsessed characters, and grotesque tone respectively stem from raising peacocks, her Catholicism, and the southern environment in which she was raised. Friedman discusses these three aspects of Miss O’Connor’s life and their manifestations in the writer’s short stories and novels. Readers must, at the very least, acknowledge the connection between O’Connor’s biography and her writing career: for her, they would have been inseparable.

Along with his comments on her childhood hobbies, her religion, and her external milieu, Friedman also offers readers a fairly accurate view of the critical reception of Miss O’Connor’s *oeuvre* and also explains O’Connor’s simple yet compelling structural style. Friedman remarks from the outset that out of her literary audience, “only the most rigidly party-line Catholics…and
the most ‘textual’ literary critics” were in any way displeased by O’Connor’s physically and religiously grotesque literature (233). In this statement alone, readers are confronted with the notion that O’Connor’s literature is quite inseparable from her deeply Catholic upbringing. Equally problematic for the elite literati reading O’Connor, though, was her lack of deviance in form; far from the William Faulkners or Samuel Becketts, O’Connor “remained faithful to chronology, with no attempt at reproducing an atmosphere of psychological time” or building any sort of experimental structure (Friedman 236). As will become clear through the proceeding material, O’Connor prefers vivid characters and shocking plot lines to conveying meaning through the textual format of her novel.

Brian Ingraffia’s article “‘If Jesus existed I wouldn’t be clean’: Self-Torture in Flannery O’Connor’s Wise Blood” both nods at and criticizes Hazel Motes’ theology, deeming Mr. Motes spiritual but falsely indoctrinated. Ingraffia sees Haze’s penitential acts as a means to earn salvation rather than express salvation and thus states that “religious readings of O’Connor do not necessarily involve accepting her own theological interpretations of her fiction” (78). In fact, Ingraffia quite clearly discards O’Connor’s claims about Wise Blood and Haze’s salvation in favor of a more critical reading in regards to Hazel and his misguided attempt to pay for his sins and disbelief, which prevent him from entering heaven upon his death. In contrast to the scholars with whom Ingraffia converses, he sees in Hazel only “self-loathing, as well as a rejection of life in this world,[…]and a return to the sado-masochistic fundamentalism inflictedit upon Motes as a child” (83). Instead of gaining wisdom or any degree of religious maturity, Ingraffia only assigns to Hazel the very basest level of spirituality, which is to discuss him in religious terms but without granting him his salvation.
In stripping Hazel of his salvation and perhaps even demeaning his penance to a gross attempt at self-satisfying martyrdom, Ingraffia joins a group of other scholars who disregard O’Connor’s opinions on her own work. Though he constructs an argument outside the typically salvific *Wise Blood* readings, Ingraffia still joins the fairly exclusive canon of O’Connor scholarship and its unavoidably religious tenor, reminding readers that religious and secular criticism are both valid. The critics who respond to Ingraffia’s article, I believe, would agree with him on this point, and their religious yet objective research proves that discussing *Wise Blood* religiously is not only warranted but nearly impossible to evade.

Susan Srigley, similar to Ingraffia, addresses Hazel’s religion without deeming him a worthy and complete Christian. Srigley’s argument centers on asceticism and the ways in which such a religious practice is meant to positively affect not just a believer’s own spiritual health but also their outward community. Thus, Srigley asks, “Do Hazel Motes’s spiritual acts improve life for himself or others?” (94). Her answer to this question is that Hazel helps only himself. Where Ingraffia judges Hazel’s actions as improper and useless self-torture, Srigley labels Hazel’s self-punishment as asceticism but condemns such performance because of the protagonist’s lack of genuine love for others. Because Hazel seeks salvation selfishly, Srigley classifies him as a “manifestation of distorted Christian vision,” indicating that O’Connor does not necessarily mean for Hazel’s “expression of Christianity [to be] whole” (94). Hazel is obviously not meant to be an image of a healthy and perfect believer. Hence, Srigley advises readers to divorce O’Connor’s religious devotion from characters’ personalities, but Srigley’s disregard for O’Connor’s wishes and intentions for *Wise Blood* seems almost to an unreasonable degree.

Hazel shows no Christian charity after his “conversion,” which inspires Srigley’s disbelief in his true spirituality and biblical adherence, and thus calls into question O’Connor’s
intentions for Haze’s character. According to Srigley, not only is *Wise Blood*’s ending ambiguous, but the “outcome of [Hazel’s] redemption is not for us to decide” (95). I find this claim conflicts with the conception of the relationship between authors and their audience. What’s more, difficulty arises for readers if Srigley is suggesting both that readers cannot determine Haze’s salvation through their own interpretive assumptions and that O’Connor is not to be trusted on the matter either. How then, are readers expected to gain any sort of authentic resolution about Haze’s eternal fate? Srigley raises fair points about the application of Haze’s supposed religious experience, but perhaps one of her contemporaries can offer a more satisfactory and consistent view of the ending to O’Connor’s novel.

In a counter to Ingraffia’s and Srigley’s analyses, Ralph Wood’s “Hazel Motes as a Flesh-Mortifying Saint in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*” seems to both accept and further Friedman’s earlier premise that Miss O’Connor imputes her work with at least a degree of the same religiosity and biblical knowledge that she herself possessed. Unlike the previous two writers, Wood gives O’Connor power over her own work, and when she calls Hazel a “Protestant saint,” Wood takes her at her word and then sets out to prove the veracity of the statement (87). On the spectrum of *Wise Blood* readings, this article presents the most generous spiritual argument for Hazel’s movement near the end of the novel. Wood’s argument, in contrast to several of his peers, is for Hazel’s pure motivations during his period of horrendous self-affliction. Not only is Hazel undergoing a sanctifying experience, but he is also “participating in Christ’s suffering,” a notion that even some mature believers cannot fathom (87). By explaining Hazel’s behavior this way, Wood confirms what O’Connor tells readers about Hazel’s salvation and at the same time finds proof in *Wise Blood* to support his reading of the work.
Wood’s article addresses both Srigley and Ingraffia and provides evidence for Wood’s more charitable view of Hazel’s ending. In answer to Srigley’s claim that Hazel exhibits no outward change of faith, Wood contends that Hazel “makes radical witness to Mrs. Flood…and to an age whose greatest horror is suffering” (87). Hazel’s faith witnesses to a whole era, let alone just his peers and community, and for Wood, this seems to be the reasonable act of love that Srigley claims is missing. As for Ingraffia, Wood finds Hazel just in his penitential inclinations, innocent of Ingraffia’s belief that Hazel is trying to earn him his salvation through self-torture. What Ingraffia fails to note and which Wood draws reader attention to is the idea in Christianity that the physical is intimately involved in the actions and attitudes of the spiritual. The body is the locus through which the soul can express faith, devotion, and sacrifice. Wood posits, therefore, that Haze’s drastic behavior at the close of the *Wise Blood* is an extension of his newfound faith rather than a means to gain it.

Thelma Shinn’s “Flannery O’Connor and the Violence of Grace”, the last of the semi-positive and singularly religious, helpfully contextualizes Wood’s 2009 article about Hazel’s flesh-mortifying actions at the close of O’Connor’s novel. Shinn’s article, in fact, offers a great deal of insight into O’Connor’s intertwined grotesque and religious images for all *Wise Blood* readers and critics. Where many want to set Hazel’s bloody, cruel, violent scenes in opposition to his pensive and spiritual ones, O’Connor saw violence as essential and inseparable from God’s grace. Part of Shinn’s thesis intimates that “the violence of rejection in the modern world demands an equal violence of redemption;” a violent and stubborn humanity needs to be “struck by mercy” in order to achieve salvation (58). In the ultra-religious South, even more than other regions, sinners roam in the prideful surety of their own goodness and spirituality and must be shocked into a sense of their need for salvation, much like the famous St. Paul in scripture.
Shinn quotes O’Connor as the writer explains the fictional violence common among her fellow believing authors: to a world desensitized to violence and grotesque images, “the novelist with Christian concerns...may well be forced to take even more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience” (59). People, especially the indoctrinated and traditionalist residents of the southern region, must experience God’s grace bodily because they are creatures who live life through bodily experience.

To return for a moment to Friedman’s biographical article about O’Connor, we must acknowledge the grist with which the peacock-raising Georgian formed her characters and plot lines. Quite certainly O’Connor would have seen conversions take place in her church, or at the very least in her town, and she could testify to the repercussions on the body when a soul went through a spiritual shift. Though quite antithetical to selfish humanity, “redemption is only possibly through an extreme act, an act of absolute irrevocable sacrifice,” and sacrifice for O’Connor, and thus for Hazel, necessarily includes the body (59). Shinn’s article, therefore, defends readings of O’Connor with her own background in mind, and Shinn also allows scholars to read O’Connor’s seemingly gratuitous violence as the necessary way for characters to understand and achieve salvation, an idea that strongly hearkens to Wood’s discussion on participating in Christ’s suffering. Too, Shinn’s interpretations of grace and violence will speak to other articles in O’Connor’s critical canon.

Jeffrey Gray, in his article “‘It’s Not Natural: Freud’s ‘Uncanny’ and O’Connor’s Wise Blood,’” takes a stance towards O’Connor’s novel that many other scholars do not dare attempt. Despite her myriad exclamations about her own work, O’Connor and her wishes are ignored as Gray discusses Wise Blood completely divorced from religious context. Gray posits that a Freudian lens “will provide us with an important supplement of reading for that novel, a
supplement we could not otherwise have” and that such a lens opens up greater meaning for O’Connor’s work (56). *Malgre lui*, a phrase appropriately used by Gray and other *Wise Blood* scholars in regards to Haze’s character, denotes that Haze is a religious being despite himself; however, where articles generally approve of this statement and utilize it to analyze the novel, Gray explores a new way to read Haze’s behavior and attitude. Gray sees a marked discomfort on the reader’s part to label Hazel a Christian and ascribes this unease to common occurrences of physical and visceral ugliness and the prolific and graphic violence throughout *Wise Blood*. To assuage or at least contextualize this discomfort, Gray turns to Freud and his definitions of the “Uncanny,” *heimlich*, and *unheimlich*; he also uses Haze and Enoch Emery to support his ideas about the separation of the subject and the body.

Instead of a crooked and violent journey to Hazel’s eventual salvation, Gray interprets all of Hazel’s wandering, his various fears, and his self-torture as an attempt to kill the Other, or *unheimlich*. The Other, Gray further explains, is the cause for all of O’Connor’s eye imagery and Haze’s insistent feelings of being watched. For Hazel, and even for other characters like Asa and Enoch, Gray bifurcates the subject and the body, that is that consciousness and physicality are separate and almost at war. In this scenario, Gray claims that the “body is figured as Other from the novel's opening scene,” and Hazel’s body is what inspires his fear, paranoia, and violence (60). Murdering Solace, then, is Hazel’s attempt at killing the physical representation of himself. This violence is exactly what Gray seems to think bars Hazel from the realm of the religious, but here is a moment where Shinn’s comments about the intermingling of violence and grace could be helpful, at least as a counterpoint to Gray’s claims. Gray, however, explains that the mystery of *Wise Blood* stems not from the chasm between God and humanity, but from the split between body and subject.
The most fascinating thing about Gray’s article is that while he attempts a unique and secular reading of O’Connor’s novel, Gray automatically places himself in the Christian vein of *Wise Blood* research. Though obviously not salvific, Gray’s antagonistic arguments must certainly be considered in relation to the starkly religious articles published by his counterparts. Since he actively mentions O’Connor and simultaneously refutes her religious opinions about her own work, Gray participates in the Christian conversation as well as the side of O’Connor scholarship which takes the author’s opinions at face value. Gray’s refutation of a singularly Christian reading of the novel at once places him, albeit on the opposite end, on the religious spectrum.

Susan Edmunds’ “Through a Glass Darkly: Visions of Integrated Community in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood,*” quite opposite of Gray’s approach, assumes a religious context in *Wise Blood* to prove a peculiar thesis. Edmunds’ article is a racially motivated one, a focus not altogether unique to the rhetoric surrounding the novel, but Edmunds approaches her discussion of race from a singular religious and symbolic perspective. Unlike many O’Connor scholars, Edmunds acknowledges that “O’Connor joins other integrationists in actively tracing out points of correspondence and continuity between” the eschatological and sociohistorical aspects of *Wise Blood* (560). The predominant conception of O’Connor’s integrationist beliefs is that she only sought racial unity in Heaven, and therefore her novels have no political or reformist leanings. Edmunds uses mirror imagery and a historically analogical rendering of *Wise Blood* to oppose and disprove such a view. She points out that O’Connor mimics other integrationists in their strategy to link Christian principles with racial attitudes in the Postwar South. To do so, according to Edmunds, O’Connor subtly and symbolically connects the South’s present state with Jesus’ Second Coming to hold the region accountable for their communal actions which
have value in God’s overall plan for eternal unity. O’Connor, furthermore, reduces segregationist policy to farce, if not in an overtly political manner.

Edmunds notes that though O’Connor was not aggressive and certainly not on par with Martin Luther King Jr. in her reformist action, she uses her fiction to establish her own stance on the endemic racism and segregation by which she was surrounded. Within mirrors and what Hazel sees reflected in them, “O’Connor sets mysterious images of racial and gender mixing which radically reconstruct Haze's notions of family, community, and selfhood” (562). Because Haze consistently finds yellow or dark faces staring back at him in the mirror, Edmunds concludes that Hazel, and by extension O’Connor, sees the races as overlapping and unifying. Edmunds connects Hazel’s experience with mirrors to the scriptural reference that on earth, we only see as in a dim mirror. With this religious and biblical establishment, the rest of the article focuses on the fulfillment of God’s plan on earth to reconcile all people, but within a primarily racial context. Edmunds’ article, accordingly, adds another facet to O’Connor research through its comments on racism, O’Connor’s political views, and the interplay between social history and Godly unity. Religiosity, once again, proves a wide and complex field within which many readings can and do exist.

Similar to Jeffrey Gray, Olivia McGuire seeks to earn distinction from the religious in her article “Incarnational Art: Thing Theory and O’Connor’s Wise Blood” which discusses O’Connor’s work perhaps more objectively than other articles. In an effort to avoid the typical “dichotomy” of Wise Blood commentary, that is religious and regional readings, McGuire suggests that “thing theory has the ability to function as a tool for this sort of neutral but robust reading” of the novel (509). She goes on to define thing theory, via Heidegger’s work “the thing,” as that which is free of religious or secular confinement, which allows for a deeper
understanding of the “things” readers find in *Wise Blood*, and which uniquely allows for things to have multiple and simultaneous meanings. With thing theory, for instance, the blood that exists within the novel and on its cover can be read as religious, secular, grotesque, or all three at once. With this reading tactic, McGuire alleges that readers can gain greater insight into the mystery of O’Connor’s novel, and she claims further than O’Connor’s wide readership among all races and religions speaks volumes about the multitude of meanings that can be found within *Wise Blood*.

Instead of restricting the novel to solely religious, racial, or secular meaning, McGuire uses thing theory to draw attention to all the strands of meaning within *Wise Blood*. Even within the world of the novel itself, O’Connor’s characters “come into contact with what seem to be mere objects, only to discover a meaning and a power in those objects different from what [they] anticipated” (511). McGuire, using O’Connor’s own term, calls this multilayered meaning “Incarnation,” but unlike O’Connor’s singularly spiritual definition, McGuire uses the essence of O’Connor’s definition to inform her own. As Christian Incarnation refers to Jesus being both fully God and fully man, McGuire’s Incarnation capitalizes on this double personhood to convey her idea that the objects and scenes in *Wise Blood* carry multiple meanings, thus enriching their overall significance to readers.

McGuire’s article, more than any other, strikes me as an outlier to the whole of O’Connor scholarship. While McGuire finds a way to discuss *Wise Blood* nearly divorced from religious sentiment, however, her objective reading still requires spiritual considerations. If her argument centers on the layers of meaning for the objects which Hazel and others encounter, a religious reading must be allowed to exist just as much as a historical, secular, or otherwise. This notion of the flexibility of meaning is what separates McGuire’s article from the rest of the *Wise Blood*
readings, and a unique perspective is certainly achieved within “Incarnational Art.” Nevertheless, even McGuire would not rule out a set of religious meanings for the things and situations in O’Connor’s work, and thus, we see once again that separating Wise Blood from its theological tone is nigh impossible.

Missing from most analyses of Wise Blood is a discussion, and even an acknowledgment, of O’Connor’s purposeful and extensive use of color descriptors and imagery. In light of O’Connor’s claims about her own work and the racial climate of the 1950s south, the colors that we experience through Hazel and his peers take on new significance. While at once conveying experience through simple vision, and thereby reinforcing O’Connor’s realistic yet grotesque style, colors also force readers to consider race relations for Hazel and for the entire South. O’Connor, in her prose essays and lectures, has been quite outspoken about her writing process: in her essay “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” O’Connor remarks that fiction “should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality” (Mystery 148). More than once O’Connor tells readers that she can write grotesque figures and situations only as exaggerations of existing characters and types. Her prolific use of color imagery in Wise Blood, therefore, reflects her close relationship with external reality. Despite her hyperbolic characters, O’Connor constantly anchors us to reality with Hazel’s simple and limited perspective and in doing so gives the novel an honest vitality. From the first line of Wise Blood, O’Connor expresses Hazel’s environment through color: Hazel sits “at a forward angle on the green plush train seat” across from “a fat woman with pink collars and cuffs” (3). Perhaps only because O’Connor grounds Hazel in the physical are we willing to accept his supernatural qualities and actions as the novel proceeds. This connection to reality, though, demands a reading of Wise Blood as connected to O’Connor’s own experiences.
With her realistic foundations expressed through constant reminders of color, O’Connor can then imbue her hues with the social relevance of her environment, which is the Jim Crow South. That Miss O’Connor comments on race in her subverted, fictional way is conceded by several scholars, but such racial considerations in Wise Blood first struck me because of her pointed use of color descriptors for clothes, objects, and people alike. In a scene which sets up Hazel’s action for the remainder of the novel, Hazel sees a bathroom where “a plain black and white sign said, MEN’S TOILET, WHITE” (26). In this short sentence, O’Connor uses two distinct types of color to achieve a unified end. The visual sign itself is both black and white in color, but the only people allowed to use the restroom are racially white. This juxtaposition is startling as it prompts readers towards an objective and unbiased view of color and the notion that black and white exist in unity in the most everyday places. To convey her racial ideals, O’Connor uses color in both its ethnic and chromatic senses.

One brilliant aspect of O’Connor is that her work, while simplistic in form and style, inspires interpretation on many different levels. Similarly, the research surrounding the southern writer is not wide in content, but within the narrow range of overarching discussions, writers elucidate the many facets of just a few strands of research. Despite the overall success of most critical analyses of O’Connor’s work, not every scholar effectively or appropriately argued their interpretation. Jeffrey Gray’s alternative Freudian perspective of Hazel’s violence and fear in Wise Blood, while unique and interesting to read, seems grounded neither in the text of the novel nor in the author’s direct comments regarding her meaning. What I find to be Gray’s greatest weakness is his ignorance of the overtly religious elements which make O’Connor’s novel what it is. To read Hazel’s clearly spiritual paranoia towards Asa and Solace as a fear simply of “the Other” is to undermine the very text of Wise Blood. O’Connor’s phony blind preacher, her
young girl named Sabbath, and her protagonist who teaches the Church Without Christ each
demand religious consideration, even if only at a very surface level. Gray seems to supplant
O’Connor’s salvation hungry main character with a man only longing for “the forgotten memory
of the womb” (60). His theory works hard just to neutralize the wealth of sources and evidence
that interpret Wise Blood theologically, and in the end, Gray’s article seems more of an
intentional backlash against typical readings.

Alternatively, Olivia McGuire’s “‘Incarnational Art’” also takes a unique view of Wise
Blood, but in her article, McGuire achieves what Gray does not: offering a serious and plausible
argument to supplement the strictly religious, political, or regional readings of the novel. Many
other articles provide an astute and well-constructed argument for their own interpretation of
Hazel’s character, or the language of the text, or of the political stance they find within
O’Connor’s work; McGuire, however, posits a new and peculiar thesis about thing theory and
justifies her interpretation by a close reading of the text. Specific to her article is that McGuire is
able to validate other scholars’ readings within her own complete and individual argument and
without sacrificing continuity or consistency. McGuire claims that her theory stemmed from a
need to exhibit Wise Blood’s “ability to withstand and even affirm complexity,” and her article
does just that. Rather than limiting Wise Blood to one reading or even two, McGuire
acknowledges the possibility for multiple interpretations, and her article certainly earns her a
place among the most prestigious O’Connor scholars.

Though I see O’Connor’s purpose for Wise Blood as quite positively religious, at least to
a degree, I was exposed to new means of interpretation that neither exclude nor undeniably
confirm one set of meanings. From the worst article to the best, this collection of O’Connor
research opened my eyes even further to the depth of meaning imbued into Wise Blood and the
ramifications of reading the novel with only one lens. Through such an array of articles, which all converse with each other, I was able to qualitatively compare one argument over another to come to the most accurate and comprehensive understanding of O’Connor’s purpose(s) for her first novel.


