

WISE BLOOD

by Flannery O'Connor



THE AUTHOR

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was born in Savannah, Georgia into a devoutly Catholic family. When she was fifteen, her father died of lupus - the same disease that was later to take her life. After she and her mother moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, she attended Georgia State College for Women, where she majored in sociology. She went on to graduate school at the University of Iowa, earning her Master's degree there, then spent time in a writers' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. She befriended and was encouraged by many writers of the day, including Robert Lowell. After five years of intensive labor and multiple revisions, she published her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952. The novel received great critical acclaim, though many readers found it grotesque and distasteful. In 1951 she was diagnosed with lupus, at which time she moved back to Milledgeville so her mother could care for her. Knowing that her time was probably short, she gave herself to writing and produced one more novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and thirty-one short stories. She won several O. Henry prizes for her short stories, a National Book Award, and even some honorary doctorates, and by the time of her death was considered to be among the great Southern writers of the twentieth century. She died of lupus at the age of 39.

Wise Blood was her first novel, originally expanded from short stories she had written for her dissertation in graduate school. The story deals openly with religious themes, which were always central to O'Connor's writing. She was influenced in her writing by many authors in whose works she immersed herself at Iowa State, with Joseph Conrad, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nikolai Gogol, and especially T.S. Eliot among the most important. The novel includes favorite O'Connor themes such as homelessness, the rootlessness of society in a post-Christian world, and above all the transforming "moment of grace" that makes all the difference in the life of one who is lost. She considered the novel to be comic, though many have difficulty getting beyond the weirdness of the characters.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Hazel Motes riding in a train. During the trip he is seated opposite Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, who carries on an almost-continuous one-sided conversation in which Haze has no interest. He keeps staring at the porter, who he thinks is from his hometown of Eastrod, Tennessee, but the porter maintains he is from Chicago. He goes back to his berth to get some sleep, but begins to think of his childhood in Eastrod - the deaths of his grandfather, brothers, and mother and his desire to be a preacher like his grandfather. He had entered the army at age eighteen and had stayed in the service for four years. During that time he had lost his faith and concluded that he didn't believe anything. Upon his return he had found Eastrod deserted - all that was left in his house was an old chiffarobe, to which he had attached a sign identifying it as his and threatening to track down and kill anyone who might steal it. He had then embarked on this train trip, intending to go to Taulkinham. After the train leaves him at a rest stop and he waits six hours for the next train, he finally gets to Taulkinham, where he knows no one and has no place to stay. He finds the name and address of Leora Watts, a local prostitute, on the wall of a public bathroom and decides to go there. It is the first time he has slept with a woman.

The next night Haze walks through the shopping district at loose ends. He comes upon a man on the sidewalk hawking potato peelers. While he is there a blind preacher and his daughter appear. She is passing out tracts, but Haze tears his up. She wants to buy a potato peeler but can't afford it. A young man named Enoch Emery is there as well, and he brags to Haze about having a job as a guard at the zoo after only having been in town two months. Haze buys a potato peeler, intending to give it to the girl, and follows her through town to try to catch up while Enoch, who knows no one in town, dogs his heels and refuses to leave him alone. When they finally catch up to the preacher, Asa Hawks, Haze gives the girl the potato peeler, but she says she doesn't want it. Asa tries to get Haze and Enoch to help pass out tracts, but they decline. When they get back to Leona Watts' house, Haze finally gets rid of Enoch, but not before the latter tells him that the girl had given him the potato peeler, which he had also coveted but had been unable to afford.

The next day Haze decides to buy a car so he'll have somewhere to live besides Mrs. Watts' bedroom. He only has fifty dollars, so he seeks out the cheapest used car lot he can find. After much dickering he buys an old heap with no back seat for forty dollars plus the cost of five gallons of gas, though the owner cheats him by only filling the gas can halfway. Haze then drives his car out into the country, where he stops at a boulder painted with the words, "WOE TO THE BLASPHEMER AND WHOREMONGER! WILL HELL SWALLOW YOU UP? JESUS SAVES." He looks at the sign for a few minutes and decides to visit Enoch at the zoo to get the address of the blind preacher from him.

Enoch's daily routine at the park is, after he gets off from work, to go to the swimming pool and hide in the bushes watching the women swim and sunbathe, then stop at the refreshment stand and get a milkshake while flirting with the waitress, then walk through the zoo cursing and making obscene remarks to the animals because they eat better than he does, then going to the park museum and looking at one particular exhibit. This day, he has the feeling that he has to show that exhibit to someone. While he is hiding in the bushes, Haze arrives. He refuses to give Haze the address of Asa Hawks unless he follows him to the exhibit, going through the entire intervening routine in the process. Haze reluctantly agrees, but on the way keeps saying, both to the waitress and the owl, "I AM clean"; the exhibit turns out to be a shrunken man in a glass case.

Enoch is so frightened by the exhibit that he forgets the address, so Haze throws a rock at him and knocks him out, then disappears.

That night Haze drives around town in his car looking for the preacher and his daughter. He finds them and sees where they live, noting that the house has a room for rent, then goes past a movie theater where he begins to preach about his Church Without Christ to the people outside; after the ticket-taker chases him away he goes to two more theaters. The next day he rents a room where the Hawks live. He intends to seduce the girl to show the blind preacher that Christ is not real. What he doesn't know is that the preacher is not really blind - he had promised to blind himself to justify his redemption but had lost his nerve - and that the daughter had taken a fancy to him and wanted to seduce *him*. Haze visits them and leaves a note in the girl's hand telling her that he wants her, then goes to find a repair shop to get his car fixed. The next day he takes his car for a drive and is surprised to find the girl hiding in the back seat. She introduces herself as Sabbath Lily Hawks and suggests they stop and take a walk in the fields to get to know one another better. She tells him that her mother, to whom her father was not married, died in childbirth, and that since an illegitimate child couldn't go to heaven anyway, it didn't matter whether she was good or not. Haze, meanwhile, keeps mulling over the fact that a preacher who was so devout as to blind himself could have had an illegitimate child. Sabbath asks him if she could go to heaven in his church, but he's not sure. She tries to seduce him, but he ignores her and goes back to the car, only to find that it won't start. A mechanic helps them get it started and they head home.

Enoch Emery comes to believe that he will be called upon to do something special, though he doesn't know what; his wise blood just tells him so. He begins saving money, eating next to nothing, and uses the money to clean up the room he is renting, get new curtains, and gild the inside of the cabinet under his washbasin. One day after work he buys popcorn and goes into the movie theater, where he watches three movies. When he comes out he sees Haze preaching his Church Without Christ and hears him talk about the need for a new Jesus, one who was all man and didn't care about redemption or dying. Enoch, remembering the shrunken man in the glass case, thinks he knows just what to do.

Haze keeps trying to visit Hawks but can't get into the old man's room; he can't understand why any preacher wouldn't want to try to save a lost soul like him. Instead, Hawks keeps trying to push his daughter on him. Haze has given up trying to seduce Sabbath and instead concentrates on protecting himself from her advances, even when she appears in his room in the middle of the night in her nightgown. She complains to her father that nothing she tries is working, but he tells her that she had better succeed before he leaves town or she won't have anywhere to stay. Haze, meanwhile, is getting increasingly frustrated because his Church Without Christ can't seem to acquire any followers. A sixteen-year-old boy showed some interest, but he only wanted Haze to take him to a brothel. Then one night a man named Onnie Jay Holy begins to pay attention to Haze's preaching. Suddenly he begins to testify that Haze, a true Prophet, has changed his life with his message, and that his listeners can have their lives changed, too, for just a dollar. Haze calls him a liar, and when he tries to climb into Haze's car, he kicks him out. In a rage, Holy, whose real name is Hoover Shoats, tells Haze he intends to provide some competition for him in the future. When Haze gets home, he picks the lock on the blind preacher's room, lights a match, and looks into his eyes; now he knows the truth.

The next night Haze goes out to preach as usual, but in the middle of his sermon another car like his pulls up, and out gets Hoover Shoats and another man - one dressed just like Haze.

Shoats introduces him as the True Prophet, who announces that the new Jesus is at hand and the unredeemed should redeem themselves. Soon the crowd leaves Haze and moves over to Shoats and his Prophet. Haze then drives home and finds Sabbath Hawks in his bed. She tells him that her father ran off because Haze uncovered his scam, and that she won't leave Haze even if he beats her because she has no other place to go. They then make love.

That day Enoch steals the shrunken man (in reality a half-breed dwarf half-mummified) because he thinks it is the new Jesus. He hides it in his newly-gilded cabinet, but when he sticks his head in the cabinet the odor soon makes clear to him what it is. He then decides to take it to Haze's apartment wrapped in some paper. On the way, he sees a crowd at a movie theater waiting for the appearance of the gorilla who stars in the latest monster movie. Enoch wants to insult the gorilla, but the man in the gorilla suit insults him instead. When he gets to Haze's place, Sabbath takes the bundle and goes to the bathroom to look at it. When she opens it she thinks it is a dead baby - Haze's dead baby. She cuddles it tenderly and brings it to Haze when he wakes up. He grabs it angrily, smashes it against a wall, then throws what is left into the back yard. Haze intends to run off without Sabbath to another town to start over where people haven't heard of his church before, but he feels too sick and tired to move.

Enoch now expects some reward from the new Jesus. He pulls apart his landlady's umbrella and goes out for a walk with the pointed shaft under his arm, thinking himself very sophisticated-looking. He goes to a diner where he borrows a newspaper and discovers that Gonzo the gorilla is making one final appearance in town. He goes to the theater and hides in Gonzo's truck. When Gonzo enters and the truck drives off, he attacks the man and steals the gorilla suit. When he falls off the truck, he buries his own clothes and puts on the gorilla suit. He goes up to a young couple and holds out his hand, expecting that they will shake it gladly the way the crowds did at the theater, but they run away, leaving poor Enoch very disappointed with his reward from the new Jesus.

Meanwhile, Hoover Shoats is making money out of his new church and new prophet. One night Haze follows them and, after Shoats gets dropped off, pursues the new prophet, a man named Solace Layfield, to a dark country road. There he rams his car, pushes it into a ditch, then runs over Layfield. Right before the man dies, he confesses his sins (including stealing the car) and calls on Jesus for help. Haze then leaves town, but is stopped by a patrolman on the road. When he finds that Haze has no driver's license, he takes his car to the edge of a cliff and pushes it over. Haze then walks back to town and buys some quicklime, then blinds himself the way Asa Hawks had promised to do. His landlady, Mrs. Flood, soon has Sabbath sent to a detention home and begins to care for Haze herself. Once she steams open his government relief check and finds out how much he gets, she raises his rent and begins to charge him for board as well. In the process of caring for him, she discovers that he lines his shoes with rocks and pieces of broken glass and wraps barbed wire around his chest. Knowing that she is presently getting only two-thirds of his government check, she schemes to get the rest. At first she intends to marry him and have him committed, but then she decides to marry him and keep him around. She proposes this, but when he refuses she kicks him out. He walks away during miserable weather and is found half-dead in a ditch by two policemen. They try to bring him back to the landlady, but he refuses, so one of the policemen hits him with his billy club, killing him. They bring him back to Mrs. Flood, who doesn't realize that he is dead.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Hazel Motes - A young man recently discharged from the army.
- Leora Watts - A prostitute Haze visits in Taulkinham.
- Enoch Emery - A young man Haze meets in Taulkinham; he has no friends, so he follows Haze around despite the fact that Haze is trying to get rid of him. He works in the zoo.
- Asa Hawks - A supposedly blind preacher whose daughter hands out tracts for him; he had at one point promised to blind himself to earn his justification, but lost his nerve at the last minute. From that time on he had traveled around pretending to be blind.
- Sabbath Lily Hawks - His fifteen-year-old daughter; she wants to seduce Haze and he wants to seduce her, though for very different reasons.
- Hoover Shoats (a.k.a. Onnie Jay Holy) - A phony preacher who tries to horn in on Haze's Church Without Christ; when Haze rejects him, he decides to provide some competition.
- Solace Layfield - A man with consumption hired by Shoats to be his New Prophet, disguised to look like Haze. Haze kills him by running him over with his car.
- Mrs. Flood - Haze's landlady, who tries to do anything she can to get money out of him after he blinds himself.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"I'm going to do some things I have never done before." (Haze, ch.1, p.5)

"There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." (ch.1, p.10)

"You can tell people better how terrible sin is if you know from your own personal experience." (Cabdriver, ch.2, p.15)

"That's the trouble with you preachers. You've all got too good to believe in anything." (Cabdriver, ch.2, p.16)

"I'm going to preach a new church - the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified. It won't cost you nothing to join my church. It's not started yet but it's going to be." (Haze, ch.3, p.28)

"You act like you think you got wiser blood than anybody else, but you ain't! I'm the one has it. Not you. *Me*." (Enoch, ch.3, p.30)

“There’s no person a whoremonger, who wasn’t something worse first. That’s not the sin, nor blasphemy. The sin came before them.” (Haze, ch.4, p.39)

“I AM clean. If Jesus existed, I wouldn’t be clean.” (Haze, ch.5, p.47)

“Where has the blood you think you been redeemed by touched you?” (Haze, ch.6, p.53)

“I’m going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn’t the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.” (Haze, ch.6, p.54)

“He felt that he should have a woman, not for the sake of the pleasure in her, but to prove that he didn’t believe in sin since he practiced what was called it.” (ch.7, p.57)

“I want to tell you a second reason why you can absolutely trust this church - it’s based on the Bible. Yes, sir! It’s based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted. That’s right, just the way Jesus would have done it.” (Onnie Jay Holy, ch.9, p.78)

“I preach that there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else’s, but behind all of them, there’s only one truth and that is that there’s no truth.” (Haze, ch.10, p.84)

“If you don’t hunt it down and kill it, it’ll hunt you down and kill you.” (Haze, ch.10, p.85)

“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.” (Sabbath’s thoughts, ch.11, p.94)

“I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil. I seen you wouldn’t let nobody have nothing. I seen you were mean enough to slam a baby against a wall. I seen you wouldn’t never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus!” (Sabbath, ch.11, p.96)

“In spite of himself, Enoch couldn’t get over the expectation that the new Jesus was going to do something for him in return for his services. This was the virtue of Hope, which was made up, in Enoch, of two parts suspicion and one part lust.” (ch.12, p.98)

“You ain’t true. What do you get up on top of a car and say you don’t believe in what you do believe in for?” (Haze, ch.13, p.104)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Some critics of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* have suggested that Hazel Motes is intended by the author to be a modern-day Apostle Paul, a fanatical opponent of the Christian faith who becomes a preacher only after being blinded on the Damascus Road. Evaluate this analogy. To what extent is it a valid assessment of the novel, not only in terms of the character of the protagonist, but also with regard to the themes of the story?
2. Flannery O'Connor was a devout Roman Catholic. Discuss the extent to which the Catholicism of the author is visible in the characters, plot, and themes of *Wise Blood*.
3. In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, why is the shrunken mummy an appropriate "new Jesus" for the Church Without Christ advocated by the protagonist? Give particular attention to the implications of Hazel's new religion for human nature, salvation, and life after death.
4. Flannery O'Connor once described her novel *Wise Blood* as "a very hopeful book." What do you think she meant in her assessment of the story? Does the protagonist find salvation? Why or why not? Support your evaluation with details from the novel.
5. Flannery O'Connor considered the South of her day to be "Christ-haunted" rather than "Christ-centered." Discuss the accuracy of this assessment using the setting and characters of her first novel, *Wise Blood*. To what extent is the South pictured in the novel far from Christian despite the Christian trappings that permeate the environment?
6. Discuss the nature of repentance as it is pictured in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Is the concept presented in the novel biblical? Why or why not? Use both details from the novel and passages of Scripture to support your conclusions.
7. In Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*, he said, "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee." To what extent does Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* support Augustine's thesis? Use details from the novel to support your analysis.
8. In discussing her novel *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor wrote, "That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence." How does the novel communicate the idea that nothing is more important than one's relationship with Christ? Be sure to use specifics in your arguments.
9. Discuss the significance of the loss of the protagonist's Essex automobile in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. What is the scene intended to symbolize? How does it fit in with the major themes of the novel?

10. Discuss the use of the symbolism of eyes and seeing in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Relate the author's use of the images to those found in Scripture. To what extent do the two coincide? Be specific.
11. Discuss the nature of the salvation pictured in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Is her view of salvation biblical? Why or why not? Be sure to use specifics from Scripture and from the novel in supporting your conclusions.
12. Discuss the symbolic significance of the protagonist's Essex automobile in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. For what does it stand (note that one might give more than one answer), and how does the symbolism associated with the car advance the themes of the novel?
13. In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, the city of Taulkinham serves as a symbol of society as a whole. In what ways does it do this? Discuss the setting in which the author places her story and show how the nature of that setting becomes indispensable to the themes communicated in the novel. What did O'Connor think were the salient characteristics of the postwar world in which she lived?
14. Discuss the nature of temptation as it is presented in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Choose three characters that serve as instruments of temptation to the protagonist and describe how they seek to turn him away from God. How does he resist their temptations? To what extent does his resistance contribute to his own salvation?
15. What is the nature of true Christianity as portrayed in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*? Distinguish the author's view of genuine faith from the false manifestations with which the novel is filled. What does O'Connor expect the reader to conclude about true religion and its manifestations? Is her view biblical? Why or why not?
16. Critic Charles Forman, writing about Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, noted, "The novelist who is a Christian must take the distortions of modern life that most of one's audience regard as normal and make that audience see them for what they are." Discuss the extent to which O'Connor accomplishes this through the use of misfits and other bizarre characters in the novel. How do they hold a mirror up to the real world in a way that takes away our comfortable illusions concerning that world?
17. In explaining her use of weird and bizarre characters in her stories, Flannery O'Connor once said, "When you assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large startling figures." Discuss the extent to which this explanation enables you to appreciate more fully the strangeness of the characters found in *Wise Blood*.

18. Flannery O'Connor once said, "I am interested in making a good case for distortion because I am coming to believe that it is the only way to make people see." What do you think she meant by this statement? Apply the principle enunciated in the quotation to her novel *Wise Blood*. How does the distortion in the novel help the reader to see more clearly? Be specific.
19. The writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 11:13, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth." Discuss the ways in which the truth of this verse is illustrated in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Why must a true believer live as an alien and stranger on earth? Answer the question using both details from the novel and passages of Scripture.
20. Discuss the incident of Enoch Watts and Gonzo the gorilla in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. What is the significance of Enoch's desire to shake the gorilla's hand and then to become the gorilla? Is it simply a matter of wanting fame and public acclaim, or is the author trying to make a point by the fact that what Enoch pursues is a *gorilla* rather than some other form of identity?
21. In Matthew 18:9, Jesus says, "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." How is the ending of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* an illustration of the truth presented by Christ in this verse? Be sure to discuss what Jesus meant as well as the extent to which O'Connor was communicating the same idea.
22. Discuss the symbolism of the names given to the characters in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Why do you think the author chose the names she did? Focus on three characters from the story and show how their names symbolize the roles they play in the novel.
23. Flannery O'Connor once said, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." How does O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, illustrate this truth?
24. The reader is told near the beginning of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* that the protagonist was convinced that "the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." What did the author mean by this? Evaluate the truth of this statement, using Scripture to support your assessment.
25. In chapter five of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes says, "I AM clean. If Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean." What does he mean by this? Assess the validity of this statement and apply it to the way people often behave today. Use Scripture to develop your discussion.
26. Some critics see in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* a scathing attack on twentieth-century nihilism. To what extent do you believe this to be the case? Support your assessment with details from the novel.

27. Compare the symbolism of physical deformity found in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. Her use of the grotesque is not intended merely to attract attention or to provide comedy by means of the bizarre. What do you think the author is saying through the repeated appearances of severely handicapped characters? Are these characters intended to have broader implications for her view of society?
28. In one of her letters, Flannery O'Connor wrote the following words: "The Liberal approach is that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own unaided efforts. Therefore, evil in this light is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc., and all mysteries will eventually be cleared up. Judgment is out of place because man is not responsible." Relate the characters of George Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* and Hazel Motes (during his rebellious phase) in *Wise Blood* to this description. What does O'Connor see as the dangers of this worldview? How do these characters demonstrate these dangers in extreme and graphic ways?

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