

FILM

Wise Blood (1952)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

adaptation by Benedict Fitzgerald & John Huston (1979)

ANALYSIS

Wise Blood was unlikely ever to be filmed because it is (1) politically incorrect; (2) subtly literary; (3) Christian; (4) perplexing to nonbelievers; and (5) satirizes Atheists. This adaptation is faithful to the novella in its essentials, with minor changes for condensation. What is often lost is the distinctive humor of Flannery O'Connor conveyed through her prose. Both she and this adaptation are dead serious about the most important issue in human life—religious belief or disbelief. Her humor is an expression of her transcendent faith, as she said: “Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe.” Also, characters in the novel who are grotesque because of their spiritual deformity tend to become merely eccentric or weird on the screen. Hazel Motes the protagonist is Brad Dourif, an actor whose frail thin face and big round eyes give his intensity effective force in a role with great depth that contrasts with the weaklings and fanatics he has often played.

Hazel Motes is a name evoking the theme of perception, suggesting that by nature he is not seeing clearly—in a haze with motes in his eyes. He first appears in the army uniform of a private, going home. The Vietnam War had ended six years before this film was produced. The army uniform and his bitterness suggest that he has been disillusioned by his military experience, whatever it was. He says only, “I didn’t want people to know where I was wounded.” He has not been rendered impotent like Jake Barnes in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, but the wounding has a comparable significance. He returns to his old family home in Tennessee and finds it a collapsing ruin, evoking the destruction of traditional values. All the young people have left for the City. He visits the graves of his parents, then he boards a train, a traditional symbol of progress, and heads for the City himself. Although the sentimental ballad “The Tennessee Waltz” plays on the sound track at times during the film, the emphasis is not on a particular setting but on the modern City as a psychological environment. The time has been made contemporary, indicating that the themes of the story are timeless and still apply as much as ever.

Haze aggressively challenges a conventional lady passenger on the train: “I reckon you think you been redeemed.” He is already looking to destroy people’s faith, like the iceman in the play by Eugene O’Neill. Misery loves company. He dresses himself in a black coat and hat like a preacher. A porter on the train remarks, “Jesus been a long time gone.” When Haze tells a cab driver, “I don’t believe in anything,” the cabbie replies, “That’s the trouble with you preachers.” And it turns out to be true that most of the preachers in *Wise Blood* are fakes. Unlike them, Haze is forthright and preaches what he believes, giving him a perverse integrity. However, it is not quite true that he believes in nothing. By rejecting the Spirit, he is left believing only in the Flesh. He goes straight to a prostitute advertised on the wall of a public toilet. “I don’t believe in sin,” he says. But as a child he dreamed of seeing a woman scantily clad who tried to seduce him to join her for sex in a coffin, an image of spiritual death that prompted him to do penance by walking with rocks in his boots.

A vendor selling potato peelers on the street is interrupted by a blind preacher selling religion like potato peelers. A surly girl with the preacher is distributing Jesus Saves handbills. Haze notices the girl notice him, but he scorns her message. He meets young Enoch Emery, a boy from the country who keeps saying that people here in the City “ain’t friendly.” Enoch is the opposite of Haze. He looks dopey and half awake, but he believes in God until he talks to Haze for awhile. He claims to have “wise blood” and to see signs—“it’s a gift.” However, in the course of their relationship, Enoch devolves into pantheism. He works in the zoo and his “wise blood” is merely regressive instinct. He steals a shrunken mummy for a “new Jesus” and

wants to emulate a fake gorilla. Pantheism makes him immoral, as he steals a gorilla suit and implicitly beats up its occupant and runs wild. The antisocial effects of animality are comical when the fake gorilla tries to strike up a friendship with an elderly couple on a park bench.

After going to the prostitute, she becomes his “love interest.” He tells Enoch that he’s not lonely because “I got Leora Watts.” The next thing he wants to do is buy a used car. He buys a battered old clunker, more evidence of his poor judgment—a pretentious oversized sedan with long tailfins. The top is white and the body is red. Since he stands on top of this car when he preaches his “Church without Jesus,” the red suggests Satan. “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified.” He keeps boasting about how good his car is. “Nobody with a good car needs to be afraid of anything.” He has bought into the materialism that prevails in the City. His clunker has replaced Jesus and his preaching is as bad as his driving. He declares that “my blood set me free,” but his blood is no wiser than Enoch’s. In the end, the only wise blood is the blood of Jesus Christ crucified in redemption.

The director John Huston appears briefly as one of the various evangelists in the film. The one most directly opposed to Haze is Hawkes, the predatory fake blind preacher. Hawkes pretends to have blinded himself for Jesus, in contrast to Haze who actually does. His daughter Sabbath who gives out the handbills calls her father “all the way evil.” She considers herself only part way evil when it comes to having sex and she ponders, “Should I go the whole hog?” Sabbath believes that because she is illegitimate she cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven anyway, therefore she might as well go the whole hog. She likes being “in the gutter.” Out in the countryside she seduces Haze and afterward his car will not start. He gets saved by a tow truck driver who does not charge him anything—charity in the spirit of Jesus. Enoch gives Sabbath the shrunken mummy he stole to give to Haze for a “new Jesus.” She thinks the ugly thing is cute. She carries it to Haze like a newborn baby with a shawl draped over her head as if she is the new Madonna. “Call me mama.” Haze is so infuriated he throws the mummy out the window.

The most comical fake is Onnie Jay Holy, a former promoter now in the “religious business” who is up-to-date by charging a fee for salvation—like the Catholic Church before the Protestant Reformation. First he tries to join forces with Haze, then after he is rebuffed he brings in his own fake preacher who is dressed just like Haze to preach the same doctrines on the street for money. Hawkes the fake blind preacher refers to his competition as “Jesus hogs.” Haze follows his imitator out of town in his car, runs him off the road, pushes his car into a ditch and drives over him. When you do not believe in anything, there is nothing left but self-indulgence. There is no reason not to be a murderer.

Haze is driving away to preach in another City when he gets pulled over by a deputy. Law enforcement protects society from criminals. The officer is polite, but when Haze asks why he pulled him over, the deputy says matter-of-factly, “I don’t like your face.” He then directs Haze to follow him in his car to a *viewpoint*. Once there, when Haze gets out to look at the view, the deputy pushes his car down a very long hill into a pond. This event is more symbolic than literal. The deputy does not know about the murder. He represents the “viewpoint” of society toward Haze based simply on how he looks as a preacher against Jesus. Without the charitable spirit and mercy of Jesus, Haze suffers the doctrine of an eye for an eye, or in this case a car pushed into a pond for a car pushed into a ditch.

As a criminal who has just done worse, Haze has no basis to claim injustice. He has nothing to stand on. His red car has been his literal platform for preaching against the justice embodied in Jesus—in effect advocating for Satan. A car is a popular symbol of upward mobility and the materialism that has displaced spiritual values in the modern world. Standing there watching his car roll down the long hill Haze sees his life going downhill and has an epiphany, as in James Joyce. Ironically, his loss in the material dimension proves to be a gain in the spiritual. By the grace of God, he experiences the reality of sin. O’Connor said, “Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.”

To atone, Haze buys lime to blind himself. Traditionally, blind seers have inner sight and are not blinded spiritually by the material world. First he does penance by walking with rocks in his boots as he did when a child, suggesting rebirth. He contains his flesh with barbed wire wrapped around his torso and he tells his landlady that he cannot preach anymore: “I ain’t clean.” When she cannot understand, he says, “You can’t

see.” As soon as he blinds himself to the flesh, he gets rid of Sabbath the devil girl. Blinding himself seems extreme until you consider that Haze has been blaspheming against the Holy Spirit by attacking Jesus, which the Bible says is an unforgivable sin. The prophet St. Paul persecuted Christians until Jesus struck him down with a light that blinded him for three days. Haze is trapped. His landlady, representing the world, demands that he marry her: “I cannot allow you to stay under any other circumstances.” He tries to escape the world again by walking out into the rain to die but one of the police officers who “saves him” returns him to the landlady, saying, “You gotta pay your rent.”

Michael Hollister (2015)