

## 36 CRITICS DISCUSS

Wise Blood (1952)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

"It is a comic novel about a Christian malgre lui [despite himself]... 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. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to. Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man."

O'Connor, Introductory Note, *Wise Blood* (1962)

"This is the first novel of a twenty-six-year-old Georgia woman.... An important addition to the grotesque literature of Southern decadence."

John W. Simons  
*Commonweal* (1952)

"When the contemporary literary imagination, in all the anxious sensitivity and honesty of youth, explores the problem of what has happened in the modern world to belief, the result is likely to be bizarre, oblique, tortured, and ambiguous. A deeply tragic sense of the human condition will wear the mask of an irresponsibly sportive nihilism. Compassion will wield a whip. Awareness of the need for grace will vent itself in the evocation of obscenity and violence. So it seems to be in Miss O'Connor's first novel...."

Onto the naturalistic farce of Erskine Caldwell she has grafted the satire of Evelyn Waugh.... Her sharp-eyed and saucy similes and metaphors indicate she may have been reading Raymond Chandler as well as Caldwell. Her allegory is Kafkaesque.... Farce, satire, and allegory are all modes that sacrifice empathy to detachment, that involve radical distortions and simplifications of character, reality, and experience, and that impose on the writer the most rigorous requirements of tonal consistency. It takes the maturest skill to combine their effects into a sustained unity. Miss O'Connor's skill is not yet that mature, although she makes a good run for the money."

Joe Lee Davis  
Review of *Wise Blood*  
*Kenyon Review* (1953)

"In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), the hero is a young revivalist preacher, founder of the Church Without Christ. The denial of God is his grotesque religious act. Blasphemer, murderer, penitent, and ascetic without a god, he still remains a pinpoint of light in a society that knows only spiritual sloth. Freakish though he may be, the grotesque seeks desperately to express spirit, denying the practicalities of daily life in favor of an outlandish hope. Between the far poles of demonic rebellion and saintly victimization lay the picturesque and the grotesque heroes, who combined elements of the polar attitudes. The picaresque carried the comic aspects of the modern reality to the verge of irony and absurdity; and the grotesque showed that the tragic aspects of that reality were frequently pathetic or incongruous. What all the incarnations of the hero seemed to share was this: an awareness of incongruousness or absurdity."

Ihab Hassan  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1422-23

"Hazel Motes is on a train at the beginning of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor's first novel, in the act of leaving his native Eastrod, Tennessee, on his way to Taulkinham. He has decided to reject the traditional Jesus and preach a new 'Church of Christ Without Christ.' He has first to go through the ritual of dislocation before he can fulfill the

terms of his prophecy, thus leaving a known area to travel to an unknown one. The prophecy and dislocation end in disaster and death. The same formula may explain Mr. Head's and Nelson's trip to Atlanta in 'The Artificial Nigger'....

Nathanael West and Franz Kafka are the writers most often suggested as inspirations for *Wise Blood*. Hazel Motes, the central figure of the novel, has the crusading zeal of a *Miss Lonelyhearts* and the blind steadfastness of a Kafka hero; but it is probably unwise to carry the connection further. When he arrives in Taulkinham to preach the gospel of the Church Without Christ he receives his redemption and purification in a way which seems unorthodox: he frequents the bed of a well-known prostitute whose address he found on a lavatory wall. This establishes the tone of the unconventional prophecy and evangelism which runs through the novel. Hazel Motes meets a succession of false religionists and we are intended to measure the sincerity of his convictions against the hypocrisy of theirs.

One of these figures, Asa Hawks, has pretended to blind himself to enhance his career as an itinerant beggar. Another, Hoover Shoats, has made a profitable career of espousing new religions: 'You watch out, friend. I'm going to run you out of business. I can get my own new Jesus and I can get Prophets for peanuts, you hear?' A third, Enoch Emery (blessed with the hereditary faculty of 'wise blood'), steals a shriveled-up mummy from a museum to oblige Hazel Motes with a new Jesus for his religion. Hazel makes his way through this corrupt universe of false prophets to advance the sincere cause of his new cult.

When he realizes that he has failed he blinds himself with quicklime and proceeds to subject himself to every variety of torture (like a latter day Oedipus, as one critic has suggested). In accustomed fashion for Flannery O'Connor's characters, Hazel Motes has had his moments of religious feeling and violence. He has experienced a series of surrealistic horrors and has worked out his destiny... There is one observer of all this action who supplies the final irony to Hazel Motes' 'achievement.' This is his landlady who represents the common sense of the unenlightened and uninitiated; Flannery O'Connor is fond of giving this type the final say.... Flannery O'Connor allows the landlady herself to complete the caricatured portrait of Bible Belt morality. Hazel Motes and the other oddly named eccentrics in *Wise Blood* seem quite without precedents until one recalls again the Sherwood Anderson of Winesburg, Ohio. A possible model for Motes' Church of Christ Without Christ could be Dr. Parcival's strange crucifixion notion: 'Everyone is Christ and we are all crucified'."

Melvin J. Friedman  
"Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction"  
English Journal LI  
(April 1962) 233-43

"A bitter parody [of] atheistic existentialism."

Brainard Cheney  
Sewanee Review LXXII (Autumn 1964) 556

"In *Wise Blood* (1952) Hazel Motes, descendant of a line of Fundamentalist preachers, becomes, as a result of his war experiences, the founder of a new religion: 'I preach the Church without Christ'... An anti-saint, as it were, in the end he wears barbed wire next to the skin and blinds himself with quicklime... Flannery O'Connor has said of her own work: 'It is literal in the same sense that a child's drawing is literal. When a child draws he doesn't try to be grotesque but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. I am interested in the lines that create spiritual motion.' And this is what she does in this raw, extraordinarily powerful, savagely comic novel of spiritual emptiness through which the God-intoxicated Hazel moves."

Walter Allen  
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States  
(Dutton 1965) 308

"In *Wise Blood* she did parody the Existentialist point of view...but the parody was very serious. In this and in most of her later writing she gave to the godless a force proportionate to the force it actually has in episode after episode, as in the world, as in ourselves, it wins. We can all hear our disbelief, picked out of the air we breathe, when Hazel Motes says, '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.'

Note the velocity and rightness of these sentences. Many pages and a number of stories by this writer have the same perfection.... I am speaking now of merits achieved in the reader's interest: no unliving words, the realization of character by exquisitely chosen speech and interior speech and behavior, the action moving at the right speed so that no part of the situation is left out or blurred and the violent thing, though surprising, happens after due preparation, because it has to. Along with her gifts, patient toil and discipline brought about these merits... similar to those of another Christian writer who died recently, T. S. Eliot.... [O'Connor and Eliot] were similarly moved toward serious art, being early and much possessed by death as a reality, a strong spiritual sensation, giving odd clarity to the appearances they saw through or saw beyond. In her case as in his, if anyone at first found the writing startling he could pertinently remind himself how startling it was going to be to lose his own body....

When it comes to seeing the skull beneath the skin, we may remark that the heroes of both O'Connor novels are so perceived within the first few pages, and her published work begins and ends with coffin dreams. Her memento mori is no less authentic for being often hilarious, devastating to a secular world and all it cherishes. The O'Connor equivalent for Eliot's drowned Phoenician sailor... is a museum piece, the shrunken corpse that the idiot Enoch Emery in *Wise Blood* proposes as the new humanist Jesus.... Her best stories do the work that Eliot wished his plays to do, raising analogical meaning over literal action. He may have felt this himself, for though he rarely read fiction I am told that a few years before he died he read her stories and exclaimed in admiration at them."

Robert Fitzgerald  
Introduction  
Everything That Rises Must Converge  
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1965)

"The structure of the gospels is consciously being used: an abstract idea will first be introduced and then made concrete, as in the parables of Christ.... In such a culture, where Calvin, though probably unknown to most of its members, is more influential than Christ, guilt overshadows love as the quintessential aspect of Christianity, and Christianity has more of an Old Testament flavor than a New. The preacher then assumes a somewhat Mosaic role of wrathful pursuer, hunting man down to confront him with the absolute sinfulness of his condition....

The name 'Haze'... suggests that Miss O'Connor wished her character to be conceived as one of cloudy vision who nevertheless insolently attempts to guide others.... In his reasoning, if he can successfully deny Christ, then he can also deny man's original sin: 'There was no Fall...' Since Miss O'Connor's main purpose in *Wise Blood* was to warn against defective spiritual vision, it seems almost inescapable that one of the most effective themes of the book is that of sight versus blindness.... Physical sight becomes associated with spiritual vision... when we are told that Haze had used his mother's glasses to read the Bible.... When the policeman sarcastically inquires if Haze knows the purpose of the signal light, Haze replies, 'I didn't see it.' Here again Haze's obsession with religious delusion, to the exclusion of everything else in the world around him, is suggested by his defective and inattentive sight.... The irony of the 'blind' preacher's words operates on both a superficial and a profound level; physically he can in fact see, and spiritually Haze will not see until he has blinded himself....

If the content of *Wise Blood* seems bizarre and ludicrous, the rhetoric only reinforces that appearance. Extremely incongruous images, oxymorons, and synesthesia convince us that here indeed is a strange new world. Objects are like humans and animals, human beings are like animals and insects... But the unconventional rhetoric is not an embellishment pasted upon a basically conventional view of the world. It is indeed a warped world, one which has been likened to a Chagall painting, and the comparison of the novel to the modern painting seems especially apt for Miss O'Connor often appears to share modern painting preoccupations.

Her world frequently is that of a dream (in keeping with her topsy-turvy aesthetic, dreams are perhaps the most lucid and conventional parts of the book), with characters who transpose themselves, with aimless action endlessly performed, with bizarre mixtures of the known and the unfamiliar. Surrealistically, soda fountain chairs are 'brown toad stools,' trees look 'as if they had on ankle-socks,' and a cloud has 'curls and a beard' before it becomes a bird. The physical world partakes of the strangeness which colors characters and action: the sky leaks and growls, the wind slashes around the house, 'making a sound like sharp knives swirling in the air,' and 'the sky was like a piece of thin polished silver with a dark sour-looking sun in one corner of it.'

Miss O'Connor believed that it was her Catholicism which prompted her to describe the world as a bizarre and sinister dream: 'My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times,

the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable.' She further thought that such a specific vantage point suggested the themes with which she worked: 'I will admit to certain preoccupations that I get, I suppose, because I'm a Catholic; preoccupations with belief and with death and grace and the devil'....

Nearly everyone who has commented on the novel has noticed the malformed characterizations, the complete absurdity of action and event, and other features which depart from convention. Is it not, then, a farfetched story, which the author has attempted to dignify by grafting on a highly unconventional rhetoric? I think not.... The ideal figure, it seems, would be a saint who disbelieved, that is, one who was actively searching for religious meaning (as opposed to the majority who passively accept the traditional view, although they secretly regard it as nonsense) but who did not find it in the established beliefs.... Both believer and disbeliever are 'outsiders,' in that they seriously think about their spiritual life, whereas most people are so immersed in a materialistic life that they neither accept nor reject religion....

Haze Motes at first seems an unlikely St. Anthony figure. But the wide differences in time and place become unimportant when the essentially similar natures of the two men are seen. Both are possessed with an overpowering sense of the importance of religious belief as the only force which can give order and meaning to their lives. And both use self-abasement to express their realization of the gulf which separates the human from the spiritual. One accepts a saint as a flagellant, but is at first surprised that Haze Motes, the illiterate Tennessean, unconsciously knows of the centuries-old method of chastising the flesh to purify the soul. Once the suggestion is implanted that Haze is to be regarded seriously as a seeker after divine truth, rather than as just another Bible-beating Southerner, the departure from the form is begun. Whereas Anthony had renounced civilization to find God in the desert, it is in the desert that Haze finds his substitute for God; the army 'sent him to another desert and forgot him again. He had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there.'

And where Anthony's confrontation with God had left him humble, Haze's false truth goads him into pride; his actions at first betray his contemptuousness of other people... Soon his words reveal the prideful unbeliever... Haze also departs from the form when he seeks the city; 'God made the country but man made the town' is at least as old as St. Augustine, but for Miss O'Connor, who always conceives of the city as Sodom, such a moral geography is still valid. When Haze reaches the city, his life once again parallels St. Anthony's; according to the legend, St. Anthony was subjected to harassment by all sorts of demons, and the invention of all kinds of demonic forms became the distinguishing characteristic of paintings which used the Temptation as a subject. Haze, too, is bordered on all sides by monsters. With figure of speech, with description, and even with suggestive names—Hawks, Shoats—the author emphasizes that Haze has plunged himself into a chaos filled with every kind of monstrous apparition.

All of the characters have some animalistic aspect to their natures, and all represent some type of worldly threat to Haze's unworldly quest. Hawks is the fake preacher, unable at the moment of truth to act in the name of that which he had preached. Sabbath Lily Hawks is the complete sensualist, who recognizes that Haze is obsessed: 'I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil....' And Hoover Shoats, who had posed as Onnie Jay Holy, is Haze's special tempter; like the pig which is generally shown in depictions of St. Anthony as a figure symbolic of sensuality and gluttony, the worst threats to his attempts to lead the religious life, Shoats is the particularly twentieth-century, bourgeois threat to Haze's religious vision; he sees the commercial possibilities of Haze's belief and he wants to make a confidence game of it.... Once the tension between the form, St. Anthony, and the departure from it, Haze Motes, has been established, there is little need for its constant emphasis.

Rather, the novel is a series of events, or panels of a painting as it were, showing Haze being tormented by the symbolically different weird beasts. The motif is not reintroduced until near the end of the novel, when Haze has been forced to see that there is no escape from Christ.... The car comes to represent Haze's attitude of deliberately wishing not to accept the reality of Christ.... When Haze first starts his car, it is naturally in reverse gear.... Haze's deliberate attempt not to see the truth (the Essex) is still able to overcome his conscience (the double, Solace Layfield), in which remain his childhood guilt and belief in the reality of Christ.... After the destruction of his car, of his delusion, Haze returns to blind himself.... This Saul does not become a Paul; with his hope of denying Christ gone, Haze returns to the city, there to blind himself as a sign that he can now see his guilt....

For the description of Haze's final, saintlike actions, the point of view is shifted to the eyes of Haze's horsey, lovesick landlady.... Thereafter his landlady, mainly because of his large disability check (which is one hundred per

cent and suggests that Haze was a mentally exhausted victim of the war), takes great interest in Haze and observes him closely....When she learns that Haze walks in shoes filled with rocks and broken glass and wears strands of barbed wire wrapped around his chest, she is convinced of his insanity: 'Well, it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats....'

Miss O'Connor was fully conscious that her work lay within a 'school of the grotesque.' She made several remarks about the presence of the grotesque in her art. Though she felt that modern life has made grotesques of us all, still, she thought that too often her work was termed 'grotesquerie' when she had no intention of achieving that response. She justified her use of it as the only mode of illusion through which she could reach her audience. I doubt that she would have attempted a rigid definition for 'grotesque'; she had used the term in too many contexts. I do believe, however, that her purpose in using it can be safely stated: the grotesque for her was a form of religious hyperbole. There is always the danger that an audience not attuned to the form will misunderstand such hyperbole. That is the chance that Miss O'Connor must have felt she had to take. Certainly she was deadly serious when she used the grotesque, and its use was not merely gratuitous. Just as certainly she was not merely celebrating southern degeneracy. [italics added]

Flannery O'Connor was, on the contrary, perhaps the writer of the modern Southern school most conscious of the chaotic world caused by the declining belief in older religious institutions. Thus her satire was the most desperate, for to her it was most obvious that the old order was crumbling. But she saw that the old order in religion remained a husk; therefore she had to attack those people who play out their lives within the old form without giving allegiance to it and those people who have gone over more obviously to some other allegiance. There was no place in her world for any norms; from her vantage point the entire world did look grotesque, since her audience did not recognize the normative value of faith."

Lewis A. Lawson

"The Perfect Deformity: Wise Blood"

Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature 17.2 (Spring 1965)

"During his term in the army, Haze, disillusioned by the existence of evil in the world, sins for the first time. As a consequence he denies Christ in order to justify his behavior and then continues to sin in order to justify his unbelief. To whoever will listen, and to some who won't, Haze preaches against redemption, insistently and obsessively denying Jesus.... Haze blasphemes, seeking proof and reproof, seeking his own salvation. The novel's irony resides in that no one is willing to save him, that his blasphemy passes virtually unnoticed. In Miss O'Connor's world, a sea of evil, one more iniquitous drop is hardly perceptible. No one will redeem Haze, he must redeem himself; he must transform his life in Christ's image, which means self-crucifixion. It is the only redemptive possibility in a depraved world. At the end, Haze immolates himself, re-enacting, in effect, the redemption of Man.

If God does not exist, Haze decides at the outset of the novel (as Ivan Karamazov had before him), there can be no sin—everything is permissible. In order to demonstrate his position, Haze determinedly sins even—and this is the irony of his behavior—when his nature revolts against the act.... The commission of sin becomes for Haze a kind of ritual declaration of freedom from God the Father's authority. Ironically, the more Haze sins, the more committed he becomes to the import of His judgement. His first conscious act in Taulkinham (the big city) is to visit a prostitute...

For all of Haze's insistence that he believes in nothing, he is unable to act without recriminations of guilt. His sinning is an insistent denial of the God in him and is self-mortifying, pleasurable only in a masochistic sense. No matter what he does to change his appearance, his calling evinces itself; he is unmistakably a preacher. Haunted by unadmitted guilt, Haze is constrained to deny his identity. His denial, because of its very insistence, becomes an affirmation.... Haze can't escape himself or his destiny. As he performs it, even whoring becomes a religious act, a kind of penitential sin. He sins, hoping in his punishment to discover the vengeance and mercy of God.

In his search for salvation, Haze is continually confronted by the disparity between appearance and reality.... Haze is repeatedly confirmed in his anti-Christian course of action, though he knows instinctively that he is wrong. When he meets a blind preacher with his little girl, Haze follows them, bent on his own salvation. That the preacher's name is Hawks and that he is introduced competing for disciples with a salesman hawking potato peelers suggests the essential likeness between the two—the shared corruption. The blind preacher and the girl are not what they seem: the man is neither blind nor a man of God; the girl is not a child but an ugly and parasitic slut. They are

both, as Hawks, predatory, selling salvation as if man were as easily shriven as a potato is peeled. While Asa Hawks preaches of Christ without believing in Him, Haze, who profoundly believes, preaches of 'the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified.' However, in a causal sense, the spurious blind man is Haze's spiritual father. The lustful girl, Sabbath Hawks, one of the prize grotesques in Miss O'Connor's gallery of moral deformities, woos Haze by taking advantage of his attraction to her 'father's' ostensible religiosity.... At the last, unable to bear the sight of evil any longer, he fulfills Hawks' forsaken intention—he burns out his own eyes....

Enoch's spiritual rebirth through the 'new Jesus' (a shrunken mummy), his transformation from man into gorilla, is a satiric inversion of the evolutionary process. His redemption is a grotesque joke... Like Haze's mortification at the end of the novel, Enoch's is an exemplary act, an objectified comment on the spiritual state of his society.... Enoch is a comic figure; Haze, a tragic.... Unable to reach his preacher friend, Enoch delivers the mummy to Sabbath Hawks, who has moved in with Hazel. Before Hazel discovers the 'new Jesus,' the evil girl has learned to dote on it, playing house with it as if it were child of her union with Hazel. In more than one sense, however, the creature does ultimately save Hazel; it gives him his first recognition of objectified evil, and he sees it as the manifest offspring of his sins, mocking him. He also recognizes it as himself—his double. Wearing his mother's glasses, he sees his own image in the mirror as his mother's, when images of Sabbath and the mummy merge into his mirror vision, blurring all distinctions. He hears a voice saying, "Call me Momma now," and is comforted by the screwed-up face of the shrunken creature.

His smashing of the mummy against the wall is his first self-murder; it prophesies and anticipates Hazel's brutal murder of his double, the false preacher, whom Hoover Shoats has hired to impersonate Hazel. In killing his impersonator (Haze's evil self), Haze, in a sense, purges his evil, making possible his rebirth and final redemption. Whereas Enoch, through the 'new Jesus' and through the murder of his alter ego, is reborn into seeming innocence—his redemption a joke on itself, Haze is reborn through his ultimate evil act into self-knowledge and, ironically, innocence, becoming in effect the 'new Jesus' himself, sacrificing himself for his belief in the redemption of Christ....

Enoch, lonely and unloved, envies the zoo animals the comfort and attention they receive.... When the gorilla finally grips his hand, Enoch is disarmed by the creature's warmth and friendship; the gorilla's is the first friendly hand Enoch has grasped since coming to the big city.... Following the dictates of some compulsive primordial urge—Enoch has a mystic faith in the wisdom of his blood—the repulsive boy kills the man in the gorilla and becomes him, reborn in innocence and stardom. In a real sense, Enoch does, as he had dreamed, better his condition. He achieves at last identity and status. The comic ritual of his rebirth is a parody of redemption: 'Burying his clothes was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn't need them anymore.' Enoch is reborn in the image of his creature-god. Yet his change of life is illusory; when as gorilla he approaches a man and woman in the park, rather than admire him and shake his hand as befitting a celebrity, they run from him....

Hazel's killing of his impersonator Solace Layfield parallels Enoch's murder of the gorilla star; they are both, in a sense, self-murders; moreover, both acts are impelled by the influence of the shrunken mummy. As Enoch has been humiliated by the man-gorilla, Haze has been inadvertently mocked by his double, a paid dupe of the spiritual con man Hoover Shoats.... However, Haze kills his double not for mimicking him but for saying that he doesn't believe in Jesus when he really does. That is, Haze runs over the imitation preacher for committing Haze's own heresy. ("You ain't true, Haze said. 'You believe in Jesus.'") Haze forces his double to strip off his clothes—the clothes of his false life; then Haze runs him down. (Enoch too had stripped off his clothes before entering his new identity.) Before the false prophet (peeled like a potato from the hawker's machine—a recurrent symbolic image) dies, he confesses his sins to Hazel, a captive priest, ministering, in a sense, his own last rites. The confession, which is in effect an objectification of Haze's confusion, is one of the few deeply moving scenes in the novel. This is Haze's first revelation of the horror of his own damned soul, his own unadmitted evil....

His double's confession is the turning point in the novel for Hazel. He is aware for the first time that he has sinned, that he is guilty of fornication, blasphemy, murder... The moment of recognition sets in motion the possibility of his salvation; thereafter Haze moves from guilt to mortification to redemption. As Haze is Solace's unwitting redeemer (he punishes Solace for his sins and hears his confession), Solace's confession makes possible Haze's redemption. Having killed his alter ego and redeemed him into innocence, Haze is prepared to start a new life, though its direction is still unclear to him.

Hazel's decayed car, an old Essex which holds neither oil nor water nor gas, is the symbolic vestment of his corrupt existence. On several occasions in the novel Hazel asserts that the car (a 'good car' he mistakenly believes) is his substitute for Jesus.... Hazel's 'good car' is his home, his pulpit, and his chance to escape to a new city, all in one. His complete confidence in and reliance on the potency of a defective machine is the blind illusion that sustains him in his spiritual deformity. The car is his sanctuary—his unfailing protector from Judgment. Once the car is destroyed (a policeman pushes it off a cliff, declaring it 'not a car'), Hazel's way of life, his defense against Jesus, is destroyed with it. The destruction of the car leaves Hazel unprotected, face-to-face with the universe he has mocked, alone with the awful recognition of his sins. The vulnerability of his machine womb effects Haze's final disillusion... There is no longer any material impediment preventing his recognition of Jesus. Looking over the embankment at the washed-out red clay and his disemboweled car, Haze has an epiphany; he sees beyond the visage of evil, the ugly veil masking the real world, to the sight of limitless space—a manifestation of the infinite....

Hazel's vision is his first and last. It is, in effect, all inclusive; having seen it, he has nothing left to see. The terrible self-awareness that his sight imposes is, like that of Oedipus, unbearable to him. The car is the vestment of his other life, and with its death, Hazel is reborn. He is able then, as Hawks was not, to burn out his eyes to justify his belief in the Redemption. Moreover, Hazel blinds himself because sight, the continuous recognition of his own evil, is no longer tolerable. As penance for his sins, for all sins, he retains intact his last terrible vision into the valley of hell and beyond, into endless space (the awesome province of God). The classical (and Biblical) irony obtains: when Hazel had eyes he saw not, in blindness he achieves at least spiritual sight. Hazel's blindness is the first in a series of penitential mortifications he inflicts on himself. The only audience to these penances (he does not of course seek any) is his voracious landlady Mrs. Flood, who is in spite of herself finally converted by the example of Hazel's abnegation and penitence—his sainthood. He eats only enough for the barest subsistence; he lines his shoes with broken glass and rocks; he wears barbed wire under his shirt; he exposes himself to cold and illness....

Hazel's mortification and martyrdom unto death is presented through the witness of his predatory landlady, who is jealous of his suffering because she is unable to fathom its purpose. Evil and voracious like most of the characters in Miss O'Connor's world, the landlady is mystified and consequently angered by Hazel's self-punishment; she feels cheated, though she regularly steals his money, because she is unable to possess his motives, to contain in her head the secret of his behavior. When Mrs. Flood spies on Hazel while he is sleeping (she devotes her waking hours to the discovery of his 'secret'), she discovers that he has barbed wire wrapped around his chest....

This is the somewhat shrill thesis of the novel: though the world is encrusted with evil ('A good man is hard to find'), if one man is willing to sacrifice himself in Jesus' image, redemption is still possible. Hazel is the fallen Adam...who achieves at last a greater innocence than that he had lost, journeying into the hell of evil and returning, purged, purified, reborn. In implication, Hazel's is a mythic journey, traversing the three consequential possibilities of man's spiritual condition: Adam, Satan, and Christ. The journey back from hell is inevitably more difficult than the Fall. For all but Hazel, Miss O'Connor suggests, it has become prohibitively difficult. His redemption is therefore intended as exemplary, that is, it makes possible the redemption of the world....

At the end of the novel Hazel accepts the fact of sin and the existential possibility of redemption. Hazel's death passes virtually unnoticed; he is found near-dead in a drainage ditch by two fat policemen, authority representatives of their society, who, out of gratuitous malice, club him into unconsciousness (his crucifixion). The law enforcers deliver Hazel's corpse to Mrs. Flood and she at last has uncontested possession of him. Her verbal fondling of the crucified saint suggests at first the necrophilia of Faulkner's Emily ["A Rose for Emily"]. However, Miss O'Connor's purpose is other: Mrs. Flood's love of the dead man comes not from sexual frustration but from the spiritual-emotional equivalent; it is an act of conversion, an act, in the religious sense, of love. She becomes, like Mary Magdalene, a convert to his example, a disciple to his sacrifice. Since she is representative of her evil world, she experiences illumination for all of us.

When Mrs. Flood looks into his burned-out eye sockets, the eyes blinded as an act of ultimate belief, she discovers his secret. She glimpses beyond the barrier of life to the God in him, which implies, of course, the God in herself. She has, through Hazel, a partial illumination of the eternal... Her insight is revelatory (like Hazel she sees for the first time when her eyes are closed). She envisions Hazel, illuminated by God's light, ascending to Him. In a corrupt world, redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute, irrevocable sacrifice. Hazel, as grotesque saint, becomes the 'new Jesus' he has prophesied."

Jonathan Baumbach  
"The Acid of God's Grace"  
The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel  
(New York U 1965) 88-99

"Hazel Motes...goes to a city...that is obviously Atlanta, to preach the 'church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified'.... As a result of Haze's refusal to go along with a religion-faker who calls himself Onnie Jay Holy...a man is hired to dress up as Haze and replace him, and Haze eventually murders the False Prophet, his Doppelganger.

Another sort of antagonist is a boy named Enoch Emery, who works as a guard at the city park, and has his own religious mystery: in fixed ritual stages he must daily have a sacramental milkshake and make suggestive remarks to the waitress, then visit the zoo animals and make obscene comments on their appearance, finally go to the museum and pay his devotions to a mummy. These are Enoch's Stations of the Cross... Eventually he finds his religious fulfillment dressed in a stolen gorilla costume, but it is as the apostle of the mummified 'new Jesus' that he functions in Haze's pilgrim's progress.... Haze puts Hawks in the role of Elijah in his new faith, and expects 'a secret welcome' from him. What he gets instead is Hawks's homely little fifteen-year-old daughter Sabbath Lily, who moves into Haze's bed, becomes the Madonna of the new Jesus (she cradles the mummy in her arms, and addresses Haze as its 'daddy'), and eventually turns into a monster of sexual voracity and heartlessness....

The Essex is Haze's religious mystery: It is Woman (the salesman asks him 'would you like to get under and look up at it?'), Ordination (Haze preaches No Jesus from its hood, as his grandfather had preached Jesus from the hood of his car in Haze's childhood), and Redemption ('Nobody with a good car needs to be justified,' Haze tells Sabbath Lily, in the book's most wonderful line). Haze kills the False Prophet by running over him with the Essex... When a policeman gets the Essex off the road by the simple expedient of pushing it over an embankment, Haze is left with no place to go but an inner Calvary of blindness, asceticism, and sacrificial death at the hands of the police....

Haze...really has wise blood: the blood of his grandfather, the inherited vocation, that preaches through him Christ's Blood, shed to redeem.... [However] 'I preach the Church Without Christ, the church peaceful and satisfied!' This is wonderfully funny, and a sharp mockery of secular rationalism, but on another level it is desperately in earnest, an indictment of the smug and secular Church today.... Two principal strands of symbolism affirm what Haze denies. One is the oaths the characters use unconsciously. 'Good Jesus,' Enoch says. 'My Jesus,' Haze mutters... The other is the rock-strewn landscape....walking with 'stones and small rocks' in his shoes...a boulder on which is painted...'Jesus Saves'....throwing a rock at Enoch....a Bible...'like a rock'... Eventually we recognize these stones, rocks, and boulders: they are tokens of the Rock, Peter's Church.... The organization of Wise Blood is thus a tight network of imagery, symbolism, and foreshadowing."

Stanley Edgar Hyman  
Flannery O'Connor  
(U Minnesota 1966) 9-13

"Wise Blood presents a powerful, mad resistance to...redemption....The challenge is to begin a Church which depends entirely on the defiant, soulless individual.... But [Motes] is so earnest, so frantic and stubborn about it, that it is obvious to anyone that he is obsessed by the challenge of Christ and will one day surrender to it.... The novel describes in detail three stages of the journey to death: (1) the recognition of death (images of coffins and of long dark corridors and the 'dark tunnel'...are corroborating evidence); (2) the rebellion against grace, against the idea of depending upon some figure or ikon, or supernatural being (this is, of course, as much a rebellion against his grandfather as it is an act of violence against religion); and (3) self-immolation, or the individual move toward redemption.... In stage three, the sheen of [his] suit wears off, and it takes on a greyish, darkish appearance as Motes himself changes halfway into the cadaver he will appear finally to his landlady."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
"The Search for Redemption: Flannery O'Connor's Fiction"  
The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor  
eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson  
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 38-39



“The city merely ignores him. The citizenry of Taulkinham—modernity, civilized urban society—is so ‘well adjusted’ to its comfortable complacency that a prophet stalking its streets to preach that there is no God is considered a freak, a harmless religious fanatic who is simply unnoticed.... If at the end Haze, a blasphemer and a murderer, is saved, it is because alone of them he has the integrity to know guilt, to feel that he is ‘not clean’.... As Haze replies to his landlady when she tells him that civilized people no longer mortify their flesh to punish themselves for sinfulness, it is the complacent, secular society of the city that is ‘unnatural’... And it is just such an ‘unnatural’ society that forces the Hazel Moteses and Enoch Emerys to find meaning only in violence. The violence of Hazel Motes is the warped and inarticulate protest of one for whom salvation is of crucial importance, against a society for whom God is dead. That Enoch Emery becomes in effect a wild animal is likewise to be expected in a society which will not offer him elementary love and compassion.”

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.  
“Flannery O’Connor and the Bible Belt”  
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 57-58

“Hazel is desperately rebelling against Jesus because He is linked with the Evil Mother.... [His mother] constantly punished Hazel: ‘Jesus died to redeem you,’ she reminded him. To which he answered: ‘I never ast him’.... First he spends the night with Mrs. Watts (or ‘Momma’ as she would like to be called)—the inverse reflection of his self-righteous mother.... By understanding the false vision of her characters, Miss O’Connor makes their spiritual plight more horrifying.... We sense mysteriously the traditional beliefs—the Grand Design—by which Hazel and his disciples fall short. Irony...asserts the light of faith.”

Irving Malin  
“Flannery O’Connor and the Grotesque”  
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 109, 110-12

“As a boy of twelve (the age at which Jesus announced that he had to be about his Father’s business) ...he first felt a vocation to preach, partly no doubt as a result of the impact upon him of his grandfather who was an itinerant evangelist... It was amidst the dislocations of army life that ‘he had all the time he could want to study his soul in’—and, studying it, he found ‘it was not there,’ that fornication and blasphemy and sin ‘ain’t nothing but words’... His nihilism does not in literal truth have any use at all for a ‘new jesus,’ for he wants nothing to shield him, or others, from the blank emptiness that he has seen beyond the world’s horizon. As he says, ‘There’s no such thing as any new jesus’....

Sensuality...were it to be enjoyed and reveled in for its own sake, would mock the truth—the truth that there is no truth behind all truths, that there is nothing in reality that can be depended upon either to sanction or to comfort the human spirit.... Haze...follows Layfield on his way home and runs him down with his automobile (which is in truth...his pulpit). And the judgment he flings at the dying man is short and blunt—‘You ain’t true’.”

Nathan A. Scott, Jr.  
“Flannery O’Connor’s Testimony: The Pressure of Glory”  
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 150-53

“Hazel Motes stands as a figure for the moderns who hate religion, as Miss O’Connor describes them to a French correspondent Anne Taillefer: ‘They are at pains to establish a religion without teeth, a Church without Christ’.... When Enoch sends the stolen ‘jesus’ to Hazel through Hazel’s paramour Sabbath Lily, Motes destroys it in the manner of an Old Testament Jew destroying an idol.... Like Oedipus and Lear...prophets Hazel Motes and later Francis Marion Tarwater come to the truth through suffering, or at least to a realization of where faith will lead them.”

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.  
“Flannery O’Connor, a Realist of Distances”  
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 172, 178

“One of course always thinks of Miss O’Connor’s city, unless explicitly identified otherwise, as Atlanta, that most ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ of Southern cities—which usually appears as a modern Sodom or Nineveh in her work. On the other hand, it would be wrong to try to set up, as some critics have, some sort of Eden-Sodom polarity, of the sentimental pastoral variety, between country and city in her fiction. Her ‘good country people’ can be just as ornery as the most calculating of her city slickers. She does suggest that there is something almost inherently

artificial in cities and city life—witness, the artificial ‘nigger’ in the story of that name. But this artificiality usually suggests just one more layer of veneer on the essential Old Adam, which is pretty much the same, she implies, whether in the city or in the sticks....

[O’Connor belonged to a family of farmers, she felt most at home on a farm, and she wrote in the tradition of agrarian pastoralism originated by Crèvecoeur and Thomas Jefferson. She portrays destructive effects upon the pastoral “good place” (a metaphor of the heart—and of the soul as expressed by peacocks symbolizing Christ) from two primary sources of evil: (1) the “machine in the Garden”—as represented by cars, rationalism and atheism—the counterforce of the City, and (2) amoral primitives from the backwoods, her version of Faulkner’s Snopeses—the counterforce of the Wilderness. M.H.]

Enoch’s donning the gorilla suit may be symbolic of evolution in reverse... And this gorilla suit none of us finally can doff—unless we put it off to put on the New Man in Christ... Miss O’Connor’s major themes are already emerging. Man cannot justify himself; he cannot find salvation in any of the modern saviors, whether sex or technology or consumer goods... Attempts to escape [Christ] or deny Him make man at once warped and ridiculous, a caricature or... a cartoon of what he was intended by his Creator to be. Yet it is often those whom the ‘upright’ and ‘wholesome’ regard as grotesque who become chosen vessels indeed. And this is just the scandal of the Gospels: the real grotesques are the self-justified, the apparent grotesques may be the blessed.... Man is not only warped in thinking he can set up shop on his own; he’s just downright absurd when he tries to do so.”

Robert Drake  
Flannery O’Connor  
(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 19, 21-23

“Mrs. Watts, a later embodiment of the woman in the coffin, represents not only the specific heathenism associated with the prostitute, but the generally corrupt condition of the world that signifies original sin, the fallen nature of man.... Haze was sexually innocent until his experience with Mrs. Watts, it is her nature not only to delight in her trade but to enhance her pleasure in it by defiling innocence. She mutilates the symbol of Hazel Motes’s basically devout soul—‘After he was asleep, she had got up and cut the top of his hat out in an obscene shape’....

He buys a car...as a replacement for his soul, contending that ‘Nobody with a good car needs to be justified’.... Haze amazes the mechanic with his doctrines, relating the car’s dilapidated condition to his own spiritual condition.... Haze is subconsciously driven to regain his lost faith. His hope is apparent not only in the fact that he protests too much, but in his fascination with the hypocritical pseudo-blind preacher Asa Hawks. His interest in Hawks’s blindness is thematically similar to Mrs. Flood’s curiosity about Haze’s blindness later in the novel; Haze suspects that the old man is not blind, but he paradoxically entertains the hope that someone has had faith enough to choose inward vision in preference to outward sight. Thus the discovery that Hawks is not blind renews Haze’s commitment to evil and impels him to succumb to the corruption of Sabbath Lily Hawks....

Enoch Emery in *Wise Blood* is the most fully developed of the neo-pagans who fail to achieve an epiphany that indicates their acceptance of grace. Since he functions in the novel as a foil for Hazel Motes, it is not surprising that in him too can be seen the characteristics of the existentialist. The most persistent feature of his portrait is the isolation, alienation, or separateness typical of the existentialist’s explanation of man’s condition.... His father’s wise blood gives the novel its title; even though Enoch claims to ‘know a whole heap about Jesus,’ it is his father’s wisdom, not Christ’s, that he turns to for direction. This belief in one’s own blood, in his own identity as the ultimate measure of truth, is at the very heart of existentialist doctrine.... In contrast to Haze, Enoch is the fully realized existentialist; whereas Haze is devoted only to nothingness...Enoch Emery has [focused] his life upon a literal new Jesus and making a religion of it even before he has heard Haze preach....

Every day he visits the shrine of his religion, carrying out a rigid order of worship, the steps of which might be taken to correspond to the successive stages of the Mass or the stations of the cross.... The first of these is at the swimming pool, where Enoch hides in the abelia bushes and watches the women in bathing suits... His voyeurism represents the extent to which pagan indulgence of the appetite is a sterile substitution for the spiritual activity of man when he identifies his existence with God. The next stage of his ritual takes place in the ‘FROSTY BOTTLE, a hotdog stand in the shape of an Orange Crush with frost painted in blue around the top of it,’ where his partaking of

a chocolate malted milkshake is the grotesque pagan equivalent of the sacrificial wine in Holy Communion... Its sordidness is enhanced by the lewd remarks made by Enoch to the waitress, a vulgar priestess...

Enoch proceeds along his unholy way to the animal cages where he spits upon the wolves, which he calls hyenas, and utters obscenities before the cages of other animals, his hatred of them arising partly from his envy of the care and feeding administered to them by the attendants. Although one of the cages that seems to be empty is of no interest to Enoch, Hazel stands before it as if it were the empty tomb of the risen Christ, and when he realizes that it is occupied by an owl with one eye open, the eye becomes the gaze of God, to which he protests, as he had earlier to the waitress, 'I am clean.' Finally at the MVSEVM, Enoch ascends the ritually numbered ten steps to the porch, ushers in his unwilling novice, explains the mystery to him in 'a church whisper,' and resents the intrusion of a mother and her children as that of the uninitiated. He is undeterred in his mission to bring the new Jesus to his new friend, even though Hazel abandons him in the museum and knocks him unconscious with a rock as he attempts to follow...

The most important piece of furniture in [his] room is 'a tabernacle-like cabinet which was meant to contain a slop-jar.' On one level this washstand symbolizes Enoch's solipsism, for its ornate exterior is climaxed by an oval mirror and Enoch 'had dreamed of unlocking the cabinet and getting in it and then proceeding to certain rites and mysteries that he had a very vague idea about in the morning. This image of Enoch in the cabinet prefigures the ultimate purpose of the cabinet as a tabernacle for the shrunken man...a god in the image of himself, mummified and unresurrected... When Enoch steals the shrunken man from the museum (his actual lack of true identity being symbolized here in his disguise as a Negro) and presents it to the one whom he considers the prophet of his neo-paganism, Hazel, as Jonathan Baumbach says, 'recognizes it as himself—his double,' and destroys it in an act of self-murder....

Mrs. Flood undergoes conversion progressively as she witnesses Hazel Motes's Oedipus-like blinding of himself. When he tells her of his intention, she is completely unable to understand the meaning of it. Her own solution to 'feeling that bad' would have been suicide, she thinks, and one sees a parallel to Jocasta in Oedipus Rex (which Flannery O'Connor read for the first time during the writing of this novel)... Even though Mrs. Flood is not aware of it, her description of Haze's condition shows almost mystical religious insight in encompassing the divine timelessness and limitlessness of Haze's vision of God....

Mrs. Flood's own conversion to Hazel's thinking is foreshadowed by her wish to marry him, not to get his pension or to commit him to the state institution, as she had earlier planned, but to 'keep him. Watching his face had become a habit with her; she wanted to penetrate the darkness behind it and see for herself what was there.... Her ignorance of the place of holiness in marriage does not diminish her sincerity. Indeed, the imagery suggests the traditional Christian analogy between Christ and the church, Haze in this instance standing as a Christlike bridegroom and Mrs. Flood (her name associating with the descendants of Noah) taking her position as the expectant bride soon to be assimilated into the one flesh of God—the concept that makes marriage a sacrament.... The consummation of the proposed marriage is figuratively accomplished when two policemen bring Hazel's dead body to Mrs. Flood and place it in her bed....

To the casual reader, Hazel Motes's blinding of himself might be interpreted as an act of despair rather than faith; such a reader would probably make the same mistake about Oedipus. But the novel denies such misreading in its detailed account of Haze's humble acts of contrite mortification, in his explicit acceptance of the Christian scheme by altering his previous refrain to 'I'm not clean,' and in the conversion of Mrs. Flood effected by his example."

Carter W. Martin

The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor  
(Vanderbilt U 1968) 53, 66-70, 117, 119-120, 122-25

"Motes's total disillusionment ends in his resuming the ritualistic suffering he practiced as a boy." [This is an atheist reduction that deliberately omits the religious meaning--cowardly political correctness by the most bigoted critic of O'Connor. M.H.]

Josephine Hendin  
The World of Flannery O'Connor  
(Indiana U 1970) 41

“Enoch’s story informs Haze’s story; both young men make a choice but they are prompted by different forces. Not wise blood like Enoch’s but rather the realization of the meaning of sin and the possibility of redemption renders Haze Motes...a Christian in spite of himself. He is the prototype of the primitive believer set free from the physical, utopian dream of the secular city.... Not a return to the animal but an overcoming of the animal will permit man at last to come home...

Man’s animal nature requires mortification and submission to grace. Enoch’s name suggests a reversal of evolution, a suggestion that recurs with his ritual procession past the caged animals at the zoo.... Enoch embodies the needs of the flesh.... Emery is an abrasive.... He serves as Haze’s counterpart throughout the novel.... He personifies what Haze might become if he does not learn the truth.... Enoch himself is the ‘new Jesus’ created by modern man in a materialistic world where his perverse inclinations deny spiritual fulfillment.... He is man in his lowest, most perverted state....

Wise Blood contains fourteen chapters which break into three separate parts, with the central four chapters (six through nine) providing the content on which depends the ultimate reversal of the quest which is the action proper of the book. Thus part one (chapters one through five) balances part three (chapters ten through fourteen), while part two spans the longer units. If one imagines the novel as an arch structure, part one leads to the apex of part two, and part three provides the reversal of part one. This reversal provides fulfillment of the quest inherent in all the action and symbols...

In the opening sequence on the train Haze Motes is wearing a new ‘glaring blue’ suit and is sitting opposite Mrs. Hitchcock, who says, ‘I guess you’re going home.’ She leans forward, ‘squinting at his eyes, trying almost to look into them.’ They seem to her like ‘passages leading somewhere,’ and she notices that the ‘outline of a skull under his skin was plain and insistent.’ On the last page of the novel Miss O’Connor repeats this sentence but omits the word insistent. Haze, his blue suit now faded, lies dead. Mrs. Flood says, ‘I see you’ve come home’ and grabs his hands while she observes his face: ‘The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them.... She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light....until he was the pin point of light.’ Haze’s quest, which has passed from denial and repudiation to ritualistic cleansing, has brought him home, and his coming home serves as a light, albeit a pinpoint of light, for his landlady. The woman on the train (Mrs. Hitchcock) and the landlady (Mrs. Flood) are similar, both genteel and respectable, and through both of them Miss O’Connor establishes the significance of Haze Motes’s eyes....

Miss O’Connor’s...final choice of Haze Motes [as his name] embodies the ironic reversal of the first and last pages. Since haze used as a noun means ‘vagueness of mind or mental perception,’ the verb to haze suggests ‘making vague or obscure.’ The verb also carries an initiatory or punitive meaning, as in schoolboy hazing of a newcomer. In its primary sense motes means ‘small particles,’ thus relating to the pinpoint of light Haze becomes at the end; Mrs. Flood calls him ‘Mr. Motes’ before looking into his eyes. For most readers motes suggests another meaning, the scriptural motes and beams, obstructions to vision.... At the moment...when Haze rejects the ‘new Jesus,’ the mummy Enoch has stolen for him, he is wearing his mother’s spectacles, which he then throws away. After these symbolic acts he leaves Sabbath Lily and pursues his course toward the ultimate self-mortification of blinding himself. In the beginning Haze has eyes and sees not; in the end he is blinded but sees. Simultaneous rejection of spectacles, mummy, and physical lust (Sabbath) is part of the progression to true sight.... Both Oedipus and Haze discover a truth unlike any they had expected, and both seek inward sight through loss of external sight...

The artificial reality—the delusion—of the movies...serves the modern age far better than does truth, for cinematic reality speaks chiefly to the physical eye.... Enoch’s story is foretold symbolically through the three movies he sees. The first movie, about ‘the Eye who performed operations by remote control,’ is an obvious allusion to the symbols of the one-eyed bear (light) in the previous chapter and the one-eyed owl in chapter five.... The second movie, ‘about life at Devil’s Island Penitentiary,’ alludes again to the caged ‘deadly enemies’ and to the caged animals at the zoo.... The third movie, called ‘Lonnie Comes Home Again,’ is about a baboon named Lonnie.... The three movies symbolize Enoch’s regression from light, to confinement, to the beastly form... In contrast, the ‘deadly enemies’ in chapter seven symbolize Haze’s story: the black ‘animal,’ defeated by the ‘hawk,’ sees the light. The animal nature and the Godlike nature are compatible only when the two are integrated and neither dominates the other....

Haze's claustrophobic state in his berth foreshadows a series of cage images, all related to the confinement of spirit in flesh. The entire opening sequence aboard a train foreshadows the tunnel image used at the end of the book. Protagonist and reader enter a dark passageway with a pinpoint of light visible at the opposite end: although Haze disappears in the 'dark tunnel,' he becomes Mrs. Flood's pinpoint of light. Thus the symbolic passageway unfolds man's movement from perversion to grace.... Ironically, by seeking what he regards as sinful, Haze is seeking Jesus....

The porter [is] the first of a series of men Haze meets who are 'not true,' that is, not what they seem to be. His sour triumph that 'Jesus been a long time gone' suggests his materialistic value scale which has resulted from his 'rising' above his origins and denying his background.... Haze's denials of his belief, both in words and in action, mark him as another character who is 'not true.' The porter who denies his origins and his religion is no worse in his negation than Haze.... Haze sees himself in Solace Layfield, an untrue prophet. Solace...is hired by Hoover Shoats to act as an evangelist. Shoats—the name means hogs... Like Enoch, Shoats is animalistic but values human friendship above all else. The value he places on friendship and religion is purely mercenary.... Although Haze thinks that killing Solace will destroy his conscience, the act will instead set him free for redemption...

The destruction of his car follows Haze's murder of Solace. The choice of the Essex is suggestive: is sex. A policeman pushes the car over a cliff in a scene that recalls Christ's driving the devil-infested swine into the sea.... The policeman tells Haze he will 'see better' if he gets out of the car, and indeed he does see better. After the car plunges over the bank, Haze insists that he is going nowhere...then he returns to the city and buys the lime with which to blind himself... Haze is found half dead... Blue is traditionally associated with truth; appropriately, when the policemen find Haze, the rain has ceased and the clouds are dispelled. His faded blue suit and the appearance of blue in the sky both suggest that the 'haze' has also been dispelled through his choice of spiritual over physical values.... *Wild Blood* is comic fundamentally because it ends happily with Haze Motes's total surrender to belief."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain

The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor  
(U Kentucky 1971) 32-58, 83

"The genesis of Hazel's spiritual career lies in the influence of his grandfather and his mother, both Tennessee backwoods believers, the variety of whose religious experience is intense and sin-ridden.... Whichever of the poles of belief Hazel is finally drawn to, his life is predicated upon Jesus, and he must live within the theologically charged field of the redemption.... For in placing upon Hazel the burden of sin and guilt, his mother and grandfather have unwittingly fused in his mind a restraining fear of Jesus... 'There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin'.... Discharged from the army, Hazel thinks himself still uncorrupted, but, lest we be tempted to agree with him, the author inflicts upon Motes a festering wound that seems symbolically equivalent to the loss of his soul.... No more soul, no more evil, no more Jesus.... Later, the suggestion of 'war poisoning' is reiterated and broadened in implication when we are told that Hazel gets money from the government for 'something the war had done to his insides'....

What is at work so effectively in the prose is a comic irony born of the narrator's (and reader's) privileged perception that, against his will, Hazel is cooperating in a pattern of grace... When Hazel awakens from his nightmare and utters a half-frustrated, half-yearning cry of 'Jesus,' the porter replies with a literally accurate but theologically cynical, 'Jesus been along time gone.' Placed crucially at the end of the chapter, the porter's words reverberate and render him a dimension not merely of social indifference, but of satanic malevolence.... Insofar as the book as a whole is...a fulfillment of Hazel's initial dream, it may be seen as a kind of dream romance [in medieval tradition of dream allegory that includes Hawthorne], and, as such, *Wild Blood* has profound psychological validity. For what O'Connor has done is to lend a spiritual emphasis to a persistent rhythm of dreams and poetry....

Another detail adding to the circular structure of the narrative is O'Connor's use of a similar figurative language (Motes's 'tunnel' vision) to describe both Mrs. Hitchcock's and Mrs. Flood's response to Hazel's magnetic power: thus Mrs. Hitchcock sees Hazel's eyes as 'passages leading somewhere,' while Mrs. Flood imagines the inside of Hazel's head to be 'like you were walking in a tunnel and all you could see was a pin point of light'.... The metaphor culminates in the last lines of the book, taking Hazel from his initial ride on the literal train to a symbolic passage through a tunnel and concluding with his figurative apotheosis, when he is at last associated with the pinpoint of light at the end of the tunnel, the star of Bethlehem. The authority for this final vision is Mrs. Flood,

who, though she has grown in her imaginative commitment to Hazel, remains unaided by grace, and hence 'blocked at the entrance'....

The reader has earlier been introduced to the haunting source of Hazel's guilt—his early and accidental exposure to the sideshow nude in a casket.... The enclosed space is not only identified with the security of home—and mother's chifferobe—but with the guilt and terror of his first discovery of the sin attached to women as sexual objects. It is his mother who chastises him on his return home, and, significantly, he later superimposes her long, straight-standing figure upon that of the fat woman who was in the actual casket.... In view of the guilt thus attached to sex, and the transposition of his mother to the feared sex object (...both Leora Watts and Mrs. Flood 'mother' Hazel), it is classically fitting that Hazel's defining act of penitence for the guilt of his generalized sin should be an Oedipal blinding.... Hazel's blinding of himself seems at least partially imagined by him as a refutation of the imposter prophet Hawks (whom he had looked upon earlier as a potential savior) and as an assertion of his own truer role of prophet....

Solace appears to Motes as his shadow, his mirror image—in short, his 'conscience,' for the absurdity and insincerity of Layfield's mechanical parody of Hazel's own anti-Christ gospel become uncomfortably and immediately apparent to the preacher. After watching Layfield's act, Motes declares ominously, 'If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll hunt you down and kill you'.... Hazel at last confronts his shadow.... 'You ain't true'... The prophet forces the imposter to take off his suit (a defrocking) and thereupon he ceremoniously runs him over with the guardian of his own faith, his Essex automobile.... As for Layfield's 'confession' of his sins to Hazel (which one critic has cited as 'one of the few deeply moving scenes in the novel'), in the context of O'Connor's unsentimental faith, this seems rather a parody of the 'moving confession scene.'

For O'Connor, Hazel is at the height of his blindness, and what is apparently required to save him is some act of grace. It comes to Hazel, ironically in the form of a patrolman... Appearing from nowhere as an allegorical agency of grace, this deus ex machina proceeds to push off the road Hazel's well-worn deus in machina, his Essex. (The car has been throughout the story the literal and figurative vehicle of Hazel's spiritual identity: 'Nobody with a good car needs to be justified'....

The reader's sympathy moves from the normal characters, who find Hazel so freakish, to a sympathy with Hazel himself. It is at last the normal, 'sane' world of Mrs. Flood that we are led to regard as a comedy of error. In certain ways *Wise Blood* resembles the form of classic tragedy. Hazel is a proud hero who scorns human limitations; he pursues sin, blasphemes God, and, in a moment of divine intervention and chastisement, suffers a recognition of his error that leads to a self-inflicted reversal of fortune. And...O'Connor did indeed read *Oedipus Rex* while working on the novel. And yet, if we accept the premises of the story, then it is not as tragedy that we experience *Wise Blood*. O'Connor has superimposed a classic tragic shape upon a defiantly Christian world view; we may indeed feel a sense of awe and mystery at the end of the narrative, but Hazel is in fact the hero of a comic plot of salvation....

The story of Enoch Emery is designed as a parody of the story of Hazel Motes, and helps define, by contrast, the sense in which Hazel is a Christian hero.... While Hazel's attention is throughout directed toward 'higher' things than man in his relations with men, Enoch's concerns are with man in his lowest relations—with animals. O'Connor dramatizes this obsession by portraying Enoch as a zoo-keeper... The focusing symbol of Enoch's ethos, with its minimal claim to man's superiority over the animal kingdom, is a man whom other men have enabled to survive...a glass-encased mummy... Taking Hazel as his divinely appointed spiritual mentor and hoping to please him, Enoch drags Motes to the mummy shrine...obeying an impulse of his 'wise blood' (Hazel and Enoch intermittently contest whose blood is 'wiser') [and he] prepares his room for the mummy. Its tabernacle will be the washstand which had previously held a slop basin... When Enoch finally brings the mummy to Hazel's house, the parody of the Nativity reaches its climax. Sabbath Lily...proclaims a new holy family....

But when Hazel confronts madonna and child, he is adventitiously wearing his own mother's silver-rimmed glasses, which he has kept with him since his army days. Thus armed symbolically with her truth-seeing lenses and having just suggestively seen his mother's face superimposed upon his own in a mirror, Hazel acts decisively—as if with her power—against this mockery of the Incarnation...[although] Hazel has not yet, himself, gained his proper vision.... Nevertheless, the idol smashing does foreshadow Hazel's eventual recantation, for, although he doesn't yet realize it, the mummy, an embodiment of man's merely physical and material... 'immortality,' has been the exact

apotheosis of his apocryphal faith... And Enoch had merely heeded what he imagined to be his leader's call for a new Jesus, 'one that's all man'...

Once he has defrocked Gonga the Gorilla, and taken on the talismanic accouterments of his newfound role (compare Hazel's murder and divesting of Solace Layfield), Enoch, with anxious anticipation, extends his newly soft and hairy hand to the first human beings he discovers (a pair of lovers gazing from a hilltop at the city), causing them, alas, to flee their diverse ways.... 'The gorilla stood as though surprised and presently its arm fell to its side. It sat down on the rock'... This is the last image we are given of Enoch, and it remains in the reader's mind to provide a parodic counterpoint to Hazel's view of the landscape at his moment of enlightenment.... Enoch's quest for a rock of faith to rest his belief on has brought him only as close as the rock earlier hurled at his head by Hazel and the final cold stone on which he sits at the end of his career. Like Hazel, Enoch ends in isolation; but his is a failed quest and, because of the grotesque misdirection of it, an essentially ridiculous and comic one."

Miles Orvell

Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor  
(Temple U 1972) 74-77, 80-84, 86-89

"He fears Jesus not as the Judge who separates the sheep from the goats, but as the Redeemer who, as the grandfather says, would chase the boy over the waters of sin to keep him from losing his soul. He sees Jesus as a devourer—'soul hungry' in the grandfather's words—and salvation as destruction of himself.... [his ego]. It is true that the Christian is expected to sacrifice his independence and the proud self of the old Adam within him, but he does so to find his essential self, not to be destroyed... [O'Connor] gives the impression of the effects of grace indirectly, without having to show them in the character himself....

Haze's concern with death is in part a necessary religious preoccupation with last things, which most of the characters in the novel ignore as if their lives were unending.... It would be wrong, then, to think of Haze's concern only as a morbidity or as an abnormal fear resulting from his childhood experiences with death and religion; to do so would be to accept the point of view of Miss O'Connor's grotesquely shallow rationalists... One may also see his dreams as an unrecognized desire for redemption to overcome death, to escape from the coffin.... Yet at the same time that the dreams show a repressed longing for eternal life and for Jesus, who has saved man from death, they also show a conflicting fear of Jesus as his devourer, as symbolically the coffin that closes down to swallow up men.... He does not see salvation as a rebirth and a culmination of his essential being.... The dreams are metaphorical capsules of the main action of the novel....

When Haze first arrives in the city, he decides that he is going to do what people call sin in order to show that he does not believe in it, which merely shows how much he does believe in it since he is so compelled to prove that he does not... He is preaching what everyone around him in the city believes, a relativistic, secular humanism. But they believe it quite comfortably, whereas he must violently and continuously assert his disbelief, because, like the Misfit, he is aware of the ultimate choices and must repeatedly deny Christ, just as the intense believer must repeatedly accept Him. Thus, Haze is an absurdity, an evangelistic atheist, a priest in the black mass of a humanistic religion that denies the validity of priests, masses, and religions. In cultural terms, he is just making explicit the demonic worship of man... He is trying to maintain the demonic despair of defiance, to deify himself as the opponent of God....

Haze is using Leora Watts not only to escape death but also to refute his religious mother by finding her replacement in a prostitute, a spiritless sexual object, a reduction of the other person to a thing.... Sabbath Lily Hawks, the young girl with whom he reluctantly makes love, is once represented as a parody of the Virgin Mother as she holds the mummified 'new Jesus' in her arms and says, 'Call me Momma now'.... Haze uses his car as an alternative to sexuality in his self-assertions, for the car is several times related to sex.... As Haze runs over Layfield with his car, claiming that this prophet 'ain't true,' he kills his double and prepares for his own rebirth. The symbolic death of the double has become almost a convention in modern literature.... The murder is not only a turning point, but also a metaphorical explanation of what he has been doing in the entire novel. All of his self-assertions are futile, not only because he is trying to deceive himself, but because he wants basically to lose his self, his independence, to Jesus.... He leans over the dying Layfield to hear the man's last words and shockingly finds himself hearing a confession. Thus, as a symbol of Haze, Layfield admits his guilt and desire for forgiveness; and, as himself, he turns the actual Haze into a priest....

Enoch feels that he has 'wise blood,' a kind of subrational bodily intuition inherited from his father. At times he is controlled by his unconscious impulses, which force him to do things he does not want to do but which he knows he must. The dark gods of his blood, in a likely parody of D. H. Lawrence's fiction, force him variously into awe, envy, and hatred of the animals in the zoo in which he works as a guard. He also worships a shrunken mummy in a museum (the 'new Jesus,' who is 'all man')... The instinctualist can go no further than an apotheosis into an ape...

Mrs. Flood is a philistine who cannot understand why anyone would act the way her boarder does.... Given such a comically inadequate point of view, the reader is not likely to be very critical of Haze's religious feelings; to question them at all would be in effect to side with Mrs. Flood, who thanks her stars every day that she is 'not religious or morbid.'... [Yet] Mrs. Flood senses vaguely that Haze is aware of something she is not, that he has some reason for blinding himself, and that she is somehow being cheated out of something that he is wise to."

David Eggenschwiler  
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor  
(Wayne State 1972) 103, 105-114

"Haze Motes is presented as the epitome of the grotesque protagonist...but...Haze is many men simultaneously: fanatic, demonist, rogue, clown, and Christ figure; displaced by the war, he frequently operates at a child's level of intelligence... Obsessed with Jesus Christ to a degree which precludes normal human behavior, Haze exchanges his black preacher's hat for a white panama, emblematic in O'Connor's fiction of the devil, and he struggles to erect a secular Church Without Christ....

As a secular prophet obsessed with the baseness of the world, he rebels against being drawn into a theological trap... This impulse toward the secular is a characteristic affliction of Flannery O'Connor's grotesques, for she sees the modern world divided between those who would eliminate mystery and those who are trying to rediscover it. The secular world which seduces her characters typically divorces eternity from temporality in order to negate the...mystery which Miss O'Connor insists upon. It is a world which values discrete data and the appurtenances of technology, which fragments experience...

Most of Haze Motes' avatars, or doppelgangers, are rogues who constantly force Haze into untenable and self-destructive situations; yet these tricksters enable Haze to perceive gradually the truth... Asa Hawks, for one, is a sham prophet—one of several psychological doubles informing Haze's destiny—who pretends blindness and turns religion into a business ethic. Haze, outraged by his commercial travesty upon religion, actually does destroy his eyesight in atonement.

Another psychological double who functions as a trickster is Hoover Shoats, alias Onnie Jay Holy, an 'artist type' who attempts to align himself with Motes for financial gain.... His easy guile and deliberate corruption are outrageous to Motes, who sees in Hoover a grotesque parody of himself. Yet a third...double whom Haze must eliminate is the trickster Solace Layfield, a false preacher hired to compete with Motes... Much of the plot is organized on the polarity which exists between Haze and his comic counterpart or double, Enoch Emery, a backwoods moron seeking a 'new Jesus' who will save him. Enoch, truly without Christ, is a brutal parody of the identity crisis suffered by Motes...

Haze's frantic attempt to escape the shadow of Jesus in the first half of the novel is later countered by equally vigorous efforts toward union with Christ through asceticism and extreme penance. As Haze figuratively moves back to Bethlehem, his half-articulated and tortured spiritual state becomes synonymous with Christ's own agonies on the road to Calvary; eventually, in a grotesque crucifixion scene, he is clubbed unconscious by two policemen and brought home dead, although his landlady continues to talk to him as though he were the resurrected Christ."

Gilbert H. Muller  
Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque  
(U Georgia 1972) 23-25, 28-29, 36-37

"The world of Taulkingham is peopled by grotesques who are ludicrous because they have rejected the possibility of grace....an uncommitted world: 'Jesus been dead a long time' and nobody really cares.... There is ever present in the reader's mind the recollection of Haze's grandfather and of Haze's rejected vocation of preacher. These hover always over the present action, placing Haze in perspective as one who is a (temporarily) 'lost soul'...



The content of his experience—sin, atonement, redemption—is totally serious; but the expression of it frequently verges on the ludicrous.... O'Connor...creates a modern saint's legend within a comic setting.... Hazel Motes, the comically pathetic runaway from God, is at last trapped by his destiny; and the story is thereby transformed from a seeming exercise in farce to a most intently serious study of the problem of redemption in the modern world. The action of *Wise Blood* develops through a basic pattern of flight, apprehension, and capitulation. The fugitive is Hazel Motes, seeking, like Jonah, to escape his divinely appointed mission. Haze had planned to become a preacher; but, having lost his faith while in the army, he dedicates his life to anti-Christ instead... In the end, however, Haze is unable to maintain his status as Satan's emissary.... He blinds himself as a drastic act of atonement for his futile efforts to flee from grace....

Most arresting are his eyes, set deep within their hollow sockets; and indeed images of sight and seeing—employed in the ancient equation of inner vision with knowledge—provide the unifying metaphor of the work. Each iteration of light imagery is resonant with biblical echoes: 'Now we see as through a glass darkly... If thy right eye offend thee... An eye for an eye...' and, above all, 'They have eyes and see not.' When we first encounter Haze, he is engaged in a typical action—he is looking intently at something which his companion cannot discern. His first spoken words in the narrative are, 'I got to go see the porter.' The eyes of Hazel Motes—'like passages leading somewhere'—are the central feature of his countenance, the visible sign of his inward identity.... Motes recalls the biblical injunction, 'first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then thou shalt see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.'

This casting out the beam is, of course, precisely what Hazel does in a most literal fashion when he, like Oedipus, serves as priest and penitent, divine executioner and human victim, exacting fierce retribution for the guilt of an unholy life. The dramatic force of the gesture is prepared for through constant references to sight and sightlessness—the glasses of his mother which Hazel carries with him as a reminder of home, the phony preacher who trades upon his feigned blindness in his evangelistic con game, the bastard child strumpet who gives Haze 'the eye,' the shining eye of the owl gazing accusingly at Haze out of the darkness of his cage in the city zoo. Flannery O'Connor, like Sophocles, uses the physical act of blinding not merely for its dramatic impact but also to awaken the full force of the many symbolic implications of sight-ignorance, blindness-knowledge, light-darkness, death-life.

His name, then, captures the essence of the man as the seeing unbeliever who becomes the blinded seer. Most often, the first name is shortened to simply Haze, suggesting mist or cloud; and this abbreviation in turn defines the moral state of Hazel throughout the early course of the action. In fact, when we first see him, he is a victim of a divided intention: 'Looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car.' Haze is at this stage in a very real sense a 'divided self'.... Hazel had known by the time he was twelve that he too would follow the preacher's calling.... His appearance and manner are still very much those of the fundamentalist disciple and he is often taken for one....

The porter's denial of his identity is the first of many instances in the story of Haze confronting those who reject their selfhood, assuming instead various disguises.... Haze encounters the responses which are to characterize the attitudes of the city dwellers—denial of truth (the porter), embarrassed refusal to approach the subject seriously (Mrs. Hitchcock), and contemptuous rejection (ladies in the diner); and in these mutually futile attempts at communication is conveyed the second major strand of imagery. Images of sound.... He assumes that, since Jesus is a fraud, the way to deny him most effectively is through a life of deliberate sin. He chooses the two most direct routes to the devil—sexual impurity and open blasphemy.... For the worshipers of gadgets, the potato-peeler salesman displays his relics from his sidewalk 'altar'... Asa Hawks does just what his name implies—he hawks his religious merchandise in the streets... Salvation, like love and potato peelers, is available for a small cash outlay....

Enoch epitomizes the spirit of the secular city, which was founded...by Cain in the name of his own son Enoch.... Enoch of the 'wise blood' finds a still more primitive deity—the shrunken mummy for which he prepares a splendid tabernacle in the form of a gilded commode.... Enoch goes lusting after a still stranger god: Gongga, the presiding deity of the modern movie set.... He ultimately becomes the god.... Having failed as a human, Enoch opts for the beast.... Gongga does, in fact, possess all the attributes essential to success in the modern age—power, celebrity, personal magnetism.... To reflect the disparity that exists between the unrealized divine potential and the gross actuality, O'Connor uses familiar images of the animal kingdom.... Often, the animal image is used to achieve

a swift insight into character.... These, then, are the cults of the secular world—sex, things, glamour...and various perversions... The new paganism produces not harmony but disharmony at all levels....

The street philosophy expounded by Hoover Shoates—and later, by his disciple Solace Layfield—embodies the extremes of ethical relativism.... It is hardly possible to have a ‘Church of Christ Without Christ.’ In this name for Hoover’s church is revealed...the peculiar paradox of the modern city, many of whose inhabitants embrace a nominal Christianity but reject all the tenets of traditional Christian doctrine. Hoover (or Onnie Jay Holy, as he calls himself for professional purposes) offers Christ without tears and salvation without suffering in a peculiar ‘do-it-yourself’ religious formula: ‘The unredeemed are redeeming themselves... You don’t have to believe nothing you don’t understand and approve of. If you don’t understand it, it ain’t true’....

The final section of *Wise Blood* occurs as a series of violent and destructive acts, each of which marks the death of some vital component of Haze’s nature and the end of a particular line of development within the novel. The first of these is Haze’s abrupt demolition of the shrunken mummy, the gift of Enoch who is convinced that his wise blood has led him to the new Jesus.... The mummy...carries, like Captain Ahab’s doubloon, a variety of meanings according to the interpreter. It is, in an objective sense...literally the ‘handful of dust,’ which the materialist insists is the sum of the human essence.... Enoch reenacts the role of the primitive worshiper who selects a strange and foreign object as his god. His presentation of the bizarre artifact to Haze is an invitation to partake of idolatry....

Wearing his mother’s glasses, he has been peering into the mirror, out of which his mother’s face stares back at him. Undoubtedly, that face recalls to him his lost life, his forsaken identity, the intensity of his former dedication to a now rejected set of ideals. It is, in fact, his own conscience which gazes at him out of the eyes of his dead mother.... His contemplation of the ‘face in the mirror’ is broken by Sabbath Lily’s intrusion. In an instant, Haze repudiates Lily and his own association with her. The contrast between his paramour and his own mother and the suggestion of a child which might well be produced by himself and Lily operate as a violent catalyst within him, and he dashes the mummy’s sawdust brains out against the wall... The action also serves as a harsh rejection of Enoch...and of his absurd dabblings in idolatry.... The symbolic murder of the effigy prefigures the actual murder of Solace Layfield, the false twin.... Once more he attacks conscience, knowing that ‘if you don’t hunt it down and kill it, it’ll hunt you down and kill you’.... [This is also a theme of “William Wilson” by Poe.]

Haze has now renounced blasphemy for a philosophy of total materialism (‘it was not right to believe anything you couldn’t see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth’).... The car is at once Haze’s holy ground (he preaches from its nose as had his grandfather before him), his mobile home (he sometimes sleeps in it), and his guarantee of removal to a new place when the old one fails.... As for many modern car owners, the auto becomes literally a projection of his own identity.... In the patrolman’s destruction of his car, Haze detects the unmistakable hand of God. It is the sign that he has waited for, for so long, the event which dramatically reverses the course of his life....a reversal as dramatic as that of Paul struck down on the road to Damascus.... Having at last seen God, he will look on man no more.... [His blinding] is...the rejection of claims of the body for the demands of the spirit, the cleansing of his outward vision that he may be prepared for the interior illumination.... He withdraws...from the world as he enters the...path of the holy ascetic.... Haze follows intuitively the course outlined by Saint Augustine in the tenth book of the *Confessions*, when he renounces the ‘lust of the eyes’...all sensory gratifications....

Mrs. Flood...is offended by Haze’s refusal to acknowledge her personal identity.... In her literal-mindedness, she is like Enoch.... Mrs. Flood’s vague sense that she is somehow the victim of an unfair hoax is the typical response of the literal mind to the symbolic mode or to the allegorical gesture.... Mrs. Flood...adheres to a philosophy of total ethical relativism: ‘I believe that what’s right today is wrong tomorrow’... Mrs. Flood, blind to Haze’s spiritual motives, finally concludes (like some early readers of the story) that Haze is insane... [She] is attracted to the mysterious realm where light shines in the midst of darkness, but she is ‘blocked at the entrance’... Mrs. Flood, like so many of O’Connor’s characters, is trapped in the self which she assumes is the center of the cosmos. Haze’s path, by contrast, is one of total rejection of selfhood... [He] is determined to expunge his impurities through superhuman efforts so that he may adequately redeem himself before the God he has so deeply betrayed.... Haze is guilty of blasphemy, murder, and sexual impurity. His rigorous fundamentalist Puritan heritage would insist upon an extreme act of expiation if he is to be saved from everlasting damnation....

It is, finally, not Enoch but Haze who is possessed of ‘wise blood’; and the Christ-pattern he follows is unmistakable. Just as Haze’s total personality is set in vivid contrast to Enoch’s absurdity, so the implicit allusions

to the blood of the cross and to the profound sacrifice there enacted serve as an ironic reminder of the essential triviality of Enoch's pursuits. O'Connor herself referred to Enoch as 'a moron and chiefly a comic character'.... [He] reflect[s] the primitive urge toward idolatry which survives even amidst the intellectual sophistications of the present age."

Dorothy Walters  
Flannery O'Connor  
(Twayne 1973) 42-61

"It is not they—these religious heroes—who are sick, who are freaks, but we ourselves; it is we who cannot give up all—who cannot give up anything—for Christ, who are sick, who have been freaks so long we cannot see ourselves for what we are.... O'Connor certainly saw her religious heroes as men whose fundamental integrity, in spite of the desperate paths of violence into which their search sometimes betrays them, nevertheless shines brilliantly forth from the dull, doomed, meaningless lives of the uncommitted people around them....

The title concept of the book is clearly an ironical one—one's blood is not 'wise'; to believe that it is (that one can rely simply on self) is the classic fundamental error of prideful mankind. This concept is one of the central recurrent themes of the book... The question projected: who does have wise blood—Hazel or Enoch?... The Enoch story is meant to form a kind of counterpoint to the much more crucial and serious quest of Hazel Motes.... Throughout the Enoch sections of the book Enoch's blood is leading him on an absurd chase... Our false gods are, more than anything else, merely ourselves, our own shrunken, dried up, and above all, mortal—no matter how we try to escape it—selves."

Martha Stephens  
The Question of Flannery O'Connor  
(LSU 1973) 48, 55-56, 58, 61

"Wise Blood is organized around a nexus of [thematic] opposites: sin/innocence; animality/spirituality; commitment to nothing/commitment to evil...spiritual sight/spiritual blindness. The tension generated by these opposites functions to bring the protagonist Hazel Motes ever closer to a revelatory moment when the scales fall from his eyes and he achieves the vision of a mystic or saint. Once this still point in his frantic quest is reached, he blinds himself as he has no further use for the means of physical sight. At this juncture the final pair of opposites draws a minor character, and along with her, the reader, toward a dark tunnel where illumination is proffered but finally withheld from all but those capable of seeing with the eyes of faith. In the resolution of the conflict between these pairs, attention is focused upon a central theme—mystery....

Hazel Motes proclaims as a key doctrine of the Church Without Christ the proposition that 'behind all [truths] there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth.' He is driven to this extreme nihilism by a haunting and half-acknowledged fear that there is one truth but not the one he preaches; namely, the truth of original sin. No matter how adamant his shrill insistence that fall and redemption are meaningless sounds, he cannot fully escape the knowledge hidden, as it were, in his blood.... In rejecting the truth of original sin, Haze unwittingly expresses the working philosophy of the city Taulkinham. For the people of Taulkinham subjectively experience themselves as innocent. 'Every person that comes onto this earth,' says the 'artist-type' preacher Hoover Shoats, 'is born sweet and full of love.' In their own eyes 'sweet' and uncorrupted, the inhabitants of the city can attend to the affairs of everyday with no spiritual disquietude.... Haze's preaching draws sarcastic remarks; Shoats's preaching draws crowds....

In such a setting those who exhibit anxiety concerning existential realities are considered freaks; when Hazel asks if anyone cares about the truth, a woman looks at him 'as if he were in a booth at the fair.' Religion becomes indistinguishable from commercial enterprise... On the street there are potato peelers for sale and Hawks and the salesman compete for the attention of prospective customers.... Asa Hawks encourages Haze's attentions largely in order to unload on him his ugly daughter, Sabbath Lily.... Despite their conviction of innocence, the people of Taulkinham are hardly sweet and full of love; rather, they are acquisitive and unfriendly. The prevailing attitude toward property is represented in Haze's landlady, Mrs. Flood, who 'felt justified in getting anything at all back that she could, money or anything else, as if she had once owned the earth and been dispossessed of it.' Unaware that she and her fellow citizens have indeed been dispossessed of their birthright by the fall, Mrs. Flood joins in the general scramble for material possessions—an unconscious attempt to regain Paradise. Thus preoccupied they have little time or patience for others....

While the average citizen's conviction of his innocent state creates an atmosphere characterized by cold indifference or violence, the near-total absence of genuine consciousness in Enoch Emery leads to animality. A satire on evolution and the American success story, Enoch's tale is also a farcical parody of [pantheistic] mystical experience.... Rather than 'making it to the top,' Enoch demonstrates one direction a fundamentally materialistic culture may take—downward toward the purely instinctual life of the animal world. Enoch's consciousness is subservient to mysterious subconscious promptings imaged as the 'wise blood' he believes he has inherited from his daddy, a reversed reflection of the original sin Haze and Taulkinham believe they have not inherited. Enoch lives a secret life among the animals and eventually 'evolves' into a gorilla.... Enoch...worships at the city's heart an effigy representing secular society's corruption and fraudulence (the 'man' is really a sawdust-filled dummy). Convinced that his god is the 'new jesus' of whom he has heard Hazel Motes preach, Enoch steals the mummy (it has been described as 'an objectification of his deformed spirit') in order to present it as an offering. First, however, he houses it in 'a tabernacle-like cabinet which was meant to contain a slop-jar'....

Enoch's story, of course, is meant to be a parody of Hazel's and 'helps define, by contrast, the sense in which Hazel is a Christian hero'.... Enoch's gift of the new jesus, for example, is a major cause propelling Haze toward recognition of the falsity of his anti-Jesus gospel.... Symbolically the new jesus is Hazel's child, sired by an apostle of nothingness upon the daughter of a fraud. By insisting upon his innocence and indirectly affirming the working philosophy of the city, Haze can produce only a grotesquerie such as Enoch's misshapened spirit. Seeing what he has begotten, Haze violently destroys it, for Enoch's new jesus is disturbingly unlike the truth he had sought through his blasphemy.... This desire for truth goads him eventually to abandon his denial of original sin and to embrace salvation....

Haze tends to define himself and to measure the success of his mission in terms of Hawks's response to his challenge. Though utterly repelled by Sabbath Lily, Haze determines to seduce her, expecting thereby to convince Hawks that he is truly dedicated to belief in nothing.... Haze has conceived his relationship with Hawks as a contest of faiths [and] the fact that Hawks had lacked the courage to 'blind himself for Jesus' is, for Haze, tantamount to a betrayal. Hawks, in other words, has become for Haze a symbol of steadfast faith, even if the object of that belief is, from Haze's standpoint, false.... That appearances deceive and that his eyes are unreliable, creates for Haze a crisis of belief.... Hawks, caught in a mesh of defiance and despair, is sinister, demonic.... In escaping Jesus, Hawks has been converted to evil, and his mocking of that in which he once believed and his turning to a life of petty crime have a devastating effect upon his 'disciple' Haze, bringing him close to Hawks's own despair. When he learns the preacher's true history, Haze appears ready to acknowledge the failure of his belief in nothing and to adopt evil as his truth. The temptation is poignantly represented in the seductive overtures of Sabbath Lily....

Haze's determination to believe in nothing and to maintain his innocence is an outgrowth principally of his grandfather's fiery sermons.... Unconsciously identifying with the old man whom he resembles physically and in the dogmatic, inflexible quality of his preaching, Haze runs toward the destiny his grandfather had predicted even as he believes that he runs from it. Yet, so weighty is the burden of guilt and so powerful therefore the need to proclaim his innocence, that Haze must consciously reject redemption and fight Jesus.... Contrasted to Hazel's passionate commitment to truth is the heedlessness of the people of Taulkinham. Even they are not outright atheists, however, for somewhere behind their perception of themselves as innocent there is hidden a god, a deity of their own creation... This deity's devotees are freed of annoying moral imperatives....

Having experienced the disillusionment of Hawks's betrayal and of Enoch's imbecilic distortion of his message, Haze kills the man hired (by Shoats) to impersonate him and prepares to leave Taulkinham. Now his philosophy exhibits an even more radical renunciation of his destiny.... He immediately begins to blaspheme—quite violently—thus indicating the desperate extremity of his spiritual state as well as the bankruptcy of his logic. Like Melville's Ahab, he must have something to rage against in order to be. Only when an official representative of the city dispossesses him of his car—the leaking rattletrap symbolizing the secular alternative to salvation—does Haze perceive the true significance of his rejection of the possibility even of repudiating redemption. Once the something he had affirmed is taken from him, he has nothing left as defense against the absurd. He is engulfed by it and then, at last, he can accept the truth of original sin...

Certainly no thoughtful reader wishes to be identified with the 'sensible' Mrs. Flood, whose views reflect so fully that spiritual wasteland Taulkinham... [However] Mrs. Flood is moved by Haze's example from seemingly

imperturbable complacency to an anxious desire to know his 'secret.' As she attempts to follow the 'pinpoint of light' which she imagines Haze at the end to have become, she is brought to the threshold of mystery. And while she is stopped there, and there is no hint that she will ever move beyond—the final impression left with the reader is that Mrs. Flood has been granted a spiritual awakening which, no matter how limited, in a sense validates Haze's own journey (as she had earlier imagined it) 'backwards to Bethlehem.' Then she had attempted to visualize what was going on in his head, but all she could conjure up was a vision of 'the whole black world in his head and his head bigger than the world, his head big enough to include the sky and planets and whatever was or had been or would be.' It is, of course, a vision of eternity, precisely that 'vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete,' and of which the other people of the secular city have lost all recollection."

Preston M. Browning, Jr.  
Flannery O'Connor  
(Southern Illinois U 1974) 25-38

"In *Wise Blood*, both flesh and spirit revolt against the summons to humility.... The narrative chronicles the process of Haze's reluctant admission of the burden of his flesh (the sin that 'came before') and of his ultimate symbolic act of reverence for mystery in his ritual self-blinding....

In keeping with a persistent tripartite pattern in the novel Mrs. Hitchcock and Mrs. Flood each make three references to home in speaking to Hazel Motes.... Haze's eventual responses to his fellow traveler's utterances become the threefold pattern of denial underlying the novel's theme: no home, no place, no redemption. A parallel pattern appears in the final chapter in Mrs. Flood's three references to home.... The entrance [to revelation] is blocked to her because her vision is limited to temporal coordinates: the only home for her is her boarding-house, the only place is with her ('No other place to be but mine,' she had told Haze); the only redemption is the ministry of her care. Haze on the other hand has found his genuine homecoming in death as passage into mystery. The 'something' blocked to Mrs. Flood became a possibility for him when he realized that history offers no lasting home.... The structural prominence of these illuminative references to home is heightened by the symbolic triple repetition; it also clearly alludes to the numinous. The Bible is replete with instances where the number three is related to the sacred...

In view of the novel's recurring patterns of three's, it is hardly surprising that there would be three exemplars of sins of the flesh and three of sins of the spirit. The woman in the carnival side show, Leora Watts, and Sabbath Lily Hawks all represent fornication; and the spiritual con men Asa Hawks, Hoover Shoats, and Solace Layfield all blaspheme for the sake of money. As for Haze's actual sins of fornication and blasphemy, he will not admit them until he experiences a triple exposure to their dual lie.... Haze discovers the absolute destitution of sexual license.... Sabbath Lily confesses to Haze that she thinks 'he's just pure filthy right down to the guts, like [her]'... The pathetic product of their union is the mummy Enoch steals to be Haze's 'new Jesus'... In the first of a series of three climactic acts of violence, each of which is also an act of recognition, 'daddy' destroys the shriveled image of his lust....

His ritual blinding is a preference for the darkness of mystery over the nihilism of blasphemous self-sufficiency; his penitential stones and barbed wire an acceptance of his unfinished nature against the absurd denial of human limitation. Enoch Emery's regression to animality is an ironic inversion of Haze's spiritual ascent. To boast of 'wise blood' is, in the final analysis, the ultimate human folly."

John R. May  
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor  
(U Notre Dame 1976) 126-29, 132-33, 135, 137

"During her lifetime she had a devout but small audience; now she is coming into her own as an important American literary figure. *Wise Blood*... is set in Georgia and is the story of a young religious fanatic's brief rebellion against Christ. It is both funny and dire. In any case, it was hardly the sort of thing to attract investors.... [We] made friends with the mayor and others of the city fathers of Macon, Georgia, where the major portion of the film was shot.... We had sunshine when we needed it, and rain when we needed it. No one got sick. There were no casualties. The picture went off without a hitch."

John Huston

“The perpetually responsive posture of many of these O’Connor characters, religiously obsessed and otherwise, does not lead inevitably to the supposition that their reactions are always to grace but often simply to the conclusion that they are victimized.” [This critic has “limits of inference.” She tries to ignore religious implications by claiming there are none, imposing her own atheism.]

Carol Shloss  
Flannery O’Connor’s Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference  
LSU 1980) 109

“In her first attempt to depict man deliberately alienating himself from God, O’Connor chose a variation of the genre which Nathaniel Hawthorne had used to explore the same theme more than a century before; her first novel, *Wise Blood*, is a comic romance. Hazel Motes, the protagonist, is a caricature, a sharply drawn figure distorted for comic effect. The world he inhabits has the real-yet-unreal quality which infuses the romance. The novel is a tale of man’s attempt to eradicate from his consciousness his belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour. On entering adult life Hazel tries to rid himself of the faith of his childhood; unable to do this, he envisions a ‘new Jesus’ who is not God, so that he can elude spiritual reality. He encounters other characters who are also spiritual ‘freaks’—persons whose apprehension of God is manifested in twisted and bizarre ways. Through the influence of these characters, he finally returns to the God from whom he has been fleeing....

The contrast between Mrs. Hitchcock’s normal behavior and Hazel’s religious fanaticism becomes evident in [their] brief exchange. Impelled to concern himself with spiritual reality, Haze (this diminutive is used interchangeably with ‘Hazel’ and suggests cloudy spiritual vision) says abruptly to Mrs. Hitchcock: ‘I reckon you think you been redeemed.’ Her response shows her inability to comprehend spiritual matters.... Haze’s landlady, the second ‘normal’ character, dominates the final chapter and brings the novel to a close. One can see, starkly illuminated by the fanatical actions of her boarder, her own common-sense approach to life. Independent and self-possessed, she is in complete control of reality... Slowly she begins to comprehend the meaning of Haze’s actions. Her ‘normal’ awareness of life expands to include spiritual reality, although that reality presents itself as a mystery. The landlady’s final words suggest the fulfillment of Haze’s spiritual quest. Gazing at the lifeless body on her bed, Mrs. Flood says, ‘Well, Mr. Motes...I see you’ve come home.’

Both of these women are intrigued by the mystery of Haze’s eyes.... But the contrast between these two characters’ attitudes toward the mystery marks their essential difference. Although Mrs. Hitchcock is immediately attracted to Haze’s eyes, she is unwilling to accept their mystery: ‘She felt irked...’ Because she had to ‘place’ everything, she cut off any apprehension of that which is beyond man’s reason. Mrs. Flood, on the other hand, continued to probe the mystery which Haze’s eyes presented to her. Although she reduced it to the question, ‘What possible reason could a sane person have for wanting to not enjoy himself any more?’ she was unable to contain it there. The mystery kept enlarging until she knew that the only way to encompass it was to possess the person who embodied the mystery—her blind boarder. As, sitting beside his body, she ‘sat staring with her eyes shut into his eyes,’ she began to see ‘the pinpoint of light’ which, earlier, she had identified with ‘the star of Bethlehem.’ This light was leading her past the mystery of Hazel Motes into the heart of the mystery of Redemption. Framed by these two ‘normal’ characters, the O’Connor freaks enact the major part of the novel. In quick succession they appear...

As the novel opens, Hazel Motes has just returned from a four-year stint in the army during which he ‘reasoned’ himself out of his faith. He finds his home in ruins, his family dead, and his village abandoned. Unwillingly, he accepts the circumstances which are existentially analogous to the biblical command, ‘Leave your people and your father’s house and go into a land that I will show you...’ Facing both physical and spiritual rootlessness, he seeks a ‘place.’... His search for place begins in Taulkinham, the only city Hazel knows.... A prostitute...welcomes him with the words, ‘Make yourself at home.’ In his embrace of sin...he finds a ‘place’ to be. The next day, at the ‘altar’ of a potato-peeler salesman, he encounters his comic counterpart, Enoch Emery. Together they meet the false blind man and his daughter, who are ‘hawking’ religion.... Haze’s security in his placement in sin with Mrs. Watts is shaken by Hawks’ preaching. He tries to counteract this displacement by purchasing a car...

Initially a home, the car becomes his pulpit, from which he preaches the ‘Church Without Christ.’ Once again he is ‘placed’; the car is his security. ‘No man with a good car needs to be justified’.... Soon the car begins to leak oil

and water and gas, and it is finally destroyed by a policeman who sees the ramshackle car and its unlicensed driver as a public threat. With the destruction of the car, Hazel is displaced again. But this time, by embracing in a flamboyant act of self-mutilation the Jesus he has been evading, he places himself firmly among the elect and has no more regard for earthly placement. His landlady, attracted by his monthly government check, offers him a place—'a home here with me, a place where you can always stay'.... But he ignores her offer, and...displaces himself by leaving his boarding-house... He knows only one place of value now—the place of the final meeting with Jesus....

Wise Blood is an extreme treatment of alienated man's search for 'home.' The reality of belief is so strong in Hazel that he is unable to uproot it; therefore, to live comfortably with it...he forces himself to create a shadow without substance, a 'new Jesus' who has only the name and not the power of a Redeemer.... His mother, by her extreme piety, inculcated in the boy a 'nameless, unplaced guilt' which he could expiate only by 'paying.' As a child, he walked with rocks in his shoes to pay for looking at a naked woman in a velvet-lined coffin at the circus; after his self-mutilation, he paid for the world's sins in the same way. Haze spent his early years trying to avoid sin, so that he would 'owe' nothing to Jesus. In the army he learned that there was no sin and that he had no soul. To convince himself that he believed this, he had to sin deliberately; therefore, free of the army, he headed for the city, to 'do some things I never have done before.' He fornicates with grim determination, but this does not convince him of 'no sin' and 'no soul.' In some way he must take into account the Jesus of his youth, who is still moving 'from tree to tree in the back of his mind'... So he transforms him into a 'new Jesus,' one that's all man....

Interspersed between the chapters detailing Haze's flight from Jesus are chapters describing Enoch's pattern of activities in the park, his adoration of a shrunken mummy in the park museum, and finally his murder of the man inside a gorilla costume so that he can become Gonga the gorilla.... Enoch knows that the shrunken mummy who he visits daily in the museum is the new Jesus. He steals it, hides it in a gilded cabinet—a grotesque tabernacle—in his bedroom, and finally delivers it to Hazel's house. Then, in insane jealousy of a gorilla whose hand people line up to shake, he clothes himself in animal skin, only to find his extended gorilla hand rejected even more decisively than his human hand had been. Enoch's odyssey is a comic parody of Hazel's intensely serious one....

After [Haze] realizes that the knowledge in him cannot be uprooted or disguised, he returns to the service of the stern God of his youth. Three experiences contribute to his conversion. [1] The first is Sabbath Lily's facetious question: can a bastard be saved in the Church Without Christ? Haze answers that there is no such thing as a bastard in his [liberal] church, but as he says it he knows that it is not true. 'The thing in his mind said that the truth didn't contradict itself and that a bastard couldn't be saved in the Church Without Christ.' This is his first realization that there is a state of sinfulness—analogue to bastardy—that one is not personally responsible for (in theology this state is called original sin). Just as, without a savior, 'her case was hopeless,' so is his own case hopeless, even if he had committed no personal sin, without a savior. This realization opens him to an understanding that faith, and not sinlessness, justifies man. [2] The second experience in his conversion is Solace Layfield's death.... Haze realizes that Layfield is mouthing words he does not believe, for pay. But as Layfield lies dying, his true faith in Christ reveals itself. He mumbles his sins aloud, and ends with 'Jesus... Jesus hep me.' Haze knows that he has heard only one end of a dialogue and that Layfield's Redeemer truly lives.

To dismiss the impact of this experience, Haze prepares to preach the Church Without Christ 'in the new city.' But from his boyhood he had believed in signs (after his penitential walk as a boy 'if a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign'), and this time the sign is unmistakable: a policeman destroys his car. Frequently, as in this instance, O'Connor characters move from the material to the spiritual realm by looking steadily into space.... The policeman tries to get his attention, but 'it seemed to be concentrated on space.' After his three-hour walk back into the city, he blinds himself. What he had seen in space so filled his eyes that he is compelled to deepen them: 'If there's no bottom in your eyes they hold more.'

The final chapter details Haze's life of penance, as grotesque in his embrace of God as his life of flight from God had been. He takes daily walks with rocks in his shoes and wears a barbed wire around his chest.... Mrs. Flood's overtures of kindness drive him from the house to the place he has been looking for—the place of his meeting with Jesus. He who knows only the stern fundamentalist God of his grandfather dies 'under the law.' Two policemen, comic in their stupidity, cut the thread of his life with a blow from a billy as they take him back to pay the money he 'owes' the landlady, but really he returns in death to lead her to the 'pinpoint of light.'

Throughout the story Hazel's laconic assertions about cleanliness epitomize his spiritual condition. Through the opening chapters he asserts periodically, 'I am clean.' In these words he denies his need for redemption; against this need he unconsciously struggles. After he realizes the meaning of Redemption and embraces a penitential life, he can give as reason for his 'monklike' behavior only the statement, 'I am not clean'.... He knows that all men are by their nature in need of redemption and can only rely on the mercy of God....

Shoats appeals only to the emotions... He promises his listeners that his [liberal] religion is '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'.... In contrast to Shoats, Asa Hawks uses the negative approach to get money.... Shoats seems the more perverse and Hawks the more pitiable character. In his pledge to burn his eyes out to prove his belief, Hawks presumed on supernatural strength, which was denied him. Spurning a harder alternative (admitting his human weakness), he chose the way of deception; any integrity he ever had was washed away in the lime stains on his cheeks....

Enoch Emery...seems to have no ties with the world of human friendship and concern. His sole allegiance is to the commands of his 'wise blood,' inherited from his father. Flannery calls him 'a moron and chiefly a comic character.' His grotesque 'way of the cross' (his daily ritual of the Frosty Bottle drink, the visit to the animals, and the adoration of the mummy); his voyeuristic absorption in the activities of the ladies at the swimming pool; his hilarious activity in preparing his room for the 'new jesus'; and his automatic responses to communications from his wise blood—all support the author's designation of him as a comic moron. He becomes a foil for Hazel; each is subject to an influence beyond his ken. His descent into animality shows—in caricature—the alternative Hazel could have taken....

Enoch's four weeks at the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy taught him all about Jesus; he rejected Him, and in the novel he seeks another god, someone who communicates with him through his wise blood. In a kind of parody of the 'dissociation of sensibility,' Enoch thinks of his brain as 'divided into two parts. The part in communication with his blood did the figuring but it never said anything in words. The other part was stocked up with all kinds of words and phrases.' The mysterious spiritual influence which Enoch terms 'wise blood' leads to violence in the two encounters between Hazel and Enoch... The origin of Enoch's wise blood seems diabolical; it is a negative counterpart of the blood of Redemption.

The theme of alienation is expressed in various ways through the metaphor of vision. Haze's blinded eyes, which given him new sight, become for his landlady 'a pinpoint of light,' a guide to a higher level of reality. Haze keeps among his possessions his mother's glasses, 'in case his vision should ever become dim.' In the climactic scene in which Sabbath presents him with the 'new jesus,' he has just rediscovered and put on these glasses and looked idly into the mirror. 'He saw his mother's face in his, looking at the face in the mirror'.... With sharpened vision, he pulls the mummy from Sabbath's arms, bangs it against the wall, and finally drops it through the fire escape door...

The all-seeing eye of God is grotesquely suggested in the description of a cage at the zoo which attracts Hazel's attention... As if responding to God himself, Hazel answers the look with 'I AM clean.' The theme of spiritual vision is distorted comically in the description of one of the films which Enoch sees while waiting to meet the gorilla. Called 'The Eye,' it tells of a mad scientist who performs operations by remote control. 'You would wake up in the morning and find a slit in your chest or head or stomach and something you couldn't do without would be gone.' In fear, the moronic Enoch slouches down into the seat; 'only his eyes looked at the screen.' This parody grotesquely suggests its opposite: the bestowal by divine power of 'something you couldn't do without'—supernatural grace.

One major symbol epitomizes the concept of spiritual alienation: the shrunken mummy which Enoch gives to Hazel as the 'new jesus.' It is man without spirit, reduced to a handful of dust. Sabbath suggests the symbolic extensions of the shrunken man when, holding him, she muses that '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.' A final description of the mummy identifies it with alienated man: 'His mouth had been knocked a little to one side so that there was just a trace of a grin covering his terrified look.' Man trying to cover his terror with a faint grin is man estranged from God."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.  
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock



“The novel remains a remarkable book, brilliantly conceived and written with precision and insight... Her technique in this novel is...rendering of emotion through image, metaphor, and action rather than through direct expression...with brilliant use of the comic simile...[and a] stunning grasp of the possibilities of paradox... The best of [her] tropes are superbly witty... Grotesques...give to [the city] the air of a sinister funhouse where distorting mirrors send mocking images of man back at himself.... Dialogues between characters are repeatedly at absurd cross-purposes... In adopting the stock naturalistic device of applying animal and mechanical metaphors to her characters and investing natural and manufactured objects with human traits, O'Connor has pushed it to an extremity of comic horror.... It is precisely the zest of this novel, its comic exuberance, its unerring eye for the absurd human gesture, its unflagging mockery of the shabby, the base, even the loathsome, that makes the vision presented in *Wise Blood* bearable...[to a secularist]

Reared under [his mother's] fundamentalist piety, Haze has been made overwhelmingly aware of sin, a state from which only Jesus can deliver him but which is given meaning only by the existence of that same Jesus.... Determined to create a new life for himself...Haze...believes himself in full revolt against his Protestant upbringing.... But in the modern city of this novel, Haze is a mere anachronism. The rejection of Jesus, the secularist creed he advocates from the hood of his car, has long since been adopted by the inhabitants... They see no real difference between [him] and a conventional Christian evangelist.... Hawks is...a kind of objective correlative for Haze, the apparent embodiment of that desire for total commitment to Jesus that he has denied in himself... What Haze never does recognize is that Hawks's hypocrisy mirrors, in reverse, his own... Onnie Jay Holy, with his huckster's language, parodies Haze's doctrines to expose their essential falseness. It is he who will produce Solace Layfield as a deliberate replica of Haze...

Like William Wilson [in Poe], Hazel Motes does hunt down and kill [his] mocking mirror image, but unlike Wilson...Haze discovers that his double is a deliberately constructed replica, an impersonator named Solace Layfield.... In using Solace Layfield's duplicity to reflect Haze's unacknowledged internal split, O'Connor manages to use Poe's situation both comically and seriously.... If Solace Layfield functions as Haze's conscience, it is not, as in Poe, by being that essential alter ego without which existence itself becomes impossible, but by being an exact reflection...

It is precisely the brilliant stroke of turning Haze into an ambulatory paradox driven through blasphemy to Sartrean nihilism and then blindly and desperately beyond both, that most compellingly contains the existentialist aspect of the novel.... Haze becomes a dangling man, presented from the opening of the novel in the imagery of explosive tension, pulled helplessly in opposed directions. If Haze is surrounded by images suggesting mechanicalness (of which his broken-down car is only the most developed), his complementary counterpart, Enoch Emery, is everywhere associated with animals. It is Enoch who claims the wise blood of the book's title.... Enoch's role in the novel is that of antihero, an inverted mirror of the protagonist. He is the comic embodiment of all that Haze claims he wishes to be... *Wise Blood* presents complementary extremes: there is Enoch or Haze, the monkey or the monkey...

All of O'Connor's central figures are dissociated creatures, versions of Enoch Emery whose 'brain was divided into two parts'...consciousness [and] the unconscious... Enoch is...driven by his 'blood' into obscure rituals which...turn out to be parodies of biblical or Christian ceremonies.... [His] washstand is...O'Connor's parody of the Ark of the Covenant... His established ritual demands not purification from sin but a formalized indulgence of instinct which leads from lust (leering at the women at the swimming pool) to gluttony ('gassing' a malted milk at the Frosty Bottle) to envy (a furious review of the animals who 'don't do nothing' yet receive lavish attention).... Properly sanctified, Enoch can then mount the steps of the...MVSEVM as if approaching an altar and...commune with the central mystery his faith has revealed to him: a shrunken mummy....

Transported by the sense that the object of his devotions is a living mystery, Enoch undergoes a moment of mystical communion: unable to stand, he collapses outside the museum 'with an exalted look on his face'.... Chapter 5...presents Enoch...performing a comic inversion of the Mass.... Cain... 'called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch' (Genesis 4:17) It is to his [murderous] 'daddy'...that Enoch traces his wise blood.... The 'new jesus'...is to be man himself.... [Enoch] will become a 'new man, which to Enoch means 'with an even better personality than he had now'.... The secret blood that pulses through Enoch also seems to spring from the

very center of the city itself, and henceforth his fate is bound to [its] values.... In a fierce travesty of Christian Redemption, Enoch is metamorphosed into the new man he has longed to be...turning himself into an ape....falling into the law of the jungle.... He stretches out a hand to the world around him, but the hand 'clutched nothing'....

As Enoch becomes all body, Haze moves toward pure spirit.... The logic of Haze's thought forces him beyond the verbal fiction of the 'new Jesus' to Sartrean nihilism... For space in *Wise Blood* is again and again presented as blank or empty... The risk of Jesus, it seems, lies in the terrible possibility that the saving miracle...may at any moment collapse, subverted by self-consciousness—Haze's personal version of the deadliest of sins, pride—that would sink him into everlasting damnation. Far better to avoid Jesus altogether...to remain safely at home.... Haze's desperate unacknowledged search for Jesus, that dark figure 'in the back of his mind,' gives his paradoxical journey meaning only on the spiritual level, for the forward physical movement takes him, in every sense, nowhere.... He attempts to suppress one side of the self—the side that feels sinful, that dreads death, that longs for Jesus. It is, of course, precisely his denials that lead him...to coffin after coffin, deeper and deeper into the experience of a living death.... Hazel Motes's asceticism [is] an extreme version of the oldest contemplative ideals of the church....

The sudden prominence of Mrs. Flood as a reflecting device whose obtuseness both makes her an appropriate target of narrative irony and allows O'Connor to suggest the significance of Haze's final phase by comic indirection.... Mrs. Flood is...“the great round world itself”.... She summarizes the secular worldliness Haze has encountered everywhere and gives final ironic expression to the matters that have so obsessed him.... With her 'switchbox' mind she is as empty and absurd as the other grotesques of the novel. She is also, however, potentially threatening. Like all the women in Haze's life, from his mother to Sabbath Hawks, she would imprison him... As she recalls the earlier female characters, she recapitulates Haze's male doubles as well by mouthing back at him parodies of the doctrines he has preached. She does not, of course, believe in Jesus.... 'It's you that can't see, Mr. Motes'.... He has the single saving grace of spiritual integrity that confers on him the image of light, 'pin point' though it is.... It is...only with the development of the sacramental landscape and the visionary mode that O'Connor reaches the full development of her prophetic vision.”

Frederick Asals  
Flannery O'Connor: *The Imagination of Extremity*  
(U Georgia 1982) 26-64, 205, 212, 218

“A 22-year-old soldier, Hazel Motes, upon being released from the army because of a wound, makes his way to his home state of Tennessee. There he finds a Church Without Christ, not only in revolt against his grandfather, a preacher, but in opposition to Asa Hawks, a religious charlatan who pretends to be blind. Hazel's follower, Hoover Shoates, who calls himself Onnie Jay Holy, comes to champion a rival prophet by running him down with an auto, Hazel blinds himself, stops preaching, tortures himself, sickens, and dies.” [This omits his implied salvation.]

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(1941; Oxford 1983) 840-41

“The setting in which she placed [her characters] was as much a waste land as the one Eliot had envisioned. This scene in the novel was from the beginning, and remained the fragmented and mobile modern world, on the heels of a devastating and disruptive war, in which there had been as many spiritual casualties as any other kind, as many wandering refugees and 'displaced persons' created, and as great a shift in values and mores. Her counterpart of Eliot's sordid London was the debased city of Taulkinham, inhabited by rootless individuals, sleazy, hostile, self-seeking, untrustworthy, cut off from each other and from every source of spiritual, intellectual, or emotional nutriment.

The figure she planned to set against this ground was a young country boy, dragged by the army from his home in Eastrod, Tennessee, in a part of the country that still retained what the author called elsewhere 'a distinctly Old Testament flavor,' and sent halfway around the globe to fight in some corner of the Second World War; then returned, wounded in body and soul, to a broken-down society, his family and home gone and his bearings hopelessly lost. The action was to encompass his journey to 'the city,' and to recount his travail in this new post-war urban moral wilderness, where he still hoped to find the equivalent of his lost community.

Characteristically, she had outlined no precise course of this conflict for her hero, except that he was at first to contend against, and then succumb to, 'modern' ideas and mores, in their various embodiments. The eventual

resolution of the situation was still a mystery even to her, except that Hazel would ultimately reject these, but how and in what terms she had no idea, and planned to find out only in the course of the writing itself, once the character had a persona of his own, and a will which he would follow wherever it led until he found his lost Eastrod. Even then, she knew exactly where she believed his true home to be, but she had no idea how she was to bring him there....

She had probably not been entirely comfortable with Eliot's mythic points of reference [in "The Waste Land"], or with the figure of Tiresias in the background. These came from lately acquired knowledge, not from things she 'knew' except in abstracts. She seemed to find her own proper, native ground when she re-characterized her hero and re-based him firmly on someone she did know and understand and believe in: the biblical, historical figure of St. Paul, fulminating enemy of Christ, who was waylaid on the road to Damascus and briefly blinded before becoming a passionate apostle. Just so is Hazel stopped in his Essex, in preparation for his own witness.

A few faint images from 'The Waste Land' are still to be recognized in the final version of *Wise Blood*. The figure in Eliot's line, 'There is always another walking beside you,' becomes for O'Connor, 'the wild ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of Hazel's mind.' The shadow which, in Eliot, 'strides behind you by day and rises up to meet you in the evening,' is enlarged upon in her description of Hazel's shadow as 'now behind him and now before him and now and then broken up by other people's shadows, but when it was by itself, stretching out behind him, it was a thin, nervous shadow walking backwards,' like Hazel himself.

By the time she had completed the novel, however, she had wisely abandoned most explicit references to the poem, except for one unmistakable echo, when her antic anti-hero Enoch says of the shrunken mummy whose embalmed remains represent all that unspirited mortal man can hope to become after death. 'He was once as tall as you or me.' In Eliot, this refers to the reduction by drowning of the formerly handsome and tall Phoenician sailor. In O'Connor, it seems to hint at a previous and higher definition of man and his destiny than the post-Christian world, and Hazel's 'modern' nihilist philosophy would allow. The dry and shriveled figure is exactly what Hazel would reduce man to; it is his 'new Jesus,' as Enoch has intuited, and as Hazel himself recognizes, with a revulsion that signifies a bad conscience despite his furious, even murderous, defense of his new belief in what he can 'see' for himself.

Even so, she never lost her sense of the power of Eliot's mix of the gross and the transcendent, the sublime vision growing out of, and imposed as a measure on, the vulgarities, visual and audible, of human spiritual and sensible reality in the present-day life.... Most important of all, Hazel himself was remolded from a character in the process of formation, a confused lamb among wolves, into a temperamental zealot who has already made up his mind to reject everything that has formed him in the past—not only his belief in Christ and his sense of objective sin, but the nameless, unplaced guilt instilled in him by his iron-lined mother with her primitively harsh religion, and by his grandfather, a circuit-riding preacher who had for years 'ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger.'

The rebellious young man is determined to lay these ghosts forever and join his contemporaries in the 'free' world of the present. The tender and timid Hazel Wickers, alias Weaver, of the earlier versions [drafts] now stalks onto the scene as the rude and contemptuous Hazel Motes (the new name suggesting his spiritual blindness) who encounters Mrs. Hitchcock in the Pullman, and at once attacks her with a sneering observation that redefines him at a stroke: "I reckon you think you been redeemed." The first line of essential motion is here drawn, and Hazel comes to life as he never had in the chapters she so rightly discarded. The image of a baffled searcher was in any case less suited to the direct and hard-driving style she was developing, which better conveyed certainty, however wrong-headed, than well-meaning confusion.

If we can find hardly a trace of the early rather sentimental Hazel in his new incarnation, it is equally hard to find anything of this O'Connor in her treatment of the same scene, only a year or two earlier, in 'The Train'.... The people with whom Hazel comes in contact in the city are for the most part utterly indifferent to his new convictions and his preachments on the subject when he founds his auto-mobile-based Church of the Truth Without Jesus Christ Crucified. But this is not because they are Christians. Even those who profess to be are frauds and scoundrels. The novel in its final form is sparsely populated, but every character is clearly conceived and acidly drawn, and each has an active and essential part to play in the working out of Hazel's illumination and destiny. Most of all, however, it is Hazel's own part to assert throughout his dangerous freedom and independence of will and, even as a penitent, to

arrogate to himself alone, without benefit of counsel from any more benign authority, the right to indict himself, try himself, convict himself, sentence himself, and carry out the terrible sentence. Ill-tutored, misguided, but passionately sincere, he meets a fate that is severely logical in the light of his nature and the circumstances, historical and personal, that have produced him.”

Sally Fitzgerald

Introduction

Three by Flannery O'Connor  
(Penguin/Signet 1983) x-xiv

“The novel ends with the narrator’s enlargement of Mrs. Flood’s situation far beyond her powers of consciousness and expression, deeper and further into her experience than she herself is able to go. We see from a vantage above the old woman’s sight, from a higher point of view, even as O’Connor’s narratorial prose elevates from the flatness of speech to language that is far richer in metaphor and suggestiveness. The lady wants a companion, but we are led to understand that what she truly seeks is more profound than company. For as the life of Hazel Motes seems to disappear down a dark tunnel before which she stalls, ‘at the beginning of something she couldn’t begin,’ he becomes the pinpoint of light at the tunnel’s end, at once describing the great distance between them and providing her with a beacon, something to move toward....her initiation into mystery. He takes her from darkness to light, from death to the possibility of birth. This is something that we know, but that she does not. And to follow this interpretation we must follow the lead of the narrator, for it is she who sees deeper and further into Hazel’s Church Without Christ and Mrs. Flood’s ‘not believing in Jesus,’ and discovers both characters moving backwards to Bethlehem. Using O’Connor’s own vocabulary, we might say that it is the narrator who calls attention to the invisible action of grace within the visible narrative.”

Peter S. Hawkins

The Language of Grace: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, & Iris Murdoch  
(Cowley 1983) 33-34

“In the order of things, Mote [Motes] is a mote, a speck, a blemish, or a particle of dust. His given name is ambiguous, male and female, as well as a tree, a nut, a piece of Nature. Within religious parable, Hazel Mote moves well beyond a cartoon character or freak. Even his car, the virtually indestructible Essex, has magical qualities, the steed to his inverted-heroic knight, so that the image of Mote in his Essex is of a centaur. When Mote blinds himself and plays Oedipus, as against the false blinding of Asa Hawks, he is doing no more than working out his heroic motif in a setting of the false and artificial. The characteristic O’Connor theme is there: the individual who burns with passions that cannot find fulfillment, the ‘hunger artist,’ as it were, who is dying intensely while audiences seek cheap thrills.

Her character, here as elsewhere, is the creature who pours oil on himself and sets himself on fire, while people ride by unconcerned or else take photographs for sale to tourists. Hazel’s double is the Prophet, the man who tries to eke out a few pennies by fortune-telling, turning Mote’s deepest feelings into salable items. When Mote kills him, he tries to kill all ‘reproductions’ of the truth; the truth may kill and the artificial may save, but in Mote’s inverted idealism, he insists on the reality of sin, not on the saving qualities of redemption. Grace, perhaps, is all....

Mote resembles the grim visage of Calvin himself. His sense of sin, however, is gripped by wit. His pleasure is in seeking antipleasure.... The blind man’s child is so homely he assumes she is innocent. But the blind man is not blind, and she, in turn, with the Hawthornian name of Sabbath Lily, seduces Mote, who is the innocent one.... The combat in her first novel is a religious one, between those who easily accept Jesus as the redeemer and those, like Hazel Mote, who sense that sin lies outside of what can be redeemed, that the Church of Jesus must be without Jesus. There is a small third group, those who run a confidence game within the interstices of sin and redemption, like Hoover Shoates and the Prophet in his pay. Within this sense of things, O’Connor has enclosed an entire world, in which Manichean elements clash, leaving little other ground.

One who attempts to achieve other ground is the extraordinary Enoch Emery, a zoo worker, a voyeur, a man who desires human contact. His career is completely within the world, but an artificial one. A worker with animals, he seeks an apeskin so that he can become the ‘ape’ who shakes the hand of people at events and sideshows. He ‘experiences’ women by way of a hidden area from which he can observe them swimming and sunning themselves.... He approaches history of sorts by stealing from the museum a three-foot mummy, which represents, in his absence of real belief, a kind of totem he needs to fulfill himself. Emery, if we can even define him, is

patterned on what does not exist for Hazel. If Hazel is the intense negative of commitment, Emery is the intense positive of social artificiality. He tries to be saved by way of an apeskin, a mummy, compensatory sexual experience; his world is based on artifice which can never achieve belief. Mote's is founded on a negative of belief which is itself a form of devotion.

Like West in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, O'Connor celebrates oddities as forms of contemporary worship. Emery's 'wise blood'—a means to salvation without sacraments—does not lead to any advantage at work or personally, but to indulgence in bewildering acts he cannot himself comprehend. Although cults and fanaticism in a larger sense had not as yet become public matters, we can see, through O'Connor's work, their potentiality for the 1960s and 1970s. By extrapolating from her own religious commitment, she could see both the positive and the negative, chiefly the intensity with which anything can be held. Mote's blinding of himself, the putting out of the speck in the eyes of the Lord, is an act of belief. Asa Hawks's false blindness serves as warning to Mote of what he must avoid, or else he falls, in his view, into the worship of idols."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions: 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 230-31

"Flannery O'Connor's irony, her comic impulse, and her involvement with modern philosophy is never clearer than in *Wise Blood*, her first novel. This novel was met for the most part with criticism narrowing the lines of response to its theological implications. And yet in the novel we find a complex and subtle satire of the nihilist, the existentialist, the modern materialist who aims to use religion for profit, as well as the born-again Southern Protestant alienated from his community because of his idiosyncratic or destructive methods of affirming his faith.

We find in this novel some of the most comic moments in O'Connor's art and some of the most grotesque—especially when considering the allusions to infanticide, self-blinding with lye as an affirmation of faith, and murder. One of the more comic incidents demonstrates the central issue in the novel—that of adjusting to modern life. Sabbath Lily, the preacher's daughter, writes the newspaper for advice about whether she should 'neck or not' because she is 'a bastard and a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven' anyway. She is not satisfied with the response to her letter: 'Your real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to reexamine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and don't let it warp you.' Sabbath Lily replies: "What I really want to know is should I go the whole hog or not? That's my real problem. I'm adjusted okay to the modern world.'

None of O'Connor's characters are adjusted to the modern world, but every possible method of achieving some kind of adjustment is explored—from promoting the Church Without Christ to murdering those who represent a more vulnerable aspect of the self in order to affirm power over death. Hazel Motes, *The Misfit of Wise Blood*, tries both of these methods to 'adjust,' among others. We tend to focus on his grotesque attempts to adjust rather than on the gestures of love found in the novel, gestures that might have succeeded. Enoch and Mrs. Flood try to befriend this perverse 'hero,' but he rebuffs everyone....

This novel was, in fact, one of the first works [by O'Connor] that critics and readers tried to understand, but it might have been better understood after first reading the stories. The stories more readily develop our appreciation for O'Connor's comic impulse and clearly express her focus on the importance of community and on the simple gestures of love that might finally help us to adjust to the modern world. Hazel's alienation from his community and inability to love results in psychic fragmentation. Mrs. Flood sees in his eyes at the end a mere 'pinpoint of light'—his humanity nearly snuffed out."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson  
*Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1988) 109-10

"*Wise Blood* came out in 1952, when O'Connor was just twenty-seven years old. The germ of the novel had been published as a short story in the *Sewanee Review* some months earlier, but otherwise nothing quite like it had ever appeared in American literature, and critics scarcely knew what to make of it. Some dismissed the work out of hand as a belated example of Southern Gothic. Others declared it a satire on popular evangelical religion in the South. Still others called it black humor at its bleakest. What saved *Wise Blood*, and with it O'Connor's budding

career, was the powerful vitality of the work that for most readers quickly manifested itself and thereafter would not be denied...

The theme of the novel was the human race's perennial thirst for truth, which for O'Connor was Christ, God incarnate, and fallen mankind's only hope for redemption. More than once she would declare that her primary objective in writing was to proclaim that truth, her talent being merely a divine gift to further that end. Actually no one ever studied technique more assiduously than Flannery O'Connor, and no one worked harder at her craft than she or was more receptive to advice and direction from the acknowledged masters who from time to time advised her (among them Caroline and Allen Tate). Truth as she understood it, however, came first, and the truth she believed in was that embodied in the Catholic Church, to which she gave complete assent and obedience.

Fortunately for her literary pretensions, public acknowledgments of religious faith during the conservative fifties had ceased to be anathema. With T. S. Eliot's announcement of his conversion in 1928, a change in attitude among the literati had begun to be noticeable, and by the end of World War II the company of public professing Christians included such figures as W. H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Allen Tate, and Katherine Anne Porter. By 1950 C. S. Lewis and Thomas Merton had achieved the status of popular apologists with many followers, especially among the young. Thus, almost as soon as *Wise Blood* came out, Flannery O'Connor began to assume willy-nilly the status of a cult figure.

She later described her hero in the novel, a recently discharged veteran from East Tennessee, Hazel Motes, who like O'Connor herself felt a compulsion to proclaim truth, as 'a Christian malgre lui.' [despite himself] Motes, however, was shrewd enough to recognize that the versions of Christianity's ancient paradoxes and moral code that had come to him by way of his semiliterate elders and preachers were hopelessly flawed with inconsistencies and improbabilities; consequently he set out to prove the irrelevance of both and to proclaim a religion without Christ.

His trouble, according to the novel, was that a longing for the Christ he had never known lurked in his subconscious and would not let him rest. Thus, blind to the truth he passionately desired he stumbled into one sin after another until eventually, in desperation trying to find the light that the world could not provide, he literally blinded himself, never realizing that by virtue of his quest he had himself become the light he was seeking. O'Connor in a headnote to a later edition attributed Motes's salvation, or 'integrity' as she called it, to his inability 'to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind,' but she acknowledged that this bizarre figure represented a mystery which a comic novel like hers could only be expected to deepen."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature  
(U Kentucky 1997) 150-51

Michael Hollister (2017)