

Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Kierkegaard

Hazel Motes is the main character and the founder of The Church Without Christ in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Despite seeming to appeal more to Nietzschean philosophy with his nihilistic preaching and rejection of values; Hazel Motes would be respected by Kierkegaard as well through his rejection of the norm, deliberation of faith, and ultimate commitment to his beliefs through his blinding. I will discuss why Hazel Motes embraces Kierkegaardian philosophy and reflects Flannery O'Connor's own opinions and how these figures compare to each other.

O'Connor's character Hazel turns away from Christianity in his youth to escape the figure that he feels is creeping from tree to tree in the back of his mind. Hazel wants complete autonomy from all values - religious, sexual, and cultural. Just like Nietzsche's madman character, Hazel is seen by those around him as a crazy religious fundamentalist and they don't understand that he isn't preaching for Jesus, he's preaching against Him. Hazel preaches from atop his car that "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 (105)." I think that O'Connor intended Hazel's character to be similar to Nietzsche's character but for a different reason. On the surface, Hazel's character preaches the rejection of values but his character, in some ways, exhibits ways that a Christian should live. I think that O'Connor drew from Kierkegaard in this regard and for this reason, I believe that although they have different opinions, Kierkegaard would understand Hazel's intentions and the way that he distances himself from the crowd.

O'Connor, Hazel, and Kierkegaard all reject the values that seem to be mindlessly supported by others in their environment. Hazel is set apart from everyone else when he travels

to Taulkinham. His glaring blue suit and preacher's hat place him in stark contrast to those around him and he is distanced from the reader further when he is described from the viewpoint of Mrs. Hitchcock. Hazel refuses to allow Hitchcock to reduce him to a mere commodity. Hazel refuses this same attempt several times - he kills his double and refuses to help Onnie Jay Holy make a profit off of him. This is contrasted with Leora Watts, the prostitute because she is quite literally for sale. On O'Connor, this writer thinks that "For her indictments of capitalism and modern materialism, in other words, O'Connor drew on the language and traditions of irreverence in which she was well versed as a pious Catholic, turning them against the false religion she discovered all around her (Pinkerton, 450)." O'Connor's condemnation of capitalism displays her feelings of anti-materialism, just like Kierkegaard. O'Connor expresses these feelings through Hazel and it's similar to the way that Kierkegaard felt about his relation to the state church and other Christians. In Kierkegaard's parable of "The Tame Geese," he equates Christians to geese. All of the geese would go to church on Sunday and speak of how they would fly away to where they belonged. Only a few geese took the sermons seriously, though, and these geese grew gaunt and thin (KA, 433). Kierkegaard's point is that living Christianity the way it was meant to be lived will be difficult. Kierkegaard thought that to be a fairweather Christian was to be inauthentic and worse than being an authentic atheist. O'Connor writes Hazel's character to be ostracized because he is completely authentic and resists any attempt to twist what he says into something that he did not mean it to be. Hazel's moment of despair, when his car was pushed off a cliff and he realizes that he has failed, leads him to Christianity again. To represent the way in which the secular man comes to terms with these same problems, O'Connor creates Enoch. "As secular man without religious tradition, Enoch moves on the dictates of his "wise blood," his intuition, but there is a wiser blood—that of Haze's blinded eyes and that of the

Christ crucified. Enoch's function is to demonstrate the secular man's answer to Haze's problems, to set off that integrity Haze achieves by accepting his psychological and religious past (LeClair, 205).”

Hazel doesn't become a nihilist overnight, he thinks in his youth that he can avoid Jesus by punishing himself for his sins. Hazel is filled with guilt from his youth because his grandfather used him as an example of why people should convert to Christianity. His grandfather would ask those he was preaching to if they knew that Jesus would even die for that “mean sinful unthinking boy” before he would let him lose his soul (O'Connor, 22). It's mainly from this experience that Hazel resolves to believe that he doesn't have a soul in the first place. This examination of beliefs places Hazel in sharp contrast with other characters in the book that seem to refuse to think about their beliefs at all. Kierkegaard embraces this decisive commitment in his journals. He says that “The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth with is true *for me*, to find *the idea for which I can live and die* (KA, 5).” Hazel doesn't live virtuously because of his principles; his principle is that there are no values at all. He flouts the law: throws a rock at Enoch, drives without a license, and even murders his double. Taulkinham pushes against him, quite literally when the police officer pushes Hazel's car into a ravine. Hazel attempts to seduce Sabbath, the daughter of Asa Hawks, simply to prove that he doesn't care about morality to Asa. Hazel is fascinated with Asa because the old man tells him that he blinded himself for his faith and this makes Hazel question his own beliefs. Hazel doesn't accept faith blindly, or blindly accept that Asa is blind. He goes and checks for himself that the old man is blind and when he finds out that Asa has lied to him, his beliefs are strengthened.

In the end, Hazel blinds himself for his beliefs when Asa couldn't. His church is defeated and never gained a single follower. Despite this, Hazel did what he thought he must. The reader's initial confusion at Hazel's character becomes lesser as they begin to sympathize with Hazel. Mrs. Floods stares into Hazel's eyes. "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 pinpoint of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind... She saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pinpoint of light (232)." Hazel becomes the light for Mrs. Floods in his blinding, the light representing her own path to salvation. Kierkegaard said that "One does not begin feasting at dawn but at sunset. And so too in the spiritual world it is first of all necessary to work for some time before the light bursts through and the sun shines forth in all of its glory (KA, 6)." Hazel related himself to what was the objective truth to him - that he had no soul and there was no Jesus - in a way that was different from other people. Most other characters didn't examine their beliefs or make any attempt to relate themselves correctly to what they saw as the objective truth. O'Connor, like Kierkegaard, criticizes the society in which individuals only live in the way that is easiest for them. To say that you are Christian only because you live in a Christian world is exactly what Kierkegaard condemned, and it's exactly what Hazel refused to do. On Hazel's blinding, this writer asks: "Is this act of mutilation one of expiation or is it one of commitment to his atheism? It is both, we must answer, because it bears a third meaning of deeper significance comprising the others and more. His mutilation is an indictment of intellectual and spiritual passivity. It is a condemnation of the amoral drift which characterizes our age (Rechnitz, 305)." I believe that it isn't an act of expiation, to absolve himself of his guilt, it's to commit fully to his conversion in

the end. With his blinding, Hazel reverts back to his self-punishment and resigns himself to the fact that he indeed has a soul.

## Works Cited

- Rechnitz, Robert M. "Passionate Pilgrim: Flannery O'Connor's 'Wise Blood.'" *The Georgia Review*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1965, pp. 310–316. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41398290](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41398290). Accessed 1 May 2021.
- LeClair, Thomas. "Flannery O'Connor's 'Wise Blood': The Oedipal Theme." *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1976, pp. 197–205. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/26474410](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26474410). Accessed 1 May 2021.
- Pinkerton, Steve. "Profaning the American Religion: Flannery O'Connor's 'Wise Blood.'" *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2011, pp. 449–469. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41319887](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41319887). Accessed 3 May 2021.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Wise Blood*. Harcourt, 1952.
- Kierkegaard, Søren, and Robert W. Bretall. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Modern Library, 1946.