

The Aesthetic Lifestyle in Wise Blood

Soren Kierkegaard is known for his spheres of existence including the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Kierkegaard believes that the religious sphere is the best way to focus your life because it is the most fulfilling in the end. *Wise Blood*, written by Flannery O'Connor, includes several characters that represent Kierkegaard's description of the aesthetic lifestyle. Kierkegaard claims that the aesthetic life ultimately leads to despair which is evident throughout this novel. I will apply Kierkegaard's description of the aesthete to several characters in this novel and demonstrate how this lifestyle ultimately leads to an unfulfilling life. First I will describe the aesthetic lifestyle and discuss key characteristics that are seen among most aesthetes. Next I will apply these characteristics to the characters in *Wise Blood*. Finally I will discuss how the aesthetic lifestyle leads to despair and how Kierkegaard would recommend for everyone to live their lives.

The aesthetic lifestyle according to Kierkegaard is lived by someone who stresses the particular and possibility. They live their lives for immediate, sensuous pleasure and avoid anything that could lead to commitment. Their lack of commitment applies to commitment to a higher being as well. The aesthete can quickly change their emotional state and is able to react quickly with their changing environment (Watkin 76). However they only develop when it is necessary, not by free choice (Watkin 76). The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by a hyperfocus on possibility over actuality; egotism; fragmentation of the subject of experience; nihilistic use of irony and scepticism; and a constant flight from boredom (Shelley). The aesthete uses "artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and wilful imagination" in order to give new life or energy to the world in his own image (Shelley). In most cases, the prime motivation for the aesthete is to turn something that is boring into something that is interesting (Shelley). Although, an aesthete

must become a scientist of pleasure in order to maximize the amount of pleasure you receive in the long run.

These characteristics of the aesthetic lifestyle can be applied to several characters in *Wise Blood* by Flannery O'Connor. The main character, Hazel Motes, embodies many of these traits throughout the novel and would be seen as an aesthete through Kierkegaard's point of view. Hazel came back to his hometown after the military with no plans and nowhere to go. However, this didn't seem to bother him and he continued to live out his everyday searching for immediate pleasures and possibility. He spends his everyday life without a plan and acts on impulse quite frequently. For example, when he first got back into town he saw a phone number in a public restroom for a prostitute. He decided to go to her house without a reason and didn't even enjoy his time there. This is an example of Hazel searching for immediate pleasures while straying away from commitment. Additionally, Hazel is not religious which is a main characteristic of an aesthete and this is evident throughout the entire novel as he interacts with other characters who are religious such as Asa Hawks who claimed that he blinded himself for Jesus. He tells Hawks that, "If Jesus existed I wouldn't be clean" and he goes as far as to start his own church called the church without Christ (O'Connor 87). Kierkegaard describes the aesthetic lifestyle by using the character Johannes the Seducer who spends his everyday life stalking and seducing young women. Hazel embodies the seducer trait of an aesthete when he decides to seduce Asa Hawk's daughter, Sabbath, in order to prove a point to him. The characteristics that describe Hazel are the same traits that Kierkegaard gives to the aesthete which demonstrates that Hazel is living the aesthetic lifestyle.

Another character in *Wise Blood* that is living through the aesthetic lifestyle is Enoch Emery. From the beginning, Enoch finds himself gravitating toward Hazel and this makes sense

because they both have the same outlook on life. Enoch has the same routine everyday where he goes to work at the zoo and then goes to a public pool to hide in a bush and watch the girls in their bathing suits. This characteristic is similar to Johannes the Seducer because he finds pleasure by stalking girls. Even though he doesn't actually interact with them, he finds pleasure through his imagination, similar to the Seducer. This is an example of Enoch focusing more on possibility and fantasies rather than actuality. Outside of his routine, he lives life similar to Hazel's and he acts on impulsive thoughts. For example, he walked past the movie theater and didn't want to go in because he doesn't like watching movies and he wanted to save his money, but he ended up going anyway. Despite his rational thoughts, Enoch finds himself acting on impulses frequently which aligns with the characteristics of the aesthete. There are several other characters throughout the novel that are not religious and could be characterized as aesthetes, however we do not learn enough about them to be able to make this conclusion.

By the end of the novel, it is evident that Hazel and Enoch's aesthetic lifestyles have resulted in lives full of despair. Kierkegaard identifies the aesthetic point of despair when the person realizes that it has become a job to get pleasure out of life and it is no longer fun or fulfilling to live your life this way. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Hazel is no longer finding fun or fulfillment from the way he is living his life. After running over a preacher with a car and killing him, Hazel is full of despair and decides to punish himself by walking with glass and rocks in his shoes, wrapping barbed wire around his chest and blinding himself. In the end, he ends up in a ditch and the police who found him ended his life. Similarly, it is clear that Enoch is no longer getting pleasure out of his life and he realizes that his life is being driven by his "Wise Blood" and he is not happy with himself because he can't seem to control his own actions.

It is clear by the ending of this novel that neither of the two characters had a “happy ending” or were fulfilled by the way they lived their lives.

It is clear from Kierkegaard’s writings that he believes the aesthetic lifestyle is not how a person can live the most fulfilling life. Kierkegaard identifies three spheres of existence which start with the aesthetic which gives way to the ethical, which gives way to the religious (Shelley). The aesthete is criticized by Kierkegaard from the point of view of ethics because their only purpose is to please themselves and they fail to acknowledge their social debt and communal existence (Shelley). This lifestyle is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and responsibility and it is self-deceiving because it substitutes fantasies for actuality (Shelley). In Kierkegaard's writing, he states that the despair resulting from the aesthetic lifestyle can be overcome by choosing ethical values (Stokes 228). Although, Kierkegaard believes that the best way a person can focus their life is through the religious sphere, specifically Christianity. In this sphere, a person will admit their sins and they relate themselves to a higher being in pursuit of eternal happiness. They stake their whole lives upon the paradox in faith commitment and live their everyday lives becoming more Christlike. However, Kierkegaard stresses the active element and believes you cannot be a true Christian until you act on it. It is clear throughout *Wise Blood* that Hazel and Enoch do not wish to live their lives in the ethical or religious spheres.

Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor includes characters that Kierkegaard would describe as living the aesthetic lifestyle. Hazel and Enoch are the main characters that live their lives every day as an aesthete, focusing on immediate pleasures and avoiding commitment. However, it is clear from this novel that living this way does not lead to a fulfilling life. Both of their lives at the end of the novel were filled with despair because of their lack of commitment and failure to live a compelling life. According to Kierkegaard, the ethical and religious lifestyles are much

more fulfilling than the aesthetic because commitment is essential to a fulfilling life. If Hazel and Enoch were to have moved to the ethical or even religious spheres, their endings in the novel would have been different.

References

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