

Search for Home: Estrangement and Alienation of Hazel Motes in O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor was one of the gifted American fiction writers of the 20th century. She was devoutly religious and her writings illuminate the human condition on universal levels. O'Connor presents grotesque and odd characters performing violent acts against fellow human beings. In her novels O'Connor tries to examine human nature and dramatizes the alienation of modern man from his worldly possessions. *Wise Blood*, her first novel depicts the story of the male protagonist Hazel Motes. O'Connor's unique treatment of existential estrangement can be seen in this novel. While analysing the novel we can see that the protagonist Hazel Motes is in a search for identity and preaches a new Church Without Christ. This paper is an attempt to depict the alienation felt by Hazel Motes in his journey from innocence to experience.

Keywords: O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, Alienation, Estrangement, Home, Self-discovery, Frustration, Quest.

An important voice in American literature, Flannery O'Connor's writing frequently examines questions of morality and ethics. Her works are centred on the Christian belief in Christ and the human need for redemption. O'Connor brings to light characters who are psychologically distorted and is alienated from friends or family. "They are not dumb creatures plodding ahead in stolid unknowing. For the most part, they are aware that there is some great void in their existences" (Quinn 39). They may have some past traumatic experiences or emotional damage. She expresses this idea in "The Fiction Writer and His Country" that "The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience" (MM 33-34).

Flannery O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* deals with the frustrating experiences of Hazel Motes in his search for a home. Though he makes many attempts to find a home, he never finds it. In his journey, he meets many people but he identifies them as distorted beings. He does not believe in sin and redemption and decides to preach a new religion, a Church Without Christ, but he fails in his mission and leads a life of penance at the end. He is in search of a home, and in his quest he rebels against false preachers and confronts with the reality of Jesus. "He is not able to achieve perfection, in Christian terms to become a saint, because he has only part of the necessary equipment, but he goes as far as he can on what he has, and so succeeds, making mistakes because of what he lacks" (Westarp and Gretlund 100).

Though *Wise Blood* is a search for home, the protagonist fails in his attempt at making a home with common people, prostitutes or in the Church he preaches. When the novel opens we see Hazel's journey to Taulkinham. Here we can have a conversation from Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock to Hazel Motes that "I guess you're going home" (WB 3). Her repeated mention about home, "there's no place like home" is significant as it shows the spiritual displacement of Hazel (4). Hazel is not at home in his own self, or in his childhood home or in his newly built Church. While analysing the novel we see that he is estranged from everybody and everything.

There are various reasons for the alienated feeling of Hazel Motes. The first and foremost reason is the life with his old grandfather, a circuit preacher. His grandfather introduced him a Jesus who is the redeemer of the sinful people like Hazel. The old man introduces Jesus to Hazel, "Jesus had died to redeem them! Jesus was so soul-hungry that He had died, one death for all, but He would have died every soul's death for one! Did they understand that? Did they understand that for each stone soul? (12). His grandfather holds the boy in utter contempt and this causes Hazel's lack of homely feeling in his own home.

As his name suggests Hazel is constantly on the move. We can see journey motif throughout the novel. We see him first in his train journey in the first chapter of the novel. While he preaches the Church Without Christ he is moving in a car. At last his dead body is carried away by policemen in their van. He is moving and moving to find a permanent home. We get a clear suggestion of his craving of a home from the words of Mrs. Flood that "I see you've come home" (159).

While he is in Essex Hazel considers his car as his home. He says, "I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me... I ain't got any place to be" (49). As a homeless fellow Hazel cannot make others feel at home and he preaches a reverse religion of his grandfather, a religion without Christ, as a moving preacher in his car. When the policeman detects Hazel as an unlicensed driver there comes an end to his mission and he becomes homeless again as he considered the car as his home for comfort. "The patrolman got behind the Essex and pushed it over the embankment and the cow stumbled up and galloped across the field and into the woods The car landed on its top, with the three wheels that stayed on, spinning. The motor bounced out and rolled some distance away and various odd pieces scattered this way and that" (143). The car served as a mobile home for him and the loss of it makes his way to his true home through death.

In his journey towards self-discovery Hazel finds many false preachers like Asa Hawks, Hoover Shoats and Solace Layfield. Though he preaches a religion which denies the reality of sin and redemption, these false preachers help him to understand reality and follow Christ. He is attracted to Asa Hawks, the fake blind preacher. "Haze ducked down a step but the blind man's hand shot out and clamped him around the arm. He said in a fast whisper, 'Repent!'" (35). The dishonest blinding of Asa Hawks challenges Hazel though he does not help Hazel in his strange quest. He has to reconcile with his baffled self. Though he preaches that there is no redemption and no fall there is a war within him about the reality of sin and redemption. Though he says, "I don't need Jesus ...

What do I need with Jesus?” there is a spiritual unrest in his mind which alienate him from others (37).

As Hazel tries to run away from God, he feels that he is highly alienated from everybody. He confronts another preacher Hoover Shoats who sees preaching as a way for moneymaking. He imitates Hazel in his preaching and “he had a winning smile and it was evident that he didn’t think he was any better than anybody else even though he was” (104). Hazel is provoked by his manner of making religion a profit-making business. He shouts, “It don’t cost you any money to know the truth! You can’t know it for money!” (105). Hoover Shoats understands that Hazel does not use religion for commercial purpose and he uses Solace Layfeild as his assistant in his ministry. Solace resembles Hazel in his dressing and preaching and this irritates Hazel and he commands him to remove his coat and kills him with his car. “Haze gave him a hard slap on the back and he was quiet. He leaned down to hear if he was going to say anything else but he wasn’t breathing any more” (140).

Hazel fees that he is alienated from God also. Though Enoch Emery tries to fill the emptiness of Hazel with a ‘new jesus’, he cannot. Enoch gives him a shrunken mummy from the city museum. Hazel shouted, “If you had been redeemed ... you would care about redemption but you don’t. Look inside yourselves and see if you hadn’t rather it wasn’t if it was. There is no peace for the redeemed” (96). The shrunken mummy is the image of man rather than an image of God, but it teaches Hazel a lesson that a man without God is as lifeless as a mummy. “Both Enoch and Sabbath accept the ‘new jesus,’ which fills needs in their starved lives, but in Haze the mummy serves to prompt spiritual awareness” (Driskell and Brittain 3).

Hazel is alienated from his own self. It is evident in his life of austerity, self-violence and the painful self-blinding. Mrs. Flood, a materialistic land-lady cannot understand him. “A woman like her, who was so clear-sighted, could never stand to be blind. If she had to be blind she would rather be dead” (WB 144-145). At first she is impresses by Hazel’s ability to pay his house-rent and decides to marry him. “She began to enjoy sitting on the porch with him, but she could never tell if he knew she was there or not” (149). She wishes to hide his disfigurement by his blinding with lime and insists him to wear glasses. But Hazel’s response was a cold indifference. This shows his detachment and alienation from people and this world. Hazel finds that all the experiences of the city can never be a home to him.

Hazel’s alienation from this world is best illustrated by his self-mortifying ways of walking with stones in his shoes and wearing of barbed wire around his chest. “He didn’t eat much or seem to mind anything she gave him He ate anything and never knew the difference” (149). He is not at all interested in food, clothing, money and human company. Hazel renews his childhood penances and cuts himself from friends and material comforts. His self-blinding is an indication of his complete alienation from the pleasures of this world. Thus, O’Connor has succeeded in her juxtaposition of sacred and secular in this novel and highlights the alienation of her protagonist Hazel Motes in an original way.

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