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From the Canon to the Anti-Canon: Literary and Juridical Subversions

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Southern Gothic: The Monster as Freak in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

In *Love and Death in the American Novel,* a founding text in the history of American literary criticism, Leslie Fiedler argues that American fiction is "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic – a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation."[1] In the same vein, Teresa Goddu points out the paradox inherent in these characteristics: "America's self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony directly contradicts the gothic's most basic impulses." That is why American gothic has come to be mainly analysed as a regional form, placing Southern Gothic at its centre. "By so closely associating the gothic with the South, the American literary tradition neutralizes the gothic's threat to national identity." Identified with violence and doom, "the American South has traditionally served as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository of everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself"[2]: racism, classism, irrationality, madness, decay, violence, religious fanaticism, poverty, rural parochialism and sexual deviance. Southern Gothic explores all these subjects, showing a particular fixation with the grotesque – that is, the juxtaposition of contrasting or even incompatible elements – and its aberrant creatures: its freaks.

Significantly, the fiction of Flannery O'Connor epitomizes all these characteristics, foregrounding, in a humorous tone, the grotesque and its peculiar protagonists, which O'Connor herself described as "freaks." Although she explores the darkly comic potential of these grotesque characters with a religious intention, their impact and symbolic role evoke the significance traditionally conveyed by the figure of the monster. As will be discussed below, O'Connor's fiction highlights the disrupting and revelatory power of the freak, despite its apparent marginality; moreover, her narrative portrays the freak in the light of a specific context, exemplifying that monsters in their diverse manifestations embody and reflect the historical, cultural and social features of the country and period in which they appear. As Judith Halberstam argues, [m]onstrosity

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[1] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 29.

[2] Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3–4, 76.

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(and the fear it gives rise to) is historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal."[3]

The term monster – "perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for the singular body"[4] – derives from the Latin terms *monstrum* and *monere*, which convey a two-fold meaning: not only to show or reveal (*monstrum*), but also to warn and instruct (*monere*). From ancient times, monsters were invested with supernatural meanings: in fact, "they were taken as a showing forth of divine will from antiquity until the hand of God seemingly loosed its grip on the world." Just as the word monster implies otherness and bodily difference, the term freak – whose etymology is not so clear – describes "capricious variegation or sudden, erratic change."[5] It evokes the singular, unusual and abnormal. The phrase "freak of nature," coined in the first decades of the 19th century, came to be applied to abnormal individuals of diverse origins that were exhibited as spectacles of amusement in carnivals and sideshows: albinos, bearded women, Siamese twins, armless and legless wonders, giants, midget triplets, and hermaphrodites, for instance. As Rosemarie G. Thomson argues, freaks exemplify the movement "from a narrative of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant":

> As modernity develops in Western culture, freak discourse logs the change: the prodigious monster transforms into the pathological terata; what was once sought after as revelation becomes pursued as entertainment; what aroused awe now inspires horror; what was taken as a portent shifts to a site of progress. In brief, wonder becomes error.[6]

In O'Connor's fiction, freaks are no longer prodigious monsters, but peculiar figures that constitute an instrument of revelation rather than a source of entertainment; their freakery has more to do with eccentric behaviour and moral deviance than with corporeal anomaly. In one of her essays, O'Connor discusses the figure of the freak as typical of Southern writing:

> Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological.[. . .]. I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature. In any case, it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.[7]

For O'Connor, the literary freak should produce a shocking effect, and above all, convey transcendental values, given her Christian and Catholic concerns. It is significant that her discussion of this figure appears included in an essay titled "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." In her analysis of the grotesque, she foregrounds the features of distortion and eccentricity, possibility rather than probability. Distortion should not destroy, but contribute to the final revelation: "Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose [. . .]. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal" (MM, 162).[8] O'Connor describes this kind of fiction as "wild, [. . .] violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine" (MM, 43). In her letters, O'Connor similarly foregrounds the mixture of humour and terror in the description of her fiction: "everything funny I have written is more terrible than it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny."[9]

In O'Connor's fiction, violence is never an end in itself. She makes use of it because, as she argues, "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace": "It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (MM, 112–113).

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[3] Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 6.

[4] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. R. Garland Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 1–19, 3.

[5] Thomson, "Introduction," 3–4.

[6] Thomson, "Introduction," 3.

[7] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* [1969], eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 44–45. Further references in the text abbreviated as MM.

[8] The grotesque is a term "applied to a decorative art in sculpture, painting, and architecture, characterized by fantastic representations of human and animal forms often combined into formal distortions to the point of absurdity, ugliness, or caricature. It was so named after the ancient paintings and decorations found in the underground chambers (*grotte*) of Roman ruins. By extension, *grotesque* is applied to anything having the qualities of *grotesque* art: bizarre, incongruous, ugly, unnatural, fantastic, abnormal." William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature* [1936] (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2006), 244.

Molly Boyd adds that the "crucial element in defining the grotesque, however, is the juxtaposition or fusion of contrasting, paradoxical, and incompatible elements, such as an impossible or horrific event narrated matter-of-factly and with great detail, often provoking a humorous response." Molly Boyd, "The Grotesque," in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, eds. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2002) 321–324, 321.

[9] Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 105.

O'Connor highlights the juxtaposition of "evil and grace," even if her characters may not be fully conscious of their encounter with the latter. It is remarkable that the freak, sometimes a devilish figure in O'Connor's fiction, becomes the instrument of revelation, the character that provokes the epiphany – the moment of grace. As has been pointed out, this epiphany has a two-fold significance in her fiction: "an appearance or manifestation of a divine being," and "a sudden manifestation or intuitive grasp of the essential nature or meaning of reality through something usually simple and striking." [10] The point is that, frequently, the result of the epiphany is not sufficiently clarified in the text, which generates ambiguity and critical controversy, as many critics have pointed out:

> The wealth of these dualities and paradoxes in O'Connor's fiction – the irony, the symbolic images, narrative displacement, and grotesque epiphanies – amplify the confusion and discomfort of the reader and render her fiction perhaps the most technically complex representation of the modern use of the grotesque.[11]

On the one hand, this ambiguity has to do with O'Connor's preference for "showing" rather than "telling" as a narrative technique, that is, her determination to avoid authorial intrusion: "The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense," she remarks (MM, 76). On the other, the confusion is also related to O'Connor's original combination of elements: her intention to evoke mystery and grace through the concrete. She's "looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye" (MM, 42). Therefore, the fictional qualities of the grotesque characters she envisions "lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" (MM, 40). That is how she describes her literary strategies:

> The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible. He has only a short space to do it in and he can't do it by statement. He has to do it by showing, not by saying, and by showing the concrete – so that his problem is really how to make the concrete work double time for him. (MM, 98)

In any case, monsters, by definition, "produce meaning that is beyond any one category of identification."[12] Furthermore, the passing of time has altered

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[10] Boyd, "The Grotesque," 323.

[11] Boyd, "The Grotesque," 324.

[12] Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, "Introduction: Toward a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21st Century," in *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui (New York: Bloomsbury): 1–13, 5.

the perception of O'Connor's work, disclosing its anticipatory power and increasing relevance. Thus, her fiction has become more realistic and less grotesque than it appeared to be in the nineteen fifties. As Harold Bloom argues, in "our new Age of Terror, with trade towers crumbling and anthrax spilling out of letters [. . .] our lives perforce turn more grotesque," while "her fiction is likely to seem even more relevant." [13]

O'Connor's freaks prove to be not only "figures for our essential displacement," as she argues, but also, emblems and reflections of American consciousness. As Scott Poole notes, American monsters "have a history coincident with a national history," that is, they are productive and representative of meanings associated with specific contexts and their historical discourses:

> American monsters are born out of American history. [. . .]. They are living representations of our darkness, simultaneously metaphors and progenitors of the American way of fear and violence. They are creatures of American history, their many permutations in folklore and pop culture impossible to explain without that complex history. American history can best be understood through America's monsters.[14]

Furthermore, O'Connor's freaks are also representatives of contemporary American society and culture because their monstrosity passes unnoticed. As Weinstock argues, "modern monsters are no longer visible to the naked eye"; "they are virtually indistinguishable [. . .] from the rank and file of humanity."[15] Monsters are *us*, O'Connor suggests both in her fiction and in her essays: "The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state" (MM, 133).

The tale "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" (1953) is an appropriate point of departure to analyse O'Connor's freaks. In it, a family of six members – which includes a grandmother, two young children, a baby and their parents – leaves Atlanta for a short trip in Florida, but they never reach their destination. On their way they meet the Misfit, a dangerous criminal escaped from the Federal Pen, who kills them one by one. Only the cat, taken by the grandmother without her son's knowledge, and partly responsible for the accident, survives the killing. No doubt, the story – "wild, violent and comic" – foregrounds distortion and depicts all its characters as freaks. Thus, the members of this family have nothing to do with the image of a traditional Southern family; on the contrary, and despite the conservatism associated with the nineteen fifties, they anticipate characteristics of present-day average or even dysfunctional families.

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[13] Harold Bloom, "Flannery O'Connor," in *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (Fourth Estate: London, 2002): 575–579, 575.

[14] W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), 18, 4.

[15] Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "American Monsters," in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Malden and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014): 41–55, 45.

The children’s mother, with her face “as a cabbage” and her head-kerchief with “two points on the top like a rabbit’s ears,”[16] appears so stupid that is not even fit to stand for the parody of the Southern Belle or lady: in an absurd and comic fashion, she answers “Yes, thank you” (GM, 131) to the Misfit’s request to follow her killers and join her dead husband. Most likely, O’Connor parodies here the Southern overemphasis on manners. In turn, Bailey, the children’s father, ineffectual and weak, proves incapable of handling his own family, and therefore, even more inadequate to confront the Misfit. His freakishness is emphasised by the ludicrous pattern of his shirt – yellow with bright blue parrots – a pattern that suggests not only a strident style, but also an imitative personality. As for the children, they are not only quarrelsome and impolite, but also perverse. We can now recall their shocking reaction after their car has turned over: “ ‘We’ve had an ACCIDENT,’ the children screamed in a frenzy of delight. ‘But nobody’s killed,’ June Star said with disappointment” (GM, 125).

The most peculiar characters in the tale are the protagonists: the grandmother and the Misfit. It is the dialogue between them that conveys the coming of grace and the grandmother’s epiphany. Ironically, the violent Misfit becomes the disrupting agent of revelation, and the pious and hypocritical grandmother, the recipient of grace. Their conversation – serious and comical at the same time – highlights opposing approaches to life and religion. The grandmother betrays her selfishness, shallow faith, and hypocrisy through her repetitive silly phrases, full of clichés, intended to postpone of even avoid death, such as “You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would you?,” or “I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood.” She even advises the Misfit to pray: “If you would pray, [. . .] Jesus would help you” (GM, 130).

However, the Misfit is too proud to ask for help. His words and behaviour portray him as frank and good-mannered, but also as a sadist and a fundamentalist:

> “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead [. . .] and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best you can by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.” (GM, 132)

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[16] Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 117. Further references in the text abbreviated as GM.

All these features depict the Misfit as a tormented quester, as O’Connor intended, but they mainly reflect two elements that are central in contemporary American society: capricious violence and religious fundamentalism. In fact, the Misfit embodies the figure of the serial killer, the most dangerous and prevalent kind of monster in the US today. Accordingly, he also epitomizes the disconnection between appearance and monstrosity. After the shooting of Bailey, the Misfit puts on Bailey’s blue parrot shirt, a detail of revealing significance: on the one hand, it suggests the invisibility of monsters – their ordinary and even familiar appearance – and on the other, as O’Connor intended, it evokes the “ties of kinship” (MM, 112) that connect humankind as a whole, contributing to the grandmother’s epiphany: “the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder” (GM, 132).

In turn, the Misfit’s words at the very end of the tale – “It’s no real pleasure in life” – which contrasts with his previous “No pleasure but meanness” (GM, 132, 133), might suggest that he has also experienced his own epiphany, and therefore a change for the better, as O’Connor’s comments appear to indicate: “I don’t want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become” (MM, 112, 113). However, as pointed out above, the epiphanies of O’Connor’s fiction are far from transparent, and this tale provides a good example of such ambiguity. In short: the evidence provided by the text tends to highlight brutality, sadism, and finally nihilism, since, as the Misfit concludes, even serial killing has become meaningless: “Shut up, Bobby Lee [. . .] It’s no real pleasure in life” (GM, 133).

In “Good Country People” (1955), O’Connor explores nihilism and freakishness in a more clear manner, while violence is more subdued. The story focuses on the female body, especially that of its pretentious and frustrated protagonist, a “bloated, rude, squint-eyed” thirty-two-year-old girl who lives with her divorced mother on a farm.[17] In this case, the character’s physical singularity suggests her moral deformity. She has a wooden leg and a Ph.D. in philosophy, is proud of her nihilism and abhors the conventional personality of people like her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, and her employee, Mrs. Freeman. She lives in a state of "constant outrage" (GCP, 273) against the two of them, her surroundings, and the world at large. Although her name is Joy, she has renamed herself with a most horrible one, Hulga, "on the basis of its ugly sound" (GCP, 275).[18] Hulga doesn't like "cats or birds or flowers or nature or young nice men." If it had not been for her serious heart ailment, "she would be far from these red hills and good country people" (GCP, 276).

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[17] Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 276. Further references in the text abbreviated as GCP.

When a travelling Bible-seller comes to her house – an apparently naive young man, with the phallic name of Manley Pointer – Hulga, sexually inexperienced, decides to seduce him, if only to show her intellectual superiority, taking for granted that he is "just good country people" (GCP, 290). As the dénouement discloses, the Bible seller proves to be a cheat and a fraud, that is, a dangerous freak: after stealing Hulga's glasses and wooden leg, he leaves her stranded in a barn loft – literally disabled – and emotionally raped. And contrary to Hulga's assumptions, his suitcase does not contain bibles, but a flask of whiskey, condoms, and a pack of cards with obscene pictures on their back.

While at the beginning of their fateful date Hulga tries to impress Pointer by boasting about her nihilism with phrases such as: "I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing" (GCP, 287), it is the apparently innocent visitor who conveys the greatest shock – and the final revelation. In reply to Hulga's accusing words "You're a fine Christian," he says:

> "I hope you don't think [. . .] that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going! [. . .]. And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga, [. . .] you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (GCP, 290–291)

As in the previous tale, it is through the encounter with the violent and freakish Other that the central character experiences her epiphany, the illumination of grace, and learns that the antagonist is not as different from oneself as she had assumed. But apart from this spiritual message, which O'Connor carefully devised, "Good Country People" conveys a kind of freakishness that the passing of time has made more relevant, both in literature and in real life. Thus, Hulga represents not only the opposite of Southern womanhood or the parody of the traditional Southern Belle (beautiful, religious, submissive, pure, innocent, and feminine), but above all – despite her immature behaviour – she anticipates a

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[18] As Ralph Wood explains, for Hulga's mother, the name evokes "the broad blank hull of a battleship." Yet, "when Flannery O'Connor visited East Texas State College in November 1962, she gave her own version of the name's origin. She said that it came to her in a moment of sheer inspiration, as a hybrid between 'huge' and 'ugly.'" Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), 200.

new type of woman who spread in the nineteen sixties with the emergence of Second-Wave Feminism: atheist, rebellious, intellectual, at odds with conventions and domesticity and eager to escape parental control. The Bible-seller is attracted by her singularity in a way that evokes the freak shows of the past, very popular in the US in the first half of the 20th century: "He was gazing at her with open curiosity, with fascination, like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo" (GCP, 283). Similarly, Mrs. Freeman, a character that foreshadows Manley Pointer, is also fascinated by the abnormal and the bizarre, and in particular by Hulga's grotesque body and artificial leg:

> Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago. (GCP, 275)

While Mrs. Freeman is entranced by Hulga's large and peculiar looks, her own appearance is also remarkable, as the narrator observes: Mrs. Freeman's expression is compared to "the advance of a heavy track" and her physical presence to "several grain sacks thrown on top of each other" (GCP, 271). In a similar manner, the description of Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese and Carramae (Glycerin and Caramel in Hulga's version of their names) magnifies the physicality and femininity that Hulga despises. As has been pointed out, "Good Country People" is mainly concerned with "the vicissitudes of being female," "the burdens of fleshly life" and "the physical difficulties of women's lives."[19] No doubt, the images of weight and heaviness associated with these women highlight their bulkiness and physical features, but also underscore their vulnerability. Moreover, the freakishness and humorous tone of the narrative intensify rather than diminish the verisimilitude of the female characters' portrayal as well as that of their surroundings: that is, their belonging to a distinct spatial and temporal context.

On the other hand, the figure of the travelling salesman – a popular type in Southern humour[20] and in this tale the devilish and unexpected agent of grace – prefigures a more sinister kind of monster: the sexual fetishist and psychopath, obsessed with the female body and with collecting women's prosthetic or non-prosthetic parts. In fact, this mysterious stranger, caller and visitor, recurrently found in literature and film, typifies sexual aggression and also the figure of Death, and anticipates characters like Arnold Friend in Joyce Carol Oates's well-known story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" (1966). It is worth pointing out that the psychopath in Oates's text, Arnold Friend, is based on a real one, Charles Schmid, also known as "The Pied Piper of Tucson," charged with the rape and murder of three young women in the mid nineteen sixties.

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[19] Sarah Gordon, *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 177, 180.

[20] Cf. Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 2000), 408.

Last but not least, O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952) – probably "O'Connor's most interesting and challenging text"[21] – deserves analysis, since it brilliantly epitomizes the characteristics of Southern Gothic: violence, religious fundamentalism, the grotesque, and the figure of the freak. As Margaret Earley Whitt remarks, the first reviewers of *Wise Blood* were quick to notice that its characters "were beyond strange." *The New York Times Book Review* said about them: "they seem not to belong to the human race at all." Other journals highlighted the novel's "oddness," its "strange, predatory people," and "its insane world, peopled by monsters and submen."[22]

The novel's plot explores the divergent quest for meaning performed by two young men in a post-war Southern town. The central character, Hazel Motes, recently discharged from service in the Second Word War, returns to the South to meet his family. As he finds no relatives and his home in ruins, he takes a train to the city, where inspired by a street preacher and the memories of his own grandfather – a wandering preacher who had Jesus "hidden in his head like a stinger" [23] – he creates his own church: the Church Without Christ. Most likely, the traumas inflicted by the war have turned his innate religiosity into a monstrous obsession, since, as the narrator remarks in the first chapter, Hazel "knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher" (WB, 13). This is the furious way Hazel describes his anti-Christian Church:

> "Well, I preach the Church Without Christ. I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. [. . .]. 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." (WB, 70–71)

His aberrant behaviour reaches its peak when he runs over with his car a man who has been hired to impersonate Hazel and get the money that he has refused to take for his street-preaching. After this murder and the loss of his car, Hazel buys a sack of quicklime, returns to the boarding house, blinds himself, and starts a life of penance.[24] He wraps his body with barbed wire, puts pebbles in his shoes and hardly eats. "I'm not clean, he repeats" (WB, 154). Finally, Hazel abandons the rooming house, in part due to the landlady's marriage proposals; a few days later, a policeman finds him lying unconscious in a ditch and strikes him over the head with his billy club. Hazel dies in the squad car, but the policemen do not notice it and take him back to his lodgings. The landlady talks to him and observes his face, "stern and tranquil" (WB, 159). It is by looking into Hazel's eyes – with her eyes shut – that she experiences the epiphany that closes the novel:

> She had never observed his face more composed and she grabbed his hand and held it to her heart. It was resistless and dry. 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, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light. (WB, 160)

Undoubtedly, Hazel Motes is one of the most powerful figures in O'Connor's fiction: she described him as "a Christian *malgré lui*," finally unable "to get rid of the ragged figure [Jesus] who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind."[25] His final asceticism brings to mind the mortification of saints, and especially the life of Saint Paul, also blind for a time and a violent persecutor of Christians before his conversion. In any case, it is clear that Hazel's freakishness embodies the defining features of Southern Gothic: violence and self-inflicted violence,

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[21] Marshall Bruce Gentry, *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 119.

[22] Margaret Earley Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 15.

[23] Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* [1952] (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 11, further references in the text abbreviated as WB.

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[24] In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor emphasises the symbolic role of Hazel's car: "the hero's rat-color automobile is his pulpit and his coffin as well as something he thinks of as a means of escape. He is mistaken in thinking that it is a means of escape, of course, and does not really escape his predicament until the car is destroyed by the patrolman. The car is a kind of death-in-life symbol, as his blindness is a life-in-death symbol. The fact that these meanings are there makes the book significant" (MM, 72). What Hazel arrogantly says about his car is equally significant, especially considering that it is a second-hand, dilapidated vehicle: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (WB, 76).

[25] Flannery O'Connor, "Author's Note to the Second Edition," in *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), xiii.

murder, bigotry, fanaticism and religious fundamentalism. In a self-reflexive manner, the words of Hazel's landlady to his tenant about his eccentric behaviour encapsulate the freakishness of the novel's plot: "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 [. . .]. There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it" (WB, 154). However, the monstrosity that Hazel represents has not disappeared. On the contrary, it has transcended the boundaries of the American South to suggest the globalization of violence and religious fanaticism, which many times erupt through terrorist attacks. Furthermore, Hazel's freakishness prefigures a variety of contemporary aberrations, such as eating disorders, fornication with minors, and self-mutilation.

In contrast to this character, *Wise Blood* portrays Hazel's foil, an eighteen-year-old boy called Enoch Emery who works in a zoo and becomes obsessed with a "dead shriveled-up part-nigger dwarf" (WB, 120), a mummified figure shown in the city's museum. One day, Enoch steals the mummy and offers it to Hazel as "the new jesus," the idol that the Church Without Christ needs but which Hazel rejects and destroys. After a series of solitary, erratic moves, Enoch stabs a man disguised as Gonga – the "Giant Jungle Monarch" (WB, 121) – to promote a film, steals his gorilla costume, buries his own clothes – not noticing that he was "burying his former self" (WB, 135) – and puts on the stolen costume. As the narrator says: "No gorilla in existence, whether in the jungles of Africa or California, or in New York City in the finest apartments in the world, was happier at that moment than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it" (WB, 136).

In different ways, the narrative portrays Enoch's degradation and his progressive descent into bestiality. Proud of his wise blood, he thinks he's destined for a great mission; he wants "to be THE new man of the future," and "to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand" (WB, 131). In fact, he is just a lonely and alienated youth, "given to stealing," with "a fondness for Supermarkets" (WB, 89), and fascinated by the sensationalism on display at the movie theaters.

As could be expected, the subject-matter of the films on show mirrors the violence and freakishness of the novel's plot: after seeing a poster that shows "a monster stuffing a young woman into an incinerator," Enoch cannot resist watching three pictures in succession. The first is about a scientist named "The Eye" who can mutilate and steal body parts by remote control; the second, about life "at Devil's Island Penitentiary"; the third, "about a baboon named Lonnie who rescued attractive children from a burning orphanage" (WB, 95). Already a thief, Enoch does not become a scientist, but chooses to turn into an ape, trying to imitate the popularity of Gonga and Lonnie. However, rather than attract people's attention and affection, Enoch only causes them to flee in terror at his sight. Mimicking the looks of the mummified figure, he has dwarfed himself into an "it," "hideous and black" (WB, 136).

While Hazel's freakishness moves towards introspection, asceticism and spirituality, Enoch's turns towards materialism, degradation and bestiality.[26] Their pathways become increasingly divergent, but both characters reflect the nihilism, insanity, fragmentation and alienation characteristic of contemporary urban life: in fact, the novel's barren landscape resembles a Southern version of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*.[27] Ten years after its publication, O'Connor described *Wise Blood* as a "comic novel" which is "very serious."[28] Now, several decades after, the novel looks darker and more realistic, and the sources of its humour, more disturbing and controversial than ever.

To conclude: O'Connor's freaks, apparently ludicrous and marginal, have a powerful, subversive, and prophetic potential: they are multivalent figures who become recipients of grace and/or instruments of revelation. Their seeming otherness – which mirrors that symbolized by the American South – unveils radical truths, provoking disruption and change. Despite their arrogant, hubristic or even devilish nature, they convey the possibility of grace and the power of mystery. They are freaks of culture, rather than freaks of nature, that is, they absorb meaning out of their historical and social context (the rural and conservative South of the nineteen fifties; the bleak urban landscapes populated by outcasts, hustlers, preachers and crooks) and invest that context with meaning. It is worth noting that despite her Roman Catholicism, O'Connor's epiphanies are not precipitated by love, but by violence, which associates her fiction with the notion of "regeneration through violence," an element of great mythical significance in the history and culture of the US.[29] She located it in the reactionary, underdeveloped, Christ-haunted South – her homeland – but the violence and monstrosity embodied by O'Connor's freaks have transcended their grotesque patterns and their spatio-temporal boundaries to form part of our daily life – to become the emblem of the human condition in the 21st century.[30]

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[26] The protagonist's name symbolises vision: in Hebrew, Hazel means "he who sees God"; the shortened name, Haze, suggests difficulty to see clearly. Motes alludes to the passage in the Gospel of Matthew (7:3–5) in which Jesus condemns judging others: "And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but seest not the beam that is in thy own eye?" Ironically, Hazel is unable to see well until he blinds himself. Enoch's name is also biblical, and reflects the character's fragmentation, since it refers to two opposing biblical figures, Enoch, the father of Methuselah, and Enoch, the son of Cain. As Jordan Cofer argues, "Enoch's bifurcation [between the spiritual and the carnal] helps readers to understand Enoch's ultimate choice toward the physical (Enoch, son of Cain), an explanation for his exit from the novel in a gorilla suit." Jordan Cofer, *The Gospel According to Flannery O'Connor: Examining the Role of the Bible in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 44–46.

[27] Several critics have pointed out the influence of Eliot's poem on *Wise Blood*. For example, Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's editor and friend, argues that although writers such as Sophocles, E.A. Poe, and Nathaniel West were sources of inspiration for this novel, "it was Eliot and his *Waste Land* who provided for [O'Connor] the first impetus to write such a book as *Wise Blood* at all." Sally Fitzgerald, "The Owl and the Nightingale," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 13 (1984): 44–58, 55.

[28] O'Connor, "Author's Note," xiii.

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[29] See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

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4 Monstrosity and Migration