

# Deepening the Mystery of Freedom

BY HEATHER HUGHES

As freedom becomes the single ambition that possesses Hazel Motes—the protagonist in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*—its competing definitions dramatically play out through plot twists and turns. “Freedom cannot be conceived simply,” O’Connor notes. “It is a mystery and one which a novel . . . can only be asked to deepen.”

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Freedom is at the heart of Flannery O’Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood*. As freedom becomes the single ambition that possesses her protagonist, Hazel Motes, its competing definitions in Western culture are dramatically played out through the narrative. “Freedom cannot be conceived simply,” O’Connor observes in the author’s note to the second edition of this work. “It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen.”<sup>1</sup>

*Wise Blood* contrasts the qualities and extreme consequences of two conceptions of human freedom: a popular modern view of freedom as personal autonomy and a Christian view of freedom that includes the limitations inherent for humans who are made in God’s image and live in a world that is divinely ordered. The novel provides an awful vision (i.e., one that inspires deeply respectful fear) of a freedom to participate in our own sanctification and to grow more deeply into the people we were created to be.

*Wise Blood* is the product of an imagination formed by a Catholic education and a profound faith, but that does not make its depiction of Christian freedom immediately palatable. Like much of O’Connor’s fiction (and the life of faith itself), *Wise Blood* can give a rough first impression. O’Connor has been denounced by such popular publications as *Time* as “a retiring,

bookish spinster who dabble[d] in the variants of sin and salvation like some self-tutored backwoods theologian."<sup>2</sup>

I am sorry to say that my initial response to Flannery O'Connor was similarly unflattering. After reading one of her stories for the first time, I was determined not to make the mistake of reading another one. Her stories, famous for their grotesquery, contain a parade of characters who suffer from physical deformities and mental disabilities, not to mention a disproportionate number of back-woods murderers, religious conmen, and viciously sentimental old women. However, years after my first encounter, I find myself returning to Flannery O'Connor again and again not only as a source of medicinal truth-telling to the modern world, but of great hope as well.

Her use of the grotesque is not a gratuitous indulgence; rather, it is a distortion meant to reveal truth. She warps her stories, like a fish-eye lens, around a central focus they are meant to emphasize. "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else," O'Connor once wrote in a letter to the novelist John Hawkes, "and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction to the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times."<sup>3</sup> Both of O'Connor's novels center on this tension—these concurrent desires to embrace God and to reject God's existence, and the free will that we are given to choose between them.<sup>4</sup>

### **FREEDOM AS IMPOSSIBLE AUTONOMY**

In *Wise Blood* this tension plays out spectacularly in the life of Hazel Motes. Raised in the shadow of an imposing traveling preacher grandfather, but outliving every member of his family by the time he is eighteen, Haze is agonizingly aware of the limitations of human freedom at a very young age. However, rather than embracing these limitations and striving to grow freely in the path to God shaped by them, Haze feels trapped and outraged by his lack of control over his own life. This may be why he fantasizes about his family members resisting burial after their deaths—fighting against the inevitable, unpreventable end that awaits us all.

Listening to his grandfather preach the "good" news that Jesus had redeemed him and "would chase him over the waters of sin," Haze is not comforted (p. 22). He does not acknowledge with Paul the plain fact that he "can will what is right, but [he] cannot do it" (Romans 7:18). Thus, he resents his grandfather's claim that "Jesus would have him in the end!" and is determined not to require saving (p. 22). Even as a boy he refuses to cry with Paul:

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?  
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!...

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.

*Romans 7:24-25a, 8:1-2*

To Haze, even the law of the Spirit of life is an undesirable law because it exposes the lie of his desired self-sufficiency. Knowing that there is no alternative to dependence on God besides bondage to the devil through sin, Haze does what he can to limit his dependence:

There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.... Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. Where he wanted to stay was in [his hometown] Eastrod with his two eyes open, and his hands always handling the familiar thing, his feet on the known track, and his tongue not too loose. (p. 22)

If freedom is defined as an absence of constraint, as an ability to determine one's life without any external standard or influence, then Christ's atoning sacrifice becomes not a gift engendering the freedom to become more fully oneself, but a coercive force hindering the self-fulfillment of one's desires. Haze is so desperate for an impossible freedom that he avoids sin merely to eradicate the need for a salvation external to his own faculties. He is willing to accept the strict limitation of "the known track" because it is self-imposed, while the idea of following Christ's direction is refused as a temptation to stray into a realm of dependence, away from that realm where he is dependent solely on himself.

When Haze does fall into sin as a boy he does not repent and ask for forgiveness, but instead undertakes the terrible (and impossible) task of paying for his own transgressions. Knowing that Hazel had seen something illicit in a tent at a local fair, his mother reminds him that Jesus died for his redemption. Haze replies "I never ast him," then fills his shoes with rocks and walks in self-imposed pain until convinced he has satisfied his debt (p. 63).

### **FREEDOM FOR NOTHING**

As Hazel Motes grows older, his confidence in the possibility of total autonomy undergoes a radical transition. Drafted by the army at eighteen, Haze is forced to leave the "known track" of his hometown. While in the army, his peers invite him to visit a brothel. In a torrent of defensive piety, Haze responds that he will not endanger his soul through such action. Before leaving for the brothel, his friends inform him that he does not have a soul. This flippant remark alters Haze's life profoundly, for "All he wanted was to believe them and get rid of [his soul] once and for all, and he saw the opportunity here to get rid of it without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of evil" (p. 24). It is an opportunity that Haze takes, believing he has finally discovered an alternative to the old choice between God and the devil. Perhaps converting to nothing will free him to be his own master,

to determine his own fate apart from any external manipulation.

When he is discharged from the army years later, Haze returns to find his hometown deserted. He decides then to head to the city, ready for the new experiences he used to avoid. No longer constrained by the wild ragged figure of Jesus, Motes makes a point of beginning his stay with a local prostitute—for believing in nothing frees one from the imposed standards of morality.

Hazel Motes' need to prove his disbelief becomes even more apparent when he forms the disturbingly humorous Church Without Christ after encountering a begging street preacher named Asa Hawks. Hawks seems heroically devout, having apparently blinded himself for the sake of Jesus. Attended by his licentious daughter Lily Sabbath, Hawks intrigues and offends Hazel. Haze's encounter with the pair leads him to attempt to convert others to what he has come to believe, or rather to what he has come not to believe.

Hazel Motes becomes what Ralph Wood has called a "scandalized preacher of nihilism."<sup>5</sup> His curb-side sermons are one of Flannery O'Connor's most acute portraits of the nihilistic trajectory of freedom as total autonomy. These extreme manifestations of the attraction to disbelief are so humorous because they express the logical consequences of all-too-familiar contemporary sentiments. "There are all kinds of truth, there's your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth," Hazel Motes preaches. "No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach!" (p. 165). Sound familiar? Despite the dramatically exaggerated nature of Haze's character and speech, these ideas are clearly recognizable everywhere in the moral relativism of our consumer culture. The convergence of so much personal subjective truth implies that there is no truth at all.

This becomes hilariously clear with the introduction of Onnie Jay Holy, a religious conman who wants to use Hazel in a money-making scheme. Hearing Hazel's street preaching, Onnie Jay considers not the validity of his message, but the potential profit that can be gained from it. Onnie Jay Holy knows that "If you want to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it

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sweet" (p. 157). Renaming Hazel's Church Without Christ to the even more nonsensical Church of Christ Without Christ, Onnie Jay jumps into Hazel's sermon and couches genuinely preached nihilism in terms of a falsely optimistic relativism more palatable to his audience: "You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it,

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it ain't true, and that's all there is to it. No jokers in the deck, friends" (p. 152). Ultimately, this fine sounding sentiment covers the kind of nihilism that Haze preaches like a pit trap. Hazel strongly rejects Onnie Jay's insistent business offer because, though he may believe that life has no meaning, he has no patience for dishonesty and self-deception. He knows what is at stake in preferring autonomy to

Jesus. Thus, his repeated response to Onnie Jay is, "you ain't true" (p. 155). Not surprisingly, Onnie Jay Holy is unfazed and quick to continue with his business plan using a lookalike replacement for the resistant Motes.

With typical backwoods flair, Hazel Motes articulates the essence of his message: "nothing matters but that Jesus don't exist" (p. 54). This simple statement of negation is necessary for the kind of freedom that Hazel seeks. For Flannery O'Connor, it is also a poignant, countrified expression of how profoundly impossible that kind of freedom is. In her letters O'Connor remarks: "Haze knows what the choice is...either throw away everything and follow Him or enjoy yourself by doing some meanness to somebody, and in the end there's no real pleasure in life, not even in meanness."<sup>6</sup> If Jesus exists and is truly who he claims to be, then there is no opportunity for moderation. Nothing can be defined apart from him, there is no meaning to life that excludes him, and no one is autonomously free from dependence. If you admit that Jesus exists, then there is no part of yourself that you can keep from him.

For Hazel Motes, the reality that Christ's existence entails is a terrible vision of bondage. This is why, as he is preaching on the street, he literally shouts:

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's no peace for the redeemed...and I preach peace, I preach the Church Without Christ, the church peaceful and satisfied!" (p. 140).

This is at once a comment on the very real cost of Christianity – the cross of Christ is not easy to bear – and a scathing critique of a cultural Christianity that prefers to be satisfied without Christ than to enter into his suffering for true peace. Haze preaches not the peace of God but the peace and quiet of being left alone by him.

### **HAUNTING DOUBTS ABOUT AUTONOMY**

Yet even as he preaches the Church Without Christ, Haze cannot wholly escape his attraction to the God he has rejected. He is fascinated by the street preacher Asa Hawks, who is apparently so free from the constraints of selfish will that he was able to blind himself for God. Haze seems to want to find in Hawks someone who has given up false autonomy in favor of a Christian freedom bound to Christ. He goes so far as to attempt to seduce Hawks' daughter Lily Sabbath in order to get close to him – though Sabbath turns out to become more seducer than seduced. Even at his most extreme, Hazel's attraction to the Holy is never fully eradicated.

Through all of Haze's loudly and clearly proclaimed unbelief, he is never able to completely devote himself to his brand of nihilism either. This is most apparent in a bizarre episode involving the comic character Enoch Embry. Upon hearing Haze preach that

The Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one!  
It needs a new jesus! It needs one that's all man, without blood to waste, and it needs one that don't look like any other man so you'll look at him.

the overly literalist Enoch realizes that he has seen this new jesus (p. 140)! Enoch breaks into the local museum and steals the shrunken mummy that he knows Hazel Motes is after. He delivers the new jesus to Sabbath Hawks who is staying with Hazel: "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" (pp. 184-185). Though Sabbath accepts this alarming apparition like a baby she can love, Hazel cannot. When finally confronted with the new jesus he preaches, Haze cannot embrace the idol of humanity severed from its *telos*, emptied of the ultimate meaning and purpose that Christ's existence brings.

In the course of the novel, Hazel Motes buys a dilapidated automobile that becomes a symbol for the idea of freedom as autonomy. Privately owned cars are something that most people living in North America know a lot about. They allow us to go where we want to go, do what we want to do when we want to do it, without anyone's help, and without needing to take anyone else into account. In the United States, not owning a car is considered restrictive to the point of disability; poverty is the only reasonable excuse for an adult not to own or lease his or her own car. As Hazel Motes expresses

this theologically and positively: “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (p. 113). For Hazel, anything is made possible with the freedom and independence of a car—“something that moved fast, in privacy, to the place you wanted to be” (p. 186).

However, like the people in them, cars are not as autonomous as they

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seem. Hazel Motes’ rat-colored Essex is a piece of junk: it stalls, it leaks oil, and it will not start. In fact, it requires constant maintenance and the help of skilled professionals to keep running. Despite the car’s obvious deficiencies, Hazel insists that it is a good car that will not let him down. His deluded obsession that the car is high-quality leads him to ignore the assessment of honest mechanics and get swindled by an opportunistic flatterer. He refuses to

acknowledge what his car is actually capable of, just as he refuses to acknowledge the limitations of what he is capable of.

Though I do not want to ruin the culmination of the novel for those who have not read it, I will say that Hazel Motes achieves the ultimate violent potential of the kind of freedom that can be represented by a car. He is then made crushingly aware of that supposedly autonomous freedom’s inadequacy. True freedom is not something that can break down, be wrecked, or stolen; it is not something that can be driven wherever you would like it to go. True freedom, whose author and conductor suffered himself to be crucified, is achieved only within limitations.

### **THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM**

In her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor comments on Hazel Motes’ inability to wholly embrace unbelief. She writes that for readers who prefer to think of belief in Christ as no great matter, “Hazel’s 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.” However, “For the author Hazel’s integrity lies in his not being able to” (p. 5). The strength and persistence of Hazel’s attraction to the Holy is not some psychological compulsion that he finally succumbs to. It is not a coup of the will won by a coercive God. There is no trick here. Integrity can lie in inability because, “free will does

not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man" (p. 5). Hazel's attraction to the Holy is his willing response to the reality of God, even as he wills to be rid of it. Love cannot be forced; it requires the opportunity for rejection, even if the beloved is created to receive it.

Flannery O'Connor portrays the consequence of these diverse wills through her writing, working them out dramatically:

I can't allow any of my characters, in a novel anyway, to stop in some halfway position. This doubtless comes of a Catholic education and a Catholic sense of history – everything works toward its true end or away from it, everything is ultimately saved or lost.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, any kind of freedom that does not lead us to God's love is a freedom that leads to ultimate loss. Hazel Motes initially chooses to live with only what he can give himself: absolutely nothing. By seeking to preserve himself in autonomy, Hazel is in fact working against who he actually is. It is this that offends modern readers so deeply in O'Connor's work – far more than grotesque mummies and violent nihilist preachers.

We are made in the image of God, and have no say in the matter. We do not choose most things about our existence: to be alive, to inherit traits from our families, to be raised the way that we are. If freedom is defined as wholly autonomous choice made in a vacuum devoid of external influence, then freedom is impossible. If we are seeking self-invention, then there is no hope for us. However, if we can finally come to accept the inherent and irreversible limitations of being humans made in the image of God, living in a world that belongs to God, the path of freedom opens before us. We can either see our very existence as an affront because we did not choose it, or we can accept what we are and move forward.

In saying no to our God-given identities we cannot remake ourselves; but we can damage ourselves. This is apparent in Hazel Motes' young life when he already does not want to be defined by Jesus. To avoid his relationship with Christ by avoiding sin he knows that he must stay in his hometown with "his hands always handling the familiar thing, his feet on the known track, and his tongue not too loose" (p. 22). Yet his trying to hide from God is impossible. Creation is so bound to its Creator that any part of it can become a conduit of God's love and grace. Even if Hazel could avoid God in creation by controlling himself so strictly, he could never escape the image in which he is made. It is who he is – to deny it is to deny himself. This is why the freedom of autonomy is truly imprisoning. There is so little that we can control and master for ourselves that pursuing a freedom of autonomy forces us to become smaller and smaller, increasingly bound and limited by what we can claim as our own: ultimately nothing.

This sounds like a harsh reality, and in some ways it is. However, as Ralph Wood astutely observes:

The theological key to Flannery O'Connor's comedy lies in her thoroughly Catholic (and specifically Thomistic) conviction that grace does not destroy but completes and perfects nature. She seeks to recover, amidst the secular absence of God, the divine presence that is sacramentally at work in every living thing.<sup>8</sup>

For O'Connor, freedom is not an impossible autonomy but a gift of grace that allows those who accept it to become more completely and perfectly their true selves. Accepting this gift does not make us less by taking away our individual identities but makes us more by working to complete and perfect us as individual members of the Body of Christ.

## CONCLUSION

The prospect of following the path formed by our limitations to God can be daunting—even terrifying. The portrayal of this process in O'Connor's fiction is certainly devoid of false comfort and cheap sentimentality. But the secondary world of her fiction reveals to us the world created by God, with every part defined by God's love even when falling short of it. It is this that makes O'Connor's characters play out such fascinating depictions of human freedom.

As G. K. Chesterton says, chaos is dull. No matter how diverse and unusual the outward form of negation takes, saying no to God's love is always the same. "I will not serve" is a tired phrase, no matter how it finds expression. It is Christ who makes things new. There are as many ways to live in Christ as there are souls to receive him. Cutting ourselves off from dependence on him is like freeing plants from sunlight and water. Christ is what makes us free to grow into our various selves. It is the acceptance of his love that makes creativity possible through participation in our own sanctification. This is the focus of Flannery O'Connor's vision: not the impossibility or foolishness of Hazel Motes' brand of freedom, but the call to true freedom—the call to accept Christ like sunlight and water for our own good and the fulfillment of our best will and true nature.

Ultimately, I know that my selfish will is boring; I am just not that creative. Freedom to fulfill our true purpose, to participate in an identity larger than ourselves is far more beautiful and interesting than the freedom to do whatever we would like. Flannery O'Connor taught me that.

## NOTES

1 Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, second edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [1949] 1962), 5. Further page citations to the novel will be in the text.

2 Connie Ann Kirk, *Critical Companion to Flannery O'Connor: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2008), 131.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 349.

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4 Flannery O'Connor described her other novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), as "a more ambitious undertaking" than *Wise Blood* (*Habit of Being*, 350). It fleshes out O'Connor's understanding of freedom, providing more subtle variations of response to God's call. Most importantly, it offers positive examples of Christian freedom: characters are shown actually choosing to live into their true identities in Christ. In some ways, *Wise Blood* contains just the seed of Flannery O'Connor's vision of freedom that grows into fruition in *The Violent Bear It Away*. I focus on *Wise Blood* in this article because it offers a less complex introduction to the freedom depicted in O'Connor's fiction.

5 Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 166.

6 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 350.

7 *Ibid.*, 349-350.

8 Ralph C. Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 80-81.

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**HEATHER HUGHES**

is Publication Specialist and Project Coordinator in the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.