THE EFFECT OF HUMOR

IN THE

WORKS OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

English

by

Ruth Roberta Street

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To

Dale and Rita

for all those years
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ABSTRACT

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The fiction of Flannery O'Connor reflects a tradition of American humor established by a group of 19th Century American writers known as the frontier humorists. The work of these writers often involves violence which they are able to treat with humor because their characters lack the pity and fear of ordinary human beings. We find that when O'Connor exaggerates her characters until they become grotesques, she follows this tradition of treating violence with humor. Another aspect of O'Connor's work which reflects traditional American humor is her use of comic character types such
as the country bumpkin, the backwoodsman, the trickster, and the Yankee peddler. Finally, in some of her straight-faced, laconic dialogue; her use of vivid "country" metaphors; and in her presentation of the traditional clash between the genteel and vernacular modes, we find that O'Connor's way of writing shows certain marked resemblances to the frontier humorists' style.

A close analysis of the novel Wise Blood demonstrates how O'Connor fits into the frontier tradition of American humor as well as how humor aids our understanding of other important elements of the novel such as characterization, theme, structure, setting, symbolism, and style.
Introduction

All of the novels and stories of Flannery O'Connor have for their central theme a serious subject and all are consistently comic in tone. O'Connor's interest in the serious intent of comedy is expressed several times in her occasional prose, notably in her remarks at Hollins College, Virginia in 1963 when she says about "A Good Man is Hard to Find" that this story should "elicit ... a degree of pity and terror even though its way of being serious is a comic one."¹ Earlier, in her note to the second edition of Wise Blood, O'Connor says: "It is a comic novel ... and as such very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death."² By matters of life and death, O'Connor implies concerns that exceed the corrective purpose of most writers of comedy, and her fiction makes it clear that, although she satirizes the hypocrisy and blindness of contemporary life, her major concerns are of a religious nature.

Louise Y. Gossett, in Violence in Recent Southern
Fiction, points out that "Miss O'Connor is unique among recent writers for the definite and clear support which she draws from orthodox theology." Gossett then goes on to say that:

For Miss O'Connor there is no explanation for the behavior of man except in terms of his relation to God. The sociology of poverty and the psychology of fear may help to interpret the action, but they never obscure the central drama—man's flight and God's pursuit.

Through characters who are blasphemous, vulgar, and grotesque in their obsessions, and violent in their actions, O'Connor stresses that man is a sinner. That he has a choice between sinfulness and faith in God, O'Connor shows through characters such as Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," who perceives the choice but dismisses it, and characters such as Hazel Motes in Wise Blood and Francis Marion Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away, who recognize the choice and fiercely resist it. Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater believe that they are destined to be prophets, and, though they strive to avoid God's calling, they seek Him in spite of themselves; thus, Gossett's suggestion that the central drama of O'Connor's work deals with man's flight and God's pursuit seems to be particularly apt.

Violence occurs in a number of O'Connor's stories and in her two novels. According to many critics of O'Connor's work, God's love and mercy are suddenly revealed to characters who are victims of violence. Mrs. May, for example, while impaled on the horns of a bull, is thought
to be granted a moment in which there is revealed to her the central mystery of life. It seems to me that the victims of violence in O'Connor's fiction do experience at least a sort of wonder, but it is not entirely clear that these characters experience anything so deep as a religious conversion. However, my intention is not to analyze O'Connor's success in presenting man's acceptance of God's love as revealed in a moment of grace. I do agree that O'Connor believes man should commit himself to a choice between faith in God or lack of faith, and that the former choice is the way to salvation. My purpose here is to show how, as a writer of comedy, O'Connor uses humor to enhance our understanding of this serious subject.

O'Connor utilizes a variety of humorous modes to establish her comic mask. She makes frequent use, for example, of such devices as dialectical peculiarities; of preposterous names for people and places; of characters such as Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley, sages whose moral codes are expounded in clichés; of humorous scenes such as the one in "The Displaces Person" when Mr. Shortley courts Mrs. Shortley by pretending to swallow a lighted cigarette butt; of outright slapstick such as that in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" when Laverne Watts does a comic song and dance routine to tease Ruby Hill into understanding that her illness is not a heart condition but pregnancy; of ironic situations such
as that in "The Partridge Festival" in which Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth satirize the hypocritical townspeople yet do not recognize their own hypocrisy; and of grim humor pro-
vided by deformity, illness, grotesque characters, and ignorance.

Critics have generally acknowledged O'Connor's use of humor, and they frequently give examples such as the ones mentioned here. There has been no in-depth study, however, which shows the way in which humor is integral to her entire body of work. A way to begin to look at humor in O'Connor's fiction is to consider how it reflects the tradition of native American humor. This method is especially relevant when we study aspects of violence in her novels and stories, when we analyze some of her characters, and when we look at certain matters pertaining to her style. For instance, violence and humor are closely related in the work of a group of 19th Century American writers known as the frontier humorists. No matter how dreadful the action they depict, these writers maintain a humorous tone because their characters do not view themselves tragically. O'Connor carries on this tradition of violence treated with humor. Her characters also often reflect another important tradition in native American humor. She uses, for example, popular comic character types such as the country bumpkin, the backwoodsman, the trickster, and the Yankee peddler. Finally, O'Connor's
way of writing shows many of the elements of the early humorists' style. This may be seen in her straight-faced, laconic dialogue; her vivid "country" metaphors; and her presentation of the traditional clash between the genteel and the vernacular modes.

In order to demonstrate how Flannery O'Connor fits into the frontier tradition of native American humor, we will examine specific instances of humor in representative stories and in the novel Wise Blood, dealing at length with the novel to show how humor aids our understanding of other important elements such as characterization, theme, structure, setting, symbolism, and style.
Chapter 1

During the period 1830 to 1860 a group of American writers who came to be known as the frontier humorists, or the humorists of the old Southwest, recalled in print the wild and comic yarns they heard when hunting, loafing, and traveling on the frontier. Influenced by sketches written by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, collected in 1835 as *Georgia Scenes*, humorists such as George Washington Harris and Johnson Jones Hooper were phenomenally successful in the press and periodicals and in later collections of their work.

Though still somewhat entertaining despite phonetically written dialect which makes reading difficult, the frontier humorists might be forgotten today except for a revival of interest in their work as establishing a tradition of American humor which we recognize in the work of Mark Twain and of later writers such as William Faulkner. I suggest that much of the work of Flannery
O'Connor belongs to this tradition.

It is in material and technique that modern writers such as O'Connor have profited by the work of the early humorists. The frontier humorists wrote their sketches to amuse readers, and, though not to be confused with the local colorists of the post-Civil War period, they professed an "intention to report and preserve the peculiarities of the local scene." The peculiarities of the local scene had often to do with some wildly extravagant and violent action such as a fight in which eyes are gouged out, ears are bitten off, noses are battered, and blood flows profusely. There is a large amount of blasphemous language in the humorists' sketches, too. Violence and blasphemy are material which O'Connor also frequently uses.

When they depict violent action such as a fight, a technique of the frontier humorists is to maintain a comic tone. O'Connor also frequently maintains a comic tone when depicting violent action. We may ask how it is that violence such as a fight in which the protagonists mutilate each other can be humorous. Robert D. Jacobs, in discussing how the dreadful violence in the work of Erskine Caldwell follows the tradition of violence in American humor, says that the wild tales of the frontier are humorous because the backwoodsmen who participate in the violence and brutality do not view themselves tragically. To them violence and brutality are the norms of existence and they live accordingly. They can be treated in the comic vein because they are
made to seem incapable of the pity and fear of ordinary human beings. It is difficult to feel compassion for those who regard the loss of an eye or a nose a trifling price to pay for the prestige of being a frontier champion. It is possible to view such people humorously because to them a bloody fight is entertainment, and a victory in such a fight means local fame and admiration. In the frontier tradition of the old Southwest even the loser avoids pathos by the way he loses. If he has fought a good fight, he has his share of admiration. Violence, then, belongs to the tradition of frontier humor as it was established in the United States. The tradition was partly oral, and the feats of strength and qualities of savagery eventually reached the level of mythic exaggeration. One does not feel compassion for an earth spirit, because all norms of human emotion are absent to him. He is grotesque, insensible to pain and unconscious of affliction. Jacobs' statement is valuable in its perception of the backwoods champion as a grotesque character who, because he does not view himself tragically and because he lacks the pity and fear of ordinary human beings, may be treated in the comic vein.

One of the best-known of the frontier anecdotes involving a contest between backwoodsmen is Longstreet's sketch called "The Fight." In several respects O'Connor's depiction of the fight between 79-year-old Mark Fortune and his 9-year-old granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, in "A View of the Woods," resembles the fight between Billy Stallings and Bob Durham which Longstreet describes.

The backwoodsmen fight to settle a dispute arising from Billy Stallings' having insulted Bob Durham's wife. O'Connor's modern-day combatants engage in a struggle that is the result of the grandfather's not perceiving the
granddaughter's point of view. Mark Fortune feels insulted because Mary Fortune, who is nearly like him in both personality and appearance, disagrees with him about selling the front "lawn" of their home. He cannot understand her reasoning and does not see the irony of his wishing to sell the property as much for the satisfaction of insulting her parents as for financial gain. There is also irony in that before their fight, Mark Fortune is always "very careful to see that...[Mary Fortune] avoided dangers. He would not allow her to sit in snakey places or put her hands on bushes that might hide hornets." Further irony is suggested by Mark Fortune's inability to understand how his son-in-law can beat Mary Fortune. When this happens, the old man feels "physically sick." As it turns out, Mark Fortune also beats Mary Fortune and then dies as a result of the exertion and excitement involved in that violent action.

Billy and Bob's fight is witnessed by a large crowd of local people who cheer their champions and place wagers on the outcome of the fight. No one watches the grandfather and granddaughter fight. Otherwise, the actual fights are similar in several ways. For example, both begin with a rush.

"The Fight": At the word, Bob dashed at his antagonist at full speed.10

"A View of the Woods": She was on him so quickly that he could not have recalled which blow he felt first (CS, p. 354).
In both stories, the fights are brutal.

"The Fight": [Bob] hit the ground so hard it jarred his nose off. . . . [He] had entirely lost his left ear and a large piece of his left cheek. His right eye was a little discolored, and the blood flowed profusely from his wounds. Billy presented a hideous spectacle. About a third of his nose, at the lower extremity, was bit off, and his face so swelled and bruised that it was difficult to discover in it anything of the human visage.

"A View of the Woods": He felt five claws in the flesh of his upper arm where she was hanging from while her feet mechanically battered his knees and her free fist pounded him again and again in the chest.

With his hands still tight around her neck, he lifted her head and brought it down once hard against the rock that happened to be under it (CS, p. 355).

Both fights conclude with the traditional end-of-fight enjoiner.

"The Fight": After a short pause Bob gathered his hand full of dirt and sand and was in the act of grinding it in his adversary's eyes when Bill cried, 'Enough!' 

"A View of the Woods": She paused, her face exactly on top of his. Pale identical eye looked into pale identical eye. 'Have you had enough?' she asked (CS, p. 355).

After their fight is ended, Billy and Bob keep to their beds for several weeks and do not meet again for two months, but when they do meet, they agree to be friends. Mark Fortune and his granddaughter lie dead at the end of their fight. The main difference between the stories, though, is in the way the characters are described. The
backwoodsmen seem to be the earth spirits which Jacob mentions. Their fight enters the realm of fantasy because their strength and skill are exaggerated to mythic proportions. The mismatched modern-day fighters, Mark Fortune and his granddaughter, however, are not exaggerated characters. Despite the uncommon brutality of their fight, they are presented as very much like ordinary people.

It is when O'Connor presents characters such as Mark Fortune and Mary Fortune Pitts, characters who are not grotesques, that she is furthest from the frontier tradition in which violence can be treated with humor. We may say that in "A View of the Woods," O'Connor selects material from the frontier tradition; however, she cannot treat this material in the manner of the frontier humorists which Jacobs discusses because the characters in her story are presented as ordinary human beings.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," another of O'Connor's stories which deal with violence, the characters are, as in "A View of the Woods," presented as ordinary human beings, although in the former story the events leading up to the violent conclusion involve a good deal of humor. A few examples of humor in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" are the prophetic place name of Toombsboro; the grandmother's story about her former beau, Mr. Edgar Athens Teagarden of Jasper, Georgia, who each Saturday presented her with the
gift of a watermelon with his initials, E. A. T., cut in it; and the grandmother's ironic plan to dress neatly so that if there is an accident she will be thought to be a lady. In spite of the build-up of comic atmosphere, however, the violence of the Misfit cannot be included in the frontier tradition of violence treated with humor. The family he murders it too much like an ordinary family to seem deserving of their fate.

We do sympathize, though, with characters who are grotesque. In Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque, Gilbert H. Muller says that "the grotesque character is a comic figure." He then goes on to quote Martin Esslin on the theater of the absurd:

Characters with whom the audience fails to identify are inevitably comic. If we identified with the figure of farce who loses his trousers, we should feel embarrassment and shame. If, however, our tendency to identify has been inhibited by making such a character grotesque, we laugh at his predicament. We see what happens to him from the outside rather than from his own point of view.

Since, in stories like "A View of the Woods" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor's characters are not exaggerated sufficiently to make them grotesques, we tend to see the characters from their point of view. Thus, pathos rather than humor is involved when violence occurs. In the novel Wise Blood, however, where violence and blasphemy are major elements and all of the characters are grotesques, O'Connor closely follows the frontier humorists
in both material and technique.

A number of violent events occur in *Wise Blood*. There are Hazel Motes' threatening Sabbath Lilly Hawks with a chair, Enoch Emery's attack on a man in order to steal the gorilla-suit he is wearing, Haze's running down and killing Solace Layfield, a highway patrolman's pushing the Essex over an embankment, Haze's blinding himself, and a policeman's hitting the dying Haze over the head with a billy club. Of these events, only Haze's blinding cannot be said to be clearly within the tradition of frontier humor. The act of Haze blinding himself, foreshadowed by the pretended blinding of Asa Hawks, suggests, as it does for Oedipus, a self-inflicted punishment.

The violent action in *Wise Blood* which does not directly involve the central character, Hazel Motes, is Enoch Emery's battle for the gorilla-suit. After he is insulted by the man wearing the Gonga-the-gorilla suit, Enoch attacks the man and steals his suit (a neat revenge). We do not witness this struggle; we only hear provocative sounds issuing from the van. We may say, though, that to fight someone in the back of a moving truck in order to steal a gorilla-suit for the purpose of really wearing it is as extravagant and as ludicrous as any wild caper in frontier humor. However, Enoch's determined effort to acquire the gorilla-suit can be seen to have a purpose in the novel other than to produce laughter through an
outlandish situation. We know that Enoch hates and fears animals. He hates the animals at the zoo, and he particularly despises the picture of a moose which hangs on the wall in his room. "The look of superiority on this animal's face was so insufferable to Enoch that, if he hadn't been afraid of him, he would have done something about it a long time ago" (WB, p. 132). He outsmarts the moose by removing its heavy picture frame which is "equal to taking the clothes off him (although he didn't have on any) and . . . when he had done it, the animal looked so reduced that Enoch could only snicker and look at him out the corner of his eye" (WB, p. 133). Enoch outsmarts Gonga in a similar way; that is, by taking the suit off him.

Enoch's hate for animals seems to be the result of his suspicion that they are actually superior to him, and it is true that Enoch's intelligence is severely limited. That he functions at all is due to a certain animal-like instinct; i.e., his "wise blood." Enoch is described as having a "fox-shaped face" (WB, p. 38), and certainly we have to credit him with fox-like cleverness in freeing himself from the Welfare woman by appearing at her bedside without his pants on, an act which "giver a heart attact" (WB, p. 48).

O'Connor's larger purpose in showing the relationship between Enoch and animals can be seen in parallels between
Enoch and Hazel Motes. On a visit to Leora Watts, for example, Haze's "heart began to grip him like a little ape clutching the bars of its cage" (WB, p. 60). This image of entrapment, which on the surface suggests that Haze is excited by Leora Watts, is part of the coffin imagery in the novel that has to do with Haze's fear of death, his obsession with sin, and his feelings of guilt. As we will discuss later, despite his assertion that he does not believe in sin, Haze does not like sinning. Therefore, Haze's heart grips him at the prospect of what to him will be a sinful relationship. We may say, then, that Enoch's hate for the caged animals and his battle to steal and wear the gorilla-suit in order to figuratively become "THE . . . young man of the future . . . with a line of people waiting to shake his hand" (WB, p. 191) parodies Haze's hate for Jesus and his trying to find freedom by proving that sin does not exist.

In his crusade to prove that there is no such thing as sin, Haze starts his Church Without Christ. His preaching is parodied by Solace Layfield, a character dressed as his twin. Haze is so angered at Solace's pretending to believe in the new church that he violently attacks Solace, very much like the backwoodsmen who mutilate each other without pity or fear. Hazel Motes runs down and kills Solace Layfield with no feeling at all, none for Solace and none for himself. Solace might as well
have been an insect for Haze to squash, a feeling that is emphasized by the description of the two men's cars as they approach the spot where the violence will occur. "The first car cut off into a lonesome road where the trees were hung over with moss and the only light came like a stiff antennae from the two cars" (WB, p. 202).

Throughout the novel Haze is without any recognizable benevolent instincts. He never thinks of any other person except in relation to his own interests, and he reacts to people with rudeness. When Sabbath Lilly Hawks steals a ride in his car for the first time (which ruins the day for Haze), he remembers to be somewhat pleasant since that will serve his plan to seduce Sabbath in order to prove to Asa Hawks that he doesn't believe in sin. He, for once, "checked his ugly tone and stretched his mouth a little, remembering that he was going to seduce her" (WB, p. 117). That is the limit of his good humor. Seconds later his "jaw tightened. . . . He had not wanted any company" (WB, p. 118). When, on one of Haze's visits to Leora Watts, Leora jokes a little, "wallowing her eyes in a comical way, Haze stared for a minute, then he made three quick noises that were laughs" (WB, p. 60). These fleeting glimpses are all that show any warmth in Haze's relations with other people with the possible exception of his curious behavior just after he has run over Solace Layfield. Haze tells Solace to "shut up" but, paradoxically, at the
same time leans close to hear his last words. Haze wants to hear why Solace has pretended to believe in the Church Without Christ, but in the incongruity of his telling Solace not to talk while still wanting to hear, we see Haze in a briefly human and humorous reaction. He turns immediately then to see if there has been any damage to the inimitable Essex. There is only a little blood on the bumper, which Haze coolly wipes off before driving back to town.

Because Haze is a grotesque character, and, therefore, a comic figure (as suggested by Muller), and because he lacks the pity and fear of ordinary human beings and does not view himself tragically (as suggested by Jacobs), O'Connor is able to utilize humor to reduce the intensity of the horror in the scene in which Haze kills Solace Layfield. There is humor in this scene, for instance, when after Haze has rammed Solace's car off the road, he asks: "'What you keeping a thing like that on the road for?'" (WB, p. 203), and amusing echo of the question mechanics have been asking Haze about his car. Then there is the vivid picture of Solace trying to undress while he runs. It is a picture that reduces the solemnity of the action to old jokes having to do with being caught without clothes on. Of course, Haze wants Solace to undress because Solace is falsely dressed, exactly like Haze, but we are reminded here of the way that Enoch Emery has un-
dressed the moose picture and the man in the gorilla-suit. We may also note that the narrator begins midway in this scene to call Solace "the Prophet," which involves complex irony since both Haze and Solace are false prophets and Haze's reason for killing Solace is that he is not "true." Further irony exists because it is Onnie Jay Holy who is Haze's real competition in the preacher business, not the hired Solace Layfield.

Hazel Motes is grotesque in his appearance, in his mannerisms, in his dealings with other people, and in his obsession with sin. His description reveals that his eyes were the color of pecan shells and set in deep sockets. The outline of a skull under his skin was plain and insistent. . . . He had a nose like a shrike's bill and a long vertical crease on either side of his mouth; his hair looked like it had been permanently flattened under . . . his heavy hat (WB, p. 10).

The heavy black hat which Haze purchases on his way home from the army gives him the appearance of being a preacher. The taxi driver who takes Haze to Leora Watts for the first time says: "'You look like a preacher. . . . That hat looks like a preacher's hat'" (WB, p. 31). Later on, Leora Watts "cut the top of his [black] hat out in an obscene shape" (WB, p. 110). The day after this happens, Haze decides that he doesn't want to go back to Mrs. Watts anymore. He plans instead to take up with Sabbath Lilly Hawks.

He felt that he should have a woman, not for the sake of the pleasure in her, but to prove that he didn't believe in sin since he practiced what was called it.
He wanted someone he could teach something to and he took it for granted that the blind man's child, since she was so homely, would also be innocent (WB, p. 110).

Because the black hat is ruined, Haze buys a new hat. "He wanted one that was completely opposite to the old one" (WB, p. 110). This time he chooses a white Panama, but after he takes off the band, crushes the top, and turns down the brim, "it looked just as fierce as the other one had" (WB, p. 111). When Haze changes to a white hat, nothing else changes in his life except that he mistakenly believes that he is changing Sabbath from an innocent woman to a sinful one. Sabbath, however, is just as amoral as Leora Watts. Since the white hat is chosen at a time when Haze believes that he is going to seduce Sabbath, an innocent child, the new hat can only be said to intensify the blasphemy of Haze's denial that sin exists. In a similar way, his wearing the black preacher's hat while he preaches "'the Church Without Christ . . . that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way . . . the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption!'" (WB, p. 105) can be said to intensify the blasphemy of Haze's cause.

The $11.98 glare-blue preacher-suit which Haze wears constantly also intensifies his blasphemous intent. His purchase of the suit is perhaps instinctive because "he knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going
to be a preacher” (WB, p. 22); but he has decided that he has no soul and he goes to Taulkinham to, as he puts it, "do some things I never have done before" (WB, p. 13). Since Haze wears the suit to preach the Church Without Christ, it, like his hats, serves to intensify his blasphemy.

We find that Haze's skull-like head and his fiercely ridiculous clothes exaggerate his appearance and prevent our identifying with him. Similarly, the rascally heroes of the frontier humorists are portrayed as revolting enough to prevent our identifying with them. Since we cannot identify with Haze or with the humorists' characters, they are, as Esslin suggests, inevitably comic.

A frontier character called Bansy Sniffle who instigates the fight between Billy Stallings and Bob Durham (discussed above) is described as:

a sprout of Richmond, who, in his earlier days, had fed copiously upon red clay and blackberries. This diet had given to Bansy a complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own, and an abdominal rotundity that was quite unprepossessing. Long spells of the fever and ague, too, in Bansy's youth, had conspired with clay and blackberries to throw him quite out of the order of nature. His shoulders were fleshless and elevated; his head large and flat; his neck slim and translucent; and his arms, hands, fingers, and feet were lengthened out of all proportion to the rest of his frame. His joints were large and his limbs small; and as for flesh, he could not, with propriety, be said to have any. Those parts which nature usually supplies with the most of this article—the calves of the legs, for example—presented in him the appearance of so many well-drawn blisters. His height was just five feet
nothing; and his average weight in blackberry season, ninety-five.\textsuperscript{15}

Another rascal of frontier humor, George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood, is a "long legged, short bodied, small headed, white haired, hog eyed, funny sort of genius."\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to similarity in the physical descriptions of some of their characters, there is a resemblance between the names which O'Connor and the frontier humorists choose for their characters, both in humorous sound and in the way they fittingly describe individual characters. Examples of similarities in names which O'Connor and the humorists use are:

\begin{itemize}
  \item **O'Connor:** Hazel Motes' first and last names suggest clouded vision. He symbolizes men who do not see that they should commit themselves to faith in God.
  \item **Longstreet:** Hansy Sniffle's name suggests an unpleasant, sniveling person. He "never seemed fairly alive except when he was witnessing, fomenting, or talking about a fight."\textsuperscript{17}
  \item **O'Connor:** Hoover Shoats' (alias Onnie Jay Holy) name suggests greed and stupidity. He dupes innocent people.
  \item **Harris:** Sut Lovingood's first name, "'Sut' is a common name among backwoods folk and farmers . . . and the surname is composed of two meaningful words: 'loving' and 'good.' Thus, the combination of a common earthy name with a surname of spiritual connotations may reflect an intent on Harris's part to suggest that Sut, like all humankind, is of a spiritual and physical nature, the one usually in conflict with the other."\textsuperscript{18}
\end{itemize}
Another aspect of Haze's grotesqueness is seen in his mechanical, puppet-like gestures. The opening sentence of *Wise Blood* shows Haze seated "at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car" (*WB*, p. 9). Near the end of the novel, Haze's face impresses Mrs. Flood as having "a peculiar pushing look, as if it were going forward after something it could just distinguish in the distance. Even when he was sitting motionless in a chair, his face had the look of straining toward something" (*WB*, p. 214).

On the train, Haze stands in the aisle holding on against the motion of the train, and he is pictured as if he were a puppet: "He got up and hung there a few seconds. He looked as if he were held by a rope caught in the middle of his back and attached to the train ceiling" (*WB*, p. 12). Later, in the potato peeler scene, as Haze watches Asa Hawks leave, "he stood staring after him, jerking his hands in and out of his pockets as if he were trying to move forward and backward at the same time" (*WB*, p. 43). While preaching, too, Haze's gestures are mechanical. He can be seen exhorting the crowd in front of a movie theater, with his arms "working up and down" (*WB*, p. 139).

These mechanical, puppet-like gestures are parodied
by the Essex. Haze buys the Essex so he will have a place to be and a way to travel. He also uses the car as a platform for preaching; he stands on the nose of his Essex just as his grandfather had stood on his Ford to shout the gospel at the people on his three-county circuit. The Essex, although the name indicates a classic automobile, is a joke of a car. It is amazing that Haze can be so taken with this car which resembles a hearse, when he is so consumed with fear of death that as he lies in his berth on the train he has visions of being shut in a coffin. He even dreams while sleeping in the Essex that he is buried alive. Ironically, however, Haze admires the Essex and is rather nonplussed when mechanics imply criticism of it.

The Essex jerks forward and backward in the way that Haze seems to be about to move forward and backward at the same time. When Haze tries to escape Onnie Jay Holy, he has trouble getting the Essex to run properly:

The Essex had a tendency to develop a tic by nightfall. It would go forward about six inches and then back about four; it did that now a succession of times rapidly; otherwise Haze would have shot off in it and been gone. He had to grip the steering wheel with both hands to keep from being thrown either out the windshield or into the back. It stopped this after a few seconds and slid about twenty feet and then began it again (WB, p. 154).

Just as disagreeable in behavior as its new owner, and as unpleasant in appearance as well, the hearse-like Essex, frequently described as a "high rat-colored car," is an
appropriate machine for the mechanical-seeming, corpse-like Hazel Motes.

It is amusing to compare O'Connor's description of the Essex as a "rat-colored car" and Harris's description of a mountaineer in a yarn called "Sut Lovingood's Daddy, Acting Horse," as a "rat-faced youth." In this sketch, Sut arrives at Pat Nash's grocery on a horse named Tearpoke and tells the crowd gathered there that "poor ole Tickeytail" is "es ded es a still wum."19

'What killed Tickeytail, Sut?' asked an anxious inquirer after truth.

"Why nuffin, you cussed fool; he jis' died so, standin up et that. Warn't that rale casteel hoss pluck? Yu see, he froze stiff; no, not that adzactly, but starv'd bust, an' froze arterards, so stiff that when dad an' me went tu lay him out an' we push'd him over, he stuck out jis' so (spreading his arms and legs), like ontu a carpenter's bainch, an' we hed to wait ni ontu seventeen days fur 'im tu thaw afore we cud skin 'im.'

"Skin 'im?' interrupted a rat-faced youth, whittling on a corn stalk, 'I thot yu wanted tu lay the hoss out.'

'The hell yu did! Aint skinin the natral way ove layin out a hoss, I'd like tu no? See a yere, soney, yu tell yer mam tu hev yu sit back jis' bout two years, fur et the rate yu'se a climbin yu stan's a pow'ful chance tu die wif yers shoes on, an' git laid hoss way, yu dus.'

The rat-faced youth shut up his knife and subsided.20

It would be unwise to push too far a comparison between O'Connor's use of "rat-colored" and Harris's use of "rat-faced," but certainly the comparison is worth noting. At least we may say that "rat-colored" is an example of
O'Connor's way of highlighting characteristics with a minimum of words. It is like her describing Enoch Emery as having a "fox-shaped face." Harris is also adept at the use of synecdoche-like description. For example, in "Acting Horse" he describes another mountaineer as a "tomato-nosed man in ragged overcoat."^21

Another tradition of frontier humor which is reflected in O'Connor's work is the use of blasphemous language. Such language is a major element of frontier humor. One example is found in "Acting Horse" when Sut Lovingood talks to Tearpoke:

"Wo! Wo! Tearpoke, yu cussed infunel fidgety hide full ove hell fire, can't yu stan' still and listen while I' se a polishin yer karacter off es a mortul hoss tu these yere durned fools?"^22

Like Sut Lovingood, the car salesman's son in *Wise Blood* uses blasphemous language. He curses so much that Haze is shocked. The father tells Haze: "'Something's wrong with him howcome he curses so much. Just don't listen at him'" (WB, p. 72), but after awhile Haze says: "'Why don't he shut up? What's he keep talking like that for?'" (WB, p. 73). This is ironic because Haze uses blasphemous language, and, furthermore, his whole project of starting a Church Without Christ is a sort of ultimate blasphemy. When Haze first announces that he is going to start a new church, he says: "'I don't need Jesus. What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts'" (WB, p. 56). Another of
several instances of Haze's blasphemous language occurs when he first drives the Essex out on the highway. On this occasion he tells an irritated truck driver: "'Jesus is a trick on niggers!'" (WB, p. 76).

In the final drama which involves the Essex, a patrolman stops Haze, who is on his way to another city to preach. The patrolman says he doesn't like Haze's looks. This could be true, but the patrolman must also mean that he doesn't like the looks of the high rat-colored car. There proceeds comic action in which the patrolman pushes the Essex over an embankment, ruining it forever. This scene, in which a surprised cow gallops away when the Essex crashes down, landing on its top with the motor bouncing out and three wheels spinning, and the patrolman anxiously inquiring: "'Was you going anywheres?'" (WB, p. 209), has the effect of a film comedy. It is as funny as the light-hearted escapades portrayed by the frontier humorists. Haze, however, fails to see anything amusing in a situation that involves the loss of his Essex. His seriousness is one of the exaggerated characteristics which makes it possible for O'Connor to treat the violence of this scene with humor.

Hazel Motes, then, is a character who is defined in terms of his grotesque appearance and behavior. Oddly enough, however, other characters in the novel, rather than being put off by his appearance and his rudeness, are
fascinated by Haze. Enoch wants Haze for a friend. Mrs. Flood wants to marry Haze. Sabbath Lilly Hawks finds him adorable. She tells Asa Hawks: "'I'm just crazy about him. I never seen a boy I liked the looks of any better'" (WB, p. 110).

Although Sabbath and Asa Hawks are not as exaggerated as the other characters in the novel, like all the others they are figuratively blind. None of the characters in Wise Blood sees his own obsession, his physical ugliness, or his sinfulness. This blindness accounts for the central symbolism of the novel and the constant references to eyes, glasses, seeing, and blindness. Sabbath has to be among the figuratively blind in order to be just crazy about such a grotesque character as Hazel Motes. She definitely overlooks his rudeness for she is not even discouraged by his raising a chair as if to hit her on the night she appears in his room in the guise of seductress. Sabbath also fails to see the grim reality of her way of life. She doesn't feel the least repelled, for example, by the experience of holding a mummy in her arms as if it were a baby.

It is in connection with Sabbath and Asa, however, that the theme of Wise Blood becomes most apparent. O'Connor's intention is to show that man is a sinner and that he must choose between faith in God or lack of faith. That there is no middle way is emphasized by Hazel Motes' determined effort, once he has decided that he has no
soul, to prove by sinning that there is no such thing as sin. He objects when others, such as Solace Layfield, do not act in a way that is true to their convictions. Asa and Sabbath suggest, however, that Haze, whose grandfather had said that "Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever," and that "Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed" (WB, p. 22), is actually searching for God. It does seem that his obsession with trying to prove that sin does not exist indicates that the unnamed guilt he feels as a child never leaves him.

Sabbath perceives that Haze doesn't like sinning but she is mistaken in thinking that he can learn to like it. She tells Haze:

'Listen, from the minute I set eyes on you I said to myself, that's what I got to have, just give me some of him! I said look at those pecan eyes and go crazy girl! That innocent look don't hide a thing, he's just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is I like being that way and he don't. Yes sir! I like being that way, and I can teach you how to like it. Don't you want to learn how to like it?' (WB, p. 169).

Haze, however, is not pure filthy right down to the guts. Asa says of Haze: "'I can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice'" (WB, p. 50); and he says to Haze: "'You've got eyes and see not, ears and hear not, but you'll have to see some time'" (WB, p. 54). Asa's comments help us to understand Haze's dilemma. While they suggest that Asa alone is not figuratively blind, we know that he is because, like Haze, Asa is consumed with guilt. He hates himself for his
failure to carry out his promise "to blind himself to justify his belief that Christ Jesus has redeemed him" (WB, p. 112). Haze is thoroughly puzzled by Asa's lack of interest in trying to convert him. "What kind of preacher are you?" Haze heard himself murmur, 'not to try to save my soul?" (WB, p. 108). It appears that Haze really wants Asa to change him so that he will no longer be obsessed with the question of whether he should go forward toward God or backward toward sin.

It is clear that Haze recognizes the choice between faith in God and lack of faith which is the theme of Wise Blood. What is not entirely clear is which choice Haze makes. There is the intimation that when Haze becomes literally blind he can now see to the heart of things. Mrs. Flood believes that he has the look of seeing (WB, p. 214), and, shocked at his wearing barbed wire around his chest and walking on rocks in his shoes, she says: "'You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things!" (WB, p. 225).

The suggestion that Haze is converted to faith, however, can be refuted by reference to a conversation he has with Mrs. Flood in which she tells him: "'I'm as good, Mr. Motes . . . not believing in Jesus as a many a one that does,'" whereupon Haze replies: "'You're better . . . if you believed in Jesus you wouldn't be so good!'" (WB, p. 221). Does Haze mean that Mrs. Flood can be just as
good without faith as she can with faith? If so, he has not chosen a new life of commitment to faith in God. Or, does Haze intend irony, meaning that Mrs. Flood, whose goodness is not true, would be truly good if she believed in Jesus? Perhaps, although such complex irony would not be characteristic of Haze. His remark to Mrs. Flood sounds too much like his sarcastic "'I reckon you think you been redeemed!'" (WB, p. 14) to Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock to be taken as ironic. Though his leaving the house after Mrs. Flood's proposal of marriage is obviously to get away from her, it also suggests that Haze is still searching. Mrs. Flood wants to know if he is leaving to go to another rooming house or to another city. '"That's not where I'm going,' he said, 'There's no other house nor no other city'" (WB, p. 228). Another way in which Haze's possible conversion is left unclear is seen in his knowledge, before he blinds himself, that Asa Hawks is not actually blind. Therefore, his blinding himself seems not to be meant to prove to others that he has been converted and that the blinding is an act to justify his belief as was Asa's intention, but is as much an indication of obsession with the unnamed guilt of his childhood as is his walking on rocks in his shoes.

Haze's death occurs in the final scene of violence in the novel. During this scene a policeman hits Haze over the head with a billy club, but his violent act, like
other incidents in the novel which deal with policemen, is treated with humor. Since we have come to expect exaggerated behavior on the part of policemen in the novel--it was after all hardly necessary for the patrolman to push the Essex over an embankment--we are prepared for the behavior of the two fat policemen who find Haze lying in a ditch wearing a suit which one of the policemen says "'might have uster been blue'" (WB, p. 230). The scene is also found to be reduced in intensity when we consider that the dying Haze is much like the dying Solace Layfield. Haze's hand "moving along the edge of the ditch as if it were hunting something to grip" (WB, p. 230) is like Solace lying "motionless all but one finger that moved up and down in front of his face as if he were marking time with it" (WB, p. 204). The policemen talk to Haze, too, in a way that is similar to Haze's talking to Solace when he is dying. O'Connor, then, treats this scene, like most of the other violent events in Wise Blood, with humor in the manner of the frontier humorists. This technique is made possible through her use of grotesque characters, characters who can also be seen to reflect another tradition of American humor, that of the comic character type.
Chapter 2

A basic element of native American humor is the comic character type. There are several traditional character types, among them the country bumpkin (known variously as the hick, the dude, or the greenhorn), the backwoodsman (also known as the gamecock of the wilderness or the ring-tailed roarer), the trickster, and the Yankee peddler. M. Thomas Inge suggests that "no single stereotyped figure, like that of the Yankee ... or the mythological 'gamecock' of the wilderness ... emerged from the [frontier humorists'] tales." Their leading characters, he says, "are usually the lower class white settlers--crackers, hillbillies, backwoodsmen, yeoman farmers, and 'poor whites.'" It seems to me, however, that it would not be difficult to label such characters as the Ransy Sniffles and Sut Lovinggoods of frontier humor as a character type. Perhaps we could call them "rascally heroes," for the humorists' heroes, though lovable, are generally involved in some petty dishonesty or meanness. Or, without much
effort, we could show the likenesses these characters share with the backwoodsman who is an exuberant, fun-loving braggart, or the Yankee peddler who is described by Constance Rourke as having "sold a load of warming pans in the West Indies" and, finding no market for "fashionable white paper hats" in a Canadian village, "ground them up into mortar and made them into pills."^{25}

Suppose, however, that, in looking at Flannery O'Connor's stories and novels, we accept Inge's statement without question. What we recognize immediately is that most of her characters belong to the lower class. Assuming that Inge's definition differentiates between crackers, hillbillies, and backwoodsmen only on the basis of the setting of a particular yarn, for a general comparison with O'Connor's characters we will categorize these three types as one; we will call the type "backwoodsmen." In O'Connor's fiction, then, we find backwoodsmen such as Mason Tarwater and Francis Marion Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away*; yeoman farmers such as Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People," and Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person"; and poor whites such as Mr. and Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person" and Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf in "Greenleaf."

If we broaden Inge's definition and suggest that frontier humor did produce a comic character type, one which could be called the rascally hero, and then look for
this comic type in O'Connor's work, we find an instance in which Enoch Emery, in *Wise Blood*, closely resembles a rascally hero called Simon Suggs, the creation of Johnson Jones Hooper. This instance occurs when Enoch and Haze begin to follow Asa Hawks and Sabbath after the potato peeler scene. Haze crosses a street when the traffic light is red, and, when he is accosted by a policeman, Enoch becomes protective and says:

'I'll look after him. . . . He ain't been here but only two days. I'll look after him.'

'How long you been here?' the cop asked.

'I was born and raised here,' Enoch said. 'This is my 'ol home town' (*WB*, pp. 45-46).

Enoch, who has been in Taulkinham for only two months, reacts in the manner of the rascally Simon Suggs who says, in an often quoted observation: "'It is good to be shifty in a new country.'"26

In the larger tradition of native American humor, we may see Enoch Emery as the comic character type known as the country bumpkin. There are other country bumpkins in O'Connor's fiction. Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," for instance, is overwhelmed by the city, so much so that he temporarily loses his reasoning powers when he observes the commotion created when his grandson, Nelson, knocks a shopper off her feet. Mr. Head becomes so confused that he disgraces himself by denying that he knows Nelson. Probably, though, there is no better example anywhere of a
country boy whose ignorance is evident when he comes to town than Enoch Emery. Enoch is at a loss in the city. He is unable to make friends and spends his non-working hours just killing time. "He had a fondness for supermarkets; it was his custom to spend an hour or so in one every afternoon after he left the city park, browsing around among the canned goods and reading the cereal stories" (WB, p. 130). It would be hard to imagine a more abject person than one who spends an hour or more every day reading cereal box stories in a supermarket. Enoch says that in Faulklinham no one is friendly: "'All they want to do is knock you down. I ain't never been to such an unfriendly place before'" (WB, p. 27). It is ironic that Enoch seems not to notice that Hazel Motes is the least friendly of people. Even after Haze has thrown a rock which hits Enoch on the forehead, Enoch does not feel any dislike for Haze.

Enoch's naivete imbues him with comic potential that he never fails to fulfill. It leads him into ludicrous situations that are central to the theme of Wise Blood, situations such as his stealing a mummy and then giving it to Haze to serve as the new "jesus" (sic) for his church. First Enoch drags Haze to the museum to see the mummy. "'See theter notice,'" Enoch says to Haze "'in a church whisper, pointing to the typewritten card at the man's foot, 'it says he was once as tall as you or me. Some
A-rabs did it to him in six months'" (WB, p. 98).

The whole matter of Enoch's stealing the mummy and taking it to Haze's room is completely zany, including his ridiculous disguise. The problems which Enoch has in keeping his landlady's fifteen-year-old umbrella from collapsing in the rain provide visual material that would be worthy of a Charlie Chaplin. He later nervously picks apart what remains of the umbrella until all that is left is the handle, "which was carved to represent the head of a fox terrier" (WB, p. 177). Enoch observes that this swagger-stick "would distinguish him on the sidewalk" (WB, p. 192).

We find that language inflates the ludicrousness of Enoch's actions and parodies Haze's blasphemous denial that Jesus and sin exist. For example, when Enoch prepares his room for the coming of the new Jesus, he concentrates on a large piece of furniture, the lowest part of which was a tabernacle-like cabinet which was meant to contain a slop-jar. Enoch didn't own a slop-jar but he had a certain reverence for the purpose of things and since he didn't have the right thing to put in it, he left it empty. Directly over this place for the treasure, there was a gray marble slab . . . (WB, p. 131).

The words "tabernacle-like," "reverence," and "treasure," used in connection with the words "slop-jar" suggest the blasphemy which is intended. The mummy treasure which is not a treasure will be placed in a tabernacle which is not a tabernacle.
Examples such as those above show Enoch's close connection to the theme of *Wise Blood*; i.e., the choice between faith in God and lack of faith. He is also essential to the structure of the novel, a structure in which characters and their actions mirror each other. Enoch's ignorance and blasphemy parody Haze. Solace Layfield is dressed as Haze's double. Asa Hawks' pretended blindness foreshadows Haze's real blindness. The three women in Haze's life--Leora, Sabbath, and Mrs. Flood--mirror each other in their amorality and greed. The consistent pattern of mirroring seems to move back and forth, much as Haze seems to be about to move forward and backward at the same time, for first one character and then another is found to reflect the personality, appearance, or actions of one or more other characters. Yet the pattern seems to proceed in a sort of whirling motion which implies the traditional religious connotation of a circular, upward trend.

Although he is not laughably ignorant like Enoch Emery, we find that Hazel Motes is also a country bumpkin, for, like Enoch, Haze is at a loss in the city. All Haze had wanted to do was "to stay in 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" (*WB*, p. 22). Instead of his having the life in the country he wants, the army sends Haze "halfway around the world"
Yet, after four years in the army, with all the traveling necessary to take him halfway around the world, Haze doesn't even know how to order a meal in the dining car of the train.

That Enoch and Haze are caught up in the traditional rural-urban dichotomy is emphasized by the setting of *Wise Blood*. Taulkinham is an extremely ugly city. Even Haze's room suggests ugliness and treachery with its extra door that opens "out onto a drop of about thirty feet... into a narrow bare back yard where the garbage was collected" (*WB*, p. 107). The city park, too, is an evil-seeming place. It contains a miserable zoo. There is an ugly museum which is described as having columns at the front of it and in between each column there was an eyeless stone woman holding a pot on her head. A concrete band was over the columns and the letters, MVSEVM, were cut into it (*WB*, p. 96).

*Enoch* pronounces the name of the building as "Muvseevum" (*WB*, p. 96). The strange sounding name of the building frightens him, and the mummy, which is inside the MVSEVM in one of three coffin-like glass cases, becomes, in Enoch's imagination, the source of portentous mystery.

Although there are hints in the novel that the country, as opposed to the city, holds possibilities for good, nothing good happens to Enoch or Haze in either place. One instance in which the failure of the possibility of the country as good occurs is when Haze drives out of the city to see how well the Essex will drive "on the open road"
(WB, p. 117). Before Sabbath, who has stolen a ride, shows herself, the sky is seen as "just a little lighter blue than his suit, clear and even, with only one cloud in it, a large blinding one with curls and a beard" (WB, p. 117). The white, god-like cloud seems to be beckoning Haze into the country. At Sabbath's suggestion, they turn off onto a dirt road.

It was hilly and shady and the country showed to advantage on either side. One side was dense honeysuckle and the other was open and slanted down to a telescoped view of the city. The white cloud was directly in front of them (WB, p. 120).

Sabbath, who goddess-like wears dandelions in her hair, says she likes a dirt road and she likes to walk in a field barefooted. The day turns out badly, though, because Haze, irritated anyway at having Sabbath along, is troubled by the problem of whether a bastard such as Sabbath can belong to his Church Without Christ, and because the Essex misbehaves. When the two turn back toward the city, "the blinding white cloud had turned into a bird with long thin wings and was disappearing in the opposite direction" (WB, p. 127). In other instances, a country setting is not a good place. For example, Haze murders Solace Layfield on a country road, and it is in the country that the Essex is ruined.

Another suggestion that the country is good, but which does not hold true, occurs when Enoch, having put on the gorilla-suit in a pine thicket, now feels immeasurably
happy. We learn that "no gorilla in existence, whether in the jungles of Africa or California, or in New York City in the finest apartment in the world, was happier at that moment than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it" (WB, pp. 197-198), a bit of exaggeration which could not have been accomplished more perfectly by Mark Twain. Now that he has bettered his condition, Enoch extends his hand in friendly greeting to a man and woman sitting on a rock and looking across "an open stretch of valley at a view of the city in the distance" (WB, p. 198). The city they see is pictured as ugly:

The smokestacks and square tops of buildings made a black uneven wall against the lighter sky and here and there a steeple cut a sharp wedge out of a cloud (WB, p. 198).

The possibility that the country will not be like the black uneven wall of the city is thwarted, however, because the couple become frightened and run when they see Enoch. Here, Enoch, wearing the costume that had earlier presented the first friendly hand that had been extended to him since he arrived in the city, is as effectively snubbed as a gorilla as he was when he was human.

It seems to me that the failure of the country as good strengthens the theme of Wise Blood. Enoch and Haze, the country bumpkins, should find security in a return to the country, but, more importantly for the development of the theme of the novel, Haze's commitment could be expected to
change from belief in sin to faith in God once he is out of the evil city and into the good country. That a change does not take place when Haze is in the country emphasizes the strength of his commitment to the belief that Jesus and sin do not exist and stresses the idea that a choice should be made and that once a choice is made there should be no waiving along a middle way.

Besides his role as country bumpkin, Hazel Motes resembles a comic character type called the backwoodsman. This fearless frontiersman is known best for the audacity of his speech. Characteristically, the backwoodsman exaggerated the wild life on the frontier and his own ability to respond to the wilderness. As Constance Rourke describes him, the backwoodsman was not only half horse, half alligator, he was also the sea-horse of the mountain, a flying whale, a bear with a sore head. . . . He was a steamboat, or an earthquake that shook the enemy to pieces, and he could wade the Mississippi. 'I'm a regular tornado, tough as hickory and long-winded as a nor'wester. I can strike a blow like a falling tree, and every lick makes a gap in the crowd that lets in an ace of sunshine.'

Hazel Motes and Onnie Jay Holy's preaching reflects this traditional backwoods manner of speech.

To stand on a car in front of a movie theater in order to shout at anyone who will listen is audacious in itself, but to preach, as Haze does, 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. Nothing
matters but that Jesus was a liar' (WB, p. 105) is the height of audacious speech. It is interesting to note that Haze reminds Onnie Jay Holy of "'Jesus Christ and Abraham Lincoln'" (WB, p. 155), because some students of American humor see Abraham Lincoln as the "master comic narrator" who elevated "backwoods . . . yamspinning to national prominence."28

It is Onnie Jay Holy, however, underneath whose smile "there was an honest look that fitted into his face like a set of false teeth" (WB, p. 148), who best exemplifies the modern-day backwoodsman. Onnie Jay Holy looks "like an ex-preacher turned cowboy, or an ex-cowboy turned mortician" (WB, p. 148). He charms the gathered crowd with his bragging speech: "'I wisht I had my gittarr here 'cause I just somehow can say sweet things to music bettern plain'" (WB, p. 149). Onnie then proceeds to win over his audience by telling them about himself and how he has been changed.

When Onnie, the former radio star, tells the crowd that they can join the "Holy Church of Christ Without Christ" (WB, p. 153) for only a dollar, Haze shouts that they can join for free. Onnie capitalizes on this by saying:

'You hear what the Prophet says, friends, a dollar is not too much to pay. No amount of money is too much to learn the truth' (WB, p. 154).

If Haze hadn't broken up the show, Onnie Jay Holy would
have earned the two of them at least ten dollars in collection money, a big sell that is very much like one accomplished by Simon Suggs in Hooper's sketch called "Simon Suggs Attends a Camp-Meeting." In this sketch, the rascally Captain Suggs, finding himself poor at the conclusion of the Creek war, exclaims to his wife:

"'D----n it! somebody must suffer!'" 29 He then leaves for Sandy Creek to attend a camp meeting where he outwits the good folk gathered there and escapes with the collection. The captain perpetrates his hoax by pretending to be overcome with religious fervor; he twitches and jerks himself to the mourners bench whereupon there is great rejoicing because this "'chief of sinners' in all the region" has seen the light. Then, like Onnie Jay Holy, the Captain sweet-talks the congregation into contributing to a "little 'sociation" he plans to start. He says:

'I want to start a little 'sociation close to me, and I want you all to help.

... ... ...

'It's mighty little of this world's goods I've got,' resumed Suggs, pulling off his hat and holding it before him; 'but I'll bury that in the cause any how,' and he deposited his last five-dollar bill in the hat.

There was a murmur of approbation at the Captain's liberality throughout the assembly.

Suggs now commenced collecting, and very prudently attacked first the gentlemen who had shown a disposition to escape. These, to exculpate themselves from anything like poverty, contributed handsomely.

... ... ...
'That's what I call maganimus!' exclaimed the Captain; 'that's the way every rich man ought to do!' These examples were followed, more or less closely, by almost all present, for Simon had excited the pride of purse of the congregation, and a very handsome sum was collected in a very short time.\footnote{30}

Onnie Jay Holy says:

"Why yonder is a little babe, a little bundle of helpless sweetness. Why, I know you people aren't going to let that little thing grow up and have all his sweetness pushed inside him when it could be on the outside to win friends and make him loved. That's why I want ever' one of you people to join the Holy Church of Christ without Christ. It'll cost you each a dollar but what is a dollar? A few dimes! Not too much to pay to unlock that little rose of sweetness inside you" (WB, p. 153).

Simon Suggs gets away with the collection by saying he has to take it into the "krick swamp" to pray over it. Onnie undoubtedly makes some money on later occasions because he begins to preach Haze's church on his own.

This ability to talk people out of their money denotes another comic character, that of the Yankee peddler, a character who is also found in O'Connor's fiction in the person of Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman in "Good Country People." Manley exemplifies the Yankee peddler who is known as a shrewd wheeler and dealer. He tells Mrs. Hopewell that he sells Bibles not to work his way through college but because he wants to "devote my life to Christian service" and that he might not live long because he "has this heart condition" (CS, p. 279). These appealing statements do not result in Manley's selling a
Bible to Mrs. Hopewell but they do earn him a free dinner.

Hulga, the Ph.D who has a bad heart and wears glasses and an artificial leg, reflects another comic character type found in native American humor. Hulga, in the role of spinster, turns out to be the traditional trickster, a trickster who in this case, as it often happens in traditional humor, gets tricked. After accepting Manley's invitation to go on a picnic, Hulga imagines how she will trick him in a seduction scene.

She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful (CS, p. 284).

The tables are turned, however, and Hulga gets tricked because the Bible salesman is not the innocent that she had believed him to be.

Manley Pointer, the Yankee peddler, succeeds in acquiring what he wants, that is, Hulga's glasses and her artificial leg. Like the Yankee peddler who is described by Bourke as on the move "through the widening settlements of the Mississippi . . . bringing a splatter of color to farms buried deep in the forests," Manley changes Hulga's life and moves on. He tells Hulga: "'You needn't think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't
stay nowhere long" (CS, p. 291).

There are also parallels in "Good Country People" with the folktale "about a lover who is disappointed to discover that the object of his affections is a bundle of cosmetic and prosthetic devices." Hennig Cohen writes that this tale is the basis for Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up." If she did know this folktale, O'Connor gave it a new twist, for Manley Pointer is only too pleased to discover that the object of his affection is a bundle of cosmetic and prosthetic devices. In fact, that is what attracts him to her in the first place.
Chapter 3

The frontier humorists tried as much as possible to make the yarns they recalled in print seem as though they were actually being told by real story-tellers. Walter Blair calls the humorists' sketches 'mock oral tales,' that is, reproductions in print of yarns told in the vernacular by a narrator of the sort who might delight a fireside audience. The influence of the unwritten form of the raconteur here is indeed a strong one. Whereas the loose commentary of the letter or the highly mannered style of most short stories of the time encouraged diffuseness, this form encouraged, among other things, directness. Oral tales . . . were likely to be told 'with a straight-forwardness and simplicity.'

Vivid phrases, drawn from the racy vernacular, here were likely to replace rambling descriptions; a striking figure of speech or a single well-chosen verb quickly recorded an action, and the narrative moved along. 34

The sketches typically introduce a vernacular narrator. After some ramblings, this narrator, though pretending not to be conscious that he is doing so, begins his tale. Mark Twain is generally thought to have perfected the
humorists' "mock oral tale" when, in "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," his straight-faced, laconic narrator, Simon Wheeler, never lets on that he is conscious of telling a tale.

There is evidence in Flannery O'Connor's fiction that she, too, recognizes the tradition of story-tellers spinning yarns. For example, in "The Comforts of Home," Thomas recalls how "his father had had the countryman's ability to converse squatting," how "in the midst of a conversation on the courthouse lawn, he would squat and his two companions would squat with him with no break in the surface of the talk" (CS, p. 393). Thomas's father and his companions portray modern-day sources of the oral story-telling tradition.

The various wives of hired hands in O'Connor's stories also portray modern-day story-tellers. Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People," for example, tells wild stories while Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga eat their meals. "She would stand in the doorway if it were summer but in the winter she would stand with one elbow on top of the refrigerator and look down on them, or she would stand by the gas heater, lifting the back of her skirt slightly" (CS, p. 273). With the utmost casualness, Mrs. Freeman expresses her preference for distasteful subjects. She "had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases,
she preferred the lingering or incurable" (CS, p. 275).

Another farmer's wife, Mrs. Pritchard in "A Circle in the Fire," laconically expresses her curiosity about how a distant relation of hers, now deceased, could have conceived a child while living in an iron lung. While Mrs. Pritchard talks to Mrs. Cope, who is pulling grass out of her flower beds, she is "leaning against the chimney, her arms folded on a shelf of stomach, one foot crossed and the toe pointed into the ground" (CS, p. 175). Mrs. Pritchard's manner thus suggests that of a disinterested narrator. Admittedly, the women gossip and are not technically telling tall tales. However, they prefer extravagant subject matter, and this is the chief characteristic of a tall tale.

Although Thomas's father and the farmers' wives can be said to follow the humorists' habit of picturing storytellers actually telling tales, there is another way in which O'Connor's work seems to reflect the tradition of straight-faced, laconic narration, and that is in some of her dialogue. Many of her characters make caustic, laconic comments. For example, after exchanging empty phrases such as "'Why, good country people are the salt of the earth!'" (CS, p. 279), Mrs. Hopewell leaves the Bible salesman to check on her dinner. She finds Hulga listening near the door. Hulga's comment is: "'Get rid of the salt of the earth, and let's eat.'" (CS, p. 279). Another
example of laconic dialogue is found in the story called "Revelation" when a woman with "snuff-stained lips" tells Mrs. Turpin she can get a clock with green stamps. The woman says: "'Save you up enough, you can get you most anything. I got me some joo'ry.'" Mrs. Turpin's mental reply is: "'Ought to have got you a wash rag and some soap'" (CS, p. 492). In Wise Blood, Hazel Motes' thought follow a similar pattern. When Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock remarks to Haze that "the way things happened, one thing after another, it seemed like time went by so fast you couldn't tell if you were young or old! He thought he could tell her she was old if she asked him" (WB, p. 13).

Such comments as these also suggest another basic element of American humor, that of understatement. O'Connor is adept at understatement, as can be seen when it is suggested about the mummy in Wise Blood that "two days out of the glass case had not improved the new Jesus' condition" (WB, p. 184). There is much of traditional exaggeration, too, in O'Connor's fiction. An excellent example of exaggeration, mentioned earlier, is seen in the description of Enoch as happier than any gorilla in existence.

The striking figures of speech which Blair mentions involve picturesque language such as that found in "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" when rascally Sut Lovingood answers George, the character in Harris's sketches who generally
introduces Sut. George says: "'Oh, you have been helping
to bury a woman.'" Sut's extravagant reply is:

'That's hit, by golly! Now why the devil can't I
'splain myself like yu? I ladles out my words at
random, like a calf kickin at yaller-jackids; yu
jis' rolls em out tu the pint, like a feller a-layin
bricks--every one fits. How is it that bricks fits
so clost enyhow? Hocks won't ni du hit."

Sut's vivid simile describing random speech as like "a
calf kickin at yaller-jackids" is very much like what I
term "country" metaphors in O'Connor's fiction, "country"
because, like the humorists, O'Connor keeps her metaphors
in tune with the characters and the setting in her fiction.

There are numerous examples of such "country" metaphors in
her stories and novels. In Wise Blood, for example, the
Welfare woman is described as having hair so thin "it
looked like ham gravy trickling over her skull" (WB,
p. 47); the moving crowd outside the building where Asa
Hawks and the others hand out tracts is described as being
"like a large spread raveling and the separate threads
disappeared down the dark streets" (WB, p. 55); when
Enoch's wise blood tells him he must prepare his room for
a special event, "his blood was rushing around like a
woman who cleans up the house after company has come"
(WB, p. 134); and once when Haze pounds the horn of the
Essex "it made a sound like a goat's laugh cut off with a
buzz saw" (WB, p. 160). As these examples show, in her
use of exuberant, vivid, and picturesque figures of speech,
O'Connor writes very much in the tradition of the early humorists.

Walter Blair points out yet another stylistic trait of the frontier humorists which we may find reflected in O'Connor's fiction, that is, the use of the incongruous catalog. Though he says that cataloging is characteristic of the early humorists, the example Blair gives is found in a story by Bret Harte, who, strictly speaking, is a local colorist, not a frontier humorist. Blair points out that the assortment of gifts presented to the child in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" includes "a tobacco-box, an embroidered handkerchief, a slingshot, a Bible, and a pair of surgeon's shears." Cataloging, which has become a staple of modern journalism, is also found in O'Connor's fiction. In Wise Blood, for example, when Hazel Motes arrives in Taulkinham,

as soon as he stepped off the train, he began to see signs and lights. PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically (WB, p. 29).

Later, when Enoch, who is on his way home from work, exhausted with the knowledge that something important is about to happen to him, arrives in the business district, he had to lean against Walgreen's window to cool off. Sweat crept down his back and provoked him to itch so that in just a few minutes he appeared to be working his way across the glass by his muscles against a background of alarm clocks, toilet waters, candies, sanitary pads, fountain pens, and pocket flashlights, displayed in all colors to twice his height (WB, p. 135).
Another example of incongruous cataloging is found in "A View of the Woods" when the items for sale at Tilman's store are listed. "Tilman operated a combination country store, filling station, scrap metal dump, used-car lot and dance hall." His place was bordered on either side by a field of old used car bodies, a kind of ward for incurable automobiles. He also sold outdoor ornaments, such as stone cranes and chickens, urns, jardinieres, whirligigs, and farther back from the road, so as not to depress his dance-hall customers, a line of tombstones and monuments (CS, p. 345).

In several ways, then, we may demonstrate that O'Connor's style reflects that of the frontier humorists. Her work pictures straight-faced, laconic narration, and it is filled with vivid country metaphors.

Further comparison with the frontier humorists' work suggests that, although the conclusion of her stories is usually foreshadowed in several ways, for the unobservant reader her stories may seem to end with the sudden, surprising twist of a typical frontier anecdote. Her stories, too, are often ludicrous in their action. It seems unbelievable that a grandfather and granddaughter could stage a fight as Mark Fortune and Mary Fortune Pitts do in "A View of the Woods," or that someone could steal another person's artificial leg as the Bible salesman does in "Good Country People." The novel Wise Blood, with its wild plot, could even be considered to be a gigantic tall tale.
Finally, O'Connor's fiction reflects the traditional clash between the genteel and vernacular modes. This becomes rather complicated in O'Connor's work because it is possible to view this traditional clash in at least two ways in her work. One way that we see the two modes in conflict in her work is in the disgust which her intellectuals feel for the lower class characters they meet. Hulga, the Ph.D in "Good Country People," for instance, feels infinitely superior to the Bible salesman, while he feels perfectly at ease in the down-to-earth vernacular mode. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. says that

There can be little doubt that this perspective—the vernacular perspective, set forth in opposition to the cultural, the literary—is the approved American mode of humor. The characteristic comic situation in American humorous writing is that in which cultural and social pretension are made to appear ridiculous and artificial. The bias is all on the side of the practical, the factual.37

In O'Connor's fiction, intellectuals such as Hulga, whose Ph.D. is useless, are definitely made to appear ridiculous, even hypocritical.

In a novel like Wise Blood, however, where all of the characters belong to the vernacular mode, we find that the clash with the intellectual, genteel mode is presented in the voice of the narrator. We see this in the third chapter which opens with a sentence that simply tells us that Hazel Motes is down town walking "close to the store fronts but not looking in them." The next sentence con-
tinues in a genteel manner:

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete.

The third sentence switches to the vernacular:

No one was paying any attention to the sky. The stores stayed open on Thursday nights so that people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale (WB, p. 37).

These images are repeated later when the patrolman has pushed the Essex over an embankment and Haze's face seemed to reflect the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space.

Immediately the narration becomes pragmatic, and thus, vernacular:

His knees bent under him and he sat down on the edge of the embankment with his feet hanging over (WB, p. 209).

The first manner of narration seems to suggest that there is something better than everyday life, and, given O'Connor's religious direction, something otherworldly. In further discussion about the clash of the genteel and vernacular modes, Rubin writes that

while Clemens' use of the clash of modes is in the great tradition of red-blooded American humor, the exploding of pretense, it is not the only way to approach the humorous chasm between the real and the ideal in American life. Almost from the beginning of American history there has been another comic tradition, which goes at its job from the opposite perspective. What this approach finds amusing is the
inadequacy of the everyday, the ordinary, for it measures the raw fact from the standpoint of genuine culture and absolute value. It assumes that the mere fact of something is not what is important; what is crucial is what one can make of the fact. It is all very well to ridicule the traditional values of culture, knowledge, taste, ethics, but what is to be substituted in their place, if life is to rise above the level of mere getting and spending? What is wrong with the genteel tradition in arts and letters is not that it is overly civilized, but rather that it is not civilized enough. It is false, sentimental, pretentious—because it is not sufficiently imaginative, sufficiently knowing, sufficiently beautiful. 38

Rubin's suggestion that neither the vernacular nor the genteel mode is adequate is particularly thought-provoking in connection with O'Connor's fiction. It may be that O'Connor attempts to substitute something of value in the place of both inadequate modes, for she seems to suggest, with the aid of humor, that we need somewhere in our learning to grasp whatever knowledge is suggested by the stars that seem to move as if they are about some vast construction work that involves the whole order of the universe and will take all time to complete.
NOTES


4Gossett, p. 76.

5In her note to the Second Edition of Wise Blood, Flannery O'Connor describes Hazel Motes as a "Christian malgré lui." Further quotations from Wise Blood will be identified with the abbreviation "WB" and a page number in parenthesis.

6Carter Martin, for example, includes a chapter titled "Comic and Grim Laughter" in The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Kingsport, Tenn.: The Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), pp. 189-214.


11Blair, pp. 296-297.

12Blair, p. 297.

14Muller, p. 7.
15Blair, p. 290.
17Blair, p. 291.
18Harris, p. 20.
19Harris, p. 33.
20Harris, pp. 33-34.
21Harris, p. 34.
22Harris, p. 33.
23Harris, p. 5.
24Harris, p. 5.
26Blair, p. 315.
27Rourke, p. 36.
28Jan Harold Brunvand, Syllabus for Anthropology X193, American Folklore (University of California Extension, Berkeley, California, no date), p. 34.
29Blair, p. 316.
30Blair, pp. 324-325.
31Rourke, p. 3.
33 Cohen, p. 93.
34 Blair, pp. 89-90.
35 Harris, p. 114.
36 Blair, p. 132.


38 Rubin, pp. 393-394.
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