



An Analysis of Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* from the Perspective of Posthumanism

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Abstract: Referring to Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, most of the research focuses on the subject of South, religion, violence, Gothic, Oedipus complex as well as the theories of feminism, Freud's psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. Through interpreting the protagonist Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* from the perspective of posthumanism, this thesis intends to verify Motes' fragmented self and alienation from others and society. By analyzing the destroyed and broken postwar world and the loss of family members, it indicates a fragmented Hazel Motes both physically and spiritually. By analyzing his persisting on a religious faith in wartime, his indifference and cruelty in the collapsed postwar world, the mistrust from acquaintances, it reflects Motes' alienation from others and society. In conclusion, this thesis assumes that Flannery O'Connor may also appeal readers to maintain a harmonious and reliable relationship among human beings in the consumer capitalistic society.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, posthumanism, Hazel Motes

1. Introduction

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), an eminent Southern writer, is hailed as one of the most gifted and important American fiction writers of the 20th century. Coming from an Irish-Catholic family that long established in Georgia, O'Connor often writes in a Southern Gothic style and relies heavily on regional settings and grotesque characters by using the comic, ironic or symbolic writing techniques. Except for reflecting her Roman Catholic faith, O'Connor frequently examines questions of morality and ethics in her writing.

Flannery O'Connor had written 2 novels and 32 short stories as well as a number of reviews and commentaries during her whole life. When O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* published in 1952, it earned a national acclaim, as Caroline Gordon's in Cofer's essay said that "I was more impressed by *Wise Blood* than any novel I have read for a long time"[5]. This novel bears witness to a veteran Hazel Motes' escaping from the traditional belief of redemption and reversing to the anti-Gospel with the new creed of 'Church without Christ' in Taulkinham City. During his pilgrimage, Hazel Motes experienced the loss of family, encountered the demoniac Enoch Emery, false preacher Asa Hawks and his daughter Sabbath Lily. Eventually, he chose to blind himself and died of typhoid on the way to redemption.

Summarizing the previous and current studies on *Wise Blood*, they mainly focus on the subject of South, religion, Gothic, Oedipus complex, Freud's psychoanalysis and so on. Critics and scholars conclude that "O'Connor first attempts at developing her backwoods prophet figures, associated with strange and violent acts"[5]. While O'Connor herself admits that initially this novel is a comic story connected with the theme of humanism, which indicates a kind of posthumanism to some extent, especially the side of fragmented self and dissimulation among human beings. Therefore, this thesis interprets the protagonist Hazel Motes as the most appropriate embodiment of posthumanism in this novel by analyzing his fragmentation both physically and spiritually, his alienation from other companions in wartime and those he acquainted in the ruined postwar society so that highlighting a demand of harmonious relationship among human beings.

2. Posthumanism Embodied in *Wise Blood*

Posthumanism is firstly emerged and employed in the contemporary critical discourse of humanities and social sciences during the mid-1990s. While dating back to the 1960s, the famous French philosopher, Foucault, firstly made a pronouncement of this term in the closing paragraph of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. In 1985, Donna Heraway endows posthumanism with new meanings as he putting forward the concept of cyborg to imply the threat of electronic devices to the status of human beings. Later in *A History of Transhumanism Thought*, Nick Bostrom proposes the connection between cyborg and posthumanism: transhumanism, which "emphasizes empirical science and cortical reason...as way of learning about the natural world and our place within it, and of providing a grounding for morality"[4]. Nevertheless, Cary Wolfe opposes the former standpoint and claims that transhumanism is "an intensification of humanism"

while the posthumanism "comes both before and after humanism"[1]. No matter how dissent the scholars hold, it is the truth that the posthumanism is "a catchall of disputed definition that points beyond various human-centric ideologies"[6]. Influenced by postmodernism and humanism, it possesses three main features: criticizing rationality, relating to fragmented and alienated human beings, and appealing to the harmonious relationships between human beings and other creatures.

Since this novel is about a veteran who seeks for truth, therefore, the changes of the protagonist would be draw more attentions to this thesis. The more he changes, the more characteristics of posthumanism he possesses, especially the fragmented and alienated image can be explored completely.

2.1 Fragmented Hazel Motes

As for fragmented human beings, it refers to those who are either disabled physically or suffers spiritual torment. In *Wise Blood*, no one would be more suitable than Hazel Motes who has experienced physical wound along with psychological pain at the same time.

For one thing, Hazel Motes is wounded during the war, as he recalls that "they remembered him long enough to take the shrapnel out of his chest — they said they took it out but they never showed it to him and he felt it still in there, rusted, and poisoning him — and then they sent him to another deserted and forgot him again"[3]. In his memory, it is clearly that he suffers the wound for a long time. This physical pain reflects both the cruelty of war and the indifference of the postwar society. This ruined and fragmented world makes survivors also fragmented, like Motes, whom is not heartbroken by the rusted and poisoning wound, but the army, the war, the whole destroyed society.

Another reason that causes Hazel Motes' fragmentation is the loss of family members, especially his mother. For example, Hazel Motes mentions the death of the male family members on the train to his hometown, Eastrod. The first one is his grandfather who has been a itinerant evangelist. When Hazel Motes saw his grandfather lay in the coffin, which "propped open with a stick of kindling the night, and Hazel watched from a distance, thinking, he ain't going to let them shut it on him"; then were his two younger brothers, "one died in infancy and was put in a small box, the other fell in front of a mowing machine and his box was about half the size of an ordinary one"; the next one he had seen was his father's burying, as he recalled that "he saw him humped over on his hands and knees in his coffin, being carried that way to the graveyard"[3]. And the last one was his mother, Hazel "had seen her face trough the crack when they were shutting the top on her"[3]. After mustering out of the army, tortured by the miss of his family members seriously, especially his mother, Hazel Motes dreamed the death of them one by one, remembered the last scene of each whether it was terrible or not.

Besides, when he goes back to Eastrod, seeing the fences around the house partly fallen, the weeds growing through the porch floor, he has realized that there is nothing left but the skeleton of a house. And the things that he totally possessed are the Bible which came from home four years ago and the chifforobe that once belonged to his dead mother. By recollecting the death scene of his family members, Hazel Motes enlarges his spiritual pain and sorrow, which haunted him all the time and made him mentally fragmented.

2.2 Alienated Hazel Motes

Since been forced to enroll the army at the age of eighteen, Hazel Motes feels the feeling of lonely and aloof gradually. In the camp, Hazel Motes is alienated by the companions for declaring to be a circuit preacher of the gospel like his grandfather and to keep his soul uncorrupted whenever and wherever. For instance, once he involves his hometown Eastrod and claims that he is not going to have his soul ruined by the army or any foreign places, but "his friends (tells) him that nobody (is) interested in his goddamn soul unless it (is) the priest", then they leave for the brothel and left Hazel Motes alone[3]. Obviously, this conversation illustrates that Hazel Motes is alienated by others during the wartime when he talks about his firm religious faith at any time. Because of the effect of war, human beings has accustomed to live an unsteady life let alone holding their religious belief. That is why Hazel Motes is alienated by others at that time.

Besides, under the pressure of survival in the collapsed postwar world, people also become alienated from their human nature. For example, when Hazel Motes finds out Hoover Shoats dressed like him with the same suit and hat, he drives towards him, "runs him down and then runs over him", and then " he stops and backs up and runs over him again, at last "he leans over Layfield and hears the man making his last confession" and "slaps him in the back" till "the man goes quiet"[2]. Through this detailed portrayal, O'Connor exhibits the inhumanity of Hazel Motes who has abandoned his human nature and become indifference. Moreover, it also implies Hazel Motes' alienation from his childhood belief of the original sin and Jesus, the Salvation of Jesus' *Wise Blood*.

In *Wise Blood*, O'Connor reveals the mistrust among people, which represents the other mode of the alienation. Here are some examples will serve to this point. Firstly, the fake blinded preacher Hawks tells his intention of blind himself to Motes in order to show how much he believes in Jesus and redemption, which illustrates Hawks distrust on Motes. Secondly,

Enoch Emery steals the shrunken body from the city park museum, then packs it like a package and sends it to Motes as a new Jesus in case the police will come looking for him. This shows the unreliability of Enoch, who has ever followed Motes every minute. Thirdly, Sabbath Lily who ever claims her ardent affection to Motes while being weary of the blinded Motes eventually. All of these instances convey the alienation of human beings in the consumer capitalistic society. Unfortunately, Hazel Motes is the only victim that is cheated, employed and abandoned under such circumstances. According to these, it is clearly that Hazel Motes is the completely alienated person in *Wise Blood*.

3. Conclusion

By analyzing the passive impacts of war on Hazel Motes' physically, the pain and sorrow of the loss of his family spiritually, the loneliness, indifference and mistrust between Hazel Motes and others, this thesis verifies the fragmented and alienated characteristics of posthumanism of the protagonist. What's more, it reflects that O'Connor may also appeals everyone to make an exertion to maintain a harmonious, reliable relationship among human beings in this consumer capitalistic society. In other words, the world needs a healthy, harmonious, and reliable relationship among human beings comparing to those passive impacts of posthumanism in this novel.

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