Flannery O'Connor’s *Wise Blood* is the story of a young man named Hazel Motes as he moves to a new city and is confronted with his own religion and spirituality. Along the way, he meets Enoch, a young man who has “wise blood.” The novel follows Hazel’s journey as he encounters prostitutes, preachers, and Jesus in this new city. A predominating theme in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* is vision. References to eyes or sight are on almost every page of the novel. O’Connor depicts vision, however, as being deceptive, only leading to lies and misconceptions. In the end, sight represents a distortion of truth or goodness. It is only when vision is taken away, either through being physically close with someone where the act of sight is no longer necessary, or, as in the case of Hazel’s moment of salvation, violence leading to blindness, that truth and goodness can be known.

Many scholars have commented on Flannery O’Connor’s works, including *Wise Blood*. They focus on her predominating themes, including grace and violence. They also comment on the grotesque nature of her characters, including their physical appearance and ugly personalities. The majority of these scholars tie these themes to their primary purpose of shocking their readers into realizing their need for grace. This conversation about vision in *Wise Blood* is significant to the pre-existing conversation about Flannery O’Connor and the themes within her short stories and fiction. By focusing primarily on vision, including spiritual vision, within *Wise Blood,* it further emphasizes the presence of the physically grotesque within the novel. This grotesquery within vision is seen most evidently when Hazel blinds himself. This shocking act of violence becomes Hazel’s
shocking moment of grace, the moment that leads him to belief in the God he had run from his entire life. The themes of violence, grace and the grotesque are very present within the theme of vision, especially within *Wise Blood*.

Vision was a significant idea to Flannery O'Connor. Being a devote Catholic, she believed in the beatific vision, or, the full knowledge of the Trinity when a soul is in Heaven (*New Advent*). Her writing is deeply impacted by the theology of Catholic writers, including Thomas Aquinas and his *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas echoed scripture when it says, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In this way, O'Connor believed that physical vision or knowledge was disposable, and the only vision that mattered was the vision with which one can know God; it is true fulfillment and peace. Within *Wise Blood*, the deeper theological implications of vision permeate every simple reference to eyes or the action of staring. O’Connor’s use of this theme of vision, as portrayed primarily through Hazel, works to show the significance of the true spiritual vision that she held so dearly as a part of her personal Catholic theology.

**Through Hazel’s Eyes**

Hazel Motes is a character surrounded by references to vision in the text. Even his name and its variations point to eyes and sight. Hazel is a color primarily used to describe eyes, and his nickname, Haze, is generally known as an inhibitor to sight, something that stops a person from seeing the truth around them. Sam Jordison comments on the significance of Hazel Motes’ name in an article written for *The Guardian*. He writes that it is “the ideal name for a man who has so much trouble seeing what is in front of his face, who
finds it even harder to see the wider truth, and looks at the Bible through distorting lenses” (2). Moreover, Jordison comments on his last name, Motes. A mote is a word that describes a speck or piece of dust. Consequently, Hazel’s last name is a direct allusion to Jesus’ teaching when He says, “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye...first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5, KJV). O’Connor’s use of the word ‘mote’ directly corresponds to a Biblical passage about eyes, and this intentional use of allusion not only highlights the importance of the theme of vision, but also, the idea of Biblical salvation and truth.

Hazel’s eyes are further described by the other characters throughout the novel. The woman on the train in the first chapter describes them as the color of pecan shells and deeply set in their sockets (4). Later it says, “His eyes were what held her attention longest. Their settings were so deep that they seemed to her, almost like passages leading somewhere” (4). When Sabbath is explaining to her father why she cares for Hazel, she says, “I like his eyes. They don’t look like they see what he’s looking at, but they keep looking” (105). Finally, Mrs. Flood, Hazel’s landlord and the woman who falls in love with him, thinks about his eyes and describes them as having no bottom and in them, “the blindness of death” (233). There is an emphasis in these references to not only Hazel’s eyes, but what is behind his eyes and the truth and knowledge that lies within them. These references only highlight the importance of the theme of vision within the novel and the potential Hazel has to be a character of truth and knowledge as represented by his eyes.
**Vision as Deception**

As the theme of vision is emphasized by the references to eyes and sight, it becomes apparent that sight can lead to deception. Asa Hawks is one of the main characters who uses his vision, or seeming lack of vision, to deceive others. Hawks promised to blind himself with lime in an act of complete faith, but in the end, only pretends to blind himself because he is too afraid. He then must pretend to be blind in order to get rich off of the people in the streets. His failure to do as he had promised and his following life of a lying street preacher shows directly how vision can be a form of deception. Consequently, his physical vision represents his lack of spiritual vision, or knowledge of truth. After seeing the newspaper clippings of Hawks' blinding event, Hazel becomes even more transfixed on him and his ministry. One night, however, Hazel realizes the deception in Hawks’ story. He sneaks into Hawks’ apartment one night while Hawks is sleeping to see “behind the black glasses” (145) and finally understands the truth behind the lies. It says, “The two sets of eyes looked at each other as long as the match lasted; Haze’s expression seemed to open onto a deeper blackness and reflect something and then close again” (162). Hazel finally understands the lies that surrounded Hawks, his ministry, and his vision. As Hazel discovers that Hawks can see, he also discovers that he is not the wise preacher that he claims to be. As Hawk’s vision is revealed throughout the novel, so is his deception. The irony of his name points to this deception. The hawk, as a bird, is known to have an extremely acute sense of sight. Asa is named after this bird, which points to his own perfectly adequate vision, even though he pretends to be blind.

Vision is also seen as deception as people are drawn to Hazel, and he is observed. He becomes a character who is oftentimes mistaken for someone different than who he is
based on his physical appearance and how others perceive him through their personal
sight. Their distortions of him create false identities that Hazel is always trying to run from.
He obtains false identities from his taxi driver, Enoch, and several other characters within
the novel who perceive him through their sense of sight. In this way, their vision is
misleading and brings them further from the truth about Hazel; vision is seen as deceptive
and untrue, rather than bringing clarity.

**Touch as Truth**

These moments of deception through the sense of sight are contrasted by moments
when Hazel comes into physical contact with some of the characters. Physical contact
creates a different space within the novel where truth and realness is finally shown. It is in
experiencing something firsthand and up close when moments of redemption and salvation
can happen. This idea of truth being found in experience and contact reflects how Flannery
O'Connor viewed faith. She believed that one can only know the truth of religion by
experiencing it for oneself. She once wrote in a letter, “I am only slowly coming to
experience things that I have all along accepted...Conviction without experience makes for
harshness” (*The Habit of Being*, 97). Experiencing something firsthand allows a person to
see the full truth. Simply observing faith only leads to deception, while salvation and grace
can come through personal encounter.

An illustration of this is when Enoch is with the gorilla at the movie theater. When
faced with this gorilla, or rather, a man in a gorilla costume, Enoch is racked with a mixture
of fear and vengeance. When he finally goes to shake the gorilla’s hand, it says, “It was the
first hand that had been extended to Enoch since he had come to the city. It was warm and
soft. For a second he only stood there, clasping it” (182). He begins to stutteringly explain who he is, what he does and how he came to be in Taulkinham. The simple warmth of a hand allows Enoch the openness to share his story; the physical contact wills him to speak in truth and honesty about his situation. The beautiful moment when Enoch is talking with the gorilla is shattered, however, when he comes into contact with the eyes of the man in the gorilla costume. It says, “The star leaned slightly forward and a change came in his eyes: an ugly pair of human ones moved closer and squinted at Enoch from behind the celluloid pair. ‘You go to hell,’ a surly voice inside the ape-suit said, low but distinctly, and the hand was jerked away” (182). This moment where Enoch’s eyes meet the eyes within the costume is the moment when the truth is snatched from Enoch, along with his identity. It is when Enoch becomes observed by the man’s eyes that the special moment is lost.

**Salvation Through Blindness**

As loss of vision through physical contact leads to truth, so does violence leading to blindness. The final chapter of *Wise Blood* tells the reader of Hazel’s act of blinding himself for the sake of his own personal salvation. It is this violent act that allows Hazel to, ironically, truly see. After spending his entire life running away from his vision of Jesus, he finally understands the truth. He comes closer to the beatific vision in that he is the closest he has ever been to fully experiencing the Divine. Sam Jordison comments on this by saying, “When he burns out his own eyes with lye, he sees more clearly than ever. He at last knows what he wants – and what he wants is to do penance and ‘go on’ to the Jesus he’s spent so much time denying. And so, with hindsight, everything we’ve read about his eyes (and all the other eyes mentioned in the book) comes to be about redemption” (2). His self-inflicted
blindness brings about this true vision and he removes the ‘mote’ from his own eye. It is in this way that Hazel embodies the life of a true Catholic, one who is striving towards the beatific vision. Hazel blinds himself, commits himself to penance, and eventually dies all in the hopes that he can fully know God. These actions not only represent his final acceptance of and dedication to his faith, but also, the redemption that he has experienced.

The truth that Hazel finds through his blindness in the final chapter is partnered with the presentation of a new character, Mrs. Flood, who helps bring about some sense of salvation to Hazel’s final days through her physical presence. It is through Hazel and Mrs. Flood’s relationship that physical contact reflects real truth and honestly. She is not only a character who rests with him physically, but she also knows and accepts him, without any misconceptions or hidden agendas. While her motives are deceptive at first, Mrs. Flood eventually becomes the first person in the novel to present herself in an honest way and offer herself to Hazel out of pure service and love. Through this physical presence with Mrs. Flood, he acquires his first real disciple. Where Enoch was simply desiring to clear his conscience by attending to his “wise blood,” and Sabbath was simply looking for protection from her abusive and neglectful father, Mrs. Flood comes to genuinely care for Hazel and allows him to rest in her presence.

Hazel’s relationship with Mrs. Flood is different from any of his other relationships in the novel because of the kind of physical presence they share. It is not the sexual presence that Hazel shared with Mrs. Watts or Sabbath, and it is not the grasping physical presence of Enoch. Rather, it is a peaceful and restful presence that is shared between them. It says, “He sat on her porch a good part of every afternoon” (217), and later, “They would sit, he only sit, and she sit rocking, for half an afternoon and not two words seemed
to pass between them” (221). They begin to spend the majority of their time together, not necessarily in physical contact, but sharing the same physical presence. Even though Hazel remains secretive in many ways, they become companions, and he relies on her for his basic needs.

In the final pages of the chapter, Mrs. Flood becomes physically close with Hazel. His body is brought to her, and she talks to him without knowing that he is already dead. It says, “She drew up a straight chair and sat down close to his face where she could talk to him...she grabbed his hand and held it to her heart...she leaned in closer to his face” (235). In this moment, she tenderly cares for him and has compassion on him. It is in this simple act of love and devotion, done out of pure motives, that Hazel can experience salvation, even though he is dead. Mrs. Flood’s love for Hazel, represented through her physical presence and touch, convey truth and redemption into Hazel’s life.

Furthermore, it is in this final moment of the novel that beatific vision is shown to be realized for Hazel. He had denied his physical vision on earth and spent his last days working towards the true knowledge of God, knowing that the day where he saw God face to face was quickly approaching. As Mrs. Flood bends over Hazel, it says, “She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light” (236). This passage indicates that there is light and truth beyond death, and Mrs. Flood’s physical closeness to Hazel allowed her to see some small part of that.
As represented through Hazel's short time spent in Taulkinham, and through his interactions with the people he meets there, vision is seen as deceptive and false, as shown through the character Asa Hawks. In contrast, blindness is seen as positive, as in the case of Hazel blinding himself. Mrs. Flood chooses to be physically present with Hazel, and in the end, only touches him with compassion and love. It is in a relationship like this that truth can fully be known. O'Connor uses these themes of vision and blindness to represent the importance of experiencing faith for oneself. Like in religious faith, observing things from a distance proves only to be misleading, and it is only in getting close enough to something to touch it that one can experience it in truth. As time goes on, one can come closer to the beatific vision, and like Hazel, come closer to obtaining a clearer knowledge of God, regardless of earthly knowledge or physical sight. What Mrs. Flood only saw faintly is just a shadow of the wholeness that comes when one sees in full realization the glory of God, the brilliant light.
Works Cited


