2024

WISE BLOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF READER RESPONSE THEORY

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By

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERITY

August, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Flannery O'Connor's 1952 novel, *Wise Blood,* is a frequently misunderstood classic. While O'Connor is very rarely associated with reader response theory, its framework offers a way to more fully appreciate O'Connor as an author and *Wise Blood* as a novel while addressing aspects of critics' confusion. The objective of this study is to consider a previously under-researched area of O'Connor scholarship while offering greater clarity to *Wise Blood*. By considering O'Connor's personal nonfiction writing and the text of her first novel through the lens of reader response scholars such as Wolfgang Iser, this study offers a call towards viewing the works of O'Connor through a greater methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

There are a few key impressions that literary critics tend to associate with Flannery O'Connor: she is an icon of the American South, a trailblazer of the Southern Gothic, a master of dark humor, and a devout adherent of Catholicism. Perhaps modernism—albeit a rather cautious rendition of it—may come to critics' minds, or New Criticism, the founders of which formed O'Connor's tight-knit literary circle, and a literary movement which O'Connor certainly embraced in many ways. To be sure, each one of these literary categories does play a part in the story of O'Connor as an author—but they are not the only categories capable of doing so. Although critics often position O'Connor within the boundaries of these select few realms, there are specific aspects of craft evident in her texts, such as her 1952 novel *Wise Blood*, that lend themselves quite well to other areas of literary criticism. Ultimately, critics' continued resolve to speak of her within these contexts only places a detrimental limit to the O'Connor conversation. Reader response theory serves as a striking example of an under-considered area of study in the body of O'Connor's work. Therefore, the primary aim of this thesis is to highlight a new reading of *Wise Blood* and illustrate how well O'Connor's carefully-honed style lends itself to reader response theory.

O'Connor crafts *Wise Blood* in a sparse style, frequently omitting ideas from her narrative so that her readers are left to connect their own knowledge to the words that

they meet on the pages of the novel. This is not a technique that is unique to O'Connor; in fact, it is a tenet of reader response theory. Reader response theory's origin story begins before it picked up steam in the 1960s and 1970s. Before O'Connor started writing professionally, scholars such as Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005) were publishing works—such as Rosenblatt's 1938 book, *Literature of Exploration*—that would come to be viewed as the building blocks of reader response theory. In this work, Rosenblatt pushed to place the power of interpretation of texts within students' hands, an idea that the fully-realized reader response theory would echo decades down the line.

For example, in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," the final chapter of his highly influential and solidly-reader-response-based work, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (originally published in 1972, English translation published in 1974), German scholar Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) communicates ideas similar to those of Rosenblatt. Iser, a theorist at the forefront of the school of reader response criticism, describes a terse writing style as a mark of quality authorship and claims that writers' calculated omission of some aspects of writing is the ideal way to ensure that readers make true connections to a text. The ideas in these works—Rosenblatt's in 1938 and Iser's in 1974—bear a fascinating similarity to the techniques O'Connor's writing contained during the mid-twentieth century. By crafting fiction that lends itself so well to reader response theory, O'Connor does what others of her era do not and leans into the path pioneered by trailblazers like Rosenblatt.

This thesis is a qualitative work of literary analysis whose methodology is based around the reading of O'Connor's texts and the consideration of those texts alongside those of reader response theorists. First, it will refer to nonfiction writings by O'Connor, such *The Habit of Being* and *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, in order to hone in on her background and style. Second, it will refer to the works of reader response theorists, primarily Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." Third, it will refer to the text of O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. This thesis will be presented in MLA format.

Previous research describes the critical reception of *Wise Blood*. In *Creating Flannery O'Connor: Her Critics, Her Publishers, Her Readers*, Daniel Moran offers several such examples. After recounting the story of Paul Engle (director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop) meeting O'Connor for the first time and being unable to understand her through her thick Georgia accent, Moran elaborates on more abstract ways that O'Connor would come to be misconstrued:

> This was not the first or the last time that someone would have trouble understanding O'Connor; while Engle, after reading her stories, immediately recognized her talent, literary agents, publishers, screenwriters, editors, and, of course, reviewers from the first have responded to her work in a number of ways, often lauding her talent but sometimes puzzled by, or downright hostile to, her work. (10)

Moran cites academic Martin Greenberg, who wrote in his review of *Wise Blood* for *American Mercury*, "I was astonished to discover as I read along in the story, it is also a philosophical novel, a very rare bird in this genre of writing" (Moran 12). This review may sound fully laudatory—however, Moran reveals, "Greenberg's parting shot, that some of the novel's strained humor might be 'chalked up to the writer's youthfulness,' allows his review to stand as a representative example of the initial positive response to *Wise Blood*: a noteworthy first novel, especially when one considers the age and gender of its source" (16). Records like this remind us that readers have not always viewed O'Connor's works as great pieces of American literature, even when they did dare to deem them as being of high quality. Rather, as Moran accounts, O'Connor's works were initially received as merely being rather interesting pieces of writing by a young and eccentric woman. This position is worth considering in the context of this thesis since authors' initial receptions can continually affect how they are viewed down the line. As casual readers and critics continue to define and redefine the status of any given author, the previously accepted definition lingers and leaves its mark on how future definitions are formed. O'Connor's first wave of reception placing her as a talented but inexperienced creator likely helped to cement her place as an adherent to a select few areas of literary theory instead of as a trailblazer of realms beyond those classifications. Moran delves into the history of critics and readers sticking to a few historically-tread labels when reviewing O'Connor. He elaborates on these traditions:

> Many of those involved in the formation of O'Connor's reputations share with Rayber [from O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*] a method of confining what strikes them as strange and powerful—in their case, O'Connor's fiction—to a neat space in which she and her work could be brought to heel. "Southern Gothic," "Grotesque," "Difficult," "Woman Author," "Catholic Novelist," and even "Racist" are all some of the cells into which readers have attempted to commit O'Connor. … The desire to categorically confine in order to conquer or dismiss, to do to O'Connor what Rayber tried to do to Mason, has been a feature of her reception by all kind of readers. (195)

This passage demonstrates O'Connor's readers' and reviewers' tendencies to compartmentalize the pieces of her work that they cannot understand. Limiting her work in this way eventually bleeds into how new readers view her work, and, to the extreme, how the cultural consciousness speaks about her works. Ultimately, this means that readers who are new to O'Connor may approach her writing with preconceived expectations of how they will perceive her work that may end up as self-fulfilling prophecies.

Beyond scholarship on O'Connor's public image as a writer, there is also some previous scholarship that references specific stylistic choices by O'Connor that bear an interesting similarity to the reader response criticism of theorists such as Iser. For example, Rachel Toombs' "A Style Too Demanding?: Caroline Gordon, the New Criticism, and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" focuses on the intentional act of

omission within O'Connor's writing. Describing O'Connor's writing style in a manner similar to the ideas of Iser, Toombs claims, "O'Connor's spare style leaves readers with ample interpretive work to fill-in a scene" (23). She goes on to write that O'Connor's "stubborn insistence on keeping her stories straight and spare" enables "her characters and readers to confront realities that a more complex style—while seeming to clarify—would have actually obscured" (32). Toombs suggests that the omitted pieces of O'Connor's fiction are usually moments of grace. She explains, "Because grace resides in the realm of the supernatural, the supra-rational, its narration requires a different kind of visibility—an excessive moment that directs the reader to something hinted at the margins of a scene" (39). This sort of description—especially her description of "something hinted at the margins of a scene"—reflect the language of reader response analyses.

Melody Graulich, as well, suggests that O'Connor's style intentionally excludes descriptions of the fantastic. Graulich writes of O'Connor, "Her characters speak ambiguously because O'Connor avoids confronting and defining faith directly. For her, spiritual belief is a mystery beyond words. She approaches truth obliquely through ambiguity, distortion, and disconnection" (65). This "ambiguity, distortion, and disconnection" towards characters' spiritual matters seems to reflect O'Connor's intentional design to allow readers to connect to these texts via their own mental responses to her writing, a choice which is in line with the writings of Iser. O'Connor, a devout Catholic, likely wanted to leave the matter of defining these spiritual moments up

to her readers while still providing the framework to support these experiences. Even beyond leaving the choices up to the readers, she sets up a framework requiring her readers to at least reach a moment of confrontation.

Beyond previous literature on O'Connor's public perception and her stylistic bents, there is another interesting area of O'Connor's life worth considering while discussing her place on the cutting edge: her fascination with the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The Catholic Church deemed Teilhard's philosophies, as outlined in works such as *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Future of Man,* as unacceptable. O'Connor's fiction was highly influenced by the works of Teilhard, who viewed evolutionary principles as being in line with Christian creationism.

Rose Bowen explores the relationship between Teilhard and O'Connor in "Christology in the Works of Flannery O'Connor." Bowen writes, "Even while knowing that Teilhard's hypotheses were suspect as to orthodoxy, O'Connor … considers him more capable than any other writer of the last few centuries of restoring a sense of expectation to the Christian world and of giving a new face to Christian spirituality" (16). This observation lends itself nicely to the conversation of O'Connor's writing as demonstrating a forward-thinking mind that was not blindly adhering to orthodoxy. While the church is accepted as *the* major influence of her thought and her writing, as Bowen states, O'Connor is also open to the avant-garde thought of Teilhard.

In summary, the criticism that is already in place serves not only to demonstrate the confusion and dissatisfaction that many critics have expressed with O'Connor's

writing, but also (on a more positive note) to recognize the merits of her writing style, which ultimately cultivates the sort of readership that lends itself well to the lens of reader response theory. Existing criticism also acknowledges how O'Connor reflects certain aspects of her contemporaries, and a background knowledge of previous criticism is a solid jumping-off point for a more in-depth study of how O'Connor's style may be studied through a reader response lens.

Wise Blood: Plot Summary

Wise Blood presents the experiences of Hazel "Haze" Motes in the fictional town of Taulkingham, Tennessee. A World War II veteran and the grandson of a preacher, Haze (who is often mistaken for a preacher himself), learns that his home has been left abandoned and announces that he is the leader of the "Church Without Christ." He proclaims his staunch opposition to Christianity to anyone who will listen. Haze's "church" is a sort of shadow to the Christian church, its very existence a purposeful foil to Christianity (Haze's inclusion of "Christ" in its name offers support for this observation).

Haze's quasi-evangelization drives the novel's narrative. Throughout the course of the novel, Haze crosses paths with characters such as prostitute Leora Watts, charlatan "preacher" Asa Hawks, Hawks' seductive daughter Sabbath Lily, and Enoch Emery—the naïve boy of 19 who is the owner of the eponymous "wise blood," which he claims guides him spiritually. Enoch has his own subplots throughout the novel, with several chapters centering around his exploits around Taulkingham.

The novel ends gruesomely. After getting arrested and blinding himself, Haze demonstrates little desire to live and does very little beyond engaging in forced conversations with his landlady, Mrs. Flood. Eventually, Haze tortures himself and dies in a ditch, only for his corpse to be found and treated as a living being by Mrs. Flood. While critics often struggle to find meaning in this dark ending, examining readers' participation in the novel may clarify the novel's ending and the novel as a whole.

Overview of Chapter Objectives

Chapter one presents O'Connor's background and her goals as an author. It argues that while O'Connor criticism often limits her writing to the realm of religious fiction, agrarian fiction, and New Criticism, her writing extends beyond these areas. Using O'Connor's personal letters as published in *Mysteries and Manners*, this chapter looks into O'Connor's history while acknowledging and exploring the reasoning behind the critical box in which O'Connor finds herself: she herself states that her artistic aspirations are primarily religious, and it is clear that she had close relationships with figures within the agrarian and New Critical movements. However, much of her writing on the theory of craft within *Mystery and Manners* evokes the criticism of not only New Critics but of theorists such as Wolfgang Iser.

Chapter two provides a more in-depth overview of reader response theory and argues that O'Connor has a deep awareness of her implied reader that aligns with the concepts of reader response theory, which scholars like Louise Rosenblatt were already developing by the time O'Connor wrote her first novel. As this chapter explains, the

works of reader response theorists such as Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser argue that a text's meaning is not just in the words on a page, but in what those words evoke within the readers' minds. This chapter centers around the main points within Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," which considers how skilled authors structure their text according to their implied readers and what readers bring to the text. This chapter also further considers how O'Connor's nonfiction writing (especially her essays as published in *Mystery and Manners*) describes the reader she has in mind for her work and how she crafts her writing accordingly. This chapter provides a basis for the idea that O'Connor's work is worth considering beyond its typical labels.

Chapter three looks directly at the text of *Wise Blood* through the lens of reader response criticism and—building on the foundation of the previous two chapters—argues that O'Connor crafts her writing style to cultivate responses from her implied reader. O'Connor's method of writing for many sections of the novel (for example, its ending) is quite confusing and may even appear flawed when only considered in light of New Criticism. O'Connor's writing in this novel is quite sparse, leaving "gaps" in the language that readers must fill with their own background knowledge.

Finally, the thesis's conclusion will suggest other, more contemporary, areas of scholarship through which future researchers and readers may consider O'Connor's writing. Critics usually are unwilling to place O'Connor's writing in movements any more cutting-edge than modernism. However, there are contemporary elements of *Wise Blood* worth considering, and there are even some sections in the novel that suggest

postmodern sensibilities. The conclusion will provide a look at the merit of considering O'Connor's fiction in fresh ways and restate the value of reconsidering limitations on O'Connor's fiction.

While there is some existing criticism on O'Connor's sparse writing style, the notable lack of scholarship that ties directly to reader response theory—as well as the general lack of scholarship that deals with how to place her beyond her typical labels of an agrarian New Critic, a Southern Gothic author, or a religious writer—necessitates further study. Furthermore, there is existing critical reception that sees the novel as "flawed" in areas that could be remedied by a more contemporary critical lens. This thesis will provide a valuable new way to consider O'Connor's work by considering one such previously understudied area of O'Connor scholarship.

CHAPTER 1: O'CONNOR'S EARLY DAYS AND ASPIRATIONS

Before Flannery O'Connor was a strange adult who wrote strange fiction, she was a strange little girl, already beginning to embark on strange projects. In 1931, broadcast company Pathé filmed a chicken—a pet who five-year-old O'Connor had trained to walk backwards—for a short film to play at the opening of films. In adulthood, O'Connor would wryly poke fun at this event's importance within her psyche—"The five-year-old Flannery was in the picture 'to assist the chicken,'" explains Barry Moser, "but later said that it was 'the high point' in her life, adding, 'Everything since has been anticlimax'" ("Writing Backward" vii). What she teasingly described as anticlimax was actually a fascinating career where O'Connor diligently worked to pursue excellence in what she viewed as a God-given talent for writing. Keeping O'Connor's goals as an author and her earliest experiences while crafting writing firmly in mind sets the foundation for understanding her writing through the lens of literary theorists. There is a tension amongst her stated goals, her known influences, and her actual writing once pen comes to page.

Kelly Gerald writes that O'Connor grew up as an only child who was "shy and could be awkward with other children," as well as "something of a brat who was used to having things her own way" (103). Despite her reported discomfort with her peers, she was "precocious and forward" in her dealings with adults (Gerald 103). There is evidence of O'Connor's strong writing talent from her earliest youth. Gerald describes O'Connor's

oldest recorded written storytelling in “The Habit of Art,” writing, “Beginning when she was very young, about age five, she drew and made cartoons, created small books, wrote stories and comical sketches, often accompanied by her own illustrations” (101). These pieces of juvenilia demonstrate her love for visual arts, which would soon meld with her sharp sense of humor in cartooning.

Throughout her college years at Georgia State College for Women (GCSW), O’Connor earned recognition for her work in student publications. This began with mostly cartoons, which were a natural continuation of her skills and interests from her childhood and = teenaged years (she was also active in the newspaper at Peabody High School). While her cartoons were popular among her peers, they would probably not be viewed as high art—still, as Moser straightforwardly asks, “so what? One does not really expect accomplished, sophisticated art from a college student, much less in a college newspaper, and in this O’Connor is not an exception” (Moser viii). In spite of their elementary craftsmanship, Moser finds value in O’Connor’s college cartoons. He writes, “Her rudimentary handling of the medium notwithstanding, O’Connor’s prints offer glimpses into the work of the writer she would become, especially, and naturally I suppose, in her captions” (Moser viii). Indeed, her cartoon captions showcase the same droll ability to capture the absurdity of human life (through simple observation) that is evident in her fiction. College student life is the usual subject of these pieces—in one, a student at the library circulation desk asks, “Do you have any books the faculty doesn’t particularly recommend?” (*The Cartoons* 62).

Her publication experience progressed and broadened throughout her time in college. Gerald explains this expansion in "The Habit of Art," writing, "As her confidence grew and her cartoons became more widely celebrated, she eventually had a presence in all of GSCW's student publications. The college's literary journal, *The Corinthian*, had been publishing O'Connor's stories, satirical pieces, and poems since her freshman year. In her senior year, she was the journal's editor" (106). Throughout this time, O'Connor gained experience and likely built confidence as a writer that would translate over into her career as a novelist and short story author. However, this was not her career plan at the time.

Originally, she planned to work as a journalist—a natural transition, one would suppose, from her time in student publishing leadership. "When she graduated from GSCW in 1945," explains Gerald, "she was a celebrated local cartoonist preparing for a career in journalism that would, she hoped, combine work as a professional writer and a cartoonist" (101). And so, she headed to Iowa for graduate school, with a full journalism scholarship under her belt. Yet, as Gerald recounts, "Early in her first semester at Iowa, O'Connor visited Paul Engle, director of the Writers' Workshop, and shared with him what her brief time in the journalism program at Iowa had taught her: 'I am not a journalist'" (101-102). From there, her efforts went toward fiction-writing. Her cartoon-writing laid the groundwork for her fiction career. Gerald asserts, "The creative process she followed in cartooning transferred well to her work in fiction. She knew how to draw a character that could make people laugh and how to use the suggestions made by images

to get readers to see what was funny without having to spell it out" (124). Perhaps that was a major aspect of why she was welcomed into the Iowa Writers' Workshop, an extremely prestigious community of writers. She took her craft seriously as a member of the workshop, the prayers she wrote during this time demonstrate her dedication. In the introduction to *A Prayer Journal* (the published collection of her written prayers), W.A. Sessions writes of O'Connor, "in her years at Iowa she was increasingly seeing openings both out of and into her life—and her desire to write fiction carried the greatest meaning for her in such a setting, where so many influences converged" (x).

As O'Connor continued in her writing career, she began to forge relationships with figures associated with the Southern Agrarian movement, such as Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Robert Penn Warren. This group is intrinsically linked to the tradition of New Criticism. *The Cambridge History of American Literature* states, "The early New Critics were led by former southern agrarians, political and cultural conservatives who had in the 1930s sought to arrest America's inexorable development into an urban, secular, industrialized, and alienating mass society," and cites Allen Tate as a specific example of one such New Critic (Bercovitch 313). O'Connor's ties to these names, as well as the time period in which she wrote, means critics often place her within the New Critical tradition, and the New Critic concepts and buzzwords that she often incorporates into her personal writing only serve to amplify this designation. As Sarah J. Fodor states, "One has only to consider [O'Connor's] carefully crafted fiction, in which every detail counts to construct a meaningful whole, to see how her stories reward the

close reading advocated by New Critics. O'Connor wrote her first stories … during the late 1940s, when New Critics had begun to wield great power within American universities" (247-48). There is certainly merit to this perspective, but that does not negate the merit of other methods for categorizing O'Connor and her fiction, nor is it the only classifier that O'Connor chose to place on herself—recognizing and considering her relationship to the Catholic Church makes that fact quite apparent.

O'Connor presents her perspective as a writer as one that is staunchly in line with the standards of Catholicism—indeed, there are multiple instances of her clearly communicating to her readers that her beliefs are fully in line with those of the church. In 1957's "The Fiction Writer and His Country," she writes, "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction" (32). Very similarly, she writes to Shirley Abbott in 1956, "Let me make no bones about it: I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. Nothing is more repulsive to me than the idea of myself setting up a little universe of my own choosing and propounding a little immoralistic [sic] message. I write with a solid belief in all the Christian dogmas" (*The Habit of Being* 147). In statements such as these, O'Connor makes it abundantly clear that she chooses to publicly and wholeheartedly align herself with the teaching of the church and that she believes that her faith is worth bringing into the conversation of her fiction. She did not view this as a

limitation to the scope of her artistry but as a benefit, writing, "[faith] is not a set of rules which fixes what [the storyteller] sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery" ("The Fiction Writer and His Country" 31). While a variety of critical approaches to O'Connor's work may opt to steer clear of religion and theology, the author's own words show us that from her work's origin, she conceived its design through the structures of her faith.

Much of O'Connor's nonfiction writing displays to her readers what she does *not* view the purpose of fiction to be. She does not support the view of the novel (or any form of art, it appears) as something that possesses a singular, straightforward, and sensible purpose. Worthwhile fiction, O'Connor argues, is not a journalistic news piece that contains a simple, easy-to-digest message. It is not a piece of evidence for the religious crowd to use as they proselytize, nor is it a simplistic moral lesson for a student to parrot back to their teacher.

Fiction, O'Connor argues, does not need to proselytize in order to have a Catholic structure. Instead, when coupled with a certain level of spiritual background knowledge, fiction should point its readers to grapple with the mysteries of the world, which O'Connor believes are answered through her belief system. This is, admittedly, a rather fragile line to walk. O'Connor tasks her readers with working through these ideas on their own on the basis of what she provides, but the Catholic author anticipates this contemplation to finally be satisfied by the perspectives of her faith.

The structures that exist in O'Connor's religious beliefs present this interesting dynamic, which is evident in O'Connor's references to both the "mystery" and dogma of the Church. As explained by Jon M. Sweeney in *Almost Catholic: An Appreciation of the History, Practice, & Mystery of Ancient Faith,* "mystery" has a specific meaning within Catholicism—he writes, "More than anything else, *Mysterium* means the mystery of the One Incarnate Christ. Every instance of the word is essentially a reference to God in Christ. … These are all things to be experienced in ways that become almost impossible to talk meaningfully about" (86). So, in a Catholic context, "mystery" refers to a mostly indescribable experience related to the incarnate God, and O'Connor's use of the term aligns with this definition. But, clearly, this inexplicable experience of mystery occurs within the thoroughly defined framework of her religious tenets. This can lead to some confusion for her readers—how can wonder and mystery flow through a barrier of dogma?

Another fine line O'Connor walks is the boundary between writing ability as a learned craft and writing ability as a gifted talent. It is somewhat ironic, given the dedication O'Connor demonstrates for *learning* her craft and putting in hard work to enhance her writing ability that she also expresses a belief that fiction-writing ability is a binary. O'Connor expresses a belief that novelists (or would-be novelists) either are capable of being a writer, or they are not, with no real gray area. In "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," she writes, "A perception is not a story, and no amount of sensitivity can make a story-writer out of you if you just plain don't have a gift for telling a story" (77).

She continues this thought in the next paragraph, “But there’s a certain grain of stupidity that the writer of fiction can hardly do without, and this is the quality of having a stare, of not getting to the point at once” (77). Although she chooses the word “stupidity,” she clearly views this characteristic as one that is a good and innate *ability* of the writer: the ability to get “to the point” without getting there immediately, in O’Connor’s case, often through omission of detail. She does, after all, claim to have been granted the skill from God Himself. Therefore, it is clear that she views human storytelling as something for which God has an intentional purpose in mind.

O’Connor repeatedly uses absolute terms when she describes the “gift” of fiction-writing. She writes in “Novelist and Believer,” “The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character” (167). O’Connor’s choice of words such as “always” and “usually” further key her reader into her view of “the serious writer”—someone who meets a set list of criteria, all the time (or at least *most* of the time). She continues in the essay to make broad statements about “the novelist” as a person, revealing her personal beliefs on the responsibilities the novelist. She writes, “The novelist doesn’t write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated, and the novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, a total experience of human nature at any time” (167). This provides clear evidence of how she views the world around her and “[her] own times”—times of “tragedy.”

O'Connor's description of "a world where something is obviously lacking" is interesting—she expresses belief that the world is intrinsically flawed and that it is the writers' duties to point out this flawed "incompleteness" through their writing and to suggest how it can be filled. It is this sense of religious *duty* that defines O'Connor's sense of authorial identity.

Indeed, O'Connor appears to find fiction's specific purpose to be one that is rather enigmatic but which authors are obligated to help their readers seek. While she does not seem to support the idea of outlining clear-cut morals in works of fiction, she does express a belief that stories have a specific "meaning," or at least that they *should*. In "Writing Short Stories," she says, "I prefer to talk about the meaning in a story rather than the theme of a story" (96). She defines the "theme" as something that can be concisely defined outside of the story itself, but believes, "The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it" (96). She expands this thought by writing, "The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience that more fully" (96). Each work has a complete meaning from O'Connor's perspective, but that meaning likely is one that is impossible to sum up via a simple truism, and *not* one that two unique readers will express in identical terms. Instead, it is a deep truth, *ideally* one that is backed by the truth of the Christian God in order to point readers to Him—not through didactic means, but through her own methods of opening readers' minds to her ideas based on their own background knowledge and experiences.

Again, despite her personal passion for writing with religion in mind, O'Connor's reading experience is offered to all audiences.

Two groups of readers that O'Connor clearly anticipated are the religious and the secular. In "The Church and the Fiction Writer," O'Connor presents an in-depth look at the act of writing fiction as a member of the body of the Catholic Church. In this piece, she essentially states that Catholic writers will begin their very process of writing from a completely different vantage point than a writer outside of the Church will. "Henry James said that the morality of a piece of fiction depended on the amount of 'felt life' that was in it. The Catholic writer," explains O'Connor, "insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it [life] has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for" (146). The initial mentality of writers when they first put pen to paper is sure to impact the words that end up on their page, and, as O'Connor asserts here, a Catholic writer brings a vastly different background to the table than a secular writer does. Of course, secular readers are capable of appreciating the underlying sense of hope that flows from the "central Christian mystery" that O'Connor references, and of catching their own version of the "meaning" O'Connor writes into her stories, but they will view it through their own different forms of nuance, something of which O'Connor herself seems to be aware based on how she writes about faith when compared to typical "Christian authors."

While O'Connor's work is explicitly intended to carry Christian tones, she does not go about this issue in the same manner as traditional religious writers—or readers, for

that matter. There is yet another a complicated tension here, this one between O'Connor's solid sense of identity as a writer of faith and her dissatisfaction with the lack of sophisticated dialogue among readers of that same literature, not to mention readers of literature in general. In some of her nonfiction writing, O'Connor expresses her disapproval towards the ways readers often approach novels. She writes in "The Teaching of Literature," "The fact is, people don't know what they are expected to do with a novel, believing, as so many do, that art must be utilitarian, that it must do something, rather than be something" (123). She is disappointed not only with the way the public at large approaches novel-reading, but with how Catholic readers, specifically, tend to view the act of reading.

Overall, O'Connor did not view the culture in which she found herself fondly. She was especially saddened by the literati's disinterest in Catholic writings during this time period. In "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," O'Connor writes, "One of the most disheartening circumstances that the Catholic novelist has to contend with is that he has no large audience he can count on to understand his work. The general intelligent reader today is not a believer" (181). She expands upon this same sentiment later in the essay, writing, "The universe of the Catholic fiction writer is one that is founded on the theological truths of the Faith, but particularly on three of them which are basic—the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. These are doctrines that the modern secular world does not believe in" ("Catholic Novelists" 185). Understanding of these three key concepts, she implies, is key to appreciating the works of religious writers from a

religious standpoint—yet she was disappointed to find that that understanding was deeply lacking within the increasingly secularized culture of midcentury America, especially within its educated subculture. O'Connor appears dismayed by her culture's inability to appreciate the writings of herself and other Catholics in the way they would if they were to approach it with Catholic background knowledge and beliefs. O'Connor's reaction also speaks to her connection to reader response theory—she hopes that readers would bring understanding to the table that would help them to make meaning within her works. Readers who are not in possession of religious backgrounds are still able to approach her texts, but with a different basis and a different outcome.

The weight O'Connor placed on the spiritual element of her fiction is well-recorded. Her prayers show her devotion to pointing others to God through her fiction—in one recorded prayer, she straightforwardly requests, "Dear God, please help me to be an artist, please let it lead to You" ("A Prayer Journal" 29), and in another, she petitions God, "Please let Christian principles permeate my writing and please let there be enough of my writing (published) for Christian principles to permeate" (*A Prayer Journal* 5). In "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor writes, "The virtues of art, like the virtues of faith, are such that they reach beyond the limitations of intellect, beyond any mere theory that a writer may entertain" (158). Art, including fiction, has a value and a purpose beyond simple intellectual understanding. O'Connor believes that there is a captivating element of drama or mystery in art, one that she chooses to compare to "the virtues of faith." Later, in "Novelist and Believer," she expresses more bluntly that she finds some degree

of supernatural belief (but not necessarily Catholic belief) to be a requirement for an author to write fiction worth reading, stating, "Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama" (167). This further exemplifies her perspective that spiritual art contains a sense of wonder more than it contains a sense of didacticism, one that will permeate rather differently in the minds of different readers.

In "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," O'Connor considers at length the role of Church members within the literary arts and how their God-given purpose plays into that role. As she expresses, "The tensions of being a Catholic novelist are probably never balanced for the writer until the Church becomes so much a part of his personality that he can forget about her—in the same way that when he writes, he forgets about himself" (181). This quote points to the fact that well-practiced writers are not actively thinking of what is going on around them as much as they are thinking about the inner workings of their craft and the ideas they are recording on the page. However, their surroundings are still likely to seep into what they write, even if they are not fully expecting them to do so. In the same way, a devoutly religious writer's personal beliefs are so much a part of their thoughts and beings that those ideas are almost certainly going to impact what they write without their awareness, and if they were to do so fully, the "tension" that complicates the balance of their writing for the worse would be no more. O'Connor continues this idea by writing that this state of being fully-enveloped in the Church is one which is very rarely achieved, "particularly by novelists"—she is not claiming that she has reached it herself, but rather, that the attempt to pursue it (and therefore more fully enable her

personal principles to saturate her writing) is a constant. In a discussion of who O'Connor is as a writer, this concept of pursuit is key. Her Catholicism is central to her writing because it is central to her very aspiration as a writer—which speaks to her diligence in pursuing excellence in her craft. Her personal writings demonstrate the overt and exceedingly high value she places on her Catholic faith. Therefore, accounting for these beliefs is a necessary element of the study of the aesthetic choices she makes in crafting her fiction.

To develop a stronger understanding of O'Connor's method of constructing a work with several audiences in mind, it is worth taking a brief detour to consider the ideas Iser builds in *The Implied Reader*. Doing so will establish a foundation of how reader response theory views engagement between writers and their readers. There is a shared power dynamic between the reader and the writer in Iser's description of reader response theory, which presents an interesting, almost contradictory, sense of tension—one that is not unlike the relationships between O'Connor's view of mystery and manners, or of the transcendent and the dogmatic. Clearly, O'Connor's fiction is no stranger to this sort of delicate balance.

The term "implied reader" defines an interaction. Iser defines the title phrase of *The Implied Reader* by writing, "This term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process—which will vary historically from one age to another—and not to a typology of possible readers" (xii). There is

legitimate justification for considering how different backgrounds of readers will undergo the process that Iser describes in his text in different ways while recognizing his statement that the eponymous term itself is not a label for possible types of readers, which this thesis will consider during the coming chapters. It is important to recognize Iser's emphasis on the relationship between how the author lays the framework to establish the text's meaning and how the reader interacts with that meaning. As established, O'Connor had specific purposes and specific audiences in mind for her fiction, which would influence the foundation of meaning-making she crafted for her readers.

The second chapter of Iser's *The Implied Reader* considers how Henry Fielding builds the reader's role into *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. In this chapter, Iser explains in more detail how writers form textual environments where their readers can effectively comprehend the essence of their text:

> In the act of reading, we are to undergo a kind of transformation … But this transformation of the reader into the image created by the author does not take place through rhetoric alone. The reader has to be stimulated into certain activities, which may be guided by rhetorical signposts, but which lead to a process that is not merely rhetorical. … The reader must be made to feel for himself the new meaning of the novel. To do this he must actively participate in bringing out the meaning and this participation is an essential precondition for communication between the author and reader. (30)

This passage offers insight into Iser's viewpoint on the roles of both the author and the reader. The reader is to be transformed "into the image created by the author" through active participation. This active participation is molded via the work of the author, not only through "rhetorical signposts" but also through language the author crafts specifically to invite their reader in the text. Iser continues to add greater specificity to his description of how writers complete their side of this process:

> If this intention is to be realized, the process of change cannot be left entirely to the subjective discretion of the reader—he must, rather, be gently guided by indications in the text, though he must never have the feeling that the author wants to lead him by the nose. If he responds as the author wants him to, then he will play the part assigned to him, and in order to elicit the correct response, the author has certain strategems at his disposal. (36-37)

This description serves to further emphasize the power that authors hold in this context to "gently" guide their readers in the way they see fit. Iser succinctly summarizes this concept of interaction between writer and reader when he writes, "And so the reader is not merely told a story; instead he has constantly to observe and deduce" (51). Through the tools that authors like O'Connor grant to readers, these readers have the opportunity to "observe and deduce" the central ideas—the *meaning*, as O'Connor would say—of texts through their personal reading experience and background experiences. One such tool for writers—those who critics traditionally associate with reader response theory, as well as with O'Connor herself—is their overall style of writing.

As she fine-tuned and improved her craft, O'Connor developed a markedly scant (yet substantial) style. She describes her reasoning for this choice of craft in several of her nonfiction pieces. In "Writing Short Stories," for example, she says, "A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is" (96). While O'Connor explicitly states in this quote that every word is necessary, the implied corollary is that that no words should be included if they are *un*necessary. Her personal writing style demonstrates this belief; it is a style that is free of flowery, superfluous language, one that allows readers to recognize the pieces she gives them and assemble a full picture based on their own life experiences. The fact that O'Connor finds it "take[s] every word in the story" to get a meaning across also points to the careful guideposts outlined by writers that Iser describes. While different readers may uncover multiple underlying meanings in a given text based on their plethora of personal experiences, the writings of Iser and O'Connor alike suggest that there still is an overarching meaning towards which authors hopes to nudge their readers increasingly closer.

O'Connor further considers the concept of a concise and seemingly over-simplified style of text in "Total Effect and Eighth Grade." In this piece, she gives a thorough explanation of the reasoning behind modern fiction's apparent simplicity. She writes, "The modern novelist merges the reader in the experience; he tends to raise the passions he touches upon. If he is a good novelist, he raises them to effect by their order and clarity a new experience, the total effect—which is not itself sensuous or simply of

the moment" (139). This description is deeply in-touch with the (at the time) forthcoming theory of reader response. O'Connor describes very deliberate actions by skilled authors—actions that allow readers to find themselves entirely immersed in "the total effect," a completely new experience. This experience is one directed by the author, yes, but it is within the mind of the reader that the "total effect" takes place. Again, studying these pieces of writing demonstrates that O'Connor considered her audience in a manner that is surprisingly in-line with reader response theory.

O'Connor also expresses the idea that there are multiple "levels" of value for fiction, the greatest level being spiritual. She writes, "We all write at our own level of understanding, but it is the peculiar characteristic of fiction that its literal surface can be made to yield entertainment on an obvious physical plane to one sort of reader while the selfsame surface can be made to yield meaning to the person equipped to experience it there" ("Writing Short Stories" 95). Notably, her recognition that a single piece of fiction contains a multitude of levels and that different readers will step away from their readings having observed different elements of the work points uncannily to reader response theory. This further supports the fact that as she worked, she recognized the fact that different readers would focus on different elements of her fiction, and she wrote it accordingly.

O'Connor is frank in her correspondence that, for its time, *Wise Blood* pushes the boundaries of fiction. She expressed disappointment in John Selby of Rinehart & Company's editorial opinion on its manuscript. In a letter to Selby dated February 18,

1949, she writes, “I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from … The finished book, though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters I have now” (*The Habit of Being* 10). A few months later, in a letter to Paul Engle dated April 7, 1949, she further expressed her distress at Selby’s feedback. She writes to Engle, “Their editorial opinion was a long time in coming because obviously they didn’t think much of the 108 pages and didn’t know what to say. When it did come, it was very vague and I thought totally missed the point of what kind of novel I am writing. My impression was that they want a conventional novel” (*The Habit of Being* 13). She fully accepts the fact that her novel is unconventional; indeed, that is her vision for it. Beyond the general content of the novel, the very angle in which O’Connor approaches this context is unusual for the early 1950s; however, it would become more typical with the progression of reader response theory.

It is clear that the layers to consider while enjoying O’Connor’s writing are numerous. Possessing knowledge of her childhood and the start of her career can help us to better appreciate her writing, as can keeping in mind the spiritual aspirations against which she held her work. Studying O’Connor’s background and career reveals a host of near-paradoxical puzzle pieces: the juxtaposition between mystery and dogma, the view of fiction-writing as simultaneously existing as a gift and a learned skill, and the imagined audiences of both religious and secular readers, to name a few. Each of these elements manage to co-exist in spite of their contradictions on the surface level, and this shared

quality bears a striking resemblance to reader response theory's placement of meaning-making in the mind of the reader *through* the craft of the writer. This trait of the theory is observable in the writings of Iser and other reader response theorists, which the next chapter of this thesis will consider at greater length.

CHAPTER 2: READER RESPONSE THEORY AND O'CONNOR'S CRAFT OF FICTION

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, literary scholars put reader response theory on the map. In its most basic terms, reader response theory states that a text achieves its full meaning within the minds of the readers who experience the text. While some control of this meaning-making lies within the hands of the readers, it also belongs to authors: they are responsible for building a setting within their work that is conducive to readers' formation of the meaning based on their own perspectives. Today, this theory is one of the major approaches to literary criticism among professionals and students within the field.

Of course, Flannery O'Connor crafted her works before the time of reader response theory's popularization. However, by the time O'Connor studied and wrote, scholars such as Louise Rosenblatt had already theorized concepts that would come to be viewed as the forerunners of reader response theory. Furthermore, O'Connor was such an inventive and cutting-edge author that she often unknowingly approached her work with a mindset that foresaw the tenets of this theory, as evidenced by her nonfiction writing on the practice of writing as recorded in works such as the 1957 publication *Mystery and Manners*: *Occasional Prose*. This chapter will consider the techniques outlined by reader response theorists and how O'Connor's expressed perspectives on writing align with them.

Rosenblatt is now regarded as one of the first to voice ideas that are incredibly similar to those that would later become known as reader response theory—her 1938 work, *Literature as Exploration*, laid the groundwork for many of the concepts that would become commonplace in the work of reader response theorists down the line. Edmund J. Farrell goes so far as to describe the book as one that is "[n]ow regarded as the first book in this country to advance a reader-response theory of literature, one that denies the existence of either generic text or generic reader …" (ix). There is a clear significance to the fact that Rosenblatt published this work over a decade before O'Connor published *Wise Blood* as it provides evidence that the key concepts of the theory were already brewing within the literary landscape when O'Connor was writing. In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt presents guidelines to empower students living in a democratic society to better appreciate and learn from the written word. She argues that the best way to do so is via a conversation between the ideas of the text and the ideas of the students themselves, which places more power in the hands of the text's reader than educators had previously seen fit. As the field of literary criticism progressed and many of Rosenblatt's ideas became less cutting-edge and more commonplace, critics began to place her within the story of reader response theory as one of its earliest voices, but Rosenblatt herself did not follow the evolving theory.

In 1990, Rosenblatt herself reflected back on *Literature as Exploration* and wrote that its primary theme is the idea "… that the work exists in the transaction between reader and text …" ("Retrospect" 97). Rosenblatt's book emphasizes the importance of

readers formulating a text's meaning for themselves based on the personal experiences that they bring to the reading process. She succinctly explains this concept when she writes, "The readers bring to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition" (*Literature as Exploration* 37). Throughout her book, Rosenblatt repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of the meeting between readers' personal experiences and the words on the page for a full, rich interpretation of literature. She writes in one passage, "A vivid response to a work will have its roots in capacities and experiences already present in the personality and mind of the reader" (51), and in another, "All the student's knowledge about literary history, about authors and periods and literary topics, will be so much useless baggage if the student has not been led primarily to seek from literature a vital personal experience" (72). These direct quotations from Rosenblatt's text clearly argue that giving students the freedom to build their own meaning for texts grants them the most vivid level of understanding.

Other passages from the text focus on more practical recommendations for the teaching of literature—for example, when Rosenblatt states, "Sound literary insight and esthetic judgment will never be taught by imposing from above what a work should mean" (41), or "When the student is challenged to examine the validity of his particular understanding of the work and his judgment on it, he will be stimulated, on the one hand, to study the work itself more closely, and on the other hand, to examine whether his own personal experiences and basic assumptions provide a valid foundation for his

interpretation" (146). Passages such as these that grant power to interpret the meaning of a work to the work's reader bear a clear connection to the writings of reader response theorists who will later enter the scene.

In his 1990 essay, "*Literature as Exploration* and the Classroom," Robert E. Probst considers not only how *Literature as Exploration* is relevant to classroom teachers over five decades after its publication, but also how it relates to later reader response works. Probst recounts Rosenblatt's belief that "[a] student so encouraged to ignore his or her own transactions with a text is unlikely to participate fully in the 'human experience' of the literature …" (28). He summarizes her arguments by writing that "…[r]ather, [Rosenblatt] suggested, the reader performs *with* the text. The symbolic dance of words on paper awakens memories, arouses feelings, evokes thought, conjures images, but all those memories, feelings, thoughts, and images are the reader's as much as—even more than—they are the writer's or the texts …" (29). This description of Rosenblatt's work likely borrows some vocabulary from reader response theory, and with good reason. Indeed, Rosenblatt's ideas are extremely similar to those that followed from later theorists within the reader response camp.

While Rosenblatt recognizes the considerable similarities her work bears to reader response theory, again, she was not fully committed to the idea of her work as a perfect representative of reader response theory, and she explains some of her hesitations towards fully embracing the theory in her 1990 essay, "Retrospect":

> Why, some have asked, am I so concerned about my differences with the other so-called reader-response exponents? Don't we all start by rejecting the idea of a single determinate meaning "in" the text? Despite this agreement, I believe that the differences in epistemology, theories of the nature of language, and views of the reading process lead to very important differences in educational and political implications. (105)

It is also notable that later on in this same piece, she outright discredits the New Critics by writing, "The New Critics' dogmatic attack on the 'intentional fallacy' and the 'affective fallacy' diminished the importance of the author and decried concern with the reader's feelings and ideas. In the universities, recognition of the reader did not begin until the late sixties and early seventies" (103). So, although Rosenblatt may have not fully embraced the reader response approach to literature, neither does she seem to reject it entirely. She acknowledges the similarities between her work and the work of later reader response critics. From her perspective, a work's meaning is found somewhere in between the author's writing and the reader's mind, which is still quite distant from the era's more prevalent creeds of the New Critics. It is not unlikely that O'Connor possessed some awareness of Rosenblatt's writing, and this knowledge strengthens the validity of considering her through the reader response lens.

Rosenblatt's presence in the literary landscape earlier in the 20th century adds validity to the ideas of this thesis, but it is also necessary to consider the works of scholars who explicitly align themselves with reader response to build a strong

foundation of the tenets of the theory. One major name in reader response theory whose contributions to this area of scholarship are worth considering in this analysis is Stanley Fish, an American literary theorist who helped reader response theory reach greater recognition within in the literary community. Although his scholarship is not the primary focal point of this thesis, as one of the most prominent names in reader response theory—and likely *the* most prominent in O'Connor's home country—it is worth recognizing Fish's impact. Fish's work will prove helpful since it presents a clear and succinct overview of how to view reader response theory.

Fish's 1980 book of literary criticism, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities,* challenges the typical assumptions on how the reading process works as they stood during Fish's time. Fish builds the book's primary argument in its titular chapter, writing, "What I have been arguing is that meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in the language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms" (318). Fish's description of a "structure" is relevant when considered alongside the structures of O'Connor's world and the structures of her the implied audience to which she wrote. There are structures of norms ascribed to by those within O'Connor's faith and those outside of her faith, and each of these audiences will receive O'Connor's words in a slightly different ways.

Fish continues this passage by expanding on the role that community plays in this interpretation. He writes, "That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but

social; and therefore it is not a single structure with a privileged relationship to the process of communication as it occurs in any situation but a structure that changes when one situation, with its assumed background of practices, purposes, and goals, has given way to another" (318). In this passage, Fish argues that it is through the norms and expectations of communities that texts derive their meanings. These meanings can vary from community to community, but it is each reader's own personal experiences within—or outside of—these communities that give the text they read a real meaning beyond mere words on a page.

For example—an example that bodes well for the consideration of *Wise Blood* in chapter three of this thesis— the words of a religious text carry a different meaning for members of that particular religious faith than they do for readers who follow a different belief system or those who do not prescribe to a faith due to the shared experiences and beliefs, both for members of that community and the "outsiders" who do not subscribe to that community's beliefs. Likewise, elements of O'Connor's fiction will mean different things to members of different communities, and she likely had some level of awareness of this fact which she used to her advantage to achieve her stated goals as an author.

Fish's descriptions of community as a factor in reader response analysis is of value, but this chapter's analysis primarily focuses on the work of Fish's precursor in reader response scholarship, Wolfgang Iser. The reader response structures that Iser outlines are useful as a lens through which to view O'Connor's works. More specifically, this chapter hones in on Iser's view of the reading process as he describes it in "The

Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," the final chapter of work, *The Implied Reader* (whose English translation was published in 1974 and original German version was published in 1972). This chapter outlines four focal points of the text/reader relationship: "The process of anticipation and retrospection, the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event, … the resultant impression of life-likeness" (290), and, fourth and finally, the act of the reading process itself, during which "something happens to us [the readers]" (291)—that "something" being a personal, internal experience that is difficult to describe. Studying O'Connor's nonfiction writing reveals that, decades before Iser published *The Implied Reader*, she considered the effect of each of these four areas of literary criticism on her own writing while crafting her fiction.

The first of Iser's four points, "anticipation and retrospection," refers to "the way in which sequent sentences act upon one another" (Iser 276). Even the smallest pieces of a narrative affect how readers perceive that narrative, and Iser believes that the act of perceiving a narrative is an act of active reader participation that involves looking both forward and backward. He writes, "The individual sentences not only work together to shade in what is to come; they also form an expectation in this regard. … As this structure is characteristic of all sentence correlatives, the interaction of these correlatives will not be a fulfillment of the expectation so much as a continual modification of it" (278). This quote explains Iser's perspective on how readers (often subconsciously) set, evaluate, and continually *re*evaluate their predictions for a work while they read it. In other words, readers approach pieces of reading material with certain expectations and

then modify those expectations based on their response to the text as they watch the narrative unfold.

Iser continues to describe the active role the reader has in forming the text's meaning through anticipation and retrospection as they continually predict, reflect, and re-predict. He writes, "Thus, the reader, in establishing these interrelations between past, present, and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text, though they are not the text itself—for this consists just of sentences, statements, information, etc." (278). Here, in an obvious defiance of New Critics' focus on "the text itself," Iser asserts that the reader's mind builds meaning within a given text through the mental connections they form. It is not merely the written words themselves that lead to these connections' formation. Rather, it is the expectations that readers form and the bridges they build between the past, present, and future that create these connections.

Iser finds that structured, intentional omission within a text is another significant contributor to the development of connections in readers' minds. He continues his chapter by expressing, "Even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, if only because no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omission that a story gains its dynamism" (280). To elaborate upon this idea, he writes, "Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for

establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (280). Through these gaps, authors are able to grant their readers a greater role in building a text's meaning through the process of anticipation and retrospection. Gaps in the text allow readers to actively interact between dimensions of time by anticipating their own mental picture of how these gaps should be filled. Iser concludes his description of the first point of the chapter by writing, "In whatever way, and under whatever circumstances the reader may link the different phases of the text together, it will always be the process of anticipation and retrospection that leads to the formation of the virtual dimension, which in turn transforms the text into an experience for the reader" (281). In short, Iser's description of the process of anticipation and retrospection emphasizes the role of activity within the reader's mind during the reading process, often through working to fill in gaps in text. It is here, he believes, that readers can construct the meaning of a work.

It is important to recognize that the author does still hold power within Iser's viewpoint, and that the words that the author *does* include are valuable, not just the words that the author omits. This is more evident in the original German version than in the English translation, as Brook Thomas explains:

> Another important word essential to Iser's argument that creates difficulties in translation is *Leerstellen*, a word referring to those parts of a text that require the reader's participation to be filled. In *The Implied Reader, Leerstellen,* is consistently translated "gaps." But "gaps" is not an adequate translation. A gap in a text implies an emptiness that a reader can fill as he wants, a notion that Iser

> works hard to combat. For instance, in a reply to his German critics, Iser is at pains to point out that *Leerstellen* are not Löcher, a German word that can be translated as "gaps." A Leerstelle is not merely an emptiness; it is a form of emptiness that determines to an extent how it can be filled. Aware of the problem of translating Leerstellen only as "gaps," Iser in *The Act of Reading* uses "gaps," "blanks," "vacancies," or "places of interdeterminacy," depending on the context. (56)

Recognizing this concept is crucial. Iser's view does not place the reader in a state of absolute control to make what they can from a formless mass left behind by the author. Although he gives more power to the reader than scholars such as Rosenblatt (not to mention the New Critics), he still recognizes the level of control that an author has in crafting a work that readers are able to fully form meaning from when they utilize that power. O'Connor has a habit of writing more about the role of the writer than she does on the role of the reader. Therefore, understanding the author's role within Iser's perspective can help make sense of the pieces of O'Connor's nonfiction writing that relate to reader response theory.

Many of the pieces of O'Connor's nonfiction writing that are collected in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* do deal directly with the topics on which Iser writes, such as audiences building textual meaning through the mental act of reading. "Total Effect and the Eighth Grade" is one such nonfiction essay by O'Connor where she

expresses ideas that demonstrate several parallels to Iser's concepts of anticipation, retrospection, and the inclusion of intentional "gaps" in fiction.

In this piece, O'Connor considers the controversies that often surround the teaching of literature and writes further on how instructors should go about teaching literature to their students. She argues that modern writing is best suited to more advanced students of literature. In O'Connor's words, "Modern fiction often looks simpler than the fiction that preceded it, but in reality it is more complex. A natural evolution has taken place. The author for the most part has absented himself from direct participation in the work and has left the reader to make his own way amid experiences dramatically rendered and symbolically ordered" (139). This passage suggests that pieces of modernist writing, where readers are responsible to find the meaning of what the author has left them to work through on their own without the direct commentary of authorial intrusion that was present in older eras' works, and, in turn, likely contain more of the gaps that Iser describes, are conducive to a deep degree of thought and a skillful level of interpretation on the reader's side. She continues her argument by stating, "The modern novelist merges the reader in the experience; he tends to raise the passions he touches upon. If he is a good novelist, he raises them to effect by their order and clarity a new experience—the total effect—which is not in itself sensuous or simply of the moment" ("Total Effect and the Eighth Grade" 139). O'Connor believes that the form authors give their work orchestrates how well readers will be able to interpret it. The idea that readers themselves carry the ability to interpret and form a text's meaning and that

authors should craft their works accordingly is an underlying concept within this passage, and ultimately, the ideas O'Connor expresses flow nicely into those of Iser.

Like Iser, who emphasizes skilled authors' tendency to place text in a way conducive to anticipation and retrospection—to allow readers to form their text's meaning—O'Connor similarly expresses that writers should arrange their words in a way that allows their readers to build meaning. O'Connor's account of the modern author leaving the reader "to make his own way" through the text contains a clear similarity to the reader response concepts that Iser would describe in the future. Indeed, her concept of "the total effect"—an experience writers build for their readers—is reminiscent of Iser's concept of readers finding meaning in a text through anticipation and retrospection.

Notably, O'Connor says that the meaning readers will find is "not in itself sensuous or simply of the moment" (139). Her choice to mention that this meaning is not merely "sensuous" is especially interesting as it suggests that fiction's meaning is beyond the sort of meaning that the five senses provide and is something mentally, or perhaps spiritually, stimulating. Furthermore, her description of meaning as something "not simply of the moment" is reminiscent of Iser's concepts, as well. It suggests that a text's meaning for a reader should be one that is deep and provide more than merely a moment's passing thought. In fact, it suggests that the work's meaning may look both forward and backward from the current moment in time, both the time the reader is in and the time the narrative occurs in—or, in other words, may be anticipatory and retrospective.

The second section of Iser's chapter looks at the way a fictional text unfolds "as a living event" (290). Authors largely create this effect, says Iser, through what they choose to *leave out* of their fiction. He writes, "The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination—he has the whole panoply of narrative techniques at his disposal—but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to put the *whole* picture before his reader's eyes" (282). To continue this thought, Iser explains, "If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of the text" (282). And, from Iser's perspective, a reader cannot visualize an image that an author spells out too clearly.

He expands upon the concept of imagination through omission by presenting the example of a mountain. According to Iser, "If one sees the mountain, then of course one can no longer imagine it, and so the act of picturing the mountain presupposes its absence. Similarly, with a literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things" (283). He continues to assert that control of a text belongs to both the reader and the writer. By his logic, readers use their imagination to find the text's meaning in between the author's descriptions; therefore, a skilled author should learn how best to use this to their advantage. If readers' responses are where a text's meaning is found, then it reasonably follows that authors must help their readers to develop specific reactions informed by calculated pieces of writing, but also, that they

must not expect to create worthwhile responses through spoon-feeding their readers complete descriptions.

Iser's writings on the value of omission in readers' imaginations once again coincide with elements of O'Connor's nonfiction writing, particularly her descriptions of grotesque writing in the piece "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." In this essay, O'Connor considers the features of a genre in which she admits critics often place her: the Southern Grotesque. O'Connor directly references omitted ideas within writing early on in this essay. She writes, "We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left" (40). She continues by expressing that the "skips and gaps" still speak to an underlying sense of cohesion, writing, "Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" (40). Much like Iser, who argues that skilled authors intentionally set up the boundaries of dead space that readers can fill in with their own imaginings, O'Connor suggests here that authors of Southern grotesque—such as herself—leave strange "skips and gaps" in their writing.

But, to move deeper into these connections, much like Iser, she also finds that there is a reasonableness to this practice. In quality fiction, descriptions are not omitted haphazardly—there is still a "coherence," but it is sort of coherence that leans "toward mystery and the unexpected." The word "mystery" is crucial: it suggests that the

characters within fiction possess elements that cannot be fully explained. Therefore, it is the readers' job to grapple with the "mystery" of these characters. From there, in keeping with Iser's perspectives on the necessity of readers formulating their own imaginings based on the carefully-placed "gaps" in a text, O'Connor's readers have the ability to either formulate their answers or let their questions sit unsolved, which still involves some degree of mental decisions and imaginings on their part.

O'Connor continues to describe the writing and reading processes that accompany grotesque writing. She writes later in her essay, "The novelist must be characterized not by his function but by his vision, and we must remember that his vision has to be transmitted and that the limitations and blind spots of his audience will very definitely affect the way he is able to show what he sees. This is another thing which in these times increases the tendency toward the grotesque in fiction" (47). Despite O'Connor's statement that there are "limitations" to the audience's understanding of a text, the ideas O'Connor is expressing here further exemplify the importance of the fiction author making a conscious effort to form a space that forms their audiences' imaginings.

Much like Iser, O'Connor recognizes the importance of authors helping their readers to make meaning from what they create. This parallel is most clear when we consider the role that Iser gives the author within his vision of reader response theory, especially with regard to the original translation of *Leerstellen* that Thomas explains. Although Iser places emphasis on the audience forming a text's meaning as they read, as Thomas explains, "… [T]o label Iser a champion of subjectivity is to completely distort

his argument" (57). In this passage of "Total Effect and the Eighth Grade," O'Connor is suggesting that authors have a specific vision they desire to transmit to their audience and that they must work to get that meaning across by intentionally crafting a piece with an understanding of how they can best equip their readers with the tools to comprehend a work. By considering O'Connor's perspectives as stated in here in tandem with Iser's theories, it is viable to view O'Connor's works, such as *Wise Blood,* as texts with several clearly-visualized imagined readers for whom O'Connor crafted her works accordingly, in keeping with the concepts of reader response theory.

The third point of Iser's chapter to consider is his description of how a text gives its readers the impression of lifelikeness. Iser finds that this area of the text is highly concerned with the making and breaking of illusions, which may come in the form of expectations that the writer enables the reader to form and then shatter during the reading process. He explains, "In the course of a novel, for instance, we sometimes find that the characters, events, and backgrounds seem to change their significance; what really happens is that the other 'possibilities' begin to emerge more strongly, so that we become more directly aware of them" (287-88). This description provides some insight into how readers come to find their expectations for a work unmet.

Iser continues his explanation, writing, "Indeed, it is this very shifting of perspective that makes us feel that a novel is much more 'true-to-life'" (288). To explain why this phenomenon takes place, Iser writes, "Since it is we ourselves [as readers] who establish the levels of interpretation and switch from one to another as we conduct our

balancing operation, we ourselves impart to the text the dynamic lifelikeness which, in turn, enables us to absorb an unfamiliar experience into our personal world" (288). While experiencing a work of fiction, readers form—and then change—their expectations for the work based on the words of the page, much as how we develop expectations for life based on our real-world experiences. Yet, like in good fiction, many (or most) of our real-life expectations end up unmet. Iser references "recreation," the act of readers checking and reforming their expectations for a piece of fiction as the author forces them to do so. According to Iser, "The act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on interruptions of the flow to render it efficacious" (288). These "interruptions" are orchestrated by texts' authors—if they are skilled at their craft—and are reflective of reality. Since real life is filled with interruptions and disappointments, it is no wonder that Iser's view of true realism in fiction contains these elements.

Yet again, these ideas of reader response theory as stated by Iser seem to echo the writing of O'Connor. In "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor writes, "All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality" (40-41). She continues by suggesting that "… if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious … His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate

psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted" (41-42). This description claims that a story's meaning exists in a place deeper than the words on the page—indeed, past not only the mere words themselves, but the exhaustion of "adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations." This suggests that a story's meaning comes from somewhere beyond simply what the words themselves mean: how those words are created and received by human authors and their audiences. In this passage, O'Connor, much like Iser, expresses that writers are responsible for presenting a lifelike depiction of reality to their readers and that this depiction often takes place through a subversion of the typical—for her, this subversion comes through "pushing … toward the limits of mystery." As Iser finds that lifelike writing contains interruptions that affect the readers' formation of ideas while reading, O'Connor finds that realistic writing is mysterious. Each of these descriptions ultimately suggests that the most lifelike writing is that which subverts the simple and allows the reader to engage in a mentally stimulating experience that piques their curiosity.

Fourth, and finally, we arrive at Iser's examination of what occurs within readers' minds while they interact with a work of fiction. In this section of his chapter, Iser considers the phenomenon of readers self-identifying with fictional characters and events as they read about them. This practice is not one that Iser finds fault with—rather, he seems to view the ability of readers to identify with particular characters within fictional works as evidence that the text's author crafted that work effectively. To support this point, he cites Georges Poulet, who, in Iser's words, "says that books only take on their

full existence in the reader. It is true that they consist of ideas thought out by someone else, but in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking" (292). In other words, although the author plays a critical role as the orchestrator of a given reading experience, it ultimately is the reader whose inner thoughts bring a piece of fiction into its "full existence" when their personal experiences and inner thoughts intersect with the author's framework. What happens within the mind of the reader during the reading process, Iser finds, is the text's transition from dead words the author meticulously arranges onto the page into a meaningful narrative that readers experience and develop further throughout the reading process. This, according to Iser, is what authors' goals ultimately should be: not to duplicate a carbon copy of their exact life experiences to those who read their works, but to give their readers the raw material to formulate a rich, meaningful piece of fiction through the reading experience.

O'Connor, too, considers the effect of readers finding themselves fully absorbed within a work of fiction. In her essay, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," O'Connor considers elements of storytelling that she believes writers must keep in mind as they set out to craft their work. After explaining the concept of multi-layered symbols to her readers and citing her own *Wise Blood* as an example of a novel that uses this technique, she continues her essay by explaining, "Now the second common characteristic of fiction follows from this, and it is that fiction is presented in such a way that the reader has the sense that it is unfolding around him" (73). This bears a clear similarity to the fourth of Iser's points. Much like Iser, O'Connor here argues that fiction should unfold within

readers' minds as though it were a real event within their lives. According to O'Connor, "This doesn't mean he has to identify himself with the character or feel compassion for the character or anything like that. It just means that fiction has to be largely presented rather than reported" (73-74). O'Connor's tone towards readers personally identifying with texts may read as being fairly dismissive when compared to the tone Iser employs, but for the purposes of this thesis, it is interesting to recognize that she, like Iser, acknowledges the importance of authors presenting fiction in a way that enables their readers to find meaning within them. This once again demonstrates that O'Connor was thinking about many of the same roles of the author which theorists like Rosenblatt had already considered and that reader response theorists like Iser would ponder decades later. Beyond Iser's fourth point, O'Connor's thoughts as expressed in the previous quote reflect many of the elements of Iser's first three points, as well—especially the unfolding of text "as a living event" and "the impression of lifelikeness."

O'Connor is not an author fully entrenched in the reader response tradition. However, this chapter's analysis demonstrates that O'Connor's nonfiction writing includes examples of concepts that bear an uncanny resemblance to those expressed by reader response critics such as Iser—as well as to earlier voices, like Rosenblatt, that have a very real possibility of having influenced her. This realization is a significant one since it exemplifies the need to view O'Connor beyond the standard labels which critics, readers, and educators typically applied to her. In the next chapter, we will consider how

O’Connor’s novel, *Wise Blood*, lends itself effectively to analysis through each of the four points Iser outlines in “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.”

CHAPTER 3: A READER RESPONSE ANALYSIS OF *WISE BLOOD*

Critics seem to take for granted that readers will analyze O'Connor's writing through the standards of New Criticism. In "Understanding Iowa: Flannery O'Connor, B.A., M.F.A.," Mark McGurl argues (rather disparagingly) that O'Connor's writing epitomizes the New Critical texts that the Iowa Writer's Workshop produced, which he claims "sometimes seem pre-packaged for close reading in the classroom: They are, in essence, a systematic production of that institutional space, and of its virtual supplement, the New Critical textbook" (541-42). In fact, McGurl believes not only that O'Connor's writing is an example of the typical New Critical writing of the Workshop, but "an unusually extreme execution of the program" (542).

While Eileen Pollack disagrees with many of the specifics of McGurl's essay, such as his derogatory descriptions of the elements of New Criticism, she does agree with him on O'Connor's standing as a New Critic, which she seems to take as a given. Pollack states that O'Connor's "adherence to the tenets of New Criticism shows itself in the care with which she selects and arranges every concrete detail, every bit of dialogue, every gesture and larger action, whether to render the setting authentic or a character believable … or to help convey the main character's conflict or the larger thematic question represented by that conflict" (551-52). McGurl and Pollack are in agreement that O'Connor writes her fiction with extreme care. However, with Iser's descriptions of

reader response theory in mind, it is evident that this level of intentionality in O'Connor's writing may lend itself best to other theories of literary criticism, such as reader response theory, and that she considered these theoretical concerns as she developed her craft.

Building off of the previous chapter, this chapter will review each of the four aspects of Iser's phenomenological reading approach and bring in specific and chronological textual evidence from *Wise Blood* to consider how different sections of the novel connect with each piece of Iser's chapter. Many of the previous frustrations with the novel—as referenced in the introduction of this thesis—may be largely satisfied by looking at the text from a fresh perspective. Critics can best understand the contents of *Wise Blood* by reading it through each of the four pieces of Iser's phenomenological approach to reading.

Anticipation and Retrospection in *Wise Blood*

The first section of the novel under consideration is its exposition. As a reminder from the previous chapter, Iser's first point within "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" is that of anticipation and retrospection. This point focuses on how each piece of the text builds off of one another to establish meaning in the mind of the reader throughout the reading experience—textual meaning rolls through the mind of the reader, allowing them to anticipate what is coming and to look back on what they anticipated in retrospect. In other words, readers form predictions, then find these predictions met or unmet. This takes place throughout the whole of the reading process, but readers naturally make many predictions towards the beginning of their study of a

work. Therefore, *Wise Blood*'s exposition is a prime section for analysis that is aligned with this concept of Iser's writing.

Wise Blood opens with the isolated Haze, a veteran of World War II, en route via train to the fictional town of Taulkinham, Tennessee. Haze rides the train in a new blue suit with an army duffel bag at his feet, suggesting that he has recently been discharged from the US Army. Additionally, readers learn that although he appears to be in his early twenties, "he had a stiff broad-brimmed hat on his lap, a hat that an elderly country preacher would wear" (4). This description likely builds a certain expectation for who Haze is in the minds of readers: perhaps he *is* a country preacher, or at least someone who aspires to be one.

O'Connor even addresses the idea of expectation based on his look directly within the narrative. Almost immediately in the narrative, she introduces Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, who sits across from Haze during the train ride and makes conversation with him by observing, "I guess you're going home" (4). As the narrator directly explains, "The sack at his feet was an army duffel bag and she decided that he had been in the army and had been released and that now he was going home" (4). However, Mrs. Hitchcock's expectations, as well as (likely) the reader's, are quickly shattered when O'Connor informs readers that Haze is actually from the town of Eastrod and that his home there has been abandoned. After Mrs. Hitchcock asks Haze directly if he is going home, O'Connor writes, "He looked at her sourly and gripped the black hat by the brim. 'No, I ain't,' he said in a sharp and high nasal Tennessee voice" (7). Mrs. Hitchcock then

asks if he is going to visit someone, to which he responds, “Going to Taulkinham. … Don’t know nobody there, but I’m going to do some things” (7). Through this sort of response, O’Connor makes it extremely apparent that Mrs. Hitchcock’s assumptions (and, by likely extension, the readers’ assumptions) on Haze’s whereabouts were incorrect.

Early insight into Haze’s view on organized religion—specifically, Christian organized religion—continues the trend of unmet expectations. Despite the preacher’s hat that Mrs. Hitchcock immediately observes on Haze, he quickly makes it quite clear that he has no desire to be associated with preaching or religion in general. The first sign of this is a challenge directed towards Mrs. Hitchcock: “I reckon you think you been redeemed” (8). Just a few pages later, he says to another woman on the train, who he is sitting with during dinner, “Do you think I believe in Jesus? … Well I wouldn’t even if he existed. Even if He was going on this train” (10). At this point (despite his preacherly hat), Haze seems to be a character with no connection to organized religion, but O’Connor soon defies that expectation, as well by explaining that “[Haze] had left it [his hometown] when he was eighteen years old because the army had called him. He had thought at first he would shoot his foot and not go. He was going to be a preacher like his grandfather and a preacher can always do without a foot” (15). In the span of a chapter, O’Connor directs her readers through numerous guided assumptions—that Haze was heading home, a preacher, and irreligious—then promptly proceeds to break each of these assumptions. O’Connor’s insertion of other train passengers as voices of reasonable

assumptions based on Haze's appearance and mannerisms is highly effective for this purpose; the author acknowledges the predictions that readers would likely make about Haze as a character and then allows them to crash down through sharp and direct retorts from Haze that also serve to initiate the process of his characterization.

As the narrative continues, O'Connor offers descriptions of Haze's first impressions of the town of Taulkinham and continues to guide her readers through the act of making and breaking expectations for the narrative. In the novel's third chapter, O'Connor describes the setting of the town:

> The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on 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. No one was paying any attention to the sky. The stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights so that people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale. (33)

In this passage, O'Connor's skillful writing builds another expectation for her readers. Through rich figurative language, she masterfully forms the mental picture of a beautiful night in the natural world. On a first reading, one would likely anticipate from the language O'Connor uses that any locals who partake in this beautiful scene would appreciate their surroundings. However, O'Connor proceeds to crush that expectation by describing a populace who is utterly disinterested in the natural world around them. Then,

she supplies her readers with an explanation of what, exactly, *does* capture the interest of the people of Taulkinham: namely, material goods available for purchase from shops that remain open well into the brilliance of the night.

Each of O'Connor's sentences builds off of her previous sentence, giving readers the opportunity to reflect back on their original expectations for the writing by the time they finish the final sentence of the passage; as Iser expresses, "the interaction of these correlatives will not be a fulfillment of the expectation so much as a continual modification of it" (278). Clearly, this process is quite similar to the ideas of anticipation and retrospection that Iser describes in *The Implied Reader*. Just as Iser states a skilled writer will do, O'Connor cultivates an environment within her novel-writing where readers may quickly recognize through "blockage" in text that they are responsible for evaluating and re-evaluating what to expect from the text of *Wise Blood*, creating a dynamic reading experience that is in harmony with Iser's descriptions of anticipation and retrospection.

Additionally, O'Connor omits a straightfoward explanation of why the town's residents are distracted from viewing the sky, leaving that up to her audience to interpret by reading between the lines. Readers can reasonably presume several things about the nature of the populace from O'Connor's simple description in this passage: for example, they may be materialistic, unconcerned with beauty, or simple-minded. O'Connor does not tell her readers *why*, exactly, the people of Taulkinham do not appreciate the magnificence around them; she bluntly states, "No one was paying any attention to the

sky." This decision on O'Connor's part gives readers the job of finding out what is missing from her text, which is a clear parallel to Iser's descriptions of blockage within texts.

The Unfolding of *Wise Blood* as a Living Event

O'Connor's writing in *Wise Blood* also lends itself nicely to the second topic that Iser writes about, the unfolding of text as a living event. As previously stated, this is the phrase Iser uses to describe how scenarios believably develop in readers' mind, often via the writer's omissions that offer readers the chance to fill in the blanks. One example of a piece of the novel that demonstrates this aspect of Iser's view on reader response theory is O'Connor's approach to characterization throughout the novel.

Enoch Emery is a highly unusual character, and O'Connor masterfully presents his nature to her readers using methods that are in line with those that Iser describes. She makes it clear to readers that Enoch is a rather immature young man who has a troubled past without explicitly stating as much. Early in the character's introduction, Enoch states, "I'm eighteen years old and I ain't been here but two months and I already work for the city" (40). This dialogue is a realistic depiction of how a childish young adult would speak—he is bragging about his experience in relation to his age instead of letting his experience speak for itself.

O'Connor continues in her characterization of Enoch through dialogue. He says to Haze, "… I went to thisyer Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy for four weeks. Thisyer woman that traded me from my daddy she sent me. She was a Welfare woman" (40). In

keeping with Iser's title of "the unfolding of text as a living event," O'Connor phrases this piece of dialogue in much the same way that an actual immature teenager would reveal pieces of his life story to a new acquaintance. Not only does the text feel "living," like the earlier example, it also allows readers to understand its levels of meaning through some degree of omission. This very small section of dialogue efficiently explains the gist of Enoch's backstory without stating it outright.

Another example of O'Connor's characterization aligning nicely with Iser's description of the unfolding of text as a living event comes through the more minor character of Onnie Jay Holy. O'Connor introduces Onnie Jay as a gregarious street preacher who, against Haze's will, aligns himself with the Church Without Christ. This takes place towards the middle of *Wise Blood*, and at this point in the novel, "… Hazel Motes had started the Church Without Christ and was preaching it every night on the street… " (140). This "preaching" takes the form of shouted public denunciations of Jesus from the sidewalk to small groups of about three or four people. Onnie Jay shows up in one of these groups and begins to more or less take over Haze's preaching by loudly aligning himself to the tenets of the Church Without Christ (as he sees them).

Onnie Jay's development for the readers begins with O'Connor's physical descriptions of him. From Haze's perspective, "[Onnie Jay] looked like an ex-preacher turned cowboy, or an ex-cowboy turned mortician. He was not handsome but under his smile there was an honest look that fitted into his face like a set of false teeth" (148). This description does not explicitly state that Onnie Jay is dishonest—nor does it, at its surface

level, seem to say anything disparaging about the man, beyond the statement that the "honest look" of his fact fits "into his face like a set of false teeth," which suggests that it is an artificial honesty. Indeed, readers' personal experiences with people who are similar to Onnie are likely to leave them with a bad taste in their mouth toward the character as his interactions with Haze continue. In other words, and in keeping with the writing of Iser, O'Connor's readers are likely to bridge the gap between what O'Connor says and what she means through their own lived experiences.

As with Enoch, much of Onnie Jay's characterization comes through his dialogue. It is through his dialogue that readers learn the views that he claims to hold on topics such as humans apparently becoming increasingly sinful as they mature:

> "… Every person that comes into this earth," [Onnie Jay] said, stretching out his arms, "is born sweet and full of love. A little child loves ever'body, friends, and its nature is sweetness—until something happens. Something happens, friends, I don't need to tell people like you that can think for themselves. As that little child gets bigger, its sweetness don't show so much, cares and troubles come to perplex it, and all its sweetness is driven inside it. Then it gets miserable and lonesome and sick, friends. It says, 'Where is all my sweetness gone? where are all the friends that loved me?' and all the time, that little beat-up rose of sweetness is inside, not a petal dropped, and on the outside is just a mean lonesomeness. It may want to take its own life or yours or mine, or to despair completely, friends." (151)

Again, the character's dialogue here is not explicitly malicious, nor does it seem at face value to be cause for distrust—read word-by-word and line-by-line, it would appear to be an endearing sentiment. But, in fact—as many people within O'Connor's audience will instinctually recognize while reading the passage—it is a very realistic depiction of how a certain variety of religious figures with a reputation for deception speak. For example, his repeated use of the word "friend" will likely elicit some feelings of mistrust from many readers who have experienced overly-friendly people in positions of power within their own lives, as will his use of flowery and emotionally-charged words and phrases like "that little beat-up rose of sweetness." This level of realism gives O'Connor's audience the opportunity to read between the lines based on their own personal experiences. When readers bring their own backgrounds with people similar to Onnie Jay to the table, they will likely recognize more from the character than a purely textual, line-by-line, analysis of the words in this passage would be able to demonstrate.

O'Connor continues this trend as she expands Onie Jay's dialogue. In the next stretch of his dialogue, Onnie Jay moves from the sentimental to the (vaguely) theological:

> "Now I just want to give you folks a few reasons why you can trust this church," [Onnie Jay] said. "In the first place, friends, you can rely on it that it's nothing foreign connected with it. You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it. No jokers in the deck, friends." (152)

This section of dialogue, like the previous section, harnesses its readers' background knowledge beyond the text to ensure full recognition of O'Connor's characterization of Onnie Jay. His description of not stretching knowledge to examine the beliefs of faith almost certainly draws a deeper level of understanding—a level that comes from experience via personal interaction—from readers of many backgrounds, whether or not they are religious. This sort of characterization picks up steam and gets slightly more specific through his further dialogue:

> "Now, friends," Onnie Jay said, "I want to tell you a second reason why you can absolutely trust this church—it's based on the Bible. Yes sir! It's based on your own personal interpitation [sic] of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpit your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpited. That's right," he said, "just the way Jesus would have done it. Gee, I wisht I had my gittarr [sic] here," he complained. (152-53)

Onnie Jay's vernacular language serves a solid purpose in the unfolding of O'Connor's text as a living event. Here, the author does not craft a block of stilted, artificial language. Rather, she expresses words exactly how Onnie Jay would speak them in a manner that realistically paints a picture of who the character is and what he believes. Through the use of vernacular, O'Connor authentically demonstrates Onnie Jay's dialect; through the highly personalized picture of religion for which Onnie Jay advocates, she demonstrates the flavor of street preacher that he is. Although it is simple, this speech is an example of the text unfolding as a living event, just as Iser says it should. Yet again, O'Connor does

not spell out how readers are meant to perceive the characterization tactics she uses; she writes them in a way that reflects reality and trusts her readers to fill in the blanks.

In this passage alone, there are several different possible interpretations that O'Connor likely placed with care. As O'Connor certainly knows, Catholic readers will likely understand this passage as a disparaging anecdote against Protestantism and the Protestant Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which asserts that scripture is the sole source of divine revelation (Sweeney 14). Protestant readers, on the other hand, may view this scene as an illustration of their faith gone awry, while secular readers or readers who follow non-Christian faiths may interpret it as a presentation of a disreputable religious figure or of the disreputability of organized religion in general. There is validity to each of these readings, and to readings beyond these examples, since they each build off of certain segments of the groundwork O'Connor has laid.

Wise Blood's Impression of Lifelikeness

O'Connor also writes in line with Iser's third point, which deals with the text's impression of lifelikeness. Recall that this point somewhat builds off of the previous two and is therefore similar: Iser's description of the text's impression of lifelikeness focuses on the forming and dissolving of "illusions" and the shifting of readers' perspectives. One example of this writing practice that O'Connor gives her readers is found in a section of the text involving Enoch Emery and a gorilla suit, which may seem more absurd than lifelike upon a first reading. Although the experience O'Connor describes is, admittedly, somewhat ridiculous, the manner in which it takes place demonstrates a strong awareness

of human nature. Furthermore, O'Connor continually makes and breaks her readers' expectations, which allows the text to read as an intriguing and lifelike experience.

In this section of *Wise Blood*, the naïve Enoch comes to a movie theater that is advertising the opportunity to meet with a gorilla. By this point in the novel, O'Connor has already informed her readers that Enoch, a city zoo employee, derives entertainment from jealously observing wild animals kept in captivity—she writes earlier in the book, "The animals didn't do anything but lie around. Enoch watched them every day, full of awe and hate" (78). But, readers also recognize that Enoch, who frequently wanders through town, possesses a degree of innocent childishness that would make him both fairly likely to participate in events for children and highly susceptible to deceit and mockery. This context lays the foundation for the strange scenario that awaits O'Connor's readers:

> [Enoch] found himself facing a life-size four-color picture of a gorilla. Over the gorilla's head, written in red letter was, "GONGA! Giant Jungle Monarch and a Great Star! HERE IN PERSON!!!" At the level of the gorilla's knee, there was more that said, "Gonga will appear in person in front of this theater at 12 A.M. *TODAY!* A free pass to the first ten brave enough to step up and shake his hand!" (177-78)

Naturally, this piques the interest of the naïve and animal-obsessed Enoch. He waits in line and eventually has the opportunity to meet Gonga the gorilla:

> 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. Then he began to stammer. "My name is Enoch Emery," he mumbled. "I attended the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy. I work at the city zoo. I seen two of your pictures. I'm only eighteen years old but I already work for the city. My daddy made me com…" and his voice cracked.
>
> 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.
>
> Enoch's humiliation was so sharp and painful that he turned around three times before he realized which direction he wanted to go in. Then he ran off into the rain as fast as he could. (181-82)

Iser says that stories gain lifelikeness when authors allow their readers the chance to build, break, and rebuild (through the act of "recreation") their expectations for a text, and this passage provides a strong example of this type of literary crafting on O'Connor's part. The interaction between Enoch and the man in the ape suit is, without a doubt, completely bizarre. The initial scenario of Enoch choosing to participate in a promotional movie theater event that is clearly aimed at children is strange enough, and the man in the ape suit telling Enoch to go to hell is, perhaps, even stranger. However, the outcome of

this situation also feels quite lifelike, especially by Iser's reader response theory standards.

As readers initially approach this text, they will probably expect that the situation will end differently than it does. Maybe "Gonga" will act politely towards his adult fan; maybe he will express some confusion towards the situation—whatever readers expect, it is most likely not what ends up occurring within O'Connor's narrative. As Iser expresses, "Elements of the repertoire are continually backgrounded or foregrounded with a resultant strategic overmagnification, trivialization, or even annihilation of the allusion. This defamiliarization of what the reader thought he recognized is bound to create a tension that will intensify his expectations as well as his distrust of those expectations" (288). Indeed, O'Connor's description of Enoch and the gorilla's interaction is sure to defy the reader's expectations based on the repertoire of knowledge of the typical outcomes of literary interactions. Yet, even with (or, from Iser's viewpoint, *especially* with) this strange interaction, the passage reads with a general air of lifelikeness. This comes in part from the defied expectations themselves and in part from the overall tone with which O'Connor writes her story: as described in the previous section, her continued characterization of Enoch, including the use of vernacular language, helps to bring the text to life.

The highly peculiar yet true-to-life exploits of Enoch continue in O'Connor's narrative. Discouraged, he ends up in the same restaurant he visits every night, where he reads the newspaper comic strips until he "[feels] himself surge with kindness and

courage and strength" (195). As he continues to scan the newspaper, he comes across an advertisement for Gonga's "live" appearances with listings of his theater visits, finding, "In thirty minutes he would arrive at the Victory on 57th Street and that would be his last appearance in the city" (195). Upon learning this, Enoch's countenance displays "a look of awakening," and he murmurs "I know what I want" (196). At this point, readers may have given up on correctly anticipating where O'Connor will take the narrative of *Wise Blood*, yet as active participants in the reading process, they are most likely still instinctively building expectations for what is to come—in the same way, as Iser suggests, that humans naturally tend to anticipate the events of their own lives.

What Enoch "wants" turns out to be yet another surprise. He steals and dons the gorilla suit himself. "No gorilla in existence," writes O'Connor, "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" (199-200). He proceeds to scare off a young couple and then to "[sit] down on the rock where they had been sitting and [stare] over the valley at the uneven skyline of the city" (200). For all its strangeness, the oddly lifelike element of the text continues throughout this episode, and from the ashes of readers' broken expectations, they may mold their new expectations for the story based on the curious situations' outcome.

It is unsurprising that this specific episode has led to a great deal of critical confusion. Stuart L. Burns, for example, argues in a 1970 piece that "Enoch's biological regression presumably is meant to parallel Haze's spiritual regression … But parallels

may exist without being thematically meaningful" (161). Burns goes on to state that the gorilla scenes "would have better been deleted from the novel" (161). Yet this earlier perspective on the novel from Burns seems to stem from the assumption that a parallel is "thematically meaningful" only if its meaning can be clearly traced out based on the structure of the text alone.

If meaningfulness can be built not just in text, but within the mind of the reader, then the sort of parallel that episodes like Enoch and the gorilla suit demonstrate possesses a strong power, which is only strengthened by the impression of lifelikeness created through this sort of odd narrative incident. This power includes enabling readers to form a variety of mental connections and to create a stronger understanding of the ideas O'Connor is presenting in her novel. The concept of critical reception misunderstanding the power of the readers' minds to create meaning from the author's framework leads nicely into Iser's fourth topic.

What Happens in Readers' Minds as They Read *Wise Blood*?

As a reminder, the fourth and final point in Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" considers what happens in readers' minds while they interact with a text. This section of Iser's chapter emphasizes the process of a reader "identifying with" a piece of writing. Iser closes his chapter by reiterating how this element of his view of the reading process, along with the prior three, forms meaning within readers' minds:

> The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity—i.e., we bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious. The production of the meaning of literary texts … does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness. These are the ways in which reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated. (294)

With this foundational concept in mind, as well as an understanding of O'Connor's imagined readers of both the secular and religious varieties, we may consider how O'Connor crafts the ending of the novel in a way that allows each subset of her audience to "discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness," as Iser puts it—to awaken a new part of the self.

Wise Blood's concluding chapter builds off of several especially intense events. The preceding chapter opens with Haze confronting Solace Layfield, a "Prophet" hired by Onnie Jay Holy—who is now operating under his legal name of Hoover Shoats—for not genuinely adhering to the beliefs (or lack of beliefs) of the Church Without Christ. O'Connor describes Haze's outburst, writing, "'Two things I can't stand,' Haze said, '—a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is. You shouldn't ever have tampered with me if you didn't want what you got" (206). This sort of dialogue builds readers' understanding of Haze's level of passion for his Church. From there, Haze plans to travel

and preach the Church Without Christ's philosophy, which he takes the time to explain to the boy fixing his car so he can do so—"As for the Jesus who was reported to have been born at Bethlehem and crucified on Calvary for man's sins, Haze said, He was too foul a notion for a sane person to carry in his head … [quotation marks omitted in original text]" (208). Haze heads out, speeding past "666 signs … and deserted barns with CCC snuff ads peeling across them, even a sign that said, 'Jesus Died for YOU,' which he saw and deliberately did not read" (209) and is eventually pulled over by the police—because, as the officer tells him, "I just don't like your face" (210). After his arrest, Haze buys "a tin bucket and a sack of quicklime" and heads back to his place of residence with these purchases in tow (212). When his landlady, Mrs. Flood, sees him, she asks what he is doing. He straightforwardly replies that he is going to blind himself. O'Connor shifts to Mrs. Flood's perspective, writing, "… if she had felt that bad, she would have killed herself and she wondered why anybody wouldn't do that … What possible reason could a sane person have for not wanting to enjoy himself any more?" (213) With this question posed, the next-to-last chapter comes to a close, and the novel's final chapter begins.

The last chapter of *Wise Blood* focuses on detailing interactions between Haze and Mrs. Flood after Haze's self-inflicted blindness and during his continued acts of self-torture. Mrs. Flood is frequently confused by Haze's actions, and O'Connor characterizes the two of them in vastly different manners. At one point, she writes, "[Mrs. Flood] could not make up her mind what would be inside [Haze's] head and what out. She thought of her own head as a switchbox where she controlled from; but with him, she could only

imagine the outside in, the whole black world in his head and his head bigger than the world, his head big enough to include the sky and planets and whatever was or had been or would be" (222). This passage shows Mrs. Flood's rather abstract view of Haze's psyche, as well as her much more concrete view of her own. The imagery that O'Connor uses to describe how Mrs. Flood's visualizes her own mind carries interesting connotations, especially for the imagined audiences O'Connor originally would have had in mind while writing the novel during the early 1950s.

O'Connor's choice to describe Mrs. Flood's mind as something comparable to "a switchbox" aligns the character with the contemporary world of the time, a world where mechanization was rapidly replacing the romanticism of earlier eras. O'Connor's imagined original readers would carry a specific schema of emotions associated with mechanical words like "switchbox." Likewise, Mrs. Flood's visualization of Haze's mind holding "the sky and planets" elicits the natural world and the planetary system that functions in an orderly manner, even without manmade automation, towards the romantic and sublime. Within readers' minds (even if they do not consciously recognize it), this description likely also calls back to the early exposition of the novel's setting, where O'Connor writes that "No one was paying any attention to the sky" (33). In short, O'Connor crafts this passage in a way that allows her readers to absorb a sense of mystery and a reminder of days prior to modernism through Mrs. Flood's initial description of Haze's inner self, as well as a sense of desolate, computerized, modernity from her description of her own mind.

This passage continues with Mrs. Flood asking herself, "How would [Haze] know if time was going backwards or forwards or if he was going with it? She imagined it was like you were walking in a tunnel and all you could see was a pin point of light" (222-23). In tandem with the connection O'Connor cultivates between Mrs. Flood and mechanization, the descriptions in this section have the power to further remind readers of the seemingly rapid progression of time during the modern era. That sentiment continues as the passage progresses, and O'Connor writes, "[Mrs. Flood] had to imagine the pin point of light; she couldn't think of it at all without that. She saw it as some kind of star, like the star on Christmas card. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh" (223). The comparison of "the pin point of light" within Haze's inner being to the star of Bethlehem "on a Christmas Card" carries a religious weight which is likely to be observable by readers of two primary backgrounds into which O'Connor's imagined audience fall: the religious and the secular.

Within the Christian tradition, the star of Bethlehem served as a sign from God the Father of Jesus Christ's birth. O'Connor's imagined audience of religious readers, who carry a personal sense of connection to this symbol, will likely feel intrigue at the concept of Mrs. Flood choosing to compare Haze's inner being to a symbol of the birth of Christ despite Haze's position as the proprietor of a church he describes as Christless. Readers may also note that Mrs. Flood, who views her mind as something modernized and mechanic, views Haze's mind as heading "backwards" to Bethlehem, suggesting that she views the religious tradition as an outdated perspective on the world. Mrs. Flood's

name itself contains another religious reference that many readers are likely to note: it is reminiscent of the flood in Genesis, which was a result of God's desire to wipe sin from the earth. Readers with a background knowledge of Christian tradition, whether they are active participants in Christianity or not, are likely to recognize this and form the interesting mental connection between the character and the act of purging sin.

Since some degree of knowledge of Christian tradition is common within Western culture, references to motifs such as the Genesis flood or the Star of Bethlehem are likely to be recognized by readers from both sides of O'Connor's audience. Those who adhere to the same beliefs of O'Connor will most likely receive these references in a very different way to those who adhere to a different faith or no faith, though. There is power in the ability of this sort of authorial framing to bring to the reader's mind whatever they personally associate with these aspects of Christianity. In line with the writings of Iser, the reader may or may not take conscious note of these associations as they come to mind, but they will almost certainly be there, shaping how the reader identifies with the narrative.

A few pages after Mrs. Flood's imaginings, O'Connor writes a stretch of dialogue where Mrs. Flood and Haze discuss the afterlife:

> "Do you think, Mr. Motes," [Mrs. Flood] said hoarsely, "that when you're dead, you're blind?"
>
> "I hope so," he said after a minute.
>
> "Why?" she asked, staring at him.

After a while he said, “If there’s no bottom in your eyes, they hold more.”

The landlady stared for a long time, seeing nothing at all. (226)

O’Connor’s description of Mrs. Flood “seeing nothing at all” allows readers to make mental connections to the chapter’s previous references to blindness, forming a deeper meaning beyond the description that the words on the page present: though Mrs. Flood stares, she does not see; she is blind not only in the afterlife, but during her present life, although she appears to lack bottomless eyes that “hold more.”

A few pages after their conversation about blindness, Mrs. Flood expresses concern after she notices her tenant torturing himself with wire:

“What’s that wire around you for? It’s not natural,” [Mrs. Flood] repeated.

After a second [Haze] began to button the shirt. “It’s natural,” he said.

“Well, it’s not normal. It’s like some of them gory stories, it’s something that people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats,” she said. “There’s no reason for it. People have quit doing it.”

“They ain’t quit doing it as long as I’m doing it,” he said.

“People have quit doing it,” she repeated. “What do you do it for?” (228)

In this section of dialogue, O’Connor allows her readers to gain an even deeper understanding of these two characters’ perspectives. Mrs. Flood’s decision to place “being a saint” in a list of phenomena she finds absurdly outdated once again offers insight into her perspective on religious devotion. Sainthood is not a closed society within O’Connor’s Catholicism. Many of O’Connor’s readers, especially those within her partial

imagined audience of religious readers, will likely recognize this fact and note Mrs. Flood's wording as being of interest. In continuation of this idea, O'Connor gives her readers another opportunity to find meaning via their own personal associations through the next few lines of dialogue:

> "I'm not clean," [Haze] said.
>
> [Mrs. Flood] stood starting at him, unmindful of the broken dishes at her feet. "I know it," she said after a minute, "you got blood on that night shirt and on the bed. You ought to get a washwoman…"
>
> "That's not the kind of clean," he said.
>
> "There's only one kind of clean, Mr. Motes," she muttered. (228)

Once again, while O'Connor is not too heavy-handed in her use of these phrases, she suggests elements of her readers' probable background knowledge through this section of dialogue. Haze's reference to being "clean" has a deeper-than-surface-level meaning within the Christian holy text, a fact which Mrs. Flood also likely recognizes: cleanliness represents one's conscience being free of sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. Haze's suggestion that he is deserving of punishment because he possesses this sort of uncleanliness, as well as Mrs. Flood's mumbled assertion that one can only be clean in a physical sense, demonstrates to readers where each character stands in relation to these ideas. While Haze claims that there is no place for Christ within his Church, the ideas and references that he expresses in his dialogue suggest otherwise, especially to O'Connor's readers who already possess an understanding of these concepts. Mrs. Flood does not

acknowledge the meaning of "clean" held by the faith, nor does O'Connor insert herself as the narrator to explain this idea to her readers. But while the suggestion is not spelled out, its presence is still apparent to O'Connor's audience within the gaps of her writing. O'Connor continues to build this concept as the text continues:

> She looked down at the dishes he had made her break and the mess she would have to get up and she left for the hall closet and returned in a minute with the dust pan and broom. "It's easier to bleed than sweat, Mr. Motes," she said in the voice of High Sarcasm. "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things. You must have been lying to me when you named your fine church. I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't some kind of agent of the pope or got some connection with something funny" (228-29)

Here, O'Connor offers her readers some slightly more candid confirmation of previously suggested aspects of the narrative. Mrs. Flood's general attitude and choice of words provide some more insight into how she views the religious beliefs of her author (in short, not very highly). She accuses him outright of being "some kind of agent of the pope"—again, by perceiving Mrs. Flood's tone, readers will take mental note of the contempt with which she views this idea.

Wise Blood's final chapter maintains its trend of unusual and sparse stretches of dialogue that find their fully realized meaning within readers' understandings. In another piece of dialogue delivered by Mrs. Flood, O'Connor writes, "'There's nothing, Mr. Motes,' she said, 'and time goes forward, it don't go backward and unless you take

what's offered you, you'll find yourself out in the cold pitch black and just how far do you think you'll get?'" (232) This piece of dialogue clearly alludes to Mrs. Flood's earlier imagining of Haze going backwards, as well as to the religious underpinnings of that thought. Furthermore, it offers yet another example of an unconventional piece of dialogue that makes space for the reader's personal interpretation based on the author's framework. Here, Mrs. Flood seems to suggest—without explicitly saying as much—that Haze must accept help from her instead of throwing himself into methods of self-punishment. This seems considerate; however, readers may suspect from the underlying tone of Mrs. Flood's words within this passage that her motivations for pulling him away from these practices are not fully selfless.

O'Connor further suggests this possibility on the following page of the novel. Here, she writes—from within Mrs. Flood's thoughts—"If she was going to be blind when she was dead, who better to guide her than a blind man? Who better to lead the blind than the blind, who knew what it was like?" (233). This, of course, links back to the chapter's previous discussion of blindness after death. But it also alludes to "the blind leading the blind," a phrase many of O'Connor readers likely recognize. Fewer readers, perhaps, will immediately recognize that this phrase has biblical origins. The term originates from a proverb in Matthew 15:14, in which Jesus states (in the Douay-Rheims translation, with which O'Connor would likely be most familiar), "And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." Readers who share elements of their religious

background with O'Connor will probably take note of this, but readers who do not are also likely to appreciate the irony of O'Connor's inversion of the common phrase.

Wise Blood quickly becomes even darker, and the three closing sentences of the novel provide another strong example of O'Connor's writing that gains its full meaning in the mind of its readers. In the span of just a few pages, Mrs. Flood kicks Haze out into a storm, and he goes missing. His nearly-dead body is found in a ditch by the police and returned to his landlady after "[h]e died in the squad car but they didn't notice …" (235). Mrs. Flood, who "had never observed his face more composed" (235), treats his corpse as though it is a living body by placing his hand on her heart and gazing into his eyes. To close out the novel, O'Connor writes a description of the experience from Mrs. Flood's perspective:

> She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light. (235-36)

This is a highly abstract passage, and readers' appreciation of it is reliant on their imaginings of the descriptions and their recollections of past descriptions within the text. Passages such as this one, that are weighty yet bewildering, clearly possess a meaning beyond merely that of the words that their author has penned.

Beyond O'Connor's overt reference to the "pin point of light" that she illustrates earlier in this chapter of the novel and which likely remains affixed within her readers' memories, there are a few other interesting descriptions here that are conducive to a reader response theory analysis. The description of Mrs. Flood feeling "as if she were blocked at the entrance of something" is quite vague, as is the mention of "the beginning of something [Mrs. Flood] couldn't begin." O'Connor's repeated use of vague placeholders like "something" certainly does not provide a clear-cut image on the page. This ambiguity is not necessarily a hinderance. Rather, it is an opportunity for O'Connor's audience to form their own understanding of what these phrases mean as they come into contact with the text. Descriptions like these speak to elements of the shared experiences of humanity and grant readers from all backgrounds the chance to, in the words of Iser, "bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious" (294).

Ultimately, these descriptions from O'Connor boil down reveal pieces of the unifying connector that enables O'Connor's readers from all different backgrounds to find ways of their own to bridge the gaps within her writing: the human experience. Although differing backgrounds mean that individual members of O'Connor's audience are likely to notice unique elements of her writing, no matter where readers fall on the spectrum that ranges from fully devout to fully secular, they are almost certain to find bits and pieces of their own life experiences within the writing of O'Connor. In accordance with the final point of Iser's concluding chapter, readers of *Wise Blood* will likely find

that the depth of O'Connor's carefully selected and sparse language reaches to the depth of their souls.

Through this analysis, it is abundantly clear that O'Connor's skillful writing lends itself well to multiple elements of reader response theory as outlined by Iser. Each section of "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" proves to be relevant to the study of *Wise Blood*. Since previous critics have mostly ignored this area of O'Connor analysis, it reasonably follows that scholars may have neglected other highly researchable areas of O'Connor criticism, and this possibility will be considered in the conclusion of this thesis.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has considered a relatively unexplored area of O'Connor literary study by recognizing the merit of considering *Wise Blood* through the lens of reader response theory. As discussed in the introduction, early critics of O'Connor often used a very narrow set of defining words for her work, which has limited audience's appreciation of the full complexity of her works. Once a descriptor becomes an established piece of the vernacular commonly used to describe an author's works, it starts to impact the way those works are taught and perceived, making it progressively more difficult to shake. Unsurprisingly, the impact of O'Connor's early pigeonholing has continued into the present day, among casual readers and critics alike. As the literary landscape looks to the future and continues to evolve beyond O'Connor's current labels, there clearly is a wealth of further underrecognized ways to appreciate O'Connor.

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Flannery O'Connor (2019), edited by Robert Donahoo and Marshall Bruce Gentry, considers several underexplored perspectives in the teaching of O'Connor at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The work includes essays on strategies for encouraging students to consider O'Connor's fiction through frameworks such as modernism, science and technology studies, and environmentalism. In the book's opening, "Introduction: Teaching on the Border," Donahoo advocates for the necessity of educators branching out from how they typically teach O'Connor's works—as he explains, "Rather than suggest one or two preferred or

popular methods of teaching O'Connor's work, the essays here demonstrate that her fiction travels well across numerous pedagogical and theoretical borders" (4). Early in this introduction, Donahoo shares a personal anecdote that signifies scholars' tendency to dismiss new approaches to the study of O'Connor, writing, "While finishing my graduate studies, I once had a conversation with the scholar Jane Tompkins and asked her about feminist approaches to O'Connor. Her quick response is still audible in my brain: 'Why would a feminist be interested in O'Connor?'" (2) The interaction between Donahoo and Tompkins shows a small slice of the common view of O'Connor: grotesque, yet conventional, and of no use to any proponents of less-than-hyper-conservative perspectives. It is this stance from which Donahoo—as well as this thesis—aims to shift the academic perspective.

Donahoo's call to teach O'Connor through fresh critical lenses is a response to decades of unfair compartmentalizing of O'Connor within scholarly settings. In *Creating Flannery O'Connor,* Daniel Moran considers different segments of the public perception of O'Connor. The sixth chapter of this book, entitled "O'Connor and the Common (Online) Reader," looks at precisely what one would expect based on its title: how casual readers of O'Connor choose to discuss her writing on the internet. In an analysis of which repeated words show up most frequently in reviews for O'Connor's work on the book-reviewing social media website *Goodreads,* Moran finds that many current readers continue to describe O'Connor's fiction using the same terms that critics began using to illustrate O'Connor's writing decades ago:

> A more specific survey of the thousands of *Goodreads* reviews reveals that some of the watchwords used in print to describe O'Connor have demonstrated remarkable staying power. "Grotesque" and "southern gothic" are ubiquitous, as when a reviewer of *Wise Blood* casually mentions that "O'Connor's grotesque characters are both inexorably tied to and alienated from their Christianity" or when a reviewer of *The Complete Stories* gushes, 'What can possibly be said about a woman who defines an entire genre of literature: Southern gothic?" Those who both admire and disparage O'Connor's work rely on the same watchwords to the point where online reviewers can refer to them as critical mainstays, as in, "She has been given many sobriquets, 'Southern Writer," 'Catholic Writer,' 'Early Feminist,' 'Southern Gothic Writer,' etc. She was all these but much more." New watchwords have taken root in O'Connor's reputation, such as 'haunting' and 'bleak,' both of which appear in hundreds of online reviews of her work. The most frequently appearing online watchword—"dark"—is found as often on *Goodreads* as "grotesque" in newspapers and magazines. (167)

This detailed analysis by Moran serves to further emphasize the prevalence of readers who opt to limit their own readings of O'Connor by relying on the well-worn path when considering her works, even into the 21st century. It is also a reminder of the necessity to look past these labels. Beyond reader response theory, there are many other understudied areas of O'Connor scholarship that deserve further study and recognition.

One such example comes from Doug Davis, who shares his experience with teaching O'Connor through the lenses of science and technology. Davis explains, "Teaching O'Connor with STS [shorthand for science and technology studies] empowers students to be close, critical, and historicist readers of her fiction. The field's terminology reveals subjects in her fiction that the author herself did not have the vocabulary to describe in her interpretive essays" (112). There is an interesting parallel to note between Davis's example of STS and this thesis's example of reader response theory—both methods of study offer the chance to consider pieces of O'Connor's work in hindsight with newer terminology that aptly describes aspects of her work. Davis elaborates on the benefits of teaching 21st-century students O'Connor from a STS angle:

> Most important, though, teaching O'Connor with STS shows students how her mid-century stories are about their world and their times too. Our students live on global networks, social and otherwise, they negotiate technological systems every day; they learn new technical skills and experience new, hybrid ways of life each time a new app or device becomes a part of their lives. Taught through STS, students learn that the world they live in now is the same world that O'Connor saw her region turning into over half a century ago. (112)

This passage explains the value not only of teaching O'Connor's works via STS but of teaching her works through any fresh viewpoint that has relevance in the lives of learners. Also, Davis's mention of O'Connor observing the changes in her region exemplifies the value of considering her writing through the aspects of society of which O'Connor was

on the cusp. In short, Davis's analysis of his teaching experience serves as yet another reminder of the value of looking at O'Connor's work through different perspectives.

Another example of an under-considered yet highly relevant framework for the study of O'Connor is environmentalism. Christine Flanagan offers her methods for this teaching strategy in "Eternal 'Greenleaf': O'Connor's Environmental Imagination." As she explains, "Ecocriticism, the application of ecological principles and environmental ethics to the study of literature, promises a uniquely rewarding exploration of [O'Connor's] work" (113). Flanagan tasks students with compiling a list of every reference to nature in "Greenleaf," a short story by O'Connor, which offers a variety of examples that are accessible for students who are new to the author. According to Flanagan, "Ecocritical scholarship of O'Connor has grown steadily since ecocriticism's entrance into the academy, circa 1990" (114), yet this area still represents a historically under-studied area of O'Connor scholarship. Flanagan concludes her essay by writing, "O'Connor's fiction remains relevant—timeless—because we still struggle to navigate the shifting hierarchies and false boundaries of our own time. We seek to understand other human beings, who we imagine are so different from us. Finally, we seek to preserve a connection to the disappearing landscapes and societies we cherish so dearly" (120). The concepts Flanagan brings up here emphasize O'Connor's lasting value for society into the present day and beyond and serve as a reminder of the power of studying her works through a wider variety of approaches.

Yet another such approach is modernism, as addressed by Donahoo in "Teaching O'Connor in Context: Modernism as Historical Artifact." As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, while O'Connor's work may be placed in the modernist camp, there is not total agreement on this amongst critics, and the version of modernism in which critics typically place her work is fairly mild. Donahoo, however, advocates for teaching O'Connor's fiction as a full-blown member of the modernist literary movement.

Through focusing on examples from short stories such as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Donahoo builds an argument for teaching students that "… writers like O'Connor, writing in the wake of modernism's solidifying stature in the canon, brought the work of modernism into their writing even when they resisted modernist ideology and techniques" (98). Donahoo uses a series of rhetorical questions to lead into his main argument:

> Just what context best serves for understanding the fiction of O'Connor? What connections should students, like the Grandmother, be exercising all their wits to make? I would answer that all connections should be made. Any context will serve students, provided it does not distort or ignore the texts themselves. Our usual teaching agenda tries to prove that O'Connor belongs only to one context, one set of connections, but I would argue that students at all levels should come into contact with as many aspects of O'Connor's fiction as possible and that the nature of context itself should be examined. In this essay, I suggest taking advantage of O'Connor's relation to literary modernism. (90)

This passage serves as an effective summarization of the validity of considering O'Connor's writing within a wide range of contexts. There are many valid methods for considering O'Connor's work beyond the frameworks suggested in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Flannery O'Connor* or thus far in this thesis. As Donahoo asserts, "O'Connor had her own interpretations of her fiction. … Yet she never insisted that those intentions marked its limits" ("Introduction" 3)—so, we are free to respond to and teach her writing through unconventional lenses, as long as they are supportable—for instance, the presence of postmodern sensibilities within O'Connor's work.

Some degree of previous research on the relation between O'Connor's fiction and postmodernist literature does exist, but overall, it is severely lacking. Within the context of this thesis, it is especially worth recognizing that scholars often choose to place reader response theory as a small slice of the larger postmodernist movement. Joanne V. Creighton describes the connection between postmodernism and reader response theory in "The Reader and Modern and Post-Modern Fiction," published in 1982. Creighton claims that there are "parallels, on the one hand, between modernist fiction and New Criticism which both flourish in the first half of the twentieth century and, on the other hand, between the concurrence of post-modern fiction and reader-response criticism in the latter decades of [the twentieth] century" (216). The connections between each of these areas of literature are both coherent and compelling. With these connections in mind, recognition of the existence of O'Connor's postmodern sensibilities flows logically from the conversation within this thesis. Based on Creighton's statement, accepting

O'Connor's works as being conducive to reader response analysis already is a form of accepting them as being conducive to a form of postmodern analysis. From the view of this baseline, delving further into other forms of postmodern sensibilities seems more than reasonable.

Lewis MacLeod considers *Wise Blood*'s relation to postmodernity in "'Was You Going Anywheres?': Wandering Between the Modern and Postmodern in *Wise Blood*," where he argues that while O'Connor is not postmodern, she exists on the precipice between modernity and postmodernity. MacLeod points out, "Haze … never learns to operate in the world of half-truths. Despite his often-repeated repudiation of Jesus, and his apparently postmodern acceptance that there [are] 'all kinds of truths' … he ultimately finds it impossible to live without the strong structure (capital T) Truth provides" (275). Not only does this need for belief reflect O'Connor herself, it places Haze in a unique and intriguing position. In short, Haze *believes* in disbelieving, which is a rather postmodernist stance. MacLeod also refers to Richard Rorty's philosophy, writing, "Under the conditions of postmodernity, Rorty claims, the term 'atheism' is losing its relevance. Without a hard conception of truth, the theist/atheist struggle ceases to demand a strong answer. Just as one can have a slight or passing interest in music, one can 'kind of' believe in God" (276). Rorty's idea of a middle ground in belief systems suggests an increasingly prevalent worldview that fits somewhere in between atheism and agnosticism, a worldview MacLeod suggests was growing in the real world as O'Connor wrote it into the behaviors of the fictional characters occupying Taulkinham.

O'Connor observed societal changes from a distance in her fiction-writing while critiquing them. Yet, she was a stylistic trailblazer—and so, these changes of which she was so wary made their way—rather ironically—into her own writing, especially through her reader-response-friendly style of prose. Perhaps it actually is her very distaste towards postmodern concepts which allowed them room in her fiction as she gave them space in her mind, albeit through her disdain. This idea also connects to the ideas expressed by Donahoo in his previously-discussed consideration of O'Connor's relation to modernism; as he explains, O'Connor's personal distaste for a given movement does not forbid her texts from consideration within the context of those movements.

As a continuation of this thesis's focus on *Wise Blood* through the lens of reader response theory, this conclusion has considered several further methods for the study of O'Connor's fiction that have, to this point, received very little scholarly attention. Further research may consider specific theories on how the idea of O'Connor as a writer possessing postmodern sensibilities applies to other examples of her work, or, in the tradition of "Approaches to Teaching the Works of Flannery O'Connor," how the acknowledgement of O'Connor's relation to reader response criticism, postmodern sensibilities, or entirely new areas of O'Connor research can be applied from a pedagogical perspective within the high school and/or college classroom(s).

At the end of the day, it is apparent that O'Connor's fiction-writing blurs the lines between a variety of literary and philosophical movements and theories. Rather than seeking to compartmentalize O'Connor's work into an untouched box, like the box of

postmodernism or the box of reader response theory, critics and readers alike should seek to elevate her writing as something new that does not fully align with any single label, not even the labels that have been considered within this thesis. The fluidity of O'Connor's fiction justifies continued scholarly research, not only on the ideas listed here, but also on other areas that fall beyond her typical labels, such as agrarian New Criticism and religious fiction. By continuing to broaden perspectives through which O'Connor may be studied, scholars and casual readers alike will be able to continue to grow in appreciation for her works, including *Wise Blood* and beyond.

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MLA 9th edition

This thesis was typed by Hannah Rose Horton Stewart