

Hunters and Prophets:

Violence in James Dickey's *Deliverance*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

Introduction

Violence has always been a central issue in human interaction and this has been represented in storytelling throughout time: Fairy tales and folklore abound with maiming and killing, many of Shakespeare's plays hinge upon a murder and modern fiction constantly deals with topics such as war, terrorism, violent crime and domestic abuse. Flannery O'Connor has stated that "it is always assumed that this violence [in modern fiction] is a bad thing and meant to be an end in itself. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself" (*Mystery and Manners* 113). The aim of this paper is to discuss to what extent O'Connor's view on violence in literature as ultimately meaningful applies to her own novel *Wise Blood* (1952) as well as to James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

In order to fully explore the meaning and purpose of the violence depicted in the three novels it is necessary to look closely at the way violence has traditionally been given mythic significance in narratives as well as at the role of violence in the national character of America. Therefore, the analyses of *Deliverance* and *The Road* will include a discussion of how the violent frontier myth and its archetypes influence the plot and theme of the novels, while the discussion of *Wise Blood* will largely be focused on how mythic violence in the Bible impacts O'Connor's message. Finally, the analyses will also touch briefly upon the difference between the portrayals of violence in the novels and the film adaptations.

While *Deliverance*, *The Road* and *Wise Blood* have been selected as the main focus of this paper due to the central roles of violence in them, brief references will also be made to Madison Jones' *An Exile* (1967) and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985). Furthermore,

the analysis of *The Road* will include references to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), where violence is also absolutely central to plot and theme, in order to compare and contrast the author's depiction of violence in the two novels. In a longer essay, it would have been an obvious choice to include Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960) for the same purpose, but this had to be excluded due to size limitations.

Violence is a broad and sometimes ambiguous term: it may be more or less symbolic and it may be emotional, mental and virtual as well as physical. In this paper, the term will be used mainly to refer to physical interpersonal force intended to harm or kill as well as to intense natural forces which result in harm to living beings. The main focus will be on violence which is instigated with an act of bodily harm. This is often the kind of violence that readers experience as the most visceral and immediately disturbing, and it is also the most interesting for the purpose of discussing the mythic violence which has grown out of the American frontier experience and the Christian world view.

Walking the Hunter's Path: James Dickey's *Deliverance*

When attempting to pinpoint the purpose of the violence that dominates the events in *Deliverance*, it is vital to note how closely the plot structure of the novel resembles that of the classic initiation narrative, also referred to as the monomyth or the hero's journey by Joseph Campbell in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). According to Campbell, the hero's journey is a standard pattern in quest narratives across the globe which involves rites of passage in three main stages: separation, initiation and return. *Deliverance* is divided into three main sections which correspond closely to the monomythic structure: before, during and after the four middle-aged suburbanites, Ed Gentry, Bobby Trippe, Drew Ballinger and Lewis Medlock embark on a canoe trip to the fictional Cahulawassee River. In the monomyth each stage of initiation is fraught with danger and the hero can only complete his initiation into manhood by doing battle with his enemies. Likewise, the narrator and main

character of *Deliverance*, Ed, must face both the violent natural forces of the wilderness and survive a series of violent encounters with the local mountain men in order to complete his own initiation into manhood and renewal.

The hero's journey begins when he becomes separated from the known, ordinary world where he has lived in a sheltered and passive state until something disturbs him enough to make him cross the threshold of adventure to a wild, alien realm in search of a regenerative boon. Naturally, the known world in *Deliverance* is represented by Atlanta City where the men live their conventional lives while the river and its surrounding wilderness represent the unknown realm. In *Regeneration through Violence* (1973) Richard Slotkin points to the striking similarities between the passage from the known world to the unknown realm in the monomyth and the experience of the colonists in early American history (Slotkin 304-5). Slotkin argues that American hero narratives are rooted in the experience of the early colonists and frontiersmen: the self-reliant hero sets out to tame the wilderness and defeat its avatars in order to make a new life for himself (Slotkin 189).

In *Deliverance*, Lewis fits this archetype perfectly: he talks “continuously of resettling in New Zealand or South Africa or Uruguay” (Dickey 5) and dreams of an existence where “you could make a kind of life that wasn't out of touch with everything, with the other forms of life” (Dickey 42). As “one of the best tournament archers in the state” (Dickey 5), Lewis also resembles the archetype of the hunter – a figure that Slotkin argues is central in American mythology because of his simultaneous knowledge and control over the wilderness and his ability to mediate the contrast between culture and nature (Slotkin 551).

In the beginning of the novel, Lewis is a mentor and guide to Ed, who “usually went with him whenever he asked” (Dickey 6), as well as the instigator of the trip. Campbell argues that before the hero can cross the threshold to the unknown realm, a herald of adventure must make him aware that something is amiss in the ordinary world (Campbell 43-

45). Lewis performs the role of herald when he makes Ed, Bobby and Drew reflect on how hollow and mundane their lives in the city are. By pointing out that they are not truly content in the ordinary world, he makes it clear that they are lacking something vital and that the canoe trip could be their last chance to retrieve it. Ed also senses that the trip serves a deeper purpose: “Ah, he’s going to turn this into something, I thought. A lesson. A moral. A life principle. A way” (Dickey 4).

The unknown realm is typically depicted as a natural wilderness which appears both alluring and dangerous since it allows access to fears and desires that are taboo or repressed in the ordinary world. As Campbell puts it: “The regions of the unknown (desert, jungle, deep sea, alien land, etc.) are free fields for the projection of unconscious content ... in forms suggesting threats of violence” (Campbell 72). The unknown world of the wilderness is attractive to Ed precisely because it allows him to enact the primeval, masculine roles of hunter - and later killer – which he longs for but has had to repress in his ordinary life as a family man and graphic designer.

Ed is dimly aware that he feels emasculated in this ordinary life. On his way to work one morning before the trip, he notices that he is surrounded by women: “I was halfway up when I noticed how many women there were around me. Since I had passed the Gulf station on the corner I hadn’t seen another man anywhere” (Dickey 14). At work, he feels imprisoned, impotent and barely alive: “I sat for maybe twenty seconds, failing to feel my heart beat, though at that moment I wanted to ... The feeling of the inconsequence of whatever I would do ... was at that moment being set in the very bone marrow” (Dickey 16-17). Prior to the canoe trip, Ed’s way of dealing with the sense of futility in this feminised society has been to repress it: “How does one get through this? I asked myself. By doing something that is at hand to be done ... and not saying anything about the feeling to anyone” (Dickey 16). Once he crosses the threshold of adventure to the unknown realm, however, he

is forced to confront his repressed fear of emasculation in the shape of the mountain men who rape Bobby and threaten to do the same to him.

The rape sparks the series of violent encounters between the city men and the mountain men which can be viewed as the road of trials that the hero must survive in the next stage of initiation in the monomyth. Not all of the men are equipped to survive the hero's violent journey into the unknown, however. Bobby fails the very first test on the road of trials: unable to defend himself from the mountain men, he is emasculated and powerless for the rest of the story. Drew fails in a different way. As a talented musician, he is arguably the most cultured of the four men. Furthermore, he is also the voice of law and order when the group discusses what to do after Lewis shoots and kills Bobby's rapist. While these are admirable qualities in the known world, they are useless in the unknown, mythological realm where the primordial rule of kill or be killed is the only one that counts. Ultimately, Drew must die because he is trying to play by the civilised rules of the known world. His death is arguably the most central violent event in the novel, but also the vaguest: he may have been knocked overboard by the violent current of the river and drowned or he may, as Lewis claims, have been shot by the mountain man who escaped their earlier encounter.

It is significant that Ed immediately accepts Lewis' interpretation of Drew's death: if Drew had died by drowning his death would have seemed meaningless, but if he is murdered by one of their enemies his death is part of a narrative that makes sense and validates Ed's actions for the rest of the novel. One needs only glance at any war or revolution in history to see how human beings always attempt to construct narratives which justify their participation in violent conflicts. David Brion Davis points out in his article "Violence in American Literature" that Americans have attempted to collectively validate the violent birth of their nation through storytelling since the time of the American Revolution (Davis 30), for example. Like Slotkin, Davis also identifies the narrative of the Western hero in early

American literature and argues that this archetype is projected into the free regions of the West because this is the only space where “his aggressive self-reliance could be interpreted as a constructive and wholly natural force” (Davis 31). The narrative that Ed constructs around Drew’s death – that he has been savagely murdered in the wilderness by the natives – allows him to play the part of the Western hero who hunts down the savage aboriginals to protect and avenge his comrades.

This narrative also fits the next stage in the monomyth. At the climax of his adventure, the hero must usually engage in a final battle with an enemy – a transforming act of violence which is integral to the rite of passage from adolescence to manhood. In *Deliverance* this occurs when Ed climbs the mountainside and shoots Stovall, the man he believes killed Drew. During the climb, Ed feels an intimate connection to the natural elements and in his pursuit of the wounded Stovall, he feels so entirely in touch with his bestial, predatory side that he considers “smelling for blood like an animal” (Dickey 184). In this scene, Ed becomes the hunter hero described by Slotkin. Like the hunter hero, he experiences “an initiation and conversion in which he achieves communion with the powers that rule the universe beyond the frontiers and acquires a new moral character ... a new identity” (Slotkin 551). Slotkin is careful to point out that the hunter hero’s adventure always culminates in violence, however, since “the killing of the quarry confirms him in his new and higher character and gives him full possession of the powers of the wilderness” (Slotkin 551).

After killing Stovall, Ed feels such a surge of power that he almost loses his sanity and descends into a state of complete bestiality: “I can cut off the genitals he was going to use on me. Or I can cut off his head ... Or I can eat him. I can do anything I have a wish to do, and I waited carefully for some wish to come ... It did not come” (Dickey 186). In this scene, Dickey shows how fine the line is between the transcendent hunter hero and the violent maniac. Moreover, the scene illustrates that one can only ever really know on which

side of the line one belongs after experiencing an extreme act of violence first-hand and being reduced to the most primitive core of one's psyche. This is precisely what Flannery O'Connor meant when she said: "the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him" (*Mystery and Manners* 114).

Since no wish to mutilate the corpse of the man he has killed arises, Ed emerges from his experience with a new moral character and identity like the hunter hero. This clearly shows in his changed behaviour towards Bobby: "I ... hit Bobby hard on the side of the shoulder; as hard as I could ... 'Did you hear me?' I said, not loudly. 'You help me with this or I'll kill you'" (Dickey 200). While he sympathised with Bobby and related to him in the beginning of the novel, he now views him as an "incompetent asshole" and a "soft city country-club man" (Dickey 187). Having transcended to a new state of being, Ed can only see Bobby as a reflection of his own former weakness and emasculation. The fact that he has a new set of morals does not mean that Ed is a better man than before – if anything he has become a much harder and potentially dangerous man – but it does mean that he has learned to control his environment and achieved a true state of manhood through violence.

Violence, control and manhood are often linked in literature. In Madison Jones' *An Exile*, for example, it is the violent and murderous moonshiner Flint who exerts complete control over his environment in contrast to the sheriff, Hank Tawes, who experiences a total loss of control as Flint sends his beautiful daughter, Alma, to seduce him. Alma resents Tawes for being powerless to deal with his troublesome deputy, Hunnicutt, while Flint simply removes him from the picture by killing him and disposing of the body. When Tawes eventually understands that Alma never loved him and strikes her in frustration, she mocks his manhood by contrasting him with Flint: "You ain't nothing. That make you feel like a man, hitting me? ... Try that out on Flint and see what you are ... See if you can stand up to

him” (Jones 130-32). The end of the novel proves Alma right: when Tawes finally does stand up to Flint – without using violence but simply saying that he intends to turn them both over to the law - Flint stabs and kills him.

In the final stage of the monomyth, the hero returns triumphant to the known society with the ability to regenerate his society by bestowing a boon of new knowledge upon it. In *Deliverance* Ed returns to society as a renewed man: he is free from childish longings like his earlier pining after the model with the golden mote in her eye, and he feels so in tune with his creative impulses that George, the outsider artist at his studio, becomes his “best friend” and they do “a lot of serious talking about art” (Dickey 257). In other words, Ed regenerates his world in the sense that the change in him does not only benefit himself, but also those around him: he and his partner Chad get along “much better than before” (Dickey 257), his son Dean looks at him differently and seems “about to speak in a way he has not spoken before”, which indicates the beginning of a new stage in their relationship, and the model now seems imaginary to him while his relationship with his wife, Martha, feels authentic (Dickey 258).

The violence in *Deliverance* is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means to an end: that of achieving the state of manhood, authentic living and regeneration. The cost of deliverance through violence is high and requires sacrifices – such as the death of Drew – but the lesson at the end of *Deliverance* is, as Lewis puts it, that “[n]o price is too big” (Dickey 42) to pay for the rewards that come with it. To the practised reader, violence in literature becomes meaningful when it occurs within a recognisable pattern like that of the monomyth where it is an integral part of the hero’s initiation and regeneration. While readers of *Deliverance* may find its violence disturbing, they are able to process it fairly easily because it falls so neatly into this well-known pattern. This does not mean that violence is unproblematic in *Deliverance*. As mentioned earlier, Dickey makes it clear that the narratives we construct

around violence may not always be true, and that we run the risk of simply becoming madmen when we try to cast ourselves in the role of the archetypal American hero.

This message is much weakened in John Boorman's film adaptation. The film lacks the same monomythic structure as the novel because the sections before and after the trip are left out, and there is much less ambiguity in the portrayal of Drew's death and Ed's shooting of Stovall. Furthermore, Ed remains more or less the same, amiable character throughout the film. The result is that the audience never really gets the impression that Ed goes through an initiation and therefore the violent scenes in the film primarily function as mere suspense and shock effect. One could ask if it is possible to depict acts of sacred and mythic violence on the screen at all, however. Without the novel's ability to dive into the character's minds and psyches any attempt to portray their deliverance through violence may very well be bound to fail.

Carrying the Fire: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

The Road takes place in what is arguably Cormac McCarthy's most amoral and violent setting: a post-apocalyptic wasteland where "murder [is] everywhere upon the land ... populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (McCarthy 192). It is worth noting, however, that violence in *The Road* is not just interpersonal. The protagonists' desperate situation is directly linked to humanity's violence against the planet as well as to the violent natural forces in the post-apocalyptic environment. The setting in *The Road* can be described, for lack of a better term, as an anti-landscape. An anti-landscape can be defined as a world that is collapsing onto itself, where nothing can grow and there is no possibility of renewal or regeneration. A few short sentences hint that this may be the man-made result of nuclear war: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy 54). There is no description of radiation or nuclear fall-out, however, and ultimately it is unimportant how the world was destroyed. In his discussion of

The Road, Richard Gray argues that the indeterminacy of the disaster reflects the “sense of dread that has seemed to haunt the West, the United States in particular, ever since the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers” (Gray 264). However, it could be argued that by describing the disaster in general terms, McCarthy reflects not the fear associated with any specific event, but simply the modern state of anxiety and deeply buried suspicion that the world might be destroyed in a single, ultimate act of violence against the planet.

Nature itself also seems to have turned violent on the survivors in *The Road*. The nights are “long and dark and cold beyond anything they’d yet encountered. Cold to crack the stones. To take your life” (McCarthy 13). In the beginning of the novel, the man and his son also encounter a man who has been “struck by lightning” (McCarthy 51). In addition to the danger of lightning storms, they are regularly in peril from earthquakes, firestorms, noxious air and the dead, falling trees. Gray reads this hostile setting as symbolic of the essentially “unhomelike nature of our environment” (Gray 268). The violent, dystopian space in *The Road* can also be seen as a grotesque rewriting of frontier myth, however. The seemingly malevolent force of the wasteland and its depiction as a veritable hell-scape brings to mind the early colonialists’ view of the frontier, described by Puritan minister Michael Wigglesworth as: “a waste and howling wilderness, / Where none inhabited / But hellish fiends, and brutish men / That devils worshiped.” (Wigglesworth qtd. Nash 36). Like the frontiersmen, the father and his son are also trying to survive in a wilderness where they could be attacked by savage others at any moment. Of course, the crucial difference is that they are trapped in the violence of their present situation because there is nothing left in this barren, hostile environment with which they can create a new existence or culture. Like the colonists who first settled in America, the father hopes to find a promised land at the end of the difficult journey, but as noted by Gray, he and his son are travelling south in a reversal of the “liberatory flight from the old to the new as in the classic American western. It is a

turning back, from the North to the South, across an unobstructed space that triggers not a sense of freedom but a feeling of empty immensity” (Gray 161).

While the classic frontier narratives are usually marked by simple dichotomies of good and evil and legitimise the American hero’s violence by depicting it as a natural and progressive force, McCarthy’s dystopian reversal of the frontier myth makes it clear that the concept of goodness in a world of so much death and violence is tenuous at best. McCarthy expresses this through the boy’s constant need to seek assurance from his father that they are still “the good guys” (McCarthy 81) and that they will not commit certain inhumane acts, such as eating people or killing dogs. The father makes use of myth and storytelling in an attempt to frame this violent world in a manner that makes it appear meaningful to the boy. For example, after having to shoot and kill a ‘roadrat’ who threatened to cut the boy’s throat, he explains to his son that they are still the good guys because: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (McCarthy 79-80). By casting himself as God’s chosen protector of the boy, the father constructs a narrative where violence can be used for the purpose of good or evil.

Language eventually begins to fail them as their misery grows, however. The short, clipped dialogues illustrate that there are no words which can fully express the horrors they witness or how to deal with them. The boy also begins to feel that his father’s attempts to make sense of the world through storytelling are pointless. Declining to hear his father tell him a story, he states that “[t]hose stories are not true” because “in the stories we always help people and we dont help people” (McCarthy 286-287). Even his dreams are full of violence: “I dont have good dreams anyway. They’re always about something bad happening” (McCarthy 288). They do manage to construct one simple narrative of almost mythic quality which they recite like a mantra throughout the novel, however: that they must keep going because they are “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 87).

Gray argues that this fire is an allusion to the light of God and interprets it as “the sense of an innate human vitality ... the spark of life in a world that otherwise seems irretrievably lost and dead” (Gray 270). However, fire is also an ancient symbol of civilisation: Not only has fire been essential to human development since the Stone Age, but it is also linked to human enlightenment and culture in mythology across the world. To mention just one example, Prometheus made mankind more like the gods when he stole fire from the heavens and brought it to them in Greek mythology. In short, carrying the fire can be read as a metaphor for keeping civilisation alive. The exchanges between the man and the boy show that being a carrier of the fire is closely linked to a certain moral conduct with regard to violence: one can still carry the fire as long as one only uses violence to defend oneself and one’s family while using it to enslave, raid or cannibalise others will rob one of one’s humanity.

There is a marked contrast between the way violence is depicted in *The Road*, as something that can be used ethically and meaningfully, and McCarthy’s earlier novel, *Blood Meridian*, where violence is used constantly, randomly and seemingly meaninglessly. Furthermore, *The Road* differs from *Blood Meridian* because it offers a glimmer of hope that goodness may have a chance of survival even in the most hostile environment. Even so, the two novels are also connected by the intertextual references, the violent motifs and archetypes in America’s national mythology. *Blood Meridian* has often been described as an anti-western and interpreted as a revisionist view on the American frontier myth.

Sara L. Spurgeon argues in “Foundation of Empire: The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*” that Judge Holden and Glanton’s gang of scalp-hunters are perverted versions of Slotkin’s archetypal hunter hero and his sacred communion with nature and his prey. According to Spurgeon, “[t]he scalphunters as a group can be read as playing the part of the sacred hunter, dark versions of

the classic Western heroes ... yet the fact that their prey is human begins the degeneration of the myth, tilts it off its axis” (Spurgeon 92). The same could apply to the cannibals in *The Road*. Glanton’s gang is in fact often linked directly to cannibals in *Blood Meridian*. When they first make an appearance in the novel they are described as: “a pack of vicious looking humans ... wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears ... the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 78).

The violence committed by Glanton’s gang, as well as the violence committed by *The Road*’s “bad guys” is depicted as random and meaningless because it has no rational goal or clear object – except for the immediate satisfaction of base and inhumane urges - and because the distinction between friend and foe collapses and everyone becomes a potential target. This is exactly what Ed risked becoming in *Deliverance* after he kills Stovall and momentarily considers shooting Bobby or eating Stovall’s body. Significantly, it is also what every nation risks turning its soldiers into when engaging in war. *Blood Meridian* has been read in this light as a direct indictment of the American involvement in the Vietnam War (Brewton 70). Judge Holden’s statement that “[a]s war becomes dishonored ... those honorable men who recognise the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance ... and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 331) could be applied to the depiction of the Vietnam War and its veterans in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In country*. In this novel Sam, the young daughter of a war veteran and a representative of the post-war generation, struggles to find meaning in a war that continues to influence her. The Vietnam War was remembered by many as dishonourable or pointless and the sense of disconnection from historicity turns the veterans in *In Country* into “false dancers”: broken men who struggle to adapt and fail to form lasting and meaningful relationships to others.

It is also interesting to note that the boy in *The Road* intuitively knows that perversion lies at the heart of the hunter myth: when he and his father encounter a dog that they might have hunted and eaten, the boy “began to cry and beg for the dog’s life” until his father promises that he “would not hurt the dog” (McCarthy 91). It is this inherent respect for the sanctity of life and abhorrence of violence as a means to satisfy selfish needs that makes the boy so drastically different from the characters in *Blood Meridian*: the contrast between the innocence of the boy in *The Road* and the kid in *Blood Meridian* who already has a “taste for mindless violence” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3) at the tender age of fourteen is especially striking. It is the boy’s innate goodness that makes the reader believe the father’s statement that he is “the word of God” (McCarthy 3). This statement refers directly to the bible where Jesus is described as “the Word [of God] made flesh” (*King James Bible*, John 1.1-14). The inference is that like Jesus, the boy is a light that “shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (John 1.1-5).

The real difference between the *The Road* and *Blood Meridian* is the fact that *The Road* is written from the point of view of the boy and his father – the exact type of people who would be the typical, innocent victims of Glanton’s scalp-hunters in *Blood Meridian*. The contrast is strengthened by the open ending of *The Road* which suggests that there is a possibility that we can trust the father’s statement that “[g]oodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (McCarthy 300) and believe that the man and his wife who encounter the boy at the end of the novel are the “good guys” they claim to be. Even if this is not so, the final page of the novel can be read as an assertion that while humanity may have been destroyed for good by its own violence, nature and other forms of life will survive: “[o]nce there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains ... In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (McCarthy 307).

In comparison, the ending of John Hillcoat's film adaptation is too overt in its optimism. The reader never gets any proof that the children mentioned by the man in the novel actually exist, which leaves the ending open and uncertain, but the film removes all uncertainty by presenting the audience with a nuclear family and their dog. By showing so blatantly that "good guys" do indeed still exist, the film undermines the threatening, dystopian tone of the original work. On the other hand, the director's choice to leave out some of the most barbaric scenes from the novel, such as the charred body of an infant roasting on a spit above a fire (McCarthy 212), are most likely to the benefit of the film. The depiction of violence in visual media tends to seem more gratuitous than violence in literature and therefore always runs the risk of seeming too much like an end in itself - as is the case in the film adaptation of *Deliverance* - thereby removing focus from the actual story.

Accepting the Moment of Grace: Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

As a Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor argued that it was necessary for her to use "violent means" and "make [her] vision apparent by shock" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 34) in order to get through to her casual, non-religious readers and make them aware of the distortions of modern life. The violent means that O'Connor refers to do not only mean the depiction of physical violence – although her fiction has its fair share of that as well – but also her writing style itself, which has often been called grotesque. The grotesque is a mode of expression which typically combines the repulsive and threatening with the ridiculous and comical (Thompson 9, 11). The effect is deeply disturbing and de-familiarising since it evokes contradictory responses of laughter, fear and disgust at the same time. When the lifestyles and values we normally take for granted are described in this way, it forces us to look at them in a new light and reconsider whether they are in fact as natural as we thought. In that sense, O'Connor's use of the grotesque can be viewed as a kind of narrative violence against the reader's senses and perception of the world. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, a young

war veteran and the grandson of a preacher, wants to live autonomously and without feeling like he owes Christ anything since he “never ast him” (O’Connor 59) to die to redeem him – an outlook which a lot of modern, non-religious readers take for granted. By describing Hazel’s quest to begin “the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified” (O’Connor 51) as grotesque, O’Connor violently jolts her readers into the realisation that the attempt to live without faith and redemption is ultimately absurd.

Hazel’s turn to nihilism grows out of his experience in the army. Like the war veterans in *In Country*, he returns to society a broken man. Although he refuses to admit this to himself and is “pleased to think that he was still uncorrupted” (O’Connor 19) the wartime experience leaves him with psychological wounds as well as physical ones: after the piece of shrapnel that has become lodged in his chest is removed “he felt it still in there, rusted and poisoning him” (O’Connor 18). Not only do his army buddies try to convince him that “he didn’t have any soul” (O’Connor 18), Hazel is also affected by the army’s total indifference towards him: they “sent him halfway around the world and forgot about him” and only just “remembered him long enough to take the shrapnel out of his chest” before they “sent him to another desert and forgot him again” (O’Connor 18). The implication is that it is the lack of regard for human life that he experiences as a soldier that enables Hazel to “assure himself that [his soul] was not there” (O’Connor 18).

It is not just his experience in the army that causes Hazel to deny the existence of his soul, however, but the general sense of dread that he has always associated with the figure of Jesus. From early childhood he has imagined Jesus as a kind of savage hunter for souls: a “wild ragged figure” that moves “from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (O’Connor 16). In this quote, Jesus himself is depicted as a grotesque. This is part of O’Connor’s shock strategy and serves to remind the reader that Jesus is a constant and inescapable presence: when one tries to run away from the unavoidable, it automatically begins to seem all the more

threatening and predatory. Hazel's evangelist grandfather, an "old man ... with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger" (O'Connor 14) has terrified him by constantly reminding the young Hazel of this fact during his sermons. By referring to him as "that mean sinful unthinking boy" and proclaiming how "[t]hat boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever ... Jesus would have him in the end!" (O'Connor 16), O'Connor depicts redemption itself as an ambush or assault on the soul of the unbeliever. As Robert Drake puts it in "The Bleeding Stinking Mad Shadow of Jesus' in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor", O'Connor's Christ is "not lamb-like and meek ... but comes in terrifying glory, riding the whirlwind ... and he terrifies before he can bless" (Drake 185). In order to understand this terrifying vision of Christ, it is crucial to realise that no religion can be taken seriously without inspiring awe – a feeling of reverence which can be defined as the mixture of fear and wonder. Without some degree of fear, religion simply loses its meaning and potency.

Hazel decides that by refusing to believe in the existence of this violent, terrifying saviour, he can avoid him even more effectively than by being a good Christian. However, the fact that he has inherited his grandfather's face, and that everyone thinks he looks like a minister regardless of how he dresses, indicates that Hazel is destined to be a preacher. Despite his constant assertions that he believes in nothing, Hazel is just as obsessed with God as his grandfather. In his new Church without Christ, Hazel preaches a philosophy of nihilism which is essentially just a negative version of his former, Christian faith: "I'm going to preach that there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar" (O'Connor 101).

Naturally, a Christian church without Christ is meaningless, even absurd. When Enoch Emery, the simple country boy who is Hazel's only real disciple, brings him the shrunken, dwarfish mummy that he has stolen from the museum to be the new Jesus of

Hazel's church, Hazel can only see it for what it is: a grotesque image of the new Jesus that he has preached about in his sermons, a Jesus who is "all man, without blood to waste" (O'Connor 140). Enraged, Hazel "lunged and snatched the shrivelled body and threw it against the wall. The head popped and the trash inside sprayed out in a little cloud of dust" (O'Connor 188). Hazel's violence is meant to be directed at the mockery of his new church, but he only really succeeds in shattering his own absurd illusion. As he is coughing in the dust of the ruined mummy – a cough that sounds like "a little yell for help at the bottom of a canyon" (O'Connor 189) – Hazel begins to understand for the first time that he has become nothing more than a prophet of the grotesque, of meaninglessness.

Similarly, Hazel's decision to murder Solace Wayfield, the fake prophet that the con-man Hoover Shoats hires to help him make money by copying Hazel's church, begins with anger at being made a mockery of but ends in the realisation that what really enrages him is the lack of integrity that he himself is as guilty of as Solace: "'Two things I can't stand', Haze said, '- a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is'" (O'Connor 206). Obviously, this applies to Hazel himself as someone who not only denies his true call to religion but also mocks that religion in an attempt to evade it. Hazel's violence against Solace results in a moment of truth for both of them. Solace shows himself to be a man of faith when he confesses his sins and Hazel feels compelled to act the part of the priest who receives it, however reluctantly: "'You shut up', Haze said, leaning his head closer to hear the confession" (O'Connor 207).

Ralph C. Wood argues in "Hazel Motes as a Self-Mortifying Saint in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" that "[o]f Motes' many failures to live out the nihilism he so confidently proclaims, the worst by far is his magnetic attraction to this dying exemplar of Faith" (Wood 7). It is possible to take the analysis of this scene one step further, however. The similarity between Hazel and Solace is so striking that a woman in the street mistakes

them for twins and Hazel himself is struck by Solace's appearance because he "[h]ad never pictured himself that way before" (O'Connor 167). Solace can be seen as Hazel's alter-ego – the false, nihilistic self he has constructed after he returned from the war – and when Hazel murders him, it is essentially an expression of the violent anger he feels towards his own fake identity as a prophet of meaninglessness.

Hazel is still in denial at this point, however, and believes that he can escape in his car to go preach in another city. In one of her lectures, O'Connor points out that Hazel "does not really escape his predicament until the car is destroyed by the patrolman" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 72). This is because the car plays a crucial part of Hazel's illusion that he has the freedom to shape his own destiny and go where he pleases, regardless of God's plan for him. When the car is destroyed he finally understands that there can be no escape from Christ. While the destruction of the car cannot exactly be described as an act of violence, it is an example of how destruction can often symbolise a positive development in O'Connor's fiction. Hazel loves his dingy, rat-coloured Essex and losing it is highly sobering to him. O'Connor has explained that "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 112). Losing the Essex must be seen as one of the crucial figurative knocks on the head that Hazel requires in order for him to return to reality.

After losing the car Hazel blinds himself with lime and begins wearing barbed wire wrapped around his chest and putting sharp stones in his shoes. Earlier in the novel, he is extremely disappointed to discover that Asa Hawks, the street preacher who claims to have blinded himself with lime in an act of extreme asceticism, is actually a fake. By doing what Hawks could not, Hazel becomes what he was always meant to be: the only true prophet in the novel. Despite being an extreme act of self-harm, it is an ultimately life-affirming action

because it signifies Hazel's return to integrity. Wood argues that his self-mutilation can easily be mistaken for "sadistic self-torment" as a way to "make atonement for his own sinful acts", but that it must instead be interpreted a way of "participating in the atoning death of his Savior" (Wood 10).

It makes sense to view Hazel's self-mutilation as acts of sacred violence. O'Connor clearly stated that she saw a close connection between violence and redemption: "The notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals, it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring" (O'Connor qtd. in Kane 59). A closer look at the bible verse O'Connor is referring to can explain Hazel's actions: "I am not come to send peace, but a sword ... And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me is not worthy of me ... and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10.11, 34, 38, 39). Hazel has in fact entered a healing-process of the spirit, but he recognises that there can be no restoration without first taking up his cross in acceptance of suffering. By blinding himself he gives up his material life and so he begins his true life by devoting himself fully to Christ. At the end of the novel he is killed by the brutal policemen who knock him over the head for no apparent reason – yet this final act of violence also becomes meaningful. When they bring his corpse to his landlady, Mrs Flood, she exclaims: "I see you've come home!" (O'Connor 235) – And perhaps he really has, after receiving the final knock on his hard head and entering the kingdom of heaven. Even more significantly, Mrs Flood comes close to a religious awakening herself while gazing into Hazel's dead eyes – a point which John Huston's film adaptation completely omits. While this would admittedly be difficult to capture on the screen, the film robs Hazel's death of some of its meaning by robbing him of his only convert as a true Christian prophet.

Conclusion

In the three novels discussed in this paper, violence plays a central role as both a social, philosophical and historical issue. In James Dickey's *Deliverance* violence is depicted as an intrinsic part of human nature which has been repressed in modern, urban society, leading to social issues of emasculation and entrapment. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* violence is used to tap into philosophical issues by serving as the dividing line between good and evil, depending on who commits it and for what reasons. Violence can also be described as a historical issue in *The Road*, since it is intrinsic to human nature in McCarthy's universe as well as in Dickey's, and there can be no vision of the past or the future without it. In *Wise Blood* violence is depicted as inseparable from Christian philosophy: while committing acts of violence only removes us further from God, accepting the suffering that is part of this world is a necessary step to share in the grace of Christ.

In all three novels, violence transcends the merely physical by being closely linked to the survival of the spirit through mythic imagery and archetypes. In that sense, each of the novels can be read as a salvation narrative where violence is either a central vehicle or hindrance for redemption, something that can restore the spirit as well as break it. Richard Slotkin has said that "[great] literature is at once the apprentice and master of myth" (Slotkin 517). *Deliverance*, *The Road* and *Wise Blood* all evoke and problematize myths that are rooted in acts of violence; the myth of the American hero, the myth of the frontier and the myth of the crucifixion of Christ; myths lie at the foundation of our shared beliefs about violence as a means to the initiation and salvation. Ultimately, each of the three novels depicts violence as far more than an end in itself by evoking these myths and reminding us of the sacred violence of hunters and the redeeming suffering of prophets.

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