



SEXISM IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "WISE BLOOD"

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to explore the theme of sexism, particularly within Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*. Historically, societies have upheld a patriarchal structure where men were considered the standard while women were viewed as exceptions. For instance, Aristotle famously asserted that women were inferior to men but superior to slaves, elevating men as the epitome of human perfection. Despite progress over time, deep-seated prejudices against women have persisted, manifesting in various forms such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. Consequently, sexism permeates multiple aspects of life, not confined to any single domain. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in women's educational attainment, with more females attending college and graduating with degrees in traditionally male-dominated fields like the sciences. However, despite these advancements, disparities persist, with fewer women pursuing careers in areas such as science and academia. Numerous factors contribute to perpetuating sexism, including societal expectations surrounding motherhood and family commitments, early socialization patterns that shape interactions between genders, institutional barriers within certain fields, and even conjectures rooted in biological differences. This paper endeavors to examine these multifaceted aspects of sexism in both literature and contemporary society.

Keywords: sexism, early postmodern literature, Flannery O'Connor, patriarchy, *Wise Blood*

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1. Introduction

The recognition of unequal treatment as unjust, leading to the concept of "sexism," is a relatively recent social development. For centuries, gender disparities were acknowledged as a societal issue, with critiques targeting the arbitrary and unjust hierarchical arrangement of gender roles in society. Sexism can be considered one of the oldest forms of discrimination and prejudice, rooted deeply in historical norms and cultural practices. The term "sexism" itself emerged during the women's movement of the 1960s, as early advocates for women's rights began to articulate the systematic exclusion of women from positions of power based solely on their gender. Additionally, feminist scholars have often used the term "patriarchy" to describe the institutionalized dominance of men over women and children within both societal and familial structures. Consequently, women find themselves marginalized from the social privileges associated with masculinity, compelled to conform to male-defined standards regarding physical appearance, social roles, and behavior (Lerner, 1986).

Sexism perpetuates a social imbalance in gender dynamics that tends to favor men. This imbalance is reflected in various forms of discriminatory treatment, ranging from unequal employment opportunities and promotion practices to more severe manifestations such as physical assault and sexual violence. Previous studies have highlighted a range of detrimental effects stemming from sexism, underscoring its pervasive and harmful impact on individuals and society as a whole (Jackman, 1994).

It is crucial to differentiate between the effects of hostile and benevolent sexism. Determining the sexual nature of benevolence, especially as it relates to discriminatory behavior, poses a significant challenge. Women may find themselves subjected to this pattern of persuasive influence and may even internalize it. Conversely, they may be more prone to encountering hostility. Instances of overt force and open hostilities can also serve as catalysts for collective action and protest (Wright, 2010).

Additionally, recent research suggests that combating gender-biased behavior can lead to negative evaluations of women. Men may judge women who do not endorse traditional gender-biased beliefs as less attractive. Consequently, facing gender discrimination presents a challenging dilemma for women.

One significant consequence of sexism is the phenomenon known as stereotype threat. Women often underperform on tasks traditionally associated with males, such as math testing, particularly when their gender identity is emphasized, even through subtle reminders (p. 99). This underscores the pervasive impact of sexism on individual performance and psychological well-being.

A body of empirical evidence highlights the detrimental effects of benevolence on the actual performance and sense of competence among women. Studies indicate that women may experience poor performance due to apprehension about negative treatment if they excel. Achievements by female individuals are often perceived as contravening gender stereotypes, potentially leading to a backlash in the form of sexism, subversion, and unfavorable evaluations (Moya *et al.*, 2010). This phenomenon underscores the complex interplay between gender norms, performance expectations, and societal

judgments, posing significant challenges for women striving to excel in various domains. (Eagly *et al.*, 2010).

Research on gender stereotypes suggests that descriptions of men often align closely with those of standard whites and healthy adults in general, while descriptions of women tend to include characteristics associated with groups, relationships, and society as a whole (p. 34). This phenomenon is exemplified by the concept of "*thinking manager-male thinking*," which illustrates that leaders, in general, are often perceived as possessing masculine traits and agency (p. 96). This underscores the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes on perceptions of leadership and competence in various domains.

As a result, female leaders often encounter conflicting expectations regarding their identity as women and their role as effective leaders (p. 24). Role mismatch theory, as proposed by Eagly & Karau (p. 51), along with the paradox hypothesis (p. 22), examines the antecedents and consequences of perceived gender violations or discrepancies in role expectations. To mitigate the effects of sexism, women frequently adjust their behaviors. For instance, they may negotiate lower salaries for themselves compared to their counterparts (p. 10), refrain from promoting their achievements during job interviews (p. 98), or downplay their performance altogether (p. 44). These adaptive strategies reflect the complex challenges faced by women in navigating gender expectations within professional settings.

The gender hierarchy perpetuates these behaviors within the current societal structure, thereby hindering women from engaging in high-profile activities (p. 12). Consequently, sexism not only impacts a woman's true performance but also diminishes or consciously obscures successful performances in domains traditionally associated with men. Moreover, it affects strategies for identity enhancement. While men may seek positive differentiation through agent dimensions (i.e., situation-related attributes), women often pursue positive differentiation through societal (irrelevant) dimensions, in a parallel process (Fiske, 1996). From the standpoint of social identity theory, this disparity can be understood as a social creativity strategy, wherein members of a marginalized group strive to attain positive distinction despite their disadvantaged position within the communal structure (p. 45).

This research indicates that, especially within traditionally male-dominated domains, men often perceive the workplace as unsuitable for women's qualities and competencies, while women themselves face accusations of sexism (p. 11). Moreover, the impact of societal stereotypes on women's professional experiences is evident through consistent and objective negative associations between family life, as indicated by factors such as family size, and their professional lives. Conversely, corresponding correlations typically exhibit significant positive levels among men (p. 6). This underscores the pervasive influence of gender norms and expectations on individuals' career trajectories and opportunities.

Sexism is defined as a type of prejudice or discriminatory treatment rooted in a person's gender (Ku, 2010). Historically, prior to World War II, the term "sexism" primarily referred to the numerical inferiority of national and linguistic groups. It was only in the 1950s that its meaning underwent a significant transformation, shifting

towards the classification of lower-ranking or stigmatized groups, such as women, individuals with disabilities, or the elderly. This evolution in the term's usage reflects changing societal attitudes and understandings regarding discrimination and inequality based on gender.

These aspects hold significant importance within the micro-level framework of historical reality and the early postmodern context, to the extent that other scholars have extensively characterized them as structured sexism. Over time, both the elite and the general populace contributed to the societal subjugation of women, institutionalizing it within the fabric of social norms and structures. This underscores the deep-rooted nature of sexism and its pervasive influence across various strata of society.

This dependency is legitimized through the portrayal of a male sexist (heterosexual) framework, which encompasses not only sexual biases but also propagates sexist imagery, emotions, and narratives that emphasize male superiority and female inferiority. Systemic sexism further encompasses a series of discriminatory behaviors directed against women by men, thereby perpetuating a gender hierarchy within society that places men above women. The perpetuation and replication of this hierarchy enable men to unjustly benefit while women endure unfair discrimination based on gender, particularly within religious and governmental institutions, economic spheres, and familial structures (p. 86). This highlights the entrenched nature of sexism and its multifaceted impact on various facets of societal life.

While all men derive benefits from various aspects of sexism, some benefit more than others. In the United States and other Western societies, white men tend to benefit the most, partially due to their position at the apex of not only the gender hierarchy but also the racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. They typically wield more power to shape these hierarchical structures and exert a disproportionate impact on the marginalized members of society (p. 15).

Sexism intersects with various other forms of discrimination, affecting women differently based on factors such as race, age, sexual orientation, ability, and gender expression. For instance, for women of color, racism is a daily reality, resulting in a compounded experience where sexism and racism intersect and reinforce each other (p. 91). This intersectionality highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of discrimination and oppression experienced by marginalized individuals.

Sexism is deeply ingrained to the extent that women themselves internalize varying degrees of it. Unlike other forms of discrimination, women are frequently confronted with male oppression on a daily basis, making it a pervasive bias. Researchers, such as Mills (p. 8), explore how language perpetuates the marginalization of women, exemplified by phrases like "*like a girl*," perpetuated not only by men but also by women. This absorption of sexism by women serves to perpetuate their own subjugation, while men reinforce it through language (p. 25). This underscores the complex dynamics involved in the perpetuation of sexism within society.

The researchers observed that women often internalize male perspectives, particularly as they gain some measure of male power. For instance, women who ascend to managerial positions tend to exhibit a preference for male managers over female ones

in hiring decisions (Correll, 2007). Women are typically penalized for resisting male dominance and other manifestations of sexism. Historically, in the United States, some women who challenged male expectations faced horrific violence, as evidenced by the persecution and execution of individuals labeled as "*witches*" (p. 14). Overall, empirical evidence indicates that, unlike boys and men, girls and women have been systematically conditioned over centuries to ensure their full societal dependency.

Analysts argue that men can also experience direct sexism, such as facing disadvantages after divorce. However, from a systematic perspective, the term "discrimination" doesn't typically encompass the ways in which women's belongings are excluded. Rather, it reflects an inherent aspect of the female dependency system, which affects many men as a collective group. Some men may also suffer negative consequences from this system, as it imposes restrictive rules associated with traditional masculinity. Sexism has become so ingrained in society that individuals often fail to recognize their complicity within the male-centric framework and other organized systems of sexism. Moving forward, future social science research could benefit from examining nationality as a system constructed by humans, thereby facilitating a broader understanding of social structures and advancing the cause of freedom and justice for all individuals, regardless of gender.

2. Literature Review

The literature review explores the conceptualization of sexism across different periods and perspectives. While various conceptualizations have emerged over time, there has been a tendency to narrow its definition to encompass only women's negative experiences and attitudes (Expósito, Moya, & Glick, 2010). Scholars have delineated two main types of sexism: traditional and modern manifestations. Traditional sexism often aligns with historical gender norms and stereotypes, while modern sexism may manifest in subtler forms, such as benevolent sexism. The intersection of patriarchy, gender role differentiation, and the interdependence between females and males serves as the foundation for the perpetuation of sexism within society. This review highlights the multifaceted nature of sexism and underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of its various dimensions and implications.

Eagly and Wood (2012) assert that various characteristics are associated with both aggressive and benevolent attitudes toward women, which serve to justify male dominance. Social role theory posits that historical disparities in physical strength, along with cultural and ecological factors, dictated the allocation of social roles between men and women. Men began to occupy positions granting them decision-making power, authority, and access to wealth, laying the groundwork for patriarchy. Unlike other disparities such as race and class, which require minimal interaction between classes, the biology of sex and reproduction necessitates continuous close contact between men and women.

This dyadic aspect of male-female relationships necessitates a unique approach, as men seek to maintain amicable relations with women, making exclusionary or aggressive

tactics less effective. Direct force, especially when the lives of dominant and subordinate group members are intertwined, carries significant risks (Jackman, 1994).

Glick and Fiske (1996) and Jackman (1994) argue that the privileged status of the dominant group is maintained through implicit sexism, with little incentive for the subordinate group to engage in the unequal system. Consequently, members of the subordinate group may exhibit minimal cooperation or even active resistance. When groups are highly interdependent, a subtler form of regulation, ostensibly benign paternalism, is more efficient at maintaining the system by concealing inequalities and eliciting desirable behavior.

Women, despite their general subordination, are not entirely powerless or subject to men's will. Intergroup behaviors are negotiated rather than dictated, with each group influencing the other. Men, as the majority group, have more power to define intergroup prejudices and behaviors due to their social status. Gender disparity does not necessarily entail deliberate manipulation or domination by men; rather, the widespread dissemination and acceptance of sexist ideology justify and perpetuate inequalities (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006).

Furthermore, Glick and Fiske (1996) identify a subtler form of sexism characterized by attitudes toward women based on stereotypical and narrow views but with a positive emotional tone for the perceiver. This optimistic tone is achieved by emphasizing men's defense of women and the complementarity of their equalities as essential for achieving true equality in society.

In summary, various conceptions of sexism emphasize disparities in gender roles, but they differ in articulation, with newer forms being subtler and more covert. Concepts such as gender inequality or control may highlight gender disparities, but they do not necessarily entail shared beliefs of sexism (Rodríguez, Lameiras, Carrera, & Faílde, 2010). The term "postmodernism" first emerged in the late 1950s within the humanities to denote a departure from modernism, encompassing new intellectual, aesthetic, and critical agendas (p. 27). Initially rooted in cultural philosophy, literature, architecture, sculpture, and cultural theory, postmodernism has since influenced debates across a wide range of disciplines, including international relations, psychology, law, history, sociology, and urban planning, among others. While some hailed postmodernism as a liberation from patriarchal constraints, others viewed it as indicative of societal decline under late capitalism (Woods, 2012).

Postmodernism seeks to reexamine conceptions of subjectivity, gender, temporality, history, space, and power relations across global societies. Although the reception and progression of postmodern ideas have varied across disciplines, significant theoretical debates emerged in various fields around 1990 (Jaén, S. O., *et al.* 19). Despite ongoing discussions about its political and ideological implications, postmodernism aims to challenge traditional norms and structures through philosophical inquiry (Sponsler, 1992).

In literature, authors like Peter Ackroyd have embraced postmodernist principles, blending various literary genres and employing intertextual dialogue to explore national cultural values and practices. Ackroyd's novels, such as "The House of Doctor Dee,"

exemplify postmodernist literature by intertwining historical, gothic, and mystery elements to create a dialogue between past and present. Through intertextual dialogue and literary reminiscence, Ackroyd engages with classical literary texts, imbuing his works with layers of meaning and complexity characteristic of postmodernist literature (Ackroyd, 1993).

In literature, authors like Peter Ackroyd employ postmodernist techniques to create innovative narratives that engage with the complexities of history and culture in a rapidly changing world (p. 18). In summary, postmodernism represents a departure from modernist conventions, challenging traditional norms and structures across disciplines. Through its exploration of subjectivity, temporality, and power dynamics, postmodernism offers a critical lens through which to examine contemporary society and culture.

3. Theory

Postmodern literature emerges as a response to what are perceived as the stylistic and ideological limitations of modernist literature, coinciding with significant global shifts following World War II. Postmodern literary authors are deeply influenced by various postmodern philosophical movements and ideas. According to postmodern philosophy, knowledge and evidence are relative to specific circumstances, making it futile and impossible to assign definite significance to certain ideas, concepts, or events (Lemert, 2015).

The debates surrounding postmodernism span a wide spectrum of disciplines, including art, architecture, literature, film, sociology, communication, and philosophy, leading to the emergence of new social, political, and literary ideas. Although the term "post-modernism" was initially used in Latin American and American literary criticism in the 1930s and 1940s, the primary study of postmodernism began to take shape in the 1970s (Brann, 1992).

In contrast, modernism emphasizes human intelligence as a significant asset and views it as the foundation of scientific mentality. Modernity is characterized by a period of scientific mentality that stems from technological advancements in fields such as physics and biology. Modernist culture is defined by technology and large factories, with science regarded as a source of power and the world viewed as mechanical. In literature, modernism emerged as an artistic movement between 1910 and 1930, with prominent figures including Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka (Rosenau, 1991).

Many postmodern ideas are attributed to "non-sociologists" such as Derrida, Lyotard, Jameson, Foucault, and Baudrillard. These influential postmodern scholars have contributed significantly to shaping postmodern thought and discourse across various disciplines, challenging conventional notions of knowledge, truth, and reality. Their ideas continue to provoke critical reflection and scholarly debate in contemporary intellectual discourse.

Derrida, a French philosopher of Algerian descent, utilized the hermeneutical method to analyze the work of Foucault (Bennington, G., & Derrida, J., 1993). He is known for his deconstructive approach, focusing on the concept of "discourse" to unravel underlying assumptions and hierarchies within texts and language.

Baudrillard, another French philosopher, argued that the signifiers we use to construct our identities are shaped by consumer culture, with social status determined by the brands one chooses (Baudrillard, 2001). He emphasized the role of information and explored the utility of signs and symbols in postmodern society.

Foucault, also a French philosopher, highlighted the importance of discourse in shaping our understanding of reality, asserting that reality itself is a relative concept constructed through social mechanisms (Foucault, 2019). His work focused on power relations and how they manifest through discourse.

Reisman, an American philosopher, discussed the influence of media on society in his work "*The Lonely Crowd*," observing a shift from being "*inner-directed*" to "*other-directed*" due to the increasing dominance of peer groups and mass media (Heberle, 1956).

Lyotard, a prominent French philosopher, critiqued totalizing and universalizing discourses, advocating for difference and plurality instead (Haber, 1994). He addressed contemporary societal conditions such as the computer age and cybernetics, challenging modernist notions of knowledge and truth.

Fredric Jameson, an American academic, associated postmodernism with late capitalism, emphasizing consumption and mass media as dominant cultural forces (Stephanson, 1989). He argued that aesthetics has become increasingly relevant in the context of consumerism development.

Despite criticism, postmodernism offers a unique perspective on social truth, particularly in the context of media dominance and technological advancements (Dr. Sheeba, 2017). The proliferation of information technology has led to the blurring of boundaries between actual and virtual worlds, fostering multiculturalism and reshaping social issues and campaigns. Individuals now have more agency in shaping their identities and experiences.

4. Context

Postmodern literature emerged in the post-World War II period, building upon and expanding the ideas of modernism rather than completely diverging from it. Major modernist authors had either passed away or ceased publishing experimental works by this time, leading to a new wave of writers exploring innovative literary forms and themes (McKeon, 2009).

Postmodern novels often challenge conventional narrative structures and explore the nature of fiction itself, with self-reflexivity being a common characteristic (Doody, 1997). These works often question the boundary between fiction and reality, echoing early modernist sentiments such as Oscar Wilde's belief that life imitates art (Couturier, 1985).

Susan Sontag, known for subverting conventions of the historical novel, uses her works like *"The Volcano Lover"* and *"In America"* to meditate on themes such as heroism, imperialism, and the nature of narrative (Sontag, S., & Sontag, R. J., 1982). Similarly, John Barth's *"The Sot-Weed Factor"* critiques America's founding myths, revealing hidden histories and challenging romanticized narratives (Holder, 1968).

Kurt Vonnegut's *"Slaughterhouse-Five"* is considered a postmodern masterpiece, departing from traditional war novels by focusing on a single protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, who experiences time non-linearly (Merrill, R., & Scholl, P. A., 1978). This novel subverts conventional narratives of war and survival, offering a unique perspective on the human experience.

Susan Sontag's novels *"The Benefactor"* and *"Death Kit"* exemplify metafiction in the postmodern novel, challenging notions of truth and reality (Sontag, S., & Sontag, R. J., 1982). These works blur the line between fact and fiction, leaving readers questioning the nature of the narrative itself.

Postmodern novels often incorporate elements of fantasy and science fiction, as seen in the works of Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, and Thomas Pynchon (Robinson, K. S., 1983). These authors explore themes of technology, history, and society through speculative fiction, offering insightful commentary on contemporary issues.

Overall, postmodern literature encompasses a wide range of styles and themes, challenging traditional literary conventions and offering innovative perspectives on the human experience.

4.1 Autobiographical Elements

Mary Flannery O'Connor, a prominent Southern writer, was born in Savannah, Georgia in 1925 to a family of Irish Catholics who had settled in Georgia generations earlier. Her ancestors were active in the state's history, with her grandfather and great-uncle becoming successful businessmen. O'Connor's family connections included influential figures such as Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon, who were pioneers in the Southern literary movement. After completing her education, O'Connor pursued a master's degree in writing at the University of Iowa (Simpson, 2005).

Throughout her life, O'Connor displayed an unusual intellect and was surrounded by adults from an early age. Despite her Catholic upbringing, she spent some time living in New York before returning to Georgia. Her writing style was characterized by its grotesque elements, caustic cynicism, and exploration of Catholic themes. Her most famous works, such as *"Wise Blood"* and *"The Violent Bear It Away,"* often reflected her Catholic beliefs and critiqued aspects of Southern society (Rogers, 2012).

While O'Connor did not explicitly connect her writing with feminism, her work has been analyzed through feminist lenses. Some scholars have noted the spiritual dimensions of her feminism, emphasizing the intersection of feminism and Catholicism in her work. O'Connor herself expressed a reluctance to categorize her writing in terms of gender, stating that she did not consider qualities to be specifically feminine or masculine (Pokswinski, 2013).

Tragically, O'Connor's life was marked by illness, as she was diagnosed with lupus at the young age of twenty-five. This chronic and incurable disease had also claimed the life of her father. Despite her health struggles, O'Connor continued to write prolifically until her untimely death in 1964. Her works remain highly regarded and continue to be studied for their literary merit and thematic complexity (Ecklund, 2003). Even Though, O'Conner does not connect her works directly with her Feminist point of view, her denial that:

"I just never think ... of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine." (Habit of Being, 176)

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Summary of the Novel

"*Jesus Saves.*" This triggers a reaction in Hazel, who becomes determined to establish the "*Church Without Christ*" as a way to preach his own version of redemption, one without the need for Jesus. He begins to attract followers and gains attention from the local community, including the police.

Enoch, meanwhile, becomes obsessed with a mummified dwarf he finds at a museum, believing it to be a spiritual sign. He steals the dwarf and presents it to Hazel as a gift, hoping to gain his approval and join his church. However, Hazel rejects Enoch's offering, leading to a rift between them (Wise Blood: 19).

As Hazel's movement gains momentum, he becomes increasingly conflicted about his beliefs and desires. He struggles with the idea of redemption without Jesus and grapples with his own sense of guilt and sin. Ultimately, his journey leads to a dramatic and unexpected conclusion that challenges both his beliefs and the reader's understanding of faith and redemption.

"*Wise Blood*" explores themes of faith, sin, redemption, and the search for meaning in a world seemingly devoid of divine guidance. Through the complex characters of Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery, O'Connor creates a compelling narrative that forces readers to confront their own beliefs and assumptions about religion and spirituality.

Meanwhile, he drives his car and stops at a rock written with the text,

*"Woe to the Blasphemer and whoremonger!
will hell swallow you up?
Jesus saves."* (Wise Blood: 44)

In his first sermon for the "*Church Without Christ*", Hazel Motes delivers a passionate and provocative speech that challenges traditional notions of faith and redemption. Standing before a small audience gathered in a makeshift chapel, Hazel's voice carries with conviction as he articulates his vision for a new kind of salvation. "*My fellow seekers,*" he begins, his voice ringing with fervor, "*we stand at a crossroads of belief, where the old ways no longer suffice and the path to redemption must be forged anew. For too long,*

we have been shackled by the chains of tradition, bound to doctrines that no longer speak to our hearts or our souls".

He pauses, allowing his words to resonate in the silence of the room before continuing, *"But I say unto you, salvation is not found in the embrace of a savior or the promise of heaven. It is found within ourselves, in the depths of our own humanity and the courage to confront our own sins and shortcomings"*. As he speaks, Hazel's words cut through the air like a knife, challenging his listeners to question their beliefs and embrace a new way of thinking. He speaks of the futility of seeking redemption through external means, urging his followers to look inward for the answers they seek.

"We are not bound by the dictates of a higher power," he declares, his voice rising with conviction. *"We are the masters of our own destiny, the architects of our own salvation. Let us cast off the shackles of tradition and embrace the freedom of our own truth"*. With each word, Hazel's charisma and conviction draw his audience deeper into his message, compelling them to reconsider everything they thought they knew about faith and redemption. And as he concludes his sermon, the room is filled with a sense of possibility and liberation, as his followers begin to see the world through new eyes.

"where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way." (Wise Blood .61)

In the concluding events of Flannery O'Connor's *"Wise Blood"*, the narrative takes a dark and tumultuous turn as the characters' fates intertwine in a series of tragic and bizarre events. Hazel Motes, driven by his relentless pursuit to establish his *"Church Without Christ,"* continues on his misguided mission, seeking to challenge and undermine traditional religious beliefs. However, his efforts are met with indifference and mockery from those around him, who view his endeavors with mild amusement rather than genuine interest.

As Hazel becomes entangled in a web of deceit and betrayal, his interactions with Sabbath Lily, Enoch Emery, and other characters only serve to deepen his sense of isolation and disillusionment. Enoch's misguided attempt to steal the shrunken man from the museum, along with Sabbath's unexpected presence in Hazel's bed, further complicates matters and pushes Hazel towards a breaking point. In a moment of desperation and madness, Hazel's confrontation with Solace Layfield leads to a violent and tragic outcome, ultimately resulting in his own downfall. His decision to blind himself, influenced by Sabbath's twisted interpretation of her father's words, serves as a haunting manifestation of his inner turmoil and spiritual crisis.

As the narrative reaches its climax, Hazel's rejection by Mrs. Flood and his eventual discovery in a ditch by two policemen underscore the tragic and lonely nature of his existence. Despite his fervent beliefs and misguided actions, Hazel ultimately finds himself abandoned and forsaken, left to wander the desolate landscape of his own making. Through its bleak and uncompromising portrayal of one man's existential journey, *"Wise Blood"* offers a searing critique of religious fanaticism and the destructive power of human folly. In the end, Hazel Motes' tragic fate serves as a sobering reminder

of the consequences of unchecked ambition and the search for meaning in a world devoid of redemption.

5.2 Sexism in Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor's portrayal of women in her works often reflects the broader societal stereotypes and struggles faced by women, particularly within the context of religion. Here are some aspects to consider:

1) Struggles Between Spirituality and Physicality

O'Connor's depiction of female characters often explores the tension between spirituality and physicality. Women are portrayed grappling with their desires, emotions, and spiritual beliefs, highlighting the conflict between the spiritual realm and the physical world.

This struggle is a common theme in many religious traditions, including Christianity and Judaism, where women are often expected to embody virtues such as purity and chastity while navigating the complexities of human desires and emotions. (p. 10). For instance, In Genesis:

*"And when the woman saw that the tree was a good for food,
And that it was pleasant to the eyes,
And a tree to be desired to make one wise,
She took of the fruit thereof, and did eat,
And gave also unto her husband with her.
And he did eat."* (Genesis 3:6)

In "Wise Blood," Flannery O'Connor portrays women in various contexts, often emphasizing their presence as solitary figures or objects of observation rather than fully realized characters with agency and depth. One example of this portrayal is evident in the scene where Hazel and Enoch spy on women swimming in the park's pool. Women as Solitary Figures: O'Connor presents the women in the park's pool as a collective entity rather than as individuals with distinct personalities or agencies. They are observed from a distance by Hazel and Enoch, emphasizing their objectification and the voyeuristic nature of the male gaze.

2) Objectification and Observation

The act of spying on the women swimming reduces them to objects of male observation, reinforcing the idea that they exist primarily for the pleasure or scrutiny of men. This portrayal perpetuates traditional gender dynamics where women are often depicted as passive objects of male desire or scrutiny.

3) Absence of Agency

By portraying the women solely through the lens of male observation, O'Connor diminishes their agency and autonomy, positioning them as passive subjects rather than

active participants in the narrative. Their actions, thoughts, and desires are not explored or developed, further marginalizing their presence in the story. Overall, O'Connor's portrayal of women in the scene at the park's pool reflects broader themes of objectification, voyeurism, and the marginalization of female agency within the patriarchal society depicted in "*Wise Blood*."

"First her face appeared, long and cadaverous, with a bandage-like bathing cap coming down almost to her eyes, and sharp teeth protruding from her mouth. Then she rose on her hands until a large foot and leg came up from behind her and another on the other side and she was out, squatting there, panting. She stood up loosely shook herself, and stamped in the water dripping off her." (*Wise Blood*:50)

4) Representation of Lust and Guilt

O'Connor's portrayal of women sometimes reinforces traditional religious stereotypes that associate women with lust and guilt. Female characters may be depicted as succumbing to temptation or grappling with feelings of guilt and shame, reflecting societal perceptions of women as morally weaker or more susceptible to sin. These stereotypes have historical roots in religious narratives where women are often portrayed as the source of temptation and sin, such as Eve in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. In "*Wise Blood*," Flannery O'Connor continues to depict women in ways that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and societal expectations. Here's an analysis of the portrayal of women in the contexts mentioned in the novel.

5) Mrs. Leora Watts as a Slut

O'Connor presents Mrs. Watts as a character labeled with the highly aggressive term "slut," which carries connotations of promiscuity, shame, and moral degradation. This depiction reinforces societal norms that condemn women for expressing their sexuality while simultaneously glorifying male sexual prowess (p. 8). The use of such derogatory language perpetuates the objectification and dehumanization of women based on their sexual behavior.

6) Sexual Double Standards

The comparison between the derogatory term "slut" applied to Mrs. Watts and the term "stud" often used to describe sexually active men highlights the existence of sexual double standards. While men may be praised or admired for their sexual conquests, women are often stigmatized and shamed for similar behavior. This reflects societal attitudes that police women's sexuality more rigorously than men's and perpetuate harmful gender norms.

7) Sabbath Lily's Temptation of Hazel

Sabbath Lily is depicted as a young girl who tempts Hazel and engages in a sexual relationship with him. Her actions perpetuate stereotypes of women as temptresses who lead men astray from their moral or religious beliefs. Additionally, Sabbath Lily's

troubled childhood and lack of love from her father further reinforce traditional narratives of women seeking validation and love through romantic or sexual relationships.

In general, O'Connor's portrayal of women in *"Wise Blood"* reflects and reinforces societal norms and expectations regarding female sexuality, agency, and behavior. Through characters like Mrs. Watts and Sabbath Lily, she highlights the ways in which women are marginalized, objectified, and judged based on patriarchal standards of morality and virtue.

"Turning over on her stomach, "that nobody cared if it lived or died. Its kin sent it around from one to another of them and finally to its grandmother who was a very evil woman and she couldn't stand to have it around because the least good thing made her break out in these welts. She would get all itching and swell. Even her eyes would itch her and swell up and there wasn't nothing she could do but run up and down the road, shaking her hands and cursing and it was twice as bad when this child was there, so she kept the child locked up in a chicken crates.

It seen its granny in hellfire, swell and burning, and it told her everything it seen and she got so swell until finally she went to the well and wrapped the well rope around her neck and let down the bucket and broke her neck. "Would you guess me to be fifteen years old?"
(Wise Blood:70)

The societal discrepancy in the acceptance and promotion of erotic imagery, particularly of women, can indeed be attributed to commercial interests and the profit motive. When society permits the widespread display of erotic content in various forms such as magazines, wine bottle covers, and other media, it reflects the prioritization of economic gain over moral values (El Saadawi, 1974).

Commercial values and the profit motive often exert significant influence over societal norms and standards. The decision to showcase erotic images of women is driven by the belief that such imagery will attract attention and generate profits. In capitalist societies, where economic interests dominate, businesses exploit sexual imagery as a marketing tool to appeal to consumers and increase sales. The normalization of sexual content, including erotic imagery, in media and advertising contributes to the objectification of women and reinforces gender stereotypes. This normalization is perpetuated by the belief that sexualized representations of women are effective in capturing consumer interest and driving purchasing behavior.

Moreover, within capitalist systems, the legitimization of sexual freedom is often framed as a means of supporting the capitalist economic structure. By promoting sexual freedom for both genders, capitalist societies encourage consumerism and the consumption of goods and services associated with sexuality, thus bolstering the capitalist economy.

In the context of Flannery O'Connor's society, the preference for young women over older women reflects societal norms and expectations regarding attractiveness and desirability. Mrs. Flood's pursuit of a younger man like Hazel Motes can be seen as a

manifestation of her desire to avoid loneliness and conform to societal expectations, even if it means exploiting his vulnerability. This underscores the influence of societal values and commercial interests in shaping interpersonal relationships and individual behavior (p. 68).

*"I ain't treatin' with you," he said and lay back down, coughing.
You got nobody to take care of you but me, she reminded him."*

The philosophical notion that men are attracted to women to purify and redeem them reflects traditional gender roles and societal expectations regarding femininity and masculinity. This perspective divides women into two stereotypical categories: mothers, who are seen as purifying through marriage and motherhood but are perceived as undersexed and unattractive, and courtesans or prostitutes, who are viewed as attractive and sexually desirable but are subjected to insult and abuse. Augustine's justification of men's desire for sex with women as a triumph of the body over the mind echoes the experiences of characters like Hazel Motes, who engages in sexual relationships with women like Mrs. Leora Watts and Sabbath Lily. In this view, sexual desire is framed as a primal urge that overrides intellectual or moral considerations.

The narrator's portrayal of women in "Wise Blood" reflects misogynistic attitudes prevalent in society. Women are depicted as either sexual objects or symbols of sin, reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal norms. Sabbath Lily, portrayed as a "bastard girl," embodies a degrading image associated with illegitimacy and promiscuity. Despite her societal disadvantages, she is depicted as having power over men and is characterized as having "nothing to lose".

Additionally, the reference to the biblical assertion that bastards will not enter heaven further underscores the societal condemnation of women who deviate from traditional norms of chastity and morality. This reinforces the notion that women who engage in sexual behavior outside of marriage are seen as sinful and unworthy of redemption:

"A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 23:2)

Consequently, these portrayals of women in "Wise Blood" reflect deep-seated gender biases and societal expectations regarding female sexuality and morality. Women are often reduced to stereotypical roles or symbols, perpetuating harmful narratives that undermine their agency and dignity (El Saadawi, 1973). For instance, when Enoch depicts his foster mother when he says:

*"This woman was hard to get along with—she
wasn't old, I reckon she was forty-year-old—but she sho was ugly. She had
theseyer brown glasses and her hair was so thin it looked like ham gravy trickling
over her skull" (Wise Blood .29)*

Enoch's depiction of his foster mother as embodying "general ugliness" reflects a misogynistic perspective that objectifies and dehumanizes women based on their physical appearance. This portrayal perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces societal norms that prioritize women's physical attractiveness above all else. By characterizing his foster mother in such a derogatory manner, Enoch reduces her worth to her appearance, disregarding her humanity and internal qualities. This reinforces the notion that women must conform to narrow standards of beauty to be considered valuable or worthy of respect.

Furthermore, Enoch's description of his foster mother as ugly suggests a broader societal attitude that devalues women who do not fit conventional standards of beauty. This perpetuates harmful beauty standards and contributes to the objectification and marginalization of women based on their appearance. Then, Enoch's depiction of his foster mother as "ugly" reflects a deeply ingrained misogyny that pervades society and reinforces harmful stereotypes about women's worth and value. It highlights the need for greater awareness and challenge of these attitudes to promote gender equality and respect for all individuals, regardless of their appearance. The portrayal of abandoned children and police cruelty in *"Wise Blood"* underscores themes of societal neglect and abuse of power.

The depiction of Enoch as an abandoned child, traded off by his father, highlights the pain and trauma associated with abandonment. This narrative thread speaks to the vulnerability of children who are neglected or cast aside by their caregivers, emphasizing the emotional toll of being unwanted or discarded. Similarly, the portrayal of police cruelty towards Hazel reflects systemic injustices and abuses of power within law enforcement. The mistreatment of Hazel by the police officers, including being found in a ditch and having his car pushed towards a hill, illustrates the arbitrary and often brutal exercise of authority over marginalized individuals.

These portrayals serve to critique societal structures that perpetuate neglect and exploitation, particularly towards those who are most vulnerable. They highlight the need for greater empathy and accountability within institutions of power, and call attention to the systemic injustices that continue to impact marginalized communities.

"It's day," the thinner one said, looking at the sky. "We got to take you back to pay your rent."

"I want to go on where I'm going," the blind man said.

"You got to pay your rent first," the policeman said. "Ever' bit of it!"

The other, perceiving that he was conscious, hit him over the head with his new billy. "We don't want to have no trouble with him," he said. "You take his feet."

He died in the squad car, but they didn't notice and took him on to the landlady's. She had them put him on her bed and when she had pushed them out the door, she locked it behind them and drew up a straight chair and sat down close to his face where she could talk to him." (Wise Blood .129)

The portrayal of violence against the elderly in "*Wise Blood*" challenges theological notions and confronts readers with harsh realities (Yaeger, 9). In the novel, the violence against the elderly serves as a stark commentary on societal attitudes towards aging and vulnerability. By depicting instances where older characters face mistreatment or abuse, the narrative sheds light on the harsh realities faced by the elderly, often overlooked or dismissed within theological frameworks.

This portrayal prompts readers to question the discrepancy between theological ideals and the lived experiences of individuals, particularly those who are marginalized or vulnerable. It challenges the notion that theological constructs provide a shield against the harshness of reality, highlighting instead the need for a more nuanced understanding of human suffering and compassion.

By presenting violence against the elderly in a sharp and compelling manner, the narrator forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the human condition and the ways in which societal structures contribute to injustice and neglect. This narrative strategy underscores the novel's broader themes of redemption, morality, and the search for meaning in a flawed world.

"He backed it over the body and then stopped and got out. The Essex stood half over the other Prophet as if it were pleased to guard what it had finally brought down. The man didn't look so much like Haze, lying on the ground on his face without his hat or suit on. A lot of blood was coming out of him and forming a puddle around his head."

(Wise Blood .114)

Flannery O'Connor's exploration of normative beauty ideals in "*Wise Blood*" reveals the societal pressures placed on women to conform to narrow standards of attractiveness. The novel depicts how women, such as Mrs. Leora Watt and Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, are marginalized and stigmatized based on their physical appearance. Mrs. Leora Watt is portrayed as deviant due to her profession as a prostitute, and her physical appearance likely exacerbates this societal judgment. Similarly, Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock's weight and appearance lead to her being disregarded by Hazel, highlighting how fatness is often equated with unattractiveness, laziness, and lack of sexual appeal.

O'Connor's portrayal underscores the pervasive influence of societal norms dictating women's appearance and behavior. Women are expected to adhere to rigid standards of beauty, which are often enforced by men. This perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and marginalization against women who do not fit into these idealized standards. Furthermore, the emphasis on women's physical appearance reflects broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and power dynamics. Women are often objectified and judged based on their appearance, reinforcing patriarchal structures that prioritize male desires and expectations.

Thus, O'Connor's depiction of normative beauty ideals in "*Wise Blood*" serves as a critique of the oppressive standards placed on women and the ways in which these standards perpetuate inequality and discrimination (Royce, 20).

"She was a fat woman with pink collars and cuffs and pear-shaped legs that slanted off the train seat and didn't reach the floor. He looked at her a second and, without answering, leaned forward and stared down the length of the car again. She turned to see what was back there but all she saw was a child peering around one of the sections and, farther up at the end of the car, the porter opening the closet where the sheets were kept." (Wise Blood .9)

The portrayal of smoking women in advertisements in the United States underwent a significant transformation, reflecting underlying societal attitudes towards gender roles and sexism. Initially, cigarette advertisements targeted women by promising them various benefits, including heightened sexuality, independence, and elegance. These ads positioned smoking as a symbol of modernity and sophistication, appealing to women's desires for empowerment and allure. Moreover, in the 1970s, normative advertising suggested that smoking made women more attractive and sexier than non-smokers, further reinforcing the notion that smoking enhanced feminine appeal.

This shift in advertising reflects broader societal attitudes towards gender and sexism. By associating smoking with femininity and attractiveness, these advertisements perpetuated harmful stereotypes about women's roles and behaviors. Smoking was portrayed as a means for women to assert their independence and allure, further reinforcing traditional gender norms and expectations.

Furthermore, these advertisements ignored the serious health risks associated with smoking, prioritizing the image of femininity and attractiveness over women's well-being. This exploitation of gender norms for commercial gain underscores the pervasive nature of sexism in advertising and society as a whole.

Hence, the evolution of cigarette advertisements targeting women reflects the intersection of gender, sexism, and commercial interests. These ads perpetuated harmful stereotypes about women while prioritizing profit over public health, highlighting the need for greater awareness and scrutiny of gender portrayals in advertising (Elkind, 15).

"The steward placed him with three youngish women dressed like parrots. Their hands were resting on the table, red-speared at the tips. He sat down and wiped his hand on the tablecloth. He didn't take off his hat. The women had finished eating and were smoking cigarettes." (Wise Blood:12)

Flannery O'Connor's portrayal of women characters in her novels is deeply intertwined with the cultural expectations of Southern womanhood. These expectations often revolve around a standard of beauty that demands meticulous grooming and adherence to certain physical standards. While these women may appear socially acceptable and well-groomed, O'Connor suggests that this pursuit of beauty can also be seen as a form of violence, perpetuating harmful ideals and expectations (Yaeger, 19).

In addition to societal pressures related to appearance, O'Connor also explores themes of sexism through the lens of conscription and combat. Men throughout history

have often been subjected to social and legal pressures to join the military, sacrificing their lives and psychological well-being in the process. O'Connor highlights the insensitivity of some women who may contribute to the humiliation of men who choose not to volunteer for military service (Benatar, 2012).

Furthermore, cross-cultural representations of nudity and eroticism can also perpetuate sexism by promoting unrealistic beauty standards and objectifying women. The portrayal of women, such as Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe, as sexual objects can lead to their demeaning and mistreatment by men (De Beauvoir, 2010). Additionally, the fashion industry's emphasis on revealing clothing and restrictive footwear can contribute to the objectification of women and reinforce harmful gender norms (The Beauty Myth .135).

Moreover, the depiction of Victoria's Secret models and the company's practices highlight the pervasive culture of misogyny and harassment within the fashion industry. The commodification of women's bodies for profit contributes to the normalization of sex trafficking and exploitation (Notohara, 2003). Thus, O'Connor's exploration of these themes sheds light on the complex intersections of gender, beauty standards, and societal expectations within southern culture and beyond (De Beauvoir, 2010).

"The walls of this room had once been a bright cheerful yellow but now they were more nearly green and were decorated with handwriting and with various detailed drawings of the parts of the body of both men and women." (Wise Blood: 20)

During World War II, women played vital roles in various sectors of society, stepping into positions traditionally held by men as they joined the military, government, and the workforce. Approximately 350,000 women enlisted in the military, serving both at home and abroad. Additionally, women took on responsibilities in scientific and technical fields, filling roles left vacant by men who were deployed for combat. In the community, women also played essential roles in maintaining the home front. They took on responsibilities such as homemaking, rationing, and recycling, ensuring that households continued to function efficiently despite the challenges of wartime shortages. Women were also involved in civil defense efforts, contributing to efforts to protect their communities from potential threats (Weatherford, 2009).

At the end, one can say that in examining these characters through the lens of sexism, one can identify various gender dynamics and stereotypes at play:

- **Hazel Motes.** Hazel's characterization as a symbol of freedom, domination, and independence aligns with traditional masculine ideals of strength and autonomy. His actions and decisions throughout the novel reflect a desire to assert control over his own life and beliefs, which can be seen as a rejection of societal expectations for men to conform to traditional roles and values. However, Hazel's pursuit of freedom and independence may also be interpreted as a form of toxic masculinity, as his defiance often leads to destructive behavior and isolation from others.

- **Sabbath Lily Hawks.** Sabbath Lily's portrayal as a teenage girl who attempts to entice Hazel reinforces traditional gender roles that position women as objects of male desire and seduction. Her actions reflect societal expectations for women to use their sexuality to manipulate and attract men. Despite her realization of her father's deceit, Sabbath Lily's agency is limited by her role as a subordinate to male authority figures. Her attempts to entice Hazel may reflect internalized sexism and the belief that her worth is tied to her ability to attract male attention.
- **Mrs. Flood.** Mrs. Flood's characterization as a foolish and dishonest woman perpetuates negative stereotypes about women's intelligence and integrity. Her actions, such as attempting to deceive Hazel and then kicking him out after his refusal of marriage, reinforce traditional gender roles that depict women as manipulative and conniving. Mrs. Flood's behavior may also reflect societal expectations for widowed women to seek male companionship and financial support, highlighting the limited options available to women outside of traditional marital roles.
- **Mrs. Leora Watts.** As a prostitute, Mrs. Watts is depicted as a symbol of moral decay and depravity. Her character reinforces stereotypes about women's sexuality and moral character, portraying women who engage in sex work as morally corrupt and degraded. Mrs. Watts' portrayal reflects societal attitudes towards women who transgress traditional gender norms and expectations, highlighting the stigmatization and marginalization faced by women who do not conform to societal standards of purity and virtue.

6. Recommendations

Basically, one can investigate more the depiction of these female characters in "Wise Blood" which reflects and reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes, perpetuating societal expectations regarding women's behavior, sexuality, and moral character.

7. Conclusion

This paper effectively summarizes the themes and observations that is made throughout the analysis of Flannery O'Connor's work and its relation to sexism. It provides a comprehensive overview of the various ways in which sexism manifests in society, from the portrayal of women in literature to the cultural norms and expectations that shape perceptions of gender roles. It highlights the complex interplay between societal values, commercial interests, and individual agency, illustrating how these factors contribute to the perpetuation of sexist attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, it effectively draws connections between historical contexts, such as World War II, and the experiences of women during these periods of upheaval and change. In particular, it effectively synthesizes the key points raised in the analysis and offers a thought-provoking reflection on the broader implications of sexism in literature and society. It leaves the reader with

a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play and encourages further reflection on these important issues.

This paper also effectively encapsulates the pervasive nature of sexism and its detrimental effects on individuals and society as a whole. It emphasizes that addressing sexism requires not only recognizing its existence but also actively working to dismantle it. By highlighting various manifestations of sexism, such as societal expectations, advertising, and religious influences, it provides a comprehensive view of its impact on women. The study also delves into the historical roots of sexism, tracing its development through societal structures like feudalism and inheritance laws, as well as its perpetuation through religious doctrines. This historical context adds depth to the analysis and helps to explain how sexism has become ingrained in cultural norms and attitudes. Furthermore, it acknowledges that sexism affects everyone, not just women, and that creating a society free from sexism is essential for the well-being and safety of all individuals. By referencing other authors who have addressed this issue, one can place O'Connor's work in a broader context of feminist literature and activism. Essentially, it effectively reinforces the importance of challenging and dismantling sexism in order to create a more equitable and inclusive society. It leaves the reader with a sense of urgency and a call to action to address this pervasive issue.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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