

**SOUNDBYTE:** "I don't believe in wishful thinking. You know, 'Imagine,' that John Lennon song, it's my least favorite of his songs. And he's the man for me, but it's like I don't believe that imagining is enough." — Bono

## THE SHADOW MAN COMETH: FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S INFLUENCE ON U2'S THE JOSHUA TREE

@U2 September 12, 2017 by Scott Calhoun



Oh, Shadow Man ... you've haunted me all summer long since I saw you there on the stage and screen on The Joshua Tree Tour 2017. Bono created you this year to help him perform "[Exit](#)." You certainly rose to the occasion, Shadow Man, joining the ranks of MacPhisto, Mirror Ball Man and The Fly. Geoff Wilson was so impressed by how you helped U2 deliver the song that he's saying "[Exit' Is The New 'Bullet](#)."

You were the solution to a performance problem. As Bono told Andy Greene of [Rolling Stone](#), he was looking for a way to not hurt himself:

*I had a lot of self-harm over the years playing that song. I was very glad not to play it for many years. I broke my shoulder. I got into some very dark places on the stage. I'd rather not step back into that song, but I found a way by thinking of where it came from and going back to the books I was reading at the time. I realized the real influence was probably Flannery O'Connor, so I developed this character called the Shadow Man and I'm managing to step into the shoes of the Shadow Man without any self-harm.*

Because of you, Shadow Man, I went back to Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) this summer, too. (That's her pictured below.) Bono said he found you in *Wise Blood*, and when I re-read *Wise Blood* I found you there, too. You're right by Hazel Motes, the novel's central character, who's trying his hardest to stop believing in the "hands of love": "Haze's shadow was now behind him and now before him and now and then broken up by other people's shadows, but when it was by itself, stretching behind him, it was a thin nervous shadow walking backwards." You were sometimes following him; sometimes leading him; sometimes you went to pieces; alone, you were retreating from him.



I also re-read "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Everything that Rises Must Converge," "Revelation," "Good Country People," "The Enduring Chill," and more. But this time I read it all with you haunting me, creeping around the trees, giving me eyes to see the two Americas U2 saw then in the 1980s ... and now. And I saw the two realities troubling the modern person O'Connor saw in the 1950s. And yea, I even gained a clearer vision of how well William Blake expressed the *Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* in his *Songs Of Innocence and of Experience* in the late 1700s.

You went "deeper into black, deeper into white." You "could see the stars shine like nails in the night." On stage this summer, you got caught in "the howling wind" with your literary brother Hazel Motes, another "broken-hearted man." Motes took up preaching because his belief was so strong he had to try to preach it away. Ironically, Motes preached to try to silence the pain of his broken heart. In *Wise Blood*, he set up the Church of God Without Christ to try, in the words of "Exit," "to drive the dreams he had away." Motes' great sermon, which Bono's Shadow Man quotes from at the end of his performance of "Exit," says:

*I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth. ... No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach!* Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. (Bono quotes only the last sentence.)

O'Connor's novel includes more of Motes' sermon:

*Where is there a place for you to be? No place. Nothing outside you can give you any place. ... You needn't to look at the sky because it's not going to open up and show no place behind it. You needn't to search for any hole in the ground to look through into somewhere else. You can't go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy's time nor your children's if you have them. In yourself right now is all the place you've got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and your body can they be? Where in your time and your body has Jesus redeemed you? ... Show me where because I don't see the place. If there was a place where Jesus had redeemed you that would be the place for you to be, but which of you can find it? ... Who is that that says it's your conscience? ... Your conscience is a trick ... it don't exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it's no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you.*

Is it true? Is it a lie? Tell me, tell me, tell me the answer, oh Shadow Preacher Man.

I wanted a better appreciation of how O'Connor's art influenced U2's art, and I have Bono's Shadow Man to thank for my wanting that. And what did you do this summer, Shadow Man? Did you build? Did you pull down? You found more Hazel Moteses this summer, didn't you? In Manchester, London, Paris, Levallois-Perret and Barcelona. And in America, outside in America, you went back to Charlottesville.

### American Soul

Bob Dylan encouraged Bono to know where he came from if he wanted to know where he was going. Dylan was talking about being a musician and specifically about Irish folk music to Bono, but the conversation helped Bono realize his need to learn much more about the American roots of rock 'n' roll. That advice came in 1984, when Bono first met Dylan to interview him and Van Morrison for [Hot Press](#).

As U2 explored rock's American roots, Bono and Edge took up reading American authors, too. Bruce Springsteen is often credited with introducing Bono to Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Bono met Bruce in 1981, when Springsteen was already well into reading O'Connor. Many fans consider Springsteen's 1982 album *Nebraska* an homage to O'Connor's storytelling craft, and Springsteen credits O'Connor's influence on him:

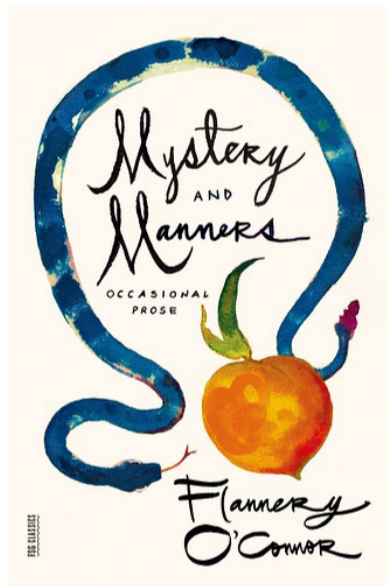
*The really important reading that I did began in my late twenties, with authors like Flannery O'Connor. There was something in those stories of hers that I felt captured a certain part of the American character that I was interested in writing about. They were a big, big revelation. She got to the heart of some part of meanness that she never spelled out, because if she spelled it out you wouldn't be getting it. It was always at the core of every one of her stories — the way that she'd left that hole there, that hole that's inside of everybody.*

This excellent [analysis](#) of what Springsteen took from O'Connor gets at his artistic desire to present America as unsympathetic toward troubled searchers, people who feel out of place, just about out of hope, and physically and existentially exhausted. Since U2 were hungry to learn about America in all ways, it would have been natural for Bono to ask The Boss for reading recommendations and it would have been natural for The Boss to direct Bono's attention to a writer who saw the meanness in the American experience and then captured it on the page.

In 1986, as The Edge tells it in *U2 By U2*, it seems that Bono was able to bring some ideas to the band based on his relatively recent readings in O'Connor: "after The Conspiracy of Hope tour" — a tour of six concerts in the United States for Amnesty International in June — "we were still short of a few songs. We spent a lot of time talking about what [*The Joshua Tree*] was going to be. Bono had been reading Flannery O'Connor and Truman Capote. ... The language of the American writers particularly struck Bono, the kind of imagery and cinematic quality of the American landscape became a stepping-off point."

Bono added to Edge's point about the influence of American writers: "I had this love affair with American literature happening at the same time as I became aware of how dangerous American foreign policy could be in the countries around it, with the brutal crushing of the Sandinistas. I started to see two Americas, the mythic America and the real America."

The Two Americas was Bono's working album title for *The Joshua Tree*. [We know he was reading William Blake](#) at that point, too: U2 recorded the song "Beautiful Ghost/Introduction To Songs Of Experience" during *The Joshua Tree* sessions. These lyrics are a recitation of Blake's "Introduction," the poem that opens his *Songs Of Experience* collection. It's interesting to think how *The Joshua Tree* could very well have been called *The Two Contrary States Of America's Soul* if Bono had borrowed even more from Blake in 1986/7 — and the songs as we know them on the album could stay just as they are under that title. Fortunately, [Anton Corbijn found a Joshua tree](#). Not wanting to let a good idea get away, though, U2's going to bring us the song "American Soul," now 30 years later, on this year's upcoming album *Songs of Experience*.



The American writers had more influence on Bono than Blake did in the mid-'80s, and while Springsteen might have been the first to mention O'Connor to Bono, it seems Bono didn't read much of her work until after he met Steve Turner in 1985. Turner was already an accomplished poet and rock music writer when he met Bono, and would later write many more books and articles on popular music, hymns, art and poetry. He wrote *U2 Rattle & Hum: The Official Book Of The U2 Movie* with Peter (now "Willie") Williams in 1988, and has remained friends with the band to this day. I exchanged emails with Turner this summer and he recounted for me his first meeting with Bono, and how O'Connor came up in their discussion:

*In July 1985, I went to meet up with T Bone [Burnett] at a hotel in London's West End — I think it was called the St. James — and T Bone told me that Bono was coming round to see him. He told Bono about my poetry and gave him a copy of one of my books. We then all went out to lunch at a Soho restaurant. (I had to keep leaving to call my wife to see if our baby was on the way! This was before cell phones.) I don't recall exactly how Flannery O'Connor came up. I think we were discussing Christianity and the arts and I mentioned Mystery and Manners, which he was really interested in. I'm fairly certain that Bono had not yet read O'Connor because he was anxious to buy some of her work. After lunch we went to Foyles on Charing Cross Road, which was nearby, and he bought two or three of her books. He was in town because of Live Aid and wasn't as well known then — all he needed to do to disguise himself was to put on a small peaked cap! He was really keen for me to keep in touch and advise him on recommended reading matter. I sent him the book Red Hill: A Mining Community by Tony Parker after he asked me to find stuff on the British miners' strike for a song he was working on. For some years later I did this service on a more formal basis for about a decade.*

Presumably, after buying some books with Turner in 1985, spending a good year or so reading O'Connor and other American authors, then facing the prospect of needing a few more songs for the album in 1986, Bono was able to draw those songs up from a well of new inspiration. Bono would come to say about his first encounters with O'Connor's fiction, "I've never felt such sympathy with a writer in America before."

### Meanness And Sympathy

I think Bono was responding to O'Connor's ability to portray both the great violence of life and the great gentleness of life. Bono was already attuned to the contrary states of his own soul, so he could see more clearly the contradiction between the dream and the reality of the American experiment. The ideas informing O'Connor's presentation of violence and gentleness — or, if you will, grace — have to do with her Christian faith. Her integrity as an artist, which was also informed by her faith, prompted her to portray the human condition with honesty, which is something else Bono was attuned to. I think the sympathy he felt for O'Connor was full-bodied, from the head and the heart. On *The Joshua Tree* it came out most directly in two songs: "One Tree Hill" and "Exit."

These two songs are side by side on *The Joshua Tree*, on the album's b-side or "Part II," and create an incrementally darker mood for the album's final track, "Mothers Of The Disappeared." In July 1986, a month after The Conspiracy of Hope tour, U2 were back at work to write more songs to complete the album. Greg Carroll, the band's friend and one of their assistants, died in a motorcycle accident. The whole band took it hard; Bono shared in *U2 By U2* that, for him, "the problem with dealing with death, for me, is that it's always the same death. It's always my mother dying, it's always the center of the universe disappearing and having to find another one." In grief, the band finished and dedicated "One Tree Hill" to Carroll, with Bono referencing in the lyric's first line O'Connor's short story, "[The Enduring Chill](#)":

*We turn away to face the cold, enduring chill  
As the day begs the night for mercy.*

I hear an emotional echo in these first lines to the "I can't believe the news today / I can't close my eyes and make it go away" of "Sunday Bloody Sunday." Both songs are about wrestling with the reality of life cut short by inexplicable violence and our wanting a merciful release from today's news. Both songs are about death and how it forces us to look both inward and forward.

O'Connor's story is about the artist Asbury, who comes home from New York City to the American South. He falls ill and he thinks he is dying. Asbury feels the effects of what he thinks is his oncoming death and is increasingly irritable. There's an indication he has always been challenging to live with, perhaps because he's been so full of artistic energy, but now his mother, emotionally obtuse, struggles to show him sympathy because he is both an artist and her (possibly) dying son. O'Connor writes of Asbury's arrival back home:

*The sky was a chill gray and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods that surrounded Timberboro. It cast a strange light over the single block of one-story brick and wooden shacks. Asbury felt that he was about to witness a majestic transformation, that the flat of the roofs might at any moment turn into the mounting turrets of some exotic temple of a god he didn't know. The illusion lasted only a moment before his attention was drawn back to his mother. She had given a little cry; she looked aghast. He was pleased that she should see death in his face at once. His mother, at the age of sixty, was going to be introduced to reality and he supposed that if the experience didn't kill her, it would assist her in the process of growing up.*

As Asbury grows increasingly ill, the story presents more and more of his awakening consciousness juxtaposed with the confusion of those around him who are living and don't understand either his final requests or the reality of their own lives. O'Connor presents death as an oncoming chill, then finishes her story in an evocative, mystical fashion with Asbury sick in his childhood bed:

*He turned his head. ... He shuddered and turned his head quickly the other way and stared out the window. A blinding red-gold sun moved serenely from under a purple cloud. ... His limbs that had been racked for so many weeks by fever and chill were numb now. The old life was exhausted. He awaited the coming of new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. ... He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend.*

This point about Asbury going through "a purifying terror" reflects O'Connor's understanding that God will bring someone through the most tragic experiences and use the pain to birth peace. While O'Connor is often described as a Southern Gothic writer and master of the form of the modern grotesque, it's imperative to read closely the endings of her stories so as not to miss how the dark humor and violence in her plots leads to the transformation of one or more of her characters into more peaceful people finding spiritual healing. That's not to say her endings are "happy," or all of the characters are redeemed, or even that any in-process redemption in the last paragraph of the story is completed on the page.

After readers had spent time with her 1953 short story, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," her most famous and most famously disturbing story, many of them demanded that O'Connor explain her interest in writing about a family dying at the hands of The Misfit, a serial killer escaped from prison. In the early 1960s, the story was being read in college classes, and a student wrote her asking "just what enlightenment [O'Connor] expected her to get from each of my stories." After telling her reader "to forget about enlightenment and just try to enjoy them," O'Connor acquiesced by explaining some of her aesthetic and logic in an essay called "A Reasonable Use Of The Unreasonable," which was published posthumously in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. This is the book Turner brought to Bono's attention over lunch in 1985: "I mentioned *Mystery and Manners*, which he was really interested in."

Although *Wise Blood*, her first of two novels, was published in 1952, before her short stories, and also has a violent ending with the indication of redemption, it became obvious to readers after a decade of exposure to O'Connor's art that she has a deep interest in presenting violence as a part of real, everyday life. In "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," her response to readers about "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," she expressed her artistic modus operandi this way:

*I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found 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. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. ... With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially, and I believe these are times when writers are more interested in what we are essentially than in the tenor of our daily lives. Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven. ... 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 ... and since the characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of what they take with them. ... In any case, I hope that if you consider these points in connection with the story, you will come to see it as something more than an account of a family murdered on the way to Florida.*

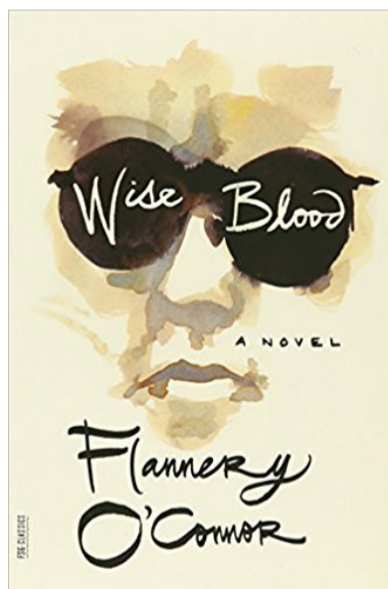
I'm thinking of Bono, in 1985, starting to read O'Connor's fiction more closely and also reading her talk about the "serious writer's" interest in violence in *Mystery and Manners*. I'm also thinking of Bono reading other American writers at that time, such as Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, who captured violence in their nonfiction accounts of troubled American killers. Tassoula Kokkoris wrote about Bono being "[Under The Influence of The Executioner's Song](#)," as U2 composed "Exit," and in O'Connor's Hazel Motes we find a similar meanness and violence in fictional form, expressed with rich symbolism and imagery throughout *Wise Blood*. Because it is fiction, however, in O'Connor's novel she was able to tell a story more in keeping with her desire to present violence as a force for redemption.

Bono said in *U2 by U2* that as he wrote for *The Joshua Tree*, he felt he had not written "real" lyrics for U2's previous albums. After spending a few weeks in July 1986 touring Nicaragua and El Salvador with aid workers, seeing firsthand the effects of U.S. foreign policy and economic support, he returned to Dublin angry at the United States:

*That is when I started to realize that the lyrics on the first four albums were not really lyrics at all, they're sketches. I wasn't a writer, really, I was a painter, or an emoter or a shouter. ... With Joshua Tree, I decided I'd better write some lyrics. I was reading more anyway, so I was more awake to the word. I discovered a love for writers and started to feel like one of them.*

Bono's vision of the two Americas was becoming clearer and clearer during the sessions for finishing *The Joshua Tree*. Just this summer of 2017, in U2's [interview with Zane Lowe for Beats 1 Radio](#), Bono described the contrariness of America: "America is a taciturn place ... it can turn on itself." It's a choice of words I think O'Connor herself would have used about America, and especially about the people she depicted as the spiritually troubled searchers walking the American South. Taciturn: reluctant to join in conversation; inclined to silence; dour; stern. The paradox wouldn't have been lost on O'Connor, as it's not lost on Bono: The competing voices in a robust democratic society such as America can, when fear starts to spread, take on a rigidity and prevent actual conversation with one another. A sternness sets in. A kind of silence takes over where no one else is heard, bringing to my mind the lyrics "There is a silence that comes to a house where no one can sleep" from "Ultraviolet," along with "it's not the noise / it's the deafening silence / that drowns God out" from "All Because Of You."

### 'In This Heartland'



Hazel Motes becomes fixated on silencing what he finds too troubling to hear. He becomes a taciturn man, trying to drown out the voices that talk of God. There are no lyrics in "Exit" or any of the album's other songs that are direct references to *Wise Blood*. We only have Bono telling us he was reading O'Connor when writing the album's songs, and that now, in 2017, he developed the Shadow Man for performing "Exit" because for that song, "the real influence was probably Flannery O'Connor." Rather than hazard a summary of *Wise Blood's* plot here, I think a better way to appreciate its influence on *The Joshua Tree* is to read the novel, then listen to the album to see if you don't hear from U2 the feelings O'Connor gave to Hazel Motes. I think you'll hear the aesthetic influence from novel to album, from writer to writer.

In both works of art, there's a creeping approach of the darkness and meanness one can get wrapped in after having searched and searched only to feel even further away from hope, peace and love than ever before. *The Joshua Tree* opens with strong evocations of hope in the search, but by the fourth song, "Bullet The Blue Sky," we hear in Bono's righteous anger that the soul is gaining some experience and has the capacity for anger. And it is the experience of anger that makes the Shadow Man cometh. Seeing an open door, he comes from the desert to lurk in and out of focus as the album's tracks continue. Sensing there is also despair, grief and longing in the soul, the Shadow Man draws enough strength from all these feelings that by "Exit," he has grown large enough to eclipse the innocence of the soul. What's left during this temporary blackout is the contrary state of the soul, the one that wants violence.

O'Connor has suggested that violence is a tool that can be used by the kingdom of heaven, and one's oncoming death reveals what you'll take into eternity. After the violence in the next-to-last chapter of *Wise Blood*, what's left for Hazel Motes? I hope you'll read the novel to find out. And then, after finishing the book, I hope you'll watch John Huston's 1979 film adaptation, *Wise Blood*, and enjoy the similarities and differences.

After the violence of the Shadow Man, what's left after he's made his "Exit" on *The Joshua Tree*? I hear in the "Mothers Of The Disappeared" the soul in mourning. Having known now both innocence and experience, and as the darkness starts to bleed daylight, Bono gives voice to the soul as it tries to grasp the violence it has experienced. It grieves. It wails. Bono expresses its pain and suggests that in its mourning it can find comfort, because the soul that mourns is a soul that feels; and in its feeling is a sign of life and hope and readiness for grace. As Bono wrote on *Songs Of Innocence*, in feeling "no end to grief" the soul knows there's "no end to love" ("California"), and in grief the heart is more able to receive grace:

*A heart that is broken  
Is a heart that is open. ("Cedarwood Road")*

O'Connor's influence on Bono's development as an artist seems noticeably strong during *The Joshua Tree–Rattle And Hum* period. I hear Bono striving to articulate darker themes of the human experience, not just in “One Tree Hill” and “Exit,” but also in “Desire” and “Hawkmoon 269,” and more stridently in “God Part II” and in U2's decision to cover the Beatles' “Helter Skelter.” Acting out the more troubling elements of human nature on stage became something of performance calling card for Bono in the 1990s, and though we saw much less play-acting of disturbed characters in the 2000s, plenty of U2's songs continued to articulate the frustration of living with two contrary states of the soul, right up to “The Troubles,” the closing track of *Songs Of Innocence*:

*Somebody stepped inside your soul*  
*Somebody stepped inside your soul*  
*Little by little they robbed and stole*  
*Till somebody else was in control*

### Back To Blake

Bono is fond of quoting another American writer, Sam Shepherd, to explain why he often finds himself between two opposing states: “Right smack in the middle of a contradiction, that's the place to be.” Bono adds, “There are more contradictions in rock-and-roll than in any other art form and I think that's good.” Back in 1790, William Blake wrote in the opening of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil.” I imagine Bono's read that bit by Blake, too.

The American Southern Gothic writer O'Connor and the English Romantic Blake might not seem to be complementary artists at first, but upon digging into both, it's not long before their common interest in the split soul appears — and it's no wonder these two authors have a special resonance for Bono. If in a fit of megalomaniacal art criticism, I might say Bono has been trying to articulate the contrary states of the soul since U2's Day One, and in the mid-'80s O'Connor gave Bono an artistic conviction and an example to follow. I would think Bono felt empowered with more poetic license to present violence, with honesty and integrity, as a tool for redemption.

Oh Shadow Man: You came off the page for Bono once and then, most helpfully in 2017, you came again for Bono and for us. You helped us receive The Joshua Tree Tour 2017 and, with your blackness, you took us back to Blake, right back into the contrary states of the soul to prepare the way for U2's *Songs Of Experience*. As Bono told Jon Pareles of [The New York Times](#):

*The core of Experience is — and this is cheeky! — ‘I can change the world, but I can't change the world in me.’ And so you realize that the biggest obstacle in the way is yourself. There are things to rail against, and there are things that deserve your rage, and you must plot and conspire to overthrow them. But the most wily and fearsome of your enemies is going to turn out to be yourself. And that's experience.*

There might not be any lyrics directly referencing O'Connor on U2's next album, but it's no secret at all that Bono will sing again of the violence that dims our lives, that occasionally eclipses the sun, and that sometimes puts our world in darkness tonight. We'll have new songs cast in the valley of the Shadow Man and U2 will help us sing our way to where we fear no evil.

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