

That eye, the sky



Tim Winton's *that eye, the sky* (1986) uses first person narrative techniques, symbolism, imagery and characterisation to create the persona of Morton Flack, the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Winton uses Ort's narration to give the reader insights into the Flack family, the relationships they have and the issues that they face. As Winton develops Ort's narration the reader is supplied with many symbolic images. The most important symbol and imagery in the novel is the sky.

Prior to Henry Warburton entering the life of Ort and educating him about God and religion, Ort sees the sky as an eye which looks over the world and sees everything. Throughout the novel the eye imagery signifies the spirituality and mysticism between Ort and Henry. This essay will analyse how Winton uses the eye imagery to reveal the differences between the two characters by examining Ort's unyielding faith in a higher force and Henry Warburton's ever changing relationship with God.

This paper will also compare the dispositions of both Ort and Henry. To describe the character of Ort and his journey throughout the novel, one may look to both vision/imagination and spirituality. Ort appears to be a very imaginative child who lacks knowledge and education. This is demonstrated in the book through the colloquial language of the text with phrases such as 'Geez, yeah' and 'Yer just a kid' (p 35 & 36). Ort has visions of an eye in the sky, jewels appearing in the flour jar and bells ringing in the forest.

At night Ort sees rabbits' eyes around the fence line and a mysterious light above the house (Matthew, 1986, p 83), although Winton describes the light as "a little cloud small and fat like a woolly sheep" (p 51). Nobody else can see these visions. Most of the time Ort keeps these images to himself. Sam

and Alice Flack chose to move to the country after getting married so that they can live amongst the trees. The countryside is another strong image in the book which symbolises the true nature of the Flack family and the reason for the natural connection Ort has with the environment (p 62).

When Ort identifies the sky as a symbol of God, he is happy to believe that something is watching over his family and protecting them. The novel ends on Easter morning, signifying the resurrection of Christ, but also the rebirth of nature and Sam Flack's possible return to conscious life. It is because of Ort's love for his family and relentless faith in God this miracle has occurred (p 150). Ort is pure and therefore has a natural connection with God, and Winton utilises the eye imagery to connect this with Ort.

A glimpse into Henry Warburton's character may be found in the incident where he almost became blind but by some fortune he was miraculously healed. That is when Henry first came a believer in God. After this incident Henry stole a bible and became a Christian (p 92). As explained by Watson, a Christian is a person who believes in and follows the teachings of Jesus Christ (2000, p 8). Henry preaches only what he has read from the bible, quite like most institutionalised religions.

Henry has never had any visions or powerful sense of spirituality. Henry's sincerity as he ministers to the Flack family, providing spiritual and practical teaching, is evident, but he is always tormented by his past sins (p 141). Henry believes that his sins have harmed his relationship with God (Watson, 200, p 44), and at times Henry attempts to hide from him, "I hide and you see. I run and you follow" (p 83). Henry seems to have an ambivalent relationship with God.

The reason Henry mysteriously arrived at the Flack household was to try and heal Sam. Henry believed that if he provided this selfless act he would be healed and God would give him the ability to truly love (p 141). Henry is a very hypocritical character who tries to give Ort spiritual meaning, yet is still searching for meaning himself. Everything about Henry seems to be artificial just like his false eye. There are conflicting characteristics between Ort and Henry. Henry's false eye emphasises Henry as a flawed messenger.

He mimics the words of God, just as his eye mimics the eye in the sky, the true eye (p 133). In comparison Ort has a very natural spirituality and is kind hearted, which leads him to be able to see visions. Ort loves his family so much that he has a habit of peeping through windows, cracks and holes in the walls. In Ort's mind he is just "Checking on people" (p 24), just like God is like the sky and can see all and hear all, Ort does not know why it will make a difference if a person's son or brother sees them as well (p 24).

Henry only watches people for his own gratification, for example when he crept around watching the Flack family for weeks and Tegwynswimming in the "nick" (p 140). The light that Ort envisages throughout this novel represents religion. Although Henry knows all about religion, he does not really practise what he preaches and consequently cannot see the light (p 91). At the end of the novel when Henry and Tegwyn depart and Grammar dies, there are only three people left in the family (p 150), symbolic of the Holy Trinity.

This essay has analysed the significance of the eye imagery in Winton's novel and how the two characters perceive the eye of God and religion. The major revelation in Ort's spiritual growth is his recognition of Henry

Warburton's false identity. Ort has grown and learnt enough about religion and life through Henry Warburton's stories and actions to identify what is right and what is wrong. Although Henry's preaching was honest and true, Ort saw that Henry was far from the image he portrayed himself to be.

Winton demonstrates through the eye imagery that Henry is more like the orthodox harshness practised by much of the institutionalised religion. In contrast, Winton seems to support the more personalised connectedness between individuals and God which is revealed by Ort. Winton is critically revealing the idea that it is important to trust one's own faith within the Lord, rather than human leaders of religion because, just like Henry, they too can be deceptive and give a flawed interpretation of God's messages to their followers.