

## ABSTRACT

Frank O'Connor's "World of Appearances":  
Epiphany and False Personality in His Stories of Childhood

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This study illuminates the influence of two vastly different short story writers on the work of Frank O'Connor: James Joyce and Anton Chekhov. O'Connor vowed never to imitate the Russian master, and yet Chekhov's theme of false personality is present in many O'Connor's stories involving young children. And while critical attention given to the Joyce-O'Connor connection focuses primarily on O'Connor's disagreements with Joyce over the aesthetic function of literature; the present study analyzes how O'Connor employs Joyce's notion of epiphany to bring his child narrators to a moment of discovery about themselves or the world around them. Lastly, this analysis employs O'Connor's phrase, "the world of appearances" to describe the deceitful nature of the world that his child protagonists inhabit. O'Connor emerges from this intertextual close reading in a new light—as the writer of complex, unsentimental, and thoroughly believable stories about children of all ages.

Frank O'Connor's "World of Appearances":  
Epiphany and False Personality in His Stories of Childhood

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the English Department

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
CHAPTERS	
1. Introduction	1
2. In Light of Eternity: The Larry Delaney Stories	16
3. Mother, Father, and the Outcast: Frank O'Connor's Other Stories of Childhood	44
NOTES	68
WORKS CITED	71

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AOC* Frank O'Connor, *An Only Child and My Father's Son* (introd. Declan Kiberd), London: Penguin, 2005.
- BFC* Frank O'Connor, *The Best of Frank O'Connor* (ed. Julian Barnes), Germany: Knopf, 2009.
- CS* Frank O'Connor, *Collected Stories* (introd. Richard Ellmann), New York: Knopf, 1981.
- FCR* Frank O'Connor, *A Frank O'Connor Reader* (ed. Michael Steinman), Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1994.
- FCW* Michael Steinman, *Frank O'Connor at Work*, Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would also like thank Drs. Luke Ferretter and Mike Stegemoller for agreeing to be a part of my committee. I am deeply grateful for the time and feedback they gave to my thesis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Frank O'Connor's near neighbor in the alphabetical ordering of storytellers, Flannery O'Connor, the great writer of the American South, once wrote that "anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days" (84). This is a true enough statement for any writer, but one that applies particularly well to the stories of Frank O'Connor, for time and again he draws on his own experiences as a child to give texture to the fictional world his young protagonists inhabit. Dan Shen's recent formulation of the "overall-extended close reading" will be the broad framework under which my study of O'Connor's juvenile stories is conducted. In Shen's re-evaluation of the traditional "close reading" format,<sup>1</sup> the critic takes into account not only a "overall" examination of the "local elements" of a text in relation to their "global function," but also "extends" the reading by combining "intrinsic criticism" with "extrinsic criticism," taking into account the socio-historical contexts involved, while paying attention to "intertextual relations" between the primary text and related ones (150). Using this framework, I will attempt to trace the influence of Joyce's notion of the "epiphany" and Chekhov's perennial theme of "false personality" in a selection of O'Connor's juvenile stories.

A multilayered close reading of four stories involving young Larry Delaney—"The Man of the World" (1956), "My Oedipus Complex" (1950), "The Genius" (1955), and "The Study of History" (1956)<sup>2</sup>—and four stories involving several other child protagonists—"The Man of the House" (1949), "The Pretender" (1950), "Masculine

Protest” (1952), and “The Face of Evil” (1954)— reveals O’Connor to be a writer of truly adult-like children’s stories. His young characters find themselves pondering questions about the vanity of human desire and ambition in the face of eternity. Additionally, O’Connor’s protagonists are not entirely innocent but are beset by the complexities of self-deceit. For all the humor and lightheartedness that make his children’s stories imminently readable, this study will show that the clear-sighted realism that is a consistent trademark of O’Connor’s short stories touches even the wild imaginations of his juvenile characters. In his fictional world, a child’s relentless inquisitiveness becomes the forerunner to the lonely voice that identifies the plight of O’Connor’s more mature characters.

One of the many experiences that the short story seems particularly adept at capturing is the inbreaking of an epiphany, as Charles May writes: “the short story, by its very shortness, cannot deal with the denseness of detail and the duration of time typical of the novel, but rather *focuses on a revelatory break-up of the rhythm of everyday reality*” (200; emphasis mine). While many writers might disagree with May, arguing that the short story can be harnessed to encompass more of life than just one revelatory moment, I believe O’Connor would agree with May’s assessment. O’Connor viewed the short story as a medium primarily suited to relating an *event* to the reader, to telling the reader that, in this short amount of space and time, something happened.<sup>3</sup> Unlike his formidable predecessors in the genre, Anton Chekhov—who could write a story based entirely on mood and atmosphere—and James Joyce—who, while paying attention to the actions of his characters, was concerned also with the aesthetics of the story’s narrative—O’Connor believed simply that a good short story springs from a promising theme. One



of his former students has related that O'Connor "virtually defined a theme as an incident in which the people involved become basically changed" (qtd. in Ingman 32). I intend to show how epiphanies act as that agent of change in many of his stories involving children.

When it comes to the sheer number of quality short story writers, Ireland finds itself with an embarrassment of riches. What is it about Ireland that brings forth so many talented storytellers? Terence Brown offers one possible reason in "Provincialism and Censorship 1930-65." Echoing Charles May's argument above, Brown suggests that it might be the Irish practitioners' ability to endow the form with a lyric and potentially transcendental purpose:

So the characteristic Irish short story deals in an oppressive, authoritarian environment, where law, politics and the iron regimen of economic life determine existence. The tale itself achieves a moment of lyric definition, an epiphany, in which protagonist, narrator, author and reader all share, as if momentarily transcending the bleak condition of life to which the story itself is attentive. (3: 93)

Brown's characterization is accurate as it pinpoints the modern Irish short story's ability to capture moments of "lyric definition," of "transcendence," and "epiphany" in the midst of a "bleak" twentieth century.

It is generally accepted that George Moore and his landmark collection of stories *The Untilled Field* (1903), with its biting realistic portrayal of the thwarted desires and the continual frustrations the Irish people face on a daily basis is the cornerstone upon which the modern Irish short story is built. After George Moore, the next significant step in the development of the form arrived with Joyce and *Dubliners* (1914). With this collection, Joyce believed, in an oft quoted line, that "in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way that I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the

spiritual liberation of my country” (qtd. in Ellmann 88). But while the stories may pinpoint a certain moral paralysis in the urban Irish soul, the collection itself achieved a kind of artistic liberation that gave the Irish short story a universal appeal above and beyond the local knowledge of Moore’s tales, as Ben Forkner notes in his considerable introduction to the Irish short story in the twentieth century: “If Moore’s stories in *The Untilled Field* were the first to adapt the methods of literary realism to specific Irish themes, Joyce’s *Dubliners* gave the Irish short story a standard of artistic perfection that went far beyond national boundaries” (31).

For the purposes of this introduction and this study, I will pass over some of the other noteworthy short story practitioners of Moore and Joyce’s generation, and proceed onto the 1930s and Frank O’Connor, who, along with Liam O’Flaherty, Sean O’Faolain, and Elizabeth Bowen, make up in Forkner’s estimation, the “golden age of the modern Irish story” (36). Although this “second” generation appreciated and honored Joyce as the premier Irish writer of the time, for the most part, they harkened back to Moore thematically and in their choice of subjects, taking particular interest in the “individual little man” of rural Ireland and his particularly Irish problems (36). (I discuss the “little man” theme in more depth below.)

Forkner is not alone in giving special place and distinction to O’Connor’s generation or to O’Connor individually; indeed, it was O’Faolain himself (who maintained a lifelong friendship with O’Connor, albeit a sometimes combative one) who stated O’Connor was “the finest craftsmen in the art of the short story Ireland has produced” (313). In addition to his contemporaries, Irish writers of the present day continue to laud his talent while attempting to escape his imposing shadow on the short

story form. For instance, Anthony Roche observes that Brian Friel, the preeminent Irish playwright of the last forty years, abandoned the short story form in the 1960s in part because of the growing realization that his stories would never surpass the mastery of O'Connor's or O'Faolain's (2). Two of the great contemporary short story writers, Anne Enright and William Trevor, in introductions to respective Irish short story anthologies, also pay homage to O'Connor's influence. O'Connor is one of only three writers in Trevor's edition (*The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*) to have two stories included in the collection, while Enright cannot seem to shake the spirit of O'Connor in her introduction to *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*. Whether praising him as "the great Irish short story writer" or attacking him for his "vile" criticisms of the Irish people, O'Connor engages Enright's attention for wholly six of the ten pages she gives to introducing her chosen stories (x-xvi). If one is tempted to dismiss the remark made by O'Connor's friend and dramatist, Jim McKeon, that he "was probably the most accomplished short story writer of all time" (32) as biased and too lofty, one does have to seriously consider the merit of Yeats' less universal but more exacting estimation of O'Connor when he stated that O'Connor did for Ireland what Chekhov did for Russia (qtd. in Whittier). The slightest sketch of O'Connor's life reveals the experiences and influences that enabled him to write so realistically and truthfully about Ireland.

Frank O'Connor was born Michael O'Donovan to Mick and Minnie O'Donovan in Cork in 1903. Despite a childhood spent in poverty, O'Connor's artistic imagination was fostered to a great extent when he came under the tutelage of another important short story writer of the time, Daniel Corkery, while attending St. Peter's National School. Corkery's influence on O'Connor cannot be underestimated, for he introduced him to the

work of the Russian writers—Turgenev, Gogol, Chekhov, Leskov, Gorky, and Babel—who would be the formative figures as he developed his short story aesthetic. When the Civil War broke out in 1922, O'Connor signed up to fight as an anti-Treatyite. After his capture by the Free State forces, O'Connor spent most of 1923 in an Internment camp. After his release, O'Connor spent the rest of the 1920s working as a high school teacher and a librarian; during this period, he began a friendship with George Russell (A.E.) and made the acquaintance of Joyce in Paris in 1927. The 1930s brought O'Connor his first success as a writer with the publication of his first volume of stories, *Guests of the Nation* (1931). At this time he began working in the Irish drama scene; he met W.B. Yeats in 1932 and was appointed Managing Director of the Abbey Theater in 1937.

The 1940s saw O'Connor resign his position at the Abbey Theater to focus on his writing full time, a decision that resulted in the publication of several collections of stories: *Three Tales* (1941), *Crab Apple Jelly* (1944), *Selected Stories* (1945), and *The Common Chord* (1946).<sup>4</sup> During the 1950s, O'Connor devoted most of his time to lecturing at American Universities, teaching courses on literature at Harvard, Northwestern, and Stanford. O'Connor moved back to Ireland in 1961 (following a stroke he suffered while teaching at Stanford) and published the first part of his autobiography, *An Only Son*, in that same year (the second part, *My Father's Son*, was published posthumously in 1968). The next year O'Connor published his influential study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*. He spent his final years in Dublin, lecturing occasionally at Trinity College, and he died on 10 March 1966.

Despite his clear importance to short story writers in Ireland and elsewhere, from a critical standpoint, O'Connor still remains a niche figure in Irish letters. Scholarly

discussion of his stories is kept alive by a small group of Irish and American critics who seek to reveal the hidden depths underneath O'Connor's calm, realistic surface.<sup>5</sup>

Looking back on his literary output, O'Connor once wrote, "Where Synge and Yeats have their presences, I only have my voices" (qtd. in Matthews 56). And here I am only concerned with two types of voices in O'Connor's work: the lonely voice and the child's voice. The former cannot be ignored in any discussion about O'Connor, as it is the central thrust of his now famous and still respected theory of the short story. In his introduction to his critical study of the genre, O'Connor intuited that the short story is generally concerned with "submerged population groups" made up of "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (*LV* 17-18). He traces these kinds of figures throughout the stories of the writers he admires—"Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials" (17)—and populates his stories with Irish equivalents—spoiled priests, peasants, provincial teachers, drunkards, orphans, storytellers, to name a few. At first glance, one might correctly assume that the subjects of this present study, children, do not belong to these "submerged population" groups, but a peculiar characteristic of the children found in O'Connor's stories is defined when one follows his "lonely voice" theory to the very end: "As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness" (19). Now one does not often equate children with a sense of "loneliness," but O'Connor's child protagonists are not average children. They are, in the words of Kate Murphy, "a form of the normal man" (314). These young characters retain the wild

imagination of youth while yearning, stretching for an adult sensibility—with all the frustrated desires and sins that accompany adulthood.

Original sin is in the background of O'Connor's inherently Catholic, moral worldview, but, more important, where my study is concerned, so are Chekhov's "venial sins," a concept worked out by O'Connor in his chapter on him in *The Lonely Voice*. In summing up the "message" of Chekhov's lengthy short story, "The Duel," O'Connor wrote:

We are not damned for our mortal sins, which so often require courage and dignity, but by our venial sins, which we can more easily conceal from ourselves and commit a hundred times a day till we become as enslaved to them as we could be to alcohol and drugs. Because of them and our facile toleration of them we create a false personality for ourselves—a personality predicated on mortal sins we have refrained from committing, ignoring altogether our real personality which is created about the small, unrecognized sins of selfishness, bad temper, untruthfulness and disloyalty. (*LV* 86)

O'Connor discerns this theme of false personality at work in the lives of many of Chekhov's characters. The most fault-worthy offender is the protagonist in "The Duel," Laevsky, a listless parasite who lives by feeding off of the cultured lives of his neighbors.

In the story, Laevsky decides to leave Nadezhda Fyodorovna, the married woman he is living with, simply because he has come to despise her. However, at a crucial moment in the story, Laevsky realizes that the condition of his moral slavery is such that one lie—the lie he will fabricate which will require him to rush back to the city, leaving Nadezhda behind—is not enough, as each petty lie inevitably gives way to the next (89):

In fact, in order to get away he would have to lie to Nadezhda Fyodorovna, his creditors, his superiors; then, in order to get money in Petersburg, he would have to lie to his mother. . . . Then, when Nadezhda Fyododrovna came to Petersburg, he would have to resort to a whole series of small and large deceptions in order to break with her. . . . A whole mountain of lies grew in Laevsky's imagination. (Chekhov 74-75)

Thus, Laevsky's false personality—constructed from an amoral lifestyle filled with small deceits—is a labyrinth of his own making and one from which he cannot escape.

In his foundational essay on the Russian master, “Anton Tchekhov: Creation from the Void,” Leon Shestov intuited a certain despairing hopelessness that descended on most (if not all) of Chekhov's characters; indeed he calls him “the poet of hoplessness” in whose tragic hands, “nothing escapes death” (4, 7). But however accurate Shestov's labeling of the prevailing mood in Chekhov is, it is still a categorization, and Chekhov is too slippery an artist to be constrained by such categories at every turn. This is why Shestov does not know what to do with the end of “The Duel.” In the conclusion, Laevsky lies awake through a night of small revelations which bring him face to face with the “mountain of deceit” he has been living under. The night before his rashly-vowed duel with Von Koren, Laevsky determines to be a changed man if he comes home from the duel alive. He survives the duel and keeps his promise. He marries Nadezhda Fyodorovna (whose former husband has died in the course of the story) and devotes himself to a quiet life of transcribing documents by the seashore. Shestov believes that in the quick transformation of Laevsky's character, Chekhov gave up the heaviness of the lies and deceit that came before too easily; he has resorted to a “commonplace, happy ending for this terrible story” (46). Even O'Connor, in his reading of the story, believes Chekhov is “faking the psychology” of Laevsky's transformation (*LV* 90). But this may be a case of O'Connor and Shestov believing too strongly in the accuracy of their insights that Chekhov is a “poet of hopelessness” who pinpoints the “venial sins” in the lives of his characters with heartless exactitude. Is it too much to ask of Chekhov, the doctor in real life, to diagnose the disease continually without ever hinting at a cure? When one

remembers that Chekhov once wrote in a letter, “I hate lies and violence in all their forms” (Pevear xiii), it does not seem to be too much of a stretch to suggest that Chekhov did not always wish to leave his characters enslaved to their false personality, but allowed them, on occasion, some freedom from their “venial sins.”

False personality, then, as a *theme*, is one strand of the core premise of the following two chapters: what O’Connor intuited in the lives of Chekhov’s Russian aristocracy was a universal fault in humans, and, therefore, a fault that with only a slight change in scenery and dialect could be found manifesting itself in the lives of O’Connor’s child protagonists. However, I do not presume to suggest that “false personality” is a mere surface level trick or technique that is passed easily from Chekhov to O’Connor; I am aware of O’Connor’s hidden rebuke in his reply to a question put to him concerning what he thought of Yeats’s aforementioned comparison of him with Chekhov: “Oh, naturally I admire Chekhov extravagantly, I think every short-story writer does. He’s inimitable, a person to read and admire and worship—but never, never, never to imitate” (qtd. in Whittier). Also, I am aware of the age difference between Chekhov’s adults and O’Connor’s juveniles. As I have stated above, however, the young protagonists in O’Connor are yearning, striving towards a maturity beyond their years, and with an adult sensibility come adult vices.

I now turn to the second strand informing my study, the epiphany; an *event* found most prominently in Joyce, but one, I argue, that is central to the plot of many of O’Connor’s juvenile stories also. In its most famous rendering, located near the end of *Stephen Hero*, Joyce has his narrator define the epiphany as a “sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in vulgarity of speech or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself.



He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (211). Alongside this famous rendering by Joyce, the specific kinds of epiphanies I locate in O’Connor’s work fall under the category that Richard Kearney has labeled “epiphanies of the everyday” (3). These epiphanies are more than just “light bulb” moments; they are inherently spiritual. For Kearney, epiphanies of the everyday represent the “sacred” breaking into the “ordinary”; they are the name we have given to the indescribable moment when humans come “face-to-face with the infinite in the infinitesimal” (3). Appropriately, as his last attempt to describe the mysterious interaction between heaven and earth in an instance of epiphany, Kearney resorts to an allusion to *Ulysses*. What is an epiphany? It is “God in a street cry” (3). Without this being an overtly Christian study of O’Connor’s stories of childhood, then, the epiphanies discussed in the next two chapters are moments of revelation that come from somewhere other than our physical reality, and thus carry spiritual implications, undefinable as those may be.

Where Joyce defined “epiphany” in *Stephen Hero*, he put it to direct use as a literary device in many of his *Dubliners* stories. I am only interested in the epiphanies which conclude two of Joyce’s stories of childhood, “Araby” and “An Encounter.” It is not my intent to conduct an in-depth analysis of these stories; I merely wish to convey the language used by Joyce in recording these moments of realization and to note the effect the epiphanies have on their respective protagonists.

“Araby” concludes with Joyce’s young narrator, after having gone on his “quest” to the bazaar to bring back a token of love to Mangan’s sister, standing in the middle of

the gallery just before it closes, at which time he receives this revelation: “Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity, and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (*Dubliners* 26). The effect of this epiphany can be viewed as the desolation of the idealistic fantasies of the self when brought face to face with ultimate reality. Morris Beja notes the qualities of “harshness” and “uncertainty” that accompany this kind of epiphany (12). The self-knowledge is gained from an experience of this sort brings with it a certain amount of suffering and inner turmoil.

By contrast, the revelation given to the protagonist at the end of “An Encounter” is of a slightly different nature: “I had to call the name again before Mahoney saw me and hallooed in answer. How my heart beat as he came running across the field to me! He ran as if to bring me aid. And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little” (19). Here the epiphany given to the protagonist is not concerned with self-knowledge but with effecting a change in the way he views another person, in this case, his friend Mahoney. And while I believe Beja may be going too far when he writes that this particular realization “reflects genuine moral progress” (13), for it is always up to the receiving agent of the epiphany to choose whether he will change his ways, it certainly suggests the *promise* of moral progress. Despite the fact that O’Connor spent much of his critical energy decrying the aesthetics of Joyce’s writing,<sup>6</sup> I will show that O’Connor employs epiphanies in his juvenile stories remarkably similar to the types examined above: revelations that either force the protagonist to understand the smallness of human ambition in the face of eternity or propel the protagonist to reconsider his relationship to another human being.

Here I want to note that I have not completely forgotten about that other story of childhood in *Dubliners*, “The Sisters.” I have left it out of my analysis because it does not yield a pattern of epiphany that can be discerned in O’Connor’s work. David Pierce voices the bewilderment of many readers (including O’Connor) when he writes that the story “seems to outflank the reader, constantly undermining or . . . extending the reader’s expectation. . . . It is . . . shaped around something missing” (72, 74). If the boy has an epiphany, it happens in between the many ellipses that signify the “something missing” Pierce intuits. What seems to be certain is that boy is shaken both by the fact of the priest’s death and by the realization that there was something “missing” in the priest’s character. The uncertainty of the priest’s eternal future is matched by the boy’s uncertainty over the path his life will take, now that he is presumably free from a life spent in service to the church.

“The Sisters” has a strong resonance for this present study, however, in that a feeling of loneliness—the loneliness of a child grappling with the issues of the adult world—pervades its final paragraphs. Time and again the epiphanies in O’Connor’s stories also bring with them an acute sense of loneliness, which is an entirely new and unnerving sensation for the children in these stories. In no less than five of the eight stories examined here—“The Man of the World,” “The Genius,” “The Study of History,” “The Man of the House,” and “Masculine Protest”—a distinct feeling of aloneness descends upon the child protagonist during an epiphany. However, it is more of an inner feeling than an outward reality, for in some cases, the child’s mother or father is there to provide physical comfort at the end of the story.

In the following two chapters I employ O'Connor's phrase, the "world of appearances" as an organizing concept for the complex territory O'Connor's children navigate. The phrase is borrowed from *An Only Child* and the story, "The Man of the World"; I elaborate on my use of it in more depth on pp. 17-19 of this thesis. The "world of appearances" stands for all that is false on the surface-level of our world and is deceiving in nature. In "The Man of the World," the first story examined in Chapter Two, young Larry encounters the "world of appearances" in the outward sophistication of his friend Jimmy, only for it to fall away at the end when an epiphany brings him to confront the meaninglessness of such "appearances" in light of eternity. False personality comes to the forefront in "My Oedipus Complex." Here Larry imposes false personas on the other members of his family in order to maintain the idealistic version of reality he has constructed for himself. The final two stories discussed in Chapter Two conclude with epiphanies that reveal the vanity behind two different "pursuits." "The Genius" exposes the empty posturing behind the endless pursuit of knowledge, while "The Study of History" once again posits the vastness of eternity as the answer to Larry's quest to find his true identity.

"The Man of the House," the first story examined in Chapter Three, is perhaps the O'Connor story which is the most closely allied structurally with Joyce's "Araby," as they both rely heavily on the "quest" motif. However, O'Connor diverges from Joyce at the very end of the story and leans toward a Chekhovian stance towards his protagonist, one that is founded on the principle of compassion for the weaknesses of human beings. The protagonists in "The Pretender" and "The Face of Evil" enact contrasting ways of receiving an epiphany which encourages action towards the "other." In the former,

Michael Murphy is granted a realization about the outcast status of a lower-class boy, Denis Corby, but refuses to extend the hand of friendship; by contrast, in the latter, the unnamed narrator actively seeks out an “understanding” with “the face of evil,” Charlie Dalton. Finally, in “The Masculine Protest,” Denis Halligan receives two epiphanies: the first is a revelation of loneliness after he has set out on his own “quest” to leave home for the big city, and the second is a recognition of a hereto unknown companionship with his father.

The bond between father and son (or at least the presence of the father figure in the families of these young protagonists) is not unique to “The Masculine Protest” but appears frequently in O’Connor’s stories of childhood. In drawing attention to this relationship within the family, albeit sometimes indirectly, my study constitutes a break with a major *idée fixe* of O’Connor scholarship: the tendency to place primary emphasis on the mother-son relationship within the domestic sphere.

The O’Connor who emerges from this study takes the developmental years of childhood seriously. He allows for a certain amount of naiveté to govern his young protagonists but also grants them moments of revelation, whereby they come to glimpse the challenges of the journey before them. Maybe the unnamed narrator of “The Face of Evil” speaks for all of O’Connor’s children when he reflects: “For the first time I realized that the life before me would have complexities of emotion which I couldn’t even imagine” (*FCR* 166).

## CHAPTER TWO

### In Light of Eternity: The Larry Delaney Stories

Larry Delaney, the child protagonist in the stories examined in this chapter, is the prototypical juvenile character for Frank O'Connor. He is precocious, highly imaginative, and is constantly bypassing his normal stage of child development, choosing to act, think, and speak like an adult whenever possible. Like many of the other children in O'Connor's stories (examined in Chapter Three), Larry becomes an actor, putting on appearances of being someone other (and usually older) than himself. This chapter will examine four stories involving Larry—"The Man of the World," "My Oedipus Complex," "The Genius," and "The Study of History." Drawing on O'Connor's understanding and absorption of Chekhov's theme of "false personality" and Joyce's use of the "epiphany" in a literary context, I will show how O'Connor's notion of the "world of appearances" confronts and sometimes deceives Larry, often leading to an epiphany, a moment of revelatory knowledge about himself or his immediate world. In other instances, such as in "My Oedipus Complex," Larry seeks to adjust the "world of appearances" in order to certify his idealized outlook as true. "My Oedipus Complex" also serves as an exception to the pattern of epiphanies I attempt to trace. In this story, false personality is so heavily entrenched in the words and actions of Larry there is no possible space for an epiphany to break through.

Before I examine the stories, however, I want to note young Larry's place in O'Connor's work and his relation to the real life experiences of Frank O'Connor's childhood. John Hildebidle has written that while "the family" in general is one of

O'Connor's main subjects, in particular, there are two "types" of families which frequently appear throughout the short stories. The first type is made up of the bickering, combative families—such as in "The Mad Lomasneys" (1944) and "The Luceys" (1944)—who wrestle with matters ranging from marriage across the class boundary to birth out of wedlock to the repressive ordinances of the institutional church. The second type of family found in O'Connor's short stories is focused on intricacies of immediate familial relationship; more important, this second group of stories usually involves a fair amount of autobiographical information from O'Connor's own experience growing up (178-79). Larry Delaney belongs to this second group. Larry can almost be considered as Frank O'Connor's young, fictional alter-ego in these stories. On many occasions, O'Connor will take a childhood incident of his own and re-arrange it to fit his narrative purposes. The same can be said of some of the child protagonists examined in Chapter Three. However, one should refrain from making a direct one-to-one association of Frank O'Connor with Larry Delaney. There is enough change in the stories—in both the character of Larry and the events recorded—to suggest that O'Connor wished there to be some distance between the retelling of his life (as he did in *An Only Child*) and the demands of fiction drawn from the wellspring of his childhood.<sup>1</sup>

Hildebidle also points out that O'Connor's familial stories are built around a constellation of three relationships: mother and son, sibling rivalry, and the relationship between husband and wife (181-82). Notably absent from Hildebidle's list is the father-son relationship. While this oversight is in line with the general consensus of critical scholarship on O'Connor's preference for the maternal bond, I believe that the father figure has been slighted in terms of his impact on O'Connor's juvenile stories (for with

O'Connor, it is *almost always* a son, not a daughter, who occupies the central place in the story) and will attempt to point this out when occasion arises.

Although it would be natural to begin with the Larry Delaney story which shows him at his youngest (this being "My Oedipus Complex") and work through the stories as they trace his development, I have chosen to begin with "The Man of the World," for it is the O'Connor story in which the idea of the "world of appearances" figures most prominently; indeed, it is the only story where the exact phrase is either spoken or referred to in the course of the narrative. And as I am concerned with how Larry deals with the false nature of the "world of appearances," it seems to be the proper starting place for my purposes. The source for this phrase comes from *An Only Child* (1961). In this recounting of his early childhood years in Cork, O'Connor uses the phrase "world of appearances" to describe his mother's constructed outlook on the world. His mother, Minnie O'Donovan, was stamped by the experience of living through some incredibly harsh circumstances: "the gutter where life had thrown her," O'Connor reflects, "was deep and dirty" (39-40). Because of her experiences, Minnie O'Donovan developed a fierce attitude towards life, one that was determined to "get on," to survive at all costs. O'Connor continues his description of his mother's outlook on life:

One way to describe this quality is to call it gaiety; another is to say that she was a woman who passionately believed in the *world of appearances*. If something appeared to be so, or if she had been told it was so, then she believed it to be so. This, as every psychologist knows, leads to disillusionments . . . And some small portion of her simple-mindedness she did pass on to me. (40; emphasis mine)

Coming as she did from an orphan's background and having finally "made it" in the world (married with a child and an income, albeit a meager one), O'Connor's mother was determined to maintain this image of herself and the small world in which she moved.



This, of course, meant that she would not put up with any intrusions which disrupted the image of life as she perceived it.

To this end, O'Connor describes a time when the poet George Russell ("A.E.") did a "charming" pencil drawing of her, which O'Connor then had framed. However, the next time he visited his mother, the frame was still there, but her portrait was gone, replaced by pictures of himself. Her reasoning for this change speaks to her underlying desire to maintain a proper image of herself: "Now, I'm just as fond of A.E. as you are, but I could not have the picture round the house. He made me look like a poisoner" (40-41). Reflecting on several examples of his mother's need to adjust some part of her life to fit the world that she believed in, O'Connor writes: "I am certain it went back to some childish technique of endurance by obliterating impressions she had found too terrible to entertain, as though, believing as she did in the world of appearances, she found it necessary to alter the world of appearances to make it seem right" (41). Michael Neary insightfully notes the subtle physiological twist in this passage, a twist which even dupes the narrator O'Connor himself: "Suddenly what looked like, and what O'Connor in fact calls, 'a belief in the objective world' [41] becomes a belief in something diametrically opposed: the world of the fancy, of the subjective world" (331).

It is Neary's aptly named "world of the fancy" or "subjective world" that repeatedly intrudes upon the objective world that the children in O'Connor's stories occupy. Thus, similar to O'Connor's mother, the children in his stories seek to adjust the particular "world of appearances" in which they live in an attempt to validate or certify their perspective as "true." Of course what occurs most frequently is the exact opposite; O'Connor's child protagonists are deceived into believing an image of themselves and

their world which is inherently “false.” Furthermore, the “world of appearances” is a construction of the adult imagination, albeit a shallow and immature one. It is a way of looking at the world which refuses to face up to reality as it actually is, only as one *wishes* it to be. It is an imaginative crutch which allows one to survive on the surface of things, all the while knowing that an inbreaking of any depth of perception will force one to face up to the truth of the world as it is, shattering the false image in the process. Since nearly all of the children in O’Connor’s stories are endowed with an adult sensibility, this construct actually holds up for much of the time. But, inevitably, the time comes (this is Joyce’s epiphanic moment) when the “world of appearances” falls away, and the young protagonists must, in essence, become children again and must face up to the world as it really is, all appearances aside. “Reality, I suppose, is like that,” O’Connor once wrote, “one looks at it and turns away, appalled by the Gorgon’s head. And then one realizes that one has lived with it, that one has no other reality than the fact that one has once looked at it with naked eyes and survived” (qtd. in Sheehy 127-28). This is the kind of mature vision O’Connor would wish his child protagonists to grow up into. It is by no means a comfortable or easy viewpoint, but it is one in which falsity has no place.

As an organizing concept, then, the “world of appearances” finds expression in O’Connor’s stories on a couple different levels. There are the “appearances” of social reality—the belief so deeply rooted in Minnie O’Donovan—in “Man of the World,” “The Study of History,” and “The Pretender.” Closely associated to social reality are the “appearances” of personal identity that the children struggle through in “The Genius,” “The Study of History,” “The Man of the House,” and “The Face of Evil.” Next, there is the romanticized, idealized version of the “world” that exists wholly within the

imaginings of the child protagonists in “My Oedipus Complex,” “The Genius,” “The Man of the House,” and “Masculine Protest.” In these stories, an idealized “appearance” of fancy must be reconciled with the “appearance” of reality. Finally, the “world of appearances” can be recognized in a religious setting, as in “The Face of Evil,” as the trappings men put on the institutional church that might potentially impede an “insider” and an “outsider” from sharing in a relationship based on understanding and compassion.

As a superficial way of viewing life here on this earth, “the world of appearances” is a concept devoid of transcendence. Therefore, the “world of appearances” must always dissolve underneath the greater weight of the “spiritual manifestation” of the epiphanic moment. The etymology of “epiphany” further reinforces the notion that this “spiritual manifestation” is stronger than the various manifestations of “the world of appearances.” The former comes from the Greek *epiphaneia* connoting a “showing forth” or an “appearance,” but not just any appearance, specifically it refers to the coming of the Christ-child, the light to the gentiles (Tucker 1211). The epiphany, breaking into our world from beyond, has the potential to shatter the “world of appearances” or to expose it as a shallow outlook on life, a false way of organizing reality around oneself.

The narrative voice in “The Man of the World” is one of a mature adult reminiscing about his childhood (“When I was a kid . . . .” the story begins). O’Connor frequently uses the narrative voice of an adult in order to, in the words of Michael Steinman, “reproduce a child’s vision of the present and the adult’s memory of that child’s perception, being true to both, often conflicting, narratives” (*FCW* 82). Steinman continues, detailing the complex nature of the narrative voice in O’Connor’s stories of childhood:

The voice is not just that of an adult remembering his past; it is characterized by the child's innocence and moral simplicity, perceiving right and wrong as clearly distinguishable and tangible opposites, as well as having the adult's knowledge of the limitations of that world-view.  
(82)

The mature voice of "The Man of the World" allows for a certain degree of separation from the events recounted, and, hence, a more thoughtful, reflective line runs parallel to the narration of actual events. This is likely the reason for the insertion of the phrase "world of appearances" (which appears no less than seven times in the story); it is a conceptual framework which helps Larry, the middle aged narrator, make sense of this crucial moment in his childhood.

The story itself relates how Larry comes under the influence of Jimmy Leary, who is everything that Larry is not but would like to be—up to date with the times, sophisticated, elusive, and someone who has a definite opinion about the things that really matter. Jimmy leads Larry through a series of grown-up conversations and actions, the penultimate of which is an act of voyeurism directed towards Jimmy's new neighbors. The story climaxes with Larry experiencing a revelatory moment of self-knowledge when what he expected to be a moment of sexual intimacy between the husband and wife turns out to be a moment of intimate religious devotion.

The first thing the reader notices as the story begins is how Larry wants to be an adult. He believes with some intensity that children are inherently left out of the circle of knowledge (a sub-theme throughout the story) because of their innocence and naiveté. To make up for this lack, he engages in what he considers to be a most luxurious adult activity—taking a holiday. The event is imbued with mature tones as Larry insists that he took his holiday "with the greatest seriousness" and made sure that he took "Father's old

travelling bag” to verify the authenticity of his journey (*BFC* 158). His journey on this occasion is to Jimmy Leary’s home, whose parents have gone away for the weekend, leaving him in sole possession of the house—an act of responsibility which only heightens the sense of the adult world in the lives of these two boys. Jimmy is only a year older than Larry but acts well beyond the level of any normal child. Jimmy is “sophisticated” and “superior” to all the other kids their age, and Larry notices that Jimmy listens to the other children with a “sort of well-bred smile, a knowing smile, that seemed to me the height of elegance” (159). Of all the splendid attributes Jimmy has, it is this “knowing” way in which he carries himself that so fascinates and elicits Larry’s utmost admiration. Larry wants to be as “sophisticated” as Jimmy, but he knows he never will, because, as he puts it, “I was always being deceived by the world of appearances” (159).

Although Larry acknowledges this fault in himself at an early point in the story, what he does not realize is that he has already deceived himself by “inventing” a holiday to make up for what he perceives as a lack in his household and by falling for the sophistication of Jimmy’s home, which contains “a piano in the front room, a pair of binoculars on a table near the window, and a toilet on the stairs that seemed to me the last word in elegance and immodesty” (158). It is not primarily the attraction of the outward appearances of materialism, however, that makes Larry aware that he has been deceived by the “world of appearances.” The gap in knowledge between him and Jimmy manifests itself most clearly in Larry’s false judgment of other people, namely, his peers:

I would take a sudden violent liking to some boy, and when I went to his house my admiration would spread to his parents and sisters . . . but when I told Jimmy he would smile in that knowing way of his and say quietly: ‘I believe they had the bailiffs in a few weeks ago,’ and . . . bang would go

the whole world of appearances, and I would realize that once again I had been deceived. (159)

O'Connor sets up a clear dichotomy between knowledge and deception; the former enables Jimmy to get behind the "world of appearances" (or so it seems), while the latter is what keeps Larry on the outside looking in, or, as the mature Larry puts it, "all this kept me on this side of the world of appearances . . . while Jimmy was always at the other" (160). The phrasing is all too apparent in the early stages of the narrative: "I was always being *deceived*. . . ."; "he would smile in that *knowing* way of his. . . ."; "once again I had been *deceived*"; "I had been *taken in*. . . ."; "Jimmy's *knowing* smile. . . ."; "I was *excluded* from *knowledge* by the world of appearances. . . ." (159; emphasis mine). O'Connor sets up the dramatic irony that occurs at the end by way of reversal, when Larry, not Jimmy, is the more perceptive judge of the neighbors—seeing honesty and an authentic goodness in them, when Jimmy can only view them as the means to an illicit voyeuristic experience.

As the story progresses, Jimmy plans to lead Larry to a place where he is no longer deceived by the "world of appearances," a social level of sophistication and knowledge that is foreign to him. Larry is only too eager to follow. Jimmy arranges for him and Larry to spy on the new neighbors from the vantage point of his attic, from which point one can see directly into their bedroom. Astonished by this mysterious act he is being invited to participate in, Larry asks (one would assume with a mixture of anticipation and fear), "And what do they do, Jimmy?" To which Jimmy replies with a "pleasant laugh," "Oh . . . everything. You really should come" (160). Jimmy's reply suggests that he has seen much more than a boy his age ever should, and, moreover, takes pleasure from the "knowledge" that the neighbors "don't know" they can be seen by

Jimmy in his attic (160). Larry is slowly becoming aware that Jimmy's knowledge of "the world of appearances" is no place for innocence; he is about to engage in a transgressive act for the first time in his life and is not sure what to make of it.

This situation—of looking down onto the actions of others from a high vantage point—also has its roots in O'Connor's childhood, related in an episode in *An Only Child*, one which tells us something fundamental about the kind of world O'Connor believes is waiting for children as they grow and mature. "I was always very fond of heights," O'Connor writes of his childhood preoccupation with sitting on a high wall and spying the daily tasks of his neighbors, "and afterwards it struck me that reading was only another form of height, and a more perilous one. It was a way of looking beyond your own back yard into the neighbours'" (88). For O'Connor, reading was his portal from childhood innocence to adult experience; it opened him up to a much larger world, one full of risk and danger. But what is a fairly innocent activity and material for metaphor in O'Connor own life has been turned into an immediate and frightening reality for young Larry in the story. He is sitting at a height looking down on the private actions of others and is entering into a new "and a more perilous" world in the process. At the beginning of the story, there is a playful pride in Larry's belief in the powers of his imagination to create new experiences for himself ("Yes' . . . I said with great pride. 'Off for my holidays to the Leary's.'"). Not anymore. One adult fantasy has been replaced with another, much scarier one. O'Connor intuited this "fantasy-making" faculty of the childhood imagination in a radio broadcast he gave in 1950: "You see, if only children escape one sort of crisis by retreating into fantasy, it's only to find another one waiting them inside" ("Only Child" 366). In a sense, this is what has happened to Larry. He

escaped the initial crisis of being a child deprived of enough adult experiences by creating the fantasy of a holiday for himself, only to find another crisis waiting inside his fantasy—that of finding himself in the middle of an adult activity that has much more serious consequences.

Foreshadowing the paradoxical turn events will take, Larry envisions the boys' lookout in both sacred and profane terms. He first says, "The attic had been prepared for our *vigil*" (*BFC* 162; emphasis mine), calling forth images of monks devoted to all-night prayer, and then compares Jimmy posture at the attic window to one who was "waiting in the cinema for the show to begin" (162). Clearly, this is a totally new experience for Jimmy, and he is searching for images that might shed some light on the "darkness and the mystery" of it all (162). Then the bedroom lights up, and the husband and wife enter the room and begin slowly, deliberately undressing. The scene is set for a moment of voyeurism, the moment when Larry will pass from innocence to experience through gazing on the most intimate adult activity. But then the turn happens, and the unexpected occurs. Jimmy and Larry thought they were going to witness the intimacy of sex, what they get instead is the intimacy of private religious devotion as one after the other the husband and wife get down on their knees and say their nightly prayers. This, the most pivotal scene in the story, deserves to be quoted at some length:

Then, to my surprise, she knelt by the bed, facing towards the window, glanced up at the picture of the Sacred Heart, made a large hasty Sign of the Cross, and, covering her face with her hands, buried her head in the bedclothes. . . . The husband . . . put on his pyjama jacket, buttoned it carefully, and knelt beside her. . . . He finished his prayers before his wife; again he crossed himself slowly, rose, and climbed into bed. . . . Several minutes passed before she put her hands out before her on the bed, blessed herself in her wide, sweeping way, and rose. She crossed the room in a swift movement . . . and next moment the light went out. (164)



It is hard to underestimate the effect this scene has on Larry. Looking back on that moment, Larry, the middle-aged narrator, uses terms that are absolute and life altering. For him, witnessing the way the woman threw herself into her faith with reckless abandon has shaken the “world of appearances” to its foundation, has made him rethink if Jimmy’s sophistication and knowledge is something he really wants to attain: “I could not bring myself to mention the woman at prayer,” he reminisces, “though I felt her image would be impressed on my memory till the day I died. I could not explain to [Jimmy] how at that moment everything had changed for me . . .” (164).

The phrase, the “moment everything had changed for me” strikes at the root of what O’Connor believes the short story has the power to accomplish. In the early pages of *The Lonely Voice*, O’Connor points to a line in Nikolai Gogol’s “Overcoat” that is almost identical to the one used by O’Connor here in “The Man of the World,” in order to highlight what he believes is the source of the short story’s immense power—namely, the power for the life-altering moment to break through the mess and the muck of human existence: “If one wanted an alternative description of what the short story means, one could hardly find better than that single half sentence, ‘and from that day forth, everything was as it were changed and appeared in a different light to him’” (16). Larry, too, experiences this life changing moment, and the revelation that comes from witnessing the woman at prayer coincides with the moment when the “world of appearances” releases its tyrannical hold on his vision of the world. Larry’s epiphany happens in two stages. First, he becomes aware of a gaze that is much larger than his or Jimmy’s narrow vision, a gaze that sees all and holds all things in its rightful place: “I could not have explained . . . how, beyond us watching the young married couple from

ambush, I had felt someone else watching us, so that at once we ceased to be the observers and became the observed” (*BFC* 165). Without explicitly naming this “someone” as “God,” it is clear that his epiphany has spiritual dimensions. Larry comes even closer to naming this Being who watches over all our actions in the second part of the epiphany, which takes place a few minutes later when he is lying in bed, “in the darkness,” covering his eyes with his hands and realizes that he “would never be able to put on a knowing smile, because always beyond the world of appearances I would see only eternity watching” (165).

When placed next to the epiphany the boy experiences at the end of “Araby”—“Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (26)—the similarities between the two epiphanies become evident. Gazing up into the darkness from his bed, Larry experiences the same kind of “anguish and anger” that the boy in “Araby” feels, knowing that he has likewise been “driven and derided by the vanity” of “the world of appearances” as it manifested itself in the sophistication of Jimmy, the elegance of Jimmy’s home, and the thrilling sensations of participating in adult activities. The spiritual terror of Larry’s epiphany—“I would see only eternity watching”—finds a possible source in the famous line by Pascal that O’Connor employs as the epigraph to *The Lonely Voice*: “The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me” (3). Like we find in “Araby” and in O’Connor’s theory of the “Little Man” in the short story (*LV* 15-19), Larry’s epiphany brings home the smallness of human beings in the face of eternity. And in the face of such an Infinite Presence, the “world of appearances”—everything that is false and

resides merely on the surface of human existence—is exposed as the empty shell that it really is.

Where “The Man of the World” has a clear and unambiguous epiphany, in “My Oedipus Complex,” the power of the epiphanic moment is muted because Larry is entrapped by false personality. Larry’s false personality manifests itself in his need to judge the contributions of his family members, in an effort to maintain the “world of appearances” he has constructed for himself, centered on his highly idealistic lifestyle with his mother.

Given the primary place O’Connor allots to his mother in *An Only Child* discussed above (in the autobiography, Minnie O’Donovan is given the opening portrait and, again, the closing one) and now, the quirky, personal title to this famous short story (“*My Oedipus Complex*” has surely drawn more readers to it than an objective rendering of the title would have, such as “*An Oedipus Complex*”), one can see how critics have built an aura of maternal love and, indeed, oedipal tendencies around the work of O’Connor. Moreover, Irish mothers have been viewed as particularly domineering in their possession of their sons, as Maura Laverty observes:

In [Irish] matriarchy, men cannot help being motherbound. Mothers prize their sons far above their daughters—they have no compunction in showing favoritism while their sons are young. . . . The inevitable result is that the Irish boy grows up with an exaggerated affection for and dependence on his mother and with a contempt for all other females. (qtd. in Wohlgeleit 69)

While it is true the mother-son bond is very tight in stories like “My Oedipus Complex,” it is equally true that the disruptions which keep the story moving, creating humorous moments of tension along the way, are a result of the introductions of the male characters of his Father and brother, Sonny. Larry does not know how to adjust his old world

(composed of his mother and himself) to this new one which brings competition for his mother's love.

Larry's childhood in the absence of his father is almost pastoral in its idyllic nature, but it is a child's perfect world; that is to say, it achieves its bliss by innocence, yes, but also with not a little ignorance and naiveté. Larry's cloistered outlook is summed up by the middle-aged narrator in this highly ironic statement near the outset of the story: "The war was the most peaceful period of my life" (*BFC* 108). Indeed, this is Larry's own "world of appearances"—the false outlook that seeks to preserve his comfortable existence at all costs—that he has built up and in which he thoroughly believes. It is a world spent watching the sun rise, playing with his toys, going on daily walks with his Mother (109), and collecting money that magically appears in the Post Office every week (113). All of this comes to an end with the permanent return of his father back from the war, and because he has never had any type of relationship with his father, it is seen as a potential threat to what he possesses with his mother. Immediately, in order to try to fit "this man, this stranger" (113) into his world, he starts attributing to his father false identities ("Like Santa Clause he came and went mysteriously") and personality defects ("I had never met anyone so absorbed in himself as he seemed") which help Larry cope with the disruption that has occurred (108, 110). A sense that he has been the recipient of an injustice pervades Larry's consciousness; therefore, he becomes the judge of the actions of all the other members in his family (a perennial sign that false personality is at work).<sup>2</sup> He observes that since father has come home, mother has betrayed her alliance with him, showing signs of insincerity and even a preference for father over Larry. When his mother tries to protect "poor Daddy's" precious sleeping

time, Larry is “sickened by the sentimentality of her ‘poor Daddy’”(112); he comments in a tone of moral superiority: “I never liked that sort of gush; it always struck me as insincere” (112). And later when Mother hushes Larry in order to hear what “Daddy” is saying, he is “mortified”: “I felt it wasn’t fair; there was even something sinister in it” (112). Larry does not reserve his pronouncements for his imposter father and fickle mother only, but extends his judgments to another paternal figure, God, and, eventually, his little brother, Sonny.

Apropos his age and development, and despite his claims to maturity, Larry’s understanding of God is not childlike, but childish. He expects his prayers to God to be as immediately productive as a request to his mother for food, so that when he prays to God to bring Daddy home from the war, and then realizes that his father is more of a nuisance than anything, he cannot help feeling (once again) as if God had pulled one over on him: “if this was how God answered prayers, he couldn’t listen to them very attentively” (110). And later he thinks God “isn’t quite what he cracked up to be” (111), when his mother lets him know that he cannot just reverse his prayer, asking God to create another war so Daddy has to leave. But it is only after Larry and his father’s yelling match that Larry’s sense of frustration at God rises to the level of fury for bringing Daddy back into his life: “It was only then that I fully realized how God had coddled me, listening to my prayers for the safe return of this monster” (115). In Larry’s immature worldview, even God Himself is merely putting on appearances, if he is not able to answer a simple prayer correctly. That is, a prayer answered in such a way as to allow Father to come home and fit perfectly into the cocoon of protection and love already established with his mother.

The arrival of Sonny is the final interruption into Larry's world. He thinks there is some false pretense about his baby brother because as company, he "was worse than useless" and yet he demands "too much attention" from his mother (117). Of course, as a baby, Sonny is acting completely normal, but Larry sees him as yet another intruder who is stealing his mother's affection. He even calls Sonny's cries for affection "a flaming lie," a ruse just to keep his mother's attention. And when he sees that his father grows weary from taking care of Sonny, he assumes another person has found Sonny out: "[Father] saw through Sonny, and now he knew that I saw through him as well" (118).

Although "My Oedipus Complex" deals largely with the titular relationship of mother and son, the involvement of three male figures in the story—Daddy, God, and Sonny—propels the plot and brings into clear focus the character of Larry. He is concerned with keeping his world together, of making sure everything stays as perfect as it has always been. Larry does this by attributing false identities and characteristics to every other character in the story. His father moves from being a mysterious "Santa Clause" figure to someone who engages in "foul play" (111) to keep the affection of mother to a "monster" who has come in and destroyed the peace of Larry's daily life with his mother. God turns out not to be the loving Father figure who cares enough about Larry to answer his prayers correctly, but a fraud who does not listen to Larry's prayers closely enough and, furthermore, is impotent to reverse or cancel out a prayer request gone wrong. Larry's mother turns traitor too and falls for Daddy and Sonny in turn. Sonny is never even given a chance. From birth, he has only one thing in mind: to steal mother away from Larry.

In the end, even though Larry—as interpreter and judge—finds God and his family members all wanting in their actions and motivation, it is in fact Larry himself who is trying not to let his own self-constructed, idealistic “world of appearances” get destroyed. He is the one acting falsely by not adjusting to the natural process of change within a family. It is not Larry’s mother who is “simple,” (a word Larry uses twice to describe her gullibility towards Daddy and Sonny’s schemes) but Larry, for not understanding the role changes that take place as a family develops. It is not Daddy who engages in “foul play,” but Larry who falsely accuses Daddy of being an impostor and a “monster.” It is not God who has coddled Larry, but Larry who tries to manipulate God into answering his prayer in a way that only protects the safe world he has constructed for himself. Finally, it is not Sonny whose actions are a “flaming lie,” but Larry’s; it is not Sonny who is always scheming up ways to get Mother’s attention, but Larry.

Larry is not granted a moment of illumination at the end of this story, as he is in “The Man of the House.” Because of this, Larry in “My Oedipus Complex” leans more towards Chekhov’s characters than the boy in “Araby.” He keeps himself blind towards the faults in his own character by attributing false motives to everyone who surrounds him. And, like for many of Chekhov’s characters, events do not go his way; as a result, his world is much more complicated and complex than before. He has two new males in the family with which he must compete for his mother’s affection, and he realizes that God does not respond to prayer like he wants him to. Vladimir Kataev points out that Chekhov relies heavily on two phrases, *kazalos’* (“it seemed”) and *ozkalos’* (“it turned out that”), to signify an alteration in a character’s vision of the world (20). This change is often negative or is one that is the opposite of what the character thought would happen.

O'Connor employs a variation of the English translation of *ozkalos* in "My Oedipus Complex" to signify a similar jarring of expectations. "It didn't turn out like that, though," Larry says after he realizes his suggestion that his mother have another baby will not bring them closer, but in fact, will tear them further apart.

Some critics read the ending of the story, where Daddy comes to lie in bed with Larry because he has essentially been replaced by Sonny as the center of Mother's affection, as a moment of reconciliation between Daddy and Larry, signaling that Larry has come to grips with his new place in the family. For example, Deborah Averill writes that the final scene "describes a boy who gains a baby brother and establishes a loving, balanced relationship with both of his parents" (282); furthermore, Averill claims that O'Connor's "happy endings" (of which "My Oedipus Complex" is an example) usually "involve affectionate reconciliation, a harmonious reintegration into the family into the family or social group" (282). However, Averill's reading ignores the fact that Larry is still not pleased that he has "gained a baby brother" nor is there any suggestion that Larry has achieved any sort of "loving" or "balanced" relationship with both of his parents. He is still too wrapped up in himself, still believes he is the mature one in the family. "I couldn't help feeling sorry for Father. I had been through it all myself, and even at that age I was magnanimous" (*BFC* 108), he claims when Father comes and lies in his bed. What he says of Father earlier in the story, "I had never met anyone so absorbed in himself as he seemed" (110) is a self-reflecting statement, which tells more about Larry than Father. The end of the story does not leave readers with a picture of boy who has matured into having a "balanced" relationship with his parents, as Averill suggests; rather, it simply shows a boy who is happy to gain an ally, believing he has won his



father over to see his side of things. The final line of the story—“At Christmas he went out of his way to buy me a really nice model railway” (119)—is set apart, giving it a structural similarity to Joyce’s epiphanies in *Dubliners*; however, as I have tried to make clear, I do not believe Larry is granted any knowledge about himself or about the way he relates to his family members. The “model railway” that Father gives him at Christmas suggests that Larry may now just switch his allegiances to Father instead of Mother; it is not a sign that the relationship has been “fixed” or “healed” in any way.<sup>3</sup> The fact that there is no epiphany at the end of the story, no moment of illumination for Larry where he recognizes his false judgment of others or the actual worth of each of his family members implies that during the little snapshot of time captured in “My Oedipus Complex” there is very little growth in knowledge about himself or the world around him, which, according to Chekhov, is a sure sign that “false personality”—whether in oneself or attributed to others—is at work in a character.

Where “My Oedipus Complex” leaves readers questioning whether Larry has really gained any amount of knowledge about himself and the world, in “The Genius,” Larry suffers his way into truth, concluding with one of O’Connor’s more desolate epiphanies. However, all is firm, child-like conviction at the beginning with Larry (now starting school) pronouncing what is surely one of the funniest opening sentences in the modern short story: “Some kids are sissies by nature but I was a sissy by conviction” (*BFC* 123). Larry is a “sissy by conviction” because he has no desire to be like the other “savages” at his school; rather, he wants to be a “genius.” For the remainder of the story, then, he is a “sissy” by all outward appearances and a “genius” in his own mind. This story, too, arises from O’Connor’s own experience. Throughout the pages of *An Only*

*Child* these are two identities he is stuck between: a “sissy” to his father masculine sensibility, while an aspiring “genius” from his mother’s point of view. Concerning the notion of child geniuses, O’Connor began his radio broadcast “Only Child” with these words:

I believe statistics have proved that genius occurs most frequently in younger sons of large families. That may be, but I’m sure the *conviction* of genius occurs mainly among only children. They have no brothers and sisters to shake it. In fact, so rooted is their conviction that it rarely occurs to them that they are geniuses at all. They merely know, as geniuses do, that they are unique and irreplaceable, and take up the occupation for want of anything better to do. (365)

This talk, given five years before “The Genius” was completed, reveals the kernel of the story, although O’Connor has slightly altered his reflections to make for better fictional material. The driving force of the story is, in fact, Larry’s growing awareness of his status as a “genius.” He fosters his knowledge by tapping into everyone and everything around him for “information,” as he declares later on in the story, when his neighbor, Miss Cooney, warns the over-inquisitive boy of losing his innocence, for the “the world will rob you of it” (*BFC* 127). “But whatever the world wanted to rob me of,” Larry reflects later, “it was welcome to it from my point of view, if only I could get a few facts to work on” (127). Thus in this story, the “world of appearances” is closely connected to personal identity, as young Larry constructs an image of himself that is based on learning and knowledge, on his status as a “genius.”

Much like the young Michael O’Donovan, the outward, physically-oriented identity of “sissy” and the inward, imaginatively-oriented identity of “genius” place him squarely between the competing aspirations his mother and father have for him. Michael Steinman comments further on this tug-o-war between mother and father over the

development of young Larry: “each parent attempts to mould the child into a desired image and the appropriate social class. Father’s idea of ‘manly’, ‘natural’ male behavior (which Larry calls ‘bloodthirsty’ and ‘illiterate’) battles with Mother’s aspirations toward culture . . .” (*FCW* 56). Typically Larry always leans towards his mother in any argument. Necessarily, Father becomes the outcast for the moment and is bitter over their allegiance: “‘Ah, you have him as bad as yourself,’ Father would snort and stalk to the front door again, to scald his heart with thoughts of the nice natural son he might have had if he only hadn’t married the wrong woman” (*BFC* 125).

Noting the large number of stories which circle around the “child-narrator’s relation to his mother,” Kate Murphy writes, “[i]n these stories the action springs primarily from the narrator’s false conception of himself and his position . . . and his consequent betrayal of his ideal self. [These stories] . . . are concerned with the conflict within the child of a false image of himself and his ideal self in relation to his mother” (317). So too it is with this story. Larry decides that he needs to be a genius because “our town hadn’t a proper genius and I intended to supply the deficiency” (*BFC* 124). Larry then goes about setting up his own private “world of appearances” where he tries on one false self after another. He becomes an “explorer” (124), the lead singer at his own Opera house (125), and a gimp, because he “was so impressed with a lame teacher” (126). Larry is smugly satisfied with himself for being able to experience so many different ways of being in the world; even so, there is an element missing. “But my work continued to bring home to me the great gaps in my knowledge” Larry laments (124). The humorous irony of the whole story is that, of course, Larry is nothing close to a genius; he is imaginative and ever-curious about new sources of knowledge, but he is not

a child prodigy. This is brought home to the reader when Larry starts attending school only to find that he cannot do long division “without falling into childish errors” (131).

Larry’s entrance into school begins the humbling process, ultimately leading to the realization that he is no genius at all and, moreover, that his sources of information can no longer be trusted. Larry enters school with two pillars of trust to lean on: his own self-projected image as a “genius” and his mother’s trustworthy information on all important matters: “Mother . . . could never bring herself to deceive me on any major issue” (131). However, beneath this façade of knowledge and learning, Larry is terrified of being shown for a fraud. This is precisely what happens when he becomes friends with an older girl in the school, Una Dwyer, and proclaims with his usual confidence the “theory” that his mother passed onto him concerning where babies come from: Mother has an “engine” in her tummy, and all Father has to do is “start it with his starting handle” (130). At this humorous explanation of the sexual act, Una bursts out laughing and Larry is filled with shame and indignation. Because of Mother’s outdated “theory” on babies, Larry is “exposed to ridicule” before Una’s family (131). His foundations are shaken, and despite his resolve “not to be exposed again” (132), Una soon begins going out with a much older boy in his school, leaving young Larry behind to watch as the “world of appearances” he built on knowledge and learning crumbles under the weight of a newly perceived ignorance: “I knew this was the end. I was too young to marry Una. I didn’t know where babies came from and I didn’t understand algebra. . . . I was full of gloom and revengeful thoughts” (133).

At the conclusion of the story, Larry is in tears when he arrives home. His mother does her best to comfort him: “You’ll soon make new friends, take my word for it” (134).

But this statement brings little comfort to Larry: “But I did not believe her. . . . My great work meant nothing to me. . . . I felt it was a poor, sad, lonesome thing being nothing but a genius” (134). Michael Steinman believes Larry has, in fact, gained *some* knowledge—the knowledge of loneliness and heartache—“but the price of such knowledge is misery” (*FCW* 47); while James Matthews believes that Larry’s desolate epiphany places him in the center of the typical “lonely” characters: “O’Connor’s children are people above all else, and like most people they are . . . misunderstood and trapped by their own misconceptions” (69). In the way that it reveals to Larry the vanity of human ambition, his epiphany comes very near to the Joycean type at the end of “Araby,” showing the world to be a place which not only shatters false images of the self but also breaks down pillars of trust in the process.

In an unusual fashion for O’Connor, “The Study of History” seems to pick up where “The Genius” left off. Generally, O’Connor is not one for connecting his stories, but these two stories complement each other in ways that other stories do not. Indeed, part of the emptiness of the epiphany at the conclusion of “The Genius,” “I knew this was the end . . . I didn’t know where babies come from” (*BFC* 133), is fulfilled in the opening lines of “The Study of History”: “The discovery of where babies came from filled my life with excitement and interest” (145). Immediately, the reader is aware that Larry’s “study of history” is not a study of the *world’s* history, but of his own *personal* history—how he came to be and how “things might have been different” (146). Also, by this time, the reader should be aware that any “discovery” at the beginning of an O’Connor story is likely to lead to an epiphany at the end which takes the protagonist beyond the limited scope of his minute “discovery” (in this case, where babies come from) and into the

realm of larger, more eternal questions. With an ironic twist, O'Connor has the middle-aged narrator reflect back at the beginning of the story: "I had not heard of Pascal, but I would have approved his remark about what would have happened if Cleopatra's nose had been a bit longer" (145). Larry is invoking Pascal here on the strange contingencies that have shaped history, but little does he know he will soon find himself wrestling with questions of identity that are Pascalian in nature, dealing with the anguished fate of the human in the face of the eternal. In this way, "The Study of History" is not only connected chronologically with "The Genius," but also thematically with "The Man of the World."

Of all of O'Connor's Larry Delaney stories, "The Study of History" most emphatically brings Larry face to face with the question of who he is and where he came from. Upon discovering that he has a personal history, Larry is concerned not with the mechanics of how he was made, i.e. the reproductive act, but with something more fundamental: the fascinating possibility that he could have been someone else had either of his parents married a different person. (Throughout the whole story, all the rational considerations of biology, which render many of Larry's ideas impossible, are simply thrown out the window, so to speak.) He names this process of teasing out the effect his mother and father's previous relationships may have had on his identity "the historical approach":

Through Mother I might have been a French boy called Laurence Armady or a rich boy from Sunday's Well called Laurence Riordan. Through Father I might, while still remaining a Delaney, have been one of the six children of the mysterious and beautiful Miss Cadogen. I was fascinated by the problem of who I would have been if I hadn't been me, and . . . whether or not I would have known that there was anything wrong with the arrangement. Naturally, I tended to regard Laurence Delaney as the person I was intended to be, and so I couldn't help wondering whether as

Laurence Riordan I would have not been aware if Laurence Delaney as a real gap in my make-up. (148)

Larry, in trying to place himself in this conundrum, attempts to get behind the appearances of identity and figure out, in his own childlike way, what it means to be “oneself” and not “another.” Thus while Larry sorts through all the false “selves” he might have been but is not, he is constantly aware of his true identity as Laurence Delaney, although he is much more fascinated by the false identities than the true one.

In order to satisfy his curiosity, he attempts to locate either the individuals who would have been his other parent or the places where he would have grown up. But even in his reimagining of this other lifestyle, he is aware of himself as he is now, and it is a recollection which, naturally for O’Connor, brings with it a distinct feeling of loneliness: “I wandered only whether I would have any awareness of the National School boy with the cloth schoolbag who jammed between the bars of a gate and thought of me. It was a queer, lonesome feeling that all but reduced me to tears” (149).

Larry’s quest to find who he would have been had his father married Miss Cadogan yields similar existential angst, only this time in a more terrifying fashion. He goes to meet Miss Cadogan (now Miss O’Brien with two children, a son and a daughter) and is completely taken with her, namely because she dotes on him in front of her own children because he is “Mick Delaney’s son” (151). Moreover, Larry, although he is rather disappointed with what he finds in Gussie, her son, nonetheless studies him closely. “After all,” he reminds himself, “he was the boy I might have been” (149). Larry comes home delighted because now he has “material to work with” (154). Like Pascal, he “re-creates” his own history, imagining himself as Gussie “standing in the bedroom, looking down at my tent in the garden, and Aideen as my sister, and Mrs

O'Brien as my mother" (154). He then comforts himself by going through a ritual to reclaim his true self, repeating a litany that confirms his real identity: "I am Larry Delaney, and my mother is Mary Delaney, and we live in Number Eight. . . . Tomorrow I'll go to school at the Cross, and first there will be prayers, and then arithmetic, and after that composition" (154). However, the "charm" does not work; his foray into discovering who he might have been has now altered how he envisions who he truly is: "I had ceased to be Gussie, all right, but somehow I had not become myself again, not any self that I knew" (154). Trying to come to grips with this frightening revelation, he reflects: "It was as though my own identity was a sort of sack I had to live in, and I had deliberately worked my way out of it, and now I couldn't get back again because I had grown too big for it" (154). Once again, Larry is filled with the terror of his own smallness and aloneness "in the middle of empty space, divorced from mother and home and everything permanent and familiar" (154). This time, the realization reduces him to tears. And it is only when his Mother comes into his room and takes his hand that the terror gradually retreats. "I became myself again," Larry concludes, "shrank into my little skin of identity, and left infinity and all its anguish behind" (155).

This epiphany that concludes "The Study of History" terrifies Larry because it takes him beyond not only all the false selves he has pretended to be, but also beyond what he believes is his true identity as Larry Delaney. He is forced to recognize that all such questions fade into insignificance as one becomes aware of one's own smallness in light of "eternity." Therefore, this last story and its existential ending returns us to the first story in this chapter, "The Man of the World," and the similar epiphanic experience with which it concludes. O'Connor time and again brings Larry to confront what is



behind the false veneer of the “world of appearances”—“appearances” which he is deceived into believing (through his friend Jimmy in “The Man of the World”) or which he constructs himself (as in “My Oedipus Complex,” “The Genius,” and “The Study of History”). Most often what he finds behind it are the terrifying eternal spaces of Pascal, which sometime terrify and bewilder, but always make him confront the truth of what it means to live inside his “little skin of identity.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Mother, Father, and the Outcast: Frank O'Connor's Other Stories of Childhood

In this chapter I will discuss four stories—"The Man of the House," "The Pretender," "Masculine Protest," and "The Face of Evil,"—involving child protagonists other than Larry Delaney. But while Larry does not show up in any of these tales, the predicaments that face the children in these stories and the themes that spring from their predicaments should sound very familiar. Indeed, one might say that these children are the long lost brothers of Larry, or maybe more accurately, they are all aspects of Frank O'Connor himself, for the "world of appearances"—present in his own life through his mother, Minnie O'Donovan's outlook on the world, and then portrayed in his fiction through Larry's friendship with Jimmy O'Leary—still casts its long shadow over the imaginations of the protagonists in these stories. The deceiving nature of the "world of appearances" appears in these stories through the characters' construction of false images of the self. To adapt John Calvin's famous insight, the minds of these children are perpetual factories of false images. False images of the self lead to a display of false personality, so once again Chekhov is in the background of O'Connor's narratives. And Joyce is present also, for, like Larry, the boys in these stories receive epiphanies at crucial moments.

Moreover, the epiphanies examined in this chapter affect the child narrators in two definable ways. In "The Man of the World" and "The Masculine Protest," the epiphanies reveal the terrifying nature of the big world, forcing the protagonists to return home to the protection of their parents as quickly as possible; while in "The Pretender"

and “The Face of Evil,” the epiphanies have a clear moral agency to them, urging the children to extend the hand of friendship to outsiders. The responses of the protagonists to the epiphanies they receive thus determine the amount of moral growth that occurs in the latter two stories.

In “The Man of the House,” young Gus assumes the role of the adult in the house after his mother has fallen ill. The story climaxes with Gus traversing the entire length of the town to go to the dispensary to retrieve the needed medicine for his mother. While at the dispensary, he is duped by an older girl into drinking the cough syrup, resulting in Gus arriving home sick with no aid for his mother and in complete despair. However, with a last minute twist, his mother’s concern for her now sick child gets her out of bed, their positions are thus reversed, and she is effectively cured of her ailment.

The similarities between “Araby” and “The Man of the House” are easily seen. The most prominent of which is the “quest” motif: a young, imaginative boy must go on a lonely trek by himself to bring back something for a loved one, is treated poorly once he arrives at his destination, and then has an epiphany which reveals to him the foolishness of his fantasies. The quest is clearly present in both Joyce and O’Connor’s stories; however, Robert Fuhrel notes in his comparison of the stories, “the similarity ends with the plots” (173). Technique and purpose divide Joyce and O’Connor as they approach the same material. James D. Alexander posits that because of O’Connor’s insistence on getting the pitch of the narrator’s voice absolutely right in a story, there is the “warmth” of the human voice “conferred on the literary creation” (“Frank O’Connor’s Joyce Criticism” 50); on the other hand, Alexander relates how O’Connor “uses the word ‘cold’ for Joyce’s technique in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, to describe the

quality of detachment he finds in Joyce. . . . Anything that gets in the way of the account, any reportage for its own sake, word play, allusion or symbol, struck O'Connor as sterile exhibitionism and was to be avoided" (50). Placing "The Man of the House" and "Araby" side-by-side reveals Joyce and O'Connor's contrasting attitudes towards their characters. Joyce, in order to illustrate the paralysis of modern Dublin, leaves his protagonist to ponder the vanity of human actions; on the other hand, O'Connor seems to take a more Chekhovian stance towards his young protagonist. This stance is predicated on compassion and an understanding of the "venial sins" unique to each human being, venial sins which are the raw material for "false personality" (LV 87), which is, in turn, raw material for the construction of the "world of appearances."

Like Larry Delaney in "The Man of The World," Gus immediately injects himself into the adult world when he takes it upon himself to become caretaker for his mother when she falls ill. The main thing for Gus is to concentrate. "I was as good as gold so long as I could concentrate," Gus remembers, "[c]oncentration, that was always my weakness, in school and everywhere else. Once I was diverted from whatever I was doing I was lost" (CS 183). Gus's intense desire to concentrate on the task he has set himself reminds one of another passionately held conviction: O'Connor's mother's stubborn belief in the "world of appearances." And indeed Gus believes that if he just concentrates hard enough in the "world of appearances" he has constructed—a "world" where he is the responsible, mature adult who takes care of the household—everything will continue to run smoothly. Gus proceeds to put his mother to bed, to build the fire, to make the tea, and to write down the list of "messages" his mother needs him to deliver. But at every turn, chinks start to show through his adult persona: he makes the tea too

strong; he offers to cook eggs because it is the only meal he knows how to prepare; he asks his mother to write her errands in big letters and to spell out everything exactly, and, to top it all off, readers are made aware of the true preposterousness of Gus's adult behavior when, in the evening, he reads his mother the newspaper and confesses, "I wasn't very quick about it because I was only at words of one syllable" (185). The reader begins to wonder just how long Gus will be able to keep up this fabricated image of himself.

Gus is given the chance to prove his worth once more when he is sent to the dispensary to get his mother's cough medicine. Gus's quest begins. "I felt exalted, a voyager, a heroic figure," he claims (187). The spiritual dimensions of the story begin to take shape when, after making his way through town, Gus ascends the hill upon which the dispensary is located and decides to spend the penny his neighbor gave him on a candle to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the nearby cathedral to speed his mother's recovery, because in his mind he feels sure he would "get more value in a great church like that so close to Heaven" (187). After being "so close to Heaven," Gus must descend into the "sordid hallway" of the dispensary, and this is where Gus's own romanticized "world of appearances," constructed from the notion that he is a responsible adult able to maturely handle the accompanying responsibilities, begins to fall apart. He is tricked by an older girl into drinking the cough medicine which tastes "very sweet and sticky, like treacle" (189). All the sudden, Gus is the innocent child once again, duped into a silly act simply because he does not know better: "Mother was far away, and I was swept from anchorage into an unfamiliar world of spires, towers, trees, steps, and little girls who liked cough bottles. . . . I began to panic" (189). After realizing that they have finished the bottle and

that he has played for a fool, he confesses, “I saw her guile and began to weep” (189). Gus’s first epiphany makes him aware of his loneliness and his naiveté; he is not ready for the world outside his home after all.

This is where Joyce leaves his protagonist in “Araby,” staring up into the darkness tasting the bitter knowledge of vanity. But O’Connor is not finished with Gus. He allows Gus to hope wildly—like any child would—for a “miracle” despite the fact that “[all] the light had gone out of the day, and the echoing hillside had become a vast, alien, cruel world” (CS 189). Gus arrives home sick and in tears from drinking the cough medicine, confesses to his deed, and expects to be punished. He has been too quick to judge the cruelty of the adult world, however, for his mother has compassion on him at once and puts him to bed. Her immediate forgiveness is made evident through her actions. It is only later, lying in bed, that Gus experiences his second epiphany: “I was no good as a nurse, no good to anybody. I accepted it all. But when Mother came up with her evening paper and sat reading by my bed, I knew the miracle had happened. She’d been cured all right” (189). The ending to this story is unique among the stories examined in this thesis because the influences of both Joyce and Chekhov are both seen in the final lines. Gus’s epiphany encompasses both a Joycean perspective, Gus is shown the foolishness of his bravado, his adult persona; and a Chekhovian one, the “miracle” of his mother’s cure stems directly from Gus’s “weakness,” his “venial sin,” one might say, for he is distracted from his quest by the girl who convinces him to drink the bottle, which leads to his sickness, which paradoxically leads to his mother’s cure.

As in the epiphany at the end of “The Man of the World,” O’Connor employs spiritual language describe his young protagonists experiences: where Larry comes face

to face with the vastness of “eternity,” Gus stumbles his way into a “miracle” that has more to do with his failures than his successes. Eavan Boland has written that “a huge and tragic innocence” hangs over the work of Frank O’Connor, an innocence that is tragic precisely because, in most of his characters, it is “contrived” and “sheltered by illusion and wrecked by disillusion” (81, 83). Boland’s assertion may work as a pretty accurate generalization of O’Connor’s vast oeuvre, but it does not hold true for “The Man of the House.” In this story, it is Gus’s *experience*, not his *innocence*, that is “contrived” and then shattered, but out of the resulting wreckage of “disillusionment” (Gus’s acceptance of his true identity as a child in need of a mother) comes a “miracle” of healing.

In contrast to the sacrificial love which seeks to fulfill another’s need displayed by Gus and his mother, “The Pretender” reveals the damaging work of some of the darker instincts of childhood: selfishness and exclusion. Although every child must work through these egotistical tendencies, O’Connor does not devote many stories to exploring children who are greatly affected by either selfishness or the need to exclude others; rather, the faults in his child protagonists usually stem from an over-zealous belief in their intellectual and imaginative powers. However, this is not true for young Michael Murphy (joined by his sister, Susan, in this story). The relatively peaceful lives of these two children are disrupted when their mother starts inviting Denis Corby to play with them. Soon Michael and Susan notice that Denis is spending more time with their mother than he is with them. Michael begins to sense there is something fishy with Denis and his suspicions are confirmed when Denis insinuates that Michael and Susan’s mother might

also be his, thus Denis becomes the “pretender.” This turns out to be untrue, however, but Michael and Susan never fully accept him back into their circle.

Class consciousness pervades this story. Although “The Pretender” does not have a mature narrator (as does “The Man of The World”) to give their cherished prejudices a name, Michael and Susan have completely bought into the “world of appearances” which distinguishes one class from the next. At the outset of the story, they do not want to play with Denis Corby because they already have friends, and they are “all good class”; needing only one look at Denis, Michael intuits that “he was no class”; Denis is then described variously as “a low class boy and a complete outsider” and not “class enough for the fellows I mixed with,” just “a common boy from the Buildings,” a dwelling place which is a “low-class sort of place” (*Stories* 262-64, 66, 68). Societal snobbery, a character trait most often reserved for adults, ensnares the imaginations of Michael and Susan in this story, rendering null the child-like abandon which normally ignores such traps.

What is more, Michael is in the grip of false personality, which further narrows his capacity to extend friendship. Michael’s overly-strict awareness of class boundaries is only one of his “venial” sins. After abandoning Denis in favor of friends with more class, Michael comes home late and expects Denis to be waiting where he left him, and as he is walking, he tries to temper his disloyal behavior with these consoling thoughts: “I was really soft-hearted and I felt full of pity for poor old Denis waiting there for me all the time” (269). Taken out of context, one might be tempted to believe Michael. But his actions towards Denis before and after this expression of regret give the lie to his supposed sincerity. Michael finds that Denis has not waited for him; instead he has



already gone home to Michael's house and is enjoying the company of his mother. All the sudden, Michael realizes that he and Denis have switched places: "They looked snug, sitting there together in the firelight . . . they made me feel like an outsider" (269). This realization is then accompanied by a second revelation has the potential to change the way he treats Denis to the good: "Denis Corby had turned the tables on me with a vengeance. It was I who was jealous and it took me weeks to see why. Then I suddenly tumbled to the fact that though he was quite ready to play with Susie and me it wasn't for that he came to the house. It was Mother, not us, he was interested in" (269). But instead of using this moment where he has felt the plight of the outcast to sincerely try to understand the unfortunate circumstance Denis must be in that he wants to spend all day at Michael's house with what he must see as a caring mother, Michael chooses to store up this information in order to expose Denis's intentions at a later time.

Nothing changes, however, after Michael calls Denis out; in fact, Denis becomes even more of a fixture in his house, turning Michael into a "stranger" in his own home (272). After feeling that they have been "replaced" in their mother's affections by Denis, Michael and Susan attempt to ostracize Denis once more by trying to start a fight with him. They punch him and insult him, all the while making sure he knows that they *are not* his brothers and sisters and their mother *is not* his mother (273-74). After this, Denis stops coming around and the children find out that not only is their mother not his real mother, but that "he hadn't proper mother" (272). But even in the final paragraphs, Michael still exhibits false personality when he relates that by that time, "I didn't really mind and I bore him no grudge for what happened. . . . I was full of compassion for him really" (274-75). These sentiments cannot be trusted as sincere because Michael feels

this way only after Denis is gone and his world and, more important, his relationship with his mother, have been put right. Moreover, when Michael and Susan condescend to visit Denis in his home at the conclusion, they clearly have not been changed by their encounter with an outsider, and are still very much deceived by “the world of appearances”:

But he wouldn't come, and nothing we said could make him. He treated us like enemies almost. Really I suppose he felt a bit of a fool. His mother was a wrinkled old woman; the house was only a labourer's cottage without even an upstairs room; you could see they were no class . . . I said to Susie on the way home, the fellow had a cool cheek to imagine we were his brother and sister. (275)

What occurs at the end of this story is the reverse of the conclusion at the end of Joyce's “An Encounter.” In that story, the unnamed narrator finally understands his need and dependence on his friend Mahoney, and the epiphany at the conclusion suggests that the protagonist has judged his friend too harshly: “How my heart beat as he came running across the field to me! He ran as if to bring me aid. And I was penitent; for in my heart I had always despised him a little” (19). Readers are left with the promise of an altered relationship between the two boys for the good. In O'Connor's “The Pretender,” however, Michael, although given the chance to reconsider his judgment of Denis—a judgment based largely on social class—refuses to extend the hand of friendship. Instead, he walks away, smugly satisfied with his superior position.

Whereas some critics may point to a story like “The Pretender” as the prototypical juvenile story for O'Connor in that it deals primarily with the relationship between mother and son, “Masculine Protest,” one of O'Connor's lesser known and least critiqued stories, offers a healthy corrective to the commonly held assumption that the father-son relationship in O'Connor's writings is filled with anger, bitterness, and misunderstanding.

On the contrary, in this story, Denis Halligan feels alienated from his mother to the point where he decides the only option left to him is to run away from home, and it is his father who comes to the rescue and encourages him to come home; more important, Denis, who is distraught because of the strained relationship with his mother, becomes aware that his father is an “ally” and truly understands his son’s actions where Denis’s mother does not.

In addition to the alienation between mother and son, another aspect to this story which makes it somewhat of an oddity for O’Connor is that Denis is not particularly intelligent (“I wasn’t very bright at school,” he confesses early on) and is not a “sissy” like Larry Delaney or many of the other children who populate the stories; rather, he is intent on proving his “manliness” to his mother (CS 137-139). But even though he is a different type of child, Denis, like Larry and Michael Murphy, struggles with exhibiting a certain falseness in his character. He claims early on that “I was against any false drama”; this, however, is a highly ironic statement for it is made directly in the middle of a “false drama” he has concocted in his imagination—he names it a “revelation”—where his mother finally realizes that the affection of his father and sister is “insincere” and that he is the only one who truly loves her (338). Furthermore, although he describes himself on more than one occasion as a plain, straightforward, and honest young boy (338-40) who backs up his claim to “manliness” by being the “Chief Gang Leader” of the boys in his town; Denis’s short experience apart from his parents in the real world of grown-ups reveals that he is far from achieving “manhood” and is need of more than just “a little affection” (339).

The story begins with alienation between mother and son. Denis’s father is barely in the picture, and there is no hint of the shared understanding the two will share at the

conclusion. The reason for the alienation with his mother, according to Denis, is that “she thought far too much about the impression she wanted to make . . .” (338). This concern with herself, her appearance, means that she spends much time away from the house with friends and at parties. At first Denis resorts to the heroic to win back her love. However, his attempts fail, and like the boy in “Araby,” Denis embarks on a quest, but for an entirely different purpose and towards a different destination.

Whereas the boy in “Araby” goes to the bazaar to bring back a token to prove his love to Mangan’s sister, it is precisely because his mother will not show him the affection that he wants that Denis decides to leave home and strike out on his own to the nearest city. Only a few miles into his journey, Denis, realizing the true weight of his actions, has a moment of indecision, but decides to continue on. Here, at this moment of renewed courage to continue his journey, he has his first epiphany, one that reveals to him the extent to which he is breaking the safe confines of his home and family:

Up to that I had thought mainly of what was behind me; now I thought only of what was ahead of me, and it was frightening enough. I was aware of great distances, of big cloud masses on the horizon, of the fragility of my tires compared with the surface of the road, and I thought only of the two-hour journey ahead of me. The romantic picture of myself cycling across Ireland in the dark disappeared. (341)

This epiphany begins the process by which the false parts of his character are slowly stripped away, leading eventually to his decision to return home. His stubbornness is still there and so his desire to see his mother repent of the way she has ignored his affection, but the “romantic,” heroic notion of his quest is slowly being revealed as an empty fantasy.

The last vestiges of any illusions he still holds are shattered when he finally arrives at the town, desperately tired, only to find that the post office is shut down,

meaning that he cannot get any money to pay for a place to stay. With nowhere else to turn, Denis thinks of his father, a figure who has been forgotten because of Denis's preoccupation with obtaining his mother's love. And with this thought comes a second epiphany: "It was funny that I had not thought of him before. . . . I hadn't even considered him an ally. Now as I thought of him, everything about him seemed different. It wasn't only the hunger and the panic. It was something new for me. It was almost love" (342). The significance of the last part of this realization cannot be overstated. For once, the mention of a father figure does not conjure up an image of a detached disciplinarian or a laughable drunk, but the possibility of rescue, of hope, of something resembling love.

After his father is notified of where Denis is, he arranges for his son's return home and welcomes him back with a frankness and a genuine good-heartedness that surprises Denis at every turn. It is here, at the very end of the story, that he receives the final and most important epiphany of the story:

Mother came in before we went to bed, and Father talked to her just as though nothing had happened. . . . I was fascinated, watching him create an understanding between us. It was an understanding in more ways than one, because it dawned on me gradually, that . . . Dad too had once run away from home, and for some reason—perhaps because the back was shut or because he was hungry, tired, and lonely—he had come back. . . . I never ran away after that. I never felt I needed to. (345)

What this epiphany concerning his father's actions reveals to Denis is not first and foremost that him and his father share an experience of "protest," which is the real sign of "manhood"; but that—through the act of creating an understanding with his son over this one isolated incident—his father has shown him the love that he yearned so deeply for from his mother at the beginning of the story. Moreover, his father's love does not have

to be earned or proven through the “false drama” of heroic acts, but is given freely and generously. In addition to providing a good corrective to the notion that O’Connor’s own experience with his father prevented him from portraying good, loving fathers in his stories, “Masculine Protest” also helps to give balance to the types of epiphanies which appear in his work. For every desolate revelation which forces his young protagonists to confront the terrifying nature of the adult world, O’Connor provides an epiphany which leads his characters to a moment of intimacy, of love, with their parents.

Apart from stories of juveniles set in domestic settings, O’Connor wrote several stories where children are placed in a religious setting. The protagonists in these stories, such as the one in “The Face of Evil,” usually attend a Catholic boys school, and are thus compelled to attend Mass regularly, thereby coming into contact with the mysteries of the faith at an early age. One might think that stories involving religious themes would be free of the deceiving nature of the “world of appearances.” But, of course, as anyone who has ever encountered expressions of religion will know, sometimes, sadly, “appearances” is all it ever amounts to. This is the question facing the unnamed protagonist in “The Face of Evil”: will he be able see beyond the shackles which men have placed on the faith and into the very heart of the mystery?

Of the archetypal worldviews which occur frequently in O’Connor’s stories, William Tomory has written that the “dichotomy in O’Connor’s fiction involves either a romantic (idealistic) conception of life . . . which fails the individual in coping with life’s exigencies, or it involves a recognition by the protagonist that his life has somehow separated him from others” (132-133). While Tomory’s observation applies well to the precocious characters in the domestic stories examined above, in “The Face of Evil,” the

young protagonist is obsessed less with his own “romantic” conception of life and is uncharacteristically attentive to how the behavior of another person has “separated” that person from the rest of the group. This attentiveness to the loneliness of another individual leads to an epiphany which is not focused primarily on oneself; rather, the revelation at the conclusion of these this story is intimately connected to the fate of a lonely individual on the outside of the religious circle. Of all of O’Connor’s child narrators, the character in this story may be the most trenchantly aware of the “lonely voices” that speak from the edge of society (whether that society is sacred or secular) but which lie at the heart of O’Connor’s vision for the short story.<sup>1</sup>

Crucially, the epiphany in “The Face of Evil” occurs inside a chapel. This is not by chance. An occasional travel piece titled “A Conversion” details a 1950 cycling trip through France that O’Connor took with his friend Stan Stewart (an Irish Protestant). One of their hobbies was to look in on as many churches as they could (abandoned or otherwise). In the course of their travels, O’Connor and Stewart befriended a French organist who claimed to be an atheist. While attempting to find a performance of the Stations of the Cross (the trip took place during Holy Week), they stumbled onto a service being conducted by a young priest in front of no more than a handful of people. And yet, despite the haphazard nature of the service, it affected O’Connor and Stewart deeply. His protestant friend, O’Connor explains, “whose usual response to a church service is like his response to a conducted tour, was half-kneeling, his eyes fixed on the priest as though he were some work of art which had to be sized up” (*FCR* 373). O’Connor framed his own reaction to the service in terms of reversal of subject and object, likening it to that disquieting moment in photography, when the photographer

feels as if the "dead child" being captured on film opens her eyes and photographs the camera (374). O'Connor's "epiphany" deserves to be quoted in full:

the service went on, disorderly, disconnected, ridiculous, but for the young priest who held it all together by some sort of inner power. What I have felt then I have felt on other occasions, but it is hard to describe. . . . It is the sudden reversal of a situation which is familiar in dreams and which sooner or later happens to all of us and to the civilizations to which we belong. Bethlehem itself was merely an interesting object which the Roman Empire had studied with amusement, till suddenly it opened its eyes and the Roman Empire was no more. (373-74)

In addition to the experiences of O'Connor and Stewart, the French atheist accompanying them was also moved by the service. For him, the event enabled about as close to a "complete conversion" as was possible (374). This short autobiographical piece shows that, despite being labeled anticlerical by many (a not wholly unfair assessment), sacred space still holds tremendous power in O'Connor's imagination. It is no wonder that the epiphanic moment in "The Face of Evil" takes place inside a church.

Like so many of the domestic stories, the plot of "The Face of Evil" is derived from an experience in O'Connor's childhood. On this occasion, he befriended a "wild, handsome boy" who had run away from home on account of his bad behavior and his father's beatings. The young Michael O'Donovan convinced this boy to return home, and, after reuniting the boy with his family, went home "in a glow of self-righteousness" (AOC 93-4). However, the story did not end well for the boy, as O'Connor relates:

"When we met again he would not look at me; instead, he turned away with a sneer, and I knew his father had beaten him again, and that it was all my fault. As a protector of the weak, I was never worth a damn" (AOC 94). The basic structure of the story is here, but, characteristically, O'Connor uses the flexibility allowed in fiction to explore more



thoroughly the relationship between an insider, the “saintly” protagonist, and an outsider, the “sinful” wild boy, given the name Charlie Dalton in the story.

The narrator of the story confidently attaches the identity “saint” to his devotion to Catholic belief and behavior. “I could never understand all the old talk about how hard it is to be a saint”; he muses in the opening lines, “I was a saint for quite a bit of my life and I never saw anything hard in it” (*FCR* 157). By placing his actions underneath an identifiable persona, he is much like Larry Delaney in “The Genius”<sup>2</sup> and Gus in “The Man of the House.” But unlike his fellow narrators, there is actually some credibility in his “saintly” identity, so that when Richard Harp writes that the transformation which takes place in this story is one of a “self-satisfied saint” being changed into “one who identifie[s] with an outcast of society” (76) he is only half-correct. To call the boy a “self-satisfied saint” is to overlook the earnestness with which he goes about his good deeds and the anxiety that is aroused by his own idleness. The story reveals that the boy’s “saintly” endeavors are misguided, and, in fact, he only later comes to glimpse what it means to be a true “saint,” but one thing he is not is “self-satisfied.” To further contradict Hart’s label, three statements early on show the boy to be really struggling with what sainthood looks like in himself and in his immediate surroundings.

First, he says, concerning the “sissies” in his neighborhood who gave “sainthood” a bad name: “I never enjoyed the society of chaps who wouldn’t commit sin for the same reason that they wouldn’t dirty their new suits. That was never what sanctity meant to me, and I doubt if it is what it means to other saints. The companions I liked were the tough gang down the road . . .” (158). Here, in his young and unsophisticated way, the boy shows that he understands sanctity to be something more than just keeping yourself

clean from the sinfulness of others. If he knew of Milton, he would agree with him that cloistered virtue is no virtue at all. Even so, he does not yet understand the immense responsibility involved in taking on the burden of another's sin. This will come later. Second, the boy shows that he understands that there is a "mystery" at the heart of the Catholic Mass which gives it a dimension that is hard to explain, but it is something which highlights and brings out the "mystery" at the heart of each person attending the service: "Then there were the different people . . . people who seemed ordinary enough when you met them during the day, but carried something of their mystery with them at Mass, as though they, too, were re-born" (159). As though they, too, were "saints," he might add. Third, the boy gives voice to an internal struggle that reveals a certain maturity in his understanding of sainthood: "[Being a saint] was like no other hobby, because you never really got the better of yourself, and all at once you would suddenly find yourself reverting childish attitudes . . . then it all came back; the nagging of the infernal alarm clock which grew louder with every moment until it incarnated as smooth, fat, jeering face" (160-61). Clearly, the boy is anything but self-satisfied.

However, despite his insight into some matters pertaining to the spiritual life, the boy still harbors a somewhat idealistic and unpracticed notion of "sainthood"; that is, until he meets the "face of evil," Charlie Dalton, the "bad boy" in town who has actually committed "real" sins. The narrator views him much like Larry views the older "man of the world," Jimmy Leary: "the feeling which came uppermost in me was never pity but respect: respect for a fellow who had done all the things I would never do . . ." (162). The crucial difference, however, between the narrator in "The Face of Evil" and Larry in "The Man of the House" is that, while the latter feels himself stuck one side of the "world

of appearances” while Jimmy remains on the other, the former is able to get behind the religious “world of appearances”—the trappings, the labels, and, especially the dichotomy between “sinners” and “saints”—and make a real, sincere effort to understand the outsider Charlie Dalton.

The relationship between the narrator and Charlie grows and becomes fortified at an intersection in the town significantly named “the Cross.” Further enhancing the spiritual symbolism of the intersection and the conversations that occur there, the narrator says that “the whole Cross had become a place of mystery; the grey light, drained of warmth; the trees hanging over the whole old crumbling walls. . . It was . . . as though everything about you melted and fused and become one with a central mystery” (164). Richard Harp correctly calls attention to the firmly held idea in Catholic thought that the Cross of Christ is the “central mystery” of Christianity; moreover, Harp points out that it is at “the Cross” that the narrator becomes a “true saint” by taking an interest in Charlie, who is one of O’Connor’s “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” (76). However, one can go even further than Harp does in connecting the relationship formed between the “saint” and the “sinner” in this story to O’Connor’s theory of the “lonely voice” (a theory which has definite spiritual underpinnings that are often overlooked). In his foundational introduction to *The Lonely Voice*, O’Connor writes of Gogol’s seminal short story, “The Overcoat,” featuring the archetypal outcast, Akakey Akakevitch: “If one wanted an alternative title for this work, one might choose ‘I Am Your Brother.’ What Gogol has done so boldly and brilliantly is to take the mock-heroic character, the absurd little copying clerk, and impose his image over that of the crucified Jesus . . .” (*LV* 16). Set in juxtaposition with O’Connor’s understanding of the immense

spiritual import of “outlawed” characters, the relationship of the boy and Charlie Dalton takes on a deeper meaning. While not fitting the precise mold of a “mock heroic” character, Charlie is nonetheless an outsider whose surface-level image of “sinner” is superimposed over that of the crucified Jesus (the name of the intersection thus becomes even more important). Whereas according to O’Connor’s schemata laid out in *The Lonely Voice*, it is normally the outsider who says to the insider, “I Am Your Brother”; in “The Face of Evil,” it is the “saintly” insider who, by his welcoming words and actions, extends this invitation to Charlie.

But the relationship developed at “the Cross,” although significant, is not the moment of epiphany in the story; it merely paves the way to the epiphany, which as I have already mentioned, takes place inside the chapel. The narrator finally convinces Charlie to come with him to confession, and after Charlie confesses his long litany of sins and is given a heavy penance by the priest, the boy sits at the back of the church and waits for him. Hindsight grants the narrator the first part of his epiphany: “And it was only long afterwards that it occurred to me that I might have taken one of the major decisions of my life without being aware of it” (166). It is not explicitly clear which “major decision” he is talking about, for it could be a number of decisions he has made in the story: the decision to befriend and develop a conversational relationship with the outcast Charlie, the decision to invite him inside the chapel to confess his sins, or the decision to wait for him at the back of the church while he completes his penance. The second half of the epiphany which comes only seconds later seems to lend weight to the last decision, that of waiting for Charlie, or, as he imagines it, bearing at least some small part of his burden: “For the first time in my life I knew real temptation. I wanted to go

with Charlie and share his fate. For the first time I realized that the life before me would have complexities of emotion which I couldn't even imagine" (166).

The boy's epiphany forces him to realize that "sainthood" is no surface-level identity, not a robe to put on in front of others to fit into the world of religious appearances. The first half of the story shows the boy's inner turmoil over what "saintliness" should look like; the second half reveals what "being a saint" actually demands of the boy when it is put into practice. What is more, the "complexity of emotions" that the boy feels at the end indicates that he is beginning to realize that truthful living in the religious sphere requires a depth of insight which sees beyond the easy dichotomy between "saint and sinner," "outsider and insider" to a deeper level where the appearance of all such binaries gives way to the "shared" burden of personal relationships.

Thus, the narrator in this story acts in positive contradistinction to Michael Murphy of "The Pretender." Michael refuses to befriend the social outsider Denis Corby, an act of snobbery made all the more vicious given that Michael was granted the chance to understand what it meant to be the "stranger," the "outcast." In contrast, the boy in "The Face of Evil" is not only cognizant of the epiphany given to him concerning Charlie Dalton, but acts upon it, engaging him in conversation and leading him to the confession box. Therefore, the unnamed narrator here shows some kinship through his actions to Joyce's unnamed narrator in "An Encounter." Both boys allow moments of revelation to alter the way they view another human being. The epiphanies propel the boys to see the possibilities of friendship instead of the continual need to maintain their superior position through judging the other.

Unlike many of his stories, O'Connor adds a coda to the epiphany at the end of "The Face of Evil" that seems to contradict and undo all the good that had been achieved up until that point, a coda which corresponds to the last two lines of his childhood memory quoted above: "and I knew his father had beaten him again, and that it was all my fault. As a protector of the weak, I was never worth a damn" (*AOC* 94). "The Face of Evil" ends with this piece of news about the actions of Charlie Dalton after he left the chapel that day: "The following week he ran away from home again, took a bicycle, broke into a shop to steal cigarettes, and, after being arrested seventy-five miles from Cork in a little village on the coast, was sent to an industrial school" (*FCR* 166). James D. Alexander reads this as a bit of realistic cynicism about the efficacy of a religious experience. Interpreting the story as one that promotes "the influence of example"—particularly the boy's "good" influence on Charlie—Alexander can only conclude by stating that the story "ends on an ominous note. . . . It implies that although more good can be achieved by example than by brute force, force may undo the good" ("Frank O'Connor's *New Yorker* Stories" 111). But Alexander seems to be too concerned about the boy making a *lasting* and *permanent* impression on Charlie, whereas O'Connor would likely say that the short story can only deal in small measures, while the novel is the form that has the time to take up complete transformation.<sup>3</sup> Alexander also forgets the importance of one of the central lines in the story, when the narrator says, concerning his intentions towards Charlie: "I never had any missionary zeal. It was the pleasure of *understanding* rather than that of *conversion*" (*FCR* 165; emphasis mine). Read with this in mind, the last paragraph need not have the effect of "undoing the good" that the narrator's friendship brought about. The epiphany reveals that the boy achieves the kind

of “understanding” he was looking for. It is an understanding that does not always hope for conversion, but one which enacts the cry of Gogol’s character that O’Connor admired so much: “I Am Your Brother.”

The epiphanies that occur in the stories examined in this chapter are sudden, intense, and force the children to confront “the world of appearances” as it manifests itself in the immediate relationships of family and friends in “The Man of the House,” “The Pretender,” and the “Masculine Principle,” and in the sphere of religious thought and practice in “The Face of Evil.” “The Man of the House” and “The Masculine Protest” relate to one another as they both follow the same narrative trajectory: the young protagonist goes on a quest and at the very height of the quest has a realization of the loneliness he feels in the big world without his parents. The *dénouements* differ slightly, but both conclude with an epiphany of communion between son and parent. In “The Man of the House,” Gus comes home crying and is comforted by his mother, while Denis in “The Masculine Protest” receives the comfort and companionship of his father. In both “The Pretender” and “The Face of Evil,” the climaxes swing on the hinge of judgment. The epiphanies the protagonists receive point them to a moral decision: they can either judge the outsiders for their weaknesses and sins or seek out the bonds of friendship. The unnamed narrator of “The Face of Evil” is alert to the insight granted him and proceeds to “share the fate” of the “sinful” Charlie Dalton, while Michael Murphy in “The Pretender” chooses not to accept the outsider Denis Corby, showing that the revelation extended in an epiphany can just as easily be refused as it is accepted.

Frank O’Connor’s reputation as a highly-skilled practitioner of the short story writer will continue to be based on his well known, masterfully crafted tales about the

“lonely” struggles of everyday Irish men and women tucked away in towns like his beloved Cork. “Guests of the Nation” (1931), “Peasants” (1922), “The Majesty of the Law (1935), “The Long Road to Unmera” (1940), and “In the Train” (1935) are some of the more popular of these types of stories. But even though only one of the eight stories examined in this study (“My Oedipus Complex”) is consistently anthologized, I would argue that O’Connor’s stories about children deserve a higher place in the echelon of great O’Connor tales. Julianne White attributes O’Connor’s success in writing about children to his intense interest and, indeed, his love of the world of childhood:

O’Connor not only seems to know and understand the terrors and joys of children’s experiences, he also seems to love such experiences for the truth they contain, not only about children’s lives, but about the adults those children will soon grow into. The characters in O’Connor’s stories are very much like the people we know and the people we are. . . . (106)

In an interview, O’Connor’s second wife, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy, confirms White’s intuition about O’Connor’s interest in the youthful imagination, when she says:

His stories about children came almost entirely from his own life and from his observations of his own children. He was endlessly fascinated by children—perhaps because their emotions are so intense, their experience of life so immediate and their reactions so transparent. (7-8)

However, just before making the statement above, Sheehy remarks, as a warning to readers who might enjoy O’Connor’s stories for the wrong reason, that her late husband “really hated sentimentality and wanted to write about people and conditions as they were and not as they might appear in some nostalgic memory of home” (7).

This study has been an attempt to do just what Sheehy suggests, namely, to read O’Connor’s juvenile stories as a remarkably realistic love affair with childhood. The strands that come together to form my close reading—Joyce’s epiphanic moment, Chekhov’s “venial sins” leading to false personality—provide the necessary rebuttal to an



idealized world of youth and innocence. For O'Connor, clear perception of reality must be earned through a careful awareness of the deceitful nature of the "world of appearances" and a wise selection of trustworthy companions. The underlying warning in O'Connor's stories is unmistakable: however precarious the journey may seem, adults and children are both required to walk it, and children must be all the more careful for having the longer road to travel.

## NOTES

### Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> Sensing that close reading has “long been discredited as a conservative and limited critical practice,” Shen puts forth his method as one which tries to bring the advantages of close reading “into full play while trying to get rid of its earlier limitations” (150). I write that I will be *broadly* using Shen’s method because I will not be sticking to his style of examination to a point. For example, when he suggests that the critic take into account “the socio-historical contexts involved,” I will consider only the “socio-historical contexts” of O’Connor’s childhood as represented in his autobiographical volume; that is, I will not be discussing larger “socio-historical” contexts of Ireland during O’Connor’s lifetime.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Delaney is the central character in eight stories of childhood and four of adolescence. These stories are collected together in the volume *Larry Delaney: Lonesome Genius*.

<sup>3</sup> In a 1956 article entitled “A Good Short Story Must Be News,” O’Connor wrote that a story “must rouse the reader’s attention like a person grabbing his lapels: it must be suitable for telling around a fire” (qtd. in Alexander, “Frank O’Connor’s *New Yorker* stories” 120).

<sup>4</sup> O’Connor was a very prodigious writer. Apart from his short story collections (of which he published eleven in total), O’Connor published two novels, *The Saint and Mary Kate* (1932) and *Dutch Interior* (1940), one book of original poetry, seven books of translated Irish poetry, a biography on Michael Collins, *The Big Fellow* (1937), three travelogues of Ireland, eight plays, two selected anthologies of Irish writing, five books of literary criticism, and over two hundred and fifty articles in a wide assortment of periodicals (Lennon 16). It was in 1945 when O’Connor published his first story in *The New Yorker*. His partnership with *The New Yorker* would last the rest of his life and is chronicled in an intimate way through his correspondence with its editor, William Maxwell. Their letters are compiled in *The Happiness of Getting It Down Right: Letters of Frank O’Connor and William Maxwell, 1945-1966*.

<sup>5</sup> For a good overview of the scholarship devoted to O’Connor, see Hilary Lennon’s introduction to the essay collection she has edited, *Frank O’Connor: Critical Essays*, and the exhaustive bibliographical appendix attached onto Robert C. Evans and Richard Harp’s *Frank O’Connor: New Perspectives*.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning the unusual amount of attention O’Connor gives to Joyce in his critical writings, James D. Alexander notes that “O’Connor writes more often on Joyce than any other writer, even on Yeats whom he admired. On no other writer does he spend

so much enthusiasm; on no other, so much vituperation” (40). In broad strokes, O’Connor dismissed Joyce’s writings as fiction for the university, fiction that is written only to be studied: “His stories are ‘art’ stories, the mind-formed patterns of an erudite man imposed on society” (qtd. in Alexander 48). Elsewhere, Alan M. Cohn and Richard Peterson synthesize O’Connor’s criticism of Joyce’s departure from the short story genre: “O’Connor argued that Joyce abandoned the short story because he had grown impatient with characters shaped by circumstance and needed the larger canvas of the novel to satisfy his obsession with style and structure” (214).

## Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Sherry observes that it is not only Larry Delaney who can be said to have one foot in real world and one foot in O’Connor’s imagination: “other names and family constellations are also used: for example, the little boy in the later versions of ‘First Confession’ is called Jackie. . . . But although Jackie is not identical with Larry, and Larry is not altogether identical with the young Michael O’Donovan, Jackie’s grandmother, with her bare feet, her shawl, and her porter, is recognizably Michael O’Donovan’s grandmother as represented in *An Only Child*” (188).

<sup>2</sup> The tone of judgment and righteous indignation colors Larry’s relationship to his immediate surroundings, from the natural world—“Dawn was just breaking with a *guilty* air that made me feel *I had caught it in the act*” (*BFC* 111)—to the actions of his family members, as he says of his mother’s change in attitude once father arrives home: “The *injustice* of it got me down. I had *convicted* her out of her own mouth of inconsistency and unreasonableness, and she hadn’t even attempted to reply” (114; emphasis mine).

<sup>3</sup> Although it is primarily (as with my purposes in this study) a story about a child, “My Oedipus Complex” can also be read from the viewpoint of the adults, a viewpoint which yields an even darker conclusion. Michael Steinman claims that “My Oedipus Complex is a story “about sorrowing adults whose problems cannot be repaired, not little boys whose tragedies can be made to disappear by a kind adult” (“Frank O’Connor’s ‘Lonely Rock’” 203). While his point may be slightly overstated, Steinman is perceptive elsewhere when he writes that the model railway is simply an object that fails to fill the void where parental love should be (*FCR* 82).

## Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> “A Minority” (1957), another story dealing with religious matters, includes “lonely voices” on the edge of society. In it, the boy Denis Halligan befriends Willy Stein, the only other “proddy” in a Catholic Boys school. After forming a bond based on their “outsider” status, Denis gives into the pressure of his peers and becomes a Catholic. The story ends with his baptismal service, where, having found out that Willy Stein is, in fact, a Jew, Dennis, angry and envious at Willy’s stubborn refusal to cling to a form of

faith (Protestantism) that is not even his own, calls him “a dirty Jew-Boy.” Denis immediately realizes how “false” his accusation is and the story ends with Dennis having a revelatory moment, where he sees “the dirty little delinquent whom everyone pitied and despised transfigured by a glory that he himself would never know” (*FCR* 182-190).

<sup>2</sup> Similar to “The Man of the World,” the title, “The Face of Evil” seems to suggest that the story’s meaning is closely connected with the *other* character in the story, not the protagonist. Much like “The Genius” and “The Man of the House,” O’Connor could have chosen a title such as “The Saint” which would have focused all the attention on the identity of the main character; however, by choosing “The Face of Evil” the story’s title suggest that the fate of Charlie Dalton is of just as much importance as that of the narrator.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Lonely Voice*, O’Connor argues that one of main differences between the novel form and that of the short story concerns the amount of time available to an author to create his narrative: “In this the element of Time is [the novelist’s] greatest asset; the chronological development of character or incident is essential [sic] form as we see it in life. . . . Because [the short-story writer’s] frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must forever be selecting the point at which he can approach it” (21), and, consequently, the point at which he must leave it.

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