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Rediscovering Frank O'Connor

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REDISCOVERING FRANK O'CONNOR

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

English

Department of English
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ABSTRACT

“Minor” twentieth-century Irish writers such as Frank O’Connor have largely been neglected by a critical era which favors longer, more experimental fiction, following James Joyce’s models. Both in practice and in theory, Frank O’Connor set standards for the modern short story beyond its current misconception as “a narrative form shorter than the novel.” Still, as a master of his genre and a significant contributor to his nation’s literary renaissance, Frank O’Connor’s reputation has faded in recent years.

This thesis will attempt to account for the decline in O’Connor’s reputation and to reexamine his artistry in terms of his range and depth of characterization and manipulation of narrative technique. O’Connor’s characters constituted a diverse population of romantic idealists, soldiers, and priests, among others, though he is best known for highly-anthologized stories about children, such as “My Oedipus Complex” and “First Confession.” Each of O’Connor’s character groups provides a significant quantity of entertaining, realistic stories which deserve further critical attention. This thesis will explore the techniques O’Connor employed in his short fiction, with the dual purpose of demonstrating the focus and insight of individual stories and judging anew the literary reputation of the artist himself.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .............................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................... v

CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION ...................................... 1

CHAPTER 2  NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN DRAFTING “FIRST CONFESSION” .... 10

CHAPTER 3  THE RANGE AND DEPTH OF THE CHILDHOOD NARRATIVES ....... 38

CHAPTER 4  “CHARACTERIZING” HUMAN PRIESTS .................................... 61

CHAPTER 5  TRADITIONALISM AND THE WRITER AMONG CONTEMPORARIES ... 89

CHAPTER 5  CONCLUSION ........................................... 111

APPENDIX I  NOTES ................................................ 118

WORKS CITED ..................................................... 121
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Michael Hurley McCarthy.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Who is Frank O'Connor? That, unfortunately, is the question most likely to arise when someone mentions, even among those familiar with literature, the name of the truest Renaissance man of the Irish Literary Renaissance. Though the generation which preceded Frank O'Connor produced such accomplished figures as Joyce, Yeats, and Synge, those who followed were left with an enormous void to fill. O'Connor certainly did his part, even if he did not receive the credit he deserved; his wide range of accomplishments rival any of those previously mentioned. This wide range manifests itself most in his writing: he wrote in every major literary genre—two novels, numerous poems, three plays, and over two hundred short stories—and he delved into translation, biography, travel literature, and literary criticism, as well.

The man himself was born in 1903 as Michael O'Donovan, but it was under the pseudonym of Frank O'Connor that he became a true Renaissance man, accomplishing an incredible amount in word and deed from his meager Cork beginnings until his untimely death in 1966. He received little formal education, having quit school at age fourteen; nevertheless, he loved books and taught himself a great deal, most notably, to read, speak, and translate from the native Irish language. As a young man, O'Connor fought as a revolutionary in the guerilla-style warfare of the Irish Civil war and was taken prisoner by the Free State government. After the war, he pursued his lifelong love of books as a librarian, eventually becoming a head librarian in his native Cork and later in Dublin. His first volume of stories, *Guests of the Nation*, won him such acclaim that he soon became part of a Dublin literary
scene which included Yeats and George Russell. His friendship with Yeats ultimately led to O'Connor's involvement in the Abbey Theater, and from 1935 to 1939, O'Connor served as its managing director, which gave him the final word and ultimate responsibility for Ireland's greatest theater.

By this time, Frank O'Connor was recognized by name and appearance throughout Ireland, and he became even more well known to a wider audience when during World War II he gained employment reading his stories over the airwaves for the BBC. His stories were most often published in British and Irish periodicals before being collected into volumes. O'Connor also became involved in Sean O'Faolain's literary journal The Bell as its poetry editor. Of course, not all of the recognition was favorable: as the title of his 1936 collection of stories Bones of Contention suggests, he was, by nature, stubbornly critical. His often controversial stances led to "reeking unpopularity" (Morrow in O'Connor Reader 305) and disdain for O'Connor among many of his countrymen (even those who had not read his work) and to censorship by the new Irish government. Nonetheless, Benedict Kiely has pointed out that "in the days of the Censorship of Publications Board every Irish writer worth talking about had a somewhat similar reputation" (36).

Even more bluntly than in his fiction, O'Connor criticized Irish life, customs, and morals in a weekly column for the Sunday Independent from 1943 to 1945 under the pseudonym Ben Mayo. Still, he remained deeply committed to his native land; he criticized freely and fought bitter battles, but only in the best interests of Ireland as he saw them.

After 1945, his recognition became more widespread, especially because he began to reach a steady American audience. O'Connor became a staple of The New Yorker magazine, which published forty-five of his stories from 1945 to 1966 (Alexander 130). He reached a further American audience when he left Ireland in 1951 to lecture and teach in America at Northwestern, Harvard,
and Stanford Universities. During this time, he began to collect his best stories and to publish a great deal of non-fiction. His university lectures justified his reflections on the nature of literature, and he began to write literary criticism which would eventually include a study of Shakespeare, a study of the novel, and a survey of Irish literature. Before his death at the age of 63, he wrote two volumes of autobiography and probably his most significant critical work, *The Lonely Voice*, a study of the short story.

Even though he led an eventful life, Frank O'Connor should principally remain with us today in the legacy of fine work he has left behind. His translations of poetry from the Irish language are the best and most extensive renderings into English there probably ever will be. His criticism remains applicable and thought-provoking, and his autobiographical work is as fresh and enjoyable today as it was to reviewers in the 1950s.

Most of all, though, Frank O'Connor dedicated his life to writing short stories, and he became one of the premier writers in the form. He wrote over two-hundred stories, many of them great, and they are as a whole marked by a consistency which blends entertainment and wonderment, comedy and tragedy, reality and imagination. Diligently crafted, O'Connor stories were usually "rewritten a dozen times, a few of them fifty times" (*The Lonely Voice* 220). Most of the time in revising a story, O'Connor was trying to "get it right"—his main concerns were with the voices he envisioned, the voices of the characters in his head and, especially, the narrator's voice. Thus, it is little surprise that his characterization and narrative technique were probably his most significant achievements.

O'Connor wrote about the Ireland he knew, and his stories were most often populated by romantics, priests, sinners, drunkards, outlaws, revolutionaries—lonely people on the fringes of Irish society. "Submerged population groups," O'Connor called them in his study of the short story, *The*
Lonely Voice:

I am suggesting strongly that we can see in [the short story] an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time—tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests. The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community...but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent. (21)

Even in O'Connor's child characters one notices a sense of individuality and separation from the adult world. O'Connor gave voice to his submerged population groups literally; he let his characters speak in their own voices, and he brilliantly captured those voices. "I prefer," [O'Connor] once wrote, "to write about Ireland and Irish people merely because I know to a syllable how everything in Ireland can be said" (Flanagan in Sheehy 150). Such a statement may sound arrogant, but in fact O'Connor was a very modest, humble, shy man who often enough put his foot in his mouth. Furthermore, O'Connor's statement was not so much a declaration of his talent as a defense of his subject matter. He was constantly defending himself for having chosen to write about Ireland exclusively, especially after he came to America ("Why Don't You Write About America?" O'Connor Reader 318). Even so, Thomas Flanagan has said, "He was right about his talent: he knew to a syllable how everything could be said in Ireland" (Sheehy 159).

Even greater than O'Connor's talent for how things could be said was his talent for determining how a story should be told. A surprising amount of the rewriting O'Connor did was devoted not just to simple revision of a word or sentence; sometimes he changed the perspective from which the story was told. He even revised stories which had already been published, for example, by shifting the narration from third to first person—or vice versa. Often the changes and the artistry behind the narration in O'Connor's stories was so subtle as to be almost invisible. Sean O'Faolain, one of O'Connor's lifelong
colleagues, has claimed (in his own book on the short story) that such invisibility is fundamental to a great story: “it becomes the highest craft in a tale if the angle is, [so] to speak, concealed” (236). O’Faolain further argues that though the author masks his artistry with great skill, the full effect of the short story can only be gained if the reader notices the writer’s subtleties:

> I cannot say too often that the modern short-story is based on the most highly perfected technique in prose-fiction; and that we read short-stories not only for their matter or content but for the joy we get out of seeing a craftsman doing a delicate job of work. (237)

The angle from which the story is told becomes almost as important as the story’s content itself; what the story is about is contingent upon who tells it. O’Connor has similarly differentiated between the objectivity of a dramatic stage performance—which allows the observer to decipher truth—and the lonely art of the short story, which “should be subjective and persuasive... [since] the storyteller suggests to the reader what he believes happened” (The Lonely Voice 163).

Thus, O’Connor’s stories almost always assume a first person or limited third person narration which follows the point of view of a single character. O’Connor always seemed to find the best way to tell the story, the character from whose perspective the story could best be told. He sometimes stumbled along the way—his reworking of stories attests to the times when he did not “get it right”—but overall, the almost perfect union of story and teller is one of O’Connor’s foremost achievements.

The short story also involves an element of condensed time, to capture in a glimpse one significant event in a character’s life. Even within that singular event there are countless ways of approaching it: shall we begin at the beginning, with the genesis and causes of the event? should we begin “in medias res” or at the event’s climax? O’Connor was a master at making such choices, another reason to claim that he knew well how a story would best be
told. For example, O'Faolain named O'Connor's "In the Train" as
one of the finest of modern Irish short-stories... [because he] takes
the story long after its obvious climax...Within that general
setting with what subtlety the camera slowly approaches...the
central figure. We get glimpses of her through the minds of almost
everybody else before at last the camera slews full face on to the
woman the story is about. That is a beautiful piece of technique. (236)

Some of Frank O'Connor's stories supply background information which
contributes to the story's meaning or simply include background details for
effect; other stories begin "in medias res" and supply background as needed;
still others focus entirely on a brief moment in time, without any background.

To a large extent, O'Connor experimented with how much background was
necessary in the many drafts he wrote for each of his stories. The first
chapter of this thesis will explore the issues of point of view, background
detail, and time span which confronted Frank O'Connor while he was writing
and revising one of his most popular stories, "First Confession," over a period
of some fifteen years.

While "In the Train" was a successful experiment in technique, one
must be mindful of the fact that form always followed subject for O'Connor;
that is, O'Connor explored technique only in so far as it helped him to reach
his primary goal, to realistically and vividly present his subject matter.

O'Connor employed various narrative techniques wmainly because he devoted
his work to depicting "the pattern of human life and how rhetoric may follow
it" ("Introduction to Portrait" in O'Connor Reader 345).

This is the point at which O'Connor chose to depart from Joyce and other
modernists, for whom "the elaboration of style and form had taken control"
(Lonely Voice 125). O'Connor argues that at the end of Dubliners Joyce lost
sight of his submerged population and was never, in "The Dead" or beyond it,
able to deal with "characters" again. Instead of portraying real, vivid
characters, Joyce could only deal with "personalities" (125). O'Connor's
harshest critique is that Joyce "made a mistake that is fatal to the storyteller [in] depriving his submerged population of autonomy" (121). Thus, instead of creating characters whose identity was determined by the circumstances of their lives, Joyce bound characters to a limited world in which his literary occupation with myth and symbolism and theory took precedence over reality. O'Connor's arguments pose some valid questions not just about Joyce's later work but about the direction of modernist writing in the twentieth century. One of our goals, especially in the final chapter, will be to consider the implications of O'Connor's stance toward modernism and its impact on his reputation.

In the years since his death, praise has been heaped on Frank O'Connor:

"...one of the great Irish writers of the century" (Jacket note for My Father's Son, 1970)

"Frank O'Connor...is famous throughout the world for his short stories[,] several of which may claim their places in any world anthology of the genre " (Sean McMahon, 1978, Great Irish Writing 25)

"The sheer quality of so many of his short stories earns him entry into the first rank of short-story writers..." (William Tomory, 1980, Frank O'Connor 177)

"Frank O'Connor, by any reckoning one of the masters of the short story..." (Peter Prescott, 1981, Newsweek 73)

"[O'Connor's] stories as a whole are his masterpiece, a body of immensely satisfying work in the realistic mode...perhaps the fullest, the liveliest, certainly the most heartwarming picture of twentieth-century Ireland...is found in O'Connor" (Clifford Fadiman, 1986, The World of the Short Story 293)

"...one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century" (James Pickering, 1988, Reader's Guide to the Short Story 64)

"[O'Connor's] many collections of short stories...gained him a worldwide reputation as one of the greatest masters of the form" (Introductory note to Guests of the Nation, 1993 edition)

"Ireland's most gifted storyteller, Frank O'Connor..." (James
However, even despite this lavish praise and the consistent label of "master of the short story" which have accompanied O'Connor's reputation all these years, today O'Connor, if he is recognized at all, is known as "a master whose reputation has deteriorated badly of late," as one of his most recent reviewers has written (Nash 106). Michael Steinman, an O'Connor scholar, tries to account for this decline in the introduction to a recent collection of O'Connor's work:

Not long ago, O'Connor's work was read enthusiastically in America, Ireland, Great Britain, Germany, Denmark, and Japan, yet he has been less celebrated than he deserves since his death in 1966 for reasons that have nothing to do with his achievement. He was an extraordinary short story writer, but that form seems an evanescent one, finding only brief fame before vanishing in a readers' Limbo between its first publication and the eventual collection or anthology. (xi)

The pages that follow will explore the factors which have shaped and, to some degree, limited O'Connor's artistic reputation. Among these factors are the limited endurance of the short story form; the supposed simplicity and humorousness of O'Connor's work in general; the allegation that O'Connor's fiction relies too heavily on his autobiography; O'Connor's stormy relationship with Ireland and, in particular, Catholicism; his literary dwelling place, in the shadow of James Joyce and other Irish luminaries, alongside Liam O'Flaherty and Sean O'Faolain, with whom he has been confused both inside and outside of Ireland; his lack of progression as a writer, and lack of innovation as a realist in the age of modernism; and his formulation of unorthodox critical theories which he did not adequately support. Most of these points of detraction are unfair, and many are inaccurate. Thus, this thesis will scrutinize these criticisms, especially as they can be judged through the framework of O'Connor's stories.

The primary concern, though, will be attempting to reclaim the literary
artistry of the stories themselves, especially in terms of the narrative
technique O'Connor employed, the range and variety of the characters he
presented, his rare ability to stir a range of emotion within the confines of a
single story, and his genuine talent as a storyteller, capturing his characters
vividly and realistically and seizing his readers' interest and wonderment.
CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN DRAFTING “FIRST CONFESSION”

Frank O'Connor's narratives of childhood, admittedly, constitute a vital portion of his work overall in the short story genre, but the significance of this particular set of short stories has long misrepresented the complete body of O'Connor's work. The stories about children make up only about fifteen percent of the total number of stories he wrote, yet they bear an incredibly disproportionate influence on his reputation. One can partially account for this undue influence as a result of the weight carried by anthologies in establishing a writer's canon of most well-known works. Furthermore, those few short story writers who withstand the test of time do so mainly through inclusion in anthologies rather than through volumes exclusively devoted to one writer. Of the ten published volumes of Frank O'Connor's stories, for example, none remain in print; in fact, only two books which are devoted exclusively to O'Connor's work remain in print: his Collected Stories, edited by Richard Ellmann, and a new anthology of lesser-known works titled A Frank O'Connor Reader.

O'Connor, as with most short story writers, remains most accessible through general short story anthologies, but these anthologies have shaped his reputation in a rather limiting way. Often, the short story writer is known and judged primarily for the few stories that have been most highly anthologized. The fate of Frank O'Connor differs only slightly from that of a typical short story writer. In O'Connor's case, instead of being represented by one or two short stories, he is typically represented by a subgenre of his own short fiction, the "simple," memorable, humorous stories told by a small,
innocent boy. Since his death, these stories—along with the early story that has had the single most effect on O'Connor's reputation, "Guests of the Nation"—have continued to be the most widely and popularly anthologized of O'Connor's stories. Thus, the work of a man who has often been called "one of the great storytellers of the twentieth century" (Pickering 64) is today represented almost solely by such stories as "My Oedipus Complex," "The Drunkard," and "First Confession."

Such misrepresentation does a twofold disservice to O'Connor's reputation. First, as the editor of one anthology points out, "It's hard to single out any one O'Connor story" as representative because "his stories as a whole are his masterpiece, a body of immensely satisfying work" (Fadiman 293). Thus, by representing O'Connor with childhood stories in which he has purposefully limited technique and subject matter, anthologies seeking to demonstrate O'Connor's work representatively have more often than not succeeded only in limiting his reputation. O'Connor may even have helped to constrain his own reputation in this way when, as editor of Modern Irish Short Stories in 1957, he chose to include "Guests of the Nation" and "My Oedipus Complex" as his two best stories.²

Secondly, the fact that the childhood narratives themselves have not received the serious critical attention they deserve compounds the problem of misrepresentation. Too often it has been easy for critics to limit commentary on these stories to links with O'Connor's autobiographical work, to the stories' "incisive insight into Irish life," and to their "charming humor" (Wohlgelehrter 69). The nature and sources of the humor central to many of these childhood narratives has not been adequately examined; simultaneously, more serious themes that often underlie superficially humorous stories have largely been ignored. Critics and anthologists alike have disregarded such childhood stories as "The Face of Evil" which lack humorous undertones. In
all, serious meaning in O'Connor's childhood narratives has seldom been identified, much less explored.

This chapter and the one that follows, then, will attempt to recapture the artistry of Frank O'Connor in the childhood narratives, first by exploring the depth of narrative technique in O'Connor's formation of a single story, and then by exploring the range of child characters and themes within the larger scope of the narratives.

A profound irony pervades O'Connor's childhood narratives: as his career progressed, age and experience granted O'Connor the ability to more clearly understand and more insightfully portray youth. O'Connor was one of the writers of the twentieth century (if not in the history of Western literature) most capable of creating believable child characters. His understanding and insight were not the result of a natural talent, but evolved, in fact, from O'Connor's own tendency toward perfectionism. One of the most essential dimensions of Frank O'Connor as a writer of short stories was his diligence in reworking a story until he “got it right.” He revised incessantly, even “tampering” with those stories he had already published, to the chagrin of editors, publishers, and critics alike (Frank O'Connor at Work 12-13). Only rarely was he satisfied. Perhaps the best illustration of his tireless efforts to write the “perfect story” was an example O'Connor used himself:

My own evidence for [the elusiveness of the perfect story] comes from a story I once wrote called 'First Confession.' It is a story about a little boy who goes to confession for the first time and confesses that he had planned to kill his grandmother. I wrote the story twenty-five years ago, and it was published and I was paid for it. I should have been happy, but I was not. No sooner did I begin to re-read the story than I knew I had missed the point. It was too spread out in time.

Many years later...I re-wrote the story, concentrating it into an hour. This again was published, and became so popular that I made more money out of it than I'd ever made out of a story before. You'd think that at least would have satisfied me. It didn't.

Years later, I took that story and re-wrote it in the first person
because I realized it was one of those stories where it was more important to say ‘I planned to kill my grandmother’ than to say ‘Jackie planned to kill his grandmother.’ And since then, you will be glad to know, whenever I wake up at four in the morning and think of my sins, I do not any longer think of the crime I committed against Jackie in describing his first confession. The story is as finished as it is ever going to be, and...I would wish you to believe that if you work hard at a story over a period of twenty-five or thirty years, there is a reasonable chance that at last you will get it right. (A Frank O'Connor Reader 317)

O'Connor's first story of juveniles (Tomory 123) was originally published as “Repentance” in Lovat Dickson’s Magazine in January 1935; O'Connor revised the story for publication in Harper's Bazaar in March 1939, changing the title to “First Confession,” and years later, in 1951, he finally “got it right” when he changed the story to a first person narrative for his volume Traveller's Samples (Frank O'Connor at Work 25-26). The many forms of the story which became “First Confession,” then, offer a case study in the development of O'Connor's understanding and portrayal of children. Since O'Connor's masterpiece was the final publication of the story, readers will profit most from examining this version first, before considering the way in which O'Connor arrived there. In the final draft, Frank O'Connor has dedicated himself to consistent artistry in a rather unique way, by allowing the young boy to tell his own story after a brief passage of time.

As well, and perhaps more importantly, a close analysis of these drafts allows one to witness the complex narrative technique O'Connor employed in typically “simplistic” stories like “First Confession.” One of the most important (and often oversimplified) aspects of Frank O'Connor's talents as a short story writer was in his ability to determine from which point of view each story should best be told. Sometimes, as with “First Confession,” the process required adjusting time frame and point of view over many drafts and many years. Critics have been apt to simplify this process--or to miss the point altogether--by discussing only “the young narrator” (Wohlgelernter 69) in these stories.
More perceptive readers may notice what James Alexander terms a “narrative of reminiscence” which “confers on the [story] a double-leveled view, that of the boy at the time, and that of the adult looking back and reflecting on the event” (135). However, not even Michael Steinman, who has done the most extensive textual criticism on drafts and published versions of stories in his book, Frank O'Connor at Work, has identified the more complex relationship which exists in O'Connor’s subtle distancing of narrator and child.

On a most basic level, one might contend that in “First Confession,” O'Connor merely entertains with one of his best-loved, most anthologized, and most humorous of stories. However, to better understand the sources of this humor, one must first of all identify the subtle distancing that complicates each of O'Connor’s child narratives. The final version of “First Confession” is, significantly, a child’s story told by a child—a narrative technique different from earlier drafts of the same story and, in fact, from most other O'Connor child narratives, which will be the concern the next chapter.

Careful readers should recognize from the second sentence that the narrator is a child, even though he tells the story in the past tense: he is speaking of events that are not long past, since he states that “Relations in the one house are a strain at the best of times” (Collected Stories 175). This claim is further substantiated by the fact that the narrator refers later in the story to “grown-up people” (179) as a set of individuals distinct from himself; an adult would not likely refer to his peers as “grown-up people,” but a child certainly might. Furthermore, throughout the story, subtle reminders of the narrator’s unreliability return our attention to the inconsistency of youth, since he is able to view matters only from his own limited perspective in the telling as well as the experiencing of the events. It is precisely the child’s misperceived understanding and misdirected narration that evoke the greatest humor in this story.
Readers cannot deny the humor of “First Confession” in its final form, but they should, to comprehend the story’s full effect, examine the nature of that humor, especially insofar as it is inspired by the narrator himself. The story of a boy’s first confession of his own sins begins, ironically enough, with a declaration implying that it’s all his grandmother’s fault: “All the trouble began when...my grandmother—my father’s mother—came to live with us” (175). This statement is not humorous in itself—it even alludes to the grandfather’s death—but it sets a context for the humor which follows. Furthermore, this statement initiates questions readers should ask themselves throughout the narration: Is it possible to accept the boy’s assertions that his grandmother and sister have done him great wrongs and even conspired against him? On the other hand, should readers attempt to approach the story more objectively: must we conclude that the child is merely telling his side of the story, his version of the truth? The answers to these questions are “yes, we should accept the narrator’s assertions because he believes them” and “yes, we must acknowledge the partiality of the truth in this story.” O’Connor creates a complex tension which manifests itself rather simply: readers feel sympathy for the narrator but know they cannot trust him. By giving the child, Jackie, the sole voice in this narrative, O’Connor focuses not on objective truth and its adult implications (as he seemed to in the original published version, as we shall see), but on the humor generated by the subjective nature of the child’s truth. Thus, rather than being confronted with deciding who is right, readers are confronted instead with the question of who is more comical, the bare-footed old country woman who carries a jug of porter beneath her shawl or the young lad so “mortified” by her that he makes excuses to avoid the embarrassment of having friends visit his house. Most comical is that these “fastidious” (176) observations and judgements come from a small boy who, other than in regard to his
grandmother, has learned very little about the way he should perceive people and events. Jackie's view of his father's mother likely has been shaped from his "Mother's great indignation" (175) toward the grandmother; however, regarding his first confession he has not developed any preconceptions before the instructional after-school classes begin. The beginning of "First Confession" does not include the encapsulated moral which some O'Connor narrators use to introduce their stories as a synopsis of what is to come. Because O'Connor has turned the story over to the child, he must shape this story in the way that the child would perceive it. The small boy who narrates is not capable, it seems, of reducing the story to its most basic terms. Probably the story is still fresh in the child's experience, and he has still not considered the moral implications of his own story; he simply seems to be telling it in the only way he knows how. O'Connor does, nonetheless, carefully craft a clear transition from his introduction about the grandmother to the main action itself, the boy's confession, and he has cleverly entwined the two.

Jackie proceeds to discuss "the crown[ing] of [his] misfortunes" (176)--as if fate has conspired against him--his first confession, for which he was prepared by another female adversary, old Mrs. Ryan. Here, Jackie's youthful insight reveals that Mrs. Ryan talked at great length about hell. He adds, "She may have mentioned the other place as well, but that could only have been by accident, for Hell had the first place in her heart" (176). Such a comment resembles an aside a comedian might craftily mold into a routine, but the comment resounds even more effectively in the innocent, spontaneous voice of a young boy who would not even understand his audience's amusement. The child literally, seriously believes in Mrs. Ryan's endearment to hell, and the child's misunderstanding leads adult readers to laugh at the irony, the difference between the adult's reality and the child's perception of it. At the same time, the reader's irony seems to be O'Connor's sarcasm, a subtle
commentary on adults who attempt to frighten children into religious devotion. In similar ways, this theme recurs throughout the story.

The humor in Jackie's misunderstanding Mrs. Ryan's instruction is compounded for the reader when she offers a coin to any boy who will hold his finger under the flame of a candle for five minutes. For Mrs. Ryan, of course, this activity sensorially demonstrates to the boys some small fraction of the "roasting hot furnaces" of Hell. Jackie comments that "The woman was really interesting about Hell, but my attention was all fixed on the half-crown." In all, her lesson was highly disappointing to him: "a religious woman like that, you wouldn't think she'd bother about a thing like a half-crown." Jackie has missed her point, of course, but his misperception is significant, for it leads the reader to critique not only the effectiveness of the lesson, but also impact the of the religious rhetoric it embodies.

To illustrate this point, one may contrast Mrs. Ryan's lesson with some very similar rhetoric conjured by James Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, in a priest's sermon Stephen Dedalus hears:

Place your finger for a moment in the flame of a candle and you will feel the pain of fire. But our earthly fire was created by God for the benefit of man...whereas the fire of hell is of another quality and was created by God to torture and punish the unrepentant sinner... [T]he sulphurous brimstone which burns in hell is a substance which is specially designed to burn for ever and for ever with unspeakable fury. (295)

While Joyce masterfully evokes in most vivid language the most horrific images that Catholicism has to offer an impressionable youth, he seems concerned with achieving a perfectly realistic representation of the priest's words, especially in the effect the speech's sensory images might create. O'Connor, on the other hand, is not concerned so much with the rhetoric as with a realistic representation of a child's response to such rhetoric. While the sermon leads Stephen to a contemplative examination of conscience, Mrs. Ryan's speech merely distracts Jackie--this contrast of deed emphasizes the
difference in character between the stoic Stephen and the unflappable Jackie. Thus, O'Connor is able to undercut the scare tactics Joyce so vividly recreates by exploiting their comic potential through Jackie. Joyce's primary concern, it seems, was to offer language vividly graphic enough to have in some way shaped the consciousness of a potential artist. However, at the same time, Joyce creates a youth so prematurely mature that his *Portrait* appears to have robbed Stephen of the genuine qualities of youth. O'Connor's Jackie, on the other hand, unreceptive to the adult's message which calls him to reason maturely, typifies the innocence of youth. Even so, Jackie's role in "First Confession," as the exemplar of innocence, serves a purpose beyond merely amusing the reader, as we shall see.

At last, in the paragraph of "First Confession," Mrs. Ryan's story about a fellow who made a bad confession achieves her intention of making a "shocking impression" on Jackie. On one level, despite the humorous context of the story—which he does not necessarily perceive—Jackie can at times be as gravely affected as Joyce's Stephen. Furthermore, Jackie is rapt by this story within a story; not even once does he veer off distractedly. Most importantly, Mrs. Ryan's words of doom here turn the tide by influencing Jackie's expectation of the first confession to come. Jackie has absorbed every detail of this story, even down to vivid sensory images such as the smell of burning timber and the burned imprint of two hands in the priest's bed. The story makes a "shocking impression" since Jackie realizes the grave consequences he would face if he were to make a bad confession.

Furthermore, Jackie begins to realize just how much he will have to confess when Mrs. Ryan shows the students how to examine their consciences. Again, we are set up for a laugh at the child's interpretation of the ten commandments, for by Jackie's standards he has at one time or another broken every single one of them. At the same time, readers again bear witness
to Jackie’s shifting the blame back on his grandmother, since he has broken every commandment “all on account of that old woman” and since he has no chance of reform “so long as she remain[s] in the house.” This seems to be just a thinly veiled coping mechanism any child might use, Jackie’s way of unconsciously manipulating the facts in a particular way, so that we will not judge him harshly. Thus, while O’Connor is clever in using such a technique common to children, readers should not be convinced that Jackie believes in his grandmother’s culpability. If he truly believed that it was all her fault, he would not have been so “scared to death of Confession.”

Jackie is deeply intimidated by the prospect of confession, and, from everything he has come to know about it, one might expect him to be. He tries vainly to finagle his way out of confession by feigning a toothache, but even this makes his situation worse, since his antagonistic sister, Nora, must now accompany him to confession. On the way to the church, Nora conducts her own examination of Jackie’s conscience on him by recounting her own version of Jackie’s misdeeds, intertwined with how meanly the priest will surely react to these sins and with how truly sorry for him she herself is. As they approach the church, Jackie reflects that his sister didn’t even know the half of what he had to tell and that

I knew I couldn’t tell it, and understood perfectly well why the fellow in Mrs. Ryan’s story made a bad confession; it seemed to me a great shame that people wouldn’t stop criticizing him. (178)

Even though readers realize that Jackie has distorted the facts of his situation a bit, they do at least feel sympathy for him at this point in the story when, at the height of his disillusionment, Nora “became the raging malicious devil she really was,” yanking him harshly through the church door to meet his punishment.

Inside, Jackie’s vivid description again suggests that he has once again become very attentive. O’Connor allows Jackie, in such a rapt moment, to so
internalize the thought "I was lost, given up to eternal justice" that even the
cold and dark sensory images within the church suggest a foreboding
symbolic message: he notices that the sunlight is replaced by a deep shadow
and that the silence within "seemed to crackle like ice under my feet." The
people within the church reinforce his anguish, especially one man about
whom Jackie wonders if he had "a grandmother too," for "only a grandmother
could account for a fellow behaving in that heartbroken way." In this way,
Jackie blames his grandmother, but even if she caused his behavior, Jackie
realizes that he is ultimately accountable for his own thoughts and deeds.
Thus, he predicts that he will "make a bad confession...die in the night and be
continually coming back and burning people's furniture." Luckily, even
among the pervading sense of doom and self-pity at this point in the story,
O'Connor injects Jackie's serious statement that he will soon be burning
furniture for its humorous effect: Jackie's plight is so seriously dire for him
as to appear silly to the reader.

Beyond the humorous element which impels the reader's involvement
and interest throughout, the issue central to the story manifests itself most
clearly in Jackie's thoughts immediately preceding his actual confession. His
sister Nora exits the confessional, appearing the paragon of devotion, to which
Jackie remarks, "God, the hypocrisy of women!...I remembered the devilish
malice with which she had tormented me all the way from our door, and
wondered were all religious people like that, really" (178-9). By this point, the
reader has become acutely aware that beneath the humor of this childish
commentary and others like it throughout the story lies a deeper questioning
of the nature of religious practice. Jackie's comment is directed mainly toward
his sister, but his criticism is applicable on a much wider scale to the
hypocrisy of Mrs. Ryan and those like her. This is not to say that O'Connor is
criticizing women in general; O'Connor's target is not the hypocrisy of
women but the sanctimoniousness of any men or women who think of
themselves as religious while often acting in overtly anti-religious ways. At
this crowning moment of the story, Jackie enters the confessional with the
“fear of damnation” weighing heavily upon his soul; however, we might
expect that Jackie’s situation can only improve, since to this point O’Connor
used humor to emphasize the hypocrisy which has almost exclusively formed
Jackie’s understanding and expectations of religion.

Despite his previous instruction and preconceived notions of
confession, once in the box, Jackie is literally in the dark and stumbles to find
his way. The pitch-darkness of the confessional causes Jackie to despair
because all of the odds are in God’s favor. Jackie’s focused despair soon gives
way to his trademark distraction, however, and Jackie admits, “all I had ever
been told about Confession got mixed up in my mind.” He turns to one wall and
began his confession; when nothing happens, Jackie tries the other wall.
Again, he receives no response.

In one of the most memorable and perfectly crafted scenes in all of
O’Connor’s work, Jackie notices a shelf at about the height of his head and
decides that he must kneel on that shelf for his confession to begin. He climbs
and, with some difficulty, manages to kneel on the ledge while holding onto
some wooden molding above his head. Finally, his third utterance of “Bless me
father, for I have sinned” receives a response; a man’s voice asks “Who’s
there?” The narration which follows describes in a special, comedic way
events that would be difficult enough to duplicate were one to act them out on
stage or screen:

The place the voice came from was under the molding, about level
with my knees, so I took a good grip of the molding and swung myself
down till I saw the astonished face of a young priest looking up at me.
He had to put his head to one side to see me, and I had to put mine on
one side to see him, so we were more or less talking to one another
upside-down. It struck me as a queer way of hearing confessions, but
I didn’t feel it my place to criticize. (179)
Because readers envision these events only from the boy's perspective, they can only imagine the priest's surprise upon opening the grille to be confronted with a young boy's posterior. Jackie only hears the angry voice shouting "What are you doing up there?" and, startled, he loses his grip, falling not only from the ledge but all the way out of the booth. Jackie's head hits the door with "an unmerciful wallop" and, soon, "flat on [his] back in the middle of the aisle," he notices people standing up and gasping at the scene he has caused.

O'Connor's medium, the printed word, presents an even greater challenge than would stage or screen; nevertheless, he masterfully allows us to visualize this scene, not only from a distance, but also from the point of view of a child who retains a straightforward, genuine innocence. Jackie truly believes, for instance, that the standard procedure is conducted with the confessor and priest holding an upside-down conversation. Jackie's remark about not criticizing is a marvelous touch on O'Connor's part, and it also highlights how impressionable Jackie really is at this stage, whether it be his full-fledged acceptance of a ridiculous confessional procedure or of a story about a furniture-burning ghost who made a bad confession. Jackie is at an impressionable age, which is significant, because O'Connor's stories most often focus on defining moments in his characters' existences. The priest certainly does leave an impression on him, especially in contrast to the intimidatory tactics of conversion to which he has previously been exposed.

Perhaps the priest's impression on Jackie would have been rather different had Jackie's sister not reached him first. Nora immediately begins to beat and scold him, and O'Connor adds another keen observation of child behavior: sometimes children can be so bewildered, as Jackie was in this situation, that they forget even a most natural impulse, to cry. The narration is even more difficult than the observation, since O'Connor is dealing with a
boy who is recounting the multiple, wandering thoughts he had at the time: “This reminded me that I was so stunned I had even forgotten to cry, so that people might think I wasn’t hurt at all, when in fact I was probably maimed for life” (180). In all, this particular sentence requires a bit more labor for the reader than another O’Connor passage might, but it seems purposefully designed as such. The three consecutive verb forms, “reminded,” “stunned,” and “forgotten” along with the modifiers “so” and “even,” confuse rather than convey meaning, truly giving us a sense that the story is being told by a mixed-up youth rather than a gifted artist. Furthermore, the child’s concern with the appearance of being hurt, coupled with his statement about being “maimed for life,” alerts us to the fact that this child is begging for attention and sympathy, not just from the churchgoers, but from the reader as well.

The priest is, of course, angered by all of this foolishness, but, luckily, the circumstances work to Jackie’s advantage. The priest’s anger immediately is directed not toward the young boy who caused the disturbance, but toward a little girl beating a scared, defenseless child. As a result, Jackie becomes an object of sympathy rather than the target of malice; given his previous experiences with religion which have shaped his view of confession up to this point, the priest’s sympathy and friendship are a surprising variation, and Jackie’s dread immediately gives way to “something approaching joy.”

Jackie’s whole attitude toward confession, if not toward religion, changes instantly after that one brief exchange. Almost immediately he receives assurance that he is not so bad as those who try their hardest to be good would have him believe. All of a sudden, the crimes of a lifetime for a boy who had broken every single one of the ten commandments “didn’t seem so bad.” Still, the inconstancy of youth causes him to rush to a polarized judgement. Jackie seems to form an unequivocal opinion of religious people which separates those like the priest—friendly, sympathetic, and “intelligent
above the ordinary"--from those inimical "old women and girls" who only
know religion to be "Hell, the Bishop, and the penitential psalms." When the
youthful Jackie polarizes these positions into two irreconcilable camps,
readers must attribute his unequivocal stance to some extent to his
inconstancy but still must realize that he has a point. In spite of Jackie's
personal allegiances, the clear hypothesis of "First Confession" is that religion
should be practiced with sympathy and understanding rather than with
threats and terror.

The priest is clearly the voice of reason; he listens to, understands, and
respects Jackie, addressing the child without condescension. This too is an
important detail, for the priest is able to gain Jackie's trust to some extent
because he does not treat Jackie as a moral inferior, as Nora or Mrs. Ryan
might, but greets Jackie on a level equal to his own. The priest is very careful
to acknowledge Jackie's "crimes of a lifetime" and to address him not
diminutively, but as an adult, "my poor man."

Furthermore, the confession assumes a tone more of conversation
rather than confrontation, reinforcing the priest's understanding, even
when Jackie all at once blurts out "I had it all arranged to kill my
grandmother." Jackie sets out to convince the priest that his grandmother's
mortal sins, her taking of porter and snuff, help to justify his position. He
proceeds to inform the priest of her misdeeds, from walking around in her
bare feet to causing strife among the other family members. However, the
priest is more interested in the details of Jackie's plot: "And what would you do
with the body?" he asks. It seems difficult to imagine a priest asking a
confessor how he planned to dispose of the body, but the priest seems aware of
the fact that Jackie's is not a normal confession. Though not condescending in
his speech, the priest also realizes that the child is relatively harmless. Plus,
the priest has genuinely taken a liking to Jackie, if only because of what has
just taken place. O'Connor even provides him with a further touch of humanity since the priest commits what might be considered a venial sin when he says of Nora, “Someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and he won’t miss her.” The priest ultimately manipulates the conversation toward the consequences of murder and to how awful the punishment of hanging is, conveying the message, however indirectly, that Jackie should not murder his grandmother nor even consider it. Jackie's first confession concludes with the priest keeping him “there for a full ten minutes talking, and then [they] walked out the chapel yard” together.

Jackie's first observation outside the church provides another slight symbolism, since he now is dazzled by the brilliant sunlight rather than submerged in the shadow of the church. He is a transformed lad, and instead of worrying about his own fate, his thoughts turn to his mother, for at least now she will not have those burn marks on the furniture to worry over.

Nora, though, remains insistent upon teasing and tormenting her brother, and her adamance is advanced by her jealousy of Jackie's having walked out with the priest. She first questions him about the extent of his penance and, unsatisfied, about whether he told all his sins or, in fact, made a bad confession. She is baffled that the priest only made Jackie say three Hail Marys in repentance, and the last straw comes when she catches Jackie sucking on something. He admits that the priest has given him candy, to which Nora bitterly responds, “'Tis no advantage to anybody trying to be good. I might just as well be a sinner like you.” This is an ironic ending for a story which centers on a boy's realization that we are all sinners by virtue of our humanity.

The two earlier drafts of this story provide some interesting insights into O'Connor's craft and many insights into the meaning of the story itself.
By turning first to the draft which immediately preceded the final published version, we will be able to look backward at the way in which “First Confession” assumed its final form. This previous version of “First Confession” is the one which first appeared to an American audience, in Harper’s Bazaar in March 1939. The two drafts differ mainly in the time frame and perspective of the narration, but this difference illuminates the flaws of the earlier draft: an awkwardness of character portrayal and often linguistic expression, and a lack of clearly overriding meaning, especially in comparison to the final version.

Most immediately, we notice that in the 1939 “First Confession,” rather than providing background details, O’Connor writes only the bare bones of the story’s plot itself, as Hemingway might have done, using the “iceberg” technique of paring away any details that the reader might reasonably infer. It almost seems that O’Connor has employed a reverse-“iceberg” technique since he supplies more details in the final version than in the earlier draft. The details O’Connor added in the final version, especially Mrs. Ryan’s religious instruction, are not new—O’Connor had used them in the very first draft, and then abandoned them—but he eventually realized that they are essential to the story’s meaning.

The 1939 draft begins, “It was a Saturday afternoon in early spring. A small boy...was being led by the hand by his sister through a crowded street.” The story seems to begin “in medias res,” with Jackie’s sister leading him to church, but readers soon realize that, in this bare bones narration, they are starting not in the middle but at the beginning. The story itself is condensed only to what occurred on that single day. Thus, the forebodingly symbolic description of the scenery as Jackie approaches the church with his sister gives way merely to “It was a Saturday afternoon in early spring.” Despite its terse, objective beginning, readers of the 1939 version get the sense that
O'Connor is, more often than not, telling directly what he could suggest by further developing character and point of view. For example, he writes that Jackie and his sister each hold a mutual malice for the other, instead of supplying details which could lead readers to a similar conclusion. It is rather difficult, as well, for readers to get an adequate sense of the "fear of damnation" in Jackie's soul if they have not been informed of why he might be fearful of confession in the first place.

Readers are also, in the early draft, provided only a limited third person account, so that they follow Jackie only in terms of what he perceives and observes, not of what he remembers and thinks about. Instead of hearing from Jackie what exactly happened, one hears Jackie's sister chiding him for "the trouble you caused your poor old nanny...and the time you went for me with the bread knife under the table." No longer are readers presented only with Jackie's version of the truth; thus, Nora's position at the end of the story carries greater weight because this draft allows her to "tell her side of it." We may very well conclude as she does, that the priest only gave Jackie three Hail Marys as his penance because Jackie was such "a cry baby" (Harper's 120).

This style of narration perhaps allows for a more objective view, but the story itself becomes somewhat less interesting--and definitely less humorous--when we are told of "a small boy" rather than told by Jackie's first person voice. Furthermore, the humor of Jackie's commentary is completely lost in third person narration. For example, Jackie in the 1939 version also forgets to cry--but all one reads is how "for some strange reason he had not yet begun to cry and that people might possibly think he wasn't hurt at all." What is missing is the finishing touch, where Jackie adds, "I was probably maimed for life."

The small boy's perspective can only be seen through the lens of the adult narrator. Thus, this draft is largely devoid of humor and psychological
insight, and in its place, awkwardly, is a sometimes too sophisticated linguistic expression. For example, Jackie's interpretation of the events largely focuses on a dialogue with his sister, with intermittent comments about how he was “trying to drag [him]self free of her,” whereas the objective narrator reports that “The little boy showed a marked reluctance to proceed; he affected to be very interested in the shop-windows.” It is no contest: the highfalutin language simply does not fit the tone or content of O'Connor’s story.

O'Connor's own comment on his revision speaks for itself: “I realized...it was more important to say ‘I planned to kill my grandmother’ than to say ‘Jackie planned to kill his grandmother’” (A Frank O'Connor Reader 317).

A further change which has broad implications for the entire story is the characterization of the priest. The priest does not so quickly discard his anger in this 1939 version; in some ways we may even wonder if this is the same priest. The priest here at least sounds condescending—“a big fellow like you should have terrible sins”—even if he is not intended to be. There is a significant difference between “a big fellow”—which emphasizes Jackie's size, when he is, in fact, little—and “my poor man”—which emphasizes his maturity and his downtrodden condition. There is likewise a significant difference between “terrible sins” and “the crimes of a lifetime”: “terrible” suggests that the priest does not really believe a boy can have such sins, while “the crimes of a lifetime” is a phrase entirely appropriate to the situation of a first confession, no matter how grave the sins actually are.

Beyond the priest's initial greeting, the confession itself takes on the air of cross-examination, if not confrontation, as opposed to the conversation that took place in the final publication. Whereas the priest formerly appeared genuinely interested and concerned when he asked questions like, “And what would you do with the body?”, here he asks a series of terse, pointed questions which suggest that he is more concerned with delving into the nature of sin
than with the boy himself. The priest seems more in the mold of Mrs. Ryan than the priest of the final version. However, this probably is a matter of O'Connor “getting it right” in the final draft, since the priest is meant to appeal to Jackie in his words and in the candy that he offers. Readers simply do not get the same sense of friendship between the two, and the conversation itself seems at times inappropriate: why would the narrator report that Jackie's interest in the details of a hanging reflects a response to “the brightness of a new theme”? Furthermore, the 1939 version incorporates much greater detail both in terms of the plot to kill Jackie's grandmother and in terms of hanging, and these details seem to distract from any overall meaning the story holds.

Additional details in the 1939 draft—which happen to be remnants of the very first draft O'Connor wrote—also detract from rather than contribute to the story. When Jackie first enters the church, for example, he hears a ballad singer for some reason. In addition, in the still-humorous physical comedy of the confession box scene, O'Connor uses a machine metaphor which is utterly superfluous. The ballad singer does have a key symbolic role in “Repentance,” O'Connor’s first draft of “First Confession,” but the machine metaphor lingers as ineffectively here as it did originally.

Besides its deletion of these superfluous details, readers should acknowledge the artistic superiority of the final version because it adequately provides readers not only with humor, but with a cleverly designed message. The meaning of the 1939 story seems confused since, for example, Jackie's ire is not expressed toward the hypocritically religious, but instead toward “women! Women! It was all women and girls and their silly talk. They had no real knowledge of the world!” Finally, Nora's statement at the end cannot have an ironic impact. Ultimately, O'Connor wisely reversed the last two lines to emphasize the irony of “a sinner like you,” rather than the hopelessness of
There's no use in being good." Furthermore, O'Connor realized that readers of the 1939 draft had not been set up with adequate background information about the nature of preparation for confession to get a true sense of the ironic impact Nora's statement carries.

The hopelessness emphasized in the final lines of the 1939 version is perhaps its greatest thematic similarity to the first published draft of the story, "Repentance," which appeared in the British literary periodical Lovat Dickson's Magazine. However, the most apparent revisions O'Connor made from this first publication to the two subsequent ones is in adapting the story for an American audience. He—or his magazine editors—made a number of significant changes in this regard. First, dialect, such as the sister's tirade, "I can't do me penance with him...He have me driven mad. Stop your crying, you ignorant scut!" was trimmed to "But I can't do my penance with him, father," by the final version. Secondly, the "shilling" the old woman offers to Jackie's classmates conveniently becomes the more generic "half-crown" for the American audience. Thirdly, blatantly British spellings such as "centre"; expressions such as "blooming"; and vocabulary words such as "beard" (which could easily be misconstrued) and "dolman" disappear altogether. These seem to suggest that O'Connor was largely responsible for making his own changes, because words are not merely substituted; usually, entire contexts are altered.

"Repentance" begins strongly, with a small boy, Micky, who knew he should have been looking forward to "preparation for his first confession and first Holy Communion," but he was not. What is largely overlooked, even in the final version of "First Confession," is the Communion itself. O'Connor's point, it seems, is that an event which so emphasizes the joyful, positive, celebratory aspects of religion is largely overshadowed by the most dreaded
event which immediately precedes it. Although Communion is mentioned briefly in the final publication, its position right at the beginning of "Repentance" seems to provide an important initial clue as to the story's meaning.

"Repentance" begins in an orderly enough fashion by following the child's exposure to religious instruction, elaborating even further on Mrs. Ryan's wicked interaction with the class; especially memorable is her line "Hell is a school from which you will never get out." One may wonder why O'Connor removed such an effective line from "First Confession," and the only feasible explanation, for me, is that including the line would make Jackie's inattentiveness much less realistic.

"Repentance" also may seem superior to the 1939 "First Confession" because it is more evocative of a child's sensibility. O'Connor especially achieves this through a blackbird which appears symbolically on the first page to reinforce "Micky's heart leap[ing] wildly," and later so that Micky can daydream about how if he were a blackbird, he could fly away and even "whistle derisively at the poor dejected urchins" (60) within the schoolhouse.

Despite a beginning which captures the meaning of the final version even more substantially than the final version's own introduction, the earliest published draft does not work, largely due to its flawed structure. Even though the story begins orderly enough, with Micky in the classroom, and progress through the narrative as we have come to know it in the other stories, at the end "Repentance" takes a rather strange turn. The story concludes not with the young boy and his sister arguing down the street on their way home, but with the narrator alone, many years later, reflecting back on the meaning of a distant experience from a Paris hotel room. The boy's having heard the ballad-singer's lines "Adieu, adieu to Dublin town, for I must now away;/ Likewise Cork city where I spent so many a happy day" (64) seem to have
triggered for the man a reflection back on his own experiences of years ago, and to have caused himself to think about his own exile from Ireland. This extra strand of meaning complicates the story, but it also very much obscures and marginalizes the main plot, the confession itself, which O'Connor ultimately came to realize was most important.

In some ways, "Repentance" might have been too close to Michael O'Donovan at this point for it to have been successful as a Frank O'Connor story. This was, after all, his first attempt at child narrative (Tomory 123). Perhaps the story was also O'Connor's first attempt at directly capturing his own life events in fiction. After all, the name Micky likely was not chosen without purpose: Michael O'Donovan's childhood nickname was Micky. Details recounted in O'Connor's autobiography, *An Only Child*, certainly support this claim. There are not only direct references to O'Connor's embarrassment of his "dirty" grandmother (19-20); also, O'Connor admits that a comment made by his mother's mother haunted his childhood, and even haunted him as he wrote—"But, my store, I have no home now" (47). The line seems particularly appropriate in "Repentance" because the narrator certainly seems haunted at the end of the story, and because in this early version the grandmother is seen more sympathetically than in the others. She is even given a voice which expresses a similarly haunting sentiment for a boy who plots to kill her:

'I won't be a trouble to ye long...I know I'm a bother to ye, but 'twill soon be over whin ye carry me to me long home. Soon enough, soon enough ye'll be rid of the poor ould woman' (61).

We may even conjecture that the poor old woman who embarrasses Micky in "Repentance" is not only the grandmother, but also, symbolically, Ireland herself. The poor old woman was probably the most pervasive nationalistic symbolism of the Irish Literary Renaissance, from Cathleen ni Houlihan to the Shan Van Vocht. Perhaps, then, this early version of "First Confession" was
about exile rather than about confession.

In a sense, the ending seems a meek attempt at a Joycean epiphany, and it certainly seems possible that O'Connor might have adopted a Joycean style as a way to disguise blatantly autobiographical content. By this point in his career, O'Connor had devoured *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist*, and *Ulysses*, and he greatly admired Joyce.5 Paris at the end of “Repentance” suggests Joyce’s place of exile (although many other writers were “exiled” there as well), and most especially, the hotel room itself recalls the epiphany caused by a reflection on the past in Joyce’s “The Dead.” Perhaps the young O’Connor was genuinely moved to imitate Joyce; perhaps his affinity for romanticism led him to envision himself as some day leaving poor old Ireland for a self-imposed exile. He had, after all, called on Joyce in a brief trip to Paris in 1927. Nonetheless, O’Connor eventually divorced himself from Joyce’s commitment to language and writing style, even distancing himself from “The Dead” in *The Lonely Voice*:

...it is easy enough to see from “The Dead” why Joyce gave up storytelling. One of his main passions—the elaboration of style and form—had taken control, and the short story is too tightly knit to permit expansion like this...[I]t is quite clear from “The Dead” that he had already begun to lose sight of the submerged population that was his original subject...They are not characters but personalities, and Joyce would never again be able to deal with characters, people whose identity is determined by their circumstances. (125-6)

Thus, we may judge “Repentance” to be a failed experiment which demonstrates how James Joyce’s style simply would not fit Frank O’Connor’s subject matter. O’Connor surely recognized the problem, since he rewrote the story four years later. He was probably glad that Lovat Dickson’s Magazine had folded by that point, so that “Repentance” could not be reissued in its Joycean form again.

Whatever the case, even if “Repentance” did fail miserably, it nevertheless provides some important insights into the craft of Frank
O'Connor, the artist. First, O'Connor reworked characterizations at least twice for the final version of "First Confession," and the grandmother and priest are most interesting in that respect. The grandmother seems to be portrayed most objectively in "Repentance"—she is more sympathetically portrayed and is brought to life, in a sense, because she is given a voice. Even the conspiracy O'Connor seems to suggest between Nora and the grandmother in "First Confession" here is reduced only to "Nora...was on excellent terms with her" (60).

Nevertheless, allowing the grandmother to become too humanized is dangerous, for the more Micky's victim is humanized and the more readers have sympathy for her, the less humorous Micky's situation becomes and the less readers sympathize with his predicament. The story still follows Micky's perspective, but O'Connor leaves "Repentance" too open and objective: if he allows all of the characters to tell their own side of the story, it becomes a story about deciding which character is right, rather than a humorous story which both embraces and critiques religion.

The priest also seems inappropriately characterized; in fact, he seems too friendly to be believable. For example, immediately after the priest sends Nora away, we might expect him still to harbor a bit of anger. Instead, in "Repentance," he seems exaggeratedly overjoyed: "Well, Micky, you're a grand young fellow, you are so!" In subsequent revisions, O'Connor seems to have tempered this reaction, and also to have confined their "great chat...about where Micky went to school, and who was teaching him and what his father's job was," (68) and so on. Such a long, divergent conversation seems unrealistic, even for a priest dealing with a boy's first confession. O'Connor also refined his description of the priest's reactions, so that instead of simply telling us how the priest "seemed to be so interested and understanding" (68), in later drafts O'Connor actually lets us draw that
conclusion for ourselves, based on what the priest says and does.

Given the over-friendly nature of the priest's conversation, the details of the murder and hanging simply become too problematic to include in the final version of "First Confession." In "Repentance," these details seem unrealistic because Micky offers most of them unprompted: it seems unlikely that a young boy, even if he had worked out all of the details of how to dispose of the body, would offer all of these details to a priest, friendly or unfriendly. In the second version of the story, the priest largely prompts Jackie to think about and divulge this information; still the detail seems inappropriate. Thus, in the final version of "First Confession," the gory details of the planned murder and of hanging are, thankfully, omitted.

The priest is able to make one very effective plea to Micky's conscience in "Repentance," but on the whole, the priest's openness is one of the highly questionable elements of the story. The priest asks Micky to think about how he would feel if someone bashed his mother's head with a hatchet; then, he logically relates Micky's reservations to the fact that his grandmother is his father's mother. "What would your father do?" the priest asks. This is an effective way to force the child to think about the consequences of his actions; nevertheless, the priest's final comments in the story seem inappropriately open-ended. It does not seem realistic that a priest would say to a child, "Think it over well, and come back and tell me. Only, mind, I'm not going to help you..." (69-70). The ellipsis at the end of the priest's statement implies that he will not help Micky commit the murder, but that Micky needs to decide for himself the best course of action. Finally, the priest returns to the consequences: "When I think of the fellows I saw being hanged..." (70). While it might be a most useful tactic for a priest to make a young confessor think about the consequences of his actions even more than the morality of them, still, the leaving the morality of the issue so open-ended for the child
Kerrigan 36

does not seem a realistic course of action for a priest in pre-1935 Ireland. In subsequent revisions, though, the priest’s actions, even if similar, seem more convincing because with Jackie as narrator we cannot be so certain what the priest said to him, especially in the final ten minutes of their conversation that Jackie chooses not to recount.

The change to a subjective first person narrator is by far the most significant revision—among many very significant revisions—of “First Confession.” One of the primary reasons that “Repentance” simply does not work is that O’Connor focuses too heavily on trying to be objective and to be precise. We get a strong sense in the early draft that Micky really is spoiled—as when his grandmother and sister “caught it” from Micky’s mother, while “Micky was petted and fed back to sanity” (62) for holing up under the kitchen table because he refused to eat in the same room with his grandmother. Also, at another point, the narrator admits that “it was really [Micky’s] fault” (63). We even get the sense that Micky’s conscience has been troubling him and that he has done much wrong, as when he vows to “tell everything, everything, to this priest, and take whatever punishment was coming to him like a man” (68). Furthermore, the only hatred expressed in the story is Micky’s own hatred for his grandmother and sister. O’Connor even revised the “Repentance” passage in which Micky looks at his sister “with a hatred that was quite inappropriate to the occasion and the place” (65) so that, in “First Confession,” the look on Micky’s face is replaced by his thoughts on the hypocrisy of the outward devotion Nora presents (Collected Stories 178-9).

Additionally, O’Connor seems intent in “Repentance” on getting exactly right the technical description of Jackie’s climbing in the confession box. “Pressing buttons on an unfamiliar machine” (65) as indicated previously, was maintained through the second version but ultimately was scrapped for the final publication. In addition, O’Connor trimmed further details from
“Repentance,” for example:

[Micky] had always prided himself upon his powers of climbing, but this was a tougher proposition than a gas-lamp or a telegraph pole, and there wasn’t as much as a foothold to be discovered. He slipped twice before he even succeeded in getting his knee on it, and the strain of drawing the rest of himself up was almost more than he was capable of. (65-6)

The final version of “First Confession,” rather than focusing so much on how tough a proposition the climbing was or where exactly Micky could place his knee, instead sets us up for the humor of the fall to come: “I was always good at climbing and managed to get up all right. Staying up was the trouble” (Collected Stories 179). Even in his great concern for technical precision in “Repentance,” O’Connor makes at least one mistake. If the third person perspective of the story is not omniscient, but is limited to what Jackie sees, hears, and does, then how does Micky know the “somber figure at the other side of the grille” (which he does not identify as the priest) stands “bolt upright” (66)? If Micky can only see through the grille, and we can only see what Micky sees, then the narration of “Repentance” is flawed. O’Connor, of course, remedied the situation quite well without dwelling on technicalities in “First Confession.”
CHAPTER 3

THE RANGE AND DEPTH OF THE CHILDHOOD NARRATIVES

In considering the reworking of one particular story in great detail, this consideration of Frank O'Connor's stories of children has thus far neglected a consideration of their extensive breadth. That, fortunately, will be the main concern of this chapter, since the variation of characters themselves and the different ways in which the author chooses narrative technique are most essential aspects of O'Connor's work.

On the whole, O'Connor especially saw fit to allow us to observe how children, through curiosity, piece by piece unravel the mystery of their own innocence, and how readers, in observing the process of how a child's expectations are dispelled, may realize in some way the shallowness of the adult world. Each in its own subtle way, the stories of children present variations on this general theme.

These child narratives most often take on a humorous exterior which, to some degree, rightly should accompany childhood's "natural piety" of which William Wordsworth once wrote (62). What Frank O'Connor has succeeded in doing where other writers have failed is in recapturing the innocence of childhood. Children in "First Confession," "The Drunkard," and "My Oedipus Complex" are genuinely happy--because, despite the occasional setbacks and dissatisfactions, things generally turn out all right. Often, humor strategically placed within stories has helped O'Connor to achieve this effect: the main difference between the masterpiece "First Confession" and its weak precursor "Repentance," for example, is that humor makes the final draft both realistic and meaningful. It is hard to imagine an Irish exile in a Paris hotel room
brooding over a priest's sympathy and over his having climbed to kneel on a shelf for his first confession years ago. Even if we think of “Repentance” as nostalgic, the story still belongs to and remains with the innocent boy rather than the brooding adult. Different events call for appropriate emotional responses, just as different stories require tones appropriate to the subject matter. The question is not so much whether happiness is a simpler emotion than sorrow, or whether comedy is in some way less literary than tragedy. Literature should concern itself with both comedy and tragedy, just as life incorporates both happiness and sorrow. O'Connor's range allows for much more than humor, even in the childhood narratives themselves, but his reputation has been formed such that humor seems to predominate. Here, then, we will look closely at two examples of child narratives—one typical (“Christmas Morning”), one not so typical (“The Face of Evil”)—which provide a glimpse at the more bleak dimensions of childhood for O'Connor.

“The Face of Evil” is the most distinct story in the child narrative subgenre, but perhaps it is precisely the darkness which the title suggests that has caused the story to be neglected. Having first appeared in The New Yorker in April 1954 (Maurice Sheehy 191), “The Face of Evil” was reprinted in 1954 in More Stories by Frank O'Connor and in 1969 in Collection Three, published in Great Britain. Interestingly, it was omitted from the American companion volume to Collection Three, A Set of Variations. Finally, the story resurfaced in 1994, after years of dormancy, in Michael Steinman's A Frank O'Connor Reader. Perhaps the story's dark undertone accounts for its neglect and even for the fact that it did not appear in short story volumes until shortly after O'Connor's death. However, even dark undertones do not justify neglecting such a fine, if anomalous, story.
Steinman rightly comments on the very illusive introduction O'Connor designs: “The Face of Evil’ begins deceptively as light-hearted nostalgia told by a typical O'Connor boy—pious, diligent, and naive” (157). Its narrator (who remains unnamed throughout the story), as with Jackie of “First Confession,” spends just as much time supplying background information as he does revealing the plot itself, so we should suspect that O'Connor is up to something. Furthermore, even though the plot eventually focuses on Charlie Dalton, an acquaintance of the narrator’s, the narrator comes to admit that the story itself is not so much about Charlie Dalton as about the results of the narrator’s own encounter with the “face of evil” which Dalton comes to exemplify.

The narrator seems deeply self-absorbed, especially from his first few statements: “I could never understand all the old talk about how hard it is to be a saint. I was a saint for quite a bit of my life and I never saw anything hard in it” (157). This latter claim itself reflects not even self-absorption as much as self-righteousness. Readers must begin to wonder whether this is the naive child telling his own story (as Steinman indicates it seems to be), but they eventually realize that “The Face of Evil,” unlike “First Confession,” is not a child’s story told by a child. In the first place, even though the narrator occasionally sounds like Jackie, the plot of “The Face of Evil” at least captures its central character at a later, more mature stage of childhood. The story reveals that the narrator has been going to confession for quite some time. Besides that, Jackie’s rather ridiculous generalizations such as “I must have broken the whole ten commandments” (Collected Stories 177) are replaced in “The Face of Evil” by statements which lessen the degree of narrator’s naivete: “Everything is harm. It might be losing my temper with me and murder with you...but it would only come to the same thing” (Reader 164). Even though it is foolish to equate one’s temper with the crime of murder, it is much more foolish for a narrator to assert that he has broken every single one of the ten
commandments, unless of course one considers the source. Jackie is a boy who has not likely reached his tenth birthday, while the "Face of Evil" narrator is probably a teenager at the time of his encounter with Charlie Dalton. The narrator has a tiff with his mother, a scenario typical for adolescents who are undergoing mood swings and feeling great resentment when asked to run the tiniest of errands. Furthermore, the teenage narrator mentions that he and his comrades think and talk about girls quite frequently (and sometimes inappropriately); a younger boy like Jackie would probably find this disgusting and at the same time boring.

The details mentioned above suggest that the narrator at the time of the plot is a teenager; even so, one must recognize that the person who tells the story is the person who has already lived through it, and he is a good bit older than that adolescent. In fact, the narrator is an adult reflecting back on a profound unraveling of the mystery of innocence; the loss of innocence in "The Face of Evil" is immensely deeper than in "First Confession." An intense scrutiny of the details of this story and of the narrator's life is buried beneath each of the narrator's words. For example, the narrator's statements that "I was a saint for quite a bit of my life and I never saw anything hard in it" and that "I can't pretend I was ever very good at school" (159) could only come from the experience of someone who has done quite a bit of living and has thought not only about his experiences themselves, but even about what he thought about them at the time. The narrator's most self-reflective comment, "It was the way I sometimes felt afterwards with a girl, as though everything about you melted and fused and became one with a central mystery" (164), indicates that we are a long way from "First Confession." Still, this narrator might very well endorse Nora's statement at the end of "First Confession" that it is "no advantage to anybody trying to be good."

O'Connor certainly has been deceptively clever at the beginning of the
story, and on a more basic level, assuming that we do not know anything about
the narrator, readers are still intrigued by his words. O'Connor at least sparks
our interest by way of the apparent vanity of the narrator's claims at the
outset, and the claim which immediately follows: "And when I stopped being a
saint, it wasn't because the life was too hard." One must at this point ask,
"Well, why did you stop?" This is exactly O'Connor's intent, to force the reader
to stop and wonder, with interest.

O'Connor's storyteller, even despite the above claims, is a child at the
time of the narration. He is a sophisticated child since he has made clever
distinctions like the one between true saints and the sissies "who hadn't the
nerve to be anything else," since that is what their mothers intended them to
be. Still, even if he is sophisticated, he is not mature, and he admits to
preferring the "tough gang down the road" to the company of saints. He sees
those boys as distinctly different from himself, taking an interest in them
mainly because they are so purely "other." This preference becomes most
apparent in the narrator's strange relationship with "easily the most vicious
kid in the locality," Charlie Dalton. The narrator both respects and is
fascinated by Dalton, chiefly because Dalton

had done all the things [the narrator] would never do: stolen money,
stolen bicycles, run away from home, slept with tramps and
criminals...and ridden without a ticket on trains and on buses. It
filled [his] imagination. (162)

What becomes most apparent in the relationship between Dalton and the
narrator is the narrator's relative inexperience and naivete--his childishness.
He admits a fascination with all of the crimes Dalton has committed, but he can
still somehow equate Dalton's sins with his own and make optimistic statements
about how easily people can change if they put their minds to it: "I wanted to
explain to [Charlie] that...he could be as much a saint as I was just as I could be
as much a sinner as he was " (164).
In Dalton, ultimately, the narrator recognizes how wrong he is, but the face of evil appears in a different form even before Dalton is mentioned. We may think of the face of evil as a visual incarnation of a guilty conscience working within the narrator's mind, tormenting him. This face, in fact, is the first real shock the story provides, and its appearance as much as any other detail suggests that this is not a story about a typical O'Connor boy. At first, the narrator mentions a nagging voice which he visualizes as the face of "a fat and sneering teacher" whom he hated. The voice initially seems harmless enough and perhaps even beneficial. On account of the voice, for example, the narrator is prompted to march downstairs early in the morning and bathe in cool water in the dead of winter, for the sake of proving his sainthood.

While maintaining this deep interior life, the narrator cherishes the fact that he can keep his distance from external matters: "to remain detached—that was the great thing; to care for things and for people, yet not to care for them so much that your happiness became dependent on them" (159). Perhaps this statement provides some insight into the narrator's relationship to Dalton, because although both remain detached for some time, the narrator's loss of innocence is traceable to the special interest he takes in Dalton. The narrator seems to be lamenting nostalgically the way that, at an earlier period of his life, detachment accompanied innocence—though he has since entered a world which requires commitment, a world in which innocence is no longer feasible.

Soon, the narrator informs us that the face would return on occasion to prod him into obeying his mother's wishes. The narrator, for example, becomes angry with his mother for asking him to go for a message; the voice says to him, sarcastically,

'Now, that's the first time you've behaved sensibly for months, boy. That was the right way to behave to your mother.'

'Well, it was the right way. Why can't she let me alone, once in a while?...I suppose I'm entitled to a bit of peace some time?"
'Ah, of course you are, my dear fellow... let that silly little woman go for the messages herself. She probably hasn't long to live anyway, and when she dies you'll be able to do all the weeping you like.' (160)

The voice goads him into exasperation and eventually guilt, and in the end the narrator runs the errand for his mother.

At this point, the narrator begins to reveal the very minimal extent of his wrongdoing, although at the time he did not know how minimal his sins were. He scoffs at the priest who heard his confessions: “Not that he was ever severe with me, no matter what I did; he thought I was the last word in holiness, and was always asking me to pray for some special intention of his own” (160). Readers begin to realize that a narrator who once considered ‘Bad Temper’ one of his gravest sins is perhaps right in having called himself a saint.

The narrator eventually forsakes the details of his own sainthood in favor of some background on “the fellow who really fascinated” him, Charlie Dalton. Throughout the story, the narrator’s concern for those beyond himself is relegated to an interest in mystery rather than genuine sympathy, and nowhere is this more apparent than when the narrator describes Dalton’s situation. A policeman’s son, Dalton was always getting into trouble and would have been sent to an industrial school if not for his father’s occupation. The narrator himself admits that

One of my most vivid recollections is that of Charlie’s education. I’d hear a shriek, and there would be Mr. Dalton, dragging Charlie along the pavement to school...pausing to give Charlie a good going-over with the belt which he carried loose in his hand. (161)

The most distinguishing feature the narrator provides about Dalton’s life is that he remembers the beatings Charlie’s father gave him. Even more astonishing is the narrator’s reaction: Charlie’s screams would always make the narrator rush to the door with fascination, and although the narrator’s mother would always express her sympathy for “the poor child,” he neither
understood her reaction nor felt any sympathy for Charlie. He comments, instead, that “He wouldn’t have been Charlie if it hadn’t been for the leatherings and the threats of the industrial school.” The narrator again seems to be espousing the philosophy that keeping one’s distance is the best policy.

The narrator continues by describing his unique relationship with Dalton. They were not friends, he says, but the narrator was the closest thing Dalton had to a friend, for at least Dalton would acknowledge his passing with a slight nod of the head: “I seemed to be the only fellow on the road he didn’t hate.” Meanwhile, the narrator admits that he tried to sympathize with Charlie, “but 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.” The narrator could stop and exchange a few words with Dalton, but more than anything, he admired Dalton from a comfortable distance, dealing with him only when they met on the road or when he could observe Mr. Dalton and Charlie from his own doorway. The narrator is not an intrusive participant but a detached observer, and readers may feel at this point as though the narrator should stop worrying about his own safe distance and should try to do something to help Charlie.

Finally, the main plot begins as the narrator reveals that “one Saturday evening, an incident occurred which changed my attitude to him; indeed, changed my attitude to myself, though it wasn’t until long after that I realised it.” The gravity of this statement suggests that O’Connor is reeling us in from the narrator’s somewhat random musings, once again forcing readers to pay attention. On the way to confession one night, the narrator pauses to talk to Charlie. Their conversation turns to confession, and Charlie admits that he has not gone for twelve months—the narrator shrugs his shoulders as if to indicate neither surprise nor offense, and he admits that “I never went in
much for criticising others, and, anyway, Charlie wouldn't have been Charlie if he had gone to Confession every week."

The conversation turns to the narrator's deep commitment to keeping out of harm's way, and here a most significant dispute arises. Charlie contends that the narrator's sins are minuscule and do not mean anything, while the narrator argues that his sins should be regarded just as gravely as Charlie's, for they are "just the same thing" and "would only come to the same thing." Here is where we come to realize most that the narrator's viewpoint reflects an idealism based on inexperience, for the narrator attributes Charlie's reluctance to accept his position to his own inability to his own deficiencies as a speaker. After Charlie admits that he wants to kill people and vows to kill his father one day, the narrator makes probably his most naive statement:

for the first time I knew that Charlie felt about me exactly as I felt about him, with a sort of envy, and I wanted to explain to him...that he could be as much a saint as I was just as I could be as much a sinner as he was. (164)

At this point, the narrator is set on convincing Charlie and even resorts to showing Charlie his most secret possession, the little notebook which records his most awful deeds, "under different headings--Disobedience, Bad Temper, Bad Thoughts, Selfishness, and Laziness." Dalton seems baffled by this and is so stunned that he sits quietly, listening to the narrator describe the benefits of doing one's best to be good. The narrator talks about the inner peace and order he feels from attending Mass in the morning. In trying to make his point, he stumbles upon a thought that probably has an incredible effect on Charlie: when you go to church, he says, "You don't mind it so much if you get a hammering. You know there's something else in the world besides the hammering." This statement likely appeals to Charlie in a very personal way, but readers cannot be sure of this, for the narrator does not observe Charlie closely. He is once again too deeply self-absorbed in his own inability to get
right the description of "what morning Mass really meant." Nevertheless, when the narrator turns to depart for confession, Dalton volunteers to accompany him. The narrator is convinced not that his expression of religious conviction has had an effect on Dalton, but that their understanding of each other has affected the change. He seems to have so projected his own image upon Dalton as to be blinded from the real circumstances of Dalton's life. Soon, however, he will be most bluntly reminded.

They enter the church together; the narrator says his confession \(^3\) and then notices "Charlie Dalton sitting among the old women outside the confessional, waiting to go in." After Charlie is a long time in the confessional, the narrator begins to worry. When he comes out, the narrator sees from the "I told you so" expression on Charlie's face that the confession did no good. The narrator becomes disillusioned when he realizes that Charlie told the priest everything and the priest showed little sympathy, laying a heavy penance on him. Further, the narrator volunteers to wait for Charlie, and it is while the narrator waits that he begins to reflect on the heavy penance the priest must have given. The narrator for the first time realizes that "Charlie must have done things that I couldn't imagine—terrible things." Still, he is enraged by the priest's treatment of Charlie, enraged because when Charlie "was down, people couldn't help wanting to crush him further." The narrator's rage suggests for the first time that he actually can understand the anger and the emotions and the actions of Charlie Dalton.

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 realised that the life before me would have complexities of emotion which I couldn't even imagine. (166)

O'Connor's postscript serves as an apt denouement, equally as scarring as the deep emotional and intellectual impact of the narrator's grim realization: the next week, Charlie Dalton ran away again, stole several petty items, "and, after
being arrested seventy five miles from Cork in a little village on the coast, was
sent to an industrial school."4

This darkest of O'Connor's stories of childhood reminds us not only of the burdensome and complex nature of experience, but also of the difficulty of escaping external circumstances. The story forces us to question not only why the narrator stopped being a saint, but even why Charlie Dalton is the way he is. Even if we do not find the answer within confines of this story, O'Connor has initiated a process whereby we may seek such answers by probing ourselves and others around us. On a deep level, "The Face of Evil" is unsatisfying and quite disturbing. We may be tempted to read the story a second or third time--as Michael Steinman has commented, "an O'Connor story is comprehensible on its first reading, but it reveals more each time because its simplicity is deceptive" (Reader xii).

Furthermore, we may even look into the circumstances of Frank O'Connor's own life to gleen additional meaning from the story. Events recounted in An Only Child strike a familiar chord:

I heard that a young fellow I knew--a wild, handsome boy whose father beat him savagely--had run away from home and was being searched for...He would be picked up and sent to a reformatory. That evening I found him myself, lurking in an alleyway, his long face dirty with tears, and tried to make him come home with me. He wouldn't, and I could not leave him there like that, lonely and lost and crying. I made it clear that I would stay with him, and at last he agreed to return home if I went with him and pleaded for him...His sister opened the door, and I made my little speech, and she promised to see that he wasn't punished. Then I went home in a glow of self-righteousness, feeling that I had saved him from the fate I had always dreaded myself. I felt sure he would be grateful...but it didn't happen like that at all. 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. (O'Connor in Steinman 157)

The emotional impact is basically the same, but in "The Face of Evil," the events have been altered and, more importantly, the story has been dramatized to a much greater extent for its impact on the reader. O'Connor's real-life
incident is one of many which flow together in his autobiographical narrative, but “The Face of Evil” isolates one singular event, supplying it with greater detail and making the reader think about its dark consequences.

An Only Child’s autobiographical statement, “As a protector of the weak, I was never worth a damn,” seems to reflect some degree of regret, but “The Face of Evil” strikes readers as much more important. It portrays a life-shaping decision for the narrator, one that results in a disillusionment that changes how a person views the world: “For the first time I realised that the life before me would have complexities of emotion which I couldn’t even imagine.” O’Connor’s autobiography certainly can contribute to understanding the story, but by no means does it substitute for “The Face of Evil” or limit what the story accomplishes. Life itself, “The Face of Evil” suggests, is sometimes disturbing and often mysterious.

It probably makes sense that, compared to “First Confession, “The Face of Evil” portrays a deeper loss of innocence as a story of adolescence and a darker vision of the world because it is told by an adult. Nonetheless, even stories of young children do not necessarily reflect a brightness of theme or a humorous tone. “Christmas Morning” is such an example. If “First Confession” makes readers laugh wholeheartedly and “The Face of Evil” causes us to question the world’s injustice, then “Christmas Morning” is one of those deeply affecting stories wrought from that intangible synthesis of emotion that can sometimes make us laugh and cry all at once (Ellmann vii).

One may account for this highly emotional response to Christmas time because of the emotional ambivalence the holiday itself created for O’Connor. “Christmas was always the worst time of year for me,” he wrote in An Only Child, “though it began well” (129), full of expectation. The poor child that he was, O’Connor had no reason to expect what most children considered to be
decent presents, but still, the boys' weekly magazines at Christmas time each year had him convinced that "anything might happen" (133). Thus, each year "When I woke on Christmas Morning, I felt the season of imagination slipping away from me and the world of reality breaking in" (134). O'Connor has cleverly forged "Christmas Morning" out of numerous details from his autobiography, which contains an entire chapter on Christmas—or perhaps one might say that the Christmas section of An Only Child was formed from what O'Connor remembered about "Christmas Morning," which was published first.5 O'Connor takes the facts of his life and shapes them in distinctly different ways for autobiography and for fiction, as we shall see.

"Christmas Morning" begins, as does "First Confession," with a narrator misdirecting us from the story he is about to tell by shifting the blame. The narrator states, "I never really liked my brother, Sonny" (200), and continues by hinting at his own jealousy at Sonny's ability to gain his mother's favor by telling on his brother and by spelling "himself into her favor." This narrator is not a young boy but a man reflecting back on the time "until [he] was nine or ten." We can assume his adulthood because of the objectivity apparent in his telling, as when he admits to having been mischievous: "Mind you, I was usually up to something." Nonetheless, the narrator still can so clearly envision himself and his thoughts in the distant past that O'Connor affords us the child's perspective as the object of humor, coupled with the wisdom of an experienced, adult narrator reminiscing. Thus, the narrator can make a ridiculous claim such as, "I really believe it was to spite me that [Sonny] was so smart at his books." Some statements even combine the child's ridiculousness with the adult's flair for expression, as in "you might almost say he spelt himself into her favor."

The narrator, readers soon learn, is Larry, the same Larry who appears as the central character in O'Connor's most popular stories, including "My
Oedipus Complex" and "The Drunkard." While O'Connor's childhood did share many similarities with his most prominent child character, Larry, these narratives are complicated by the fact that Larry has a brother, Sonny, with whom O'Connor usually shares even more similarities. Sonny, for example, is the sissy, as O'Connor himself was a sissy to the other boys in the neighborhood (An Only Child 126). O'Connor himself, of course, had no brothers or sisters, so his sources for the tensions between Larry and Sonny— and Jackie and Nora— are external. These sibling rivalries and conflicts are central to and pervasive in the child narratives, and they reflect one more keen observation on O'Connor's part. What sources did he have for envisioning such tensions? Perhaps he learned a great deal from his own children or from other children he had observed; perhaps too he used his extensive imagination.

Larry moves on to tell us a bit about himself, most notably that, for lack of concentration, he was not able to do his schools lessons well, and, besides, he was much more interested in going out to play with the neighborhood gang. Larry's mother tries to prompt him to study by telling him that "You ought to be ashamed of yourself that your baby brother can read better than you," but he refuses to listen. Larry is not the studying type; Sonny, on the other hand, shares with Frank O'Connor an interest in books which put him in his mother's favor. Still, Larry shares with Michael O'Donovan an interest in adventure and excitement; both often found themselves gathering outside with the neighborhood boys, the tough gang down the road (An Only Child 116), and O'Connor as a young man became the soldier Larry aspired to be (Collected Stories 201). For O'Connor, the difficulty between being Larry and Sonny was resolved in the following manner:

Apart from any natural liking I may have had for education, I knew it was the only way of escaping from the situation in which I found myself. Everyone admitted that...They blamed their own failure in
life on the lack of it. (An Only Child 117)

Thus, O'Connor could divide his own personality amongst his characters as a means to creating believable fiction.

As with most O'Connor child narratives, the storyteller eventually does get to the point, after much backgrounding. At this point Larry begins to wonder what Santa Claus might bring him, despite what his friends the Dohertys tell him about there being no Santa Claus. Larry dispels their claim by stating that "the Dohertys were a rough class of children you wouldn't expect Santa to come to anyway" (Collected Stories 201). To confirm his belief in Santa, he intends to write to the North Pole directly.

Nonetheless, his mother instills some doubt by suggesting that Santa only comes to good boys, at which point Sonny chimes in that Santa only comes to good spellers. Larry's mother clarifies her statement by saying that Santa comes to "any little boy who does his best" (201). Larry seems deeply troubled by his mother's remark, and perhaps, as we learn, he has good reason to be. He and Peter Doherty played hookey from school for three consecutive days right before the holidays, because "Flogger Dawley gave us sums we couldn't do." They would have gotten away with it, had the teacher not sent a note home.

When Larry tried to explain about the sums, his mother said to him only "You have no word," and she did not speak to him for days. The mother's response, "You have no word," again derives from autobiographical reminiscence, this time it reappears in O'Connor's second volume, My Father's Son. In this case, however, the statement comes not directly from O'Connor but from the mother of Father Tim Traynor, a close friend of O'Connor's who passed this story on to him:

'Once, when I was at University College, Cork...I made an excuse not to come home for the weekend. I pretended I had a lot of work to do, but, really, all I wanted was to get off with a couple of fellows for a weekend in Youghal. When we were walking along the promenade,
who do you think we met, but Mother? She'd got lonely at home and come down for a day excursion. When she saw me she smiled and bowed and said, “Good Evening,” and all I could do was to raise my hat. But after that she wouldn't even let me talk about it. “Ah, you have no word!” she said. Wasn't that a terrible thing for her to say—“You have no word”? (154)

Even though O'Connor seems to understand the implications of “You have no word”—he admits that his mother also used it on him and that “word” meant honor to her—Larry is utterly baffled by his mother's statement and by her overall response to the situation. He wonders “why she wouldn't let me grow up naturally like anyone else” (Collected Stories 201).

Larry's misbehavior, of course, is Sonny's advantage, and he exploits the situation to its fullest potential by standing at the door in a paternal manner, informing the neighborhood that “Larry isn't left go out. He went on the lang with Peter Doherty and me mother isn't talking to him.” Sonny's tormenting Larry in this way makes us laugh at the ridiculousness of the young child posing as the paternal enforcer, but also makes us feel badly for the embarrassment it causes the elder brother. Sonny continues to tease Larry in bed that night, telling him that Santa will not bring him anything. Standing up for himself just for his own dignity, Larry tells Sonny that their mother cannot inform Santa of his misdeeds without travelling to the North Pole. Sonny insists that Santa will not come, and Larry's responds “‘We'll see whether he will or not,’... sarcastically, doing the old man on him” (202). In confidence, though, Larry admits to bluffing and surmises that “You could never tell what powers these superhuman chaps would have of knowing what you were up to.” The boy's typically logical (though at the same time naive and innocent) belief in Santa Claus is perfectly set up for what is to come.

Larry decides to wait up for Santa on Christmas eve, to explain himself and account for his deeds in person. He has a way with words, he says, and given the opportunity, he may be able to convince Santa that he really
deserves a model railway. Larry practices lying awake and figures out when Santa should arrive, “seeing that he’d be coming from the north, and would have the whole of the South Side to do afterwards” (202). He declares that

In some ways I was very farsighted. The only trouble was the things I was farsighted about. I was so wrapped up in my own calculations that I had little attention to spare for Mother’s difficulties. (202-3)

Mother’s dilemma is a scene which in detail closely resembles a scene O’Connor described in An Only Child (131-2). In each case the boy (O’Connor or Larry) overhears his parents arguing when his father returns from work on Christmas eve. The father gives the mother the weekly amount of money for housekeeping he is accustomed to giving. The mother explodes at him because it is Christmas, and he has withheld much of his pay from her, knowing that she will need money to buy the children presents. Much of the dialogue, especially the mother’s, is similar, and one particular line which shifts the argument in the mother’s favor O’Connor repeats almost verbatim:

‘Do you think I’ ll leave them with nothing on the one day of the year?’ (Collected Stories 203)

‘Do you think I’ll leave him without it on the one day of the year?’ (An Only Child 132)

What happens in the autobiography and in the short story is rather similar, but how the events are described is distinctly different. “Christmas Morning” repeats the dialogue objectively in the sense that readers only receive the argument as the child might hear it. The father, of course, comes out looking bad if the reader is to make a judgement of him, since he storms out, leaving the mother to comment bitterly, “I suppose the publicans will get the rest” (203). Nevertheless, the judgement is the reader’s to make, since the child (and even the adult behind the child telling the story) only reports what he hears.

The autobiography, on the other hand, supplies multiple inferences by the author. O’Connor tries to be objective, but his work seems to function on
the premise that objectivity in non-fiction is markedly different than in fiction. In the autobiography, O'Connor still reports what his mother says, but he adds much in terms of inference and judgement, especially about his father. For example, O'Connor points out that his father usually provoked the normal arguments during the year out of his own guilt because he expected an argument each week and got, usually, only the mother's resignation. At Christmas time, though, O'Connor's mother typically went white with indignation and uncharacteristically invoked the name of God. Then, O'Connor's father—as O'Connor would sarcastically comment, "a poor, hard-working man deprived of his little bit of pleasure at Christmas time because of an extravagant wife and child" (132)—would suddenly blow up at her. She would then run down her shopping list, "which, God knows, must have been modest enough." Eventually, O'Connor's mother would give her whispered, frenzied reply: "Do you think I'll leave him without it on the one day of the year?"

By far the most important difference between "Christmas Morning" and the autobiographical incident in An Only Child is the awareness of the situation O'Connor has that the boy (who is only reporting) cannot:

Years later I suddenly remembered [Mother's words] because of [their] beauty, and realized that it was I who was to be left without a toy, and on this one day of the year that seemed to her intolerable. And yet I did not allow it to disturb me" (132).

Perhaps the most significant difference between fiction and autobiography here is that in "Christmas Morning" the boy does not appear to be disturbed by the argument, while in An Only Child, O'Connor is most certainly disturbed. O'Connor treats his father rather hostilely—with good reason, of course—but an intense subjectivity arises only in the autobiography. Sometimes, however ironic it seems, fiction can be more objective than non-fiction. This difference between the objectivity of youth and the subjective judgement of
maturity highlights that same "detachment of youth," that ability to keep his
distance, for which the narrator of "The Face of Evil" longs.

Following the argument, Larry's mother makes the final preparations
for Christmas, lighting the Christmas candle and hanging the stockings.
Then, the children head for bed, with visions of a model railway dancing in
Larry's head. He waits for Santa and finally hears the latch on the door, but it
is only his father returning home. The father and mother have a brief
exchange, and Larry's father, who is of course drunk, begins to sing "Adeste
Fideles," making up the words as he goes along. Unfortunately for Larry, his
father's singing puts him to sleep.

Larry awakes the next morning, only to realize that Santa has come and
left "with an entirely false impression" (204) of him, since he finds only some
sort of book as his present. Santa also goofed in Sonny's case, since "all Santa
had left him was a popgun, one that fired a cork on a piece of string and which
you could get in any huxter's shop for sixpence" (204-5). Larry rationalizes
the situation, asking himself what would Sonny do with such a gun, and what
good would a book do himself. While Sonny sleeps, Larry comes up with what
he deems a brilliant inspiration: he would trade the book for the gun. No one
would know, he figures, so he exchanges the gifts and returns to bed.

Sonny awakens Larry to tell him that Santa brought him a book and
Larry a gun; then Sonny insists that they take their presents in to show their
parents. Larry warily comments that "I distrusted Mother, [but] I had the
consolation of believing that the only person who could contradict me was
now somewhere up by the North Pole" (205). The children burst into their
parents' bedroom, and Larry knows instantly, when his mother's smile fades,
that something is wrong, though it baffles him how she is able to guess what
he did. Larry's mother says to him "You stole it from that poor child's
stocking while he was asleep...Larry, Larry, how could you be so mean?"
The father attempts to intervene on the grounds that no one should be upset on Christmas morning. Larry's mother responds with fury, "Do you think I want my son to grow up a liar and a thief?" The father again steps in to try to rectify the situation by offering Larry sixpence "and one for Sonny," but the damage has been done.

Larry finally sees for what they are his family's circumstances, his father's nature, the value of education to his mother, and the true meaning of Christmas:

I understood it all and it was almost more than I could bear; that there was no Santa Claus...only Mother trying to scrape together a few coppers from the housekeeping; that Father was mean and common and a drunkard, and that she had been relying on me to raise her out of the misery of the life she was leading. And I knew that the look in her eyes was the fear that, like my father, I should turn out to be mean and common and a drunkard. (206)

This story, which has been consistently humorous and light-hearted, in the end is utterly heart-wrenching. The droning repetition of "mean and common and a drunkard" emphasizes a bleak reality in stark contrast to the romantic expectation of the child's perspective which dominated throughout. The father's offer of sixpence is hauntingly bothersome, since Larry earlier informed readers that the popgun, the Christmas present itself, cost not more than sixpence. Again, we return to O'Connor's autobiographical statement that "I knew [education] was the only way of escaping from the situation in which I found myself" (An Only Child 117). "Christmas Morning" dramatizes the exact moment when such knowledge came to O'Connor. Thus, autobiography is magically transformed and brought to life even more meaningfully and realistically in the fictional artistry of Frank O'Connor.

The three great stories we have explored, of course, do not do justice to the entire breadth of Frank O'Connor's child narratives, but they do set its boundaries. Throughout the children's stories, O'Connor used a variety of
subject matter to explore the general theme of the loss of innocence. Whether
the background was the wonderment of Christmas morning, a curiosity about
the rationale for good and evil in the world, or the dreaded expectation of first
confession, the message was remarkably consistent. With each reading of a
Frank O'Connor child narrative, one feels the sense of an almost universally
transcendent familiarity that stems from shared humanity, whether the
reader has experienced a similar situation or known someone who has, or if
one simply recalls the emotions and perspective of being a child.

Thus, even though O'Connor uses Micky, Jackie, Larry, and a host of
other seemingly interchangeable narrators in these stories, O'Connor's
approach to narration using children themselves as the means is justified by
our sense of shared humanity. Furthermore, some variation of narrators is
justified because it allows O'Connor's keen insight as an artist to flourish in
the way he has chosen the perfect narrative approach for each story, by
permitting a young child to narrate, letting an adult reminisce about his
youth, or allowing some outside narrator to tell the story. Primarily, O'Connor
relied on first person narration, but even within the first person, he has
created a range of techniques from "First Confession" to "The Face of Evil."

The primary objection to O'Connor's narrative technique, and to the
stories of childhood in general, has been that the many of the stories involve
situations which derive from O'Connor's autobiography—thus, the stories are
deemed too personal to be considered in any sense "transcendent" or
"universal." Some would also argue that the first person narrative which
filters the story through the child's consciousness emphasizes humor while
simplifying and even obscuring a story's more serious and meaningful
implications. Even O'Connor's widow, Harriet Sheehy, has referred to the
apparent contrast between O'Connor's stories of children and adults:

Michael [O'Donovan] the child and Michael the adolescent are
transparently there in stories like "The Drunkard," "The Face of
Evil," "Judas"—one has only to read An Only Child to see how closely fiction resembles truth when it comes to himself as young. But Michael the adult is more veiled. (Steinman interview 253)

One may assume that some, even most, of O'Connor's childhood narratives are derivative of his own experience. After all, is it not natural for authors to shape fiction out of what they know to be true from their own experiences? As we have seen, even if circumstantial background seems similar, autobiography and fiction for Frank O'Connor always diverged significantly. Exploring this divergence is engaging in itself, but even more engaging are the fictional and non-fictional narratives themselves.

The real problem, it seems, is not with the sources of O'Connor's fiction, but with the perceived limitations of Frank O'Connor as an artist. As James Matthews, O'Connor's sole biographer, has pointed out,

'When most readers think of Frank O'Connor, they probably recall the brilliantly balanced 'simple' stories published mainly in the New Yorker in the 1950s and 1960s.' The immense popularity of such stories as "The Drunkard"—and "First Confession" and "My Oedipus Complex"...has resulted in their being highly anthologized. (Alexander 142)

Thus, returning full-circle to the limitations placed on O'Connor's reputation today through (mis)representation in anthologies, and I would return to my original argument, one should acknowledge that there is much more to the stories of childhood than Frank O'Connor has been given credit for. Few, if any, artists have ever so observantly, masterfully portrayed children, and fewer still have been so skillful as to enable the children to speak for themselves, realistically, genuinely. If some stories derive from Frank O'Connor's childhood, so be it. The first of these stories, "Repentance," did not appear until twenty years after O'Connor's childhood had ended, and the bulk of them appeared some twenty years after that.

Thus, one can only marvel if O'Connor truly was able to summon his early experiences as subject matter for his work, and readers must lament that
misunderstanding and misrepresentation have detracted from his reputation. Every one of the most popular Frank O'Connor stories in anthologies today\(^6\)-even "Guests of the Nation" and "Judas"--is a first person narrative of a boy, adolescent, or young man who is coming to terms with a loss of innocence. One must acknowledge that Frank O'Connor's diligent craftsmanship in manipulation of narrative technique, characterization, and humorous effect has made his work accessible and enjoyable to a wide audience. However, one must also admit that Frank O'Connor presented a different moral landscape for exploration and a wide variation on the consequences of experience in each of these stories: the world of "The Face of Evil" is entirely distinct from the world of "First Confession," for example, and not every Frank O'Connor story is about "a loss of innocence"--only about fifteen percent of the stories are, in fact. By reducing the body of O'Connor's work to children's stories about the loss of innocence, one ignores not only the range of characterization and narrative technique in the other worlds and worldviews O'Connor has created; one also ignores many of the finest short stories O'Connor wrote.
CHAPTER 4

“CHARACTERIZING” HUMAN PRIESTS

If the childhood narratives, to some extent, appeal to a universal familiarity to which readers can relate, the stories of priests instead evoke a distant curiosity shared by writer and reader alike. Of all the characters to which O'Connor has given a fictional life, the priests may have been his greatest accomplishment, both because he had to reach so far beyond his own experience and because he seemed to understand deeply the difficulties of being a priest, from the necessary restrictions on behavior and thought, to the secrecy required within and beyond the confessional, to the unpopular moral decisions and actions sometimes required of the job, to the impossibility, even, of having a “normal” conversation with anyone.

Overall, the priest may have been the model character for O'Connor's short fiction, since his thesis was that “there is in the short story...an intense awareness of human loneliness” which echoes from its main character, not a hero, but a member of a “submerged population group” (The Lonely Voice 19). In Ireland, one population group is feared, admired, loathed, respected, loved, and kept at a distance, all at once. Priests are to some extent distinctive representatives of Irish society, but still they are submerged, “wandering about the fringes of society” (19). There is something about being a priest that is almost antithetical to the human condition; O'Connor most often sought to show that, for better or worse, priests were human, despite the restrictions placed upon them, and this theme unifies the stories, even if some characters receive a much more severe treatment than others. O'Connor carried this theme with him from his first story of the priesthood, “Peasants” (published
in 1936), to one of the last stories he wrote in the year he died. This chapter will explore, then, O'Connor’s emphasis on the humanity of priests in the varying attitudes toward the priesthood manifest in his short fiction, especially in terms of the progression of his writing career, which had no small effect on his varying treatments. To achieve this broader exploration, this chapter will focus less specifically on individual stories and more on the stories’ impact on trends in O’Connor’s career.

In 1993 a new volume, *The Collar*, collected O’Connor’s short stories about Irish priests. In introducing this collection, Harriet Sheehy, O’Connor’s widow, states that these stories seem to “reflect the ambiguity in O’Connor’s own attitude, torn between empathy with the men and antipathy towards the institution” (*The Collar* vi) they represented. This attitude can best be understood by exploring briefly O’Connor’s religious belief (or unbelief, as some may say) and his relationship toward priests.

For most of his life, O’Connor was not exactly an atheist but neither was he a hard-line Catholic. He was skeptical of the institutional Catholicism that was practiced in Ireland—and of Ireland in general—which originated in his disillusionment as a prisoner of war during the Irish Civil War. This skepticism, and his spiritual understanding in general, is most clearly manifest at the end of *An Only Child*, when O’Connor recounts his return from imprisonment:

> But the following Sunday I found I did not want to go to Mass...and a girl...said bitterly when I met her in the street: ‘I hear you don’t believe in God any longer.’ Though this wasn’t true, it took me some time to realize...that I had crossed another shadow line, and make me wonder if I should ever again be completely at ease with the people I loved, their introverted religion and introverted patriotism. (275)

... All our arguments about the immortality of the soul seem to me to be based on one vast fallacy—that it is our vanity that desires eternity... From the time I was a boy and could think at all, I was certain that for my own soul there was only nothingness...But I knew that there were souls that were immortal, that even God, if He wished to, could not
O'Connor was a humble, skeptical man who invested more faith in humanity than in religion. Even if he found it difficult to believe in what Catholicism taught, he certainly had a respect for those who did believe, including his mother. His investment in humanity and respect for true faith is evident in the stories he wrote about Irish priests.

Thomas Flanagan has written that even though O'Connor was "a notorious opponent of the Church temporal,... no other Irish writer has written with such persuasive warmth of the community of priests" (Maurice Sheehy 163). In large part O'Connor's sympathy for the priesthood came from his relationship with one clergyman in particular, his friend Father Tim Traynor, "an interesting man who should never have been a priest" (My Father's Son 146). Traynor gave O'Connor a sympathy and understanding for the men themselves and for "the necessary limits of [their] vocation," which often made Traynor brood over all the missed opportunities in his life (147-8).

O'Connor acknowledged that Traynor made a sacrifice in befriending him--many priests would not even speak to O'Connor if they recognized him--and their conversations were likely as honest and open as any "normal" dialogue, which was extraordinary for a priest. Thus, O'Connor learned a great deal and gained an appreciation for the men one always approached with caution, from a distance. Even so, O'Connor himself said on more than one occasion in all seriousness that he had "missed his vocation and ought to have been a priest" (Tracy in Maurice Sheehy 4).

O'Connor's sympathy for the difficulties of the priesthood first came to the fore in Crab Apple Jelly, a story collection published in 1944. "Crab apple jelly" was a sweet and tart mixture of ancient custom and modern reality, of laughter and weeping (Ellmann vii). Within that framework, the three stories
which focus on Catholic clergy, "Song Without Words," "The Shepherds," and "Uprooted," fit rather well because they highlight the fundamental tension between being a priest and being a "normal" person.

"Song Without Words" is one of the most meager stories Frank O'Connor wrote in terms of characterization and dialogue—it involves only two monks who have taken a vow of silence—but even so it says a great deal about human nature. The story itself shows how even two pious monks, Brother Arnold and Brother Michael, need some earthly solace to combat their desperate loneliness. For years, each kept a single secret reminder of the outside world: for Michael, it was the racing newspaper which reminded him of his jockeying days; for Arnold, it was a bottle of beer refilled each week by a farmer. However, only when Arnold happened to discover Michael hiding something behind his back did they reveal their secrets; sharing made them realize what a temptation friendship was to their isolated existence. Not until Arnold introduces an additional external vice, a deck of cards, does the righteous Michael object. Finally, both men give up their vices and their friendship, realizing their error, and both at once "went off to confess their guilt to the Prior" (Collected Stories 40).

The story holds the two monks at a distance in some respect, since we are not granted the privilege of first person narration (here or in any of the clergy narratives). Still, even if the monks are not allowed to speak to each other, they do understand each other; we understand them even further, since we are able to follow the thoughts of both monks, Brother Arnold in the first half, and Brother Michael in the second half of the story, particularly. Brother Michael's piety, whether we see it as respectfully genuine or as overzealously prudish, ultimately wins out. Thus, O'Connor's moral from the first paragraph holds true:

Even if there were only two men left in the world and both of them saints they wouldn't be happy. One of them would be bound to try and
One further point: this story’s focus on religion’s silencing of expression has particular symbolic resonance in the context of Irish literature because the traditions of the Druidic religion dictated a silence in Irish writing until Christian custom prevailed in the Middle Ages.

“The Shepherds” provides perhaps the most distinct clash between traditional Irish custom and the mores of the modern world. The curate at the center of this story, Father Devine, is able to succeed not so much because he clings to the traditional power of priests in Ireland as that he can adapt his role to fit the modern climate he faces. Devine stands as the translator—in more ways than one—between the local parish priest, Father Whelan, and the captain of a French ship, docked in the (Cork?) harbor. Even if the parish priest and the captain spoke the same language, they still would not understand one another. Whelan, an old curmudgeon whose experience it is that, as a priest, his word goes unchallenged, comes to the ship to ward off the Irish girls who have been frequenting it. Whelan summons one girl to the deck of the ship and dismisses her. However, when Whelan’s bullying tactics fail, luckily, his translator bails him out by requesting to speak with the captain. The captain no more understands Irish custom than Whelan would understand the French—both are equally set in their ways—but ultimately Devine’s flexibility prevails. Devine achieves Whelan’s goal, to remove the girls, through his manner and politeness, and by allowing the French captain to delude himself that the girl is Whelan’s (and Devine’s) mistress and that Whelan has had two spies watching the ship due to his own jealousy. The language barrier is most important because it allows Devine to appease the captain without having Whelan get in the way.

The story is not only a showcase for O’Connor’s linguistic abilities—at least one third of the dialogue is in French. It is the first of many O’Connor
stories in which he plays a distant, duty-bound parish priest off of a caring, affable curate. Also, especially at the story's inception, we get a glimpse at the life of a priest, Devine, who must substitute intellectual pursuits for human intercourse and who has some doubts about a priest's role in private affairs of the community—"'The Good Shepherd indeed!'" he sarcastically scoffs at Whelan (Collected Stories 43).

The third story of the clergy in Crab Apple Jelly, "Uprooted," involves a priest's brother and his family almost as much as the priest himself, and it is unique in that respect. Usually, priests seem to be completely cut off from the laity, but here, at least, the young priest visits his family. Mainly, the story is concerned with the priest's finding a wife for his younger brother, who is so uncertain about his own situation, having just moved to Dublin, that he utterly rejects the idea of marriage, saying, "'I nearly wished I could!'" (Collected Stories 98). Thus, the two brothers are left isolated and uprooted from their family. Most significant and affecting in this story are the priest's statements to his brother when he describes the difficulty of the life that lies ahead:

'Time will settle nothing for me...You have something to look forward to. I have nothing. It's the loneliness of my job that kills you. Even to talk about it would be a relief but there's no one you can talk to. People come to you with their troubles but there's no one you can go to with your own.' (97)

Thus, these earliest stories of priests in Crab Apple Jelly, for the most part, share the often tender, sometimes humorous, always lonely task of being an Irish priest.

Given these early portrayals of the clergy, Harriet Sheehy points out that one of the most painful, damaging accusations leveled against O'Connor's reputation was that he hated priests:

Frank O'Connor was often accused of being iconoclastic—of being in a perpetual state of annoyance with the Catholic Church. It was even written that 'the sight of the collar was enough to make his hair stand on end.' It is true that he had little time for the institutional Church's
pedantic and legalistic moralising, and even less for its Byzantine secrecy and triumphalist and authoritarian voice. But towards the actual men set apart by the collar—those called 'father' by people who are not their children—he had an attitude compounded of amusement, respect, curiosity and, above all, compassion. (v)

The accusations were painful because they were untrue, and damaging because any real or perceived slight to priests in early twentieth century Ireland met with condemnation from a united church, state, and populace. Thus, it is regrettable, but of little surprise that most of O'Connor's work throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s was banned in his own native land. It was not so much that O'Connor's work was offensive as that his reputation carried a stigma in the puritanism of post-colonial Ireland. A Censorship Board was appointed soon after Ireland gained its freedom. Of course, if a bureaucracy is created, it must do something, so the board took to banning many of the works of O'Connor, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Faolain, and others.

O'Connor in a way saw it as his obligation as a writer to push the bounds of what could be said. Benedict Kiely, reviewing O'Connor's Collected Stories and trying to characterize O'Connor's relationship to Irish society, provides and comments on a self-portrait of O'Connor's which accentuates his rivalry with priests:

Last Sunday morning,
Sitting on the tram,
I found myself beside a priest,
A fat and gloomy man:
I looked over his shoulder
And I read namguam.
Now I happened to be reading
Les Amours de Madame,
And even though he scowled at me
I didn't give a damn.
And that just shows you
The sort I am.

The mood, often acted upon, of that jingle acquired for him in the 1940s and 1950s the reputation of being a wild man. But in the days of the Censorship of Publications Board every Irish writer worth talking about had a somewhat similar reputation in the eyes of some of his (or her) compatriots. (36)
Every major Irish writer of O'Connor's era had run-ins with the censorship board, but none were so bitterly fought as O'Connor's. His difficulties began with the ultimate responsibility he had for every production held at the Abbey Theatre from 1937 to 1939. Yeats had held a position of similar responsibility, but he was better equipped to deal with petty (and even large scale) conflicts because of his personality and stature. O'Connor was, at this time, only the author of the highly praised Guests of the Nation. Thus, his position carried minuscule weight when compared with Yeats. Plus, O'Connor had to deal with puritanism not only in the response to the productions, but even with puritanism within the board of directors itself. O'Connor's troubles continued even after he left the Abbey. As one of O'Connor's friends and colleagues has noted, "People were always attacking him from no real conviction but because it was the correct thing to do" (Tracy in Maurice Sheehy 3). When O'Connor's second novel, Dutch Interior, was banned in 1940, a combination of circumstances sent him scrambling for employment outside Ireland. He found a temporary reprieve working in London for the Ministry of Information and the BBC during World War II. Eventually, Ireland's government even imposed restrictions on travel back and forth from London, specifically targeting O'Connor, and this forced him to move to London for a time, leaving his family behind. Circumstances were never so bad as in the early 1940s, but at least two times during his life, the difficult relationship he had with the country he loved forced him to seek employment outside Ireland, first in Britain, and then in America.

Why is this information relevant to an exploration of O'Connor's stories of Irish priests? Censorship on moral grounds, championed by priests, is relevant in so far as it influenced both Ireland's outlook on O'Connor and O'Connor's attitude toward the Irish priesthood. O'Connor was often criticized and misunderstood based on a view of his work often distorted by the lenses
religion and politics—O'Connor's work was even banned as a result, and therefore much of it had no chance even to reach an Irish audience. Censorship did not, however, stop Irish who had not read O'Connor's work—especially priests—from judging him. Secondly, preconceived notions about his own work to some extent embittered O'Connor against the very institutions—religion and the government—which were rushing to judgement against him. Censorship, of course, will have some effect on an author; as we shall see, at the height of the censorship, the stories of the late 1940s in particular present O'Connor's least sympathetic stories of priests as conduits of religion, especially those of The Common Chord. This 1947 collection contains two stories, "News for the Church" and "The Frying-Pan," which especially invite critique and analysis of the clergy.

Even though the priest at the end of "News for the Church" seems content enough and resolute in the position that he has sufficiently taught his young confessor a lesson, the pervasive irony of the story reduces Father Cassidy to ignorance and ineffectual bullying. "News for the Church," which opens The Common Chord, begins with a familiar sympathy, but it is the O'Connor story which most emphasizes the division between priests and other "normal" people. Irony almost determines the plot, and probably it influences, if not shapes, our reading of the story.

The plot itself exists as the narrative, with almost no background provided; it concerns a young girl confessing to an old priest who is sympathetic enough to individuals but rather cruel in his "abstract hatreds" (Collected Stories 121). He hates England, the Irish government, the middle classes, and perhaps even women, given some of his comments. At the least, he admittedly does not understand them: "with women you could never tell. They were all contrary, saints and sinners" (121).

This priest's inconsistency is gradually revealed throughout the stages
of the confession. At first, he takes to the girl and her minor sins, telling her “there isn’t much harm” in blasphemy, though “it coarsens the character” (122). The priest grows a bit more concerned when the girl next reveals excessive drunkenness, but still he is able to pity her because her mother is long dead and her father is not opposed to her drinking. He admits to taking a drop himself now and then but encourages her to quit. Next, the girl confesses to having had bad thoughts and indulging them, to which the priest advises her, “You ought to have a boy of your own” (123) so as to avoid moral complications. Throughout, the priest has maintained his composure, has taken a liking to the girl, and has treated her with kindness and affection. Within an instant, his attitude changes when the girl pauses and then states “quietly and deliberately,” that she has “had carnal intercourse with a man” (123). Immediately, he turns on her; convinced that she has “no proper idea of the enormity of her sin” (124), he does his best to prove it her.

Here is where irony sets in, because here we realize that, at least up to this point, the priest has not been the one in control. The girl has manipulated the confession to gain the priest’s sympathy before dropping the bomb on him, and this leaves the priest with “the feeling that somebody was playing an elaborate and most tasteless joke on him” (126). From this point on, irony pervades and simultaneously underlies the action. We realize as the priest does that the girl was stuck in a strange place on the day after her affair and, wanting to tell someone, she stirs the courage to confess to the priest. Thus, she can clear her conscience without facing the damaging consequences of communal revelation: the priest carries all secrets with him to the grave. In this situation, then, the priest becomes not the object of our sympathy so much as a fool:

He saw now how he had been taken in. This little trollop...had to tell someone her secret, and he, a good-natured old fool of sixty, had allowed her to use him as a confidant. A philosopher of sixty letting
Eve, aged nineteen, tell him all about the apple! (127)

A further irony is that the confession subsequently takes on two simultaneous roles, neither for the benefit of the confessor. First, the priest aims to find out as much as he can about “the apple” to confirm his own suspicions about sexual intercourse. The irony is, of course, that when the priest tells her, “Don’t you try and tell me anything about immorality...I know all about it already” (125), he does not know anything about this type of immorality, except for what he has heard from people outside the church who have done it and people within the church who have not. He uses the confession, in part, to test his theoretical knowledge against her practical knowledge.

The second irony which arises in the latter part of the story is that the priest’s understanding (and sympathy) does not extend to those sins he does not understand. Thus, spiritual understanding is completely replaced by what the priest seems to see as a moral obligation to embarrass, degrade, and humiliate the girl. Once the priest hears this last admission, the matter of her behavior now becomes the responsibility of the priest and of the girl’s father: “What you want, young woman,” he says to her, “is beside the point.” The final irony is that despite all his prodding questions, the priest sends her off with an act of contrition, three Our Fathers, and three Hail Marys—and thinks that this “was hitting below the belt” (128). It seems that the priest has bullied her a bit, but one must keep in mind that this girl has just committed probably the worst sin a young Irish girl could commit; if she had told anyone besides the priest, she would have been ostracized from the community, would have lost her job, and might have been forced to leave Ireland. By telling the priest and enduring the few minutes of his prodding questions and his condescending penance, she may very well recover with resilience. She may, on the other hand, turn out to be the wild girl the priest says she could become, or perhaps the priest’s words will haunt her for the rest of her life.
The story ends somewhat ambiguously for the girl, but what we do know is that the priest’s “good natured chuckle” (128) and knowing wink to St. Anne indicate that he thinks he has affirmed his spiritual duty. At the same time, though, the priest’s “delight in what he has done, his certainty about what is sinful and what is to be done about it, are...symptoms of a profound ignorance, both of himself and of others” (Hildebidle 202). The priest’s scornful dismissal of the girl seems an inappropriate response to the “news” he has just received.

A second story in this deeply critical phase is “The Frying-Pan.” This story introduces Father Jerry Fogarty, the figure, patterned after Tim Traynor, who dominates O’Connor’s later stories of priests. Furthermore, the subject matter for “The Frying Pan” is framed around two intimate relationships from O’Connor’s personal life. One might see Fogarty as Traynor and the story’s other male character, Tom Whitton, as Richard Hayes. Hayes and Traynor were O’Connor’s two closest friends at the time he wrote the story. Just as Whitton, a closet priest himself, “like other outsiders,...knew perfectly what priests should be, without the necessity for having to be that way himself” (Collected Stories 149), so too Hayes, “the seed and breed of priests and himself everything [O’Connor] admired in certain priests of the older generation,” occasionally warned O’Connor against Traynor, who “should have never been a priest” (My Father’s Son 146). These two men’s rivalry for O’Connor’s friendship certainly influenced the story, but largely the plot of “The Frying-Pan” is the result of O’Connor imagining “what-might-have-been,” for he and Traynor became friends only when they discovered that as boys they “had both had a romantic crush on the same girl” (148).

More important than these autobiographical considerations is that here O’Connor places a priest in the most impossible of situations. Whitton and Fogarty were old friends from the seminary, but Whitton chose marriage over the priesthood. Fogarty’s “only real friends” were the Whittons, and Una
Whitton "formed the real center of what little social life [Fogarty] had" (Collected Stories 148). Tom Whitton, in the meantime, led the scholarly life he would have had as a priest, and instead of loving his wife, he seemed to neglect her and blame her for luring him away from the priesthood. Until she is alone with Fogarty later in the story, we are as able to look into Una Whitton's heart and mind as her husband is; however, we can sense her dissatisfaction with her husband's neglect; on the other hand, this story grants the first of many opportunities readers have to view Father Fogarty in his loneliness: "it seemed to him that with all the things he bought to fill his home, he was merely trying desperately to stuff the yawning holes in his own big, empty heart" (152).

This all leads up to a climax in which "in the simplest way in the world [Fogarty] had been brought to admit to a married woman that he loved her and she to imply that she felt the same about him, without a word being said on either side" (155). Fogarty and Una share an intimate conversation about her husband's problems; she begins to cry, and the priest and the wife engage in a passionate kiss. Then, they discuss her troubled marriage and the way her husband makes her feel guilty by having tempted him from the priesthood--O'Connor uses the Biblical symbolism of Adam and Eve's fall here (156)--and by making her feel that she is responsible for their love-making, which he regards as a sinful, almost adulterous, temptation. Lastly, the wife admits how comfortable she is with "Jerry" (Fogarty), even though she knows she should not be.

In all, things have turned out exactly wrong in "The Frying-Pan." Tom Whitton has missed his true calling as a priest, and Una Whitton and Jerry Fogarty, even though each has acknowledged affection for the other, will lead lives of loneliness, regretting what their life together might have been. The story ends with Fogarty, having gathered himself, waiting for Tom Whitton's
return, realizing that “the three of them, Tom, Una, and himself, would die as they had lived, their desires unsatisfied” (157).

The title “The Frying-Pan” suggests that these three characters, Una and Jerry, especially, will never get “out of the frying pan and into the fire”--they will remain in it as long as they live. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that although “The Frying-Pan” and “News for the Church” are stories about priests, they are also part of The Common Chord--and the “common chord” which unifies this story collection is sexual repression in Irish society (Tomory 104). Because sexual matters cannot be openly addressed within the community, the stories in this collection suggest that problems will arise for priests and for other “normal” people. A short story about an Irish priest who kisses a married woman was particularly scandalous, but once again Frank O’Connor was extending the boundaries of what could be said, not because he held a particular grudge against the clergy, but precisely because he wanted to raise a scandal, to make people think about the boundaries of the priesthood and the role that religion played in governing sexuality and other areas of their lives.

For the most part, O’Connor moved on to explore other themes in the 1950s, most notably child narratives and stories of lost love, but a few exceptional stories provided variations on previously established themes regarding the religious life. More importantly, women began to play a role in O’Connor stories of the religious life such as “The Sentry” and “The Ugly Duckling.”

In “The Sentry,” O’Connor once again shows how the human understanding of a priest can be his most transcendent quality, this time as it dismisses political boundaries. The story involves an Irish priest, Father Michael MacEnerney, stationed in Salisbury, England during World War II.
MacEnerney seems to spend a good deal of time allaying the fears of his compatriot, Sister Margaret, in regard to the English. Even the Catholic clerical English act, to her, "as if they owned the earth" (Collected Stories 242). Sister Margaret vows to fight the "moral cowardice" of the other Irish nuns and to acquaint her British colleagues with Irish history whenever she has a dispute with them. Ironically, though, what foregrounds "The Sentry" is a minuscule problem of MacEnerney's which escalates to nationalistic proportions.

The main plot involves a conflict between Father MacEnerney and a British soldier he catches stealing onions from his garden. That, during World War II, an Irish priest's "greatest anxiety" (242) in life was his onions is one of the many wry ironies the story presents. At any rate, the priest and the soldier get into a bit of a tussle; the priest behaves rather in a rather unpriestly manner, calling the soldier a "dirty little English liar" (243) and a "bloody little English thief" (244), twisting his arm, challenging him to fight, and calling the soldier "dirty little English coward" (244) when duty dictates that the man cannot fight. The soldier, despite being in a somewhat defenseless position--on duty or not, as a sentry, he cannot fight an Irish priest--still gets in a few verbal jabs of his own: "You're mighty cocky, just because you're in a privileged position, you mean, bullying bastard!" (244). At last the sentry gives up arguing and returns to his post. Father MacEnerney, only after speaking with Sister Margaret, sees his conduct in its true light[:]

He had behaved disgracefully. After all his talk of charity, he had insulted another man about his nationality, had hit him when he couldn't hit back, and, only for that, might have done him a serious injury--all for a handful of onions worth about sixpence! (245)

The irony multiplies the next day when a British officer pays a visit to MacEnerney the next day to confront him about the incident. MacEnerney learns that the sentry, fearing the priest would report him, turned himself in.
Most of all, though, the priest learns from this bottom-line Englishman that the sentry, named Collins, deserted his post and, for that, could be shot.

Thus, the priest is able to make a useful, fundamental distinction between English and Irish law: while the English “had to reduce everything to the most literal terms” (247), the Irish were more flexible. In his Irish way, the priest attempts to rectify the situation out of genuine concern for the victimized soldier. He bends the truth, offering an alibi which, though it contradicts what Collins originally reported, could still help the man’s cause, if only by confusing the evidence. Unfortunately, the English officer, Howe, cleverly baits and catches the Irish priest in the midst of the lie; still, as an Englishman, he cannot understand why MacEnerney would lie: “I presume you’re trying to shield Collins, but I’m blessed if I see why” (248). Then, Father Michael thinks about the Irish response to the literal Englishman:

If Howe had been Irish, he wouldn’t have asked such a silly question [as why], and as he wasn’t Irish, he wouldn’t understand the answer. The MacEnerneys had all been like that. Father Michael’s father, the most truthful, God-fearing man in County Clare, had been threatened with a prosecution for perjury committed in the interest of a neighbor. (249)

Thus, the priest’s stance in “The Sentry” almost seems to transcend the bounds of traditional religion. Nevertheless, MacEnerney consults with Sister Margaret after Howe leaves, and the two discuss whether the priest has committed a sin. Both seem to decide that he has not, but still the story concludes with Sister Margaret offering to “start a novena at once” (250).

Ironically, one story which reveals a great deal about O’Connor’s distant respect for the religious life is a story which contains no priests as characters, “The Ugly Duckling.” This story traces the life of a woman from her unsettled early years as a tomboy and an “ugly duckling” through the love relationships of her unsettled early adulthood, to her arrival, finally, at contentedness in middle age. However, as in most O’Connor short stories, in “The Ugly
Kerrigan, recognizing the point of view is a key to grasping the story’s meaning, and readers must as always keep in mind that the story is only as true as its teller. The narrator, Mick Courtney, has known Nan Ryan all his life, and even was engaged to her for a time; the story thus hinges on Mick’s narratorial bias, his inability to understand Nan’s true nature.

The narrative, from its early stages, is framed as a love story. The first few pages describe Nan Ryan’s evolution from a teenage ugly duckling in typical O’Connor fashion, in stages, by providing readers glimpses at certain formational incidents and situations. O’Connor often did not limit all stories to a single formational event, as with the singular incidents and consequences of the confessions, for example, which have formed the basis for stories like “First Confession,” “The Face of Evil,” and “News for the Church.” Even though O’Connor is especially capable of emphasizing the importance of the crisis moments inspired by such events, many stories like “The Ugly Duckling” require years and several such crises to transpire.

The first truly life altering event for Mick Courtney is on the day he realizes that Nan Ryan is no longer an “ugly duckling,” but has, on the other hand, become “a girl of startling beauty” (Collected Stories 447). From that point onward, the story becomes very clearly centered on his courtship of Nan, even despite their disputes and despite her other suitors. Even despite all of Mick's faults, especially that he is unambitious and prefers to allow himself to fall into routines, Nan has always had a crush on him, and this section of the story reaches a climax when Nan accepts Mick’s proposal of marriage. The climax, from Mick’s point of view, quickly fades to denouement when what he thought was just another disagreement became Nan’s solemn declaration that she could not marry him. She tells him, “You don’t understand me at all, Mick Courtney...You’re wrong for me. I always knew you were” (453). Only the next day, when Mick receives a message that Nan has decided to marry one of
her other suitors instead of him, does he realize at all the implications of what she has said. Nan's brother Dinny (and Mick's best friend) informs Mick that his sister is "a curious girl" (454) and that she will not marry him now, even were he to plead with her. Mick took his friend's advice and moved to Dublin to start anew. He lost touch with his native Cork completely, got married himself to a "nice girl called Eilish," and saw neither Dinny nor his sister for a long time.

Finally, readers realize that Mick never did understand Nan—or even try to understand her on her own terms, for that matter. It has been difficult even for readers to decipher Nan and her motives; everything begins to make sense, though, when Mick meets Dinny one day and finds out that Nan Ryan has "gone into a convent" (455). Mick is shocked, and immediately asks what happened to Nan's plans to marry her other suitor. Dinny responds, "The truth is I don't think Nan is the marrying kind" (455). Mick does not believe it for a minute:

He was quite sure that Nan was the marrying kind, and that nothing but the deep unhappiness that had first united and then divided them had kept her from marrying. But what that unhappiness was about he still had no idea, and he saw that Dinny knew even less than he did. (455)

Some time afterward, Mick found himself back in Cork and visited the Ryans. Mrs. Ryan, still upset at her only daughter's decision, remarks that "God forgive me, that's not a natural life at all!" (456). She urges Mick to visit Nan, who "must be dead for someone to talk to!" (456), and Mick decides that she is right. Even in seeing Nan and hearing her speak, he is still not convinced of her genuine calling, even though she had often remarked as a child, "I want to be a nun" (445). He hears her words, "I suppose God came first," (457) and rationalizes her spiritual calling by attributing it to some deep need in her nature which required her to build "a rich interior world" (457). Perhaps he is right, but then again, O'Connor carefully and cleverly disguises the
narrator's voice. At the conclusion, one is offered only Mick's reading of their final encounter and Mick's understanding of their relationship. If "that old love affair went on [at all]...and would continue to do so till both of them were dead" (458), that old love affair continued only in Mick's thoughts revealed in the course of narration. Even if we seek "the truth," we are left only with Mick's male, atheistic perspective.

Readers may be tempted to label Mick's perspective Frank O'Connor's as well, but they should certainly use caution in doing so. After all, Mick does not acknowledge any spirituality, any connection with God--he cannot even bring himself to concede that what happened to Nan was "something unique and inexplicable" (457). He reduces Nan's "problem" to what he sees as its most basic terms, her need for an interior life. Frank O'Connor could at least acknowledge that God existed, and he could accept immortality, even if he knew that "for my own soul there was only nothingness" (An Only Child 276). O'Connor turned to storytelling, in fact, as a "celebration of those who for me represented all I should ever know of God" (276).

Nevertheless, behind this autobiographical statement is the assumption that Frank O'Connor, like Nan Ryan (in Mick's view), turned to God through an interior world; perhaps Mick's claims do have some validity. In this aspect, that the religious life and the artistic life both devote themselves to a lonely, inner existence in pursuit of higher truths, O'Connor has compared the priest to the writer:

The attraction of the religious life for the story teller is overpowering. It is the attraction of a sort of life lived, or seeking to be lived, by standards other than those for this world, one which, in fact, resembles that of the artist. The good priest, like the good artist, needs human rewards, but no human reward can ever satisfy him. (O'Connor in Harriet Sheehy v)

Thus, one may see O'Connor's later work as a very respectful treatment of religion at least partially because its devotion runs so parallel to the artist's
existence.

To reduce O'Connor's respect only to this metaphoric level, though, would be a serious mistake. In the last stage of his career, O'Connor seemed to write with a great deal of genuine and straightforward respect for his subject, especially as he developed the character of Father Jerry Fogarty, who originally appeared in "The Frying-Pan." Fogarty appeared in at least eight O'Connor stories, and within most of these, including "The Teacher's Mass," "An Act of Charity," and "Requiem," he is a central character confronted with often difficult, sometimes devastating, occasionally humorous external conflicts which force decisions between the spiritual aspirations of his vocation—which are expected of him—and the realistic demands of this world. Most importantly, in these stories, priests act on their own free will rather than on some code predetermined by either their moral standards or an overriding human understanding.

"The Teacher's Mass" centers on the difficult decisions Father Fogarty faces in his relationship to a retired teacher, John Considine, who serves as his acolyte for mass each morning. Considine was serving that mass, never attended by anyone but the curate and the acolyte, for years before Fogarty became curate, so Fogarty cynically calls it "the teacher's Mass" (Collected Stories 612). The story traces the way that Fogarty's hidden animosity toward the man slowly gives way to a great appreciation and understanding for the sacrifices Considine makes.

The story begins to reach a moral crisis for Fogarty when Considine summons him because, in the midst of an attack, the old man thinks he will die. However, the next morning, despite the doctor's admonitions, the old man shows up to serve mass the next morning, insisting that he is "fresh as a daisy" (616). Fogarty knew he could not talk the man into going home for his
own safety and forgetting about mass; he even tried appealing to the parish priest, but even Father Whelan knew he would not get his way with Considine. At last, Fogarty resigns himself to appeasing the old man as long as he will try to take it easy.

Because of Fogarty's tampering after his previous attack, when Considine has another attack, he does not even summon a priest, and Fogarty hears only indirectly about the man's trouble. Fogarty is filled with compassion for the old man's suffering, but he comes to realize that interfering with the old man's desire to serve mass will only offend the man and will deprive the man of the opportunity "to do what clearly he wished to do--die in harness" (618). Fogarty admits that Considine has more faith than he does, but instead of adopting a jealous attitude, he admires the old man for it. Fogarty decides that if the man wants to die by exerting himself for God, "the only kindness he could do him" (619) would be to let him do it.

When, finally, one day the old man does collapse during the mass, Fogarty makes another key decision: to continue the mass, for the special intention of the old man. The priest props Considine's head with cushions, anoints the body with oils, and, as Considine would have wanted, returns to saying the mass. The old man had for so long persevered through his own difficulties during the mass that it is only fitting for the priest to make this final gesture. The priest also affirms, by this choice, that his spiritual priorities are in order: the concern for the dead man's physical body is secondary; it is to come after the priest cares for his soul.

"An Act of Charity" involves a much more difficult decision for Fogarty and the other priests involved, yet in no way does O'Connor brace readers for the impact of what is to come. The story's background discusses mainly Father Fogarty's understanding of the relationship between the other two priests in the parish, Father Maginnis, the old professional, the parish priest, and Father
Galvin, the amateur, flappable second curate. Maginnis often and overtly tormented Galvin. Fogarty felt sympathy for his fellow curate, but Fogarty even halfheartedly joins in on Maginnis's verbal crushing of Galvin and observes “with malicious amusement,” knowing well “it was turning into persecution” (Collected Stories 637). In all, the story starts off with a comic air; given Galvin's awkwardness and Maginnis's humorous story about the Pope, readers are likely to anticipate a comic reversal in which Galvin has the last laugh at Maginnis's expense.

Galvin commits suicide in the middle of the night. In terms of narration, we observe only what Fogarty hears, observes, and does; he is so stunned that he can only react externally to what has taken place. He hears the shot, finds the body, instructs the housekeeper to call the doctor, and anoints the dead body before the parish priest arrives. Readers, in turn, are left with the realization that sometimes life just does not work the way we expect it to—or even the way that literature sets us up to expect it to.

Rather than brooding over the pain of the situation and perhaps even a sense of guilt, Fogarty and Maginnis stay focused on the very grave situation which now confronts them. Fogarty's initial contemplations indicate the serious nature of the problem at hand:

The worst thing a priest could do was to commit suicide, since it seemed to deny everything that gave his vocation meaning—Divine Providence and Mercy, forgiveness, Heaven, Hell. That one of God's anointed could come to such a state of despair was something the Church could not admit. It would give too much scandal. It was simply an unacceptable act. (638)

Nonetheless, in this situation, Fogarty's human impulses and spiritual obligations converge, and, with Maginnis, he is resolute in the conviction that the community must not discover the real cause of death.

Fogarty's stance becomes rather important because of the battle that ensues between the parish priest and Dr. Carmody, who is summoned rather
unnecessarily since Galvin was already dead. Furthermore, Maginnis makes it clear that having this young, straight-laced doctor will present a serious problem. It does, for Carmody insists that he cannot lie about the cause of death. His concern for the truth stems from his concern for the hidden problem of suicide in Irish society. However, Fogarty throws this concern right back at Carmody in a personal light: "That's all very well, Jim, but Christian charity comes before statistics...Father Galvin wasn't only a statistic. He was a human being--somebody we both knew. And what about his family?" (639). Fogarty brings up the very real concern that the main reason suicides were usually covered up was to avoid public scandal not only for the dead but also, more importantly, to avoid disgracing the family involved.

The tensions are eased a bit when the undertaker arrives and efficiently goes about his business, and the doctor realizes he does not have much of a choice in the matter. "An act of charity," the undertaker calls it. The scandal is diffused, and the curate is laid to rest. After the funeral mass, Fogarty is full of "a strange mixture of rejoicing and mortification that the worst was over" (643). Things return to normal when at lunch the next morning Fogarty hears Maginnis telling some visiting priests his humorous story about the Pope.

Galvin's death lingers for Fogarty, for he can talk only with those directly involved about the scandal and cover-up. Even though he feels that it was the right thing to do, Fogarty is troubled; Fogarty tries to speak to the new curate about it, but its significance escapes him, and he concludes that Fogarty is "only overdramatizing it" (643). Only Carmody fully understood, and the story ends with Fogarty planning to visit the doctor's house, thinking to himself, "What lonely lives we live" (643).

If "An Act of Charity" sets us up for comedy but delivers a deeply tragic blow, "Requiem" offers a very different situation for Father Fogarty. His
housekeeper admits an old woman who looks as though she has been weeping a great deal, and Father Fogarty, the sympathetic man that he is, realizes immediately her evening visit to the priest must mean a grave matter is at hand. The woman indicates that this is the case, that what he can do is, “Only to say Mass for Timmy, father” (Collected Stories 628). The priest tries to comfort her, and they have a long discussion in which Fogarty eventually realizes how confused he is about her situation. The woman is unable, or unwilling, to divulge right away the nature of what she has to say to Fogarty. She wants to phrase it delicately, for she has been rejected by other priests already, and she wants to gain Fogarty’s sympathy before asking him in any direct way.

To the woman’s defense, she claims that the priest has distracted her all along by asking questions based on his assumptions of the situation, and she has not had an ample chance to explain herself. Plus, she forgets the exact way to describe Timmy for most of their conversation, until finally she remembers and blurts out, “A poodle!...a French poodle is what they called him...Oh, father, I don’t know how I’m going to get on without him. He was everything to me. The house isn’t the same without him” (631). The gravity of the story is suddenly lifted, and even when Fogarty’s confusion immediately becomes shock and scorn, we can only laugh at the foolishness of the situation of a woman who wants a priest to say mass for her deceased dog.

The story digresses into the woman’s philosophical justification for her request, but Fogarty is firm in his stance: “‘God knows, if it was anything I could do for you I’d do it, but this is something that, as a priest, I can’t do’” (634). Fogarty’s dismissal of the woman is kind and gentle; he does not crush her, as some priests might have. He tries to convince her of the error in her conception, but he wisely becomes resigned to simply maintaining his ground and allowing her to speak her mind. He listens to the woman politely, all the
while insisting on his duty to the church, which allows him only to hold masses for humans, who alone have souls.

O'Connor has been criticized for a superficiality which makes his stories comprehensible on first reading (Steinman, Reader xii), but here is an example of the depth behind one of the many stories which readers will find more enjoyable on the second or third reading, when they can anticipate the humor fully from the beginning and can evaluate the ridiculousness of the woman's position with a closer examination. The woman asserts her position so strongly and gains his sympathy to such a degree that, at some points, she almost has Fogarty questioning his conviction and wondering if he will cave in to her will. Nonetheless, through it all, even if the priest's serious conversation with this woman does seem foolish, at least he finally orchestrates a tender balance between human sympathy and spiritual duty.

"The Mass Island" is O'Connor's final tribute to Father Fogarty, a farewell in which only Fogarty's body remains, but even here a bitterly contested conflict arises. Fogarty final wishes were to be buried far from his home parish on the Mass Island, where in the days of Cromwell and British persecution, the bravest of the Irish were forced to travel miles to hold secret masses. However, no one can officially confirm Fogarty's wish since he did not write it down, and his brother is unwilling to pay the bill for such an arduous journey.

The story should be prefaced by O'Connor's "The Wreath," which demonstrated the ease with which Fogarty communicated and the joy he received from the simple country people of the West. "The Wreath" involves Fogarty and Father Jackson travelling to a friend's, Father Devine's, funeral. At the funeral, the two are confronted with the decision of what to do about a wreath of red roses which has arrived for the deceased. It was a kind enough
gesture, but the wreath could be construed as linked to an illicit affair, since
the roses were sent by a woman. This reminds Fogarty particularly of a
previous near-affair in his own life, one which he confesses to Jackson and
which happens to be the basis of another O'Connor story, "The Frying-Pan."
Ultimately, Father Jackson speaks up, telling Devine's brother that they are in
a no-win situation with the wreath, but that hiding it would be to "'throw mud
on a dead man's name that would never be forgotten for you'" (611). In Father
Fogarty's case, "The Wreath" lays the foundation for "The Mass Island,
because Fogarty tells Jackson, as their procession arrives at the burial site,
"They'll be waiting for us at the bridge. That's the way they'll be waiting for
me when my turn comes" (610).

Readers are witnesses to Fogarty's desire to be buried on the Mass Island
(those who have read "The Wreath," at least), but no written document exists to
prove the claim. The conflict here is resolved by a compromise, to put it
mildly. Father Jackson and another priest find out that the last note Fogarty
wrote was to a family in his parish. The two visit this family and design a well-
tentioned conspiracy to make sure that Fogarty gets his wish. Without any
direct prompt, which leaves the family's mother utterly confused, the father
volunteers--again, without directly saying so--to mail the note that Fogarty
had sent to him, so that it would not arrive until the day after the funeral.
Because the communication is subtle and covert, all evidence indicates that the
note did not specify Fogarty's intentions and that the father will likely
fabricate the note himself.7

Thus, despite the objections of the parish priest and Fogarty's brother,
the funeral procession takes Fogarty's body to the Mass Island, and there the
long march is ultimately justified by the fulfillment of the prophecy Fogarty
made in "The Wreath": "'they'll be waiting for me when my turn comes'"
(610). They certainly were waiting for him, and
Only then did Jackson notice the...lanterns and flashlights, coming down the mountain or crossing the stream, and realize that they represented people, young men and girls and an occasional sturdy old man, all moving in the direction of the Mass Island. Suddenly it hit him, almost like a blow...He had thought when he was here with Fogarty that those people had not respected Fogarty as they respected him and the local parish priest, but he knew that for him, or even for their own parish priest, they would never turn out in midwinter, across the treacherous mountain bogs and wicked rocks. He and the parish priest would never earn more from the people of the mountains than respect; what they gave to the fat, unclerical young man who had served them with pints in the bar and egged them on to tell their old stories and bullied and ragged and even fought them was something infinitely greater. (653)

This is a culminating moment, for the human sympathy and understanding which set Fogarty apart as a priest is returned as a final earthly tribute to him.

As usual, in the end, we return to a skeptic who “reduces reality to its real proportions” (O'Connor Reader 165); here, it is Jackson, from whose perspective “it was like a miracle, and [he] didn’t really believe in miracles” (654). Even Jackson’s skepticism, though, cannot detract from this wonderful tribute to O'Connor's prototypical ideal for a man of the collar, Father Fogarty.

The wide range of circumstances which O'Connor's priests encounter and the ways in which they deal with those circumstances allows readers to witness the variety of attitudes and perspectives reflected in O'Connor's work. More importantly, tracing these stories gives us some notion of the development within the stories of priests, a significant point, because entire judgements of O'Connor have been based on the supposed limitations of Frank O'Connor's fiction based on the stasis or, to be kinder, the marked consistency from Guests of the Nation to his last writings. While it seems true that O'Connor most often worked within a framework suggested by a formulaic theme, the variety of these themes and the range of variation within a thematic framework suggests that O'Connor, like his priest characters, operated not by some code which determined the subject matter and outcome of
his writing; he composed using his own free will, writing stories as they came
to him—and, often enough, they came to him in what he heard and
experienced.
CHAPTER 5

TRADITIONALISM AND THE WRITER AMONG CONTEMPORARIES

Probably the greatest challenge in attempting to rescue Frank O'Connor's reputation is to address the consequences of his strident opposition to the trend of linguistic experimentation in modernist fiction initiated by James Joyce. This chapter will take on that momentous task, not in a hubristic effort to debunk modernism, but to show that O'Connor was very much a writer of his time, responding in an anomalous way to the same conditions to which Joyce and most other modernist writers were responding. A writer is subject to the closest scrutiny when he bucks the trends which, at his present time, shape how people write and are expected to write. O'Connor got himself into even further trouble not only because he rejected the trend of modernism: he rejected it in favor of what he deemed nineteenth-century realism. This gave critics and contemporary writers alike an opportunity to characterize O'Connor's work as outdated and lacking innovation. Richard Ellmann's introduction to the Collected Stories edition, for example, returns again and again to this point, asserting that "avant-garde methods of narration" did not interest O'Connor (viii), that "the writers whom he loved were all realists" (ix), and that O'Connor "could not approve of Joyce" and the modernist linguistic experimentation that Joyce induced (xiii). Others have gone further: one reviewer of the same edition, for example, emphasizes that O'Connor's work is "out of fashion" and relies on "old ways of storytelling," and that O'Connor "thought experimentation a trap for ambitious or unwary writers" (Prescott 73). Such representation makes O'Connor out to be an extremely reactionary writer, but one must keep in mind that modernism—along with
the current post-modernist phase of writing which supports the same ideals—was founded on the principle of innovation, of constant reinvention. Modernism, by definition, rejects past tradition.

To the contrary, from his very upbringing, his self-guided education in the novels of Austen and the stories of Chekhov, O'Connor associated himself with a well-founded, well-developed tradition from the past. He even declared that “To have grown up in an Irish provincial town in the first quarter of the twentieth century was to have know the nineteenth century novel as a contemporary art form” (in Ellmann ix). Once again, a statement taken out of context can be misleading, for O'Connor was celebrating the impact of realism rather than humbly conceding his own outdatedness. O'Connor embraced realism before he ever rejected modernism; in fact, O'Connor did not reject modernism so much as modernism rejected him.

Still, it is inaccurate to contend that O'Connor merely embraced nineteenth-century realism as it was practiced by Turgenev, Babel, Maupassant, and others. O'Connor had a large dose of realism in his adolescent years; however, most significantly, he approached even the most starkly realistic works with a rather romantic attitude. Even at the time he enlisted, he later admitted, “I still saw life through a veil of literature...[in which] I was tending to see the Bad Girl of the neighbourhood not as ‘one more unfortunate’ but as Madame Bovary or Nastasya Filipovna” (An Only Child 211). Replacing life’s real circumstances with a literary referent (on a more exaggerated scale, of course) was how Joyce would later respond to the circumstances which confronted him. O'Connor did eventually reject this romantic outlook, but it had some influence on one of his character types, the romantic adolescent or young adult. O'Connor came to view romance, or any use of imagination outside of the real expences of life, as escapism, and he was rather wary of the effect myth and symbol could have in allowing us to lose
sight of reality. To illustrate this point, we may look at an example O'Connor himself gave about the false reality literature can create:

I...remember with revulsion that I once wore a dead boy's blood-stained cap...I fancy the truth is that nothing of it was real to me, and it never once occurred to me that the boy whose cap I was wearing had that day been as living as myself, and perhaps loved his mother as much as I did mine. It was all as if I had read about it in War and Peace. (An Only Child 224)

Only upon O'Connor's return from captivity, when he realized his deep disillusionment and alienation from his religion, his nation, and its people, did he see through his romantic veil to the reality of life before him, which would hold complexities "I couldn't even imagine" ("Face of Evil" O'Connor Reader 166). Realistic writing was an important influence on O'Connor, but even so it did not influence him so much as some other movements and events, most notably the Irish Civil War. The often grim realities which shaped his first volume of stories, Guests of the Nation, were not so much the product of his learning from realistic fiction as they were the product of the immediate and blunt experience of war.

Sometimes content has a sheer and raw power, even if its presentation is flawed. "Getting it right" occasionally must take a secondary role when the immediacy of "getting it out" forms the real essence of a story. A perfect example of the raw power of content is the one story for which Frank O'Connor has always been known, "Guests of the Nation."

The story is about a profound loss of innocence, a great change that took place within the narrator as a result of the events he recounts. Unknowingly, the narrator, Bonaparte, and his fellow Volunteer, Noble, committed a cardinal sin in befriending their British prisoners, 'Awkins and Belcher. The Irish soldiers' loyalties are truly tested when word arrives from superiors that the British captives are to be shot. Bonaparte and Noble must weigh their political allegiances against the personal alliances they have formed. The decision is
by no means an easy one, and readers follow Bonaparte's narration through stages in which he ponders whether to tell the Englishmen they will be shot (Collected Stories 7), decides that he would never fire if they were to run (9), and wonders how he and Noble could prevent the shooting (7). Bonaparte makes it abundantly clear that “I didn’t want [them] to be bumped off” (9), and even in the end, the only shot Bonaparte fired was out of mercy, to put an end to ‘Awkins’ suffering.

While Bonaparte has been pondering these moral burdens, his “chums” have been arguing about the meaning of existence. ‘Awkins and Noble are engaged in a constant religious and philosophical struggle from which the other characters distance themselves. Noble, the traditional Irish Catholic, argues from his own understanding of Church doctrine, but it is ‘Awkins, the atheist, who seems to win the arguments, at least from the narrator’s point of view. Then again, even ‘Awkins met his match in the old Irish woman, whose nonsensical diatribe on Jupiter Pluvius probably had as much effect on the narrator as ‘Awkin’s and Belcher’s debates did. At any rate, the old woman’s ridiculous explanation for the causes of “the war” allow us to reflect on the justification for any war. A fundamental absurdity underlies her explanation, the murders of ‘Awkins and Belcher, and the story itself.

One can see that the narrator becomes bitterly disillusioned by the task of participating in the murder of two friends and perhaps by war itself. The story seems informed by a sensibility heightened by immediacy, and if readers notice any literary influence at all, it is more likely to derive from Wilfred Owen or A.E. Housman, who struck a chord for generations of soldiers to follow, than from any of the nineteenth-century realists. The narrator is disturbed by “the usual rigmarole about doing our duty and obeying our superiors” (9). Nonetheless, he follows along blindly as ‘Awkins and Belcher are led to their deaths.
Both deaths are painful and disturbing to Bonaparte, even though he only fires a single merciful shot. The deaths, further, emphasize the two thematic strands that run continuously through "Guests of the Nation"—the question of the afterlife and the tension between duty and human compassion. Ironically, the most important speeches engaging these themes come from the most taciturn character, Belcher. When Bonaparte delivers the final blow to 'Awkins, Belcher comments that "Naow, 'e knows as much abaat it as they'll ever let 'im know, and last night 'e was all in the dark" (11). All indications, especially 'Awkins philosophy itself, suggest that 'Awkins still is in the dark; that is why he put up such a strident verbal opposition in the end, because he was convinced it was the end of everything. Belcher's last speech resonates ironically because his admission of ignorance should remind us that duty by the story's definition is beyond our comprehension as well, and attests to the absurdity of the situation: "I never could make out what duty was myself," he said, 'but I think you're all good lads, if that's what you mean" (11). Belcher returns to the idea, if not the word, which has been reinforced over and over for Bonaparte: "chums (the word lingers painfully in my memory)" (9).

Finally, the British captives are dead and their "warm" corpses are carried to their burial site—over and over, even in death, the story returns to the personal element of humanity. Noble returns and prays with the old woman; Bonaparte cannot pray, for he has been forever transformed: "And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again" (12).

Beneath that closing statement is a deep disillusionment regarding man's inhumanity. Bonaparte's inaction, in following along without actually choosing his own course, borders on existential angst. Furthermore, his final statement reflects a lack of meaning and direction in his life; his superiors' subversion of conventional morality has caused him to experience some degree of anomie. These existential implications of "Guests of the Nation" are
significant, as we shall see, for O'Connor was not out of touch with the
twentieth century, as is implied by those who contend that he was merely a
nineteenth-century realist born in the twentieth century.

O'Connor revised "Guests of the Nation" over a period of many years and
republished it, but the best version, ironically, is the original 1930 form used
in the above quotations. It was chosen for inclusion in the Random House/
Vintage Collected Stories volume, but the story almost always appears in its
later, revised form, when O'Connor rewrote it for publication in 1954. Even
the most current reprints of the volume Guests of the Nation have updated
O'Connor's revisions. Still, however, the immediacy of experience which lies
at the heart of "Guests of the Nation" is best captured in its original published
form.

Most of the changes O'Connor made in 1954 seem minor, and perhaps
they reflect the author or his editor attempting to better accommodate his
more diverse audience (especially Americans). O'Connor eliminated both
British and Irish dialects, perhaps for the ease of reading, so that 'Awkins's
comment that Mary Brigid Ho' Connell was arskin abaout you and said 'ow
you'd a pair of socks belonging to 'er young brother (Collected Stories 3)
becomes Hawkins's remark Mary Brigid O'Connell told me to ask you what you
done with the pair of her brother's socks you borrowed (Guests 6).
Significantly, There were four of our lads went west (Collected Stories 8)
becomes There were four of our lads shot (Guests 10). Thus, the audience is no
longer assumed to be familiar with subtle "Irishisms." This is unfortunate,
because "Guests of the Nation" does not have the same impact when the
locality is removed.

Furthermore, the free-flowing nature of the narrator's comments and
the dialogue itself is an essential element which has been trimmed away.
Fragments and run-on sentences have been corrected, and any extra language, such as the word *abiding* in “his only abiding passion” (*Collected Stories* 4) and the phrase *without a syllable out of him* (4), has been eliminated. The narrator’s comment that when ‘Awkins had no one else to talk to he *fixed his claws into the old woman* (5) becomes the weak *he got stuck in the old woman* (*Guests* 7). In essence, the talkativeness of “getting the story out” has been removed, but it is precisely the talkativeness, the need to tell us too much, that draws readers so closely to the original story. Even the old woman’s one long tirade which runs together as a flowing speech is halted by additional punctuation.

Further reinforcing the seminal nature of loquacity in “Guests of the Nation” is that the many references to the second person have all been edited out. The personal pronoun “you” was particularly effective in the original, because O’Connor used it sparsely, at the end of sections, to keep readers returning to the personal element, thereby involving and implicating readers in the whole matter: Bonaparte addresses the reader at the end of the first paragraph (*Collected Stories* 3), the first section (5), and the third section (9), and in the last paragraph (12). Only the last reference to “you” is retained in the 1954 revision.

The greatest loss is the narrator’s personal, subjective commentary and, along with it, the proximity which shapes readers’ sympathy for the narrator and understanding of his story. In the earlier version, the sense of time is collapsed to the present, often in the use of the present tense, as in “gets” (*Collected Stories* 6) and “perceive” (9). However, time is also, remarkably, distanced through the narrator’s reminiscent asides—“in those days” and “I knew better after” (7) and “the word lingers painfully in my memory” (9).

If revision has cost the story the vital element of time, it also has caused the loss of an indispensable subjectivity. Throughout the earlier version, the
narrator subtly indicates his preferences and prejudices, where in the later version he maintains the silence of objectivity in such affairs. For example, readers know in advance how the events have effected him when he thinks of trying to prevent Belcher and 'Awkins from being shot and decides not to do so: “in those days disunion between brothers seemed to me an awful crime. I knew better after” (7). Bonaparte blatantly states to readers in the early version that “all the same, if you can understand, I didn’t want [‘Awkins] to be bumped off” (9). He clearly takes a stand in his narration, condemning “the usual rigmarole” (9) of how the guerillas informed those they were about to kill that they were only doing their duty. Bonaparte’s narration is not even objective in its reporting the facts, as when he fired a final shot to put ‘Awkins “forever out of pain” (11). Readers sympathize with Bonaparte’s difficult duty here, to put ‘Awkins out of his misery. In the later version, though, readers feel sorry only for Hawkins, whose slight laugh “sounded so unnatural” (Guests 15)--Bonaparte’s feelings and actions are omitted, perhaps in the interest of an objectivity which the early version does not achieve (nor should it).

Lastly, and significantly, O’Connor’s early version of the story incorporated the narrator’s comment that “It is so strange what you feel at such moments, and not to be written afterwards” (Collected Stories 12). Here the character—and perhaps even the author—acknowledges the impossibility of conveying everything; the statement suggests the limitations of language. To return to the original point, then, there is a danger in Joyce’s having allowed “the elaboration of style and form” (The Lonely Voice 125) to take control of his writing. Communication necessarily involves not just a speaker, but a listener as well, and in emphasizing too greatly the form of a work, an author can become so self-referentially engrossed as to lose sight of the audience and the reason for telling the story in the first place. Who, other
Confronted with the modernist movement of his time, O'Connor had two choices, to accept and follow, or to reject and abandon. He chose the lonely path, adhering to a past tradition while creating his own territory within it. O'Connor was a twentieth century realist in the sense that he was deeply aware of the circumstances—economic, spiritual, psychological, and technological, among them—which most concerned the modernists, yet he consciously chose a realistic technique with which to express a "modernist" or early twentieth century subject matter. Behind Bonaparte's statement, "And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again" (Collected Stories 12), for example, seems an existential angst caused by the reality of twentieth century warfare, a revolt against an absurd social system that inadvertently renders human relationships meaningless. While O'Connor was by no means an existentialist, what he did in his short stories and the theories behind them was to show the loneliness of existence and the individual's displacement from the community and its values—alienation and anomie, respectively, for the modernists.

Still, O'Connor's fiction should not be restricted to these terms, for his version of reality was not restricted to alienation, angst, and anomie; it incorporated laughter, goodness, and innocence, as well as sorrow, evil, and isolation. One may not even consider O'Connor in the bounds of realism or modernism, but rather in a broader framework of fictional tradition which he himself claimed in The Lonely Voice: "the novel and the short story are drastic adaptations of a primitive art form to modern conditions" (45). O'Connor was, to James Alexander, "Ireland's most gifted storyteller" (130); this is no small compliment, for Ireland has always been a land of storytellers. Frank O'Connor lived at an especially appropriate time, for Ireland itself was in the process of rediscovering and relearning the ancient sagas and myths,
the stories which encompassed the cultural tradition of the nation. O'Connor, thus, practiced the ancient art of storytelling in a contemporary setting. However, he departed from the Irish oral tradition in using the first person, in allowing the narrator to tell stories about himself (Alexander 134) and in moving "beyond the seanchai's [storyteller's] technique of presenting character with a single stroke" (138). Thus, O'Connor embraced and synthesized many traditions: his art was a composite of realism, early twentieth century subject matter, and traditional Irish storytelling.

Joyce and the majority of those who chose to follow him, on the other hand, attempted to utterly reject tradition, to pursue a course that relegated society and humanity to the framework of the artist's imagination. In doing so, such artists were--intentionally, in some cases--ignoring the very nature, the very mystery of the world. The postmodernist movement, if nothing else, has offered a critique of modernist ordering, declaring that the world exists in fragmentation and should be portrayed that way in art. Interestingly, O'Connor's own stances in some ways predate the postmodern response to modernism; in a way, the narrative technique in O'Connor's stories seems an application of a postmodern premise that the world is incomplete if seen from just one point of view but incomprehensible if seen from all points of view at once.

Even if we may argue that his fiction and criticism has some affinities with postmodernism's critique of modernism, we must question whether such affinity resides solely in the act of criticizing itself. O'Connor lived long enough to see only the briefest inception of postmodernism, and he had problems with it as well. In The Lonely Voice, he identified J.D. Salinger as "the most typical of modern American storytellers" (42) of the time, the early 1960s. Salinger was one of the earliest postmodern writers, yet O'Connor's criticism points right to the very flaws of postmodernism one might cite today:
[Salinger's typicality] is not only that he has developed the [short story] form itself as no one since Chekhov had done or that in his work it stands out as precisely what it is—the anti-novel. What makes him typical is that though his theme is still human loneliness the loneliness is specific instead of generalized...[H]e has no submerged population, no objectivization for the loneliness in himself that he externalizes. (42-3)

O'Connor was deeply troubled that art had become so intensely personal and self-referential as to lose touch completely with the way the world really was. We might say, then, that O'Connor's work has an affinity with postmodernism chiefly because the realism that preceded modernism, like the postmodernism that followed, denied an artistic ordering of the world and, instead, favored a subjectivity best portrayed through individual perspective.

O'Connor existed somewhat in isolation from these movements, even from realism's traditional content, but, even if one can isolate O'Connor from realism and modernism to some extent, differentiating O'Connor from such movements is still problematic, since it is precisely from within such movements that writers' reputations are measured.

O'Connor had a few accomplices along the road less travelled, and these included his countrymen Liam O'Flaherty and Sean O'Faolain. These are often named, especially in anthology introductions, as “the three most influential Irish writers in the [short story] genre since Joyce” (Trevor xvi). They are so frequently named together and lumped together, in fact, that their work has been somewhat indistinguishable for those within and outside of Ireland, and this too has a bearing on O'Connor's reputation. A perfect example is a story of confused identity O'Connor was fond of telling, here related by Benedict Kiely:

once [O'Connor] found himself on a railway dining car with an elderly parish priest, and the old man recognized him and said quite affably: 'Ah, you're the man who eloped with Mrs. Curtis and wrote 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' Thereby confusing four authors, only
three of them Irish. (37)

On the surface, O'Connor's similarities to O'Faolain suggest that perhaps such confusions are not unfounded. They were lifelong friends and rivals until O'Connor's death in 1966; both were raised in Cork and fought in the Irish Civil War; both wrote novels and drama early in their career, but came to focus specifically on short stories and criticism. Both also published biographical works and travel books, and both lectured at American universities.

However, the similarities end, it seems, where the fiction begins. O'Faolain's short story career is difficult to compare with O'Connor's, because they were, in fact, such different writers. Even if both were influenced by nineteenth-century writers like Chekhov and Maupassant, O'Connor consistently applied realism, while O'Faolain began his career with the romantic and lyrical Midsummer Night Madness and moved toward a more detached, compact social commentary (Katherine Hanley in Butler 155). The element of romance, especially drawing upon the inspiration of the past, never completely disappeared from O'Faolain's work. In O'Faolain's work, additionally, is a worldly-wise, intellectual air which reflects the man himself. Educated at University College, Dublin and at Harvard, and having lived in France and America for extended periods early in his life, O'Faolain was adept at portraying a different set of population groups than O'Connor. For example, O'Faolain treats the French psyche with much greater depth and understanding in "The Faithless Wife" than O'Connor did in "The Shepherds" (which we examined in the last chapter). Still, where O'Faolain represented an Irish literary elite as a man of letters, O'Connor was certainly more in touch with the low and middle class people of which they both wrote.

O'Faolain's work is even more reflective, even subtler than O'Connor's. O'Faolain, for example, carefully pondered the resonance of past meaning in
"The Sugawn Chair," producing narratorial reminiscences which lead us through association to an incidence of his father's bumbling in the narrator's youth and, eventually, back to his father and mother "as they were that morning...their arms about one another, laughing foolishly, and madly in love again" ("The Sugawn Chair" 341). O'Faolain's brief story is emotionally evocative and remotely romantic. On the other hand, when O'Connor narrators reminisce, which they do quite often in the child narratives, the author does not allow the story to evolve associatively; rather, he controls the reminiscence, carefully supplying background and choosing the narrative technique and temporal framework. Furthermore, O'Connor's reminiscent narratives occasionally end in O'Faolain's characteristic romantic wistfulness, but more often they end in humor or return to the hard realities of life.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two is that O'Connor was better at envisioning events in their broader scope, whereas O'Faolain's work usually takes a rather intimate approach on a much smaller scale. Clifford Fadiman has supported this claim by writing that O'Faolain "works with particles of recollection rather than with intricately connected whole patterns" (224). O'Connor's characters, on the other hand, often move between stories and exist outside of them, especially in the recurrent cyclical figures like Larry Delaney and Father Jerry Fogarty. One can most clearly see this contrast in the two writers' storytelling in two pieces which derive from the same source, O'Connor's "The Holy Door" and O'Faolain's "The Woman Who Married Clark Gable." This is an unfair comparison, to be sure, since O'Connor's story is his longest, whereas O'Faolain's is but a few pages; still, in a certain sense, the stories exaggerate O'Connor's and O'Faolain's differences just enough to shed some light, especially on O'Connor's fiction. Of these two stories, Michael Steinman has written:

Both [O'Connor] and Sean O'Faolain knew the story of a Cork wife who could tolerate intercourse only when imagining her husband a movie
The tale which O'Faolain derives is a brief, humorous story of a husband and wife's sexual repression; their relief, for a time, due to the mere image of Mr. Clark Gable, whom the wife envisions when she sleeps with her husband, thus enabling her to stand him. In the end, though, the husband shaves his Gable-like moustache, the wife's romantic illusions are dashed, and "They lived unhappily ever after in complete marital satisfaction" ("The Woman Who Married..." 428).

One might also consider O'Connor's main theme—or one of them—in "The Holy Door" to be the challenges of marriage. Indeed, this one story, almost a novella, encompasses not only the sexual repression of the one couple in O'Faolain's story. "The Holy Door" unintentionally draws the lines for much of O'Connor's fiction, encompassing many of the themes and characters which appear throughout O'Connor's work. In the frame of the story, for example, is a variation of the love story O'Connor rewrote all his career: Charlie Cashman pursued Nora Lawlor, and, after an incredible turn of events, Charlie got her. On the other hand, one might say that Nora Lawlor did not want to settle for Charlie and did not see much in him until his attentions turned to her friend, Polly. O'Connor more than once played off of the replaceability of friends—or of sisters, as in "The Masculine Principle."

Beyond these main characters are the stubborn old woman character of "The Long Road to Ummera" in Charlie's mother; the amiable, understanding priest in Father Ring; and the illegitimate outcasts: Molly, the servant girl, who is raising Charlie's son, is as inconsequential to Charlie and the others as the prostitute and her child are to the two men at the end of "A Story by
Maupassant.” One gets the sense throughout the story that everyone is involved in everyone’s business, and that reputation is more important than reality, as in “The Late Henry Conran,” and of course this story includes the almost omnipresent confessional which certainly shapes, though it does not determine, what moral decisions characters will make.

The lines drawn by “The Holy Door” are the bounds of Irish society itself. O’Connor once answered the question of why he chose to write about Ireland exclusively by saying that

The subject of literature [is not] merely a country, merely a different set of facts, words, and manners...it...consists of two ordeals, ordeal by family and ordeal by community. (O’Connor Reader 319)

...for the loyalties of the exceptional person are not so much to any country, but to the place or places where he endured the two ordeals. (321)

In exactly this way, Father Ring draws this line at the climax of this story; Polly, confronted with her husband’s infidelity, stands at the “holy door” of her home, deciding whether to leave him or to remain. Father Ring warns her about opening the door: “what you do in your own house is your business. What you do in the public view is mine” (O’Connor Reader 119). We have, on one hand, the basic ordeals of family and community, but we also have something much more complex. The community consists, first of all, of the moral values that Father Ring and the Church represent. However repressive the Church may be, though, we have the even more repressive talk-obsessed community which values reputation over actual morals. A character like Polly must consider whether her family circumstances are dire enough to warrant a public scrutiny that will involve not just scandal but ostracism and the boycotting of and foreclosure on their means of subsistence, namely Charlie’s shop.

Should she choose to remain in the house, she still must deal with the family ordeal. First, there is the overriding concern, for the Cashmans, of
procreation—somehow their lives will both be better, or so they think, if they can just get it over with and have a child. There is the further “masculine” sexual appetite and the “feminine” responsibility to repel it—as Father Ring tells Polly, a woman is justified in giving in to her husband if it is done “with a good object,” to fulfill a necessary purpose, and “provided, of course, she didn’t get any pleasure from it” (106). It is from this sexual repression itself, where a wife must seek the priest’s consent, that Michael Steinman claims that “The Holy Door” characterizes a national obsession. Why does this story occupy so much of O'Connor's artistic devotion in its length and depth? Perhaps it is because the expanded format allows us, as the short story does not, to see the real irony behind Charlie’s statement, “‘So this is married life!’” (115). The brief glimpse at marriage that a short story like O'Faolain’s “The Woman Who Married Clark Gable”—or any short story—might offer would not allow O'Connor to show readers the real agony and emotional torment which often enough gradually tears apart relationships.

Even if readers have difficulty separating O'Faolain's short stories from O'Connor's, they should have no such trouble with Liam O'Flaherty, since his work is very much distinct from that of his Cork colleagues. The most fundamental difference is that if O'Faolain's work is deeply reflective, Liam O'Flaherty's is prereflective, even instinctual. O'Flaherty was born and raised on the Aran Islands, and the ruggedness of life and proximity to nature there is evident in his fiction. Some of his stories depict animals in their natural setting, and there, Sean O'Faolain has written, “one has the feeling that O'Flaherty has his ear to the earth, listening quietly” (Cahalan 138). The stories of humans are equally powerful, and still we see in them the instinctual nature of man as an animal. O'Flaherty stories are often populated with human characters on the fringes of society—among them, the Pedlar, the
Fanatic, and Patsa—but regardless of their status, O’Flaherty characters act rather than think. O’Connor has rightly pointed out the advantages and limitations of O’Flaherty’s approach:

when he describes the instinctual life of human beings—of children, women and men from his own wild countryside—there is no question in my mind that he writes as a master...He begins to go false only when he has to deal with people who are compelled to live by their judgment rather than their instincts. (Cahalan 138)

When O’Flaherty devotes himself to developing character, the result can be amazing, as in his novel Famine: however, short fiction does not allow for such development, and O’Flaherty’s characters in the stories represent a rather limited “submerged population” of characters who act only on instinct.

The significant departure of views in the ways in which O’Connor and O’Flaherty perceive humanity is best manifest in two stories which deal with a police officer who must take action against a respected elder: O’Connor’s “The Majesty of the Law” and O’Flaherty’s “King of Inishcam.” O’Flaherty’s version of the story appeared almost ten years earlier, as “Irish Pride” in 1926.

However, at least one critic argues that the similar theme is likely coincidental rather than influential: most likely, “the two writers independently picked up on... similar cultural curiosities” (Cahalan 71). The most similar characteristic in the two stories is that the men who have broken the law are not arrested as such but are allowed to turn themselves in at their own convenience.

This single similarity is significant because, by approaching the common ground of these stories, one may notice the divergence of style and content in O’Flaherty and O’Connor. The two authors seem to regard the concept of the law and the role of the policeman somewhat differently, O’Flaherty with a distrust and even a mild contempt for police akin to the view of the Irish of the western islands among whom he was raised, and O’Connor with a certain admiration for the law’s flexibility.

O’Flaherty tells the story from the first person perspective of the
policeman's point of view. This choice of narration allows readers to witness O'Flaherty's characteristic bluntness: in the first paragraph alone, the policeman's narrative discloses who he is, what the people he was in charge of are like, and that this story exemplifies one such individual, Sean McKelvey. There is no subtlety in O'Flaherty. He even allows the policeman early on to divulge the secret of his trade: "as I understand it, the business of a good police officer is to preserve order in his district at the expense of as little coercion as possible" (O'Flaherty 159). The sergeant in "The Majesty of the Law" might make such a statement if O'Connor allowed readers into his thoughts, but then again this is not necessary, for O'Connor allows readers to figure out where the policeman stands by themselves through the gradual stages of revelation in the story. It is precisely O'Connor's subtlety which distinguishes his story.

"King of Inishcam" reveals a similar structure of wearing away layers, but it is the narrator himself who learns as much as the reader about how to deal with western islanders. The task with which Corrigan, the policeman, is faced is how to rid Inishcam of its poitheen stills; Corrigan thinks he has devised a brilliant plan which centers around confronting the "King" of the island rather than all of its members at once. He travels to Inishcam to challenge the "King," Sean McKelvey, a typical instinctual, animalistic O'Flaherty character: "He came forward two paces slowly, just like an animal getting into position for a pounce" (162). Corrigan's solution is that he and McKelvey should fight, and the law of the victor will reign supreme on the island--if McKelvey wins, the policeman will no longer disturb the islanders, but if Corrigan wins, the stills must be dismantled.

In the fight which ensues, McKelvey seems the stronger man and the obvious favorite, but the underdog Corrigan outwits him in the end. Tiring his opponent and catching him off-guard, Corrigan delivers a knockout punch
which sent the “invincible chief...down in a heap on the ground” (166). The King immediately loses the respect of his people, a consequence the policeman had not anticipated. Nonetheless, Corrigan wins, so his objectives are obtained. McKelvey willingly dismantles the stills and turns himself in to the police station on the mainland. This last action is curious, because McKelvey has to ask Corrigan for permission to avoid the embarrassment of arrest. Corrigan consents, but still the affair has the appearance of arrest to the people of Inishcam.

Most significant in this story is that the policeman does not have inherent understanding and compassion; it is only when he is reminded of subtle courtesies by McKelvey and, later, McKelvey’s wife, that he grants such courtesies, though they are a natural part of the sergeant’s character in “The Majesty of the Law.” Perhaps Corrigan is simply too new on the job to recognize that the islanders are a special people who need special treatment; however, it is more likely that O’Flaherty’s distrust of police is what ultimately tempers his story. Even the narrator’s demeaning prefatory comments on the emptiness of the islanders’ traditional kingship show his natural disrespect for the “King” and his people: “The King [is] a title...claimed by some romantic people to have come from ancient times, before Gaelic civilization was overthrown by the British, but whose origin is really quite recent and rather ridiculous” (159). The fundamental difference between O’Flaherty’s view of the policeman and O’Connor’s is a matter of flexibility. Corrigan says that no matter how much he has come to admire McKelvey, “the law is the law and must be upheld” (161). While the sergeant of O’Connor’s story might ultimately agree with the former statement in principle, he realizes that the law must be applied gently and flexibly so that it can be upheld and respected in the first place.

In “The Majesty of the Law,” O’Connor has once again created a
masterpiece, especially in terms of the angle from which the story is told. The narration is from a detached third person perspective, but throughout readers follow the actions of "old Dan Bride" (O'Connor Reader 30). The angle O'Connor has chosen is unique because the story itself is not so much about the law as it is a tragic lament for waning customs and traditions. Dan and his guest, the sergeant, talk at great length of liquor and medicine and various other topics, all in terms the way things are and the way they used to be. As opposed to O'Flaherty's "King of Inishcam," in O'Connor's story the two main characters have have a respect for one another on a personal level that transcends the bounds of law which divide them. Dan, for example, clearly disagrees with the liquor laws that have been imposed, but he refuses to speak his mind out of respect for the sergeant: "it was not in nature that in his own house a man should criticise the occupation of his guest" (34). Even the sergeant relegates the difficult matter that brought him to Dan's to an afterthought—or at least he makes it seem that way. Even if the law is the bottom line for the sergeant, as it was for Corrigan, here the sergeant importantly acknowledges his respect for the customs and the person before he performs his duty.

The motivation for the story does not become clear until the long chat has ended and the sergeant has departed. He returns suddenly to ask Dan about "that little fine" which "in a way...was what brought me" (37). Dan, readers learn at the story's close, has "had the grave misfortune to open the head of another old man in such a way as to necessitate his being removed to hospital" (38). Dan's refusal to pay the man damages means that he will have to spend a brief period in jail. Even here the sergeant dissociates himself from the duty of his job and suggests that Dan may serve his sentence at his convenience. Dan ponders whether he should go now or wait a day or two; clearly, the choice is his, and as in "King of Inishcam," the sergeant is not so much
arresting Dan as he is asking that he please turn himself in at his convenience. The flexibility of the law is emphasized, and in the end Dan travels by himself on Friday down the long road to the prison.

Vivian Mercier has noted that in a story like “The Majesty of the Law,” abstract concepts like “the law” are “opposed to the concrete behaviour of country people, who act and judge in accordance with tribal, familial, or personal values rather than those of the impersonal church or state” (241). In the end, Dan Bride refuses to pay a fine and, thus, must go to jail. In doing so, he hopes to embarrass and shame his accuser: “I'll punish him...I'll suffer for him, sergeant, till he won't be able to rise his head, nor any of his children after him, for the suffering he put on me” (O'Connor Reader 38). Mercier points out that O'Connor uses traditional Irish notions of justice to his advantage: “The old man’s method of reprisal is reminiscent of the Early Irish custom of fasting against someone who has done one an injustice.” Thus, Mercier concludes that “the ends of impersonal modern justice are frustrated by an older code, which reverses the roles of punisher and punished” (241). Viewed in this light, “The Majesty of the Law” explores the way in which modern law must necessarily accommodate traditional society.

This chapter, beyond attempting to clarify O'Connor's reputation in terms of his predecessors and contemporaries, has explored three of the best stories Frank O'Connor ever wrote. Each, whether readers recognize it or not, deals with the twin ordeals of family and community which were discussed in terms of “The Holy Door.” The ordeal of the family, which keeps matters on a personal level, seems to be O'Connor's preference in these stories. In much of O'Connor's best fiction, characters are confronted with a changing, foreboding, impersonal community—and their only solace is in interpersonal contact. Occasionally, they find solace from duties or worldly responsibilities
by clinging to traditions of respect, politeness, and gentility, as do the
sergeant and Dan Bride in "The Majesty of the Law." Sometimes, though, they
can find solace from harsh realities only in an innate reliance on
interpersonal contact, as do the "chums" of "Guests of the Nation." O'Connor's
insistence on the vital element of human understanding proposes a method of
dealing with the twentieth century ordeal of the community for character and
reader alike.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Why is Frank O'Connor not known widely as a great twentieth-century author? The chief factors which have worked against him are the limitations of the short story form, the shadow of James Joyce, and the lack of serious attention devoted to the work O'Connor has done. Any twentieth-century short story writer has had to contend with the dual ordeals of Joyce's shadow and limitations of form. However, this third factor is especially unfortunate in O'Connor's case, for, unlike O'Flaherty and O'Faolain, O'Connor has had a tenacious biographer and has received some lengthy critical study. James Matthews's biography is "detailed but consistently hostile" (Steinman in O'Connor Reader 403); it has been very well-researched but approaches O'Connor in such a negative vein that one wonders why Matthews chose his subject in the first place. Even if the biography itself is inordinately negative, O'Connor's reputation should be based on the literary work with which Frank O'Connor made his mark.

The two full-length critical studies of Frank O'Connor, Maurice Wohlgelernter's Frank O'Connor: An Introduction and William Tomory's Frank O'Connor have proved to be problematic as well. They are too basic to be useful in either exploring O'Connor's work or defining his place among other writers of his nation or genre. Both books appeared a few years before Matthews's biography, so both critics felt compelled to devote a significant portion of their work to providing background information on O'Connor's life. Wohlgelernter's book is a hodgepodge of miscellany, mostly directed at linking biography with fiction: chapters focus on O'Connor's early years, his war
experiences, his relationship to religion, the family in O'Connor's fiction, and his criticism. This is a rather random assortment, and the book ends rather strangely as well, with a chapter on O'Connor's early career at the Abbey Theater, without providing any evaluation of Frank O'Connor's literary standing. Tomory does offer an assessment of O'Connor's short fiction, but his conclusions are suspect because his criticism of individual stories throughout the book has been inconsistent. Tomory's book preceded the definitive Collected Stories edition of O'Connor's work, so he relied on his own judgement to determine superior versions of multiple-draft stories. Unfortunately, he made a great many poor choices: Tomory mostly critiques early, inferior versions of stories from magazine publications or early story volumes, so the book's usefulness even in terms of individual stories is questionable.

The exact nature of the problem in each of these cases, then, is the difficulty of evaluating Frank O'Connor's literary standing. People have for many years passed judgement on Frank O'Connor, but no one has offered a fair and accurate assessment based on an extended study of the work itself. This conclusion will attempt to exact such a measurement from arguments already presented and by considering some circumstances previously unexamined.

It has been written that Frank O'Connor's "place in the company of W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, and James Joyce seems secure" (Wall Street Journal reviewer on Collected Stories cover). The tenuous, contingent, uncertain word seems encapsulates the very problem we have in determining Frank O'Connor's reputation. Frank O'Connor did as much for Ireland as any of the above-mentioned names. He alone among the very greatest Irish writers risked his life for his nation. He alone invested years studying Ireland's native language and preserving its native literature. O'Connor alone among these luminaries so boldly risked his artistic reputation for the sake of his ideals, writing about
subjects he knew would raise controversy, even while his nation organized campaigns against his work (Forkner 36). Furthermore, O'Connor stabilized the Abbey Theater financially in the late 1930s, when it was at a point of artistic decline. Ireland, it seems, owes a great deal to Frank O'Connor.

In his later years, O'Connor became an international figure. He achieved notoriety among the Irish, and he even achieved popularity in Britain and America. A film version of "Guests of the Nation," radio and television appearances for the BBC, and recordings of O'Connor reading his stories on Caedmon records helped to bolster the popularity of his published writings in Britain (Alexander 142). As for America, O'Connor’s association with The New Yorker benefited author and magazine alike, and his stories have bolstered anthologies for years. In teaching, O'Connor offered himself as an established model, critic, and respondent to some of the brightest American creative writers at Harvard, Stanford, and Northwestern. Among O'Connor’s students were Larry McMurtry and Ken Kesey (Wallace Stegner in Sheehy 99).

O'Connor's influence overall is perhaps more easily defined in non-fiction than in fiction, but the impact of both are difficult to measure in any case. O'Connor remains one of the most often cited short story theorists; The Lonely Voice has proved a force to be reckoned with in the field. Most critics have accepted the validity of O'Connor’s theory of submerged population groups which differ from author to author, but because of the highly subjective nature of his theories, no one will ever be able to support them adequately beyond the support O'Connor himself has provided. This is ironic: the main criticism of O'Connor's theories has been their supposed unreliability, since the theorist himself did not develop them well enough. O'Connor was honest and straightforward about what he knew of his craft, even though many of the greatest twentieth century writers have avoided discussing the nature of their art in any useful way (and some are simply
unable to do so). O'Connor's commentary is important, then, not only because he chose to discuss his craft in an open forum, but also because few are blessed with the talent of being able to write as great artists and to explain their art.

O'Connor's influence in fiction itself has certainly been called into question. If O'Connor was a nineteenth-century realist and was not an innovator, then he must not have influenced any twentieth-century writer, or so the argument goes (Tomory 177). O'Connor was, in fact, an innovator, according to James Alexander: the "use of narrator as disembodied voice with dubious authority is an outgrowth of O'Connor's New Yorker writing and appears to be an innovation on this side of the Atlantic" (133). Whether O'Connor wrote in first or in third person, his readers always had to be alert, for his narrators were seldom reliable. O'Connor's narrative technique was successful because it was unpredictable. One never knows what outlandish generalization O'Connor's narrators might come up with about women or life or freedom or happiness or whatever—these statements are occasionally insightful, but above all, they are provocative. The subject of the statement never seems to matter as much as the way it is said, and readers usually get the sense that O'Connor is up to something. Usually he is trying to get our attention, and usually he succeeds.

This same brand of unpredictability permeates O'Connor's characters on the whole. Theirs is the unpredictability of life, for their actions are not determined by theme or circumstance. Their actions are predicated on choice, and often enough they choose wrongly: Larry probably should not have switched the Christmas presents, nor should the priest and the guard have fought so bitterly over a few onions in "The Sentry." Significantly, things do not always work out in the end, though characters usually learn from their mistakes. Within the broad human conflicts involving the ordeals of family and community resides every important decision an O'Connor character will
make. The ordeals of family and community seem to be precisely the two conflicts that are at once human and transcendent.

To return to the question at hand: was O'Connor influential? O'Connor was the foremost voice of his generation, a writer to be reckoned with—and, because his work was censored, one to be read with interest by any Irish citizen with an artistic sensibility. One of those who obviously read O'Connor's work was William Trevor, another Corkman. Trevor seems to have adopted O'Connor's penchant for characters who make their own choices, who are not so much bound by circumstance. Furthermore, and more importantly, Trevor's own insistence on human understanding for basic resolution very well may derive from O'Connor. Could it be mere coincidence that the title of Trevor's "The News from Ireland" is vaguely reminiscent of O'Connor's "News for the Church" and that the main characters of this Trevor story are named Fogarty? Such minor details seem to pay a subtle homage to O'Connor, and it is likely that other contemporary short story writers—especially Irish ones—also owe O'Connor such a tribute. One other indirect influence should be mentioned: O'Connor served as a father-figure to a great many young Irish writers, perhaps as a way of repaying his own debt to Yeats.

This thesis has traced some small portion of a lifetime of work—which included over two hundred short stories, the most realistic portrayal of the lifetimes and life experiences of the common people of Ireland in the early twentieth century. Beyond this, Frank O'Connor, at his best, wrote stories which transcended nationality, to touch a common chord in all of us. Even if readers are not Irish, even if Frank O'Connor died before some of his readers were born, all must cope with the burdens of being human which are at the heart of his work.

The true test of whether literature will withstand the test of time is
whether it remains relevant. Can readers today feel the joy of anticipation and the pain of defeated expectation? Can we reflect back on the many stages in which we lost our youthful innocence? Have we ever had a gut-wrenching feeling that the world will never be the same again? Are we really confronted with two ordeals, the ordeal of the family and the ordeal of the community? If we have answered “yes” to any of these questions, readers owe Frank O'Connor's short fiction a second (or even third) look. A first look very well may captivate and entertain somewhat superficially, but only by looking more closely can one judge the short story writer. The short story is not the usual magazine pulp it sometimes seems; it is a serious art form which begs, even demands, that the reader return to the text again and again--at least O'Connor treated it as such. The modern short story derived from an oral tradition which involved a return, over and over, to the same text. There was once an art both in the story one told and how that person told it; each time a story was told, it evolved both in content and in form. At last, after perhaps hundreds of years, someone recorded that story in writing. The story thus achieved a stasis of form and content which preserved it for the future. Thus, we have The Iliad, The Odyssey, and the great Irish sagas—but even these, having achieved stasis, were too ponderous to achieve perfection in any sense.

O'Connor, on a smaller scale, sought to extend the oral tradition to an ideal form; by revising or retelling his short stories again and again, he could finally get them right. O'Connor's abundance of consistently high quality work is emotionally evocative and resonant with meaning. In his best stories, not a sentence, not a word should be changed—he has already done that work for us in drafting the story over and over. Readers should savor the way an O'Connor story is told and ponder carefully the subjective truth which each story offers. Furthermore, if one traces the patterns of O'Connor's stories to follow, for example, the hilarity, the loneliness, the moral tribulations, the
incredible sympathy and understanding evidenced in the fictional life of Father Jerry Fogarty, one is left with something approaching the sublime. O'Connor had a romantic streak which he never quite allowed to surface, yet was is an important influence on his fiction. Even if he could not endorse romance, he certainly did not lack imagination. O'Connor had an uncanny ability to gather stories that resembled or were real life and to transform them into meaningful and imaginative art. His ability to make a story work resided in the creative powers which shaped real-life characters and chose how best to tell a particular story. In the most significant, most celebrated era of Irish storytelling, the Irish Literary Renaissance, Frank O'Connor was the preeminent storyteller. Frank O'Connor's achievements have certainly distinguished him amongst the seanachai on the island of storytellers.
APPENDIX

NOTES

CHAPTER 2

1 At least twenty-seven stories (Tomory 123) out of the over two hundred to which Michael Steinman refers in A Frank O'Connor Reader (xi) are childhood narratives.

2 This volume is still in print as Classic Irish Short Stories.

3 O'Connor published two other “drafts” of “First Confession,” one in Selected Stories by Frank O'Connor in 1946, and one in 1952’s The Stories of Frank O'Connor, but the changes made are relatively minor (Frank O'Connor at Work 35) and thus do not warrant separate consideration here.

4 O'Connor’s boy narrators have largely been regarded as interchangeable, but Micky can at least be distinguished from Larry and Jackie because Micky was Michael O’Donovan’s real childhood nickname.

5 O'Connor’s attitude toward Joyce’s later work would drastically change. This became especially evident and a cause for some controversy when the man who had memorized large portions of Finnegan’s Wake became disillusioned with and, eventually, openly critical of Joyce’s last two works, especially in The Mirror in the Roadway: A Study of the Modern Novel.

CHAPTER 3

1 Unlike “First Confession,” “The Face of Evil” has not been revised since its original publication in 1954.

2 Publishers were then desperate to find new O’Connor material to print.

3 The priest mentioned in “The Face of Evil” is Father O’Regan, who is named after the priest O’Connor actually confessed to: O’Regan was “a gentle old priest who regarded me as a very saintly boy, and regularly asked me to pray for his intention...once I confessed to “bad thoughts,” meaning, I suppose, [having thought about] murdering my grandmother...” (An Only Child 164).

4 This is the only direct reference to Ireland in the story, although there are references to “bobbies” and to other particularly British words. The story, as
mentioned, first appeared to an American audience in *The New Yorker*, but it was later reprinted only in the British edition *Collection Three*.

5 *An Only Child* was first published as a whole in 1958; "Christmas Morning" appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1946. Chapter eleven of *An Only Child* (pages 129-137) is devoted entirely to O'Connor's experiences at Christmas time.

6 The single exception is "The Majesty of the Law."

CHAPTER 4

1 "The Shepherds" was published in *Crab Apple Jelly* as "The Star that Bids the Shepherd Fold," but throughout I have maintained that the last revision of O'Connor's work, even if under a different title, was the version which usually pleased O'Connor most (otherwise he would not have published it again) and thus is the version we should most closely examine.

2 Thus, the Irish sagas did not assume written form until at least 800 A.D.

3 O'Connor himself worked as a censor at least twice in his life, once for Britain's Ministry of Information, and earlier, as a rebel Irish Nationalist censor for the local newspaper during the Irish revolution (*An Only Child* 211). Thus, he well knew the responsibility of the bureaucratic censor.

4 At least, Mick believes she has always been infatuated with him; he is, after all, the narrator, and we do not know how Nan would respond to this claim, except by inferring from her later dialogue that she always did have a crush on him but that she always knew he was wrong for her (453).

5 Again, this could be seen as romance versus realism or imagination versus reality in an artistically metaphoric schema.

6 Lying "a big paw on her shoulder" (628) subtly foreshadows the revelation to come.

7 At least, the note will arrive late enough that Fogarty will already be buried before anyone can complain that the note really did not specify his intentions.

CHAPTER 5

1 Of course, it was not known by any such name or recognized at all then.

2 The writers were O'Connor himself; O'Flaherty, who had an affair with Mrs. Edmund Curtis; O'Faolain, author of the story "Midsummer Night Madness" and
a collection named after it; and William Shakespeare, author of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

3 O'Faolain died in 1991, at the age of ninety-one.


5 Poitheen (or poteen, but pronounced "pocheen") is "moonshine," or illegally distilled whiskey.

**CHAPTER 6**

1 Tomory could instead have relied on the superior versions from O'Connor's collections and revisions of his own work, such as *More Stories by Frank O'Connor*.

2 Such statements abound; at least one can be found in every O'Connor story. Noteworthy examples include:
   - "God, the hypocrisy of women!" in "First Confession";
   - "that was the English all out. They had to reduce everything to the most literal terms" in "The Sentry"; and
   - "Brother Michael was rather given to a distrust of human nature, the sort of man who goes looking for a moral in everything even when there is no moral in it" in "Song Without Words."
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121


