

Reading O'Connor's My Oedipus Complex

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Abstract: Frank O'Connor (1903-1966) displays with deep acuteness, subtle irony and much humor the conflicts of the world of children in "My Oedipus Complex", the title of which illustrates the theme and is repeatedly used as a leitmotif in almost all of the episodes.

Five-year old Larry, the main character in the story, comes up against difficult situations, on account of his fantasies and narcissism, when his father/rival comes back home from the First World War. This is when his Oedipus complex comes to the fore. If, on the one hand, the father's homecoming is responsible for Larry's isolation and anguish by bringing out his obsessive love for his mother, on the other hand, the birth of a younger brother exacerbates his frustration and jealousy, and, in the process, reveals the ambivalence of his feelings. However, it is precisely because of his younger brother that Larry overcomes the Oedipian stage of the triangle upon identifying himself with the mirror image of his father. This image reflects itself in several mirrors, including those which represent the Other, his mother, his father, and his brother. These reflections come together so that the union of the family is re-established.

He saw through Sonny, and now knew that
I saw through him as well.
(Frank O'Connor's *My Oedipus Complex*)

The title of the short story "My Oedipus Complex" indicates its interrelationship with Greek mythology and psychology. In the well-known Greek legend, Oedipus slew a man without knowing that he was his father and made his wife his – unaware that she was his mother. This inspired Sophocles (414 BC.) to write his two celebrated tragedies: *Oedipus King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Freud (1886-1939) used the expression "the Oedipus Complex" for the first time in his work *Contributions to the Psychology of Love* (1910). In his view, the Greek

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myth is a slightly modified manifestation of infantile desire against which the barriers of incest are raised as the child grows older. This analysis of “My Oedipus Complex” will examine the following features of the story: Larry displaying his Oedipal complex; the father as a socio-sexual prototype; the mother defending her son’s attitudes and the newborn child as a mediating instance of the father-son conflict.

A critical review of the story reveals it to be a reminiscence of childhood which, from the Freudian perspective, owes its existence to a *displacement process* (Italics mine) made up from the supplemental reproduction of other extremely important impressions which are made apparent by psychological analysis but which cannot be directly produced because of a *resistance* (Italics mine) (Freud s.d., 55). On account of the relationship between the story’s content and other repressed content, Freud calls these reminiscences “hidden reminiscences”. (55).

As a starting point, I will assume that the main character reveals, as in a dream, only remnants of events (261) which marked his childhood and will try, as far as possible, through association of ideas, to wend a way through the labyrinth of his unconscious in order to seek out the most important impressions he did not reveal on account of that resistance.

The first thing to notice right from the first paragraph is the egocentric narrative of the main character. This evokes the paternal absence related to what Serge Leclaire calls emptiness, vacancy, ‘lettre’ (Leclaire 1997, 123). It becomes significant in order to give meaning to the solitude of the child who withdraws into the world of his fantasies and dreams to escape from reality. This is why Larry, who up to the age of five, had been raised without his father, confesses that the little he knew about him did not worry him in the least. This makes us note a feigned indifference on his part, a clear portent of the conflict-ridden atmosphere-to-be when they meet. It is interesting to recall that “the primary function of fantasy is to act out the desire where the thing prohibited is always present in the proper position of the desire” (Freud s.d., 118). In such conditions it is normal that Larry’s Oedipean structure becomes obsessive in view of his demanding love for his mother.

In reminiscing on his childhood, the artful narrator sums it up in a memorable antithetic phrase loaded with meaning: “The war was the most peaceful period of my life”. These words show the interference of the writer by his use of a stylistic resource. In my view, this calls for further analysis. Firstly it is an ambiguous, ironic affirmation since nobody can have peace in a war. However for the main character-narrator paradoxically the war may mean the realization of his narcissistic Id, on account of his possessive love for his mother. According to Freud, while the Ego “stands for what can be called reason and common sense the Id stands for the passions”. (195).

In addition, taking into account the hidden reminiscences which “do not correspond to the original material but are deformed substitutes in the presence of a resistance” (Freud s.d., 55), there may be an association between the elements of ideation of Larry (the desire to possess his mother) and an element of wishful thinking, that is, to be free from his father by having him removed from his world.

When playing with his feet, Larry calls them Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right, which may suggest a projection of his mother's neighbors or friends as he sees them when these women are gossiping. Maybe the idea of projection of his Id (115) prevails associating each significant respectively to the maternal and paternal instances. And to the maternal instance corresponds the affective part. The fact that the boy gives his feet women's names and not men's names is perhaps due to the context of the story that refers to the war, when there were probably few men around, and it would not have been appropriate for his mother to have men friends.

Larry's play takes us to the live scenario of his childhood world and illustrates Freud's reflection that "the favorite and most intense occupation of the child is the toy". It may be correct to say that the child at play behaves like a poet, creating his own world and "the antithesis of the toy is not seriousness but reality". (118) This adds to significance to the scene where Larry is scolded for playing with his father's toys. For Larry, his father's treasures were toys; for the father they are the memorabilia of reality but at the same time he seems to recognize unconsciously they can be seen as toys.

"The immortality of the Ego so strongly denied by reality conquers its reaffirmation by taking refuge in a child". (165). This idea applies here, for guided by the principle of pleasure, (Le Galliot 1977, 13) Larry overestimates the power of his wishes and mental acts and therefore makes use of fantasies, placing himself at the phase of the ideal Ego, judging himself omnipotent in his anxiety to have his mother for himself alone and to be the center of the household. While he is fantasizing on his source of pleasure, he introjects the maternal image and expels whatever in himself has become a cause of displeasure. In such circumstances his Ego becomes an "Ego of pleasure" (Freud s.d., 47).

Larry's sexual ideal (his mother) is menaced by the arrival of his father. At the same time, the dissatisfaction he feels, caused by the non-fulfillment of the ideal of the Ego, in a cleavage turns into aggressive behavior which leads to a "guilt complex" and to a "castration complex". (Le Galliot 1977, 22) Larry's conflict may be more intense on account of his having received excessive maternal affection while his father was absent.

When account is taken of the affection Larry is given by his mother, the revival and reproduction of maternal narcissism are shown. "Parental love", Freud says, "so moving and so infantile is basically only a resurrection of the parents' narcissism which evidently reveals its former nature in this transformation into the objectivized love." (268).

It is not without reason that the child feels free to play with the military equipment that his father left at home. The chain of signifiers "model tanks and Gurkha knives [...] all sorts of military equipment" (O'Connor 1975, 27) conveys the meaning of Larry's *pleasure* (Italics mine), tinged with a feeling of vengeance, which takes us back to the "original scene". Interpreting Freud, Jean Le Galliot points out that the scene referred to is "at the origin of the sexual relation between the parents as observed or imagined by the child". (Le Galliot 1977, 22) Then the scene in question is taken by the child as an aggression by the father towards the mother in a sadomasochistic relationship, which caused the child

sexual excitation concomitant with the anguish of castration, a characteristic of the Oedipal phase (23).

The episode when Larry says “Mother let me get a chair and rummage through his treasures” is charged with meaning. First of all, the term ‘treasure’ would lend a strong sexual connotation to Larry’s impressions of his mother since he invests his narcissistic libido in her. At the same time, it functions as a metaphor of paternal power. And also the term “treasure” in the Freudian symbology, refers to someone who is loved in dreams or in conscious life. (Freud s.d., 107). Furthermore, would the referred scene be a symbol of Larry’s mother wanting to imprison him in his childhood? And still, this same scene of playing with Father’s ‘toys’ is paralleled immediately with Larry trying to imitate some of his father’s habits and mannerisms, acting out what it is to be a man.

Gazing out at nature through the window, Larry was stimulated by a specific quality of excitation: the beauty of the scenery. According to Freud, “an examination of how the erogenous zones adjust themselves to sexual excitation shows that the eyes – although distant from the sensual object – correspond to the zone most frequently stimulated by the excitation”. (215) Thus it may be suggested that the signifiers “tall, red-brick houses [...] rigid and painted”, (O’Connor 1975, 28) give symbolic meaning to the sexual act in Nature and represent the unfolding of Larry’s pulsional sexual universe toward his mother. In Freudian theory, “any part of the body can be the seat of an erogenous zone and so too the whole body”. (Freud s.d., 259). Furthermore, “all tall things symbolize the masculine phallus in contrast to the corresponding feminine organ which is deep and concave”. (107).

The external world is described through the eyes of the child as he sees and feels it. It is presented in the first person, as experienced by the child who is only an object in the hands of the narrator and here an unfolding and isolation are to be found. The child feels lonely and a strong obsession for his mother.

The scene in which the boy goes to his mother’s bedroom evokes intimate privacy, especially by means of the sequence of signifiers “[...] Mother’s room and climbed into the big bed” (O’Connor 1975, 28) which conveys a hint of incest. At the same time and paradoxically, Larry, while investing his libido in the prohibited object, feels hampered and despondent. This idea is suggested by the words “petrified” and “frost”, “strong symbols of the castration complex”. (Le Galliot 1977, 22).

The fact that Larry accompanies his mother to Saint Augustin Church merits comment. It is quite possible that O’Connor has picked out this name in particular to relate Larry’s future atonement to Saint Augustin’s. Soon after the boy gives vent to his feelings: “Little, indeed, did I know what I was praying for”, (O’Connor 1975, 28) which may be construed as a complaint against God himself who is personified, transposing the cosmic level into the personal one. Might God then be a symbol of Superego?

An analysis of the text also brought to my attention the recurring association between Larry’s father and Santa Claus. The characteristics of both are all-important to distinguish that the emphasis is set on the characterization of the father as a masculine

personage *par excellence* as a prototype of man, when always dressed in his military uniform which for Larry is another symbol of power.

Although smoking has become a commonplace habit among women, it was formerly a man's habit (at least in public) and this enhances Larry's father masculinity. In the same way, insignia and caps used to be masculine objects and shaving is essentially a male activity. All these aspects evidence Larry's father as a socio-sexual stereotype. According to the text I argue that the child would link Santa Claus, who is a giver, to the maternal instance for the mother gave when the father was at war. Another possible interpretation is that Larry may unconsciously relate the comings and goings of his father to his parent's lovemaking, such an idea being strengthened by the word "mysteriously" (O'Connor 1975, 27) which refers back once more to the "family romance". (Le Galliot 1977, 22).

In the episode where Larry walks to his parent's bedroom, he jumps into bed and places himself in between the two of them and sucks his thumb – after failing to expel his father from bed as was his intent. Thumb-sucking represents a return to the oral phase which begins at the maternal breast and corresponds to the "lettre" inscribed in Larry's unconscious (Leclaire 1997, 123). It may also be a representation of Larry's unconscious satisfaction intensified by mother-oriented sexual desires and by the awareness that his father was an obstacle to that realization. This being so, this emotion returns transformed into never-ending social and moral anxiety and self-censorship. Thumb-sucking "is a substitute for displacement". (Freud s.d., 69) Furthermore, "thumb-sucking is an essential characteristic of the sexual manifestations of childhood and sensual sucking includes total absorption and induces sleep or even a motor reaction like an orgasm". (184).

Of course there is great irony in the reference to what is healthy in bed. Larry was not allowed to sleep with his mother while her husband was in the army though he did go to her bed when he woke in the early morning and fell asleep again there.

The expression "talking-to-Daddy" may be the metaphorical focus standing for the prohibited object (the mother) desired by the son. The first day his father comes home to dinner, after his return from the war, Larry did not like to see how anxious his mother was, claiming that "it destroyed her good looks". The child is jealous of his mother and does not accept her interest in his father which sends us back to the "original scene", as conceived by Freud. It is worth examining some of the details in this description. For instance, "put on his slippers" carries a sexual connotation. To Freud, "the act of putting on one's slippers would refer to the sexual act" (118). The phrase "to save him from colds" may represent the "castration complex" and imply a "feeling of culpability". (Le Galliot 1977, 22).

When Larry's mother asks him to keep quiet because she is "talking to Daddy" or says "don't wake Daddy", and "don't wake Sonny", three nodal points are established. The first expression is an euphemism to allow a couple to be alone. Perhaps we can go beyond and say that "talking to Daddy" means that Daddy wants sex, while "don't wake,

Daddy” suggests that Daddy has had sex and needs to sleep. The last one “don’t wake Sonny” conveys that Daddy cannot have sex. These phrases will keep ringing in the child’s head tormentingly and his ambivalent feelings will re-appear. We will see later on that he is going to pray to God to send his father back to the war, which is the equivalent of sending him to his death. From then on Larry will begin to repress his feelings.

The first walk Larry and his father took together was very disagreeable for the child because of his father’s interest in conversation was with adults exclusively and whenever Larry wanted to stop his father tugged him on by the hand. It may be possible that the father’s aggressive pulsion spills over, spurred on by his jealousy of his wife. At first sight it may imply the traumas of the man who comes home from war and loses patience with children, even if the child is his son. When the child avows that “Father has an extraordinary capacity for amiable inattention”, (O’Connor 1975, 29) this conveys Larry’s latent desire to get his father’s attention. Thus the meaning of the irony is tantamount to a frustration backed by “I sized him up and wondered would I cry...” Still in the same passage, the child compares his father to a mountain. That would represent his desire to have him back to the inorganic state, which unconsciously may indicate a wish for his father’s death. (Guerin 1972, 75) Also and more directly, the sheer size of the adult world – the child is overwhelmed and he realizes that resistance is useless because he will be ignored.

Another issue present in the story is eroticism as in the following passage is redolent with eroticism. “Dawn was just breaking” [...] I had caught it in the act” (O’Connor 1975, 30) brings to mind the idea of catching the parents in the sexual act. Thus Larry would harbor latent elements of scopophilia in trying to see what was happening when his parents were having sexual relations. In Freud’s theory, “the pair of opposites scopophilia/exhibitionism refers to instincts for the purpose of looking and exposing respectively. (40)

In projecting himself into nature, Larry is sub-consciously reflecting on an initial relation between “the symbolic, the imaginary and the real” which would mirror his fantasies and myths (Clément 1975, 17).

Since nature is the archetype of “mother”, Larry is reinvesting his libido in it. This idea is emphasized because Larry goes to his parent’s bed and places himself in between them, kicking his father. Once more the maternal instance seems to be his accomplice. Says he: “Mother felt for me”. Literally, this is only an expression of the mother understanding Larry’s emotional need as long as she reaches out and touches him and her touch puts him to sleep: in other words, physical contact with her is soothing to Larry. However, in an analysis like this, the expression also connotes Larry’s unconscious sexual desire for his mother. When antagonizing his father, Larry is nevertheless afraid of him. This reveals that Larry is acting out his inner drama and struggling with the ban on incest. His mother/wife plays the part of “the Other”, (Lemaire 1977, 201), a mirror image in the contemplation of which Larry delights, since it represents a version of his narcissistic Ego.

In the early morning the child would go to his parent's bedroom to talk with his mother. Larry's oneiric world is brimming with fantasies. Now "don't-wake-Daddy" will be another signifier of the wish which will remain on the same plane as "talking-to-Daddy".

As may be observed the nodal points keep growing from the moment the child expresses his wish to go fishing. The problem reaches its climax when the hero demands to be treated as an equal. He wants "to have tea", another signifier of desire. And he says that one of the two will have to leave home, either he (Larry) or his father.

When Larry says he wants to go fishing, this shows he has not yet associated his father with this kind of activity. We conclude his mother used to take him on such expeditions because his father was at the war front. Perhaps we could say the father's return means this mother loses the masculine attributes – something that Larry failed to understand especially as the text implies that the father did not take up this role on his return from war.

In a study on Lacan, Anika Lemaire shows that "repressed pulsion keeps tending to complete fulfillment which would consist in the repetition of a primary satisfaction: that of the union with the mother" but "nothing can put a stop to that state of tension". (22). It is precisely Larry's repressed pulsion which makes him aggressive, as when he reverts to his sado-masochistic phase by defying his parents.

By physically punishing the child, in similar fashion to her husband, Larry's mother may be considered as a virtual phallic woman and also because in her husband's absence she played the father's part. Thus in this aspect she is unmistakably phallic.

In another nodal point, paternal authority is challenged by the ambivalent hero who, although only five years old, snaps back at his father so challenging the paternal Superego. This is the point at which Larry's father slaps his son's backside and the fact of being smacked even though no pain was inflicted infuriates the boy. At that moment maybe Larry assumes the role of a sado-masochist to the extent that he wishes to provoke negative feelings in his parents. He may also desire to be a victim because on this occasion he is protected by his mother who, in a cleavage, shows she is annoyed with her husband by siding with Larry.

The episode when Larry avows to his mother that when he grows up he will marry her and they will have many children, is very instructive. This is when she takes the opportunity to tell him that he will have a little brother. It is worth recalling Freud's observation that "children choose their parents as their first objects of love". (43).

Though Larry longed to have a baby brother, Sonny's arrival belies this. Contrary to his earlier thoughts, Larry expresses negative feelings toward the infant. Larry projects himself in Sonny and finds him very possessive when actually it is Larry who wants to be the center of attention. His jealousy is so intense that he used to pinch his little brother, thus displaying sadistic behavior. When his mother catches him in the act of pinching the baby, she slaps him.

After this episode Larry is very depressed since he was used to being the center of the family. One night just as his father arrived home, Larry gave vent to his feelings:

“If another bloody baby comes into this house, I’m going out”. This explosion of pent-up rage causes his father to understand him better and so to project himself in his son. This is the climax of the story, that is, the defining moment in changing Larry’s life.

His father, who had rejected him, now counter-invests in his son as a result of the sharp transfer of maternal love toward the new baby who, in a process of displacement, becomes the center of maternal attention. While previously it was Larry who had been driven out of bed, now it is his father’s turn. An understanding is reached: “He saw through Sonny, and now he knew that I saw through him as well”. (36) This is linked to Lacan’s image of the mirror, that of the identification with the Other and with the father.

Let us recall in line with Freud that at the very moment the Oedipus Complex was destroyed, Larry recognizes that a maternal characteristic is to give priority to the newly born, that is, “mother” as child-bearer. At the same time, Larry identifies himself strongly with his father and this allows Larry to maintain an affectionate relationship with the mother and also with the baby.

An interesting fact stands out though: we become familiar only with the hero’s name. Only once, as the conflict grows in intensity, do we hear Larry’s mother call her husband ‘Mick’ which reminds us of “meek” meaning obedient, yielding, and presents a strong contrast to the ongoing paternal violence.

Larry only once (29) refers to his father as ‘Daddy’. All other uses of ‘Daddy’ are by his mother. Apart from this one instance, he always uses the form ‘Father’. This suggests that the boy never got really close to his father.

Beyond this, I argue that maybe the omission of names takes on some relevance since it may indicate a displacement, a cleavage of the mental route by representations very distant from the signifiers “Father”, “Mother”, and “Sonny” in contrast with the importance of the meaning they have for Larry, a fact enhanced by the capitalization of the names. As in a dream, this artifice could indicate, in the latent content, something repressed or yet be the receptacle of a trauma. It may also be that the absence of names indicates contempt, a withdrawal or an escape mechanism of the narrator.

Freud’s reflection that “humor is one of the main functions of defense which, as opposed to repression, neglects to subtract from attention the content of representation linked to painful affection and in this way, governs defensive automatism” (243) applies here.

He adds that “maybe the connection with the infantile allows humor to play that role thoroughly since in a child’s life, intensive painful affections occur which the grown-up would laugh at as does the humorist when identical feelings assail him at maturity”. (243) This observation is strikingly exemplified by Larry who feels the pain of having to share maternal love. And there is an interesting connection with the infantile behavior through the exaltation of the Ego shown by the humorous displacement. This is a point of view which this analysis has been examining.

It may be possible to infer that the specific feature of comicality of “My Oedipus Complex” is exactly the rebirth of the child and to consider the comic as “the lost

childhood laugh” recovered. The laugh springs therefore from the comparison between the adult Ego of the narrator and his Ego when a child (243).

O’Connor’s short story confirms Freud’s observation according to which “humor is the highest of the defensive processes”. Humor is but a camouflage which hides something deeper. Does its very title suggest that the author’s intent was to make fun of psychoanalysis? If it is so, it is exactly by gently mocking Freudian theory, that the author falls into a trap at the level of the text by creating various humorous moments centered on both the “I” as narrator and the “I” as hero.

It is Leclair’s “lettre” which is beneath and beyond the Oedipean drama. Larry’s Ego is an empty place, his desire is not at the place indicated and the object of his search may be unreachable. The desire in “My Oedipus Complex” is in the before, now and after and the hero speaks of his infancy as if it were a self-defense mechanism. The irony of the title “My Oedipus Complex” is a metaphor which sums up the spirit of the work. By this artifice and because of it, the narrator feels less inhibited to tell such a story in which he reflects on himself.

The thematic preoccupation already singled out – Oedipus – with the literature itself implies a reversal of the irony on the narrator himself and on the mirror features of his childhood in which narcissism is seasoned with poetical maturity. Yet this does not keep him from revealing his Ego and presenting us with an aesthetic experience.

The message is the whys and wherefores of childish attitudes, behaviors, pains and pleasures, which reverberate in the reader who projects and identifies herself/himself in Larry’s mirror image. This is because by being a universal figure, Larry stands for the eternal theme of the search for the Other; the mirror of the other – the maternal one – which reflects and materializes the Oedipean child’s desires which converges in the father and son scene in which the family model is re-established. This is a reflection of the very social system in which we live.

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