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Ignatius descending



-A psychoanalytical reading of a confederacy of letters –

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Introduction

A confederacy of dunces contains many strata. It seems a pleasant and humdrum story at first, but the text proves itself highly complex when dissected through a psychoanalytical looking glass. On the surface it is a humorous story, constructed by contrast, underneath which there is a far less tangible seriousness. Walker Percy¹ writes, in the foreword of the novel, "I hesitate to use the word *comedy* - though comedy it is - because that implies simply a funny book, and this novel is a great deal more than that ...It is also sad. One never quite knows where the sadness comes from."² In this essay I will try to analyze where the sadness comes from.

The main character, Ignatius Reilly's inequality to all the other characters is palpable. Most of the characters in the book represent the marginalized in society, the Reilly's exhibiting the most striking display. Within the Reilly family, consisting of mother and son, there is conflict and disorder, the discord of which is almost unbearable to the conscientious reader. Ignatius' use of language differs extremely from the others. When he speaks to his mother, his vocabulary and the issues he is discussing puzzle her to such an extent that communication collapses. In his dialogue with the peripheral characters in the novel, Ignatius seems to lack the ability to adapt his linguistic register. This presents a divergence which creates a lopsided omnium of the text, which in turn evokes ample power from language.

Language is the key subject of the analysis in this essay. Important to point out is that I am treating the text as if it had its own will, and defines its own structure and meaning. From my point of view the text itself is suppressing information, and will therefore be treated as one of the analysands. My standpoint is that no text or utterance is ever completed, and therefore it is not absolute. The text itself is the strongest manifestation of power in the novel. When scrutinized, the text in *A confederacy of dunces* appears highly aporetic. In this study I want to point out these aporiae, through psychoanalysis.

To begin with, the father in the Reilly family is not only dead; he is abnormally nonexistent. The reader is allowed no additional information about him. Furthermore, the Reilly's display sadistic and masochistic tendencies. Hate and mistrust are abnormally present and there is no sign of love. The capricious image of the implied truth in the novel, that the caring mother is trying to help her son to a better life is tantalizing to the analytic

¹ American novelist who helped Thelma Ducoing Toole get the book published.

² Toole, John Kennedy, *A confederacy of dunces*, Penguin Classics, 2000, vii.

reader. It is tempting to suggest the opposite; that Irene is an insecure and abusive mother, who wants to get rid of her unwanted son. Additionally, Mother and son seem to be symbiotically attached, unable to stand alone as individuals. Oddly enough, they also exhibit parasitical features, both serving as host for the other, a disposition weakening and decaying them. As will be shown, they also seem to parasitize on the 'idea of the father'; an empty, unwholesome, and inedible host. Fixed in this dysfunctional situation, the Reilly family displays a singular absence of power.

One of the many oddities in the text is that Ignatius Reilly is depicted as an infant at the age of thirty. Notably, he is described as a large man with a mustache; however, his behavior and apparel, as well as his interests and his warped worldview are infantile. In contrast to his symbiotic attachment to his mother, he also exhibits behavioral abnormalities which can be seen in orphans, and in parentless children who have been rejected or permanently lost by their parents. What is more, Ignatius' sexuality is indeterminable, and this seems to be connected with his infancy, as well as his orphanhood.

The imbalance in the Reilly story is further enhanced by the text's refusal to present a clear ending. All the subplots are tied up and concluded, but the main story is left dangling in the air. By presenting normal power structures in the subplots, the text averts the readers attention from the strikingly odd powerlessness in Ignatius' and Irene's relationship.

Theoretical background

Undeniably, Ignatius Reilly is a very disturbed man of thirty; however, it is not at all simple to determine exactly what is wrong with him, or why he became disturbed. He exhibits several psychic disorders, among which the most arrestive are sexual repression, a God complex, sado/masochistic tendencies, and polymorphous perversity.

Finding theories through which to analyze the text has proven difficult. Purely Freudian analysis, which focuses on human behavior only, and on the human being as a 'neurotic'³ existence at that, will not suffice to explain the textual issues raised in this study. Neither can Ignatius' complex manifestation be analyzed through Freudian concepts exclusively, since "Freud continued to be tempted by organic models and with a desire to find the neurological and, thus, 'natural' causes for sexual development."⁴ Ignatius' intricate being is far too unnatural and unreal for fundamental Freudianism. Freudian

³ Neurotic: A perception no longer in scientific use.

⁴ <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html>, accessed 2006-11-21

revisionists' theories, whose view is that language equals power, will therefore be needed for the textual analysis. Freud's fundamentals are, nevertheless, necessary as a starting point, for the analysis of Ignatius and Irene. In Freudian psychoanalysis the Oedipus complex is central for the development of a child's socialization and sexual identity.

“In Freudian psychoanalysis the Oedipus Complex refers to the whole complex of both loving and hostile feeling experienced by a child towards its parents in the process of achieving acculturated maturity ... It manifests itself as an intense rivalry with the parent of the same sex for the love of the parent of the opposite sex ... The Complex is never completely successfully negotiated, however, and there are always residual Oedipal problems in even the healthiest of adults.”⁵

If there is no father present, the Oedipal triangle⁶ is incomplete and the child cannot pass through this phase of development. If the mother is absent too, there is nothing to negotiate and the child is essentially an orphan. The result is a non-adult with no clear sexual identity or language.

“ If the boy is unable to successfully overcome the Oedipus Complex, he may be sexually incapacitated for such a role [of himself being a heterosexual man and a father one day]: he may privilege the image of his mother above all other women, which for Freud may lead to homosexuality; or the recognition that women are ‘castrated’ may have traumatized him so deeply that he is unable to enjoy satisfying sexual relationships with them.”⁷

Ignatius displays an immaturity far beyond what could be seen outside fiction. He is, to begin with, an infant at thirty.

When I claim that Ignatius is an infant, the issue of Ignatius' and Irene's attachment to each other is of importance. Psychiatric theorist John Bowlby has “demonstrated that the accessibility of parental figures is uniquely capable of sustaining children's feelings of security and has used the term, ‘attachment’, to refer to the responsible relational bond.”⁸

⁵ Wolfreys, Julian, *Introducing literary theories*, Edinburgh U P, 2001, 304.

⁶ Mother, father and child.

⁷ Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: an introduction*, 2nd ed., Blackwell publishers Ltd, 1997, 135.

⁸ Parkes, Colin M. (Editor). *Attachment Across the Life Cycle*. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1993, p 67.
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/halmstad/Doc?id=10099233&ppg=75>. accessed 2006-10-31

Bowlby also states that the parent – infant relationship has lifelong effects on the growing individual. “Out of the infant’s first experiences of attachment stem expectations and assumptions which will colour all subsequent relationships – for good or ill.”⁹ In the Reilly situation it is indubitably for ill. I will show that Irene Reilly is a powerless and unwilling parental figure, much like a new and insecure mother suffering from postpartum psychosis.¹⁰ Ignatius only gets her attention when he shames her by rebellious behavior, and then she is abusive. Nonetheless, she is all he has got and vice versa. Bowlby states that ‘attachment’ between adults and their parents is unusual, however close kinship is common.

“... most adults do not display continued child-like relationships with their own parents. Rather, most of the time at least, they treat their parents as close kin for whom they feel affection, about whom they may worry, but whose presence does not enhance their feelings of security.”¹¹

As will be seen in the Reilly case, there is a sense of insecurity related to the increased distance between mother and son. John Bowlby has established eight ‘attachment properties’, out of which three will be used in this essay, to point out Ignatius’ and Irene’s attachment to each other. These three ‘attachment properties’ are:

‘Proximity seeking’ The child will attempt to remain within protective range of his parents. The protective range is reduced in strange or threatening situations.

‘Secure base effect’ The presence of an attachment figure fosters security in the child. This results in inattention to attachment considerations and in confident exploration and play.

‘Insensitivity to experience with the attachment figure’ Attachment seems to persist even when the attachment figure is neglecting or abusive. Feelings of anger or misuse may then be associated with attachment feelings, and attachment feelings may consequently give rise to conflict, but, under conditions of threat, security nevertheless remains linked to proximity to the attachment figure. It is an unusual relationship of

⁹ Parkes, 2.

¹⁰ An acute mental disorder occurring in the mother following childbirth.

¹¹ Parkes, 67.

adult and parent in which the adult continues to view the parent as an attachment figure.¹²

It is clear that the Reilly's need each other to feel secure, and fear straying too far from each other. The aporia is that they function *only* as 'attachment figures' to each other, not as a genuine 'parental figure' and its child. Irene is not a true mother to Ignatius; she functions only as the body from which he sprung. The lack of affection between mother and son can be seen as an effect of this stagnation. The text presents an incomplete, dysfunctional and utterly unreal relationship. Irene is a rejecting mother and Ignatius is a grown infant; they have not yet established a relationship, there is only the biological bond; the instinctive need for the other's physical proximity.

As stated in the introduction, Irene and Ignatius display tendencies of sadism and masochism in their relationship. It may appear strange, even impossible to include these abnormalities in the symbiosis between mother and son, but they cannot be ignored. Indeed, both British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, and Erich Fromm, German psychoanalyst and author, have included sadism and masochism in their theories on symbiotic relationships. Klein focused her career on young and emotionally disturbed children. Like Klein, Fromm broke from the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition, which focused largely on unconscious motivations. Fromm held that humans are products of the cultures in which they are bred. In modern, industrial societies, he maintained, they have become estranged from themselves. These feelings of isolation result in an unconscious desire for unity with others.¹³ Klein's and Fromm's theories on symbiotic attachment, which include sadism and masochism will be used to bring forward these traits in the text.

In my analysis of the novel, Jacques Lacan's¹⁴ theories will be used to accredit the text with absolute power over the author, the reader and the characters. Lacan refers to the Freudian 'Father Figure' as the 'phallus'. The text itself as 'phallus' will thus be described through Lacanian terminology. "For Lacan the phallus, though still powerfully metaphorized by the penis, has become a transcendent term: it can be whatever enforces rules, and hence the structuring of the meaning (the symbolic order)."¹⁵ From Lacan's theory I draw the conclusion that 'language' equals 'power' (phallus). The transcendency of 'phallus', as I interpret it, permits psychoanalysis of the text itself.

¹² Parkes, 66.

¹³ <http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/Fromm-Er>, accessed 2006-11-22

¹⁴ French psychoanalytic critic and Freudian revisionist.

¹⁵ Wolfreys, 105.

Lacanian terminology also includes the “imaginary” and the “symbolic” stages, which are part of his revision of the Oedipus complex. These two stages of early human development will be needed to analyze Ignatius’ infanthood.

“...The Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which the child has not differentiated himself or herself from the mother and has accordingly not yet learned language. The Oedipal Crisis marks the entrance of the child into a world of symbolic order (language) in which everything is separate, including conscious and unconscious, self and other, words and actions. This transition also marks entry into a world ruled by the ‘law of the father’.”¹⁶

By Lacanian terminology Ignatius is stuck in the ‘imaginary stage’, and has failed to complete the ‘mirror stage’, where a child is supposed to obtain its identity. Once through with this process of detachment from the mother’s bosom, the child enters the world of the adult; the ‘symbolic order’, essentially ‘the law of the father’. In the ‘symbolic’ stage, the child learns to conform to the rules of a given society and culture, and to fit the norm as an adult, responsible and independent individual in that context.¹⁷ Ignatius, being fixed in the ‘imaginary stage’ and symbiotically attached to his mother at thirty, does not fit any norm available.

The text as phallus

As formerly established, the text manifests the power of structure and meaning. The author of *A confederacy of dunces*, John Kennedy Toole, wrote the following to Robert Gottlieb at Simon & Schuster publishers, while struggling to get the book published,

“[...] this book became more real to me than what was happening around me: I was beginning to talk and act like Ignatius. No doubt this is why there’s so much of him and why his verbosity becomes tiring. It’s really not his verbosity, but mine. And the book ... became a way of life. With Ignatius as an agent, my New Orleans experiences began to fit in, one after the other, and then I was simply observing and not inventing.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Guerin, Wilfred L. ...[et al.], *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*, 4th ed., Oxford U P, 1999, 204.

¹⁷ Eagleton, 142.

¹⁸ Nevils, René Pol, *Ignatius rising: the life of John Kennedy Toole*, Louisiana State U P, 2001, 139.

This, to me, indicates that Toole was inferior to his own text. I admit myself inferior to it, as well. Lacan, as I see it, suggests that we are all enslaved by language. To analyze the text as if it had its own will and intentions is thus my method in this study. Notably, on dialogue level the text presents those who speak New Orleans dialect, ‘yat’, as people who truly belong to the setting, while it exposes Ignatius as a *persona non grata*.

The communication between Ignatius and people around him is nonfunctional. To Irene he is signalling¹⁹ his domestic needs successfully. When trying to communicate anything beyond that he fails. Ignatius’ discourse with his mother primarily consists of instructions to fill the bathtub, ‘warm up the television set’ or provide him with food. When addressing others, he makes no attempt at adjusting his vocabulary or tone of voice to make himself better understood or favored. He is using, to them, an unfamiliar register because he is unable to adapt to the situation.

Ignatius’ odd worldview and vocabulary are impeding his understanding of his fellow humans, and vice versa. Although his vocabulary is very well developed, it would fit better in a medieval context than in the USA in the mid 20th century. His odd speech also strengthens the allusions to the medieval Ignatiuses and Irenes discussed on page 19 in this essay. His fixation with the medieval era further nurtures that notion. Too, his language would better fit a mentally adult man than an infant. Thus, simply learning language is not all a human being needs to do, in order to enter the ‘symbolic order’ successfully; one has to learn the appropriate language for the time and place where one lives. Also, one has to be able to vary one’s register accordingly to different situations. Irene informs her son that “You learnt everything, Ignatius, except how to be a human being.”²⁰ If she means that being a communicatively functioning adult is required to be worthy of the epithet ‘human being’, then she certainly communicates her frustration at their inequality. Ignatius does not reply to this specific utterance, it passes him by because he does not understand what she means at all.

A normally developed adult has a broad linguistic register to use, whereas I suggest that an infant only has a fixed register for expressing itself, which is greatly limiting. Terry Eagleton explains the connection in sexual and linguistic development, by tying it to poststructuralist Saussure, and psychoanalysts Lacan and Derrida: “Significantly, the child’s first discovery of sexual difference occurs at about the same time that it is discovering language itself. The baby’s cry is not really a sign but a signal: it indicates that

¹⁹ ‘Signal’ is here meant as communication that only an ‘attachment figure’ can understand.

²⁰ Toole, 312.

it is cold, hungry or whatever.”²¹ Successful communication is possible only with and through an ‘attachment figure’, or ‘parental figure’. The ‘attachment figure’ is also needed for translation, and to evoke the child’s confidence to speak up. Adaptation skills come later in development. Ignatius Reilly can therefore be regarded an infant, as far as language is concerned.

The idea of the father

Ignatius’ father represents a lack of ‘phallus’, a void which is never filled. The reader is not allowed any information on how he died, or what the man was like as a person. It seems the text wants to hide he were ever there. The only emotional references to the father are made towards the very end of the book, and even then they appear insincere. When Ignatius and his mother have reached the end of all trust in each other, and are arguing about her possibly marrying Claude Rubichaux, Irene, for the first time in the story, shows a true will to go to battle with her son. Interestingly enough, she here addresses him as an adult for the first time. Sadly, they do not speak the same language. She pours her heart out.

“I’ll get married if I want, boy. You can’t stop me. Not now. ... Just who the hell are *you* to try to tell me what to do, Ignatius? ... I’m worried about dying halfway decent. Claude can be kind to a person, and that’s more than you can do with all your politics and all your graduating smart. For everything nice I’ve ever done for you, I just get kicked around. I want to be treated nice by somebody before I die. You learnt everything, Ignatius, except how to be a human being.”²²

In the previous passage, the text, at first, seems to want us to get the idea that Irene’s departed husband was never nice to her, thereby justifying its leaving him outside the story to the greatest possible extent. However, after deeper analysis I think the text implies there never was a father, thereby suggesting immaculate conception.²³ Essentially, Irene claims never to have been ‘treated nice’ by any man at all. Ignatius spills his guts as well.

²¹ Eagleton, 144.

²² Toole, 312.

²³ The burial of Rex is further discussed on pages 11 - 13.

“ It is not your fate to be well treated ... You’re an overt masochist. Nice treatment will confuse and destroy you ... That man shall never enter this house while I’m here. After he had grown tired of you, he would probably turn his warped attentions on *me*. ... when I think of my dear departed father barely cold in his grave, (Ignatius murmured, pretending to wipe some moisture from his eyes).” ²⁴

The father is a powerful weapon to the Reilly’s. When Ignatius says his father is barely cold in his grave, it is only to manipulate his mother to try and remember how long he has been dead. She says that he died twenty years ago (to prove that he is not still warm), and Ignatius corrects her saying it is twenty one years, gloating. The text plays menacingly with the role of Ignatius’ father. It implies, regardless of whether there ever was a father or only an absence of ‘phallus’, that he was an incestuous castrator of Ignatius’, who is only *pretending* to wipe tears from his eyes. The text also delivers a Freudian ‘slip of the tongue’, or parapraxis, ²⁵ when Ignatius expresses worry about a new man (‘phallus’) coming into the family and molesting him, and ultimately castrating him a second time. Here Ignatius is revealed as a boy unconsciously fantasizing about sexual encounters with other men. The text is being quite mean.

If no father ever existed, Ignatius was born castrated, deprived of ‘phallus’ or ‘the law of the father’. Irene and her son have, until the day Ignatius buries his dog Rex, ²⁶ agreed that there ever *was* a father. Ignatius buries that idea. In other terms, his chances of ever becoming a man are null. Admittedly, it may seem strange to link the dog with the father, but textually the entire Reilly family could just as well consist of canines. The text strongly implies this. The dog’s name was ‘Rex’ ²⁷ which is textually synonymous with ‘The Law’, or in this case ‘the law of the father’. In addition, ‘Big dog’ is a metaphor for father, as well. Consequently, the puppy realizes there is no leader of the pack, while the underdog mother wants him to cling to that idea, for some retainment of order. Ignatius is consistently depicted as a puppy-ish dog, with his big ‘paws’ and clumsy motorics. The earflaps on the hunting cap are like fluffy dog-ears, from which he only bares his human ears to listen carefully. The wet moustache symbolizes a puppy’s nose, and his pink tongue is often outside of his mouth. Irene is also doglike, in her undetermined behavior and submissive position; a dog needs a master. Finally, the Reilly family clearly lacks an alpha

²⁴ Toole, 312.

²⁵ Eagleton, 145.

²⁶ Toole, 308

²⁷ Means *King*, but is also synonymous with *The Law*.

male, needed to protect the pack from chaos. The lack of a father represents the lack of a ruler; ‘Rex’. The canine connection is crystal clear.

The absence of a ‘father figure’ further impairs the fragile relationship between mother and son. Ignatius would naturally like to have his father around the house, and he is trying to tell his mother about this during one of their quarrels in the kitchen. As usual, communication collapses completely.

“ ‘What I want is a good strong monarchy with a tasteful and decent king who has some knowledge of theology and geometry and to cultivate a Rich Inner Life.’

‘A king? You want a king?’

‘Please!’ Ignatius pounded a paw into the oilcloth on the kitchen table. ‘Sweep the porch, visit Miss Annie, call the Battaglia bawd, practice with your bowling bawl out in the alley. Let me alone! I am in a very bad cycle.’

‘What you mean ‘cycle’?’

‘If you don’t stop molesting me, I shall christen the prow of your broken Plymouth with the bottle of wine in the oven,’ Ignatius snorted.²⁸

‘Fighting with some poor girl in the street,’ Mrs. Reilly said sadly. ‘Ain’t that awful. And right in front a weenie wagon. Ignatius, I think you need help.’

‘Well, I am going to watch television,’ Ignatius said angrily. ‘The Yogi Bear program is coming on.’ “²⁹

Both of them have a remarkably short attention span, thus nothing comes out of their discussions but further fueled hatred for each other. When both have given up for the time being, Irene has a drink of wine and her child resorts to watching ‘Yogi Bear’ on tv.

Irene the abject mother

The text strains itself to give us the false impression that Ignatius’ mother is a victim. As mentioned in the introduction, Irene Reilly initially appears to be a caring mother, who wants her son to have a better life than she has had. From my point of view she is the opposite; a rejecting and abusive ‘attachment figure’. Through Miss Annie’s³⁰ voice the text allows the reader some information about events previous to the timeframe of the novel.

²⁸ Irene Reilly drinks, and ‘hides’ her bottle in the oven.

²⁹ Toole, 183-184.

³⁰ The next door neighbour to the Reilly’s.

“ All I know is he’s all over this morning’s paper. Where he oughta be is in a asylum ... Ever since he was a kid. His momma was sure proud of him. All the sisters at school loved him he was so precious. Look how he ended up, laying in a gutter ... That Idnatius was okay until that big dog of his died ... Idnatius is got the dog layed out in his momma’s front parlor with some flowers stuck in its paw. That’s when him and his momma first started all that fighting. To tell you the truth, I think that’s when she started drinking ... So Idnatius goes over to the priest and ax him to come say something over the dog. ... the priest says no, of course, and I think that’s when Idnatius left the church. So Idnatius puts on his own funeral. A big fat schoolboy oughta know better. You see that cross? ... He had about a dozen little kids standing around in that yard watching him. And Idnatius had on a big cape like superman and they was candles burning all over.”³¹

It seems obvious that Ignatius’ wanting to give the dog a human burial is something Irene Reilly feels she has to stop because her teenage son is acting in an infantile manner, and needs to be corrected for his own good. My reading is rather different. I suggest instead, that Irene’s only concern is that Ignatius’ shaming her in their neighbourhood. She does not want him there at all. She never did. Furthermore, the neighbour’s recollection ‘His momma was sure proud of him’ is, as I read it, a sarcasm. So is her comment that the nuns found the young Ignatius ‘precious’; a word often used derogatorily.³² Miss Annie continues:

“Then Idnatius was at college for about ten years. His momma almost went broke. She even hadda sell the piana she had.”³³

I surmise that Irene sent her son away for ten years, not to provide him with an education and give him a better future, but to get rid of him at any cost. Almost all the peripheral characters in the book feel sorry for Mrs. Reilly for having such a terrible son. Only Gus Levy and Myrna Minkoff are of the opposite opinion. They feel that Irene has destroyed her son. I share their point of view.

³¹ Toole, 308.

³² flagrant; gross. Also: Conspicuously bad, offensive, or reprehensible.

³³ Toole, 309.

Irene's self-image is that of a victim. When patrolman Mancuso is visiting with the Reilly's to discuss a solution for reimbursing the owner of the house, which Irene has crashed into while driving drunk, her point of view is anterior in the text, further strengthened by Mancuso's agreement. Ignatius is indifferent, as long as she does not decide to sell the house³⁴. Irene and Mancuso are left alone in the kitchen after Ignatius has returned to the living room.

“ ‘ What am I gonna do with a boy like that?’ Mrs. Reilly sadly asked patrolman Mancuso. ‘He don't care about his poor dear mother. Sometimes I think Ignatius wouldn't mind if they did throw me in jail. He's got a heart of ice, that boy.’

‘You spoiled him’, patrolman Mancuso said. ‘A woman's gotta watch out she don't spoil her kids.’

‘How many chirren you got, Mr. Mancuso?’

‘Three. Rosalie, Antoinette and Angelo, Jr.’

‘Aw, ain't that nice. I bet they sweet, huh? Not like Ignatius.’ Mrs. Reilly shook her head. ‘Ignatius was such a precious child. I don't know what made him change. He used to say to me ‘*Momma, I love you*’. He don't say that no more.’”³⁵

They are talking about actual children, and they compare Ignatius with Mancuso's children without any reservations. Irene is so self absorbed that she refers to herself as ‘his poor dear mother’. This is a very manipulative move on her part.

Everything was copacetic, and her child was ‘precious’ (that is completely limp and compliant) until the day of the burial of Rex. Ignatius experienced an epiphany, he realized the trauma of being parentless, when he buried Rex (the ‘idea of his father’). What made Irene's son change was that he discovered he has no mother. According both to Miss Annie and Irene, it was after the death of the dog that things changed. Even abused children say they love their parents, because they genuinely think they do. They do not know what love is; love is a very difficult word for a new user of language to comprehend. What happened was that Ignatius became aware of who and what his mother is; an abject ‘parental figure’, stranded with her unwanted child. Regarding Irene's awakening, she became conscious of the fact that even a mentally infantile adolescent can develop his own will, and decide to rebel against mother. Once Ignatius started to attempt verbal communication, she became

³⁴ In which garden *Rex* is buried.

³⁵ Toole, 37 - 38.

inferior to her child. Her disgust for her own flesh and blood evolves into hatred. Ignatius response is unavoidable. He takes comfort in the idea of fate,³⁶ as do many abused children, to create meaning and stop blaming themselves. He regresses further back into infancy hoping that perhaps then his mother will love him.

Ignatius and Irene – parasites in symbiosis

The Reilly's stay together because they cannot separate into individuals. Irene is present physically, as a guidepost under which Ignatius dares to meander and conversely, he is her beacon with the same function. As mentioned earlier, the symbiotic attachment between Ignatius and Irene includes tendencies of masochism and sadism. The Reilly's are constantly hurting each other, both suffering from the other's unwanted but necessary proximity. Erich Fromm views symbiosis as follows.

“Symbiosis, in this psychological sense, means the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its own self and to make them completely dependent on each other. The sadistic person needs his object just as much as the masochistic needs his. ... In both cases the integrity of the individual self is lost. ... It is always the inability to stand the aloneness of one's individual self that leads to the drive to enter into a symbiotic relationship with someone else. It is evident from this why masochistic and sadistic trends are always blended with each other. Although on the surface they seem contradictions, they are essentially rooted in the same basic need. People are not sadistic or masochistic, but there is a constant oscillation between the active and the passive side of the symbiotic complex, so that it is often difficult to determine which side of it is operating at a given moment. In both cases individuality and freedom are lost.”³⁷

According to Fromm, “both tendencies are the outcomes of one basic need, springing from the inability to bear the isolation and weakness of one's own self”³⁸. Irene is too weak to take control of the situation. She is not even interested in taking care of her son, who in turn is unable to take care of himself. Ignatius' domination over his mother is infantile, and

³⁶ The writings of Boethius and Fortuna's Wheel are his paradigm.

³⁷ Fromm, Erich. *Fear of Freedom*. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2001. p 136.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/halmstad/Doc?id=2002669&ppg=146>.

³⁸ Fromm, 136.

he has no prospect of keeping her in his possession. The paradox that Irene is the one finally capable of acting towards breaking the chains by which they are fettered, while seemingly being the subordinate character of the two, becomes evident at the end of the novel. She has by that time become symbiotically attached to her new friend, Santa Battaglia, who is making her decisions for her. Irene, 'the parasite' has found a new and wholesome host, serving as her 'attachment figure'.

In Bowlby's terms, Ignatius' 'protective range' is the proximity of New Orleans. He does go to the movies on his own, and he does go to work without his mother. He even rampages on personal adventures, but only as long as he knows that Irene will be at home when he returns. Once he starts to doubt this security he is petrified with fear. The fear he is experiencing when she finally leaves him at the very end of the book is completely disabling. It takes the arrival of a new 'attachment figure', Myrna Minkoff, to mobilize him anew.³⁹ Myrna then says something that suggests either that she is not ready to replace his mother, thereby revealing that she is no more mature than he is, or that her time has come to replace Irene as an 'attachment figure'. "It's so strange to find your mother gone. She used to be around here all the time."⁴⁰ This sentence is charged with fear, rather than relief, in my opinion. I surmise the former; she is not ready.

The text hints that Irene Reilly is destructive, self-destructive, sadistic and masochistic, feeding her son the fuel that will destroy them both. Ignatius is scared to death of her near the end of the book, when she is secretly talked into having him submitted to a mental ward, by Santa Battaglia. " 'Goodness only knows what you're planning.' ... The bloodshot eyes flashed with fright ... His mother had something up her sleeve, some clumsy plan, some scheme that would ruin him forever."⁴¹ Melanie Klein's theory of symbiosis includes the infant's fear of destruction.

"In the pre-Oedipal state, the child lives a symbiotic relation with its mother's body which blurs any sharp boundary between the two ... This merging of identities is not quite as blissful as it might sound, according to Freudian theorist Melanie Klein: 'at a very early age the infant will harbour murderously aggressive instincts towards its

³⁹ Toole, 331.

⁴⁰ Toole, 334.

⁴¹ Toole, 328-329.

mother's body, entertain fantasies of tearing it to bits and suffer paranoid delusions that this body will turn and destroy it.' ”⁴².

Irene's son does not know that he has been emotionally aborted long ago, poisoned and broken down by his mother's long term abuse. Consequently, Ignatius' excessive eating is a result of the diet his mother has been feeding him all his life, which basically consists of baby-ish, non-nutritional food. Ignatius has voiced that Irene is an “overt masochist”,⁴³ and amazingly enough this seems to be true even though his view of other people, his mother included, is warped. The text is leaking truth after truth, surfacing a horrible tragedy.

Ignatius the infant

Signs of Ignatius' infancy is ubiquitous in the text. Much of Ignatius apparel is that of a young child's. The green hunting cap, the sturdy boots, the layers of clothes and the monstrous scarf are a few examples. His Mickey Mouse wrist-watch is another strong symbol for Ignatius being stranded in the ‘imaginary stage’, “Looking at his Mickey Mouse wristwatch which was, as usual, moribund, he wondered what time is was”.⁴⁴ Not only does it have a universal childhood symbol on it, it also does not work properly. An infant does not *need* to keep track of time, even if he *can* decipher the hands and numbers in the watchcase. The watch is worn for affectional reasons only. Yet another sign of infancy is that he is appalled by, and unfamiliar with adult sexuality. Ignatius' sexuality is narrowed down to him ‘attacking’ and ‘deflowering’ a rubber glove in his boyhood bed, while fantasizing about his since long departed dog Rex.⁴⁵ There are two occurrences of this, placed in the beginning and at the end of the book. One can conclude that no maturing development takes place within the timeframe of the story. Also the description of his motoric skills are part of the depiction of an infant. “Ignatius had always had a poor sense of balance, and ever since his obese childhood, he had suffered a tendency to fall, trip and stumble. Until he was five years old and had finally managed to walk in an almost normal manner, he had been a mass of bruises and hickies.”⁴⁶

⁴² Eagleton, 142.

⁴³ Toole, 312.

⁴⁴ Toole, 280.

⁴⁵ Toole, 28, 324.

⁴⁶ Toole, 73.

As previously mentioned, his confident exploration and play is regulated by the ‘Secure base effect’⁴⁷. Only within the city limits of New Orleans, and only as long as he knows that mother will be there when he gets home, can he play. The more time Irene spends out with her new friends, the more insecure Ignatius gets. The ‘Secure base effect’ is apparent when Ignatius is wasting an entire afternoon, while working for Paradise Vendors, trying to trap a cat to take home for a pet.⁴⁸ He also neglects a morning of work at Levy’s pants, in order to paint a sign with his name in bold blue gothic lettering. Much time is also spent on a huge wooden cross in that office, which he is allowed to continue on since his boss thinks he is finished filing papers. Ignatius, the irresponsible child, considers it much easier to simply throw the files in the trash.⁴⁹

The Reilly’s ‘proximity seeking’ is apparent throughout the book. There are several instances where Ignatius and his mother stick together to ward off outside threat. One of these events is in the very beginning of the book, where Ignatius is at risk of being arrested while waiting for his mother outside ‘D.H. Holmes’ department store. Dressed, as usual, in his green hunting cap and layers of clothes, he is ‘suspicious looking’ in the eyes of patrolman Mancuso, and therefore submitted to questioning on the spot. An elderly man, Mr. Rubichaux⁵⁰ defends him and calls the police officer a communist. Irene arrives at the scene, attacking Mr. Rubichaux, who is then a complete stranger to her.

“ ‘He’s crazy, Ignatius,’ Mrs. Reilly said. ‘We better get outta here, baby.’ She turned to the crowd. ‘Run folks. He might kill us all. Personally I think maybe *he’s* the communiss.’ “⁵¹

Irene calls her son ‘baby’ here, which of course people do sometimes in New Orleans, but normally she calls him ‘Ignatius’. This further proves my point, that Ignatius is an infant and that this is what the text wants us to look closely enough to see. Moments later, when the Reilly’s have managed to escape from the crowd and the confused patrolman, an interesting dialogue takes place between them, where Ignatius’ ‘proximity seeking’ and ‘insensitivity to experience with the attachment figure’⁵² become evident.

⁴⁷ See Bowlby’s attachment properties.

⁴⁸ Toole, 182.

⁴⁹ Toole, 72.

⁵⁰ Irene’s possible future second husband, connected through patrolman Mancuso’s mother Santa Battaglia.

⁵¹ Toole, 7.

⁵² Bowlby’s attachment principles.

“ ‘If I could drive, I would be able to help you more, I imagine.’

‘Aw, that’s okay, honey.’

‘Actually, even riding in a car affects me enough. Of course, the worst thing is riding on top in one of those Greyhound Scenicruisers. So high up. Do you remember the time that I went to Baton Rouge in one of those? I vomited several times. The driver had to stop the bus somewhere in the swamps to let me get off and walk around for a while. The other passengers were rather angry. They must have had stomachs of iron to ride in that awful machine. Leaving New Orleans also frightened me considerably. Outside the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins.’

‘I remember that, Ignatius,’ Mrs. Reilly said absently, drinking her beer in gulps.”⁵³

Irene has been listening this story of her son’s for three years, as he repeatedly tells it to her. Her saying ‘Aw, that’s okay, honey’, is not a sign of affection, but rather a display of inattention. Children telling mother a very familiar story often start with a phrase like ‘Do you remember when’, regardless of whether it happened this morning or two years ago. He may not be aware, himself, that he tells the story like small child. Because his mother is ‘absently drinking her beer in gulps’, he must keep telling her the story until she acknowledges his fear of leaving her. The text seems to want to show Ignatius’ infanthood to the reader, while simultaneously trying to suppress it. In saying ‘if I could drive’, Ignatius excuses himself for not being an adult. Additionally, very few adults vomit while riding on a bus, whilst small children very often do. Furthermore, not being able to drive is very emasculating for a man of thirty in the United States, where children under the age of sixteen are not allowed to maneuver a motor vehicle. However, I think the scholarly allusions to Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot, in the second last sentence in the quotation above, are presented by the text to conceal his infancy. The reader can easily be fooled.

When Irene tells her son she has met a man,⁵⁴ there is clear evidence of Ignatius’ unfamiliarity with adult courtship.

“ ‘Claude has been courting me’, Mrs. Reilly said defiantly.

‘What?’ Ignatius thundered. ‘Do you mean to tell me that you have been permitting some old man to paw all over you?’

⁵³ Toole, 9 – 10.

⁵⁴ Claude Rubichaux, the man who tried to help Ignatius in the beginning of the book. Claude got himself arrested instead, which is quite a fatherly gesture.

‘Claude’s a nice man. All he done is hold my hand a few times.’

The blue and yellow eyes crossed in anger. The paws closed over the ears so that he would not have to listen to more.

‘Goodness only knows what unmentionable desires that man has. Please don’t tell me the whole truth. I would have a total breakdown.’ “⁵⁵

Irene dares tell her son she has held hands with the man, addressing Ignatius as a child as usual. The infant’s perverted mind is certain that there was more mysterious bestiality going on, so he refuses to listen, begging her to stop. A *real* child could not have uttered a more childish response.

Ignatius the orphan

I have previously concluded that Ignatius has no parental figures around himself; he is essentially an orphan. Ignatius’ pomposity is the result of a psychic condition, caused by a negligent mother and a nonexistent father. The effects of parental deprivation are explained by W. W. Meissner as follows.

“The most noteworthy sequela of early parental deprivation is the tendency to depression that can afflict the individual throughout life, especially when it evolves into a factor in the individual’s character structure. The unresolved mourning for the lost mother can also influence relationships with women and make forming mutually satisfying love relationships problematic. There may be longterm narcissistic difficulties involving issues of self-esteem regulation and the prolongation of infantile narcissistic grandiosity.”⁵⁶

The above quotation is a good description of Ignatius Reilly’s personality. Also Irene’s incapability of, and lack of interest in, being a mother are the result of a psychic condition. The postpartum psychosis from which she suffers has transformed into a permanent and incurable state. This too, explains the lack of love and affection between mother and son. Irene let go of her son soon after birth because she could not cope with being a mother.

⁵⁵ Toole, 311.

⁵⁶ Meissner, W. W. *To the Greater Glory: A Psychological Study of Ignatian Spirituality*. Milwaukee, WI, USA: Marquette University Press, 1998. p 6. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/halmstad/Doc?id=2001902&ppg=20>

Ignatius' father, who obviously was not loved by wife or child,⁵⁷ for reasons not revealed in the text, thus represents only a lack of 'phallus'.

Ignatius' orphanhood is a puzzle, however the text is leaking a few possible explanations. As previously mentioned, the text is implying the possibility of no father at all. The name 'Ignatius' is allusive to saints and martyrs, *Ignatius of Antioch* being one who was the first writer to stress the virgin birth.⁵⁸ Another saint was *Ignatius Of Loyola*, an orphan whose mother died shortly after his birth.⁵⁹ A third saint, *Ignatius of Constantinople*, was castrated and shut up in a monastery by the man who deposed his father.⁶⁰ Either Ignatius becomes an orphan nine years after his birth when the father dies, or he was born an orphan; the abject mother impregnated by the holy ghost. Both possibilities are highly emasculating. His mother's name 'Irene' is allusive as well, to the Byzantine empress who served as regent for her son, whom she had deposed and blinded, so she could ascend the throne.⁶¹ This too, is quite emasculating, and also disturbing since Irene Reilly wants her son out of the way by any means necessary. Her innocent façade is reaching its snapping point.

The text's surfacing the notion of virgin birth also implies that Ignatius Reilly is messianic. He evidently suffers from a God Complex,⁶² caused by parental deprivation. "According to the book *All Mighty: A Study of the God Complex in Western Man*, by Horst Richter, authoritarian compulsions are related to the rebellious stage of childhood development".⁶³ Ignatius is an infantile, rebellious prophet on a mission to salvage mankind from the apocalypse. His unforgiving and hypocritical standpoint naturally reveals him as a pathological fraud.

Even though Ignatius lives together with his biological mother, he can still be considered 'motherless'. Irene's shortcomings as a mother are obvious, as is Ignatius inability to recognize his own needs as an adult. The smell in his 'musty chamber' of a bedroom is described through Mr. Levy's thoughts as that of 'old tea leaves',⁶⁴ unimaginably putrid. There is not one instance of Ignatius taking care of his personal hygiene. His long soaks in the bathtub are taken to soothe his nerves and sore feet, and not

⁵⁷ Toole, 312.

⁵⁸ <http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/IgnatiusA>, accessed 2006-11-13

⁵⁹ Meissner, 5. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/halmstad/Doc?id=2001902&ppg=19>

⁶⁰ <http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/IgnatiusC>, accessed 2006-11-13

⁶¹ <http://www.reference.com/browse/columbia/IreneByz>, accessed 2006-11-15

⁶² A person who suffers from a 'god complex' does not believe he is God, but acts so arrogantly that he might as well believe he is a god or appointed to act by a god. Also called 'messianic complex'.

⁶³ Regretfully, the source for this quotation is lost.

⁶⁴ Toole, 315.

to clean up. His clothes or bed sheets are never washed. He is left on his own, abandoned in his own home by an abusive mother. He is emotionally aborted.

Ignatius the polymorph

Ignatius' organism has not yet established its sexuality, and this polymorphous perversity is apparent not only in his excessive eating, but also in his undeveloped sexuality, keeping him androgynous and ambivalent.

“Freud observes that originally, in infancy, there is a constitutional bisexuality which is merely a subset of a more general disposition he names ‘polymorphous perversity’. This is a postulation of receptivity of the organism to the action of history, as experience. The child’s body is ‘polymorphously perverse’, which is to say, capable of experiencing pleasure in various of its parts - pleasure specific to that part. But infant sexuality is polymorphous, not amorphous; the child is a set of potentialities specific to its anatomy.”⁶⁵

The above quotation precisely describes Ignatius' sexuality. From Ignatius' perspective, everyone else is a sexual deviant, which exposes his infantile mind and the warped worldview it produces. He has no idea of what is considered normal to begin with. When considering that he is sexually repressed, one cannot rule out any *type* of sexuality. There are, for example, several instances in the text which strongly suggest that Ignatius is a repressed homosexual. Reilly's covert curiosity and phobia of homosexuals explain his projected desire, as well as his anger towards these *deviants*, as he puts it. A very interesting device in the text is that Myrna Minkoff often psychoanalyzes Ignatius as a repressed homosexual in her letters. He gets especially upset when she mentions homosexuality. When Myrna arrives to help Ignatius flee the shackles of his boyhood home at the end of the novel, there are conspicuous hints in the text implying homosexuality.

“He was in the closet, where he was looking for the overnight bag that his mother had bought for him for a disastrous one day stay at boy's camp when he was eleven.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ferrell, Robyn. *Passion in Theory : Conceptions of Freud and Lacan*. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1996. p 33. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/halmstad/Doc?id=2003100&ppg=41>

⁶⁶ Toole, 334.

The text here suggests more than him looking for something inside the closet; he is *in* the closet. Moreover, boy's camp for an eleven year old polymorphously perverse boy with homosexual tendencies is naturally disastrous. However, exactly what happened on that 'one day stay' is one of the text's many well kept secrets. Adding homosexuality to Ignatius' repression puts a whole new perspective on his passionate love for the 'Paradise Vendors' foot-long hot dogs, not to mention the 'Dr. Nut' beverages.⁶⁷ The text is here proposing the reader be perverted as well, since it hands out the possibility for such an indecent interpretation. We are indeed inferior to the text. Furthermore, when Ignatius is ordered by his boss Mr. Clyde, at 'Paradise Vendors', to sell hot-dogs in the French Quarter, he protests saying "My psyche would crumble in that atmosphere. Besides, the streets are narrow and dangerous there." Ergo, there is too much temptation, and he might accidentally touch some homosexual man in the narrow streets. Reilly adds "If you insist, I imagine that I shall have to trundle my franks down into Sodom and Gomorrah," and "I can't promise you that many hot dogs will be sold in the Quarter. I will probably be kept busy every moment protecting my honor against those fiends who live down there."⁶⁸ He is as afraid of himself, not being able to resist and remain innocent, as he is of the other homosexuals. Indeed, there is also the second meeting with Dorian Green,⁶⁹ a homosexual man who crosses paths with Ignatius.⁷⁰ Reilly displays a flirtatious condemnatory attitude towards him, throwing pejoratives like daggers. Dorian has just thrown Ignatius' boot back at him after having caught it in the air. It hits Ignatius flat on the face.

" 'I can easily have you booked for assault'

'If I were you I'd stay as far away from the police as possible.'

'The police will believe everything I tell them'

'Get with it please.'

'You may be locked away for several years'

'Oh, you really are on the moon.'

'Don't talk to me you degenerate. Go play with your little friends. I'm sure the Quarter is crawling with them.'

'How is that dear mother of yours?'

⁶⁷ Repressed desire for the male genitals.

⁶⁸ Toole, 181.

⁶⁹ Toole, 211-221.

⁷⁰ Dorian buys Irene's hat at the Night of Joy bar, when the Reilly's are hiding from the police incident in the beginning. The second time they meet is after Ignatius has been thrown out of an art exhibit, being solipsistic as ever. He is wearing his Paradise Vendors outfit, plastic cutlass, bandana and all.

I don't want to hear her sainted name across your decadent lips.' “⁷¹

Their disputation climaxes into a foolish fight with shoe-throwing, and plastic cutlass poking. There are erotic undertones in the text.

“ 'I am the avenging sword of taste and decency,' Ignatius was shouting. As he slashed the sweater with his broken weapon ...

'Why did I ever stop to talk to you, you maniac' the young man asked in a vicious and breathless whisper. 'This is my very finest sweater.'

'Whore!' Ignatius cried, scraping the cutlass across the young man's chest.

'Oh, isn't this horrible.' He tried to run away, but Ignatius had been holding his arm firmly with the hand that was not wielding the cutlass. Slipping a finger through Ignatius' hoop earring, the young man pulled downward, breathing to Ignatius, 'Drop that sword'. ”⁷²

The finger through the earring and the excited breathing utterance is Dorian's suggesting Ignatius stop fighting his urges and give in to his desire for men. Ignatius' firm grip of the young man's arm reveals he does not want this wonderful experience to end. Oddly enough, the fight culminates in a joint decision to start a homosexual political party, hoping one day the world will be ruled by them. They agree to arrange a rally at Dorian's house, their intentions antithetic of course, since they do not speak the same language.

Ignatius has no idea what being gay really means. Still, he is angry with himself for being drawn to men, projecting this predisposition onto others with vehemence. He is very intrigued by Dorian and his friends. That is, until he meets several of them at once at Dorian's house.⁷³ Having failed completely at delivering his political standpoint and help the party getting started, he is ridiculed and ignored by every one.

“There Ignatius stood like the boy on the burning deck ... Dorian fled to speak with a group of his guests, actively ignoring Ignatius, as was every one else in the room. Ignatius felt as alone as he had felt on that dark day in high school when in a chemistry laboratory his experiment had exploded, burning his eyebrows off and frightening him. The shock and terror had made him wet his pants ... Ignatius, feeling

⁷¹ Toole, 212.

⁷² Toole, 213.

⁷³ Toole, 266-280.

just as invisible standing there in Dorian's living room, began fainting at some invisible opponent with his cutlass to relieve his self-consciousness.”⁷⁴

He is an abused little boy, with no friends. As mentioned before, when it comes to Ignatius any type of sexuality is possible. Correspondingly, he is also heterosexually in love with Myrna Minkoff, whom he notably calls his ‘lost love’.⁷⁵ Further proof of Ignatius being an infant polymorph can be found when Miss Annie tells Gus Levy⁷⁶ about Ignatius’ early relationship with Myrna.

“... You oughta seen this girl he picks up at college ... All they done is sit in his room. It seem like every night she and him was putting on a regular hootenanny. The things I useta hear through my window! ‘put down that skirt.’ And ‘Get off my bed.’ And ‘how dare you? I’m a virgin’.”⁷⁷

Of course the voice she heard was Ignatius’, but the text suggests she remembers the girl screaming. Since he is an infant in my line of reasoning, Ignatius is pansexual until fully developed, outcome unknown.

The suppressed ending

In the very last paragraph Ignatius is headed for New York, escaping by car together with Myrna Minkoff. She has come to rescue him from his ‘vicious’ mother, worried to death by his last letter. Ignatius does not drive; he is an infant. Placed in the backseat⁷⁸ alone, he is further emasculated by the fact that a woman is driving him. None of this bothers him. The text suggests that he is, like an infant, incapable of taking off by his own device; he needs an ‘attachment figure’. Also, Ignatius ‘the parasite’ needs a host in order to function. Myrna does not know what she has in front of her, or in her backseat.

“ Now that Fortuna had saved him from one cycle, where would she spin him next? The new cycle would be so different from anything he had ever known. He rolled down the window an inch or two and breathed the salt air blowing in over the marshes from the Gulf. As if the air were a purgative, his valve opened. He breathed again, this

⁷⁴ Toole, 277.

⁷⁵ Toole, 6.

⁷⁶ A former employer of Ignatius’, and one of the sore victims of his rebellious ventures.

⁷⁷ Toole, 309.

⁷⁸ An erotic location for the adolescent and the adult inhabitants of the United States.

time more deeply. The dull headache was lifting. He stared gratefully at the back of Myrna's head, at the pigtail that swung innocently at his knee. Gratefully. How Ironic, Ignatius thought. Taking the pigtail in one of his paws, he pressed it warmly to his wet moustache."⁷⁹.

In the above extract, the text is suppressing an abundance of information, but the most salient question is: What is ironic to Ignatius? There are several possible answers to this question. One possible interpretation is that the physical, steadily increasing distance moving away from his mother miraculously cures him. His fear of the 'symbolic universe'⁸⁰ has been destructive, while he has taken comfort in the illusion that it has protected him. That is ironic, since he suddenly realizes he could have left long ago. The innocent pigtail swinging at his knee is a symbol for Myrna's childlikeness. It is ironic that his new attachment figure is as infantile as he is. That his mother is being replaced by another woman, unable to control him, is ironic too. He now miraculously seems able to feel affection, as he 'warmly' presses Myrna's pigtail to his wet moustache. He has metamorphosed into an adult heterosexual in love with Myrna. Not until now, through the eyes of a grown man, can he see that she is a child. Facing a pedophilic relationship, him being the adult and Myrna the child, is ironic. Through psychoanalysis of the text itself, this interpretation seems as reasonable as any.

Conclusion

A psychoanalytical reading of *A confederacy of dunces* reveals a completely different story from what is implied in the text. It turns out to be an unresolved tragedy, with monumental exhibitions of psychic disorders among the Reilly's, rather than the simple and 'funny' book initially assumed. The comedy lies upon the surface of a deep sea of suppressed information.

The text at first suggests that Ignatius Reilly is a burden to his poor mother, who does everything in her power to fulfil his needs. By deciphering and extricating the text's suppressed information, I came to a different conclusion: Irene Reilly is an abusive, abject and unwilling mother, who wants her son aborted and out of her life. She suffers from postpartum psychosis which has degenerated into a permanent condition. She never wanted

⁷⁹ Toole, 338.

⁸⁰ Adulthood.

a child, and when she ended up with one, she ruined its life. What is more, the Reilly's are symbiotically attached, rather than being two separate individuals, as the text incipiently suggests. In other words; they need each other's proximity in order to operate functionally. They are not individuals, but the sum of both.

Within their symbiosis they also exhibit parasitical characteristics. This seems a paradox at fist, since a parasite needs a host to function, which means they would have to be two separate individuals, but proves possible after all. Sadly none of them is wholesome for the other and consequently they are decaying. Simultaneously, they both parasitize on the idea of the father, a completely empty host. Starving and weakening through the story, they finally break free from each other, only to attach to new hosts to which they hope to become symbiotically attached to instead. That symbiosis will probably never be established. If no new symbiosis is settled they will be reduced to 'only' being parasites, in which case eventually both Myrna and Mr. Rubichaux will be consumed.

A novel such as *A confederacy of dunces* does not seem to need an ending. It is widely considered an unusual, but funny book, and most readers leave it at that. To my knowledge there has so far been no psychoanalytical study of the text itself. To place the text itself 'on the couch' has been an interesting and labyrinthine experience, which has probably eradicated any possibility for this analyst to enjoy a comedy novel ever again. Still, it has been immensely rewarding.

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