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Frank O’Connor’s
“The Man of the World”
and the Betrayed Reader

by MICHAEL STEINMAN

IN HIS 1957 PARIS REVIEW interview, Frank O’Connor spoke of the ideal relationship between his fiction and its readers: “Dragging the reader in, making the reader a part of the story—the reader is a part of the story. You’re saying all the time, ‘This story is about you—de te fabula’” (181). “The Man of the World,” published in the same year, exemplifies this, although readers become enmeshed almost unwillingly and cannot predict their involvement. Our complacent expectations re-emerge in ruins, and we must acknowledge our inability to adapt to a new script when it appears suddenly.¹

Usually readers view O’Connor’s fiction as comfortably “about” them and familiar emotions and situations. His comedy asks that we distance ourselves from characters’ foibles, but their behavior remains recognizable. In either case, self-recognition is not painful, nor does it seem a betrayal. This disturbing story, however, eludes attempts to categorize it as a variation on one of his familiar themes, the naive young man trying to decipher a confusing, often repressive world and his place in it. As we read it, nearly forty years later, we might unintentionally congratulate ourselves on our sexual and secular freedoms unavailable to his characters, but our complacency is undermined as O’Connor makes us participate in the narrator’s desires and shame. With no reason to distrust Larry Delaney, we peep over his shoulder at the forbidden, but must share harsh self-perception when the window becomes an accusing mirror. As Larry relives the incident “forty years later,” we might marvel at how O’Connor, like Jimmy Leary, Larry’s friend, has invited us to spy on a young couple in their bedroom, and has made us re-examine our eagerness. Larry, like us, wants to get behind the “world of appearances” and believes he can decode perceptions and sensations, but the text’s openness is deceptive. In it, the most earnest inquiry is a frustrating endeavor, the results uncertain. Observation, the senses, logic, and language all offer incomplete or deceptive answers.²

¹. An early version of this essay was presented as “Rereading Frank O’Connor’s ‘The Man of the World: This Story is About You’” at the American Conference for Irish Studies in October 1993.

². Of the sparse critical attention O’Connor’s fiction has received, his more complex later stories have received the least. Only James Matthews even mentions “The Man of the World,” speculating briefly on “whether or not [Jimmy] will be able to tempt Larry again” (310), a less relevant query, as the story ends irreversibly, so a Larry and Jimmy sequel—Huck and Tom, adventuring again—seems inconceivable.
O'Connor always reimagined a heard anecdote, transforming characters and situations; in his earliest incarnation, Larry Delaney of Cork, the narrator, was Harriet Sheehy’s cousin’s wife (“Listening to Frank O’Connor” 151). In his 1950’s notebook collection of four-line themes, his preferred form for story ideas, the beginnings of this story were “Lila’s snooping expedition at the age of 11 with her pal in the attic. Sees man strip—medals which she takes for identification disc—they kneel down and pray” (248). He completed the story in only three months, published it in the New Yorker, then revised it for the collection Domestic Relations, whose title seems pointedly ironic.

“Larry Delaney” was a favored persona for his later recreations of childhood, and the first six stories of Domestic Relations cover more than a decade in Larry’s life—from precocious boy to young soldier in the “secret revolutionary army.” Whatever the issue, his emotional conflicts are acted out in public, and he reacts to others as often as he instigates action. In “The Man of the World,” however, the conflict, catalyzed by Jimmy, is internal, and the action takes place in someone else’s house, with Mother and Father, Mr. and Mrs. Leary, the usual suspects, absent. Larry’s parents, encouraging Mother and skeptical Father, are muted background figures, although they still can induce remorse, guilt, and affection (40). The only adults remaining are the couple next door, “victims” of an “ambush,” a situation affording the boys unexpected adult powers. The cast is limited to ten: Larry and his parents, Jimmy and his, Mrs. Rooney (a neighbor), old Mrs. MacCarthy (the landlord). They seem isolated and tangential, but each is essential. The conversation between Larry and Mrs. Rooney is brief, less than twenty words, but it allows the adult narrator to recall himself with mild derision; Jimmy’s parents abet voyeurism by their absence; the frugality of Mrs. MacCarthy, who is unseen and unheard, is critical, for she refuses the young couple a blind for their bedroom window. O’Connor prided himself on his mastery of “voices” but the text is almost completely narrative, focused on sensations filtered through Larry as he observes, speculates, and reacts. Except for Mrs. Rooney, he speaks only to Jimmy. The adults are capable of speech—Father reads the paper aloud to Mother and the young married man, in conversation with a neighbor, “doubled up in an explosion of loud laughter”—but we hear none of this, so we must trust the narrator, our “soundtrack” (39).

From the start, however, this situation prefigures Larry’s own; we watch as if hearing-impaired, dependent on a running commentary which may be inaccurate. We concentrate on Larry, perceiving himself, Jimmy, and the young couple

3. O’Connor’s developing this story from a four-line theme to the final published version in Domestic Relations was atypically direct and quick, which suggests that it came to him almost fully formed. The Florida archives contain four typescripts (one, a carbon of a ribbon copy); one, a duplicate of the New Yorker version; one, the Domestic Relations version; and the earliest, titled “A Knowing Smile.” Differences are slight: the story grew from eight to ten typewritten pages.

Many of O’Connor’s stories of childhood echo his own experience, as does this text; the evidence appears in the first volume of his autobiography, An Only Child. Remembering childhood topography, he sounds much like Larry: “there was an outdoor toilet, with a door suitable for climbing. From the roof of this I could get on to the high back wall and command a view of the neighbours’ back yards and of the hillside opposite as it sloped down into the valley of the city. I sometimes sat there for hours . . .” (15). His gentle and devoted Mother, of “Mozartean” temperament, believes naively in “the world of appearances” (55); he remembered imitating someone’s “elegant” signature and another’s “neat, square, erect handwriting that I greatly admired for its legibility” (168,199).
as actors and audience, their roles and definitions interchangeable.

As in many O'Connor stories of childhood, an intermittent tension exists between the youthful protagonist and the narrator, now in his early fifties, who remembers events in greater depth than he was capable of at the time, often "with amusement," always ambivalently. His ambivalence makes Jimmy's presence ineradicable, although Larry and Jimmy may not have had any contact since the incident:

Forty years later I can still measure the extent of my obsession, for, though my own handwriting is almost illegible, I sometimes find myself scribbling idly on a pad in a small, stiff, perfectly legible hand that I recognize with amusement as a reasonably good forgery of Jimmy's. My admiration still lies there somewhere, a fossil in my memory, but Jimmy's knowing smile is something I have never managed to acquire. (37)

"Obsession," more than a parody of Yeats's automatic writing, shows that Jimmy's mannerisms resurface unbidden. "Forgery" suggests that the narrator copies what he values to claim it. The adult, although he will separate himself from what Jimmy represents, cannot evade Jimmy's shadowy yet powerful essence; he retains a subversive affection for it. Handwriting operates as metaphor for tale telling, as his frank admission of illegibility tells readers that they must decipher what is presented to them—especially when it appears most plain—and comprehension requires that they experience emotional conflict as they read. (Jimmy's clear script is unflattering metaphor; his shallowness makes him too comprehensible.)

The story's title refers to the narrator's youthful wish to emulate or become Jimmy. Its positive resonance, suggesting his development from ignorance to an adult's ease in the world, is treacherous, as the goal is a potential danger. As "man of the world" Jimmy is a broken idol, his sophistication morally and factually questionable; only the adult Larry is ultimately the true man "of the world," having learned and suffered. Unable or unwilling to scrutinize himself, Jimmy basks in Larry's idealization, gloriing in the superficial charms of the title. (Larry's praise is also unsubstantiated by any other character.) Larry's age is unspecified, but he stresses early that he is a year younger and less experienced than his model, who appears to move gracefully among women, desirable, mystifying, and unreachable. (Larry is no longer the amorous five year old of "The Genius" who boldly imagines marriage to an older girl; adolescent self-doubt has replaced innocent boldness. The first five stories of Domestic Relations have romance and amorous fantasies in common, whether the child Larry is deciding to court schoolgirl Una and worrying about the effects on Mummy [now a discarded love-object] or, older, rescuing a prostitute from her pimp. In "The Man of the World," Larry falls in love with no one and rescues no one, but his experience is linked to past illusions and adventures.)

The story's structure is a measured prelude to a devastating incident with its repercussions as coda, as in "Guests of the Nation." In the first pages, the adult narrator remembers his youthful self, describes Jimmy, and speaks of his summer "holiday." These acts—reminiscing, describing, observing, assessing, self-scrutinizing—are all preliminaries. The crucial visit begins only after half
the story has been told, and its focus sharpens only after Larry and Jimmy have spent forty-five minutes waiting, heightening expectations, theirs and ours. The action for which we have waited patiently takes only four paragraphs; it is intensely detailed yet it ends before we are ready. The story concludes with a page-long coda, but much is left incomplete as the narrator does not lead us back to his present state as a reflective adult. Perhaps because of Larry’s uncomfortable complicity, his role is diminished at the end; rather than having him interpret the experience, a favored (and occasionally overly didactic) closing, O’Connor gave the last words to Jimmy. Since Larry is rarely speechless and his emotions have been stirred, his silence is troubling.

The adult Larry begins with bland recollection, offering memories unencumbered by analysis. As a child, there were “no such things as holidays for me and my likes” (a comment whose economic implications he leaves unexplored), so he “simply invented them, which was much more satisfactory” (35). This predicts a happy, uncomplicated childhood where imagination can improve on reality and can easily defeat poverty. (Later, we may stumble into similarly misleading assumptions when Larry and Jimmy have a preliminary glass of milk in the kitchen, like two good boys posing for Norman Rockwell in Cork.) Our expectations of subject and mood are encouraged by Larry’s pleasure in his world and in himself; when he has told Mrs. Rooney his plans and she says “with amusement” that he is “lucky,” he agrees: “Lucky seemed an absurd description of my good fortune” (35).4 We learn more of the proposed holiday, “a couple of nights,” although the text concentrates on a few hours, “at the house of a friend called Jimmy Leary, who lived at the other side of the road from us.” As Jimmy’s parents are away, he was “given permission to have a friend in to keep him company.” (The Learys’ solicitude shows they are unaware of how Jimmy amuses himself.)

Jimmy’s world and social class are identified by enviable possessions—Larry calls them “advantages”—and an unattainable gentility: his “big” house has a “high flight of steps up to the front door, which was always kept shut.” This contrasts to the Delaney home: “the tiny terrace house we lived in, with its twelve-foot square of garden in front, its crumbling stumps of gate-posts and low wall that had lost its railing” (“The Duke’s Children” 46). Magically lavish, the Leary residence offers Larry temporary permission to shed adolescent inhibitions and pose as an adult, self-conscious and anxious no longer: “once inside Jimmy’s house I did not care so much. It always had that effect on me, of blowing me up twice the size I was, as though I were expanding . . .” (“The Man of the World” 40). Once open, the front door reveals emblematic objects: “a piano in the front room, a pair of binoculars . . . and a toilet on the stairs . . .” (35). (O’Connor’s fiction relied on physical props infrequently, but those chosen—a Sacred Heart lamp, a copy of Romeo and Juliet, a game of cards, “bull’s-eyes,” a new blue blouse—have emotional significance.) More than a sign of genteel

4. If “absurd” seems ambiguous, the first published version shows that Larry’s glee is unrestrained: “Lucky? I felt made for life” (1). We may even read “made for life” as foreshadowing lasting emotional repercussions.
wealth, the piano enables Jimmy to demonstrate expertise Larry lacks: “I tried to pick out a tune on the piano with one hand, and Jimmy, having listened with amusement for some time, sat down and played it himself as I felt it should be played, and this, too, seemed to be part of his superiority” (40). “With amusement” also characterized Mrs. Rooney’s response, suggesting that others find Larry unintentionally comic, although he is unaware of any condescension. (It also describes his adult reaction to the resurrection of Jimmy through calligraphy, which shows the distance between the adult’s perception and the youth’s.) The “toilet on the stairs” reveals how the Learys, given power by their class, integrate the forbidden into the familiar; wealth makes it permissible to include the socially unspeakable in the decor. (The emphasis given it prepares readers for the sexuality that follows, or that we expect to follow, and the mix of curiosity, anticipation, and unease that the forbidden stirs.) To Larry, the toilet “seemed to me to be the last word in elegance and immodesty” (35-36). “Elegance” suggests a world he is invited only to visit; “immodesty” is again ambivalent and a significant foreshadowing, as his window in his family’s house shows no one disrobing; only Jimmy’s window allows and encourages this perspective and act. These three objects have as center “a pair of binoculars on a table near the window.” The triad is suggestive, combining the senses, wealth, and the body: an expensive musical instrument requiring talent and training; an instrument of optical privilege making the distant and the forbidden accessible; and a facility, like the binoculars, that combines money and fashion with activities that are politely unacknowledged. (None of the objects belongs to Jimmy exclusively, although he uses them without restriction; they belong to the house and to the Learys, who bear unstated blame for their son’s acts.)

The binoculars first gratify Larry’s innocent curiosity in a presexual auroral bedroom: “We brought the binoculars up to the bedroom with us. From the window you could see the whole road up and down, from the quarry at its foot with the tiny houses perched on top of it to the open fields at the other end, where the last gas lamp rose against the sky. Each morning I was up with the first light, leaning out the window in my nightshirt and watching through the glasses all the mysterious figures you never saw from our lane: policemen, railwaymen, and farmers on their way to market” (36). Looking through this unsullied window, Larry is a likable anthropologist in miniature, recreating the ordinary by his delight in its newness. We may view him “with amusement” but that is our only reservation.

His admiration of Jimmy, consciously standing alone and separate, playing
his part of sophisticate at all times, well-mannered, well-dressed, apparently “the height of elegance” (36), gifted “by right of birth or breeding” (38), goes beyond predictable envy of possessions or station. Larry is most awed by Jimmy’s experience and its accompanying power of divination; generously, Jimmy offers wisdom from mysterious wellsprings. Sensitive to subterranean economic tremors, he knows magically which house “had the bailiffs in a few weeks ago,” and, better, is intuitively wise about women, even older women: “Seeing some bigger chap we knew walking out with a girl for the first time, Jimmy would say casually: ‘He’d better mind himself: that one is dynamite.’ And even though I knew as little of girls who were dynamite as I did of bailiffs, his tone would be sufficient to indicate that I had been taken in by sweet voices and broad-brimmed hats, gaslight and evening smells from gardens” (37). We might ask how or if Jimmy knows all this, for his pronouncements hang brilliantly in mid-air, unsupported by evidence, and we never see him accompanying a girl, but Larry, his earnest disciple, does not taint worship with logic, for he is delighted to have been picked from his peers to hear such secrets. (As Larry needs someone to idolize, Jimmy needs an eager, uncritical listener to validate his worldly self-image.) Larry’s fascinated curiosity inspires Jimmy to reveal more, to play the sage with conviction: “I only imagined things about them [fellows and girls] but Jimmy knew. I was excluded from knowledge by the world of appearances that blinded and deafened me with emotion” (37); “I wanted him to tell me what it was like, but he didn’t seem to be able” (38); “one evening he was listening to me talk. . . . My excitability seemed to rouse in him a mixture of amusement and pity” (38). As a result of these emotions, leavened with condescension, Jimmy asks Larry to “come over some night when the family is away” to show him “a few things.” The “things” are not delineated but his “dreamy smile” is enticing: “You can see right into the bedroom from our attic,” only “a couple of feet away,” and the “newly married couple” is presented in irresistibly vague terms:

“And what do they do, Jimmy?”

“Oh,” he said with a pleasant laugh, “everything. You really should come.”

“You bet I’ll come,” I said, trying to sound tougher than I felt. It wasn’t that I saw anything wrong in it. It was rather that, for all my desire to become like Jimmy, I was afraid of what it might do to me. (38-39)

Larry’s desire to lose his innocence (as in “The Genius”) and the simultaneous fears it generates do not startle us; we can sympathize, although we may feel that he goes too far, as do other young men in O’Connor’s fiction. In retrospect, a reader may wonder how much Jimmy has ever seen. Probably the couple has never done “everything” brazenly, and he may never have viewed anything more erotic than a kiss, but, at this point, we, like Larry, exercise no cynicism. Without being explicit, Jimmy has invited Larry to what he advertises as an archetypal pornographic film: free, conveniently located and regularly scheduled, its plot so plain as to make dialogue unnecessary. His curiosity becomes ours: even if we figuratively cover our eyes, we may still peek. However, the couple’s bedroom mirror suggests others—as in the last scene of Between the Acts—held up to our faces; like Larry, we are watched as we watch.

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Having committed himself, Larry spends three evenings studying the couple he has agreed to spy on, from “the gas-lamp at the foot of our lane” where scrutiny is an accepted communal activity. (In Domestic Relations, when frustrated by any situation that points up the limits of his knowledge, he always believes that personal quasi-investigations will provide the answer.) On the third evening, the young wife joins her husband in a tableau merging private and public behavior: “she scurried down the steps to join in the conversation. She had thrown an old jacket about her shoulders and stood there, her arms folded as though to protect herself further from the cold wind that blew down the hill from the open country, while her husband rested one hand fondly on her shoulder” (39). Her gesture, although never decoded by the adult narrator, suggests that she is shielding herself from exposure, a mute foreshadowing.  

6 (Her husband’s affectionate gesture needs no analysis and reminds us that he is, after all, less an object of voyeuristic fascination.)

When Saturday night arrives, fittingly a time reserved for adult pleasure and license, Larry entrusts himself emotionally and physically to his guide to this new world. His admiration may make it difficult for readers to react critically, although we do assess the results negatively:

“I suppose we’d better put in an appearance of going to bed,” he said disdainfully. “Someone across the road might notice and tell. They’re in town, so I don’t suppose they’ll be back until late.”

We had a glass of milk in the kitchen, went upstairs, undressed, and lay down, though we put our overcoats beside the bed. Jimmy had a packet of sweets but insisted on keeping them until later. “We may need these before we’re done,” he said with his knowing smile, and again I admired his orderliness and restraint. We talked in bed for a quarter of an hour; then put out the light, got up again, donned our overcoats and socks, and tiptoed upstairs to the attic. Jimmy led the way with an electric torch. He was a fellow who thought of everything. The attic had been arranged for our vigil. Two trunks had been drawn up to the little window to act as seats, and there were even cushions on them. (40-41)

“Our vigil” suggests religious devotion, heroic wakefulness, or a polar expedition where supplies are dwindling, here comically diminished into one bag of candy, rationed for fifteen minutes; the discrepancy between the expectations aroused by “vigil” and by “spying” accounts for an uncomfortable comedy. Jimmy’s stage setting dramatizes privilege and comfort even in the illicit “even cushions.” Without warning, these adventurers turn into comfortable burghers at the theatre, waiting at their ease for the show to begin. The darkened “single window, eight or ten feet below” is the stage or screen, and Jimmy whispers to his neophyte companion about what awaits. The binoculars, crucial earlier, vanish as superfluous; perhaps O’Connor wished to avoid a slapstick squabble over one pair. As if seated alongside, we wait, trusting the charming host who seems to have provided for our comfort. Larry is anxious, but his “qualms” have become familiar enough that we may dismiss them: “I was

6. In “A Knowing Smile,” Larry’s discomfort at observing the affectionate couple, since he knows what has been planned, is sharper. Her posture is unchanged, but his thoughts seem Sadean: “Getting behind appearances I found was all right so long as you did it in your imagination, but in cold blood to watch what I wanted to strip away, the trim jacket, the tiny shoes, the swift and brilliant smile was almost as much as I could bear” (4).
scared by the darkness and the mystery. . . . I didn’t feel at home there. At any moment I expected the front door to open and his parents to come in and catch us” (42). When the couple returns, the scene is extraordinary because of our expectations, prurient or ominous, and the pace slows, simulating “real time,” as they enter and undress:

At that moment a faint light became visible in the great expanse of black wall, a faint, yellow starlight that was just sufficient to silhouette the window frame beneath us. Suddenly the whole room lit up. The man I had seen in the street stood by the doorway, his hand still on the switch. I could see it all plainly now, an ordinary small, suburban bedroom with flowery wallpaper, a coloured picture of the Sacred Heart over the double bed with the big brass knobs, a wardrobe, and a dressing table.

The man stood there till the woman came in, removing her hat in a single wide gesture and tossing it from her into a corner of the room. He stood still by the door, taking off his tie. Then he struggled with his collar, his head raised and his face set in an agonized expression. His wife kicked off her shoes, sat on a chair by the bed, and began to take off her stockings. All the time she seemed to be talking because her head was raised, looking at him, though you couldn’t hear a word she said. I glanced at Jimmy. The light from the window below softly illumined his face as he sucked with tranquil enjoyment.

The woman rose as her husband sat on the bed with his back to us and began to take off his shoes and socks in the same slow, agonized way. At one point he held up his left foot and looked at it with what might have been concern. His wife looked at it, too, for a moment and then swung half-way round as she unbuttoned her skirt. She undressed in swift, jerky movements, twisting and turning and apparently talking all the time. At one moment she looked into the mirror on the dressing-table and touched her cheek lightly. She crouched as she took off her slip, and then pulled her nightdress over her head and finished her undressing beneath it. As she removed her underclothes she seemed to throw them anywhere at all, and I had a strong impression that there was something haphazard and disorderly about her. Her husband was different. Everything he removed seemed to be removed in order and then put carefully where he could find it most readily in the morning. I watched him take out his watch, look at it carefully, wind it, and then hang it neatly over the bed. (42-43)

Though the bedroom is a flat backdrop, the familiar religious picture possibly neutralizing erotic ambiance, Larry’s astonishment is profound, as if he were a primitive viewing his first film without understanding how technology had replaced reality. A hushed audience would be customary, but this silence intensifies the strangeness for us and the boys (unaccustomed to silent cinema, especially one lacking title cards). Silence is also appropriate to Larry; earlier he had portrayed himself as “excluded from knowledge by the world of appearances that blinded and deafened me with emotion” (37). Now, he cannot use sound to interpret the scene or to reassure himself; soon, he will be unable to see (as the scene becomes dark);

7. The minimally embellished bedroom suggests O’Connor’s disinterest in superficial realism, as William Maxwell remembered: “It used to amuse and interest him that when we were considering an early draft of a story together, I would ask what the furniture was like, or what the inside of a house looked like. ‘Oh, Lord,’ he would exclaim, ‘don’t ask me that!’ And he couldn’t, in fact tell me. He was not interested in interior decoration.” Yet Maxwell later returns to “The Man of the World” as evidence that O’Connor “could do it when he needed to. And in a way that was masterly” (Michael/Frank 144-45); elsewhere, Maxwell suggested that the bedroom’s few details may have resulted from his gentle urging: “he was immensely good-natured and would satisfy my curiosity about, for example, details of interiors. The room that the two boys spied on in ‘[The] Man of the World’ is a case in point. But in general he needed an editor the way a cat needs two tails” (Letter to the author, 3 Oct. 1983).

John Hildebidle whimsically suggested that the couple resembles Gretta and Gabriel Conroy, the husband’s foot pain perhaps caused by gutta-percha goloshes. They are, surely, another couple whose sexual expectations are unfulfilled. Of course, every sleepy Irish marital pair does not have a Joycean antecedent, yet the text may make us ponder the subconscious influence of “The Dead,” especially when Larry, narrator-racconteur-writer, finds the handwriting of one “Jimmy” coming through his own: Jimmy Leary or Jimmy Joyce? To what extent Larry Delaney is indebted to the boy narrator of “An Encounter,” “The Sisters,” and “Araby,” we may well speculate.
when Jimmy breaks the silence at the end, he can find no words.

The couple’s undressing, intimate and private, is no erotic display, as attention is drawn to the non-erogenous; their bodies are landscapes whose prominent features are low-level discomforts, not sexual possibilities. Her modest, functional disrobing is swiftly accomplished in five undramatic sentences. Viewers are denied the prize of nakedness, artistic or lewd; the one sentence where she wears only lingerie passes speedily and the moment, once ended, is gone. Larry, who has found the remarkable in the morning world, records nocturnal details flatly. Although he says “I could see it all plainly now,” he seems numbed, neither gratified nor moved. He cannot absorb information and sensations; one event follows another with no interval for him to internalize or adjust to them, which may be why he feels compelled to retell this story forty years later. We do not learn if he has eaten of Jimmy’s sweets—the banal fruit of the fall?—but Jimmy, happily infantile, sucks his candy and anticipates the peep show untroubled by doubt.

The boys still hope for “everything,” but the pact between Jimmy (usher, impresario “who thought of everything,” screenwriter, and later connoisseur) and the couple (actors unaware that they have been auditioning) collapses as they begin to perform a scene, appropriate to them, that violates the audience’s expectations. The discrepancy between Larry and Jimmy as expectant audience and the young couple as divergent actors echoes our relationship to the text. Had the story concluded abruptly with the couple’s disappointing undressing, Larry’s identification with Jimmy might have remained intact, as his desire to enter Jimmy’s world outweighs his identification with and sympathy for the couple, who “looked like people who would approve of me, too” (40). Our expectations would have remained unchallenged and we would have remained distant from a tale of bad boys foiled in naughtiness. However, whether we have been expecting Jimmy’s parents or a sexual enactment, we, like Larry, are emotionally unprepared:

Then, to my surprise, she knelt by the bed, facing towards the window, glanced up at the picture of the Sacred Heart, made a large hasty Sign of the Cross, and, covering her face with her hands, buried her head in the bedclothes. I looked at Jimmy in dismay, but he did not seem to be embarrassed by the sight. The husband, his folded trousers in his hand, moved about the room slowly and carefully, as though he did not wish to disturb his wife’s devotions, and when he pulled on the trousers of his pajamas he turned away. After that he put on his pajama jacket, buttoned it carefully, and knelt beside her. He, too, glanced respectfully at the picture and crossed himself slowly and reverently, but he did not bury his face and head as she had done. He knelt upright with nothing of the abandonment suggested by her pose, and with an expression that combined reverence and self-respect. It was the expression of an employee who, while admitting that he might have a few little weaknesses like the rest of the staff, prided himself on having deserved well of the management. Women, his slightly complacent air seemed to indicate, had to adopt these emotional attitudes, but he spoke to God as one man to another. He finished his prayers before his wife; again he crossed himself slowly, rose, and climbed into bed, glancing again at his watch as he did so.

Several minutes passed before she put her hands out before her on the bed, blessed herself in her wide, sweeping way, and rose. She crossed the room in a swift movement that almost escaped me, and next moment the light went out—it was as if the window through which we had watched the scene had disappeared with it by magic, till nothing was left but a blank black wall mounting to the chimney pots. (43–44)
The couple's prayers are authentic, not hasty ritual; our initial surprise may spring from the suspicion that our neighbors behave badly when they believe themselves unobserved, yet their piety vanquishes cynicism. Their depth of feeling is measured in the metaphor illustrating the husband's attitude to God, which requires an adult's perception beyond a child's experience. Larry's reaction transcends disappointment, although context shapes perception; observing the couple at Mass would have evoked no shame. God, we are aware, is watching him watch them, attempting to gain power and pleasure from violating their privacy. (Were Jimmy to share his shame, collective responsibility would lessen the burden. Larry, however, acknowledges the wrong and accepts it wholly, as neither the child nor the adult narrator accuses Jimmy at this point.) Because O'Connor chose not to have the adult Learys intrude and punish, Larry is his own accuser, judge, and punisher, harsher than they would have been. His self-judgment is inescapable and unmediated, and its severity colors what follows:

Jimmy rose slowly and pointed the way out to me with his flashlight. When we got downstairs we put on the bedroom light, and I saw on his face the virtuous and sophisticated air of a collector who has shown you all his treasures in the best possible light. Faced with that look, I could not bring myself to mention the woman at prayer, though I felt her image would be impressed on my memory till the day I died. I could not have explained to him how at that moment everything had changed for me, how, beyond us watching the young married couple from ambush, I had felt someone else watching us, so that at once we ceased to be the observers and became the observed. And the observed in such a humiliating position that nothing I could imagine our victims doing would have been so degrading.

I wanted to pray myself but found I couldn't. Instead, I lay in bed in the darkness, covering my eyes with my hand, and I think that even then I knew that I should never be sophisticated like Jimmy, never be able to put on a knowing smile, because always behind the world of appearances I would see only eternity watching. (44-45)

Like Bonaparte of "Guests of the Nation," Larry cannot escape his acts through prayer. Echoing the couple in thought or act might have saved him self-laceration, but now he can only cover his eyes as if atoning for sight. Having assumed himself a controlling observer, given immunity by his guide and their secret perspective, he becomes the subject, degraded by his expectations. His language, reflecting self-condemnation, is permeated by negations which resist modification: repetitions of "could not," "couldn't," "never," "nothing." Speech, rationalization, logic are inadequate, leaving Larry and readers no absolution.

Jimmy's pride in his "treasures" leads us to question him more than Larry has.

8. This echoes "The Face of Evil," where the pious narrator punishes himself for his inadequacy to live up to an ideal.
9. The reversal summons up two analogous moments in O'Connor. One concerns Bonaparte, of "Guests of the Nation," who has committed spiritual suicide by participating in the deaths of Hawkins and Belcher. The other instance is from a little-known 1951 essay/story, "The Conversion," about a religious experience O'Connor had on a cycling trip through France with his friend, Stan Stewart: "What I felt... is hard to describe. I have felt it about a picture of a nun which has been standing before me for some days. I felt it about another picture, which I took in a Fever Hospital when a family whose child had died asked me to photograph the little body for them one summer morning in the mortuary chapel. The photographs I took were beautiful, but I could not live with them. In a peculiar way the positions had been reversed; the object had become the subject; the dead child had photographed the camera. It is the sudden reversal of situation which is familiar in dreams and which sooner or later happens to all of us and to the civilizations to which we belong" (268).
ever done. His satisfaction with the scene, advertised as “everything,” suggests ignorance at best, and his closing comments startle by their banality. Entirely self-centered and sure of himself, he ignores Larry’s dismay: “Sometimes, of course, it’s better than that,” Jimmy’s drowsy voice said from the darkness. “You shouldn’t judge it by tonight” (44–45). The comic shock may free readers to laugh at him, to pity and despise him, as it momentarily deflects attention from Larry’s pain. We know what Jimmy means: this masturbatory spectacle, one of a series, has been substandard; “of course” is condescending, as if “better” had to be clarified for his student. (His tone is also colored by a defensive response to what he imagines as Larry’s unspoken disappointment, “Was that all?”) For Larry, such an evaluation, part unstated invitation to revisit “it,” is unthinkable, as is being asked to suspend judgment.

We hope the young couple, cleansed of worldly impurity, sleeps soundly. Typically assured, Jimmy has told Larry that they will not be lodgers for long (thus, they will soon be safe from him): “People like that never rest until they get a house of their own,” and, perhaps for the only time, we hope he is right (41). Having satiated himself with sensations, “drowsy” Jimmy will sleep peaceably. We are never told if Larry falls asleep, but rather like the lawyer in “Bartelby the Scrivener,” he seems doomed to relive his story, and may have done so for forty years. Having wanted sophistication, he recoils from what that desire shows of himself; having wanted to see “everything,” surrendering his judgment to someone who “thought of everything,” he has seen himself capable of it.

Readers have not escaped this stern judgment. No matter that the newlyweds are fictional and unharmed; we betray ourselves by tacit encouragement. Trusting the narrator, we are weighed against the couple’s piety. Remembering O’Connor’s statement that his fiction is “all about you”—“The Man of the World” succeeds as we squirm. We may have entered this created world considering ourselves “lucky” to have a fictional “holiday,” yet we share his “dismay,” regret, degradation, as our willingness to participate reveals us as morally no better than Jimmy.

The story’s emotional directness drags us in, but it is also elusive. Larry wishes to get behind “the world of appearances,” a valid inquiry, but what is behind the curtain—substance, fraud, a mirror of our baseness? Gaps in the spare text are equally troubling. Given the paucity of historical landmarks in the text, are we to assume that “forty years later” is to be taken literally, thus placing these events before 1920, or is the reference simply there to separate the adult narrator from the child? What are we to think of the narrator’s relation to his former self (ashamed? indulgent? amused? forgiving?) and his later relations with Jimmy, never described? Is Jimmy the tale’s villain, or just morally insignificant? Does he become simply an adolescent Saturday night Tempter or, ominously, the Accuser, showing how we rush to embrace our worst selves? Is he a corrupted storyteller producing a distorted text which Larry recognizes too late as distorted?

These questions point to a larger truth about O’Connor’s work. If such an innocent-looking story provokes our involvement, his fiction merits reconsider-
eration. Were we to discard our familiar preconceptions about an author apparently too simple to necessitate analysis, we would find ourselves mirrored on every page, sometimes uncomfortably but always honestly, as he promised.

Works Cited


MAXWELL, WILLIAM. “Frank O’Connor and the *New Yorker.*” *Michael/Frank*, 140–47.


