My Oedipus Complex

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK O'CONNOR

Frank O'Connor (pseudonym of Michael Francis O'Donovan) was born and raised in the Irish city of Cork, where he attended primary and secondary school. The only child of Michael and Minnie O'Donovan, O'Connor grew up in a tumultuous household. Michael O'Donovan Sr. was a former soldier whose severe alcoholism prevented him from holding down a job after leaving the army. Despite having bitter feelings towards his father, O'Connor had a close relationship with his mother, who cared for Frank and provided for the family by cleaning houses. O'Connor worked as a librarian before becoming a member of the Irish Republican Army in 1918, which resulted in his imprisonment between 1922 and 1923. Upon his release, O'Connor became somewhat of a Renaissance man. In addition to working as an Irish teacher and librarian, O'Connor served as a broadcaster for the Ministry of Information for the United Kingdom during World War II, as well as a member of the Abbey Theatre Board of Directors. After publishing several works, including his short story "Guests of the Nation" (1931), O'Connor began to acquire fame as a writer. Following the separation from his first wife, Welsh actress Evelyn Bowen, O'Connor accepted American university teaching positions at Northwestern (where he met his second wife, Harriet Rich) and Harvard. While in the United States, O'Connor became known for his short stories, many of which were featured in *The New Yorker*. O'Connor returned to Ireland in 1961, prompted by a stroke he suffered while teaching at Stanford University. A year later he was granted a Doctor of Letters from Trinity College, Dublin. Frank O'Connor continued to write until his death, dying from a heart attack in Dublin on March 10, 1966.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I came at a time of unrest for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Demanding an autonomous government, Irish nationalists had been fiercely campaigning for the Irish Home Rule movement since 1870. After the first two bills failed to pass, advocates for Irish self-government introduced the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912. This spurred a standoff between unionists and nationalists known as the Home Rule Crisis, which came to a temporary halt two years later with the arrival of the First World War. Despite its domestic turmoil, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland unified to join the Allied Forces against the Central Powers. Bills for Irish independence passed not long after the start of World War I, but were not to be executed until the war was over. When Germany surrendered on November 11, 1918, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and other Allied Nations signed the Treaty of Versailles, marking the end of the war. The tension within the country came to a head a mere two months later, when the Irish Republic introduced a Declaration of Independence. This ignited the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), in which Frank O'Connor served as a member of the Irish Republican Army. In "My Oedipus Complex," Larry mentions accompanying his mother to mass at St. Augustine's, signaling that his family is Catholic. In the context of the country's political struggle, most Catholics were members of the Irish nationalist party, a minority movement that supported Irish unification. Protestants, on the other hand, mostly belonged to the unionist party, who wanted to prevent Northern Ireland from separating from the United Kingdom.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

After World War I, many modernist literary works shed light on some of the darker aspects of humanity. "My Oedipus Complex" directly confronts this, depicting a family who grapples with repercussions of the war. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) is another renowned example, thought to be a radical exploration of society's struggle to reclaim its integrity after the First World War. Fellow Irishman William Butler Yeats also produced reflections on a post-war society with his poems "The Second Coming" (1920) and "A Prayer for My Daughter" (1921). Though not an exact replica, "My Oedipus Complex" echoes some of the familial problems O'Connor experienced in his own life. O'Connor depicted these struggles in his biographies, *An Only Child* (1961) and *My Father's Son* (1968). The title was taken from Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, first used in his book on the stages of psychosexual development, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). The roots of this reference extend even further, as Freud named his theory after Sophocles' ancient tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (first performed around 429 BC). The epitome of literary father-son conflicts, *Oedipus Rex* tells the story of a man who kills his father and sleeps with his mother. O'Connor was a modernist, whose style was largely characterized by its introspectiveness. In "My Oedipus Complex," the narrator demonstrates a high level of self-awareness by relating his childhood experiences to the reader. This narrative style echoes the stream of consciousness technique used in other modernist works including *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel published by English writer Virginia Woolf in 1925. Like O'Connor's short story, *Mrs. Dalloway* contains a great deal of reflection, as it depicts a woman recalling events of her younger years.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** My Oedipus Complex
- **When Published:** A month after being broadcast on BBC, "My Oedipus Complex" was published in December 1950. The story was later published in a collection, *My Oedipus Complex and Other Stories*, in 1963.
- **Literary Period:** 20th Century Irish Realism
- **Genre:** Short story, Memoir
- **Setting:** A town, presumably in Ireland, at the close of World War I
- **Climax:** Larry telling his mother his plans to marry her when he grows up
- **Antagonist:** Throughout most of the story, Larry considers his father to be his most threatening rival. This view begins to change, however, with the introduction of a new antagonist: Larry's baby brother, Sonny.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Saving face by changing name: Michael Francis O'Donovan assumed the pseudonym Frank O'Connor as a precaution, worried that the content of his writing could be used against him and jeopardize his job as a librarian in Dublin. This was brought on by a scandal involving Irish dramatist Lennox Robinson, who was fired from the Advisory Committee to the Carnegie Trust in Ireland after one of his published works was deemed blasphemous. For his pseudonym, Frank replaced his father's surname, O'Donovan, with his mother's, O'Connor.

A friendship for the books: Frank O'Connor and William Butler Yeats had a close friendship. Yeats regarded O'Connor as "Ireland's Chekhov," and provided him with a great deal of support throughout his literary career. Yeats called O'Connor "Michael Frank," a nickname that merged O'Connor's birth name with his pen name.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "My Oedipus Complex," Larry recalls events from his childhood. A soldier in World War I, Larry's father is rarely at home, making him little more than a stranger to his five-year-old son Larry. Over the course of his father's extended absences, Larry develops a daily routine of waking up with the sun, talking to his feet (aptly named Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right), and climbing into his mother's **bed**. Larry and his mother spend their days pleasantly by running errands and attending mass, where they pray for the safe return of Larry's father.

Larry wakes up one day to find that his father has returned for good, but he immediately finds the man less appealing when he sees him out of uniform. The next day, Larry's father complies with his wife's request to take Larry for a walk through town. Larry throws a series of quiet tantrums when his father does not stop to admire railways and horses, following his own separate interests instead. That evening, Larry's father shares stories from the paper with Larry's mother, leaving Larry to feel as though his father is playing dirty by outsourcing interesting material for conversation. That night, Larry asks his mother if God would answer a prayer to return his father to the war. Larry's mother tells him that God would not answer this prayer, as it is bad people, not God, who make wars. Larry goes to bed disappointed, thinking that perhaps God is not as big a deal as people make him out to be.

The next morning, Larry goes to his parents' bed. Appalled by the amount of space his father takes up, he kicks his father to make room for himself. Larry is upset when his mother cuts him off in an effort not to wake his father, and he becomes convinced that he and his father are unable to live under the same roof. That evening, Larry's mother requests that Larry refrain from waking his father in the early morning. She explains that Larry's father must have sufficient energy to work since he is no longer eligible to receive an army pension. Larry reluctantly agrees, but ultimately returns to his parents' bed and kicks his father awake. After Larry throws a fit and talks back to his father, he receives a half-hearted spanking that leaves Larry livid and his mother heartbroken.

Reaching his limit, Larry delivers the ultimate blow to his father, announcing to his parents that he plans to marry his mother and have multiple babies with her. Larry's mother informs him that a baby will be coming along soon. Larry enjoys the reality of the baby far less than he had predicted. Frustrated with newborn Sonny's constant crying and need for attention, Larry passively communicates his annoyance to his father by pretending to talk to himself, threatening to leave the house at the prospect of another baby. Larry notices that his father has begun to treat him nicely. Larry feels a sense of pity toward his father and sympathizes with his situation, having gone through it himself. One evening, Larry is jolted awake when he finds his father lying next to him in bed, attempting to escape Sonny's cries. Larry comforts his father, urging him to put his arm around him. Soon after, his father buys him a model railway for Christmas.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Larry – The story's protagonist and narrator, Larry is a five-year-old boy whose father returns home after fighting in the First World War. Since his father was at war for as long as Larry remembers, Larry is very close with his mother. The two of them eat meals together, take walks, and talk at length about Larry's interests and ideas. Larry is an imaginative, energetic, and talkative child, who names his feet Mrs. Right and Mrs. Left and treats them as confidants, inventing and narrating dramas

for them when he is alone. Once his father returns, however, Larry struggles to cope with his changing household. In addition to feeling more distant from his mother, Larry grows to view his father as a stranger and rival who is stealing his mother's attention while acting indifferent and even hostile to Larry. Due to this, Larry begins to act out, interrupting his parents' conversations, talking back to his father, and drinking his mother's tea. Often, Larry crawls into his parents' **bed** to be close to his mother, and, in one instance, Larry brazenly tells his mother (in front of his father) that he plans to marry her. After the birth of Larry's baby brother, Sonny, the dynamic in the household changes again; suddenly, Larry's mother is only paying attention to the infant, leaving Larry and his father in an uneasy alliance. Throughout the story, the limitations of Larry's youthful perspective are clear: he thinks one buys babies, for instance, and he doesn't understand why he can't share a bed with his mother while his father can. While Larry can be domineering and judgmental, he is largely a funny, observant, and charming child.

Father (Daddy, Mick) – For years, while fighting as a soldier in the First World War, Larry's father is away from his wife and young son, Larry. During this period, Larry's father returns home for brief visits, where Larry watches him smoke and shave and then digs through the trinkets he brought back from war. Once he returns home permanently, however, Larry's father struggles to reintegrate into family life. Larry resents his father for claiming his mother's attention, and Larry's father seems not to know how to relate to his young son, taking no interest in Larry's hobbies (such as trains and ships) and ignoring Larry's attempts to converse. Furthermore, Larry's father seems aggravated when Larry wakes him up early, seemingly having no sympathy for the natural rhythms of children. Larry describes his father's appearance as being bony and not terribly attractive, and he criticizes his father's manners, such as his noisy chewing. Despite this, Larry grants that his father has "a fine intelligence." Larry sees his father as a strict parent, but he doesn't describe his father's personality in detail, suggesting that he and his father are not yet closely acquainted. It is only after the birth of his second son, Sonny, that Larry's father begins to display more warmth toward Larry—with Larry's mother busy caring for an infant, Larry and his father seemingly bond over feeling cast aside. The next Christmas he buys an expensive model railway for Larry, an act that suggests he is beginning to better understand his son.

Mother (Mummy) – Only referred to as "Mother" or "Mummy," Larry's mother cares for Larry while her husband serves in World War I. For the first five years of her son's life, she shows Larry a great deal of affection. She lets him sleep in her bed, listens to his stories, and brings him into town to run errands, attend mass, and visit family friends. When Larry's father returns home from the war, Larry's mother must reconcile her roles as a wife and mother. She attempts to split her time, giving her husband her full attention when he shares news from the evening paper, while continuing to spend private time with Larry when tucking him into bed. Larry's mother also attempts to spur a connection between Larry and his father by encouraging them to go on a walk through town together. When this fails, Larry's mother must mediate between them during their quibbles over tea, sleep, and, ultimately, her. After an intense fight between Larry and his father results in Larry's spanking, Larry's mother is heartbroken at being caught in the middle of the two people closest to her. After giving birth to Sonny, Larry's mother shifts her attention to the new baby, much to the irritation of Larry and his father. Though he often misjudges her as "simpleminded," Larry recalls his mother as being a warm and comforting figure.

Sonny – Sonny is Larry's baby brother, whose birth marks a major change in Larry's household. Because he demands his mother's full attention, Sonny widens the gap between Larry and his mother. He has the same effect on the relationship between his mother and father: in order to support this addition to the family, Larry's father must now spend more time away from the house working, and he finds that his wife now has less time for him. Sonny behaves like a typical baby, and does not have the same sleep schedule as his family members. This frustrates both Larry, who pinches him awake on several occasions, and his father, who eventually seeks refuge in Larry's bed in order to avoid Sonny's cries. Because he has become the new focus of his mother's attention, Sonny makes room for Larry and his father to develop a closer relationship with each other.

Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right –Larry assigns the names "Mrs. Left" and "Mrs. Right" to his feet. Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right are meant to entertain, advise, and validate Larry. Mrs. Right plays a more prominent role in Larry's discussions, as Mrs. Left is generally silent and defers to Mrs. Right. Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right are used as a way of helping Larry work through things, making them particularly useful when Larry's father returns home. In a lengthy discussion about fathers, Mrs. Right shares an anecdote about putting her father in "the Home," convincing Larry that his own Father ought to be sent there (despite Larry's admission of not knowing exactly what "the Home" is). Although Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right are technically two distinct characters and provide Larry with companionship, they are ultimately extensions of Larry who fade in prominence as Larry matures.

The Geneys – The Geneys are a family that live up the road from Larry's family. They are not financially comfortable, and recently had a baby. The Geneys are referenced in a disagreement Larry has with his mother. Larry's mother tells him that their family will not be able to have a baby until Larry's father returns from the war, insisting that this is the only way they will be able to afford the cost of a baby." Because he knows the Geneys to be poor, Larry claims that their baby must be

cheap, and says that his mother ought to follow their example by settling for a less expensive baby.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss MacCarthy –Miss MacCarthy handed out army pensions to Larry and his mother through the Post Office. Once the war is over, "Miss MacCarthy hasn't got any more pennies" for Larry's family because they are no longer eligible to receive an army pension through Larry's father.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FATHER VS. SON

At the center of "My Oedipus Complex" is the conflict between Larry and his father. O'Connor makes the importance of the father-son relationship clear in his title, which references Sigmund Freud's idea of the Oedipus complex, a theory that proposes that boys desire their mothers and therefore view their fathers as competitors. Larry's relationship to his father seems to mirror Freud's theory, since Larry wants all of his beloved mother's attention, and when his father returns from war, Larry despises him for taking up her time and affection. However, Larry's fixation on his father and his anguish over his father's indifference to him suggests that their conflict is not simply over Larry's mother—it's also rooted in Larry's desire for his father's love.

While Larry's mother seems to be the most important person in his life, O'Connor depicts Larry's father's presence and absence as uniquely powerful. For example, while the story's first section describes Larry's blissful wartime experience of being alone with his mother, O'Connor begins with the word "Father" and introduces Larry's relationship to his mother through recollections of his father's absence from the home. In this way, Larry's affection for his mother is shown to be inextricable from his awareness of his father—even though his father isn't often physically there.

Although Larry ostensibly loves his mother and hates his father, his narration shows him to be equally obsessed with both parents—and perhaps even more obsessed with his father. For example, when he and his father walk into town and his father ignores him, it makes Larry so frustrated that he wants to cry. This emotional reaction seems more severe than the simple anger or irritation he shows whenever his mother shushes him or ignores him. Getting teary over his father's indifference therefore suggests a unique investment in earning his father's attention. Furthermore, Larry obsessively observes his father, noticing small details about his appearance and manners—that he is hairy, that his clothes are grimy, and that he's a noisy tea drinker, for instance. He does not seem to observe his mother with the same care, even though she is ostensibly the parent to whom he is more attentive. He describes her as "pretty," for example, but even that bland description comes only in the context of noticing something about his father: that his behavior has made her anxious.

Larry claims that he wants his father to disappear so that he can have his mother all to himself, and his thoughts and actions provide some evidence for this: he fantasizes with Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right about sending father to a Home, for instance, and he tries to physically maneuver his father out of his parents' **bed**. However, Larry's loathing of his father seems also to be rooted in a feeling of which he is not quite conscious: the pain of wanting his father's love while his father ignores him. On several occasions, Larry emulates his father to attract his attention. In one case, he walks around with a pipe and pretends to read the newspaper just like his father does. He's ostensibly vying for his mother's love, but he admits in passing that he wants his father to notice him doing this, too. Larry also imitates his father when he tries to act like he doesn't notice that his father is there—the inverse of how Larry perceives his father to be ignoring Larry's existence. For example, Larry admits to playing with his toys noisily "to show [his] total lack of concern" with his father, and he later pretends not to notice his father but says aloud that he'll leave if another baby comes. This seems like a tactic (after all, feeling ignored has made Larry obsessed with his father, so maybe ignoring his father would earn the man's attention) and it works: the threat about the baby not only earns his father's immediate attention, but also marks a shift in their relationship, the moment at which Larry's father starts being nicer to him.

The story's ending, in which Larry's father—displaced by newborn Sonny—ends up in Larry's bed, cements their uneasy alliance, showing that father and son are coming to terms with one another. Larry asks his father to put his arm around him, and when his father begrudgingly does, Larry complains that it's bony. Nonetheless, he finds the embrace "better than nothing." This seems to be a confirmation that Larry has wanted his father's attention all along—with "nothing" as a baseline, even his father's begrudging attention is a promising start. That the story ends with this moment of growing tenderness between father and son, and with Larry's mother all but forgotten, suggests that the central dynamic of the story has always been between Larry and his father, and that his desire for attention and love was never limited to his mother. He always wanted his father to notice him, he just didn't know how to ask.

COMING OF AGE

In "My Oedipus Complex," O'Connor points out what is perhaps the most painful side effect of one's coming of age, mapping out the gradual demise of a child's innocence and self-importance. Larry lives his first five years in a state of childhood innocence, which his father upends after returning from World War I. In order to remain the center of his mother's universe, Larry attempts to overthrow his father by besting him in a game of adulthood he does not yet know how to play. After Larry learns to imitate his father's manly habits of shaving and smoking pipes, he experiences another growth spurt when his baby brother, Sonny, is born. Still an adolescent, Larry is not yet a man once the story ends. However, Larry is far from the callow juvenile he was at the age of five. While he navigates the changing relationships he has with his mother, father, and baby brother, Larry slowly realizes that he is changing, too.

Before beginning his slow coming of age, Larry lives in a state of childish ignorance. When mentioning his father's visits home during wartime, Larry remarks, "Like Santa Claus he came and went mysteriously." Not only does Larry believe in Santa Claus, but he is also at a stage in life in which much of the world is still unknown to him—including the gravity of his father's occupation as a soldier. Larry also shows his naiveté when he expresses his desire for the family to have a baby. He remarks that a baby would "brighten the home" (as if it were simply décor rather than a life-changing responsibility) and then suggests that families obtain babies by purchasing them, which shows his profound innocence of human reproduction. Furthermore, Larry's interests are characteristic of his age ("trams, ships, and horses"), and he cannot fathom why his father would not be equally interested in them. "I had never met anyone so absorbed in himself as he seemed," Larry says of his father's interest in adult things like talking to men his own age. The irony of this is lost on Larry, as *he* is acting incredibly self-absorbed by expecting his father to tailor his interests to suit his five-year-old son's.

However, as he adapts to his father's presence, Larry begins to see the world in a more complex way. In part, this comes from Larry's mother beginning to be honest with him about serious matters. While earlier in the story she shoos Larry away by saying vaguely that she and his father have "business to discuss," Larry's mother eventually explains their precarious financial situation by admitting that Larry's father needs to earn money or else they'll have to beg. In a surprising act of maturity, Larry reacts to this by vowing to do his best not to jeopardize his family's finances, showing him taking responsibility for his part in the family. As Larry sheds his childhood innocence, he also expects his parents to treat him as a mature person. While he doesn't register much objection to punishments earlier in the story, the first time his father spanks him, he considers it to be an indignity to which he should no longer be subjected. In addition, when his father brings tea for himself and his mother but none for Larry, Larry feels that he, too, should have a cup, since he wants to be "treated as an equal in my own home." Of course, Larry is not an equal—he is a child—but his increasing demands for respect and consideration show him growing up.

Perhaps Larry's most significant maturation is his gradual development of empathy. When Larry first begins his narration, he frequently treats his feet (dubbed "Mrs. Left" and "Mrs. Right") as invisible friends with whom he discusses his thoughts. However, by the end of the story, references to Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right have stopped entirely, suggesting that Larry is not as concerned with having his own thoughts mirrored back at him, and instead he might be growing more interested in the thoughts of others. This is confirmed when Larry demonstrates that he is mature enough to empathize even with his sworn enemy, his father. Throughout the story, there are hints that Larry is beginning to understand his father's emotions, such as his realization that his father's anger comes partially from his jealousy of Larry. Towards the end of the story, though, Larry finds himself not only able to understand his father's emotions, but also to treat him with empathy and care. When Larry's father (displaced by the infant) gets in **bed** with Larry, Larry contemplates this odd situation and realizes the parallel between his own experience and his father's: "After turning me out of the big bed, he had been turned out himself." Suddenly able to empathize with his father's plight, Larry cares for him: he strokes his father, comforts him, and even chooses not to react when his father "snarls." Just as Larry is now able to make room in his bed for his father, he is able to make room for a larger understanding of the world and his role in it. As he no longer has the luxury of viewing himself as the center of his household, Larry—like all children—gradually becomes less self-involved, more empathetic, and more adult.

CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

Since Larry is a child during the events of "My Oedipus Complex," he naturally has a childish perspective: he can be immature, self-centered, silly, and naïve. Throughout the story, this youthful perspective puts him at odds with his adult parents, and their success at parenting Larry depends on their ability to understand him on his own terms. While Larry's mother tries hard to understand Larry's perspective and meet him where he is, Larry's father seems unable to understand his young son's needs, beliefs, and behavior, which leads to bitter conflict. Larry's relationship with his parents suggests the importance of understanding children's perspectives and meeting them where they are—something that the story's narration also emphasizes. Larry narrates the story of his childhood from the perspective of adulthood, but he never imposes his adult understanding or judgment onto the events of the story—he merely

communicates how he felt as a child. By portraying childhood Larry as a smart, funny, and even dignified person, "My Oedipus Complex" shows the value of respecting children and taking them on their own terms.

Larry's father has difficulty respecting his young son and seeing the world from his perspective, which causes troubles in their home. When Larry's father returns from World War I, he views his return as a restoration of the family's previous way of life. He replaces his uniform with a suit, takes back his side of the **bed**, and begins to reconnect with his wife. What Larry's father fails to understand is that for Larry, his return is not a restoration, but a disruption. For the first five years of his life, Larry rarely saw his father, and was essentially raised by a single mother. Accustomed to having his mother's complete devotion, Larry dislikes the idea of sharing her with someone else, let alone someone he does not really know. Since Larry's father doesn't bother to understand his son's perspective, the two lock horns throughout the story. This is particularly bad in their conflict over the bed. While Larry's father was away, cuddling with his mother in the big bed was perhaps the most treasured part of his daily routine. Not stopping to consider this, Larry's father shouts at Larry for climbing into the bed and disrupting his sleep and then spanks his son, damaging the family dynamic. Even when Larry's father spends one-on-one time with his son, it is to satisfy his wife's request. While on a walk through town, he is unable to indulge Larry's interests, and he talks to men his own age instead of his young son. When Larry makes a point of sulking and tugging on his father's pants for attention, his father responds with "amiable inattention" or "a grin of amusement" rather than acknowledging why his son feels the need to act out.

Unlike her husband, Larry's mother tries to listen to her son and take his feelings into consideration, which allows her to disperse tension in the house. Adult Larry recalls her with affection, suggesting that he appreciates her efforts to understand him. The story makes clear, however, that for an adult to understand a child takes intention and effort. While her husband is at war, Larry's mother makes her bed available to Larry and spends hours and hours each day listening to him talk about his interests and plans. Even when Larry's father returns and Larry's presence in the bed threatens to wake him, Larry's mother reaches out to feel for her son and makes space for him. At one point, Larry's mother even defends Larry to her husband, begging him to understand Larry's behavior by explaining, "Don't you see the child isn't used to you?" Larry's mother sympathizes with Larry's struggle to adapt to his father's homecoming, which she also demonstrates by quietly taking Larry's juvenile actions in stride, like when he drinks all her tea or proclaims his plans to marry her. Furthermore, in contrast to Larry's father ignoring or laughing at his son's actions, Larry's mother tries to respect Larry and make him feel included by explaining adult issues. For instance, when Larry asks if God would send his father back to the war, Larry's mother stops to think before responding. Rather than yelling at Larry for wanting his father sent away, she tells Larry that the war is over and that God wouldn't want another one.

By portraying Larry's mother as a more sympathetic figure than his father, O'Connor implicitly advocates for respecting and understanding children, and the story's narration itself underscores the importance of listening to childhood perspectives. After all, while the story's narrator is technically Larry when he's grown up, Larry recalls his childhood without imposing his adult perspective. Throughout the story, adult Larry has plenty of opportunities to criticize and make fun of child Larry, but he never does. When Larry disagrees with his mother about having a baby, for instance, he buys his mother's fib that babies are obtained through being bought for "seventeen and six." Rather than reflecting on his gullibility, adult Larry follows child Larry's thought process, calling his mother "simple" for not settling for a more affordable baby. Furthermore, child Larry fails to see the connection between baby making and the fact that his parents share a bed. When narrating this, adult Larry doesn't make fun of his youthful confusion, but rather leans into it, telling the reader of how he tried to spy on his parents' "unhealthy habit of sleeping together" but didn't find anything suspicious that he could see. Cementing his lack of knowledge on the subject, Larry informs his parents that he plans to not only marry his mother, but also have "lots and lots of babies" with her. At no point does adult Larry pause his storytelling to snicker at or condemn this. Instead, he speaks from the perspective of child Larry, who is very pleased that his mother seems to respect what he has said.

By consistently understanding and respecting childhood Larry's perspective, adult Larry depicts the perspectives of children as interesting, dynamic, and worthwhile. Implicitly, this instructs readers to take children seriously and try to understand them, rather than imposing their own views and judgments onto children. This includes actions that aren't innocent. In retaliation to his father's threats to spank him, for instance, Larry boldly instructs his father to "smack his own" bottom. Larry is also guilty of pinching baby Sonny to prevent him from falling asleep at times he finds inconvenient. Still, adult Larry never indicts child Larry for his behavior. When recalling his schemes to disrupt his father's sleep, adult Larry does not offer an apology or admission of guilt, but attempts to explain—perhaps even excuse—the situation by describing his father's shouting and conduct ("[Father] looked very wicked"). Rather than simply telling readers that child Larry's behavior is, at times, reprehensible, adult Larry chooses to *show* readers this, allowing child Larry's actions to speak for themselves.

One of the biggest lessons Larry learns as he matures is to empathize with others. In becoming more adult, Larry loses some of his self-centeredness to make room for his parents' perspectives. This makes it all the more important, then, for

Larry's mother and father to reciprocate their son's efforts by considering how *Larry* sees things. Child Larry is clever and witty, but he is still young and unaware of many things (war and God among them). It is therefore the responsibility of Larry's parents to educate their son about what he does not yet know, and make room for Larry to teach them in the process. In showing child Larry's perspective in such detail, O'Connor sends a message that making the effort to understand a child's perspective results in better parents as well as more compassionate adults.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BEDS

The beds in Larry's house represent emotional connection between members of the family; those who share a bed are close, and those who are removed from bed are growing apart. At the beginning of the story, while Larry's father is away at war, Larry and his mother share a bed. Not coincidentally, this is the period in the story when they are closest; Larry tells his mother all his ideas, troubles, and schemes, and she listens and devotes herself solely to him. After Larry's father returns from the war, however, he reclaims his side of the bed to rekindle his connection with Larry's mother. Larry tries to sleep between them, but complains of his father taking up "more than his fair share of the bed." On several occasions, Larry complains of the "uncomfortable squeeze" between his parents, implying that the bed is only comfortably suited for two people. The limited amount of space in the master bed mirrors the way Larry's mother has limited capacity for emotional connection. Just as three people cannot fit in the bed, Larry's mother cannot devote all of herself to both her husband and her son, even if both of them demand this. Furthermore, once Sonny is born, his mother channels all of her attention to the baby, and the family's sleeping arrangements reflect this change. Larry, who has distanced himself from his mother for her increasing strictness and "silly" behavior, is back to sleeping in his own bed, while Larry's father has also grown apart from his wife as she has paid more attention to the baby. One night, when Sonny is sleeping in the master bed, Larry's father decides to sleep next to Larry in Larry's bed. For Larry and his father to share a bed marks the start of their friendship; by sharing a bed, they are—both literally and symbolically—getting closer.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1982.

My Oedipus Complex Quotes

> The war was the most peaceful period of my life.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right, Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

As Larry shares memories from his younger years, he decides that his life was at its calmest during World War I. He is clear that this period of peace coincides with a time when he and his mother were alone together, since Larry's father was away fighting in the war. The daily events Larry describes are simple and pleasant: rising at dawn, taking in life's possibilities, having heart-to-hearts with his feet (Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right), and spending the day as his mother's companion. It is significant that the only figures Larry mentions in this era of peace are himself, his mother, and his feet—Larry's father and baby brother, Sonny, are noticeably absent. That Larry would associate World War I with peace implies that the period *after* the war—the period of his father's return as well as the birth of Sonny—marks the beginning of Larry's personal war at home. Larry's childish perspective is a selfish one; his words are completely tone-deaf to the global destruction brought by the First World War, showing that Larry's view of the world is limited by his own interests.

> Ours was the only house in the terrace without a new baby, and Mother said we couldn't afford one till Father came back from the war because they cost seventeen and six. That showed how simple she was.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), The Geneys, Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

There is a great deal of irony in Larry calling his mother "simple," since Larry himself is being childish here while his mother is quick on her feet in thinking up ways to deflect his

questions about reproduction. Larry's childish outlook is plain: not only does he view adding a baby as a way of brightening the home and keeping up with the neighborhood trend (rather than a life-changing responsibility), but he also buys his mother's false explanation that people obtain babies by purchasing them. Larry may dismiss his mother as simple-minded, but her quick thinking and clever excuse reveal to the reader that Larry's mother is quite smart.

Although Larry is fooled by his mother, it's noteworthy that he makes the case for a baby using impressive logic. Larry knows that the Geneys up the road have just had a baby. He also knows that they are too poor to afford "seventeen and six," deducing that they must have bought a cheaper baby. To Larry, the solution is simple: if a bargain baby is good enough for the Geneys, there is no reason his mother should continue to hold out for a more expensive one. His combination of naivete and logic shows developmental the stage he's in where he's caught between the worlds of childish thinking and more mature thinking.

❝ Father had an extraordinary capacity for amiable inattention. I sized him up and wondered would I cry, but he seemed to be too remote to be annoyed even by that.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

Even though Larry is skeptical of his father when he returns, he is excited at the idea of going into town with him. Larry's positive attitude disappears partly because he is used to going on walks with his mother, who humors Larry's interests, and directly confronts him when he starts throwing tantrums. Larry's father doesn't yet know how to interact with his son, so he conducts himself differently than Larry's mother does.

When Larry's father brushes past the trains and horses Larry wants to admire, he puts Larry in a bad mood. Larry's father pushes Larry's buttons even further by refusing to acknowledge Larry's pouting. Regardless of how hard he tugs at his father's clothes or how loudly he huffs, Larry can't get a reaction out of his father. Larry's walk through town with his father marks his first painful rejection. When his father was away at war, Larry wasn't at risk of being rejected because there were no opportunities for the two to connect. Now that his father is home, Larry is eager to share his interests with him. This makes it all the more disappointing for Larry when his father not only ignores Larry's interests, but also Larry himself.

Larry's desperation for his father's attention also underscores that, even as Larry professes to want his father to go away, it seems as though he actually really cares about his father's love and attention. Perhaps this moment of feeling rejected (and his profound emotion over the rejection, as Larry is on the verge of tears) leads Larry to believe that it would be better to harden himself towards his father and try to banish him than to feel rejected by him again.

❝ "It's not God who makes wars, but bad people."

Related Characters: Mother (Mummy) (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Larry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

Larry has had enough of his father living at home full-time, so he asks his mother if God would send his father back to the war if he prayed hard enough for it. Not wanting to dismiss her son's feelings, Larry's mother tells Larry that God wouldn't do that because World War I is over. Larry proves just how little he understands about war and its consequences, proposing that God make another war since he has enough power. Larry's mother puts an end to Larry's questions by saying that God wouldn't like that at all—in fact, God isn't even responsible for making wars. Larry's mother loads her words with a double meaning. When she explains the origin of war, she is speaking not only about the general idea of war, but also the tension brewing in her own family. Larry's mother chooses the term "bad people" carefully, indirectly communicating a message to her son: since "bad people" make wars, Larry should try to be a good person by not starting a war with his father.

❝ I was sickened by the sentimentality of her "poor Daddy." I never liked that sort of gush; it always struck me as insincere.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Larry is a very perceptive child, so he can tell when he is being condescended to by adults. Whenever Larry's mother waters down an adult explanation by simply telling Larry that "poor Daddy" shouldn't be interrupted, or that "poor Daddy" needs sleep, Larry picks up on her artificiality. Although he's young, Larry is clever enough to follow a logical argument, begging the question of why neither of his parents sit him down and speak to him like a competent individual. Larry's mother's use of "poor Daddy" gets at the root of one of Larry's biggest frustrations: his parents won't take him seriously. Whenever Larry feels he is being condescended to or ignored, he acts out. Larry's mother is at her most effective when she speaks to Larry honestly. When she discusses war with her son, Larry internalizes her words because they are said plainly and without fluff; however, now that his mother is asking that he go easy on "poor Daddy," Larry doesn't accept her request. It isn't until Larry's mother speaks frankly about *the reason* for her husband's need for sleep that Larry finally listens and obliges.

> I simply longed for the warmth and depth of the big featherbed.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

There is nothing "simple" about what Larry wants. Larry claims that all he needs to be content is to curl up in the big bed, but he is really talking about the "warmth and depth" of his mother's affection. The big bed is only warmer than Larry's bed because his mother cuddles him in it, and Larry becomes closer to his mother when he lies next to her and spills his stories and plans. Therefore, when he says he wants to be in her bed, what he really wants is to be close to her.

What's more is that being in the big featherbed isn't enough to satisfy him. The addition of Larry's father to the bed has arguably made it warmer, but that isn't actually what Larry cares about. In Larry's mind, the big featherbed represents the time he felt most connected to his mother (not coincidentally, the same period his father was away from home fighting in the war). Now that everything has changed, Larry feels like his entire world has been turned upside down. Struggling to adjust to his father being home and his drifting apart from his mother, all Larry can do is long for the time he spent each morning curled up in the big featherbed with his mother's complete devotion.

> "Mummy," I said with equal firmness. "I think it would be healthier for Daddy to sleep in his own bed."

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

Larry views the bed conflict with his father in simple terms: if his father wants to sleep that badly, he can do it somewhere else. The way Larry sees it, he wants to talk with his mother (and thinks that his mother obviously wants to talk with him), so there is no reason for Larry to tiptoe around his father's sleep schedule when his father could make everyone happy by sleeping in his own bed. Needless to say, Larry's logic is full of problems, the biggest one being that it would be healthier for *Larry* to sleep in his own bed. While Larry has gotten this idea from something his mother said to him (that they shouldn't share a bed because it would be healthier for them to have separate ones), he has clearly misunderstood her meaning. It's healthier for a child, developmentally speaking, to learn to sleep on his own, while it's healthier in a marriage to sleep together to cement a bond. Larry doesn't understand the distinction here, though, and in a way it's quite clever that he turns his mother's words and logic against her to try to get what he wants. Larry's mother is so taken aback by what Larry says that she can't even come up with an explanation. She can only repeat herself, saying that Larry needs to either be

quiet or return to his own bed.

> All his previous shouting was as nothing to these obscene words referring to my person. They really made my blood boil. "Smack your own!" I screamed hysterically. "Smack your own! Shut up! Shut up!"

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

O'Connor juxtaposes the voices of adult Larry and child Larry, resulting in a funny and dramatic change of tone. As adult Larry reflects on a heated argument between him and his father, he explains his emotions in a detailed and eloquent way. His father's words aren't just bad; they're "obscene," which is clearly the vocabulary of an adult. And Larry's father wasn't talking about Larry, but was "referring to [his] person," a phrasing a child would never use. After adult Larry explains to the reader exactly how he felt in that moment, child Larry takes over with a not-quite-as-classy "Smack your own!" He doesn't leave it there, repeating himself and following it up with two demands for his father to "Shut up!" Even though adult Larry is in charge of narrating the story, he always leaves room for child Larry to take over. The brilliance of combining the two perspectives is made clear here: no matter how artfully adult Larry is able to explain his emotions or reactions, nothing compares to the directness of young Larry's voice.

> [...] but the sheer indignity of being struck at all by a stranger, a total stranger who had cajoled his way back from the war into our big bed as a result of my innocent intercession, made me completely dotty.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

Larry has just been spanked by his father as punishment for kicking him, throwing a fit, and talking back to him, yet Larry would have the reader believe that *he* the real victim in all of this. More than being insulted by being struck, Larry is mortified at being struck by "a stranger, a total stranger." At first glance, Larry calling his father a stranger seems like a stretch; however, Larry's father has been away at war for most of his life, essentially making him a stranger to his young son. Larry doesn't know enough about war to choose a more appropriate word for his father's return, so he makes the outrageous claim that his father had "cajoled his way back" from World War I. Furthermore, there was nothing "innocent" about Larry kicking his father in the bed, but Larry brushes past this to make his point. Larry's complaint is self-righteous and inaccurate to be sure, but there is some merit to what he says. Larry tried to protect the father he barely knows from ruining the routine he's grown up with, and got humiliated for it by the very man who disrupted his life.

> "I'm going to marry you," I said quietly. Father gave a great guffaw out of him, but he didn't take me in. I knew it must only be pretense. And Mother, in spite of everything, was pleased. I felt she was probably relieved to know that one day Father's hold on her would be broken.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

Larry doesn't see why his mother would choose to be with his father, so he reasons that the only explanation is that his mother is being held against her will. Up to this point, Larry has exhausted himself trying to overthrow his father: he's thrown tantrums, kicked his father, created fake news stories, smoked pipes, and even yelled at his father to smack his own bottom, but to no avail. When Larry finally delivers his most powerful attack, he doesn't scream or kick. He speaks "quietly" to announce that he plans to marry his mother (thereby replacing his father) when he grows up. Despite Larry's father writing off his proposal by letting out "a great guffaw," Larry insists that his father must secretly feel nervous at the idea of being ousted. Larry also gives himself creative license in interpreting his mother's reaction. From Larry's childish perspective, his mother doesn't show that she's pleased because she's flattered or

amused. Larry is sure that his mother wants to accept his proposal, and can't wait for the day she frees herself from her current husband.

This is the story's most deliberate invocation of its title; in the original story of Oedipus, Oedipus kills his father and accidentally marries his mother. Here, however, Larry is a stand-in for Oedipus who (metaphorically) wants to kill his father and outright desires to marry his mother. Of course, this is a childish farce rather than a Greek tragedy, so the echo of Oedipus is meant to be funny.

> I couldn't understand why the child wouldn't sleep at the proper time, so whenever Mother's back was turned I woke him.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Sonny, Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Larry has done a lot of growing up since his father's return from the war, so much so that he is now in his father's former position of feeling annoyed by a child younger than himself. However, he is not yet mature enough to put his own desires aside in order to be considerate of Sonny's needs. While Larry himself was greatly offended by his father trying to impose his own sleep schedule on Larry and the family (by requesting that Larry sleep in his own bed and not wake up him early), now Larry finds himself in the same position, pinching Sonny so that the infant will sleep on a schedule closer to Larry's own. Larry isn't quite mature enough to reflect on his previous behavior with his father, but he is aware enough to understand that waking his little brother is wrong, so he only does it when he thinks his mother isn't paying attention.

> It was his turn now. After turning me out of the big bed, he had been turned out himself.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Sonny, Mother (Mummy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

When Larry realizes that his father has left the big bed, he considers it part of a natural cycle. Just like Larry's mother gave Larry's spot in the bed to her husband, she is now filling the spot with the new baby. Larry's logic isn't entirely accurate; unlike Larry, who was forced to leave the big bed, Larry's father is electing to leave because he can't take any more of Sonny crying in the middle of the night.

Because his parents didn't tell him otherwise, Larry still thinks that he was forced to leave the big bed because of his father. It's true that the return of Larry's father was *partly* responsible for Larry being removed from the big bed, but Larry's father didn't turn Larry out as he claims. What Larry doesn't see (or perhaps doesn't want to believe) is that he would have had to move to his own bed at some point anyway. Regardless of whether or not his father is at home, Larry is slowly growing into a man, and shouldn't continue to share a bed with his mother.

This moment does show some increased maturity on Larry's part, however, as it shows him finally empathizing with others. Larry is able to see how his father's situation parallels his own and give the man some sympathy, even though the two had previously been mortal enemies. It's a big moment for Larry, who has generally prioritized his own emotions over everyone else's.

> At Christmas he went out of his way to buy me a really nice model railway.

Related Characters: Larry (speaker), Father (Daddy, Mick), Sonny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

Larry informs the reader earlier in the story that he is fond of trains. When he and his father have their first outing together, Larry becomes upset when his father fails to take notice of this interest. This marks a turning point for his relationship with his father, causing Larry to treat his father with hostility, since Larry feels that his father is hostile to him. After the birth of Sonny, Larry's father begins to pay more attention to Larry. The last full scene Larry narrates is

of his father gawkily putting his arm around him in bed, both of them having been dethroned by the new baby. O'Connor ends his story with a time jump, just one sentence long, to imply that Larry and his father are slowly developing a closer relationship. Larry's father gifts Larry a "really nice model railway," a choice that shows he finally recognizes what Larry's interests are and is trying to connect with Larry on Larry's own terms. The phrase Larry uses, saying that his father "went out of his way," also suggests that Larry sees and appreciates his father's efforts to connect with him.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

MY OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Larry's father served in World War I, which meant that Larry didn't see him much until he turned five. In wartime, his father would come and go mysteriously "like Santa Claus." When his father would visit, Larry would squeeze into **bed** with him and Larry's mother, which was not an easy fit. When his father left, he would leave behind souvenirs from war—knives, bullet cases, badges—that Larry would rifle through.

The first five years of a child's life play a large part in their development, foreshadowing that the long absences of Larry's father will have a big influence on Larry. At this stage in Larry's life, his father no more familiar to him than Santa Claus: Larry's father is described only by his entrances and exits, and the trail of knickknacks he leaves behind.

Wartime was peaceful for Larry. In the mornings, he would wake with the dawn, full of energy, and gossip with Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right, nicknames he gives to his feet. Unable to get his mother to comply with his request for a baby, Larry vents to Mrs. Left and Mrs. Right; according to Larry's mother, the family cannot afford a baby until his father returns home. Dismissing his mother as simple, Larry insists that their neighbors, the Geneys, recently had a baby, so there must be cheaper babies on the market than the one his mother wants.

O'Connor is quick to show that Larry's character has many sides. Larry says that wartime is peaceful for him, revealing that he is too young and self-involved to understand issues outside of himself. Despite his lack of awareness, Larry is charismatic and imaginative, making clever use of his feet by talking to them as a way of working through problems. Both trusting and naïve, Larry believes his mother's false explanation of buying babies. In addition to being a cute story, the anecdote about the Geneys makes Larry appear likeable and endearing. This strategic move primes the reader to root for Larry as the story progresses.

Larry grows accustomed to moving from his **bed** to his mother's in the morning. Somewhere between warming up beside his mother, plotting out his day, and eating breakfast, Larry takes a brief nap. Each day, Larry accompanies his mother into town, running errands and attending mass. Following his mother's example, Larry prays for the safe return of his father. "Little, indeed, did I know what I was praying for!" he remarks.

There is a stark contrast between how close Larry is to each of his parents: Larry defines his father by his absence and distance, but his mother by her presence and attention. Not being able to predict how his father's homecoming will affect him, Larry simply does what his mother tells him and prays for his father to return safely. By adding the disclaimer, "Little, indeed, did I know what I was praying for!" Larry hints that the return of his father will be a disaster.

One morning, Larry wakes up to find his father in the master **bed**. When Larry sees his father change into a suit instead of his uniform, he realizes his father has returned for good. He's less interesting to Larry this way. As Larry's father speaks solemnly with his mother, Larry worries about her—anxiety makes her less pretty, he thinks. He interrupts his father several times, but each time his mother shushes him.

As soon as Larry sees his father as a civilian, the magic is gone—he's no longer a Santa Claus-like presence, but rather a regular part of their life. Larry has no idea what his father is saying to his mother in this moment, concluding only that he doesn't like the negative effect their discussion has on his mother's appearance. To Larry's parents, Larry's interruptions are irritating; however, from Larry's perspective, they are valiant attempts to keep his mother from getting upset and damaging her good looks.

Larry's mother has her husband take Larry on a walk through town, and Larry's hopes for improved relations are quickly dashed. His father is not interested in things like trains and horses; instead, he wants to lean on walls and speak with men his own age. As Larry tries to get his father's attention, his father ignores him, which makes Larry want to cry.

Larry's mother senses that her son and husband would benefit from one-on-one bonding, but the outing she suggests does more to expose how disconnected Larry and his father are from each other than it does to bring them together. Larry's father walks past the things Larry enjoys because he doesn't know how to relate to his son. Like Larry struggles to adapt to his father's return, Larry's father clings to what is familiar; he is a soldier recently back from the war, so he feels more comfortable talking with adult men than with a son he barely knows. Because Larry perceives his father's awkwardness as a rejection of him, he becomes angry and hurt.

At teatime, Larry's mother and father converse again, with his father reading aloud from the newspaper. Larry feels that this is unfair; while he is prepared to fight his father for his mother's attention, the newspaper gives his father built-in content for conversation. Nonetheless, Larry tries to change the subject a few times, but his mother shuts him down. From this, Larry decides that his father is either a better conversationalist than he, or that his father has ensnared his mother in an impossible trap.

Larry can't separate his mother's roles as a mother and wife, making him think that he and his father are rivals in a love triangle. Larry calls foul play when his father shares bits from the newspaper because his own reading ability is limited to a child's level. Larry tries to combat this by offering new things to talk about, but he ultimately can't accept that his mother wants to—and is able to—devote quality time to both him and his father.

Saying goodnight to his mother, Larry asks whether God might send his father back to war if he prayed for it. Larry's mother thinks and then says no, because the war has ended. When Larry asks if God could make another war, his mother says that only "bad people" make wars, which makes Larry think that God isn't worth the hype.

Larry finally has alone time with his mother, but chooses to make the discussion about his father: Larry's father is not there, and Larry wants to keep it that way. When Larry's mother answers his question, she masks any anger, shock, or heartbreak she may be feeling. Instead of fussing or laughing, she takes time to consider Larry's reasons for wanting his father sent back to the war, showing her efforts to consider her son's point of view.

The next morning, Larry wakes up full of energy and eager to share his plans with his mother. He climbs into **bed**, but finds his father taking up "more than his fair share" of room. He kicks his father to move him, but when he tries to speak with his mother, she tells him not to wake his father. "Poor daddy" is tired, she claims, which Larry finds an insufficient excuse. This conversation wakes Larry's father, who seems grouchy. Larry is stunned when his mother speaks in a timid voice, trying to placate her husband by asking if he wants tea.

Larry complains that his father is taking up "more than his fair share" of the bed, when the truth is that Larry no longer has claim to his parents' bed. To Larry's parents, having Larry sleep in the big bed was a phase only made possible by Larry's father being away at war; however, to Larry, sleeping in the big bed is all he's ever known. This makes it even more jarring for Larry when his mother gushes about "poor daddy" and compromises Larry's routine for his father's convenience.

Previously, Larry told his mother that the two of them sharing a **bed** would be more efficient, but Larry's mother said that having separate beds is "healthier." Now, Larry is infuriated that his father shares his mother's bed without any attention to her health.

Larry's mother tries to tell Larry that it is "healthier"—meaning more natural—for a son to sleep separately from his mother, but Larry misunderstands her, thinking that it is bad for his mother's physical health to share a bed with anyone. To Larry, his father sharing a bed with his mother is evidence of his father's selfishness.

Larry's father gets out of **bed** and brings tea for himself and for Larry's mother. Larry wants a cup of tea, and his mother offers some of hers, but Larry isn't satisfied; he wants to be treated "as an equal in my own home." Out of spite, he drinks all his mother's tea.

It doesn't occur to Larry's father extend his kind gesture to his son, making Larry feel left out. Larry's mother thinks of her son and tries to include him, but it's too late. Larry doesn't want his mother's scraps; he wants the same consideration his parents give to each other. Instead of confronting his father for excluding him, Larry immaturely punishes his mother (with passive aggression) for not being able to give him what he wants.

Larry's mother tucks Larry in for the night, making him promise not to disturb "poor Daddy" in the morning. She reminds him of Miss MacCarthy at the Post Office, who gave the family their army pension during the war. Now that the war is over, Larry's father must get a proper night's rest so he can provide for the family—otherwise, they will have to beg. Larry understands the gravity of the situation, and he resolves to sleep in his own **bed**.

This exchange shows the mutual respect Larry and his mother have for each other. Larry's mother doesn't fuss at her son to stop interrupting his father's sleep, but calmly explains why *Larry's father needs sleep. She lays out the family's financial situation in a way that Larry can easily understand, and shows Larry that his actions are important. Larry responds maturely by considering the issue, and he decides to cooperate for his family's sake, which shows his increasing ability to consider the needs of others.*

Even though he tries, Larry can't resist the temptation of going to his parents' **bed**. Larry's mother permits him to stay so long as he doesn't talk. Not accepting this, Larry says that his father should have his own bed since he wants to sleep and Larry wants to talk. He kicks his father, jolting him awake. When his mother tries to lift him and return him to his room, Larry begins shrieking in protest.

Even though his mother offers him half of what he wants, Larry refuses to compromise. He is fed up with his father intruding on his relationship with his mother, so he resorts to literally kicking him out. Larry interprets being picked up by his mother as a sign that she has chosen Larry's father over him, so he screams at the whole situation.

Larry's father shouts at his son and says that it's time for Larry to break his habit of throwing tantrums. Stunned at his father's new and startling tone, Larry stops his screaming. He ignores his father's threat to spank him, telling him to spank himself. Larry's father delivers a lifeless spanking as Larry's mother watches in dismay. After this humiliation, Larry comes to two conclusions: that his father must be jealous of Larry, and that his mother deserves to feel pain for being stuck in the middle.

This is the first time anyone has threatened Larry without coddling him, which wounds Larry's pride. Since Larry's father has chosen to yell at his son in a more grownup way, Larry responds by ignoring his father's authority and yelling back. The presence of Larry's mother saves Larry from a harsher spanking, but Larry still blames her; Larry thinks that if his mother had sided with him sooner, he wouldn't have been humiliated at all. After demonstrating so much indifference toward his son, Larry's father finally unleashes his feelings, causing Larry to realize that he isn't alone in his jealousy.

The aftermath of Larry's spanking is gruesome. Larry and his father shamelessly scheme to steal the attention of Larry's mother. After Larry's father catches Larry going through his war curios, he becomes upset. Larry's mother mediates by reminding Larry that, since his father doesn't play with his toys, Larry should not play with "Daddy's toys" unless given permission. Larry's father pouts that his prized belongings are not toys.

O'Connor reminds the reader that one doesn't have to be a child to act like a child. In wanting to maintain his wife's affection, Larry's father reverts to juvenile behavior. When Larry's mother tries to explain the golden rule to Larry, she refers to her husband's war curios as "Daddy's toys." Rather than taking this moment to learn about Larry and appreciate his wife's efforts to arbitrate, Larry's father sulks like an angst-filled adolescent, all because his wife doesn't recognize the significance of his property.

Larry tries to figure out what makes his father so appealing to his mother. Even though Larry thinks he himself is a better catch, he tries to take up some of his father's habits. He makes up pieces of news to share with his mother, and tries smoking his father's pipes until he gets caught. Larry starts spying on his parents to investigate their sleeping habits. He pretends to talk to himself so that his parents won't catch on to his snooping, but he is disappointed when "they were never up to anything that [Larry] could see."

Even though Larry insists that he is superior to his father, he begins to model himself after him. Larry says that he is only copying his father's habits to beat him at his own game, but the close attention he pays to his father shows that he might not dislike him as much as he thinks—in fact, maybe he does want to be more like his father. When Larry spies on his mother and father in bed, he thinks that he's outsmarted his parents by creating a cover. It never occurs to him that the reason he fails to see anything is that Larry's parents have modified their behavior whenever they know Larry is watching them.

Larry proclaims in front of both parents that he is going to marry his mother. His father laughs in disbelief, while his mother smiles and responds, "Won't that be nice?" Larry agrees, saying that he and his mother will have lots of babies. Larry's mother pledges that a baby should be along shortly to give Larry a companion. Larry is satisfied that his mother is finally respecting what he wants.

All Larry knows is that he loves his mother and wants to insult his father. He hasn't the slightest idea about marriage or baby making, but is pleased at the reactions he gets from his parents. Larry sees his father's dismissive laugh as acknowledgement of Larry as a viable threat. When Larry's mother reacts positively to Larry's proposal and confirms that there will be a new baby, Larry finally feels validated, showing how juvenile he still is. Getting his wish of his father coming home didn't make his life better, which should give him some clue that getting his wish about the baby might be similarly complicated.

The new baby arrives. Much to Larry's surprise and displeasure, Sonny cries constantly and rarely sleeps. Tired of hearing "Don't-wake-Sonny!" Larry pinches his baby brother when his mother isn't looking in order to recalibrate his sleeping schedule. His mother punishes Larry and becomes more impatient with him.

Sonny is a baby, making him selfish, demanding, and immune to Larry's influence. Larry resents Sonny for stealing his mother's attention, and blames him for sleeping on a different schedule. When his mother disciplines him for pinching the baby, Larry becomes even more upset that Sonny has managed to widen the gap between him and his mother—Sonny, it seems, is the new threat in the house.

Larry is playing in the garden when he sees his father come home from work. Larry pretends to talk to himself, threatening to walk out "if another bloody baby comes into [Larry's] house." Larry's father overhears and gives Larry a warning, but Larry insists that it doesn't count since he was only chatting with himself. Larry's father begins to be nicer to Larry. This is not surprising to him, since his mother is acting silly and gives all her attention to Sonny. Larry senses camaraderie with his father, praising his "fine intelligence" and ability to see past Sonny's cries for attention.

When Larry's father overhears Larry's threat to leave the house if another baby comes, he makes a show of letting Larry know that what he said isn't acceptable. Underneath his stern reply, however, Larry's father sees that Larry is having a hard time adjusting to Sonny's arrival, so he starts treating Larry with more kindness. Larry doesn't see a connection between what he said and his father's new behavior, believing that the sudden change is due to his mother's sickening attitude about Sonny. Larry is convinced that the enemy of his enemy is his friend, and since Sonny is now his enemy and his father is also Sonny's enemy, Larry believes that he and his father now have something in common.

A startled Larry wakes up one evening to find that he is not alone in his **bed**. He thinks that his mother has finally "come to her senses and left Father for good." After hearing her voice comforting a crying Sonny in the next room, Larry realizes it isn't his mother beside him. He sees his father, "wide awake, breathing hard and apparently as mad as hell." Larry feels a rush of compassion, realizing that now his father was the one being kicked out of bed for another man (or, in this case, the new baby). Larry comforts his father.

Even though Larry is starting to think better of his father, he is willing to toss him aside at a moment's notice if his mother chooses Larry. When Larry finds his father in such a foul mood, he suddenly flips out of pity. Larry equates his experience of being thrown out of the big bed to his father's. He doesn't understand that his father is choosing *to leave in order to avoid Sonny's crying, and thinks that his mother has simply phased both of them out for the newest man in her life. Despite his misunderstanding, Larry treats his father with compassion, letting go of his anger toward him. This shows Larry's growing empathy, a sign of maturity.*

Larry's father grumpily inquires why Larry is also awake, and Larry asks his father to hug him. Larry's father begrudgingly puts his arm around his son. His arm is bony, but Larry is nonetheless comforted. Larry shares that, the following Christmas, his father "went out of his way" to buy an expensive model railway for Larry.

Larry's father is unsure of how to respond to Larry comforting him, but he does his best to show his son affection. His arm is bony but better than nothing, paralleling his efforts to bond with Larry: the process is off to a somewhat awkward start, but still holds promise. Larry confirms that he and his father have gradually grown closer since then, ending his story by recognizing the thoughtful Christmas gift his father bought for him.

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