INNOCENCE AND ABUSE IN “MY OEDIPUS COMPLEX”
A Short Story by Frank O’Connor

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Abstract
The story is about an adult narrator relating about his past childhood. The son of a soldier, he was spoiled by mother in time of war, but felt alienated from her in time of peace. The ensuing conflicts and language are analyzed using psychoanalytical theory, which states a child has to go through a period in life when he has erotic attachment to the parent of the opposite sex and is hostile to the parent of the same sex (Freud in Richard: 845). To reveal innocence and abuse inherent in the conflicts, events are examined using the points of view of the narrator when he was still a small kid and when he is a soldier, now adult. It is found out that outwardly the main character is abusive, but in reality innocent.

Key words: abusive, innocent, alienated

Introduction
The title above is a contradiction, for innocence means the state of being blameless, free of guilt, unpretentious, whereas abuse is just the opposite: misuse, coarse and insulting language (Merriam Webster Thesaurus). Oedipus Complex is a psychoanalysis term to mean one’s tendency to be close to the parent of the opposite sex and hostile to parent of the same sex. According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language the term means “the unresolved desire of a child for sexual gratification through the parent of the opposite sex, especially the desire of the son through his mother (923).”

The story is about a husband and wife together with their son. The son and father - the former now narrator in the story and telling his own past - seldom sees each other: the
son being spoiled by mother; and father a soldier, in the battle field. The story begins when mother and son go to attend Mass and pray for the return of father from the war. Ironically, tensions and complication arise as the prayer is granted. The son feels alienated: a ‘stranger’ wins the heart of his mother, who usually lavishes affection on him. Meanwhile, after being so long away from family and tired of war, the father needs peace, rest and privacy with his wife, but this is denied of by the disturbing and disturbed kid. Tension keeps rising between father and son as the father needs rest, and son confused by the presence of a stranger “interfering” his family. Mother is equally faced with hard dilemma. She is torn between providing attention, rest and peace to the tired husband and maintaining attention to the stirred son. This paper discusses the ‘trio’s problem, language, and behaviors which are subject to misinterpretations, either Innocence or Abuse.

Analysis of the Characters

1. Son

Learning that, like other children in his neighborhood, this particular kid is also proud of having father, but alas is now in the war. Yearning for his return, the mother and son go to Mass to pray for his safe return. Aunt is also asked to do the same. Prayer is later granted, but turns a big irony for the kid. Soon after they return from Mass to thank God for Dad’s comeback, he notices his father’s casualness at home and closeness to mother but her distancing from himself. Her refrain “I am talking to father (40)’ doesn’t mean anything to him. It even makes him feel more detached.¹

The boy cannot stand the change and partiality. His frustration is punctuated by paradoxical remarks, remarks that are contradictory to common sense: “Mummy, do you think if I prayed hard, God would send Daddy back to the war?” (41) When mother says he wouldn’t because there is no more war, he continues: “But Mummy, wouldn’t God make another war if he liked?” (41). From these quotations we may construe that the kid doesn’t understand the meaning of ‘war’ at all, for war is destructive, therefore undesirable and averted; but the son says out those things of his yearning to be together again as usual with his mother. In another occasion he states “The war was the most peaceful period of my life” (39). This paradox implies if there is war, father

¹ (Henceforth: Figures refer to pages of the source Literature: The Human Experience).
will be away in the war, and he, the son, will live peacefully together with mother. But if there is no war, father will be back separating him from mother.

He is even more confused and feels more distanced from mother when she reasons why he is provided with a separate bed in a separate room. He is too young to understand her reason: "It is healthier that way" (42). Small children would not understand another meaning of "healthy" which is "it is not good, 'not healthy,' for children to know bed privacy of parents." He is then angered when he spies his father lying beside her, doing just like what a husband can do to his legal wife - stroking, hugging, twitching. "... and now here was this man, this stranger, sleeping with her without the least regard for her health" (42). We may note here the language used by son and father is getting harsher as the emotional tension rises. Son no longer uses Dad or father, rather 'man' and 'stranger.'

In some occasions he has to kick his father's buttock in order to give him space to lie on beside his mother. This of course affects the quality of his father's sleep and, in turn, his emotional state. Many times the son answers back his father's abuse: "Shut up, you!", "Smack your own!", "Shut up!", "Shut up!", "Shut up!" (44).

After all that happened covertly between mother and the man: making noise in his tea, whispering to the newspaper (45), the boy has an inkling that it all hinges round being grown up and giving people rings, meaning 'marriage'. So he says the most outrageous thing a son says to his mother in the presence of his father: "Mummy, do you know what I am going to do when I grow up? I am going to marry you" (45). This is another indication that the boy doesn't understand so many things, including 'marriage', for otherwise, he would not say such an idea. Luckily, hostility between father and son to win the heart of the mother doesn't last long. Later they, eventually, come to term. When a new baby, Sonny, was born in the family, father feels 'expelled', as the baby keeps crying. Father seeks a place where to sleep undisturbed. He goes to his elder son's room and sleeps beside him. Meanwhile to comfort the crying baby to send him to sleep, the mother keeps soothing: "There!" "There!" to mean 'Calm down! Calm down!' This, however, can be ambiguous. It may also mean: "Look dear, your father is over there, sleeping and avoiding you. He is only seeking for comfort." The elder son takes pity on his father deprived of sleep. He has turned out his son, and now it is his turn to turn out himself (46). Now, like his mother to the baby, the son strokes his father, also saying: "There!" "There! This is also ambiguous," but this time another meaning can be: "Listen! Your baby is over there, crying. Why don't you go and see what's amiss?"
Realizing that he and father cannot sleep, the kid says: "Ah come on. Put your arm around us, can’t you?" (47). Arm suggests ‘warmth’, ‘comfort’, ‘closeness’. This plea is an impossibility but is very meaningful and gregarious. One cannot put his arm around himself and around somebody else at the same time. But this gesture is enough to suggest that the two are in ‘the same boat.’ Both (not only the son) need consolation for being turned out. They need reconciliation, and son not revengeful.

2. Father

Father is typically a soldier. He is modeled by his profession: tough. He is even trained to kill. He lacks of closeness to children. He never cuddles his son, never hugs him, but he gives him playthings, like models of tanks and knives. When he takes his son to town under Mother’s request, he does not anticipate what his kid likes. Many times he has to stop to talk, and if this happens, he is so immersed that son has to pull him hard. He likens walking with Dad to walking with a mountain (41).

When he sleeps beside his son, his son feels him bony (47), muscular, like a typical soldier. Frequently disturbed in his sleep, he becomes hot-tempered, ignorant of the reason for his son’s changed behavior. His language becomes abusive. “That damned child! Doesn’t he ever sleep? ..... Shut up, you little puppy!” (44).

3. Mother

She is in the most difficult situation. On the one hand, she has to attend to the need of her husband just returning from war. On the other hand, she has to keep caring for her kid. Her concern is to give her husband rest and enough sleep which, is always interrupted by the disturbed kid. She and husband never discuss the reason for their kid’s aggressive behavior. She never understands why he is so irksome and demands more attention. She only once reasons “Don’t you see, the child isn’t used to you?”(44). She says this when the child answers his father’s abusive remarks back, for which father almost slaps him.

It is wise for her to provide a bedroom for the kid, now that he is getting mature, but is at a loss as to explain her reason why “It is healthier that way” (42). The explanation makes the kid more puzzled as he detects a contradiction. Mother does not “teach what she preaches” as explained above.
Innocence and Abuse

Literally, one may have a hasty conclusion about the three figures in the family: father as callous, abusive; son as disgraceful, aggressive and outrageous, and mother unfair. But careful examination of their respective nature and condition, he may think otherwise.

Outrageous and abusive though the son and father sound like, if we see into their true nature, hardly can we detect any premeditated wrong doing in their behaviors. The son is tormented by his ignorance, envy, and confusion. Ignorant of the nature of war, father, even mother; ignorant of the nature of being grown up; ignorant of the ambiguity in “Healthier that way”; Ignorant of the nature of a military personnel. Son would not blame mother for preparing him a room if he understood the nature of husband and wife and that of being grown up. We take pity on him when he is separated from mother for ‘health’ reason, but this measure is inconsistent with what father does towards her. Above all, son does not in the least have amorous feeling when he says that he would marry his mother when he grows up.

Father looks egoist and unsympathetic; but he is influenced by his nature as a soldier. However evil his exchange and son sounds like, it is due to lack of sleep, being incessantly harassed by his son.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis some conclusions can be made:

1. The father and son sound abusive, but if examined closely, in reality they are innocent. There are reasons for this misleading portrayal: the father being a soldier, and the son being too immature to understand life.

2. The son’s either-wise innocence is contained in his paradoxical remarks about and against his father.

3. The story is compatible with Psychoanalysis theory, which states that a child has erotic attachment with its parent of the opposite sex, and is hostile with the parent of the same sex. In the long run, the tie is loosened and the hostility is eased, enabling a male child to become an independent, responsible man and head of family and, above all, dread incest between parents and children is prevented.

4. My Oedipus complex in the story is about the writer’s experience of going through the stage of life as mentioned above.
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