

An Analysis of My Oedipus Complex

The story begins in retrospection. The adult Larry remembers his idyllic and blissful early childhood at home with his mother while his father was away during World War I. Larry, confident of his mother's full attention, accompanied her throughout each day, prayed unfailingly for his father's safe return, and urged his mother to brighten up the house by bringing home a baby. This Edenic existence is abruptly lost when his father returns home from the war. Suddenly, Larry finds that he has been demoted: His mother is attentive to his father and inattentive to him. He is repeatedly asked to be quiet while his father speaks and to be careful not to wake him up in the morning. In short, he finds that he must at all times play second fiddle to a rude and monstrous stranger whom his mother seems to favor for some reason mysteriously related, Larry concludes, to "that unhealthy habit of sleeping together." Larry regrets his many prayers for his father's safe return. "I couldn't help feeling that if this was how God answered prayers, he couldn't listen to them very attentively."

One morning, when Larry awakens his father by screaming, his father tells him to shut up. Larry is so shocked by this presumptuousness that he yells back, whereupon his father slaps him. Thereafter, the two of them are "enemies, open and avowed." They engage in a series of skirmishes: In one of these, Larry announces to his mother that he will one day marry her and they will have lots of babies. When she tells him that she will have one soon, he interprets her response as a sign of favor to him.

Just when Larry concludes that he has turned the tide, he is besieged by the noisy arrival of his brother, Sonny, who proves as much of a disappointment to him as his father was on his return. One day, his father overhears him muttering to himself that he plans to leave if another baby arrives. Thereafter, his father treats him more kindly. One evening, when Sonny is crying louder and longer than usual, his father seeks refuge in Larry's bed. Larry understands that now it is his father's turn to be dispossessed. "I couldn't help feeling sorry for Father. I had

been through it all myself, and even at that age I was magnanimous.” He attempts to comfort his father, asks him for a hug, and concludes that, it was “better than nothing.” Thus, in their common displacement, Larry and his father are reconciled.

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.