

First Confession



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK O'CONNOR

Frank O'Connor was born and raised in Cork, Ireland. His father was often drunk and violent, while his mother worked hard for the family's living and introduced her son to the work of Shakespeare and other poets and writers. O'Connor described spending his childhood in a dream from all the reading he did. At eighteen, he joined the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) on the side of the United Kingdom against the Free State separatists. Still, he rejected hardline politics and refused to shoot opposing soldiers when they were out with their girlfriends. Afterward, he worked as a librarian, a teacher and a theater director and befriended many of the famous Irish writers of his day, including William Butler Yeats. From 1950 till his death in 1966, he lived and taught writing in the United States, but maintained close ties with his native Ireland. While he is best known for his short stories, he also wrote plays, longer fiction, biography, history, poetry, memoirs, and translations from Irish into English. The Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award is named in his honor.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

O'Connor came of age while the political future of Ireland was in question—whether it should be part of the United Kingdom or be a separate country with its own independent government. This question influenced the fiction of many writers of his generation, encouraging them to examine specifically Irish themes through references to folklore, history, or traditional use of language, and the unique relationship between the Irish and the Catholic Church. O'Connor's experience as a soldier in the Irish Civil War showed him how ordinary people can become hard and cruel to one another instead of showing empathy, even within family or friendships.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O'Connor admired the work of 19th century realist authors such as Tolstoy and Flaubert—he considered himself a 19th century author at heart, though he lived in the 20th century. He wanted to be like a mirror on a long ambling walk, reflecting the truth of the world as he found it. He was also among the many Irish writers of the time interested in describing Ireland's unique character, including O'Connor's friend William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge. O'Connor's work is realist, but also distinctly Irish in its voice and concerns. Edna O'Brien and William Trevor also worked in a similar style, and since then the tradition of Irish realism continues in the work of writers such as Colm Toibin and Anne Enright.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** First Confession
- **When Written:** early 1930s
- **Where Written:** Ireland
- **When Published:** O'Connor's first version of the story was published as "Repentance" in *Lovat Dickson's Magazine* in 1935. In 1939, it appeared with some changes under the title "First Confession" in *Harper's Bazaar*, and then in its final form in the book *Traveller's Samples* in 1951.
- **Literary Period:** 20th Century Irish Realism
- **Genre:** Literary short story
- **Setting:** A city in Ireland
- **Climax:** Jackie confesses to attacking his sister and plotting his grandmother's death
- **Antagonist:** Nora and Gran
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Feud. O'Connor disliked the work of famed Irish novelist James Joyce, feeling that the writer's interest in his own literary voice took the place of showing the world accurately. O'Connor himself aspired to reflect what he observed with as little bias as possible.

What's in a Name. While he was named Michael Francis O'Donovan after his father, the author published under the name "Frank O'Connor" using his middle name and his mother's maiden name. Georgiana Yeats, wife of the poet William Butler Yeats, nicknamed O'Connor "Michael Frank," uniting his two identities.



PLOT SUMMARY

Jackie, a seven-year-old boy from an Irish Catholic family, is embarrassed and disgusted by his grandmother, Gran, when she moves into his family's house. He dislikes her country manners so much that he refuses to eat at the table with her. When his sister Nora tries to force him to eat at the table, he attacks her with a bread knife. His father beats him for his behavior, and his mother intervenes on Jackie's behalf. The anger within the family after this incident lasts a week. Jackie blames his grandmother for it all, believing that the only solution to his problem is for her to no longer live in their house.

Jackie is preparing for his first confession, a Catholic ritual of atonement for sins. His teacher Mrs. Ryan is obsessed with hell,

and she has frightened Jackie with a story about a man who fails to confess all his sins and then goes to hell. Even so, Jackie doesn't know if he should tell the priest about attacking his sister and plotting to kill his grandmother, because those sins seem so enormous.

When he goes to Confession, Jackie doesn't know where to sit in the confessional and he climbs up onto a shelf made for adults' elbows. He falls off the shelf and out of the confessional. At first the priest is angry, but Nora scolds Jackie and hits his ear. The priest scolds Nora for hitting Jackie and sends her away. The priest shows Jackie the right way to sit in the confessional. His kindness makes Jackie feel safe, so he tells the priest about attacking Nora and plotting to kill Gran. The priest tells him both of these violent urges are normal and reasonable, even while he scolded Nora for a much smaller act of violence against Jackie. The priest assigns Jackie only three short prayers of atonement, and then gives him candy. Both Jackie and Nora walk away from the church understanding that there is no need to be good—both children can see that Jackie is favored over Nora.



CHARACTERS

Jackie – Jackie is a seven-year-old boy from an Irish Catholic family. He lives with his mother, father, sister Nora, and grandmother, whom he loathes. Jackie can be judgmental and hypocritical, as when he judges his grandmother's country manners (even though he himself doesn't know the proper etiquette for confession), and judges Nora for "sucking up" to Gran for money, which he believes himself to be too honest to do (even though he makes up a toothache to get out of confession). Jackie can also be cruel. Once, when Gran made dinner and Jackie was too disgusted to eat it, he hid under the table with a bread-knife and attacked Nora when she tried to make him sit at the table—an event that caused much conflict within the family, although Jackie blames it solely on Gran. Jackie begins to prepare for his first confession through lessons with Mrs. Ryan, who speaks often of hell. This leaves Jackie unmoved until she tells a story about a man who gave an incomplete confession and then returned from hell to try to confess the rest of his sins. The story remains with Jackie as he heads to the church for his first confession, believing that, since he cannot admit to the magnitude of his sins, he is destined for hell. However, the priest's disarming manner leads Jackie to confess everything, including plotting to kill Gran and attacking Nora with the knife, and the Priest is jocular about it—even suggesting that he himself would like to stab someone. He gives Jackie the lenient penance of three Hail Marys, which scandalizes Nora. Throughout the story, Jackie never has to take responsibility for his actions. While he understands his own behavior to be bad, he blames his behavior on others. The one person who might have been able to make him see things in

a different light—his priest—seems to reinforce his own immature worldview, whereby he can misbehave, blame others, and be forgiven without cost.

Nora – Nora is Jackie's older sister. She is obedient to her parents, polite to Gran, and takes responsibility for Jackie's behavior while caring for him. Because she is close with Gran, Gran gives her a penny every week. Jackie sees Nora's kindness to Gran as insincere, but his perspective is unreliable and often full of gendered stereotypes about her bad motives—it's possible that Nora does genuinely love her grandmother, despite Jackie's opinion. Once, when Nora tries to get Jackie to eat the dinner Gran has prepared for them, Jackie attacks her with a knife. Nora tells her parents about Jackie's bad behavior, which leads to Jackie getting beaten by their father, and Nora herself getting implicitly blamed by their mother. This shows Nora's allegiance with her father and grandmother, and her mother's unfair treatment of her. On the way to Jackie's first Confession, Nora scolds him for attacking her with the knife, and warns him that his punishment will be terrible. In this moment, she seems eager for her little brother to be punished. When she sees Jackie falling out of the confessional, she punishes Jackie herself as though he is willfully embarrassing her, slapping his ear. The priest scolds her for being violent and threatens her with more prayers if she won't go away. While she tries to be good, she often falls short—but she is deeply disturbed when the priest treats her much more harshly than he treats Jackie, who is a much more sinful child. When she sees that the priest has given Jackie candy after his Confession, she is astonished that the priest could have been so lenient when Jackie had attacked her with a knife. She muses that there is no point in trying to be good.

The Priest – The priest is a gentle and humorous Catholic priest who hears Jackie's first confession. When Jackie first meets him after falling out of the confessional, the priest appears to offer mercy, as the church is supposed to teach. He puts aside his own anger at Jackie's mistake and offers him kindness instead, scolding Nora for slapping Jackie, which seems like a disapproval of violence. However, when he hears Jackie confess to attacking his sister with a knife, he says "someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and he won't miss her"—implying that Nora deserves to be stabbed and that Jackie's attack was not as sinful as Nora's slap on his ear. He also tells Jackie in a joking tone that it's normal to want to murder his grandmother, and the only reason Jackie shouldn't kill Gran is that he would be hanged. The priest's kindness and generosity toward Jackie therefore tip over into endorsing violence and indulging sin. Whether he intends to or not, he teaches Jackie to embrace his own violent urges and hypocritical double standards judging others. In addition, by judging responsible Nora's errors more harshly than Jackie's, he makes her believe that there is "no advantage to anybody trying to be good."

Gran – Gran is Jackie’s father’s mother. She is “a real old-country woman” with manners that disgust Jackie and displease Jackie’s mother: she eats potatoes with her hands, drinks beer at dinner, and walks around the house with bare feet. Jackie is mortified by her lapses of etiquette, but she seems to have done nothing to deserve Jackie’s violent wrath towards her. In fact, she seems potentially generous: she cooks dinner when the children’s mother isn’t home and shares part of her pension with Nora, who is kind to her.

Mrs. Ryan – Mrs. Ryan, also called Ryan in the story, is a neighbor of Jackie’s who goes to the children’s school to prepare them for their First Confession and First Communion. She is the same age as Gran, but she is wealthy, wearing a black cloak and bonnet and living in a large house. Instead of telling them about Catholic doctrine or even the logistics of the rituals, she talks at length about the torments of hell, daring the children to hold a finger in a candle **flame** for five minutes. She tells the children a ghost story about a man who goes to hell because he didn’t confess all his sins, and this is the only lesson that seems to stick with Jackie, frightening him without giving him useful information. In fact, her lessons are so useless that, when Jackie goes to confess, he doesn’t even know how to kneel in the confessional and he makes an embarrassing mistake that almost leads him to hurt himself and anger his priest.

Father – The father of Jackie and Nora, husband of Mother, and son of Gran. Father beats Jackie for refusing to sit with Gran and for going after Nora with a bread-knife. After their mother intervenes in the beating, Father won’t speak to her for several days. He seems absent, frightening, and punitive, although he seems to favor Nora and Gran over his wife and Jackie.

Mother – The mother of Jackie and Nora and husband of Father, Mother’s main role in the story is despising Gran’s manners and stopping her husband from beating Jackie. When their father won’t speak to her for days afterward, she won’t speak to Nora, appearing to blame her daughter for Father’s violence. This displacement of blame might be what’s influencing Jackie to blame his own misbehavior on others, especially since he and Mother appear to be allies throughout the story. Mother also sends Nora to care for Jackie when he goes for his first Confession.

TERMS

Confession Confession is a ritual in the Catholic Church in which a person confesses their sins to a priest. Then the priest tells the person how many prayers they must say to atone for these sins. Afterward, the person has been forgiven by God and may receive Communion. The First Confession is supposed to be a time of solemn reflection, but still a happy milestone for a

child growing up in the church. It is supposed to teach a child about the impartial divine forgiveness that Catholics believe is available to all humanity when they repent their sins.

Communion – Communion is a ritual connection with God in the Catholic Church. It takes place after Confession, when a person has atoned for their sins and is seen as pure enough to accept God. A child’s First Communion happens when they are about seven or eight years old and is seen as a joyful occasion.

Confessional – The ritual of Confession in this story happens in a confessional, a booth inside the church. The priest sits on one side of the divider, and the confessing person sits on the other side. There is a small window with a screen in between the two people so they can hear but not entirely see one another. When the screen is closed and the doors are also closed, it is entirely dark in the booth.

Penitential Psalm – One of a series of long prayers that express sorrow and regret. They take longer to say than a brief Hail Mary and are used to atone for more serious sins.

Hail Mary – A very brief prayer addressed to Mary, mother of Jesus.



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.



CATHOLICISM, JUDGMENT AND HYPOCRISY

In “First Confession,” Jackie—a young boy from a devout Catholic family—judges others for qualities he himself embodies. He is ashamed of the uncouth manners of his grandmother, Gran, and he believes that his sister Nora is inherently “evil” and hypocritical. Yet Jackie is a flawed individual himself, having lashed out violently at Nora and even plotted to kill Gran, and he is terrified of being judged by the Catholic priest at his first Confession in the same manner in which he casts judgment at others. The priest, however, refuses to judge Jackie, and instead merely reinforces Jackie’s critical attitude. By demonstrating how the priest—and by extension the church—reinforce Jackie’s hypocritical, self-centered mindset, O’Connor suggests that, when religion is centered on judgment, it can cause believers to act more sinfully, rather than less.

Jackie’s moral judgments about others are flawed and biased, in part because he embodies many of the dishonest and violent behaviors he critiques in others—a far cry from the Christlike acceptance and love that is typically encouraged in the

Christian faith. For example, Jackie judges his grandmother as sinful because she walks barefoot in the house, eats potatoes with her fingers, and drinks port at dinner. At worst, these are innocent mistakes of etiquette, yet they disgust and embarrass Jackie to the point that he plots to kill her. While it's clear from his judgments of Gran that Jackie values knowing proper etiquette, he himself falls short on this front sometimes—most notably when he doesn't know how the Confessional booth works, and he climbs onto the elbow-rest, tumbling out in front of other congregants. Ironically, when Nora punishes him for embarrassing her (which he himself would do to Gran), Jackie believes that Nora is being evil. This whole situation shows how hypocritical Jackie is and it suggests that his strict Catholic upbringing has encouraged him to be relentless and unforgiving in his judgment.

Jackie is hypocritical and judgmental in other situations, too, demonstrating that he is not morally superior to those he criticizes. He engages in the same violence that his father inflicts on him, for instance. While his father beats him for transgressions, Jackie attacks Nora with a bread-knife during a fight. Jackie also judges Nora harshly, even though she genuinely tries to be good. He views her as a “raging malicious devil” and, even though she takes church seriously and appears pious after her own Confession, Jackie assumes without evidence that her faith is false, thinking “God, the hypocrisy of women!” Yet, Jackie does not reflect this same judgment back onto himself. He only cares about being seen as good, and as long as he thinks his sinful behavior is hidden, he fails to feel any remorse for how he affects others. This is obviously false piety of the kind he accuses Nora, but he never thinks to question himself.

Even though Jackie doesn't critique or change his own bad behavior, his fear of his first Confession indicates that he knows, on some level, that his behavior has been sinful. The first Confession, then, is an opportunity for Jackie to be reprimanded by a priest and possibly change his ways. However, when the priest hears Jackie's Confession about his immoral behavior, he himself proves to be a sinful hypocrite. The priest makes light of Jackie's sins, affirms Jackie's harsh judgments of others, and even admits that he himself would like to commit egregious sins, such as stabbing someone. That the priest seems to share all of Jackie's sins implies that the Catholic faith is at the root of Jackie's hypocritical attitude, and that the religion merely reinforces the very behavior it claims to abhor.

Furthermore, the church seems to treat its parishioners differently based on their gender. When Nora slaps Jackie's ear in the church, the priest reprimands her, exclaiming, “how dare you hit the child like that, you little vixen?” However, when Jackie confesses to attacking Nora with a breadknife, that same priest says “Someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and he won't miss her.” For Jackie's sins, he receives a lenient

penance of only three Hail Marys, while Nora's penance—for much lesser sins—is far graver. This affirms Jackie's opinion that Nora is evil, and hypocritically suggests that it is morally acceptable for Jackie to be dangerously violent towards Nora, while even Nora's petty violence is worth a strong reprimand. In addition, when Jackie confesses to plotting to murder Gran, the priest takes an indulgent and humorous tone and advises him that he shouldn't kill his grandmother, but only because Jackie would be hanged for it. This attitude underscores the sense Jackie gets that the lives of women and girls are less valuable than his own, while their sins are more grave.

While Jackie's experience of Confession could have made him come to terms with his own sin and hypocrisy, making him kinder and more generous to others, the ritual has the opposite effect: afterwards, Jackie feels justified in continuing to sin, reflecting that his behavior—even attacking Nora with a knife and plotting to kill his grandmother—no longer “seems so bad.” To cement this impression, the priest gives Jackie a piece of candy and walks out of the church with him, demonstrating to Jackie and Nora that Jackie is the favored child, even though Nora tries harder to be good. This preferential treatment ultimately teaches both Jackie and Nora that moral judgment is subjective and arbitrary rather than objectively fair, and that—in light of this—there is “no advantage to anybody trying to be good.” This conclusion reflects the story's cynical outlook on Jackie's experience of Catholicism as an institution that encourages hypocrisy, cruelty, and self-interest.



FEAR AND VIOLENCE

“First Confession” focuses on a young boy, Jackie, who struggles to make sense of morality and guilt as he is initiated into the rituals of the Catholic

Church. Throughout the story, characters like Jackie's father, his teacher Mrs. Ryan, and the priest instill fear in Jackie using violence, intimidation, and threatening imagery (such as the man bursting into **flames** when he gives a “bad Confession”). Yet none of this encourages Jackie to behave morally; it only makes him guilty and terrified, rather than encouraging him to feel genuine remorse or learn a lesson from his bad behavior. By showing that violence and the threat of violence only teach children to be fearful, dishonest, and violent themselves, O'Connor suggests that violence is counterproductive when trying to encourage moral behavior.

Jackie is afraid of the violent consequences with which adults threaten him, such as being beaten by his father or burnt in hellfire—yet these threats do not teach him the lessons that the adults mean to impart. When Jackie is disgusted with Gran's manners, for example, he hides under the table with a breadknife to threaten anyone who tries to make him eat with her—a violent reaction to his grandmother's kindness in making him dinner. Later, when his father beats him to teach him to be polite to Gran, Jackie concludes that the beating was “all

because of that old woman!" Not only has his father's violent punishment failed to make him examine his own behavior and learn to be kinder, but his father's violence has reinforced Jackie's own violence, making him think that beatings and threats are the way to get what you want.

Jackie also faces the threat of violent punishment at school. To teach the children to make a full Confession to the priest, Jackie's teacher Mrs. Ryan tells a story of a man who fails to confess all his sins, dies and goes to hell, and then comes back to try to rectify his Confession. However, before he can confess, he burns up in front of the priest, leaving singe marks on the priest's furniture. This story terrifies Jackie, making him "scared to death of Confession." But the violent threat implied by the story does not achieve its desired end of making sure Jackie will confess all his sins. Even as he fears dying and leaving burn marks on his mother's furniture, he still doesn't think he can confess all his sins to the priest because he feels that his sins are too severe. The violent threats and imagery he associates with the church don't teach him that being honest during Confession will give him relief and closeness with God. Rather, it terrifies him and makes him feel like he'll face something unpleasant whether or not he makes a full Confession, undermining his ability to connect with his faith.

Ultimately, during Jackie's first Confession, he makes a full Confession to the priest only because the priest is kind to him. When Jackie falls out of the Confessional and Nora slaps him, the priest takes pity on this child who is clearly confused and humiliated. Because of this, and because of the priest's disarming suggestion that it's normal for Jackie to have sinned quite a lot, Jackie surprises himself by feeling comfortable confessing to all of his sins. This first instance of kindness in the story shows its power to gently and positively shape a child's mind, as opposed to scaring them into submission with threats of violence. After all, both the priest and Mrs. Ryan want Jackie to make a full Confession, but while Mrs. Ryan's scary stories failed to produce a full Confession, the priest's kindness succeeded.

However, while the priest's kindness influences Jackie to make a full Confession, he ultimately does not use that influence to teach Jackie right and wrong. When Jackie confesses to plotting to kill his grandmother, the priest does not explain to Jackie that Gran's mistakes—like his when he fell out of the Confessional—were innocent and deserving of the same kindness and forgiveness that the priest has shown him. Instead, the priest discourages Jackie from killing his grandmother not because it's wrong and she deserves better, but because Jackie would be hanged if he kills his grandmother. Once again, this is a threat of violence meant to coerce Jackie into moral behavior, and like the earlier threats of violence from Jackie's father and Mrs. Ryan, it does not teach Jackie to be good; it teaches him that he is right to hate his grandmother. From his first Confession, Jackie does not learn the Christian

principle of divine forgiveness and mercy for everyone who atones for their sins. Instead, he learns another backward lesson—that he alone deserves the priest's kindness, and others (like Nora) deserve to be violently punished.

The priest's kindness is a powerful force in Jackie's life that could have taught him to be kinder to others and to take responsibility for his own actions. However, the priest follows his gentle words with more discussions of violence and implicit threats, and Jackie ultimately only learns to be more confident in his hateful and violent attitudes toward others. The story shows how a little kindness can have a powerful effect in a child's life, but threats of violence can twist even that positive effect into something ugly.



FAITH AND RITUAL

In "First Confession," Jackie struggles to acclimate to the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church.

In part, this is because there's a lot to learn: the Bible is a huge book, and the Catholic Church is filled with detailed formal rituals that Catholics must learn. While participating in these rituals is supposed to bring Catholics closer to God, however, "First Confession" portrays religious rituals and the people in charge of conducting them as being alienated from the morality and spirituality at the core of Catholicism. The woman who prepares Jackie for his first Confession essentially just tells him ghost stories to stoke fear about the **fires** of hell, and Jackie's priest endorses immoral behavior during a ritual that is supposed to make Catholics take stock of their shortcomings. By portraying Catholic rituals and religious authorities as being somewhat nonsensical and even damaging to moral behavior, O'Connor suggests that the formal trappings of religion often distance people from their faith and moral sense.

Jackie's family, as well as the other adults he interacts with, have warped ideas about the church's teachings. Despite being devout Catholics, they often fail to effectively explain even the most basic rituals of the church to the children. Mrs. Ryan, for example, who is supposed to prepare Jackie and his classmates for their first Confession teaches them nothing practical; instead, she focuses on dramatic, fear-mongering descriptions of Hell. One result of this is that Jackie doesn't even know how to make his Confession: he ends up falling out of the Confessional because he thinks he needs to sit on the elbow-rest. But even worse than leaving him ill-prepared for Confession, Mrs. Ryan's lectures terrify Jackie and alienate him from the spiritual purpose of the ritual. Jackie is, on some level, quite worried about his bad behavior, so he's somebody who could really benefit from a ritual of admitting to and atoning for his sins—this might, in a different context, make him feel relieved of his guilt and resolved to behave better. However, Mrs. Ryan's exclusive focus on instilling fear of hell makes Jackie unaware of any positive aspects to Confession, and

unable to use this ritual to make his faith stronger or to make him a better person.

Even worse, the priest himself reinforces Jackie's misguided view of right and wrong, using the ritual of Confession to encourage behavior that is in direct opposition to the Church's teachings. At first, the priest shows the compassionate spirit of Christian teaching when he puts aside his anger at Jackie, who has fallen from the Confessional. When he sees that the boy needs sympathy rather than scolding, the priest is empathetic and kind. Yet once Jackie actually begins confessing, the priest shows that he has no more divine perspective than Jackie's family or teachers. He encourages Jackie to think only of his own benefit, and essentially rewards Jackie for his violent feelings toward Gran and Nora by giving him candy after his Confession, while chastising Nora for much lesser sins. Instead of learning about moral behavior, both children learn that the ritual of Confession is based on arbitrary, subjective judgment, and that it is therefore pointless to be good. Ultimately, then, the ritual of Confession only leaves Jackie *more* alienated from the true spiritual meaning of Catholicism, rather than connecting him to God and the teachings of his faith.

In this story, none of the characters seem to know why, exactly, they are participating in the rituals of Catholicism, or what these rituals are supposed to mean. Jackie, and everyone else around him, believe that they'll be punished if they don't engage in these practices, and the priest uses his authority in the church to favor some people over others. By demonstrating how characters use religion and ritual in ways that deviate from their purported divine purpose, O'Connor shows how these rituals can ultimately push people further away from God and convolute their understanding of moral behavior.



SYMBOLS

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



FIRE

In "First Confession," fire, flames, and burning symbolize God's judgment. Throughout the story, Jackie fears judgment much more than physical punishment. After all, he never seems to particularly fear the slaps and beatings he gets from his family, but he's terrified that others will believe—perhaps correctly—that he is bad. This is best embodied by the scene in which Mrs. Ryan lights a candle and offers a coin to any student who can hold their hand in the flames for five minutes. Jackie doesn't volunteer, and it's not because he's afraid of the pain of the flames—it's because he's worried that he will come across as greedy in front of the whole class if he takes the challenge. The connection between flames and fear of judgment is also clear in Jackie's reaction to Mrs.

Ryan's story about the man who makes an incomplete Confession, goes to hell, and then returns to try to fix his Confession, but burns up in front of the priest, leaving burn marks on his furniture. What Jackie seems to fear about this story (and what he brings up several times afterwards) is the marks on the furniture, which are visible proof of the man's sins. Jackie worries that this will happen to him and he'll leave marks on his mother's furniture, which would confirm to her that Jackie is bad. In this way, throughout the story, flames seem to have the potential to illuminate Jackie's sins for all to see, a fate that terrifies him. O'Connor mostly associates these flames with hellfire, but in the Catholic tradition, fire can also symbolize the Holy Spirit and divine inspiration—the positive angle on God's all-knowing gaze. (For instance, in the Bible, God appears to Moses as a burning bush, and they speak directly to one another.) That Jackie can only see fire as hellfire, and not an opportunity to connect with God, underscores that his first Confession is a missed opportunity to develop a more nuanced and positive relationship with sin and forgiveness, one that might lessen his terror of being judged.



QUOTES

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

First Confession Quotes

...to make matters worse, my grandmother was a real old country woman and quite unsuited to life in town. She had a fat, wrinkled old face, and to Mother's great indignation, went round the house in bare feet—the boots had her crippled, she said.

Related Characters: Jackie (speaker), Mother, Gran

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Jackie is describing his family's situation at the start of the story; his father's mother has just moved into his family's house. Jackie describes his grandmother as "unsuited to life in town" but his reason for thinking this is her "fat, wrinkled old face," a cruel judgment against an old woman that is based on her age not her actions. His mother's "great indignation" is for Gran's manners, which are a relatively superficial concern. Worse, Jackie and his mother are appalled that Gran walks with bare feet in the house, even though her "boots had her crippled"—meaning that walking

barefoot is necessary for her comfort and it's not simple rudeness.

Both Jackie and his mother believe Gran doesn't belong among them for petty reasons. It's not possible for Gran to change her face or her feet, so she can't avoid their resentment. The other things Jackie dislikes about Gran are similarly petty: he doesn't like how she eats potatoes and drinks beer at dinner. The judgments Jackie and his mother have against Gran are explicitly counter to the Catholic religion, which teaches kindness toward others. Jackie is only seven years old, but he is learning to make these unkind judgments from his mother and other Catholic adults around them.

☛ Nora, my sister, just sucked up to the old woman for the penny she got every Friday out of the old-age pension, a thing I could not do. I was too honest, that was my trouble; and when I was playing with Bill Connell...I made excuses not to let him come into the house...

Related Characters: Jackie (speaker), Gran, Nora

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Jackie believes that Nora must be disgusted by their grandmother, just as he is, but that she is “sucking up” to Gran for money. Jackie assumes that Nora is manipulating Gran and never considers that she might feel genuine warmth toward her. He believes that Gran's face and manners are objectively horrible—not just offensive to him because he's judgmental—so he believes that Nora must also be disgusted with Gran, and her kindness must be false.

Later in the story, during the scene where Mrs. Ryan offers a coin for holding a finger in a flame, Jackie reveals his own greed (even though he doesn't try for the coin, he wants to). In light of Jackie's belief that he himself is greedy, he seems to be ascribing his own motives to his sister while trying to make himself seem morally superior. It's not clear from the story whether Nora genuinely loves her grandmother, but it's telling about Jackie's character that he doesn't consider this possibility.

When Jackie claims to be “too honest” to be polite to Gran, he is implying that Nora is being dishonest. However, immediately following this statement, Jackie himself admits to being dishonest; playing with his friend, he makes

“excuses not to let him come into the house” so that his friend won't see Gran and judge Jackie for her behavior. Since Jackie is only seven years old, his lack of self-awareness isn't surprising, but this quote shows what the adults in his life ought to teach him—to take responsibility for his own motives and actions, rather than blaming others for them, and to be kinder and more considerate to others.

☛ Then, to crown my misfortunes, I had to make my first confession and Communion. It was an old woman called Ryan who prepared us for these... She may have mentioned the other place as well, but that could only have been by accident, for Hell had the first place in her heart.

Related Characters: Jackie (speaker), Mrs. Ryan

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

When Jackie describes the rituals of Confession and Communion as “my misfortunes,” it suggests that he does not understand the religious meaning of these rituals. Confession is supposed to be a ritual of taking responsibility for one's behavior and making amends before God—something from which Jackie could benefit—but Jackie is terrified to be seen as a sinner and nobody has ever taught him that it's important to be accountable for one's own misdeeds. Furthermore, when Jackie describes how he has been prepared for Confession and Communion by Mrs. Ryan, he says “Hell had the first place in her heart” and she only mentions “the other place”—meaning heaven, in this case, as an accident. “The other place” can be used as a euphemism for Hell in contexts where the word “Hell” is seen as a curse or unsuitable for children, which makes this description of Heaven slightly ironic. Readers can extrapolate that Mrs. Ryan speaks of Hell as punishment for the children's sins, but does not speak of heaven or, by extension, the redemptive purpose of Confession. Jackie doesn't understand that these rituals are not misfortunes because he has not been taught well by Mrs. Ryan, or by any other adult around him.

●● She didn't know the half of what I had to tell—if I told it. I knew I couldn't tell it, and understood perfectly why the fellow in Mrs. Ryan's story made a bad confession; it seemed a great shame that people wouldn't stop criticizing him.

Related Characters: Jackie (speaker), Mrs. Ryan, Nora

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Jackie says this after Nora reminds him of the sins he will have to confess at Confession, which Jackie knows are not even half of what he'll have to own up to. With all his sins in his mind, Jackie is considering hiding them by making a “bad confession” like the man in Mrs. Ryan's story. A bad Confession is an incomplete Confession, which means hiding some of his sins from the priest. Jackie appears to believe that the man in the story wasn't fully responsible for his bad confession: it wasn't his fault because “people wouldn't stop criticizing him,” which is another instance of Jackie not liking the idea of being responsible for his own actions, and attributing his own motives to others (Jackie hates the idea of being criticized or judged).

At the same time, Jackie's reaction to the man in the story shows that he is capable of having empathy and connecting his own immediate feelings to the feelings he supposes others might have—he just hasn't been taught to make that moral connection with Nora or Gran. While she is talking to him, Jackie doesn't think about why Nora might be angry at him, and whether he would be angry in her position. He thinks about how it will be her fault for “criticizing him” rather than his own fault, if he makes a bad Confession.

●● God, the hypocrisy of women! Her eyes were lowered, her head was bowed...You never saw such an exhibition of devotion; and I remembered the devilish malice with which she had tormented me all the way from our door...

Related Characters: Jackie (speaker), Nora

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Jackie is reacting to Nora's appearance when she comes out of Confession. He believes that her pious look must be hypocritical because of how she scolded him

while they were walking to church, and that her hypocrisy is a general trait he ascribes to all women. Since Jackie believes Gran is responsible for the fact that he attacked Nora with a knife, when Nora scolds him, he believes that her motive must be devilish malice rather than straightforward anger. He believes a person full of devilish malice couldn't feel devoted or purified by the ritual of Confession, so she must be dishonest. Jackie's refusal to take responsibility for his own actions harms his understanding of other people here. By seeing her lowered eyes as “an exhibition of devotion,” he is saying that he believes she is faking the appearance of devotion rather than being absorbed in her own thoughts. Because he is thinking of her appearance, he believes she must be thinking of her own appearance as well, with dishonest intentions. “God, the hypocrisy of women!” sounds like a phrase that seven-year-old Jackie would only use if he had learned it from the adults around him. It suggests that Jackie has absorbed many negative stereotypes about women from adults in his society.

●● It was pitch dark and I couldn't see the priest or anything else. Then I began to be really frightened. In the darkness it was between God and me, and He had all the odds. He knew what my intentions were before I even started; I had no chance.

Related Characters: Jackie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

With this quote, for the first time in the story, Jackie is entirely honest with himself and the reader. He acknowledges that his intentions are bad, and his only “chance” (to avoid punishment) comes from hiding those intentions. When he feels that he is alone with God, he doesn't blame Gran, he doesn't blame Nora, or pretend that he is too honest to behave well. He is even honest with himself about his instincts to hide the truth about his intentions. Without all these layers of self-justification, Jackie knows that he has been truly sinful. Because Mrs. Ryan has only taught him about Hell and not about redemption, he doesn't understand that this feeling of culpability is, in the Catholic tradition, not the beginning of punishment but the beginning of atonement and forgiveness. At this point, he seems ready to begin the ritual, since he is finally being truthful about his own intentions and his own wrongdoing.

“What are you doing up there?” he shouted in an angry voice,

Related Characters: The Priest (speaker), Jackie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

When the priest sees that Jackie has made a mistake, crouching on the elbow shelf in the confessional instead of kneeling properly, he reacts “in an angry voice.” When Jackie is making an innocent childish mistake by simply not knowing how to behave in a new circumstance, the priest’s first reaction is anger, which is also how Jackie and his mother react to Gran’s etiquette mistakes (and how Nora reacts when Jackie falls out of the confessional moments after the priest speaks). It seems that everyone in Jackie’s life reacts to difficulty with anger first, so it makes sense that this is often Jackie’s reaction, too. The difference is that the priest doesn’t stay angry at Jackie. Once he understands that Jackie is doing his best and not intentionally trying to misbehave, the priest puts aside his anger.

This is a model for how Jackie and his mother could treat Gran, or how Nora could treat Jackie. When these characters are angry at one another, they don’t make a moral distinction between intentional malicious actions, such as Jackie’s attacking Nora with a knife, and accidental annoyances, such as Jackie falling out of the confessional and embarrassing Nora. The priest is in a position to teach Jackie and Nora the difference between these two things, and he appears to understand that his first reaction isn’t the most suitable one after Jackie’s mistake.

“What’s all this about,” the priest hissed, getting angrier than ever and pushing Nora off me. “How dare you hit the child like that you little vixen?”

Related Characters: The Priest (speaker), Nora, Jackie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

When Jackie falls out of the confessional and Nora slaps his ear for his mistake, the priest reacts with this “hiss.” It seems that he disapproves of violence, particularly against children, because he scolds Nora for hitting Jackie. He

appears not to believe that Jackie should be punished at all for his innocent mistake. It seems that he is the first character in the story to understand the difference between intentional wrongdoing and innocent errors, and he is teaching Nora not to be so harsh to Jackie for an innocent error.

However, he also calls Nora a “vixen” which is a word for a female fox, and a gendered insult specifically for a conniving girl or woman. The fact that he insults her with this word suggests that he may have some of the same negative stereotypes as Jackie about girls and women. The story doesn’t make it clear exactly how much older Nora is than Jackie, but she is often responsible for caring for him and has already been to Confession, so she is older and likely bigger than him. When the priest is defending Jackie from her slap, he calls Jackie “the child,” which also suggests that Nora is older.

When he calls Nora “little,” then, his meaning is not that she is small or vulnerable like a child (though she is a child, as well); his meaning is more that she is insignificant. This meaning is supported by the priest’s later comments to Jackie, calling him “a big hefty fellow” to inflate his feeling of importance. The priest appears to be doing more than preventing Nora’s violence against Jackie; he seems to be suggesting that Nora has no right to slap Jackie because she is an insignificant girl. He later confirms this interpretation with his comments supporting Jackie’s violence against Nora and implying that her nature is permanently, inherently bad.

“Oh,” he said respectfully, “a big hefty fellow like you must have terrible sins...”

It only stood to reason that a fellow confessing after seven years would have more to tell than people that went every week...It was only what he expected, and the rest was the cackle of old women and girls with their talk of Hell, the Bishop and penitential psalms.

Related Characters: Jackie, The Priest (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

After the priest has reassured Jackie that he expects to hear

“terrible sins” from “a big hefty fellow like you,” Jackie begins to think that having “more to confess” is something to be proud of. The priest’s praise of Jackie as “a big hefty fellow” is a contrast to how he describes Nora as “a little vixen” earlier. Nora is older and likely physically bigger than Jackie, so this description of Jackie as “big” and Nora as “little” seems to reflect how the priest wants the children to think of their importance. He scolds Nora with the word “little” and is speaking to Jackie “respectfully” and trying to comfort him by describing him as “big” and “hefty.” He connects this praise with the word “fellow,” meaning a man or boy, which is a small indication that the priest’s kindness toward Jackie is because he is a boy. This interpretation is supported by the priest’s gendered scolding of Nora as a “vixen” and his drastically different treatment of the two children.

After praising Jackie for being “a big hefty fellow,” he connects these praise-worthy and masculine traits with having committed “terrible sins.” This comment causes a change in Jackie’s feelings about himself and Confession. Before this, Jackie’s positive self-image rests on believing people see him as good. After the priest says this, his positive self-image is satisfied by being seen as having committed serious, important sins. Once Jackie has begun to feel proud of his sins, he begins to think of worrying about sins as “the cackle of old women and girls”—and therefore insignificant. He is showing that he has learned the priest’s implicit lesson—that he is expected to sin—and the entire concept of feeling ashamed of sin becomes feminine to him.

“Is that the little girl that was beating you just now?” he asked.

“Tis, father,” I said.

“Someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and he won’t miss her,” he said, rather cryptically.

Related Characters: Jackie, The Priest (speaker), Nora

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

Jackie has confessed to attacking Nora with a knife and the priest responds by confirming that Nora is the person he saw slap Jackie. However, the priest exaggerates Nora’s violence, describing her as the girl who was “beating you just now.” When he calls Nora a “little girl” while implying

that she was beating Jackie, he is using the word “little” again to mean that she is personally unimportant, not that she is too small to harm anyone or that her slap was a minor, childish sin. Instead, the priest says, “someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day” implying that her personality is permanently so bad that a man will murder her, and she will deserve it.

There is a double meaning to “he won’t miss her”: that he will successfully stab her, where Jackie didn’t, and that when she is dead, that man will not be sorry for her absence, or miss her emotionally. Both meanings suggest that Nora’s slap is unpardonable, whereas Jackie trying to stab Nora is only what she deserves. This is a horrifying thing for a priest to say about a child. The foundation of ritual of Confession is the idea that no person is permanently judged for their sins—divine forgiveness is available to anyone who repents. For the priest to see a child misbehave and claim that her nature is permanently irredeemable is directly counter to Catholic teaching.

The priest is also lending support to Jackie’s habit of blaming his own behavior on Nora’s feminine nature. Rather than teach Jackie that he should not sin, the priest is encouraging Jackie to sin again and encouraging the immoral beliefs that led to the sins in the first place.

“Oh a horrible death!” he said with great satisfaction. “Lots of the fellows I saw killed their grandmothers too, but they all said ‘twas never worth it.”

Related Characters: The Priest (speaker), Jackie, Gran

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

When Jackie confesses to plotting to murder Gran, the priest explains that hanging is the legal punishment for murder. When the priest says that “lots of the fellows” that he saw hanged had killed their grandmothers, he is using a humorous tone, but he is also persuading Jackie that it is natural for Jackie to want to kill Gran. The priest does not point out that her mistakes are as innocent as Jackie’s was when he fell out of the confessional, or correct Jackie’s impression that drinking beer is a sin. Instead of showing Jackie how to extend empathy to another person or teaching him to see the difference between malicious actions and innocent mistakes, the priest treats Jackie’s plan

to murder Gran lightly, as a subject for humor. The only reason the priest offers for why Jackie shouldn't kill Gran is that he would be hanged. By suggesting in a humorous tone that lots of people kill their grandmothers, he makes the idea seem like a big joke, a thing that he and Jackie can speak about cheerfully and honestly without shame. Combined with his harsh assessment of Nora and his refusal to see Gran's innocence, the priest is teaching Jackie to think it's normal and even a masculine virtue to commit violent acts against girls and women in his family.

“Tis no advantage to anybody trying to be good. I might just as well be a sinner like you.”

Related Characters: Nora (speaker), Jackie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

This comment of Nora's is the last sentence of the story, which suggests it's close to the heart of O'Connor's purpose in writing "First Confession," the final impression he would

like to leave with the reader. There are no further comments or events in the story to challenge Nora's perception that she gets no "advantage" from trying to be good. The only character who appears to care about Nora trying to be good is Gran, and Gran rewards Nora with a penny each week—by contrast, the priest rewards Jackie for what the priest called his "terrible sins" with candy, which the children see as equivalent signs of favor. When Nora says "Tis no advantage to anybody trying to be good," she is expressing her disappointment that the priest didn't give Jackie many prayers to say to atone for attacking her, and that the priest gave Jackie candy when she got none. She has taken the ironic lesson from church that there's no reason she should try to be good, but the supposed goal of religion is to teach people moral values.

However, when she says, "I might just as well be a sinner like you," the reader knows that the priest would not be as lenient with her as he has been with Jackie if Nora were to confess similar sins. Nora does not know about the priest's remarks about how "someone will go after her with a bread-knife one day" because of her fairly minor violence against Jackie, so the reader can see what Nora does not—even though she is trying to be good, she is judged as naturally bad, and if she became "a sinner like" Jackie, she would be treated very differently than Jackie is.



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.

FIRST CONFESSION

Jackie, a seven-year-old boy, describes “all the trouble” that began in his family when his grandfather died and his father’s mother, Gran, came to live with them. She is a “real old country woman and quite unsuited to life in town,” because of her uncouth country manners. Jackie and his mother both dislike her and find it disgusting when she roams the house in bare feet and eats with her fingers instead of a fork.

Jackie believes that girls “are supposed to be fastidious” and that he suffers because of this. While Jackie’s sister Nora “suck[s] up” to Gran to get a penny from her pension every week, Jackie won’t do this, because he claims to be “too honest.” Mortified by his grandmother’s behavior, he keeps his friends from the house when she’s there.

When the children’s mother is at work, Gran makes their dinner and Jackie is so disgusted that he won’t eat it. One night, he hides under the table with a bread-knife so no one will force him to eat. Nora tries to get him to sit at the table and Jackie attacks her with the bread-knife.

When their father comes home, Nora tells him about Jackie’s behavior. He beats Jackie, and the children’s mother intervenes. For several days, the parents won’t speak to one another, Mother won’t speak to Nora, and Father won’t speak to Jackie. Jackie blames all these events on Gran.

Jackie and his mother interpret Gran’s country etiquette as a sign that her presence in town is unsuitable. Their judgments of this old widow seem unkind and unnecessary—they don’t judge her because she’s a bad person, only because her behavior is unrefined. This suggests from the beginning that Jackie and his mother have an ethical compass that is attuned more to appearances than to actual wrongdoing.



Jackie relies on stereotypes about girls to understand Nora’s behavior. He expects her to be fastidious, so when she is not disgusted by Gran, he assumes she is being insincere. At the same time, he believes his own nature is honest, even while he is hiding Gran from his friends. This shows his hypocrisy, which will become more apparent as the story continues.



Jackie believes his rudeness to Gran and violence towards Nora are justified, even though all they have done is make dinner for him and ask him to eat it. It’s becoming clearer that, while Jackie blames Gran for the trouble in their family, he is really the one behaving badly.



Jackie’s father beats him as a punishment for being rude to Gran and attacking Nora, but it doesn’t teach Jackie to behave better. Instead of making him examine his own choices and values, this violence only makes Jackie more committed to blaming others—mostly Gran—for his own shortcomings.



“To crown [his] misfortunes,” soon after this Jackie has to make his first Confession and Communion. A neighbor woman called Mrs. Ryan prepares the children in town for these rituals. She is Gran’s age, but well-to-do. Her lessons are obsessed with the torments of hell but they rarely mention heaven. In Jackie’s estimation, “Hell had the first place in her heart.”

Mrs. Ryan tells the children she will give a valuable half-crown coin to any boy who will hold his finger in a candle’s **flame** for five minutes. Jackie is tempted to try but he doesn’t want to appear greedy. When nobody volunteers, she tells the children that if they’re too afraid to put a finger in a candle for five minutes, then they should be petrified of “burning all over in roasting hot furnaces for all eternity.” Jackie remains fixated on the half-crown and he is disappointed when she puts it back in her own bag.

Mrs. Ryan tells another story about a priest who is awakened in the night by a ghostly man who made an incomplete Confession and wants to confess the rest of his sins. While the priest dresses, the man vanishes and leaves the mark of his **burning** hands on the bed frame. Jackie is terrified of this story.

When Mrs. Ryan explains how the children should examine their consciences, Jackie is even more afraid because he knows he has “broken the whole ten commandments,” all because of Gran. He believes he has no hope of behaving better while Gran lives in their house.

Jackie sees these holy rituals as misfortunes because he and Mrs. Ryan have no clear understanding of the rituals’ spiritual meaning. Had Mrs. Ryan adequately prepared him for Confession instead of fearmongering about hell, he might have understood that this ritual could connect him to God and help him behave better. Jackie is only taught about judgment, not redemption, which shows in his behavior; he himself is judgmental of others, but never forgiving.



Note that Jackie doesn’t sit out this challenge because he’s afraid of the prospect of burning his finger in a flame—he’s worried that he’ll appear greedy if he does something extreme for money. This shows Jackie’s profound fear of appearing sinful and being publicly judged. Mrs. Ryan is clearly using the candle as a metaphor for hell, so it’s significant that Jackie doesn’t fear it. What motivates Jackie throughout the story is not a desire to behave morally or even a fear of hell, but rather a fear of judgment by those around him. In other words, Jackie doesn’t have genuine religious feeling, only a desire to seem religious to his peers. This is consistent with how he and his mother disapprove of Gran’s appearance, even while Gran is kindly making the family dinner.



This story is mere superstition—the Bible never suggests that this is the punishment for making an incomplete Confession. This shows how the authority figures in Jackie’s life are not really helping him understand his faith. Furthermore, it’s significant that Jackie is completely unaffected by the prospect of burning his finger on a candle, but he is terrified by this story. As the candle scene suggests, Jackie’s fear of this story has to do with the possibility of being judged by his peers for his sinful behavior. After all, the mark of the sinner’s hands on the bed frame is a visible sign of sin. If Jackie were to make an incomplete Confession, he worries that his sin would be similarly visible to all.



Jackie is aware that he has sinned, but he thinks Gran and her country manners have caused all his bad behavior. Mrs. Ryan has not taught him that he is responsible for his own actions. Because he doesn’t understand that he is the cause of his own actions and not Gran, he thinks it’s impossible for him to stop breaking the ten commandments while Gran is in the house. Though he doesn’t tell the reader at this point in the story, this is likely where he begins the plan to murder Gran that he later confesses to the priest. It’s ironic that Mrs. Ryan’s teaching about the ten commandments, intended as a moral guide, would lead Jackie to contemplate murder.



The day Jackie is supposed to go to Confession for the first time with his class, he fakes a toothache to get out of it. He has to make it up on Saturday, and—even worse—his mother can't go with him so she sends Jackie with Nora instead. Nora, Jackie says, has “ways of tormenting me that Mother never knew of.”

Jackie lies about having a toothache but does not see this as contrary to his self-conception, expressed earlier, of being “too honest.” This is an example of his lack of self-awareness, similar to how he judges Gran for her errors while he also makes ignorant mistakes. In this case, Nora bears the consequence of Jackie’s lie since she is responsible for Jackie’s care while their mother works. Jackie is self-centered and does not see that he has made Nora’s life harder; he only sees his own misfortune of having to walk with her.



Walking to the church, Nora says “Oh Jackie, my heart bleeds for you!” and reminds him of all his sins that he will have to confess, including attacks against herself and Gran. Jackie reflects that Nora “didn’t know the half of what I had to tell—if I told it.” He understands why the man in Mrs. Ryan’s story didn’t own up to all his sins. Before they go into the church, Nora “became the raging malicious devil she really was” and says, “I hope he’ll give you the penitential psalms.”

Nora expresses her anger at Jackie through false sympathy, relishing the punishment she believes is in store for her brother. However, her conception of penance—the Catholic ritual of atonement for sin—as punishment rather than an opportunity for redemption shows how punitive and judgmental their exposure to the Church has been. Rather than owning up to his bad behavior, Jackie believes that Nora’s anger is caused by her bad nature—as a “raging malicious devil”—rather than by his torment of her.



Jackie believes he is “lost, given up to eternal justice” while he waits in the church for his turn to confess. Indoors, “the sunlight went out and gave place to deep shadow.” He sees a man praying “in an anguished tone” and thinks “only a grandmother could account for a fellow behaving in that heartbroken way.”

The descriptions of the “deep shadow” indicate that church is a fearful place for Jackie, and his association with the word “justice” seems to be hopelessness, rather than fairness. When Jackie describes the other people in the church, his description shows that he is still locked in his narrow perspective. He can’t imagine suffering unlike his own, so when he sees a man praying “in an anguished tone” he believes a grandmother must be responsible.



Jackie expects that he won’t be able to make a full Confession and then, according to Mrs. Ryan’s story, he will die in the night and “be continually coming back and **burning** people’s furniture.”

Jackie is afraid of making a full Confession because he doesn’t want the priest to judge him. His fear about making an incomplete Confession is similar: that he would leave visible traces of his sins if he came back as a burning ghost like in Mrs. Ryan’s story. Whether he makes a full or a partial Confession, he is afraid of being seen and judged as bad. He does not expect to have the courage to choose the full Confession.



It's Nora's turn for Confession, and she comes out looking serene and devoted. Jackie thinks "God, the hypocrisy of women!" because of the "devilish malice" with which she spoke to him on the way to the church.

When Jackie sees that Nora appears to have been satisfied by the ritual of Confession, he believes her response must be false. He relies on his stereotypes about women and girls to explain Nora's behavior. Since he does not believe that he is responsible for his own actions, he blames Nora and Gran for causing him to sin. When Nora scolds him, he takes this as more evidence of her "devilish malice." Since he thinks she is the kind of person that causes his sins and then blames him for them, he believes her nature is so bad it is impossible for her to feel genuine serenity or devotion.



Then it's Jackie's turn to confess, and he goes into the confessional "with the fear of damnation in my soul." In the booth, it's dark and he is afraid of God, who "knew what my intentions were before I even started; I had no chance." Jackie forgets all his instructions and begins the ritual of Confession even without the priest, saying "Bless me father for I have sinned," and then he sits in silence. Jackie feels that God has "spotted" him.

Alone in the dark, Jackie faces his worst fear, which is for his true intentions to be seen and judged. Mrs. Ryan's teaching has not prepared Jackie for even the most basic logistics of this ritual, and he doesn't understand the redemptive spiritual meaning, either. This is the first time in the story that Jackie acknowledges that he has had sinful intentions, and they are no one's fault but his own. When he says, "I had no chance," he means he had no chance to hide the sinful truth about himself. When he believes God can see the truth about him, he knows that God would be right to judge him. Though he doesn't understand that the ritual of Confession is supposed to show him how to atone, his honesty about his sinful actions is the beginning of the ritual that ought to end with forgiveness and connection to God.



Jackie notices a shelf on the wall of the confessional. It is designed for adults to put their elbows on, but Jackie doesn't know how he is supposed to behave and he climbs up onto the shelf and balances precariously. He is sitting up there when the priest opens the window of the booth and says, "Who's there?"

Jackie's lack of preparation for the rituals of the church is so extreme that he doesn't even know how to sit in the confessional. While he's in a new situation, he is guessing how to behave and getting it wrong. He is making a mistake equivalent to Gran's etiquette errors, but this experience doesn't teach him to feel empathy for her. He doesn't see the similarity between this experience and her experience moving from the country to the town.



When the priest understands that Jackie is crouched on the elbow shelf in the confessional, he angrily says "What are you doing up there?" Jackie loses his balance and falls off the shelf and out the door of the confessional. The priest comes out of his section of the booth and the people who are waiting to confess all stand in shock.

In the confessional, Jackie's mistake was private, but when he falls off the shelf and out of the confessional, many people see him embarrassing himself. The priest's first reaction to Jackie's mistake is anger, which echoes Jackie and his mother reacting angrily to Gran's errors.



Nora comes over to Jackie also, scolding him for his mistake and saying he has disgraced her. She slaps him on the ear, and he begins to cry. The priest directs his anger at Nora and says, “how dare you hit the child like that, you little vixen?” Nora says she can’t say her penitential prayers while caring for Jackie, and the priest tells her to go away lest he give her more prayers to say.

Nora interprets Jackie’s embarrassing mistake as willful misbehavior and uses violence as a punishment. Both of these reactions are similar to how her own mother reacts to Gran’s errors and how her father reacts to Jackie’s misbehavior by beating him. Like the beatings at home, Jackie does not learn a positive lesson from her violence. The priest appears to disapprove of violence when he scolds Nora for this slap. He also uses prayers as a threat of punishment to her, which sheds some light on why Nora and Jackie think of prayers as punishment rather than redemption.



The priest helps Jackie stand up and asks him kindly if this is his first Confession. He reassures Jackie that “a big hefty fellow” like Jackie will have “terrible sins” and “the crimes of a lifetime” to confess, and he gives Jackie time to collect himself before trying the Confession again. The priest says no one else in line for Confession is likely to have anything much to confess.

This kindness from the priest is the first merciful reaction in the story. The priest felt anger but put it aside when he understood more about the situation. The priest’s kindness makes Jackie feel calm and safe. At the same time, the priest connects the idea of being “a big hefty fellow” with “terrible sins,” which teaches Jackie to feel that he is more important than the other people in line. The priest tells Jackie that having big sins makes him more important than people with smaller sins.



Jackie is relieved that the priest seems “intelligent above the ordinary” in his understanding that Jackie’s lifetime of sin is normal. In this light, none of Jackie’s sins (“barring the one bad business with my grandmother”) seem so bad. He decides that the stories of Hell and penitential psalms are only “the cackle of old women and girls.”

Jackie shows what an enormous change the priest’s words have made in his understanding of sin. Instead of being afraid to be seen as sinful by other people or by God, the priest has taught him to feel that committing serious sins makes him important. He no longer feels shame about his sins, or anxiety about confessing them. He expresses his trust in the priest by calling him “intelligent above the ordinary.” As the priest has connected having significant sins to confess with a masculine description of Jackie as a “big hefty fellow” earlier, Jackie connects the idea of being punished for one’s sins with femininity, and foolishness—“the cackle of old women and girls”



When it’s Jackie’s turn, the priest shows him how to sit in the confessional and asks him, “what’s a-trouble to you, Jackie?” Jackie thinks he should confess his worst sin while the priest is in a good mood. He says he plotted to kill Gran.

The priest shows Jackie how to behave in the confessional, but then takes an informal, personal tone, parting from the ritual language of Confession. This is the first time the story shows how far Jackie has taken his anger against Gran—that he has plotted to murder her. He is confessing to the reader as well as to the priest and God.



While the priest is silent at first, he asks Jackie why he would make this plan, drawing Jackie out about Gran being an “awful woman.” The priest affirms Jackie’s judgments of Gran, and even asks what Jackie planned to do with the body. Jackie then confesses to attacking Nora with a knife. The priest confirms that Nora is the little girl that slapped Jackie earlier, and he says, “someone will go after her with a bread-knife one day and he won’t miss her.”

The priest tells Jackie that he must have “great courage,” since there are lots of people the priest would like to stab if it wasn’t for his fear of being hanged for murder. He tells Jackie that he has seen lots of hangings and “they all died roaring”—many of them for killing their grandmothers, and none of them felt it was worth it.

The priest walks Jackie into the chapel yard, and Jackie is sorry when he leaves, thinking that the priest is the “most entertaining character I’d ever met in the religious line.” Away from the “shadow” indoors, Jackie feels “dazzled” by the sunlight and the noise of the street. His “heart soar[s]” knowing that he won’t “die in the night and come back,” **burning** his mother’s furniture.

Nora is waiting for Jackie outside the church, and she has a sour expression when she sees Jackie with the priest. She asks what the priest gave him, and he tells her three Hail Marys. Nora is in disbelief, and says that Jackie must not have confessed everything. When Jackie clarifies that he told everything—even about Gran and the bread-knife—and Nora sees him sucking candy that the priest gave him, she is “baffled” and “suspicious.” Finally, she “bitterly” concludes, “Tis no advantage to anybody trying to be good. I might just as well be a sinner like you.”

Before this point in the story, the priest has scolded Nora for slapping Jackie, and he has been kind to Jackie after his mistake—the priest appeared to be a kind-hearted person who behaved according to the teaching of mercy in the Catholic Church. At this point, it is clear that his judgment is no more divine than Jackie’s. He confirms Jackie’s narrow perspective and approves his violent impulses. He does not change his gentle playful tone when Jackie describes his plot to kill Gran. In the priest’s estimation, Nora slapping Jackie’s ear means that she deserves to be stabbed. This is counter to Catholic teaching that a person may always earn divine forgiveness.



The priest’s reasons for not committing murder are no more divine than one of Jackie’s father’s beatings or Mrs. Ryan’s talk of hellfire. The priest only offers Jackie another threat of violence (hanging) to keep him behaving well, without offering any moral insight.



Jackie is relieved of his anxieties about the sins he committed, but not because he completed the ritual of Confession correctly. He has gained no new moral insight into human nature or divine justice. Instead, the priest has taught him that he is more important than other people and his sins are normal and acceptable. He believes that Mrs. Ryan’s story about the burning ghost no longer applies to him because he no longer believes there will be negative consequences for sinning, nor that he should feel shame making a full Confession of his sins in the future.



Rather than teaching goodness, the priest’s actions have taught Nora as well as Jackie that goodness is not important—each of them knows that Jackie is favored over Nora, regardless of their behavior. Neither of them has reason to believe in impartial divine justice or atonement. They have learned the opposite of the lessons Confession is supposed to teach. However, Nora doesn’t know what the reader does—that the priest believes her nature is essentially bad and that she deserves to be stabbed regardless of her efforts to be good. The story shows that she would not have such a warm response from the priest if she were to “be a sinner like” Jackie.





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