

Flann O'Brien: An Exegesis of Satire

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The purpose of writing *Flann O'Brien: An Exegesis of Satire* was to illuminate how O'Brien uses political, religious, and social satire to destabilize identities. Satire is achieved through hyperbole, irony, and irreverent diction. Identities are exaggerated in the texts to reveal problematic aspects embedded within them. Some of O'Brien's heavily satirized identities are nationalist, Gaelic, academic, and masculine identities. Troublesome components of these respective identities are revealed in order to improve said identity, which O'Brien is passionate about. O'Brien's five novels were analyzed in how satire functioned and why; the result being he heavily criticized that which he was passionate about. His passion is revealed through his familial history, interviews with family members, and O'Brien's personal letters. O'Brien, neglected in comparison to other Irish authors, brilliantly deconstructs identities in a "irreverent reverence" and should be respected for his metafictional works.

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1.0 Introduction to O'Brien

Flann O'Brien's metafictional novels use humor as ridicule and satire. Satire illuminates identities by pushing them to the point of farce. Farce is achieved through the rhetorical devices of hyperbole, irony, and unusual context. Hyperbole creates exaggerations that undermine essentializations associated with respective identities. The identity is exaggerated such that it conveys essentialisms embedded within the identity. Some of the identities O'Brien scorns are nationalist, Gaelic, and academic identities. O'Brien, in satirizing these identities, demonstrates the extent to which he cares about the matter. In tackling identities through satire O'Brien acknowledges the sacredness satire functions on. For satire to be effective, the writer must be critiquing through deconstruction of said identity. In regards to sacredness, the height of hyperbolic usage occurs tandem to the depths of disillusionment by the writer.

An example of hyperbole illuminating absurd identities is in *The Poor Mouth* where the protagonist reflects on a neighbor: "He possessed the very best poverty, hunger and distress also. He was generous and open-handed and he never possessed the smallest object which he did not share with his neighbours [...]even the quantity of little potatoes needful to keep body and soul joined together. The gentlemen from Dublin who came in motors to inspect the paupers praised him for his Gaelic poverty and stated that they never saw anyone who appeared so truly Gaelic. There was no one in Ireland comparable to O'Sanassa in the excellence of his poverty; the amount of famine which was delineated in his person" (O'Brien 463). The satirical commentary on how cultural identity is impractically valued over actual living conditions is conveyed by excessive exaggeration. "Excellence of his poverty" illuminates the identity of Gaelic culture because being impoverished is associated as a badge of honor for being "so truly Gaelic."

O'Brien's irreverent humor is significant because it desecrates the "sacred cow" within nationalist, Gaelic, and academic identities. O'Brien's purpose for doing the aforementioned is deconstructing identities such that they can be improved.

O'Brien's five novels are described chronologically as follows: *At Swim-Two-Birds*, published in 1939, is a Celtic knot of interwoven stories, about a novel's narrator writing a novel about another man writing a novel. *The Third Policeman*, written in 1940 but published in 1967, features a protagonist who has committed murder and wanders through hell while encountering three policemen who experiment with space and time. *The Poor Mouth*, published in 1941, is a parody at those who romanticize Gaelic culture, through a bleak but hilarious portrait of peasants in a rural village. *The Hard Life*, published in 1961, is a coming of age story that challenges Irish identity, formal education, and the Catholic Church through a young orphan's story. *The Dalkey Archive*, published in 1964, is an satiric fantasy featuring a mad scientist who uses relativity to age his whiskey and has James Joyce as bartender. These comic portrayals advance the notion of subterfuging identity tropes such as the poor, drunk Irish because they are so outrageous in their depiction.

The master of metfiction embodied the style in which he wrote; over the years he assumed numerous personas. Keith Donohue, in his introduction to *The Complete Novels of Flann O'Brien*, notes that O'Brien was a "serial pseudonymist." Literature remembers him as Flann O'Brien but that was merely author Brian O'Nolan's first pseudonym. O'Nolan, born in 1911 in Ulster, was one of twelve children. His father, Michael Nolan, was an Irish Nationalist who met his mother Agnes in an Irish language class. Upon marriage, Michael changed the family name to Ó Nualláin to reflect their Gaelic roots. Growing up, Nolan experienced a language divide as his family spoke only Gaelic at home while at school only English was spoken. The early

linguistic difference was integral to O'Brien's later novels as he disseminates the two in both structure and style. Only *The Poor Mouth* was published in Gaelic, originally titled *An Béal Bocht* under the pen name Myles na gCopaleen.

Little is known about the man behind the many masks, other than his crippling alcoholism and marriage to Evelyn McDonnell, also a civil servant. Friend Niall Sheridan commented on the shenanigans O'Brien loved to dabble in; "Writing under several different names, he proceeded to carry on furious arguments on many topics, satirizing *en passant* almost every established literary figure. Before long, many notable personalities joined the mêlée and the whole affair exploded into a giant display of fireworks, a mixture of satire, polemics, criticism, savage invective, and sheer nonsense" (O'Brien xi).

Critic Maebh Long notes that the range of characters O'Brien employed reflected the individual himself; he was "a full-time civil servant; an English-language novelist; a part-time journalist; an Irish-language novelist; a playwright; a full-time journalist; a novelist again; and a writer of teleplays" ("Flann O'Brien: Man of (Many) Letters, Man of Many Masks."). O'Brien's ever-shifting identities can in part be viewed as his manic humor while also considering the necessity of forced self-recreations. The sole breadwinner after his father's death, O'Brien at the age of twenty-six, was responsible for feeding the family of twelve on his paycheck alone for eleven years (Ó Nualláin). His most respected work, *The Third Policeman*, was rejected by publishers throughout his lifetime. Only published in 1967 after his death, the rejection of his second novel profoundly altered how he approached his work. *The Poor Mouth*, his third novel, followed a year after and was under a new pen name, Myles na gCopaleen. His numerous pseudonyms were such that he allegedly would write letters to the editor of *The Irish Times* complaining about his own articles published in that newspaper; often in an irate way. His young

death at fifty-four on April Fools' Day due to a heart-attack, rather than the throat cancer he had been diagnosed with, is considered his "final joke" by his younger brother Micheál (Ó Nualláin).

2.0 The Palimpsest of Control and Kangaroolity in *At Swim-Two-Birds*

At Swim-Two-Birds is a cluster of shenanigans disguised under the initial bildungsroman story of an unnamed Irish college student studying literature. The autobiographical frame story features the student writing a novel with three alternative beginnings and with antepenultimate, penultimate and ultimate conclusions. The primary narrator, the college student, decides to write a novel in which one of his characters decides to write a novel, a Mr. Dermot Trellis. Trellis then creates a fellow character, John Furriskey and attempts to write a lurid story involving Furriskey and a new character, Sheila Lamont. Instead of crafting Furriskey's downfall, author and creator Trellis "is so blinded by her beauty (which is naturally the type of beauty nearest to his heart), that he so far forgets himself as to assault her himself" (O'Brien 58). The son is born at the age of twenty-five, from the indiscretion of his father. He too, wishes to write. Meanwhile, the college student writes two further stories. His second story details the story of Pooka MacPhellimey, a member of the devil class. The third story consists of adaptations of Irish legends regarding Finn McCool and Mad King Sweeny. O'Brien deconstructs binaries by utilizing a palimpsest structure, misshapen Irish folklore, and anarchic syntactic structures. The end result is a meditation on the struggle between control and chaos.

The palimpsest structure creates layered text with meaning, or power, being erased with each addition. As the plot of each story within a story develops, the original author of the plot loses control as his characters begin writing their own stories. An example of the palimpsest structure is evident on pages 96-97, where our unnamed narrator is discussing his fictional character Trellis in such a manner that Trellis seems living, rather than an imaginary character. It also demonstrates the intertextual narratives that weave in the storylines. O'Brien writes:

“I’m afraid I never heard of Trellis, said Byrne. Who is Trellis?”

A member of the author class; I said.

Did he write a book on Tactics? I fancy I met him in Berlin.

[..] He makes the characters live with him in his house. Nobody knows whether they are there at all or whether it is all imagination. A great man” (O’Brien 96-97).

The questioning of who Trellis is by the narrator’s friend Byrne serves to create the palimpsest structure but also subverts traditional notion of authorial control, that what an author writes he has power over because he can control it. The unnamed narrator has created the character of Trellis who has then taken control away from the initial author as he too, becomes an author. Trellis, once a puppet of the unnamed narrator’s imagination, breaks free by writing his own novel where he can control himself and his characters.

The physicality of authorship seems particularly important as the unnamed narrator consistently refers to the practice of writing taking place in bed. In identifying the bed as the place where creation ensues, O’Brien furthers the notion that creation is a private and deeply personal struggle. A key distinction that accompanies the idea of private creation, is the isolation from the real world to create a fictional world. In this manner O’Brien seems to suggest that reality has little bearing on fiction. Or that perhaps, fiction can become one’s reality. The unnamed narrator’s response that Trellis is “a member of the author class” calls attention to the numerous ways in which authors lose control of language, as it garners its own meanings unintended by the author and therefore gains its own authority. Furthermore, the unnamed narrator reflects that Trellis’ “dominion over his characters is impaired by his addiction to sleep” furthering the idea that authorial control is weakened as time passes.

Ironically, what the unnamed narrator claims about Trellis actually reflects strongly on his own person. He idealizes himself as a great, isolated writer who “makes the characters live with him in his house.” Another example is the “addiction to sleep” that Trellis purportedly holds, when the unnamed narrator does as well and misses class due to this. In this manner, the palimpsest is further established through which characters alter each other as storylines are embedded.

O’Brien inserts himself into the reflection through the narrator’s line; “It is important to remember that he reads and writes only green books. That is an important point” (97). While the narrator is elaborating on Trellis, it can be inferred that O’Brien is undermining the isolationist political and literary movement occurring in the 1930’s and 1940’s. *At Swim-Two-Birds* was published in March 1939 before the outbreak of World War II that year. The narrator continues noting, “Trellis practised another curious habit in relation to his reading. All colours except green he regarded as symbols of evil and he confined his reading to books attired in green covers. Although a man of wide learning and culture, this arbitrary rule caused serious chasms in his erudition. [...] On being commended by a friend to read a work of merit lately come from the booksellers [...] on learning that they were not of the green colour would condemn the book (despite his not having perused it) as a work of Satan” (O’Brien 97).

The repetition and focus on *green* books in the above passage connects the content to Nationalism while the diction choice of “arbitrary” signifies the contempt O’Brien feels towards the isolation movement. Arbitrary signifies the lack of rational thought behind such *green* choices. “All colours except green he regarded as symbols of evil” directly connects to the fascist tension building in Europe at the time as O’Brien connects isolationism with the evils of fascism. Ireland in the 1930s “had to take account of walking existence of what appeared to be the

presence of evil on a cosmic scale in the world” (Cronin 42). O’Brien resists dominant artistic and political modes in Ireland because *At Swim-Two-Birds* literary style insists that the reader interrogate the numerous reflections of characters. Instead of condemning “despite not having perused it,” O’Brien forces the reader to dissect how the ponderings of one character influences the others.

The unnamed narrator reflecting on Trellis’ lack of dominion reveals to us the nature of the narrator’s desire for control. The narrator explicitly states this when he claims that “the novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic” (O’Brien 21). Therefore, the unnamed narrator’s musings on what a novel must be are prophetic in understanding why O’Brien chose the metafictional style of multiple narratives: to undermine centralized control.

Misshapen Irish folklore most obviously demonstrates itself in the narrative of the Good Fairy and the Pooka. Similarly, altered Celtic mythology in the novel centers on Finn McCool and King Sweeny. We are introduced to the reworked tales by the unnamed narrator discussing his character’s creations:

“an eccentric author, conceives the project of writing a salutary book on the consequences which follow wrong-doing and creates for the purpose

THE POOKA FERGUS MACPHELLIMEY, a species of human Irish devil endowed with magical powers. He then creates

JOHN FURRISKEY, a depraved character, whose task is to attack women and behave at all times in an indecent manner. By magic he is instructed by Trellis to go one night to Donnybrook where he will by arrangement meet and betray

PEGGY, a domestic servant. He meets her and is much surprised when she confides in him that Trellis has fallen asleep and that her virtue has already been assailed by an elderly man subsequently to be identified as

FINN MACCOOL, a legendary character hired by Trellis on account of the former's venerable appearance and experience, to act as the girl's father and chastise her for her transgressions against the moral law" (O'Brien 57-58).

O'Brien's Gaelic upbringing coupled with his studies of Early Irish literature make it unsurprising that *At Swim-Two-Birds* references fourteen different sources in early and medieval Irish literature (Clune 17). Finn MacCool, mythically known as the leader of Fianna Irish warriors, is a beloved figure in Irish imagination. O'Brien's resistance to dominant artistic and political modes appears in his debasing of nationally-held myths. Finn MacCool's introduction in the above excerpt highlights O'Brien's critique of rigidly held national ideals. "Her virtue has already been assailed by an elderly man subsequently to be identified as FINN MACCOOL, a legendary character hired by Trellis on account of the former's venerable appearance" morphs the original myth into a narrative about an exaggerated character that is of poor moral standing (O'Brien 57-58). The diction choice of "virtue" plays to the mythic tale while the inclusion of "assailed" and "elderly" sharply undercut any ethereal dreams. Portraying the "legendary hero of old Ireland, [...] a man of superb physique and development" as an elderly figure serves to emasculate not only the myth itself, but the nationalist movement behind it (O'Brien 1).

Irish Revivalists as well as Fascists utilized myth for political purposes in the 1940s which is what O'Brien attempts to undermine in his inclusion of a feeble yet morally corrupt Finn. Co-opted by Trellis to be a moral compass for daughter-figure Peggy, Finn instead sexually assaults her, though we are unaware of how far his assaillment against her chastity went. In

contrast, Pooka McPhellimey, a member of the devil class, is less evil than his counterpart the Good Fairy.

In Irish tradition, the character of the Pooka performs humorous mischief as well as genuine evil. *At Swim-Two-Birds* has the Pooka exist on two levels within the narrative; he is a character of Trellis' as well as written into Orlick's story to torture Trellis. In contrast, the Good Fairy lacks a clear tradition-based past and acts only vaguely as the Pooka's foil. Some of the most humorous scenes are based on the ridiculous interactions between the two. Their first encounter, where the Good Fairy barges into the Pooka's home while he is in bed with his wife, witnesses the following exchange:

“When I spoke last, said the Good Fairy, I was kneeling in the cup of your navel but it is bad country and I am there no longer.

Do you tell me that, said the Pooka. This here beside me is my wife.

That is why I left, said the Good Fairy.

There are two meanings in your answer, said the Pooka with his smile of deprecation, but if your departure from my poor bed was actuated solely by a regard for chastity and conjugal fidelity, you are welcome to remain between the blankets without the fear of anger in your host, for there is safety in a triad, chastity is truth and truth is an odd number. And your statement that kangaroos are not human is highly debatable. [...]

To admit a kangaroo unreservedly to be a man would inevitably involve one in a number of distressing implications, the kangaroolity of women and your wife beside you being one example. [...]

I would not be in the least surprised to learn that my wife is a kangaroo, for any hypothesis would be more tenable than the assumption that she is a woman. [...]

There is nothing so important as the legs in determining the kangaroolity of a woman. Is there for example fur on your wife's legs, Sir? [...]

I cannot say whether there is fur on my wife's legs for I have never seen them nor do I intend to commit myself to the folly of looking at them. [...] surely nothing in the old world to prevent a deceitful kangaroo from shaving the hair off her legs, assuming she is a woman" (O'Brien 103-104).

After reading three pages of the argument with complete absorption and frequent laughs, it hopefully dawns on the reader that they are immersed in a discussion on kangaroolity. Kangaroolity being a comical farce around which an absurd and inane argument is taking place. There seems few authors that can mangle beloved mythic tales such that they produce a comedy of utmost hilarity and ridicule. The Pooka's refusal to admit his wife is a woman, "any hypothesis would be more tenable than the assumption that she is a woman," is problematic as their barometer for judging femininity versus kangaroolity is leg hair. Nevertheless, "deceitful kangaroos" that shave their legs to pretend to be women rouses a laugh.

O'Brien takes a gleeful joy in the anarchic structure of the novel that creates ludicrous passages such as that of the Pooka and Good Fairy's. The palimpsest structure is anarchic as *At Swim-Two-Birds* utilizes postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and the unreliable narrator well before the movement began after World War II. The four stories are difficult to follow as the characters rebel against their creator Trellis and torture him in his story. However, the series of metafictional forays of the unnamed narrator are thankfully divided by frequent headlines, for the most part. The headlines differ based on content such as "biographical reminiscences" is used when the narrator is discussing his existence as an absent young Dublin student. While not present in every story, the unnamed narrator asserts his presence in an

arrogant, if not classist manner. The following examples serve to illustrate the judgmental tone the narrator assumes towards his life and his metafictional works:

“Note to Reader before proceeding further: Before proceeding further, the Reader is respectfully advised to refer to the Synopsis or Summary of the Argument on Page 57” (O’Brien 101).

*

“A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers, and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. Conclusion of explanation” (O’Brien 21-22).

In the first excerpt, the unnamed narrator attempts to control the narrative of other characters. Furthermore, the second passage utilizes irony as the entire novel is built on existing works (Irish myth and fictional characters) but is morphed such that “persons of inferior education” can derive an understanding.

The headlines, while sometimes helpful in orienting oneself to which narrative is occurring, serves a dual-purpose of undermining claims of control. The unnamed narrator consistently aims to control his story and the story of further characters yet, the characters’ stories continue after the narrator has returned to the “real” world. Therefore, signaling the loss of control by the creator.

O’Brien deconstructs power binaries (writer/reader, educated/uneducated, wealthy/poor, British/Irish, etc.) by utilizing a palimpsest structure, misshapen Irish folklore, and anarchic syntactic structures to undermine authorial figures. His postmodern techniques, rather than detracting from political engagement, insist on it. The very style of his writing (having an unreliable narrator, fragmented stories, and paradoxes) implores the reader to question what they

are reading. By being unable to trust what they are reading, coupled with a lack of the full story and contradictory logic, one is required to be a diligent reader with O'Brien's novel. The critical thinking by the reader on the text can then be transferred to their reality. *At Swim-Two-Birds* challenges the reader to grapple with who truly has authority and why because hegemonic systems of power are set up such that they go unquestioned.

3.0 Existentialism, Farce, and Identity in *The Third Policeman*

The Third Policeman, written in 1940, was rejected by O'Brien's publisher and went unpublished until 1967. The novel opens with a homicidal burglary committed by the unnamed narrator, who intends to use the proceeds of the crime to publish his academic theories on the writings of a cracky philosopher named De Selby. De Selby theorizes that the earth is shaped like a sausage, night is a form of industrial pollution produced by industrial effluvia, and sleep is a form of hysterical fainting necessary because of the lack of oxygen caused by the soot. The narrator's obsession with De Selby's writings starts to seem almost sensible after a while with consistent repetition. O'Brien utilizes repetition in *The Third Policeman* to convey that if a claim is repeated often enough, it can be more easily believed. Unusual context is employed for comic farce such as eternity can be accessed through an elevator, just to the left of the local river. Repetition, unusual context, and digressive footnotes (of which De Selby is the subject) combine to criticize apodictic notions of what it means to exist.

After murdering his neighbor, the narrator returns to the scene of the crime months later and stumbles into an alternate dimension. The landscape looks similarly enough to his rural home; however different laws of metaphysics apply. Neighbors are turning into bicycles, which in turn are stolen regularly for which the punishment is death. Local policeman are vigilant in investigating bicycle crimes that are a "very depraved and despicable manifestation of criminality" (O'Brien 272). The narrator experiences eternity via an elevator down the road, meets his soul "Joe," confronts his victim, is condemned to public hanging, and held at gunpoint. The penultimate metaphysical experience occurs at the end where it is revealed that the narrator has been in hell the entire time.

O'Brien elaborates to a friend that "the main character has been dead throughout the book and that all the queer ghastly things which have been happening to him are happening in a sort of hell he earned for the killing. Towards the end of the book (before you know he's dead) he manages to get back to his own house where he used to live with another man who helped in the original murder. Although he's been away three days, this other fellow is twenty years older and dies of fright when he sees the other lad standing in the door. Then the two of them walk back along the road to the hell place and start thro' all the same terrible adventures again, the first fellow being surprised and frightened by everything just as he was the first time and as if he'd never been through it before. It is made clear that this sort of thing goes on for ever - and there you are. [...] Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable" (405-406). Distilled, the final scene ends on the first officer once again inquiring "Is this about a bicycle?" and undermining concepts of existence through repetition, irony, and unusual context.

O'Brien establishes the connection between the narrator and philosopher De Selby in the following passage:

"My life at this school does not matter except for one thing. It was here that I first came to know something of de Selby. One day I picked up idly an old tattered book in the science master's study and put it in my pocket to read in bed the next morning as I had just earned the privilege of lying late. I was about sixteen then and the date was the seventh of March. I still think that day is the most important in my life and can remember it more readily than I do my birthday. The book was a first edition of *Golden Hours* with the two last pages missing. By the time I was nineteen and had reached the end of my education I knew that the book was valuable and that in keeping it I was stealing it. Nevertheless I packed it in my bag without a qualm and

would probably do the same if I had my time again. Perhaps it is important in the story I am going to tell to remember that it was for de Selby I committed my first serious sin. It was for him that I committed my greatest sin” (224-225).

Derision at institutionalized forms of knowledge is a recurrent motif through all of O’Brien’s works however it is particularly prominent in *The Third Policeman*. The narrator’s obsession with De Selby develops while at an elite boarding school where false knowledge is readily found on the professor’s bookshelf. His fellow murder accomplice, Divney, conspires with the narrator to murder their neighbor so that they will have the funds to publish the narrator’s “De Selby Index.” His obsession to convey his perceived wisdom of De Selby leads him to murder an innocent man.

O’Brien, through the radicalization of the narrator at boarding school, ridicules formal education as a means for becoming “educated.” The remembrance of March seventh “that day is the most important in my life” recalls the Irish obsession with historical dates (ex. Partition, Easter Rising, Bloody Sunday). By highlighting the date of discovery as being more memorable than the narrator’s birthday, O’Brien indicates the loss of individuality that occurs due to collective conscious. Age is also suggested as a factor in radicalization with the narrator being “about sixteen then.” The book on De Selby lacks an ending with pages missing and is in a state of incompleteness. However, the narrator steals it regardless and though it is his first crime for De Selby it is a harbinger of the “greatest sin” to come.

As the novel progresses, the narrator consistently uses digressive, lengthy footnotes about De Selby. During the narrator’s encounter with his victim after murdering him and dying himself, a footnote is included:

“4 It is not clear whether de Selby had heard of this but he suggests (*Garcia*, p. 12) that night, far from being caused by the commonly accepted theory of planetary movements, was due to accumulations of ‘black air’ produced by certain volcanic activities of which he does not treat in detail. See also pp. 79 and 945, *Country Album*. Le Fournier’s comment (in *Homme ou Dieu*) is interesting. ‘On ne saura jamais jusqu’à quel point de Selby fut cause de la Grande Guerre, mais, sans aucun doute, ses théories excentriques - spécialement celle que nuit n’est pas un phénomène de nature, mais dans l’atmosphère un état malsain amené par un industrialisme cupide et sans pitié - auraient l’effet de produire un trouble profond dans les masses.’” (O’Brien 246).

The appearance of footnotes correlates to the anxiety the narrator expresses about his existence. As the plot progresses in antics, so too, does the narrator’s footnotes on De Selby. O’Brien suggests, through this repetition, that instability in one’s existence can lead to clinging to untruths. O’Brien also uses footnotes to satirize academia as the numerous detours serve no purpose other than intellectual posturing. In the eleventh (of twelve) chapters, a footnote pans five pages and rambles to the point of incoherence. The narrator’s mental deterioration coincides with his determination to hold onto the validity of his work, though his work was based on a ramblings of a crazed philosopher.

De Selby is first introduced in the epigraph with the quote: “Human existence being an hallucination containing in itself the secondary hallucinations of day and night (the latter an insanitary condition of the atmosphere due to accretions of black air) it ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death. De Selby” (O’Brien n.p.). The quote from “De Selby” centers on the falsity of human existence because according to him, “the supreme hallucination is death.” Therefore, according to De

Selby, it is unnecessary to concern oneself with death because it would mean one is living, which one is not (“human existence being an hallucination”).

In addition to De Selby’s quote as an epigraph, Shakespeare is also quoted; “Since the affairs of men rest still uncertain, let’s reason with the worst that may befall. Shakespeare” (O’Brien n.p.). The lofty quote seems legitimate given its paring with literary genius Shakespeare. Only when one completes the novel is it apparent that De Selby is a fiction of O’Brien’s imagination.

Hallucination, repeated three times in one sentence, mimics the word’s meaning while the insertion of parentheses serves to break up the sentence and further convolute its meaning. “(the latter an insanitary condition of the atmosphere due to accretions of black air)” represents a digression from theoretical thought to applied yet speculative reasoning. It’s speculative because readers are unfamiliar with the notion of black air and it is unsubstantiated in the quote.

The novel will later reveal the genius mingled with the insanity of the imagined philosopher De Selby, noting on page 265 that “It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated such as the sequence of day and night while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena” (O’Brien). Given that readers are unaware of the fictional and insane nature of De Selby, O’Brien’s decision to first immerse readers in his novel via a De Selby quote creates a space where the fantastical is believable through parataxis. The rhetorical device creates an implied parallelism however the reader is falsely led by the fictional De Selby quote. O’Brien, through his use of parataxis, ridicules the authority given to idolized figures.

If De Selby’s quote creates a fantastical believability, Shakespeare’s quote directly following it issues a legitimate authority for belief in the fantastical. The literary and cultural authority that

rests with Shakespeare legitimizes De Selby's quote because O'Brien pairs them together ensuring that if the first quote seems absurd, the following carries the authority that the first lacks.

Regarding the substance of the Shakespeare quote, it derives from *Julius Caesar* when Cassius is saying goodbye to Brutus before battle. O'Brien's decision to use this line reveals itself when contemplating the interaction between the unnamed narrator and Divney as they decide to mutually murder their neighbor. The context of the quote illuminates parallels between Shakespeare's characters and O'Brien's characters regarding murder.

While Divney originally conceives of the idea to murder the wealthy neighbor, it is the unnamed narrator who commits violent murder. As Divney urges him on, the narrator "felt and almost heard the fabric of his skull crumple up crisply like an empty eggshell. I do not know how often I struck him after that but I did not stop until I was tired" (O'Brien 232). When the plot surprise is revealed (our named narrator has been dead and wandering hell since the murder), the elapsed time is revealed to have been not three days, as the narrator imagines, but sixteen years. It becomes clear, upon encountering Divney, that they are in hell for their crimes and will wander it for the rest of eternity.

4.0 Hyperbole and Identity in *The Poor Mouth*

The Poor Mouth, or *An Béal Bocht*, introduces readers to the young Irish lad Bonaparte O'Coonassa. The novel was originally published in Gaelic in 1941 and titled *An Béal Bocht* after the Irish expression, "an béal bocht a chur ort" which means to put on the poor mouth or exaggerate one's hardships. Our protagonist's fictional memoir tells the story of one of the poorest Gaels in all of Gaeltacht as he struggles through life in wretched Corkadoragha in the townland of Lisnabrawshkeen. *The Poor Mouth* satirizes the "Gaeltacht autobiography" that was popular in Ireland during the early twentieth-century. Gaeltacht autobiographies emphasized the misery and impoverishment of Gaelic people and portraying them as experiencing the worst conditions possible. This sort of narrative continues today with works such as *Angela's Ashes*. In this fictional memoir, O'Brien subverts the conventions of this literary genre by relentlessly reminding the reader that it is a genre with its own particular techniques and devices. For instance, O'Brien exaggerates the folk-dialect the characters employ or the antics of life in the country. O'Coonassa's mother is deathly ill after the stench of an overfed pig, Ambrose, stalks the house. On page 420, she cries, "If this pig is not put out of the house at once, said she feebly from the bed in the end of the house, I'll set these rushes on fire and then an end will be put to the hard life in this house of ours and even if we finish up later in hell, I've never heard there are pigs there anyway!".

In response, O'Coonassa's grandfather replies: "Woman! said he, the poor creature is sick and I'm slow to push him out and he without his health. 'Tis true that this stench is beyond all but don't you see that the pig himself is making no complaint, although he has a snout on him just like yourself there" (O'Brien 420-421). The above passage calls into question the characters'

desires because O'Brien consistently represents them as doing little to escape their conditions, or worse, actively pursuing said conditions. It also highlights the equation of female and animal where pig's sensibilities are treated on an equal level with the woman's.

The village beggar, Sitric O'Sanassa is crowned as the exemplary Gael by outsiders because he is so poverty stricken that he can barely stand up but nevertheless is incredibly happy. The outsiders response to Sitric suggests that being a poor Gael is a blessing rather than affliction, which is O'Brien's way of mocking the revivalist attitude. O'Brien writes "There was a man in this townland at one time and he was named Sitric O'Sanassa. He had the best hunting, a generous heart and every other good quality which earn praise and respect at all times. But alas! there was another report abroad concerning him which was neither good nor fortunate. He possessed the very best poverty, hunger and distress also. He was generous and open-handed and he never possessed the smallest object which he did not share with his neighbours [...]even the quantity of little potatoes needful to keep body and soul joined together. The gentlemen from Dublin who came in motors to inspect the paupers praised him for his Gaelic poverty and stated that they never saw anyone who appeared so truly Gaelic. There was no one in Ireland comparable to O'Sanassa in the excellence of his poverty; the amount of famine which was delineated in his person. He had neither pig nor cup nor any household goods. In the depths of winter I often saw him on the hillside fighting and competing with a stray dog, both contending for a narrow hard bone and the same snorting and angry barking issuing from them both" (O'Brien 463). The passage contains disfigured phrases such as "Gaelic poverty" and "excellence of his poverty" that reflect O'Brien's exaggerated use of stereotypes to reveal their idiocy. As O'Brien pokes fun at-- to be Irish is to be poor and miserable, and so anything but the most extreme poverty and misery falls short of an authentic Irish experience. *The Poor Mouth*

interrogates stereotypical representations of Irish life such as the picturesque land, quaint villages, or cheerful spirit of the inhabitants regardless of the very real strife they faced.

O'Brien utilizes cultural stereotypes by pushing them to the point of farce, such as O'Coonassa being so accustomed to extreme poverty that when he does acquire some gold, it takes him a month to figure out how to spend his money. His selection, a pair of boots, makes him so uncomfortable he doesn't tell anyone. The Gaelic feared sea-cat monster is then spotted around town through odd markings on the ground, for which it is left to readers to giggle over the villagers lack of knowledge to even recognize boot prints. Humor, such as when the reader finds herself giggling over the folly that is frequently demonstrated by the Gaelic protagonist, serves to illuminate the reality of what was a very real suffering in the countrysides of Ireland.

No party is spared from O'Brien's acerbic wit, both the Irish and English governments are scorned for meager aid and education given for which the Western populace is expected to be thankful. In order to receive government aid, students must be able to speak English. Protagonist Bonaparte attends school for the first time where he encounters a rigid English schoolmaster that "cared not a wit for anyone." O'Brien's genius reveals itself in the following passage where he undermines both English superiority and the Gaelic revivalist movement:

"He cast his venomous eyes over the room and they alighted on me where they stopped. By jove! I did not find his look pleasant [...] after a while he directed a long yellow finger at me and said:

-Phwat is yer nam?

I did not understand what he said nor any other type of speech which is practised in foreign parts because I had only Gaelic as a mode of expression and as a protection against the difficulties of life. I looked around timidly at the other boys. I heard a whisper at my back:

- Your name he wants!

My heart leaped with joy at this assistance and I was grateful to him who prompted me. I looked politely at the master and replied to him:

-Bonaparte, son of Michelangelo, son of Peter, son of Owen, son of Thomas's Sarah, granddaughter of John's Mary, granddaughter of James, son of Dermot . . ." (O'Brien 424-425).

The vivid diction choices of Bonaparte, such as "venomous," coupled with perfect grammar casts him as an intelligent child. In contrast, the English schoolteacher displays poor English speaking with his "Phwat is yer nam?" and other incorrect phrases. In regards to Bonaparte, his comment that he had "only Gaelic as a protection against the difficulties of life" is O'Brien's scathing critique on cultural nationalism whereby unending devotion to what is "Irish" interferes with actually bettering life. Individual hardships are not seen as distinct problems with solutions but part of the living damnation of "the fate of the Gaels." This anti-individualist and submissive mindset allows responsibility to be shirked in favor of a passive destiny.

During Bonaparte's first day of school, he is beaten violently for responding with a Gaelic name and is sharply reprimanded that his name is "Jams O'Donnell!" (O'Brien 425). Jams O'Donnell, an anglicized British name, is given to every single student under the schoolmaster's care; "Yer nam is Jams O'Donnell! He continued in this manner until every creature in the school had been struck down by him and all had been named *Jams O'Donnell*" (O'Brien 425). In his reflection to his mother, the cause of suffering isn't deemed British colonialism but destiny as she laments it is just the way of things. Her excuse for the lack of action by the local families is explained as the fate of the Gaels:

"Don't you understand that it's Gaels that live in this side of the country and that they can't escape from fate? It was always said and written that every Gaelic youngster is hit on his

first school day because he doesn't understand English and the foreign form of his name and that no one has any respect for him because he's Gaelic to the marrow. There's no other business going on in school that day but punishment and revenge and the same fooling about *Jams O'Donnell*. Alas! I don't think that there'll ever be any good settlement for the Gaels but only hardship for them always" (O'Brien 426).

The fatalism of the Irish mindset does not mean that their suffering will go unacknowledged, rather it is subjected to ceaseless discussion. As the discussion of the suffering of the Gaels is as essential as the actual suffering. *The Poor Mouth* is an example of universal satire whereby disaster is the inevitable fate of the Gaels with it simultaneously annihilating and ennobling one. In regards to education, Bonaparte chooses not to return to school and is commended on his "shrewdness" by his mother. Jams O'Donnell will be the only snippet of English Bonaparte ever learns, in the end he comically discovers his father has the same moniker as well.

True Irishness is to be found in the absurd constant reflection on the condition of Irishness which O'Brien furiously pokes fun at. His humor derives from the notion that there is nothing funnier than unhappiness, which is the essential to the notion of "Irishness." O'Brien reflects on the broader theme of idiotic cultural nationalism on page 440 where the President of the Corkadoragha feis orates a "truly Gaelic oration:"

"Gaels! He said, it delights my Gaelic heart to be here today speaking Gaelic with you at this Gaelic feis in the centre of the Gaeltacht. May I state that I am a Gael. I'm Gaelic from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet- Gaelic front and back, above and below. Likewise, you are all truly Gaelic. We are all Gaelic Gaels of Gaelic lineage. He who is Gaelic, will be Gaelic evermore. I myself have spoken not a word except Gaelic since the day I was born- just

like you- and every sentence I've ever uttered has been on the subject of Gaelic. If we're truly Gaelic, we must constantly discuss the question of the Gaelic revival and the question of Gaelicism. There is no use in having Gaelic, if we converse in it on non-Gaelic topics. He who speaks Gaelic but fails to discuss the language question is not truly Gaelic in his heart; such conduct is of no benefit to Gaelicism because he only jeers at Gaelic and reviles the Gaels. There is nothing in this life so nice and so Gaelic as truly true Gaelic Gaels who speak in true Gaelic Gaelic about the truly Gaelic language."

O'Brien, through his use of repetition and tautology, parodies the Gaelic revival occurring during his era. Conradh na Gaeilge, historically known in English as the Gaelic League, is a social and cultural organisation which promotes the Irish language in Ireland and worldwide. The Gaelic revival promoted Irish language books such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain's memoir *An t-Oileánach (The Islander)* where this type of literature, rural, poor, and uneducated, was idealized as an exemplary form of Irishness.

Cultural nationalism had revered the notion of the "noble savage" ideal of rural Ireland that was embraced by Yeats and other artists. Yeats was sponsored by John O'Leary, a political mentor in addition to his literary patron (Zhao). O'Leary was essential in influencing Yeats to craft picturesque pastoral works of rural Ireland (Zhao). "He particularly encouraged Yeats to cultivate a unity of national culture in imitation of the Irish patriotic poetry in English" (Zhao 96). Romanticized notions of rural Ireland featured in literary works such as Yeats' possessed a harmful, contradictory message. While it aimed to revive Irish national culture by resisting British culture, it coincided with British stereotypes of Irish culture and reinforced those stereotypes such as the noble savage (Zhao 96).

The President's feis speech is O'Brien's sharp satire of the revivalist movement and at artists' that absently accepted it. Repetition of the word Gaelic, much like a dull parrot that repeats the same word over and over, serves to dim our expectation of intelligence from the Gaelic leaders. In chapter four, where the feis is featured, the word Gaelic and its deviations appears one-hundred and twelve times. Featured in these one-hundred and twelve references is the revelation that culture vultures have flocked to the destitute fields of Corkadoragha because the town has exemplary backwardness such that "real" Gaelic is still spoken there. The nonstop downpour is embraced by the outsiders as perfect because it aligns with their preconceived notion of what crummy Corkadoragha should be. During the feis, eight locals die because they cannot handle the compulsory Gaelic folk "Long Dance" as Bonaparte notes: "Even though death snatched many fine people from us, the events of the feis went on sturdily and steadily, we were ashamed to be considered not strongly in favor of Gaelic while the President's eye was upon us" (O'Brien 442-443).

The term Gael and its derivatives, is used repeated so frequently throughout that novel that it mimics the absurdity O'Brien feels towards it. Each speech culminates in a greater height of purported Gaelicism, irrespective that a number of the Gaels "collapsed from hunger and from the strain of listening while one fellow died most Gaelically in the midst of the assembly" (O'Brien 441). The spectacular writing is based off O'Brien's skillful tone that has a facade of seriousness balanced with hilarious repetition, as Bonaparte reflects on the happenings in a monotonous tone with repetition that creates a comic effect. These two techniques are essential to *The Poor Mouth* because they mimic the lifestyle he is narrating; a poor, tedious life that continues in banality and sameness. Bonaparte's first encounter with alcohol highlights these two techniques:

“If the bare truth be told, I did not prosper very well. My senses went astray, evidently.

Misadventure fell on my misfortune, a further misadventure fell on that misadventure and before long the misadventures were falling thickly on the first misfortune and on myself. Then a shower of misfortunes fell on the misadventures, heavy misadventures fell on the misfortunes after that and finally one great brown misadventure came upon everything, quenching the light and stopping the course of life” (O’Brien 444).

Bonaparte’s initial lamentation reads quite seriously in its formality, however upon further analysis the repetition of misfortune and misadventure creates a humorous notion. His first experience with alcohol comes in the form of poitín, the potato fermented to the point of near-lethality, has a comic inversion as the potato that so often gives him life, is also capable of dealing him death. This comic riff where alliteration and repetition create an endless cascade of troubles reinforces the notion of “putting on the poor mouth.” Repetition serves exaggerate the difficulties faced by Bonaparte and his fellow Gaels such that it creates humor in an otherwise terribly depressing tale.

O’Brien’s creation of humor through a nonchalant tone, repetition, and casualness unbalances the reader when reflecting on the content of the story. For example, Bonaparte faces starvation numerous times but it is often masked by the casual passage of time coupled with cultural idiocy. On page 471, Bonaparte states “In one way or another, life was passing us by and we were suffering misery, sometimes having a potato and at other times having nothing in our mouths but sweet words of Gaelic.” O’Brien, through formal grammar and a nonchalant tone undermines idealized nationalism that prizes “Irishness” over reality. He mocks the message that to be patriotic, is to be poor and hopelessly hungry yet to be prideful in one’s starvation.

The Poor Mouth succeeds in being a comic farce because it is precisely funny because of the least funny of reasons; misery and loss rarely end where one would like them to. Instead, life continues on such that “misfortunes fall on the misadventures, heavy misadventures fall on the misfortunes after that” and so forth.

5.0 Inertia in *The Hard Life*

The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor begins with the statement: “All the persons in this book are real and none is fictitious even in part” and the dedication to fellow author Graham Greene; “I honourably present to Graham Greene whose own forms of gloom I admire, this misterpiece.” O’Brien’s third novel was published twenty-two years after *At Swim-Two-Birds* and opens in 1890, the year of Charles Parnell’s downfall. Parnell being the Irish nationalist MP that was highly respected for his political acumen, such that Home Rule seemed possible, until an affair with a married woman ended his career. The novel echoes similarities to Joyce’s *Dubliners* with its focus on miseries on life in Dublin. *The Hard Life* is a satirical, loose bildungsroman of orphan protagonist Finnbar and his brother Manus. Satirical because the coming of age story is centered on Manus’ deception to earn a living while Finbarr rejects the path out of decent but with no resolution for how he will actually survive. While initially popular (its first print run sold out within forty-eight hours), the *The Hard Life* is considered the most-tame of O’Brien’s novels by critics. As such, statements like “the less said about “The Hard Life,” though, the better” are frequent (O’Connell). Nonetheless, the work critiques aspects of the Catholic Church, Irish identity, and the concept of formal education. The rambling structure, irreverent diction, and a distanced narrator all contribute to a tone of lackadaisical frustration.

Upon the death of their parents at an early age protagonist Finnbar and his brother Manus are sent to live with their alcoholic uncle. While the novel’s subtitle is *An Exegesis of Squalor*, little squalor is actually present. The boys are well-fed, looked after by their cousin (so far as bringing them breakfast in bed), and receive an education. Orphans and alcoholism are not novel devices for O’Brien to include in the 1961 publication. The boys’ privilege in steady

housing and food in Dublin do little to explain squalor. Little plot structure is adhered to, instead the novel consists mostly of ramblings between the local Jesuit priest, Father Kurt Fahrt, and Uncle Collopy. In one-hundred and fifty-one pages, action occurs with only two events. The first in the unexpected departure of Manus, who leaves for London to escape Dublin. The second being the pilgrimage of Mr. Collopy & Father Fahrt to meet the Pope, and promptly are asked to leave after insulting the Holy Father. After twenty-one brief chapters, the novel ends abruptly after Mr. Collopy collapses through a second story floor in Rome due to his obesity and dies. Finnbar is in the same position he started in, while Manus has made a living off duplicity in London.

The exchanges between Father Fahrt and Mr. Collopy are a substantial part of the novel and range from caustic to downright idiotic. Unbeknownst to the reader until the end, Mr. Collopy is angling to develop public restrooms for women in Dublin. In the interim, bizarrely sexual conversations occur between priest and man. The following best exemplifies this:

“ - Trams, Father. *Trams*. I don't know how many distinct routes we have here in the city, but say the total is eight. One tram for each route in each direction would suffice, or sixteen trams in all. Old trams repaired and redecorated would do.

- Are you serious Collopy? Trams?
- Yes, trams. They would have to be distinctive, painted black all over, preferably, and only one sign up front and rear - just the one word WOMEN. Understand? It would be as much as a man's life was worth to try to get into one of them” (O'Brien 524).

The scene illustrates the less-than subtle humor O'Brien was positing with the phrase “It would be as much as a man's life was worth to try to get into one of them.” While discussing

converting trams into bathrooms, this is unbeknownst to the reader at the time. Instead, what is conveyed is the sexual innuendo with men clamoring to get into one of them- ie. women.

Neglected in much criticism of *The Hard Life* is the negating portrayal of women. O'Brien, similar to most Irish authors of his time, did not fully develop female characters. Instead, humor such as the aforementioned is used and meek women are featured in the text, only in relation to their sexual status in relation to the male characters. At points, females are used as weapons to further each's respective point. Mr. Collopy claims men:

“have only two uses for women, Father – either go to bed with them or else thrash the life out of them. I was half thinking of trying to enlist the support of this new Gaelic League but I'm afraid they're nothing only a crowd of thooleramawns. They wouldn't understand this crisis in our national life. They would think I was a dirty old man and send for the D.M.P

- Um.

Father Fahrt frowned speculatively.

- What about making a move at Dublin Castle? They could certainly put pressure on the Corporation.

- And get myself locked up? I am not a damned fool.

Ah! With politics I am not familiar” (O'Brien 523).

Mr. Collopy's use of irreverent phrases makes him look foolish because he fails to thoroughly analyze why he is critiquing his subject in question. Instead, the fantastical phrases such as “thooleramawn” serve to make him appear quick-tempered and absurdly humorous.

While angling for his plan, he notes what would likely be perceived of him if his plans were to

get full public notice. The DMP, or Dublin Metro Police, is viewed as an adversary in addition to the government at Dublin Castle. In regards to the Church, the priest claims ignorance on political matters which is hilarious, if not overdone on O'Brien's part. Any lay person, semi-familiar with Ireland's history or the Catholic Church, knows that no such thing as an apolitical priest exists in Ireland. Mr. Collopy attempts to goad Father Fahrt into a discussion on violence and the use of force. His blustering on Mrs. Flaherty and her proposed scheme evokes a rambling structure where the two return quips like tennis volleys until Mr. Collopy states the previously unsaid obvious. To note that going to prison for an ideal is "a habit with some people here" demonstrates a rare insight of Mr. Collopy's while also reinforcing his inertia. He is content to lengthily discuss such issues and "habits" but will die of obesity before taking any action. The excerpt that follows contains Mr. Collopy's goading:

"We had a committee meeting last Wednesday. Mrs Flaherty was there. She told us all about her dear friend, Emmeline Pankhurst. Now there is a bold rossie for you if you like, but she's absolutely perfectly right. She'll yet do down that scoundrel, Lloyd George. I admire her.

— She has courage, Father Fahrt agreed.

— But wait till you hear. When we got down to our own business, discussing ways and means and ekcetera, out comes the bold Mrs Flaherty with her plan. Put a bomb under the City Hall!

— Lord save us!

— Blow all that bastards up. Slaughter them. Blast them limb from limb. If they refuse to do their duty to the ratepayers and to humanity. They do not deserve to live. If they were in ancient Rome they would be crucified.

— But Collopy, I thought you were averse to violence?

— That may be, Father. That may well be. But Mrs Flaherty isn't. She would do all those crooked corporators in in double quick time. What she calls for is action.

— Well, Collopy, I trust you explained the true attitude to her — your own attitude. Agitation, persistent exposure of the true facts, reprimand of the negligence of the Corporation, and the rousing of public opinion. Whatever Mrs Flaherty could do on those lines, now that she is at large, there is little she could do if she were locked up in prison.

— She wouldn't be the first in this country, Father, who went to prison for an ideal. It's a habit with some people here" (O'Brien 544-545).

The political irony in Father Fahrt's claim of his apolitical nature mirrors itself in the character of Mr. Collopy. The cantankerous, reform-minded uncle refers to his liquor as either water or "the crock" and subsequently spends his time inside drinking and talking away the day. While infuriated at the inefficiency of the government, he does not actually take any decisive action to advocate for his cause therefore mimicking the very inefficiency he bemoans. His crock also serves as a mimicking device as nothing of substance can be discerned when Father Fahrt and he discuss over the crock. Thereby emulating the phrase "a crock of shit" as it is described here further:

"On the floor beside Mr Collopy's chair was what was known as 'the crock'. It was in fact a squat earthenware container, having an ear on each side, in which the Kilbeggan Distillery marketed its wares. The Irish words for whiskey - *Uisge Beatha* – were burnt into its face. This vessel was, of course, opaque and therefore mysterious; one could not tell how empty or full it was, nor how much Mr Collopy had been drinking" (O'Brien 517).

The reflections of Finnbar, a quiet observer, are more substantial than the musings of the men. His noting of the burnt identifier on the container are illuminating as the Irish term is one of

the very few Gaelic words in the novel. As such, the significance of “*Uisce Beatha*” is further emphasized by the authorial choice of italics. Noting how the phrase was a translation of whiskey, it is not stated but implied that this is an anglicized phrase. In reality, the anglicized word whiskey derives from the mispronunciation of the Gaelic word *uisce*. The phrase *uisce beatha* translates to “water of life,” given by Irish monks of the early Middle Ages to distilled alcohol. Further musings are made by the men as they drink copious amounts and continue to postulate about women. Mr. Collopy claims “They say piety has a smell, Mr Collopy mused, half to himself. It’s a perverse notion. What they mean is only the absence of the smell of women.

He looked at me.

- Did you know that no living woman is allowed into this holy house. That is as it should be. Even if a Brother has to see his own mother, he has to meet her in secret below at the Imperial Hotel. What do you think of that?

- I think it is very hard. Couldn’t she call to see him here and have another Brother present, like they do in jails when there is a warder present on visiting day?

- Well, that’s the queer comparison, I’ll warrant. Indeed, this house may be a jail of a kind but the chains are of purest eighteen-carat finest gold which the holy brothers like to kiss on their bended knees” (O’Brien 510-511).

O’Brien’s criticism of the Church, “chains of the purest eighteen-carat finest gold which the holy brothers like to kiss on their bended knees,” is born out of irreverent diction choices that serve to mock rather than glorify. Terms such as “smell, perverse, secret, very hard,” create a sexual tone that implies illicit behavior. The introduction of women once again concerns sexuality, in a heavily implied way. The term piety, or the quality of being religious, is posited in contrast to women. By having olfactory senses as the means of distinguishing piety, Mr. Collopy

makes a crude analogy that serves to draw attention to female sexuality by positing it in terms of lacking religion. Because the priest's rooms do not smell of women, he must be deemed religious. The irreverence of the diction, while aimed at the Catholic Church, comes at the expense of women.

The degradation of women is also more blatant in Father Fahrt's remarks on Mr. Collopy's endeavor; " - I know, Collopy, that you are devoted to women and their wants. But I am afraid that they are not *all* angels. Sometimes one meets the temptress. You mentioned biting a ripe apple. Do not forget the Garden of Eden.

- Baah! Adam was a damn fool, a looderamawn if you like. Afraid of nobody, not even the Almighty. A sort of poor man's Lucifer. Why didn't he tell that strap of a wife he had to go to hell?" (O'Brien 532).

Father Fahrt's remark on women, and the temptresses among them, has no relevance to public restrooms. Instead, his fixation on the Eve analogy makes him appear sexist and unintelligent in his endless ramblings. Mr. Collopy is not much better in his response; O'Brien is quick to undercut any positive association based on Mr. Collopy's endeavor. "Why didn't he tell that strap of a wife he had to go to hell?" reveals the subservient role women occupy in Mr. Collopy's mind. The phrase "go to hell" repeats itself at the end of the novel, when the Pope directs the phrase at Mr. Collopy after his unintelligible ravings. Repetition also occurs in Manus' disruption of the lifeless conversations such as the following:

"- Excuse me, Father Fahrt.

[...] It was the brother, again interrupting his betters. They turned and stared at him, Mr Collopy frowning darkly.

- Yes Manus?
- The wife of Adam in the Garden of Eden was Eve. She brought forth two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel but afterwards in Eden he had a son named Henoah. Who was Cain's wife?
- Well, Father Fahrt said, there has been disputation on that point already.
- Even if Eve had a daughter not mentioned, she would be Cain's sister. If she hadn't, then Cain must have married his own mother. Either way it seems to be a bad case of incest.
- What sort of derogatory backchat is that you are giving out of you about the Holy Bible? Mr Collopy bellowed. [...]
- Now, now, Father Fahrt said smoothly, that question has been examined by the Fathers. What we nowadays know by the term incest was not sinful in the case of our first parents, since it was inevitable if the human race was to survive. We will discuss it another time, Manus, you and I" (O'Brien 533).

Manus' intrusion cheekily notes the "bad case of incest" overlooked by Father Fahrt and Mr. Collopy in their banter. Mr. Collopy, eager himself to talk low of the Church, relishes the opportunity to criticism Manus because Manus interjects words with actual substance. Manus' musings on the illogical origin story contradict what is deemed as truth by the Church, hence Father Fahrt excuses it without explaining it and says they'll discuss it another time. The opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation is steamrolled in favor of comfortable talks of which both men can maintain their hubris.

The contrast between Finnbar's succinct observations and the hollow musings of the men seems to suggest that language serves as a deception. Father Fahrt and Mr. Collopy spend nearly every evening discussing different iterations of empty dialectic games. Neither has a

conversation that involves actual specific and direct actions to take, instead they posture. Next to nothing is revealed about Finnbar and his distant narration style reinforces observations but reflect little on the lad himself. Manus' great deception, running a university via mail where he instructs his students on a variety of subjects through using high-terms that are meaningless but sound intellectual, creates an aura of authority via language. The extensive success Manus has in his endeavor peddling gibberish coursework with the fictional "London University Academy" reinforces the emptiness of words and human nature's quick willingness to assign meaning. Manus recognizes this idea and capitalizes on it; "Everyday you meet people going around with two heads. They are completely puzzled by life, they understand practically nothing and are certain of only one thing--- that they are going to die. I am not going to go so far as to contradict them in that but I believe I can suggest to them a few good ways of filling up the interval" (O'Brien 566).

The novel, least-liked by critics, has been judged inaccurately based on its lack of coherent narrative structure and bland plot. Instead, I assert that the seemingly benign story is purposeful to suggest that language is a "crock" where one can never truly discern how empty the words are. Hence, the rambling structure, irreverent diction, and distant narrator serve to corroborate this idea. O'Brien's *The Hard Life* ends with Manus suggesting Finnbar marry Annie since she "takes care of you alright" and Finnbar vomiting whether from not being able to handle the bitterness of his drink or reality is left to the reader to determine.

6.0 Stagnation in *The Dalkey Archive*

The Dalkey Archive, published in 1964, is O'Brien's fifth and final novel. An intrusive author of the book is the central figure though the story is told through protagonist Mick. *The Third Policeman*, rejected by publishers at the time and only published after O'Brien's death in 1966, was mined as inspiration for *The Dalkey Archive*. O'Brien wrote to his agent that it was "not a novel but really an essay in extreme derision of literary attitudes and people, and one pervasive fault is absence of emphasis, in certain places, to help the reader" (xvi-xvii). *The Dalkey Archive* includes characters from *The Third Policeman* particularly with the mad genius De Selby. Mick, an Irish lad in the village of Dalkey, and his friend Hackett encounter De Selby on the beach. The plot centers on De Selby's plans to destroy all life on Earth by eliminating oxygen from the atmosphere; "the destiny of all mankind, which is extermination" (O'Brien 622). The trio travel to an undersea cave where they have a passionate religious and philosophical discussion with Saint Augustine. While drinking, they discuss erroneous ways of the Catholic Church, science, James Joyce, St. Augustine, and the Jesuits. The epigraph, "*I dedicate these pages to my Guardian Angel, impressing upon him that I'm only fooling and warning him to see to it that there is no misunderstanding when I go home,*" acknowledges the disparaging humor within the text. The text also contains an unrelated side plot where a bewildered James Joyce is alive but in hiding, living secretly as a bartender in a nearby village. O'Brien was heavily influenced by Joyce, but loathed the comparison made between the two authors and the character of Joyce is written in mainly for spite. Some of *The Third Policeman's* material was cannibalized and recycled into *The Dalkey Archive* such as the ever present police

and their bicycles. The comic novel is problematic because of latent misogyny coupled with a stagnant plot.

Each character has a grandiose obsession that remains ambiguous as to whether it is actually truthful. Mad scientist De Selby claims to have invented a de-oxygenating method he terms “DMP” and acknowledges it stands for the Dublin Metropolitan Police. During a release of a DMP particle in an underwater cave, De Selby argues with St. Augustine over his sexual exploits and Church figures. Mick, hearing that Joyce is rumored to be alive, hunts him down till he finds him living “on Skerries.” Skerries translating to the rocks, and Joyce therefore living on the rocks. Elderly Joyce declares his intention to join the Jesuits while scorning *Ulysses*. Keith Donohue’s introduction to O’Brien’s collected works claims that “*The Dalkey Archive* sets up these representative figures not only to point out the futility of the search for self-identity, but also to undermine systems of authority that might guide individuals. Science, religion, secular and political authority, literature and art are exposed as incomplete and provisional systems to explain life” (O’Brien xvii). To an extent Donohue is correct, however worst aspects of O’Brien’s writing are captured in the text; misogyny, redundancy, and rambling.

It is revealed during De Selby’s introduction that he stumbled upon his ability to freeze time; “Gentlemen, he said, in an empty voice, I have mastered time. Time has been called an event, a repository, a continuum, an ingredient of the universe. I can suspend time, negative its apparent course” (O’Brien 617). His newfound power would be used to “destroy the whole world” (O’Brien 621). “It merits destruction. Its history and prehistory, even its present, is a foul record of pestilence, famine, war, devastation and misery so terrible and multifarious that its depth and horror are unknown to any one man. Rottenness is universally endemic, disease is paramount. The human race is finally debauched and aborted.

- Mr. De Selby, Hackett said with a want of gravity, would it be rude to ask just how you will destroy the world? You did not make it.

- Even you, Mr Hackett, have destroyed things you did not make. I do not care a farthing about who made or what the grand intention was, laudable or horrible. The creation is loathsome and abominable, and total extinction could not be worse. [...]

When I mentioned destroying the whole world, I was not referring to the physical planet but to every manner and manifestation of life on it” (621-622).

O’Brien’s extensive use of hyperbole in the passage (“Rottenness is universally endemic, disease is paramount” etc.) conveys De Selby as a troubled misanthrope. The lengthy ravings of De Selby are unsubstantiated and left vague as to how the mechanisms for destroying the world would occur. The stagnant plot never sustains the intriguing storyline as an actual threat to mankind is never conveyed. Protagonist Mick is credited with burning down De Selby’s house at the end of the novel and eradicating the DMP particles. While hailed as a hero by friends, Mick betrays his friend and literally burns down his world. Ironically, more empathy is created for the unstable, misanthrope De Selby trying to destroy the world than the local lad filled with prejudices and deceit. O’Brien, through the affable character of De Selby contrasted with the calculating Mick, suggests that actions rather than intent is how one should judge individuals.

O’Brien’s portrayal of De Selby as a genial but manic character creates comic scenes that attack the Church directly such as the following:

“The early books of the Bible I accepted as myth, but durable myth contrived genuinely for man’s guidance. I also accepted as fact the story of the awesome encounter between God and the rebel Lucifer. But I was undecided for many years as to the outcome of that encounter. I had little to corroborate the revelation that God had triumphed and banished Lucifer to hell forever.

For if - I repeat *if* - the decision had gone the other way and God had been vanquished, who but Lucifer would be certain to put about the other and opposite story?

- But why should he? Mick asked incredulously.
- The better to sanre and damn mankind, De Selby answered.
- Well now, Hackett remarked, that secret would take some keeping.
- However, De Selby continued, perplexed, I was quite mistaken in that speculation. I've since found that things are as set forth in the Bible, at least to the extent that heaven is intact.

Hackett gave a low whistle, perhaps in derision.

- How could you be sure? he asked. You have not been temporarily out of this world, have you, Mr De Selby?
- Not exactly. But I have had a long talk with John the Baptist. A most understanding man, do you know, you'd swear he was a Jesuit. [...]
- Where did this happen? Hackett asked.
- Here in Dalkey, De Selby explained. Under the sea" (624-625).

The intellectual ideas of De Selby largely go uninterrogated and instead his logic is belittled rather than questioned. Mick's friend Hackett ridicules De Selby through his snarky questions that don't look for answers so much as reactions. The philosophical postulation (ie. is the Bible legitimate) by De Selby fails to engage the men, who prefer superficial critiques on the slightly crazed component of his thoughts. While only a looming presence in *The Third Policeman*, De Selby of *The Dalkey Archive* serves as the comic farce in the novel to highlight the idiocy of Mick and Hackett. In true form, O'Brien's most comic scenes involve whiskey and the Church. De Selby attempts to explain the relative nature of time to Mick and Hackett through drink:

“-This is the best whiskey to be had in Ireland, faultlessly made and perfectly matured. I know you will not refuse a taiscaun. [...]

-The water’s there, De Selby gestured. Don’t steal another man’s wife and never water his whiskey. No label on the bottle? True. I made that whiskey myself. [...]

-My dear fellow, De Selby replied, I know all about sherry casks, temperature, subterranean repositories and all that extravaganza. But such considerations do not arise here. This whiskey was made last week.

Hackett leaned forward in his chair, startled.

- What was that? He cried. A week old? Then it can’t be whiskey at all. Good God, are you trying to give us heart failure or dissolve our kidneys?

De Selby’s air was one of banter.

- You can see, Mr Hackett, that I am also drinking this excellent potion myself. And I did not say it was a week old. I said it was made last week” (O’Brien 617).

[...]

“-Give us another drink if you please, Hackett said. Whiskey is not incompatible with theology, particularly magic whiskey that is ancient and also a week old”(O’Brien 619).

As De Selby attempts to explain his theory on time, Hackett refuses to engage and instead insists on more whiskey. The motif of alcohol acting as a dampening of abilities correlates to O’Brien’s life as his works became less witty as he sunk further into alcoholism. While Mick and Hackett drink whiskey that is ancient and also a week old, De Selby attempts to explain that “consideration of time, he said, from intellectual, philosophical or even mathematical criteria is fatuity, and the preoccupation of slovens. In such unseemly brawls some priestly fop is bound to induce a sort of cerebral catalepsy by bringing forward terms such as infinity and eternity”

(O'Brien 618). Time, O'Brien suggests, is merely another concept used by the Church to control their flock. Hackett and Mick's refusal to question De Selby signifies the ways in which control is handed over in exchange for vice. De Selby, the rebel against accepted forms of authority, challenges the Church again through the apparition of Saint Augustine.

The interactions between De Selby and Saint Augustine are passages in irreverence and farce. However, like the rest of the novel O'Brien explicitly tells the joke rather than the sardonic wit in his previous novels. While humorous, the hilarity is lessened by beating the reader over the head with the joke. The initial discussion between De Selby and Saint Augustine highlights the aforementioned:

“You admit you were a debauched and abandoned young man?”

- *For a pagan I wasn't the worst. Besides, maybe it was the Irish in me.*

- The Irish in you?

- *Yes. My father's name was Patrick. And he was a proper gobshite.*

- Do you admit that the age or colour of women didn't matter to you where the transaction in question was coition?

- *I'm not admitting anything. Please remember my eyesight was very poor.*

- Were all your rutting ceremonials heterosexual?

- *Heterononsense! There is no evidence against me beyond what I wrote myself. Too vague. Be on your guard against that class of fooling. Nothing in black and white.*

- My vocation is enquiry and action, not literature. [...]

- *I reprobate concupiscence, whether fortuitous or contrived.*

- You do *now*, you post-gnostic! You must have a red face to recall your earlier nasty gymnastiness, considering you're now a Father of the Church.

- *Rubbish. I invented obscene feats out of bravado, lest I be thought innocent or cowardly. I walked the streets of Babylon with low companions, sweating from the fires of lust. When I was in Carthage I carried about with me a cauldron of unrealized debauchery. God in his majesty was tempting me. But Book Two of my Confessions is all shocking exaggeration. I lived within my rough time. And I kept the faith, unlike a lot more of my people in Algeria who are now Arab nincompoops and slaves of Islam.*

- Look at all you squandered in the maq of your sexual fantasies which otherwise could have been devoted to Scriptural studies. Lolling loathsome libertine!” (O’Brien 635-636).

The witty dialogue takes a crack at Irish stereotypes through Saint Augustine attempting to contend that his antics were because he was Irish, rather than acknowledging his personal responsibility. Further illustrating the Saint’s religious blunders is his excuse that his sexual exploits with women and men could be attributed to his terrible eyesight, rather than his nether region. For his part, De Selby’s comment that his “vocation is enquiry and action, not literature” is O’Brien’s way of mocking academia with its endless answers that are not necessarily accurate answers. The Saint further distances himself from his actions by claiming that he invented his sins out of bravado but if even if they were true, he claims that at least he isn’t an “Arab nincompoop and slave of Islam.”

Through the character of the hypocritical Saint, O’Brien scorns the hierarchy within the Church that claims some are more pious than others. In response to De Selby grilling him on his human life with accusations of concubines, bastard children, and multiple wives, Saint Augustine blames it on his mother. De Selby, shocked, responds: “You betrayed and destroyed two decent women, implicated God in giving a jeering name to a bastard, and you blame all this outrage on your mother. Would it be seemly to call you a callous humbug? - *It would not. Call me a holy*

humbug” (O’Brien 639). While the alliteration and repetition highlight the satirical nature of De Selby’s “devotional” inquiries however considering the heavy sarcasm already present in the encounter, the devices overemphasize the farce to redundancy.

Redundancy and repetition continue throughout the comic interaction as the Saint elaborates on the characters in heaven.

“- Are there any other strange denizens?

- Far too many if you ask me. Look at that gobhawk they call Francis Xavier. Hobnobbing and womanizing in the slums of Paris with Calvin and Ignatius. Loyola in warrens full of rats, vermin, sycophants, and syphilis. Xavier was a great travelling man, messing about in Ethiopia and Japan, consorting with Buddhist monkeys and planning to convert China single-handed. And Loyola? You talk about me but a lot of that chap’s early saintliness was next to bedliness. He made himself the fieldmarshal of a holy army of mendicants by maybe merchandizers would be more like it. Didn’t Pope Clement XIV suppress the Order for its addiction to commerce, and for political wirepulling? Jesuits are the wiliest, cutest and most mendacious ruffians who ever lay in wait for simple Christians. The Inquisition was on the track of Ignatius. Did you know that? Pity they didn’t get him. But one party who wouldn’t hear of the Pope’s Brief of Suppression was the Empress of Rooshia. Look at that now!

- Interesting that your father’s name was Patrick. Is he a saint?

- That reminds me. You have a Professor Binchy in your university outfit in Dublin and that poor man has been writing and preaching since he was a boy that the story about Saint Patrick is all wrong and that there were really two Saint Patricks. Binchy has his hash and parsley.

- Why?

- *Two Saint Patricks? We have four of the buggers in our place and they'd make you sick with their shamrocks and shenanigans and bullshit*" (O'Brien 637).

De Selby's fixation on Patrick, the father, at the expense of considering serious allegations against the Church suggests that ignorance is chosen rather than inherent. By ignoring overt claims and focusing on "the father," O'Brien satirizes Catholics in their blind following of the Church. While irreverent, O'Brien's own Catholic faith was strong and he intended criticism to improve the Church rather than destroy it. In the end, the binary between heaven and hell is deconstructed such that O'Brien contends that if this is heaven, surely hell must be better?

The plot of *The Dalkey Archive* mirrors traditional Catholic expectations of hell in that it is meaningless, incomprehensible, and lacking in pleasure. O'Brien includes his hero/nemesis James Joyce in the plot and crafts him into a feeble, delusional old man that ends up knitting knickers for the Jesuits rather than becoming one. Introduced into the novel randomly and without purpose, other than to demonstrate the selfish ways of Mick, the character of Joyce reflects the bitterness O'Brien felt at his literary career and how it was received in comparison to Joyce's (Dotterer 54-60).

O'Brien's Joyce is living incognito in a town outside of Dublin, working as a bartender after being separated from his family during World War II. Joyce, conventionally pious, scorns his work with the exception of *Dubliners* and proclaims that the crude, immoral trash should not be acknowledged. In one rant on *Ulysses*, Joyce argues: "I paid very little attention to it until one day I was given a piece from it about some woman in bed thinking the dirtiest thoughts that ever came into the human head. Pornography and filth and literary vomit, enough to make even a blackguard of a Dublin cabman blush. I blessed myself and put the thing in the fire" (O'Brien 763). Upon finding out that the novel has critical acclaim and is published everywhere, Joyce

laments “May the angels of God defend us!” (O’Brien 763). The diction choice of “given” in regards to the writings of Ulysses is not connected to God but to “ruffians” that wrote *Ulysses* and “imputed smutty writings to me.” O’Brien creating Joyce as a pious and elderly man that lives near Dublin while acknowledging that he plagiarized *Ulysses* fails to enhance the narrative. The only plausible sentence of fictional Joyce is when he laments that “one of the great drawbacks of Ireland, he said, is that there are too many Irish here” (759).

The insertion of Joyce seems more out of spite than literary insight. Critic Keith Donohue claims that in contrast to Joyce’s mining of his own experience and fears to produce his representational human comedies, O’Nolan moves more toward self-effacement. One of the characters paraphrases his objections to realism and the autobiographical novel: ‘One must write outside oneself. I’m fed up with writers who put a fictional gloss over their own squabbles and troubles. It’s a form of conceit, and usually it’s very tedious.’”(O’Brien xvii-xviii). The irony, intended or otherwise, is that *The Dalkey Archive* is comprised on conceit. The material is recycled from past works, his bitterness at his lot in life, and diatribes on authorial institutions.

Furthermore, the protagonist Mick after learning his brilliant girlfriend Mary intended to break-up with him, even as he intended to break-up with her, proposes to her. O’Brien’s mocks misogynistic views in the following lines, “he was very fond of her and did not by any means regard her merely a member of her sex, or anything so commonplace and trivial. [...] Her job was one thing they had never talked about. That her earnings were a secret was something he was deeply thankful for because he knew that they could scarcely be less than his own. [...] She read a lot, talked politics often and once even mentioned her half-intentions of writing a book. Mick did not ask on what subject, for somehow he found the idea distasteful. Unknowingly, she could exceed her own strength. He would make Mary more of his own quiet kind, and down to earth”

(O'Brien 654-655). The novel ends bleakly with Mick marrying and impregnating her such that she need not work. O'Brien's final novel contains satirized gender attitudes, a stagnant plot, and canabilized material. The effect is a read that wilts in comparison to his earlier works.

7.0 Reflections on Flann O'Brien

Flann O'Brien uses humor as the primary means for satire in order to illuminate identities by pushing them to the point of farce. Farce is achieved through the rhetorical devices of hyperbole, irony, repetition, and unusual context. The devices undermine essentializations associated with respective identities by manipulating them such that they are distinguishable from the text. Identity is exaggerated such that it conveys essentialisms embedded within the identity. Some of the identities O'Brien scorns are Catholic, nationalist, Gaelic, and academic identities. O'Brien, in satirizing these identities, demonstrates the extent to which he cares about them. In tackling identities through satire, O'Brien acknowledges the sacredness satire functions on. For satire to be effective, the writer must be critiquing through deconstruction of said identity. In regards to sacredness, the height of hyperbolic usage occurs tandem to the depths of disillusionment by the writer. He values Catholic, nationalist, Gaelic, and academic identities so much that he draws attention to the problematic aspects of them.

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