



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EFFECT OF MATERIALISTIC CULTURE ON TRADITIONAL SOCIETY IN O'CONNOR'S
"FIRST CONFESSION" AND "A MOTHER'S WARNING"

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that instead of the idealistic and romantic approaches towards the nation, O'Connor adopted a very realistic one through which Ireland is viewed as a Free State with problems that need to be addressed in a more realistic manner. Obviously, O'Connor's engagement with the Irish society is comprehensive as it includes all aspects of society, such as family relationship, the relationship between father and son, and the changes that have taken place under the effect of this encroaching materialistic culture. Thus, this paper focuses on O'Connor's engagement with the Irish family and the social transformations confronting Irish people after Ireland has become a Free State.

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INTRODUCTION

Frank O'Connor turned nineteen when Ireland gained its independence from Britain in 1922; nevertheless, he had taken part in warlike activities against the British rule a few years before Ireland was declared a Free State. He joined the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and became a member of the Daniel's Corkery's intellectual company, a step that encouraged him to read almost everything that is Irish. As Welch and Stewart (1996) write, "he (O'Connor) read voraciously, encouraged by Daniel Corkery, who directed him to Russian fiction, Gaelic poetry, and nationalism" (p. 413). This made of him a sterner nationalist whose writings and actions continued to reflect such a nationalistic spirit until the independence. After independence, the man's loyalty to Ireland continued to motivate his actions, which caused him to follow the "dominant mode" of his days, which was "consciously and deliberately realistic, part of a generation's recovery from the emotional and linguistic excesses that accompanied romantic nationalism" (The Princess Grace Irish Library, 1989 p. 62). Instead of using certain idealistic and romantic approaches towards the nation, O'Connor adopted a very realistic one through which Ireland is viewed as a Free State with problems that need to be addressed in a more realistic manner. In short, the society became O'Connor's topic, and his main concern, at

this point in time, became the "submerged population groups" of Ireland (O'Connor, 1963 pp. 20-1). O'Connor's writings, particularly after independence, address the social conditions and transformations which influenced the Irish society. He focuses on the Irish people whom he views divided between maintaining their society's traditional principles and adopting the new material principles which became the driving force of modern life. This in a way shows part of the changes which the Irish society began to experience as the result of modernity and economic transformations. O'Connor's engagement with the Irish society is comprehensive, as it includes all aspects of society such as family relationship, the relationship between father and son, and the changes that have taken place under the effect of this encroaching culture namely, the materialistic culture. Moreover, his engagement with the Irish family and the social transformations confronting the Irish people after Ireland has become a Free State are the points which we are emphasizing in this study. The Irish family and the social transformations which have taken place in the Irish society have been among the most important topics which O'Connor deals with in his stories (Storey, 1990). Therefore we are taking up this study with an eye on these major social issues which O'Connor gives a large space in his stories.

DISCUSSION

O'Connor believes that the main cause behind the break in the Irish society may be attributed to modernity which is the

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product of materialistic development and success. This materialistic success has become for the Irish people as it is for O'Connor himself paradoxically speaking, the safety boat from the severe indigence which they had lived during the British mandate. But these economic developments which the Irish people began to sort of enjoy have not been without a heavy price. Chris says:

Before capitalism, we were who we are by our culture, Mexicans, Irish, Spanish, Africans, we had folklore, we had heritage, and we knew our place in the world. May be it wasn't an elite culture, but it was something we value. We had our lives structure and meaning. Now, capitalism defines our society and who we are in a different way: upper class, middle class, and lower class,...It has damaged the basis upon which we are defined.... (1)

As a result of this, the Irish people have suffered from division and transformations towards the worst both on the family and social levels. O'Connor has therefore tried to create a kind of balance which cannot be achieved if he embraces the new materialistic culture without having a strong traditional base. "O'Connor aspired to social 'freedom' for people to express their individuality, but paradoxically he also desired the comfort of traditional sense of community" (Lennon, 2007 Para.6). However, O'Connor's attempts at creating equilibrium has failed to hit the target and fallen too far beyond expectations. Capitalism and materialistic culture is a very colossal whale that has swallowed traditions and all that comes its way. Therefore, capitalism and the materialistic aspects of life are so adverse forces that have worked towards reshaping society in such a way as to create imbalance within the individual on the one hand and society on the other. To show the impact of capitalism on traditional society, the study discusses two stories: 'A Mother's Warning' and 'First Confession'. These stories may be taken as a sociological study in which the social norms and religious beliefs of people come under the direct influence of materialism, civility, and modernity. In the stories 'First Confession' and 'A Mother's Warning', Jackie and Moriarty's families consecutively with their traditional family setup, try to live according to a traditional set of behaviors, find themselves entangled into the labyrinth of modern life, namely materialistic temptations.

In 'A Mother's Warning', when Sheila Moriarty, a young girl who comes from a traditional family, turns her back on the family's codes of behaviors, she finds herself beset by many problems. She gets into a series of problems. She first steals a brooch from the shop where she works and as a result gets into an unlawful relationship with Joyce and then she approaches a clergyman to resolve the complications which she finds herself in. Moriarty's gets in the mud as a result of her break with society's norms a thing that she comes to realize too late. She says, "I suppose that's what got me into the mess I'm in. Oh, I didn't realise it in time, but I was probably brought up too sheltered." Sheila Moriarty is a representation of the modern person who begins to live in a state of uncertainty and indefiniteness as the result of her departure from her normal place within a traditional family. Moriarty's decision to do work itself is the beginning of her deviation from the traditional line of behavior. She is now on her way to initiate a job and finally a new sense of independence resulting from her adoption of this new style of living according to the materialist principles. The moment Moriarty leaves home to work in a materialistic environment, she begins to experience the same

kind of fragility that is characteristic of materialistic society. Her break with the social norms, principles of her society, and her deviation from applying the advice of her mother have made her life more difficult than it used to be before leaving home. It has brought about a similar break within her. This is reflected in the way she is beginning to behave. The cleavage in her sensibility has made her retreat and resulted in the feeling of guilt which she began to experience, leading her to approach a clergyman. However, she seems to live in a situation where everything is in fact contaminated by the evil of materialism. The clergyman is also a part of this infected world where he cannot work as he is required to do. When he is supposed to do everything in the service of God, he is on the contrary, haunted by self-motivated interests. At the end of the story, he finds himself tempted by Moriarty. It seems that materialistic culture with its promotion of selfishness and self-centeredness has left man totally bereft of reacting from a purely human center. The materialistic influence on man is getting an octopus attitude in the way it has expanded to affect man's life wherever he is in city, village or even church. Therefore, the whole society is being impregnated with materialism and things have reached the point of no return as regards its bending effect on all aspects of society. It seems that tradition is in no way self-sufficient as to support human needs with the all its new requirements and the solution seems to be there in adopting the tenets of materialism. It is why materialism finds favor with all people. Therefore, materialism has superseded tradition the moment it declared its presence. Materialism has won the war without fighting.

The feeling of temptation the clergyman experiences has led him to think about Moriarty's mother's advice and about her violation of her mother's advice with Joyce and finally with himself. This leads him to think of himself as a part of the new system to which Joyce belongs. The clergyman begins to see himself as a sinner whose faith in God has not helped him to withstand temptation. O'Connor in his novel, "News for the Church", views the priest as corrupted "because he uses blasphemy himself and is unable to resist temptation in his life" ("Frank O'Connor's 'News for the Church'" 2007, para.1). This is in a way the same thing as told by Leavis and Thompson (1962) about organic society or traditional societies after the advent of modernity and materialistic culture. "organic community has gone; it has so nearly disappeared from memory....Its destruction (in the West) is the most important fact of recent history." (87). Moriarty remains in a state of uncertainty and confusion about whether to accept the new set of principles, which the materialistic culture presents or abandon this culture all together in favor of the norms of her traditional society. This struggle within her between all that is traditional and the materialistic culture seems to come up with results that amount to an intrigue against tradition when she says that her problems are the upshots of her "sheltered" upbringing. Therefore she seems to blame tradition and at the same time seems to show a great interest in the way materialism works towards achieving happiness through gaining materialistic things and finally materialistic success. Moreover, according to Moriarty, materialistic culture seems to imply deeper and stronger personality quality which the traditional personality denies. Moriarty's attribution of her problems to the way she was brought up shows her indifference to the kind of personality which people brought up along the traditional lines show. In other words, modern culture with its deep implications about life seems to suggest that materialism produces people fully equipped with all the

tools that entitle them to sail in the great labyrinth of this culture. Therefore, this is a pointer that this culture is a culture of intrigue and indifference to all that is simple, plain, and honest. It moreover dictates division and inhumanity. After having submitted to the evil influence of materialism, Moriarty begins to experience a feeling of guilt for stealing the brooch. When Fogarty's housekeeper offers to make coffee for her she tells him "When you know what I came about you probably won't ask me to have coffee," She probably means the theft which she committed. When Fogarty asks about her case, she tells him that she "Stole a stuff from the shop," However, this feeling of guilt does not seem to affect her behaviors so as to make her avoid committing such mistakes again. On the contrary, she goes on with the same mistakes and sins by both violating the social codes of her society by not listening to her mother's advice on the one hand and by committing sins against God on the other. This shows how tempting and strong the influence of materialism on man's behaviors even however careful he may be against its evil influences. Therefore, Moriarty continues to be affected by the new rules of behaviors which the new society, the capitalist society in which she lives after leaving home to work in Carr's Stores. Therefore, neglecting all the rules of behaviors which her mother tried to inculcate in her as a girl that belongs to a traditional family, has resulted in the many problems which she began to confront. She says to Fogarty, "...and before I left Mummy told me never to take anything that belonged to my employers. I went into hysterics on her. It shows you the way we were brought up."

Family and social relationships in materialistic society are out of shape and finally in total disharmony. Michael Joyce's relationship with his wife lacks the closeness and warmth which family relationships have in traditional society. Moriarty says that Joyce's wife "was frightened of him as (Moriarty) was. There is a devil in that man". Joyce represents the materialistic culture with all its complications and negative implications. He is so unfeeling, inhuman, self-centered as far as his relationship with Moriarty and others is concerned. His relationships with others is based on self-interests and mutual merits too. Moriarty describes him to Fogarty by saying "He's clever. I know he's smooth and he's a liar, but he could probably get round you too if it was worth his while." Again, Michael Joyce's relationship with Moriarty is also based on materialistic interests. Her theft of the brooch was in the first place encouraged by him and is done in violation of the rules of behaviors which the mother tried to establish in her. Moreover, her connection with Joyce as a married man, is again in violation of her mother's advice. Her mother told her "not to have anything to do with married men because they weren't all like Daddy!" Therefore, we have two levels of behaviors representing two different cultures. These behaviors are reflected in the character of Moriarty who represents tradition and Michael Joyce who represents the materialistic culture. The conflict between the two cultures shows a clear domination of the materialistic culture over tradition. This in way is a great loss for humanity as a whole for such domination cannot be made possible without man's promotion and sponsorship of this culture. In 'First Confession,' Frank O'Connor, seems to depict a traditional family in which all members are responsible for each other. The family consists of a father, mother, son, daughter, and grandmother on the father's side. The father dominates the family and it is through his care and guidance the family gets on. The father is in full control of the family members and all differences and

problems are referred to him. Jackie tells of Nora's complaint about him to her father " 'Oh, Dadda, do you know what Jackie did at dinnertime?' " Of course, she complains to her father about what Jackie did when she tried to make him eat from the dinner which his grandmother prepared in his mother's absence and he tells how his father reacts to her complaint, "Father gave me a flaking;" This, in a way reflects the authority of the father in traditional societies. However, this does not happen in materialistic societies where each family member lives a completely independent life from the rest of the family.

Being a traditional family, the relationships among the family members are rooted in the social heritage of their class. However, such relationships are beginning to suffer as a result of the impingement of civility, technology, and modernity. This is reflected in the stories, 'First Confession' and 'A Mother's Warning'. In the former story, the relationship between Nora and her grandmother is for the most part based on money. Nora's relationship with her grandmother is presented as hypocritical and Nora's service of her grandmother is in return of a sum of money which the grandmother pays for her. Jackie tells of Nora's hypocrisy, "Nora, my sister, just sucked up to the old woman for the penny she got every Friday out of the old-age pension...."

In 'First Confession,' money enters as a competing partner with social norms to play a role in the organization of traditional societies. This definitely leads to creating a social bondage based more on mutual interests than on the social norms of the society. Therefore, mutuality of interests has begun to supersede the human pattern of relationships which traditional societies used to practice as their normal system. Nora, on the account of money and money only, serves her grandmother and in doing that she becomes hypocrite and overlooks all the humane qualities which her customs and traditional values have. "Nora's hypocrisy is shown in her actions, her speech, and in the way her brother Jackie thinks of her" (Brewer, 2007 Para.1). Jackie is also tempted with the same evil. He is jealous of Nora who receives a small sum of money from her grandmother every Friday for the service she gives to her. Jackie, therefore, does not like his grandmother because she gives Money to Nora and does not give him. He says "and she knows I don't like her, and she gives pennies to Nora and non to me...". This shows how materialism is beginning to get a firm hold over traditional society. When the old woman, Ryan, in 'First Confession' tells the boys that she would give a half-crown for the boy who can keep one of his fingers in the candle flame, Jackie at first is hesitant to do that on the belief that "it might look greedy." However, Jackie can not help think about the half-crown just at the moment when the old lady is putting it back in her pocket.

In 'A Mother's Warning,' Moriarty belongs to a traditional family with a father, mother and three brothers and three sisters. Despite the fact that she received good education and was brought up on the norms of her society, she couldn't escape the evil influence of the materialistic culture which brought her to steal a brooch from the shop where she works. Therefore, the strong bonds and norms which used to bind and organize traditional societies, are beginning to lose favor and are gradually being replaced by civility and materialistic codes of behaviors. The case of this family may be generalized to become universal. Civility and modernity are pressing for a place in traditional societies and threatening finally to eradicate

traditional societies' principles and customs once for all. This definitely shows how great the effect of materialism on modern man. Man has become torn between following the traditional codes of behaviors and the new materialistic ones. Materialism seems to have a stronger hold on man's life, especially when man's needs have become so pressing and urgent and social values have retreated and become hardly effective in the face of the overwhelming materialistic force. As we have already stated in regards to 'A Mother's Warning', 'First Confession' asserts that religion is not exempted from the evil influence of materialism. Religious people are again infected with the same disease of the age and behave as if they are ordinary people with no message to deliver to people. Therefore, they are not worthy of the holy duty they are supposed to perform towards God. The clergyman in 'First Confession' reacts in a way far from being religious. When Jackie makes his first confession to the clergyman, the clergyman's reaction to the sins committed by Jackie does not show that the clergyman is neutral, but his reaction shows that he is deeply contaminated by the evils of the world in which capitalism is the chief directing force. Jackie tells the clergyman that he was about to kill his sister Nora, and the clergyman tells him in return that "Someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and won't miss her,...Between ourselves, there's a lot of people I'd like to do the same to but I'd never have the nerve. Hanging is an awful death!". He is seen to have similar outlooks as that of Jackie. Even Jackie senses how agreeable the clergyman is, in the way he reacted to his criminal dispositions. Jackie says" (he) was genuinely sorry to part with him, because he was the most entertaining character I'd ever meet in the religious line".

Moreover, Jackie's inclination to kill as Nora and he himself has confessed to the clergyman and the clergyman's unexpected cool reaction are behaviors that lie at the core of materialistic culture and definitely the products of this new culture, namely capitalism. However, materialistic culture, when it dominates over man, works on destroying the balance which he has within him and he begins to see life and everything using materialistic standards. Therefore, emotions, love and human feelings relegate to a very low rank and in most cases cease to exist leaving a person to live like a machine which is empty of any human feelings. Joyce is such a person who tries to blackmail Moriarty sexually just to gratify his desires and avails himself of the opportunity that Moriarty is a typical Irish woman who reflects the common conditions of all Irish women. Moreover, he could assess her needs and how far she can resist these needs. Such an intriguing mind is undoubtedly the making of a culture that is so calculating and irresponsible to all that is natural and traditional. However, traditional society maintains strong relationships among family members. The family members are closely related and fully responsible for each other. The parents are responsible for the children's upbringing, feeding, health, education, etc.... This traditional pattern of relationships establishes unity and force in the structure of the family. Moreover, this strength of the bondage among the members of the nuclear family expands to include the same kind of intimacy in the extensive family.

On the contrary, high class society or materialistic society is in complete opposition to traditional society. In materialistic society, social and particularly family bondage is very limited and in some families, it hardly exists. Though the family consists of a father, mother, and children, the authority of the parents is almost non-existent and the family seems to run by

itself by the complete independence of each member. "Today, the father finds himself before his children in a situation similar to that of a sovereign deprived of any meaning to repress the rebellion of subjects" (Delassus, 2009 para.11). However, this is not so in a traditional society where the parents and social norms are looked upon as judges of the individuals' behaviors and actions. In materialistic society, the individual is fully responsible for his actions and none has the right to encroach upon him. Even traditional societies are beginning to behave like materialistic ones, of course, under the pressing needs which modern life conditions and requirements have made as necessary. It moreover, seems as if modernity has tinged man's life with colors, tastes and, styles of behaviors that are fully materialistic and made them as such appear as if they are so feasible to the new stage in man's life. The materialistic culture may be likened to a very strong wind that carries away everything that comes in its way. This may be seen in the way how the clergyman becomes part and parcel of the new social system which modernity has brought into existence. This again highlights O'Connor's attitude against the Catholic church to which he showed total indifference. For O'Connor, the Catholic church with its absolute authority worked in much the same way as the conqueror did on suppressing the Irish people's freedom and will. This further points out the church and the priests' malpractices as motivated by this excess of force.

Conclusion

At the end I would like to recapitulate my discussion of the stories 'First Confession' and 'A Mother's Warning'. The two stories being of significant importance so far as society is concerned, it has been a priority for me to highlight the works making full use of the sociological approach. Being at first a nationalist, O'Connor was fully occupied with the Irish problem before independence. After the independence, the Irish people became his primary topic. The Irish family and society and the social transformations which the Irish society began to experience after the Irish people achieved independence became a full time engagement for O'Connor. O'Connor himself suffered a great deal as the result of severe indigence and his stories appear to be a reflection of these hard experiences. These biographical elements which he depicts in the 'First Confession', and 'A mother's Warning', and in many of his stories make his work a real reflection of the conditions of the majority of the Irish people both the middle and the down trodden classes. Therefore, O'Connor's characters are "realistic and closely observed, they offer a full portrait of the middle and lower classes of Ireland" (Drabble, 2000 p. 735). In almost all of his stories, the Irish family and society is reflected in a certain way. O'Connor emphasizes the developments which happened to the Irish society after the advent of modernity. Moreover, he seems to say that materialistic culture is on its way to swallow and destroy all the forces of tradition and nature in favor of the new social behaviors that support and sponsor mutuality and self interest against the norms of society that support social values, such as virtues, respect, and humanity. O'Connor's move to the United States in 1950 did not uproot him or come in the way of his attachment to his country. Though the move to America could take him physically away, it never took him away emotionally from Ireland. O'Connor's devotion to Ireland was original and authentic unlike the unjust claims which were leveled against him as being a traitor. O'Connor "endured an unofficial 'blacklisting' by the state authorities during World War II... At

one stage, he was publicly denounced as an 'anti-Irish Irishman'" (Lennon, 2007 Para.13).

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