

# Essay on character analysis - first confession by flannery oconnor

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The main character of "First Confession" is Jackie, a seven-year-old boy living in Ireland who absolutely hates his sister and grandmother. Over the course of the short story, he has to go to his first confession, a thought which fills him with dread (and is exacerbated by the beastly behavior of his sister Nora). Jackie's fear, guilt and resentment at his family is indicative of the Catholic guilt he feels having grown up in Ireland, and in such a religious community. With that in mind, Jackie's journey throughout the story leads his own acting out and resentful behavior to become justified, as the priest eventually takes his side. By the end, Jackie learns to accept his own beastly thoughts, as they are shown to be part of being human altogether.

Jackie's appearance betrays his own feelings of helplessness and impotent rage; he is a very small boy, being able to fit under tables and having a hard time reaching the confession booth. Due to this smallness, Jackie often feels powerless against both the adults that have power over him (his grandmother, Mrs. Ryan) and his sister Nora, who shares his size but makes up for it in perniciousness and guile. Jackie, being so young, does not quite understand the world around him, and is still getting used to the varying aspects of his own religion, much less his own body, and his smallness also makes him the prime target for taunting and persecution by those around him.

Jackie has very innocent ways of looking at the world; he believes girls are "supposed to be fastidious," but he tends to suffer at the hands of the women around him. His family life leads him to have very ill opinions of women; Jackie's grandmother is an old woman with a "fat, wrinkled old face," who

always walked around in bare feet. Jackie believes that his sister, Nora, sucks up to their grandmother to be the more favored sibling in the family. Jackie is very disapproving of his grandmother, because he perceives her appearance and demeanor as ugly and disgusting, noting that she eats like a pig, " using her fingers by way of a fork." Due to all of the terrorizing he experiences at the hands of the women in his life, he believes them to be contrarian curs. " God, the hypocrisy of women!"

Jackie's thoughts toward religion are those of terror; the indoctrination and fear that Mrs. Ryan, his grandmother, his sister Nora and others instill in him leave him " scared to death of confession." All throughout his childhood, authority figures have been scolding him and reminding him of the threat of hell, to the point where they almost completely ignore the possibility of heaven. Of Mrs. Ryan's threats of fire and brimstone, he thinks, " She may have mentioned the other place as well, but that could only have been by accident, for hell had the first place in her heart." Jackie constantly negatively judges the women around him because of the way they treat him, but is never in a position to do anything about it because of the fear of reprisal from his religion. " I decided that, between one thing and another, I must have broken the whole ten commandments, all on account of that old woman, and so far as I could see, so long as she remained in the house, I had no hope of ever doing anything else."

Jackie's behavior and mannerisms are indicative of just how helpless and trapped he feels, at least with regards to religion and authority figures. In one early encounter with Mrs. Ryan, Jackie tells of a half-crown that she

would offer to the first boy who could put a finger in the flame for five minutes. However, he refrains, because he did not want to look impertinent or ungrateful in front of her; " Being always very ambitious I was tempted to volunteer, but I thought it might look greedy." This ambition, however, is much greater at home, when he feels the need to defend himself against the women in his life, specifically his grandmother and Nora - says Jackie, " Nora once tried to make me [eat grandmother's dinner], but I hid under the table from her and took the bread-knife with me for protection."

Jackie seems to repress his thoughts about others when they seem to be in authority over him; the only exception seems to be his grandmother, for whom he carries an incredible disdain because of her beastliness and her disgusting manners. It is once he finally gets the priest's attention and is able to give his confession that he lets out all the things that he thinks about those around him - that he wants to kill his grandmother, that he has tried to kill Nora with a butterknife, etc. It seems to be a cathartic experience for him, as he lets these revelations pour out of him. Of course, once he realizes he has the priest on his side, and he confesses to these things, his own guilt starts to abate. " I started to make my examination of conscience, and barring the one bad business of my grandmother, it didn't seem so bad."

Jackie's own character is also revealed by the other characters statements and actions about him, though they almost say more about the character who is speaking them. Mrs. Ryan, Nora, and his grandmother all believe that Jackie is a terrible boy. In the case of Nora, she actively wants to get Jackie in trouble, because she can seemingly get away with being beastly due to her

gender - this is evident through her instant blaming and shaming of Jackie after he falls back out of the confession booth the first time he tries to confess. Jackie, because he is a young boy who is new to the world (i. e. an easy target), is fodder for the guilt of the women around him, causing him no shortage of resentment toward them.

The priest, however, has the most healthy and sympathetic relationship with the boy, as he actually takes Jackie's side - this is important for Jackie, as he has not received this kind of validation seemingly ever before; " I was genuinely sorry to part with him, because he was the most entertaining character I'd ever met in the religious line." The priest states that he has 'great courage' to defend himself against the obnoxious nature of his sister, and is the only character to tell Jackie that he is on the right path. Granted, he admits that Jackie is a 'terrible child,' but his admiration for those actions reveal that he, despite being a priest, is also 'terrible' in his own way. This brings comfort for Jackie, as he now knows that he is not alone in his troubles.

The narrator of the story is Jackie himself, and so the reader gets a first-rate glimpse at Jackie's worldview through direct and indirect statements. Jackie, through his experiences, hates women, and is ever distrustful of them. Nora is a beast who constantly taunts him and makes him feel guilty, his grandmother is disgusting and portly, with no manners, and Mrs. Ryan is a cruel tyrant who perpetually threatens him with the destiny of hell. His only positive relationship with a woman is his mother, and she is barely around for the events of the story (leaving Grandmother to make his meals, and

sending him to confession with Nora). One of Jackie's coping mechanisms in his own narration is sarcasm and ironic understatement; despite being bullied by Nora often, he remarks back (even in his own mind) to belittle her; after getting off easy with the priest in terms of punishment, he notes that "clearly, this [concept] was beyond her." This and other instances note his sharp tongue, which he uses to give biting insults even just in the form of his cutting thoughts about the events around him. Through this narration, and the events of the story, Jackie reveals himself to be an innocent yet mischievous young boy who is nonetheless stymied by the guilt and torment his aggressive and antagonistic family constantly subjects him with. The reassurance of the priest frees him from the guilt of being a "sinner," and he is rewarded for being perfectly naturally frustrated at the women in his life.

## **Works Cited**

O'Connor, Frank. "First Confession."