

"my oedipus  
complex": mixed  
reactions to  
o'connor's central  
character



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

" My Oedipus Complex" by Frank O'Connor is a short story in which the reader has extremely mixed feelings towards the main character, Larry. The story begins with Larry and his mother having a normal day. Their incredibly strong bond is clearly demonstrated, as is the way Larry's father is completely alienated to Larry. When his father returns from the war, however, Larry believes that his and his mother's relationship is at risk. Larry begins acting out in petty attempts to gain his mother's attention, usually in ways that he believes to be discrediting his father. It soon becomes apparent to the reader that Larry is in love with his mother. The arrival of a new baby, however, once again changes the family dynamic as Larry and his father come to a mutual understanding and empathy is developed between the two. The author clearly conveys Larry as innocent and naive making him appear more sympathetic and allowing more room for debate over whether he is a good or bad character.

Larry's father is rarely at home, going home from war once a year at most. Larry describes his father as being " like Santa Claus" enforcing the idea that he is rarely seen and only appears annually. Larry suggesting his father " mysteriously" appearing demonstrates Larry's misunderstanding of the adult world as his father is, in fact, fighting in the war. Ironically, Larry describes this time of violence as being the " most peaceful period" of his life as he is able to spend all of his time alone with his mother. The author uses Larry's innocent narration to further demonstrate the purity of the world through a child's eyes. This also allows Larry's character to be depicted early, allowing the reader to connect more with him and also develop their likely mixed feelings towards him.

Larry soon realises that his mother's attention is divided between him and his father, this comes as a shock to Larry as he is not used to having to share his mother, having been the only other person in his house for her to talk to for so long. His mother's attitude towards Larry seems to change as he is told to "be quiet" for "the first time" suggesting this is only the first of many times to come. Larry begins to feel ignored as he believes his mother prefers "talking to daddy" over spending time with him. Larry's mother also becomes impatient with him as she begins to snap at him, making Larry see that he may not be the most important person to her, as she is to him. The reader reacts with a mix of disgust and empathy towards Larry as they can clearly see that he is only a child who does not understand the adult world. This reaction quite clearly conveys the mixed feelings that the reader develops towards Larry.

Within the story, Larry continues to exhibit aggressive feelings towards his father and decides to openly act out against him in competition. Larry and his father become unconcealed enemies. They both begin conducting "a series of skirmishes against one another" in a trivial attempt to gain Larry's mother's attention. This illustrates the official start of the feud between Larry and his father and demonstrates Larry's childlike need to constantly compete against his father and win. Larry also believes his father is trying to "steal" his time alone with his mother, a clear example of Larry's naivety as he over exaggerates attempts at conflict and compares them to unlawful acts such as theft. The first person narration puts everything into Larry's point of view automatically allowing the reader to see things through Larry's eyes. This evokes empathy from the reader, however, through Larry's

actions, the reader can see Larry as both the protagonist and antagonist, resulting in the reader having mixed feelings towards him.

Larry continues to see his father as an obstacle between him and his mother. Larry believes his father is trying to "alienate" him from his mother as an extension of the rivalry between the two. Larry also is unable to comprehend why his mother prefers spending time with his father as Larry sees him as "less winning" than himself. Larry is clearly unable to understand the adult world as he continually questions why he and his mother cannot be without his father. Larry's obsession with his mother comes across to the reader as not only unhealthy but also deeply disturbing. This view, however, is contrasted as, through the first person point of view narration, the reader can see that Larry is simply naive to how the adult world works and to the implications of his feelings, resulting in mixed emotions from the reader.

A thought-provoking short story, "My Oedipus Complex" prompts in its reader mixed reactions towards its central character. Larry's failure to fully understand his situation is key to the story and plays a crucial role in the overall understanding of the text. Through a variety of techniques, the author effectively conveys how important a consistent family hierarchy is and the impact it can have if a stable familial structure is not set. Larry's character is developed by describing his quest for his mother's attention and conveying his ignorance of the adult world. Larry's overall disposition evokes mixed emotions from the reader throughout the story.