

# Ignatius and irene: partnership and polarization



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Ignatius and Irene: Partnership and Polarization by Daniel G.

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Familial bonds add arresting dimensions to even the most torturously mundane of novels. The literary options are truly myriad; family ties can represent both complexity and simplicity, and provide characters with both adversity and appeasement. The intricate interaction between mother and son has particularly saturated the authorial mind since the dawn of literature. In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, author John Kennedy Toole utilizes the sacred union between mother and son in unprecedented fashion. In particular, the attitudes and activities of Irene Reilly and her son Ignatius determine the tone of the novel and guide its course of events. While Irene and Ignatius Reilly are both inherently insecure and unassertive, they attempt to remedy these debilitating traits in contrasting fashion. Irene betters herself, while Ignatius pursues negativity; Irene attempts high fashion, socialization, and dominance, while her son pursues pompousness, malignity, and gluttony. The psyches of the mother and son clan shed their default parallels and conclude the novel amidst tense polarization. At the core of her complex character, Irene Reilly is defined by unadulterated meekness. She is idle, unmotivated, and discouraged. Living with her son—who preys on the weak—has only furthered Irene’s despair. She listens to Ignatius’s belittling critiques, yet responds with silent bashfulness. Clueless in regards to proper postnatal childcare, Irene often attempts to stymie her son’s seemingly endless arsenal of affronts with pleasantries: Ignatius, I’m gonna have to go by the Homestead tomorrow. We shall not deal with those usurers, Mother. [Ignatius speaking] Ignatius, honey, they can put me in jail. Ho hum. If you are going to stage one of your hysterical scenes, I shall have to return to the living room. As a matter of

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fact, I think I will. (Toole 42) Choosing humiliation over dignity, Irene Reilly desperately tries to appease her son—probably out of fear that he will descend into an irrational rage and physically harm her. Furthermore, Irene releases her understandably gargantuan sum of stress via whimpering, rather than discipline and preventative measures: “What am I gonna do with a boy like that?...He don’t care about his poor mother. Sometimes I think Ignatius wouldn’t mind if they did throw me in jail. He’s got a heart of ice, that boy” (Toole 42). Irene’s rhetoric embodies an attitude of inaction. Even a shallow review of the novel’s inaugurating chapters will lend revealing insight into her default dolefulness and her self-destructive acceptance of the status quo. Irene, recognizing her pitifully powerless personality, spends the whole of the novel recovering from such melancholy. Ignatius Reilly’s natural disposition is one of fervent insecurity. His facade of control and abuse deteriorates outside the boundaries of his mother’s home. When surrounded by unfamiliarity, his true demeanor is instantly revealed; he becomes almost comically apprehensive, self-doubting, and eager to please. He is so powerless and unsure of his social abilities that he allows complete strangers to dictate his every action. When Ignatius finds himself in a proletarian-packed dance venue, his desire to appease the workers and protect himself—all at the expense of his dignity—is unmistakable. Ignatius acknowledges his blunders, and defies his own cravings in an anxious bid to seamlessly fit in: I...turned off the switch which controlled the music. This action on my part led to a rather loud and defiantly boorish roar of protest from the collective workers...So I turned the music on again, smiling broadly and waving amiable in an attempt to acknowledge my poor judgment and to win the workers’ confidence. (Toole 21) If Ignatius’s homebound attitude of

supremacy applied to foreign environments, he would refuse to honor the desires of his fellow laborers. Ignatius is clearly aware that he is unable to intimidate, and is afraid of the ramifications of his behavior. Thus, instead of displaying impatience and high-volume vocal antics, he displays nothing but a consortium of friendly gestures and a synthetic smile. Ignatius—clearly afraid of revealing his true disposition and becoming a target of mockery—tirelessly tries to conform to blue-collar culture when under pressure: “ I knew that I had recovered my ground with them when several began pointing to me and laughing. I laughed back to demonstrate that I, too, shared their high spirits” (Toole 21). Ignatius’s inherent insecurity is epitomized by his inability to defend himself and his ferocious desire to “ further pacify the workers” (Toole 21). He assumes a position of weakness and acquiescence when in public, and thus feels compelled to amplify his grievances when in the seclusion of his mother’s home. To quell her inherent insecurities, Irene Reilly attempts to take control of her fate and her image; she attempts to better herself. Irene commences this scheme with a bold effort to make herself more attractive. She abandons her typically mundane (and stereotypically motherly) outfits in favor of clothing that she feels is modern and chic. Simultaneously exerting desperation and style, Irene clumsily attaches an article of botanic beauty to her clumsily matched outfit: “...she added a dash of color by pinning a wilter poinsettia to the lapel of her topper” (Toole 116). Furthermore, she increasingly delves into the realm of makeup and various facial stimulants: “ His (Ignatius’s) mother’s maroon hair was fluffed high over her forehead; her cheekbones were red with rouge that had been spread nervously up to the eyeballs. One wild puff full of powder had whitened Mrs. Reilly’s face” (Toole 16). Although many feel that <https://assignbuster.com/ignatius-and-irene-partnership-and-polarization/>

her newfound awareness for superficiality has transformed her into an over-clothed fashion catastrophe, Irene is steadfastly proud of her new poshness. Irene's attempted transformation from functional to fabulous is a blatant bid to legitimize her presence and raise her confidence. She recognizes that her lack of authority is a product of her lack of confidence and sedated spirits. She recognizes that regaining her personal prestige and societal presence requires a reversal of this lack of confidence. She recognizes that first impressions often craft relationships for the long-term, and thus wisely decides to loft her spirits via superficial improvement. To further her recovery from the doldrums of powerless depression, Irene Reilly initiates a steadfast bid to liven her social life. Irene—a widower who is dependent on her abusive son—has historically been a weak and lonely entity. Particularly because she suffers from homebound hardships, Irene needs to balance her home life with social endeavors. The obvious antidote to her sorrow is an infusion of jolliness, laughter, and company. Realizing this, Irene strives to create a tighter bond with her acquaintances, with a concentration on Santa Battaglia; achieving this goal requires appropriate attire, frequent phone conversations, and outings to the bowling alley. Ignatius quickly takes notice of his mother's influx of companions, and responds with his typically cynical and deriding rhetoric: My mother is currently associating with some undesirables who are attempting to transform her into an athlete of sorts, depraved specimens of mankind who regularly bowl their way to oblivion. At times I find carrying on my blossoming business career rather painful, suffering as I do from these distractions at home. (Toole 101) Ignatius, perhaps jealous of his mother's increasing socialization, consistently mocks his mother's social efforts—but to no avail. Irene steadfastly strengthens her

public exposure as the novel progresses. Although her demeanor remains relatively morbid, Irene's efforts to infuse companionship into her meanderings breed tangible results. Irene changes her appearance, her daily schedule, and her attitude towards strangers. Most importantly, Irene increasingly confides in her acquaintances, especially regarding Ignatius's merciless behavior. Irene's embrace of social buoyancy—which contrasts with Ignatius's defeatism—rescues her from the brink of irreversible hermitage. To directly combat her waning lifelessness, Irene adopts an aggressive attitude towards her son, Ignatius. Irene gradually replaces her prototypical acquiescence with a newfound voice of dominance, resilience, and independence. Irene increasingly counters Ignatius's demoralization, and becomes increasingly willing to criticize her son's generally reprehensible actions. By the conclusion of the novel, Irene does the unthinkable; she assumes full control of her son's future, and decides to send him to the lowly realities of institutional incarceration: " I finally made up my mind. Now is the time. He's my own child, but we gotta get him treated for his own sake... We gotta get him declared temporary insane" (Toole 381). Irene's decision to contact the Charity Hospital signifies the culmination of her incremental empowerment. She is no longer a pawn of Ignatius, and no longer yields to his every demand. Irene manages to reverse the status quo which her insecurity fostered; she commenced the novel as the dominated entity, and concludes the novel as the premier dominator. She succeeds in relegating the incumbent tyrant to a position of subordination. Much like his mother, Ignatius is cognizant of his unassertiveness and attempts to quell it; unlike his mother, Ignatius implements this policy in flagrantly repugnant fashion. To conceal his insecurity, Ignatius spews arrogance at every juncture. He

lofts himself above all others, believing that he is more sophisticated than the working masses and more genuine than the aristocratic classes. Believing that he is too formidable a person to take part in the culture of dunces, Ignatius vehemently refuses to wear the headgear of frankfurter distributors: “ I will not wear that paper cap!...Plunge the fork into my vital organs, if you wish. I will not wear that cap. Death before dishonor and disease” (Toole 158). Ignatius attempts to establish a respectable societal presence by constantly referencing his unrivaled intelligence and physical aptitude. When in conversation with his ex-girlfriend Myrna, Ignatius boasts that his amalgam of abilities overwhelms others in his presence: “ As the magnificence and the originality of my worldview became explicit through conversation, the Minkoff minx began attacking me on all levels...I both fascinated and confused her; in short, I was too much for her” (Toole 124). Ignatius glorifies his personality as singular and complex when in fact it is wholly primitive. His pompous rhetoric is a method of escapist self-manipulation; he attempts to disguise his inherent insecurity by convincing himself that he is empowered, admired, and has a “ rich inner life” (Fletcher). Ignatius attempts to counter his default weakness by mistreating his embattled mother. Amidst the mid-century Cajun conservatism in which Ignatius resides, a male cannot simultaneously shun assertiveness and maintain sanity. Ignatius is incapable of combating public humiliation, and thus diverts his desire to exert stereotypical masculinity unto his mother. Irene is forced to weather the ramifications of her son’s public weakness. Ignatius and Irene seldom engage in dialogue that is not marred by critique and chaos. He condescendingly refuses to afford his mother a good-bye kiss, despite her desperate pre-departure pleas: Open the door, babe, and come

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kiss me goodbye. Mother, I am quite busy at the moment. Don't be like that, Ignatius. Open up. Run off with your friends, please. (Toole 115) Although Irene subscribes to a strict policy of conversational civility, Ignatius responds with a steady spew of childish belittlement. Instead of embracing his mother—whose emotional stamina is seemingly eternal—Ignatius insults her appearance and her lack of productivity: “Are you ruining that pair of absurd shoes that were bought with my hard-earned wages?” (Toole 116) Ignatius's lack of public fortitude provides him with an insatiable desire to abuse the seemingly defenseless—a desire that leads to the constant victimization of Irene Reilly. Ignatius Reilly combats his insecurity and internal strife by achieving a seemingly impossible degree of gluttony. Ignatius's life is devoid of familial love and friendly affection. Ignatius's life is devoid of consistent romance and sexual indulgence. Ignatius's life is devoid of productivity and self-sufficiency. To compensate for such gaps in his lifestyle—and to strike an emotional equilibrium—Ignatius consumes tremendous sums of artery-clogging edibles: “Believing that the human need for food and sex are equal, Ignatius substitutes food for sex by doubling or even tripling a normal food intake.” (Fletcher) Ignatius replaces sex with eggnog, love with éclairs, and his dignity with deep-fried and breaded eggplant. Ignatius becomes dependent on food to alleviate stress and give him a sense of purpose. By pursuing gluttony, Ignatius gains short-term gratification, yet becomes increasingly shackled by the uneasiness and depression that he strives to quell. He becomes obsessed with the production patterns of his intestinal labyrinth, which he believes is activated by nervousness. He suspects that his mother's seemingly empowered state disrupts his gizzards' tranquility: “...the sight of his mother in full regalia always slightly appalled his valve”



(Toole 116). Ignatius becomes a bastion of physical flabbiness, and becomes substantially less physically attractive as his life progresses. Despite such adverse effects of overeating, Ignatius feels that he must continue such policy or risk worsening his depression and degree of stress. He is truly the pinnacle of the pathetic. Irene and Ignatius Reilly are an unwieldy duo of dynamism and dysfunction. Their dialogue is dominated by scuffles and maternal suppression. However, Irene and Ignatius have parallel genetics, and deceptively parallel personalities. Both halves of this familial relationship are subsumed by fundamental weakness and disabling self-consciousness. Both characters realize these flaws, and pursue behavior aimed at improving their abilities to function amongst the emotionally stable masses. Although the motivations of Ignatius and Irene are alike, their personal resurrectional schemes are starkly contrasting. Irene's recovery focuses on self-improvement and empowerment; she beautifies, socializes, and becomes less tolerant of abuse. Ignatius's recovery focuses on being "so obnoxious, arrogant, and self-righteous that he becomes a walking farce" (Caviness); he concludes the novel in a state of flatulent and frustrated solitude. Add to this Ignatius's abdication from New Orleans (prompted by his mother's newly obtained mental muscle) and the rational reader will conclude that Irene's attempted improvement is substantially more successful than that of her son. The patient and tactful are able to overcome their weak genetics, while the bitter and cruel are captive to their inherited flaws.