

**Paradox Lost and Paradox Regained: An Object Relations
Analysis of Two Flannery O'Connor Mother-Child Dyads**

By

Sherry Lynn Lebeck

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The San Francisco School of Psychology

San Francisco, 1999

Abstract of the Dissertation
PARADOX LOST AND PARADOX REGAINED:
AN OBJECT RELATIONS ANALYSIS
OF TWO FLANNERY O'CONNOR MOTHER-CHILD DYADS

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Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
The San Francisco School of Psychology
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1999

This study uses two short stories by Flannery O'Connor to explore D. W. Winnicott's theory of early childhood development. This thesis proposes that the "inherited potential" of the individual is determined by the quality of the early maternal environment, especially during the period of Winnicott's first two paradoxical stages of development: Absolute Dependence and Relative Dependence. The mother-adult/child relationships in O'Connor's two short stories "Good Country People" and "The Enduring Chill" serve as case studies to examine the ramifications of "not good-enough" mothering on the infant's psychological state during these first two stages of development. The concepts of mirroring, impingement, true and false self development, illusion, transitional phenomenon, and aggression are considered in the context of the mother-child relationship to demonstrate how maternal inadequacy undermines all aspects of the child's "going-on-being."

In "The Enduring Chill" it was determined that protagonist Asbury Fox is psychologically fixated at the stage of Absolute Dependence because he exhibits symptoms indicative of repetitive early environmental impingement: He is maternally dependent, has little or no sense of self, exhibits primitive omnipotence and thwarted creativity. Conversely, Joy/Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People" achieves the developmental stage of Relative Dependence based upon her ability to physically and psychologically separate from her mother, forge

her own identity, accomplish educational goals, and make use of transitional objects.

In conjunction with the observation of mother-infant dyads, the impact of the absent father is further assessed to determine the level of impairment and quality of the adult-child's achievement of independence. It was concluded that Asbury Fox was unable to complete passage of the Oedipus complex, because his father died when he was five. Divorce, when Joy/Hulga is ten, leaves her without a father to mediate between mother and daughter. Thus, these two angry adult children experience either dependency, like Asbury Fox who searches for fathers in life, or rejection of maternal closeness like Joy/Hulga who attempts to forge a father in the creation of a name.

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The dissertation journey has been, for me, a lonely one--harsh, evocative, seductive, and often cruel. It has required isolation, demanded attention, and has essentially cut me off from a social life. The process has also opened my eyes, my heart, and my mind.

Carolyn Porter, Ph.D., first introduced me to the fiction of Flannery O'Connor in her American writers' seminar at the University of California at Berkeley in 1981. I was mesmerized not only by the substance and quality of O'Connor's writing, but also the paradoxical components in and the psychological manipulation of the portrayals of her seemingly "common people." I knew then that I would somehow incorporate O'Connor's work into my life. I am indebted to Dr. Porter who, unbeknownst to her, has been a silent mentor throughout this dissertation process.

In 1992, Beate Lohser, Ph.D., introduced me to the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott--a philosophy that encouraged creativity and growth. At that time I was searching for a dissertation topic and devised the idea of uniting art and psychology. Dr. Lohser's enthusiasm for and support of this project has not only been invaluable emotionally and intellectually, but also it has been aesthetically inspiring.

Although I have been kind of a loner throughout the dissertation journey, there have been some wonderful and generous people who have given to me the best parts of themselves. I am indebted to Nancy Barber, Ph.D. who shares my love of Flannery O'Connor, and who has been doggedly insightful in helping me edit this manuscript. Joe Tally, who is a walking encyclopedia, went beyond the call of duty to answer my questions, order documents, and/or to explain how those mechanical monsters--computers--work. I also wish to thank Katherine Czesak for making the bureaucratic process less painful.

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I was fortunate to have two other extremely talented committee members who not only understand and appreciate the importance and beauty of literature, but who also grasp the psychological impact of the written word. Margot Duxler and Susan Pomeroy have my deepest respect and gratefulness for turning a sometimes frustrating project into a labor of growth and love, through their ever present encouragement and belief in this undertaking. I am especially indebted to Dr. Pomeroy, because she took on this project toward the end of its completion. Her keen intelligence and insights raised provocative questions that spurred my

curiosity. In a way, this dissertation comes full circle--Susan and I met in Dr. Porter's class and fell in love with the words of Flannery O'Connor, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, James Faulkner and many other greats. The lust for knowledge is something we share.

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I am the only person in my entire family--ever--to obtain a Ph.D. This accomplishment, which is the fulfillment of a childhood dream, carries with it a sense of pride and obligation. I give thanks to all of my relatives and friends for their encouragement to keep climbing this steep pinnacle in my life: Debbie, Alan, and Hilary Bruckert, Connie Szarka, Dixie Lindsley, Inez Peterson, Ida Hill, A. M., Barbara Harvey, Maya Del Mar, and Katherine Brinnier. In addition, I do not know what I would have done if it were not for my dissertation buddy, Gail McCann. She graced me with her subtle humor in the darkest moments of this project.

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I was given three wishes in this life, and all of them came true--to them, I dedicate
this work:

Jon, Diana, and Elisa

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There is no health for the human being who has
not been started off well enough by the mother.
D.W. Winnicott, 1951

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This investigation explores the impact of the early infant environment on the adult's emotional and creative potential. I will examine the importance of the mother as both environment and object in the mother-infant relationship. Within this relationship between mother and infant, I will look at dynamics that inhibit the growth of the infant during the first two phases of development: the "Absolute Dependence" (Winnicott, 1960, p. 43) of the newborn, and the "Relative Dependence" (p. 46) of the toddler. Paradox is a crucial concept during these two stages, as conflicting beliefs work together in their opposition to create a growth potential. Ogden (1986) explains:

Many of Winnicott's most valuable clinical and theoretical contributions are in the form of paradoxes that he asks us to accept without resolving, for the truth of the paradox lies in neither of its poles, but in the space between them. (p. 168)

Winnicott (1967) emphasizes the importance of paradox as he describes the infant's omnipotent creation of the object: "A paradox is involved here, in that in

this initial phase the baby creates the object, but the object is already there, else he would not have created it. The paradox has to be accepted, not resolved" (p. 30). Paradoxes are examined in the context of initial ego union with and gradual separation from the mother, including: (a) the oneness/separateness of the mother-infant during "primary maternal preoccupation" (Winnicott, 1960) in Absolute Dependence; (b) and the infant's move toward independence during the period of Relative Dependence. This second stage involves the use of transitional space and transitional phenomena leading to the capacity of the infant to be alone in the presence of the mother and the ultimate ability to distinguish between internal and external reality.

I will also examine the importance of the father during these two initial phases of life. In particular, I will discuss how the absence of the father affects the mother-infant dyad, principally the infant's ability to separate from the mother.

I chose Winnicott because of his optimistic belief in the resilience of the individual. Rather than concentrating on rigid paradigms that fit the individual to the theory, Winnicott (1957) tailored the theory to the individual:

It is not enough for [an] analyst to state that the external factor is recognized as having its importance. If a formulation of a complete child psychology is being made, one that can be tested by direct observation, the analyst must imaginatively clothe the earliest material presented by the patient with the environment, the environment that is implied but which the patient cannot give in analysis because of never having been aware of it. (p. 113; emphasis in original)

He stated, "I'm going to show that infants are ill very early, and if the theory doesn't fit it, it's just got to adjust itself" (Winnicott, 1967, p. 575). As a pediatrician, Winnicott saw first-hand the emotional effects of mothering styles upon infants. He strove to assist mothers in creating positive environments for their infants by guiding them in his private practice, writing articles, and through radio programs and speeches to the general public. Instead of isolating himself within the scholarly towers of academia, Winnicott became a proponent of education, addressing his words to the average person. He also trained analysts how to serve as "good enough" surrogate mothers for their analysands in order to cultivate the potential growth thwarted by poor environmental beginnings.

Winnicott (1960) says:

My thesis is that what we do in therapy is to attempt to imitate the natural process that characterizes the behavior of any mother of her own infant. If I am right, it is the mother-infant couple that can teach us the basic principles on which we may base our therapeutic work, when we are treating children whose early mothering was 'not good enough', or was interrupted. (pp. 19-20)

These adult "children" whose early beginnings were "not good enough" are often seen in analysis, tenaciously hiding behind the façade of an adult. Thus Winnicott's approach has much to recommend it to therapists/analysts who wish to help the patient uncover his or her creative potential.

Most of Winnicott's ideas were presented in an informal style in various addresses to lay people and colleagues. His writing is simple, yet eloquently

builds on concepts that are transformations of earlier psychoanalytic thought--in particular that of Freud and Klein (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Rather than consider the infant as a unique and separate being with biological drives and motivations, Winnicott was the first theorist to understand the mother and infant as a unit--in which neither exists without the other. In addition, Winnicott was one of the first theorists who not only made analysis available to the middle-class, but most importantly, pioneered the significance of the mother-infant relationship on the subsequent development of the individual.

Classical analytic theory delved into the childhood experiences of the adult patient--what Davis (1981) calls, "experience seen backwards" (p. 17). In contrast, Winnicott began observational studies of children in the clinic setting--something that had not been done before. Whereas Freudian theory focused on psychoneuroses of the adult related to childhood interactions with both parents, Winnicott studied the influence of the early or pre-Oedipal mother, as environment and object, on the infant, and later, on the adult. As Winnicott (1963) points out:

At that time, in the 1920s, everything had the Oedipus complex at its core. The analysis of the psychoneuroses led the analyst over and over again to the anxieties belonging to the instinctual life at the four to five year period in the child's relationship to the two parents. . . . Now innumerable case histories showed me that the children who became disturbed, whether psychoneurotic, psychotic, or antisocial, showed difficulties in their emotional development in infancy. . . . Something was wrong somewhere. (Cited in Davis, 1981, p. 17)

Literature as Teaching Tool

Literature is an especially fitting medium to study Winnicott, who so encouraged the development of creativity in the individual; literature as an art form is also something I personally venerate. There were also other reasons for choosing literature over actual case studies. First, literature provided me the liberty to select the most distorted examples of mother-infant disruptions as teaching tools to discuss Winnicott's theory. Second, literature used as case study does not commit a boundary violation of an actual therapist-patient relationship (Glover, 1998). Instead, it allows for a neutral stance much like the function of the implicit father in the mother-infant relationship, as it mediates through fiction a problem that exists in reality. Hence any potential conflict regarding confidentiality between the patient and therapist is removed.

O'Connor, like Winnicott, uses the medium of paradox as an undefined tension that ultimately leads to some kind of change. A quote from Jung found amongst O'Connor's belongings after her death portrays the importance, beauty, and elusiveness of paradox: "A great work of art is like a dream, for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is never unequivocal" (Kinny, 1985, p. 89). Greenberg & Mitchell (1983) best describe the paradoxical nature of development in Winnicott's theory as a "continuously hazardous struggle of the self for an individuated existence, which at the same time allows for intimate contact with others" (p. 190). Winnicott (1967) emphasizes the importance of

paradox as he describes the infant's omnipotent creation of the object: "A paradox is involved here, in that in this initial phase the baby creates the object, but the object is already there, else he would not have created it. The paradox has to be accepted, not resolved" (p. 30).

When I first discovered American writer Flannery O'Connor in 1981, I was struck with the intensity and intelligence of her writing. Here was a Southern woman writer, on a par with William Faulkner, who cut to the chase when exposing the foibles of human behavior. It seemed logical, then, that the protagonists in her short stories would be excellent case studies for this research project, especially because she created the most exquisitely disturbed, almost grotesque, mother-child dyads. McFarland (1976) describes the term "grotesque" as "physically or psychologically abnormal, and to bizarre and extreme situations, especially those in which contradictory elements, such as comedy and horror, are mixed" (p. 3). O'Connor's short story "The Enduring Chill" provides an example of a failure of the mother-infant relationship as the protagonist is stuck in the developmental phase of "Absolute Dependence," while the protagonist in the story "Good Country People" fashions a kind of crude separation leading to Relative Dependence. O'Connor (n.d.) wrote in a letter:

I myself prefer to say that a story is a dramatic event that involves a person because he is a person, and a particular person--that is because he shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation. A story always involves a dramatic way, the mystery of the personality. (p. 90)

The two stories in this study reflect a surface reality while simultaneously revealing the characters' distortions through allegory and exaggeration; O'Connor's characters struggle to exist in conditions that are on the surface paradoxical, in that they are "self-contradictory, absurd, or at variance with common sense" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1980, p. 2072). For example, in order to make a point, the author may overstate a situation to comical proportions. O'Connor does this in a formidable manner in the two stories discussed in this paper, as she calculatedly pits her mothers and their children against each other in an almost primal survival struggle.

O'Connor felt that the novelist must "know how far he can distort without destroying, and in order not to destroy, he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work" (O'Connor, 1960, p. 50). As Winnicott (1967) states:

Much of the pleasure in the experience of art in one form or another arises from the nearness to unintegration to which the artist's creation may safely lead the audience or viewer. So where the artist's achievement is potentially great, failure near the point of achievement may cause great pain to the audience by bringing them close to disintegration or the memory of disintegration, and leaving them there. The appreciation of art thus keeps people on a knife-edge, because achievement is so close to painful failure. This experience must be reckoned part of health. (p. 29)

Synthesis of Psychoanalytic Theory and Literature

Literature serves as a mirror of life through the analysis of character development. Using Winnicott's theory as an interpretive lens for O'Connor's

stories provides a creative space for understanding his theory. Moreover, examination of the Winnicottian elements in these deeply American (though fictionalized) families with their mother-child dyads illuminates aspects of the therapeutic tasks and challenges facing contemporary American clinicians. By focusing on the two developmental stages of Absolute Dependence and Relative Dependence while reading these stories as case histories, a picture emerges of how symptoms manifest in the psychological development of the individual.

The powerful reactions evoked by "The Enduring Chill" and "Good Country People" pull at our most primitive emotional states, reflecting the individual's capacity and need for interaction. The protagonists are stuck in a primitive psychological state somewhere between what Winnicott (1960) calls primary "unintegration" (p.18) or the synonymous "true self" (Winnicott, 1960b, p.148), e.g., when the child is playing in the presence of the mother and is at the same time an isolated and contained self, and "integration", an "I am" status the child's personality has attained by the end of the first year (Winnicott, 1958). Disruption of the evolutionary process from unintegration to integration is indicative of poor environmental beginnings.

This psychodynamic analysis of O'Connor's fiction explores the impact of "not good-enough" mothering as illustrated through the unique bonding and relational breakdowns between two adult children and their mothers, in conjunction with the absence of the father. The protagonists from "The Enduring

Chill" and "Good Country People" serve as case studies for Winnicott's relational model, which can provide an understanding of how and why these characters, and many real people, struggle to interact in the world with deficient personalities. By "deficient," I do not mean that the individual has a biological predisposition to failure, reflected in unsatisfactory interactions with the environment. Rather, I assert Winnicott's perspective, that failure in early environmental nurturing (by the mother or primary caretaker) forms cracks in the foundational object relations of the infant which are then played out in the psychological life and interpersonal relationships of the adult.

The two O'Connor stories used to illuminate Winnicott's theory demonstrate this dynamic. Both protagonists struggle to interact with hostile environments and both are developmentally immature. One of the protagonists, Joy/Hulga Hopewell, is able to create a crude transitional space despite poor environmental beginnings. The other protagonist, Asbury Fox, is frozen in time, unable to achieve the "intermediate area . . . between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing" (Winnicott, 1951, p. 239), and, therefore, that region between illusion and reality.

Both Winnicott's and O'Connor's creative insights into the human experience are based upon their observations, experiences, and beliefs; each leaves a legacy of unique visions in their communications. O'Connor states, "The Southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond

mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets" (O'Connor, 1960, p. 45). Like O'Connor, Winnicott held that communication and understanding must "be transmitted and that the limitations and blind spots" (p. 46) of the patient "will very definitely affect the way he is able to show what he sees" (p. 46).

The two stories cited in this investigation serve as case studies for the examination of character development. Though the stories are fictional, the theory is real. Applying Winnicott's theoretical model to the investigation provides a foundation on which to understand the importance of early development on later behavior. For example, O'Connor uses the bird stain in "The Enduring Chill" as both an unfriendly and indifferent symbol of Asbury's mother. One can imagine a terrifying bird with talons outstretched and at the same time realize that a stain on the ceiling is just that. The tension between the emotional and visual content revealed through the protagonist is how O'Connor communicates with the reader. In Winnicott's theory the infant is both contained and frustrated, but the loss of equilibrium occurring from the failure is so minimal that it is barely discernible. That insignificant loss in psychological balance is necessary for psychic growth and creativity to emerge, just as the tension in the story needs to exist in order to keep the reader engaged. As Winnicott (1971) says:

My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and

respected and not to be resolved. By flight to split off intellectual functioning, it is possible to resolve the paradox, but the price of this is the loss of the value of the paradox itself.

This paradox, once accepted and tolerated, has value for every human individual who is not only alive and living in this world but who is also capable of being infinitely enriched by exploitation of the cultural link with the past and with the future. (Winnicott, 1971, p. xii)

About the Authors

D. W. Winnicott

Donald Woods Winnicott was born in 1896 in England to an upper-middle class family. His father, a successful merchant specializing in women's corsetry (Phillips, 1988, p. 23) was 42 when Winnicott was born. Despite his financial and social achievements, Mr. Winnicott, who was knighted Mayor of Plymouth, was self-conscious about his lack of education in part due to learning difficulties (p. 23), and therefore engaged in local politics rather than Parliament. He was extremely preoccupied and spent a great deal of time away from home, becoming a "rather bland figure" (p. 20) in Winnicott's life. In a letter to his wife Clare, Winnicott revealed, "So my father was there to kill and be killed, but it is probably true that in my early years he left me too much to all my mothers. Things never quite righted themselves" (Cited in Clancier & Kalmanovitch, 1984/1987), p. 2). Consequently, as Phillips (1988) states, "Fathers turn up in his writings as brackets or parentheses" (p. 6).