'The Genius' by Frank O'Connor

The boy's personality and his intelligence are swiftly established in the opening paragraph. His mother is presented as being a strong influence on him and appears as a kind of 'ally' against the rough children – 'savages' as she describes them – that live and play in the area. It is clear that she encourages him to regard himself as 'different' and separate from them, but it is equally obvious that he is not anxious to associate with them anyway. He describes himself as "a cissy by conviction" and says that he regarded the idea of fighting as both unattractive and 'dangerous'. He avoids rough games and prefers the company of girls to boys only because "they don't fight so much".

Religion seems to play an unusually important role in his life and it seems probable that this is a reflection of his close relationship with Miss Cooney. He himself uses "our Blessed Lord" as a kind of defence against bullies who might otherwise 'hammer' his head on the pavement. It is evident from the way he uses argument that he is unusually articulate for his age, and this is a reflection of both his natural intelligence and his strong preference for adult company.

The fact that his mother has told him "about geniuses" makes it clear that she has high ambitions for him. This is reinforced by the fact that she:

> "Worried herself endlessly finding answers to my questions".

Miss Cooney, however, plays an important role in encouraging and 'feeding' the boy's sense of himself as someone 'special'. Although a very eccentric and even unstable woman, she recognises his intelligence and, by making her "religious books" freely available to him, seeks to plant and foster the growth of the idea that he will grow up to be a priest. The boy himself is not particularly enthusiastic about this prospect but he very much likes the attention she gives him which 'feeds' his already established sense of his own importance.

Although the story is supposedly written from the point of view of the boy himself, the tongue-in-cheek humour is extremely adult. The adult writer describes how the boy's desire to become 'an explorer' is expressed through his journeys that take him a whole mile from his home, the findings of which are recorded in a book called by the very grand title of 'The Voyages of Johnson Martin'! Similarly, the adult writer communicates much more sympathy with the long-suffering father who stares 'moodily' at the son whose behaviour and whose interests he does not understand than he does with the little boy who takes himself so very seriously and is determined to be "a proper genius". In fact, the writer gently mocks the boy's very elevated opinion of himself by repeatedly

referring to him as a 'genius'. Thus, if the story is autobiographical, he is laughing at the serious and pretentious child he used to be.

The incident of the 'lame leg' is a particularly interesting one because the writer uses it as a means of presenting the relationships that exist between the boy and both his mother and his father. The Greek word 'Oedipus' means 'swollen foot' and, in Greek mythology, Oedipus was a Greek prince who married his mother and murdered his father. The strong attachment of a son to his mother combined with unconscious feelings of rivalry and hostility towards his mother was called the 'Oedipus complex' by Freud who was a famous psychologist. In the story, however, although the boy clearly prefers his mother to his father – whom he regards as a 'hindrance' – the adult writer portrays the father with understanding, sympathy and humour

Because he is an intelligent little boy with a great deal of natural curiosity, he is full of questions and has no great faith in the ability of the adults in his life to supply satisfactory answers. His mother and his father have very different ideas about what it is 'natural' for a child to learn and know. His mother, on the one hand, believes that "the child must learn" and seeks to provide answers to all his questions; on the other hand, his father believes "he'll learn soon enough" and that answering his questions amounts to "putting ideas into his head" thus making a bad situation even worse.

This difference in attitudes is well illustrated when the boy's thoughts turn to the question of where babies come from. His mother, obviously embarrassed by his question becomes 'upset' and talks about "birds and flowers" so that the boy, who has long had a low opinion of his mother's store of knowledge, concludes that she does not know the answer to his question. Miss Cooney also lets him down, telling him he should keep his 'innocence', and it is ironic that it is his father's fanciful explanation about aeroplanes that he is most inclined to accept. On discovering that his father was "only joking", he is filled with childish rage. It is this reaction that finally prompts his mother to tell the boy the truth, though she expresses this 'truth' in terms that she hopes are appropriate to his age and understanding.

There is further irony in the fact that it is this very issue that later causes the boy to feel that he has been made to look foolish in front of Una. The belief that his mother has supplied him with embarrassingly inaccurate information causes him to make enquiries at school. Here, a number of theories are advanced – including the idea that babies make their way to earth "by floating down on a snowflake" – but the boy concludes that Mrs Dwyer was probably right when she told Una that babies were purchased from the local nurse.

It is almost inevitable that the boy should develop a childish devotion for Una. He is a child who prefers the company of adults and she, an older girl, appears to take him seriously and listens attentively to his talk about himself, his 'voyages' and his plans for the future. It is clear to the reader that her interest in the child springs from the sense of loss she feels following the death of her small brother. The boy himself, however, is unaware of this being too young properly to understand either the concept of death itself or the feelings of grief that must accompany it. This is made clear through his inappropriate question:

"Was it a Ford or a Morris?"

and also through his comment that:

"Our Lord must have wanted him".

The reader understands that he is merely repeating a phrase that he has heard adults use in a similar context.

The adult writer recreates the boy's fierce affection for Una with a kind of fond amusement, dwelling particularly on the "four times" that she mentions his 'silliness' about babies causing him agonies of embarrassment are described as 'mortification'. At his mother's house, one day, his self-conscious dread that Una will mention it in front of his mother causes him to behave very badly indeed. The reasons for this behaviour – completely incomprehensible to his mother at the time – are easily understood by the reader. The boy, suffering the anguish of 'first love', is acutely embarrassed by his mother whom he regards as being inferior to the Dwyers in every possible way. What is worse, this is the woman whom he holds responsible for his humiliation because it was she who supplied him with the ludicrous information about 'engines' and 'starting handles'.

The conclusion of the story comes as no great surprise to the reader. It is inevitable that such a relationship can only end in tears. Una finds a boyfriend, as all growing girls will, and her rejection of her little devotee, however gentle, causes him to experience the kind of pain that he has never before experienced. Such a rejection is painful to anyone who is tasting love for the first time but, for this boy, the pain is all the more intense because he is a strange, intense child who does take himself so seriously, a child whose previous experience has encouraged him to believe that he is truly 'special' – a genius! The ending of the story is particularly effective because it reveals that, despite his anguish, this belief is unshaken. The boy returns to his 'work', long neglected for 'love', but feels that it is:

"a poor, sad, lonesome thing being nothing but a genius".

The Genius by Frank O'Connor – (Irish)

> O'Connor's work is likely to grow considerably in popularity at all levels. His fiction alone has the range of the greatest of writers. The most frequently anthologized stories are those about children -- "My Oedipus Complex," "The Drunkard," "My First Confes - sion"--which achieve the difficult end of seeing the world through a child's eyes without being childish. Such stories are amusing but, like children themselves, demand to be taken seriously. The moral of "My Oedipus Complex," for example, is the interesting one that "Of course the Oedipus Complex exists --and it is not such a bad thing."

This corresponds not only to Pritchett's comment about the rightness of 'the glancing form of fiction...for the nervousness and restlessness of contemporary life', but also to Frank O'Connor's discussion of the short story in The Lonely Voice (1963). O'Connor compares the novel and the short story: whereas the novel can 'adhere to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community...the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community - romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.' The relevance of aspects of this will echo through my discussion of a story by Tobias Wolff in the final section of my paper.

For O'Connor, the short story is concerned with individuals who are marginalised, or who marginalise themselves: these individuals are 'outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society...As a result, there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel - an intense awareness of human loneliness.'