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Conjuring a Carnival of Denial: How the Oedipus Complex Manifests in the Sociosexual Fringes of John Kennedy Toole’s A Confederacy of Dunces

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Introduction

Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis. (Freud 226)

John Kennedy Toole’s eloquent, picaresque satire, *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), draws the reader into a microcosmic New Orleans world where a lethargic, paranoid Ignatius Reilly lives in a state of misanthropy and arrested development with his increasingly independent, alcoholic mother. Toole’s novel weaves a tapestry of misadventure as Ignatius attempts to apply his obscure brand of philosophy to the numerous challenges he faces during his dysfunctional encounters with the marginalized populace of the carnival city. The protagonist’s megalomaniacal pursuit of employment and hypocritical lambasting of others is tempered with doctrine from the medieval philosopher, Boethius, whose book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, is a narrative artefact in the story. According to Elizabeth Bell, Ignatius admires Boethius as a cultural crusader who inhabited a world that did not subscribe to his idiosyncratic views (17). Additionally, Julija Potrč sees Ignatius’ views of sexuality and his offhanded superiority complex as an affront to the “carnivalesque equality” that is normally treasured in carnival cultures (83). A chronic masturbator, slob, and harbinger of chaos, Ignatius rains down his exquisitely articulated vitriol on all whom he meets. He is an inert, unemployed thirty-year old who regularly vilifies sexual deviancy and carnal desire (with the exception of his frequent onanism). William Bedford-Clark cites the absence of a father figure (Ignatius’ father died when he was nine), as a key catalyst for the character’s skewed sense of self and inherent immaturity (275). With this in mind, one can relate Ignatius’ neurosis to a concealed womb-separation anxiety that is informed by compromised maternal signals and intrinsically linked to the Oedipus complex, which is a thematic trope throughout the novel (Freese 371). He is rash
and condescending, consistently overreacting to the menagerie of social and sexual misfits of New Orleans with venomous tirades that provide the scaffolding for the tragicomic pathos in Toole’s work.

Toole’s pastiche of sexual subversion and aversion is indicative of his own mysterious and tragic existence, which culminated in suicide at the age of thirty-one. Fellow author and champion of Confederacy, Walker Percy, provides a poignant summation in the foreword of the novel, stating: “The tragedy of the book is the tragedy of the author” (Toole ix). While much correspondence and written work was destroyed or withheld by his mother, there remained enough material to piece together two major biographies; Butterfly in the Typewriter (MacLauchlin) and Ignatius Rising: The Life of John Kennedy Toole (Nevils and Hardy). These works approach the author’s life in different ways, with the latter examining the close maternal relationship and guarded upbringing that the prodigious John ‘Kenny’ Toole experienced during his formative and adult years. The text furthers that his mother, Thelma Toole, “dismissed the possibility that anyone except her was important to him, saying “Boys and men have romantic feelings towards their mothers, you know” (Nevils & Hardy 46). This is pertinent both biographically and fictionally, as motherhood is a central developmental concern for author and protagonist alike. MacLauchlin furthers that Toole may have been asexual, but his friends “held suspicions that he harboured unrealized homosexual inclinations” (214). Both biographies paint a picture of an eccentric and omnipresent mother, who reared her boy protégé without interference from a submissive and incapacitated father. It is this life experience that granted Toole the reference point to develop Ignatius, perhaps as an expression of his real-life frustrations and sexual angst. This background remains a relevant addendum to the Oedipal discussion at hand and opens a wider field of vision into the portrayal of sexuality and repression in A Confederacy of Dunces.
The critical work of Bedford-Clark focuses on the childlike representations in *Confederacy* while circling the psychological traumas that are incurred during Ignatius’ youth (269). In fact, the scholar sees “the corruption of childish innocence” (269) as a core theme played out not only in the novel’s rendition of infantilism and retribution, but also in the surrounding familial relationships in the novel where physical violence and psychological threat are used to maintain a status quo of parental power. While Bedford-Clark takes great pains to highlight the extravagant episodes of cruelty and bullying between adults, and adults and children, he does not elaborate on the sociosexual effects of these actions nor the lingering question of incumbered psychosexual development within the adult experience. Michael Hardin suggests that Ignatius’ immaturity creates a problematic reading of his sexuality, often resigning the character to a parody of non-heterosexual adulthood (59). He also posits a queer subtext to the novel that is shrouded in the performance of heterosexuality and the diminished responsibility of Ignatius’ childish, reactionary behaviour, which complicates a concrete reading of sexuality: “If Ignatius rages against masturbation, yet enjoys it often, perhaps homosexuality offers the same potential” (67). According to Hardin, Ignatius appears to be performing both heterosexuality and “queerness” (69), resulting in a muddying of sexuality which is dependent on the approach of the reader. This scholarship delves remarkably deep into the homo- and heteroerotic performances in Toole’s novel whilst also threading instructive links between author and text, thus providing a platform on which to extend a discussion about sexual repression and denial.

Peter Freese’s extensive survey of *Confederacy* not only discusses the historical, biographical, environmental and linguistic aspects of the novel, but also excavates the sexual ambiguity and reverse satire that Toole so aptly toys with in the text. The “grotesque protagonist” (Freese 365) is a gargantuan contradiction, suffering only his own corporeal vulgarity as he chastises others and avoids all physical contact with them, preferring instead to
be isolated as one within a social network of marginalized misfits. Freese highlights the irony of Ignatius, suggesting that Toole used this feature as a narrative ploy to create both empathy and disgust toward the character, thus further complicating a definitive reading of the obese protagonist’s sexuality and potential reformation (369). This critical treatment provides vital analysis of a range of concerns in the novel and reinforces the ties that connect Toole’s life experiences to his characterization of Ignatius. Although Freese outlines a conglomeration of childhood trauma, Oedipus complex and asexuality, he is not convinced of any definitive sexuality being proffered and furthers that “it is hardly believable that the prude “virgin” can produce the advanced sexual puns his creator allows him to make” (384). This position lurches somewhat toward a disclaimer of a specific portrayal of sexuality, favouring instead the dichotomous rendering of sexuality as a satirical device.

The psychosexual and social inertia that Ignatius radiates may be viewed as a biproduct of unconscious Oedipal transference resulting from subliminal parental influence. Adler sees this as an operation where ongoing development requires “a process of sublimation mediated by the actual receptiveness and responsiveness of the libidinal environment” (543). This implication shifts away from “Freud’s phallocentric account” of sexuality and Oedipus resolution and focuses on the signification of “love and rivalry” between parent and child, outlining the need for balance between the two agents to avoid “the attendant risk of either too much or too little parental responsiveness” (Adler 543). Adler elaborates on the consequences of this risk:

Too much incestuous enticement entraps the child in a libidinous relationship that can derail the transformation of primary identificatory bonds […] that point the way along the difficult path of continued individuation and full autonomy. Failure to surmount these
temptations institutes a regressive pull towards oneness, destructive to the narcissistic 
core of an autonomous self… (543)

In this light, Ignatius’ neurotic response mechanisms and narcissism can be tethered to the 
smothering maternal practices that he struggled to navigate as a child under the duress of 
parental ambiguity and paternal absence.

The theoretical groundwork laid out above serves as a point of departure for an 
exploration of the Oedipus complex that envelopes Ignatius Reilly and the symbolic 
implications it has in Toole’s work of literature. Through literary analysis this paper will locate 
the manifestation of Oedipus complex in the protagonist and assert that Ignatius Reilly’s 
developmental arrest is a product of the denied heteronormative resolutions that persist from 
incumbent parental complications. New territory for considering both the author’s personal 
investment in the main protagonist and the mirroring that occurs in the novel will be illuminated 
at the fictional and biographical crossroads. The canon of critical literature outlined here is 
vital to launching a broader inquiry into the sociosexual interplays that threaten Ignatius and 
motivate his sociosexual defenses. In order to move toward a renewed psychosexual discussion 
of Confederacy, one that considers the unconscious intra-familial influences and extra-familial 
encounters that impact Ignatius, this thesis will demarcate the maelstrom of causality that 
underpins the sociosexual inertia experienced by the protagonist. This theoretical approach 
marks a new space to analyze and dissect the Oedipus complex from a multifaceted angle, 
accounting for multiple outcomes for a character’s sexuality while also recognizing the 
constraints of the Freudian Oedipus complex and the need for latitudinal consideration.

The Oedipus ‘Toole’ Box
The Oedipus complex, which draws on the mythological tale of an abandoned son, Oedipus, who unwittingly slays his father and marries his mother, is informed by the psychosexual processes that a child navigates when passing through the nascent attachment and sexuality phases of growth. Elliot Adler, in summoning the work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, sees this function as a “normative developmental pathway…[towards] a dissolution of the Oedipal constellation of desire, fantasy, and fear, leaving the child free in puberty to pursue nonincestuous eroticism” (542). To facilitate a literary criticism that involves such psychosexual phenomena it is prudent to embark on a discourse that turns to the seminal work of Freud. The Freudian Oedipus complex involves an essentialist assumption that bisexuality is an early developmental phenomenon that transforms into a discrete binary where “girl’s first affection is for her father and a boy’s first childish desires are for his mother. Accordingly, the father becomes a disturbing rival to the boy and the mother to the girl…” (Morgenstern 779). Naomi Morgenstern furthers that “the [Freudian] Oedipus complex…[is] the place where sexual difference is established” (779), although Freudian Oedipus theory has attracted contemporary criticism elsewhere for its reductive, heteronormative and even misogynistic imbrications (Adler 2010; Barry 2017, 104; Hardin 2007). Jody Davies contends that Freud’s premise of the “homoerotic aspect of early sexuality …[being] presumably outgrown” (268) is flawed and does not account for the multiplicities of sexuality and self that are harboured in the negotiation of the Oedipus complex. The notion of complexity in the sexual subject and the inhibitions that a heteronormative approach shapes are also explored by Michael Hardin’s queer theoretical approach to Confederacy, prompting him to claim that Ignatius’ grotesque embodiment may be a mask to disguise the character’s homosexuality (74). This scholarship offers a kaleidoscope of insight into the construction of the sexual subject and Oedipus complex and provides a tangible psychoanalytical canvas on which to survey the text.
Freud’s work underscores an imperative that divides the psyche into three distinct moments; the Id (unconscious), the Ego (consciousness), and the SuperEgo (conscience). Within this triadic framework lies the Freudian Oedipus complex; a natural stage of development that is successfully overcome when the burgeoning sexual desires of the child are no longer focused on the parental object, instead finding a conscious balance between the uninhibited wishes of the Id and the socially constructed moral codes of the SuperEgo (Barry 98). When the desires of the Id are repressed by the SuperEgo, the unconscious seeks ways of releasing psychosexual energies contained there. In acts of sublimation, which Barry describes as a process of disguising or promoting repressed desires, unresolved conflicts, or traumas, the unconscious redirects the repressed energy to other activities deemed acceptable by the conscience (97-97). If this process is thwarted by parental incursions, psychological issues or problematic social experiences, the result may be a symptomatic neurosis, narcissism or other psychotic anomaly. The subjective response to the repression of unsanctioned desires may be realized in psychic projection (where unacceptable desires are transferred to others), denial (where emotions are denied an existence), or displacement (whereby an appropriate object is substituted for an inappropriate one) (97-110). However, Freud’s theories are not absolute nor the sole school of thought regarding the development of an individual’s sexuality. It is therefore beneficial to briefly consider Michel Foucault’s theories of sexuality that posit it as a function of power and knowledge rather than an explicit mitigation of internal desire and fear.

A Foucauldian approach to sexuality integrates the internal Oedipal processes into the familial sphere and interrogates the functions of power that occur there, asserting that the Oedipus complex manifests “not in connection with desire and the unconscious but in connection with power and knowledge” (Foucault in Konoval 7). Sarah Mills suggests that “Foucault…is concerned to describe the interaction of institutions and the individual” (82), emphasizing the function of power in the institution of family while also pointing toward a
construction of sexuality rather than a natural evolution of it. In fact, Foucault sees the
individual as a “prime effect” of power, and sexuality as the result of sociosexual inscription
on the body by the interactive forces that engage with the subject (Foucault 98). In Foucauldian
terms, desire requires the presence of power, which positions sexuality development as a
dividend of balancing this exchange. While the subject of power is important to the discussion
of sexuality and the Oedipus complex, and the significance of power relations between Ignatius
Reilly and his counterparts is relevant to this discourse, this analysis can only provide a cursory
glance at Foucauldian theory in order to furnish a more lateral perspective on sexuality
alongside Freudian claims. In revising Freudian theory, Siegfried Zepf, Burkhard Ullrich and
Dietmar Seel attempt to disentangle the patrio-centric values of Oedipus complex binaries
which privilege male power as a central concern and locate homosexual tendencies as the
negative response to a positive heterosexual desire (698). Zepf, et al. further that both poles of
sexuality, for males and females, are not independent of each other, and the formation of one
does not necessarily deny the other, asserting that it is the parental unconscious that informs
and influences the desires of the child “with the intention of keeping the child blameless” (701).
These conceptual frameworks give greater scope to the overarching analysis of Oedipus
complex in Confederacy and are a necessary segue to understanding familial power relations
and unconscious parental influences on Ignatius and his creator.

The Ties That Bind

John Kennedy Toole’s demise at the age of thirty-one was a dire end to a life full of literary
promise that was punctuated by intrigue, familial drama, mental illness and sexual ambiguity.
Thelma and John Toole’s prodigious son was welcomed to the world on December 17, 1937
and grew up in New Orleans under the watchful admiration and shameless lobbying of his
imperious, narcissistic mother. Toole, who was known as ‘Kenny’ as a child and later took ‘Ken’ as his social name, was regarded as a genius by his insistent mother. Thelma Toole, who was a trained drama teacher and elocution coach, saw her son as a rarified extension of her own salient charisma; constantly pushing him to perform for people and promoting his supposed innate gifts (Nevils and Hardy 19). While Toole’s father worked as a car salesman and passed his love of automobiles on to his son (notably, Ken took his life in his favourite car), he was overshadowed by the domineering marital and maternal force of Thelma. According to MacLauchlin, the fractious marriage was infected with Thelma’s scathing scrutiny of John Toole, who did not live up to expectations and failed to reach his potential (11). She would not allow the same fate for her son and “demanded that he be in every way superior to others his age…fearing that contact with average people would somehow rub off on her son” (Nevils and Hardy 31). This effectively isolated him from his peers and falsely glorified him at an early age, perhaps seeding the authorial insight to inscribe isolation, false intellectualism and aversity to physical contact into his character.

Within the troubled matriarchal Toole household, John Toole became a deteriorating negative of himself, as Thelma ensured her son was afforded every opportunity for cultural growth and never strayed too far from her conservative domestic bedrock. Ken was reluctant to leave home and returned often to his mentally and physically deteriorating parents and their economic woes, even after his various scholarly undertakings and military service in Puerto Rico (where he began penning Confederacy of Dunces). During his sojourns away from his parents Ken partied and drank heavily but remained congenial. One encounter with a friend at a gay party drew Ken to express his “distaste for the gay life” (Nevils and Hardy 58), which prompted a teaching companion to suggest that the author was sexually repressed and ambivalent (58); traits mirrored in his protagonist. Ken’s behaviour contradicted an earlier personal anecdote regarding a homosexual liaison during high school, exemplifying symptoms
of denial that are echoed in the novel’s protagonist and narrative conflicts. Ignatius’ fear of touching others is reified when his mother requests that he rub her arthritic elbow, rebutting her with “I hope you don’t want me to do that. You know how I feel about touching other people” (9). The protagonist furthers his superiority complex, vehemence for social contact, and loathing of sexual deviancy when he addresses patrolman Angelo Mancuso outside a department store: “This city is famous for its gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christists, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs, and lesbians, all of whom are only too well protected by graft” (3). This diatribe exposes the hypocrisy, apathy and narcissism of Ignatius Reilly, but it also exposes the author’s articulate, conservative, biographical investment in his abominable, catastrophic character.

The parallels between Toole’s life and his text are relevant to this character psychoanalysis, serving to illustrate the author’s unique personal imprint on the world of Ignatius Reilly whilst demonstrating the interplays of sexual angst, maternal oppression and Oedipus complex in both realms. John Kennedy Toole’s characterization of Ignatius demands more than a passing glance at the writer’s life. Former colleague, Bob Byrne (who is credited with being the inspiration for the character of Ignatius (MacLauchlin 88)), suggested that Ignatius was a “doppelganger of his creator” (Nevils and Hardy 112), and the more Toole immersed himself in the construction of the character, the more his “mask slipped, revealing the complex person beneath it” (112). Invective centrifugal examples of the mother-son binary are found both corporeally in Toole’s life and fictionally in Ignatius’. Toole’s shadow of a father and his domineering mother are also mirrored in Ignatius’ family unit – his father died when he was ten and his mother filled the void with a dubious bi-parenting role. In another instance of reflexivity, Ignatius’ mother and Thelma Toole were both heavy drinkers. Toole’s mother hounded him when he was writing at home, ignoring the KEEP OUT sign on his door and interrupting him in order to get attention; a practice that eventuated in fierce arguments (Nevils
and Hardy 148). This episode is parodied in *Confederacy* when Mrs. Reilly insists on entering Ignatius’s slovenly man-child cave, complete with DO NOT DISTURB on the door. Ignatius lolls about in his room, disconnected from reality and scrawling his obscure worldviews in Big Chief scrap books:

“Ignatius, let me in there, boy,” she screamed.

“Let you in here?” Ignatius said through the door. “Of course I won’t. I am occupied at the moment with an especially succinct passage.”

“You let me in.”

“You know that you are never allowed in here.” (41)

Toole was a university scholar as Ignatius is, and they shared relatively close ages and a meticulous vocabulary, with Toole claiming in a letter that: “I was beginning to talk and act like Ignatius. No doubt this is why there’s so much of him and why his verbosity becomes tiring. It’s really not his verbosity but mine” (MacLauchlin 179; Nevils and Hardy 139). Both also exhibit personality disorders realized through paranoia, narcissism (Toole learnt from his mother as did Ignatius), sexual ambiguity and alienation. Toole’s real-life relationships, fears and concerns are amplified and caricatured in the socially reprehensible, anti-heroic, sexually repressed and absurd figure of Ignatius Reilly.

**Locating Oedipus in New Orleans**

Hardin posits that the “domestic ideal is parodied” (66) throughout *Confederacy* but there are more subversive undercurrents of sociosexual entropy that deserve examination, particularly regarding the interdependent mother-son relationship vortex. Ignatius’ long-suffering alcoholic
mother keeps muscatel in the oven and many other places, in order to drown her sorrows and blur the reality of a perplexing family environment. Her man-baby is infantilized regularly in conversations about his incompetency, dependence and social retardation. When mother and son find themselves in the Night of Joy strip-bar, Irene Reilly tries to coax her son into a heteronormative sexual response with: “They got strippers in here at night, huh?” (9), to which Ignatius painfully and obliviously replies, “I would imagine so” (9). He immediately retreats from the thought of sexual arousal and his mother’s coaching while she becomes inebriated and apologizes to the bartender: “My son loves Dr. Nut…I gotta buy it by the case. Sometimes he sits himself down and drinks two, three Dr. Nuts at one time” (9). Ignatius’ development is stalled in his mother’s eyes and she consistently massages his immature ego. Even after his appalling behaviour in the strip-bar, when he inadvertently offends everyone, Irene can barely muster a reprimand, invoking an Oedipus bind that complicates the parent/child boundaries and instead implies a sexual partnership:

“Yes, and I apologized to him over the way you acted.”

“Mother, you are standing on my tablets. Will you please move a little? Isn’t it enough that you have destroyed my digestion without destroying the fruits of my brain also?”

“Well, where I’m gonna stand, Ignatius? You want me to get in bed with you?” Mrs. Reilly asked angrily. (42)

The inference here may be maternal comfort or incestuous suggestion, which Konoval surmises is an “obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love” (30) where “sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family” (30). It is within the family structure where sexuality is first seeded, with Foucault expounding that normal sexual growth is constantly being negotiated in the family space where psychosexual compromises and parental prohibitions guide the
development of the child away from the “constant sexual incitement” that prescribes and potentializes incestuous behaviour (in Konoval 31). Ignatius Reilly’s reactions against his mother and his sexual ambivalence appear to be symptomatic regressions from normative exercises within the family unit that would typically ground sexual development. Bedford-Clark sees Ignatius’ infantilism as a response to paternal absence, whereby the overprotective mother operates as a supplement for both sexual exemplars, consequently leaving the child subject adrift from patriarchal influence and complicating the maternal bonds that dominate Ignatius’ formative experiences (275). When Irene Reilly implies that Ignatius “shoulda married…and had a nice baby or something” (46) with the lascivious Myrna Minkoff, his former college acquaintance and nemesis, Ignatius rails back at his mother with: “Do I believe that such obscenity and filth is coming from the lips of my own mother?” (46). Ignatius is unable to comprehend any other function, particularly of a sexual nature, away from his maternal, nurturing safe-haven. This scene concludes with Irene applauding his half-hearted willingness to work with: “I’m so proud you gonna work at last” (46) as she “kissed her son somewhere in his damp moustache” (46), further delineating the confusion and complexity embedded in the Oedipus roleplay that Ignatius and Irene entertain.

Irene attempts to coerce Ignatius into searching for gainful employment, trying to redirect his enervated energies away from self-absorption and sloth toward productivity. The text is riddled with examples of motherly coaxing of Ignatius (who still sports a Mickey Mouse watch), as Irene ironically directs Ignatius toward adult behaviour while perpetuating his womb-like entrapment. She sees him as a “babe…a fine boy with a good education” (44) and encourages him with “Lord, babe, you gotta look up” (52), to which he replies: “I refuse to ‘look up.’ Optimism nauseates me. It is perverse” (52). This statement further outlines the hypocritical irony at work in the text, as Ignatius “epitomizes the very perversions against which he rages” (McNeil in Potrč 86), becoming the “dunce he accuses everyone else of being” (Potrč
87) and exemplifying “the very behaviour he castigates” (Freese 368). Irene recognizes this dilemma, but even when she confronts Ignatius with “…you don’t care. You never cared for nothing, boy” (101), it is tempered with consolation: “You know I appreciate you, babe…Come on and gimme a little goodbye kiss like a good boy” (101). As Mrs. Reilly exercises her independence by going bowling she is apologetic to her son: “I’ll be in early, honey” (102), leading Ignatius to scream “I shall probably be misused by some intruder!” (102). These childish tantrums are testament to Ignatius’ fear of severance, of being cast out of the familiar and into the netherworld of adulthood and psychosexual accountability. After losing his job at the Levy Pants factory Irene admonishes her son with: “A little job in a [sic] office and you can’t hold it down. With all your education.” (124). Upon reembarking on his doomed job hunting, Ignatius ponders childlike over his mother’s demeaning comments: “[She] had been in a violent mood all week, refusing to buy him any Dr. Nut, pounding on his door when he was trying to write, threatening to sell the house and move into an old folks’ home” (139). He is unable to navigate an adult reality outside his bubble-like sense of the world and the unassuming martyrdom of his mother, which results in a developmental stalemate that homages and aligns with John Kennedy Toole’s real life “autobiographical pressures” (Bedford-Clark 279).

The dichotomous parental image of Irene Reilly creates an ambiguous model that denies a natural, logical guidance system for Ignatius. He is placated by his mother for thirty years only to witness her support slowly erode as she embraces ideas of independence. Ignatius is also denied the opportunity to challenge and repel from a father figure, thus depriving him of experiencing the tensions and authority found there. Instead, his didactic mentor is an aloof, unstable mother who contrarily smothers him and regrets his existence:
Suddenly Mrs Reilly remembered that horrible night that she and Mr. Reilly had gone to the Prytania to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow in *Red Dust*. In the heat and confusion that had followed their return home, nice Mr. Reilly had tried one of his indirect approaches, and Ignatius was conceived. Poor Mr. Reilly. He had never gone to another movie as long as he lived. (79)

Irene Reilly’s coping response to parenting takes shape in alcoholism and overcompensation with Ignatius, at times bearing more resemblance to a distorted marriage than a parent/child dyad. This skewed familiarity begs for a Freudian interrogation of mother fixation, which Barry describes as “an exaggerated reverence for the mother” (109) in young males. Barry advances that the taboo of incest negates the expression of sexual feelings toward the mother, forcing the young male to “seek sexual relationships with women who do not resemble the mother, and whom they therefore despise” (109). Within the framework of Freudian Oedipus complex, this desire for the mother figure is often overcome by the onset of adolescence, unless there are circumstances where the heteronormative nuclear family is fractured by death or absence of a parent, resulting in a realignment or repression of sexual desire (Barry 109-110). In the case of the Reilly family, motherhood is orchestrated rather than naturalized and, in turn, the fatherly role is subsumed into a non-archetypal bireole fashioned from ambiguity and ambivalence, which problematizes Ignatius’ ideation of parental figurehead. In Ignatius’ case, this theoretical application lacks fixity and is tricky on several fronts, particularly within the heteronormative contingencies that are essentialized in its approach. It is perhaps the confronting nature of heterosexual family bonds that drive Ignatius’ sexual desire underground, manifesting instead in an unhealthy multiplex of gluttony, self-aggrandizement and repressed sexuality. He is unable to mitigate the familial anomalies or personal relations that encircle him without turning to an over-inflated sense of propriety and
grievous alienation. Myrna Minkoff astutely summarizes Ignatius’ state of being when she offers him a role in a play in New York: “You see, Ignatius, if you would just decide to cut the umbilical cord that binds you to that stagnant city, that mother of yours, and that bed, you could be up here having opportunities like this” (70), after which he states, referring to Myrna: “I’ll show that offensive trollop” (70). His refusal to accept the offer is symbolic of his attachment issues, as neither Ignatius nor his mother are willing to cut the symbolic umbilical cord which perpetuates his arrested development, sexual inertia and social inhibitions, harnessing him in a psychosexual yoke.

**Traversing the Sociosexual Fringe**

Ignatius Reilly’s redirection of repressed psychosexual energies toward his narcissistic scribblings, particularly his *Journal of a Working Boy*, and his unabashed vitriolic servings to his fellow New Orleanians, point toward a neurotic sublimation of desire and sexuality. Friedrich Nietzsche sees this type of behavior as sexual renunciation, where sexuality is denied and supplanted by diversions of energy to “productive pursuits, pursuits that might be as much intellectual as athletic” (in Konoval 23). Although exhibiting heightened intellect, the disheveled Ignatius is averse to physical activity and contact, with the exception of jumping on his bed to alleviate his pyloric valve and his frequent masturbation, which he has “almost developed into an art form, practicing the hobby with the skill and fervor of an artist and philosopher, a scholar and gentleman” (28). In a bizarre episode involving an erotic vision of his long-deceased dog, Rex, Ignatius shows how far his psychosexual development has regressed and morphed by transferring the only sexual pleasure he can muster onto a fond childhood memory of the dog. The death of Rex coincided with several other childhood traumas including Ignatius’ father leaving, instances of bullying in school, a pant-wetting
episode and alienation from peers, perhaps leading to the paranoid neurosis that young Ignatius ensconced in his developmental retreat. Such a perfect storm of trauma and ill-guided parenting seems to have resulted in a psychosexual neurosis and channeling of repressed sexual energies into a culturally unacceptable practice, further symbolizing the depths of Ignatius’ depravity, skewed moral code, and Oedipus complication. Ignatius’ outlet for sexual release takes shape in the comforting memory of his only friend, Rex, reinforcing the constraining nature of his sexual anxiety, isolation and arrested development.

Following Freud’s theory of sublimation, Zepf et al. suggest a revision of the Oedipus complex that allows for “embedding the Oedipus complex in culturally accepted, conscious substitutive formations” (699). With this conceptual framework in mind, one can interpret Ignatius’ hostile attacks on social and sexual deviancy as diversionary; a tactic to smother his own sexual conceits and distortions. His attention to intellectual verbosity, dismissal of contemporary society, and moral vicissitude may be read as redirection of compromised sexual desires to his own brand of contrived, cultural rectitude and “rhetorically elevated displays of erudition” (Rudnicki 297). Ignatius’ misplaced intellectualism and twisted morality alienate him in several peer-related social spheres, leading him to state, “the nation as a whole has no contact with reality” (103), and concede that he is “forced to live on the fringes of society, consigned to the Limbo reserved for those who do know reality when they see it” (103). In a further self-ingratiating monologue, he states: “I mingle with my peers or no one, and since I have no peers, I mingle with no one” (105). With unwavering conviction and absolute reprehension for others, Ignatius delivers his scolding personal ethos upon all. However, this grandstanding does not go unnoticed or unchided, especially by his former university acquaintance, Myrna Minkoff, who delivers rebuttals and psychological interrogations of Ignatius in the form of regular, chastising written correspondence.
The prosaic stoushing that occurs between Ignatius and Myrna provides the impetus for mutual cross-examinations, satirical provocations, and sociosexual jousting. Ignatius is intrinsically bound to Myrna as his intellectual equal, although he derides her at every opportunity, calling her a “trollop” (70), a “minx” (107) and an “offensive maiden from the Bronx” (107). The two graduates met at a coffee shop in New York where Ignatius “was holding court by the singularity and magnetism of [his] being” (107), attracting Myrna with his “magnificence and originality” (107) of perspective which “both fascinated and confused her” (107). Their abrasive, tenuous and distorted relationship plays out in a tempest of disconnection and misguided virtuosity, with Ignatius’ erratic sense of self and abstinence from life constantly pricking Myrna’s attention, prompting her rash social commentary and sexually-charged libertinism. She is “terribly engaged in her society” (108) whereas he is “older and wiser [and] terribly dis-engaged” (108; emphasis in original), which speaks volumes for the polarized, spirited and ludicrous dialogues they undertake. Myrna constantly prods Ignatius’ unconscious desires, attempting to wrest a naturalized sexuality from him which results in the overburdened misfit inscribing in his journal: “I must admit that I always suspected Myrna of being interested in me sensually; my stringent attitude toward sex intrigued her; in a sense, I became another project of sorts” (108). Indeed, Myrna’s quasi-psychological ramblings raise important issues regarding Ignatius’ sociosexual isolation, and she consistently seeks to be his one-woman panacea for psychosexual abnormality. She brims with doctoral authority when analyzing Ignatius’ state of being:

Subconsciously you feel that you must attempt to explain away your failure as an intellectual and soldier of ideas, to actively participate in critical social movements. Also, a satisfying sexual encounter would purify your mind and body. You need the therapy of
sex desperately. I’m afraid – from what I know about clinical cases like yours – that you may end up a psychosomatic invalid like Elizabeth B. Browning. (69)

This brazen diagnosis appears designed to demystify sexuality and appeal to Ignatius’ egocentricity and intellectual delusion, in turn exposing him to the elements of normalecy that he refuses to envision outside the post-natal nest.

**Shaking the Sexuality Tree**

Freudian philosophy surfaces in Myrna’s assessments of Ignatius when she claims that “Freud linked paranoia with homosexual tendencies” (69) and infers “great Oedipus bonds are encircling your brain and destroying you” (156). This overt reference to Oedipus complex once again highlights the stasis of Ignatius’ psychosexual development and his inability to function or transcend the neurosis that cripples him. Adler sees this dysfunction as a process outside the triadic Freudian representations of Id, Ego and Superego, suggesting that the psychosexual subject acts as a “personal agent, ceaselessly constructing a neurotic universe in its own image” (544). This framing of psychosexual development implies that Ignatius is constantly creating and recreating an unrealistic self that is constantly subjected to the scrutiny of others. Unable to anchor to a fixed point within his atypical family structure, Ignatius internalizes his identificatory processes and restructures them in ways that suit his misconstrued and cloaked version of self, in turn feeding a cyclic state of neurosis with few viable resolutions. Davies sees these myriad constructions of self as a “kaleidoscope patterning of identifications and counteridentifications [that] contain an erotic or potentially antierotic component with conscious, preconscious, and unconscious dimensions” (267). When read from this perspective, Ignatius’ may be understood as an asexual product of lack: he lacks the necessary role models
to identify with and therefore lacks the appropriate response mechanisms to social and sexual stimuli in more extant public situations. In Lacanian terms, he cannot participate in the social symbolic order without understanding his sexuality, that is, he is unable to recognize the psychosexual elements crucial to “assuming one’s position in the entire field of human relations” (Morgenstern 784). When being lifted by co-workers in the Levy Pants factory, Ignatius had to “hide from his audience…[that] he had become stimulated” (118), as well as being aroused by a pornographic picture of a woman holding his Boethius book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Unbeknown to Ignatius, his book had been making the rounds of the community, eventually ending up in the hands (literally) of Lana Lee, amateur pornographer and proprietor of the Night of Joy strip club. Ignatius is stimulated more by the fact that the naked woman in the picture is holding the tome of Boethius rather than the actual pose, exclaiming: “Do I believe what I am seeing? What brilliance. What taste. Good grief” (247). His haphephobia is only alleviated in these few moments of stimulation and underscores the protagonist’s anomalous disconnection between corporeality, sexuality, consciousness and reality.

Ignatius’ state of mind and sexuality crisis are intrinsically hitched to the influencers around him and the experiences they afford, whether abhorrent, instructional, deceitful or serendipitous. He wreaks havoc wherever he goes and his interactions provide telling markers for his sexual ambivalence and social incongruity. Employer and hotdog entrepreneur Mr. Clyde “had a certain paternal quality that Ignatius liked” (152), but berated Ignatius for being incompetent, eventually firing him. This is a rare mention of paternity in the novel, with the only other person receiving acknowledgement being Mr. Reilly, who Toole scripted as an insignificant father filled with regret. The teenage miscreant, George, who peddles pornographic photographs for Lana Lee, accosts Ignatius when he is selling hotdogs and a
scuffle ensues. When explaining the incident to Mr. Clyde, Ignatius insinuates that George stole all the hot dogs:

> The human desire for food and sex is relatively equal…His unfulfilled physical desires therefore sought sublimation in food. I, unfortunately was the victim of all of this. We may thank God that this boy has turned to food for an outlet. Had he not, I might have been raped right there on the spot. (142-143)

This misdirection strikes several ironic chords and raises issues of psychosexual sublimation (mentioned explicitly by Ignatius) and projection, which Barry defines as a process of disowning our own ‘desires or antagonisms’ by perceiving them in or transferring them to another (98). Ignatius is both describing his own sublimation of gluttony for sex and testifying to his sexual anxieties by elevating sexual deviancy and positioning himself as a potential victim of sodomy. Another instance that hints at latent homosexuality involves Dorian Greene, an elegantly dressed homosexual man who argues with Ignatius over a hot dog cart. Ignatius tells him: “Don’t talk to me, you degenerate. Go play with your little friends. I am certain the Quarter is crawling with them” (212), before calling him a “Whore!”, “offal”, and threatening him with “the avenging sword of taste and decency” (213). In a curious transfer of sexual energies, Ignatius convinces Dorian Greene to have a meeting/party to form a militant, homosexual political body. The plan ends disastrously, with Ignatius causing chaos and being thrown out of Greene’s house, but not before unloading a fresh barrage of homophobic abuse on the partygoers. Upon hearing of the encounter Myrna writes Ignatius, “Are you hanging around with queers?” (261) and tells him, “this Sodomite plan does not sound very practical at all. In addition, I think it is only a dangerous manifestation of your declining mental health” (261), before applying her cereal-box psychology to the situation:
Your normal sexual outlets have been blocked for so long that now the sexual overflow is seeping out into the wrong channels…you have been undergoing a period of crisis which is culminating in overt sexual aberration.

Call me collect if you want to and we can talk over this problem of sexual orientation that you are having. You must have therapy soon or you will become a screaming queen. (261)

Myrna’s summation of Ignatius’ condition points to an internal contradiction, or at least a masking of the main character’s sexuality, leading Hardin to suggest that the character “appears to be a vocal opponent of moral and intellectual decay” (66) and yet covertly seeks out components of sociosexual nonconformity only to deny them. Following this interpretation, one might comprehend Ignatius’ associates as multiplicities of his divergent personality, each displaying some quality that Ignatius cannot fathom, leaving him stranded on an island of misconceived sexuality, cocooned in a bosom of motherly whimsy.

While Myrna continues to harass Ignatius about his “unhealthy attitude toward sex” (153) and suggests possible psychosexual remedies for him to “reach a plateau of perfect mental-sexual balance” (153), Irene Reilly drifts further away from her son as she explores her newfound independence and companionship with an elderly gentleman, Mr. Claude Robichaux. The key instigator in Irene’s transformation from being Ignatius’ maternal crutch to romantic actor, and eventually to hostile mother, is Santa Battaglia, aged aunt to patrolman Mancuso and firebrand grandmother. Irene’s new friend presses her to liberate herself from her obese ward with: “It ain’t your fault you got a brat on your hands…What you need is a man in that house, girl, to set that boy straight” (150). Signs of a burgeoning animosity for her son become evident with: “I don’t know what that boy likes. Personally, I’m getting kinda fed up on Ignatius, even
if he is my own child” (167). Ignatius condemns his growing sense of abandonment: “My mother is becoming increasingly abusive and vicious” (180). These gradual acts of separation drive Ignatius’ anxiety and paranoia to new heights, motivating another glib appraisal from Myrna: “…you’re always sealed up in that room and have become suspicious of the outside world…You’ve probably regressed completely by now living in that substandard old house with only your mother for company” (156). The only stable centre that Ignatius has known, albeit an incongruous and unwilling one, is agitating, becoming an illusory, intangible failsafe to which he can no longer couple. Lèvi-Strauss posits that family structures are in a constant state of flux that require negotiation and reformation by all parties, eventually stabilizing after Oedipal complexities have been managed and reconfigured into transformed identificatory subjects (in Morgenstern 786). Misrecognition of these relational components and the psychosexual processes entwined in familial intercourse can lead to a state of developmental arrest. In Ignatius’ situation, an insidious combination of childhood traumas and maternal molly-coddling may have contributed to his developmental inertia and psychosexual neurosis. Ignatius’ struggle to detach from the “womb-house” (185) indicates an immaturity that is furthered by the enormous gulf that is widening between himself and his mother, forcing a withdrawal into his own erroneous intellectual shelter and sexual apathy.

As Irene becomes more distant in her attempts to live a normal social life, she conjures a plan to admit Ignatius to a mental hospital, thereby moving to sever the Oedipal cords that ensnare them both. In Foucauldian terms, Irene is enforcing her power in the relationship and establishing a new space that removes her as the interdependent maternal entity that Ignatius unconsciously craves (in Konoval 7). This realignment of power is catalyzed by Irene’s need to secure funds for paying a debt incurred from a car accident, which is also a key narrative plot moment in the novel and the motivation for pushing Ignatius toward gainful employment. Although Ignatius’ “being has many facets” (218), he is unable to comprehend the nature of
independence and the dissolution of the figurative motherly body. Irene’s feelings of shame are shaped by her son’s continual breaches of basic social etiquette and misadventure, feeding her rage as she “grabbed Ignatius by the collar of the clown-like dotted pajamas” (291) and threatens to “slap [his] face off” (291). His mother transforms from an ambiguous pacifier to an engorged authoritarian, exhibiting “the determination, the superiority that comes with intense anger” (293) in order to provoke change in Ignatius, who reacts by being condescending about his mother’s fledgling romance: “No wonder you’ve turned on me so savagely. I suspect that you are using me as a scapegoat for your own feelings of guilt” (310). Here Ignatius admonishes his mother in an act of desperation that displays an accentuated level of psychosexual paranoia and fear of estrangement. When told of Irene and Claude’s pending marriage Ignatius intensifies his reactions by suggesting that his mother will be “dragged from one reeking motel to another” (312) and will “end up a suicide” (312) – an uncanny piece of prose when considered retrospectively with John Kennedy Toole’s real-world demise. After arranging for Ignatius to be picked up by the psychiatric ambulance, Irene “embraced Ignatius and kissed him on his moustache” (328), an action that is reconstructed by Ignatius when Myrna arrives to save him: “He snatched at her pigtail and pressed it to his wet moustache, kissing it vigorously” (331). This episode places Myrna as a surrogate for the lost mother, represented further by Myrna saying, “I feel as if I’m saving someone” (335; emphasis in original), and significantly by Ignatius claiming: “Perhaps my mother has done me a great favor by planning to remarry. Those Oedipal bonds were beginning to overwhelm me” (334). This apparent rebirth of Ignatius is somewhat problematic, as he assumes a fetal position in the back of Myrna’s car before they abscond to New York, symbolically replicating his Oedipus stasis and supplanting Myrna as the mother figure (Bell 21; Freese 383).

Conclusion
John Kennedy Toole’s life, death and posthumous celebrity are intriguingly linked to his characterization of Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*. One cannot divorce the real-life influences and inscription of Toole in *Confederacy*, particularly the concepts of sexuality, isolation and neurosis that are explored and challenged through the incarnation of Ignatius Reilly. The character’s struggle with identifying a core self and holding meaningful communication with others testifies to an Oedipus complex that is stagnant and repressive, causing a cyclic response mechanism imbued with psychosexual panic, social contempt and self-delusion. Ignatius’ state of despair and incongruity emerges from the anomalous relationships that he participates in, especially the fractious, incestuous manifestation of the mother-son binary which is further complicated by inconsistent maternal signifiers and the absence of paternal influence. The lack of clearly structured role models denies the protagonist the wiggle room and recoil to construct a concrete psychosexual space in the non-heteronormative enclave of New Orleans. In response to the deconstructed models of self that surround him, Ignatius internalizes his emotions, sexuality, and psyche, moulding instead a belief system that is informed by narcissism, paranoia and obscure intellectualism. Ignatius displays an underlying homosexual inclination that masquerades as vitriolic turbulence through homophobic anti-social behaviour, mimicking that of his creator, John Kennedy Toole. When escape from his New Orleans bindings appears possible through Myrna’s rescue mission, Ignatius grasps a rare moment of sensuality and self-realization. However, it is contentious if his repatriation to New York under the guidance of Myrna Minkoff is grounds for real transcendence. In liberating Ignatius from his New Orleans quagmire, Myrna represents a potentially new beginning for him: as girlfriend, sexual confidante, counsel or intellectual peer. In a darker fortune Ignatius risks becoming just another personal project for Myrna and she the turbid matron of a new asylum. Worse still, Ignatius may become perpetually enslaved to sexual
repression under Myrna’s maternal succubus. One can only speculate if Ignatius finds a true expression of selfhood and sexuality free from the Oedipus net that bound him so tightly – something his master scribe was unable to realize.
Works Cited


