The Drunkard

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK O'CONNOR

Frank O'Connor (pseudonym of Michael Francis O'Donovan) was born and raised in the Irish city of Cork, where he attended primary and secondary school. The only child of Michael and Minnie O'Donovan, O'Connor grew up in a tumultuous household. Michael O'Donovan Sr. was a former soldier whose severe alcoholism prevented him from holding down a job after leaving the army. Despite having bitter feelings towards his father, O'Connor had a close relationship with his mother, who cared for Frank and provided for the family by cleaning houses. O'Connor worked as a librarian before becoming a member of the Irish Republican Army in 1918, which resulted in his imprisonment between 1922 and 1923. Upon his release, O'Connor became somewhat of a Renaissance man. In addition to working as an Irish teacher and librarian, O'Connor served as a broadcaster for the Ministry of Information for the United Kingdom during World War II, as well as a member of the Abbey Theatre Board of Directors. After publishing several works, including his short story "Guests of the Nation" (1931), O'Connor began to earn fame as a writer. Following the separation from his first wife, Welsh actress Evelyn Bowen, O'Connor accepted American university teaching positions at Northwestern (where he met his second wife, Harriet Rich) and Harvard. While in the United States, O'Connor became known for his short stories, many of which were featured in The New Yorker. O'Connor returned to Ireland in 1961, prompted by a stroke he suffered while teaching at Stanford University. A year later, he was granted a Doctor of Letters from Trinity College, Dublin. Frank O'Connor continued to write until his death, dying from a heart attack in Dublin on March 10, 1966.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Unlike other stories by Frank O'Connor, in which early twentieth-century Irish history and politics play a significant and explicit role ("Guests of the Nation" being an obvious example), "The Drunkard" makes no reference whatsoever to specific historical events. Indeed, it is even unclear what decade the story takes place in. There are only a couple of unobtrusive hints that its setting is Cork: Larry mentions Blarney Lane, one of the town's oldest streets, and another character mentions the "night and day robbers" in the "[Cork] Corporation" (city council), which was dissolved in 1924 following an inquiry that revealed evidence of nepotism and maladministration.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Frank O'Connor once claimed that his single biggest literary influence was Isaac Babel, an early twentieth-century Russian writer and playwright whose short stories, like O'Connor's, often feature child narrators. O'Connor was also influenced by major realist writers, such as Tolstoy and Flaubert. Larry Delaney, the narrator of "The Drunkard," is Frank O'Connor's literary alter ego, and he appears in various other O'Connor short stories, including "The Procession of Life" and "Daydreams." The degree of explicitly autobiographical content varies in these stories, as does Larry's age during the story's events: he's a young child in "The Drunkard," but he's in his late teens in "Daydreams." The theme of problematic father-son relations is a recurring one in the Larry Delaney stories—it is at the heart of "My Oedipus Complex," for example. Other works of fiction that prominently feature alcoholic fathers include Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Russell Banks' *Affliction* (1989). Small-town gossip, meanwhile, is a central theme of E.W. Howe's *The Story of a Country Town* (1883) and William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" (1930).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Drunkard
- **When Published:** 1948
- **Literary Period:** Twentieth-century Irish realism
- **Genre:** Comic realism
- **Setting:** Cork in the first quarter of the 20th century
- **Climax:** A drunken Larry humiliates Mick in front of the townspeople
- **Antagonist:** Alcoholism, Peter Crowley
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Frank of all genres. Although Frank O'Connor is mostly renowned as a master of the realist short story, he was prolific in many other genres, producing two novels, two volumes of travel writing, various translations of Irish poetry, and a biography of the Irish revolutionary Michael Collins, among numerous other works.

...maidename for himself. "O'Connor" is actually the author's mother's maiden name, which he adopted as his literary pseudonym early on in his career to avoid being associated with his hard-drinking father.

PLOT SUMMARY

When Mr. Dooley, a traveling salesman with high-up connections, passes away, his friend Mick Delaney intends to attend the funeral. Mick's wife, Mrs. Delaney, doesn't like the sound of this—not because she has anything against Mr. Dooley, but because Mick, a hard-drinking laborer, is in a period of sobriety. She worries that the temptation to drink after the funeral might break Mick's sobriety, leading to the strife and destitution that come when Mick is drinking.

Mrs. Delaney insists that Larry, their preadolescent son, accompany Mick to the funeral so he can be a "brake" on Mick's drinking. Larry reflects that, while this has never worked before, his mother has great faith in him.

At the funeral, Mick enjoys himself. It's a fine social occasion full of fancy cars and important people. He mingles with these folks, showing off in front of them and looking forward to drinking later. Once the funeral is over, he ignores Larry's pleas to go home and entices him into the pub with a bribe of lemonade. His back turned to Larry, he proceeds to hold forth ostentatiously in front of the other mourners, listing all the other important funerals he's attended in the past. Larry, meanwhile, gets bored and thirsty, so he drinks his father's pint which is still untouched at the bar.

With Mick distracted by making himself seem important, Larry drinks without his father noticing. Though he's initially disappointed by the taste, he soon finds himself "pleasantly elevated"—quickly, though, this lapses into depression, an inability to control his motions properly, and nausea. By the time Mick realizes what's going on, Larry is about to vomit.

Mick is cruel to Larry while he vomits; he refuses to hold his son for fear of ruining his best suit, he scolds Larry for making a fool of himself, and he dismisses Larry's pain when he walks into a wall and cuts his eye. Mick takes Larry home with the help of another mourner and fellow drunkard, Peter Crowley. On the way home, Larry seems to experience the entire spectrum of possible drunken states, from maudlin self-pity to short-tempered animosity. Much to Mick's dismay, various townswomen are observing "the strange spectacle of two sober, middle-aged men bringing home a drunken small boy"—and laughing mockingly.

The trio eventually arrive home and Peter Crowley, fearing Mrs. Delaney's wrath, quickly takes off. Mick, meanwhile, undresses Larry and puts him to bed. Mrs. Delaney, who has been out, presently returns home and berates her husband for "filling your unfortunate innocent child with drink" and for creating a disgraceful scene for the whole town to see. Mick haplessly protests that he's not to blame.

The next morning, after Mick leaves sheepishly for work, Mrs. Delaney throws herself happily at the still bedridden Larry and calls him "Mick's guardian angel"—after all, thanks to Larry, Mick didn't drink a drop.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mick Delaney — Mick is the father of the story's narrator, Larry. A hard-drinking laborer with a tendency to squander his family's money on alcohol, Mick is in a period of sobriety at the beginning of the story. This threatens to crumble after his friend Mr. Dooley dies and Mick insists on going to the funeral—an event that his wife, Mrs. Delaney, knows will inspire him to drink. Mrs. Delaney sends Larry with Mick, thinking that the presence of his young son will stop Mick from drinking; Mick, however, is vain and irresponsible and he can't resist going to the bar to hold forth in front of the other mourners, mingling with Mr. Dooley's high-status friends and telling stories that make himself seem knowledgeable and important. While trying to impress this crowd, Mick neglects Larry, who gets bored and drinks his father's pint before Mick can even taste it. When Mick realizes that Larry is falling-down drunk, he's humiliated and furious that Larry has brought an end to his fun, and he drags Larry home along **the road**, where all the neighbors stand outside laughing and gossiping about this spectacle. Throughout the story, Mick is shown to be reckless and even cruel with Larry: he scolds Larry for drinking (even though it's his own fault), refuses to help when Larry is vomiting (lest it spoil his good suit), and pities himself relentlessly for the public humiliation of Larry's drunkenness, unwilling to take responsibility for his role in the matter. Mick is depicted as a man of poor character who is always at risk of spiraling into drunkenness, prone to blaming his own defects on others, and cruel to his wife and son. While Larry successfully spares his father from lapsing into drunkenness this time, the story is pessimistic about Mick's future: this shocking episode does not inspire Mick to reflect on his behavior, which suggests that his self-destructive tendencies have not changed, and he has initiated young Larry into drinking at far too young an age, demonstrating Mick's terrible influence.

Larry Delaney Larry is the young son of Mick and Mrs. Delaney. His relationship with his parents is far from ideal: at the beginning of the story, his mother gives him the (near-impossible) responsibility of keeping his father sober during Mr. Dooley's funeral. Larry understands why this is important, since he implies that he has often had to drag his drunken father home in front of their mocking, gossiping neighbors, and he understands that when his father drinks, it leads to marital strife and financial destitution. Larry, in other words, is already taking responsibility for caring for his family, even at an age where he himself needs lots of care. While Larry is mature enough to understand this reality, his actions show him to be, in some ways, still innocent and naïve. At the bar following the funeral, for instance, Larry drinks Mick's pint out of curiosity,

and the beer tastes so bad that he assumes his father only drinks it because he's never tried lemonade. That Larry is still so naïve and impressionable gives the story its dark cast: while he tries to behave as he thinks an adult would, the adults around him are neglectful and abusive, allowing him to get drunk and then scolding him for humiliating them, even though this is essentially their fault. O'Connor makes it clear that Larry is a highly perceptive child who, like his father, appreciates the importance of constructing a favorable image of oneself: on the way back home from the pub, he refuses Mick's offer of being carried back home for fear that this would only humiliate him further in front of all the watching townspeople. Larry is generally funny and caring and observant, and it's heartbreaking to see him lose his innocence piece by piece.

Mrs. Delaney Mrs. Delaney is Mick's nameless, long-suffering wife and Larry's mother. A victim of Mick's carousing, she has to clean up his messes when he drinks, making excuses for him at work when he's hung over and pawning household items to make up for the money he's squandered. The reader is never told how she feels about her husband, but she hasn't left him, so it seems that she has somewhat resigned herself to his antics. That said, she screams furiously at Mick when he brings Larry home drunk, which suggests that she isn't taking all of it lying down. Mrs. Delaney clearly loves Larry and cares about him deeply, but she inadvertently puts him in danger by insisting that he accompany Mick to Mr. Dooley's funeral in order to act as a "brake" on Mick's drinking. Not only does this unfairly burden Larry by making him responsible for the family's wellbeing, but it also sets him up for failure; Larry has never succeeded in preventing his father from drinking before, and he only succeeds this time by getting drunk himself. While Mrs. Delaney thanks Larry profusely for keeping Mick from drinking, this episode corrupts Larry's innocence and humiliates him in front of the neighbors—both huge prices for a child to pay. Much like her husband and son, Mrs. Delaney has an eye on the opinions of "**the road**"—their acquaintances and neighbors—and she is mortified that so many people have witnessed Larry's drunkenness and Mick's cruelty.

Mr. Dooley Mr. Dooley is a local traveling salesman and insatiable gossip who is a friend of Mick's (despite having much higher social status than the Delaney family). At the beginning of the story, Mr. Dooley has just died, and his funeral promises to be an important social event. Mick wants to be seen at Mr. Dooley's funeral because Dooley was well-liked in town, and Mick wants to be well-liked by proxy. He looks forward to mingling with Dooley's high-up friends, thereby reinforcing his own sense of self-worth.

Peter Crowley Peter Crowley is a friend of Mick's, a "mean man" who "only went to funerals for the free drinks." When Larry sees Peter Crowley at Mr. Dooley's funeral, he interprets it as a "danger signal" for Mick, as he knows Peter Crowley will encourage Mick's worst behavior. Ultimately, Peter Crowley helps Mick bring the drunken Larry back home, although Crowley is no kinder to Larry than Mick is. He is an embodiment of some of the worst aspects of Mick's own personality: an excessive liking for drink, an inability to take any responsibility, and a tendency towards cruelty.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sonny Sonny isLarry's baby brother.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILIAL INFLUENCE

At the heart of "The Drunkard" is the relationship between Larry and his hard-drinking father, Mick. When their neighbor dies, Larry's mother knows that Mick is likely to use the funeral as an excuse to drink, so she sends young Larry with his father, hoping his presence will deter Mick from drinking. Afterwards, though, Mick simply brings Larry to the bar, where Larry winds up drinking his father's pint before Mick can have a drop. In this way, Larry *does* keep Mick sober (though not how his mother expected); Mick, after all, is too busy taking care of his drunk child to do any drinking himself. Despite Larry's success in keeping Mick sober, the spectre of Mick's influence on Larry looms over the story's somewhat happy ending. Even though Mick's sobriety is intact, Larry has been introduced to drinking at a shockingly young age, and it's clear that his father's influence might be leading him down a disastrous path.

One of Mick's central character traits is his lackluster parenting. On the day of the funeral, he bribes Larry with lemonade so he can go to the bar and drink, tries to get Larry to play out in the road unsupervised, and, when this attempt to ditch Larry fails, Mick ignores Larry in order to talk to his friends, which pushes Larry to drink. There's also evidence that this kind of behavior (and worse) is normal for Mick. Larry shows himself to be wary of his father's conduct: he knows the lemonade is a bribe, presumably because he's been bribed in similar fashion before. More significantly, he also knows he "might have to bring [Mick] home, blind drunk, down Blarney Lane." Once again, readers must presume that Larry knows this because something similar has happened before. Given Larry's young age, the fact that Mick puts Larry in the position of having to take care of him when he's drunk demonstrates how inept and reckless he is when it comes to parenting. It's no wonder, then, that Larry instinctively distrusts Mick's motives.

While Mick sets bad examples for Larry, Larry's drunkenness might be an opportunity for Mick to change. After all, by embarrassing Mick and behaving badly, Larry is inadvertently holding up a mirror to Mick's own behavior, which might allow Mick to see himself for who he is. Once drunk, Larry becomes the unmanageable embarrassment his father has always been, and he seems to experience the entire spectrum of possible drunken states, from self-pity to animosity and everything in between. Mick, sober for once, struggles to maintain control over the situation—a taste of his own medicine that might make him reflect on his past behaviour. However, Mick seems to squander this moment, since he's too caught up in self-pity and vanity to change his ways. When he realizes that Larry is drunk, he continues to behave poorly, refusing to help Larry when he's vomiting because it might spoil his suit, and scolding Larry for being drunk, even thought it was Mick's neglect that allowed Larry to drink in the first place. In addition to blaming Larry for Mick's own irresponsibility, Mick blames his wife, snarling that women should be at home to "look after their children themselves"—implying that it's his wife's responsibility to watch Larry, even though he was explicitly in charge. Mick's refusal to take responsibility for his own negligence becomes absurd as he repeatedly bemoans the "misfortune" of his child has ruining his opportunity to have fun. It seems that, instead of feeling ashamed of his own negligent parenting, he feels entitled to the pity of others. This attitude lasts through the end of the story, when he tells Mrs. Delaney not to be mad at him for getting Larry drunk, since he deserves her pity for having his day ruined. It seems he has learned nothing from this episode. Even though his sobriety is intact and he's able to go to work as normal (a boon to his family), his inability to acknowledge his bad behavior is not promising for the future.

O'Connor uses the story to make a serious (if largely implicit) point about the way alcohol abuse tends to run in families, and, more generally, about how fathers can condition their sons to adopt harmful habits. Mick may be the "drunkard" of the story's title, but the suggestion is that Larry—a natural mimic of his father's behaviors—could go on to become an alcoholic himself. O'Connor subtly drives home the idea of destructive mimicry by having the drunken Larry belt out "The Boys of Wexford," an Irish ballad with the lyric "'Twas the drink that brought us down." Should this reference be lost on the reader, Mrs. Delaney subsequently makes the same point in much more explicit fashion: "God forgive you, wasting our hard-earned few ha'pence on drink, and bringing up your child to be a drunken corner-boy like yourself." So, while this story's ending is somewhat happy—Mick stays sober and takes care of Larry—its undertone is unmistakably bleak. Mick's influence on Larry has already led Larry to dangerous behavior, and nobody is confident that he has changed.

JUDGMENT, GOSSIP, AND REPUTATION

In the small town in which "The Drunkard" is set, everyone knows each other's business. Friends, neighbors, and acquaintances gossip incessantly and judge their peers, taking pleasure in feeling superior to others. Mick Delaney is no exception; he constantly gossips with his neighbor Mr. Dooley, he passes hypocritical judgments on local drinkers, and when his irresponsible parenting leads his young son to get drunk, he is concerned for his own reputation, not Larry's suffering. While O'Connor is clear that the town's atmosphere of rampant gossip encourages Mick's vanity, it's no excuse for his behavior. Larry getting drunk was Mick's fault; nonetheless, Mick feels only self-pity and embarrassment that this happened in public, and he's cruel to Larry as a result. By juxtaposing Mick's desire for admiration with his deplorable behavior, O'Connor mocks Mick's obsession with reputation, suggesting that pursuing public admiration can lead one to behave inadmirably.

From the opening of the story, O'Connor depicts a town soaked in gossip. The story begins with the death of Mr. Dooley, a beloved local man who knew almost everything about "what went on in town" and who came often to the Delaney house to tell Mick the "news behind the news." Mr. Dooley's high social status and his penchant for gossip are intertwined; he knows gossip because he's so well-connected in town, but he's well-connected in part because he loves to gossip (it's through gossip that he's friends with Mick, after all). From this, O'Connor implies the high value this community places on gossip.

When Mr. Dooley dies and Mick plans to attend the funeral, Mick's wife protests because Mick is an alcoholic and she knows he might drink after the service. Mick defends his decision by appealing to what others would think if he skipped the funeral; "I wouldn't give it to say to them," he says, showing how much he cares about what others say behind his back, and revealing the power of gossip to lead him to make poor choices. O'Connor takes this a step further by drawing an explicit link between the town's vain obsession with reputation and Mick's temptation to drink. In his bouts of sobriety, Mick mocks his peers who waste their money at the pub, becoming so "stuffed up with spiritual pride" at believing himself to be "better than his neighbors" that he inevitably decides to celebrate his virtue with a drink. Then, after realizing he's "made a fool of himself," he drinks more to forget. Clearly, living in an environment in which gossip and judgment are so pervasive distorts Mick's sense of self and leads him to behave poorly.

At the bar after the service, Mick's desire to impress his peers contrasts with his irresponsible behavior. When they arrive at the bar, Mick orders a drink but doesn't touch it; he's too busy "holding forth […] in great style," making himself sound important to his peers while they listen "reverently." It's clear how much Mick loves to drink, so impressing his peers must be

incredibly important to him for it to take priority over his pint. Not coincidentally, it's Mick's vain need to show off for others that leads Larry to trouble. While Mick is holding forth, Larry gets thirsty and drinks his father's whole pint. This is a stark illustration of the dangers of burnishing one's image; Mick is so beholden to his vanity that he doesn't notice his child get drunk. O'Connor drives this point home when Larry starts vomiting and Mick, instead of showing concern for his sick child, moves away from Larry because he's worried that the vomit might ruin his suit. It's absurd to think of a man so concerned with how he appears to others that he can't help his son in a moment of crisis—especially since this crisis is his fault.

O'Connor's strongest condemnation of the town's obsession with appearances comes as Mick walks Larry home from the bar and the townspeople gather on **the road** to mock them. Even in his drunken state, Larry is aware of his neighbors' scorn: he sees that "every woman old and young in Blarney Lane was leaning over her half-door or sitting on her doorstep. They all stopped gabbling to gape at the strange spectacle" of a father dragging home a drunk child. Later on, they openly laugh, but nobody tries to help. In some ways, this cruelty explains Mick's obsession with appearing respectable to the townspeople (who wouldn't want to avoid their relentless cruelty by putting on a good public face?), but O'Connor still judges Mick's reaction: while Larry suffers, Mick isn't focused on taking care of him. Instead, Mick indulges his "neighborly need to explain that it wasn't his fault" (even though it clearly is his fault), he threatens and scolds bleeding Larry, and pities himself that he'll be the subject of endless gossip. Rather than taking responsibility for his actions and showing compassion for his son, Mick frets about other people's opinions and tries to "work up a smile" for a neighbor, showing again that putting on a good face for others comes at the expense of his son.

In the end, all of this is for naught; Mick is, of course, the subject of vicious gossip. In fact, the neighbors falsely assume the worst—they tell Larry's mother that Mick deliberately got Larry drunk simply for amusement, even though it was actually an accident. While Mick is humiliated and pities himself for his loss of reputation, his wife will have none of it; "everyone knows what you are now," she says. And she's right. Even if the neighbors have distorted the details, Mick behaved abominably—the irony is that his terrible behavior (from his irresponsibility at the bar, to his cruelty with Larry as they walked home) was all meant to impress them.

INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Through Larry Delaney, O'Connor explores the interrelationship between innocence and experience. The story is essentially a tragedy told as a farce; the reader is invited to laugh at the "hilarious" behavior of the drunken Larry, an innocent who's just had his first taste of alcohol. At the same time, however, the reader is also invited to remember that Larry's innocence has been exploited by his mother, who has (unfairly) burdened him with the responsibility of preventing Mick from drinking, and disregarded by Mick, who takes him to the pub even though he's underage. By emphasizing Larry's comedic, naive misperceptions, O'Connor underscores the tragedy at the story's heart: that Larry is a child thrust into a disturbing situation that he's not mature enough to understand, making him lose his innocence too young.

The story's comedy comes primarily from Larry's outrageous misperceptions of the world, which demonstrate that he's still fundamentally a child. When Larry takes a sip of Mick's pint while Mick is ignoring him, he's "astonished that [Mick] could even drink such stuff. It looked as if he had never tried lemonade." What's comically obvious to readers is that Larry perceives *his father* as the naïve one when—of course—Mick knows how lemonade tastes, and Larry clearly doesn't get that his father drinks beer not for its taste but for its effects. The scene culminates when Mick and Peter Crowley steer Larry out of the pub and attempt to reassure him that he's going to be all right, leading Larry to think, as a dry aside to the reader, that he "never met two men who knew less about the effects of drink." Again, Larry believes the extent of his knowledge to be far greater than it really is: if anyone knows about the effects of drink, it's these two! In a textbook example of dramatic irony, the reader is encouraged to smile at the child's naivety.

While Larry's naivety is amusing, O'Connor also presents it as tragic, since Larry's innocence is imperiled at far too young an age. Larry *shouldn't* know the effects of drink at this stage in his life, and while his commentary on his own drunkenness is funny, it's also devastating to see him losing the very innocence that makes his brash, inaccurate observations so charming. Furthermore, even before the story begins Larry is clearly *already* too familiar with adult realities. "Mother and I," Larry recalls, "knew all the phases and dreaded all the dangers [of Mick's drinking]," including the financial troubles it inevitably creates for the family. And O'Connor gestures towards related traumatic experiences in Larry's past. For example, Larry fears he might have to bring his father home drunk after the funeral, strongly suggesting that this isn't the first time he's been put in this situation. Strengthening this implication, Larry's mother is the one who sent Larry with Mick in the first place, encouraging the boy to act as a "brake" on his father's drinking. When Larry reflects that, "As a brake I had never achieved anything," it becomes clear that his mother has put him in charge of his father's sobriety before. This is an unfair responsibility to place on a child, and one that has clearly led Larry to see his father behave in disturbing ways (behavior that Larry might believe is his fault, since he was in charge of preventing it). Seeing a child thrown into a complicated situation that he only sort-of understands results in some funny moments, but mostly it's horrifying—particularly due to the danger that this premature

exposure to alcohol will make Larry more likely to follow in his father's footsteps.

O'Connor handles the twin themes of innocence and experience with considerable subtlety, teasing out both the humorous and serious aspects of Larry's predicament. "The Drunkard" is simultaneously a farce-like comedy of a role reversal between father and son, and a serious comment on the irresponsible and despicable corruption of an innocent. The comedic elements of the story heighten its underlying tragedy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ROAD

The road (presumably the town's main street) is a place where people exchange gossip and watch one another pass by. It's also a term that Mick and Mrs. Delaney use to refer to their neighbors and acquaintances (when Mrs. Delaney says "the road knows all about it," what she means is that the people in town know). In the story, the road is a symbol of the gossip and judgment that pervade small-town life. For the Delaneys, this is both positive and negative: Mr. Dooley, for instance, crosses the road "evening after evening" to give Mick "the news behind the news," and Mick clearly relishes being kept in the loop. In this way, the road connects a community and provides Mick with entertainment. However, while Mick relishes gossip that isn't about him, the road quickly turns negative when Mick himself is in the spotlight. In order to get drunken Larry home from the bar, Mick has no choice but to drag Larry along the road. The town is so small, it seems, that there is no other route, which shows how privacy is impossible in small communities, even in one's most vulnerable moments. Furthermore, as Mick and Larry walk home on the road, all the neighbors are outside watching them, gossiping, and laughing cruelly. The road, it seems, unites a community in public judgment and scorn, but not in mutual care—not one person, after all, offers to help. The neighbors then spread gossip that Mick was dragging his drunk child home (which is true), but also that he deliberately got Larry drunk for his own amusement (which is false). That this malicious rumor spreads so quickly (Mrs. Delaney has heard it within hours) shows that the road relishes destroying the reputations of others without regard to fact. Thus, even if the road has some advantages—namely, bringing people together—O'Connor paints a dark portrait of small-town community. After all, it might be better for people to not come together at all than for them to come together through cruelty.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1982.

The Drunkard Quotes

❝ Between business acquaintances and clerical contacts, there was very little [Mr. Dooley] didn't know about what went on in town, and evening after evening he crossed the road to our gate to explain to Father the news behind the news. He had a low, palavering voice and a knowing smile, and Father would listen in astonishment, giving him a conversational lead now and again, and then stump triumphantly in to Mother with his face aglow and ask: "Do you know what Mr. Dooley is after telling me?"

Related Characters: Mick Delaney, Larry Delaney (speaker), Mrs. Delaney, Mr. Dooley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

"The Drunkard" opens with a sketch of the character of the recently deceased Mr. Dooley and his relationship with Mick Delaney. Mr. Dooley is not an important character in his own right—he is already dead by the time the story begins—but his character allows O'Connor to shed immediate light both on the personality of Mick Delaney and on the nature of the small-town society he inhabits. In this society, as this opening description makes clear, being "in the know" is all-important, and gossip therefore takes on paramount significance. Mick, a simple laborer, clearly relishes the inside information on the town's business and clerical worlds that Mr. Dooley feeds him evening after evening, and this marks Mick as someone who perhaps aspires to a higher social status.

> Drink, you see, was Father's great weakness. He could keep steady for months, even for years, at a stretch, and while he did he was as good as gold. [...] He laughed at the folly of men who, week in week out, left their hard-earned money with the publicans; and sometimes, to pass an idle hour, he took pencil and paper and calculated precisely how much he saved each week through being a teetotaller. [...] Sooner or later, [his] spiritual pride grew till it called for some form of celebration. Then he took a drink [...]. That was the end of Father. [...] Next day he stayed in from work with a sick head while Mother went off to make his excuses at the works, and inside a forthnight he was poor and savage and despondent again. Once he began he drank steadily through everything down to the kitchen clock. Mother and I knew all the phases and dreaded all the dangers.

Related Characters: Larry Delaney (speaker), Mrs. Delaney, Mick Delaney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Mick can't seem to escape the alcoholic's cycle of sobriety turning into binge drinking—but, unlike some alcoholics, who are entirely clear-eyed about their predicament and just can't do anything about it, he's also a self-deluded hypocrite. During his periods of sobriety, he has the gall to look down on drinkers he regards as weak-willed, seemingly oblivious to the fact that, more often than not, *he's one of them*. Worse still, Mick is blind to the pain—psychological and financial—that his binges inflict on his wife and son, who have both grown unpleasantly accustomed to the "phases" and "dangers" of his cycle. The tone in this passage is light and faintly absurdist (the reader can almost imagine Mick proposing a toast to sobriety or some such nonsense), but the implications—for Mick as well as for Mrs. Delaney and Larry—are serious and very dark.

> He had long months of abstinence behind him and an eternity of pleasure before. He took out his pipe, blew through it, filled it, and then lit it with loud pops, his eyes bulging above it. After that he deliberately turned his back on the pint, leaned one elbow on the counter in the attitude of a man who did not know there was a pint behind him, and deliberately brushed the tobacco from his palms. He had settled down for the evening. He was steadily working through all the important funerals he had ever attended.

Related Characters: Larry Delaney (speaker), Mick Delaney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Mick, as the narrator says elsewhere, is a man of "natural vanity," and he's clearly a natural-born performer as well. He's at the pub after Mr. Dooley's funeral, and he's backsliding out of sobriety, as per usual, but he does so knowingly, treating the whole thing as a kind of self-conscious ritual, with his fellow mourners serving as an audience. He clearly wants them to think that he is someone who's seen it all, a worldly-wise, urbane fellow—and certainly not a simple provincial laborer. Mick is playing a particular role and constructing a favorable image of himself in order to convince his audience of his social superiority and to gain standing with influential people. This is a highly advantageous situation for him, an opportunity to play to the gallery and gain self-validation. It's noteworthy that, even though drinking is so alluring to Mick, he leaves his pint untouched; it seems that impressing others takes priority, which suggests that the one thing he loves more than drinking is performing for others. It's during this period of absorption in having an audience that Mick ignores Larry to the extent that Larry drinks a whole pint without Mick noticing. Therefore, this is also an example of Mick's need to impress others leading him to poor decisions.

> I knew Father was quite capable of lingering [at the pub] till nightfall. I knew I might have to bring him home, blind drunk, down Blarney Lane, with all the old women at their doors, saying: "Mick Delaney is on it again." I knew that my mother would be half crazy with anxiety; that next day Father wouldn't go out to work; and before the end of the week she would be running down to the pawn with the clock under her shawl.

Related Characters: Larry Delaney (speaker), Mrs. Delaney, Mick Delaney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Larry, as this quote makes clear, has become inured to

Mick's behavior over the years. Even so, the events of the story accelerate his premature loss innocence: in using Larry as a "brake" against Mick's drinking, Mrs. Delaney has inadvertently weaponized his innocence and exposed him to the worst of Mick's excesses. Although Larry is undoubtedly the main victim here, things aren't exactly nice for Mrs. Delaney either: she has to clean up Mick's mess and sell off household items just to ensure the family remains financially afloat. That the clock is "under her shawl" is a significant detail here: even in her despair over Mick's behavior, Mrs. Delaney has enough presence of mind to minimize the chances of any neighbors discovering what's going on.

> I should have advised him about lemonade but he was holding forth himself in great style. [...] I took a longer drink and began to see that porter might have its advantages. I felt pleasantly elevated and philosophic. [...] The wonderful thing about porter was the way it made you [...] watch yourself with your legs crossed, leaning against a bar counter, not worrying about trifles but thinking deep, serious, grown-up thoughts about life and death.

Related Characters: Larry Delaney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

The theme of innocence and experience is developed here by means of word choice. The naivety of child Larry is juxtaposed with the sophisticated vocabulary of the adult Larry who is narrating the story. Child Larry, who thinks adults need advice about lemonade, is unlikely to use words like "elevated" and "philosophic"—these words clearly emanate from the mind of an adult. The adult narrator refuses to pass any explicit judgment on the behavior of his younger self, but he does indirectly poke fun at his attempt to play at being a grown-up here. As the story demonstrates, the *real* grown-ups in Larry's world spend very little time philosophizing, and rather a lot of time worrying about trifles, such as whether their suit has been spoiled by a vomiting child...

> I saw plain enough that, coaxed by the sunlight, every woman old and young in Blarney Lane was leaning over her half-door or sitting on her doorstep. They all stopped gabbling to gape at the strange spectacle of two sober, middle-aged men bringing home a drunken small boy with a cut over his eye. Father, torn between the shamefast desire to get me home as quick as he could, and the neighbourly need to explain that it wasn't his fault, finally halted outside Mrs. Roche's.

Related Characters: Larry Delaney (speaker), Mick Delaney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

The fact that Larry was previously too drunk to understand what was happening to him, but he suddenly perceives with utmost clarity that his neighbors are staring, shows how much power and importance public image and reputation have in this community, even to a child as young as Larry. Clearly, Larry thinks it's quite significant that his neighbors are watching, and this knowledge cuts through even his severe drunkenness.

It's noteworthy that O'Connor uses the phrase "strange spectacle" to describe Mick and Peter dragging Larry home: the word "spectacle" implies that this is a prime event for gawking, and its strangeness (which initially shocks the neighbors into silence) shows just how beyond-the-pale it is for a young boy to be drunk in the middle of the day, escorted home by his father. The neighbors' reaction in some sense confirms the reader's suspicion that things are *really bad* here, even though the story's tone has been fairly lighthearted and Larry himself hasn't perceived any of this as being dire.

While Mick had previously relished performing for the audience of sympathetic male drunkards at the pub, he's now got a group of gaping women to contend with, and he's well out of his comfort zone—this is a place he wants to flee as quickly as possible. However, knowing how important it is to preserve his reputation, he stops to explain himself to one of the neighbors. This is yet another instance of Mick prioritizing his public image over the wellbeing of his son, as stopping to chat means further delaying getting sick Larry home.

> "Twill be all over the road," whimpered Father. "Never again, never again, not if I lived to be a thousand!" To this day I don't know whether he was forswearing me or the drink.

Related Characters: Larry Delaney (speaker), Mick Delaney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

As Mick drags drunken Larry home in front of their gawking neighbors, Larry begins lashing out at them for leering at him. After Larry curses, insults the neighbors, and threatens them, Mick laments that his whole community will soon know about his son's behavior, which is humiliating to Mick. This quote comes immediately after Larry's unruly behavior, but it's not clear—to the reader or to Larry—what Mick is swearing off when he says "never again." It's possible that, having seen the ugly side of intoxication in someone else, Mick is committing to being moderate in his own drinking from now on. It's also possible—and perhaps more likely—that Mick is swearing that Larry will never humiliate him again, which might mean that Mick intends not to bring Larry out anymore at all. While readers must make up their own minds about how this episode has affected Mick (is he only concerned about saving face in front of the road, or has he finally realized that his behavior is having a negative impact on his son?), it's worth noting that before and after this moment, Mick never takes responsibility for his actions and seems filled with self-pity more than self-loathing. This indicates that—as cruel and unfair as it may be—Mick is probably swearing off Larry, rather than promising to quit drinking.

"But I gave him no drink," he shouted, aghast at the horrifying interpretation the neighbours had chosen to give his misfortune. "He took it while my back was turned. What the hell do you think I am?" "Ah," she replied bitterly, "everyone knows what you are now. God forgive you, wasting our hard-earned few ha'pence on drink, and bringing up your child to be a drunken corner-boy like yourself."

Related Characters: Mrs. Delaney, Mick Delaney, Larry Delaney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Mick's argument with his wife at the end of the story encapsulates the story's main themes. That Mrs. Delaney hears what happened to Larry within hours of the incident shows how pervasive gossip is within their community, and the fact that the neighbors assumed the worst from what they saw (that Mick deliberately got Larry drunk, rather than it being an accident) shows the neighbors to be meanspirited and ungenerous, relishing the downfall of others. This paints the influence of community in a poor light.

Mick, true to form, remains primarily concerned about the damage this incident has done to his standing in the community, rather than the damage it has done to his son. Mrs. Delaney, for her part, is worried that Mick's bad influence will eventually turn Larry into a "corner-boy," or a disreputable youth. She is, of course, right to be concerned, because, as the story makes clear, Larry is being progressively corrupted by his exposure to his father's terrible behavior. That the adult Larry is able to tell the story in a detached and ironic manner suggests, however, that he has perhaps not ended up succumbing to the temptations of alcohol—or at least not to the same degree as his father.

"My brave little man!" she said with her eyes shining. "It was God did it you were there. You were his guardian angel."

Related Characters: Mrs. Delaney, Larry Delaney (speaker), Mick Delaney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends with a brief concluding scene that takes place the following morning, after a sheepish Mick has departed for work. Mrs. Delaney hugs a still bedridden Larry and calls him Mick's "guardian angel." Her use of the word "guardian" here emphasizes that Larry and Mick have swapped roles on some fundamental level, with the child intermittently playing a parental role (bringing Mick back home from the pub, etc.) and the parent playing the role of the wayward, irresponsible child. This moment also frames Larry's drunkenness as a positive thing that saved his father from relapsing into alcoholism, but Mrs. Delaney fails to acknowledge here that—while Larry's misfortune did

effectively protect his father—Larry himself suffered tremendously and was exposed to alcohol at far too young an age. It seems that the story ends much as it began: with Larry's parents paying little mind to the cost of exposing a child to things he's not mature enough to grasp.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE DRUNKARD

Mick Delaney finds out one day that his friend, Mr. Dooley, has died. Mr. Dooley, a traveling salesman, knew everything there was to know about the life of the town. Even though he was "miles ahead" of the Delaney family socially, Mr. Dooley was still willing to give Mick the inside scoop on things that Mick, a mere laborer, had no way of knowing.

The opening of the story introduces two central ideas. First, Mr. Dooley's role as a local gossip (and the fact that Mick loves Mr. Dooley for this) shows how important gossip and rumor are in town. Second, this passage hints at Mick's grasping for status. After all, Mr. Dooley is more socially important than Mick, and it's implied that part of why Mick values Mr. Dooley is that he makes Mick feel looped into the social lives of high-status men.

Mick resolves to go the funeral, which his wife, Mrs. Delaney, discourages. Mick tells her that others would talk if he didn't attend, but she counters that he hardly knows the Dooley family. In part, Mrs. Delaney hesitates to let Mick go because he will lose a half-day's pay if he attends the funeral, but her real worry is that Mick will see the funeral as an excuse to drink.

Mick wants to go the funeral because Mr. Dooley is well-liked in town, and Mick wants to be well-liked by proxy. Here, readers see for the first time Mick making decisions based on social pressure. While Mrs. Delaney is ultimately right to worry about Mick going to the funeral, Mick decides to go—regardless of whether it will imperil his sobriety—because he's worried that, if he doesn't, people will talk about him.

Mick is currently in one of his regular periods of sobriety, in which he becomes a courteous man who delights in saving money while more foolish men spend their hard-earned cash at the pub. But these sober periods always come to an end when Mick gets "so puffed up with spiritual pride" about not drinking that he celebrates himself with a drink. From there, Mick tends to descend into constant drinking, making him miss work and behave horribly, spending all the family's money.

Although O'Connor's tone remains superficially light and comic throughout, and he never judges his characters explicitly, it is nonetheless clear that Mick is being condemned here as a self-deluded hypocrite who's intoxicated (pun intended) with his own self-righteousness and is seemingly blind to the pain his binges inflict on his family. His vanity is on full display here, as he has no humility even about sobriety: he gets so proud of himself for being sober that he has to celebrate it with a drink, plunging the family into difficulty.

Fearing that Mr. Dooley's funeral will trigger Mick's drinking, Mrs. Delaney protests that Mick must look after their young son Larry, and Mick agrees—Larry will come to the funeral. Larry knows that he's too old to need looking after; his mother simply wants him to be a "brake" on his father's drinking. "As a brake, I had never achieved anything," Larry reflects, but he knows that his mother believes in him.

Mrs. Delaney is essentially weaponizing Larry's innocence here (as she has evidently done in the past, as well) in hopes that his presence at the funeral will stop Mick from going to the pub afterwards. It's clear that Mrs. Delaney is putting Larry in a difficult position, especially for a child so young. After all, Larry himself doesn't anticipate succeeding at keeping his father from drinking, even though his mother desperately wants him to. This means that, if his father drinks, Larry might think it's his fault—a horrible relationship for a child to have with his alcoholic father.

The next day, wearing his very best suit, Mick brings Larry to Mr. Dooley's funeral. Peter Crowley is there, whom Larry sees as a "danger signal," since Crowley attends funerals only for the free drinks. Mick finds the funeral excellent; it's fancy and full of important people. Larry sees danger signals everywhere: it's a beautiful day, Mick is in "distinguished company," and—having mourned his friend—Mick feels especially alive.

Mick, a simple laborer, wants to improve his social status, if only temporarily, by mingling with Mr. Dooley's important friends. Larry, meanwhile, has seen it all before—this is by no means the first time he's been put in a situation of this kind, which is why he's so accustomed to these "danger signals." His childhood innocence has been steadily eroded by his father behaving badly and his mother putting him directly in his father's path.

The mourners head to the bar, and Larry seizes his chance to be a "brake," asking his father if they can go home now. Mick says they can go soon and offers Larry a lemonade, which Larry knows is a bribe. Mick orders the lemonade and a pint, and while thirsty Larry drinks his lemonade quickly, Mick leaves his pint untouched—he is in no rush, anticipating "an eternity of pleasure" before him. Mick turns his back on the pint and regales the other mourners with stories of "all the important funerals" he has attended in the past.

Again, Larry knows exactly what Mick's game is here because he's been through it before; he is used to being manipulated by his father. Meanwhile, Mick, as a vain man, seizes the chance to present himself as worldly and well-connected to his fellow mourners. His vanity and desire to construct a favorable image of himself lead him to ignore Larry (and his pint)—which, in turn, leads to the story's tragicomic climax.

Larry asks again if they can go home, but Mick tells the boy to go play in **the road**. Reflecting that his father might stay for hours, Larry anticipates once again having to bring Mick home, "blind drunk," while all the neighbors gossip about them. Bored and thirsty, Larry grabs Mick's pint to see what it tastes like. It's disgusting, but since Mick is still "holding forth" while Peter Crowley listens "reverently," Larry keeps drinking. It suddenly makes him feel "elevated and philosophic," which soon gives way to the impulse to laugh. By the time the pint is done, Larry feels depressed and sick. He's barely able to put the glass back on the bar.

Mick's bad parenting is on full display here. Worse still, it's clear that Larry has had previous experiences of helping his father through drunkenness. That even a young child understands the social humiliation this entails shows again how powerful reputation and gossip are in this community. The serious implications of this scene are set in sharp contrast with the overt comedy of Larry having his first ever drink and experiencing revulsion, "philosophic" detachment and nausea in quick succession.

Mick then reaches for his pint, finding it empty. It's clear that Larry is drunk, and he immediately begins to vomit. Mick moves away from his son, fearing that Larry might spoil his good suit, and he opens the back door for Larry, telling the boy to go outside. Larry runs into a wall before vomiting again, while Mick "cautiously" holds him, still concerned about his suit.

Although Mick does show that he cares at least somewhat about Larry's welfare here, he's also more worried about his suit than his son, demonstrating that his preoccupation with looking good in front of others never leaves him—not even when his own son is experiencing physical distress.

When Larry is done vomiting, Mick brings him back inside. Someone looks at Larry with pity and says, "isn't it the likes of them would be fathers." The bartender tells Mick that he needs to take Larry home, and Mick moans about his "misfortune," since he knows Mrs. Delaney will be mad. He "snarls" that women should "look after their children themselves." Mick then threatens that he'll never bring Larry out again, and he hands the boy a handkerchief for his eye. Larry is surprised to realize that he's bleeding from running into the wall, and he howls in pain, which Mick dismisses.

Mick is completely unwilling to admit that he's responsible for this situation. Instead, he pities himself and tries to shift the blame onto "women" as a whole, and onto Mrs. Delaney in particular, rather than conceding that what has happened is entirely his own fault. Again, he doesn't seem particularly concerned about Larry's injury; he's not heartless, exactly, but he's certainly highly self-centered—even to the extent of neglecting Larry somewhat.

Mick and Peter Crowley grab Larry's arms to steady him as he walks home, assuring Larry that he'll be okay soon. Larry reflects that these two men must not understand the effects of drinking, since he still can't see or walk straight at all. What Larry *can* see, though, is all the women out on **the road**, "gap[ing] at the strange spectacle" of sober men dragging a drunk and bleeding boy home. In his shame, Mick is torn between wanting to get Larry home as fast as possible and wanting to stop to explain to the neighbors that this isn't his fault. When Mick stops to talk to a group of women, Larry resents them for staring at him, and he begins to sing a song. Mick scolds Larry while smiling for the benefit of the neighbors, which makes Larry sing louder.

"The road" has become an arena of public humiliation for Mick. Fully aware of the need to save face at all times, he attempts to justify himself to the neighbors, and, again, to assert that the blame for what's happening lies not with him but elsewhere. Ironically, his need to stop and put on a show for the neighbors means that he is neglecting his sick son for all to see. Meanwhile, the song Larry sings—"The Boys of Wexford"—is an Irish ballad with the lyric "'Twas the drink that brought us down," which has obvious relevance for the plot of the story. It's also noteworthy that the neighbors are out gaping at them and laughing at their misfortune, but nobody tries to help or even expresses sympathy. It's clear that community here is fraught: it's not nurturing or helpful, but judgmental and mean.

Mick says he'll carry Larry home, and Larry swears at his father, asking to be left alone. The women on **the road** laugh hysterically, which infuriates Larry; he thinks that nobody can "have a drop" without the neighbors coming to "make game of him." Larry calls the women "bitches," and Mick furiously drags Larry away, snarling at his son and lamenting that this episode will be "all over the road." Mick says, "never again," and Larry isn't sure if his father is swearing off drinking or Larry himself.

Larry is clearly mimicking Mick's own drunken behavior here, swearing and threatening others. It's a bad sign that Larry imitates his father, since the specter of Mick's alcoholism being passed to his son is an undercurrent of the story. The ambiguity of the phrase "never again" is, of course, deliberate: O'Connor intentionally leaves it unclear as to whether Mick's cycle of sobriety and binge drinking has been permanently disrupted, or whether, on the contrary, he has resolved never to let Larry embarrass him—and to stop him from drinking—again. It seems unlikely to be a commitment to stopping drinking, though, since Mick still hasn't taken responsibility for the situation—it's much more likely that he's saying "never again" about Larry and implicitly blaming the boy for what has happened.

At home, Mick puts Larry to bed, but Larry can't sleep and he gets sick again. Mick wipes Larry's forehead, chops wood for the fire, and sets the table. When Mrs. Delaney gets home, she screams at Mick for what he's done to Larry, but he shushes her, asking if she wants "the whole **road**" to hear her. Mrs. Delaney replies that the road already knows that he got his child drunk for his own amusement. Mick protests this misinterpretation of his "misfortune," asking his wife "who the hell do you think I am?" She replies that everyone knows who he is now, "bringing up your child to be a drunken corner-boy like yourself."

Mick, for all his faults, does have a more tender, fatherly side, which he demonstrates when undressing Larry and putting him to bed. But this display of tenderness is short-lived: Mick is sidetracked by thoughts of his damaged reputation. That Mrs. Delaney has already heard the neighbors' distorted version of what happened shows how quickly gossip spreads in town (and how ungenerous the neighbors are, since they automatically assume the worst). Mrs. Delaney makes a harsh point when she says that the neighbors know who Mick is, even if they have the details of what happened wrong. What she means is that his humiliation and the damage to his reputation are deserved. Larry, the victim in the situation, does not seem to be at the forefront of either parent's thoughts at this point, even though Mrs. Delaney is superficially more concerned about him than Mick.

Mrs. Delaney goes to check on Larry, but Mick appears in the doorway, criticizing his wife for speaking to him that way after "all [he] went through." He insists that he should be pitied, since his day was ruined; he didn't drink at all, and he was humiliated in front of **the road**.

If Mick showed a glimpse of his more caring side when putting Larry to bed, his natural self-centeredness takes over again here. It's not Larry who's worthy of pity, he thinks, but him—not least because his reputation has been unjustly tarnished.

The next day, Mick goes to work as usual, and Mrs. Delaney showers Larry with affection, letting him stay home from school until his cut eye heals. She calls him brave and insists that God kept Larry with his father, since Larry was Mick's "guardian angel."

Mrs. Delaney's use of the word "guardian" here emphasizes that Larry and Mick really have swapped roles on some level, with the child intermittently playing a parental role (bringing Mick back home from the pub, etc.) and the parent playing that of the wayward, irresponsible child.


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