

# Family Crises, Half-Truths, Ironies, and Private Devils

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The four American stories discussed in this paper – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”, Sherwood Anderson’s “The Untold Lie”, Katherine Anne Porter’s “He”, Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation” – have been first grouped together by Dean Flower, in his *Counterparts*, but for reasons different from ours. The title points to the four elements we identified in each – (family)crisis, lying, irony, private devil – and that turned out to be sort of crossing borders from one into the others; moreover, on a closer look, they are all interconnected and almost synonymous: lies result in crises, ironies may also end up in crises, a crisis may lead up to irony, irony is basically a lie and expressive of a crisis, and a devil, private or public, or whatever, is in each of them. Our point, therefore, is not that Hawthorne and Porter may have influenced O’Connor (which they did) and that Anderson belongs in the series as well, but that apparently different short stories are made up of theoretically identical components.

**Keywords:** crisis; lying; irony; private devils; four stories.

With the observation that “half-truths”, “ironies” and “private devils” are all three conceptual components of the “crises” in our first title term, we can proceed by pointing out that each of them is central to one of the four stories selected for discussion here and that all four can be easily identified in all of these short narratives. So, what we have in mind are four great American writers – Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941), Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), and Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) –, four great short stories: “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1832/1851), “The Untold Lie” (1915/1919), “He” (1927/1930), and “Revelation” (1964/1965) (the two years after each title refer to writing and publication times), and four descriptions of narrative situations/themes/devices... i.e. crisis, lie/vagueness of truth, irony, and private devil (Flower’s nickname for Mary Grace in O’Connor’s “Revelation”), concerning the four families involved.

The idea of grouping the four stories under this complicated title is borrowed from Dean Flower, only he puts them together in view of his thematic “counterparts”, whereas what we have in mind is an attempt at seeing how the four masterpieces are implicitly concerned with the inadequacy of language as the authors are in search for a “reconstruction of meaning” (Paquet-Deyris, 2005); the difficult point here (which would require a longer and more complex demonstration that we are not prepared to give) is the relationship between fiction and truth, as “fiction” itself is basically “a lie”; and an “untold lie” may be seen as a half-truth (which may be regarded as a “private devil”, with “private” = secret and “devil” = lie, error, the opposite of truth, i.e. a “secret lie”), since we do not know when a lie is a lie (if it is just thought of and thus untold, or it only becomes a lie when it is told), just as we cannot say if irony (words used to convey the opposite of their meaning) is not another form of falsehood (i.e. a lie, or deception, or dissimulation), and the liar (deceiver, pretender, Pharisee, hypocrite, dissembler, or ironist) is not a private devil after all; in which case our title is made up of four near-synonyms, which may explain the several working titles we have had to drop along the way (“Kinsmen and Kinswomen in Crises”,

“Family Nemeses, Private Devils, Evil Kinships”, “Family Lies, Ironies, and Revelations”, “Fictional Kinsfolk in Dire Straits”...).

Also part of this introductory section might be a discussion of how the four families (the “brotherhood” of Britain and America, Ray Pearson’s large and vaguely known family, the Whipples, and the Turpins) cope with their different types of crisis; and crisis (from the Greek for “decision”; also *krinein* = to decide, to separate, to judge) can mean a lot of (similar) things, so one could choose an appropriate meaning – or cluster of meanings – for each of the stories; basically, it would refer to a turning point or sudden, *decisive* or crucial change; or to a breaking point or emergency, an unstable period or one of distress and disorder; an emotionally significant event (like an attack of pain) or a radical change of status in a person’s life; a juncture (whose outcome will make an important, decisive difference) or crossroads, or straits (even dire straits); an exigency resulting from some pressure of restrictions or urgency of demands...; and others, such that any reader could choose for each of the four family crises any number of these dictionary meanings.

Still, since it is not only “family crises” we are concerned with, we can have a look at each story in turn and see how lies, ironies, and private devils combine with crisis in narratives that are as different from one another as any reader could imagine. “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” was not a favorite of Hawthorne’s, so even though written in 1831 or ’32, and published anonymously in *The Token* (an annual gift book), the story was only included in his third collection, *The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales* of 1851.

The narrated time of the story is a moonlight evening (and night) “not far from a hundred years ago” so, most likely, the 1750s or ’60s, the decades preceding the American War of Independence; the place is a “little metropolis of a New England colony”, Boston most likely. As a matter of fact, this is the story of Robin, a young man (“barely eighteen”) from the country (the American fledging colonies) who goes to the city (Great Britain) to look for his wealthy and important kinsman (Major Molineux and Robin’s father – a New England clergyman – were “brothers’ children”, i.e. cousins). Inexperienced Robin is a tall, strong country lad, “quiet and natural in gait”, and also “shrewd”, i.e. more like wily, cunning, artful and sly rather than intelligent or simply clever; our wanderer’s search results in a night quest that brings him into contact with a variety of characters: a threatening rich elderly gentleman (“I have authority...”), another gruff unhelpful man, an innkeeper (of French Protestant lineage), a “hospitable dame” (“lady of the scarlet petticoat”), a watchman (or “lantern bearer” and “guardian of midnight order”), a “bulky stranger” with a red (“friend of fire”) and black face (“friend of darkness”) – “an infernal visage”; a polite gentleman towards the end, and then all of these together and a “mighty stream of people” involved in an “unknown commotion” caused by a pageantry of torches, wind-instruments and shouting crowds accompanying the disgraced and scorned Major himself, now “in tar-and-feathery dignity”. (The Medieval practice of tarring and feathering – a form of public humiliation and mob vengeance – appeared in American colonies in the 1760s – Virginia and Massachusetts first – and continues into the following three centuries; in literature, one can find other examples in Poe, Twain, Dickens, Roth...). More than ironically disappointed, Robin thinks of going back to the ferry that had brought him to this inferno (Dante is echoed more than once), only his companion on the church steps advises: “You may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux”. (A moral Hawthorne spelled out as plainly as that.)

Young Robin’s quest is more like a phantasmagoric journey in a labyrinthine maze of paths that lead to other paths, of meandering, crooked, dark and narrow, “strange and desolate streets” of low, small, mean wooden houses and uninviting taverns for mariners, laborers, or a few countrymen, toward more spacious streets of lofty houses; a quest in the dark, marked by ambiguity, uncertainty and indeterminacy, by confusion and disorientation, a frustrating journey (Robin has no address and thus knows no destination) of self-discovery (“Am I here, or there?”) and loss of innocence; a journey under the aegis of the moon, all the time in control and “creating, like the imaginative power, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects”. (*ostronomie*, i.e. defamiliarization?)

From one point of view, this may be taken as the struggle of a young man to separate himself

from his father (America from Great Britain); from another, Robin's quest is far from dissimilar to that of Little Red Riding Hood, who wanders through the dark unknown wood, encounters fake helpers and real obstacles and, ironically, instead of finding the good old grandmother, she has to encounter the big bad wolf; Robin's strong and steady and noble and powerful uncle turns out to be a ghostly, red and wide-eyed, trembling, disgraced and scorned old fellow ("Is there really such a person in these parts, or am I dreaming?"), so, for a moment only, "they stared at each other in silence...[while]...on swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind"; Robin's wild, loud laughter joins in the "convulsive merriment" of the mob, as history moves on and there is no way back or out of the wild, chaotic carnival that America just got into.

This may seem like enough of a story presentation for us to show how the four title elements are present (where we have not already done so); the (family) crisis is there almost from beginning to end, if we equate the concept with tensions or clashes: youth and age, naivety and sophistication, nature and culture, urban and rural (country and town), America and Britain; and there is also permanent danger, instability and the resulting upheaval, i.e. crisis resolution, its testing time.

The half-truth/lie is very much like the one in the "Riding Hood" archetypal plot pattern, where the age-old story brings the heroine face to face with the big bad wolf (of another faerytale, of course) instead of her loving, helpful grandmother; i.e. the tar-and-feathered ugly tyrant instead of the kind good-willing uncle.

Irony appears as a little more complex, since we can listen to Robin, for instance, thanking "you and my other *friends*", and even the "country bumpkin" being compared to "the philosopher seeking an honest man"; but there are the ampler ironies of Robin's very quest for his "inscrutable relative", engulfed by the even larger ones of democracy deteriorating into a discordant anarchy, by Hawthorne's fear – less than a hundred years after Independence – that the American Revolution may have meant just the breaking down of order through the irrational actions of the mob carried away by the stupid cruelty of a senseless rebellion; and so, the "Kinsman's" private devils come to be seen as projected into the "public devils" Robin encounters in his memorable moonlit night; the hero's/America's identity crisis is then marked by irony, frustration, and falsehood, and one is not surprised to remember that the author had hesitations about (re-)publishing his story.

A deliberately ambiguous story is also Anderson's "The Untold Lie", which contains the (family) crisis in its very title: caught in the trap of family life – wife Minnie, six children, poverty, the lost dreams of youth, getting older... –, Ray Pearson finds no way out of *his* crisis, which is existential, in fact; family or no family, one still leads a meaningless, *false* life; the only meaning is in nature, in its beauty, and its tragic "fall" (Northrop Frye's "season of tragedy").

But we can slow down and have a closer look: two farm laborers, as unlike each other "as two men can be unlike", are working in a field in northern Ohio; it is late October and they are husking corn; Ray Pearson, in his early fifties, quiet and nervous, felt he was a slave to his responsibilities – "tricked by God, that's what I was, tricked by life and made a fool of" (i.e. his bitterness about his own marriage, resulted from an unwanted pregnancy, and as such an unhappy choice, a loveless marriage and the man as a victim of societal/religious straightjackets); Hal Winters, thirty years younger, Ray's fellow employee, is the son of a "confirmed old reprobate Windpeter Winters" (a crazy man killed by a train), and is himself "always up to some *devikment*", a rebel fighter and womanizer, who now has just "got Nell Gunther in trouble" – as the language goes.

What Anderson gives us here is a sort of story within a story, as Hal would like to have Ray's expert opinion, as it were, coming from one who has known how to deal with the compromise between acceptance and submission – the moment of crisis, therefore: "There they stood [Ray and Hal] in the big empty field with the quiet corn shocks standing in rows behind them and the red and yellow hills in the distance, and from being just two indifferent workmen they had become all alive to each other... Whatever you say, Ray, I'll do".

Trust (in a man who, from his wife's point of view, was "always puttering")? Cowardice? Indecision? Identity given up? Fear (of the life in death theme)? This is the time for the moment

of crisis, as “Ray Pearson lost his nerve and this is really the end of the story and what happened to him”. Hal tells him he wants “to settle down and have kids...”, while Ray, very much like Robin, “felt like laughing at himself and the world”, and muttered – “It’s just as well. Whatever I told him would have been a lie”, he said softly, and then his form disappeared into the darkness of the fields”. His family crisis is part of the lie and the fact that the lie is “untold” is part of the tragedy (“Most boys have seasons of wishing they could die gloriously instead of just being grocery clerks and going on with their humdrum lives”; Ray had dreamt of being a sailor or a cowboy in the west, not a farmhand) – that of an unhappy man in an unwanted station in life.

So crisis and half-truth go hand in hand here, as the lie may be one to himself, but also a resistance to communication in general; as in the other three stories, the vagueness of truth invites the question if truth exists, and if it does, what is it? On the other hand, nobody (author and Ray and readers included) really knows what the “untold lie” is, and this is highly ironic; and also ironic is that the seemingly irresponsible youth finally knows better about familiar responsibility than an aging husband and father; it looks like Hal’s private devils get added up to those of middle-aged Ray to construct the critical point, masterfully suspended by Anderson: “I must catch Hal and tell him”, but he doesn’t, most likely because Ray “could not stand” the beautiful landscape of Ohio in the fall.

Katherine Anne Porter’s story takes us to another farm, a Southern one, where a poor but proud family is coping with a retarded son of ten; her first sentence announces the possibility of family crises (besides this very one): “Life was very hard for the Whipples” – especially for Mrs. Whipple; the two stories by male authors focusing on Northern male characters find their counterparts (*pace* Dean Flower) in these two other stories by female authors focusing on female Southern characters. So Porter’s Mrs. Whipple is caught in the crisis generating tension between her concern with keeping up appearances and what the neighbors will think on one hand, and her arbitrary treatment of her disabled, unnamed (just “He”, all the way through) son on the other; and this is also the big half-truth of her life: while she “couldn’t stand to be pitied” and thought that “nobody’s going to get a chance to look down on us”, she was also trying hard to come to terms with her son, another source of tension; and there is also her unsupportive husband, Mr. Whipple, with whom she seems to agree only in making light of “His” suffering.

In short, Mrs. Whipple’s life was a torment not only because they were growing poorer and poorer as the harsh winter was approaching (again Frye – the season of irony and satire), but also because her two other children are gone to work for their living, and, above all, she had to struggle with her pride and vanity that came above the needs of her family – especially those of their pitiful retarded son; while stubbornly concerned over appearance (as her brother and family come to visit she decides to kill a piglet in their honor as a show of prosperity for them), she becomes cruel and neglectful of her son, for whose death she secretly wishes; in fact, she wishes he had never been born.

In fact, Porter constructs at least three instances where Mrs. Whipple deliberately sent Him into potentially life-threatening situations: to handle the stinging bees; to get the suckling pig from its dangerously protective mother; and to bring the neighbor’s bad bull to their pasture for breeding (as she thinks her dumb boy could never get hurt – “The innocent walk with God”); finally, towards the end, Mrs. Whipple is secretly glad (happy?) the boy is going away to a county hospital (“Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born...” go her thoughts). Only as a neighbor with a carryall brings the Whipples to the institution, Mrs. Whipple sees her son “scrubbing away big tears that rolled out of the corners of His eyes... He seemed to be accusing her of something... Maybe He knew they were sending Him away for good... [Mrs. Whipple] began to cry, frightfully...”. Her sense of guilt at the mistaken idea or feeling that He was incapable to return her/their love joins together, in this ending, the unwitting cruelty of a hypocritical (lying) mother, their half-truths, ironic stance and self-deceptions (“They didn’t talk before Him much, but they never knew just how much He understood...”), abnormality and parental conflict, private devils, belated remorse and revelation.

Which requires that one should remind the three revelations so far: Robin's about his kinsman, Roy's about his young friend Hal, and Mrs. Whipple's revelation about herself and the contradictory motives in her mediocre life.

Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" has for its setting, most of the time, a hospital waiting room, where, obviously, a number of people wait for something to happen: a social microcosm therefore, including the Turpins, who are there for Claud Turpin's ulcer on his leg after being kicked by a cow (first irony?); all the others are given through Ruby Turpin's point of view, i.e. in her waiting room small talk and prattling (about harvesting and the weather, households and niggers...), plus judgments in her head (free indirect discourse, cf. Hardy, 2003) and what "she added to herself" about all/most of the people in the room, seen from her grossly restrictive vision of the world; and they are: good-humored Claud; another elderly gentleman; a slovenly White Trash woman, her son and his grandmother; a well-dressed gray-haired lady, a stylish lady and a thin leathery old woman; a red-headed youngish woman and one with snuff-stained lips; a few others (a Negro boy, a doctor, a nurse...) and the Pleasant Lady of high social standing with her fat ugly, acne-faced teenage daughter.

Ruby Turpin is very large and in her late forties, believes in her moral superiority, so she loves herself and is absolutely self-righteous ("Our hogs are not dirty and they don't stink" – the source of one of O'Connor's great ironies); in other words, O'Connor's central character has all the features-o-bigoted, complacent and proud, irritating, full of herself and condescending, prejudiced and self-congratulatory, a grotesquely displaced figure and "a closed circuit of intolerances that pass for social distinctions" (Giannone, 1989: 213) – necessary for a family/personal crisis. Moreover, she "occupied herself at night naming the classes of people..." – in a hierarchy that included colored people, white trash, home-owners, home- and land-owners (herself and Claud here), and people with a lot of money; she also played a game with herself as to what she would like God to make her, if she were given a choice – black, white trash, good, fat, ugly, poor...

And, in the meantime, the ugly teenager gets a name, Mary Grace, and, as such, she becomes Ruby Turpin's private devil; for some time she occupies herself reading a book titled *Human Development*, and we all find out she goes to Wellesley College to study English and Math and other subjects; Ruby Turpin's blather gradually determines Mary Grace to stare and make ugly faces at her, and finally hurl her book in her eye, jump up and clutch her throat; subdued and sedated she hears Ruby Turpin's question, "What you got to say to me?", and answers: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog".

And the crisis is just at the beginning, since reconstruction of meaning follows; the Turpins go home, with Ruby... – "I'm not... a wart hog. From hell". And her sense of displacement continues through the afternoon, as Claud brings some "niggers" back from the field and Mrs. Turpin tells them about the waiting room incident with the "peculiar" girl who "said... that I was an old wart hog from hell", followed by the "Negro" rhetoric of flattery. So she goes to the pig parlor to punish the hogs: "How am I a hog?". In the deepening light of the evening, the hogs "appeared to pant with a secret life".

So she has a vision: "a vast horde of souls" running toward heaven – white trash first, then niggers, freaks, lunatics..., and, at the end, those like her and Claud ("But many who are now first will be last, and many who are now last will be first", *Matthew 19:30*), and thus Mrs. Turpin is saved by the *grace* of a forgiving God; this "country female Jacob" (O'Connor's description elsewhere) has her grand illusion fulfilled. And thus, once again and for the fourth time – abnormality, emergency event and violence as signs of crisis, irony in a variety of forms, the heroine's half-truths (or half- or full lies) about herself and her world, and the private devil incarnate; and, of course, Mrs. Turpin's "apocalyptic enlightenment" at the end of her "hermeneutic crisis" (Paquet-Deyris, 2005); which may also show (if any longer necessary) that language – in the four stories and, probably, in all stories – fails to provide a definite meaning.

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