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The Crude, Informed Misogyny of Ignatius J. Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*: Involuntary
Celibacy and Hatred of Women

The psyche of Ignatius J. Reilly, the main character in John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, holds almost as much as his stomach. His written identity as a genius intellectual, post-collegiate, sexually ambiguous, disgruntled, New Orleanian man allows him to stumble and slobber about New Orleans in a conflicted, comedic manner. However, delving past the comedy and into Ignatius's sexual and social interactions, he has a certain misogynistic rage that is hard to ignore. *A Confederacy of Dunces* was penned in 1963, but Ignatius exhibits key similarities to a contemporary community of "involuntary celibates" (also known as incels).

While the involuntary celibate circle was primarily formed online and did not have a formal title in 1963, Ignatius can be seen as an unrecognized literary incel. Although incels are mostly known for their violent attacks and mass shootings, there is a spectrum of incel that can range from the love-shy to the blackpilled. Ignatius falls somewhere in between—he has a certain hatred for women and men who have sex, but isn't a violent man. He has no issue speaking to women, but often does so in an outrageous or misogynistic manner. I intend to analyze the character of Ignatius J. Reilly, focusing on how he views women, sexuality, and masculinity throughout the novel in order to examine his representation as an involuntary celibate male.

To draw links between Ignatius's fictional 1963 existence and the modern community, it is important to understand the basic ideology of incels. Fundamentally, they are people (mostly men) who are unable to obtain a sexual or romantic partner, hence the term “involuntarily celibate.” While simply being involuntarily celibate isn’t inherently a bad thing, the portmanteau nickname, “InCel,” brings with it an entire body of people indoctrinated with a certain, oftentimes angry, belief system. Many of them are outraged at their perceived status in society, and their inability to achieve what they feel is the ultimate goal. Their ire is aimed at three main things: women, themselves, and other men. This hatred shows up in many facets of their lives: they are unhappy, frustrated, and unoccupied, with little to do but mull over their celibacy and anger; they shirk responsibility, blame others, play the victim, and are prone to cognitive distortions. Some are violent, believing that acts of savage force such as an uprising or a rape will change their way of life or give them revenge. Others are nihilistic, certain that their life nor society will never change. Many rely on pseudoscientific concepts to “prove” that their involuntary celibacy will never change, incorporating them into an extensive in-group lexicon. A few prominent terms that are relevant to the analysis of Ignatius and incels include:

based - when someone is concerned with spreading the truth, unconcerned with any potential reaction, *betabux* - a beta male when a girl takes advantage of him. He is chosen to be her significant other . . . [she] is past her prime . . . has already ridden the Cock Carousel, and her value on the sexual market has decreased, *cope* - anything anybody does to deal with their ‘incel-ness,’ *inhib* - can be described as low or high . . . low inhib guys don’t care what others think about them, *NEET* - “not in Education, Employment, or Training,” etc. (IncelTear)

These terms and many others signify an entire community built around involuntary celibacy.

They are applicable to Ignatius, even though they were created long after he was written into existence.

Part of incel ideology stems from power dynamics between men and women. In “The Making of an Incel,” Katherine Laidlaw write that incels are “angry because they can’t have sex with the women they feel they deserve simply for being themselves” (44). They view women as “subhuman ‘femoids’” (44) (also referred to as “foids”), who are “immoral, dishonest and capable of hurting men” (Koller and Heritage 152). On the very second page of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Ignatius, while waiting for his mother to finish her doctor’s appointment, embodies this misogynistic view. He “polish[es] a few carefully worded accusations designed to reduce his mother to repentance . . . He often had to keep her in her place” (Toole 2). In addition, when his mother suggests that she is going out bowling, Ignatius retorts, “You can’t go bowling” (79), in another effort to control her. The notion of keeping women in their place is central to incels, as they feel they are entitled to women, or that they are possessions. Incels see sex as power over women—Myrna insinuates that Ignatius may be involved in “Great Oedipus bonds [that are] encircling [his] brain and destroying [him]” (Toole 181), and it may be concluded that Ignatius needs this way of controlling his mother. He may be verbally assaulting her, as well, in order to keep her wrapped around his finger. Incels also have high standards for the women they would like to be with, even though they are unattainable. Ignatius, when watching a movie at the theater, shamelessly: “inspected her [the heroine] teeth for cavities and fillings . . . surveyed [her leg’s] contours for structural defects” (Toole 56). Although Ignatius never has a sexual encounter with a woman throughout the novel, he holds the lead actress in a movie to the highest

standard, an unachievable perfection. During his brief stint at Levy Pants, Ignatius (on his very first day) takes issue with a the stenographer, “a young and brazen tart” (Toole 75). She had made comments towards him about his “person and bearing” (75), to which he grew outraged, and sneakily had her fired on the spot. Without knowing this woman, he threw derogatory names at her, simply for speaking to him and wearing heels, lipstick, and mascara. He immediately read her as having little value because of the way she spoke and dressed—value judgements on appearance is a common subject on incel forums.

Myrna Minkoff, a college associate, is another main subject of his rage. She is a liberal radical who embraces sexuality, writing to him that he “need[s] the therapy of sex desperately” (Toole 80). She holds a lecture about erotic liberty, and invites Ignatius to “save America from sexual ignorance, chastity, and fear” (176). He is enraged by her, and in constant competition with her endeavors. He consistently belittles her, calling her sleazy, a trollop, and obscene, to name a few choice insults. This calls the “wicked woman” trope to mind, a common theme on incel forums. Myrna’s independence and sexual liberation is probably a point of envy for Ignatius. He may be jealous of her ability to have sex with whoever she wants, and speak freely about her sexuality. Elliot Rodger, a deified incel who went on a killing spree, holds similar views, and left this quote in his manifesto: “Sex is by far the most evil concept in existence...the ultimate evil behind sexuality is the human female . . .” (Rodger, 2014, p.136). Both Ignatius and Rodger seem to be blaming women for the ills of society. An example of this notion is when Ignatius is watching a television show with children dancing. He screams “These girls are doubtless prostitutes already” (Toole 44). This line can be read as further insight into Ignatius’s view on the deterioration of society because of female sexuality. The incel mindset deems

women subhuman “foids” because they have sex, or are sexual, similar to Ignatius’s sweeping statements about female sexuality. When his mother brings up the possibility of him having a child with Myrna Minkoff, he bellows, “Do I believe that such obscenity and filth is coming from the lips of my own mother?” (Toole 53). Ignatius is outraged that his mother would say anything about sex, especially to her own son.

A worthy addition to Ignatius’s relationship with women is that he lives with his mother. His “home living situation reflects familiar Freudian complexes: the only child rebelling against the stifling, overprotective affections of the Bad Mother, with whom he is engaged in a pathological relationship of mutual resentments and disappointments” (Slepov 12). Living at home into their 30s is a stereotypical incel trait, having to do with lack of ambition and motivation emanating from the inability to have sex, hence the term *NEET* being incorporated into their jargon. Ignatius may compare the two women in his life (his mother and Myrna), seeing his mother as lacking autonomy, while Myrna is independent and liberated. He expresses a similar disdain for both women, but lashes out in different ways: he tries to control his mother (despite living under her roof) and disparages Myrna.

@mondomovieguys posted this on the subreddit r/IncelsWithoutTheHate: “Being lonely and feeling ugly and unlovable for so many years really fucks with you. I think some of these guys end up hating women because it’s just easier than hating yourself.” Another incel, on the forum Incels.co, wrote that a “lack of success with women will bleed into every aspect of your life.” Incels often see themselves as worthless, unable to practice the societally constructed ideals due to psychological factors, shyness, “foids,” looks, etc. In the documentary *Shy Boys*, a man going by the name of Urban White Trash states that “Omegas are, what I would call, genetic

garbage.” Omegas are the outcast incels, those who cannot relate to other human beings because of their perceived insufficiencies. They are separated from humanity and are in continual emotional distress. Ignatius meets all of the criteria for a man who fails to meet societal standards. He was in college for years and earned a Master’s degree, but can’t hold a job. He is obese and strange-looking, complete with a repellent personality. He lives with his mother. He is despised in his community, under police suspicion, and in near-constant gastrointestinal anguish. However, in a classic psychological reversal, Ignatius holds himself in the highest regard. He seems to view himself as *based*—he spreads his own truth, no matter what people think of him or what he has to say. *A Confederacy of Dunces*’s epigraph bears this Jonathan Swift quote from *Thoughts on Various Subjects, Moral and Diverting*: “When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.” Even though he is clearly a social outcast, Ignatius continues to think the world of himself. While he writes in his opus that he has “always been forced to exist on the fringes of . . . society” (119), it doesn’t read as though he feels particularly upset about it, or if it even registers at all. He is an outcast, if unknowing—readers know this based on the way people talk about him. He represents himself as hated and persecuted, of course, through no fault of his own.

The representation of persecution is reminiscent of both incels and saints. Ignatius can be seen as a saint-like figure, especially in a Medieval sense. In “Apocalypse and A-Bomb: States of Consciousness in John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*,” Olga Colbert writes that “divinity in Medieval iconography can be recognized by position (centre of the painting or sculptural group), size (larger than surrounding figures) and certain attributes (including type and color of clothing)” (Colbert 25). Ignatius consistently embodies all three of these attributes. He

is the genius, facing off against a confederacy of dunces, constantly positioned in the middle of swirling catastrophe. He is the main character of the novel, also reminiscent of a front-and-center position. He is elephantine and attracts attention because of his stature. Lastly, he wears a uniform of a green hunting cap, black mustache, tweed trousers, and a plaid flannel. He takes pride in this outfit, characterizing it as lending him a “rich inner life” (Toole 1). This self-proclaimed rich inner life evokes the sense that Ignatius thinks better of himself than everyone thinks of him. His grand attachment to Medieval life is reflected in the way he seems to see himself as a God-like figure. Ignatius hails medieval times as that of pristine morality, free of debauchery and full of “theology and geometry, some taste and decency” (Toole 42). In his five year old, ongoing written opus, he writes: “With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy” (Toole 28). By falsifying his reality, Ignatius is able to see himself as holier-than-thou, even though he is human like anyone else.

Parallel to Ignatius’s self-deification is Elliot Rodger, the mass murderer in the name of involuntary celibacy. He has been taken as a saint in the incel community after his rampage and subsequent suicide. This drew attention to the incel community through violence—while Ignatius is not violent, he still loves attention. He is consistently attempting to attract notice from of all types of people, and frequently does due to his outlandish speech, large stature, and strange uniform. This kind of power, the power of attention, is invaluable to incels and Ignatius. Both feel they are on the fringes of society, though to varying degrees due to *inhib*, and any kind of attention is incredibly validating.

In the novel, Ignatius is in near constant company with a zany cast of characters, but he is alone in his mind. He is endlessly ruminating, with disgust, suspicion, and self-importance, over

the corruption and perversion of his perceived world. Online, incels have constructed a similar echo chamber that constantly reinforces their beliefs. “Like many echo chambers, it keeps participants participating, stuck in an increasingly nihilistic headspace” (Laidlaw 45). Laidlaw writes that someone who possesses “. . . a desire for personal significance, a narrative that guides them in the quest for renown, and a network that offers veneration to the members who validate and implement the collective narrative . . .” (45) is predisposed to the incel mindset. Once again, Ignatius matches the incel traits, even though many are bestowed upon him by him. He desires significance wholeheartedly, devoting himself to a pretentious manuscript written, no surprise, about himself and his adventures (greatly exaggerated). The entire novel is his quest for renown, traipsing about New Orleans on an expedition for attention. His veneration comes solely from himself, as he has no one else to rely upon.

Ignatius, like many incels, thwarts stereotypical masculine roles. Traditional gender roles and male sexuality are critical to the incel construction of masculinity. Analyses of the text lead critics to “read his sexuality as childish or immature” (Hardin 59), or even assert that he is a homosexual because of his inability to have sex. He is assaulted with jests from others about the way he looks—he is called a “big crazy fruit” (Toole 174), “Bette Davis with indigestion” (259), and doesn’t object to wearing an earring and a pirate costume in order to sell hot dogs. He masturbates like “an art form, practicing the hobby with the skill and fervor of an artist and philosopher, a scholar and gentleman” (Toole 31). He shrinks from responsibility and providing for his family; he resists getting work in favor of extreme sloth. He disrespects women, sidesteps chivalry, and isn’t self-sufficient. Ignatius may loathe those who do perform masculinity accurately, acting in ways that serve to diminish their accomplishments. He snaps at a bartender:

“Will you kindly tend to the bar properly?” (13), deprecates a police officer (3), and rails against one of his former professors, writing, “Your total ignorance of that which you profess to teach merits the death penalty” (128). In the end, Ignatius assumes a “damsel in distress” position, being rescued from his impending admission to a psychiatric ward by none other than Myrna Minkoff. In nearly every way, Ignatius foils traditional masculinity.

However, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a comical novel. Perhaps Ignatius’s misogyny is all a hilarious facade. Glowing reviews on the back cover of *A Confederacy of Dunces* laud it as “an epic comedy” (*The Washington Post*), “one of the funniest books ever written” (*The New Republic*), “radiant with . . . high comedy” (*Newsweek*), and call it an “assured comic spree” (*New York*). Misogyny veiled as comedy is a central tenet of the incel dynamic. This can be used to investigate the comedy surrounding Ignatius throughout the novel. Oftentimes, incels share and create “content meant to provoke responses from target audiences, and . . . content ‘for the lulz’, or in jest” (Witt 676). The inability to distinguish between “trolling” and true sentiment is relevant to *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The way Ignatius speaks to nearly every character is humorous to the reader; he uses diction in a cutting manner that places him intellectually above everyone he meets. But is the way he tries to control his mother humorous? Is his offensive name-calling comedic? Regular “trolling” is the incel way of covering up socially unacceptable ways of speaking and thinking, giving them a veneer of plausible deniability. They often use outrageous or provocative statements in order to meld what is real and what isn’t. However, in an analysis of a popular subreddit (r/IncelTears), Marta Dynel found that in terms of incels, humor is often/usually “the bearer of serious meanings.” This can be applied to *A Confederacy*

of Dunces, as well, suggesting that the book is not humorous but frightening—an alarming account of a frustrated and egotistical man terrorizing New Orleans.

Ignatius's representation as an incel exposes facets of a strange, large man. He is misogynistic, a man that women would be frightened to be around. His self-aggrandizing behavior and speech is concerning, given that he is an outcast on the fringe of society. He doesn't deserve our pity, nor our laughs—he is a hateful, involuntarily celibate man whose inability to have sex and connection stifles the characters surrounding him.

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