Francie Brady: Serial killer caught early?
A comparison between the protagonist from the novel
The Butcher Boy and convicted serial killers

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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 - Dysfunctional family</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 – Adolescent criminal activity</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 – Sexual abuse</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 – Regression</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary sources</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary sources</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Published in 1992, *The Butcher Boy* is the most famous novel by the Irish author Patrick McCabe. The text follows the life of Frances “Francie” Brady who is a normal young boy in the beginning. As the novel progresses the reader sees, following a series of unfortunate circumstances, how Francie Brady slowly becomes a cold-hearted sociopath who eventually kills the woman he accuses of being the cause of all his problems. The novel acts as an opportunity for the reader to follow the young boy and the difficulties he faces that, along with his slowly regressing mental health, slowly turns him into a cold-hearted monster who can only see one solution to all his problems: murder.

True crime is a non-fiction genre in which the author uses an actual crime and real people as a base for their book. The modern true crime genre frequently consists of biographies that attempt to explain criminal psychology, describe police investigations as well as trial procedures. In most cases, true crime literature focuses on high-profile, sensational crimes including serial killers and mass murderers.

The purpose of this extended essay is to compare the protagonist in the novel *The Butcher Boy*, Francie Brady, with convicted serial killers and mass murderers and to see if there are any similarities between them. The first three chapters, “Dysfunctional family”, “Adolescent criminal activity” and “Sexual abuse” focus on particular characteristics in Francie’s past that he has in common with convicted serial offenders, along with a comparison of murderers who have experienced similar events in their past. The fourth chapter, “Regression”, analyzes the important relationships in Francie’s life and how these relationships along with the different events described in the previous three chapters eventually make him kill the woman he accuses of being the cause of all his problems, Mrs. Nugent.

The method used to find similarities between Francie Brady and convicted serial killers and mass murderers consisted of reading and comparing *The Butcher Boy* with information on convicted serial offenders collected from true crime literature. When choosing true crime books, this extended essay will use some of the most recognized and renowned authors that have been or still are active within the true crime genre. These authors include;

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- Robert K. Ressler and John Douglas, retired FBI profilers who spent part of their career building the most comprehensive database of murderers by interviewing some of the most heinous serial killers and mass murderers.
- Vincent Bugliosi, who worked as the lead prosecutor for the Charles Manson and the Manson Family case.
- Harold Schechter, who is a professor of American literature and popular culture that has specialized in true crime novels about serial killers.

The aim is to show to the reader that there are several characteristics Francie Brady has in common with convicted murderers. If he had not been caught, his upbringing and the regression he is undergoing might have resulted in several more victims being killed by him.
Chapter 1: Dysfunctional family

At an early stage in *The Butcher Boy*, the reader is introduced to the family situation in the Brady home. The first interaction between Francie Brady’s parents consists of his father coming home from the pub and initiating a fierce argument with his wife. The argument ends with Francie hearing his father yelling out to his mother “God curse the fucking way I ever set eyes on you”\(^2\). The day after the fight between his parents, Francie comes home from school and his mother gives him a sixpence, sending him off to buy some candy at the local sweetshop. However, the store is closed and Francie returns to ask his mother for permission to keep the sixpence. Upon entering the kitchen, he finds his mother standing on a chair on top of the table with a fuse wire hanging from the ceiling. When he questions his mother about what she is doing, she avoids answering him. Later, Francie finds her sitting in front of the fireplace, staring at the dead fire. Not long after this incident, she goes to town to purchase some cake ingredients. Later that day, Francie hears a woman talking to his father, telling him that his wife had “been standing for two hours looking in the window of the fishing tackle shop with the bag on the ground and a tin of beans rolling around on the footpath”\(^3\). It becomes clear that she has suffered a breakdown and is sent to an institution which Francie calls “the garage”\(^4\).

When his mother returns right before Christmas, Francie notes how she keeps switching subjects during conversation. She also starts to bake and fill the house with cakes as she waits for Uncle Alo to come visit from London. Francie is told that Alo is a very successful man in London, were he is supposed to be the boss of ten men. Francie is filled with a sense of pride when he hears this. After having heard his family being referred to as “Pigs” by Mrs. Nugent, he feels that as soon as Alo comes to visit, it will become clear to everyone in town that they are much better than the Nugents.

When Alo arrives, they have a big party in the Brady’s house and Francie is ecstatic. In his mind, this is the best night ever. Music, singing, people flocking around Alo and everyone has a very pleasant evening. After the visitors go home, Mr. Brady gets into an argument with his brother Alo, in which he exposes Alo as the fraud that he is. He also accuses Alo of making a

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\(^3\) McCabe. 8.
\(^4\) McCabe, 8.
fool of himself and the entire family. Mrs. Brady defends Alo, telling Mr. Brady that while the time spent in a foster home destroyed him that “nothing should make you turn on your brother like a dog!”5. Upon hearing this, he attacks her and claims that at least he “never had to be took off to a madhouse to disgrace the whole family”6. Following this, Mrs. Brady leaves the room and Alo leaves the house. Later that night, Francie Brady sneaks out of the house and travels on foot all the way to Dublin. When he returns to his hometown, he meets Mrs. Nugent who says that it is a shame he missed the funeral. When inquiring from his father about what happened to his mother, his father says with a bitter smile on his lips that “they had dredged the lake near the garage and found her at the bottom of it”7.

Mrs. Brady, along with Joe Purcell, is one of the few points of stability in Francie’s life. When he finds her standing on the table with the fuse wire hanging from the ceiling, she does not go on with her suicide attempt. She does not want to leave Francie or have him find her hanging from the ceiling. When returning from the madhouse, she is determined to show the rest of the town that they are not so-called “Pigs” and also to show Alo that they are good people, just like him. The abuse she is forced to take from her husband is what finally drives her over the edge.

Throughout the novel, the constant influence of alcohol is the cause of the many arguments Mr. Brady had with his wife and also quite possibly with his eventual death. He spends most of his time at the local bar and when he comes home, he blames his problematic situation on everyone but himself. Moreover, he does not show any concern for his wife and her clearly problematic mental state. He keeps talking about how he grew up in a foster home and how that changed him. Completely self-centered and uncaring, Mr. Brady acts as a stark contrast to his wife, but at the same time they are both haunted by psychological issues of their own. When Francie returns to the town after his mother has passed away, he finds his father with “red circles around his eyes”8 in addition to being able to “smell him”9. Mr. Brady has obviously taken refuge from his wife’s passing by visiting the pub and is highly intoxicated at the moment when he blames Francie for the death of his wife. From the first half of the book,

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5 McCabe. 37.
6 McCabe. 37.
7 McCabe. 46.
8 McCabe. 46.
9 McCabe. 46
the abusive and alcoholic Mr. Brady can only be considered a bad influence on everyone that is in his presence.

Francie suffers when his mother, one of his few sources of support is taken away from him, following constant psychological terror from his father together with her own mental instability. After the death of his wife, Mr. Brady tries to shift the blame onto Francie. He once again tries to shift the blame away from himself, as he often does when it comes to his own upbringing and current situation in life.

It is quite clear, even at an early stage in the novel, that the Brady household should not be considered healthy for a young child. Mrs. Brady is showing signs of mental distress and tries to commit suicide early in the novel. Mr. Brady is an alcoholic who constantly berates his wife and laments over his failed life. How did this affect Francie Brady? It is impossible to draw a conclusion, but it is possible to compare some of the important characteristics of his childhood and how similar experiences have affected others.

Upon reading a study conducted by Robert K. Ressler, a retired FBI agent who specialized in profiling many of the most notorious killers in American history, it is easy to note several similarities between Francie Brady’s upbringing and the early life of the previously mentioned multiple murderers.

- “Half of [the study’s] subjects had mental illness in their immediate family” 10
- “Nearly 70 percent had a family history of alcohol or drug abuse” 11
- All the murderers—every single one—were subjected to serious emotional abuse during their childhood” 12

Finding the exact kind of abuse that Francie Brady suffers throughout the book is impossible. However, there are other convicted serial killers with characteristics similar to Francie’s upbringing. Terry Sullivan, who is the author of the biography of John Wayne Gacy, brings up the effect alcohol abuse in a father can have on a child. Growing up with an alcoholic father who used to beat his wife in fits of drunken rage, John could do nothing to protect his

11 Ressler & Schachtman. 82.
12 Ressler & Schachtman. 82
mother. When he grew older and tried to come to his mother’s defense, his father ridiculed him, calling him a “mama’s boy or a sissy.” The repeated psychological abuse and derogatory names conflicted deeply with John’s own homosexuality. He grew up hating his own sexuality and after this self-hatred had grown to an alarming rate, 33 young men were dead by the now serial killer’s own two hands.

As noted earlier, 50 percent of the interviewed killers had mental illness in their family. One of the murderers that fall into that category is Jeffery Dahmer. According to Brian Masters, the author of Dahmer’s biography, Joyce Dahmer had several psychological difficulties, including “hypersensitivity, depression and need for arguments.” In 1970, when Jeffery was 10 years old, his mother’s health began to deteriorate. She began to increase her consumption of anti-anxiety and sleeping pills. This increased the tension in this house, which Jeffery noted. “It just didn’t seem like the parents really liked each other too much” /.../ “It made me feel on edge, unsure of the solidity of the family.” Jeffery’s younger brother, David, confirms that there was a bad atmosphere in the house, there was shouting and items thrown, but the children were never attacked. Finally, Joyce was taken to a hospital and spent a month in a mental ward.

To any reader, it is clear that hearing constant arguing between parents cannot be a positive influence on a young child. While several children grow up in troubled homes, only a handful of them later turn into criminals. However, the early childhood years are directly responsible for shaping a person into what they will be for the remainder of their lives. When comparing the facts presented by the FBI study with the childhoods of convicted serial killers John Wayne Gacy and Jeffery Dahmer, it becomes clear that the fictional Francie Brady has several points in common with both. While John Wayne Gacy and Jeffery Dahmer had one parent each who fit in with the criteria presented by Robert K. Ressler, both of Francie Brady’s parent are in some way unfit in their respective roles as caregivers. The eerie similarities between Joyce Dahmer and Mrs. Brady is a reminder that while The Butcher Boy is a work of fiction, it is by no means something that only occurs within the boundaries of literature.

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15 Masters. 38.
Chapter 2 - Adolescent criminal activity

After the reader has been introduced to the situation in the Brady household, it might not come as a surprise that Francie Brady continues his downward spiral as the novel continues. After learning that his mother has passed on, Francie goes over to the Nugent’s house and looks in through the windows. He sees Mrs. Nugent and her son, Phillip, sleeping on the bed. Francie imagines that when sleeping, Phillip is thinking to himself “I love my mother more than anything in the world and I’d never do anything in the world to hurt her”16. The guilt of being blamed for his mother death is hanging over Francie’s head. He looks up at the stars in the sky and thinks to himself that as long as he walked under these stars, there’s only one thing people can think about him and that is “I hope he’s proud of himself now, the pig, after what he did on his poor mother”17.

Later that day, Francie waits for Phillip Nugent to walk by on his way to his music lesson. When Phillip sees Francie, he tries to quickly walk away but Francie runs up to him and begins to talk with him. At first, Phillip is very hesitant to talk to him, however Francie slowly gains his trust by praising his music books, discussing records and claiming that all the troubles they have had have been jokes. Slowly, Phillip begins to trust Francie and the two boys begin to discuss comic books. Francie tells Phillip that he has some comic books from America stashed in the chickenhouse. They go to the chickenhouse and Francie tells Phillip to wait while he goes to get them. When he comes back, he calls out Phillips name and when Phillip turns around, Francie tries to hit him over the head with a chain.

He repeatedly swings the chain at Phillip, who is crawling around on the floor looking for his glasses. He is holding his arm up, pleading with Francie but Francie is not listening. Joe suddenly appears in the chickenhouse, prying the chain from Francie’s hand and helping Phillip back to town. When Joe comes back, he cusses at Francie and tells him that if he “did things like that it would all be ruined”. Francie appears to respond to that and swears on his life that it would not happen again.

16 McCabe. 47.
17 McCabe. 47.
However, that is not the last of it. Walking in town one day, Francie hears Mrs. Nugent talking to Phillip about Francie’s Uncle Alo and that is enough to make Francie go back on his word to Joe. Francie goes to the Nugent’s house, acting like a pig in front of Mrs. Nugent and Phillip, scaring them both. A couple of days later, Francie waits for the Nugents to leave before he enters their house through the back window.

Francie spends some time downstairs, eating sandwiches and drinking tea in front of the television before walking upstairs. Once upstairs, Francie walks into Phillip’s room where he dresses up in Phillip’s old school uniform and pretends that he is Phillip. He walks into Mr. and Mrs. Nugent’s room and there, it appears that Francie’s fantasies are beginning to control him. He imagines that Mrs. Nugent and Phillip come home, find him there and come to the conclusion that Francie wants to be part of their family. She attempts to breast feed Francie, who pulls his head away. He breaks a mirror and writes “PHILLIP IS A PIG” 18 with lipstick on a wall. Mrs. Nugent and Phillip act like pigs and Phillip defecates on the floor. Then, Francie appears to escape from his fantasy and see Phillip, Mr. Nugent and Mrs. Nugent standing in the room, looking down on him.

Mr. Nugent tells his wife and son to leave the room and then he calmly orders Francie to clean up the mess he has made. When Francie keeps talking about how he was holding a pig class, Mr. Nugent slaps him over the head and Francie does what he is told. The sergeant comes over, picks Francie up and when they are both in the car the sergeant tells Francie about how he used to court his mother when they were younger. He then says that it is fortunate that Francie’s mother is not here to see this. When hearing this, Francie answers “she’s in the lake, and it was me put here there”19.

This quotation, while not given a lot of focus, is perhaps one of the most important passages in the book. The death of ma Brady has clearly affected Francie’s sanity. The jealousness he feels when seeing Phillip Nugent sleeping next to his mother takes him over to such a level that he wants to kill him. If Joe had not interfered, it is more than likely that Francie would indeed have killed Phillip.

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18 McCabe. 65.
19 McCabe. 69.
The promise Francie makes to Joe shows that while most of Francie’s life has been destroyed, he still has his friend with him. Although when Francie heard, or imagined hearing, Mrs. Nugent making negative comments about Uncle Alo, Francie breaks his promise to Joe. Uncle Alo is the one family member that Francie still looks up to, even after he overheard what his father said about Alo. When Mrs. Nugent once again says something bad about his family, Francie goes over to their house, acting like a pig in front of her. Francie Brady is slowly regressing before the reader’s eyes. When he later breaks into the Nugent’s home, it appears that he is no longer in control of his impulses. At first, it looks innocent enough when he is wearing Phillip’s clothes and pretending to be him. The fantasy quickly shifts to Mrs. Nugent forcing Francie to suckle her breast, thus turning him into a Nugent. Finally, Francie imagines degrading the Nugents to the level of pigs in order to bring them down, in a way, to his own level.

When looking at the parallels between Francie Brady and real offenders, these early criminal acts are a common factor in the majority of cases. Robert Ressler writes “there is no such thing as the person who at age thirty-five suddenly changes from being perfectly normal and erupts into totally evil, disruptive, murderous behavior”\(^\text{20}\). Due to the overwhelming amount of criminal activity in the childhood of convicted serial killers, this chapter will focus on the violent crimes that are done in the killer’s early teenage years. Vincent Bugliosi writes in his biography of Charles Manson, who many consider to be the most well-known and feared killer in modern history, that “Manson had “graduated” by committing his first armed robbery at age thirteen”\(^\text{21}\). Being sent between institutions and reform schools throughout his entire childhood, Charles Manson had several violent incidents during this time that finally culminated at the age of seventeen, when he “took a razor blade and held it against another boy’s throat while sodomizing him”. This shows how violent criminals generally evolve with their crimes, becoming more and more brutal as time continues.

John Douglas, who along with Robert K. Ressler interviewed some of the most heinous serial killers in history, writes in his autobiography about the first serial killer they decided to attempt to talk to: Edmund Kemper. As a child, Edmund displayed some weird behavior including “the dismemberment of two family cats and playing death-ritual games with his

\(^{20}\) Ressler & Schachtman. 82.
sister”. Kemper’s mother could not deal with her son, so she decided to send him away to live with his paternal grandparents on their farm. At the farm, Kemper felt miserably bored, cut away from the relative security of his life at home.

One afternoon in August 1963, the fourteen year old Edmund Kemper shot his grandmother with a .22-caliber rifle before stabbing her dead body repeatedly. The reason given for this brutality was that his grandmother had insisted that Edmund stayed at the house instead of following his grandfather, whom Edmund liked better, into the fields. Edmund knew that his grandfather would not condone what he had done, so when his grandfather returned from the fields Edmund shot him to death with the same rifle and left him dead in the yard. When asked later about this, Edmund answered “I just wondered how it would feel to shoot grandma”. While Francie Brady has yet to escalate to murder, he shares the lack of impulse control that Edmund Kemper had that day.

Carl Panzram writes in his autobiography that when he “was very young at age five or six, years of age I was already a thief and a liar. The older I got the meaner I got”. This fits the characteristics of Charles Manson, Edmund Kemper and even Francie Brady. The reader is slowly watching Francie Brady evolving into what many might consider a monster, while it is hard for the reader not to feel sorry for him. The more trouble he gets into and the more bad things he does, the reader is getting is slowly getting to understand why he is acting in the way that he does.

Francie Brady is changing in front of the reader’s eyes. It appears that the guilt he is feeling over his mother’s death along with what he believes to be the Nugents continuously attempting to push him down to the level of an animal is slowly pushing Francie towards the edge. For awhile, Francie seems to let his hatred for the Nugents go after Joe persuades him to do so, but once he hears what he believes is Mrs. Nugent verbally demeaning his beloved uncle, Francie does not have any choice but to retaliate. His dwindling mental state finally catches up with him as he is caught, handed over to the authorities and finally sent off to a catholic reform school. While the reform school is seen as Francie’s way out, it turns out that the school might be the last place Francie should go to.

23 Douglas & Olshaker. 100.
Chapter 3 – Sexual abuse

Following the incident at the Nugent’s house, Francie Brady is sent to an industrial school, under the leadership of catholic priests, where he is to live for the duration of six months. Once there, Francie is introduced to a priest that he refers to as Father Bubble. Immediately, Francie starts to call the school a “school for pigs”\(^{25}\) and is once again pretending to be a pig. Father Bubble hits Francie over the head but as Francie is expecting to be hit again, Father Bubble just observes him quietly. Being sent to the reform school does not appear to trouble Francie as much as the thought of breaking the promise he made to Joe about leaving the Nugent’s alone.

Francie gets a letter from Joe which seems to shock Francie deeply. In the letter, Joe tells him that he and Phillip Nugent went to the carnival together where Phillip won a goldfish which he then proceeded to give to Joe. This news stuns Francie and he decides that he has to go home as soon as possible.

Francie then begins to try to earn what he calls his “Francie Brady Not a Bad Bastard Anymore Diploma”\(^{26}\). Following this personal promise Francie appears to have changed his ways at the school, always showing the priests his best behaviour. Eventually, he decides to start telling Father Bubble that he has been talking to Our Lady and several other Saints out in the field. When hearing this, another priest named Father Tiddly asks Francie to share the story with him. When Francie finishes, Father Tiddly asks him to come over and sit in his lap. When Francie does this, Father Tiddly pulls out his penis and masturbates against Francie’s thighs. When seeing Francie later, he refers to him as his “best little girl”\(^{27}\).

Father Tiddly claims that Francie could perhaps become a priest later on in life and takes it on himself to tutor him. He continues to make approaches towards Francie, one time asking him what he is most ashamed of. When Francie does not give him the answer he wants, Father Tiddly tells him repeatedly that he wants to hear something worse. Francie refuses and is eventually pushed to the edge where he bites Father Tiddly in the arm and runs away. The incident does not discourage Tiddly, who instead of staying away from Francie takes him out

\(^{25}\) McCabe. 73.

\(^{26}\) McCabe. 75.

\(^{27}\) McCabe. 86.
to a café and tells him that he is in love with him. Tiddly also gives Francie candy and cigarettes on a regular basis, something Francie uses to his advantage repeatedly. The numerous advances by Father Tiddly do not subside, they increase. He asks Francie if it would not be lovely if they could get married and talks about how he would come home with chocolate and flowers to Francie while he has been home making dinner. Francie laughs like a girl and this arouses Tiddly even more. Despite all this, the reader might be astonished that Francie still appears to be quite fond of Tiddly. This changes when after giving Francie a bonnet to wear, Tiddly starts to ask him questions about his home. Francie even thinks to himself “I don’t like you anymore, Tiddly”28.

The questions continue and Francie begins to describe the Nugent’s home instead of his own. He begins to imagine that Mrs. Nugent is once again talking to his mother and this causes Francie to become truly violent for the second time in the novel. He punches Tiddly and reaches for the paper knife that lay on Tiddly’s desk. Francie tries to cut him, but is not able to. The rest of the priests apprehend Francie and lock him up. When he is let out, Father Bubble asks him if he is going to behave himself from now on. Soon afterwards, Father Tiddly is seen entering a car and leaving the school, never to be seen again by Francie. After seeing Father Tiddly leave, Father Bubble questions Francie about the incidents and Francie realizes that he is afraid that anyone else will know what transpired. Fearing that the whole story will become public knowledge, Father Bubble agrees with leaving Francie to mind his own business for the rest of his time in the reform school. Francie is left alone, knowing that the priests think of him as “a fungus growing on the walls they wanted them washed again.”29.

For most occasions, it appears to the reader that Francie does not attempt to stop the sexual abuse or in any way show Father Tiddly that he does not tolerate this behaviour. Instead, Francie leads Tiddly on whenever Francie can gain something personally from the exchange, such as candy or cigarettes. It is not before Father Tiddly questions Francie about his house that Francie gets angry with him. To him, it appears to be nothing more than a game until that subject is brought up. The reader might draw the conclusion that the shame for what happened to his mother and Uncle Alo is still bothering Francie and filling him with a sense of shame.

28 McCabe. 96.
29 McCabe. 102.
The violent, delusional outburst that follows is the second time in the novel where Francie has attempted to purposely hurt another person. He keeps thinking about his mother, the Nugent’s and what they called his family, as he attacks Tiddly with ferocity. He is unaware of the gravity of the other incidents with Tiddly, but the mentioning of the one thing he is most ashamed of causes him to immediately change his mind about the priest. The sexual abuse that Francie is subjected to can only be viewed as another horrible incident in his life, but sexual abuse is a common occurrence amongst serial killers. Harold Schechter, one of the leading authors of true crime books, writes in his book The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers that according to FBI finding from studies of serial killer that “43 percent were sexually molested”

Aileen Wuornos, one of few known female serial killers who killed strangers, grew up in a horrible situation. Her father hanged himself in jail after being arrested on charges of child-molestation. She was sent to her grandparents who kicked her out. At age thirteen she gave birth to a baby which was, according to her story, the result of a rape. She became a prostitute later in life and began killing the men who paid her for sexual intercourse. According to her statement, she killed her first victim in an act of self defence after “he choked and tortured her, raped her anally, and threatened to kill her”

In Aileen Wuornos case, sexual abuse is what started her regression into a murderer, but in the case of Pee Wee Gaskins, it was rape that turned him from a small time criminal into a murderer. In Evil Serial Killer: In the minds of Monsters, the story of Pee Wee is told. Because of his short stature, Pee Wee was a regular victim of sexual abuse during his repeated stints in prison. It was not until he nearly decapitated one of the men that assaulted him that he turned from the victim into the aggressor.

The two cases of sexual abuse described might be considered more brutal than what Francie Brady suffered. Nevertheless, the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of Father Tiddly shows a young boy who is slowly developing. In the two previous major incidents in Francie Brady’s life (The attack of Phillip Nugent and what transpired in the Nugent’s house hold), the delusional side and the violent sides of Francie have been separated. This time, Francie
appears to be changing between being aware of what he is doing and thinking about the
Nugent’s, his mother and his home.

The two times that Francie attacks Father Tiddly, Francie is questioned about his past and his
household. The first time, he was being asked what he was most ashamed of in his past. The
second time, Father Tiddly kept pushing Francie to tell him about his home. This is what is
making Francie uncomfortable, not getting dressed in women’s clothes or being called a girl.
Tiddly continues to pressure Francie, while Francie is trying his best to hide the part of his life
which he is the most ashamed of.

The time spent in the reform school can also be seen as a place where Francie Brady evolved
even further in a criminal aspect. He lets Father Bubble know that if he is not left alone and
allowed to leave the school as soon as he can, he will let everyone know about what Father
Tiddly did to him. Due to the fear of what the scandal might cause, Francie is allowed to
spend the remainder of his time in relative solitude, until he is free to go wherever he wants.

Francie is, just as he did with Father Tiddly’s abuse, turning the traumatic events into means
for satisfying his own needs. With Father Tiddly, it kept him supplied with cigarettes and
candy and now, he quickly realises that he can do the same to Father Bubble in order to make
the rest of his stay at the school as easy for him as possible.

Nevertheless, the boy who leaves the reform school is not changed for the better. As soon as
he is released, Francie heads back to his hometown in order to find his friend Joe and continue
their lives, as if nothing had changed.
Chapter 4 – Regression

The reader is given a first-hand observation into the slowly regressing Francie Brady. In the beginning of the novel, Francie is a happy young boy. By the end, he is left without any of the stabilities he had. Without anyone to feel secure with, along with his mental instability, Francie Brady is a ticking time bomb just waiting to explode.

One of the biggest influences in the life of Francie Brady is his friendship with Joe Purcell. From an early stage in the novel, the two boys share a bond that might, to the reader, appear to go beyond normal friendship. They seem inseparable, until the Nugent’s move into town and Francie becomes furious with both Mrs. Nugent and her son Phillip. Blaming them for the death of his mother, Francie attacks Phillip in the chickenhouse one day, but is stopped by Joe. At the time, Francie is not worried about getting caught. He is however, worried about Joe leaving him. Then he would “be left with nobody no ma no nothing”\(^\text{34}\). The thought of being all alone frightens Francie to the point that he promises Joe that he will leave the Nugent’s alone from there and then. A promise he then breaks after once again going after the Nugent’s which results in Francie being sent to industrial school.

When in school, Francie receives a letter from Joe asking him why he did what he did. Joe also says that Phillip Nugent really is alright and that they went to the carnival where Phillip won a goldfish which he then gave to Joe. This act of friendship horrifies Francie and the only way he can cope with it is to think that this is Joe’s way of making peace with Phillip over the attack in the chickenhouse and what Francie did in the Nugent’s house. After getting the letter, Francie decides to do everything in his power to get out of the school.

When he leaves the industrial school, the first thing he does is return to his town and search for Joe. After calling at his house a couple of times, Francie meets Joe as he is coming home from school. Francie starts to tell Joe about the time spent in reform school but when Francie mentions what happened between him and Father Tiddly, Joe keeps asking him over and over what happened and if he really did what Francie says he did. Francie does not want to keep talking about Tiddly; he wants to begin where he and Joe left off before all these things started to happen. Joe excuses himself by saying that he has homework to do.

\(^{34}\text{McCabe. 52}\)
Another day, the two boys are down at the lake when Mrs. Nugent’s brother, Buttsy, and his friend show up. The two men threaten Francie and when Buttsy questions Joe why he is fraternizing with Francie, Joe answers “I’m not hanging around with him. I used to hang around with him”35. Upon hearing this, Francie is stunned. He attacks Buttsy with a rock until Joe and Buttsy’s friend pull him away. Francie tries to ask Joe why he said it, but Joe puts his hands in the air and backs away from him. Later, Francie attempts repeatedly to talk to Joe but each time he goes to the Purcell’s house, his parents claim that Joe is either busy or away.

When Francie came back to town, he started to take care of his sick father. His dad is the only family Francie has left so Francie decides to take care of him. He tells his father; “Us Bradys—we’ll show them! We’ll show them we stick together”36. Francie begins to take care of the shopping, bringing home flypaper to catch the flies that are in the house. He even gets a job at the local butcher’s shop in order to be able to pay for groceries. Working for Leddy, the butcher, Francie is introduced to the bolt pistol they use to kill pigs with. This is the same bolt pistol that he later uses to kill Mrs. Nugent. When working for Leddy and pushing the brock cart around town Francie would often see Joe and Phillip, but always kept his distance.

While his father only appears to get more ill as time passes, Francie starts to take his place not only as a provider but also by repeating his father’s alcoholism. He goes to dances but he does not dance as he keeps imagining the girls turning him down by saying “I’m sorry but I don’t dance with pigs” 37. Instead, he consumes large quantities of alcohol before getting involved in fights with bouncers or other men he gets annoyed with. His mental stability continues to diminish as he imagines Uncle Alo coming back to the house, spending time there. When he leaves his delusional state, the sergeant is looking down on him. His father has been dead for such a long time that maggots have eaten him.

The betrayal by Joe Purcell and the death of his father means that Francie Brady is now completely alone in the world. His friendship with Joe, which the book largely focuses on, is the biggest influence in Francie’s life and it is thinking that everything will be the same as it was that helps him through some of the most difficult times. When Joe tells Francie that he

35 McCabe. 119.
36 McCabe. 127
37 McCabe. 146
has to leave the Nugent’s alone, Francie listens to him and it is not until what Francie believe to be a provocation from Mrs. Nugent that he breaks his promise to Joe.

After being sent to prison, it is the letter he receives from Joe that makes Francie so concerned about losing his best friend and which makes him decide to make a change for the better and get back out there. Nevertheless, he has to rationalize Joe’s involvement with Phillip Nugent to the extent that he believes Joe is only spending time with Phillip in an attempt to clear the air. Francie repeatedly thinks to himself that when he is allowed to leave, he will find Joe and things will be back to normal. He can not accept the fact that Joe might be Phillip’s friend as well. Joe is all Francie has left and the thought of having him leave fills him with such fear that he decides to do everything he can to prevent it.

Joe can be viewed as the voice of reason, who time and time again does the best he can in order to make peace between Francie and the Nugents. However, Joe realizes that he and Francie have grown apart during the time that they have been separated, something Francie does not appear to fathom. To Francie, everything will stay the same as long as they have each other. Meanwhile, as Francie is sent away from town Joe starts a friendship with Phillip Nugent. According to Francie, this would not have happened if the Nugents had not moved into their town. When he attacks Mrs. Nugent, he says to her “You did two bad things Mrs Nugent. You made me turn my back on my ma and you took Joe away from me. Why did you do that Mrs Nugent?”38. In his mind, everything bad that has happened to him can be traced back to her.

His father’s illness and eventual death shows how lost Francie Brady actually is. He decides to show the town that the Bradys are not pigs and he begins to take care of his father while also working for Leddy. However, he takes over too much of the role his father had in the family and becomes an alcoholic. After it is revealed that Francie’s father had been dead for a long period of time, Francie is taken to a mental institution. The fact that he has had conversations with his deceased father for a unknown period of time presents the reader with a view of a boy who is trying to hold on to the last person he has any connection to. Even though he did not seek his father’s approval in the beginning of the book, the loss of both his mother and Joe has left Francie with nothing to rely on. When he turns to his father and his

38 McCabe. 209
father passes away, Francie can not handle that and continues acting as if his father is still alive.

The instability that plagues Francie’s life does nothing to help his state of mind. Hearing his parents being ridiculed by the Nugent’s appears to trouble him deeply, as the long awaited return of Uncle Alo will show the town that they are not the pigs they are called. “We don’t want to be like the Nugents. We don’t want to be like any of them”39 his mother says when she is preparing Alo’s arrival. The thought of having a successful Brady in town again brings Francie up and for a while, it seems that he does not care about what the Nugent’s think about him and his family anymore.

When his father reveals that Alo is nothing but a scam, Francie runs away from the home. Returning and hearing the news of his mother’s death is the second incident in a short period of time that scars Francie. The attack of Phillip Nugent appears to happen without provocation, but when this occurs Francie has already suffered more loss than most boys at his age. He is furious with Mrs. Nugent who he later exclaims took his mother away from him and his attack on Phillip might be considered his own way of trying to take something she loves away from her.

The constant shame about what has happened and being referred to as a pig haunts Francie throughout the novel. The murder itself can be viewed as a symbolic act, with Francie Brady using the very bolt pistol he uses to kill pigs when murdering Mrs. Nugent. By murdering her in the same way as the pigs in the slaughterhouse, the reader might consider the underlying meaning of killing Mrs. Nugent with the bolt pistol. It is possible that Francie is passing on the label of a pig to her by treating her like that. It is his ultimate revenge in the way the murder is performed and how he hides her body on his brock cart afterwards.

There are always warning signs and incidents that have occurred in the past that often help to explain why individuals do what they do. According to Shirley Lynn Scott; “Traditional explanations include childhood abuse, genetics, chemical imbalances, brain injuries, exposure to traumatic events, and perceived societal injustices.”40 . During his short life, Francie Brady has already suffered childhood abuse, exposure to traumatic events and what he perceived to be a deep injustice since it was not his fault all this had happened to him, but rather Mrs. Nugent’s.

39 McCabe. 19.
Retired FBI profiler Robert Ressler wrote “there is no such thing as the person who at age thirty-five suddenly changes from being perfectly normal and erupts into totally evil, disruptive, murderous behavior”\textsuperscript{41}. In Patrick McCabe’s novel \textit{The Butcher Boy} the reader follows the life of young Francie Brady and how his life slowly changes him to a cold-hearted murderer. When comparing Francie to real life serial killers and mass murderers, this essay has found several similarities between them.

Just like Francie Brady, who comes from a dysfunctional domestic situation, half of the subjects in an FBI study had mental illness in their immediate family. Nearly 70 percent had a history of drug or alcohol abuse in the family\textsuperscript{42}. In the Brady household, Francie’s father struggles with alcohol problems and his wife, Francie’s mother, is a mentally ill woman who attempted to hang herself on at least one known occasion before she committed suicide. This deeply affects Francie, who was very close to his mother. The loss of his mother and subsequent accusation of being the reason for her death is something he struggles with for the rest of the novel.

When he has lost his mother, Francie begins to turn into a criminal. In the first real violent act of the novel, Francie attacks Phillip Nugent but is stopped by Joe Purcell, the only other person that Francie really trusts other than his mother. Joe makes Francie promise to leave the Nugents alone but instead Francie considers himself provoked by Mrs. Nugent. Due to this, possibly imagined, provocation Francie breaks in to the Nugent’s house and defecates on their floor. As noted earlier, no one just quickly turns from a normal man into a ruthless killer. Francie’s criminal activities correspond with the childhood of a serial killer.

After being caught in the Nugents’ house, Francie is sent to an industrial school where he is the victim of sexual assault at the hands of a priest. Sexual abuse in different forms is another common occurrence in the history of serial killers. While Francie does not seem to suffer any direct harm from his own point of view, it is clear that the time in the reform school is changing him for the worse. When the priest is caught, Francie manages to manipulate the

\textsuperscript{41} Ressler & Schachtman. 82.
\textsuperscript{42} Ressler & Schachtman. 82.
other priests by threatening to tell everyone what happened to him at the hands of Father Tiddly. When the other priests realize what can happen if Francie reveals what has been done to him, they let him spend the rest of his time in relative ease before he is released.

When released, Francie returns to town in order to regain his friendship with Joe but it does not work as he had planned. The two former best friends have become so different but Francie does not see this. He moves back in with his ill father and begins to take care of him. Francie struggles to keep up appearances and show the rest of the town that the Bradys are people to respect. Instead his father passes away, he develops a drinking problem and is later taken to a mental institution. When he returns, he can only focus on the one common denominator to all his problems; Mrs. Nugent.

According to this essay, there are a lot of similarities between the upbringing of Francie Brady and some of the traumatic events that eventually form future serial killers. The traumatic events that slowly change Francie Brady into someone capable of killing someone are a horrific read, but it is far from total fiction. While some might consider *The Butcher Boy* terrifying, it shows a fairly realistic view of how a boy is shaped by the different events in his life. For Francie Brady, the repeated loss of loved ones and the constant hatred displayed for the person he views as the cause of all his troubles finally reached a breaking point.

Francie Brady is obviously a very troubled young man who has lost everything that he hold dear in life. When pushed repeatedly, he finally caves in and uses the bolt pistol he kills pigs with to murder his nemesis. The symbolic act of killing Mrs. Nugent and passing the ‘Pig label’ onto her is important to him, as he wants to overcome the shame of being referred to as a pig by her.

To speculate whether Francie is in fact a serial killer caught early is in fact just that: speculation. There is no way for the reader to know that happens after the book ends. However, there is no doubt that there are a lot of characteristics that fit when you analyze and compare the traumatic events. The dysfunctional family, early acts of criminality and the sexual abuse are the three main factors that he has in common with serial killers. There is also the regression that he suffers after his release from industrial school which plays a big part in finally creating a killer. By acknowledging these points, one might argue that it was fortunate that Francie got caught early.
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