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The Effect of Religion on Society Represented Through *Dubliners*

The first clause in the Bill of Rights states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution helps formulate the constitutional right of freedom of religion. This put in place the separation of church and state, meaning that the government cannot assume a religion and base its actions upon religious beliefs. This has become a point of reference in the current argument about the overturning of *Roe V. Wade*. Abortion-rights advocates often claim that their opponents’ beliefs are religiously based, rising the debate on religious influence in government. While the United States continues to disagree, Ireland has also been experiencing the same problem, recently overcoming this issue in 2018 after a nationwide push to repeal the 8th amendment, legalizing abortion. Learning of this raises the question on how “Ireland leaped into modernity.” (Dowd) while “...America lurched backward.” (Dowd) Do culture and religion have negative ripple effects upon a society?

In the first thirty years of his life where he lived in Dublin, Joyce witnessed the enslavement of his people to religion. He witnessed first hand the conflict between the mostly Catholic Irish and the Protestant British who ruled over the country. There were many Irish writers before him who chose to stray away from writing about this controversy and wanted to sustain the world’s point of view on the country through rose colored glasses. Joyce, however,

thought that this would only backfire, and wanted to show to the world the true Ireland, hoping that a clear view would help liberate the country from its strife. Throughout a series of short and seemingly flimsy stories, James Joyce gives us an insight on how religion, an essential part of life in Dublin, and its use of fear can be detrimental to a society and its culture.

In one of the stories, *An Encounter*, Joyce tells the story of a young Irish boy in a Catholic school who yearns for an adventure. This unnamed boy, wanting an escape from routine, plans an excursion with two other boys, Leo Dillon and Mahony to the Pigeon House, Dublin's electrical power station. Right from the start, the reader is introduced to the tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland at the time. At the beginning of the story, Leo was caught with a fiction book, which was forbidden since students of their school were only allowed Roman history books. He was given a stern talk from Father Butler, the Catholic teacher, who said that this was the behavior of "National School Boys." I believe this scolding caused Leo to ditch the boys' plan for adventure and go to school in the morning instead. Father Butler seemed to instill fear within Leo by associating reading western books with National School Boys, something that no Irish boy would want to be. Joyce uses this as a metaphor to how religion can rely on fear to push its narratives. This interaction introduces the normality of the widespread hatred that the Catholic Irish have towards the Protestants, who would go to a national school. We witness how this resentment is passed down from generation to generation and is spread as a standard way of thinking. Another example of this can be seen on the boys' walk towards the Pigeon House.

As the two boys make their way through Dublin, Mahony harasses a group of "ragged girls" (Joyce 13) with his catapult but gets retaliation from "two ragged boys" (Joyce 13) who throw rocks at them and call them "swaddlers," (Joyce 13) thinking they were Protestants. This

shows how strongly Catholic the population was at the time and how such young children already knew that they were not supposed to like Protestants. By describing these children as ragged I believe Joyce was suggesting that they were malnourished and underfed. The reason being the poor treatment of Catholic Irish citizens from Great Britain during that time, explaining the boys' natural hate towards them while further reinforcing the idea that this is a fact of life in Ireland at the time.

Throughout the stories contained in *Dubliners*, we are constantly reminded about how a country's grip on religion can impact its society for generations. Using religion as a central basis of a country's ideals can harm both those who are not in that religion as well as those who practice. Joyce gives us an insight on this through Leo's scolding from Father Butler and the interaction with the rock-throwing boys, but we can also witness this contemporarily.

With the current arguments on Roe V. Wade, the United States could perhaps look towards Ireland for guidance. Along with being the first in the world to legalize same sex marriage in 2015, its recent legalization of abortion puts the country on a pedestal of modernity above most of the rest of the world. The achievement of these freedoms could partly be accredited to James Joyce, who pushed the boundaries of Irish writing at the time. Unlike Irish writers before him, he showed Dublin to the world through a clear lens. Many scrutinized this method due to his stark portrayal of the Church, which was a central part of their culture, but without his harsh criticism of religion's effects on society, Ireland may not be the country it is today. Through *Dubliners*, Joyce supports the idea that a society must develop the right morals and principles in order to succeed. For the right morals and principles to develop, a separation of religion from politics is necessary. Without so, a society can't inhibit a safe and inclusive population due to some non inclusive beliefs being passed from generation to generation.

Works Cited

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