

## The Sisters

*Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word **paralysis**. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.*

The first story of Dubliners sets the tone for Joyce's reflection on the Irish people and the people of Dublin more specifically. He understands the population to be complacent and unable to move out from paralysis. The obvious means of subjugation are the economic oppression of the British and the ideological oppression of the Catholic Church. With rising nationalist tendencies both of these figures demonstrate how the Irish accept their fate. The arc of the stories depicts this subjugation as beginning from childhood and deeply engrained within Irish adults.

The structures of the stories further demonstrate paralysis through their lack of narrative movement. Characters do not change, develop or grow. They exist within a stratum of society and do not move themselves through it, though they can be moved by larger political wheels.

*He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte, and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the Post Office Directory and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions. Often when I thought of this I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice. Sometimes he used to put me through the responses of the Mass which he had made me learn by heart; and, as I pattered, he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip—a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.*

Joyce's treatment of the priest here and religion throughout his work is complex. He understands the oppressive power of religion and the paralysis it inflicts on the Irish. He himself was an atheist, and even denied his mother's dying pleas to convert. But, he was also educated through the church and any knowledge of the Irish must consider their reflections on religion.

How Joyce complicates the subservient position of someone studying the catechism is by introducing more ancient religions into the conversation, the Greeks and Romans, and seeing his current moment only as a reinterpretation of past thought. Joyce often contemplated and utilized Giambattista Vico's theories of a cyclical history. Though it only peeks out its head here it will be more fully realized in *The Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*.

### The Boarding House

The boarding house is another story that shows the cyclical nature of Dublin families. Polly and Bob (who by the time of *Ulysses* do marry) are doomed to repeat the failed lives of their parents. Joyce reveals a marriage through moral failing that had not often seen the light of day in literature, especially in this short format. There is no passage to a better life, no deep contemplation of the events of the individuals' lives, just a window into Irish existence.

### A Little Cloud

*A Little Cloud* reveals what Joyce envisions as two possible paths for the Irishman: serving the capitalism of the British or the conservative ideals of the Irish. Little Chandler is very much trapped in his life.

*It was useless. He couldn't read. He couldn't do anything. The wailing of the child pierced the drum of his ear. It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life. His arms trembled with anger and suddenly bending to the child's face he shouted: "Stop!" The child stopped for an instant, had a spasm of fright and began to scream. He jumped up from his chair and walked hastily up and down the room with the child in his arms. It began to sob piteously, losing its breath for four or five seconds, and then bursting out anew. The thin walls of the room echoed the sound. He tried to soothe it but it sobbed more convulsively.*

Little Chandler is imprisoned in his familial life. There is no opportunity for him to explore the Paris of Gallaher, to see the people of the world and to experience the life and emotion that he desires. He can hardly even leave his home, as he is unable to afford a servant. He can only invite Gallaher into his home, an invitation that the worldly Gallaher turns down and almost certainly will never fulfill.

But, Little Chandler does not want Gallaher's life. He pulls back into himself at the thought of travels to "immoral" Paris. Gallaher has embraced wealth and left any semblance of Irish culture behind. He is interested in the continent, in the Empire and the wealth that it might bring him. He is not looking to advance his people.

The one possibility for Gallaher is poetry. "Could he, too, write like that, express the melancholy of his soul in verse"? In short, no. The cry of the baby prevents him. He is not able to single handedly overcome his paralysis because he is too far into the mores of Ireland. His cry of "Stop" is heard by the child but it does nothing. It only provides him with a momentary reprieve. The crying resumes and he is once again trapped.

## A Painful Case

The incident in “*A Painful Case*” is based upon an actual train accident. Mr. James Duffy is a character in the vein of Gabriel from “The Dead”, he is intelligent, unemotional and lives his life in a certain modesty, but is above poverty. Yet, Joyce again complicates the ability of any Irishman to see himself in a positive state. Though Mr. Duffy does not engage in the usual vices, that is part of the problem. He is too intellectual and abstracted from the blood and bones of Ireland. He meets an Irish woman and abandons her because of his Christian values, and because the involvement leads him to abandon his intellectual pursuits. Yet, the story ends poorly for Mrs. Sinico as well. She is too invested in emotion and falls prey to the drink and thereby abandons her very life. What are we to make of this couple? Does Joyce see any possible life as beyond this paralysis? Again he makes no argument, but forces the reader to hold the mirror Joyce has provided to himself.

## Ivy Day in the Committee Room

This is the most political of texts in *Dubliners* and even then Joyce cages his bets. The men who show up are all interested in the drink and only canvass for pay. The only hope for political movement is in the long dead Parnell and none of these men can stand up to or carry his memory.

The people present come from many levels in Dublin society, but despite their various appearances and inclinations they are all equally indifferent. This is Joyce’s realism that attempts to undercut the history of literature as depicting a narrative or as an attempt to argue. Joyce is simply interested in presenting reality through a mirror regardless of any argument. Yet, we see that Parnell is still the gold standard for politicians and Joyce (as his father was a faithful Parnellite) wishes there were a man capable of action like Parnell, but there are none left.

## Grace

There are a few things of note in “Grace”:

This is the second work to treat of religion and here Joyce takes a very different approach. As we are in the later phases of life, one is already deeply imbued with a sense of religion and morals, but this belief is only a result of context. And the changing context in the life of Tom Kernan forces the possible conversion to Catholicism. Again there is no true winner here. If Mr. Kernan were to hold by his beliefs or convert it would be submitting himself to another force.

The misremembering of facts is also essential. As Joyce strives for realism, all fraudulent facts are included on purpose. He intends to show how real beliefs are constructed on misremembered, half-truths as opposed to the foundations of reality.

It is also not clear what Mr. Kernan has to gain. Catholicism will not stop him from drinking; it will only change the people he drinks with.