

“A Painful Case”

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He looked down the slope and, at the base, in the shadow of the wall of the Park, he saw some human figures lying. Those venal and furtive loves filled him with despair. He gnawed the rectitude of his life; he felt that he had been outcast from life's feast.

(See [Important Quotations Explained](#))

Summary

A predictable, unadventurous bank cashier, Mr. Duffy lives an existence of prudence and organization. He keeps a tidy house, eats at the same restaurants, and makes the same daily commute. Occasionally, Mr. Duffy allows himself an evening out at the opera or a concert, and on one of these evenings he engages in a conversation with another audience member, Mrs. Sinico, a striking woman who sits with her young daughter. Subsequent encounters ensue at other concerts, and on the third occasion Mr. Duffy sets up a time and day to meet purposely with her. Because Mrs. Sinico is married and her husband, a captain of a merchant ship, is constantly away from home, Mr. Duffy feels slightly uncomfortable with the clandestine nature of the relationship. Nevertheless, they continue to meet, always at her home.

Their discussions revolve around their similar intellectual interests, including books, political theories, and music, and with each meeting they draw more

closely together. Such sharing gradually softens Mr. Duffy's hard character. However, during one of their meetings, Mrs. Sinico takes Mr. Duffy's hand and places it on her cheek, which deeply bothers Mr. Duffy. He feels Mrs. Sinico has misinterpreted his acts of companionship as sexual advances. In response, he cuts off the relationship, first by stopping his visits and then by arranging a final meeting at a cake shop in Dublin, deliberately not at Mrs. Sinico's home. They agree to end the relationship, but Mrs. Sinico's emotional presence at this meeting suggests she is less willing to say goodbye than is Mr. Duffy.

Four years pass. One evening, during his usual dinner in town, Mr. Duffy reads a newspaper article that surprises him enough to halt his eating and hurry home. There, he reads the article, entitled "A Painful Case," once more. The article recounts the death of Mrs. Sinico, who was hit by a train at a station in Dublin the previous evening. Witness accounts and the coroner's inquest deem that the death was caused by shock or heart failure, and not injuries from the train itself. The article also explains that Mrs. Sinico was a drinker and had become increasingly detached from her husband over the past two years. The article concludes with the statement that no one is responsible for her death.

The news of Mrs. Sinico's death at first angers but later saddens Mr. Duffy. Perhaps suspecting suicide or weakness in character, he feels disgusted by her death and by his connection to her life. Disturbed, he leaves his home to visit a local pub, where he drinks and remembers his relationship with her. His anger begins to subside, and by the time he leaves to walk home, he feels deep remorse, mainly for ending the relationship and losing the potential for companionship it offered. Upon seeing a pair of lovers in the park by his home, Mr. Duffy realizes that he gave up the only love he'd experienced in life. He feels utterly alone.

Analysis

Because Mr. Duffy cannot tolerate unpredictability, his relationship with Mrs. Sinico is a disruption to his orderly life that he knows he must eliminate, but which he ultimately fails to control. Mrs. Sinico awakens welcome new emotions in Mr. Duffy, but when she makes an intimate gesture he reacts with surprise and rigidity. Though all along he spoke of the impossibility of sharing one's self and the inevitability of loneliness, Mrs. Sinico's gesture suggests that another truth exists, and this truth frightens Mr. Duffy. Accepting Mrs. Sinico's offered truth, which opens the possibility for love and deep feeling, would mean changing his life entirely, which Mr. Duffy cannot do. He resumes his solitary life with some relief. When Mr. Duffy reads of Mrs. Sinico's death four years later, he reacts with shock and disgust, as he did when Mrs. Sinico touched his hand. Mrs. Sinico's dramatic demise points to a depth of feeling she possessed that Mr. Duffy will never understand or share, and it provides Mr. Duffy with an epiphany as he walks home. He realizes that his concern with order and rectitude shut her out of his life, and that this concern excludes him from living fully. Like other characters in *Dubliners* who experience epiphanies, Mr. Duffy is not inspired to begin a new phase in his life, but instead he bitterly accepts his loneliness.

"A Painful Case" concludes where it begins, with Mr. Duffy alone. This narrative circle mimics the many routines that comprise Mr. Duffy's life and deny him true companionship. The story opens with a detailed depiction of Mr. Duffy's unadorned home in a neighborhood he chose for its distance from the hustle and bustle of Dublin. Colors are limited and walls are bare in Mr. Duffy's house, and disorder, spontaneity, and passion are unwelcome. As such, Mr. Duffy's house serves as a microcosm of his soul. His regulatory impulses make each day the same as the next. Such deadening repetitiveness ultimately brings Mr. Duffy death in life: the death of someone who once stirred his longings to be with others. In life, Mrs. Sinico invigorated Mr. Duffy's routine and, through her intimacy, came close to warming his cold

heart. Only in death, however, does she succeed in revealing his cycle of solitude to him. The tragedy of this story is threefold. First, Mr. Duffy must face a dramatic death before he can rethink his lifestyle and outlook. Second, acknowledging the problems in his lifestyle makes him realize his culpability: Mrs. Sinico died of a broken heart that he caused. Third, and perhaps most tragic, Mr. Duffy will not change the life he has created for himself. He is paralyzed, despite his revelations and his guilt.

Joyce's choice of symbolic names in "A Painful Case" articulates the story's somber subject of thwarted love and loneliness. Duffy derives from the Irish word for dark, suggesting the grim, solemn mood in which the story unfolds and Mr. Duffy lives. The suburb in which Mr. Duffy resides, Chapelizod, takes its name from the French, Chapel d'Iseult. Iseult is half of the famed set of lovers, Tristan and Iseult, whose doomed affair ranks as one of the most iconic love stories in literature and music. This name's appearance in the story as Mr. Duffy's home neighborhood, which he purposely chose in order to distance himself from Dublin's hustle and bustle and which is the starting point for his daily routine, connects the unrequited love and death of Mrs. Sinico with Mr. Duffy's restrained existence.

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Summary and Analysis A Painful Case

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Summary

A solitary, effete bank cashier named **James Duffy** becomes acquainted with a woman named **Mrs. Sinico** at a Dublin concert. They meet regularly to discuss art and ideas, first at her house (with the full knowledge of her husband, **Captain Sinico**), and then at her cottage outside the city, where they grow close both intellectually and emotionally. When Mrs. Sinico reaches for Duffy's hand, however, he insists that they stop seeing one another. Four years later, Duffy reads in the newspaper about Mrs. Sinico's death, apparently by suicide. At first he feels revolted, ashamed that he ever considered her a peer. Then Duffy begins to feel guilty: Did his rejection of her result in Mrs. Sinico's suicide? Finally he identifies and empathizes with Mrs. Sinico, realizing that her aloneness mirrored his own — and that he is now more alone than ever.

Analysis

Like "Eveline," this is a story of missed opportunity, and true to its title, "A Painful Case" is perhaps even more agonizing to read than that earlier selection. Just as Eveline's fiancé presents her the chance to escape Ireland, Duffy is allowed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to connect with a kindred soul, Mrs. Sinico. Tragically (and typically), both are paralyzed: Eveline by guilt and fear, and Duffy by fear as well — fear that his fanatically orderly world will be thrown into disarray by shared passion. As in the earlier story, Joyce seemingly intends the reader to believe that such an opportunity will never come again.

In some ways, "A Painful Case" is the most sophisticated and complex *Dubliners* story yet, as it achieves its powerful effect through a deft combination of storytelling techniques and symbolism. As in "A Little Cloud," "Counterparts," and "Clay," Joyce employs the limited third-person point-of-view, allowing access to his protagonist's thoughts and feelings while keeping the reader distant enough from the main character to realize the errors of the protagonist's ways before the protagonist does. (The reader knows, for example, that it is a terrible mistake for Duffy to terminate his relationship with Mrs. Sinico.)

Unlike the stories "A Little Cloud," "Counterparts," and "Clay," however, "A Painful Case" includes information that was initially beyond the perspective of its protagonist. Because he does not speak with Mrs. Sinico for the four years immediately prior to her suicide, Duffy has no way of following what goes on in her life during that time, nor does the reader. Joyce includes the newspaper article documenting her death and the inquest that follows it, and the article retroactively shares Mrs. Sinico's life since of the past four years with Duffy and the reader. The author's use of this document to tell his story is an inventive way of surmounting his limited point-of-view strategy without violating its restrictive rules.

Joyce characterizes Duffy by means of his possessions: the picture-free walls of his uncarpeted room, and the fastidious, eminently practical manner in which he has arranged his books (by weight!). Though Joyce reveals that Duffy "abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder," he doesn't really have to because he has

taken care to *dramatize* Duffy's character. The reader can generalize about the man Duffy is based on the evidence presented.

The colors yellow and brown (which Joyce uses to indicate paralysis and decay) are everywhere in "A Painful Case" — in Duffy's uncarpeted floor, his hazel walking stick, and the beer and biscuits he eats for lunch. Even Duffy's face is brown: "the brown tint of the Dublin streets." An apple rots in his desk (that is, turns yellow and then brown), a symbol of Duffy's own decaying possibilities. The newspaper that announces Mrs. Sinico's suicide is buff in color, yellowish brown. The use of these colors by Joyce to symbolize decay and paralysis is consistent both within individual stories and across the collection as a whole. It thereby links the stories of *Dubliners* together, reiterating the common lot of the book's many disparate characters.

Glossary

Bile Beans a popular patent medicine in Ireland during Joyce's day.

the Rotunda a group of buildings on Rutland Square, one of which is a concert hall.

astrakhan a wool fabric with a pile cut and curled to look like a loosely curled fur made from the pelt of very young lambs originally bred near Astrakhan, a city and port in southwest Russia.

Earlsfort Terrace the location of the Dublin International Exhibition Building, a concert venue at the time this story takes place.

Leghorn a seaport in Tuscany, western Italy, on the Ligurian Sea (The Italian name is Livorno.)

Parkgate the main entrance to Phoenix Park, the large public park in northwest Dublin.

the buff Mail the Dublin Evening Mail, which was printed on buff (brownish-yellow) paper.

reefer an overcoat; a short, thick, double-breasted coat in the style of a seaman's jacket.

the prayers Secret prayers in the Roman Catholic mass between the Offertory and the Preface, read silently or quietly by the priest.

Sidney Parade a train station on Sidney Parade Avenue, in the village of Merion, southeast of Dublin.

Leoville apparently the name of the house in which the Sinicos lived.

a league a temperance association; its members would have pledged to avoid alcohol.

the Herald the Dublin Evening Herald.