

## **James Joyce and Modern Fiction**

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Please Silence Cell Phones

### **Biography, 1882-1941**

- Family life and the façade of Middle Class Pretense
- Jesuit education
- University College in Dublin
- Left for Paris in 1902
- Nora Barnacale; married in 32
- Lived in Europe as journalist and writer

### **Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland**

- Family, Church and Irish Nationalism: he loves all three but also reacts against them
- Irish nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell
- Infidelity and gender tension in the family
- Catholic Church was suspect in the eyes of nationalists for ‘conspiring with English’

### **Joyce and Modern Art**

- Like Dadaism, the “point” is no longer to “mean” anything precisely; it is the “process” of making meaning that is of interest to Joyce
- Just as artists are abandoning traditional forms, he is abandoning the structures of literature such as character, plot and setting

### **Works**

- *Dubliners*: collection of short stories set in Dublin; more narrative than the rest of his work; 1914
- *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1914-1915, semi-autobiographical; stream-of-consciousness narrative; psychological;
- *Ulysses*, 1922; first published in France because of Censorship; major theme: adultery; very loosely based upon Homer’s *Odyssey*.
- *Finnegans Wake*, 1939; narrative and plot are completely obscured; verbal play; experimentation with language, embedded meaning, playful

### **Dubliners**

- Asked to submit a short story for a newspaper, The Irish Homestead, he wrote 15 stories total, published in 1914 as *Dubliners*.
- His intent was to provide a “moral history” of Ireland
- Editor objected to the “stark realism—or sordidness—of several scenes”

Joyce focuses on children and adults who skirt the middle class, such as housemaids, office clerks, music teachers, students, shop girls, swindlers, and out-of-luck businessmen.

### **“The Sisters”**

A boy grapples with the death of a priest, Father Flynn. With his aunt, the boy views the corpse and visits with the priest’s mourning sisters.

As the boy listens, the sisters explain Father Flynn’s death to the aunt and share thoughts about Father Flynn’s increasingly strange behavior.

### **Innuendo about Priest**

The boy overhears his Uncle and Old Cotter: “No, I wouldn’t say he was exactly...but there was something queer...there was something uncanny about him. I’ll tell you my opinion...”

After the narrator comments on Old Cotter as a “Tiresome old fool!,” Cotter continues: “I have my own theory about it, he said. I think he was one of those...peculiar cases... But it’s hard to say...”

### **Friendship between boy and Father Flynn**

“I knew that I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me. My uncle explained to old Cotter: The youngster and he were great friends. The old chap taught him a great deal, mind you; and they say he had a great wish for him.

Cotter: “I wouldn’t like children of mine, he said, to have too much to say to a man like that...it’s bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be....Am I right, Jack?”

### **Snuff Box**

The boy recalls how his aunt would give him a packet of “High Toast” to bring to the priest as a present when he visited

“It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor.”

The snuff represents the sensual side of the priest—his one visible sin.

### **Juxtaposition: Relationship between contiguous parts of a narrative**

The next paragraph after the snuff describes what the priest taught the boy: Latin, history of Napoleon, meaning of the Mass and the vestments, mortal sins differentiated from venial, and finally the important secrecy of the confessional.

The confessional connotes sin

The paragraph returns to the snuff, as the boy repeats the parts of the Mass “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 lips—a habit which had me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.”

### **Religion and Ceremony**

■ He visits the wake with his Aunt but he can only pretend to pray because he is distracted: “I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman’s mutterings distracted me. I noticed how clumsily her skirt was hooked at the back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side. The fancy came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin.”

#### **Hum Drum Small Talk but with the Most important Ideas left Unspoken**

■ The Aunt and Sisters sip wine and discuss the priest—how one brought him soup and how difficult it was to get his body washed

■ “He was too scrupulous always, she said. The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed.”

■ “Yes, said my aunt. He was a disappointed man. You could see that.”

■ A silence took possession of the little room...

#### **Broken Chalice**

■ One sister breaks the silence: It was the chalice he broke... That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still... They say it was the boy’s fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!”

■ And was that it? Said my aunt. I heard something...

■ Eliza nodded.

#### **Return to Confessional at End: Structure**

■ After the chalice incident Father Flynn wandered around and they couldn’t find him.

■ “And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box wide awake and laughing-like softly to himself?”

■ Wide awake and laughing-like to himself... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him...

#### **“An Encounter”**

■ Two young boys skip school; an old lecher approaches them; the one boy, Joe Dillon, was a wild boy who became a priest

■ Joe Dillon introduced friends to penny magazines for boys like The Union Jack and the Halfpenny Marvel, but he “played too fiercely for us who were younger and more timid. He looked like some kind of an Indian when he capered round the garden... beating a tin with his fist and yelling: Ya! Yaka, yaka, yaka!”

■ Everyone was incredulous when it was reported that he had a vocation for the priesthood.”

#### **Books and Church**

■ The boys passed around these adventure story books secretly

■ One day they were reading Roman History with Father Butler and he caught Leo Dillon with one of these books:

■ What is this rubbish? He said. The Apache Chief! Is this what you read instead of studying your Roman History? Let me not find any more of this wretched stuff in this college.”

### **Transition from Books to Real Adventure**

■ The narrator notes: But real adventures, I reflected, do not happen to people who remain at home;; they must be sought abroad.”

■ And so the boys plan to skip school and have an adventure

■ Leo Dillon didn't show up but the narrator and Mahony take a ferry across the river Liffey

■ They buy some snacks and wander off into the country

### **The Encounter with the Man**

■ “There was nobody but ourselves in the field. When we had lain on the bank for some time without speaking I saw a man approaching from the far end of the field.

■ He was shabbily dressed...

■ When he passed at our feet he glanced up quickly and then continued his way. We followed him with our eyes and saw that when he had gone on for perhaps fifty paces he turned about and began to retreat his steps. He walked towards us very slowly, always tapping the ground with his stick, so slowly that I thought he was looking for something in the grass.”

### **The Man Makes awkward conversation**

■ He said that the happiest time of one's life was undoubtedly one's schoolboy days and that he would give anything to be young again.

■ He mentions Romantic writers like Thomas Moore or Sir Walter Scott and Lord Lytton

■ “Of course there was some of Lord Lytton's works which boys couldn't read. Mahony asked why couldn't boys read them... The man only smiled. I saw that he had great gaps in his mouth between his yellow teeth. Then he asked us which of us had the most sweethearts.”

■ The narrator is embarrassed that Mahony doesn't know the writers and the man will think him equally unread. But does the man know himself?

### **Sweethearts**

■ “Every boy, he said, has a little sweetheart.

■ His attitude on this point struck me as strangely liberal in a man of his age. In my heart I thought that what he said about boys and sweethearts was reasonable. But I disliked the words in his mouth and I wondered why he shivered once or twice as if he feared something or felt a sudden chill.”

### **His attitude conveys something bad without being explicit**

■ “He began to speak to us about girls, saying what nice soft hair they had and how soft their hands were and how all girls were not so good as they seemed to be if one only knew.

■ He gave me the impression that he was repeating something which he had learned by heart...

■ And at time he lowered his voice and spoke mysteriously as if he were telling us something secret which he did not wish others to overhear.”

#### **Unspoken action**

■ The man walks away near the field

■ After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahony explain: I say! Look what he’s doing!

■ As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahony exclaimed again: I say....He’s a queer old josser!”

#### **Whipping**

■ While Mahony chases a cat through the fields, the man returns and asks the boy “did he get whipped often at school.”

■ He began to speak on the subject of chastising boys. His mind, as if magnetised again by his speech, seemed to circle round and round its new centre. He said that when boys were that kind they ought to be whipped and whipped well.

■ As he looks up he sees the man looking at him with a “gaze of a pair of bottle green eyes peering at me from under a twitching forehead.”

#### **Man connects whipping theme and Sweetheart theme**

■ He said that if he ever found a boy talking to girls or having a girl for a sweetheart he would whip him and whip him; and that would teach him not to be talking to girls...He said that there was nothing in the world he would like so well as that. He described to me how he would whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery. He would love that, he said, better than anything in this world; and his voice, as he led me monotonously through the mystery, grew almost affectionate and seemed to plead with me that I should understand him.”

#### **Flight to Mahony**

■ Narrator ties his shoe and goes running after his friend:

■ “I went up the slope calmly but my heart was beating quickly with fear that he would seize me by the ankles.”

#### **Observations on The Encounter**

■ Boys seeking adventure encounter a man who is himself stuck in monotonous existence

■ The man repeats himself and even repeats his steps

■ He is stuck on certain subjects like girls and whipping

■ Attempts to break away from mundane and ordinary often lead to a different monotony

■ The boy experiences paralysis and even after the man exposes himself can not easily get away

## Summary

- Stark realism devoid of authorial commentary or morality in *Dubliners*
- Parallels the art of the period in its attempt to do something new, while still being steeped in the traditions of the past.
- Reader must impose morality or meaning
- Use of ellipsis, juxtaposition, and symbolism to convey larger meaning, or rather, to invite reader to construct larger meaning.