

### **The Church and Religion as the Prominent Moral Paralysis Theme in Dubliners**

The distinct and intricate ways in which James Joyce chronicled the perils of his fellow Irish countrymen in the novel, Dubliners, provides a blueprint of the perpetual paralysis and hopelessness that, in Joyce's opinion, plagued the city of Dublin for centuries. Specifically, two of Joyce's stories in Dubliners, *The Sisters* and *An Encounter*, possess a wealth of references of all-encompassing themes such as identity, politics, culture, and Irish history; all themes that Joyce himself deemed essential and unique in his depiction of the drab disposition of his fellow Dubliners. Each individual theme presents its own valid argument in discussing which motif acted as the largest roadblock in the twentieth-century Dubliner's passage to prosperity, though the one that argues its case most prolifically to me is the theme of church and religion. Through Joyce's writing, my deduction is that being an Irish Catholic in Dublin at the time of the novel was the most dangerous and paralyzing quality of all the aforementioned themes because of the intense control the church had on Dublin's population, as well as the lack of control Dublin had, priests and clergymen included, on the church itself.

Typically, followers of religion, regardless of choice, are told they should be able to lean on their church, clergymen, and fellow parishioners for support and guidance in all aspects of life. However, the Irish Catholic church in Joyce's Dublin operated in stark contrast when compared to the classic ideas of what religion's role in society should be. What must be first understood about the Irish Catholic, before attempting to fathom the church's asphyxiating grip on them as a whole, is their unique mindset. As discussed in class, an Irish Catholic rarely finds himself at a loss for words when an opportunity to speak on behalf of his own religious decisions and perspectives arises. We also concluded that an Irish Catholic defines himself as more intellectually aware in terms of faith when compared to any other Catholic. Unfortunately, their self-characterization of having superior religious wherewithal is a vulnerability and ultimately paralyzes them within the confines of Dublin.

Joyce placed religious cues throughout Dubliners. Some were blatant by design, some were meant as innocuous details, which, through our reading and discussion of Joyce, was also determined to be by design. One prominent and reoccurring symbol of religious paralysis can be found in the depiction of Priests. In many religions, a Priest is recognized as an authoritarian figure, the head of the church. In Dubliners, Joyce frequently revisits the notion that Priests have very little control and are becoming increasingly immoral and incapable of performing their duties. Two of his stories, *The Sisters* and *An Encounter*, best depict the church's control of the Dubliner's human condition.

In *The Sisters*, Eliza, Old Cotter, and Nannie reminisce about the downfall of the now-deceased Father James Flynn. Flynn was a mentor to a young boy, who narrates the story. The benefit of the close relationship between Priest and boy was scrutinized by Old Cotter, who "had his own theory on the matter (4)", as any Irish Catholic would. He questions the moral validity of Father Flynn and the negativity surrounding such a relationship throughout pages three and four, stating that there was something "queer" and "uncanny" about him, as well as staunchly opposing the method in which he

mentored the young boy. Cotter proclaims that his theory is to “let him learn to box his own corner (4).” As a mentor, Flynn failed miserably. While his pupil mentions that “he had taught me a great deal (6)” and that Flynn “showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts (6)”, his lessons realistically reaped no benefits other than the idea of paralysis; learning to understand Latin (a dead language), listening to stories of French hero Napoleon Bonaparte, and meanings of certain church-related particulars (7) are hardly lessons that promote growth and expansion.

Much is alluded to concerning Father Flynn’s eventual insanity, particularly within Eliza’s commentary on page ten. “Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly. Whenever I’d bring in his soup to him there I’d find him with his breviary fallen on the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open.” Also, blame is placed partly, but significantly enough, on a chalice Father Flynn broke in the weeks prior to his death. “It was that chalice he broke. . . . That was what was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean (11).” The dropping of this chalice, another Joycean symbol, which is used to contain the wafer-like body of Christ, symbolizes Father Flynn’s fleeting grip on the church and its parishioners. Eliza mentions that the chalice was empty when Flynn lost his grasp on it, but symbolically, to Father Flynn, that chalice held what the church itself holds sacred. In destroying the chalice, Flynn was able to make the connection that he no longer maintained control of the church, and that realization was daunting enough to ignite his plight towards insanity. Ironically, and this only complements Joyce’s genius, Flynn is suited with a new, unbroken chalice while laying on his death bed (8), symbolizing that in Dublin, God cannot be found until you die.

Direct thematic parallels can be made between *The Sisters* and *An Encounter*. The symbol of a Priest is again presented within *An Encounter*’s first page. The Priest, Father Butler, scolds young Leo Dillon upon finding Leo reading a copy of a Native American comic book, instead of his assigned reading on Roman history (12-13). Joyce’s insertion of this Native American comic, as well as Father Butler’s reaction, were meant with symbolic purpose. The Native American lifestyle is quite opposite of Joyce’s countrymen, almost fantastical in comparison. This Native American lifestyle stirred hunger for wild sensations (13) in Leo’s mind, a hunger that acted as a deterrent from the normal, paralytic lives most Dubliners led. Joyce’s inclusion of this particular hints at the youth’s desire to imagine and spread from Dublin and experience something unique.

“This rebuke during the sober hours of school paled much of the glory of the wild west for me and the confused puffy face of Leo Dillon awakened one of my consciences. But when the restraining influence of the school was at a distance I began to hunger again for wild sensations, for the escape which those chronicles of disorder alone seemed to offer me. The mimic warfare of the evening became at last as wearisome to me as the routine of school in the morning because I wanted real adventures to happen to myself. But real adventures, I reflected, do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad (13).” This excerpt encapsulates the entire idea of a desire to escape the confines of Dublin refuted by the restricting clench of the church, symbolized here by Father Butler.

Further on in *An Encounter*, Joyce’s characters decide to skip school in search of the excitement they have been yearning for, by way of a journey to the Pigeon House,

which is a fort maintained by the power and light company (16). This power and light company is a symbol for the church, as the church is typically recognized as an establishment teeming with power and enlightenment. Keeping in mind the symbolic representation of the children's destination, one can further assume that this journey for excitement doubles as a trek to find God. But of course, with the church making its grasp felt at all times, the boys do not find God, but instead, a pervert. Ironically, the pervert's garb is exactly the same as Father Flynn's (16-17) from *The Sisters*, connecting these two stories through the idea of inappropriate relationships between Priests and children in Ireland while even furthering the concept that the church retains only a few of the moral values it once had. The inability of Leo to attend this day of hooky coupled with Mahony's abandonment of his friend while in the presence of the pervert mirrors the abandonment felt by Dublin's society via the hands of the defunct church.

The boy's day of excitement and adventure, which hinted of a religious quest and awakening, after being stalled by the pervert, was abandoned prematurely by the boys, who reasoned:

“It was too late and we were too tired to carry out our project of visiting the Pigeon House. We had to be home before four o'clock lest our adventure should be discovered. Mahony looked regretfully at his catapult and I had to suggest going home by train before he regained any cheerfulness. The sun went in behind some clouds and left us to our jaded thoughts and the crumbs of our provisions (16).”

This failure to reach their destination is a huge let down and a direct reflection of the failure of human condition. The rejection of discovering something exciting stemming from the interaction with the pervert inflicted moral paralysis in the boys, and the decision to retreat home became obvious to them because of it.

Both *The Sisters* and *An Encounter* tackle the idea of moral paralysis via the hand of the church. In each story, a Priest is responsible for some sort of disappointment or confinement, exemplified by Father Flynn with his paralytic lessons and Father Butler in his scolding of Leo Dillon for what can be presumed as freethinking. The unique ways in which James Joyce was able to offer us insight to the actual motives of the church leave me without doubt in regards to the church being the largest influence on Dublin's moral paralysis.