

The theme of paralysis in 'The Sisters'

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(Revised essay)

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In this essay, I will focus on the dominant theme of paralysis in 'The Sisters' and illustrate the several kinds of inertias as experienced or demonstrated by the characters.

The theme of paralysis that pervades the stories of Dubliners is introduced to the reader in the opening story "The Sisters". Since this was also the very first story written for Dubliners in August 1904, the theme was present right at the moment of conception of the book. Therefore, it is important to first take a closer look at the conception of Dubliners.

In July 1904, George Russell proposed to Joyce that he should write something "simple, rural?, livemaking?, pathos?" (R. Ellmann, James Joyce, p.163) which was to be published in the Irish Homestead. But judging from the result, Joyce had something quite different in mind. The stories written after Russell's proposal appear, in fact, to be written in simple and rather straightforward prose, but only at first glance. Underneath the literal surface of the text, one can discover many layers of symbolic meaning, pointing towards religious, political, social, sexual, psychological, physical and other forms of paralysis. But what about the proposed rurality, then? Joyce did not follow this particular suggestion, either, since he intended to focus on urban middle-class Dublin as a paralyzed society. In a letter to C.P. Curran, Joyce frankly declared his intention to "betray the soul of the hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (R. Ellmann, James Joyce, p. 163). This leaves us with the point of the stories being livemaking, as proposed by Russell.

'The Sisters' is, in fact, one of the least livemaking stories one can imagine. Indeed, a young boy of about ten years of age recounts how he encountered death and paralysis in the shape of a befriended paralytic priest - Father James Flynn - who died after his third stroke. The boy's father is not mentioned at all; other male figures like Old Cotter and Uncle Jack are characterized as being unfit as role models. Despite the fact that the priest was affected mentally after having broken an empty chalice, he had become a father figure for the boy. The two seem to have been friends for a period unknown, and "the old chap taught him a great deal" (Dubliners, p.8). But, strangely enough, the encounter with his friend's death – his first encounter of that sort ever – leaves the boy only puzzled, with a slight sensation of a strange freedom, but not mourning. Why? On the one hand, the boy recognizes that the priest has taught him a lot of things about the church, like the "meaning of the different [...] vestments worn by the priest". In their regular conversations, they also touched upon rather sophisticated subjects (history, Latin, theology). But on the other hand it is through general innuendo and the discussion of the deceased by the boy's aunt and the priest's sisters that he gradually becomes aware of the appalling story behind Father Flynn's grey face, the trembling hands and the idiotic smile. He encounters the priest's spiritual paralysis, and the sensitive boy is confused, repulsed and disappointed.

But why is the story entitled 'The Sisters', if it is for the most part about a boy's recollections of a paralytic priest and his first encounter with death? Are the priest's sisters affected by this Irish paralysis as well? I think that they experience paralysis in three different ways: sexually, spiritually and socially. These inertias all relate to one common cause: their brother's church career. We know, for example, that Father Flynn had been educated at the Irish College in Rome, which means that he must have been a very bright and promising child. But it also suggests that the education must have cost the family a good deal of money. We can presume that, since the hopes of this poor Irishtown family focussed entirely on James' prestigious church career, neither thought nor money was spent on the education of James' sisters. For example, they speak of the "Freeman's General" instead of Freeman's Journal and "rheumatic wheels". Nor could the family afford to supply an adequate dowry. As a result of these shortcomings, the sisters experienced a kind of sexual paralysis: the

moral standards at the time, dictated by rigid Catholic doctrine and the fact that they were the sisters of a future priest, almost certainly prevented them from becoming sexually active without the blessing of the Church, i.e. the sacrament of marriage. But it seems like they never married at all. As a consequence, the sisters most certainly started working in order to earn a living in case of their parent's death. The drapery store evidently never got them any fortunes, and Eliza and Nannie seem weighed down by the burden of their lives and "God knows we done all we could [for him], as poor as we are" (Dubliners, p.14). Thus, being barred from marriage and education by poverty, the sisters experience a social paralysis insofar as they cannot, by any means, improve their situation, a feature not uncommon for women in these days.

Their fate is worsened by the fact that they have to take care of their brother and support him. But do they rebel against their fate? No. Joyce did not link these characters with the theme of angry but unsuccessful revolt that is omnipresent in Dubliners. The sisters have come to accept their burden just like Jesus Christ accepted the cross to which he was to be nailed to. It is not only Father Flynn's life that is "crossed". One might say that the sisters' lives are crossed, too, and that they are 'nailed' to a paralytic church, symbolized by their paralytic brother-priest, while their own paralysis is symbolized by their "great sacrifices [...] to maintain a defective church." (Z. Bowen, Companion to Joyce Studies, p.174). There is no sign of escape or redemption - actually "there [is] no hope" (Dubliners, p.7).

Joyce clearly does not veil his opinion that the Catholic Church is responsible for a large portion of Irish paralysis. But he also quietly hints at another malefactor: England. The death notice on the door lets us know that the priest died on 1st of July 1895. This hints at a very important and at the same time traumatizing event in Irish history: the Battle of the Boyne (July 1st 1690). The date is also that of the Feast of the Most Precious Blood which can be associated to Father Flynn, his strokes, the broken chalice and the sherry served in the death-room. But in this context, the historic reading is more important. The historic defeat of Catholic forces loyal to James II. by Orange forces supporting William III. eventually led to the establishment of English Protestant Ascendancy and further oppression of the Catholic faith. This date, with all its emotional and historical connotations, gives the story its historic dimension and blames England for a considerable proportion of Irish paralysis.

Furthermore, all the different forms of paralysis as experienced by the priest and his sisters, centre on that “little house in Great Britain Street” (Dubliners, p.10). It is there that the paralytic priest is cared for by his apathetic sisters who never married, who are poor and uneducated but still support him devotedly. It is there where the priest dies on the day of the Battle of the Boyne and where he experiences, so to say, eternal paralysis.