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The "Secret War" on Religion in *The Dubliners*

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ABSTRACT

This essay will discuss how religion and daily life intermingle in an intricate way in James Joyce's Dubliners, with special attention to the short stories "The Sisters" and "Grace." The conflict between institutional and personal conscience in Joyce's work depicts the pervasive religious influence, revealing the mysteries and constraints of religious practice in early twentieth-century Dublin. In stories such as "The Sisters" and "Grace," Joyce explores the impacts of religious education and social demands that create, restrict, and ultimately fail to transform people, as seen in the case of the young boy in "The Sisters" and Mr. Kernan in "Grace." By using irony, subtle criticism, and understated portrayals of clerical characters, Joyce questions the effectiveness of religious authority while showing that it continues to permeate social life. The essay posits that Joyce's treatment of religion indicates a so-called "secret war" between personal liberty and imposed faith. This approach places greater emphasis on the clash between personal morality and religious dictates, thereby disclosing the vulnerability and hypocrisy of Dublin society.

Keywords: *James Joyce, Dubliners, religion, Irish society, "The Sisters", "Grace", clerical authority, individual conscience, social critique, moral ambiguity*

The essay explores the relationship between religion and the lives of Dubliners in James Joyce's two short stories "The Sisters" and "Grace" from his collection Dubliners. Joyce's notions of how religion influences, modifies, and subjects people to enigma are evident in these stories. James Joyce's Dubliners addresses religion in the context of contemporary practices, but at times it reveals debatable religious aspects that largely disturb society. Though he leaves some aspects unexplored or unanswered for the reader to deduce, the writer seems to question the role of religious institutions. To him, the entire fabric of society linked to religious mindsets appears fragile. He is content to use ironic and implicit language to present such notions. His approach delicately engages with the religious concerns of the society in which he lived and authored his works.

In his letter to Nora Barnacle, 29 August 1904, James Joyce mentions his confrontation with religion as a "Secret War" and an "Open War". Similarly, stories in this study share the complicated yet indispensable relationship between an individual, society and religion. L. A. Murillo, in The *Cyclical Night; Irony in James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges* mentions that Joyce "sees in Irish social convention and religion the cause of private frustrations and failure" (17).

"The Sisters" unhesitatingly reflects the mind of an innocent boy stuck in the quagmire of questions and confusions, as Hart believes that in *The Dubliners* religion influences the decisionmaking ability and judgment (Hart 79). It refers to the questions like an immature boy being subjected to religious teachings not considering his impressionable mind. Similarly, in "Grace" the main character is forced to submit to the will of the priest who satisfies the "businessman" and other professionals who pronounces him as a spiritual "accountant" (197).

In the short story "The Sisters" a young character whose reaction towards the long expected, but the seemingly delayed death of his religious teacher Father Flynn lays the foundation of the relationship. The death of the Father stirs a dilemma in the mind of the young narrator. The young lad never reveals to others but his feelings about the death of the father reveal a sort of a satisfaction. The narrator is unmoved by the death of the Father and does not acknowledge the fact he was tutored by the deceased man. Like Mr. Kernan in "Grace", he is forced to believe in religion he is yet to understand; both are not changed from within but try to convince their respective circles of transformation. As Foster would describe the status of such characters in *The Dubliners* fighting for conflicting values (Foster 36).

Mr. Kernan's friends miss-present a number of Latin words while debating over the fabulous career of Leo XIII. Mr. Cunningham represents the voice of the society as tries to convince the group of his erudition. They represent vain religious figures, to an extent like Parson Adams, a figure in Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews. Focusing on Mr. Kernan's submission to the will of the group, the writer seems to represent the religiously ignorant and confused figures. The dubious emergence of the central character in the last part after the apparent fall in the bar represents the lack of influence of religion on people. It criticizes the definition of church as the place for healing by highlighting the negligence prevailing there. And importantly, father Purdon's represents his own kind. He believes that Jesus Christ introduced a number of texts for different people and walks of life: "He came to speak to businessmen and he would speak to them in a businesslike way" (197). He further adds that: "He was their spiritual accountant; and he wished each and every one of his hearers to open his books, the books of his spiritual life, and see if they tallied accurately with a conscience" (198).

In both short stories the reader finds the central character under the influence of religious figures. In "The Sister" the members in the family regard him too close and a friend to the old deceased man and they thought, "The old chap taught him a great deal" (7), and he wanted the young fellow to become a priest. But the young lad is not satisfied with the kind of imposed relation he has built up. Old Cotter, also believes otherwise and does not like the intimacy between the young and the old men "because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect [...]" (10). Similarly, there is a lot to discuss in the life of Mr. Kernan as he not portrayed as a changed man but compelled to move to church. On one side there is a mature figure like Mr. Kernan and on the other side, there is a young narrator; a boy yet to learn the ways of the world. However, ultimately these two central characters remain unchanged internally.

In "Joyce's Dubliners and Modernist Doubt: The Making of a Tradition" Neil Murphy mentions that "'The Sisters' generates a sense of incompletion […] the narrator is continually in a state of uncertainty" (14). James Joyce takes on the imposed liaison between a young lad and the old priest. The young lad has unasked questions that help him understand life more than a common boy of his age is expected. Though covert in nature possibly much-intended reservations shown by the writer: "angry with old Cotter for alluding to me [him] as a child" (12).

The writer acts to hit the religious figure when the young lad remembers him and develops a sense of freedom, "neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death"(9). Mr. Kernan's

concept of freedom seems to have been retained in the last part of the story when he denies believing in magical stuff; apparently, he negates the entire ceremony. In both stories, conversion and change fail to acquire the desired result. The writer tries to look into the innocent mind of the youngster by drawing freedom from the religious mans' death and efforts to justify his very innocent idea as a mature man would do; Mr. Kernan's presence at the church also disqualify any significant religious allegiance in his life afterward.

Sometimes father asked difficult questions to the child; questions regarding one's shrewdness and intelligence quotient. However, he never forgot to ask questions about spirituality and life after death, virtues and "sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections" (8) and "His questions showed me [the young boy] how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church" (6). The priest has paralysis and had strokes, was eerie at times because of his physical faintness. And even at the time of the death, negating the expectations of the people, he says that "I saw that he was not smiling" (8), and that, "There was a heavy odour in the room—the flowers"

(7). Keeping the mentioned words in consideration, we can very easily answer the questions, i.e. how does the writer look at the very notion of the religious figures? How he indirectly tries to inculcate the reader about the futility of certain customs and norms related to religious teachings. He is not convinced that the ideological enslavement of either a child or a man should be carried as it appears in the both cases. In short, it seems all too complicated in Joyce's Dublin Murillo mentions that the words "paralysis," "gnomon," "simony," possess the deliberateness of an intended analogy and correspondence between the sincerity of the boy narrator, the ruin and failure of the dead priest, and the exhausted life of the living (19).

In the end, the sisters refer to the clerical life of the Father as the cause of his death. The significant paralytic impact of religion in the short story rises from the fact that the religious vanguard Father Flynn drops the chalice; his incapacity to control the same thing in the coffin suggests that the religious accomplishments lead to paralysis of life in Dublin, if the "body" is construed as the society in which the characters are living. The characters seem to be unable to accept death as a reality. Likewise, in "Grace" commenting on the religious particulars they believe to convince Mr. Kernan of his spiritual refinement. However, the reader may feel Mr. Kernan's friends lack fundamental knowledge about church on one hand, while on the other they claim the "[t]he Irish priesthood is honoured all the world over" (185), and try to vigorously propagate their ideology. Joyce's seems to analyze the inability of an individual to go beyond one's socially and culturally bestowed knowledge. His characters are bound in the limits set by their respective environments.

However, it is shared that Father Flynn may be dead, but in a number of ways, he is present among them. It may be attributed to the view that certain impacts of the religious figure exist in the little boy's personality in particular and in the society in general even after the death of the father or it can be referred to as "the paralytic corpus, of Irish public life." (Murrillo 17). In "Grace" a number of religious characters do occur and their significant impact on the minds of the each other is quite discernable. These inspirations give the impression to live even after their demise in the shape of the people who are in one way or the other influenced by their teachings.

The central figure of "Grace" Mr. Kernan is a convert from Protestantism to Catholic belief.

He did it for the sake of his wife and was never welcomed in this church. Mr. Power, Mr. Cunningham, and Mr. M'Coy visit Mr. Kernan to inquire about his health. They all seem to praise the Irish Priesthood and nineteenth-century Popes and force Mr. Kernan to take part in a retreat, which he agrees upon, but with one condition that he would not light candles. It illustrates the complicated religious lives of Dubliners as they sometimes go through forceful conversions. In the first place, Mr. Kernen is represented as a fallen man and in the last stage, he receives semiredemption. Joyce's ironical representation of Mr. Powel declares him unworthy and unreliable as a friend as he inwardly mocks at the lower class attitude

of Kernan's children. It not only questions the goodwill of his associates but also the religiosity in the figures. Mr. Power's figure reassures that he is more into the want for recognition and reputation than anything like unworldly. Similarly, all men offer ambiguous details about the Catholic Church and its history.

Mr. Kernan's friends conclude his fall as the consequence of absence of God's grace and he could only be protected with the help of God's grace: "Jesus Christ was not a hard taskmaster. He understood our little failings, understood the weakness of our poor fallen nature, understood the temptations of this life" (199). But the cleansing of the man fails as the priest fails to convince both the reader and Mr. Kernan. In the short story, the cleric concludes that reckoning with oneself, serves as the period of grace; "to be straight and manly with God" (199) yet this is ironical that all the characters seem to fail to go through introspection. Hence, searching the problems in the surroundings don't appear to bear concrete solutions. James Joyce appears to bash the incapability of Dubliners to admit their faults and position themselves on the right path rather than participating in debates and hyperbolical conversations.

At times in both stories, religion appears to appreciate individual conscience hence out casting sociability and social responsibilities of individuals. Joyce delicately deals with the intricacies of religious differences between groups, and their inability to accept others' religious standpoints. Therefore, it controls and governs the society and to an extent dictates individuals. Joyce seems to acknowledge the influence of religion but to him its pros and cons are debatable. "Grace" seems to convey the message of fallen Adam in the Paradise Lost. A man has fallen down in the Central Dublin pub and is briefly unconscious. He goes through purgation in the middle part of the short story when all his friends join him and preach him. But the ending seems to be a bit unconvincing in terms of his acceptance of his weaknesses as he appears to be forced to go on a retreat. The young narrator of "The Sisters" also focuses on the individuals as a part of society going through forceful conversions.

CONCLUSION

James Joyce develops a discussion about the importance of religion in the development of the life of individuals and societal conventions, in both *The Sisters* and *Grace*. Joyce illustrates through the young boy in the story *The Sisters* and Mr. Kernan in the story *Grace* how religious authority can be inhibiting, confusing and even paralyzing to individuals and yet at the same time, it can be an omnipresent force in moral and social structures of individuals. Both characters do have to deal with religious leaders and institutions whose preoccupation is more about appearances, ritual and social decency than real spiritual direction, exposing the shortcomings and hypocrisy of organized religion. The irony and subtle criticism that Joyce uses reveals the contradiction of the morality of an individual and the expectations of the society, the war hidden which was the freedom of thinking and the force of belief. Though the characters are usually forced to attend religious ceremonies or conversion, their moral and intellectual growth is not influenced to any significant degree, which highlights the futility of forced piety. Furthermore, the emphasis that Joyce puts on personal perception, be it the impersonal way in which the boy looks at Father Flynn or the way Mr. Kernan hesitantly assents, underscores the precariousness of the position of faith, moral values and societal norms in early twentieth-century Dublin. Finally, Joyce describes the sphere of religion as something omnipresent and vague at the same time: it determines the behavior, supports social conventions and continues to exist even after the direct waves of clerical representatives have disappeared, however, it is not able to completely predetermine the inner world and conscience of the individual. Through this contrast of personal and institutional, Joyce encourages the readers to consider the ambiguity of religious authority, boundaries of social conformity, and the constant struggle of the individual to make his or her way in moral and spiritual life in the confines of the society.

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