

Father Flynn and the Boy: a Relationship in Joyce's 'The Sisters'

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The first story of the Dubliners is the most elusive of the set of fifteen stories. Despite many critics' efforts, the story behaves like a fish, wriggling its way out of the critic's hand to recede into a pool of allusions, innuendo and opacity. After 100 years, we are - just like the boy in the story - still struggling to "extract meaning"¹ from this story.

Several circumstances have made life difficult for critics and readers alike. First of all, the story published in the "Irish Homestead" on August 13, 1904, is quite different from the story included in the 1914 version of Dubliners. During a period of ten years, the story underwent severe revision; things were left out, altered or added, the focus of the story changed as well as the characters.² The story experienced a process of distilling, thus resulting in a very dense text, "full of echoes, allusions and quotations",³ but still deceptively straightforward, even simple on the surface. While this offers some opportunities for a comparative study of the different versions, there also lurks the danger of taking "Joyce's words too far in an unwanted direction".⁴ According to Fritz Senn, Joyce "made [words] do a lot of work, discharging all their potential historical and literary accretions. Words, too, are symbols behind which are massed centuries of traditional, scriptural, literary and marketplace use".⁵ In this context, we have to bear in mind one simple fact: as the original number of stories

¹ James Joyce, Dubliners (London: Grafton Books, 1977), p.9. All other excerpts from this edition will be quoted as follows: Dubliners, p.x.

² cf. Florence Walzl, "Joyce's 'The Sisters': A Development," *JJQ*, vol. 10. no.4 (Summer 1973), pp.375-421.

³ Fritz Senn, "'He Was Too Scrupulous Always': Joyce's 'The Sisters'," *JJQ*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Winter 1965), p. 66.

⁴ Senn, "Too Scrupulous," p.71.

⁵ Senn, "Too Scrupulous," p.66.

expanded from ten (1904), twelve (1905), fourteen (1906) to the final fifteen stories actually published in 1914, Joyce was forced to change his concept. He had to rewrite his first story in order to adapt it to the needs of the book as a whole. 'The Sisters', therefore, had to serve not only as the first story of childhood, it also had to introduce on all levels major themes like "paralysis-decay-death and freedom-escape-life"⁶ without neglecting the psychological integrity of the characters or the storytelling itself.

I think it best to focus this essay on the discussion of the characters central to the story since the major themes are attached to the major characters. Thus I will concentrate on the nature of the relationship between Father Flynn and the boy who is protagonist as well as narrator.

In 'The Sisters', we learn right from the beginning that the priest died after his third stroke. Still, the ailing old priest almost haunts the story with his ghostly omnipresence. Joyce artistically delayed his physical appearance until the latter part of the story, where he ironically appears in the form of a corpse, lying stiff in an upstairs room in his sisters' house. There, he is bemoaned by his relatives, by the boy and his aunt as they "visit the house of mourning."⁷ It is striking that throughout the story there is no example of direct speech from Father Flynn. He is just as silent as the young boy, so the reader learns about him only through the boy and his sisters' and the boy's recollections as well as the innuendos and unfinished sentences uttered by Old Cotter and Uncle Jack. We have to rely on distorted and biased second-hand information to gain knowledge about the priest's character and his past. This has to be done very carefully; as Therese Fischer has pointed out, we have to be aware of the fact that this information presented to the reader may or may not be reliable: the boy's point of view as narrator and witness "can [...] be defective and reliable at the same time. It is defective, because of his limited intellectual abilities [due to his young age], and reliable, because of his naivety".⁸ Old Cotter's and Uncle Jack's prejudiced opinions are openly expressed in front of the puzzled boy, while the priest's sisters see their brother only through an uneducated and

⁶ Senn, "Too Scrupulous," p.66.

⁷ Dubliners, p.12.

⁸ Therese Fischer, "From Reliable to Unreliable Narrator: Rhetorical Changes in Joyce's 'The Sisters'," JJQ, vol. 9, no. 1(Fall 1971), p.87.

extremely hypocritical veil of piety, not refraining from gossiping over their dead brother. As a consequence of this cluster of distorted information about the priest, the readers and the critics have to judge the reliability of the incomplete information and to “[transcend] the character’s limited, though not altogether unreliable view.”⁹

Due to Father Flynn’s opacity in the story, the critics have differed widely upon the literal or symbolic meaning of the cleric. Literal readings cover the wide range of “unbeliever, simoniac, homosexual and pervert, defrocked cleric and merely ailing priest in valid standing”.¹⁰ Interpretations searching for symbolic meaning see him as “the Irish God, the Catholic Church, a Father figure and the personification of the theological virtue, faith.”¹¹ One might add Peter Spielberg’s theory of “the dead Father Flynn [being] analogous to the dead Lazarus”¹² or Donald Torchiana’s discovery of Masonic and Rosicrucian overtones.¹³ My own point of departure is a suggestion made by Mr. Norris in his lecture on Dubliners on December 3, 1993.

In that lecture, Mr. Norris suggested that, by breaking the chalice, Father Flynn showed an appalling neglect for the vessel that normally contains the holy wine, the transubstantiated blood of Christ, although the chalice had “contained nothing”¹⁴ at the time.

If we follow this idea and give it some thought and consideration, we will discover that Father Flynn, the disbelieving priest, comes to terms with his sin of breaking the chalice, that he even comes to terms with his discovery of the silence of God. And even the boy, who discovers Flynn’s disturbed past, will be on the verge of making the same discovery, for there is - as I hope to show - a certain spiritual kinship between him and the priest.

⁹ Fischer, “Rhetorical Changes,” p.89.

¹⁰ Walzl, “Joyce’s ‘The Sisters,’” p. 375.

¹¹ Walzl, “Joyce’s ‘The Sisters,’” p. 375.

¹² Peter Spielberg, “The Sisters’: No Christ at Bethany,” JJQ, vol. 3, no. 3 (Spring 1966), p. 193.

¹³ Donald T. Torchiana, “The Opening of Dubliners: A Reconsideration,” Irish University Review, no. 1 (Spring 1971), pp. 153ff. Cf. also Donald T. Torchiana, Background for Joyce’s Dubliners, Boston 1986, pp. 18-35.

¹⁴ Dubliners, p. 17.

Since Father Flynn was (or should have been) “Christ’s earthly representative in his life and teaching”¹⁵, he has gravely sinned against the Lord by breaking the consecrated vessel. This is a deed severe enough to evoke the wrath of God upon him; he can therefore expect ‘celestial’ punishment. But, as Mr. Norris suggested, there was no immediate punishment, no lightning from above or loud thunder announcing God’s anger. Joseph Chadwick sees this as the turning point in Flynn’s life and interprets it quite sensibly as the troublesome discovery of the “silence of God.”¹⁶ This silence obviously affected the priest deeply, resulting in his strange behaviour. Chadwick then goes on to argue that Flynn’s “silent moping and his conversations with the boy” are “strategies by which he defends himself, albeit with little success, against his discovery.”¹⁷ I cannot fully agree with this argument. I do not see the moping and wandering, the laughter in the confession-box and the discussions with the boy as a defence against his discovery. I rather see it as evidence of a process of coming to terms with it, of coping with the “doubt that any higher being was speaking to or through him.”¹⁸ In order to support this idea, I want to extract from the text a chronology of this process.¹⁹ If we take a look at the real sequence of events, we see that Father Flynn overcomes his doubts and comes to terms with his discovery via three stages. First, there is the breaking of the chalice and the subsequent moping and wandering, then the priest is discovered in his confession-box and finally, there are the discussions with the boy shortly before the priest’s death.

Eliza’s statement about “poor James [being] so nervous”²⁰ hints that there was something wrong with him even before he broke the chalice. He may have felt and feared but not consciously admitted his doubts about God, and his doubts may have remained subconscious and unrealized until the breaking of the chalice. The priest’s discovery of the silence of God, his epiphany, so to speak, is ironically a “eucharistic”²¹ one. By breaking the consecrated vessel, he experiences the

¹⁵ Walzl, “Joyce’s ‘The Sisters’,” p. 375.

¹⁶ Joseph Chadwick, “Silence in ‘The Sisters’”, JJQ, vol. 21, no. 3 (Spring 1984), p. 247.

¹⁷ Chadwick, “Silence,” p. 247.

¹⁸ Chadwick, “Silence,” p. 247.

¹⁹ The chronology of the narrative, though, follows the boy’s slow discovery of Father Flynn’s past, a chronology which is of course different from the real sequence of events.

²⁰ Dubliners, p. 17.

²¹ Richard Ellmann, James Joyce (Oxford: OUP 1959), p.83.

“revelation of the whatness of a being [i.e. God]”²² which causes him to start his lonely itinerant reasoning. Evidently, Flynn’s behaviour of “[moping] by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself”²³ bears signs of distress and betrays an effort to try to cope with his discovery. But when Father Flynn is discovered in the confession-box, “wide-awake and laughing-like *softly* to himself”²⁴ (my italics), we hear a laughter of relief and of coming to terms with God’s silence rather than one of madness. It has also to be stressed that this scene takes place in the confession-box, as if Father Flynn had confessed to God about his doubts, and God still had remained silent, just as the priest had guessed. Father Flynn’s discussions with the boy need a more extensive examination since they reveal a certain spiritual kinship between the boy and the disbelieving priest.

The young boy and his mentor carry the same seed of disbelief in them. Although it is acknowledged by Uncle Jack as well as the boy that the priest taught him “a great deal,”²⁵ the contents of the teaching, as remembered by the boy, betrays the priest’s state or rather non-existence of his faith. His teachings actually fail to inspire even the mildest form of childlike faith in the boy. Instead, the priest mystifies the institution of the church; he hides a ‘god-less’ church in clouds of “theological subtleties.”²⁶ Even this young, fatherless and sensitive boy observes that the priest was turning the “simplest acts” into “complex and mysterious [...] institutions of the Church.”²⁷ So the priest’s own lack of spiritual enlightenment is clearly reflected in the boy’s recollections. The priest’s smile plays a crucial part in the understanding of his attitude towards the boy. He is described as “[smiling] and [nodding] his head twice or thrice,”²⁸ a habit which shows only when the boy is not able to answer the tricky but hair-splitting questions. We should see this smile in a more favourable light than many critics have done. It is certainly void of any homosexual, pederastic or sadistic connotations which would suggest that the boy is the victim of a queer, sadistic pleasure on Father Flynn’s side. On the contrary, I imagine the smile to be that of someone recollecting his own youth, his own communion-preparation lessons where he probably pattered just as the boy before him did. To me, the priest smiles

²² Richard Ellmann, James Joyce (Oxford: OUP 1959), p.83.

²³ Dubliners, p. 17.

²⁴ Dubliners, p. 17.

²⁵ Dubliners, p. 8.

²⁶ Chadwick, “Silence,” p.247.

²⁷ Dubliners, p. 11.

²⁸ Dubliners, p. 12.

sympathetically as he “pensively [... nods] his head”²⁹ over the boy’s hesitant answers. The ugly or rather unusual appearance of the smile and the boy’s initial discomfort are perfectly counterbalanced by the fact that this uneasiness is overcome as the boy had got to “know him well.”³⁰ It may well be that the priest remembered the days when he was a little boy, more naïve than the boy before him, with a childlike belief in God and absolute faith the authorities of the Church. In his present state, however, having accepted the silence of God, he cannot, by any means, instill a sense of faith in a God that he has ceased to believe in; he rather plants seeds of doubt in the youth. There are other details from the text that support the argument of a certain spiritual kinship between the boy and his mentor. For example, as the boy sits there with his aunt, Eliza and Nannie, he is offered wine and some cream-crackers which he both declines. Wine and cream-crackers evidently are “communion symbols”³¹. After a little while, “under cover” of “a silence [which] took possession of the little room,”³² the boy gets up and sips from his sherry, again not touching the crackers for fear of disturbing the silence. Since only “the priests partook of wine at communion”³³ at this period, we see the boy in the function of a priest. This clearly links the boy to his mentor on a symbolic level; but there is other evidence of the spiritual bond between the youth and the cleric, as can be demonstrated by the boy’s dream. In this dream, three aspects link the boy with the priest: the smile, his priestly powers to absolve Father Flynn of his sin and the vague notion about the discovery of the silence of God.

The smile appears in this scene as a significant hint as to the relationship between the two characters. Even in the dream, the smile appears on the priest’s moist lips. The boy himself adopts the same “feeble smile,”³⁴ a trait so typical of the paralytic and especially prominent in the part where the boy recollects his lessons and the muddled contents and subject matter of the teaching. In my opinion, the boy unconsciously tries to imitate this smile in his dream, but he does so feebly, as if he was not yet fully initiated or would not exactly follow Father Flynn’s footsteps by making different choices in life (we have already seen that the boy in the death-room

²⁹ Dubliners, p. 12.

³⁰ Dubliners, p. 12.

³¹ Walzl, “Dubliners,” p. 208.

³² Dubliners, p. 16.

³³ Walzl, “Dubliners,” p. 208.

³⁴ Dubliners, p. 9.

acts like a priest, but partakes only in the wine/blood and leaves the crackers/flesh aside). Besides, the priest and the boy are singled out by the simple fact that they are the only two characters who smile in 'The Sisters'. In the dream, there is a rudimentary understanding between him and the cleric, where in fact the roles of everyday life are reversed: the boy is invested with the priestly powers to absolve Father Flynn of the "simoniac of his sin."³⁵ By doing so, he assumes the same duties of the priest which had before filled him with awe due to their graveness. In addition, the boy also has a vague notion about the origin of Father Flynn's discovery of the silence of God. As he wanders and seeks enlightenment from the murmuring voice in the dream, he obviously is too young and intellectually immature to understand and fully grasp what the paralytic is trying to tell him although he is twice very close to discovering the real reason for the priest's smile: once in a dreamlike state, where the subconscious dominates, and once while awake. In the dream, the tension builds up: the boy finds himself in that "pleasant and vicious region"³⁶ where the paralytic is already anxiously waiting for him. The priest inaudibly begins to confess, causing the boy to wonder at the cause of the smile and the moist lips. Then, then tension trails off as the boy rather soberly remembers the plain physical reason for the smile and the spittle. Then, the boy is even closer to discovering Flynn's secret. This time, he is awake, walking the streets after checking the death notice at the door, trying to recollect his dream: he thinks himself to have been in "some land where the customs are strange – in Persia"³⁷ perhaps. This place may be identical with the "pleasant and vicious region"³⁸ mentioned before. The boy "[tries] to remember the end of the dream,"³⁹ but he cannot. Clearly, something felt unconsciously is kept from bubbling to the conscious surface of the young boy's mind.

What does this kinship between a dying, disbelieving and paralytic old priest and a young boy actually mean with regard to the story or the book as a whole? If we think of 'The Sisters' as a sort of prelude to the following stories, we can see the spiritual bond between the boy and the priest as an innate seed in the youth, with the possibility of germinating towards escape and freedom from oppressive moral and social authorities. If we take a broader outlook and consider the book as a whole,

³⁵ Dubliners, p. 9.

³⁶ Dubliners, p. 9.

³⁷ Dubliners, p. 12.

³⁸ Dubliners, p. 9.

³⁹ Dubliners, p. 12.

then we realize that this seed of freedom will gradually be blighted, as the characters progress in age and as they are increasingly affected by the paralysis until they are deprived of any will to escape. The forces hostile to this seed of not only personal and social but also artistic freedom are already at work in this very first story: we find hypocritical faith, slavish piety, deprived and destitute lives as shown by Eliza and Nannie, but also the proliferation of false middle-class morality, as represented by Uncle Jack and Old Cotter. Is the boy's fate, then, sealed? We cannot be sure as to how the boy reacts to the appalling news about Father Flynn's past, since "Joyce does not allow the reader to learn how damaging these last events are to the protagonist."⁴⁰ And this is exactly where Michael West sees the strength of the story: for him, it lies "in the beautifully human ambivalence with which the priest reveals his unconscious doubts only to his young disciple and in the boy's equally ambiguous and unconscious absorption of them."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Bernard Benstock, "The Sisters' and the Critics," *JJQ*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1966), p. 34.

⁴¹ Michael West, "Old Cotter and the Enigma of Joyce's 'The Sisters'," *Modern Philology* vol. 67, no. 4 (1970), p. 372.