

The “Broken Chalice”: Stasis, Sterility and Death in *The Dubliners*

Shritama Mukherjee

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

shritama1994@gmail.com

Abstract— James Joyce’s *The Dubliners* is replete with images of stagnancy in life. Discomfort and inescapability reign large in the lives of the characters in this collection of stories. The present paper is an attempt to understand the stagnancy in life that prevailed in Ireland of the early 1900s and how Joyce vehemently responded to it. His vision of his country and countrymen included an understanding of how the dreary and corrupt motherland encroached upon the lives of men and women so much so that neither the youth was spared nor the old and the dying. Ireland, in Joyce’s eyes, was decaying and rotting in spirit and that very strain had invaded the lives of his countrymen. This paper is an examination of how Joyce probes into the moral corruption and degeneration, examining the emotional stasis that had reduced his countrymen to mere “hollowmen”.

Keywords— *Broken Chalice, The Dubliners, hollowmen.*

James Joyce in a letter to C. P. Curran writes about his upcoming project, “I am writing a series of epicleti—ten—for a paper....I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (Gilbert, 1957, 55). The very basis of *The Dubliners* is founded on an inability to progress, a regression into the past and its traditions, a lament for the loss of values, of forgotten heroes and their bravery, a dying, diseased city and an impoverished existence. It was Joyce’s intention to capture the very soul of the city through its institutions—political, social and religious, and its men and women. He divided the stories in the collection in four groups—from childhood to adolescence to maturity, ending with the accounts of public life. What is pervasive in all the stories is a theme of inescapable dreariness and sterility of living. The theme of paralysis, set forth in the first story, ‘The Sisters’, is manifest in the later ones through images of entrapment, disillusionment, and death. Paralysis creeps in the mind and will of the characters and the city in general so much so that acts of resistance are absent and in its stead, a willing resignation to inertness, passivity and immobility. Joyce’s texts are often impregnated with profound moments of epiphany but in *The Dubliners*, we find epiphanies of negation and repudiation. This paper will attempt to examine the psychological and emotional stasis and stagnation in the characters from two stories in the

collection—‘The Sisters’ and ‘Eveline’, with particular focus on language, narration and the action.

The collection begins with ‘The Sisters’ in which we find the unnamed child hero pondering over death, religion and oddities of the human nature. He is disillusioned at a very early age with the humankind. Through the eyes of his narrator, and in a seemingly childish diction and manner of narration, Joyce portrays the moral corruption and degeneration of the Irish society where even the highest institution of sanctity comes under the scanner and vehement criticism under the veil of propriety. The holy and the laity both form a picture of the unwholesomeness of life in Dublin where the former presents possible symptoms of the syphilitic insanity and the latter an uncomfortable acceptance of a cramped existence. The scene in ‘The Sisters’ opens poignantly and with a negation: “There was no hope for him this time” (Joyce, 1914,9), states the narrator, while pondering over the several nights he had spent anticipating death. In the first paragraph itself, we are introduced to all the themes that Joyce intends to work with—night, paralysis, simony, gnomon, death, corpse, darkness and fear. The absolute lack of any positivity and the utter confidence in the finality of the human condition is strikingly uncanny. The whole story is filled with aging, dying men and women with one or the other deformity—while the priest was a paralytic, the sisters, Nannie and Eliza, suffer from joint and hearing

issues. “When the priest was alive, he and his sisters formed an unfortunate family circle. They were aging, impoverished, needy, damaged individuals....Nannie is mute and Eliza uses malapropisms and pauses during speech” (Timins, 2012, 9). Immediately after the dying priest is mentioned, our focus is shifted to Old Cotter. He, along with the child hero’s uncle and aunt, forms a triad of the dying and the decaying. It gives an impression of the entrapment of youth in a stifling atmosphere. The physical deformation and dying resonates through the whole story “as a disease of the spirit” (Timins, 2012, 8). The physical paralysis works its way up to the paralysis of mind and soul, will power and action, language and intention.

The final version of the text of ‘The Sisters’ has a different opening than the original Irish Homestead version. Through subsequent revisions, Joyce made the first paragraph more direct, hard-hitting and as a fit introduction for the themes of his succeeding stories in the collection. The Homestead version reads: “Three nights in succession I had found myself in Great Britain Street at that hour, as if by Providence. Three nights also I had raised my eyes to that lighted square of window and speculated” (Walzl, 1973, 383). What was a mere speculation in the original version, is replaced by certainty about the knowledge of death in the final version. The boy narrator says: “...for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of the corpse” (Joyce, 1914, 9). Joyce does away with the repetitive “three nights” in the original version and is direct with his negation in the final: “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke” (Joyce, 1914, 9). The original version, however, was able to portray the feeling of a limited existence and space—the Great Britain Street—as if the world encompassed by it was the extent to which one was allowed to travel. The feeling of limitedness, the clipping of space and the rejection of the outer world depict the stagnancy in the Irish society and mind. It was his intention to capture the moral degeneration and the religious corruption in the Irish society; the staleness of existence and the stagnancy in ideas and ideals in the country as such find expression in Joyce’s stories. Although a student of medicine, Joyce was more interested in expressing his discontent over the moral degeneration of Dublin. The “cosmopolitan canker” (Timins, 2012, 449) that Joyce terms syphilis to be, must not be taken as the only point of criticism in the text. It should be read, as the other stories in the collection are, as a canker that preys on the mind, soul and spirit, and Dublin as the main infection. The moral degeneration and stagnation prevalent in society that Joyce

attacks through his stories is his main objective. The stories are not limited to the mere scientific terms or to the everyday as such but transcends to the universal.

The idea of religion as a possible means of salvation has been done away with to intensify the feeling of the entrapped Irish soul, where the fate of every individual is tied in the same, monotonous chain of a closed world, without any means of escape. There is no or very little light in their lives—phrases like “night after night”, “evening invade”, “faintly and evenly” (Joyce, 1914, 12-47) dominate the scene. Most of the action, too, takes place under the veil of darkness and night. The freedom from materialism and corruption that religion promises has been subverted with the figure of the priest. “Symbolically, he has been discussed as the Irish God, the Catholic Church, a Father figure and personification of the theological virtue, faith” (Walzl, 1973, 375). But this goes through an upheaval with the very persona of the priest as recounted by the narrator. Father Flynn’s figure in the “little dark room” presents sinister notions in the minds of the narrator as well as the readers as he would feel “uneasy” when the priest smiled, uncovering “his big, discoloured teeth, and let his tongue lie on his lower lip” which made the boy feel “uneasy” (Joyce, 1914, 13-14). The queerness, moral and spiritual degeneration that marks the lives of Joyce’s characters and their very spirit is insinuated by a possible incestuous relationship between the priest and his sisters. The unknown cause of the siblings’ syphilitic condition, according to Michael Timins, “adds to the sense of unease and possible corruption within ‘The Sisters’ itself and the collection, *Dubliners*, as a whole” (Timins, 2012, 448). Alluding to certain letters penned by Joyce to his friends, publishers and his brother, Michael Timins makes stronger his claim that it was Joyce’s intention to not just toy with the idea of religious and moral corruption in the stories but to make them all the more palpable by taking seemingly innocent characters to the zenith of ignominy.

The feeling of being shut in a world with no respite is made evident when we hear the narrator say “I had been freed from something by his death” (Joyce, 1914, 13). The stronghold of religion is now almost claustrophobic and not guidance for spiritual enlightenment. The future holds no promise of new life but fatigue, exhaustion and the inevitability of death. The physical paralysis gets a more universal dimension and treatment in the text through the emotional inertness, passivity and immobility of the characters. It is this paralysis of the soul and the general stagnancy of Irish life that Joyce intended to capture. There

is passivity in the youth which relegates action to an unknown temporality and the obsession with death in the boy sets the scene for *The Dubliners*. There is no movement, but an encircling motion where every route comes back to dreary Dublin, to the musty lanes and the stifling existence. Death is a strange obsession as it fills the narrator with fear and yet he wishes to “look upon its deadly work” (Joyce, 1914, 9). In his dream, he too smiles to “absolve the simoniac of his sin” (Joyce, 1914, 12). The young child would partake of the sin of the sinner—readying himself for a life of sin, taking on the share of the past generation as well—it is this sterility of life, ideals and ambitions that impregnate the text.

Physical and symbolic diseases plague Joyce’s narrative and in order to heighten the sense of the malaise pervading the characters, and the nation in general, the characters in the texts are always suffering, either from physical or emotional discomfort. While the priest, Father Flynn, has had multiple strokes, the crooked and bent physique of Nannie suggests a form of syphilitic disorder—*tabes dorsalis*—the damaging of the spinal cord. Eliza’s hyperacusis is symptomatic of a syphilitic hearing disability. Timins, in the first section of his essay attempts to define and give a history of syphilis from which he furthers his claim of the sisters being syphilitic as well. He gives a number of instances, such as when the boy narrator and his aunt arrive at the house of mourning, the latter shook hands with Nannie “as it would have been unseemly to have shouted at her” (Joyce, 1914, 15). The narrator also notes how silent it is downstairs, and this, Timins reads as a deliberate arrangement on the part of the sisters because of Eliza’s hypersensitivity to sound. Moreover, when Eliza talks of her brother’s unfulfilled wish to visit their ancestral place, her malapropism becomes apparent—“them with the rheumatic wheels” (Joyce, 1914, 19) as does her discomfort when taking the usual modes of transportation, which screech and are usually noisy. Nannie’s head is bowed and she can scarcely be seen above the bannister-rail of the stairs. This crookedness of her frame suggests, in medical terms, degeneration of the spine. This, according to Michael Timins, is rather odd as Nannie is not older than sixty-five and such deformation occurs at later age in a person’s life, if, at all, it is due to advanced age. Timins structures his essay by dealing with the symptoms of the three characters separately. In the original *Irish Homestead* version, Eliza tells the aunt that the priest was “always a little queer” (Timins, 2012, 449) and taking a personal account from Stanislaus Joyce’s diary entry about Joyce’s own ideas on

syphilis that the syphilitic “‘contagion is congenital’...that the cause of this mutual infection was familial” (Timins, 2012, 449). Developing on this, Timins adds that the culmination of the disease in the priest was his first stroke when he broke the chalice and was never the same again. In Nannie, the same disease has manifested through deafness and deformity of the spine: “her head is not just bowed, but her upper spine is severely angled forward about 90 degrees” (Timins, 2012, 447). Eliza presents symptoms of Tulio’s phenomenon—a hypersensitivity to sound—caused by syphilis and this, in turn, is symbolic of the general paralysis of the spirit of Dublin. The questions and central argument that he poses are established through medical enquiries and theories. While Nannie’s joint issues are not merely rheumatoid arthritis but symptomatic of Charcot’s joint, which are made evident through her uneven gait and worn out bones and joints. Neurosyphilis manifests in different forms, and Timins being a skeletal radiologist reads into the details provided such as Nannie’s “clumsily” hooked skirt. Joyce himself being a medical student for three years, finds the choicest details for his narrative and it is through the eyes of a medical professional as Timins that the story gets a different dimension altogether.

Death and the dead reign large in the narrative of the stories and the presence of the absent figures stimulate the living—not to prod them to an energetic impulse, throbbing with life but a death like existence. Eveline’s dying mother too warns her daughter that the end of all pleasure is pain, “DerevaunSeraun! DerevaunSeraun” (Joyce, 1914, 47). It is a negation of the eros, the life principle and an affirmation of thanatos. It is because of her clinging to past traditions and the “Irish bourgeoisie society that ensnares and paralyzes” Eveline (Walzl, 1961, 224). Eveline is denied subjectivity and a subjective consciousness as such. She does not speak in the entire story nor is she allowed a vocabulary of her own. There is a deliberate movement to the past—a reliance on memory—the past stifles the future. She is reported to have acted in a certain way, to have felt in a certain way—she is a point of view, a recollection of the storyteller and not an individual in her own right. She acts as her mother had directed her to or out of fear of her father, and when she does decide to live, as an individual, she fails to—she falls back in the same entrapment that she has etched out for herself—she is, at best, “passive, like a helpless animal” (Joyce, 1914, 48). The final moment of epiphany is one of inaction without any “sign of love, farewell or recognition” (Joyce, 1914, 48). She is directed into a life of sterility when it should have

been one of fruition and maturity—in modified roles of a wife, mother and a free individual but all she musters courage for is “dusty cretonne”(Joyce, 1914,42).

The quest for both the protagonists in ‘The Sisters’ and ‘Eveline’ remains unfulfilled as made evident through the symbol of the broken chalice. It represents the hollowness of culture, morals, custom, and religion. That in which the blood of the son of God is contained, is tampered. The broken chalice is at once Ireland with its “special odour of corruption” (Stuart, 1957, 79) and at the same time, the individuals. The characters move from painful realization to total unawareness and await the final hour. It was a search for light that met with windows covered in blinds, a substitution of life in the tropical and sunny Buenos Aires with that of a dark, nightmarish one in Dublin; a quest for a life that can never find fruition, that can never be contained in the chalice—it is an impossible quest not because of its magnitude but the very aim that constitutes it.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gilbert, Stuart, ed. *Letters*. London: Viking Press. 1957.
- [2] Joyce, James. *The Dubliners*. Scotland: Grant Richards Ltd.: 1914.
- [3] Walzl, Florence L. “Joyce’s ‘The Sisters’: A Development”. *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4. JSTOR. 1973.
- [4] -----“Pattern of Paralysis in Joyce’s ‘Dubliners’: A Study of the Original Framework”. *College English*, Vol. 22, No. JSTOR. 1961.
- [5] Timins, Michael. “The Sisters: Their Disease”. *James Joyce Quarterly*, Volume 49, no. 3/4. 2012.