

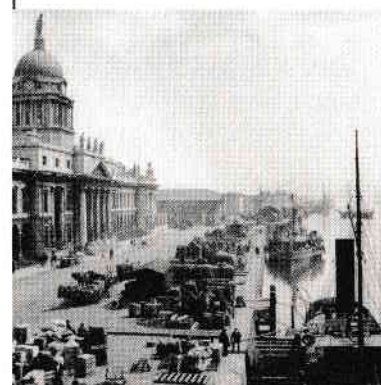
LBRIS

We know
books



James Augustine Joyce (1935) by Jacques-Emile Blanche.

A selection from Dubliners



James Joyce

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Introduction, notes and activities

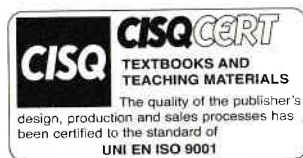
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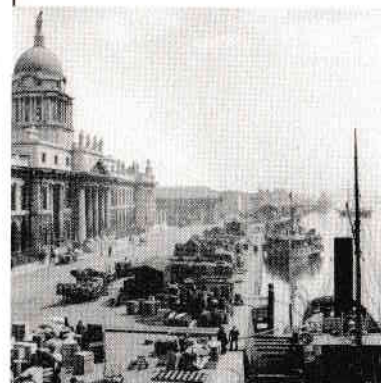


Drawing by Wyndham Lewis, 1921.

Pre-reading Activities

1. *Dubliners* is a collection of short stories. What other short stories have you read? What do you expect of a short story?
2. It is not, however, a random collection. Each story stands on its own, but *Dubliners* as a whole is more than the sum of the stories. This kind of text is called a 'short-story cycle'. Have you read any other short-story cycles? What do you expect of a short-story cycle?
3. James Joyce is a modernist. Have you read any other modernist fiction? What do you expect of modernist writing?
4. As its title suggests, *Dubliners* is about a city and its inhabitants. Have you read other works of literature in which the setting is a central concern?

The Sisters



The Sisters¹

There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. He had often said to me: *I am not long for this world*, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*.² It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like



These symbols indicate the beginning and the end of the four stories recorded.

1. *sisters* : the sisters in question are clearly Father Flynn's sisters. It should be remembered, however, that 'sister' also means nun.
2. *paralysis* : Father Flynn has suffered three strokes, and is thus physically paralysed. Here, however, Joyce is introducing us to the main theme of the book: the religious, social and moral paralysis of turn-of-the-century Dublin.

the word *gnomon*¹ in the Euclid and the word *simony*² in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out³ my stirabout⁴ he said, as if returning to some former remark of his:

—No, I wouldn't say he was exactly ... but there was something queer ... there was something uncanny⁵ about him. I'll tell you my opinion...

He began to puff⁶ at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms;⁷ but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery.

—I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases.... But it's hard to say....

He began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory. My uncle saw me staring⁸ and said to me:

1. *gnomon* ['nəʊmən]: the Greek geometrician Euclid (c. 300 BC) defines a gnomon as what is left of a parallelogram when a similar parallelogram containing one of its corners is removed.
2. *simony* ['saɪməni]: traffic in sacred things, such as the buying or selling of ecclesiastical offices, pardons or emoluments.
3. *ladling out*: distributing with a large spoon.
4. *stirabout*: Anglo-Irish for 'porridge'.
5. *uncanny* [ʌn'kæni]: disturbingly strange or weird.
6. *puff*: light abrupt emission of smoke.
7. *faints and worms*: 'faints' are impure spirits which come through first and last during the process of distillation; 'worms' are the long spiral tubes which are connected to the head of a still.
8. *staring*: looking fixedly with eyes wide open.

—Well, so your old friend is gone, you'll be sorry to hear.

—Who? said I.

—Father Flynn.

—Is he dead?

—Mr Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house.

I knew that I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me. My uncle explained to old Cotter.

—The youngster and he were great friends. The old chap taught him a great deal, mind you; and they say he had a great wish for him.¹

—God have mercy on his soul, said my aunt piously.

Old Cotter looked at me for a while. I felt that his little beady² black eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate. He returned to his pipe and finally spat rudely into the grate.³

—I wouldn't like children of mine, he said, to have too much to say to a man like that.

—How do you mean, Mr Cotter? asked my aunt.

—What I mean is, said old Cotter, it's bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be... Am I right, Jack?

—That's my principle, too, said my uncle. Let him learn to box his corner.⁴ That's what I'm always saying to that

1. *a great wish for him*: 'great esteem' – from the Irish 'meas'.
2. *beady*: round and glittering.
3. *grate*: the frame of metal bars on which the fire is lit in the fireplace.
4. *to box his corner*: to take care of himself, stand up for himself.

Rosicrucian¹ there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper² every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that's what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large... Mr Cotter might take a pick of³ that leg of mutton, he added to my aunt.

—No, no, not for me, said old Cotter.

My aunt brought the dish from the safe⁴ and laid it on the table.

—But why do you think it's not good for children, MrCotter? she asked.

—It's bad for children, said old Cotter, because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...

I crammed⁵ my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger. Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!

It was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul

1. *Rosicrucian* [ˌrɒʊzɪˈkruːʃn]: a member of the fraternity of religious mystics, the Ancient Order Rosae Crucis, revived in the fifteenth century by Christian Rosenkreuz (possibly a legendary figure). The order was revived in England in the nineteenth century when people became fascinated with the occult. It was generally associated with a dreamy withdrawal from worldly cares.

2. *nipper* (slang): boy, lad.

3. *take a pick of*: eat some of.

4. *safe*: meat safe – a ventilated cupboard in which meat is kept to keep it fresh and cool.

5. *crammed*: filled to excess.

receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist¹ with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.

The next morning after breakfast I went down to look at the little house in Great Britain Street. It was an unassuming² shop, registered under the vague name of *Drapery*. The drapery consisted mainly of children's bootees and umbrellas; and on ordinary days a notice used to hang in the window, saying: *Umbrellas Re-covered*. No notice was visible now for the shutters³ were up. A crape⁴ bouquet was tied to the door-knocker with ribbon. Two poor women and a telegram boy were reading the card pinned on⁵ the crape. I also approached and read:

July 1st, 1895

The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of S. Catherine's
Church, Meath Street), aged sixty-five years.

R.I.P.⁶

The reading of the card persuaded me that he was dead and I was disturbed to find myself at check.⁷ Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his arm-chair by the fire, nearly smothered in

1. *moist* [mɔɪst] *with spittle*: slightly wet with saliva

2. *unassuming*: modest.

3. *shutters*: moveable panels fixed to the window for security.

4. *crape* [kreɪp]: (modern English 'crepe') black, semi-transparent material with a wrinkled or folded surface.

5. *pinned on*: attached to with a pin.

6. *R.I.P.*: abbreviation for the Latin 'requiescant in pace', may the dead person rest in peace.

7. *at check*: taken by surprise.

his great-coat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast¹ for him and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze.² It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor. Even as he raised his large trembling hand to his nose little clouds of smoke dribbled³ through his fingers over the front of his coat. It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of a week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious.

I wished to go in and look at him but I had not the courage to knock. I walked away slowly along the sunny side of the street, reading all the theatrical advertisements in the shop-windows as I went. I found it strange that 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. I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said the night before, he had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome⁴ and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte, and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest.

1. *High Toast* : the name of a brand of snuff (tobacco to be inhaled through the nose).
2. *doze* [dəʊz] : light sleep.
3. *dribbled* : (here) escaped.
4. *Irish college in Rome* : seminaries were forbidden in Ireland until the foundation of Maynooth in the late eighteenth century. Subsequently, Irish colleges were set up in Louvain, Lille, Douai, Paris and Rome. Some of these still exist.



The interior of St Catherine's, Meath Street.

Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions. Often when I thought of this I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting¹ one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice. Sometimes he used to put me through the responses of the Mass which he had made me learn by heart; and, as I pattered,² he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches³ of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip – a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.

As I walked along in the sun I remembered old Cotter's words and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in the dream. I remembered that I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange –

1. *halting* : unsure, lacking in confidence.
2. *pattered* : recited them.
3. *pinch* : the quantity of something (e.g. snuff, salt) it is possible to pick up between the thumb and forefinger.

in Persia,¹ I thought... . But I could not remember the end of the dream.

In the evening my aunt took me with her to visit the house of mourning.² It was after sunset; but the window-panes of the houses that looked to the west reflected the tawny gold³ of a great bank of clouds. Nannie received us in the hall; and, as it would have been unseemly⁴ to have shouted at her, my aunt shook hands with her for all. The old woman pointed upwards interrogatively and, on my aunt's nodding, proceeded to toil up⁵ the narrow staircase before us, her bowed head being scarcely⁶ above the level of the banister-rail. At the first landing she stopped and beckoned⁷ us forward encouragingly towards the open door of the dead-room.⁸ My aunt went in and the old woman, seeing that I hesitated to enter, began to beckon to me again repeatedly with her hand.

I went in on tiptoe.⁹ The room through the lace end of the blind was suffused with dusky¹⁰ golden light amid which the candles looked like pale thin flames. He had been coffined.¹¹

1. *Persia* : an important theme in *Dubliners* is that of the attraction of the East. Joyce himself went East to Zürich and Trieste, in order to escape from the paralysis of life in Dublin. Remember, too, that Christianity has its roots in the East.
2. *mourning* : expression of deep sadness for a person's death.
3. *tawny gold* : reddish gold colour.
4. *unseemly* : impolite.
5. *toil up* : mount with difficulty.
6. *scarcely* : only just.
7. *beckoned* : made a summoning sign.
8. *dead-room* : room where the corpse lay.
9. *on tiptoe* : with the back part of the feet (the heels) raised to enable him to go in very quietly.
10. *dusky* : dark or obscure in colour.
11. *coffined* : put in his coffin.

Nannie gave the lead and we three knelt down at the foot of the bed. I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman's mutterings¹ distracted me. I noticed how clumsily² her skirt was hooked at the back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down³ all to one side. The fancy⁴ came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin.

But no. When we rose and went up to the head of the bed I saw that he was not smiling. There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hands loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent,⁵ grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a scanty⁶ white fur. There was a heavy odour in the room – the flowers.

We blessed ourselves and came away. In the little room downstairs we found Eliza seated in his arm-chair in state. I groped my way⁷ towards my usual chair in the corner while Nannie went to the sideboard and brought out a decanter of sherry⁸ and some wine-glasses. She set these on the table and invited us to take a little glass of wine. Then, at her sister's bidding,⁹ she poured out the sherry into the glasses and passed them to us. She pressed me to take some cream crackers¹⁰ also

1. *mutterings* : low indistinct utterances.
2. *clumsily* : awkwardly, without grace.
3. *trodden down* : damaged, worn away through use.
4. *fancy* : idea.
5. *truculent* : aggressive, fierce.
6. *scanty* : very small quantity of.
7. *groped my way* : felt my way blindly.
8. *sherry* : sherry wine, rather like Marsala.
9. *bidding* : an order or invitation to do something.
10. *cream crackers* : dry biscuits. Possibly a symbol for the host in the Eucharist.

but I declined because I thought I would make too much noise eating them. She seemed to be somewhat disappointed at my refusal and went over quietly to the sofa where she sat down behind her sister. No one spoke: we all gazed at¹ the empty fireplace.

My aunt waited until Eliza sighed and then said:

—Ah, well, he's gone to a better world.

Eliza sighed² again and bowed her head in assent. My aunt fingered the stem of her wine-glass before sipping³ a little.

—Did he ... peacefully? she asked.

—Oh, quite peacefully, ma'am,⁴ said Eliza. You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be praised.

—And everything ...?

—Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday⁵ and anointed him and prepared him and all.

—He knew then?

—He was quite resigned.

—He looks quite resigned, said my aunt.

—That's what the woman we had in to wash him said. She said he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. No one would think he'd make such a beautiful corpse.

—Yes, indeed, said my aunt.

She sipped a little more from her glass and said:

1. *gazed at* : looked vacantly at.
2. *sighed* : made a long, audible exhalation expressing sadness.
3. *sipping* : drinking a very small quantity.
4. *ma'am* : 'Madam' – a respectful form of address (now rarely used).
5. *a Tuesday* : Irish usage for 'on Tuesday'.