

Grace by james joyce essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ The grace of God is infinite and eternal. As it had no beginning, so it can have no end, and being an attribute of God, it is as boundless as infinitude” (“ Precious Grace”). With this description, how can one go through his or her life without desiring grace? James Joyce first published “ Grace” in his book, *Dubliners*, in June of 1914. Even as a fallen Catholic, Joyce still has many allusions to Catholicism in his stories, and in this story those allusions are to the basic knowledge stories of the Bible.

Although these Biblical and religious references are numerous, Joyce truly makes a point to ridicule the Catholic faith. Mr. Kernan is the main character as he struggles with alcohol and being a good family man in general. In an attempt to sway him towards Catholicism, Mr. Power, Mr. Cunningham, Mr. M’Coy, and Mr. Fogarty plan to take Mr. Kernan to a retreat at the church. In “ Grace,” Joyce extensively uses thoughtfully planned writing techniques as he works to bring the themes of Catholicism to light.

James Joyce uses many symbols and literary techniques in his short story, “ Grace,” ultimately satirizing the Catholic faith and its relationship with commerce. Joyce’s use of symbols brings to light very noticeable Catholic teachings, but uses them to poke fun at Catholicism. The most notable symbolic allusions to Bible stories are the allusions to Jesus’ crown of thorns, as there are two in the short story. The first occurs following Mr. Kernan’s fall when the crowd forms around him.

The fall drew quite a bit of blood from his head, and Joyce describes the scene with the quote; “ A dark medal of blood had formed itself near the man’s head on the tessellated floor” (Joyce). When thinking about a medal

one thinks about a circular shape, and when this blood is circular near a man's head, it brings to mind the crown of thorns being placed on Jesus' head in the crucifixion story. A circular pool of blood by a man's head bears a certain resemblance to the idea of the crown of thorns. However, this Christ parallel is overshadowed by the fact that this man whom fell down the stairs was completely drunk.

The fall symbolizes the fall of man from God's grace, which truly is a Catholic teaching. However, that Joyce creates the scene in a pub satirizes the faith as a whole by making the presumption that Catholic fallings occurred from stupid decisions. Joyce strategically places symbols in order to satirize Catholicism. Along with the medal of blood alluding to the crown of thorns, Joyce also uses the words "thorny points" when Mr. Kernan is trying to remember theology. In this case, thorny is describing points of religion.

So, not only does it bring us back to the story of the crown of thorns, but also, it shows Joyce's dissatisfaction with the Catholic religion, as the points are pointy and painful, as well as difficult to recall since Mr. Kernan gives up trying to recall these points. When the men finally do say something relating to the Catholic Church, whether it is about a former pope or that pope's motto, they are completely incorrect in their statements. The pope they talk about is Pope Leo XIII. They say his great idea was combining the Latin and Greek churches when in fact that is not a true statement.

Where Joyce makes the most mockery of these gentlemen is when they discuss Pope Leo XIII's motto. Mr. Cunningham says his motto was, "Lux upon Lux - Light upon Light." This simply makes him look like a complete

idiot. No man would have a motto partially in Latin and partially in English. It just does not happen that way. Even worse is that when Mr. Fogarty tries to correct him by saying something similar, partially in English and partially in Latin.

Finally, the worst is done by Mr. Cunningham once again when he says the pope preceding Pope Leo XIII had a motto of "Crux upon Crux. Again this is a most foolish claim that is made. Neither of these two phrases was the motto of their respective popes nor was spoken in proper tongue. These phrases were either all in Latin or all in English. Mixing languages was unheard of at the time. The absurdity with which the gentlemen speak to Mr. Kernan about the Catholic faith truly shows Joyce's satirical nature in the short story.

Another traditional Bible story alluded to by Joyce is the story of Jesus curing the blind man, and giving him sight. This one comes as Mr.

Cunningham tells a story of an elderly man who bit his tongue in the same manner as Mr. Kernan. Mr. Cunningham says, "The tongue had filled in again, so that no one could see a trace of the bite" (Joyce). Much like Jesus healing the blind man so he could see again, restoring one of his senses, Mr. Cunningham is insinuating that Mr. Kernan's sense of taste and ability to talk will be restored to him as though it had never disappeared. Jesus healed the blind man, and Mr. Kernan's friends are attempting to convince him that he will be cured also, through Jesus at the retreat.

Where Joyce truly delves into the satire of the Catholic Church is the entire scene of the men in the church for the retreat. Despite their inaccurate theological beliefs, the men convince Mr. Kernan to join them for the retreat.

One of the main persuaders for Mr. Kernan was the fact that the priest was Father Purdon whom is described as, "... a man of the world like ourselves" (Joyce). The specific wording of this phrase is important, as this is where the meanings of the story's title begin to show themselves. On one level, it is clear that the men intervening want Mr.

Kernan to encounter the divine grace that comes with confessing his sins and promising to improve his unruly behavior. On the other hand, however, Joyce is merging ideas of religion and commerce in a way that lends the meaning of his story a pervasive ambiguity. After getting to the church Mr. Kernan feels more comfortable seeing familiar faces. Then Father Purdon ascends the pulpit. Joyce describes the scene portraying Father Purdon kneeling down and turning towards the red light above the altar. In Dublin, Purdon is the name of a street in the red light district that was home to its brothels.

Through using this name and having the priest face the red light, Joyce satirizes the Church and its connection with commerce, and at very most, prostitution. Along with this, Father Purdon is shown how he is "a man of the world" in the Bible passage he reads. The verse from Luke 16: 13 says, "For the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. Wherefore make unto yourselves friends out of the mammon of iniquity so that when you die they may receive you into everlasting dwellings." However, this is a slightly altered verse.

The true passage says, "... so that when you shall fail they may receive you into everlasting dwellings." These alterations by Father Purdon make the

verse more relatable to money and commerce than it truly is. There is no conflict between worldliness and Godliness in Purdon's eyes, and the priest concludes by aligning himself directly with mammon when he compares himself to an accountant. The satirical nature of "Grace" explicitly comes out in the scene at the retreat. Joyce's ultimate symbol in "Grace" is the use of candles in the story. Mr. Kernan refuses to hold any candles, or even be involved with using candles.

The candles represent the light, or goodness, of the church during the retreat ceremony. It could be for this reason that Mr. Kernan declines any use of candles. Perhaps he knows that he is not a good person. Perhaps he feels he does not deserve to hold the light of the church in his hands. Perhaps that light will illuminate the hidden darkness inside him - his alcoholism, his lack of family values, his inadequate religious doings. All of these are possibilities for Mr. Kernan's adamant denial of holding or having anything to do with candles.

The candles and their light are a key symbol in "Grace," and the light of the candles creates an intriguing paradox with darkness. James Joyce is an incredible writer when it comes to leaving his readers on a ledge. He leaves so much ambiguity. For example, just at the end of "Grace" he leaves the questions of whether Mr. Kernan finds himself all well inside or whether he needs to rectify his wrongs and receive God's grace. There are many explanations of what this is truly accomplishing within the story, and that is exactly Joyce's goal in ending the story where he does.

He leaves it open to interpretation. Some believe Mr. Kernan will see himself as a good man who needs no rectifying, and yet others will believe the exact opposite that he sees himself as a terrible sinner who is in dire need of God's saving grace. The ambiguity left to the reader is whether or not Mr. Kernan will be saved or will continue down his path of worldliness. With Joyce's satirical critique of the Catholic Church epitomized by Father Purdon, however, it seems that religion and mammon are not far removed. James Joyce uses many symbols and literary techniques in his short story, " Grace," ultimately satirizing the Catholic faith and its relationship with commerce.