

# The erotic in joyce's "a painful case"



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The characters whom inhabit Joyce's world in "Dubliners," often have, as Harvard Literature Professor Fischer stated in lecture, a "limited way" of thinking about and understanding themselves and the world around them. Such "determinism," however, operates not on a broad cultural scale, but works in smaller, more local, more interior and more idiosyncratic ways. That is, the forces which govern Joyce's characters are not necessarily cultural or socioeconomic in nature, but rather, as Prof. Fischer stated, are "tiny," and work on a more intimate level. In any case, as a result of such "forces", these stories often tend to be about something, as Prof. Fischer said, that doesn't happen, about the "romance of yearning and self-disappointment." Joyce's story "A Painful Case" is a perfect example of a story about something that doesn't happen, and more specifically, about "the romance of yearning." It is through such yearning, however, and the various "erotic" forms that such yearning takes, that Joyce's characters are able to transcend the "forces" which govern their lives. In "A Painful Case" the erotic takes on three separate forms: mental, physical, and what I call, "auditory." Although all three play a role in the story, it is only through "auditory" eroticism that Joyce's protagonist, Mr. Duffy, comes to experience a moment of "self-transcendence." While "auditory" eroticism may serve, in the end, as the conduit for Duffy's self-transformation, initially it is "mental" eroticism that brings together Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico. Joyce writes, "Little by little he (Duffy) entangled his thoughts with hers. He lent her books, provided her with ideas, shared his intellectual life with her. She listened to all" (110). Joyce uses the word "entangled" to frame the "mental" eroticism that he describes. "Entangled" instantly connotes an erotic physical entwining of bodies, but Joyce instead applies it to "thoughts." Thoughts, rather than

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bodies, are "entangled," and their mutual exchange of "ideas" is described as "intercourse." We are told that "in return" for "theories", "facts" are "given out" (111). Joyce, by using phrases like "intercourse", "in return" and "given out," builds an "erotic" framework" into which he inserts "ideas" and "facts" and theories," thus reinforcing the notion that the transmission of such "facts" and "theories" must necessarily take on a distinctly erotic dimension. Only two paragraphs later, once Duffy and Mrs. Sinico become more closely acquainted, does Joyce, nearly verbatim, repeat this sentence, writing: "Little by little, as their thoughts entangled, they spoke of subjects less remote" (111). Notice that whereas before it was Duffy who "entangled his thoughts" with Mrs. Sinico's, in the second instance a shift occurs in the subject, so now it is "their thoughts" which entangle. In the first instance Duffy plays the typical male role of aggressor; it is he who initiates the "entangling." In the second, however, the "entangling" is mutual, as suggested by the passive verb tense. Such a shift only takes on significance when we consider the "physical" forms eroticism takes on in "A Painful Case." The first, and only, instance of actual physical contact comes when Mrs. Sinico loses control of her emotions and "caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek" (112). In this case it is Mrs. Sinico who acts as the aggressor; it is she who initiates physical intimacy with Duffy. The roles have been reversed; where Duffy played the aggressor in "entangling" his mind with hers, it is she who plays the aggressor in entangling her hand with his. But although Duffy and Mrs. Sinico share "facts" and "ideas" with one another in a "mentally" erotic fashion, they never, through such sharing, are "united." And when "physical" eroticism is attempted, the two actually separate. Thus it neither through physical, nor

mental "eroticism," but as we shall see, "auditory" eroticism that the two eventually are brought together. The first instance of this occurs when Joyce writes, "The dark discreet room, their isolation, the music that still vibrated in their ears united them" (111). As with the description of "mental eroticism," (i. e. "thoughts entangling"), Joyce couches "auditory eroticism" in physically erotic terms as well. It is through sound, in this case "music," music which we are told "vibrates," that the two are brought together, "united." The setting, "a dark discreet room", the way in which the music is described, "vibrating" and the use of the phrase "united," all suggest a kind of romantic, physically erotic union. Similarly, Joyce later describes how Duffy "seemed to feel her voice touch his ear..." (118). By describing a voice as "touching" an "ear," Joyce again suggests a physical act of eroticism. Unlike, however, the "touching of their hands," which Joyce says Duffy imagines as well, the idea of a "voice touching an ear" suggests not only external "touching", but because a voice enters one's body and soul, also connotes images of penetration. A voice, unlike hands, penetrates; committing the most erotic act of all. It is not, however, until the end of the story that we are able to understand not only how "sound" and "voice" functions in a "auditory erotic" fashion, but how such eroticism is responsible for Duffy's, albeit impermanent, self-transcendence. In a passage which Professor Fischer would label a Joycean "moment" or "unit," he writes, "He turned his eyes to the grey gleaming river, winding along towards Dublin. Beyond the river he saw a goods train winding out of Kingsbridge Station, like a worm with a fiery head winding through the darkness, obstinately and laboriously. It passed slowly out of sight; but still he heard in his ears the laborious drone of the engine reiterating the

syllables of her name. He turned back the way he had come, the rhythm of the engine pounding in his ears. He began to doubt the reality of what memory had told him. He halted under a tree and allowed the rhythm to die away. He could not feel her near him in the darkness nor her voice touch his ear. He waited for some minutes listening. He could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone" (118). We must first of all treat Joyce's sexually explicit metaphor of a train as a " worm with a fiery head winding through the darkness." There are obvious overtly phallic connotations here, and it is this explicitness which is so surprising; Joyce's tone in this instance differs severely from other erotic moments in the story. While " entangling thoughts" or voices " touching ears" may hold vague erotic undertones, Joyce's metaphor here is so graphic, so explicit and so overt that it can be read as " cliché." The idea of a train symbolizing a penis is not, in any way, new. Joyce, then, in another abrupt change of tone, breaks out of his " realism" and tell us that the " drone of the engine" reiterates " the syllables of her name" (118). This is a surreal, magical moment; clearly the drone of the engine wouldn't, in " real life," sound her name, but Duffy hears it this way. It is in this moment, when he hears the train and then " hears" her name that " auditory eroticism" is fully realized. That is, Joyce frames the surreal moment in a fully erotic, although cliched, manner: a " worm with a fiery head. This frame suggests that in " hearing" (magically) her name, he thus consummates, sexually, his relationship with her. In this instance " physical hearing" and " magical hearing" become one; he hears her name, and thus he consummates, in his mind, their relationship. Duffy experiences a moment of self-transcendence. He goes outside of, if only for a moment, his own " categories" or ways of

thinking and feeling. But what exactly constitute such "categories?" Duffy is a man who would catch "himself listening to the sound of his own voice...He heard the strange impersonal voice which he recognized as his own, insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness. We cannot give ourselves, it said: we are our own" (112). It is this inexplicable "it," this "strange impersonal voice," which he knows is his own yet has no power over, that prevents him from loving, from consummating his love and from giving himself fully to his lover. This is how he "is," how his body and brain and soul work. "It" limits what he can feel and do. Thus after having just witnessed "venal and furtive loves" and having felt himself "outcast from life's feast," Duffy experiences a transcendent, surreal moment where he, in an erotic and clichéd sexual manner, symbolically consummates his relationship with Mrs. Sinico. It is as almost as if her name drowns out his "it." For an instance he is no longer alone, being joined to his lover in spirit and symbol. Notice, however, that this sentiment almost instantly vanishes. He begins to doubt the "reality" of what just happened, and he allows the rhythm of the engine, "to die away" just as he let her die in real life. Reality and "realism" reassert themselves. In the end, his "it" regains control. The "strange, impersonal voice" which had told him that the soul is always alone, again wins out, and then finally, "He felt that he was alone" (118). But is, in truth, this moment of "self-transcendence," if it happens at all, not all that glorious or for that matter, enlightening? Joyce's description of the train is not one framed in glorious terms, but rather with a clichéd sexual metaphor. And the sound of the train is described as a "laborious drone,"- not exactly poetic. The ultimate irony here is that while there is a surreal moment of "self-transcendence," Joyce refuses to poetically beautify such a moment; the train's sound isn't "lovely"

or "pretty" or "pleasant", it's a "laborious drone." In fact he goes in the opposite direction, intentionally cheapening the moment by employing an explicit, clichéd sexual metaphor as a symbol of the consummation of their relationship. Note that the sound which prompts the "self-transcendence" is not her voice "touching" his ear, which is a beautiful and original image, but rather the laborious drone of a symbolically clichéd "phallic" train. Thus Joyce refuses to allow this moment of "self-transcendence" to take on poetic dimensions; Duffy may go "outside" of himself here, but, Joyce through the use of a clichéd sexual metaphor and drab description of the train's "drone", maintains his, as Professor Fischer would say, "scrupulous meanness." The moment is thus dampened; Duffy's self-transcendence is not allowed to shine in full poetic fervor and "reality," although Joyce attempts to escape it, seeps back in through his words and metaphors.