

Paralysis and the need for escape



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James Joyce's *Dubliners* is a fearlessly candid portrayal of his native city, providing his readers a glimpse of a "dear dirty Dublin", and to his countrymen "one good look at themselves". Joyce's collection of stories, virtually chronicling the stages of maturation within a human life, depicts the *Dubliners* as powerless individuals who often contemplate escape, but are chained to a paralyzed Dublin. Through "Araby", "Eveline", and "The Boarding House" and the individual psychological, spiritual, and moral paralyzes their characters face, we find that it is society and its social mores which imprison and mold the *Dubliners* into what they should be. As the 'chronological-periods-of-human-life' structure of Joyce's collection and reoccurring paralysis pattern suggests, this societal paralysis transcends and encompasses all, deeming escape unlikely. Joyce's "Araby" is one of his initial short stories within the progression of *Dubliners*, and logically begins with a younger protagonist. The nameless young narrator is filled with romantic aspirations for a girl he meets, destined to woo her with some splendid gift from the upcoming bazaar Araby. Quickly however, we experience through the boy the defined restrictions imposed upon him. Primarily, we find that the bazaar is a rather gaudy representation of his dream. He overhears the conversation among some of the vendors, who are ordinary English women, and the commonplace nature of their talk reminds the boy that regardless of the bazaar, he is still in Dublin. "Observing me the young lady came over and asked me did I wish to buy anything. The tone of her voice was not encouraging; she seemed to have spoken to me out of a sense of duty" (23). Furthermore, although the boy arrives too late to buy anything, he describes his stay as "useless", and only "to make[his]interest in her [the vendor] wares seem the more real"(23): he

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cannot afford anything offered. From his modest housing condition and the small sum of money his uncle gives him, we know that their financial situation is tight. Like his fellow poverty-stricken Dubliners, his aspirations come at the expense of his modest means. There are no resources, no opportunities for the people of Dublin to materialize their dreams)none go beyond a pleasant mental fantasy. His longing for escape is even symbolized by the title “ Araby”, representing an exotic, adventurous Arabia. However, the young narrator, a prisoner of his society-imposed poverty, remains fettered to his paralyzed Dublin. Likewise chained to Dublin is the unfortunate character in “ Eveline” of the same name. Only nineteen, she has taken on the burden of catering for her family, in the absence of her deceased mother, in an inappreciative and demoralizing environment. On the other hand, she is fiancéed to a good man with a hopeful future who will take her to Buenos Ayres “ where he had a home waiting for her” (26). Accordingly, she has every reason to leave for both motive and optimistic alternative, and mulls over it perpetually: “ Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness” (26). In the moment of her departure with her lover, she experiences a “ nausea in her body” (28) and stops. “ All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing” (28). She is taken by the psychological paralysis which presides over her conscience and desires. She is physically paralyzed, unable to move forward, to step into another existence that will free her of her oppressive existence in Dublin. She is too scared to leave Ireland, and possibly pressured by the social mores of her society which force her to

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reassume the role of matron in her household. Regardless of its optimism, she is scared of an uncertain future, and clings to the certain but dismal. Unlike the child in “Araby”, who is too young to escape or to do anything about his poverty, Eveline is given a chance to escape but declines it. Dublin possesses her. If callowness and psychological dilemma and fear were enough for paralysis, the force of moral and societal repercussions are equally if not more powerful in “The Boarding House”. Mr. Doran is trapped and manipulated by Mrs. Mooney into marriage with her daughter, of whom he has had an affair. He finds himself coerced to marry Polly because of the damning consequences news of this affair would have on his reputation and stature in society. “The affair would be sure to be talked of and his employer would be certain to hear of it. Dublin is such a small city: everyone knows everyone else’s business! All his long years of service gone for nothing! All his industry and diligence thrown away!” (49). His job, his reputation, and his religious guilt from the affair merge to rob him of choice. He does not love her, and insists to “remain free” and “not to marry” (49), but must do so as not to lose face: holy matrimony becomes oppressive societal manipulation. Although he is fully cognizant that “he[is] [being had]” (49), he is interestingly “thankful at being afforded a loophole of reparation” (49) through marriage to Polly. Social mores end up forcing him into manipulative subjugation. Social mores trap Mr. Doran into how he is supposed to be to live in Dublin. Even a successful, influential businessman is reduced to a helpless prisoner of his society’s moralistic traps. No one is spared of the societal paralysis Dublin imposes upon its people, regardless of maturity or stature. Joyce’s *Dubliners* suggests that it is the stagnating paralysis of his native Dublin that subjugates and imprisons his people. Through his

chronicling of the human progression of life and maturity, and the widespread setbacks of poverty, fear of change, moral obligation, and societal repercussions, Joyce reveals to the reader that paralysis is impartial to age in Dublin: all are victims. However, it is important to ask here, does Joyce simply make a statement towards Dublin's paralysis, or does he also implore change? Although paralysis seems dismal and uneventful, through the need for escape, Joyce does suggest change and that paralysis need not be permanent. One must break free of the social subjugation Dublin imposes upon them and escape. By escaping societal subjugation, by experiencing the outside world, and then later coming back to Dublin as Joyce does, change is eminent.