

Why james joyce rewrote the sisters



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James Joyce wrote two versions of his short story “*The Sisters*,” the first one under the pen name of Stephen Daedalus. Both versions tell the story of a boy and a priest, Father Flynn. The latter dies, and the people around him react to the loss. They share memories, they speculate about his morality, and they contemplate sin. The boy had been close with the Father, but he is slightly ambivalent about the death. Joyce’s final version of the story runs completely parallel to the first one, but it contains some major differences. Joyce filled in blanks and elucidated the characters more fully. The final version of “*The Sisters*” is a more appropriate note on which to begin *The Dubliners*. Joyce added several themes that connect this story to the rest. One important addition is the mention of paralysis. Paralysis, an overarching theme of the entire collection, is not nearly as explicit in the original version of this story. Another difference is that, in the final version, the young boy is extremely self-conscious and frustrated. He feels deep anger and irritation easily, and he monitors his behavior constantly for fear of embarrassing himself. Finally, and more generally, the final version is much darker. Joyce chose words to express a sense of fear and haunting. The original version, almost lighthearted, ends on a different note. James Joyce wrote *The Dubliners* because, as he said, “that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis” (xxx). In every story, there is a character that is stuck in some way, some in patterns of alcoholism, or in uncomfortable family situations, or impossible love affairs. “*The Sisters*” is a fitting opening, because in the first paragraph, the narrator contemplates this notion: “Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis. It had always sounded strangely in my ears...” (1) It is unclear why he thinks about paralysis. The reader is led to believe that the person behind the window is

paralyzed because the boy wants “to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work” (1). In any case, the mention of paralysis at the beginning of “*The Sisters*” sets the stage for a grim set of stories. In the original version, Joyce makes no mention of paralysis. Rather, he uses the word “*Providence*” several times. The element of fear is absent in the original, whereas in the final version the boy is “filled” with fear. From the beginning to the end of *The Dubliners*, we encounter characters—young and old alike—who feel as though they are under surveillance at all times. From the young boy in “*The Sisters*” to Gabriel in “*The Dead*,” there is a bevy of overly self-conscious characters. This boy is not nearly as concerned with his own behavior in the original version as in the final version. When he first returns home, he thinks more about himself than his dead friend. “I knew that I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me” (2). And though it does interest him, and he yearns to lash out at Old Cotter for his moral judgment of the late priest, he does not want to make a wrong move or show any emotion. It seems as though he is slightly ashamed or uncomfortable with his relationship with Father Flynn. His self-obsession continues the following day: “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” (4). The boy thinks only of his own personal reactions, and of the way other people view him. The death is only significant insofar as it affects him. At the memorial service, his Nannie offers him cream crackers. “...but I declined because I thought I would make too much noise eating them” (7). Here again, the death revolves around the boy. Nobody would notice how much noise he would make eating the crackers, and his rejection of the offer

appears rude. The boy also tiptoes into the dead-room so as not to draw attention. Joyce probably added the element of self-consciousness for two reasons. The first is that it creates a link with the other stories, and the other self-conscious characters. There is a fluidity and logic in *The Dubliners* that would not exist without common threads such as this one. Another reason is that this kind of behavior is typical of childhood. His stories are divided into four categories, and in order to make this one distinctly about childhood, it was necessary to magnify the young and awkward aspects of the boy. In the original version, very little time is spent inside the boy's head. When the adults discuss Father Flynn, the boy is livid. He wants to interject, but he is too angry. "I crammed my mouth with straw for fear I might give utterance to my anger. Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!" (3) In the original version, the boy does not like Old Cotter, but his criticism never goes further than "tedious." He sees him more as a distraction. In the final version, Old Cotter has become a menace. The boy feels that Cotter is condescending and obnoxious. This difference is connected with the preceding paragraph about self-consciousness. In order to portray childhood vividly, Joyce showcased the boy's insecurities and rage. Even though he does not express it or think it, the boy has lost a very close friend, and he is suffering. He expresses his grief as anger in this story. Another difference is the overall somber tone of the final version of "The Sisters." Through the use of language rather than plot, Joyce achieved a dark and depressing mood. One example occurs at the beginning, as the boy gazes at the window. In the original version, Joyce writes, "As I went home I wondered was that square of window lighted as before, or did it reveal the ceremonious candles in whose light the Christian must take his last sleep." In the newer version, we

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have, “ 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” (1). Joyce employs the word “ corpse” more than once in the final version, and it affects the overall tone of the piece. Another example is the haunting presence of Father Flynn, which is much less present in the original. As the boy tries to sleep on the night of Father Flynn’s death in the new version, he describes a grey face following him, trying to speak to him. This is such a dark and scary image that it casts a shadow over the rest of the story. Another word choice that changes the story is the description of the Father’s nostrils. In the original, they are described as “ distended.” In the final, they “ black cavernous” (6). One final example is the end of the story. Whereas in the original, it ends with the exclamation, “ God rest his soul!”, in the revision it ends with the more haunting, “...there was something gone wrong with him...” (10). It is evident that Joyce walked through this story very deliberately with a specific end in mind. James Joyce rewrote “ *The Sisters*” to exhibit the idea of paralysis, to give a stark and more jarring portrayal of childhood, and finally, to alert those reading *The Dubliners* that they will not encounter a very cheerful group of people in the stories to come. The original version is forgettable. It is a story of a man dying and the subsequent memorial service. The final version is about a boy who loses a close friend, one with possibly questionable morals. It is about the dead priest haunting the boy’s dreams, and images of the priest at the forefront of his young friend’s mind. In this version, there is a distinct sense that people are contemplating their own deaths in light of the priest’s. Works Cited: James Joyce, “ *Dubliners*” c. 1992, Penguin Books