

# Dubliners essay sample



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BUSTER**

Before discussing the portrayal of Ireland in *Dubliners*, it is important to note Joyce's aversion for Ireland. Joyce's 'nicely looking polish glass' [2] is integral as a motif in itself. The idea of a 'looking glass' reiterates his own true perception of Ireland, but more importantly what he considers the real and true Ireland. By referring to *Dubliners* and the portrayal of Ireland as betraying 'the soul of that hemiplegia which many consider a city', Joyce separates himself from any associations to his motherland.

It is clear then, that there is an undeniable sense of tension and antipathy that we as readers expect from Joyce. It can be argued that similar to Joyce's depiction in *Dubliners*, Brian Friel attempts to hold up his own 'looking glass' in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Friel in response to a question about 19th century Russian authors once commented: "The characters in the plays behave as if their old certainties were as sustaining as ever, even though they know in their hearts that their society is in meltdown and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them.

Maybe a bit like the people of my own generation in Ireland today" - Brian Friel [3]. It seems apparent that both Joyce and Friel aim to explore aspects of Ireland that are dear to them, however it seems that where Joyce 'intended to betray the soul of that paralysis', Friel's incentive was much rather due to "our need for a past, for memories, and our need to constantly revisit and re-invent those memories" [4]. Joyce's vivid naturalism ("driven and derided by vanity") is a contradistinction to Friel's nostalgic motivation ("what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact.

In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory”). James Joyce was born and raised as a Catholic in the suburbs of Dublin, at a time when Ireland was referred to as the “nursery of nationality” K. Declan (1995) [5], and this clearly had a detrimental impact on Joyce, both as an Irish citizen of the time, and a writer later in life. Dublin was in a dejected economic state at the time of Joyce’s childhood, and his family was struggling financially as a result of this. In 1904, Joyce decided to emigrate to Europe from Dublin.

Competent in his understanding of Irish politics and Catholicism, he seemed disgruntled with his native Ireland and hometown of Dublin; his literary work thereafter seeming reminiscent of this eerie and quite vulgar portrayal of Ireland: “It is not my fault that the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs round my stories. I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass.” - James Joyce [6].

The setting of Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* is also important. It is set in the county of Donegal, a place that is politically Southern but geographically Northern. Ballybeg, the village that the play is set in, is quite remote. The Mundy sisters are shown to be isolated and by the end of the play, we as readers witness what is a tragic disintegration of their family; symbolic of the repressive social and cultural state of affairs in Ireland in the 1930s – an Ireland that “was a confused and devastated place” K. Declan (1995) [7].

“Are we all for a big dance somewhere?” , “After I’ve put Michael to bed. What about then?” – This exchange between Maggie and Chris is yet again

noteworthy in regards to the theme of isolation. During a time where women were expected to uphold the ‘moral fibre of Irish life’[8], it is interesting to see that even in a literal sense, all of the sisters seem detached; mirroring this idea of seclusion and separation from society’s norms and values. As K. Declan (1995) goes on to reaffirm, women “deeply resented a constitution which told them that their sole place was in the home” [9].

Joyce forebodes the ever-present theme of paralysis from the beginning of *Dubliners*: “Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis”. Eveline’s reluctance about eloping with her lover resonates Joyce’s characters’ inability of being decisive in life. They are always stuck in this paralysis; be it metaphorically or physically. Friel insinuates a similar notion in *Lughnasa*; a memory play where memories and recollections are quite personal for the characters at hand.

Friel’s use of emotive language such as “Just the memory of it – that’s all you have now – just the memory” and “like we used to” reinforce characters’ attachment with the past. Friel attempts to constantly romanticise this attachment, “I’m only thirty-five. I want to dance” (Agnes), this goes to show how the characters are stuck in the past, so much so that even age seems to prove irrelevant, as if it were something timeless. Eveline in *Dubliners* is overtly engrossed with the past – “her father was not so bad then”, and “besides her mother was alive” makes the reader aware of this.

The obsession with the past leads to paralysis. ‘The Dead’ stands as confirmation of this, as well as the shortcomings of all *Dubliners*. Gabriel’s melancholy attitude is emblematic of the of all the other *Dubliners*’

shortcomings; the use of the phrase “ shade” in particular, summarises his view of life; his very reality is starting to become void-like, just like every other Dubliner. The sibilance at the end of the passage, “ soul swooned slowly”, permeates Joyce’s very solemn perception of Ireland.

It amalgamates the motif of life and death against the backdrop of the falling snow. Joyce through vivid descriptions such as this instigates that it is the norm to surrender to paralysis. It is a circle of life for the characters of Dubliners and it entraps them. Although Eveline desires an escape from this, she finds it unbearable to do so. She has lost the aptitude to believe in and aspire to her dream of hope and escape; she has become physically and mentally overpowered by the environment that is Ireland.

Ireland bombards her with a duty of care and guilt for her promise to her late mother. It has shaped her to such an extent, that she is “ passive, like a helpless animal”. This is identical to how the women of Ireland were passively accustomed to domestic labor, and is illustrated through the drudgery of the Mundy sisters in Lughnasa -” I polish your shoes. I make your bed. Paint the house. Sweep the chimney. Cut the grass”. In the same way that the Mundy sisters see dance as a form of catharsis, Eveline tries to see marriage as a form of escapism, but her credence is invalid.

As S. Frank (2001) states, ‘ the cycle of dependency, responsibility and the denial of the spirit is shown time and again in dominating marriage’ [10]. Kate’s anagnorisis to Maggie that “ it’s all about to collapse” is identical to Eveline’s false epiphany of eloping with Frank. “ I don’t think I could go through that again”, along with Kate’s general rhetoric during this exchange

with Maggie suggests that like Eveline, Kate's dependence on habit and routine is all too much to bear. So much so, that she succumbs to inadvertently distrust her faith; " I must put my trust in God, Maggie, musn't I?"

He'll look after her, won't he? You believe that Maggie, don't you? " – the succession of rhetorical questions create a triple emphasis, and in effect makes for a role reversal between Kate and Maggie during this exchange. Kate, arguably the epitome of the 1930's Catholic spinster (matriarchal, controlling, and of a paternal role) is seeking reassurance from Maggie – a character that is essentially just comic relief for us as readers. During the 1930's, the Catholic Church was almost unquestioned by the clerical Irish community as faith was seen to be that strong.

By Kate (A personification of the church) even seeming to question her faith, Friel is trying to elaborate this idea of change in Ireland, and the anxiety surrounding it. This apprehension over change is supplemented with the embracing of pagan ideas into the Mundy home. Kate is very hesitant in the singing of pagan songs, and the explanations of pagan rituals, but as stated before, she too is starting to lose her faith. Her rhetorical statement that " He'll look after her, won't he? " further evinces this.

In ' The Sisters', Joyce advocates the young boy as being under a verbal paralysis, " But they had never pulled together from the first, he and Mr. Alleyne". The people around him, mock him about death of the priest to provoke a response, but he anxiously chooses to remain quiet. " I crammed my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger", the

boy suggests that he ‘ crams’ his mouth to suppress his anger, but it is clear that, as with most of Joyce’s Dubliners (Eveline, Gabriel etc), that it is more to do with him becoming accustomed to paralysis, (it is simply a part of his life now).

Even the way in which he declines the offering of crackers, connotes a deeper-seated form of paralysis; almost as if eating them would disturb the dead priest as he lies in his coffin. Joyce’s attitudes and portrayals of Catholicism, in particular the aforementioned priest, are at times quite obscurely coarse. As T. Margaret (2014) states, there remains an “ ambivalence of faith”, in that “ it is tempting to identify the narrator of the story with the young Joyce who had a reputation as a pious boy” [11]. ‘ The Sisters’ can be said to propagate this ‘ ambivalence’.

Not only does Joyce choose to deliberately leave the young boy’s “ sensation of freedom” unexplained to us as readers, he exaggerates this with the “ truculent, grey and massive” and “ solemn and copious” imagery of the priest. Perhaps the corrupt “ odour in the room” that is the priest, stands as Joyce’s microcosm for a corrupt Ireland? Dubliners, in its depiction of what one character refers to as “ Dear dirty Dublin,” is not only a re-imagination of Joyce’s city as a youth, it also stands as a reflection of the antithetical impulses of the outsider.

Joyce’s perception of Ireland spares us as readers, and observers – nothing. The decency stands alongside the deceit somewhat. The same “ glow of a late autumn sunset” that overwhelms the walks is the same that “ cast[s] a shower of kindly golden dust on the nurses and decrepit old men”. Joyce

seems to advocate a satirical intolerance in his work, which makes for a bleak outlook of Ireland. As K. Declan (1995) states in relation to the Irish society; “ they seem to take pleasure in the fact that identity is seldom straightforward and given, more a matter of negotiation and exchange [12].

Joyce’s unpredictable depictions of life events reflect a form of paralysis in and of itself: “ Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Fury lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns.

His soul swooned softly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. ” This is the very final paragraph of “ The Dead,” and thus the last of Dubliners. The falling snow is described so explicitly because it plays a critical role during these final moments of the story. Not only does the snow signify the physical paralysis of frost as it touches the earth – we as readers are also under a paralysis during Gabriel’s somewhat stream of consciousness.

For what is meant to be the one story in Dubliners that “ ends on a more optimistic note than the others” S. Frank (2001) [13], there remains this innuendo of exile and almost numbness on behalf of the readers as Gabriel speaks. “ Treeless hills” and “ Shannon waves” illuminate a lifeless



environment. A ‘living death’ almost. Gabriel’s contemplation of the dead, in particular, Michael Furey – leads him to an epiphany; that the dead in fact play an active part in the lives that surround him, including his own life.

This is a realisation for Gabriel, but not us as readers. Joyce evoked this sense of paralysis to the readers from the beginning of *Dubliners*, and it was to be expected by the end. Through Joyce’s use of chiasmus; ‘faintly falling’ and ‘falling faintly’, we as readers are presented with an air of ambiguity. It can either infer the motion of Gabriel’s soul, or the motion of the snow – perhaps both. These interpretations mirror both environmental exile, and the exile of self, and leave us as readers with what can be perceived as a quite disturbing form of closure.

Both Friel and Joyce’s texts end tragically, with almost all the characters being in no better position than when they started off – ensnared in a vicious ‘circle of paralysis’. The characters of both *Lughnasa* and *Dubliners* are deceived by the prospect of exile. The word exile itself connotes escape and freedom, and the characters in both texts desire this, yet ironically it is this desire for escape that ensnares them. Agnes and Rose attempt to leave, but a change in environment means nothing as the ill-fate of paralysis follows them to their death.

It is the same with Gerry Evans. Eveline’s narrow hope of escape with Frank is also short-lived. In both of these texts, it seems apparent that the backdrop of Ireland is nothing but a manifestation of “a paralysis which marks its termination” K. Declan (1995) [14]. Where both *Dubliners* and *Lughnasa* attempt to convey in some capacity, an “Ireland frozen in

servitude” K. Declan (1995) [15], the argument remains that Friel’s narrative is more altruistic than Joyce’s: “ In that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties.

It drifts in from somewhere far away – a mirage of sound – a dream music that is both itself and its own echo; a sound so alluring and so mesmeric that the afternoon that the afternoon is bewitched, maybe haunted by it...

Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary”. Irrespective of what came before this, there is more optimism in this conclusion of Friel’s than that of Joyce, which could be indicative of hope for Ireland, as being our “ only method of replying to... nevitabilities” – Brian Friel [16].

James Joyce on the other hand, wished to ‘ betray the soul of that paralysis which many consider a city’, and indeed does so through his “ scrupulous meanness” K. Declan (1995) [17]. The snow almost as a canopy over the environment is a metaphor for paralysis taking over. It has paralysed everything in its way; people, places, religion, pride, identity and culture – in essence, the whole of Ireland. By the end of Dubliners, Ireland well and truly becomes Joyce’s “ centre of paralysis” [18].