Whodunits in *Dubliners*

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Whodunits in *Dubliners*:

What Joyce Says, and How He Means

By

Peter van de Kamp

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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For Laura and Saskia

With all my love

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PREFACE

ANNE FOGARTY

James Joyce's *Dubliners* is the most important and influential short story collection of the twentieth century. It was published on 15 June 1914 by Grant Richards. Yet, its current acclaim as a modernist touchstone and undisputed literary masterpiece is at odds with Joyce's determined but arduous struggle to see it into print. Although *Dubliners* now is universally valued as a volume that radically reconceived the short story form, the success and later impact of Joyce's first major work were not, in fact, assured.

Dubliners is the creation of a precocious young author; Joyce was twenty-two when he embarked on writing the initial stories. The collection was composed in a remarkably short period of time, between July 1904 and September 1907. It had its origins in a number of stories, "The Sisters", "Eveline", and "After the Race", that Joyce published in *The Irish Homestead* at the instigation of George Russell in the Summer and Autumn of 1904. Russell requested something "simple, rural? livemaking? pathos?", but Joyce defied this brief by producing singular, complex, recondite, and disturbing tales.[1] The three stories hence sit strangely and combatively in this journal which was largely designed for a rural readership and primarily featured articles about modern techniques of agriculture. The literary section of the journal, "Our Weekly Story", showcased mainly conventional work. Joyce aligned himself with the spirit of self-help and the purpose of national awakening that were central precepts of the Irish Agricultural Organisation, the society behind the journal. But the style of "scrupulous meanness" that he affected and the unsparing critique of Dublin life that emerged in his stories were bold and radical, and went decidedly counter to popular taste.[2] Unsurprisingly, a fourth story, "Hallow Eve", that Joyce submitted to the *Homestead* in January 1905 was turned down. It was later revised and retitled "Clay".[3]

The subsequent stories in *Dubliners* were composed during Joyce's first years on the Continent as he moved between jobs in Pola, Trieste, and Rome and endeavoured to piece an existence together. The final story that Joyce composed was "The Dead", which he envisaged as a counterweight

to the other tales, as it gave a more positive view of life in Dublin and drew out the conviviality and generosity he saw as key virtues of his native city. The prolonged quest to publish *Dubliners*, lasting some nine years in all, however, hardened Joyce against Dublin for new reasons. In 1905, he signed a contract with Grant Richards, an English publisher. Richards and his printer, in due course, began to question the scandalous content of the stories. The use of the word "bloody" in "Grace" was found unacceptable as were the sexual transactions in "Two Gallants". Joyce refused to make many of the requested changes but compromised in other instances. Yet, as Edna O'Brien observed, when opened up to censorious scrutiny, every story in *Dubliners* proved offensive in a different way.[4] Richards, as a consequence, broke his contract with Joyce in September 1906 and summarily rejected *Dubliners*.

Far more damaging in Joyce's eyes were the prevarications of George Roberts, director of the Maunsel and Co. publishing house in Dublin, who agreed in August 1909 to print *Dubliners*. If Roberts had produced the text, Joyce would have fulfilled his cherished goal of publishing his text in Dublin. However, the pattern of initial acceptance of the text, followed by subsequent moves to censor it, repeated itself. In this instance, the initial sticking points for Roberts were the derogatory comments on Edward VII and Queen Victoria in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room". Additionally, the subject matter of "An Encounter" was found to be objectionable. Roberts, like Grant Richards, also reneged on his contract in September 1912, although, as legend has it, Joyce managed by a contrivance to salvage a complete set of proofs from him. Joyce viewed Roberts' change of heart as a damning instance of Irish perfidy and it permanently coloured his relation to his country. In the following year, Joyce approached several other publishers who duly turned the text down. He eventually in November 1913 re-approached Grant Richards who rethought his rejection of *Dubliners* and, in what seems like an unwarranted twist of fate, proceeded with publication of it in June 1914.

If the few readers and reviewers who tackled *Dubliners* when it appeared in 1914 found themselves floundering and rudderless, the challenge of approaching *Dubliners* in the twenty-first century is navigating the overwhelming wealth of scholarly readings that have accumulated in the meantime. *Dubliners* has prompted more critical commentary than any other collection of short stories in English. Readers are faced with the multiple beguiling enigmas of Joyce's texts and the slew of annotations and interpretations that have been composed about them. Peter van de Kamp's magisterial but open readings of the stories of *Dubliners* are of particular value because they preserve the viewpoint of the amateur reader while

drawing on all the sage insights of a highly seasoned Joycean exegete who can adjudicate on a host of interlinked but warring assessments. His lively and often provocative and unsettling interpretations capture the excitement of reading Joyce and restore a sense of novelty and the intellectual sparring match to literary analysis.

Van de Kamp's account of *Dubliner*s is informed by his passion for Joyce and lifelong experience of teaching the text, as well as his extensive knowledge of Irish literature. He expertly conveys what is at stake when actively reading Joyce; in the successive analyses entered into here he carefully unfurls the exegetical processes involved in teasing out the complexities of Joyce's stories and the debates that need to be entered into in order to make sense of their stylistic and rhetorical features. His interpretations, as a result, never foreclose on meaning and remain always poised on the brink of other discoveries. For him, *Dubliners* is a reader's text. It is not a hidebound classic, but rather constantly invites us to rediscover and re-interrogate it. Indeed, in keeping with the open spirit of inquiry that adds piquancy to this study, many of the chapters conclude by flagging further questions and mysteries rather than with a summative account of an argument that seeks to copper-fasten itself and ward off counter-views.

The central premise of his study is that *Dubliners* may be conceived of as a series of whodunits. Detective stories in this mode construct plots that revolve around the detection of a crime and the ultimate identification of a culprit. They are often seen as providing readers with the satisfaction of closure and of rationalist, rule-bound fictional worlds. Customarily, they are opposed to the modernist novel and short story with their propensity for layered symbolism, linguistic games, and their endeavour to fathom complex inner states. Yet, as Peter Brooks has argued, detective stories in their efforts to tell an absent story, that of the crime, may more properly be viewed as "the narrative of narratives" as they dramatize how all narratives come about and are predicated on the double order of what Russian formalists have called *fabula* (the story told) and *sjužet* (the story as it is actually narrated).[5] For van de Kamp, Joyce enlists us all as sleuths and immerses us in stories that refract meaning and face us with a plethora of mysteries that we must resolve as skilfully as we can. Reading, in this light, involves a kind of pragmatics; despite this, Joyce's artistry foils our attempts fully to explicate or decode the hieroglyphics of his stories or to smooth out their narratives. Meaning, however, is not undecidable but something that needs to be argued out and negotiated.

Conveying a sense of the varying and ramifying mysteries in the individual stories of *Dubliners* and fully weighing them up and taking their

measure are the key steps in van de Kamp's investigative method. Apart from positing that literary analysis in Joycean mode is akin to the whodunit and mapping out in his appendices the maxims of Gricean communication, he resists imposing any overall views on these stories or coercing them to adhere to synoptic critical views he propounds. The interpretations advanced in the different chapters are striking because of their even-handedness, their well-primed scepticism, their wittiness, and their conversant knowledge of Joycean criticism, which is amply and generously cited and drawn upon. Time and again, readers will find themselves forced to rethink their presuppositions about the moral tenor of Joyce's characters and key junctures in plots that have been assumed to be incontrovertible. Overall, they are made aware of the treacherously shifting sands of Joycean narration. Ingenious interpretations aplenty are put forward, for example, about the nature of James Duffy's political affiliations in "A Painful Case" and the causes of Emily Sinico's death, how the narrator functions in "After the Race", why the narrative of "Eveline" does not cohere, precisely how Charles Stewart Parnell and James Connolly insinuate themselves as ghostly emanations into "Ivy Day in the Committee Room", and the purport of the bicycle pump in "Araby". But, first and foremost, van de Kamp's lively, original, and engrossing readings show how Joyce trains us in a practice of open-minded engagement in which we must always be ready to question what we think we know and revise those judgemental or even erroneous commentaries and unwarranted inferences that criticism of *Dubliners* so often reach for.

Moreover, given his command of Irish literary and political writing, he provides enlightening insights into the often obscured or forgotten intertexts and sources of Joyce's stories which others have not previously picked up on. In sum, this is a lively, informed, and authoritative addition to the crowded field of Joycean scholarship which it judiciously assesses and takes stock of. Peter van de Kamp's urbane, knowledgeable, and surefooted interpretations valuably redress some of the excesses and misprisions of Joycean criticism and exemplify a new, more nuanced and empathetic mode of close engagement with the texts of *Dubliners* from which every reader of Joyce, whether beginner or advanced, can profitably learn.

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PREAMBLE

'A Summer School, with lectures in his own Physics Theatre, what do you think?' Gus Martin asked me in 1986. That Joyce Summer School would become an integral part of my life. I missed the first two years, having moved back to Leiden University, but from 1990 to the Covid lockdown in 2019 I was associated with the school, leading the seminars on *Dubliners*. I made a lot of friends over the years, and learnt a lot. This is their book as much as it is mine. I started it in the '90s with Anthony Kovach, who attended the school twice, and wrote a marvellous thesis on the dot at the end of 'Ithaca'.[1] Tony was a retired lawyer, and you can detect his legal expertise in the earliest essays in this book. Sadly, Tony grew incapacitated. I asked my friend John Wyse Jackson to consider collaboration. John had published his wonderful annotated edition of *Dubliners* with Bernard McGinley in 1993.[2] But John could not find the time; he did, however, offer advice and counsel right until his sudden death in 2020. He and Peter Costello paid many a visit to my *Dubliners* seminars over the years, much to the delight of the students, and me. I had collaborated with Peter on a pictorial biography of Flann O'Brien; in the process, he taught me the basics of becoming a research sleuth. He, too, has been a continuous source of generous guidance and information—and a trusted friend. But, alas, this book became a solo task.

Somehow we don't read what it says in *Dubliners*. The reason why we don't is because we know better. After all, wouldn't it be absurd to accept that 'Maria is [Joe's] proper mother', or that Corley literally 'pulled it off', that, indeed, 'it was impossible' for Eveline to sail away with Frank, that Araby was 'some Freemason affair', that Mrs Kearney 'had tact', or that James Duffy could rob his bank? No, we don't believe them; we assume that the literal is figurative (as it is in Lily's being 'literally run off her feet'). 'No serious reader today thinks that simple statements are simple', Fritz Senn wrote in 1997.[3] That seriousness is based on our experience, of life and of its stories; we get the intention of the implied author or the narrator, and hence we tease out the meaning. The ironic mode prevails, and with it the bonding between teller and reader. With our experience we opt for the scenarios that seem epistemologically elicited, and that are often ambivalent.

But they're not real. Reality *is* absurd. Time and again, Joyce is manipulating us so that we deny phenomenological realities. They may stare

at us on the page, but we won't have it. Joyce warns us, story after story, that the narratives we consume are consuming us: his protagonists are defined by their three-penny novels, Wild-West fantasies, plucky detectives, creepy ghost stories, fairy tales, romances, exotica, erotica. But it is a warning that Joyce knew we would not heed. He is banking on our epistemonical experience, and toying with it.

I try to tease out what happens when we take the literal literally. My readings may seem innocent; they may seem absurd; they may even make you snigger (I hope). They are close readings, up-close. They are aided by Pragmatics and Stylistics (what Leo Hickey has termed Pragmastylistics[4]). The maxims of H.P. Grice, and the speech act theories of Austin and Searle are fairly prominent in my analyses. I suspect most of my readers will not be familiar with these; therefore I have appended basic explanations, revamping material I wrote when I was teaching Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis at the University of Leiden in the late '80s.

These essays span nearly thirty years. I started the book when I was a young man (in Joyce's terms); now I'm at the age of retirement. The passage of time is manifest in the book: the early essays espouse the tenets of New Criticism, most notably the autonomy of the text. On this I was raised. As I got older, I began to distrust those tenets, simply because meaning is dependent on context. And the context gradually expanded diachronically, biographically, historically, politically. There were practical reasons for this contextual expansion. When I began this enterprise, the internet did not exist. Research required travel to libraries and archives, and inter-library loans. Now so much material is available at home on our computer screens. Close reading, however, always remained the alpha and omega of my approach.

I revised the earlier essays only lightly, to bring them in line with my more attenuated, and expansive, later view. But the folly of my youth also had its fervour, and that I did not feel entitled to erase.

The order in which I tackled the stories was determined by their inception. That way I could track Joyce's development. There was one exception: 'After the Race' was eluding my attempts at close reading—and not just mine: many critics think of it as the book's ugly duckling. So I left that story till last. I'm glad I did.

I had intended to limit this book to the fourteen stories, the sonnet of *epicleti*, by which Joyce betrayed the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city. They lent themselves to my critical approach; 'The Dead' is too long for an up-close reading. But it felt wrong to fully discard the greatest story of the book. So I added some summary notes, which don't do 'The Dead' any justice, of course, but which do bear out my

main observations—that being a narrator in *Dubliners* is a precarious position,[5] and that Joyce is playing with us, for we know better.

So many people—friends, colleagues, teachers, students, have inspired, informed, interrogated me (and disagreed, sometimes vehemently). They will recognise bits of this book. I am deeply indebted to them.

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ABBREVIATIONS

D	James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Margot Norris, Text ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Walter Hettche, New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. For each chapter, I provide the line reference to the story that I am discussing. I refer to the other stories by page and line.
FW	James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1939.
JWJ	John Wyse Jackson & Bernard McGinley, *James Joyce's* Dubliners. *An Annotated Edition*, London, Auckland, Melbourne, Singapore and Toronto: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993.
LI	James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, Vol. I, ed. Stuart Gilbert, Reissued with Corrections, New York: The Viking Press, 1966 (1957).
LII	James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, Vol. II, ed. Richard Ellmann, New York: The Viking Press, 1966.
OCP	James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
P	James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Walter Hettche, London: Vintage Books, 2012. Reference is to the line numbers.
SH	James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spence; rev. eds. John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon, London, Toronto, Sydney, New York: Granada Publishing, 1979 (1977) (Theodore Spencer, ed., Jonathan Cape, 1944).
U	James Joyce, *Ulysses*. *A Critical and Synoptic Edition*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior, New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1984.

CHAPTER 1

AN OWNER WANTED:
THE SISTERS

The Opening Paragraph

James Joyce presents himself to the reading public:

> There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. (*D* 1)

Hardly an introduction that would merit a literary prize. A sentence that wouldn't pass the censure of any teacher of English.[1] Two dummy subjects and barely any content. Those English teachers would red pencil 'There was' and 'it was', would query 'this time', and would write in the margin: 'Go for contents rather than effect.' *Dubliners* has been described as Joyce's workshop. He was a young man when he wrote 'The Sisters'.

What we have left of that first sentence once we take away the seemingly unnecessary dummy subjects is: 'no hope for him this time: the third stroke'. The colon presumably indicates that the second clause explains the first: the third stroke accounts for the lack of hope. But of this we cannot be certain, for even without the dummy subjects there is a distinct lack of specific reference. Who is this 'him'? And what kind of a third stroke? of a bell? an attack of apoplexy or paralysis? This lack of specificity is the more marked because it contrasts with the firmly assured title, 'The Sisters' (the determiner suggests familiarity).

Stylistically, it doesn't get any better in the second sentence, with its three unnecessary repetitions of 'night', its uncouth repetition of 'lighted' and its awkward and irrelevant parenthetic clause:

> Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. (*D* 2-4)

The style is ungainly. In its gangliness it draws attention onto itself. The story-teller doesn't come to the point (he's going to offer us, literally, a

surplus of points later, but not quite yet). We do have a purposeful Dickensian colon, where a comma or a full stop would be expected. It is the first possible sign that this narrator may be, well, quite adept. Which narrator though? We are presented with a first-person narrative with the immediate actions, feelings and thoughts of the narrator:

> 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. (*D* 4-7)

'I thought', and not 'I had thought'. That this past tense conveys immediacy is signified by the change in tense and time focus in the next sentence:

> He *had often said* to me: *I am not long for this world*, and I *had thought* his words idle. (*D* 7-8) [1st & 3rd italics mine]

This is pitted against the 'present':

> *Now* I *knew* they were true. (*D* 8-9) [italics mine]

The narrator seems to establish a pattern where the—habitual—past (of 'night after night') is conveyed by a pluperfect, and the present by a simple past. However, this pattern is broken in the next sentence:

> *Every night* as I *gazed up* at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. (*D* 9-10) [1st & 2nd italics mine]

Here habitual past and present collocate—the narrator is still engaged in his nightly gazing at the window and his repeating of the word '*paralysis*'. What distinguishes that habitual past from the present is not any difference in the boy's actions but a realisation:

> It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (*D* 10-15)

That realisation is brought about by death, the impact of which is somehow associated with moral, ethical corruption.[2] However, the narrative contradicts itself: there is no 'reflection of candles on the darkened blind', for there is no corpse (yet); no death has taken place. The 'now' of '[n]ow I knew they were true' and '[n]ow it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being' does not denote the present but a putative future. The narrator wishes for that death to happen—he can't wait; he

'long[s] to be nearer to it'. Joyce's first narrator of his 'childhood' has a marked penchant for the morbid. That he is a child can be gleaned from the scene which follows the opening paragraph:

> Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said, as if returning to some former remark of his:
> —No, I wouldn't say he was exactly .... but there was something queer ..... there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion…. (*D* 16-21)

We never learn the age of the boy; it is generally assumed that he is about twelve. But it doesn't follow that our narrator is of that age; his fascination with words like 'paralysis', 'simony' and 'gnomon' may account for his extensive lexicon; he *is* a studious youth ('stud[ying]' the lighted square of window' during 'vacation time'), yet phrases like 'maleficent and sinful being' are less attributable to a young boy. What we seem to have in the opening paragraph is a dual narrator—a grown-up trying to approximate a memorable childhood experience. The effect is not unlike Wordsworth's in *The Prelude*, with the immediacy of that experience contrasting with, and compromised by, its distanced expression. Donald Davie has noted a disparity between nouns and verbs in *The Prelude*, attributing the former to the adult 'explicator' and the latter to the boy 'experiencer'; Davie writes: 'The nouns are not concrete; but the verbs are, and may be lingered over. In short, this is poetry where the syntax counts enormously, counts for nearly everything.'[3] The same observation applies to 'The Sisters', and to its contrasts between polysyllabic adjectives and substantives, and monosyllabic 'common' verbs. The narrators of 'The Sisters' and Wordsworth both endeavour to give substance to an unutterable concept. Of the latter, John Jones has observed:

> In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth uses the word 'things' with astonishing frequency. The Concordance reveals that the 1850 text alone accounts for about one-thirds of its occurrences in the entire bulk of his poetry. 'I looked for universal things': 'I conversed with things that really are'; Wordsworth will make his verse 'deal boldly with substantial things'—the word is clearly and consistently referred to the main theme of the poem. His search for universal things is on one side a search for particularity…. [on the other] he enquires not only for the particular but for the powerful.[4]

Similarly, the narrator in 'The Sisters' tries to particularize 'some … being', but where Wordsworth articulates a grand design through the thrust of his energetic verbs, the present narrative is stuck in its lack of reference; the

verbs, although more concrete than the nouns, barely add such thrust—instead they become haltingly repetitive: *passed*, *studied*, *found*, *lighted*, *thought*, *see*, *knew*, *said*, *thought*, *knew*, *gazed*, *said*, *sounded*, *sounded*. 'It', the apex of that opening sentence, keeps on being repeated—seven times in this paragraph—without ever gaining a referent. Wordsworthian pathos is replaced by bathos, for here the disparity between the non-event (the narrator's not being witness of no signs of no death) and the adult's explication lead to a clumsy contrast, marked by that laughable parenthesis—'(it was vacation time)'—in the middle of a paltry attempt for effect by insistent repetition—'Night after night … and night after night'.

The Effect

The boy never witnesses any sign of Father Flynn's death on his nightly sojourn to Great Britain Street. That privilege is bestowed on old Cotter, who 'was passing by the house' (*D* 35-6), and who acquaints the boy's aunt and uncle over supper some time. That supper exchange witnesses the taciturn boy's only spoken contribution to the story—'Is he dead?' (*D* 34)—he is the only character in the story who actually says 'the word'. This scene contrasts starkly with the opening in a way which foreshadows the ironic contrasts between Stephen's heightened awareness at the end of each chapter of *Portrait* and the sordid reality which opens the subsequent chapter. The boy learns of the priest's death while his aunt is 'ladling out [his] stirabout'. He remains silent, but the news is having an effect that night:

> It was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin. (*D* 71-83)

It is a small step from 'some maleficent and sinful being' of the opening paragraph to 'some pleasant and vicious region'. This scene witnesses the boy's attempt to restore his story—a ghastly Poe-like tale complete with a ghost, its 'murmuring voice' and lips 'moist with spittle'. Like all characters in *Dubliners*, the boy attempts to furnish himself with a *raison d'être*; he is

the hero in his own story, and must perforce provide that narrative with intent, purloined from the fare of his imagination. Fair and square, were it not that our narrator seems to be that grown-up-boy's equivalent; his is the boy's substantial substantive register. Yet again, in the middle of the boy's clamouring for mysterious and ghostly effect he interrupts, and deflates humorously—'I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas'. He holds the narrative strings, and infuses the story with bathos. A ventriloquist, he lets his doll do most of the talking, abrogating responsibility, and only interrupting now and then with a tell-tale remark which shows he knows better. As with any successful ventriloquist act, it's the doll that creates a lasting effect. Despite the adult narrator's disavowal, this, so far, *is* a ghost story.

And the adult know-it-all disappears. The dream ends the first part of the story. We're not even one-third into it. From here on in, as we trade the night solidly for the day, the disparity between our two narrators dissolves, and everything *is* taken seriously. It's as if the adult narrator has protested too much; he's been suitably apologetic; the remainder, the serious business, provides the reason why the adult narrator feels obliged to tell this story in the first place.

In fact, the remainder, the sisters' part of 'The Sisters', challenges the epistemological unity of the story. Until we enter the living-room in Great Britain Street, the dialogue has been sufficiently sparse for us to suspend disbelief, but the third part of the story is dominated by dialogue, which is too detailed, and too ample, to be taken as *verbatim* recall. That dialogue must be made up. It shows how the traditional notion of a narrator is challenged in *Dubliners*.

The narrator wishes to entertain, surely. Doesn't any story-teller? Hence his attempt to recreate the atmosphere of Edgar Allan Poe. This he may pass off as a youthful fascination, while allowing that atmosphere to take effect and hold us spell-bound. But his intention seems to surpass a wish to narrate, or to lay bare the embarrassment of his youthful fancies. If that had been his aim, he could have stopped the narrative right here at this dream. That he doesn't attests to the import he attaches to the events he narrates. The speech act that looms large in 'The Sisters' is to confess.[5] The heavy grey face of the paralytic 'desired to *confess* something'; '[i]t began to *confess* … in a murmuring voice'; the priest has impressed upon the boy 'the secrecy of the *confessional*'(*D* 133-4); and the priest is discovered 'in the dark in his *confession box*' (*D* 297-8) [all italics mine]. The narrator, who likewise favours the dark, seems to feel a need to tell his story in order to confess. He is the Ancyent Marinere of his tale, and we are his wedding-guest. But what does he confess? We are left in the dark.

Which is where the boy is in that ghostly visitation in his bedroom, where we are once again confronted with a surplus of 'it'—six in all. With a dextrous switch, 'it' is replaced by 'his', putting an identity on 'it'—that of the 'simoniac' whom we, all-too-readily, assume to be Father Flynn. There is absolutely no evidence for this identification in the text—'it' is 'he'—but who is he? and what is 'it'? Awkward repetitions in *Dubliners* do not allow themselves to go by unnoticed. 'It' is no exception. Just prior to the bedroom scene, we are told, by Old Cotter, that '[*i*]*t*'s bad for children … because their minds are so impressionable…. *it* has an effect….' (*D* 66-8) [italics mine] Old Cotter has implanted a sinister *it* in the boy's mind that night.

That 'effect', the boy's fascination with the ghostly, we have acknowledged. But we are not done with that 'it' which seemed so awkwardly postulated in the first sentence ('it was the third stroke'). Eliza, one of the sisters after whom this story seems so unaptly named, reveals how the church authorities had declined to grant Father Flynn financial support: 'we wouldn't want to see him want anything while he was in *it*'. (*D* 224-5) [italics mine] The referential 'want' of that 'it' is exemplified by the chalice—'*it* contained nothing'. (*D* 283-4) [italics mine] Time and again returning onto itself, 'it' remains without reference, and so the story implodes, meaningless, as hopelessly as the opening ('There was no hope for him this time').

This absence of reference is of central concern. Context seems to elude all the characters. It is pushed to the back, or indeed chased away, by textual dots that denote silence. The studious narrator 'puzzl[es] [his] head to extract meaning from [old Cotter's] unfinished sentences' (*D* 72-3) only to thread his own account with similar unfinished sentences. Such silences extend beyond the characters' dialogues into the exchange between narrator and implied reader. With ellipsis and *aposiopesis* the reader is invited to extract meaning from the story's unfinished sentences, similar to the way in which Nannie beckons the boy into the dead room. But unlike the boy, readers are not let in. It is an infuriating pragmatic strategy which we've all experienced—and employed. Nothing is wholly predicated onto the subject. This is obviously manifest from the copious dots that litter the dialogues (and are not limited to Old Cotter's contributions), but it is already present, albeit somewhat more subtly, in the syntax of the first two sentences, with their dummy subjects. On a larger scale, it manifests itself in every scene. And with every unfinished level emerges an infinite number of possible endings. Endlessness is the consequence of this pervasive lack of closure, from sentence- to story-level. And this is what the narrator says most irked him about old Cotter's stories—'I soon grew tired of him and his *endless*

stories about the distillery'. (*D* 24-6) [italics mine] Cotter's stories are endless because they are innumerable, and that precisely because they never end. But yet again the narrator falls into the same trap; he also reveals a penchant for stories without endings, 'endless stories', for he 'could not remember the end of the dream'.

Old Cotter may have his 'own [unspoken] theories about *it*' (*D* 27) [italics mine], but we know exactly when 'it' has lost its reference, and has received exclusive rights:

> — *It* was that chalice he broke.... ***That* was the beginning of *it*.** Of course, they say *it* was all right, that *it* contained nothing. I mean. But still……. They say *it* was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him! — And was *that it?* said my aunt. I heard something…….. (*D* 282-7) [italics and bold mine]

'It', of course, is not 'all right', but then what people are reported by the—rather generic—speech act 'say' to say in *Dubliners* is often wrong. We can hear Othello as he prepares to strangle Desdemona: '*It* is the cause, *it* is the cause, my soul: / Let me not name *it* to you, you chaste stars! / *It* is the cause….' (*Othello* V.ii.1-3) [italics mine]. William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* sums up the circularity of Othello's assurance: '… we are made to wonder what *it* was that was *causing* the tempest in [Othello's] mind; and are given only the 'irrelevant' statement that it was the *cause*…. There is no primary meaning for lack of information, and the secondary meaning, therefore holds the focus of consciousness, that we are listening to a mind withdrawn upon itself, and baffled by its own agonies.'[6]

'There was no hope for him' applies not just to Father Flynn, but to all the characters in a story which posits in the opening paragraph the boy's fascination with 'paralysis', 'simony' and 'gnomon'. These words are missing from the original publication in *The Irish Homestead*; Joyce added them as symbolic pointers which thematize story after story, countering 1 Corinthians 13:23, with expostulations of frustrated faith, frustrated hope, and frustrated love. Their symbolic and structural relevance to his fourteen *epicleti* and coda has been analysed to such an extent that I can remain silent about them. The relevance of 'paralysis' and 'gnomon' to the semantics of this particular story has received ample attention—the argument invariably focusing on 'gnomonic absences'. At a pragmatic, rather than a symbolic or anagogic, level, they attest to the boy's fascination with 'difficult', allographic words—Gus Martin has pointed out that all three words are pronounced differently from the way they are written.

Symbolism

I am veering away from a stylistic to a symbolic reading of the story. What else can I do, considering the story's paucity of reference? Old Cotter may have 'endless stories about the distillery', but, just like the boy puzzling his head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences, I am incapable of distilling a suitably encompassing surface level context. The 'special odour of corruption' (*LII* 123) hangs over 'The Sisters'; just as 'faints and worms' (*D* 24) feature in Old Cotter's endless stories, they inform the boy's experience—his 'faint' (impure spirit) is the 'grey face' of the paralytic desiring 'to confess something' in the boy's dream rather than impure spirits produced early and late in distillation, and instead of distillery coils his worms are those of death and corruption. Words tend to shed their specificity in this story, inviting a far more general sense of reference, with a more embracing and coherent purport. Inevitably, 'The Sisters' has been the receptacle of many a 'symbolic' reading—as has all of *Dubliners*. The problem with such an approach is that the process of abstraction hardly requires a 'common-sense' grasp of the actual text: spirits can be distilled out of many different sources. Let us, for the time being, not be dismayed by this. Let's take the plunge.

We don't have to dive deep. As Lucia Boldrini observes, 'the first sentence of the story has been interpreted as a direct allusion to one of the terrible lines that Dante reads above the portal of Hell as he enters the land of the dead: 'Lasciate ogne speranze, voi ch'intrate' ('Abandon every hope, you who enter') (*Inferno* 3.9) an epigraph for the entire collection and for the City of Dublin itself with all its inhabitants (Cope, 'Epigraph' 364).'[7] Boldrini goes on to suggest further parallels with the *Inferno*. She notes:

> Dante meets the simoniacs in canto 19, their heads stuck in narrow holes in the ground and their feet kicking up in the air. As he bends down beside one of them, Pope Nicholas III, he describes his position as that of a priest during confession: "Io stava come 'I frate che confess" ("I was standing there like the friar who confesses") (*Inf* 19.49). There is a similar reversal of the normal situation in both Dante's and Joyce's stories: Dante, the pilgrim, hears the confession of the Pope, and in 'The Sisters' the old priest confesses to the little boy.[8]

Boldrini is making the assumption that it is the priest who confesses—or, rather, wishes to confess—in the boy's dream. This is not specified in the text. She does, however, touch on an important point. There *is* something topsy-turvy about the priest, and not just because his clerical status is ambiguous (as Father O'Rourke's anointing of 'poor James' and arranging for his funeral 'mass in the chapel' reveals, Father Flynn was not

excommunicated). As a priest, Father Flynn seems to be in a form of Limbo: a priest who is not defrocked but nevertheless is denied both the privilege of exercising priestly powers and the right to financial support—all ostensibly due to a blameless accident of the kind anticipated by the Church-prescribed procedures for accidents involving the Eucharist in each species. Rather than communing with heaven, he is particularly prone to the fall. The crossing of Father Flynn's life is figured in the irony of his dead hands 'loosely retaining a chalice' (*D* 182-3) while in life he broke one. In life he dropped and spilled his snuff ('these constant showers of snuff' [*D* 109-10]), and his breviary ('Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen on the floor' [*D* 254-5]). The 'High Toast' snuff (the name of the snuff seems 'to combine most economically the liquid, solid and spiritual elements of the Mass', John Wyse Jackson notes (*JWJ* 4h), and the sacred word are dropped to the ground as symbols of the inversion of Father Flynn's life.[9] In parallel, he reveals in death that 'his life was, you might say, crossed'. (*D* 273-4)

Of all the stories in *Dubliners*, 'The Sisters', with its blatant lack of surface specificity, seems most in need of clues. Zack Bowen finds them in the description of the sisters' shop:

> The next morning after breakfast I went down to look at the little house in Great Britain Street. It was an unassuming shop, registered under the vague name of Drapery. The drapery consisted mainly of children's bootees and umbrellas and on ordinary days a notice used to hang in the window, saying: *Umbrellas Recovered*. No notice was visible now for the shutters were up. (*D* 84-90)

Bowen argues that 'the priest's house in Great Britain Street was "registered under the vague name of Drapery" (D 11) for a reason', and that the notice *Umbrellas Recovered* told those in the know that here prophylactics were for sale. Bowen infers: '[t]hat the priest died of syphilis may have been due to the analogy of his umbrella needing recovering in the prophylactic sense of the word, with his spiritual umbrella of faith, at least in the eyes of the clerk and Father O'Rourke, who discovered Flynn laughing aloud in the confessional and who decided that "there was something gone wrong with him".' The priest, he suggests, 'may have been up to a little sexual hanky-panky metaphorically linked to his ecclesiastical misdeed'; his decline is 'due to his flouting of church law and analogously the rules of personal hygiene'.[10]

There is a lot of cover-up in 'The Sisters', but whether any of it is of a prophylactic nature, and how to relate condoms to 'recovery', remains unclear. 'Umbrellas Recovered' and 'Umbrellas Re-Covered' were common

signs in draperies, haberdasheries, and other such stores. The service was also commonly advertised in newspapers—without any innuendo.

That the shop is 'unassuming' and vaguely registered as 'drapery' attests to the decline of Great Britain Street at the end of the nineteenth century. It had been a retail street, with 'retailers and service providers in virtually every premises—both at street level and in the upper floors of buildings. The variety and quality of businesses … ranged from dressmakers to confectioners to druggists to light manufacturing.'[11] But with the rise of local tenement housing (from 0 in 1845 to 6 in 1900, in Great Britain Street itself), the quality of the street deteriorated to 'serving the domestic demands of the local tenement population.'[12] The number of clothiers, tailors, haberdashers, hosiery and drapery shops fell from 17 in 1845 to 6 in 1900. This decline is emblematicized by 'the heels of [Nannie's] cloth boots … trodden down all to one side' (*D* 176-7) (the number of shoes and bootmakers in the same period fell from 10 to 0).

The ill-fortune that has beset the street and its shop-owners is inevitable. The only things that can be recovered are umbrellas. Down-at-heel, the sisters and their brother try to recover their memory of Irishtown, which had been a popular sea-side resort in earlier Victorian times, but had fallen out of favour, just as the priest seems to have fallen out of favour in his parish.[13] The Flynns wish to recover these memories by revisiting their old home in a modern coach:

> —But still and all he kept on saying that before the summer was over he'd go out for a drive one fine day just to see the old house again where we were all born down in Irishtown and take me and Nannie with him. If we could only get one of them newfangled carriages that makes no noise that Father

> O'Rourke told him about—them with the rheumatic wheels—for the day cheap, he said, at Johnny Rush's over the way there and drive out the three of us together of a Sunday evening. He had his mind set on that.... Poor James! (*D* 259-67)

But the carriage that is to convey them is paralysed because it has rheumatic wheels (Joyce changed the 'pneumatic' in his *Homestead* version, prompted by the advertisement for Cantrell and Cochrane's mineral water—'for the gouty & rheumatic'—at the bottom of his story's page—Eliza is substituting a bodily discharge for the spirit[14]). 'There was no hope for him this time': James Flynn's spirit could not be recovered. As with the air out of the tyres, 'the breath went out of him' (*D* 205). At one level the story is about the sisters' hope of the priest recovering from his nervous illness. Tangentially related to the notion of recovery is the play made on the word 'resignation':

> — He was quite resigned —
> — He looks quite resigned, said my aunt.
> — That's what the woman we had in to wash him said. She said he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned (*D* 213-4).

Phatic language indeed, but the incremental repetition effects more: the polite exchange suggests that the women believe that Father Flynn was 'resigned', or accepted the turn taken in his life, even though none of them probably believed that, as suggested by the word 'crossed.' Father Flynn may even *have* 'resigned' from his priestly role on hierarchical order, but on removal from the active priesthood he clearly was 're-signed', re-designated, both as priest and layman, a concept that is supported by the aunt's remark that contradicts the acquiescence conveyed by her earlier description: 'Yes said my aunt. He was a disappointed man. You could see that' (*D* 275-6). Father Flynn was clearly more disappointed than resigned, but he was also 'dis-appointed' as a priest.

The nature of Father Flynn's character proposed here is borne out by his course of instruction for the boy: apart from the death-focused 'stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte' (*D* 123-124), his teachings deal exclusively with the dead hand of institutional procedures and legalistic construction. They are all matters of form, devoid of a substantial core of faith or creed. Father Flynn's dead body, 'vested as for the altar' (*D* 182), is the correlative of his life where the fundamental tenets of the faith around which ritual, ceremony and rules have been constructed have been obscured or displaced by 'books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper' (*D* 137-8), as if those were the criteria for the good news of the Gospel. That is

all Father Flynn taught because that is all he had the capacity to teach: *Nemo dat qui non habit.*

Recovery extends beyond the Flynns' wish to return to the place of their birth. At that supper where Fr Flynn's death is announced, the Uncle refers to the boy fancifully as a 'rosicrucian':

> —That's my principle, too, said my uncle. Let him learn to box his corner. That's what I'm always saying to that rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that's what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large..... Mr Cotter might take a pick of that leg of mutton, he added to my aunt. (*D* 54-60)

The term is intended as a facetious allusion to the boy's reclusive studiousness, but it may also hint at the Uncle's awareness of the boy's secret and morbid imaginative life.[15] The Rosicrucians were a hermetic order, which was supposedly founded by Father Christian Rosenkreutz in 1484, in Bohemia, from where it spread through the Continent in the Renaissance. In the nineteenth century, the interest in Rosicrucianism was revived, and contributed to the foundation of the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* by a coroner called Wescott. W.B. Yeats was one of its members. Rosicrucianism seems particularly relevant to a story which deals with a dead priest lying in state. In the Rosicrucian legend, Father Rosenkreutz is lying in state as well, in a secret tomb, and will come to life again as soon as his body is discovered by one of the Rosicrucians, thus initiating a new Dispensation—he is, in other words, waiting to be dis- (or re-) covered. Yeats, in an essay entitled 'The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux' (1895), recounts the legend:

> The followers of the Father Christian Rosencrux, says the old tradition, wrapped his imperishable body in noble raiment and laid it under the house of their Order, in a tomb containing the symbols of all things in heaven and earth, and in the waters under the earth, and set about him inextinguishable magical lamps, which burnt on generation after generation, until other students of the Order came upon the tomb by chance. It seems to me that the imagination has had no very different history during the last two hundred years, but has been laid in a great tomb of criticism, and had set over it inextinguishable magical lamps of wisdom and romance, and has been altogether so nobly housed and apparelled that we have forgotten that its wizard lips are closed, or but opened for the complaining of some melancholy and ghostly voice.[16]

As a latter-day Rosicrucian, the boy in 'The Sisters' is in search of the body of Father Christian Rosenkreutz, represented here by Father Flynn. He is