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JAMES JOYCE'S USAGE OF DICTION IN REPRESENTATION OF IRISH SOCIETY IN *DUBLINERS*: THE ANALYSIS OF "THE SISTERS" AND "THE DEAD" IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

In the present study the researcher argues the important role the diction play in *Dubliners*, especially in the first and the last stories, "The Sisters" and "The Dead." The researcher attempts to show how phraseology helped Joyce to carry the themes of decrepitude, stagnation, and paralysis in Irish society at the turning of the twentieth century, and how this collection emphasizes the significance of societal context in understanding Joyce's texts, and vice versa. The hope of this de-codification is to help readers having a clearer understanding of this collection of short stories, what happens beyond the text, and the commonalities prevailed in atmosphere of Dublin of 1900s. In order to fill in the concealed gaps in cryptic references of Joyce, etymological and symbolic functions of specific words, especially allusive ones, would be discussed in this article.

Keywords: Etymology, Paralysis, Gnomon, Simony, Religion, Univocity, Dublin, Allusion.

Introduction

What has come under attention in recent decades, regarding literature and literary studies, is that of postmodern, especially poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories. The major hypothesis of the theorists of the mentioned fields is that 'signs', as Thais E. Morgan sketches in "Is There an Intertext in This Text?," are "always caught up in that crowded space of interdiscursivity" (12), and are not isolated from their social, cultural, and linguistic environment. The pioneer of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, through his major works introduced either/or dualism that blurred the traditional hermeneutic fixity of meaning, for example, that of Gadamer's 'prejudice' and 'truth', or E. D. Hirsh's desire for meaning stability. In his paper *Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences* (1966) Derrida asserts that agreements are not based on some fixed conventions for these new postmodern theorists. According to Derrida's logic of binary oppositions, along with Foucault's notion of 'structures of power', always one part of this polemic bifurcation is more privileged than the other part, because of dominant ideology or institutionalization of that phenomenon. It is believed that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (Lodge 108). In this sense, Deconstructionists

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claim that every text carries by itself the potentiality to disregard its own claims of meaning stability by an activity of 'semantic freeplay'.

But this semantic freeplay in Joyce is restricted to the framework of history and historical events. Derrida in *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry* (1989) distinguishes between 'empirical history' and 'pure history'. He tries to epitomize these two expressions through univocity. He believes that "absolute univocity would itself have no other consequence than to sterilize or paralyze history in the indigence of an indefinite iteration" (102). Somewhere else he states that "the 'iterability' of any trace implies that it can be severed from its original context and intention" (194).

In other words, Derrida's theory of no-centrality presents the idea in that every fixed ideology or slight interpretation can be analyzed on its other extreme. The clustering of a core and centralizing a cluster is not anything more than oscillation between dual interplay between socio-cultural linguistic poles. In this way "the center is not the center" (Lodge 89) and "repetitions, substitutions, fragmentations, and permutations are always taken from a history of meanings" (ibid 90). Regarding James Joyce, this history of meaning is dissolved in polysemy of language or equivocity, "for equivocity always evidences a certain depth of development and concealment of a past" (Derrida, Edmund Husserl, 102).

What the researcher attempts to demonstrate in this paper is first how Joyce could impose the socio-cultural background of his native land through specific lexicon and structure, and then how he used the same structure for parallel stories unnoticed. The overt intertextual use of concept plus symbolic visualization of scenes in stories helped Joyce to be one of the forerunners of modern prose. It is believed that multidimensionality of his texts were not accessible if he had not amalgamated the contextual elements of his local with pure textuality of his stories. Researcher attempts to elicit how this mere textuality leads to the 'beyond' the texts.

Discussion

Certainly what has put Joyce and his works under sever attention more than any other English prose writer is his direct attitude towards reality prevail in [Dublin's] society. Some people like Ezra Pound and Peter Mahon believed that "*Dubliners* is a classic example of literary realism," (2) and whatever is depicted in this collection is real picture of Dublin of 1900s and middle-class Irish people. But Joyce himself asserted that his outlook toward Dublin and *Dubliners* was exaggerated in his short story collection. He confessed in a letter to his brother, Stanislaus, that "his treatment of Ireland in *Dubliners* had been unnecessarily harsh and singled out Dublin's ingenuous insularity and its hospitality as especially important qualities that he had not shown in his stories" (Potts 84). The cause of this hyperbolic dark description of Dublin is believed to be his mother's death in their destitute condition; as Gibson Wrote, "he [Joyce] wrote to Nora, in 1904, 'I understood that I was looking at the face of a victim and I cursed the system which made her a victim'" (68).

The reason for choosing "The Sisters" and "The Dead" as the main focus of this study was not because of their being first or the last stories of *Dubliners*. "The Sisters," undoubtedly more than any other story in this collection, introduces Joyce's intentions of writing *Dubliners*. This story functions as a prelude to this collection. At the very beginning of its plot, typographically in italics, three words are introduced that don't take their shades away till the last story:

Now I knew they were true. 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, 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. (1)

The triangle of 'paralysis', 'simony', and 'gnomon' is a key to decipher the Joycean codification of his cryptex. The characters in *Dubliners* are either physically or mentally paralyzed. Father Flynn's paralysis in *The Sisters* is just the inauguration of metaphorical paralytic characterization of figures in the following stories in this collection. For example, the young boy narrator of "An Encounter" faces mental paralysis confronting the paedophile jostler, or colonial and financial paralysis of Doyle family in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room". Similarly, the word 'simony', "the buying or selling of spiritual offices, pardons or favors" (Mahon 3), is traceable in, more or less, whole the text of this series and functions as Joyce's direct criticism of Irish Catholic Church. Etymologically speaking, the notion of 'simony' is derived from Simon Magus, first-century Samaritan sorcerer, who based on *New Testament* tried to buy ecclesiastical powers from apostles (Acts 8:9-24). In *Dubliners*, simony reaches to its apex in Grace where businessmen and Father Purdon congregate in church and Father Purdon preaches Bible:

It was a text which might seem to the casual observer at variance with the lofty morality elsewhere preached by Jesus Christ. But, he told his hearers, the text had seemed to him specially adapted for the guidance of those whose lot it was to lead the life of the world and who yet wished to lead that life not in the manner of worldlings. It was a text for business men and professional men. Jesus Christ with His divine understanding of every cranny of our human nature, understood that all men were not called to the religious life, that by far the vast majority were forced to live in the world, and, to a certain extent, for the world. (126)

Other apparent instances of simoniatic degradation of Irish people can be perceived through emasculation of Corley and Lenehan in "Two Gallants", or selling the artistic talent of Kathleen Kearney by her mother in "A Mother". Likewise, *gnomon* is one of the prevalent motifs in *Dubliners*. According to Euclidean geometry, it "designates that part of a parallelogram that remains when a similar parallelogram is taken away from one of its corners" (Ellmann 126), or in simple words, *gnomon* can be defined as lack of a segment in order to leave a whole deficient. As an example we can refer to elliptical sentences in "The Sisters" which magnify the unfinished concepts which cause ambiguity in Joyce.

To mention other examples of *gnomon* in *Dubliners* we can refer to Mr. Kiernan's broken tongue which signifies his broken masculinity in "Grace," Little Chandler's castrated figure in "A Little Cloud," and Mr. Holohan's crippled leg in "A Mother." As may be understood all these physical abnormality signifies emotional paralysis in *Dubliners*. But in some other stories the emotional paralysis leads to physical deviations. As Peter Mahon wrote, "feminine versions of the *gnomon* can be seen in Eveline's terrified breakdown which leaves her clinging to the railings at the ferry, Polly's loss of her 'honor' in 'The Boarding House', the death of Mrs. Sinico in 'A Painful Case'" (6). In short, simony and *gnomon* in *Dubliners* have interchangeable functions, for instance, the absence of Father Flynn can be interpreted as an incarnation of *gnomon*.

Perplexity and ambiguity are other important characteristics common in the stories of *Dubliners*. It seems that they function as riddles, and readers should endeavor to solve them by associating the present clues with concealed referential acknowledgements caught beforehand. One of the aspects of intensification of ambiguity in *Dubliners'* short stories is lack of denouements. Stories in *Dubliners* stop rather than end, by the exception of "The Dead." For example, no one exactly knows what had happened to Father Flynn in "The Sisters," or what the gold coin in "Two Gallants" distinctly signifies. Similarly, in other stories of *Dubliners*, the reader is faced with many

cryptic references that can be solved just beyond the text. In fact, as Derrida states, "there is no visibility without the symbolic, no 'ergon' without 'parergon,' no figure without frame" (Ellmann 124).

Put all these commonalities away, we should see how "The Dead" is perceived to be the mature intertextual synchronization of "The Sisters." In "The Sisters" the narrator seems to be a nameless boy without parents living with his aunt and uncle. Similarly, Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" in his homecoming experience returns to his aunts and rarely mentions his own parents.

Both stories are critique of [Irish] Catholic Church. Father Flynn in "The Sisters" is said to have broken 'the chalice' and metaphorically committed unforgivable sin. The Irony is in that the Catholics believe that sins should be atoned through priests, but here the priest is the cause of the sin. In "The Dead", the church and priests are accused of killing Aunt Julia's artistic talent by having sexist attitude towards women singers of church's and putting girls away.

Celibacy is another prominent feature in *Dubliners*. Rarely we see a married person, or if we see any, he/she is not happy or satisfied with his/her life like little Chandler. It seems that love has bitter mystery for Joyce. The love for him is summarized to sexual seduction or is just the beginning of either a business as demonstrated in "The Boarding House", or a mystical bafflement like the destiny of the young boy narrator of "Araby." In his personal life it seems that Joyce sacrifices his love for the power of imaginative creativity. His wife, Nora, "told Frank Budgen in 1918, 'Jim wants me to go with other men so that he will have something to write about' (JJ 445)" (Ellmann 118). Nora had decently come from Galway, and this had critics mention that Gretta in "The Dead" was the representation of Joyce's Wife, and the story is the autobiographical presentation of Joyce himself. In Joyce's biography we "discover that his friend, Vincent Cosgrave, has been pursuing Nora in 1904" (ibid). All this personal shortages made love a 'objet petit a' for Joyce, thus we rarely see true love in Joyce.

In contrast to Joyce's dilapidated male characters, his female characters are able to take care of themselves. In "The Sisters", Fr. Flynn is manipulated by his old sisters. In "Eveline," the character by the same name is handling the house. In other stories of *Dubliners*, like "The Boarding House", "Clay", and "A Mother", women are the centre of power. This overmastering the men reaches its highest point when Gabriel Conroy in spite of his desire of mastering turns to be emotionally a slave though this loss was anticipated from the very beginning of the story when Lily said: "the men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you" (Joyce 126). Likewise, we see that other characters of "The Dead", who are mostly women, are unmarried. The approval celibacy is most symbolized in the song of 'Arrayed for the Bridal' when Aunt Julia sings it in "The Dead," and as Schlossman refers, this song "ironically figures the proper bourgeois lives of Irish spinsters and the aging singer's approaching end" (78).

In either of these stories, "The Sisters" and "The Dead", a third person exists who is literally deceased, but even his absence affects the main character. Michael Furey in "The Dead" and Father Flynn in "The Sisters" are dead but both stories' protagonists are mentally related to them. It is this past entanglement that Joyce believed to have shadowed the present condition of Dublin and the Dubliners.

In both stories the protagonists confront a foil character whose presence problematizes their peaceful condition. In "The Sisters" old Cotter, as his name innuendoes to phonologic pun of 'cutter', is accused of cutting the poignant connection between notorious Fr. Flynn and the nameless character when he informs them of the priest's death:

He began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory. My uncle saw me staring and said to me:

"Well, so your old friend is gone, you'll be sorry to hear."

"Who?" said I.

"Father Flynn."

"Is he dead?"

"Mr. Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house". (126)

In "The Dead" Miss Ivors who is "involved in the Irish Revival and stands as a symbol of Irish nationalism" (Gleed 119) calls Gabriel a 'West Briton'. She uses this derogative phrase in order to show how far he is away from his homeland, both physically and emotionally. If we focus more on the characterization in these two stories, we will understand that personages are isolated in their own caves though they are in communities. They rather have chosen corner of the rooms as their sitting and review their own memories for which Joyce used the techniques of stream-of-consciousness or interior monologue "for which he is famous in *A Portrait of the Artist*" (Bass 514).

By the way, the basic difference between "The Sisters" and "The Dead" is revealed in the implication they impose. Although *Dubliners* begin with the dark, gloomy, and hopeless atmosphere, it ends with happy Christmas party. There are some symbolic references in "The Dead" that signify the element of hope unlike other stories of *Dubliners*. The dark and poor situations are usually incarnated by street names in this collection of short story, for example Great Britain Street in "The Sisters" was famous for its poor condition in 1900s. In contrast, in "The Dead" the signs of nationalism, hope, and rebirth are advocated. Gabriel Conroy's mentioning the statue of King Billy is probably the insinuation to William III of England, who is known as King Billy in Ireland and Scotland. The other reference to King William is in 'The Lass of Aughrim', the song that moves Gretta at the end of the story and reminds her of her former lover. As Gibson mentions:

the song summons up a history of oppression and grief... The battle of Aughrim in 1691 has some claim to having been 'the most disastrous battle of Irish history'. Amidst havoc and brute carnage, William of Orange's army clinched its victory over Catholic Ireland and finally 'broke the back of Gaelic civilization'. (75)

This Catholic defeat is reinforced by lively characterization of Mr. Browne in "The Dead". He, "who is of the other persuasion" (Joyce 140), is the only ubiquitous character in the story who is protestant. He who knows himself as 'the man of ladies' gives air to the party and controls the drunk Freddy. Unlike other characters of the story who are shadow of death, Mr. Browne besides titillating others and breaking the common death-in-life mood of the party is Joyce's main device of Catholic criticism. This idea is signaled when the group try not to give any opportunity to him (Mr. Browne) to offence catholic church.

Conclusion

While reading Joyce in general and *Dubliners* in particular readers are conscious how narrativity unfolds codes that are not directly experienced in real life. Though these codes just by themselves don't cause interest or enjoyment for the readers, they guide them through cultural labyrinth of Dublin and Ireland. Different Gaps adjunct with different expectations make this intricacy awkward for an unaccustomed reader. What is important in *Dubliners* as a text is that it can be analyzed and interpreted by diverse readings and through different methods. Joyce left his text half open to be written by

the enthusiast reader as is proposed by hermeneutic philosophers, and it illustrates Joyce's craftsmanship to keep the element of suspense present in his works.

'Ambiguous ending' and 'deliberate withholding of information' holds *Dubliners* in the state of uncertainty and complicity, and classifies it as a modern text. But unlike the uncertain meaning, the intention of the *Dubliners* is made clear by Joyce himself as the first step to spiritual liberation of Ireland and Irish people. This freedom is concretized through Gabriel Conroy's final decision in "The Dead" when he understands that he does not belong to any other place except Ireland, thus the 'journey westward' which historically stands for 'death' metaphorically refers to death of Gabriel's affected identity, and proposes his return to his former Irish identity. The Englishness which Gabriel was proud of is accused of being the symptom for his inferiority to Michael Furey whose main attribution was rural Irish passionate hospitality. After *Dubliners* we rarely see such harsh and severe account of Ireland and Irish people expressed by Joyce instead the instances of sectarian animosity colours his subsequent works.

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