

Are Joyce's Dubliners Paralyzed? A Second Opinion

JOHN HOBBS

Abstract

Although over the years critics have maintained a consensus on the central theme of paralysis in *Dubliners*, this essay contends that it fails to provide a coherent reading of the stories, a fact that has already been widely admitted when it comes to the expansive view of Irish society in "The Dead." Unsurprisingly enough, the social theory Joyce announced conflicts with the diversity of his fictional practice. Following Joyce's contradictory assertion that his collection intends to forward "the spiritual liberation of my country," this essay examines each protagonist's double liberation, first from his or her daily routine, and second from the new "adventure" when it proves disappointing. Joyce doesn't judge his characters, leaving them free to make their own mistakes. Similarly, he leaves his readers free to draw their own conclusions from the delicately balanced evidence he presents in his tone of ironic sympathy.

As a young Irish writer trying to sell a collection of stories that would shock some readers with their honest realism and unconventional morality, Joyce explained to a potential publisher, "my intention was to write a chapter of the moral

history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis."¹

This was not the first time that he had diagnosed his fellow citizens' psychological, intellectual, and spiritual condition. He complained to his brother Stanislaus: "What's the matter with you is that you're afraid to live. You and people like you. This city is suffering from hemiplegia,"² or partial paralysis. To an audience in Trieste he added that in Ireland "individual initiative is paralysed by the influence and admonitions of the church, while its body is manacled by the police, the tax office, and the garrison."³ However, since neither Rome rule nor British rule are blamed for his characters' problems in *Dubliners*, Joyce's social theory may not explain his fictional practice. Coming up with a unifying theme for his collection may have been his strategy to interest editors, for in a suspiciously obvious move for this subtle writer, he placed the word "paralysis" in italics on the first page of his *Dubliners* collection.

At any rate, as readers we learned long ago to take any author's stated intention with several grains of salt, yet Joyce's paralysis idea has somehow remained sacrosanct. *Dubliners* critics have been quick to take Joyce's hint and run with it. As one concludes: "competing approaches to [*Dubliners*] generally center on disagreements concerning the implications of what nearly all critics have recognized as Joyce's central theme: the paralysis permeating Irish life."⁴ Judging by four recent anthologies of critical essays, he understates the critical consensus. Not one of these forty *Dubliners* interpreters questions the relevance of paralysis. Most assume it, and some go to considerable lengths to demonstrate paralysis in their stories.

Admittedly, the paralysis theme has always faced a major obstacle in "The Dead," because it presents a much more expansive and positive view of Dublin life. As early as 1966 Florence Walzer suggested that "'The Dead' is story of insight and realization, and it seems to reverse the pattern of increasing insensibility that *Dubliners* otherwise traces...It cannot be fit

with easy logic into the dominant paralysis pattern.”⁵ If, however, paralysis fails to provide a coherent and revealing pattern for *Dubliners*, as I will argue, we can try another of Joyce’s other thematic hint, using it to loosen the tight grip of paralysis on readers and critics. For with his characteristic arrogance Joyce also insisted that in writing *Dubliners* “I have taken the first step toward the spiritual liberation of my country.”⁶ Following this opposite lead, I suggest that these stories depict the protagonist’s double liberation—first from his or her daily routine, and second from the new “adventure” itself when it proves disappointing. Because that is where we usually find a story’s final significance, my brief survey will focus mainly on endings.

To help in exploring this alternative reading of *Dubliners* I will draw on an insight of Jean-Paul Sartre, like Joyce a boldly intellectual novelist and the proud citizen of a country that had been occupied by a foreign power. In his classic study *What is Literature?* (1948), he maintains that the goal of fiction should be “to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom.”⁷ So “however dark may be the colours in which one paints the world, one paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it.”⁸ Each literary work, then, “proposes a concrete liberation on the basis of a particular alienation.”⁹ Liberation is for Sartre, and I suggest for Joyce too, the necessary goal for modern fiction.

In the first *Dubliners* story “The Sisters” the boy’s visits to the old priest offered a temporary escape from his everyday routine of school and family life and also another sort of learning—about the Latin liturgy, Napoleon, and Church doctrines. The priest’s earlier nervous breakdown had, in effect, freed him from the “the duties of the priesthood” that were “too much for him.”¹⁰ To the boy the word “paralysis” refers less to the old priest’s physical condition than to an attractive mystery that “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” (9).

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Despite the loss of his old friend, the boy feels liberated, “as if I had been freed from something by his death” (12), and this emotional freedom allows him to observe the adult conventions of mourning with a critical eye, noting how they conceal the real mystery of death. Our young protagonist contemplates the mystery of paralysis as he contemplates death, but he is in no way paralyzed himself. In fact, he undergoes a double liberation—first, from his daily routine, and then from his charitable visits to the priest.

In the next two stories similar boys seek a more active liberation from their everyday routine, but each time they find themselves in an even more constraining situation, from which they again must free themselves. In “An Encounter,” the boy skips school to have an adventure, but he ends by exchanging Father Butler’s schoolroom scoldings for the too close attention of an ominous male instructor. The boys’ Wild West games had at first “opened doors of escape” (20) from the “wearisome” “routine of school,” but he later feels the need for “real adventures” and he knows these “do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad” (21). Yet his Dublin outing with his buddy Mahony proves to be tame enough, until they’re approached by an older man who takes them on his own bizarre verbal adventure that ends in a fantasy whipping. In his second liberation the boy finally escapes from the pervert, and in doing so he comes to appreciate the presence of his stalwart friend Mahony whom he had looked down on. For him the freedom to have “real adventures” proves more risky than rewarding.

In “Araby” the boy’s “real adventure” is no longer boyish games but his romantic obsession with Mangan’s sister whom he watches from an adoring distance until she finally tells him about the bazaar. His plan to go there and buy her a gift meets with minor obstacles of family life, and when he finally arrives, his destination turns nightmarish—the bazaar is closing, and he doesn’t have enough money to buy anything anyway. His romantic adventure in which he “bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes” leads him to an intense

realization: “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (35). Yet his disillusionment, however exaggerated, does free him from his romantic fantasy, and since Mangan’s sister had no expectation of a gift, his embarrassment remains private. He gains the freedom to reflect on his first love and to go on a wiser boy. Like “An Encounter,” this story delineates a double liberation—first, from the boy’s daily routine, and then from his obsession. Although temporarily frustrated, he is hardly paralyzed.

If youth is naturally associated with freedom, adult responsibilities at home and work inevitably bring limitations. The young woman in “Eveline” has internalized these responsibilities, taking her dead mother’s place in the household as well as working to support her family. On the evening of the story she faces her first major life decision—will she go with Frank to start a new life in faraway Argentina, or will she stay securely at home in her difficult but familiar circumstances? Given the high stakes, this would be a tough decision for anyone: “She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh each side of the question” (37). And as readers we participate vicariously in her weighing process, testing her estimations against our own. Having no friend to consult, Eveline is at the mercy of her own confused emotions. The memory of her mother’s “life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness” tips the balance. Suddenly terrified of ending up the same way, she thinks: “Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love too”—weighty expectations for any young man to fulfill. Although she goes to the dock with Frank, she’s still hasn’t quite made up her mind to leave her home, and at the last minute she decides to stay in Dublin.

Readers usually feel disappointed by her decision, but it can be viewed in a different light. Like the boys in the earlier stories, she experiences a double liberation, first freeing herself from her exhausting routine to take up with Frank against her father’s wishes, and then freeing herself from Frank as well.

For perhaps the first time, she experiences her own free will by resisting the expectations of the two dominant men in her life. Her last description exemplifies physical and mental paralysis, if anything in *Dubliners* does: "She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (41). Yet this could also be seen as her non-verbal resistance. As she asked herself earlier: "Could she still draw back after all he had done for her?" (41). The answer her own behavior delivers is "yes." And we have no reason to assume that Frank is the last young man who will want to marry Eveline. As is typical in *Dubliners* Joyce gives his readers the interpretive freedom to decide for themselves whether she was right or wrong.

"After the Race" tells the story of a different sort of freedom—of gambling on an auto race, on an investment, and in a card-game. Jimmy's evening follows the pattern of double liberation we have traced in the earlier stories. Not that poverty or immaturity constrain him; his father is wealthy, and Jimmy is university-educated with no need to work. At Cambridge he had met the Frenchman, who "had seen so much of the world" that Dublin life, in comparison, seemed a mere "channel of poverty and inaction" (42). Their lively company liberates Jimmy from his mundane routine and also promises him an exciting future. After dinner the young men are invited on board an American's yacht. For Jimmy "this was seeing life," and when they start playing cards they fling "themselves boldly into the adventure," (48) risking large sums of money. By the evening's end he and the American are the big losers. An "inheritor of solid instincts," he seems half-aware that they've taking advantage of him all along, and he was "glad of the dark stupor that would cover up his folly" (48). Like the boy at the end of "Araby," he too has been "driven and derided by vanity." But if his shame saves him from even greater financial folly later in life, this evening's experience will have liberated Jimmy from his own illusory liberation. However that may be, paralysis or the fear to live hardly seems relevant to the plot and themes.

The skillful manipulation of others for financial gain takes a much more sinister turn in “Two Gallants,” where Corley cynically romances a servant girl to get her to steal money from her employer. Lenehan, by his vicarious identification with Corley’s plan, is freed from his own pointless routine of wandering the streets thinking how he’d like to marry a woman with money. Meanwhile the time weighs heavily, and Joyce maintains his (and our) suspense to the final sentence when Corley “with a grave gesture extended a hand towards the light and, smiling, opened it slowly to the gaze of his disciple. A small gold coin shone in the palm” (60). The reader too may feel an uncomfortable sort of freedom in this story, since their scheme is morally reprehensible, yet we are intrigued by the suspense of the theft. Again, paralysis of the will, as desirable as it would be for these reprobates, is nowhere to be found. In fact, their scheme demonstrates the destructive use of their freedom.

As the comic alternative to the serious “Two Gallants,” “The Boarding House” depicts another clever manipulation of sexual desire for financial gain, this time in the extended form of marital security. Instead of Corley and Lenehan, we have Mrs. Mooney and her daughter Polly, although this time there is no “open complicity” (63) between the conspirators. Far from being paralyzed or indecisive, Mrs. Mooney “dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat” (63). On the immediate question of Mr. Doran’s marrying her daughter, “she was sure she would win” (65). Polly, for her part, “did not wish it to be thought that in her wise innocence she had divined the intention behind her mother’s tolerance” (64). Mr. Doran, on the other hand, “had a notion that he was being had,” and “his instinct urged him to remain free, not to marry” (66). Yet he also “remembered well her eyes, the touch of her hand and his delirium” (67). His urge to escape conflicts with his feelings of desire and responsibility: “He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away...yet a force pushed him downstairs step by step” (67-8). Their climactic discussion occurs off-stage, so the reader’s final image is of Polly first

crying and then dreaming of their future together. Doran had been liberated from his drab routine by his romance with Polly; his second liberation is more uncertain. As readers we are free to wonder if their marriage will work, and as usual, Joyce has carefully balanced the conflicting evidence. Societal expectations constrain them, yet neither is compelled by harsh economic circumstances. If the cautious Mr. Doran has been "afraid to live," as Joyce accused his brother Stan, the scheming of the mother and daughter has drawn him into the mainstream of Dublin family life.

Several years ahead of Mr. Doran, Chandler in "A Little Cloud" has married an attractive woman who has turned out to be an unsympathetic wife and mother. Going excitedly to meet his old friend Gallaher, a successful London journalist, "for the first time his soul revolted against the dull inelegance of Capel Street" (73). This evening's liberation from his tiresome office job even prompts a reverie about writing poetry that "took life within him like an infant hope" (73). Yet as they drink and talk, Chandler notes the crudity of his idol, so he leaves him disillusioned but still frustrated by his own narrow life. The final scene in which his wife unfairly rebukes him for making their baby cry leaves him devastated. Like the boy in "Araby," "Little Chandler felt his cheeks suffused with shame and he stood back out of the lamplight." When the baby's crying stops, "tears of remorse started to his eyes" (85). In the course of the story Chandler realizes the limitations of both Gallaher and his own wife, but will his new freedom from romantic illusions motivate him to change his life? Joyce characteristically withholds an answer. Still, for the first time Chandler has recognized how the circumstances of his life drag him down.

Harsher circumstances make it difficult to find an element of freedom for Farrington in "Counterparts," since "all the indignities of his life enraged him" (97). Yet he had impulsively "done for himself in the office, pawned his watch, spent all his money; and he had not even got drunk"—a busy day in which his actions only make his difficult situation that

much worse. The final scene when he comes home is surely the most painful in *Dubliners*. Taking as his excuse the fire going out, he beats his little son with his walking stick, while the boy cries “I’ll say a Hail Mary for you, pa, if you don’t beat me” (98). In this violent conclusion there are frustration and rage, but there are no signs of paralysis in Farrington—in fact, the reader likely wishes there were.

In sharp contrast to Farrington’s total dissatisfaction, Maria seems perfectly content with the busy and useful life she leads in “Clay.” Her plans for the Halloween party go awry when she leaves the cake on the tram, and later the children play a trick on her with the saucer of dirt, but she keeps reassuring herself that everything is fine. And at the story’s end her song evokes a sentimental harmony to which the whole family assents. The reader sees that her complacency covers a limited life, yet Maria’s freedom may be to define her life in miniature. Being paralyzed or afraid to live implies rejecting opportunities—marriage, for example—which Maria obviously lacks.

Defining the narrow limits of his own life, Mr Duffy in “A Painful Case” chooses to remain independent of all human ties, living “as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen,” (107) and living “his spiritual life without any communion with others” (109). However, the friendship he develops with Mrs. Sinico draws him beyond his familiar routine to the point where he “thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature” (111). Her aroused passion then disillusiones him, and he forces their separation, freeing himself from his own former liberation. Yet his life takes one further twist when after reading of her death she reappears to him as a ghost, shattering his superior independence and forcing him to see how “his life would be lonely too until he, too, died, ceased to exist, became a memory” (116). “At moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear, her hand touch his” (117)—the very gesture that led him to break off their friendship. Could a man of his intelligence fail to learn from this traumatic experience? Joyce

offers the reader no reassurance, yet paralysis of the will is obviously not Mr Duffy's problem. In fact, he makes decisions without allowing his real feelings to influence them.

Upon a first reading "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" does seem to epitomize Dublin paralysis with the lazy election canvassers taking refuge from the rain around a small fire in a cold dark room, waiting to be paid for their feeble efforts. Like the sputtering fire the energy of their conversation rises and declines. Mr O'Connor has little to say, whereas Mr Hynes stoutly defends the interests of the working man, and Mr Henchy sharply quizzes them on the voters they interviewed. As they wait patiently for drinks to be delivered, they gossip about the current Lord Mayor and King Edward. The quiet story ends with Hynes's ceremonious performance of his own poem on Parnell's death, subduing their political bickering in harmonious nostalgia—their second liberation, this time from dissent. They certainly might have made more productive uses of their day, but is it revealing to categorize them as mentally or spiritually paralyzed because their gossip takes the place of Parnell's bold political action? On the contrary, they seem to be making the best of a dreary day by sharing their concerns before they return to their normal routines.

Nor does paralysis constrain the contest of wills between the incompetent Eire Abu Society members and the fiercely determined Mrs. Kearney in "A Mother." Mr. Holohan, the concert organizer, walks aimlessly around the city, but "in the end it was Mrs Kearney who arranged everything" (136). Planning the concerts to promote her daughter's musical career liberates her from her housewifely routine. But when the problem about a reduced fee comes up, Mrs. Kearney is consumed by anger, "and she looked as if she would attack someone with her hands" (148). She demands her legal rights, and the story ends in a stalemate, leaving the reader free to decide who is right: does her goal of fair treatment justify her harsh methods? Mrs. Kearney operates as a feminist in a male social world that keeps reminding her to be

a proper lady, yet her assertiveness repeatedly backfires and ends by hampering her daughter's musical future.

Assertiveness proves to be more effective in "Grace" where the drunken Mr. Kernan is picked up from the pub lavatory floor, brought home by his friend, and later cajoled into attending a church retreat. As Mr. Power tells his wife, "we'll make him turn over a new leaf ...we'll make a new man of him" (155). Paralysis may describe his initial drunken stupor, but he soon enough regains his ornery self-confidence. Gathered in his bedroom, his friends carry on a confused theological discussion as they tactfully draw him into their scheme. Father Purdon's financial metaphors ironize the retreat in the reader's mind. Nevertheless, a generous impulse motivates the friends who do their best to help, and the ending leaves Kernan's future reformation an open question.

A collective generosity also defines the atmosphere of the story Joyce added last to his collection, because he came to feel that the earlier stories had been "unnecessarily harsh" in their portrayals of Irish lives. "The Dead" has two separate and contrasting scenes—the holiday party and the hotel room. Gabriel is drawn away from his everyday routine by the special occasion and the challenge of his after-dinner speech. Despite his anxieties—heightened by his embarrassing misunderstandings with Lily and Miss Ivors—his speech is well-received. As the party ends he falls into an "Araby" mood, idealizing his own wife from a distance and imagining a romantic night with her, but his plan is frustrated by her sad memory of an adolescent lover evoked by Darcy's ballad. During his busy anxious evening Gabriel has no time to be paralyzed, nor do any of the other characters for that matter. Indeed, as an active husband, father, and teacher Gabriel seems unafraid to live. Yet he comes to understand the urgent necessity of integrating his re-awakened passions with his everyday routine—one way of reading the mysterious ending of "The Dead" in which individual egos are absorbed in his broader vision of life and death. As to be expected from this long, complex story Gabriel's liberations are multiple: from his

everyday life, from his speech anxieties, from his romantic fantasy, and finally from his own pointless jealousy.

In summary, Joyce develops each of these stories by means of the multiple liberations of the central characters who are typically freed from their everyday routines and then find that they must liberate themselves from their initial liberation. Joyce doesn't judge his characters, leaving them free to make their own mistakes, demonstrating how freedom can be negative and even destructive. As readers we share the characters' uncertainties, but we are left free to draw our own conclusions from the skillfully balanced evidence at the end. For these stories do leave the door open to the future, and not just for the boys in the early stories, but also for Eveline, Jimmy Doyle, Bob and Peggy Doran, the Kearney's daughter, and the Conroys. Will Mr. Kernan really stop his drinking? Will Mr. Duffy expand his narrow life? Will Little Chandler start writing poetry? We might even wonder if Corley and Lenehan will get arrested—or get jobs? With the possible exception of Farrington, none of these characters appears to be without hope, none is so imprisoned by circumstances that change is impossible, even if it is just the act of saying no, the power that forms the core of Stephen's personality in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

A detailed reading along these lines would, of course, take a whole book, but this quick survey may help to loosen the grip of the familiar paralysis theory. Mesmerized by his pronouncement, Joyce's critics—and the readers who have followed their lead—have somehow overlooked the lack of solid evidence for paralysis in the texts themselves. In fact, the *Dubliners* collection reveals how the didactic intent of Joyce the social critic has thankfully been subverted by the achievement of Joyce the artist who brings an ironic sympathy to each of his characters and their situations. Diagnosing psychological or spiritual paralysis—fearing to live, as Joyce put it—is relative and subjective. It may be too easy for modern readers to conclude that these Victorian Irish lives are too limited and unambitious. Although they meet minor

frustrations and major setbacks, they continue to struggle. For, as Sartre wrote, “however dark may be the colours in which one paints the world, one paints it so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it.” These free men and women, I suggest, include Joyce, his characters in *Dubliners*, and also his readers.

Notes

¹ James Joyce, *Selected Letters*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1975) 83.

² Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 140

³ Ellmann 258.

⁴ Craig Hansen Werner, *Dubliners: A Pluralistic World* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988) 33.

⁵ Florence L. Walzl, “Gabriel and Michael: The Conclusion of ‘The Dead,’” in James Joyce, *Dubliners: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (New York: Viking, 1969) 430.

⁶ James Joyce, *Selected Letters*, 88.

⁷ *What is Literature* (London: Methuen, 1970) 41.

⁸ Sartre 45.

⁹ Sartre 51.

¹⁰ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Viking Press, 1961) 17.

Further references to the collection are cited parenthetically in the text.