

The Stagnation – Disruption Dichotomy in *Dubliners*

SREERADHA SETH

“Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.”¹

The concluding line from ‘Araby’, the third story in *Dubliners* sums up the feelings of most of the protagonists of the different stories in the collection. In this story, Joyce depicts the unimaginative, conventional, narrow minded existence of the Dubliners and how the protagonist desperately tries to escape from it. He depicts it with unsparing realism with an abundance of descriptive phrases such as “the waste room littered with old papers”, “the dark odorous stables”, “the dark dripping gardens”, and “the few straggling bushes in the garden”.² Joyce symbolically indicates the stagnated existence of Dubliners where the protagonist is compelled to take refuge in his reveries for a better existence amidst the stifling surroundings. The impression of this stagnation is further intensified by the details like the ‘musty’ air and the ‘brown’ unpainted facades of the houses in the locality. The turning point which provides a disruption amidst this stagnation is the boy’s decision to go to the oriental fair called ‘Araby’ to buy a token of love for Mangan’s sister whom he is infatuated with. His definition of ideal love is ruptured when he receives a rude shock upon witnessing the shameless flirtation of a female shop assistant with two men. Like the other protagonists, he is confronted with a disturbing self-revelatory epiphany that his imaginative superiority over the crestfallen Dubliners is eventually fruitless. This ultimately transforms him from an idealistic state of innocence to the complexity of adult experience.

Disruption in the lives of the characters in the first story 'The Sisters' occurs due to the death of Father Flynn, with whom the boy protagonist shares a very ambiguous relationship. The boy was somewhat irritated that his regular routine has been disrupted because of Father Flynn's death which is evident in the lines "Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his armchair by the fire, nearly smothered in his greatcoat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast for him and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze."³ Even the Father's sister seems to be sad at the disruption of her daily routine, "I won't be bringing him his cup of beef tea..."⁴

What is disturbing in the narrative is the boy's recollection of the paralyzed father. He states that his musings about Christmas were disrupted by father Flynn's image who began to confess to him in a murmuring voice and the boy was vexed when he smiled continually and his lips were moist with spittle. The boy even admits feeling uncomfortable about him even though he paints their relationship as nothing but spiritual. The character of the invalid malevolent father Flynn becomes further questionable when old Cotter says it is unhealthy for young boys to mingle with such fathers. The stagnation in the story is shattered by his death as the narrator observes that he felt a strange sense of freedom after he passed away. Father Flynn's paralysis runs as a crucial part of the story, it was destabilized by his deteriorating condition, epitomized by his laughing frenzy in a confessional box. This image is not only disturbing but is perhaps symbolic of the disturbing chaos his surrounding was in. Moreover, the priest's dropping of the chalice and his inability to grasp the same in his coffin indicates a disruption in the rituals of religion. Even death is followed by unnatural reaction from the protagonist. While kneeling down before the coffin, the boy was expected to pray, but he was distracted by a strange reverie of the old priest smiling inside his coffin. Even when the boy saw the corpse lying "solemn

and copious”,⁵ the gravity of the situation escaped him for he was distracted by the heavy odour of the flowers in the room.

The presence of father Flynn lingers throughout the story, tinting the narrator’s experience of death and shows how it interrupts normal human activities and their psyche. It has not only affected the young narrator’s spirit but of other characters as well such as the maid who washed him. She makes a disturbing observation “No one would think he’d make such a beautiful corpse”.⁶

The narrative acts as an amorphous space as Joyce uses several aborted sentences in the story, similar to Mansfield’s short story ‘The Fly’ as much is left to the reader’s imagination. Even the story ends with an unfinished sentence. The narrator while trying to interpret Old Cotter says that, “I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences.”⁷ These incomplete sentences act as a disruption to the normal flow of the narrative as one can discern the presence of subterranean currents in the story.

Readers encounter another questionable figure like father Flynn in ‘An Encounter’ who disrupts the otherwise unadventurous life of the two young boys, Mahony and the young protagonist. The disruption in the normal routine life is indicated in the very opening of the story as the narrator observes, “Everyone was incredulous when it was reported that he had a vocation for the priesthood”.⁸ Here he refers to Joe Dillion, a friend of the protagonist who had introduced the boys to several games and has been a consistent winner. Reading regular school syllabi was a form of paralysis and to relieve this tedium, they wanted to play a real life adventure games.

The undercurrent of religious conflict in the city is highlighted when the narrator and Mahony were attacked by two poor boys in North Dublin who thought that they were Protestants. This highlights the rigid Catholicism prevalent in Ireland as Joyce has also mentioned the presence of catholic schools in Dublin several times in the collection. Joyce gives a vivid description of the bustling city life, away from the stagnation of school life through the narrator’s description of workers,

drivers and laborers working near the river who “shouted” (Joyce, p.11) at their “immobility” (Joyce, p.11). Here Joyce gives a rare view of the city as an un-stagnated space where immobility is discouraged. When the boys had sat hopelessly on the bank as their friends did not arrive for the adventurous game, their chat was disrupted by the old man. In the course of the conversation, he soon came out as an opportunistic man who tried to engage young boys in perverse conversations. He asked personal questions about having romantic companions and to gain the better of the curiosity of the young boys, he told them that he had books that young boys like them could not read. A disruption in the narrative takes place when the man began an inappropriate conversation with the narrator about whipping young boys when Mahony escaped (using the alibi of a cat) upon seeing the old man masturbating. He soon changed his opinions and uncannily began to talk about torturing young boys for having romantic interest in girls. His fixation with whipping made it sound like a sadomasochistic sexual act which made the narrator very uncomfortable. Although his speech was monotonous, it was quite disturbing with its sexual innuendos. Even though the boy tried to escape the monotony of school life, he was ultimately paralyzed because of his excruciatingly disturbing afternoon with a perverted old man. Thus it highlights the stagnation-disruption dichotomy by showing that when the boy tried to escape routine and hence stagnation, he is paralyzed by a fearful experience.

‘Eveline’, the fourth story in the collection illustrates how the daily routine bogs one down and thwarts the scope for experiencing a better life. The disruption in the daily routine is caused by an epiphany but the impact of the realization is short lived. Initially Joyce symbolically indicates a disruption through Eveline’s eyes when she ponders on how a field by her house, where she used to play, was brought by a man in Belfast who built “bright brick houses with shining roof”.⁹ Joyce indicates how urbanization has disrupted a space meant for sportive activities of children. However, this is deceptive because the readers soon realize how fond she is of routine and yet

yearns to escape from it. Brooding about the past, she realizes she has to leave the “familiar objects” with which she never “dreamt of being divided”¹⁰ for a better prospect with her lover Frank in Buenos Aires. She is also held back by her promise to her mother to keep the home together. Thus she is drawn into a conflict between these two lives. She realizes the drawbacks of this routinely life for her father was a drunkard and an abusive man. Moreover, her brothers were not there to protect her. But the readers can anticipate that she would perhaps not choose the adventurous life over a routine-mundane one because she reasons with herself and finds it not to be wholly “undesirable” with its monotonous activities like running the household, working in a shop and looking after her siblings.

Joyce provides a sharp contrast between the two men and shows Eveline holds much better prospects with Frank. He was a sailor who treated her with respect while her father, like the old man from the ‘An Encounter’ forbids her from having an affair. This makes her think that she must leave with Frank and which is evident in her exasperated exclamation, “Escape! She must escape!”¹¹

Her conflict leaves her indecisive as she prays to God to show her the rightful path. Her return from the brink of leaving with Frank suggests a paralysis as she stands the threat of repeating her mother’s life. However, the story is also open to interpretation as to how she would build her life without Frank. Although her reliance on routine overrides her impulses, her return suggests that there would be certain permanent changes in her life, just as the boy’s return from Araby suggests a transition from an idealistic state of innocence to experience. Thus Joyce shows the conflict between the pitfall of holding onto the past and the disruption in domestic life caused by the possibility of a new life away from Dublin.

‘Two Gallants’ the sixth story in *Dubliners* portrays the paralysis in low life of Dublin and the disruption in political functioning of the Irish government symbolically. The title is ironic because the two main characters, Lenehan and Corley are nothing but cheaters who live

by the unpleasant practice of duping maids into stealing from their employers. Joyce depicts stagnation in the low life of Dublin and how desperately people made money. Since they were cheaters themselves, they worried about betrayal as Lenehan initially suspects that Corley has cheated him out of the profits. This constant worry about betrayal resulting in disruption of the mundane low life symbolically allude to the disruption in the political life of Ireland where Parnell and all his loyal followers were abandoned by the Irish government and many voters when the news of his affair was leaked by the press. The chaos in Lenehan's life is linked to the political context and shows Ireland's condition as he taps to the notes of a harpist outside a wealthy Anglo-Protestant gentleman's club and then has a meagre feast of peas and ginger, reflecting the color of the Irish flag. Thus his economically ravished tumultuous life indicates the disruption in the political order of Ireland and the chaos it has sunk into.

'After the Race' in contrast, suggests paralysis in the Irish national movement. The protagonist, Jimmy's father was once a fervent supporter of the Irish independence but now runs a profitable business by making contracts with police who uphold the British law. He also acts against national interest by sending his son to England and encouraging investments in French business ventures. Thus, when Jimmy attempts to talk about such politically debatable issues at a dinner table, his voice is silenced, suggesting how the national fervor has subdued. Like the political movement, his posh life has also come to a halt. He leads a seemingly whimsical life because of his affluent father. Jimmy participates in posh car races and through this, Joyce provides a vivid contrast with the poverty stricken areas of Dublin through which the cars went. At the end of a card game he appears not as a dashing popular bachelor, but as a clueless fool with his pocket empty after losing. Like other protagonists in the collection, he has an epiphanic moment of revelation where he recognizes the truth about the situation but does nothing to change it.

'The Boarding House' depicts how one's preoccupation with routine

and order can cause disruption in the lives of others to an extent that their reputation is at stake. Unlike other female characters like Eveline, Mrs. Mooney is decisive, for she brought back order in her life by setting up a boarding house, after her husband ruined her butcher business. Ironically, Mrs. Mooney or “the madam”¹² as she was called ruined her daughter’s life by trying to control her in the manner a “cleaver deals with meat”.¹³ This brings out her ruthless nature and her determination to deal with emotional matters objectively to such an extent that it became cruel. Mr. Doran was complacent with a casual affair with Polly but Mrs. Money wreaked chaos in his life by forcing him to marry Polly against both their wishes. Marrying her seemed like a lifelong burden for he couldn’t imagine what his friends would think of her as his wife as she had an ill-reputed father and had an uncouth, unpolished way of speaking. His victimization by Mrs. Mooney resulted in his years of hard work and good reputation being destroyed for marrying a girl beneath him. He relented out of fear of criticism from his priest, his employer. Polly too, was against this forced marriage as she frantically pleaded to him, “What am I to do?”¹⁴ and even thought about putting an end to her life. But the last part of the narrative showed a change in her mind when her face was free of perturbation as she slept comfortably on Mrs. Doran’s pillow, reminiscing about their time together. Unlike Eveline, she lost her indecisiveness and became determined to get married.

The boarding house acts as a microcosm for the city of Dublin where everyone, according to Joyce, “knows everyone else’s business”.¹⁵ Maintenance of order at the macro level comes at the cost of disruption of order at the individual level as Mr. Doran’s life and reputation are destroyed for marrying Polly.

Joyce depicts Dublin as a quagmire in ‘A Little Cloud’ through the experiences of the protagonist Little Chandler who thought that one “could do nothing in Dublin”¹⁶ and whose soul revolted against the “dull inelegance of Chapel Street”¹⁷ just like the protagonist of *Araby* who wanted to escape the sordid and depressing neighbourhood

of Dublin. His friend Gallahar provides a stark contrast to “dear dirty Dublin”¹⁸ by talking about the gaiety and the excitement of life in Paris. Gallahar is a pragmatic man working for a newspaper and even has a patronizing attitude towards his friend who daydreams about writing verses and getting published and it’s quite similar to the boss’ patronizing attitude towards helpless Woodfield in Mansfield’s short story ‘The Fly’ as both have been compared to babies. Gallahar symbolically represents Paris through his life of excitement, his busy press activities and his inclination towards flings rather than settling for a stable married life. Little Chandler yearns for an adventurous life like his friend which is evident in his getting irritated and feeling trapped upon seeing his wife’s photograph at home. But his child’s sobbing acts as an epiphanic moment for him as he feels shameful, perhaps for desiring to leave everything behind in pursuit of a career as a writer. Like Eveline, he returns to his mundane routine life, perhaps with a changed attitude towards his routine life.

Disruption in the monotonous life takes an explicitly violent form in ‘Counterparts’, where the root of the protagonist’s violent behavior lies in his circular repetition of routine. Even his job is that of a copier. He envisions release from it by drinking in public houses but it begets only further routine and it becomes a vicious cycle as he becomes torturous like his boss, taking his frustration out on his son and his wife. His boss also indicates routine behavior through his repetition of phrases like “do you hear me now”¹⁹ “you impertinent ruffian” and “do you take me for a fool”²⁰ while scolding the protagonist Farrington for his rebellious attitude. Farrington’s discontent mounts as he loses to a much younger boy in an arm-wrestling match and then later pawns his watch for money. His discontent reaches his climax when he beats his son and Joyce shows that the desperate servitude of his son doesn’t stop him, signaling that spirituality doesn’t protect anyone. It indicates a moral and spiritual abyss the city has fallen into. Through the character of Farrington, Joyce indicates a typical frustrated Dubliner who being exasperated

with their stagnated life takes their anger out on their family as he feels trapped in a vicious cycle.

Maria in 'Clay' is another character who like Mrs. Mooney is obsessed with routine as a slight disruption caused by the loss of plum cake on the tram overwhelms her. Her reputation as a veritable peacemaker attests to her placid lifestyle. She fastidiously supervises everything at the charity she works for and perhaps pays great attention to trivial details to avoid the greater pain of monotony. Similarly, Joe to cover up his mysterious tearful reaction to Maria's song asks his wife to find an ordinary household object. Maria's fateful selection of clay which symbolizes early death at the Halloween game suggests the paralytic stagnant life she leads, somewhat similar to father Flynn in the sisters. She fails to recognize the tedious routine of her days suggested by the repetition of the song she sings for everyone. Maria's selection of a prayer book after the clay perhaps symbolically suggests that she will be further drawn into the vicious cycle of routine in the cloistered life of a convent.

'A Painful Case' illustrates the case of Mr. James Duffy who cannot tolerate unpredictability and therefore brings an end to his affair with Mrs. Sinico, the only disruption in his life, resulting in the painful death of the latter. Joyce gives his contemporary view of Dublin in the very opening sentence:

"Mr. James Duffy lived in Chapelizod because he wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen because he found all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern and pretentious."²¹

Mr. Duffy abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder, suggesting his obsession with order and routine. He himself is symbolic of Dublin as Joyce writes that his face carried the "brown" tint of Dublin, suggestive of dirt, putridity and stagnation. The description of his "dry black hair" and "tawny moustache"²² that did

not cover his mouth is reminiscent of the “straggling bushes”²³ in ‘Araby’—an expression that Joyce uses to indicate the un-amiable and uncompromising nature of the city. Joyce portrays the detached and unemotional nature of city life by stating that Mr. Duffy was not only friendless, but “escorted”²⁴ his relatives to the cemetery when they died. This subtle sarcastic comment is directed at Dublin which had stagnated to a point that it lacks both emotion and life. Although Mr. Duffy was fond of routine, Joyce depicts his frustration with his adventureless life through his daydreaming about robbing a bank, an act which was too far-fetched to be materialized.

Disruption to his routinely life comes when he begins an intimate affair with Mrs. Sinico, whose companionship was like a “warm soil”²⁵ to him. It wore away the rigidity in his character and emotionalized his life. However, amidst this warmth, he heard an impersonal voice in himself talking about the “incurable loneliness”²⁶ of his soul. This suggests the emotional void in the life of most Dubliners which Joyce considered to be beyond recuperation. This was perhaps because of the rigid mindset of the citizens who were not open to alternate sexuality and platonic companionship as suggested by Mr. Duffy’s observation:

Love between man and man is impossible because there must be no sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse.²⁷

Although Mr. Duffy withdrew from the affair, his complacency was shaken upon learning about Mrs. Sinico’s death. The newspaper even reported how her marriage had degenerated because of her drinking habits. Mr. Duffy reacted with both shock and disgust at her dramatic demise. He realized that his obsession with order and rectitude has prevented him from living his life fully which is evident in his comparing himself to a “worm”,²⁸ leading a listless mechanical life. Like an average hopeless Dubliner complacent with their stagnation, Mr. Duffy too bitterly accepts his feeling of being unwanted and his loneliness.

'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' grieves the indolent state of Irish politics and people's inability to have steady faith in a political party. The men in the story dwell much on the political past of their country but does nothing constructive to commemorate this special day. Ivy day honors Parnell's death and takes its name from the loyal Dubliners who at Parnell's funeral wore the ivy growing by his grave in their lapels. Both O'Connor and Hynes wear ivy but they involve themselves in petty politics. The men in the committee room are paralyzed in a cycle of inactivity. The arrival of father Keon who is unattached to any church suggests the widespread distrust that exist in any belief system, be it spiritual or political. The story, set in the wake of the Irish political collapse suggests uncertainty in the fate of the political life of the Irish.

Hynes' poetic recitation stirs the men into quite reflection on their unremarkable contribution in politics. Thus the story not only highlights the mourning over Parnell's death but the political paralysis and lack of firm political opinion in general

Another figure like Mrs. Mooney appears in 'A Mother' whose obsession with routine ultimately destroys her daughter's musical career. Mrs. Kearney has initially sent her daughter to a convent to learn French and music just like she did. Her daughter's musical career ultimately comes to an end when she became aggravated by the lax attitude of men who arranged a prestigious concert taking her help and was late in making payments to her daughter. When the organizers offered half the money and promised to pay the other half soon, she whisked her daughter away. Her daughter had to pay the price for her mother's fastidiousness and uncompromising nature as her career got ruined.

Disruption in 'Grace' occurs with the fall of Mr. Kernan which can be symbolically equated to the fall of man. However this ultimately does not bring any significant change in his life, for his friends try to have his faith in Catholic Church by giving exaggerated, inaccurate details of church history. He ultimately stays away from lighting the candle which seems pointless to him. The story concludes with father

Purdon's assurance that even the fallen man can be saved but he uses economical language of accounting to communicate his thoughts to the congregation of businessmen. None of the men in the story comes to terms with themselves, suggesting a paralysis. Searching for grace or redemption becomes another repetitive cycle for these Dubliners.

Disruption comes in Gabriel Conroy's life in 'The Dead' at the annual dance party held by the Morkan sisters. He encounters Miss Ivors who challenges his assumed air of superiority. Gabriel even provokes a defensive statement from the overworked servant Lily when he asks her if she has a romantic companion. The discomfort provokes him to leave the situation quickly after giving Lily a holiday tip. The encounter shows that like his aunts, he cannot tolerate "back answers" (Joyce, p.127). During the dance he is confronted by a barrage of questions about his nonexistent nationalist sympathies which he could not answer properly. He disrupts the conversation by blurting out that he is sick of his own country, to the utter surprise of Miss. Ivors and himself.

Disruption in his own relationship comes when he learns that Greta, his wife, was transfixed by the song sung by Mr. Bartell D'Arcy. Gabriel is preoccupied with his wife's mysterious mood and recalls their courtship. Greta's confession—thinking about her first love brings to surface the truth that her former lover sung it to her in her youth in Galway. Michael Furey died waiting for her outside her window in the cold. Gabriel's desire to gain control over her reveals that his attraction is not rooted in love but his desire to control Greta. His realization that Michael Furey had died young but had led a passionate life contrasted with his own stagnated life saddens him and keeps him awake.

Gabriel realizes that he is a shadow of Michael Furey. Though his speech at dinner insisted on the division between the past of the dead and the present of the living, he realizes how the memories of the dead can destabilize the lives of the living and in this case, the relationship with his wife.

Like the horse that circles around the mill, as Gabriel cited in

one anecdote, everyone settled into an expected routine in the party, suggesting a state of paralysis.

Joyce depicts the city of Dublin as an amorphous space, where characters from ordinary walks of life are ultimately transformed because of a disruption in their stagnated tedious lives. This disruption is caused by bitter self-revelatory epiphanies often accompanied by a sense of hopelessness and frustration. It is perhaps this stagnation-disturbance dichotomy that ennobles and validates the quest of the protagonists for a better existence, even if they fail to do so.

NOTES

- 1 James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993), 21.
- 2 *Ibid*, 17.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 5 *Ibid*, 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 5
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 9 *Ibid*, 23
- 10 *Ibid*
- 11 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 12 *Ibid*, 43.
- 13 *Ibid*, 44.
- 14 *Ibid*, 47.
- 15 *Ibid*, 46.
- 16 *Ibid*, 51.
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 *Ibid*, 52.
- 19 *Ibid*, 61.
- 20 *Ibid*, 64.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 22 *Ibid*.

23 Ibid, 17.

24 Ibid, 77

25 Ibid, 79.

26 Ibid, 80.

27 Ibid., 80.

28 Ibid, 84.