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The Scapegoating of Father Flynn: Unveiling the Catholic Church's Oppressive Impact in Joyce's *Dubliners*

Bachelor's thesis in English
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Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate and analyse how James Joyce portrays the Catholic Church's oppressive impact on the people of Dublin during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Focusing on the first story of *Dubliners*, 'The Sisters,' this study delves into the phenomenon of scapegoating endured by Father Flynn at the hands of the other characters. It shades light on how the condemnation of him as an individual serves as a manifestation of their deep-rooted anger and frustration towards the oppressive and irreligious aspects of the Catholic Church. Through a close reading of 'The Sisters', it becomes evident that their condemning comments and ideas about Father Flynn are unfounded and unjust. More than anything else, the story serves to demonstrate the powerful influence of gossip and the prevailing tendency to assign blame to individuals rather than addressing the broader structural and societal powers at play. This thesis uncovers the underlying motivation behind the characters' need to condemn Father Flynn by highlighting the flaws and wrongdoings of the Catholic Church, as depicted in the entirety of *Dubliners*. In addition to analysing 'The Sisters,' it explores examples from other stories such as 'An Encounter,' 'Araby', and 'The Dead' to provide evidence of the Church's oppressive and irreligious tendencies. Through the exploration of Joyce's *Dubliners*, this thesis provides a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between individuals and the Church. By illuminating the broader societal issues that shape this dynamic, it emphasizes the importance of confronting and challenging oppressive power structures.

The Scapegoating of Father Flynn: Unveiling the Catholic Church's Oppressive Impact in Joyce's *Dubliners*

James Joyce's work reflects his complex relationship with the Catholic Church and its influence on Irish society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While the renowned Irish writer demonstrated a fascination with religious rituals and symbols, using them as literary devices to explore broader themes and to add depth to his narratives, Catholicism is represented in his early writings predominantly as a destructive force in the life of Irish people. In Joyce's *Dubliners*, first published in 1914, the Catholic Church serves as a central cause to the paralysis experienced by the characters, disabling them to break free from their mundane and restrictive routines and leaving them in a state of emotional, psychological, and social stagnation. The opening story of *Dubliners*, titled 'The Sisters,' centres around the death of Father Flynn and explores the perceptions of the other characters regarding him. These perceptions are condemning, portraying him as an eccentric figure, a potentially negative influence on children, and as someone ill-suited for the demands of his occupation. As a Catholic priest, he was part of the occupational group that carried the responsibility of not only abiding by the Church's rules and limitations but also enforcing them upon the people of Dublin. This thesis argues that the characters' condemnation of Flynn as an individual must be read as reactions to the paralyzing restrictions that they are subjected to by the Catholic Church in Ireland. He is merely a scapegoat, burdened with the blame for the wrongdoings and flaws of the Church, and subjected to unjust hostility.

To substantiate this claim, I will first present evidence that display the absence of valid grounds in the characters' critique against Father Flynn. Following that, I will proceed to unveil how Joyce masterfully demonstrates the oppressive and irreligious aspects of the Catholic Church in 'The Sisters' and throughout the entirety of *Dubliners*. Through his vivid portrayal of the Church's flaws and wrongdoings, as well as the resulting limitations, frustrations and spiritual emptiness experienced by the people of Dublin, Joyce invites the reader to redirect blame from the individual level towards the broader societal and institutional influences.

'Uncanny,' 'scrupulous,' 'the paralytic': The groundless condemnation of Father Flynn

The first voice to express condemnation of Father Flynn is Old Cotter, who never properly explains what the priest has done wrong, only offering groundless judgements. On a

visit to the narrator's family, Cotter utters a series of unfinished sentences about Flynn. '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....' (Joyce, 2012, p 1). While claiming he will state his honest opinion about the dead priest, Old Cotter fails to present his reasons for accusing the dead man of having been 'queer' or 'uncanny': "I have my own theory about it," he said. "I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases But it's hard to say...." (Joyce, 2012, p 1). When the aunt challenges him to present the grounds for his cryptic comments, Old Cotter can only offer her unspecific, general answers. To avoid more of her scrutiny, he cowardly approaches the more impressionable Uncle Jack, hoping to get him on his side.

"I Wouldn't like children of mine," he said, "to have too much to say to a man like that."

"How do you mean, Mr Cotter" asked my aunt.

"What I mean is," said old Cotter, "it's bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be... Am I right, Jack?" (Joyce, 2012, p. 2).

Whereas the closest Old Cotter comes to justifying his condemnation of Father Flynn is pointing to the influence that he has on children, he appears oblivious to the role of public opinion and gossip in influencing others and spreading distorted impressions of the dead priest. He says that it is bad for children to spend time with a man like Father Flynn, " ... because their minds are so impressionable ... " (Joyce, 2012, p. 2-3). Nevertheless, it is Cotter who appears to be the impressionable one rather than children, as he bases his critique of Father Flynn on vague impressions instead of concrete evidence. It is Cotter's unfinished and cryptic sentences that influence the minds of Uncle Jack and the boy narrator, and not the memory of Father Flynn himself.

The way that Uncle Jack appears to absorb and bend to Old Cotter's insinuations only illustrate the impact of gossip and public opinion on impressionable people. Consequently, his implicit condemnation is just as ungrounded as Cotter's. Early in their conversation, he positively advocates for the formative benefits that their young nephew has gained from the friendship with the priest: "The youngster and he were great friends. The old chap taught him a great deal, mind you; and they say he had a great wish for him" (Joyce, 2012, p. 2). Jack's informal and friendly way of referring to Father Flynn as 'the old chap' reveals his initial sympathetic view of the man. Furthermore, his remark about the priest's 'great wish' for the boy has often been interpreted as a hope that he becomes a priest, but Lyons (1974, p. 260) identifies the phrase as an Irish idiom meaning 'a general warm regard rather than the hope of a particular fulfilment'. With this interpretation in mind, it is reasonable to assume that Uncle

Jack saw Father Flynn as a man of good intentions, and not someone that children should be protected from.

In response to Cotter's condemning comments about the dead priest, Uncle Jack moderates his view regarding the boy's relationship to Father Flynn. He agrees with Old Cotter that, for children, physical play with their peers should be prioritized over a religious education, which he condescendingly describes as "' ... all very fine and large ...'" (Joyce, 2012, p. 2). He says: "' ... Let him learn to box his corner. That's what I'm always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise ...'" (Joyce, 2012, p. 2). Instead of defending 'the old chap,' Uncle Jack accepts and adheres to his guest's unsubstantiated opinions. By demonstrating how easily individuals alter their opinion when being presented by that of the public, despite their own first-hand experiences, Joyce opens the possibility that Father Flynn is not as bad as rumour has it. It is also important to note that Uncle Jack only agrees with Old Cotter on a general level about the education of young boys, and never personally condemns the dead priest.

Just like his uncle, the young narrator is influenced by the negative comments about Flynn, further demonstrating the impact of gossip. The boy shows significant interest in knowing what the rest of society thinks about his dead friend. In both scenes in which the adults are discussing the character of Father Flynn, he tries to be as quiet as possible and listen attentively. When Uncle Jack informs him that his old friend is dead, the boy strategically keeps eating 'as if the news had not interested [him]' (Joyce, 2012, p. 2). He represses his own reaction to avoid attention, subconsciously hoping that Old Cotter will elaborate on his 'own theory' about the 'peculiar case' of Father Flynn. Despite his anger at Cotter's condescending attitude, the narrator is far from indifferent to his unfinished sentences, as he desperately tries to extract meaning from them the following night. Furthermore, on the visit to the sisters of Father Flynn, he declines the offer to take some cream crackers because he fears that he will make too much noise eating them (Joyce, 2012, p. 6). Like Robinson puts it (1987, p. 379), he attempts to absorb meaning from 'the gnomonic silences' of the other characters. This shrewd manner of acquiring information from the adult world suggests that he has already been exposed to the public's opinions about Father Flynn.

As children lack the life experience and knowledge of adults, it is no wonder that the narrator has let his own impression of Father Flynn get influenced by secondary sources. On his habitual walk past the old priest's house, the boy seeks verification of Flynn's death in the 'reflection of candles on the darkened blind' (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). As identified by Bremen

(1984, p. 57), this can be read as a pictorial representation for experiencing the world through reflected information. Although the word 'blind' obviously refers to the window covering, the pun also suggests an inability to see something clearly. As the boy can no longer see and speak to Father Flynn, he can only meet his old friend in his memories and dreams. However, these mental images are increasingly coloured by the society's condemnation of the priest. When Father Flynn was alive, the boy could make up his own opinion about his mentor from experiencing him at first hand. Now that he is dead, his image of the priest is in the position to be influenced by all other voices than that of Father Flynn himself. The influence of the gossip on the boy's mind is manifested in the fearful images that haunt his sleep. Old Cotter's critique of Father Flynn for being an 'uncanny' man, and a dangerous influence on children, distorts the narrator's impression of his old friend. It is remarkable that the boy, in his imagination, refers to Father Flynn as 'the paralytic', reducing him to the physical condition he suffered from (Joyce, 2012, p. 3). This is an oversimplified label to give someone that the boy later reveals to have known well, showing beyond doubt that the boy has started to see Father Flynn through the eyes of society instead of his own.

Furthermore, he seems to sense a connection between Father Flynn and the sinful act of simony, imagining the figure's desire to confess and be forgiven for the 'simoniac of his sin' (Joyce, 2012, p. 3). Simony is the act of buying or selling something spiritual or intricately connected with the spiritual realm. The link between Flynn and simony is also present in the beginning of the story, when we learn that 'simony' is one of the words with which the narrator associates 'paralysis', a word that is naturally linked to Father Flynn. Interestingly, the boy seems more bemused by the sound of 'simony' than with what it means: 'It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism' (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). Since the narrative never, through the account of the boy or any of the other characters, gives evidence that Father Flynn practiced simony, it can with good reason be read as a mere rumour that the boy has internalized. Regardless of the boy's ignorance of the word's definition, he seems to be aware that 'simony' is a deadly sin and that Father Flynn is accused of having committed it. In the first sentence of 'The Sisters', the boy states that there is no hope for Father Flynn (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). As Albert (1990, p. 353) points out, the narrator must know, because of his apprentice to the scholarly priest, that Christian hope is only ever lost to those who are guilty of eternal sins. Nevertheless, the boy seems to know within himself that, despite what society believes, Father Flynn was an inherently good person that must be forgiven for whatever sin he has committed. Bremen (1984, p. 59) points out that the boy's subconscious apprehension of

Father Flynn can be read as mixed with a 'sympathetic desire to ease the pain of his paternal, spiritual instructor'. Indeed, in the boy's dream, he envisions himself seeking to absolve the old man of his sin, suggesting a yearning for the redemption of Flynn (Joyce, 2012, p. 3).

The boy's nightmare about Flynn stands in contrast to what has seemed like a healthy and beneficiary relationship between him and the old priest. Whereas Old Cotter alludes to him as a child, and his family fail to include him in the conversation, Father Flynn had treated the narrator as an aspiring, young man, giving him ambitious teachings about religion, history, and language. The narrator is a verbally precocious child, whose complicated vocabulary can be explained as a legacy of his frequent conversations with Father Flynn. The uncle's three repetitions of the adjective 'great' (Joyce, 2012, p. 3) and the boy's familiarity with words such as 'maleficent', 'simony' and 'gnomon' demonstrates that the intellectual priest did play a more important role in the boy's upbringing than the caregivers whose house he grew up in (Albert, 1990, p. 358). When Father Flynn dies, the word-sensitive boy has no one in his close circle to talk to or confide in. He is merely a passive spectator in the exchange between his caregivers and Old Cotter, being the topic rather than an active participant of the discussion.

More than intellectually formative, there is reason to believe that the narrator's relationship to Father Flynn was a paternal and affectionate one. The boy remembers how the priest used to 'smile and nod his head twice or thrice' when he was unable to answer the tricky questions that he was given (Joyce, 2012, p. 5). This gesture displays Father Flynn as a gentle and composed educator, encouraging the boy to try and fail on his learning journey. The priest's habit of uncovering his 'big discoloured teeth' and letting his 'tongue lie upon his lower lip' made the narrator 'feel uneasy' in the beginning of their acquaintance, implying that the uneasiness subsided as they got to know each other better (Joyce, 2012, p. 5). Furthermore, the fact that the boy passes his nights during vacation time walking past the house of his diseased, old mentor, instead of spending time with his peers or relaxing at home, testifies to the close bond he feels with Father Flynn. Benstock (1966, p. 34) comments intelligently that the narrator has a greater insight into the dead priest's character than Old Cotter, and that strongly suggests that the boy's impression of Father Flynn is the most dependable one.

The public condemnation of Father Flynn does not exclude his own family, as his sister, Eliza, appears to deem him a degenerate beyond help. The narrator and his aunt visit the house of the dead priest's mourning sisters, to pay their condolences and pray by the open coffin of the corpse. After the death-watch, they sit down in the living room to converse with

Eliza. The aunt states, as a phrase of comfort, that Father Flynn has ‘gone to a better world’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 6). Eliza’s immediate response is to sigh in resignation, as if she shares the narrator’s religious notion that there is no hope for James and that he is doomed to suffer eternal punishment in hell. While giving a clear image of her brother’s physical paralysis, recounting how she used to find him “... with his breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open”, she views his mental breakdown as a result of his innate misfortune character (Joyce, 2012, p. 8). Rather than as symptoms of his medical illness, Eliza explains his incidents of weakness as matters of his ‘queerness’, echoing Old Cotter’s condemning comments about Father Flynn: “Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly ... “ (Joyce, 2012, p. 8).

Ironically enough, Eliza’s public admiration of Father Flynn is a clear demonstration of her moral disapproval of him. At one point, her way of expressing herself is described as ‘shrewdly’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 8), indicating that she is clever at understanding and judging situations, and using this skill to her own advantage. A sign of this shrewdness can be found in the assenting nod which quickly follows her sincere sigh, seemingly to express agreement with the narrator's aunt that Father Flynn has gone to heaven. Her brother’s legacy will to a certain degree reflect her and Bessie, by virtue of their shared blood, and she might therefore want to redeem Father Flynn of his alleged sinful behaviour. Consequently, she presents Father Flynn as a strong-willed and compassionate man, telling her guests that her brother had, on his latter days, had ‘his mind set on’ taking his sisters with him to the house where they were all born (Joyce, 1914, p. 8). After reluctantly revealing the pivotal event of her brother’s deterioration, namely his dropping of a chalice, she attempts to relieve James of all guilt at the expense of a poor altar boy:

“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!” (Joyce, 2012, p. 9).

Furthermore, dissonance between Eliza’s version of Flynn’s death and that of the narrator shows her vigorous effort to portray her brother in a favourable light. She assures the narrator and his aunt that his corpse looked ‘peaceful and resigned’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 7). This description contrasts the narrator’s experience of seeing the corpse of Father Flynn, who uses the word ‘truculent’ twice when describing the dead priest’s face (Joyce, 2012, p. 6, p. 9). This word translates to ‘aggressively defiant,’ indicating that the corpse had a hostile and combative look on his face; the opposite of peaceful and resigned. As discussed earlier, the

boy's perception of Father Flynn is plausibly tinged by society's opinion. Indeed, if the old priest had been committing sinful acts on his latter days, it would make sense for the boy that he would have suffered an internal struggle of guilt on his deathbed. Regardless of whether Flynn is an innocent man or not, his scrupulous character would have made him imagine sin where it does not exist, or grave sin when it is venial and can be forgiven by God. A truculent look on his lifeless face could therefore also result from a nervous exhaustion from feeling guilty all the time. If the boy's view of the corpse is the accurate one, Eliza's description may read it as her attempt to counter society's and her own quiet condemnation of her brother.

It is important to note that Eliza does not see her brother as an inherently bad person, but rather someone that has been corrupted by external factors. In this sense, she represents the view that an individual's deviating behaviour must be seen as a result of the social environment they are in. She advocates that her brother's noble character traits have been misused in the priestly profession to the point of his becoming mentally unstable. "He was too scrupulous always," she said. "The duties of the priesthood were too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed." (Joyce, 2012, p. 8). Whereas the direct speech of Old Cotter and the half-aware sentiments of the narrator insinuate that Father Flynn was morally corrupt, Eliza describes her dead brother as too virtuous for his own good. 'Poor James' she keeps calling him, implying that he was a victim of his circumstances and should be pitied (Joyce, 2012, p. 8-9). Although she focuses on 'the duties of the priesthood' as the cause for her 'nervous' brother's mental deterioration, she fails to blame the system itself (Joyce, 2012, p. 8-9). Father Flynn is presented as the mentally weak person, faltering to the pressure of priesthood, rather than seeing the pressures of priesthood and Catholic duty as too strong for any individual to manage.

Based on the evidence presented, it becomes apparent that Father Flynn is unjustly condemned, seeing that there are insufficient grounds to support the accusations against him. Father Flynn, as a representative of the Catholic Church, becomes a convenient target for the characters to channel their frustrations and criticisms associated with the Church's flaws and wrongdoings. His inability to defend himself due to his illness and ultimate death makes him an easy scapegoat, allowing them to direct their grievances towards him without facing any opposition or counterarguments. The characters' avoidance of directly attacking the Catholic Church can be attributed to the institution's detrimental impact on the people of Dublin, as depicted by Joyce. In the following section, I will explore the paralyzing and monotonous state experienced by the characters of *Dubliners*, stemming from the oppressive nature of the Church and its perceived lack of spiritual depth. This condition prevents them

from daring to openly criticize the apparent oppressor, contributing to a sense of stagnation and resignation within their lives.

The oppressive impact of Catholic Church on the people of Dublin

The pervasive and oppressive impact of the Catholic Church is a recurring theme in the short story collection, being established right from the first sentence of 'The Sisters' and *Dubliners* as a whole. 'There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke' (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). This sentence possesses an authoritative and prophetic tone, which is a defining characteristic of biblical language. It conveys a message that seems to emanate from a higher divinity, evoking a sense of urgency and unwavering conviction in its absolute truth. By explicitly stating that there was no hope instead of allowing for the possibility of 'little hope', the message in the sentence leaves no room for doubt, firmly asserting Father Flynn's impending doom. The syntactic restrictiveness of the sentence, with all words being monosyllabic, contributes to the overall impression of a restrictive religious tone. Semantically, monosyllabic is an adjective that can be used to describe someone that says very little, usually because they want to avoid a conversation. The deliberate use of monosyllables could therefore be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of the Catholic Church's reluctance to actively engage with ordinary people, assuming a position of authority and superiority, rather than fostering a sense of connection and understanding with its subjects.

This imbalance dynamic can be detected in the submissive speech of Old Cotter, who communicates through incomplete sentences, underscoring the Church's repressive nature. He says about Father Flynn: "'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...'" (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). This use of ellipsis, where words are intentionally omitted from a clause, contributes to a sense of paralysis by evoking a feeling of hesitation or incompleteness in Old Cotter's speech. It suggests that he faces difficulties in articulating his thoughts or deliberately chooses to withhold information. Regardless, it conveys a sense of restraint, as if someone with authority is monitoring him to ensure he does not say anything inappropriate. The context provided in the last paragraph suggests that this authoritative presence aligns with the Catholic Church.

The impact of the Catholic Church's restrictions is evident in the social repercussions faced by individuals who dare to express criticism towards its institution. This point is demonstrated in 'The Dead', where Joyce gives us an example of how one man's harmless ridicule of ecclesiastical rules and rituals is met with graveness and rejection from its recipients. At the annual Christmas party at the Morkan sisters, a central topic of conversation

happens to be the 'hospitable' monks at Mount Melleray (Joyce, 2012, p. 183). Mr. Browne expresses amazement at their austere lifestyle; how they refrain from speaking, begin their days at two in the morning and sleep in coffins. Rather than simply accepting Aunt Kate's firm statement that they follow 'the rule of the order,' he sarcastically suggests that 'a comfortable spring bed' would be just as good as a coffin to lay in (Joyce, 2012, p. 183). This remark reflects his criticism of blindly adhering to rules without considering their spiritual or practical significance. Mary Jane gravely explains that the purpose is to 'remind them of their last end' (Joyce, 2012, p. 183). Subsequently, the subject is 'buried in a silence', and the final point being made by one of the guests is that the monks are 'very good' and 'very pious' men (Joyce, 2012, p. 183-184). The guests' reaction to Mr. Browne's joke effectively underscores the oppressive nature inherent within the Catholic Church. It leaves the impression that the rituals and rules of the Church should only be honoured; never questioned or mocked.

Mr. Browne's mockery carries an ironic undertone, as the monotonous and repetitive lifestyle of the monks can be paralleled to that of himself and the other characters of 'The Dead.' As the guests prepare to leave, Gabriel shares a story about his late grandfather's horse, which would continue walking in circles even outside the mill where it had worked. The repetitive motion of this poor creature, persistently engaged in mundane tasks, can be seen as an allegory for the lives of Gabriel and the other guests. Much like the horse, they mindlessly replicate their actions and adhere to familiar notions without considering the reasons behind their behaviour. Year after year, the same individuals dutifully attend the Morkans' party, despite the strained atmosphere and absence of genuine connection among the guests. Following a confrontational encounter with Miss Ivors, Gabriel enters a superficial conversation with Freddy Malins' mother, where he poses a question without genuine interest and merely goes through the motions of polite discourse. As the mother talks incessantly, Gabriel tries to 'banish from his mind all memory of the unpleasant incident with Miss Ivors' (Joyce, 2012, p. 173). While the encounter with Miss Ivors is marked by a sense of strain and hostility, Gabriel's conversation with Malins' mother feels shallow and devoid of any meaningful connection. Irrespective of whom he interacts with, Gabriel feels a deep sense of isolation and dissatisfaction throughout the gathering. At one point, he gazes out the window and yearns to be outside amidst the snow, escaping the unhappiness of the party: 'How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!' (Joyce, 2012, p. 175).

The portrayal of Catholicism in 'The Dead' emphasizes its significant role in shaping the characters' monotonous lives, highlighting its pervasive and integral nature within Irish culture. The Morkans' party takes place at the conclusion of the Christmas holidays,

coinciding with the Feast of the Epiphany (Coward, 1989, p. 499). By functioning as a frame for the entire narrative, the religious occasion underscores the significance of tradition and the Catholic calendar in the lives of the characters. The Morkan sisters, with their Celtic name, can be viewed as representatives of traditional Irish values, with one of the values being a strong adherence to the Catholic Church. While Kate Morkan strongly disagrees with the Church's policy of excluding women from church choirs, her belief in the infallibility of the pope prevents her from fully rejecting or questioning this policy: "O, I don't question the pope's being right. I'm only a stupid old woman and I wouldn't presume to do such a thing ... " (Joyce, 2012, p. 177). Kate's internal struggle exemplifies the broader theme of the repressive impact of the Catholic Church on individuals. It highlights how the Church's doctrines and teachings can curtail freedom of expression and independent thinking among its followers.

The narrative also symbolically critiques the Catholic Church's quest for dominance over individuals. The dependence of the Morkan sisters on Gabriel to oversee various aspects of the party can be seen as a parallel to how believers often rely on the Church for guidance and support: "It's such a relief," said Aunt Kate to Mrs. Conroy, "that Gabriel is here. I always feel easier in my mind when he's here ... " (Joyce, 2012, p. 165). Just as believers trust in God to navigate their lives, the aunts entrust Gabriel with tasks such as delivering a speech, carving the goose, and maintaining a harmonious atmosphere at the party. The correlation between Gabriel's figure of authority and the Church is reinforced by his name, which signifies 'strength of God.' Within Christianity and other Abrahamic religions, Gabriel is recognized as an archangel bestowed with the authority to announce God's divine will to humanity. Dickerson (2018, p. 12) aptly observes that Gabriel's obsession with strength permeates the entirety of the story. In response to Molly Ivors' accusation of weakness and labelling him as a West Briton, Gabriel strategically accentuates the theme of hospitality in his speech. His private remark, 'that was one for Miss Ivors' (Dickerson, 2018, p. 12; Joyce, 2012, p. 175), reveals his intention to assert his own dominance by undermining her dignity. By embodying the Catholic Church, Gabriel's aggressive behaviour critiques and exposes the Church's oppressive tendencies and its insatiable thirst for power.

Joyce demonstrates, throughout *Dubliners*, how the oppressive nature of the Catholic Church gives rise to an unhealthy power dynamic between those who are deemed acceptable and affiliated with the Church, and those who are deemed unworthy and subjected to scorn or judgment. In 'The Sisters,' we witness not only a public condemnation of Father Flynn but also the young narrator's aversion to Old Cotter. Whereas Flynn is a priest and therefore of

the professional middle class, Cotter is a 'red-nosed' distiller of alcohol and of the working class (Joyce, 2012, p. 3). Dilworth (1993, p. 100) identifies these men as rivals for the boy's attention, with Cotter ultimately losing his audience to the priest. Previously intrigued by the old man's tales about distilleries, the boy now regards Old Cotter a 'tiresome old fool' (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). This switch of allegiance appears to have left Cotter feeling angered, as he views it as part of a larger pattern where those associated with the Church hold a privileged position over ordinary working people like himself. He perceives Father Flynn as distinct from himself, implying an awareness of the priest's elevated social status: "I wouldn't like children of mine, he said, to have too much to say to *a man like that* [emphasis added]" (Joyce, 2012, p. 2). Uncle Jack shares a similar perspective when he condescendingly comments that "... education is all very fine and large ..." (Joyce, 2012, p. 2).

The sense of resentment towards religious institutions can also be observed in Mr. Browne's commentary on the monks in 'The Dead'. Not only does the critique of the monks' austere lifestyle highlight its perceived lack of spiritual purpose, but it also draws attention to the contrast between their chosen poverty and the struggles of ordinary poor people. While the monks willingly sleep in coffins as a form of self-discipline and renunciation, ordinary individuals who are impoverished are facing challenges in securing basic needs such as shelter and food. This comparison raises questions about the value and impact of voluntary asceticism in the context of social inequality and the real hardships experienced by those who are poor.

Moreover, Joyce sheds light on the cruel treatment of children by priestly authorities, an aspect that potentially contributes to Old Cotter's implication that Father Flynn has a negative influence on children. In 'An Encounter', Father Butler practices a strict and merciless form of instruction at one of Dublin's schools, having no tolerance for childish fun and creativity among his pupils. When the clumsy Joe Dillon is discovered with a copy of a harmless boys' magazine about adventures, Father Butler reprimands him in front of the whole class, and sternly states that 'educated' boys like them should abstain from consuming 'rubbish' (Joyce, 2012, p. 11). It is ironic that a figure that is supposed to emulate the life of the compassionate and forgiving Jesus Christ only inspires fear in the youth of Dublin, making the hearts of the whole class palpitate (Joyce, 2012, p. 11). The fact that he wants them to concentrate on Roman history only adds to the irony, as it alludes to the Roman Catholic Church. Weary of the dreary and restraining everyday life and yearning to experience the wild adventures they only read about in magazines, the narrator and his friends plan to skip school and go on an excursion to Dublin's pigeon house. Leo Dillon, who was

ruthlessly rebuked by Father Butler, expresses fear that they might be so unlucky as to meet the strict schoolteacher on their excursion. The unlikeliness of this scenario is pointed out by Mahoney: ‘... what would Father Butler be doing out at the Pigeon House’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 12). Nevertheless, Leo fails to join them on the excursion, indicating the strong influence that Father Butler exerts on the minds of the young boys.

The ungrounded grudge that Old Cotter feels for Father Flynn is plausibly a result of his own experiences with strict, priestly authorities in his youth, having felt deprived of the freedom that childhood should grant. While the link between Father Flynn and Father Butler may be weak, they both represent a certain type of Catholic Irishness that emphasizes discipline and intellect at the expense of freedom and emotions. Instead of treating their young students like the children they are, encouraging them to engage in childish play and fanfare, Flynn and Butler regard the boys as malleable individuals that mainly benefit from filling their brains with detailed knowledge about the real world. Father Flynn’s focus lies in instructing the boy on the correct pronunciation of Latin and immersing him in historical anecdotes and liturgical symbolism. In a similar vein, Father Butler dedicates his efforts in extensively testing his students’ knowledge of Roman history. Old Cotter and Uncle Jack, on their hand, express their desire that their children get to be children, and not be cast into the seriousness of adult life yet. As they do not have access to the memory of the young narrator like the reader does, they cannot see that Flynn was a more compassionate tutor than Father Butler. While Father Butler seeks to make his students feel ashamed for indulging in non-academic reading material, Father Flynn, in contrast, responded to the boy’s faltering answers with a benevolent smile. It is conceivable that Old Cotter has allowed his own experiences in the past to colour his judgment and opinion of Father Flynn.

The narrator in ‘The Sisters’ experiences a feeling of relief upon learning about Father Flynn’s death, which can be interpreted as a release from the perceived obligation of a lifelong service to the Church. To his own confusion and annoyance, the boy discovers in himself ‘a sensation of freedom as if [he] had been freed for something by his death’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 4). Rather than reading his sensation of freedom as evidence that the relationship with him and the priest was abusive or unhealthy in any way, it can be interpreted as a relief that he no longer has to follow in the priest’s footsteps. Although Father Flynn’s ‘great wish’ for the young boy can, as discussed earlier, be understood as a general warm regard, the narrator might have felt an intrinsic pressure to live a similar life to his mentor. Bremen (1984, p. 61) holds that Flynn’s teachings about Catholic rituals, priestly garments and categories of sin was, if not simoniacal, ‘an insidious, paralyzing force of their own’. The boy

remembers thinking that a priests' duties to the Church seemed 'so *grave* [emphasis added] to [him] that [he] wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them' (Joyce, 2012, p. 6). The use of the adjective 'grave' has a double meaning; the priestly duties are undeniably grave in the sense that they are of immense importance and must be fulfilled to avoid dischargement or an afterlife in hell. However, 'grave' is also an allusive term for death, implying that it was the mechanic performance of duties which spiritually killed Father Flynn.

The image of the dead priest loosely holding a chalice, representing religious ceremony, serves as a symbol of the Church's inescapable and paralyzing grip on its followers, regardless of their attempts to break free. As a close witness to how the priestly profession can break an individual down by surreptitiously depriving him of his personal freedom and making him an eternal slave to religious rituals, the boy will happily follow a different path of life. A subtle echo of the boy's feeling of freedom is present in the beginning of 'Araby': '... [it] was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brother's school *set the boys free* [emphasis added]' (Joyce, 2012, p. 19). This chosen phrasing implies that the boys experience a momentary liberation from the constraints of religious doctrine that permeate the Catholic boy's school, comparable to the feeling of being set free from a prison.

However, Joyce demonstrates throughout the short story collection how the Dubliners are never fully free from the Catholic habit of mind, and that it permeates the way they talk, think and act in relation to other people. The word 'blind' from the first paragraph of 'The Sisters' is reverberated in that of 'Araby'; this time it is used to describe North Richmond Street as a dead end (Joyce, 2012, p. 19). As pointed out by Stone (1965, p. 382), the choice of word suggests that blindness is a theme in the story. The young narrator of the story is blind in the sense that he does not know how to differentiate romantic love from religious love, only being able to describe his crush in religious terms. This is due to his Catholic upbringing which has clearly shaped the framework through which he comprehends his intense emotions. At one point, his image of Mangan's sister becomes his sacred chalice, which he protects from a 'throng of foes'; a biblical reference that compares her to the Holy Grail (Joyce, 2012, p. 20). The boy's idealization of her as an exalted, angelic being prevents him from establishing a mutual and genuine bond with her: 'I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood' (Joyce, 2012, p. 20). While romantic love implies an emotional attachment and reciprocal attraction between two individuals, religious love usually denotes one person's dedication to a higher

power. In this sense, the boy's ability to establish deep, romantic relationships is curtailed by his Catholic upbringing.

In 'The Dead,' we witness how this Catholic mindset persists into adulthood as evidenced by Gabriel's idealized vision of his wife. Positioned in the dimly lit hallway at the base of the staircase, Gabriel gazes up at Gretta, who is captivated by the melodic voice of someone singing. He is mesmerized by the 'grace and mystery' of her attitude, as if she embodies a symbol of something beyond comprehension (Joyce, 2012, p. 192). He admires her in a shallow way, as he solely envisions how she would look in a painting he would make, failing to acknowledge the fullness of her existence as a living, breathing individual: 'Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones' (Joyce, 2012, p. 192). Gabriel's portrayal of her bears resemblance to the Catholic veneration of saints and angels, a practice he may have become accustomed to from a young age. Stone (1956, p. 384) highlights the irony within Gabriel's concept of naming his envisioned self-created painting of her as 'Distant Music', considering the particular song that captures his wife's undivided attention. 'The Lass of Aughrim' resonates deeply with Gretta because it evokes memories of a cherished past love interest. In the final moments of the story, Gabriel comes to the poignant realization that he has failed to form a genuine bond with his wife: 'It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life' (Joyce, 2012, p. 203). The revelation of the passionate love story between his wife and Michael Fury acts as a stark reminder of the emotional and spiritual depths from which Gabriel perceives himself to be distant from: 'Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love' (Joyce, 2012, p. 204).

The perceived absence of spiritual essence within Catholicism is prominently illustrated in 'The Sisters', and it serves as a catalyst for the condemnation of Father Flynn by the other characters. While Eliza appears devoted to the Catholic Church, with a firm belief in the spiritual significance of its rituals and symbols, the other characters in 'The Sisters' exhibit greater uncertainty and scepticism. Old Cotter and Uncle Jack hold the belief that religious education and devotion lack practical relevance in the modern world. Consequently, they indirectly advise the young narrator against spending excessive time with Father Flynn:

““What I mean is,” said old Cotter, “it's bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be...Am I right, Jack?”

“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 (...)” (Joyce, 2012, p. 2).

The boy himself exhibits a conflicting attitude towards the Catholic Church and its spiritual foundations. In the opening paragraph of ‘The Sisters’, he confesses to experiencing both fear and a desire for proximity when confronted with the word ‘paralysis’: ‘It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). Despite being aware that the rituals and symbols of the Catholic Church lead to stagnation and spiritual death in people, the boy remains captivated by them due to his fascination. On the one hand, he holds a sense of reverence for the priests who perform the sacred duties of the Eucharist and maintain the secrecy of the confessional, and he is fascinated by the ‘complex and mysterious’ nature of the ecclesiastical institutions that Father Flynn has shown him (Joyce, 2012, p. 4). Despite this attraction, he harbours doubts about the religious essence underlying the priests’ actions and duties. His perception of the institutions as ‘the simplest acts’ reveals his difficulty in understanding why anyone would willingly take on solemn responsibilities for them (Joyce, 2012, p. 4). While performing the mourning ritual of kneeling at Father Flynn’s open coffin, the boy finds himself unable to pray. He is distracted by ‘the old woman’s mutterings,’ something which not only suggests that the content of what she says lacks spiritual meaning; it even implies that the ritual stands in the way of the boy being able to connect to God (Joyce, 2012, p. 6). The act of formality bears so little significance for the boy that he gets caught up in something as superficial as Nannie’s attire: ‘I noticed how clumsily her skirt was hooked back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side’ (Joyce, 2012, p. 6). The boy imagines Flynn’s corpse to be smiling from his coffin; he seems to know that the dead priest himself would find the Catholic ritual meaningless and even laughable. This choice of phrase implies that the boys experience a temporary liberation from the confines of religious doctrine prevalent in the Catholic boy’s school, comparable to being freed from a prison.

In addition to ‘simony’, the narrator thinks of the word ‘gnomon’ in connection with ‘paralysis’, suggesting that Father Flynn is a ‘gnomon’; a remnant after something else has been removed. This could symbolize his loss of faith that the Catholic Church in Ireland is a noble institution whose biggest interest is to serve and spread the word of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Benstock (1966, p. 33) claims that the Rome-educated intellectual was superior to the tedious demands of the function he was obligated to perform, finding them without spiritual purpose. After the breaking of the chalice, Flynn is found ‘sitting by himself in the dark in his

confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself'; an image that Walzl (1962, p. 186) reads as the priest rejecting the idea of repentance and confessional cleansing. If the institution truly has lost its spiritual foundation, it is the Church, and not Father Flynn, who is the real simoniac. It is noteworthy, given his role as a priest in administering religious rites, that Flynn says to the boy that he is 'not long for this world' (Joyce, 2012, p. 1). By breaking the chalice, he does not only deviate from the rituals he is expected to administer; he also exposes the fallibility of his vocation, revealing it to be merely an ancient facade that calls for overthrowing. We learn from Eliza Flynn's account that the chalice 'contained nothing', and the non-literal meaning of this could be that the religious symbol does not fulfil its promise of a communion between God and man (Joyce, 2012, p. 9; Williams, 1991, p. 420). The void chalice symbolizes a perceived lack of substance within Catholicism. Although Father Flynn is the sole character in 'The Sisters' who openly rebels against the spiritual emptiness of the Catholic Church in Ireland, the other characters refrain from supporting his revolt and instead condemn him. Paradoxically, it is likely that their own spiritual void hinders them from acknowledging Flynn's rebellion as a valid critique of the Church, thereby causing them to distance themselves from his actions.

As demonstrated through examples in both 'The Sisters' and other stories in *Dubliners*, the characters' condemnation of Father Flynn should be interpreted as responses to the suffocating constraints imposed by the Catholic Church in Ireland. The lack of solid foundation in the characters' condemning ideas about Flynn provides an initial indication that their critique is focused on the wrong target. Old Cotter's vague remarks about the priest being 'uncanny' and a negative influence on children lack evidence, as Flynn's interactions with the young narrator portray him as a kind and positive figure in the boy's life. However, Uncle Jack and the narrator display aversion towards Flynn which contradict their personal experiences with him, thus underscoring the influential power of gossip in shaping perceptions. Eliza Flynn's condemnation of Flynn serves as a partial recognition of the societal and structural influences that contribute to her brother's mental downfall. Although she acknowledges him as a victim of his priestly occupation and its burdensome demands, she ultimately attributes the responsibility for his mental decline to his inherently fragile character, rather than fully acknowledging the potential impact of the institution's excessive restrictiveness or lack of spiritual fulfilment. In short, Father Flynn is a scapegoat for the flaws and wrongdoings of another sinner.

The characters in 'The Sisters', in their anger and condemnation, fail to recognize that their grievances should be directed towards the Catholic Church and its oppressive impact on the people of Dublin. In 'The Sisters', its oppressiveness is evident both linguistically, through the use of different tones reflecting Catholic authority and people's submissiveness, and thematically, as seen in the boy's sense of relief when he realizes he is no longer obligated to a life devoted to the Church. In 'The Dead', Joyce depicts the limitations imposed by the Catholic Church through the social repercussions faced by individuals who dare to question its practices. Furthermore, the characters' lives, deeply intertwined with the Catholic symbolism, rituals, and ideology, exemplify the restrictive and monotonous nature of their existence. In both 'The Sisters' and 'The Dead', Joyce presents instances that highlight the unequal power dynamics between individuals associated with the Church and those who are perceived as inferior or ordinary in comparison, and in 'An Encounter', Joyce vividly portrays the harsh and authoritarian treatment of children by priestly authorities. Lastly, in 'Araby' and 'The Dead,' Joyce illustrates how a deeply ingrained Catholic mindset can constrain individuals' capacity to form deep, spiritual connections to others.

Dubliners offers a stark and powerful portrayal of the oppression and spiritual emptiness experienced by the Irish people. It is through this portrayal that one can understand why they find themselves trapped in a state of paralysis, unable to confront their collective oppressor, the Catholic Church. The narratives presented in *Dubliners* offer a poignant depiction of the pervasive control exerted by the Church in Ireland during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which tightly governs the characters' lives and inhibits their escape from a monotonous existence. They serve as a powerful reminder that it is crucial to resist oppressive institutions and find the inner strength within us to overcome spiritual and societal paralysis, leading to the attainment of true freedom.

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