
Note: this paper was written by Chad Dickerson for Dr. Elgin Mellown's English class at Duke University in 1992.
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Outcast From Life's Feast: Joyce's Characterizations of Self-Absorption

"A Little Cloud" and "A Painful Case"

In the Introduction to the 1926 Modern Library edition of Dubliners, Padraic Colum observes that the most lasting stories in the collection deal with characters who are touched by death in some way (Ruoff 257). Death figures prominently in "The Sisters" and "The Dead," but only insofar as the living experience it. Throughout the Dubliners stories, Joyce skillfully employs death as a powerful metaphor not to mourn the legions of the dead, but to warn the living dead of their sad state. In "A Little Cloud" and "A Painful Case," Joyce creates two characters who experience metaphorical, but nonetheless tragic, deaths in their daily personal lives. James Duffy in "A Painful Case" experiences death in the crazed suicide of a former "lover," ultimately realizing that he has been emotionally dead for many years. Although there is no physical death in "A Little Cloud," James Ruoff writes that Little Chandler experiences a "purely metaphorical, living death of creative impotence and frustration, a protracted form of death. . . as terrifying in its finality as any organic dissolution" (257). Both Duffy and Chandler have willfully created a personal world in which they act as the all-important center, ultimately receiving damning epiphanies for their self-absorption. Joyce

negatively portrays and punitively judges both characters for three closely interrelated reasons: their indulgent self-dramatization, their strong feelings of superiority (or hubris), and their selfish objectification of those who offer the possibility of intimacy.

Noting Duffy's "perilous" predicament in "A Painful Case," John W. Corrington writes, "[h]is tendencies seem to indicate a kind of cleavage between person and ego" (184). The text of the story supports Corrington's assertion of Duffy's insistent self-dramatization:

He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which lead him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense. (108)

Little Chandler in "A Little Cloud" also tends to think of himself in dramatic, self-removed terms, daydreaming of how the English critics would comment on his poetry: "He began to invent sentences and phrases from the notices which his book would get. '*Mr. Chandler has the gift of easy and graceful verse. . . .A wistful sadness pervades these poems. . . .The Celtic note*'" (Joyce 74). Little Chandler cripples himself with his unrealized dreams of poetic transcendence; however, James Ruoff's assessment of Little Chandler applies equally to both characters--each man is unable "to transcend a narrow existence of his own creation" (257). The "odd autobiographical habit" of each character is simply another tool Joyce uses to emphasize each man's inability to see the world in terms other than his own, a mutual failure which ultimately saps both men of their humanity.

By stripping both Chandler and Duffy of the essential human element of empathy, Joyce creates characters that believe they are above humanity itself. Duffy chooses to live in Chapelizod because "he wished to live as far from the city of which he was a citizen and because he found all the other suburbs mean, modern, and pretentious" (Joyce 107). He dined nightly in an eatinghouse "where he felt himself safe from the society of Dublin's gilded youth and where there was a certain plain honesty in the bill of fare" (Joyce 108). Corrington claims in his essay that Duffy's "obvious rationalism, his contempt for the ordinary values inherent in life, [and] his total unconcern for human connections" (185) represent what Joyce thought would be the result of "modern urban, industrialized, godless, amoral, and fragmented society" (186). Viewed in this context, Duffy's character nevertheless remains unworthy of redemption. Although he views himself as a sort of "superman," he offers nothing to the progress of mankind, arrogantly dismissing Irish workmen as "hard-featured realists" who "resented an exactitude which was the product of a leisure not within their reach" (Joyce 111). Any ideals of selfless progressivism die when Duffy brags of himself as "a unique figure amidst a score of sober workmen" while he was active in the Irish Socialist Party (Joyce 110). Duffy "holds nothing. . .but his own conception of self. . .in esteem" (Corrington 187).

Little Chandler's arrogance does not appear as well-defined as Duffy's, yet it is equally evident in his thoughts that he feels a certain superiority to mankind. According to James Ruoff, Little Chandler's egotism is destructive: "His life is

marked for unfulfillment because . . . its vital forces . . . have flowed back toward the ego instead of outward into 'the common tide of others'" (Ruoff 270). When walking through a "horde of grimy children", Little Chandler "gave them no thought" (Joyce 71). As Little Chandler walked to meet Gallaher "he felt himself superior to the people he passed" (73). Unable to take note of anything but his own superiority as he walks, Little Chandler unwittingly fails as an objective artist. After arriving at Corless's and talking with Gallaher, he becomes bitter over his own situation, resorting once again to his illusion of superiority to combat his lack of success:

He felt acutely the contrast between his own life and his friend's, and it seemed to him unjust. Gallaher was inferior in birth and education. He was sure that he could do something better than his friend had ever done, or could ever do, if he only got the chance. (80)

Like Duffy, Little Chandler's insistent claims to superiority undermine any chance of ever breaking out of his tragically impotent personal universe.

The self-dramatization and hubris of Little Chandler and Duffy necessarily lead to the degrading objectification of people in their lives, especially Annie (Chandler's wife) and Mrs. Sinico. Both Chandler and Duffy place themselves on an imaginary stage, accepting only those who will act as simple spectators. When asked by Gallaher how long he had been married, Little Chandler replies, "I was married last May twelve months" (79), yet he seems to hold only acrimonious feelings towards his new wife. Little Chandler's complete objectification of his relationship with Annie is described appropriately as he gazes

at her face in a photograph, a mere representation of the real woman:

He looked coldly into the eyes of the photograph and they answered coldly. Certainly they were pretty and the face itself was pretty. But he found something mean in it. Why was it so unconscious and lady-like? The composure of the eyes irritated him. They repelled him and defied him. . . (83)

Describing her face as "unconscious" in his bitterness, Little Chandler defensively attributes a lack of awareness to Annie, presumably because of her inability to recognize his poetic genius. Little Chandler laments the fact that he has been unable to muster the courage to read poetry aloud to her, placing the blame on his "shyness." Instead, sometimes "he repeated lines to himself and this consoled him" (71). Because of her refusal to engage in "the little clerk's self-aggrandizement" (Ruoff 267), Annie (and his life associated with her) becomes "useless, useless!" (Joyce 84). Little Chandler's wife and family are simple obstructions to his own ideas of greatness, and his contempt for them (although tinged with remorse) is unquestionably strong.

In "A Painful Case," Duffy objectifies Mrs. Sinico more readily than Little Chandler objectifies his wife, perhaps due to Mrs. Sinico's seemingly desperate search for companionship. As Corrington writes, the entire episode with Mrs. Sinico falls into the category of Duffy's "third person" habit of self-dramatization (185). In his conversations with Mrs. Sinico, she "is no more than an audience, a spectator at the artistic event of Duffy being created by Duffy" (Corrington 185). Duffy immediately assumes the intellectual superiority in the relationship, always advancing his cold-blooded "theories",

taking note of what Mrs. Sinico says as dry "fact": "Little by little he entangled his thoughts with hers. He lent her books, provided her with ideas, shared his intellectual life with her. She listened to all. . . Sometimes in return for his theories she gave out some fact of her own life" (Joyce 110). The language employed by Joyce in this passage implies that Duffy feels as if he is acting charitably by "sharing" his intellectual life and "providing" her with ideas. Constantly maintaining the objective relationship of Mrs. Sinico to himself, Duffy "caught himself listening to the sound of his own voice" (Joyce 111) in his conversations with her. After one of these conversations, Mrs. Sinico, having "shown every sign of unusual excitement . . . caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek" (Joyce 111). As John Corrington notes, "This. . . is the end of the affair. Mrs. Sinico has destroyed her usefulness, betrayed her function. She has moved from the status of audience and attempted to become an actor in the epic of Duffy's self revelation" (186). Only with her death does she become a participant in Duffy's "self revelation," a revelation of intense sorrow and pain.

The final revelation of futility and hopelessness is shared by Duffy and his counterpart, Little Chandler. What Ruoff writes about Little Chandler can easily be applied to Duffy: "His self-imposed isolation is absolute; he has cut himself off from the young and the old, the past and the present, the poor and the rich" (259). Realizing the futility of his existence, Little Chandler condemns himself at the conclusion of "A Little Cloud": "He couldn't do anything. . . He was a prisoner for life"

(Joyce 84). Similarly, James Duffy comes to terms with his life of emotional sloth, finally feeling for himself the loneliness and sorrow that drove Mrs. Sinico to her death: "Now that she was gone he understood how lonely her life must have been, sitting night after night alone in that room. His life would be lonely too until he, too, died, ceased to exist, became a memory--if anyone remembered him" (Joyce 116). The living death of James Duffy grows more painful as he understands that he has been "outcast from life's feast" (117), joining Little Chandler as "a prisoner for life" (84).