



# Dubliners

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BY JAMES JOYCE



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# Notes

**What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was born in Dublin, on February 2, 1882, into a Roman Catholic household. Joyce's father had failed at various types of employment, and he struggled to keep up the façade that the family still belonged to the comfortable middle-class. At sixteen, Joyce entered University College in Dublin, where he soon began to write a few lyric poems. During these early years, Joyce developed an anti-religious sentiment, especially toward the conservatism of the Church; this continued throughout his life. He graduated in 1902 and went to Paris for a year, returning in time to comfort his mother shortly before she died. Two years later, he went abroad again, this time with the woman he would eventually marry, Nora Barnacle, the inspiration and model for Molly Bloom, the heroine of Joyce's most important book, *Ulysses* (1922).

A collection of Joyce's early poems, *Chamber Music*, appeared in 1907, which showed his love for musical forms, and this appreciation is evident throughout many of his works. Joyce used words similarly to how composers use sounds—to fill the page with accents, colors, noises, and textures. In addition, while still in college, he communicated with Henrik Ibsen, the playwright; Ibsen's friendship and encouragement proved to Joyce that his own talents and particular style could be expressed through literature and was a milestone in his life.

# Pointers

## READING POINTERS

### Reading Pointers for Sharper Insight

To better understand and appreciate James Joyce's *Dubliners*, consider the following:

1. Although Joyce uses different characters and plotlines in each of the short stories included in *Dubliners*, they are all connected.
  - Common motifs and thematic concepts are present in all the short stories.
  - Literary allusions and contemporary references link one story to another.
  - Similar historical or political references affect the characters of different stories.
  - Areas of Dublin or specific landmarks are shared by more than one story.
2. Each story takes place somewhere in Dublin, Ireland, and Joyce refers to many specific places. Including these place names in his stories adds verisimilitude to the novel because each story is realistic and could actually happen.
3. Joyce uses a great deal of slang throughout each story, which is another element that adds verisimilitude to *Dubliners*.
4. As a whole, these stories trace life in the city of Dublin from innocence to maturity. As you read, be aware of the extent to which each story is in one of the following three categories:
  - childhood
  - adolescence
  - maturity
5. Throughout *Dubliners*, Joyce uses many symbols, but he uses two colors consistently:
  - yellow
  - brown



# The Sisters

THERE WAS NO hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. He had often said to me: “I am not long for this world,” and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*.<sup>†</sup> It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid<sup>†</sup> and the word *simony*<sup>†</sup> in the Catechism.<sup>†</sup> But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said, as if returning to some former remark of his:

“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...”

He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery.

“I have my own theory about it,” he said. “I think it was one of those... peculiar cases...But it’s hard to say...”

<sup>†</sup>Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

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

“Well, so your old friend is gone, you’ll be sorry to hear.”

“Who?” said I.

“Father Flynn.”

“Is he dead?”

“Mr. Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house.”

I knew that I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me. My uncle explained to old Cotter.

“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.”

“God have mercy on his soul,” said my aunt piously.

Old Cotter looked at me for a while. I felt that his little beady black eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate. He returned to his pipe and finally spat rudely into the grate.

“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?”

“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<sup>†</sup> there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that’s what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large...Mr. Cotter might take a pick of that leg mutton,” he added to my aunt.

“No, no, not for me,” said old Cotter.

My aunt brought the dish from the safe and put it on the table.

“But why do you think it’s not good for children, Mr. Cotter?” she asked.

“It’s bad for children,” said old Cotter, “because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...”

I crammed my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger. Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!

It was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child, I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured, and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding

into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.

The next morning after breakfast I went down to look at the little house in Great Britain Street. It was an unassuming shop, registered under the vague name of *Drapery*. The *Drapery* consisted mainly of children's bootees and umbrellas; and on ordinary days a notice used to hang in the window, saying: *Umbrellas Re-covered*. No notice was visible now for the shutters were up. A crape bouquet was tied to the doorknocker with ribbon. Two poor women and a telegram boy were reading the card pinned on the crape. I also approached and read:

July 1st,<sup>†</sup> 1895

The Rev. James Flynn (formerly of S. Catherine's Church,  
Meath Street), aged sixty-five years.

R. I. P.

The reading of the card persuaded me that he was dead and I was disturbed to find myself at check. Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his arm-chair by the fire, nearly smothered in his

great-coat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast<sup>†</sup> for him and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze. It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor. Even as he raised his large trembling hand to his nose little clouds of smoke dribbled through his fingers over the front of his coat. It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of a week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious.

I wished to go in and look at him but I had not the courage to knock. I walked away slowly along the sunny side of the street, reading all the theatrical advertisements in the shop-windows as I went. I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death. I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said the night before, he had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs<sup>†</sup> and about Napoleon Bonaparte,<sup>†</sup> and



he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist<sup>†</sup> and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions. Often when I thought of this I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice. Sometimes he used to put me through the responses of the Mass which he had made me learn by heart; and, as I pattered, he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip—a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.

As I walked along in the sun I remembered old Cotter's words and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in the dream. I remembered that I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange—in Persia, I thought...But I could not remember the end of the dream.

In the evening my aunt took me with her to visit the house of mourning. It was after sunset; but the window-panes of the houses that looked to the west reflected the tawny gold of a great bank of clouds. Nannie received us in the hall; and, as it would have been unseemly to have shouted at her, my aunt shook hands with her for all. The old woman pointed upwards interrogatively and, on my aunt's nodding, proceeded to toil up the narrow staircase before us, her bowed head being scarcely above the level of the banister-rail. At the first landing she stopped and beckoned us forward encouragingly towards the open door of the dead-room. My aunt went in and the old woman, seeing that I hesitated to enter, began to beckon to me again repeatedly with her hand.

I went in on tiptoe. The room through the lace end of the blind was suffused with dusky golden light amid which the candles looked like pale thin flames. He had been coffined. Nannie gave the lead and we three knelt down at the foot of the bed. I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts

## Glossary

### **The Sisters**

**paralysis** – Note that paralysis is a motif that is seen in many different forms throughout each story.

**Euclid** – a Greek mathematician who greatly influenced the subject of geometry

**simony** – a crime that involves the buying and/or selling of offices, positions, or objects belonging to the Catholic Church; for Roman Catholics, this act is a sin and can result in excommunication. Simony fell out of common practice after the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**Catechism** – a handbook containing the principles of Catholicism

**Rosicrucian** – a secret society begun in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that focused on the study of ancient mysticism, philosophies, and religions; the boy's uncle uses this reference to describe the boy's relationship with Father Flynn—a secret relationship that was full of possible risks and dangers.

**July 1<sup>st</sup>** – This date is significant for Irish citizens because it marks the day, in 1690, when the Battle of Boyne was fought. This battle was between Protestant England and Roman Catholic Ireland. The Catholics were defeated.

**High Toast** – a brand of tobacco (snuff); snuff was finely ground and then sniffed or chewed.

**catacombs** – cemeteries where Christians and some Jews were buried; the catacombs were also used as a hiding place or sanctuary from persecution.

**Napoleon Bonaparte** – (1769 – 1821), the Emperor of France, famous for his military tactics

**Eucharist** – communion; a ceremony during which Christians follow Jesus' instructions during the Last Supper.

**“And everything...?”** – The boy's aunt wants to know if Father Flynn was granted his last rights; with this question, it is evident that she suspects some ill behavior from the priest. If a priest was denied his last rights it would be because he betrayed the priesthood or misbehaved in some way.

**Freeman's General** – an Irish newspaper

**rheumatic wheels** – This is an example of a malapropism. The correct word to use in this context is *pneumatic*, which means “filled with air.” Instead, the speaker uses *rheumatic*, which refers to arthritis.

### **An Encounter**

**“...to have some gas with...”** – [slang] “to have some fun with”

**Vitriol Works** – a chemical factory in Dublin

**“Swaddlers! Swaddlers!”** – [slang] “Protestants! Protestants!”

**Smoothing Iron** – a bathing place in Dublin

**right skit** – [slang] good fun

**Liffey** – a river in Ireland

**Dodder** – a type of herb

**Thomas Moore** – (1779 – 1852), an Irish poet

**Sir Walter Scott** – (1771 – 1832), a Scottish author who wrote historic novels, ballads, and narrative poems

**Lord Lytton** – Edward George Earle Lytton-Bulwer (1803 – 1873) was an English novelist who coined many expressions still used today: “It was a dark and stormy night” and “The pen is mightier than the sword,” among others.

## Vocabulary

### The Sisters

alluding – referring

anointed – applied an ointment to as part of a religious ceremony

assent – an agreement

breviary – a Roman Catholic book containing the daily reading prayers

chalice – a cup

communing – communicating

copious – very plentiful, abundant

crape – a type of soft fabric

decanter – a decorative bottle

distillery – an establishment where alcohol is made

elucidating – explaining, clarifying

faints – impure alcohol that comes from the distillation of liquor

fancy – an idea, notion

gnomon – the object on a sundial that casts a shadow and indicates the time

grate – the fireplace

great-coat – a heavyweight overcoat

inefficacious – ineffective

interrogatively – questioningly

latterly – lately

maleficent – harmful; evil

mutton – lamb meat

nipper – [slang] a small boy

paralytic – relating to paralysis

pensively – thoughtfully

piously – religiously

resigned – submissive

revery – [*reverie*] a daydream

scanty – thin, meager, insufficient

scrupulous – extremely careful to do the right and proper thing

shrewdly – wisely, sharply

simoniac – a person who commits simony (see note: *simony* in “The Sisters” glossary)

snuff-box – a container for tobacco (snuff)

stirabout – a porridge stirred in boiling water or milk

suffused – filled

tawny – a brown or brownish-orange color

toil – difficultly proceed

truculent – fierce, cruel

venial – a minor or forgivable sin

vested – dressed

vestments – clothes worn by priests or other ecclesiastical figures

worms – coils used in stills (implements used to distill alcohol); distillery

### An Encounter

air – a song, tune

bob – a shilling (British currency)