Paralysed by History: Irish Social and Political Life as Depicted by James Joyce


Abstract

This paper explores the effects of historical paralysis on the Irish society and politics, as depicted by James Joyce in Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The fact that Joyce was rather committed to representing the citizens of Dublin and their everyday lives is visible from the fact that this city has a cardinal position in a number of his works. The short stories deal with the problems of colonial subjugation, betrayal, nationalism, poverty and corruption that all have one thing in common: paralysis that pervades even the basic layers of society. In The Sisters, Joyce criticises religion and its impact on the nation as a whole. Eveline deals with immigration, or the inability of the protagonist to escape the grip of paralysis and give up on her routine, due to her fear of the unknown. Ivy Day in the Committee Room depicts the political paralysis of the canvassers and of the society in general, marked by a strong sense of betrayal and the martyrdom of Charles Stewart Parnell. In the Two Gallants, the author ironically portrays the effects of collaboration between the Irish and the Dublin Castle, effectively claiming that his compatriots share the blame for the English colonial dominance. The protagonist of the last short story, The Dead, as a possible Joyce’s alter ego, struggles to reconcile his Irishness with the prestige associated with the English language and culture. However, his presumptuousness ends with the emergence of a shadow from the past. In his autobiographic novel, A Portrait of the Artist of the Young Man, Joyce illustrates a rite of passage of young Stephen Dedalus into adulthood. During his maturation, Stephen decides to abandon all the values his father stood for, primarily religion and nationalism. The protagonist is an austere critic of his nation and his compatriots: not only does he blame them for giving up on their language and embracing English, but also sees Ireland as a monster that destroys its “children”. The inability of the young artist to create in such an oppressive environment culminates with his decision to emigrate, to free himself from the shackles of paralysis and ultimately create the consciousness of his people. Many of the reasons why Joyce opted for leaving Ireland can be found in Dubliners as well, precisely because the author wanted to show the Irish the way he was perceiving them. Due to that, it is particularly interesting to read the two works together and compare them.

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steadily grow older story by story, to represent the different facets of a Dubliners life. Collectively, the short stories included in Dubliners is are descriptive not only specifically descriptive of the people Dubliner in specific of the early 1900s, but also of the country as a whole. ‘The Sisters’ is the opening story in James Joyce’s 1914 collection, Dubliners. Unlike the other stories in the collection, it is told in the first person, by a young man recalling his friendship, as a boy, with a Catholic priest. As this very brief summary of the story would suggest, there is something odd in the story being given the title ‘The Sisters’, since the two sisters are actually not the central focus of the story. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. And Catholicism is an important part of Old Ireland, the outdated and paralysed country which James Joyce, in ‘The Sisters’ as in the rest of Dubliners, wants to wake from its slumber and bring into the modern age. ‘The Sisters’ ends on an ellipsis: ‘Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself. . . ."