



General article : views and analysis

James Joyce Dubliners : how religion influences conscience.

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Religion is one of the emerging issues in the modern era and forms the backbone of most literary works. Religion as a theme is seen to influence the operation of those who believe in it. It forms the functional framework that predetermines ones actions and behavior. Philosophers have pondered the meaning of consciousness for a very long time. Consciousness includes all the mental sensations that are roaming through one's mind at a given time; ideas, emotions and perceptions. It is the perception that passes in a person's mind. It is being aware of who you are (John Locke). Religion encompasses any belief in something or someone. Religion is what determines the habit of someone. It also has a direct influence on the thoughts of a person. There is a strong relationship between religion and conscience. These two are almost intertwined. They are complementary to each other with religion having a direct influence on one's conscience. James Joyce's Dubliner is a vivid collection that depicts conflicts that exist between the modern era and the early times of the 20th century in terms of beliefs and cultural practices (Parrinder 27). Joyce advances the significance of Dubliners by providing readers with insights into the current transformed world (Parrinder 29). According to Joyce, the current era is the type that compels people to know more about the world they live in and fully understand the potential that it possesses (Ellmann 127). The writer uses life in Dublin to forward his goal by indirectly criticizing its beliefs and exposing certain failures in their fundamental beliefs hence implying that not all beliefs are good. Beliefs can change one's life either to the negative or to the positive depending on the circumstances. In the story of Dubliner, Joyce depicts Dublin to be a city where religious oppression is at optimum and intolerable to the citizens (Foster 36).

In his first story, 'the sisters', Joyce uses Dublin as a country whose citizens have a strong belief in religion that they have become slaves to it (Foster 35). In this story we are told of father Flynn who was always unhappy and usually looked disappointed. The answer to his disappointment is attributed to the time when he accidentally broke his chalice. Having been a father, he felt guilty of himself and he had to go to the church and hide himself in darkness just because he felt he had sinned against God. It is his strong belief in religion that directly dictates his conscience which then has a direct influence on his attitude towards life. Also, in the same story, most characters seem to be deeply rooted in religion just from the way they express themselves. The phrase 'may God have mercy upon him' has been repeatedly said by a number of characters when referring to the late father Flynn. They all think that every word they utter is offensive to God in a way. The narrator in this story seems to be greatly affected by what he hears especially from his seniors. At some point in the story, he had a dream that was a result of over-meditating over certain things that were told to him by Cotter. The narrator seems to be greatly affected his emotions. This is very evident when he accompanies his aunt to the late father Flynn's home. As they pray over the dead corpse, the narrator seems troubled and tries to imagine that the corpse was smiling at him. As Mr. Cotter discusses with the narrator's parents, he comments in a statement on the narrator's relationship with the priest. He says that it is not good for such a young boy to relate with an elderly priest. He knew very well that father Flynn was a religious stereotype and it would be unfair if such beliefs were inculcated into the innocent mind of the young boy. I strongly believe that Mr. Cotter had seen how much the narrator's conscience had been

affected. As the narrator contemplates over the priest's demise, he finds himself thinking about his own death. It is as if there was some inner force that was governing the narrator's mind because whenever he thought of anything, something just came in and sort of redirected his thinking. He was always filled with a feeling of guilt. Having been closer to someone whose belief was deeply rooted in the catholic religion, nothing else could be expected from the narrator other than the beliefs of the late father Lynn. It is something that the narrator cannot avoid since it comes automatically. Now that the narrator had been exposed to strong beliefs at a relatively tender age, the effect on his mind was so significant that everyone could see it from his behavior. In this story, religion is vividly brought out as a major theme and it seems to have a stronger influence on how the people of Dublin carry out their activities. Generally, the writer wants to show how people are tied up by whatever they believe in and as a result how these beliefs affect their consciousness (Parrinder 21).

In the second story, the encounter, the theme of religion still has a stronger influence on the characters' personal lives. As the narrator and his friend Mahony go out for an adventure, they meet an old man who, from the description, looks experienced just like the former late father Lynn who had a strong influence over the narrator's consciousness. Their conversation instills a lot of fear in the young boys and makes them suspicious of the old man. The old man seems to impute some kind of belief in the young boys since at their age they seem innocent and tend to believe everything they hear especially from mature people like the old man. It is this feeling of guilt that makes the narrator to devise way of evading from the old chap. The old man's advice seemed to revive what father Flynn had told him initially. In the two, the sisters and the encounter, there is a great resemblance such that in the two cases the elderly men are conversing with the young innocent and gullible children in a convincing way. The description Joyce gives to the old man as being shabbily dressed only depicts that the man had a lot of wisdom and experience as far as life was concerned. The appearance of the old man alone invokes a feeling of insecurity in the minds of the young children as the narrator remembers of the experience he had with the late father Flynn during his days. It is as if the narrator was not ready for such an experience again and that is why he tried as much as he could to run away from the old man. From his advice to the young boys, the old man was trying to impart his funny ideologies in to the innocent young children just like

father Flynn had done before. It is because of what they believed in that was strongly influencing what came out of their mouth. Religion has a significant effect on the believers mind and even goes ahead to dictate the kind of life they live. The old man in the second story seems to be living a disappointed life just like father Flynn. This is what worries Mr. Cotter because children tend to believe in what they see and are told and it becomes very hard to change them thereafter; they become incorrigible and stereotypic. The old man explains to the children of how much he loved what he believed in and says that it is the very best thing in the world that he would ever love. His belief which forms his religion had become part and parcel of him and influenced everything he did. He was too conservative and he could only influence others but not the vice versa. In the two stories, fear is seen to take center stage in the spread of religion and this interrupts with the conscience of people. This is how father Flynn managed to influence the life of the narrator. The old man in the story 'the encounter' and the old priest in the first story 'the sisters' misused their societal position of giving good counsel to the young children but instead capitalized on such opportunities to spread negative influence into the minds of the children. They use enticing words in capturing the attention of the children. At the beginning of the story, the old man seems to be advising the young boys in the right direction but after winning their attention, he diverts and starts convincing them that talking to the girls was a bad thing and unacceptable (Segall 140).

Still in the same story, the encounter, Joe Dillon's behaviour appeared at some point to be weird even as they played their childhood games. It later dawned on them that he had a calling to be a priest and he justified his behaviour. It is what he believed in that made him be different from the other children. In this story religion tends to have a stronger influence on the children (Sherry 71).

At school, they were only allowed to read the roman history and it was an offense reading other materials especially from the west. It is because of what the priests believed in that made them regard other literature other than the roman history as useless and commercial. Leo Dillon receives a stern warning when it is discovered that he was having a small book on the Wild West of which father Butler refers to as being rubbish. The narrator also states that the open rebuke by father Butler stimulated some fear in him but at times when he was away from college, such feelings would still come and he would start developing

an interest in what father Butler had warned them not to read. Dillon's parents are also seen to be too religious and they used to go to church every evening for fellowship. Father Butler's words seemed to instill a lot of fear in Leo Dillon's life because he even never turned up for the adventure as they had planned but chose to go to school instead. On their adventure as they walked along North strand road, some two boys started throwing stones at them since they thought that the narrator and his friend were Protestants. This clearly shows that this society was strongly catholic and no other religion was allowed. It is also surprising that such an early age, the two young boys who were throwing stones at the narrator and his friend had already been influenced and knew that protestants were not allowed in that community. They fought for what they believed in and could not allow anyone to change them (Parrinder 101).

In the story 'Araby', the narrator's aunt was too religious and this is evident when she tells the narrator that he would have to cancel his visit to the bazaar that 'night of the lord'. She alluded everything to God meaning that she had deep faith in the catholic religion till it was openly displayed without her notice. In another story 'Eveline', Joyce furthers the theme of religious oppression especially against women. This is a society that is built on catholic principles and everyone seems to abide by them. Ladies are ill treated as we see the way Eveline is treated by her father especially after her mother's death. She says that her father never at any time went to pick her like he did for her brothers just because she was a girl and they were boys. It is as a result of his strong belief in the catholic religion that did not acknowledge ladies as equivalent counterparts to men and deserved as much respect as the other members of the society. We are told that her father never used to provide for her pocket money. She had been isolated from the entire family. Her mother's demise leaves her with a lot of responsibilities. Since then, she had to work so hard so as to take care of herself and the whole family. It is this kind of oppression that compels her to contemplate eloping with Frank. Even as she thinks over their elopement, there is still a feeling that makes her believe that she was better where she was and hence could not risk moving out with a stranger. She rather prefers remaining behind and takes care of her siblings. After all the preparations for her elopement had been finalized, she still refuses to go and it is as if her mother's last words tend to convict her mind. She is actually torn in between eloping and remaining behind

and keep things in order just as she had promised her mother. In my opinion, she was used to being oppressed by her father and could not think otherwise. Since religion allowed it, she believed it was normal and that is why she really hesitated eloping and finally decided to remain in her oppression (Sultan 213).

She had been made to think that all men were oppressors' and that is why she refuses to elope with Frank due to the fear that he might also treat her the way her father was treating her. The narrator says that sometimes her father helped her just in honor of her late mother. This ends up oppressing the girl who then develops an inferiority complex and sees herself as an outcast. She submits to the circumstances and believes it in her conscience and that is why it becomes too hard for Frank to convince her that he would take good care of her (Sultan 119).

In the next story 'the boarding house', Joyce creates a cultural and religious conflict. The concept of divorce is highlighted when Mrs. Mooney divorces and separates with her husband. After Mr. Doran had fallen in love with Polly, Mrs. Mooney's daughter, it is discovered and the priest is summoned. Doran was a committed member of the Catholic Church and had a strong belief in their doctrine. He says that he had lived an upright life for most part of his life except after he fell in love with Polly. He was described as quiet cool man who had respect for both himself and others. The priest instills a lot of fear in Doran and even magnifies his case to appear a great sin. Being a strong believer in the catholic doctrine, Doran's conscience is greatly disturbed and he seems to spend much of his time thereafter just thinking about his mistake. He is judged by what he believed in and this makes him feel guiltier of what he had done. Doran is forced by the circumstances to go against his will and accept to marry Polly. He had his own reasons of not marrying Polly but because the priest had imputed a lot of fear in him, he had to conform to what he had been told. He had been made to appear like the prodigal son who had been given another chance to live. From this story, it is very clear that religion has a significant influence over one's decisions since it creates an unknown fear in those who believe in it and that is how it gains control over their conscience (Hart 79).

In the story 'A little cloud', we meet Chandler who seem to be dissatisfied with the life he was living. Initially, he had no feelings of regret and was happy with his family but all this changed to the opposite after meeting his old friend, Gallaher, who changes his attitude towards his family and the kind of life he was

living. Mr. Chandler seemed to be a catholic believer and this was evident when he made a catholic sign on hearing of the immorality in the cities that Gallagher had visited. Mr. Gallaher's ideas seemed to conflict with what Chandler believed in and that is why Chandler was greatly disturbed in his conscience after their conversation. He was struggling with conflicting values in his mind (Foster 36).

In the story, 'clay' the writer presents to us some religious conflicts. Maria confesses that she used to hate Protestants. In this city, catholic had taken root in almost everyone's mind and anyone who seemed to embrace another religion was treated with a lot of contempt. Maria had a calling of being a nun and that is why she was never married in the first place. When she visited Joe's family, children were playing games of which they also involved Maria. Mrs. Donnelly seems uneasy and quickly instructs the child who was having a ring to throw it away. This is because she knew that Maria was a nun and would feel offended by anything that would mean contrary to her faith. She had a belief in singlehood and everyone knew it. Also, Joe seems to be a staunch believer in his doctrine. This is exposed when he openly swears that God would punish him if he talked to his brother Alph. It is his religious belief that makes him swear to God unknowingly since religion has a direct influence on someone's mind (Ellmann 129).

Joyce brings in yet another theme of religious transformation in the story 'Grace' where a drunkard man is helped by his friends to change from his evil life. They believed that the only way to change their friend's habit is by making him believe in a religion that would direct his conscience to the positive. This means that religion influences one's character. Even though Mr. Kernan disliked candles, still they adjust circumstances to suit his demands with a view that by the end of the exercise he would be a changed person. It is what someone believes in that shapes his habit. As discussed earlier, religion always has the effect of creating an unknown fear in those who believe in it and hence make them live according to their doctrine. In this story also, there are religious conflicts between

Protestants and Catholics. Catholics believe that Protestants cannot be money lenders because of what they believe in and no one can convince them otherwise. They actually hate Protestants just because they have been made to believe it (Connolly 78).

In almost all his stories, Joyce clearly illustrates how modernity has changed religion and also exposes the conflicts modernity has brought as far as religion is concerned. The other short stories that talk of modernity include; *After the race, two Gallants, Counterparts, A painful case, Ivy day in the Committee Room, Grace and The Dead*. Dublin is depicted as city that was embedded in catholic as their main religion. The writer shows how religion has been a stronger towards change as most religious stereotypes would stick to their norms however oppressive they are. This belief has stuck in their minds till it has become their lifestyle. They do not accept anything contrary to their beliefs however good it may be (Backus 34).

In conclusion, Joyce's view on religion and how it influences one's conscience is that it confounds and distorts. From most of his works, religion is seen to have destabilized individuals and destroyed the foundational base of the society. It is actually the responsibility of the society to preserve the good morals and prevent at all costs individualism. However, contrary to this, religion tends to promote individual conscience hence eliminating the entire concept of society. Furthermore, Joyce compares religion in the modern era and the ancient times. He vividly exposes the wrangles between different religious groups and how modernity has changed religious practices. Religion therefore is seen to possess some force that governs and dictates one's life either to the positive or to the negative. It is like a framework that guides and controls the life and character of those who believe on them. In my own opinion therefore, I see religion as a tool that can be used to change lives positively if done with the right motive. I believe that even though religion has had an adverse effect especially on people's culture, it is still an important domain in the society and plays a significant role in shaping the society.

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