

# No Sisters, No Brother, No Man: “The Sisters” and Joyce’s Gnomonics

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## ABSTRACT

Modern fiction has a certain way of achieving ‘literariness’ and ‘sophistication’; it does so by means of “ambiguity”. Being “witty” or “deceitful”, to quote William Empson, ambiguity seems to press home the writers’ intention of deferring the meaning by making the ontological status of the text as implicit as possible. Ambiguity, therefore, forms a kind of narrative that determines the writer’s style. In James Joyce, however, particularly in the stories of *Dubliners*, this ambiguity is meant to reach a ‘mysterious’ level. Joyce’s “mysteries” are utterly different from commonly-believed, so-called textual “problems”. The problems can be solved, but mysteries should be “witnessed” and “attested” to be unfolded. Joyce’s mysterious ambiguities bear his unique signature: they represent the complexity, significance, and survival of a “gnomonic” patterning. Being a geometric figure, a gnomon is the part of a parallelogram which remains after a similar parallelogram has been taken away from one of its corners. The gnomon, therefore, represents an incomplete figure, like Joyce’s vaguely elliptical and incomplete stories. Joyce introduces the gnomon as the personification of imperfection, hopeless, paralysis, and damnation. The following study is going to elaborate this main principle of Joycean ambiguity in the opening story of *Dubliners*, “The Sisters”, and demonstrate its distinctively gnomonic narrative and characterization.

Key words: Ambiguity, gnomon, paralysis, *Dubliners*, James Joyce.

## INTRODUCTION

Being an indispensable part of modern fiction, ambiguity is intended to imply what is always merited as the ‘literariness’ and ‘sophistication’ of such texts. Ambiguity signifies the determination of the modern fiction writer for not informing the reader explicitly of the ontological status of the text he is reading: the meaning, then, turns into the Holy Grail and the reader into the questing knight. Once William Empson (1970) defined ambiguity as “something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful” that can be found in any “prose statement” (p. 1). Nonetheless, this naïve, rather general, definition cannot seem to be efficient and sufficient in investigation of the textual difficulty of modern fiction. Ambiguity embellishes, rather forms, the writer’s style. That is perhaps why it has been a primary reason for critics to broaden their textual investigations in order to explain both the complexity and richness of the meaning, and the difficulty of the writers’ styles. But it is not that one writer’s stylistic ambiguity is better or worse than the other one; the differences connote a variety of textual richness.

However, in modern fiction, particularly in James Joyce’s stories, ambiguity and indeterminacy transcend the textual difficulty and lead to a ‘mysterious’ level. Denis Donoghue believes “mystery” has such a quality that makes it far different it from “problem”:

I want to reinstate mystery and to distinguish it from mere bewilderment or mystification. One of the strongest motives in modern life is to explain everything and preferably to explain it away. The typical mark of modern critics is that they are zealots of explanation, they want to deny to their arts their mystery, and to degrade mystery into a succession of problems... A problem is something to be solved, a mystery is something to be witnessed and attested (Herring, 1987, p. ix).

This can be obviously why Joyce’s texts are still unsolvable because, against some common beliefs, they are not meant to offer merely textual difficulties and problems, but mysteries of varying degrees and depths. This study is going to shed light on some aspects of the unique nature of Joycean mysteries in *Dubliners*.

## GNOMONS: JOYCE'S MYSTERIOUS AMBIGUITY

James Joyce's fifteen mysterious, elliptical and remarkably 'modern' stories are gathered in the collection called *Dubliners*. In a letter to Constantine P. Curran in 1904, James Joyce (1957) declared, "I'm writing a series of epilecti – ten – for a paper. I have written one. I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (p. 55). Joyce wanted to form a chapter of the "moral history" of his country. Every single one of the stories narrates the moral, intellectual, physical, and spiritual paralysis of people who were given an opportunity to "take a good look at themselves". Moreover, Joyce's zealous readers can find *Dubliners* a statement of all reasons he had for exile – an artist's exile. What gives *Dubliners* a unique quality is the way Joyce blends realism and symbolism and creates a principle, rather a complex pattern, that forms the unity of the collection. David Daiches (1968) underlines such a technical duality when stating

Joyce's realism in *Dubliners* is not therefore the casual observation of the stray photographer, nor is it the piling-up of unrelated details. All the stories are deliberately and carefully patterned, all have a density, a fullness of implication, which the even tone of the narrative by *disguising* [italics mine] only renders more effective (p. 31).

All this patterning owes its complexity, significance, and survival to Joyce's *disguising* art. This over-all pattern existing throughout *Dubliners* aims to disguise the writer's real meaning and intention leading to the Joycean kind of ambiguity – gnomonic – which is the focal point of this essay.

What one may confront as 'ambiguous' or 'enigmatic' in stories of other modern writers, one shall call 'gnomonic' in *Dubliners*. Gnomonic, the true nature of Joyce's ambiguity, can be what Philip F. Herring justifiably discusses as Joyce's 'uncertainty principle'. In *Dubliners*, this uncertainty principle crystallizes the nature of Joyce's narrative and characterization where he tends to conceal rather than to reveal. Consequently, the absent words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and even characters are rendered more significant than all those present. Lee Spinks (2009) would rather see this principle as "the 'meanness' of Joyce's narrative" (p. 50). Magalaner and Kain (1957) believe that "Joyce is a writer who must be heeded. This awareness deepens with each reading...[His writings] are that of a many-faceted prism, catching half-lights and projecting magnified distortions" (p. 3). But that is not the climax yet; Joyce

is a writer, whose incomparable joke was that he could be "the invisible man who was even able to make his invisibility invisible" (p. 6). Joyce, the master of disguise, made an enormous effort to live and create an 'enigma' leaving behind puzzling blanks of various sizes and shapes for both readers and critics to recognize and fill. But what can really 'gnomonic' be, after all?

The opening page of the first story ("The Sisters" that will be mainly discussed here) perplexes the readers with three enigmatic italicized words; they have traditionally been read as thematic keys to the meaning of *Dubliners* as a whole.

Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. 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 (Joyce, 1992, p. 5).

Not only do these words suggest some thematic significance here, but also they signal some certain type of narrative. Evidently, most of the stories in *Dubliners* represent very little action – paralysis – which is dramatized by a series of epiphanies. Simony suggests a different kind of narrative: it involves a debasement of spirituality – an exchange of spiritual for temporal things – that involves those stories peopled by the present or absent holy fathers.

And gnomon? As mentioned in Euclid's *Book II of Elements*, a gnomon is the part of a parallelogram which remains after a similar parallelogram has been taken away from one of its corners. What is significant to this discussion is that gnomon is an incomplete parallelogram, and this incompleteness leads meaningfully to the gnomonic existence of *Dubliners*. *Dubliners*, each a gnomon taken from the main parallelogram (Dublin), are all caught in the incomplete areas of human relationships. Gordon (1995) sees even Joyce's country as a gnomon when stating:

To make a gnomon, what you do is to take a rectangular piece of paper, crease it in half along width and length, then cut out one of the four smaller rectangles marked by the creases. (The map of modern-day Ireland, properly rendered, approximates such a figure). A gnomon illustrates engineered absence, a sign of something subtracted.

Being also the sign of absence, gnomons indicate imperfection, deficiency, and loss. The failings and

fallings of 'no-men', their dislocations, their incapacity to communicate and belong make potential cases of gnomons in *Dubliners*. Gnomonic Dubliners mostly reveal the tragic-comic epiphanies of life-traps in which they are stuck; they are also followed and surrounded by the shadows of the dead (absent gnomons) heading on in the universal marathon of the frustration of the living and the dead.

But as mentioned before, Joyce uses gnomons to form also some narrative strategies that bear his unique signature. Joyce's stories can be called gnomonic since it is their incomplete and fragmentary language that unveils the meaning. Joyce's language in *Dubliners* is elliptical; that is to say, there are omissions, ellipses marks, narrative cuts, incomplete conversations, as well as unexpected moments of silence that result in, to borrow from Benstock (1988), the "absence of climactic instances, deleted resolutions of plot, inconclusive closures, inexact overlays of perception on the part of the characters, [and] insufficient information about them" (p. 537). It sounds convincing, then, that the narrative, as Weir (1991) believes, would take "on the characteristics of the character whose activities are being narrated" (p. 346). Being so, the story becomes a version of the narrative just like a gnomon becomes a version of a parallelogram.

The following study intends to give a brief analysis of Joyce's main principle of ambiguity in "The Sisters" (the first story in *Dubliners*) demonstrating its distinctively gnomonic aspect of narrative and characterization.

### Gnomonic Narrator

As a story about the loss of faith, the corruption of religious values, and maturity, Joyce's "The Sisters" holds mysteries no less complex than that of McIntosh in *Ulysses*. Contrary to its uncomplicated realism, the story has kept critics busy for years discussing its seemingly unsolved enigmas. There is so much unexplained about the protagonist (the boy), the other characters (the priest, and his old sisters), and the plot. The readers also have to overcome some textual incongruities: while the story restricts itself to the limited point of view of the boy himself, it also relishes an elliptical narrative signified remarkably by unfinished sentences, thoughts, and dreams that are supposed to be filled by the readers. The strangely sounding 'gnomon' is busy working here.

The disguised notions in the very title of the story, 'The Sisters', launch the gnomonic narrative strategy that Joyce develops and perfects in his later works.

Why should Joyce choose such a title while the story is propelled mainly by the boy's presence and the priest's absence? Knowing that 'sisters' may refer to 'nuns' and 'nurses' in Irish (Gifford, 1982, p. 29) does not illuminate the puzzling title because the priest's sisters are neither nuns nor nurses in fact – unless we point to their ironically nursing and priestly roles. Or should we build our assumptions based on the vague tone of homosexuality suggested by Old Cotter's unfinished sentence? Discussing the boy's friendship with the dead priest, Old Cotter says to the boy's uncle, "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, 1992, p. 6) The lustful connotations of the priest's smile – "he used to uncover his big discolored teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip" (p. 8) – can also be another significant clue to the priest's perversion. 'Sister' is also the Irish slang for homosexuals. But is that what Joyce wants us to know? Certainly not. The title remains gnomonic and mysterious as the old sisters themselves.

The story opens with the death of the paralyzed priest who was the young protagonist's companion and spiritual instructor, and unfolds with an evolvingly gnomonic sense of loss and maturity. All details in the setting yield perfectly to this very sense of loss. "There was no hope for him," thinks the boy, "it was the third stroke" ('third' can meaningfully refer to the three corners of the gnomon – an incomplete figure); every night the boy 'studies' the "lighted square of window" (the rectangular shape of the window may again suggest a gnomon that must be studied by the seeking boy, while the light, which it offers to the seeking boy, is confronted with both literal darkness of the night and the symbolic darkness of a spiritual vacuum); every night the boy 'gazes' at (or studies?) the window only to be enchanted by the weird words of 'paralysis,' 'gnomon' and 'simony' (the three-cornered gnomonic existence of the priest gains the perfection which is doomed for by receiving the fourth corner: death).

Skepticism is provoked once again in the face of the story-teller. The boy seems to mislead us about his real age, and his real feelings about the death of the priest. We may guess him to be about nine or ten years of age while his reactions towards Old Cotter's words prove us wrong. "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" (p. 6). As he is confronted with Old Cotter's last unfinished, vague remark about the possibly negative influence of the priest, the boy's next reaction becomes once more revealing,

‘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!” (pp. 6-7)

The boy, later at night, becomes angry again recalling how Old Cotter had considered him a child. He does not seem that innocent and naïve as we expect; he could be a couple of years older, and more cunning apparently. He might certainly know something about the dead priest to hide from his family, Cotter, and the readers as well.

The equivocal behavior of the young narrator concerning the priest is also intended to be mysterious. In the opening part of the story, after looking at the priest’s window he feels mesmerized by the echo of the word ‘paralysis’ – personified as a sinful being – that both repels and attracts him. He is said to have been a great friend of the priest; someone whom the priest had a “great wish” for. However, all he can do or say after being notified of the priest’s death is to continue “eating *as if* [italics mine] the news had not interested” him (p. 6). Why does he pretend so? Is he guilty of something? Does he carry some forbidden knowledge? Furthermore, the boy, in a nightmare, feels strangely pleased to see the dead priest and tries to pardon him of his sin, but the next morning he finds out

“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” (p. 8).

Later in the evening, when he is taken by his aunt to the wake held for the priest, he describes the priest’s room as the “dead-room” (p. 9) – ‘dead’ being an unusual adjective used for ‘room’ may signify a lost parallelogram here – and then disappoints Nannie by refusing wine and some crackers which she passes around. He prefers to go back to his usual chair in the “corner”: could this “corner” signify one of the four a parallelogram may potentially lose? Or does it suggest the young boy’s anxiety for maturity by keeping his “corner” to remain as a whole and complete?

It sounds meaningful, now, when we remember his uncle advising, “Let him learn to box his corner” (p.6). Though ‘corner’ here refers to an Irish slang (Gifford, 1982, p. 30) meaning “share” or “proceeds” (let him go out and make a living), its geometric implication should not be ignored. Walzl (1973) does not miss this point as she states that the “Dublin youth

must develop into a whole person: he must in the geometrical sense “box his corner” and become like the restored parallelogram a complete figure. Maturity requires wholeness” (p. 399). Joyce is introducing, perhaps, an incomplete/gnomonic portrait of the young artist in *A Portrait* who has to overcome the same struggle within: to welcome the realm of art and quit the priesthood for good. The young boy expresses unconsciously his desire to get away from the paralyzing aura of the corrupted priesthood that may prevent his maturity and freedom.

### Gnomonic Father

One should bear in mind, nonetheless, that the boy’s vague attitude of making the obvious uncertain cannot be very unfamiliar. Perhaps he practices what he has learned from the priest whose gnomonic implications explicitly outweigh those of the other characters:

“Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me... His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts” (p. 8).

Being a metaphor for what would have become of James Joyce if he had devoted himself to the service of the church, Father James Flynn is the character who holds a significant key to the mysteries in the story. Who is Father Flynn indeed? Why does no one have any hope for him? Why is his image associated with the fatal trinity of ‘paralysis,’ ‘simony,’ and ‘gnomon’ to the boy? Why were the ‘duties of the priesthood’ too much for him? What did he die of so far? The questions abound as we grope for a way through all probable and possible suggestions we may find here and there.

Like a figure with something missing, Father Flynn’s ghostly presence looms from the very beginning. Although Walzl emphasizes the “intricate play of light-dark imagery” (p. 384) in the story to be mainly associated with the symbolic role of the dead priest, I would like to draw the attention to how that light-dark imagery implies a gnomonic notion of absence-presence – a key point to study the priest’s character. Father Flynn is ‘presented’ as the ‘absent’ dead priest who had lost his hope, faith, and spiritual power becoming only a fragment of what he used to be, becoming a no-man (gnomon). His presence, no wonder, suggests the symbolic darkness – the absence of light. When, for the first time, we hear of him, he is told to be behind a “faintly and evenly” lighted window (p. 5). Late at night, the boy imagines the dead priest’s “heavy grey face” in his ‘dark’ room. Next morning, after reading the death notice of the

priest, the boy does not feel willing to go into his "little dark room"; on the contrary, he walks "away slowly along the *sunny* [italics mine] side of the street" (p. 8).

Significantly, this light-dark contrast unveils, once again, the theme of maturity. The boy prefers to be on the "sunny" side of Dublin life, to walk in the light, to "study", to "gaze". Therefore, he tries to demystify the unfinished sentences and visions that are mysterious to him, and know more – to become a know-man. As he keeps walking in the sun he tries to get to the bottom of Old Cotter's vague statements, to find a conclusion for his unfinished dream. In the dead priest's room, what he "notices" are Nannie's old and shabby skirt and trodden-out boots, as well as a heavy odor – all of which, being mysteries themselves, representing what else they could have been. Better to say, as Leonard (1990) states, the boy "is drawn to describing [them] because something is missing from [them] which is announced by what remains. What wore down her boot heel? Something so vast as to be unrepresentable" (p. 456). He truly is a seeker.

Back to the priest, it is now noteworthy to see why he is described almost always surrounded by such claustrophobic, geometric shapes. He is remembered behind the 'square of the windows'; he is imagined with his 'black snuff-box'; he seems to have been restricted to his 'dark room'; he is found in the 'confession box'; and at last we see him lying down in his 'coffin'. The deficient priest with his mental aberration might symbolize the collapse of salvation, hope, and grace in Ireland; he fails in his holy vocation being stuck in the mud of a reducing earthly life. He can be the 'absence' personified. Eliza's speaking about her brother, "poor James", is brilliantly enlightening: "He was no great trouble to us. You wouldn't hear him in the house *any more than now* [italics mine]. Still, I know he's gone and all to that...", and further she goes, "He was too scrupulous always. The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed" (p. 11). The priest is remembered as if he never existed, was never efficient in the church, had never spiritually healing power, and could never offer salvation. And isn't his crucifixion secular when he is even incapable of saving himself "talking to no one and wandering about by himself"? The hope is all gone when he is found all alone "sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself." (p. 12) This could be the personification of life-in-death no matter caused by paralysis, madness, syphilis, or the loss of faith.

Walzl's highlighting the archetypal nature of the geometrical shape of the squares can also add a remarkable dimension to the significance of Joycean gnomon. She quotes from George Ferguson's *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* saying that squares are "emblems of the earth" and symbolize the "earthly existence", while circles are universally believed to be emblems of "eternity" (as cited in Walzl, 1973, p. 401). There will be no annunciation for such heavenly circles in Dublin; the priest (the Irish Church? God?) has broken the chalice of faith turning his life (all life) into damnation.

### Gnomonic Sisters

After the boy's elliptical narrative, Old Cotter's elliptical speech, and the priest's elliptical existence, we can finally focus on the old sisters' elliptical presence in the story. Liza and Nannie are spinsters and devoted themselves to their brother's duties of priesthood, but are they really nuns or nurses? Certainly, we are to underestimate Joycean symbolism if we believe so. It is not an accident if they mysteriously resemble the Morkan sisters in "The Dead", the two old women in the "Parable of the Plums" in *Ulysses*, or the two washing women in *Finnegans Wake*. Who are they indeed? Do they represent Ireland – deprived and devastated? Are they the dead priest's ironic replacements (as they pass around the wine and the crackers of a parodied communion)? Are they, as Walzl mentions, the sisters of "fates" (p. 385) who determine what will become of the Dubliners? Or, perhaps, as Marian Eide (2004) adapts Oscar Wilde's ironic phrase, they could be "women of no importance": no-woman, no-man, gnomon (p. 36).

Though occupying the second half of the story, these paralyzed sisters' presence and words cannot unravel the priestly mystery of the story. Nannie says too little to be noticed; she strangely keeps "beckoning" to the guests. Eliza does the talking but she is not informative, either by making linguistic mistakes or by exerting vague pauses. She talks about the death notice in the "*Freeman's General*" (*Freeman Journal*); she expresses her desire for having a short trip to her old house in carriages with "rheumatic wheels" (pneumatic wheels); and, finally, when she seemingly explains the odd condition of his brother, she cannot be more enigmatic than this: "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..." (p. 12). There is nothing we can be sure of except that, according to Tindall (1963), the "father's gone" (p. 17).

## CONCLUSION

Joyce identifies the slanted and incomplete figure of the 'gnomon' with 'paralysis' and 'simony' in the story so that gnomon can symbolize a social paralysis that can potentially creep through the entire continent. All those characters who are defective psychologically, spiritually, morally, and physically are the products of the gnomonic/distorting Ireland. Ireland is the ruthless mother pig that eats her furrows. For Dubliners, maturity and perfection can never be fulfilled, love is as hopeless as freedom, and salvation is a dream that will never come true. The way to maturity and perfection must be sought beyond the Irish borders: in exile. Paradoxically, to "box their corners" and expand their life roots, Dubliners must leave their shaky corners of the huge parallelogram of Dublin; to represent a "whole" they must stand out alone or they are doomed to live a life of regret and frustration – always.

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