





# DUBLINERS

James Joyce

Dossier pédagogique et exercices : Axel Delmotte

Collection Classiques VO

**Studyrama**  
Réussir son oral

*La première édition de ce titre a été initiée par Annie  
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# Repères

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## **A short biography :**

### **Contextual elements in James Joyce's life**

James Joyce was born on February 2nd, 1882 in a suburb of Dublin. His birth city played a major role in Joyce's writings as he saw the city as a true character, a mirror in which the people of Dublin could take, as he put it, "good look at themselves". To him, Dublin was some embodiment of the urban experience.



When James was only 11, his father lost his job as a tax collector and it marked the beginning of the impoverishment of his family. His father was also involved in politics and had Fenian sympathies (an Irish revolutionary organization founded in the US in the 19th century to fight for an independent Ireland). As the family's income steadily diminished, the Joyces repeatedly had to move to ever more modest houses and James Joyce's father's unemployment as well as his drinking habits, made it difficult for them to maintain their social standing.

Joyce studied at Clongowes Wood College (a voluntary secondary boarding school for boys founded by the Society of Jesus known as one of the best preparatory schools in Ireland) from 1888 until 1892. This school figures prominently in his future work. But as his father lost his position, James Joyce had to leave it. Then in 1893, he attended Belvedere College

(a Catholic school under the trusteeship of the Society of Jesus) and in 1898, he entered University College Dublin where he studied foreign languages. Whereas it seemed James Joyce's vocation seemed to become a priest, he met members of the Irish Literary Renaissance and his interest in priesthood decreased. Rather, this year marked the very beginning of his artistic career. He published his first reviews in *Fortnightly Review*, one of which of Ibsen that got him a favorable response by the famous writer himself. Though his mother still hoped he would return to Catholic Church, he decided to move to Paris to pursue a medical education in 1902 after graduating from University College of Dublin. But he had to come back to Ireland the following year when his mother was diagnosed with cancer.

After the death of his mother, he stayed in Ireland and resumed reviewing books while working as a schoolteacher, a recurring autobiographical detail in the story of Stephen Dedalus. He also started binge drinking.

In 1904, Joyce returned to mainland Europe and settled in Zurich with Nora Barnacle. It was during this period that Joyce began writing professionally.

In Zurich he was promised a position at the Berlitz Language School, a promise that was not kept even if the school sent him to Trieste where he had no official position before being offered one secure job by the school in Pola (Croatia) from 1904 to 1905, the year when he completed a collection of fifteen short stories entitled *Dubliners*. Unfortunately, again there were no open positions for James Joyce, but the director of the Berlitz School at Trieste was able to secure Joyce a position in Pola. Joyce and Nora Barnacle were able to stay in Pola with the financial security the job offered from 1904 until 1905. Unfortunately, he had to leave

the city because of Austro-Hungarians who expelled all aliens after discovering a spy ring including an Italian national. The Berlitz School at Trieste eventually offered him a teaching position in Zurich where he stayed for ten years and met Ezra Pound. During these impoverished years, Joyce received the support of his lover Nora Barnacle—he had not yet married—and could count on his younger brother's financial support. Yet, he continued to drink and borrow money. *Dubliners* was not printed before 1913. During these eight years, Joyce and Barnacle had two children, a son, Giorgio and a daughter, Lucia.

In 1914 and 1915, another of James Joyce's major novel *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* was published in serialized form until Ezra Pound got the complete text printed in New York in 1916. It was published in London the year after. This book, which relied on Joyce's autobiographical experience, was a financial flop even if it won Joyce the admiration of many writers of his time.

Meanwhile, Joyce had already started to write what was to be his masterpiece: *Ulysses*. Thanks to Ezra Pound, James Joyce met Harriet Shaw Weaver, who not only became his editor but was a reliable patron as Joyce was writing *Ulysses*. In 1920, Ezra Pound persuaded Joyce to come to Paris where he was to live for twenty years. When *Ulysses* was published in Paris in 1922, the novel was praised as a masterpiece. *Ulysses* shares themes already characteristic of his previous works and investigates the relationship between the modern man and his myth and history, focusing on major issues of Irish independence, the effects of religion on the human soul, and the moral decay produced by economic development.

Though praised internationally, *Ulysses* was also censored in the United States and the United Kingdom on obscenity

charges. It was not distributed before 1934 in the USA and 1936 in the UK.

During the period, Joyce wrote *Finnegan's Wake*, his final novel where Joyce tried to a work that would occupy most of his mental energies. *Finnegan's Wake* tried to capture the sleeping life of those living in Dublin. It was panned by the critics and most readers were discouraged by its complexity. When World War II broke out, Joyce stayed in Paris until he had to move to Switzerland. He died on January 13, 1941, of a stomach ulcer. Though he had lost part of his prestige shortly before dying, the decades that followed restored his stature as a major literature writer and James Joyce remains today of the geniuses of the 20th century and *Ulysses* stands as the text of the Anglo-American modernist movement.

## **Reading *Dubliners***

### **People trapped in routine**

The various stories offer quite a wide picture of the social and political life of the time in Ireland. Irish nationalism was at its peak and the burden of religion on the society fostered some narrow conformism that people underwent so heavily that they could not escape permanent frustration.

One of the main characteristics of Dubliners' lives is indeed the way they are trapped in the routines of their mundane existence, which makes them the prisoners of their own dissatisfaction and violent feelings. Whatever the hardships they encounter, daily routine is what affects and determines their destinies. The characters are unable to live the more exciting lives they may dream of. As they spend their time following repetitive activities and conventions, they find themselves unable to change anything in their lives. They may be frustrated, they systematically return to their routine, as if considering the unknown future was enough to paralyze them. For some of them, this routine existence even engenders brutal reactions.

In many cases, the routine leads to loneliness and unreciprocated love. The circularity of people's lives confines them in an inability to experience happiness and to live new experiences.

### **Dreaming of elsewhere**

All characters live in Dublin but many of them dream of thrilling adventures elsewhere. Yet, none of them can fulfill these dreams. Actually, what they basically need to free

themselves from is rather their own restraints than the city they live in. There are various temporary escapes in *Dubliners*, notably in music, alcohol, and even daydreaming. But these temporary moments of relief actually make the difficulty of living such mundane lives and the impossibility to move away even harder. This longing for escaping from sad and routine lives is what characterizes people in *Dubliners* as well as this inability to do so in the end.

### The Dead and the Living

Most of these short stories investigate this meeting point between life and death and what the shock of death can lead to for those living. The collection starts with *The Sisters* dealing with the process of remembering the dead and ends with *The Dead*. The pervasive presence of the dead in the lives or memories of those surviving them points at the failures of people, generation after generation, and the reproduction of mistakes. Joyce sees those surviving as "living dead people", a figure Joyce is deeply concerned with. Dubliners are the "living dead", people going through life without feelings or emotions. Actually, the very life in Dublin, in its routine and monotony, symbolizes this suspended state between life and death where people may dream of leaving but are unable to start the process of leaving.

### The Paralysis

In *Dubliners*, many of Joyce's characters are paralyzed, both physically and emotionally, physically as they are trapped in their city and emotionally as they can hardly react. This theme is getting more and more powerful and pervasive along the



collection of stories. From the paralysis of individuals in their personal lives, it spreads to a social, economic and, of course, religious paralysis that encompasses the whole city of Dublin. Once again, *Dubliners* are just unable to move on, to challenge things in their lives and to kill the routine they are trapped in. This state is also clearly that of Ireland itself, a country where people seem to have admitted they could do nothing but accept their fate.

## The Revelation

Despite the mundane life they are trapped in, characters in *Dubliners* are given opportunities to experience revelations, moments that Joyce himself called "epiphanies", a word with religious overtones. But these "epiphanies" do not help the people living them to experience new things. They are just moments of realization for people momentarily being more aware of what they are and what they live, before returning to their sad routine and their frustration. Sometimes, the characters are not even aware of the epiphany they are offered and the reader can observe them missing the opportunity.

Through the passivity of the people in *Dubliners*, Joyce underlines the destiny of humans trapped in their condition.

## The Corruption

The lives of Joyce's characters are made of this corruption that blocks any hope of progress: perversity or depravity. Hence the paralysis they find themselves in. Almost all the relationships in the stories are marked by deceit or betrayal, which shows how people find it hard to build ties one with the others. Rather, many characters feel they are betrayed

be it by their spouses, by politics, their leaders or the British. This also characterizes the state of mind of these people living in isolation and the fear of humiliation.

# *Dubliners*

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## *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. 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.

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:

*Stroke* : attaque  
*To pass* : passer  
devant

*Faint* : faible  
(lumière)  
*Even* : plat,  
uniforme, stable  
*Blind* : store

*Idle* : vain, futile

*Maleficent* :  
malfaisant

*To ladle out* :  
servir à la louche  
*Stirabout*  
*porridge* :  
bouillie d'avoine

*Uncanny :*  
mystérieux  
*To puff :* tirer une  
bouffée  
*Tiresome :*  
ennuyeux  
*To faint :*  
s'évanouir  
*Worm :* ver

"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..."

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

*Chap :* garçon

*Beady eyes :*  
yeux de fouine

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.

*To spit* : cracher  
*Grate* : âtre

"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?"

*Lad* : gamin,  
jeune gars

"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 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 (1). Education is all very fine and large... Mr Cotter might take a pick of that leg mutton," he added to my aunt.

*To box his corner* :  
apprendre à  
boxer sur le ring  
*Rosicrucian* :  
Rose-Croix  
(ordre)  
*Nipper* : gosse

"No, no, not for me," said old Cotter.

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

*Safe* : coffre (ici :  
garde-manger)

"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 (2). Tiresome old red-nosed (3) imbecile!

*To cram* : remplir  
à ras bord

To puzzle one's  
head :  
se creuser la tête

Moist : humide  
Spittle : salive

Unassuming :  
modeste

Bootee :  
chausson,  
bottillon

Shutter : volet,  
rideau  
Crape : crêpe  
Ribbon : ruban

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 (4). No notice was visible now for the shutters were up. A crape bouquet was tied to the door-knocker with ribbon. Two poor women and a telegram boy were reading the card pinned on the crape. I also approached and read:



July 1st, 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 (5) 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** 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 shopwindows 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

*R.I.P. (Rest In Peace) : repose en paix*

*To smother : étouffer  
High Toast : tabac à priser  
To rouse : réveiller  
To doze : somnoler  
Snuff-box : tabatière  
To spill : renverser, verser  
Snuff : tabac à priser  
To dribble : tomber goutte à goutte, baver  
Garments : vêtements  
Handkerchief : mouchoir  
Stain : tache*

*To mourn : être en deuil*

*A great deal :*  
beaucoup

*To undertake :*  
entreprendre,  
assumer la  
charge de  
*Directory :*  
annuaire

*To nod :*  
acquiescer  
*Thrice :* trois fois  
*To patter :*  
bredouiller

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 and about Napoleon Bonaparte, 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 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.

*Nostril* : narine

*Acquaintance* :  
connaissance

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.

*Velvet* : velours

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

*Pane* : vitre

*Tawny* : couleur  
fauve

*Unseemly* :  
inconvenant

*To toil* : peiner,  
avoir des  
difficultés

*Bowed* : ployé  
*Banister* : rampe  
d'escalier

*Landing* : palier  
*To beckon to* :  
faire signe

*On tiptoe* : sur la  
pointe des pieds  
*Dusky* : sombre

*Coffin* : cercueil  
*To kneel down* :  
s'agenouiller

*To mutter* :  
marmonner  
*Clumsy* :  
maladroit  
*Skirt* : jupe  
*Heel* : talon  
*To tread* :  
marcher

*Copious* :  
corpulent  
*Altar* : autel

*Scant* : rare

*To bless oneself* :  
se signer  
*In state* :  
très digne  
*To grope* :  
chercher à tâtons  
*Sideboard* : buffet  
*Decanter* : carafe  
*At someone's  
bidding* : aux  
ordres de  
quelqu'un

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 **kneled down** at the foot of the bed. I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman's **mutterings** distracted me. I noticed how **clumsily** her **skirt** was hooked at the back and how the **heels** of her cloth **boots were trodden** down all to one side (6). The fancy came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin.

But no. When we rose and went up to the head of the bed I saw that he was not smiling. There he lay, solemn and **copious**, vested as for the **altar**, his large hands loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a **scanty** white fur. There was a heavy odour in the room—the flowers.

We **blessed ourselves** and came away. In the little room downstairs we found Eliza seated in his arm-chair **in state**. I **groped** my way towards my usual chair in the corner while Nannie went to the **sideboard** and brought out a **decanter** of sherry and some wine-glasses. She set these on the table and invited us to take a little glass of wine. Then, **at her sister's bidding**, she filled out the sherry into the glasses and passed them to us.

She pressed me to take some cream crackers also but I declined because I thought I would make too much noise eating them. She seemed to be somewhat disappointed at my refusal and went over quietly to the sofa where she sat down behind her sister. No one spoke: we all gazed at the empty fireplace.

My aunt waited until Eliza **sighed** and then said:

"Ah, well, he's gone to a better world."

Eliza **sighed** again and **bowed her head** in **assent**. My aunt fingered the stem of her wine-glass before **sipping** a little.

"Did he... peacefully?" she asked.

"Oh, quite peacefully, ma'am," said Eliza. "You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be **praised**."

"And everything...?"

"Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and **anointed** him and prepared him and all."

"He knew then?"

"He was quite resigned."

"He looks quite resigned," said my aunt.

"That's what the woman we had in to wash him said. She said he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. No one would think he'd make such a beautiful **corpse**."

"Yes, indeed," said my aunt.

She sipped a little more from her glass and said:

*To sigh : soupirer*

*To bow one's head : baisser la tête*

*Assent : accord*

*To sip : boire à petites gorgées*

*To praise : louer*

*To anoint :*

*donner*

*l'extrême-onction*

*Corpse : cadavre*

To smooth :  
lisser

"Well, Miss Flynn, at any rate it must be a great comfort for you to know that you did all you could for him. You were both very kind to him, I must say."

Eliza smoothed her dress over her knees.

"Ah, poor James!" she said. "God knows we done all we could, as poor as we are—we wouldn't see him want anything while he was in it."

To lean :  
se pencher

Nannie had leaned her head against the sofa-pillow and seemed about to fall asleep.

Worn out :  
épuisé, usé

"There's poor Nannie," said Eliza, looking at her, "she's wore out. All the work we had, she and me, getting in the woman to wash him and then laying him out and then the coffin and then arranging about the Mass in the chapel. Only for Father O'Rourke I don't know what we'd have done at all. It was him brought us all them flowers and them two candlesticks out of the chapel and wrote out the notice for the Freeman's General and took charge of all the papers for the cemetery and poor James's insurance."

"Wasn't that good of him?" said my aunt

Eliza closed her eyes and shook her head slowly.

"Ah, there's no friends like the old friends," she said, "when all is said and done, no friends that a body can trust."

Reward :  
récompense

"Indeed, that's true," said my aunt. "And I'm sure now that he's gone to his eternal reward he won't forget you and all your kindness to him."

"Ah, poor James!" said Eliza. "He was no great trouble to us. You wouldn't hear him in the house any more than now (7). Still, I know he's gone and all to that..."

"It's when it's all over that you'll miss him," said my aunt.

"I know that," said Eliza. "I won't be bringing him in his cup of **beef-tea** any more, nor you, ma'am, sending him his snuff. Ah, poor James!"

She stopped, as if she were communing with the past and then said **shrewdly**:

"Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open."

She laid a finger against her nose and **frowned**: then she continued:

"But still and all he kept on saying that **before the summer was over he'd go out for a drive** (8) one fine day just to see the old house again where we were all born down in Irishtown and take me and Nannie with him. If we could only get one of them **new-fangled carriages** that makes no noise that Father O'Rourke told him about—them with the rheumatic **wheels**—for the day cheap—he said, at Johnny Rush's over the way there and drive out the three of us together of a Sunday evening. He had his mind set on that... Poor James!"

"The Lord **have mercy** on his soul!" said my aunt.

*Beef-tea :*  
bouillon de  
bœuf

*Shrewd :*  
judicieux

*To frown :* froncer  
les sourcils

*New-fangled :*  
ultramoderne  
*Carriage :* voiture  
*Wheel :* roue

*To have mercy :*  
avoir pitié

To wipe : essuyer

To gaze :  
regarder  
fixement

Eliza took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes with it. Then she put it back again in her pocket and gazed into the empty grate for some time without speaking.

"He was too scrupulous always," she said. "The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed."

"Yes," said my aunt. "He was a disappointed man. You could see that."

A silence took possession of the little room and, under cover of it, I approached the table and tasted my sherry and then returned quietly to my chair in the corner. Eliza seemed to have fallen into a deep revery. We waited respectfully for her to break the silence: and after a long pause she said slowly:

"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... They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!"

"And was that it?" said my aunt. "I heard something..."

Eliza nodded.

To mope :  
se morfondre  
To wander : errer

"That affected his mind," she said. "After that he began to mope by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself. So one night he was wanted for (9) to go on a call and they couldn't find him anywhere. They looked high up and low down (10); and still they couldn't see a sight of him anywhere. So then the clerk



suggested to try the chapel. So then they got the keys and opened the chapel and the clerk and Father O'Rourke and another priest that was there brought in a light for to look for him... And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself:"

*To laugh to  
oneself :  
rire tout seul*

She stopped suddenly as if to listen. I too listened; but there was no sound in the house: and I knew that the old priest was lying still in his coffin as we had seen him, solemn and truculent in death, an idle chalice on his breast.

Eliza resumed:

*To resume :  
reprendre,  
conclure*

"Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him...

## Dossier pédagogique

### Summary

A young boy lives with his uncle and aunt and is concerned about the impending death of his friend Father Flynn, an old priest who taught him a lot but has recently had his third stroke. He knows the man is paralyzed and will not live long now. He likes walking past Father Flynn's house, watching for the candles that will signal his death. Each time, the boy thinks of the word *paralysis* and ponders how strange this word sounds. One night at supper time, a friend named Old Cotter visits the family. They talk, sitting before the fire. Old Cotter announces that Father Flynn is dead. The uncle comments positively on the friendship between Father Flynn and his nephew as the priest was a real mentor to the boy. He planned to prepare the boy for the priesthood. Old Cotter insists, however, that a boy should not spend such time with an older man. To him, young lads should play with young lads of their own age. The aunt wonders why anyone could think of Father Flynn so critically and asks Old Cotter to be more clear about what he thinks about but she gets no real answer and the conversation ends.

That night, the boy is angry that Old Cotter treated him as a child and has a difficult time sleeping. He wonders what the old man meant without saying it exactly. Then, as he dreams of Father Flynn smiling he sees his paralyzed face and his lips moving as if the old man wanted to confess something.

The following morning the boy goes to Father Flynn's house and he sees a crape bouquet and a placard announcing Father Flynn's death and the boy realizes the reality of death. Death becomes a reality to him. He will no longer spend

time there, bringing the old priest snuffing and speaking about Latin pronunciation and religion. He knows he should feel sad but he is surprised to find that, rather, he feels free, "a sensation of freedom" as a result of his mentor's death.

That evening the boy visits the house with his aunt. Nannie, one of Father Flynn's two sisters, takes them in to view the body. They kneel at the open coffin and pray. Then, the three of them go to another room to join Eliza, Father Flynn's other sister. They drink sherry and speak together about Father Flynn's death, his career as a priest and the way he died peacefully. Eliza explains that these last days, he had begun to act strangely, a strange attitude that started just after the old priest had dropped and broken a chalice during Mass. The sisters had realized something was wrong with the man when one night, whereas he should have gone out on a call, the man had been found shut in a confessional laughing to himself.

## Analysis

The first three tales in James Joyce's *Dubliners* deals with children. *The Sisters* is the story of a young boy in contact with the death for the first time. But this is also, like all the stories of the collection, about highly influential role of the Catholic Church in the lives of Irish people. To James Joyce, the Church is one major factor of paralysis, affecting not only individuals but the whole country.

The Catholic Church in *The Sisters* is Father Flynn. Though he may appear as a nice and pious man who brought much to the young man, he is also paralyzed and mentally unstable. The reader never learns exactly what was wrong with him. Some scholar argue that his mental illness might be signs of the final

stages of syphilis, which would suggest that what he felt when ending up laughing to himself in a confessional might be of a sexual nature. Similarly, Old Cotter finds that the relationship Father Flynn had with the young boy was unhealthy, even if the narrator explains this relationship was purely spiritual. But this boy himself dreams of the priest as a man who needs to confess something. Obviously, Joyce metaphorically suggests that the Church has become some demented institution with past sin to confess. But he also underlines the major role the Church plays in paralyzing its flock as the sisters are also paralyzed, unable to see the truth, blinded as they are by their devotion.

Like in all his works, what Joyce doesn't say is what matters. For instance, Old Cotter's "unfinished sentences," are what the key to the mystery of this story.

In *The Sisters*, like in the other stories in *Dubliners*, events occur but remain unexplained. The reader never learns exactly what was wrong with Father Flynn not to what extent his relationship with the boy was unhealthy. There are various elements that may suggest that the priest was evil but nothing that can really confirm it. What is sure is that the word "paralysis" is closely associated with the priest, even if the boy is surprised to realize that he feel some freedom after the death of his mentor. The priest's dropping of the chalice and his inability to grasp one in his coffin illustrate how religion can paralyze living humans. Similarly, the sisters underline how the strains of clerical life must have led to his death.

Then, the physical presence of a dead man is pervasive in this story. This is the first time the boy understands what death really means and even sees it "in the flesh". After Father Flynn's death, the boy keeps thinking of his physical appearance, his paralysis, his mouth, his tongue. Similarly, when they drink and speak downstairs with the coffin upstairs, the presence of

the corpse is heavy. The boy cannot eat crackers because he fears eating them could make noise. During the time they are gathered together drinking sherry, the presence of the dead is string in the group of those surviving him.

## Exercices

### Énoncés

**1** Expliquer les passages en gras de la nouvelle (lexique ou grammaire).

- (1) that's what stands to me now
- (2) for fear I might give utterance to my anger
- (3) Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!
- (4) Umbrellas Re-covered
- (5) Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room
- (6) her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side
- (7) You wouldn't hear him in the house any more than now.
- (8) before the summer was over he'd go out for a drive
- (9) he was wanted for to go on a call
- (10) They looked high up and low down.

**2** Vocabulaire : remplir les pointillés des phrases suivantes avec les mots tirés de la nouvelle (conjugués ou non).

To spill - To cram - To mutter - To faint - To smooth - To tread -  
 To doze - To lean - To resume - To sigh - To toil - To sip -  
 To mourn - To praise - To rouse - To frown - To spit - To wander -  
 To nod - To gaze

1. A 77-year-old patient claims he ..... after being left alone in an ambulance car for 20 minutes outside a hospital on a sweltering hot day.
2. Police were searching for the two women, who allegedly punched, bit and ..... on the bus driver, after he asked them to pay their fares.
3. On the other side of the room was a vast bookshelf, every inch of which ..... with books of all sizes.
4. Laughter from the lobby ..... him from the deep thought trance he had been in since the phone call from his wife.
5. I ..... in front of the TV when I lifted one eyelid to see my favorite singer interviewed.
6. Alex was so incensed that he ..... his coffee on the floor and said "Make sure you clean that."
7. South Africans ..... their "Madiba," since his death.
8. He ..... and did what he was told. "Good boy".
9. Young workers who ..... for a socially-conscious company will naturally feel more committed to their work.
10. Jean ..... under her breath. She didn't notice that those words had come out of her mouth.
11. She was exasperated after he ..... on her foot for the third time.

## Exercices

12. She ..... of relief as she finally sat down, a hand on the top of her stomach, growling again, a bit louder.
13. He ..... his coffee. Three milks, two sugars. Letting the liquid linger in his mouth, he savoured its taste.
14. Most ..... his decision to send U.S. troops to aid the United Nations rescue operation.
15. She ..... her white hair with her fingers and dabbed her wrists with oil from the lavender-scented bottle on the bedside table.
16. He ..... against the wall of the ballroom, quietly sipping his drink as he stared out at the mass of people.
17. They ..... when they heard the sound again, but this time it sounded like someone muttering.
18. He ..... at his reflection in the mirror. To his shock and dismay, he was clad only in his underwear.
19. I ..... around for the last week wondering how all this happened.
20. The bombing ..... after a break on Christmas day, focusing on airfields and air-defense capabilities.