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DEATH DEFIED: JAMES JOYCE'S NATURALISTIC EVOLUTION

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Abstract

Death, as a thematic and narrative motif, is of particular import to the Naturalistic literary approach. This is extremely evident in the work of James Joyce, on whom the Naturalist movement had a notable influence. Throughout his career Joyce utilized the subtext surrounding death in the father-son relationship to criticize Irish culture as it appears in his works. However, Joyce was not content to simply recreate a textbook interpretation of Naturalism. Joyce developed the core principles of the Naturalistic approach, starting with a basic and purely Naturalistic approach in his early writing; Joyce eventually managed to subvert and reinterpret the literary style that inspired his career.

In Joyce's earliest short story "The Sisters" (1914) he recounts the death of the defrocked priest Father Flynn from the perspective of a young boy to question the effects of the judgmental and unyielding nature of religion as Flynn is allowed to slip further into ill-health due to being excommunicated from the church. Joyce's work becomes all the more complex in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as he presents the subtleties of Simon and Stephen Dedalus's relationship, and in the process criticizes paternalism as it leads to Simon's failures and spiritual demise. Finally, in *Ulysses* (1922) he makes light of death itself as he presents the humorous and irreverent insight of Stephen's alternative father figure Leopold Bloom as he attends the funeral of Paddy Dignam.

In my paper I will examine death as it appears in these works spanning Joyce's career. In the process, I observe the effect of Joyce's treatment of death and paternalism, and how they, like his writing and interpretation of Naturalism, evolve throughout his career.

The relationship between the works of James Joyce and those of the major naturalist authors has been a concern in Joyce scholarship for years. In "Grist for the Mill: James Joyce and the Naturalists," Phillip Raisor observes

the huge influence Naturalist figures such as Henrik Ibsen had on Joyce, writing that “naturalism was a shaping force in Joyce's art” (459), and more recent scholars such as Sean Latham and Paul Stasi are hard-pressed to consider Joyce's earlier work, such as the short story “Eveline” from *Dubliners*, without noting that the work owes much to the conventions of Naturalism. Latham claims that “Eveline” is “the last gasp of Naturalism” (130), while Stasi claims the work “differentiates itself from the totalizing politics of literary naturalism” (40). Naturalism is a literary movement known for “mechanistic and deterministic principles” derived from “a literary aesthetic that sought to reconcile the aims of art with the all-pervasive authority of the natural sciences” (“naturalism”), and there is little doubt that much of Joyce's work exhibits these qualities. The exact prevalence of these ideas in Joyce's work, and Joyce's relationship to the ideas themselves, however, is a matter of ongoing debate, with scholar Weldon Thornton claiming in *The Antimodernism of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that even as early as his first poetry collection *Chamber Music* Joyce was simply experimenting with styles rather than committing himself to a literary approach (53).

Joyce often uses Naturalistic devices and expectations to criticize and explore paternal relationships featured in his work, while also considering major ideas such as faith and grief. By doing so, Joyce redefines and repurposes Naturalism, using it to address overtly Naturalistic themes such as heredity, with all of its Darwinian baggage concerning inherited rather than chosen traits, but also uses it to address less material concerns. He explores these themes in a relatively straightforward manner in his earlier works such as “The Sisters” (1914) and *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* (1916), but in *Ulysses* (1922) Joyce subverts Naturalism, turning its devices towards a less deterministic and more hopeful goal.

Joyce begins his collection of short stories titled *Dubliners* with “The Sisters.” This story is simple enough at a glance. It follows the thoughts of a young man who learns that an older friend and mentor of his, a defrocked priest, has passed away. However, the details given concerning the death of the young man's friend, named Father Flynn, serve as an accusation of conservative Irish Catholicism. While Joyce is purposely vague concerning the cause of Flynn's death, in “Structure and Meaning in Joyce's 'The Sisters,’” Phillip Herring observes “that Father Flynn suffered from paralysis, otherwise known as syphilis of the central nervous system, and that Joyce took care to describe numerous symptoms of this disease while calling it simply, though ambiguously, paralysis” (39). This story is a prime example of Joyce's Naturalistic tendencies as the boy's thoughts and fears present Flynn's ostra-

cization by the church as the cause of his descent into madness and death, and as the priest's madness itself seems to stem from a sense of isolation from God, a feeling founded on the fact that the church chose to isolate him in his time of doubt and weakness, rather than care for him.

The nature of the boy's relationship with the late priest is established early in the story where Joyce writes, "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" ("The Sisters" 20). Here Joyce begins to inform the reader of the paternal relationship between the boy and Father Flynn as he clearly implies that Father Flynn mentored the boy. This is only solidified when he remembers his visits with the old man thinking, "His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church" (23).

The reader learns about Flynn's excommunication from the church through the dialogue of characters such as Eliza when she comments that "[h]e was too scrupulous always" and "[t]he duties of the priesthood [were] too much for him (27). Here, Joyce comments on the effects of the priesthood as he hints at the social pressures that led to his ostracism and ultimately his death. Raised Catholic, Joyce himself was acutely aware of the effects of the high-pressure nature of the church. It is clear that Joyce considers the church's decision to excommunicate Flynn from its ranks as a contributing factor in Flynn's deteriorating health and ultimate demise as the church refused to accept him, either due to the outright claim of his breaking the chalice (28), or the more subtly implied shame of his illness. This implication against the church is distinctly Naturalistic, and even Deterministic in its undertones. Flynn's fate is determined by the society that produced him, and the confining and demanding nature of that society traps Flynn, turning his excommunication and death into a link in a chain of cause and effect.

The boy's dream offers the audience the clearest insight into the damage done to Flynn. This is reflected primarily in a passage where Joyce describes the young protagonist's dream, writing, "I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic . . . the grey face . . . followed me, It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something" (21). This passage reveals Father Flynn's spiritual isolation; however, it is also significant in its effects on the boy's relationship to Father Flynn, turning Flynn into a nightmare as the boy feels he "too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin" (21). This dream sequence removes the divide between the boy and his father figure, almost leaving the boy sharing in the guilt and doubt he never fully understands as they are both smiling and seeking for-

givenness for the old priest's sins; however, the power of forgiveness lies in the hands of the society that condemned Flynn rather than in the boy.

Following *Dubliners*, Joyce published the semi-autobiographical *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, which follows Stephen Dedalus's youth and education. Near the end of Chapter Five of *A Portrait*, Stephen's schoolmate Temple claims to "know all the history of [Stephen's] family" and asks him if he "[believes] in the law of heredity." Temple then goes on, saying that the law of heredity states, "Reproduction is the beginning of death" and claims that this passage is taken from "the end of the zoology" (500-501). Here, Temple is applying overtly scientific ideas to his discussion about Stephen's family. He is judging Stephen according to "the law of heredity" and attempting to leave Stephen trapped, using this to ridicule the idea of Stephen being "Ireland's Hope" (501). When Temple makes this claim, he asks Stephen if the statement affected him so notably because he is a poet (501). Thus, Joyce brings attention to Stephen's reaction to the question without directly commenting on his reaction. Joyce uses this scene to bring to light an issue that drives Stephen's character throughout *A Portrait*, as well as throughout his appearances in Joyce's later work *Ulysses*: Stephen's fear that his heritage will somehow limit his growth as a poet. This fear is most clearly dramatized through his relationship with his father Simon.

Through passages such as Temple's remark on the law of heredity, Joyce leads his readers to look at Stephen's relationship with his father through the lens of a biologically determined Naturalistic hereditary cycle. Temple draws these ideas from a zoological textbook, ideas that view individuals simply as the end results of natural selection, trapped in a cycle of death and reproduction. Despite the bleak realism of this view, the death Stephen fears is more than literal; rather, this is a hint of Stephen's viewing his father as a representation of death and Stephen's fear of ultimately growing to share in this death. In *The Ordeal of Stephen Dedalus: The Conflict of the Generations*, Edmund L. Epstein observes that Stephen resents his father and feels that as his son he is an inhabitant of a "house of decay" (10). The decay of the house of Dedalus is well documented in *A Portrait*, and is represented by Simon's failure to maintain the family's lifestyle. This is documented in *A Portrait* when Stephen accompanies his father to Cork, his father's childhood home, for the auctioning off of his father's possessions. This portion of the novel surrounds Simon's character with a sentiment of death, placing great emphasis on Simon's boyhood friends who have passed away. The thematic pairing of the auction with death occurs early in the section where Joyce writes that Stephen:

[L]istened without sympathy to his father's evocation of Cork and of scenes of his youth, a tale broken by sighs or draughts from his pocketflask whenever the image of some dead friend appeared in it or whenever the evoker remembered suddenly the purpose of his actual visit. (336)

This pairing of death with the auction helps imply the relationship between the auction and Simon's own death as a father. Stephen's unsympathetic feelings for his father, which are revealed throughout the visit to Cork as he grows annoyed with his father's reminiscing, reveal his awareness of his father's emasculation and spiritual death as he now simply remembers the great events of his life, rather than hoping to have any more. Furthermore, the auction itself references death, as all of Simon's worldly possessions are being sold off as though he were literally dead.

Simon Dedalus's thematic association with death is elaborated on during the visit to the Queen's College. While at the college, Simon takes Stephen to the anatomy room to find where his initials are carved into a desk; a marker from Simon's past life (339). In this scene, the location being visited is as important as Stephen's reaction to the visit. The fact that Stephen finds the most tangible vestige of Simon's youth in an anatomy room strengthens his association with death as his initials and youth are laid out like a cadaver for observation. The trip to Cork functions as a funeral complete with a eulogy and reading of the will as Simon gives up his worldly belongings at auction and his boyhood days are remembered.

This episode also indicates Stephen's fear of inheriting his father's death when he finds the word "foetus" carved on a desk, rather than his father's initials. This image burns into his mind and helps Stephen to understand his father's youth, bringing to life what "his father's words had been powerless to evoke" (339). This word brings to Stephen's mind the relationship between his own youthful escapades and his father's, "shock[ing] him to find in the outer world a trace of what he had deemed till then a brutish and individual malady of his own mind" (340). This experience impacts Stephen as he sees himself in his father and is forced to address that he is aging along the same path his father once walked. Rather than being a unique individual with his own array of sins, he becomes a product and inheritor of his father's original sin.

The association between Simon Dedalus and the concept of death is only expanded upon in *Ulysses* and is particularly relevant to the "Proteus" episode of the novel. Near the end of the episode, Joyce includes the most ob-

vious association of Stephen's father with death. As Stephen contemplates a corpse being dragged out from the sea, he thinks to himself a phrase from Ariel's song in *The Tempest* that runs: “[f]ull fathom five thy father lies” (Ulysses 50). Here, Stephen is directly connecting the thought of his father with a corpse. Stephen's fear of becoming his father is also documented in this section. Early in “Proteus” as Stephen is walking, he thinks to himself, “I was . . . made not begotten. By them, the man with my voice and my eyes and a ghostwoman with ashes on her breath” (38). In this section, Stephen's apprehensions about his father become clear, as Declan Kiberd notes in *Ulysses and Us*, “Stephen would like to free himself of those eyes which expect so much yet offer so little” (68). In this section, Stephen also attempts an act of “self-invention” by claiming to be made, not begotten.

Stephen's relationship with his father illustrates Temple's claim that “reproduction is the beginning of death.” Stephen fears his similarities to his father because they inspire in him the thought that he will grow to become his father, spiritually dead and unable to fulfill his role as patriarch. This fear exists in Stephen on two levels, as is noted in Epstein's *The Ordeal of Stephen Dedalus*: “he...may never become capable of becoming a “true” father, either in the flesh...or in the spirit, in which case he will never be a creator” (10). In Stephen's eyes as an artist, the ability to create is paramount to life; therefore, Stephen sees his father as a form of death. Stephen's greatest fear is the inexorable determinism indicative of Naturalism, as he fears he will be trapped by his heritage and his father's spiritual death.

Ulysses does not leave Stephen with only Simon to look towards as a father, however. It breaks the mold of Joyce's earlier works as he offers an alternative father, an everyman whose aloof, if unaware, acceptance of the absurdity of death seems to offer a chance for life. Leopold Bloom exists as the exception that proves the rule in Joyce's literature, undermining death and the pattern of failed father figures. Bloom becomes a new father to Stephen in the “Circe” chapter of *Ulysses*, as Declan Kiberd notes in *Ulysses and Us*, comparing Bloom to a “step-father” (237). Bloom undermines death itself in the “Hades” chapter of the novel as he empirically observes the funeral rites of his country, but does not allow them to hold dominion over his life. Like Odysseus that his story alludes to, Bloom will survive his descent into the underworld and emerge triumphant into the living present through the past.

The reader explores the mind of Leopold Bloom as he attends fellow Dubliner Paddy Dignam's funeral. During the funeral Bloom considers the other mourners, with Joyce writing:

Mr. Kernan said with solemnity: *I am the resurrection and the life*. That touches a man's inmost heart – It does, Mr. Bloom said. Your heart perhaps but what price the fellow in the six feet by two with his toes to the daisies? No touching that. (105)

This section is fascinating in regards to Bloom's insight into the funeral proceedings. Joyce presents this event in a Naturalistic manner through Bloom's thoughts, which are extremely rational and presented in contrast to the “pomp of death” (100) displayed by his fellows at the funeral proceedings. This chapter uses both Naturalistic and Absurdist devices with Bloom's strikingly Naturalistic view of Dignam's death creating a humorous contrast with the ceremonious dialogue taking place in the scene. Here, Joyce uses Naturalism against itself, undermining the power of death and the impact of Naturalism as a writing style as he observes the absurdity of the human tendency to overstate the significance and meaning of death, specifically attacking sentimentality.

Joyce wastes no time in establishing an absurd tone for “Hades” through his presentation of the theatrics of the funeral. Even as Bloom sits in the carriage intended to take the mourners through Dublin, he is considering the soap in his pocket and when to shift to avoid sitting on it (87). The lack of concern for the funeral itself is maintained throughout the early portion of the episode, with the other mourners making small talk and Bloom musing on many trivial things such as whether or not he could go to the theatre that night (92). The mourners only begin to behave after Martin Cunningham brings it to the groups attention that they had “better look a little serious” after the group had been laughing at a joke (95). The superficiality of the mourners is most clearly seen through Bloom as Joyce gives his audience a direct account of Bloom's thoughts. An example of this can be seen when Mr. Kernan makes his claim about “*the resurrection and the life*” touching a man's heart and Bloom agrees out loud, but quickly ridicules the sentiment in his thoughts (105).

In *Ulysses and Us*, Kiberd writes that Bloom's reaction to the funeral is “composed, because it is both playful and commonsensical” (102). This quality quickly becomes apparent as the mourners begin to discuss Paddy Dignam's death. Joyce wastes no time on breaking down their sentimental tone. As Martin Cunningham sadly observes that Dignam died of heart problems, Bloom's thoughts immediately break in as Joyce writes, “Blazing face: redhot. Too much John Barleycorn. Cure for a red nose. Drink like the devil till it turns adelite. A lot of money he spent colouring it” (95). Bloom's consideration of Dignam's death is very Naturalistic in that it simply breaks down

the cause of Dignam's heart condition. It is interestingly juxtaposed against Cunningham's sentimental thoughts concerning Dignam's death: Cunningham's seemingly heartfelt concern makes Bloom's thoughts seem simplistic and cold, while Bloom's thoughts make the behavior of Cunningham and the mourners seem ludicrously sentimental. Bloom's frank and unsentimental take on the funeral continues when he considers the fate of Dignam's family, wondering about the state of the family's insurance policy and the future of the children (99).

Many scholars have contemplated the role of genre in *Ulysses*. Daniel Schwarz observes an intentional manipulation of genre in the work which creates an effect similar to God writing his own exegeses (13), and both Weldon Thornton and Brian Caraher have attempted to establish an inherent genre or style in *Ulysses* that Joyce deviates from. Unsurprisingly, they both point towards the early episodes of the novel as representative of a normative style (Thornton 32 ; Caraher 188). The "Hades" episode is one of the first signs of Joyce's generic manipulation as he uses Bloom as a window into Naturalism, allowing himself to tell the narrative outside of the literary confines of the genre, while still being able to use Naturalism's no-nonsense understanding of the world to attack the sentimentality of the funeral. Furthermore, it is revealed that Bloom is innately interested in life as he focuses on his plans for after the funeral and the fate of Dignam's bereaved family rather than the death itself. While Bloom's internal monologue supplies a distinctly Naturalistic tone to the scene, he himself is not limited to it. This is revealed in his association with life, as well as his plans to go to the theatre, which functions as a complete escape from Naturalism's unrelenting realism.

In the "Circe" episode, Bloom fulfills his promise of life revealed through his skepticism in "Hades." At the end of this episode, Bloom assumes his role as surrogate father to Stephen when he finds him knocked out by a British army officer. When Bloom finds Stephen, he comforts him and attempts to clean him up, playing the part of the caretaker or protector. While Bloom does this, he sees a vision of Rudy, his son who died at a young age (595). Daniel Schwarz considers this scene at length in *Reading Joyce's Ulysses* where he discusses the role of the Yeats poem "Who Goes with Ferguson" in the scene. Schwarz observes that Bloom misunderstands Stephen as he mutters the poem after his run-in with the law, mistaking the name of the ancient king for that of a woman and saying that a girl is the best that could happen to him. Schwarz argues that this represents Bloom denying the escapism and Romance of Yeats' poem and focusing on the flesh and blood realities of life (224-5). However, Bloom is still responding to a vision; therefore,

this scene creates an interestingly balanced message, offsetting Bloom's more realistic tendencies with the figurative. By this scene, Bloom has ceased to be the window into Naturalism he was in the "Hades" episode, as he has an other-worldly vision of his dead son and takes a fatherly role towards Stephen, moving into a distinctly figurative role in the novel. By first turning Naturalism into a comedic device in "Hades" and undermining the deterministic rule of death in the very land of the dead, and then assuming this symbolic and nearly prophetic role, Bloom becomes a symbol for life, a life found in the balance between Naturalist and Romantic tendencies. This scene becomes one hope for both characters as Bloom finds a living son in Stephen and Stephen finds a living father in Bloom.

When one observes Joyce's work from throughout his life, a growth in his critical attitudes becomes apparent. Joyce's earlier writings, while subtle in their devices, such as the ambiguity of Father Flynn's illness in "The Sisters" were, in general, straightforwardly Naturalistic, especially in comparison to more mature works such as *Ulysses*. For example, it is clear that the social circles of Father Flynn would contribute to his death, considering the amount of stress and pressure they place on him. As Joyce grew as a writer, his work became more complex. His use of Naturalism took a more symbolic turn as he explored Stephen Dedalus's fears of becoming his father. Joyce's growth as a writer is clearest in *Ulysses*, as Bloom's funeral commentary serves as both observation of the overly-empirical devices of Naturalism and the absurdities of human treatment of death. In observing Joyce's development from "The Sisters" to *Ulysses*, one can see Joyce's search for self and life as he moves away from his "artistic fathers" such as Henrik Ibsen and creates his own literary form, one with room for stark realism as well as nuanced symbolism.

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