

"A Painful Case"

Summary

A predictable, unadventurous bank cashier, Mr. Duffy lives an existence of prudence and organization. He keeps a tidy house, eats at the same restaurants, and makes the same daily commute. Occasionally, Mr. Duffy allows himself an evening out at the opera or a concert, and on one of these evenings he engages in a conversation with another audience member, Mrs. Sinico, a striking woman who sits with her young daughter. Subsequent encounters ensue at other concerts, and on the third occasion Mr. Duffy sets up a time and day to meet purposely with her. Because Mrs. Sinico is married and her husband, a captain of a merchant ship, is constantly away from home, Mr. Duffy feels slightly uncomfortable with the clandestine nature of the relationship. Nevertheless, they continue to meet, always at her home.

Their discussions revolve around their similar intellectual interests, including books, political theories, and music, and with each meeting they draw more closely together. Such sharing gradually softens Mr. Duffy's hard character. However, during one of their meetings, Mrs. Sinico takes Mr. Duffy's hand and places it on her cheek, which deeply bothers Mr. Duffy. He feels Mrs. Sinico has misinterpreted his acts of companionship as sexual advances. In response, he cuts off the relationship, first by stopping his visits and then by arranging a final meeting at a cake shop in Dublin, deliberately not at Mrs. Sinico's home. They agree to end the relationship, but Mrs. Sinico's emotional presence at this meeting suggests she is less willing to say goodbye than is Mr. Duffy.

Four years pass. One evening, during his usual dinner in town, Mr. Duffy reads a newspaper article that surprises him enough to halt his eating and hurry home. There, he reads the article, entitled "A Painful Case," once more. The article recounts the death of Mrs. Sinico, who was hit by a train at a station in Dublin the previous evening. Witness accounts and the coroner's inquest deem that the death was caused by shock or heart failure, and not injuries from the train itself. The article also explains that Mrs. Sinico was a drinker and had become increasingly detached from her husband over the past two years. The article concludes with the statement that no one is responsible for her death.

The news of Mrs. Sinico's death at first angers but later saddens Mr. Duffy. Perhaps suspecting suicide or weakness in character, he feels disgusted by her death and by his connection to her life. Disturbed, he leaves his home to visit a local pub, where he drinks and remembers his relationship with her. His anger begins to subside, and by the time he leaves to walk home, he feels deep remorse, mainly for ending the relationship and losing the potential for companionship it offered. Upon seeing a pair of lovers in the park by his home, Mr. Duffy realizes that he gave up the only love he'd experienced in life. He feels utterly alone.

Analysis

Because Mr. Duffy cannot tolerate unpredictability, his relationship with Mrs. Sinico is a disruption to his orderly life that he knows he must eliminate, but which he ultimately fails to control. Mrs. Sinico awakens welcome new emotions in Mr. Duffy, but when she makes an intimate gesture he reacts with surprise and rigidity. Though all along he spoke of the impossibility of sharing one's self and the inevitability of loneliness, Mrs. Sinico's gesture suggests that another truth exists, and this truth frightens Mr. Duffy. Accepting Mrs. Sinico's offered truth, which opens the possibility for love and deep feeling, would mean changing his life entirely, which Mr. Duffy cannot do. He resumes his solitary life with some relief. When Mr. Duffy reads of Mrs. Sinico's death four years later, he reacts with shock and disgust, as he did when Mrs. Sinico touched his hand. Mrs. Sinico's dramatic demise (morte) points to a depth of feeling she possessed that Mr. Duffy will never understand or share, and it provides Mr. Duffy with an epiphany as he walks home. He realizes that his concern with order and

rectitude shut her out of his life, and that this concern excludes him from living fully. Like other characters in *Dubliners* who experience epiphanies, Mr. Duffy is not inspired to begin a new phase in his life, but instead he bitterly accepts his loneliness.

"A Painful Case" concludes where it begins, with Mr. Duffy alone. This narrative circle mimics the many routines that comprise Mr. Duffy's life and deny him true companionship. The story opens with a detailed depiction of Mr. Duffy's unadorned home in a neighbourhood he chose for its distance from the hustle and bustle (confusione) of Dublin. Colours are limited and walls are bare (spogli) in Mr. Duffy's house, and disorder, spontaneity, and passion are unwelcome. As such, Mr. Duffy's house serves as a microcosm of his soul. His regulatory impulses make each day the same as the next. Such deadening repetitiveness ultimately brings Mr. Duffy death in life: the death of someone who once stirred his longings to be with others. In life, Mrs. Sinico invigorated Mr. Duffy's routine and, through her intimacy, came close to warming his cold heart. Only in death, however, does she succeed in revealing his cycle of solitude to him. The tragedy of this story is threefold. First, Mr. Duffy must face a dramatic death before he can rethink his lifestyle and outlook. Second, acknowledging the problems in his lifestyle makes him realize his culpability: Mrs. Sinico died of a broken heart that he caused. Third, and perhaps most tragic, Mr. Duffy will not change the life he has created for himself. He is paralyzed, despite his revelations and his guilt.

Joyce's choice of symbolic names in "A Painful Case" articulates the story's sombre subject of thwarted love (un amore ostacolato) and loneliness. Duffy derives from the Irish word for dark, suggesting the grim, solemn mood in which the story unfolds and Mr. Duffy lives. The suburb in which Mr. Duffy resides, Chapelizod, takes its name from the French, Chapel d'Iseult. Iseult is half of the famed set of lovers, Tristan and Iseult, whose doomed affair ranks as one of the most iconic love stories in literature and music. This name's appearance in the story as Mr. Duffy's home neighbourhood, which he purposely chose in order to distance himself from Dublin's hustle and bustle and which is the starting point for his daily routine, connects the unrequited love and death of Mrs. Sinico with Mr. Duffy's restrained existence.

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