

Dubliners

Key Facts

FULL TITLE · *Dubliners*

AUTHOR · James Joyce

TYPE OF WORK · Collection of short stories

GENRE · Realist fiction; urban literature

LANGUAGE · English (with some Irish and Hiberno-English sayings)

TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN · Early 19 00s, Ireland and Italy

DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION · 19 14

PUBLISHER · Grant Richards

NARRATOR · The first three stories are narrated by the main character of each story, which in all three cases is a young, unnamed boy. The rest of the stories are narrated by an anonymous third person who pays close attention to circumstantial detail though in a detached manner.

POINT OF VIEW · The first three stories, told from the first person, focus on the thoughts and observations of the narrators. In the stories told from the third person, the narrators detail objective information and present characters as they would appear to an outsider, but also present thoughts and actions from the protagonists' points of view, giving the reader a sense of what the characters are feeling.

TONE · Though told mainly by an anonymous narrator, the stories of *Dubliners* form a self-conscious examination of Joyce's native city in Ireland. Because the narrator maintains a neutral and distant presence, detecting Joyce's attitude toward his characters is not always easy. The abundance of details about the grim realities of the city and the focus on hardships, however, create a tragic tone and offer a subtle critique.

TENSE · Past tense

SETTING (TIME) · Early 19 00s

SETTING (PLACE) · Dublin

MAJOR CONFLICT · Various figures struggle with the challenges of complicated relationships and life in Dublin.

THEMES · The prison of routine; the desire for escape; the intersection of life and death

MOTIFS · Paralysis; epiphany; betrayal; religion

SYMBOLS · Windows; dusk and nighttime; food

FORESHADOWING · The death of Father Flynn in “The Sisters” announces the focus on death in later stories like “The Dead”; story titles hint at events in the stories

THEMES

The Prison of Routine

Restrictive routines and the repetitive, mundane details of everyday life mark the lives of Joyce's *Dubliners* and trap them in circles of frustration, restraint, and violence. Routine affects characters who face difficult predicaments, but it also affects characters who have little open conflict in their lives. The young boy of “An Encounter” yearns for a respite from the rather innocent routine of school, only to find himself sitting in a field listening to a man recycle disturbing thoughts. In “Counterparts,” Farrington, who makes a living copying documents, demonstrates the dangerous potential of repetition. Farrington's work mirrors his social and home life, causing his anger—and abusive behaviour—to worsen. Farrington, with his explosive physical reactions, illustrates more than any other character the brutal ramifications of a repetitive existence.

The most consistent consequences of following mundane routines are loneliness and unrequited love.

In “**Araby**,” a young boy wants to go to the bazaar to buy a gift for the girl he loves, but he is late because his uncle becomes mired in the routine of his workday. In “**A Painful Case**” Mr. Duffy's

obsession with his predictable life costs him a golden chance at love. **Eveline**, in the story that shares her name, gives up her chance at love by choosing her familiar life over an unknown adventure, even though her familiar routines are tinged with sadness and abuse. The circularity of these Dubliners' lives effectively traps them, preventing them from being receptive to new experiences and happiness.

The Desire for Escape

The characters in *Dubliners* may be citizens of the Irish capital, but many of them long for escape and adventure in other countries. Such longings, however, are never actually realized by the stories' protagonists. The schoolboy yearning for escape and Wild West excitement in "An Encounter" is relegated to the imagination and to the confines of Dublin, while Eveline's hopes for a new life in Argentina dissolve on the docks of the city's river. Little Chandler enviously fantasizes about the London press job of his old friend and his travels to liberal cities like Paris, but the shame he feels about such desires stops him from taking action to pursue similar goals. More often than offering a literal escape from a physical place, the stories tell of opportunities to escape from smaller, more personal restraints. Eveline, for example, seeks release from domestic duties through marriage. In "Two Gallants," Lenahan wishes to escape his life of schemes, but he cannot take action to do so. Mr. Doran wishes to escape marrying Polly in "A Boarding House," but he knows he must relent. **The impulse to escape from unhappy situations defines Joyce's Dubliners, as does the inability to actually undertake the process.**

The Intersection of Life and Death

Dubliners opens with "The Sisters," which explores death and the process of remembering the dead, and closes with "The Dead," which invokes the quiet calm of snow that covers both the dead and the living. These stories bookend the collection and emphasize its consistent focus on the meeting point between life and death. Encounters between the newly dead and the living, such as in "The Sisters" and "A Painful Case," explicitly explore this meeting point, showing what kind of aftershocks a death can have for the living. Mr. Duffy, for example, re-evaluates his life after learning about Mrs. Sinico's death in "A Painful Case," while the narrator of "The Sisters" doesn't know what to feel upon the death of the priest. In other stories, including "Eveline," "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," and "The Dead," memories of the dead haunt the living and colour every action. In "Ivy Day," for example, Parnell hovers in the political talk.

The dead cast a shadow on the present, drawing attention to the mistakes and failures that people make generation after generation. Such overlap underscores Joyce's interest in life cycles and their repetition, and also his concern about those "living dead" figures like Maria in "Clay" who move through life with little excitement or emotion except in reaction to everyday snags and delays. **The monotony of Dublin life leads Dubliners to live in a suspended state between life and death, in which each person has a pulse but is incapable of profound, life-sustaining action.**

Motifs

Paralysis

In most of the stories in *Dubliners*, a character has a desire, faces obstacles to it, then ultimately relents and suddenly stops all action. These moments of paralysis show the characters' inability to change their lives and reverse the routines that hamper their wishes. Such immobility fixes the Dubliners in cycles of experience. The young boy in "Araby" halts in the middle of the dark bazaar, knowing that he will never escape the tedious delays of Dublin and attain love. Eveline freezes like an animal, fearing the possible new experience of life away from home. These moments evoke the theme of death in life as they show characters in a state of inaction and numbness. The opening story introduces this motif through the character of Father Flynn, whose literal paralysis traps him in a state suspended between

life and death. Throughout the collection, this stifling state appears as part of daily life in Dublin, which all Dubliners ultimately acknowledge and accept.

Epiphany

Characters in *Dubliners* experience both great and small revelations in their everyday lives, moments that Joyce himself referred to as "epiphanies," a word with connotations of religious revelation. These epiphanies do not bring new experiences and the possibility of reform, as one might expect such moments to. Rather, these epiphanies allow characters to better understand their particular circumstances, usually rife with sadness and routine, which they then return to with resignation and frustration. Sometimes epiphanies occur only on the narrative level, serving as signposts to the reader that a story's character has missed a moment of self-reflection. For example, in "Clay," during the Halloween game when Maria touches the clay, which signifies an early death, she thinks nothing of it, overlooking a moment that could have revealed something about herself or the people around her. "Araby," "Eveline," "A Little Cloud," "A Painful Case," and "The Dead" all conclude with epiphanies that the characters fully register, yet these epiphanies are tinged with frustration, sadness, and regret. At the end of "The Dead," Gabriel's revelation clarifies the connection between the dead and the living, an epiphany that resonates throughout *Dubliners* as a whole. The epiphany motif highlights the repeated routine of hope and passive acceptance that marks each of these portraits, as well as the general human condition.

Betrayal

Deception, deceit, and treachery scar nearly every relationship in the stories in *Dubliners*, demonstrating the unease with which people attempt to connect with each other, both platonically and romantically. In "The Boarding House," Mrs. Mooney traps Mr. Doran into marrying her daughter Polly, and Mr. Doran dreads the union but will meet his obligation to pursue it. In "Two Gallants," Lenehan and Corley both suspect each other of cheating and scheming, though they join forces to swindle innocent housemaids out of their livelihoods. Concerns about betrayal frame the conversations in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," particularly as Parnell's supporters see his demise as the result of pro-British treachery. Until his affair was exposed, Parnell had been a popular and influential politician, and many Irish believe the British were responsible for his downfall. All of the men in "Ivy Day" display wavering beliefs that suggest betrayal looms in Ireland's political present. In "The Dead," Gabriel feels betrayed by his wife's emotional outpouring for a former lover. This feeling evokes not only the sense of displacement and humiliation that all of these Dubliners fear but also the tendency for people to categorize many acts as "betrayal" in order to shift blame from themselves onto others.

Religion

References to priests, religious belief, and spiritual experience appear throughout the stories in *Dubliners* and ultimately paint an unflattering portrait of religion. In the first story, "The Sisters," Father Flynn cannot keep a strong grip on the chalice and goes mad in a confessional box. This story marks religion's first appearance as a haunting but incompetent and dangerous component of Dublin life. The strange man of "An Encounter" wears the same clothing as Father Flynn, connecting his lascivious behaviour, however remotely, to the Catholic Church. In "Grace," Father Purdon shares his name with Dublin's red-light district, one of many subtle ironies in that story. In "Grace," Tom Kernan's fall and absent redemption highlight the pretension and inefficacy of religion—religion is just another daily ritual of repetition that advances no one. In other stories, such as "Araby," religion acts as a metaphor for dedication that dwindles. The presence of so many religious references also suggests that religion traps Dubliners into thinking about their lives after death.

Symbols

Windows

Windows in *Dubliners* consistently evoke the anticipation of events or encounters that are about to happen. For example, the narrator in "The Sisters" looks into a window each night, waiting for signs of Father Flynn's death, and the narrator in "Araby" watches from his parlour window for the appearance of Mangan's sister. The suspense for these young boys centres in that space separating the interior life from the exterior life. Windows also mark the threshold between domestic space and the outside world, and through them the characters in *Dubliners* observe their own lives as well as the lives of others. Both Eveline and Gabriel turn to windows when they reflect on their own situations, both of which centre on the relationship between the individual and the individual's place in a larger context.

Dusk and Nighttime

Joyce's Dublin is perpetually dark. No streams of sunlight or cheery landscapes illuminate these stories. Instead, a spectrum of grey and black underscores their sombre tone. Characters walk through Dublin at dusk, an in-between time that hovers between the activity of day and the stillness of night, and live their most profound moments in the darkness of late hours. These dark backdrops evoke the half-life or in-between state the characters in *Dubliners* occupy, both physically and emotionally, suggesting the intermingling of life and death that marks every story. In this state, life can exist and proceed, but the darkness renders Dubliners' experiences dire and doomed.

Food

Nearly all of the characters in *Dubliners* eat or drink, and in most cases food serves as a reminder of both the threatening dullness of routine and the joys and difficulties of togetherness. In "A Painful Case," Mr. Duffy's solitary, duplicated meals are finally interrupted by the shocking newspaper article that reports Mrs. Sinico's death. This interruption makes him realize that his habits isolate him from the love and happiness of "life's feast." The party meal in "The Dead" might evoke conviviality, but the rigid order of the rich table instead suggests military battle. In "Two Gallants," Lenehan's quiet meal of peas and ginger beer allows him to dwell on his self-absorbed life, so lacking in meaningful relationships and security, while the constant imbibing in "After the Race" fuels Jimmy's attempts to convince himself he belongs with his upper-class companions. Food in *Dubliners* allows Joyce to portray his characters and their experiences through a substance that both sustains life yet also symbolizes its restraints.