

## The Concept of Death in Joyce's *Dubliners*

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### Abstract

The concept of 'death' has been a common point in many disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and literature. James Joyce has applied this theme intensively in many stories of *Dubliners*. The stories also have common themes such as death, routine lifecycle, moral and material paralysis of some characters. The intensive application of aforementioned themes makes it necessary to evaluate *Dubliners* from this perspective. This study is prepared to meet such a need.

**Key Words:** Death, routine, paralysis.

### *Dubliners*'ta Ölüm Kavramı

#### Özet

Ölüm kavramı felsefe ve sosyoloji bilim dallarının yanı sıra edebiyatın da tartışma konusu olmuştur. James Joyce ölüm temasını on beş kısa hikâyeden oluşan *Dubliners* adlı yapıtında oldukça yoğun bir şekilde kullanmıştır. Bu hikâyeler ölümün yanı sıra, ölümle özdeşleştirilmiş rutin hayat tarzı ve maddi-manevi paralize olan karakterleri de ele almaktadır. Adı geçen temaların birçok hikâyede kullanılmış olması, *Dubliners*'ı bu açıdan değerlendirmenin gerekliliği düşüncesini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu çalışma bu ihtiyacı karşılamak üzere hazırlanmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Ölüm, rutin, paralize.

### Introduction

The concept of 'death' has been a matter of debate in many different disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology and literature. Death is a common experience of all human beings and it has a substantial effect on formation of cultures and literature. James Joyce has manipulated this concept intensively in *Dubliners*. *Dubliners* consists of fifteen short stories. These stories have common themes such as death, routine lifecycle, moral and material paralysis of some characters. Although the stories are about different events and characters, the commonality of aforementioned themes causes coherence in *Dubliners* in the sense of style. This unity provides a fluency in reading of the stories.

In *Dubliners* many stories are related to death in one way or another. Joyce applies death as a functional theme in his stories. Some stories are principally composed around the subject of death, whereas some of them are strongly affected of the same subject. The general ambience of *Dubliners* is gloomy. The weather is mostly dusky and it causes pessimism in the characters and the reader as well. Joyce's intense concentration on the concept of death makes it necessary to work on this notion. Not all of the stories but the ones that come into prominence

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influentially in respect of the concept of death will be studied in this study. The stories related to death have strong messages and effect on the readers.

The first story of *Dubliners* is “The Sisters” and the story starts with the death of the priest, Father Flynn. In this story ‘death’ functions as an access to the story. The narrator of this chapter is a young, unnamed boy who is also a main character of the story. There used to be a strange relationship between the priest and the boy and it is evident that the boy is disturbed of the priest’s manners. There is a kind of anxiety in his behaviours. The death unveils the relation between the priest and the boy. The priest’s intention is to make the boy a priest without paying attention to boy’s consent. In this respect it can be suggested that the boy is waiting for the death of the priest impatiently. When Flynn dies, the adults are looking forward to see the boy’s disappointed reaction. However; the boy stands still as if nothing has happened. On the contrary priest’s death causes a sense of relief in the conducts of the boy. This incident is the boy’s first experience with death. He seems confused about the feeling he is supposed to have after priest’s death. But the most certain thing about his feelings is that he is not upset.

As stated above ‘paralysis’ is a theme which is used both morally and materially by Joyce in many parts of *Dubliners*. In “The Sisters” it is used in both ways. Father Flynn becomes paralyzed before his death. In addition to paralysis, his strange behaviours indicate that he becomes mentally retarded. In this regard, unlike the morally paralyzed characters, his death is an escape from the life which gradually becomes a burden for him. As he dies he becomes free from physical paralysis, however; some of the other characters remain paralyzed morally. Although he is dead his effect on the living does not come to an end. As Connolly (1965) suggests Father Flynn becomes an example of paralysis to which society continues to pay respect. His dead body becomes a silent character which plays a role in the story. The crying sisters of Flynn become paralyzed in front of dead body. They do not move, eat, drink or speak. They just sit and cry for Flynn. When the boy is offered some crackers, he refuses to eat them for fear of making noise to awaken the dead body (Joyce, 2011, s.7). The dead old man’s intervention and interruption on living ones is not finished yet. Flynn is still a source of fear in the heart of the boy and a cause of sorrow in the hearts of his sisters.

The first story of *Dubliners* functions as a key to other stories. ‘The Sisters’ is utterly formed around the theme of death. This indicates that the same theme will often be applied in the following stories. Not only death, but also the paralyzed characters, the life of Dublin are some of the common subjects dealt with in the first story.

One of the stories in which the death person’s haunting the living can be observed clearly is the ‘Eveline’. Eveline is the name of the main character that used to have a happy childhood when her mother was alive. After her mother dies she assumes full responsibility of

the family. The death of her mother changes her life profoundly. Life becomes a heavy burden for her. She has two options; staying at home to take care of her family or leave Dublin with Frank, her lover. But the memories of the dead, her mother, do not leave her. She promised her mother to keep the home together as long as she could. She is in a big dilemma. If she leaves Dublin, she would be respected, she would not be treated as her mother had been (Joyce, 2011, s.28). On the other hand she would feel guilty if she breaks her promise to her dead mother.

The death's influence continues profoundly on the conducts of Eveline. Frank waits at the dock to save her from her misery. But Eveline becomes spiritually paralyzed at the time of departure. Despite Frank's all efforts she does not move and leaves his hands. She sacrifices her only chance of happiness for the sake of her death mother's wish. She cannot revolt against the routinized lifecycle. She has been defeated by the routine. Her wish for a new life contradicts with her lack of courage to leave the routine. Her wish for freedom contradicts with her promise to her mother. "Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (Joyce, 2011, s.32). She looks as if she is paralyzed. It is not possible to determine what she feels, what she thinks. She appears emotionless. It can be result of the shock of losing her only chance for happiness. She is not capable of substantiate her dreams. The dead person is the most powerful reference on the vital decisions of her. Eveline's fate depends on the dictation of her dead mother. She becomes a living dead. She sacrifices her life for the sake of the dead.

'A Painful Case' is a true to its name story. James Duffy is an unadventurous man who is another victim of routine lifecycle. He is an emotionally dead person. He accidentally meets Mrs. Sinico and unexpectedly they become friends. Mrs. Sinico's small display of endearment frightens Duffy and he abruptly decides to break up this relation. After the break up Duffy turns back to his routine life. Duffy lives in an illusion. He has halted his attention to outer world. He has focused his energy to himself. He is not aware of the outer reality. He is conservative and very rigid against the changing. Mr. Sinico is a chance for him to awaken the dead emotions. But his reaction to Mrs. Sinico's simple approach is very severe. As Duffy stops meeting her, he loses his chance to escape from illusion.

James Duffy is an extremely self-centred character. His reaction to death of Mrs. Sinico is striking evidence of his selfish personality. The reader will anticipate seeing a regretful Duffy who thinks himself responsible for the death of Mrs. Sinico. On the contrary Duffy represents a very meaningless reaction. He loses his temper when he reads the incident in the newspaper. Her death seems as a commit suicide not an accident. He considers it as a commonplace vulgar death. According to Duffy with such an act she not only degraded herself but also degraded him (Joyce, 2011, s.105).

James Duffy's unusual and selfish approach to Mrs. Sinico's death can be result of sudden aftershock of death. As he contemplates about her death, a self-realization starts in him. He puts himself in her place. "Now that she was gone he understood how lonely her life must have been..." (Joyce, 2011, s.106). The realisation causes a more painful awakening. "His life would be lonely too until he, too, died, ceased to exist, became a memory – if anyone remembered him" (Joyce, 2011, s.106). Mrs. Sinico is physically dead, but Duffy is a living dead. Mrs. Sinico could have brought him to life; escaped him from his deadly routine of life. However; Duffy drags her to physical death and himself to a moral death. Duffy begins to re-evaluate his life after Mrs. Sinico's death. He recognizes his loneliness. He finds out his illusion. His false happiness shatters. His self-centred concern becomes reversed to his environment. The death of Mrs. Sinico is painful, but Duffy's realization of his moral death status is more painful. He knows that it will continue until he physically dies.

The dead character of 'The Ivy Day in the Committee Room' is Charles Stewart Parnell who is a real character and a leading figure in Irish history. In this story Parnell symbolizes Irish nationalism and freedom. Parnell's influence is seen along the whole story. The story starts with the gathering of a group of politicians at the committee room. These politicians, except Hynes, do not have the spirit of Parnell. They cannot show consistency and association on the candidates of mayor election. They are focused on their concerns and existence. Joyce portrays these characters as paralyzed and impotent politicians. Although Parnell is dead, he is the only power of the story. Parnell is physically dead but these politicians are morally dead. His influence is stronger than the living ones. The politically paralyzed characters lack the ability to produce strong political opinions. The dead Parnell promises more hope than the living ones. In this story, Joyce criticizes the politicians that cannot show the wisdom that Parnell did. There is a longing to politicians like Parnell.

The last and longest story of *Dubliners* is titled as 'The Dead'. This story has received more scholar attention when compared to rest of the stories. The name of the story is meaningful in respect to the general atmosphere of other stories. The *Dubliners* starts and ends with dead. This story progresses around Gabriel Conroy. Gabriel is another selfish character of Joyce. French (1987) claims that his intellectual superiority to the others at the party, except Miss Ivors, is real, but the problem is that Gabriel has come to equate intellectual superiority with human superiority. In addition to his disparaging people around, he feels ashamed of Ireland. He clearly defines his distaste of his own country. Delany (1972) states that Gabriel is rootless and lacks any sense of solidarity with others who share their condition. All these facts make him to be a disgraced character in scope of Joyce's criteria of patriotism. However; at first

step Gabriel does not find his contemplation about his own country strange. A shock is needed to alter his approach to people and Ireland.

Gabriel's resolution does not last long as he finds out the incident about Greta's former lover Michael Furey. At first Gabriel is prejudiced about what happened. When he becomes aware about the contents of the incident and especially about boy's death at an early age, he feels ashamed. The death of the boy makes him deeply moved and he begins to change. Unlike other characters of *Dubliners*, Gabriel does not become paralyzed. He re-evaluates his marriage, his family, his life and personality. The death awakens him from his illusion. His selfish personality shatters and his energy turns from himself to his environment. 'The Dead' is the only story of *Dubliners*, in which there is a positive change in the main character. The general gloomy atmosphere of *Dubliners* is cleared away in 'The Dead'. Actually this circumstance contradicts with the name of the story. It can be evaluated as a trick of Joyce's narrative art.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of death is a prevailing theme in the overall frame of *Dubliners*. According to the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch (2001), death has an important role in disposal of illusion. The experience of death has a potential to direct a person's energy from himself to others. As a result the person begins to see the reality. But it does not happen to characters of *Dubliners* in general. Most of the characters become morally paralyzed in case of such incidents. On the other hand Walzl (1961) takes the paralysis status to a wider perspective and claims that "Both opening and close depict a paralyzed society in the persons of older characters". She believes that Joyce wants to represent the paralyzed Irish society via morally paralyzed characters. Among all characters of *Dubliners* the only character who awakens from his illusion is Gabriel Conroy in 'The Dead'. Joyce does not want to depict a completely desperate scene. Too much focus on negativity and death brings a general gloomy atmosphere to *Dubliners*. This gloomy atmosphere is broken down in the last story. Montgomery (1978) supports this idea by claiming that *Dubliners* does not conclude with an image of fallen man. The last story functions as a saviour to redeem the general negativity. Joyce manipulated the concept of 'death' as a major theme in *Dubliners*. This theme is sometimes the spirit of Ireland, sometimes the people who become slave of routine and sometimes the one who are morally paralyzed.

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