
"The Sisters" and its Source of Mystery

In "The Sisters" James Joyce creates an elusive mystery surrounding the death of James Flynn by withholding narrator insight into the events of the story. He achieves this by selecting a young boy as the narrator, whose age is not specified but is hinted at in the condescending tones of the adult characters towards him. Thus, we get the picture of a boy who is somewhat sheltered by a protective cast of adults and naive to the ways of the world. As a result, he is unable to fully process the clues that the story drops as hints about the dark nature of Father Flynn's past, and the reader must piece together many elements of the puzzle himself, resulting in a more personal interpretation.

In the first dramatized scene, Old Cotter's "unfinished sentences" provide the first evidence of strange circumstances surrounding the preacher's death and prior mental state. He utters half clues and incomplete speculations, such as "I think it was one of those... peculiar cases... But it's hard to say...." The narrator's age-appropriate response is to rebut with childish rebelliousness, and thus he is too busy calling Cotter a "tiresome old fool!" to consider the implications of his statements about the Father. Thus, the reader must undertake the speculation for him.

The dream sequence provides the starkest example of a lack of narrator insight in illuminating the shrouded mystery of the priest's affliction. The ghoulish face in the dream, with its moist lips and eerie smile, represents a dark side to Father Flynn that the boy had not previously met with. Confused as to how to confront this manifestation, he finds himself "smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin". Even upon seeing a nightmare-skewed representation of the Father, the boy fails to react to his dark side with the repulsion that we as readers feel towards the face. His naivete prevents him, even subconsciously, from grasping the dark symbolism that we plainly see.

Many hints about the Father's past are included in the dialogue-heavy last scene, in which the narrator's commentary recedes almost completely, indicative of his overwhelmed, confused state. The "crossed life" of the Father is alluded to, and we hear of the incident with the goblet. This incident is speculated to be the priest's final breaking point, but we do not know for sure whether this is merely a superstitious explanation. We hear of the confession booth incident, which suggests that the Preacher's breakdown comes as a kind of repentance for his past, and seems closer to a real explanation of his cause for mental breakdown. Eliza confirms that he received last sacrament, and the fact that she feels the need to explicitly state this hints that there was a possibility of him being turned aside by the Catholic church. This suggests a major transgression, religious or moral, on the part of Father Flynn. Again, we as readers must pick up

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on each subtle clue, because the narration is oblivious to them.

While we never get more than hints as to what sin may have been eating at the priest, the story does suggest that it is the religious burden of piety that makes sin unbearable for Father Flynn. This is hinted at by his emphasis on the volume and gravity of Catholic religious protocol in his lessons to the narrator, which suggests a heavy religious burden weighing on the priest's mind and soul. We can speculate that such a burden arose from the hypocrisy of maintaining Catholic piety and protocol in the face of a past somehow tarnished with sin. The nature of this sin, we must imagine, based on our own experience. Thus, Joyce inadvertently pushes the reader to think critically about how his own transgressions would hold up under the weight of Catholic piety. The effect is to guide the reader towards a critique of an institution that as a whole is burdened by hypocrisy and is thus subject to the same kind of internal conflict and breakdown that ends up paralyzing Father Flynn. Delivering such a comparison straight from the narrator would no doubt come off as preachy rhetoric. Joyce sidesteps this problem ingeniously, guiding us to make the parallel ourselves by withholding narrator insight and forcing us to substitute our own. The effect is a personal and unsettling resonance to the story that is both troubling and thought-provoking.

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