
Happiness and Vulnerability of Childhood in "Dubliners"

The theme of childhood is typically presented as one of happiness and youthful freedom. James Joyce takes a different approach, however, as he exposes the vulnerability that naturally comes with childhood but is often not expressed in literature. He does this through his use of language, free indirect speech and through the content which he chooses to include, in stories such as "The Sisters" and "An Encounter." These two stories show the vulnerability of childhood, without presenting the child as naive, which is especially true in "An Encounter." Each story takes place over a different period of time, as "The Sisters" shows how a trusted authoritative adult figure is capable of taking advantage of a child over a longer time period than the stranger which is presented in "An Encounter." These narratives provide two useful insights into the differing levels of vulnerability in children.

Joyce presents the vulnerability of childhood by placing the children in his stories with possibly inappropriate adult figures, which can be clearly seen in "The Sisters" and "An Encounter." The inappropriate relationship between the priest and the boy in "The Sisters" is more subtly hinted at than in "An Encounter," as the boy's uncle says, 'I wouldn't like children of mine to have too much to say to a man like that.' Here, the references to a possible inappropriate relationship with the priest continue later in the story, as the boy has dreams of the priest's, 'heavy grey face,' which gives the priest a monstrous and grotesque appearance. A juxtaposition between this image and the conventional image of a priest conveys the message of his inappropriate relationship with the child and therefore the vulnerability of the child. The boy says, referring to the priest's mouth whilst he confesses something to the boy, 'I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle.' The priest confessing to the boy works as an effective metaphor for the inappropriate nature of the priest, as he does not correctly assume his role of pastoral care but instead is confessing his own sins to the boy. This could be perceived to have sexual connotations, as he could be confessing perceived sinful sexual acts to the boy. The fact that the priest was smiling during his confession shows him taking a certain pleasure in the act, which goes further to support the previous theory. The phrase, 'why the lips were so moist with spittle,' whilst being explicit in its imagery, goes one step further to suggest an inappropriate relationship between the boy and the priest. This relationship is not something that can be defined as proven however, as Joyce only goes as far as to suggest and imply, never explicitly offering the necessary information to call the relationship completely real.

The inappropriate adult and child interaction is comparatively more brief and isolated in "An Encounter," showing the full extent of a child's vulnerability. The child presented in the short story is older than the child in "The Sisters," shown by his ability to recognise the potential danger of the situation, as a strange man approaches him and his friend and begins to make inappropriate comments to them. The man asks if the boy has any, 'sweethearts,' he is then suspended in incredulous disbelief when the boy says he has none. This can be interpreted as flirtation, as if the man is saying that the boy is too attractive to not have any sweethearts. The inappropriate affection for young people becomes clear slightly later on in the story, as the boy says, 'There was nothing he liked so much as looking at a nice young girl, at her nice white hands and her beautiful soft hair.' Such a sexualisation of young people can be seen as a gateway into opening the boys he is addressing to sexualisation. Using innocent words such as, 'soft,' and repetition of the word, 'nice,' change the context of the words and give them a

sinister undertone. This transforming of innocent words into something more sinister is a fitting metaphor for the rest of the encounter, as things that could potentially be innocent are made to sound explicit and make the narrator extremely uncomfortable. This point is summarised by the narrator as he says, 'I thought that what he said about boys and sweethearts was reasonable. But I disliked the words in his mouth.' The man then momentarily excuses himself from the company of the boys, walking a small distance away from them and performing an unspecified act. Judging from the reaction of Mahony, the narrator's friend in the story, 'I say! Look what he's doing!' we can assume that he is doing something that they perceive as outrageous. There are multiple interpretations of what the man could be doing, I believe that he is either urinating or the more extreme interpretation would be that he is masturbating in front of the boys. In either case, he is exposing himself to the young boys and making them feel very uncomfortable.

Another side of childhood is then shown by Joyce, as Mahony acts impetuously by chasing a cat across a field, leaving the narrator alone with the strange man. This occurs directly after the narrator expresses his trepidation towards the man, saying that if he asks for their names then, 'let you be Murphy and I'll be Smith.' This shows a maturity and awareness from the narrator and a vastly contrasting immaturity and lack of awareness from Mahony, showing clearly how children mature at different rates. This a subtle and interesting point made by Joyce and is effective in showing the true nature of childhood. The stranger then asks about whether the boys are whipped at school or not, saying that if he was in charge of Mahony's discipline he would give him, 'a good sound whipping,' whilst the narrator tells us that he speaks of the matter in a tone which is, 'affectionate.' This turns the stranger from being presented as a figure which makes the narrator feel uncomfortable into an entirely different beast; one that is sadistic and malevolent, referring to inflicting pain upon the boys and taking a great pleasure in it. The boy then carefully gets up, pretends to tie his shoelaces and quickly leaves the man, showing the boy's awareness and use of tact to negate the danger of the situation, presenting the youthful boy as young and vulnerable, but also mature and self-aware.

The two stories show different aspects to the presentation of childhood, as "The Sisters" presents the child as a more helpless individual, subject to the inappropriate behaviour of the priest. Such a situation forms a stark contrast with the events in "An Encounter," as the narrator here is aware of the situation unfolding around him and manages to carefully escape and place himself out of harm's way. "An Encounter" is effective in showing the more multifaceted approach to the presentation of childhood, whereas "The Sisters" shows the pure vulnerability which naturally occurs in childhood. They are both very effective in presenting different aspects of childhood, both of which using Joyce's power of suggestion and implication to create images useful in discerning his exact viewpoint on childhood as a key theme in the short stories.