The words ‘paralysis’, ‘gnomen’ and ‘simony’ are given special emphasis in ‘The Sisters’, the first story in Dubliners. Discuss the thematic significance of one or more of these words to Dubliners. You should explore at least two of the Dubliners stories in your answer.

With Dubliners release in 1914, James Joyce published an argument that Ireland’s society lacked dynamism, illustrated by the physical, mental and emotional stagnancy of the book’s native characters. The claim, citing the forces of religion, social convention and a xenophobic indifference to ‘the outside world’ as reasons for the nation’s progressive downturn, stemmed from Joyce’s personal experiences as a child growing up in Dublin.

Joyce advanced his case in Dubliners using a ‘paralysis motif’ to convey the debilitating consequences of an apathetic mentality. This relationship between the irresolution and “psychological malady” of Ireland and ‘paralysis’ was justified by Joyce in external texts including letters to C.P. Curran and Joyce’s publisher respectively:

“’I call the series Dubliners to betray the soul of that hemi-plegia or paralysis which many consider a city,”’...my intention was to write a chapter in the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin from the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis.”’

These sentiments guide the thesis of the essay: James Joyce’s abhorrence of the stagnant society that Dublin is represented through characters’ inability to evolve, mature and forget in Dubliners.

Joyce orders the novellas chronologically according to the age of the protagonist, establishing a coherency for the ‘paralysis motif’ that used the book’s arrangement to convey a hemi-plegia of the will in Dublin’s society across all ages. Failure and disappointment becomes apparent across the city, affecting all ages and classes of the community. This chronological sequencing of Dubliners acknowledges the childhood, adolescent, maturity and public life phases of existence in Dublin. This notion is supported by Florence L. Walzl, a renowned critic of Dubliners, who wrote:

“Dubliners [exemplifies] the effects of a creeping paralysis in a progressive diminution of life...each [story] marks a decisive stage in this deteriorative process.”

Preying on the innocent naïveté of the central characters in ‘The Sisters’ and ‘Araby’, Joyce promotes disillusionment in children. Their experiences of failure, notably the boy’s inability to win the affections of Mangan’s sister in “Araby,” contribute toward the ‘paralysis motif’ by instilling a fear of decision-making in their futures. This emerges in the adolescent and mature stages of Dubliners. Joyce’s use of disillusionment – a variant of paralysis – to convey disappointment in multiple stories demonstrates thematic significance while supporting the thesis’ claim that Joyce uses paralysis to transmit ‘the stagnant society that Dublin has become.

James Joyce’s use of entrapment in “Eveline” and “The Boarding House”, where the adolescent protagonist exhibits physical and mental paralysis in the face of an important decision. Through this vehicle, Joyce alludes to Irish bourgeois social convention and morality’s role in financial gain as grounds for Eveline’s and Doran’s failure to move abroad and refuse to marry respectively. The negative impact of a paralysis on their future is essential to establishing sterility – another variant of paralysis - in the maturity phase of the book. The function of paralysis in the climax of these novellas transmits thematic significance.

In “Counterparts”, the sterility also features. From a hemi-plegia of the will during his youth, Farrington of “Counterparts” becomes the frustrated representation of an unproductive life. Repressed by conventions and subsequent paralysis, Farrington beats his child as a method of venting frustration. The beating itself is another attack.

---

by Joyce on social and religious order in Dublin, as Farrington continues the cyclical ‘paralysis’ of tragedy in the life of Dubliners.

Joyce cites religion as a prevalent cause of paralysis in the novel. Raised as a member of the Catholic Church until his departure from it in 1898, the author had first-hand experience of the Church’s influence, inspiring *Dubliners*, which sought to oppose the socio-religious authority that had exorcised control over Joyce throughout most of his formative life.

Joyce conveys the impact of the Church on the lives of twentieth century Dubliners using literary techniques including terminology from the semantic field of religion in multiple novellas:

“[‘Eveline’]...the *Blessed* Margaret Mary Alacoque...she *prayed to God*”, “[The Boarding House] The belfry of George’s Church sent out constant *peals...reparation* must be made for such a *sin.*”, “[‘Counterparts’] I’ll say a *Hail Mary* for you.”

These recurring references convey the perpetual presence of religious conviction had in the Irish community. Consistent with Joyce’s argument that the Church was a contributory to the spiritual paralysis of Dubliners, the frequent references towards faith demonstrate the ‘thematic significance’ of the ‘paralysis motif’.

Similarly, archaic language with religious undertones used by the child protagonist in “Araby” reveal the faith-orientated education he has experienced in Dublin. In keeping with the Romantic vocabulary the child employs, the figurative use of archaic language heightens the child’s own aspirations: “I imagined that I *bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes*”. The disillusionment the child becomes a victim of following his epiphany is heightened by the false images born out of archaic language. Joyce’s portrayal of religion as an antagonistic force that promotes sadness and frustration amongst its devotees is sustains the thesis of this essay.

James Joyce also mocks the use of epiphany, inverting its definition from a positive religious revelation to a depressing reflection on the reality of life in Dublin. Joyce conveys disdain for religion, with satire signifying a personal animosity towards the effect religion has on life in Dublin. These epiphanies conclude the stories of “Araby”, “Eveline” and “The Dead”. Feelings of aggravation, fear and regret respectively contribute towards their varying afflictions of mental paralysis; maintaining the motif’s ‘thematic significance’. This notion is supported by James S. Atherton:

“Joyce’s epiphanies...showed the reality to be less attractive and praiseworthy than might have been expected.” Atherton’s argument complies with the thesis of this essay, recognising the hidden motive of Joyce’s epiphanies.

Repetitive noun phrases of time create a sense of paralysis that maintains social stagnancy in Joyce’s narrative: “for years and years...a good thirty years ago...every year...every two minutes”. These phrases transmit the demoralising, monotonous lifestyle that residents of Dublin are subjected to under the authority of socio-religious traditions. The repetition of words conveys Joyce’s belief that Dublin had become ‘stagnant’.

A variety of symbolism and figurative language exaggerate the uninspiring conditions Dublin has adopted to, promoting Dublin as a derelict city incapable of change and converting the capital into a symbol of paralysis. Figurative language, including adjectival pre-modifiers and personification in multiple stories, creates a sense of inertia. Most notable in “Araby” and “Eveline”, the characters and environment they are surrounded by are devalued through conventionally unpleasant descriptors:

“[‘Araby’] North Richmond Street, *being blind...conscious of decent life* within them, [the houses] *gazed at one another* with *brown imperturbable faces*”, “[‘Eveline’]...she was again in the *close, dark room*.”

---

7 Ibid.: p.109
8 Ibid.: p.31
11 Ibid.: p.29
12 Ibid.: p.41
Joyce’s argument is strengthened by portraying certain characters as inept and vulnerable to their surroundings. Walzl credits Farrington’s workspace in “Counterparts” as afflicting him with the frustration that he releases on his son:

“the mechanical office routine images the sterility of modern business. The unproductive work dehumanises Farrington as man and father.”

The effect of a paralysing environment on the characters of Dubliners highlights the ‘thematic significance’ of the ‘paralysis motif’.

Symbolism convey the bleak reality of life in Dublin to, extending into visual perception a Joyce conjures images of darkness and night time with failure and the depressing revelations of the protagonists. This point is most evident in “Araby”, when the young boy’s epiphany coincides with his sudden immersion in darkness:

“The upper part of the hall was now completely dark. Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger”13.

Darkness as a theme holds connotations of fear and weariness that can manifest themselves physically, allowing Joyce to explore physical paralysis in Dubliners, eliciting a stronger reaction of sympathy from his reading audience and attacking the religious forces that helped lead the young boy into the ‘paralysing’ darkness.

The physical representation of paralysis in Dubliners is the most blatant means of accentuating the crippling effects of socio-religious order in Dublin according to Joyce for the reading audience. Promoting physical paralysis using entrapment communicates the tediousness of routine lifestyles. Arnold Goldman highlights the most valuable examples of physical paralysis in Dubliners for the benefit of this essay:

“Father Flynn’s ‘scruples’ and his torpid life…Eveline is powerless to leave Dublin and Bob Doran…succumbs to the pressures of convention and Mrs Mooney…Farrington... leads a severely restricted life, unable or unwilling to break out of webs of containment…”14

Moments of physical paralysis are a straightforward means of conveying the protagonists’ incapacity to dispose of the overpowering routines that impede their free will. The protagonists of “Araby” and “Eveline” slow their movements, transmitted through dynamic verbs, upon the realisation that they cannot escape the hindrances of Dublin:

“I knew my stay was useless...Then I turned away slowly”15, “She stood among the swaying crowd...Her hands clutched the iron [railing] in frenzy.”16

These examples of immobility in the face of change place the Dubliners into a perpetual state of disappointment that Joyce identifies and holds social, religious and xenophobic principles responsible for.

Joyce’s carefully constructed representation of Dublin’s society being stagnant uses the ‘paralysis motif’ to contribute strength and diversity to his argument. The chronological order of his tales exhibiting variants of paralysis, the presence of religion in his novellas and the satirical approach towards the epiphany enhance his argument while repetition and figurative language add a literary dimension too.

Bibliography


Joyce, James, Dubliners, (Popular Penguin Classics, 1996)

13 Ibid.: p.36
16 Ibid.: p.42