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An Existence in the Third Person: Mr. Duffy's Case

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"A Painful Case" forms with "Clay" a balanced pair of "celibacy stories" in *Dubliners*. Mr. Duffy's love affair in a fragmented modern society brings frustration. The main action of the narrative pivots around Mr. Duffy's love affair with Mrs. Sinico, his sudden breakup with her, and her ensuing death. At first glance, this narrative reads like a painful case about Mrs. Sinico because she is reported killed in a train accident. A deeper reading, however, reveals that Mr. Duffy's case is far more devastating than hers. If their short, turbulent relationship ends so quickly, arguably caused by Mr. Duffy's abrupt breakup declaration, I think we should pay more attention to his personality than their companionship. Tracing the whole narrative, I will strive to lay bare his personality problems and how this puts his affair with Mrs. Sinico in such tragic *dénouement*.

Before Mr. Duffy met Mrs. Sinico, he lead quite an uneventful life as a clerk at a bank. He showed a certain fastidiousness in organizing his living quarters, job,

leisure, and human relationships. No problem occurred as long as his actions did not relate to others. Before beginning the main action (i.e. Mr Duffy's encounter with Mrs. Sinico), the narrator shows Duffy's divided personality, not through direct explanations but through figurative details: i. e. his residential area, the articles in the room, and his habits and bodily features. First, he resides in Chapelizod, because he wishes "to live as far as possible from the city of which he is a citizen" (*D* 103). His reluctance to become entangled with the "mean, modern, pretentious" realities of Dublin betrays his intentional insulation from communal life. Yet he still wants to maintain non-resident citizenship, as he looks toward the city from his window. Second, a glance at Duffy's room reveals the hollowness of his soul: "The lofty walls of his un-carpeted room were free from pictures" (*D* 103). He wants to maintain his "lofty" ideals, reading Wordsworth and translating Hauptmann. His romantic ideals of love, literature and religion, however, are not likely to enrich his emotional, mental and spiritual life. If we heed the subversive content of this intertextual data, his intent becomes much clearer. His choice of Chapelizod as his residence recalls the romantic legend of *Tristan and Isolde* but also implies the pain of rejected love. Hauptmann's *Michael Krame*r which Mr. Duffy tries to translate into English dramatizes the conflict between a high-minded father and his Bohemian son that leads to the latter's suicide, an event which subtly anticipates the tragic end of his love affair with Mrs. Sinico.

The bare space of the room reflects Duffy's pathological obsession with orderliness and his denial of "anything which betokened physical and mental disorder" (*D* 104). Despite his wish to reconstruct his life through literature and music, his preoccupation with order and cleanliness, and his parsimony naturally result in emotional starvation and celibacy. Such an ascetic cautiousness and avoidance of dynamic human relationships simply intensifies his isolation: "He had neither companions nor friends, church nor creed" (*D* 105). When we hear that he has always detached himself even from his own body, we recognize an extreme case of divided consciousness: "He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances" (*D* 104). A keen if skeptical

observer of himself, he prefers a solipsistic mode of being and denies himself life's rich possibilities. He thus replaces a multidimensional process of living with a monotonous process of recording his own life "in the third person" and "a predicate in the past tense" (*D* 105, 104). He would like to erase the "presentness" of his actions and escape into the "pastness" of recording. For Mr. Duffy, the observing self takes precedence over the acting self. Yes, Mr. Duffy's life of "an adventureless tale" is "already completed and therefore narratable," as Ingersoll puts it (217). Granting that modern consciousness tends to be excessively self-reflexive, Mr. Duffy's case seems yet worse because he chooses to erase his subjectivity moment by moment, and he does so voluntarily.

Ironically, the emptiness of Duffy's "spiritual life" is expressed by signs encoded in his body, betraying the close relationship between mind and body. Physical illness serves as the first metaphor. We guess his bilious affliction from the advertisement for "Bile Beans" he cuts out of the paper. If this is the case, the malady has definitely affected his temperament. A medieval doctor would have diagnosed Duffy's character as "saturnine" because excessive bile makes a man constitutionally melancholy. Second, his facial expression carries the "brown tint of Dublin streets" (*D* 104), the negative, prevalent color of Irishness. Third, his eyes also prove to be failing because he cannot find in others a "redeeming instinct" (*D* 104).

Mr. Duffy finally finds a "redeeming instinct" in Mrs. Sinico when he encounters and starts to talk with her at a Rotunda concert but he flees from the chance of redemption. It is Mrs. Sinico who, with her unconventional sensibility, tries to penetrate Mr. Duffy's solipsism as well as challenge his asocial behavior. But he shows more interest in her intellectual charm than in her physical attractions. The following is a description of Mrs. Sinico's gaze recorded in the meticulous memory of a bachelor.

> The eyes were very dark blue and steady. Their gaze began with a defiant note but was confused by what seemed a deliberate swoon of the pupil into the iris, revealing for an instant a temperament of great sensibility. The pupil reasserted itself quickly, this half-disclosed nature fell again under the reign of prudence,

> and her astrakhan jacket, moulding a bosom of a certain fullness, struck the note of defiance more definitely. (*D* 105)

The quotation is significant because Mrs. Sinico's great sensibility attracts as well as frightens Mr. Duffy. "What will eventually end their relationship is also forecast in this description of her gaze," as Leonard predicts (219). The description disorients because it is mixed with conflicting sets of signifiers that betray Mrs. Sinico's and Mr. Duffy's ambivalence toward each other. In other words, the quotation reflects his subtle denial of the sexual potential in her eyes. Roughly speaking, terms like "dark," "confused," "swoon of the pupil," "reasserted itself," "half-disclosed nature" and "a bosom of a certain fullness" are laden with sexual potency while terms like "defiant," "deliberate" and "reign of prudence" repress his sexual desire aroused by the former qualifiers. Indeed, her very "gaze" suggests a sexual invitation. Ironically, Mr. Duffy's graphic description of her appearance reveals his obstinate resistance to emotional involvement. He knows that she is attractive and charming but he does not know how to deal with her sexual appeal. Furthermore, he disdains involvement with her or he feels no emotion in her company. How he came to such an abnormal attitude toward feminine sexuality is unrevealed. He is just that way. Mr. Duffy therefore can do no more than "fossilize" her in his mind: "while they talked he tried to fix her permanently in his memory" (*D* 105).

Mr. Duffy may be better off for his affair with Mrs. Sinico because she gradually pries "his nature open to the full" (*D* 106), thus enriching his life. In a sense, Mrs. Sinico is far more mature than Mr. Duffy. Equipped with practical knowledge and marital experience, she sees in his impoverished soul too many ideas, theories and enclosures within himself. As a self-deemed "confessor," she also urges him to write what he thinks instead of schizophrenically cataloging his own behavior. Mrs. Sinico gradually succeeds in making their relationship "less remote." The following passage depicts what soul-warming therapy their companionship brings to Duffy:

> Her companionship was like a warm soil about an exotic. Many times she allowed the dark to fall upon them, refraining from lighting the lamp. The dark discreet room, their isolation, the music that still vibrated in their ears united them. This union exalted him, wore away the rough edges of his character, emotionalized his mental life. (*D* 107)

While Duffy wants their affair in broad daylight, Mrs. Sinico prefers it in darkness. When he sees light, as Heller suggests, it completes his isolation (39). Here we see a temperamental difference between the two: the sterility of Mr. Duffy's intellect-driven personality and the richness of Mrs. Sinico's emotion-oriented character represented by warm, exotic darkness. In order to be whole, their each mode of being complements one another. Exalted by the spontaneous merging of his soul with another, Mr. Duffy unconsciously grants Mrs. Sinico's "fervent" and intimate maternity. At the height of elation, he elevates his own status to that of an angel, a Nietzschean Zarathustra, which he so admires. The intimacy he shares can be summarized as "the emotionalization of his mental life," a humanizing process to smooth the rough edges of his character. Mrs. Sinico could liberate Mr. Duffy from his vain, self-consuming thoughts. Mrs. Sinico acts in undaunting if abortive resistance to male values. She actually tries to "cross the line," as Lowe-Evans calls it (397).

Mr. Duffy could cure his loneliness if he lets go of his instinctual urges and surrenders to Mrs. Sinico's healing, feminine darkness. He yields, however, to his inner egocentricity and returns to his former self when Mrs. Sinico "[catches] up his hand passionately and [presses] it to his cheek" (*D* 107). Henke tries to explain Mr. Duffy's behaviour through an Oedipus Complex, noting that when Duffy is "[t]errified by the prospect of physical intimacy with the untouchable body of the mother, he breaks off social intercourse and retreats into prudish propriety" (36). Henke's reference sounds convincing because Mrs. Sinico's affection toward Mr. Dufy shows a warm, maternal quality. Mrs. Sinico's emotional progress here is not surprising, considering that her matrimonial relationship with Captain Sinico seems to have been barren for quite some time. Ignoring Mrs. Sinico's sexual needs,

Captain Sinico even encourages Duffy's visit to his home because he thinks no one could be interested in her. He does not regard Mr. Duffy's presence as a threat to his marriage. To his "experienced" eyes, Mr. Duffy seems an emasculated, and therefore safe, bachelor. He casually assumes Mr. Duffy is interested in his daughter.

Mr. Duffy's abrupt breakup with her is also understandable, considering he has been isolated for so long. But why did he act like that? He may have been too terrified of his own "natural" response to feminine sexuality because he resists emotionalizing his mental life. Or he may feel no arousal to Mrs. Sinico's advances, and not know how to respond. Mrs. Sinico's "sign of unusual excitement" as an unfulfilled wife (*D* 107), a desperate attempt to love Duffy, is immediately frustrated. Her emotional initiative leads to their breakup and their parting exposes again Mr. Duffy's hard shell of egotism as well as his lack of responsibility. When we hear him excuse himself by saying, "every bond . . . is a bond to sorrow" (*D* 108), and we see him leave Mrs. Sinico in a violent convulsion, we doubt if he can feel at all, emotionally or sexually. (Mrs. Sinico's extreme anguish expresses itself through her body, active in the narrative flow. The potential textuality of her body is reconfirmed by her self-destruction following her resistance to male discourse, for the body that once desired Mr. Duffy can be the most powerful medium by which she can retaliate for his neglect of her passion.)

During the next four uneventful years, Mr. Duffy continues to read Nietzsche, possibly to rationalize his ascetic isolation with the idea of "Superman." Wrapping himself in such contemporary thoughts, he reverses the positive function of Mrs. Sinico's rich, emotional, feminine value, for instance, in "the intellectualization of his emotions." During the period of his intellectual revival, we hear another cliché: "Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual relationship" (*D* 108). It would be rash to read into this quotation any hint of Duffy's sexual orientation. Wachtel suspects Duffy may be homosexual (50). Unfortunately, textual evidence is too skimpy to justify this assumption. The

avoidance of heterosexuality does not necessarily indicate a homosexual impulse. Rather, Duffy seems to be afraid of any kind of sexual intercourse, homosexual or heterosexual, as Hart suggests (113-114). So far, "Mr. Duffy lives rather uneasily within the bounds of sexual normality," as Frawley argues, but his sexuality on the periphery is challenged through encountering Mrs. Sinico. This is the point, I would argue, that Mrs. Sinico has misunderstood: "Her interpretation of his words disillusioned him" (*D* 107). Mr. Duffy certainly likes women's company but would like to restrict his fellowship with Mrs. Sinico to the mental domain and exclude sexual intrusion. Phenomenally, Mr. Duffy seems frigid or xenophobic but it is beyond our capacity to infer the cause here.

Mr. Duffy's emotional instability is reconfirmed when we witness his response to the news of Mrs. Sinico's death, a *coup de grâce* to his self-indulgent quiet. Initially, he is so disgusted by her death's vulgarity that he feels sick to his stomach. Then he feels violent anger toward Mrs. Sinico, who has damaged his sense of propriety: "Not merely had she degraded herself; she had degraded him" (*D* 111). He also feels anger at himself for having mistakenly chosen Mrs. Sinico as his "soul's companion" (*D* 111). Furthermore, he condemns her moral weakness and justifies his abrupt breakup with her. Seeing him describe Mrs. Sinico's final "outburst" so harshly, we cannot help but regard him as misanthropic rather than misogynistic. His words are the worst possible example of brutal self-defence, which, paradoxically, betrays the vulnerability of his enclosed vision as well as his lack of any responsibility. Again, we doubt if he feels for any human being, much less sympathizes with his soul mate in days past.

The more atrociously Duffy criticizes Mrs. Sinico, the more strongly he reveals his moral shock at the accident. Two inner voices fight each other, i. e. his self-righteousness struggling against his conscience. When the shock of the news sinks in, he leaves the pub. What is remarkable is that as it grows darker ("the light failed")—and darkness is Mrs. Sinico's proper territory—Mr. Duffy, led by the power of memory ("he thought her hand touched his" [*D* 112]), feels less and less vindictive toward Mrs. Sinico. That she is gone, and has become just a

memory, leads Duffy to sympathetically grasp her loneliness and death: "Why had he sentenced her to death . . . one human being has seemed to love him and he denied her life and happiness: he had sentenced her to ignominy, a death of shame" (*D* 113). The irretrievable fact of her death makes Duffy's one-sided accusation all the more futile. It is remarkable that Mrs. Sinico, even after death, still has a spiritual pull on Mr. Duffy through the all-encompassing power of maternal warmth which soothes his existential exhaustion. Not surprisingly, Mr. Duffy willfully embraces the spectral touch of Mrs. Sinico's hand, which he previously abhorred. In such a moment of "imagined intimacy," he is eager to listen to whatever message she might deliver. A voice comes up, instead, from the depths of his own purified soul. Wearing off the hard shell of his self-centeredness, Mr. Duffy, for the first time ever, accepts part of the responsibility for driving Mrs. Sinico to her death.

Can we take his moral "confession" at face value, then? I think not. West and Hendricks also feel suspicious about the "slightly overblown quality of Duffy's rhetoric" and suggest an ironic reading of the story (701). He seems sympathetic toward her untimely death and feels sorry for what he had done. Arguably, however, he is more concerned with his loneliness as well as his own unlamented death he foresees. Gradually, he glimpses the terrible fact of his own emotional starvation, the living death, and the aftermath of his eventual death. He fears no one will ever recall him. This is the illuminating moment of Mr. Duffy's perception of his own humanity, specifically, his mortality. But the scope of his self-redemption is limited. Again, he accepts his culpability in Emily Sinico's death but, as Werner puts it, he "evades and perpetuates the cause of his guilt: the profound solipsism that renders him incapable of accepting the validity of any experience other than his own" (53).

Mr. Duffy's moral discovery, though in a limited scale, continues when he spots the shadow of lovers cuddling which, while venal and furtive, suggests the soul-warming function of "making love" which he has rejected. The prostrate human beings in the dark remind Duffy of his lost opportunity, of the richness that

merging with another might bring. Hence his painful confession that he is "outcast from life's feast" (*D* 113). He sees the hollowness of his solipsistic existence. He works out sexual imagery when he sees a train in the distance. The fiery head of the train ploughing the darkness is an unmistakable phallic signifier, all the more poignant when we recall that Mr. Duffy has just passed an amorous scene, and that he is continually haunted by Mrs. Sinico's voice. The train proceeding "obstinately and laboriously" is clearly related to his tired sexuality as a bachelor. The droning of the whistle reminds him of the amorous possibility he has turned down. To sum up, he should naturally hear in the train sound the mesmerizing repetition of her name, the object of his desire he brutally repressed out of his abstinence, fear, and arrogance.

Past the moment of moral illumination, he no longer feels Mrs. Sinico's presence nor hears her voice. The narrative's last passage is sadly elegiac. Even the brooding silence seems to ridicule Duffy's obstinate self-centeredness and all its drawbacks. Unlike the moral shocks of Jimmy Doyle, Little Chandler and Farrington, shocks felt in intoxication, Duffy encounters, all-too-soberly, the stark reality of his solitude, the cold reality of himself. Yes, Mrs. Sinico's death is a painful case as the newspaper recounts. Yet Mr. Duffy's own case is far more painful because his state is a living death, an anesthetized life totally surrendered to self-entrapment. Worse still, he cannot help being who he is, i. e. a man who cannot bring himself to feel toward any human. We therefore cannot guess how much Mr. Duffy's self-revelation will change his life, which is bereft of community. Yes, this is one of the worst stories of self-destruction in *Dubliners*. However, there is hope. Mr. Duffy is the most sophisticated character in the collection. He is well-equipped for psychological introspection. Thus we heed Werner's advice to take into account both the authenticity and limitation of Mr. Duffy's perspective, admitting the illumination of the final scene (53). Mr. Duffy's love affair is in the third person singular, as is his life. That is his tragedy.

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Abstract

An Existence in the Third Person: Mr. Duffy's Case

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Mr. Duffy, a highly sophisticated Dublin intellectual, develops a love affair with Mrs. Sinico who turns out to be a lady of great sensibility and maternal warmth. Their turbulent affair, however, comes to an end when he denies her abrupt advance toward him. Four years later, Mrs. Sinico is reported killed in a train accident. The newspaper headlines it "A Painful Case." Yes, it is painful. Isn't Mr. Duffy's case painful, as well? This paper starts with the question and tries to lay bare Mr. Duffy's personality issues. My argument is that he may be one who simply cannot bring himself to feel, emotionally as well as sexually. This partly explains why he is so driven, fastidiously orderly, and insulated from any communal life. That also explains his bizarre preference for recording rather than acting, thus fixing his life in the immediate past in the third person singular. His life is odd and tragic, but if we admit that he cannot avoid being himself, we can better understand who he is and how his affair ended up so quickly. At the narrative's end, he achieves a kind of moral discovery about himself as well as his affair but that discovery is limited, considering that he is pathologically self-centered.

■ Key words: Mr. Duffy, solipsism, existence, emotional inability