

Different Modes of Solipsism: Emily Grierson versus James Duffy*

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Aristotle said, in *Politics, Book One*, “that man by nature is a political animal.” The adjective that Aristotle used to describe man in Greek is ‘politikos’ which came from the Greek word ‘polis’ meaning city-state. To be ‘politikos’ was to be a member of the ‘polis,’ while participating in various political responsibilities as well as contributing to the good of the whole. In this way, the meaning of ‘politikos’ more resembles the English word “social” than “political.” Later in 18th century, Immanuel Kant pushes this definition of man one step further by saying “die ungesellige Geselligkeit (unsociable sociality),” which means man is basically an unsocial being but he has to join in the social activities to survive in the world. Sure enough, Kant sums up the existential anguish all humans are caught in. Even Joyce refers to “the stern task of living” all his characters as well as he himself face on a day-to-day basis.

In literature, however, we encounter not a few examples of eccentrics who choose a highly individual mode of existence and cut themselves away from any

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social ties or activities. They are so preoccupied with themselves that their selves are the only realities for them that can be pursued and verified. Such persons are labelled as “solipsists” in philosophy, and I don’t hesitate to call Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily” and James Duffy in “A Painful Case” as extreme cases. Both Miss Grierson, an American spinster in the late 19th century and Mr. Duffy, an Irish bachelor in the early 20th century, share similarities as pathologically asocial beings while they show slightly different modes of behavior. In this paper, I will trace each one’s solipsistic existence, its aspects and consequences, in relation to their amorous affairs which, I argue, reveal who they really are much more vividly than otherwise possible.

“A Rose For Emily” is a stunning story of isolation, obsession and murder. Not until the end of the narrative does anyone realize her poisoning of Homer Barron, her lover. Why would she do something so ghastly? How could she kill a man and bed his corpse? This kind of question naturally leads to a psychological examination of Emily’s character. Freud theorized that repression, especially if sexual, often results in psychological abnormality. In the story, Emily’s overprotective, overbearing father denies her a normal relationship with the opposite sex by chasing away any potential mates: “None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such”(Faulkner 134-35). Mr. Grierson, an aristocratic man in the antebellum South, would not compromise with the radically changing post-Civil war society. The townspeople therefore invented a fixed image of the domineering father and obedient daughter:

We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. (Faulkner 134)

When Mr. Grierson died, Emily denies his death for three days because her father is the only man with whom she has had a close relationship. (Quite strange, her mother is never mentioned in the story, nor her siblings, if any, either.) She would

have kept his corpse in her house forever if it had not been for the doctors who claimed the body. Finally, she broke down and let them bury her father. Bizarre as this case is, it foreshadows her sleeping with Homer Barron's cadaver as well as betrays her declining mental status, which the village people would not admit at first: "We did not say she was crazy then"(Faulkner 135). Instead, they try to understand her situation: "We believed she had to do that . . . with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will"(Faulkner 135).

While Emily's seclusion from the society was forced more or less by her father who cherished traditional class-values, Duffy's solipsistic existence proves to be his own. He requires order and structure in every aspect of his life. His living quarters, his office, his daily routine all reflect his need for consistency. Each morning he commutes to the private bank in Dublin, eats lunch at Dan Burke's, ends his workday at four o'clock, and dines at George Street. His evenings too were predictable. They "were spent either at his landlady's piano or roaming about the outskirts of the city"(D 104). The only exception to this rule was an occasional visit to the opera or a concert.

In addition, he has "neither companions nor friends, church nor creed"(D 105). He visits his relatives at Christmas and escorts them to the cemetery when they died. Actually his father, his only blood-tie, died and "the junior partner of the bank retired"(D 108) in the course of the narrative. Such can be a comfortable if monotonous routine for an intellectual bachelor who earns his living by working as a cashier. When we hear, however, he is more preoccupied with writing rather than living his own life, we can safely call him an extreme case of solipsism.

He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense. (D 104)

His self is torn asunder into living one and observing selves. According to his autobiographing process, his existence is not in the first person but rather in the

third person, singular. What is regrettable is that he views his own behavior not with certainty but with skepticism.

Interestingly, space and body are telling metaphors for Emily's and Duffy's autistic personalities. At one time, the Grierson home was in one of the finest neighborhoods in Jefferson. By the time of Emily's death, however, it has become "an eyesore among eyesores" because of the industrialization process engulfing the agricultural South. The narrator reports, "only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its coquettish decay"(Faulkner 178). The negative function of her intentional self-isolation is portrayed, again, through the metaphor of the interior of Grierson house: "It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell"(Faulkner 130). Staying inside with no connection to the outer world makes her look unhealthy and macabre.

She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face, to another while the visitors stated their errand. (Faulkner 131)

The very isolated Duffy lives on the periphery of Dublin because he wants to stay "as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen"(D 103). Ironically, he wants to carry Dublin citizenship while rejecting its "mean, modern and pretentious"(D 103) suburbs. His room is lofty, uncarpeted, free from pictures. He keeps his interior neat and orderly, and the furniture is minimal as well as functional. He even arranges the books on the shelf according to their weight: "Mr Duffy abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder"(D 104). Such a fastidious addiction to orderliness makes him seem saturnine, brown, unamiable, and harsh. Both Emily's decadent interior and Duffy's clinical orderliness duly reflect their highly solipsistic character.

Both love affairs bring to the surface their deep solipsism. After her father's death, Emily was sick for a long time. She must have passed painful hours coming to terms with the situation: no father, no money, etc. Then, Homer Barron, a Yankee foreman, appears in Jefferson with the construction gang. He looks quite

cheerful, masculine, and big mouthed. Soon enough, the townspeople see Emily dating him on Sundays. Why does she go out with him, to the chagrin of the whole town? The most obvious reason for her dating outside her social caste is simply that she is lonely. Actually, she has no one except Toby, a combined cook and gardener. Another plausible explanation for her relationship with Homer is “her way of rebelling against her dead father”(Akers <http>) who would have considered a Yankee day-laborer an unacceptable suitor. Whatever the reason, Emily felt a strong crush on him. The narrator suggests, however, that Homer was not so enthusiastic about marrying her. First, Homer, we hear, is not a marrying man. He may like men. Some readers suspect Homer may be a gay but I don't think so. He as a blue color simply enjoys hanging out with younger men, drinking with them. Second, he's gone suddenly and comes back within three days. The people in Jefferson “believed that he had gone on to prepare for Emily's coming”(Faulkner 139). But in those days I don't think Homer could make a round trip to the North in three days. Possibly, Homer was weighing in his mind whether or not to marry her. If he were interested in Emily's wealth, he may have noticed “the house was all that was left to her”(Faulkner 134). When he returned, and was admitted by the Negro Man at the kitchen door at dusk, that was the last a neighbor saw him alive.

Emily was, observably, busy preparing for her wedding. She'd been to the jeweler's for a men's silver toilet set and bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including nightshirts. Her boudoir, revealed to the villagers after her death, was decorated and furnished in a rose shade as for a bridal. Such was Emily's marital expectation that she may have suspected when Homer's gone he will never return. Finally she takes the offensive by poisoning him so he can't abandon her. We hear she dropped by the druggist and bought arsenic “for rats”(Faulkner 138). When the door of the attic room was broken open after her funeral, people found indentations of her head and a strand of hair on the pillow next to the rotting corpse. Some readers refer to Emily's necrophilia, i. e. sexual interest in dead bodies. While Emily has betrayed symptoms of psychological abnormality, she did not kill Homer in order to sleep with him forever. In her madness, she killed him to make him

stay with her forever. Circumstantial evidence shows she did not sleep with the cadaver long. People knew her bridal room had been long locked away until she died: “there was one room in the region above the stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced”(Faulkner 143). One thing, however, remains unresolved; i. e. if the long strand of hair was iron gray, she may have slept with the skeleton “lain in the attitude of embrace”(Faulkner 143) for quite a while because her affair with Homer started in her early thirties and she died at the age of 74.

Emily’s solipsism, verging on madness, is a product of the old South which makes much of aristocratic honor and chivalry, as Mr. Grierson does, Townspeople expected of Emily “*noblesse oblige*”(Faulkner 136). Emily was such a victim of her exclusive circumstance that she could not cope with the changing society. To keep her autistic world intact, she froze time by rejecting taxation and the free postal system adopted by the Jefferson municipality. She refuses to give up her father’s body and even poisons Homer. Such was her desperate resistance as the last Grierson to new democratic order.

Duffy, another self-enclosed person, gets to know a lady at a Rotunda concert. Mrs. Sinico comes to Duffy’s uneventful life, a life that was an “adventureless tale”(D 105). With her “redeeming instinct,” she challenges Mr. Duffy’s solipsism. 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. Equipped with practical knowledge and marital experience, she sees in his impoverished soul many ideas, theories and enclosures. 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)

Here we recognize 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. 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.

Mr. Duffy could cure his loneliness if he let go of his instinctual urges and surrendered to Mrs. Sinico's healing, feminine darkness. He yields, however, to his inner egocentricity and returns to his former state when Mrs. Sinico "[catches] up his hand passionately and [presses] it to his cheek" (*D* 107). Mrs. Sinico's affection toward Mr. Duffy 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. Her emotional initiative, however, leads to their break-up, 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), we doubt if he can feel at all, emotionally or sexually. Mrs. Sinico's extreme anguish expresses itself through her body, which moves convulsively. The potential textuality of her body is reconfirmed by her self-destruction following her breakup with him, 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.

Duffy rationalizes his ascetic isolation with the idea of a Nietzschean "Superman." We also hear him mouth 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). Textual evidence, however, is too skimpy to justify this assumption. The avoidance of heterosexuality does not necessarily indicate a homosexual impulse. Rather, Duffy seems afraid of any kind of sexual intercourse, homosexual or heterosexual, as Hart suggests(113-14). Actually, Mrs. Sinico has misunderstood who he was: "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. As long as she can be his fantasy companion, the perfect listener and partner, he can love her. But the moment "she becomes a real woman with real needs, he shies away"(Omalley http). Phenomenally, Mr. Duffy seems frigid or xenophobic but it is beyond our capacity to infer the cause here.

The news of Mrs. Sinico's death proves a *coup de grâce* to Duffy's self-indulgent quiet. He feels violent anger toward Mrs. Sinico, who has damaged his sense of propriety. 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. His words are the worst possible example of brutal self-defence, which, paradoxically, betrays the vulnerability of his narrow solipsism as well as his lack of any responsibility. Again, we doubt if he feels for any a human being, much less sympathizes with his soul mate in days past.

As it grows darker, Mr. Duffy, led by the power of memory, feels less and less vindictive toward Mrs. Sinico. That she has become just a memory leads Duffy to sympathize with her loneliness and death. The irretrievable fact of her death makes Duffy's one-sided accusation all the more futile. Remarkably, 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. 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 some responsibility for driving Mrs. Sinico to her death.

Can we take his moral “confession” at face value? I don’t think so. 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 which 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 continues when he spots the shadow of lovers cuddling which 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.

The narrative’s last passage is sadly elegiac. Even the brooding silence seems to ridicule Duffy’s obstinate self-centeredness and all its drawbacks. 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 worse because his state is a living death, an

anesthetized life totally surrendered to self-entrapment. Worse still, he cannot help 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. Mr. Duffy's love affair is in the third person singular, as is his life. That is his tragedy.

Man is a social animal and he, as such, should participate in social activities, whether he likes them or not. Emily and Duffy are eccentrics who choose solipsism over collective living. They have little or no connection with the community they belong to, nor do they pay heed to social happenings or vicissitudes of the times. Going further, they don't even care about those they love; Emily's emotional cannibalism causes Homer's untimely death while Duffy's autistic attitude pushes Mrs. Sinico to commit an accidental/ suicidal death. Emily freezes time, totally ignoring the passage of clock time. She feels comfortable living in her own time-scheme, as insane people do. Duffy can't give himself to the process of loving in the present tense. He observes his own behavior as well as "fossilizes" Mrs. Sinico in his mind: "while they talked he tried to fix her permanently in his memory" (*D* 105). Their solipsistic mode of living requires extreme cost, both emotional and physical, not only of themselves but of the others related to their love affairs. Their lives were not easy. Emily totally excluded herself from human society, while putting Homer in eternal sleep. Duffy shudders at the prospect of his solitude to be prolonged for good, while driving Mrs. Sinico to alcoholism and death. If we as readers feel the richer for reading them, I think we should try to sympathize with Duffy's emotional emptiness as well as dedicate another rose to Emily's complete but futile love affair.

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Abstract

Different Modes of Solipsism:
Emily Grierson versus James Duffy

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Man is a social animal and he, as such, should participate in social activities, whether he likes them or not. In literature, however, we encounter not a few eccentrics who choose a highly individual mode of existence and cut themselves away from any social ties or activities. Such persons can be categorized as “solipsists,” and Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily” and James Duffy in “A Painful Case” are extreme cases. Both Miss Grierson, an American spinster in the late 19th century and Mr. Duffy, an Irish bachelor in the early 20th century, share similarities as asocial beings while they show slightly different modes of behavior. While Emily’s seclusion from the society was forced more or less by her father who cherished traditional class-values, Duffy’s solipsistic existence proves to be his own. Their solipsistic existence, its aspects and consequences are vividly portrayed in relation to their love affairs. They are so pathological that they don’t even care about those they love; Emily’s emotional cannibalism causes Homer’s untimely death while Duffy’s autistic attitude pushes Mrs. Sinico to commit an untimely suicide. To keep her autistic world intact, Emily freezes time, totally ignoring the passage of clock time while Duffy can’t give himself to the process of loving in the present tense. He observes his own behavior as well as “fossilizes” Mrs. Sinico in his mind. Their solipsistic mode of living requires extreme cost, both emotional and physical, not only of themselves but of the others around them. Emily totally excludes herself from human society, while putting Homer in eternal sleep. Duffy shudders at the prospect of his solitude to be continued for good, while driving Mrs. Sinico to alcoholism and early death. I think we readers should try to sympathize

with Duffy's existential void as well as present another rose to Emily's passionate but one-sided love affair.

■ **Key words** : solipsism, social animal, mode of existence, love-affair

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