

Finishing Unfinished Sentences: Re-Examining “The Sisters”

Hee-Whan Yun

“Abandon hope, all ye who enter . . . ” (*Inferno* III.9)

“There was no hope for him this time . . . ” (*D* 9)

I

Since its publication in 1904 in *The Irish Homestead*, critics said much about “The Sisters.” Yet much remains unclear about Joyce’s short story. No one truly says the cause of Father Flynn’s gradual mental instability and eventual death. Readers often feel frustrated when they try to interpret Father Flynn’s case because the three varying interpretations, i. e. Cotter’s, the boy-narrator’s and the Flynn sisters’, which constitute the narrative, each withhold essential information. Indeed, the three different interpretations provide general data about Father Flynn’s mental and physical deterioration, but each somehow hesitates to speak out fully. Gaps, ellipses, and absences in their accounts halt the narrative flow, and readers find themselves at a loss in deciphering the text.

The story's intriguing complexity, ambiguity, and mystery never slacken and never resolve either. Joyce's revision of the story merely added textual obscurity. The text, which underwent many revisions, was finally combined, together with 14 other stories, under the title of *Dubliners*. In so doing, the diction and structure of "The Sisters" was transformed from a loose, romantic style to a compact, Modernist text. *The Irish Homestead* version explained more. In the 1914 version, however, non-essential commentary was cut, leaving the text to speak for itself. Joyce called this style "scrupulous meanness." Readers are left to contend with the bare texts for themselves. The style demands greater engagement, guessing, deduction, and imagination by the reader.

We can analyze "The Sisters" through its political metaphors for the Irish Church in Father Flynn's case. Or we can tease out psychosexual implications of Father Flynn's behavior toward the boy-narrator. Or we can elucidate the three, seemingly unrelated, signifiers of the boy-narrator: *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony*. But this paper attempts to unravel the inviting yet frustrating relationship between the reader and the text. How deep can the reader plumb when the controlling text is less than accessible? Are creative conjectures justified? Who decides a text's final meaning, if such exists? How reliable are the boy-narrator and other characters, who try in turn to interpret the priest's case? This paper asks these repeatedly and seeks answers in the three variants of the case. In so doing, frequent comparisons are made between *The Irish Homestead* and final versions in order to decide which utterance to trust.

II

Surprisingly, Joyce chooses an anonymous young boy to narrate such an enigmatic story. Since the boy was Father Flynn's sole friend in his last days, assigning the boy as narrator is understandable. Another consideration is that Joyce finds the boy, aged about 10, suitable as narrator because his sensitive but limited

perspective baits readers. The boy should be intelligent enough to know what happens, but lacking perspective on the matter. Joyce's narrative strategy lets the boy solve the priest's mystery, the whole content of the text. By letting the boy tell the story, Joyce manipulates all the information regarding Father Flynn's deterioration and chooses what to reveal to and hide from the reader.

Yet Joyce does not let the boy tell just one side but employs multiple perspectives. The boy-narrator has to compose a plausible story out of the words of Cotter, Uncle, Aunt, and the Flynn sisters to satisfy our curiosity. Such repeated filtering of information leaves the narrative more and more opaque, and the reader's job thus more baffling. Let's look at Cotter's version. He first delivers the news of the priest's death. At dinner, the boy, expecting Father Flynn's death one of these nights, hears about it. The death is confirmed with its context left unsaid:

—No, I wouldn't say he was exactly . . . but there was something queer . . . there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion. . .

—I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those . . . peculiar cases . . . But it's hard to say . . . (D 10)

Arguably, Cotter is well aware of the cause of the priest's death but won't expose it freely. Why does he abstain? Why does he abruptly cut short his 'theory,' 'opinion' or whatever it is? I suspect it's because of the boy's presence. He is too young and impressionable, Cotter suspects, to hear or "see things like that" (D 11). That's his "idea" (D 10). Cotter's reluctance to betray the whole gamut of Father Flynn's case, as well as his euphemisms, suggests that there is something disgraceful about the priest's death. Furthermore, Cotter urges that the narrator-boy should play with others his age instead of befriending adults, such as Father Flynn. Cotter does not simply stress the importance of playing and exercise for the boy. He indirectly warns the boy about getting close to Father Flynn. This hints that something unspeakable might have caused the priest's unstable mind and death.

The Irish Homestead version brings up different issues in the dinner scene.

Cotter insists on the priest's *occasional* sanity, while Uncle would like to believe "he was sane enough."

"Without a doubt. Upper storey—(he tapped an unnecessary hand at his forehead)—gone."

"So they said. I never could see much of it. I thought he was sane enough."

"So he was, at times," said Old Cotter.

I sniffed the "was" apprehensively, and gulped down some stirabout (*The Irish Homestead* 676)

Cotter mentions Father Flynn's *occasional* sanity because he suspects the priest was insane at other times. In the final version, however, the priest's insanity goes unmentioned. Instead, Father Flynn's suspicious behaviour is shown as proof of his mental breakdown at the narrative's very end. Another point to note here is the issue of Extreme Unction in *The Irish Homestead* version is brought up by the Flynn sisters in the final version. Let's compare both.

"Do you think they will bring him to the chapel?" asked my aunt."

"Oh, no ma'am. I wouldn't say so."

"Very unlikely," my uncle agreed. (*The Irish Homestead* 676)

—And everything . . . ?

—Father O'Rourke was in him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all.

—He knew then?

—He was quite resigned.

—He looks quite resigned, said my aunt. (*D* 15)

In *The Irish Homestead* version, both Cotter and Uncle flatly deny the possibility of Extreme Unction for the priest. Possible denial of the final sacrament is a vital clue of his transgression, whatever his sin may be. Only in the most extreme

circumstances would the Church deny a priest its final blessing and forgiveness. Here it is worth recalling that long before his death he was also relieved of his clerical duties. In the final version, however, Joyce generously grants the Father his anointment be prepared for the long last journey to Heaven. Once again, the Aunt wonders whether all is well but cautiously fails to complete her question. But Eliza, the priest's sister, answers confidently that Father O'Rourke came, prepared everything needed for the dead priest, i. e. Extreme Unction. The ladies in the room feel relieved. They would even like to believe Father Flynn accepted his impending death "resignedly." Yet the boy-narrator still feels agitated because no adults would let him know this. He has to determine it all by himself.

The boy's response toward Father Flynn's death is ambiguous. When the boy watches the priest's window two nights before his death, the boy feels not a little terrorized. Such signifiers as "paralysis," "simony," "gnomon" show him fear-stricken "like the name of some maleficent and sinful being" (*D* 9). Fearful though he is, the boy would like to draw closer and see the face of death itself: "It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work" (*D* 9). As a young boy who has never experienced death, he naturally feels fearful at first. Still, the boy feels somehow fascinated by the priest's death. To be specific, the boy wants to explain the Father's cause of death, to fill the gaps Cotter left unsaid. A narrator, the boy wants to gather information about Father Flynn as well as possible.

What is preposterous is that the boy-narrator feels relieved instead of sad by the priest's death. The boy upsets himself by feeling that way:

I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death. (*D* 12)

Why does the boy feel liberated? First, he may have felt burdened by the Father's teaching, i. e. Latin, Church history, ceremonies, priestly vestments, etc. He hears of books written by Church Fathers as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as

dense as law notices. In addition, questions regarding Church institutions Father Flynn asks of the boy turn out to be too intricate to answer. Second, he may have dreaded, knowing that Father Flynn wanted him to become a Catholic priest: i. e. “they say he had a great wish for him” (*D* 10). But the boy wonders to himself “how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake” (*D* 13). priestly duties: i. e. the Eucharist, secrecy of the confessional, etc. Third, if such an interchange between them had any sexual implications, plausibly the boy may have felt uncomfortable. Father Flynn may have taken “rather sadistic pleasure in confusing the boy with moral scruples reflective of his own psychological state” (Walzl 398). This argument supports the boy-narrator’s earliest verdict on the Father: “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third time” (*D* 9). Remembering Father Flynn’s paralyzed body, the boy even connects the Father to a “maleficent and sinful being” (*D* 9). Somehow, the boy may feel that the Father deserves what has transpired. Does the boy secretly wish to be rid of the “sinful being”? Does he pass judgement on the Father’s wrongdoing? It is difficult to know.

The boy-narrator feels vaguely disturbed about Father Flynn and tries, on his own, to pinpoint the cause of the priest’s dementia and death. When adults frustrate the search, the boy continues to examine Father Flynn’s case in his dreams. As the boy falls asleep, he thinks of Cotter’s unfinished sentences. He is interested not in guessing what Cotter declined to mention but “in extracting meaning from what has been said” (Leonard 39). His dream of the priest, however, is ambiguous, even nightmarish. A grey face, he identifies as a “paralytic,” chases him. It follows the boy, murmuring continuously as if to confess something. It even smiles. The boy’s soul hides itself in a “pleasant and vicious region” (*D* 11), where the face starts to confess. But it makes no sense; it just murmurs. Suspicions arise here. Does the boy truly know Father Flynn’s trespasses? If so, why does he assume the role of the Father’s confessor? Is the pleasant/vicious place the boy recedes to a metaphor of the ambivalence of their relationship? Why do they exchange feeble smiles with each other? Furthermore, does he know but not share all this with the readers? Is

he simply pretending not to know? Such questions arise but readers feel all the more puzzled because the boy-narrator's effort to finish Cotter's "unfinished sentences" (D 11) seems to lead nowhere.

Finally, we should examine the Flynn sisters. Eliza thinks clerical duties were too heavy for him, and he was "too scrupulous always" (D 17). The breaking of the chalice, she judges, was the beginning. The chalice contained nothing, she adds, and the incident was not his fault but the altar-boy's. According to church doctrine, the chalice is the most important vessel in the Church—used in the Eucharist and holding Christ's blood. After presiding over the Eucharist, "the priest prays that 'no stain of sin remain on me . . . whom these pure and holy sacraments have refreshed'" (Kennedy 27). The chalice's significance makes it seem natural that Eliza connects its breaking to Father Flynn's illness. Textual evidence, however, shows that long before, signs of his affected mind appear. His trembling hands, for instance, spill "half the snuff about the floor" (D 12), his "tongue lie[s] upon his lower lip" (D 13), and he smiles and nods unconsciously. Such abnormal behaviour by the Father leaves the boy uneasy in his company. Also, Eliza's assumption that priestly duties were too heavy for Father Flynn is unconvincing. Educated at Rome's Irish college, he appears erudite in Latin, history and Church institutions. Considering his explanation of the different ceremonies of Mass, and his preoccupation with mortal sins, venial sins and simple imperfections, Father Flynn's commitment to his vocation seems passionate.

The Flynn sisters' naïveté and ignorance are thus doubtful. If Father Flynn had been educated in Rome, he must have been a promising and dedicated youth. His education presumably has cost the family a great deal of money. With the hopes of this poor Irishtown family pinned entirely on James' prestigious church career, the family could afford neither education nor dowry for the Flynn sisters. (Gifford describes Irishtown in 1900 as "a poor, working-class slum" (30).) Hence Eliza's malapropism: i. e. she speaks of *Freeman's General* instead of *Freeman's Journal* (D 16). She pronounces wheels with pneumatic tyres as "rheumatic wheels" (D 17). In *The Irish Homestead* version, the narrator unreservedly says "neither of his

sisters was very intelligent” (676). In addition, it seems both never married. As spinsters with no future, Eliza and Nannie certainly worked hard in the drapery store to support their priest-brother: “God knows we done all we could, as poor as we are.” They “wouldn’t see him want any thing while he was in it” (*D* 15-16). In his last bed-ridden days, Eliza used to bring him “his cup of beef-tea” (*D* 16) and Nannie read him a newspaper each morning” (*The Irish Homestead* 676). His poor, uneducated sisters, arguably, cannot grasp the true cause of James’ gradual breakdown. They conclude: “He was a disappointed man,” and “his life was . . . crossed” (*D* 17). They realize, “there was something gone wrong” with James but understand from their own limited perspective. They lavish pity on him: “God be merciful to him” (*D* 17). Ironically enough, the Flynn sisters, moribund and amnesiac though they are, survive their priest and “serve a communion of sherry and crackers at his wake” (Henke 15).

Eliza’s report forms the narrative’s end. Surprisingly, the boy-narrator has disappeared from the narrative surface by now. The story begun in a first-person narration, ends with third-person detachment. With no intrusive filtering by the boy-narrator, readers face the final frightening images of the mad priest.

—That affected his mind, she said. After that he moped by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself. So one night he was wanted for to go on a call and they couldn’t find him anywhere. They looked high up and low down; and they couldn’t see a sight of him any where . . . And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-wake and laughing-like softly to himself? (*D* 17-18)

That Father Flynn was found in the confessional connects the scene with some disgraceful misconduct on his part. Readers are apt to suspect that the priest has much to confess, either to the boy in his dream or to himself in the confessional. Circumstantial evidence accumulated thus far supports such an interpretation. The closing ellipsis provides an “epiphany,” even if it can’t definitely solve the riddle of the priest’s sin (Heller 32). Yet ironically, there is nothing clearer to decide what

actually happened.

III

Thus far, readers have grasped the cause of Father Flynn's gradual decline and death. Cotter's version hints at something sinister about James Flynn's past behaviour, and the boy-narrator implies obliquely that Father Flynn must have committed a transgression which he wants to confess. Readers must form a plausible, coherent story from these two versions: i. e. that Father Flynn has been carrying a disgraceful secret all along. Such an interpretation, at the cost of Father Flynn's priestly honor, is denied by Eliza who, recalling James' scruples, attributes the genuine cause of his insanity to the broken-chalice. Eliza's good intentions toward her brother provides an alternative to the shameful suspicions. No reader, however, can accept at face value what Eliza wants to believe about her brother's breakdown because her version is self-deluding and irrational. Her story clashes with Cotter's and the boy-narrator's versions, and therefore prevents readers from interpreting the narrative from a clear perspective.

Eliza regards the broken chalice as the starting point of James' dementia and adds, true or not, that not the priest but the altar-boy broke it. She goes on to say the chalice contained nothing. Hence, she tries to fashion a reasonable story. If nothing was in the chalice, then why the fuss? Either broken or empty, the chalice has been interpreted as a challenge to or the decline of the Irish Church because the vessel of Christ's blood was violated. To go one step further, why not read into it a subtle deconstruction of the whole process of our narrative reading? This is supported by the boy-narrator who imagines: "the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin" (*D* 14). Imagining the dead priest's smile is hilarious, and the boy refers to the chalice on the dead Father's breast as "idle." Does the boy-narrator ridicule adults' overemphasizing the chalice? Or does he, controlling all the information about the Flynn case, poke fun of the readers' signification

process? Possibly yes because the word “idle” means that the object/symbol of the priesthood is now “empty of meaning” (Senn 67).

It is interesting that *The Irish Homestead* version shows the priest in his coffin with a rosary on his chest. An early text edited by Scholes and Litz has a cross (D 249) instead of a rosary. The final version replaces the rosary and the cross with a chalice (D 18). The cross and rosary are two main Catholic articles of faith that believers, priests and laymen alike, carry. If those items are substituted with broken, empty chalice, our interpretation may shift from sympathetic and orthodox to radical and deconstructive.

One irony of the story is that the boy may be the only person with a clue, even subliminally, as to why the priest went “off.” Another plausible observer is Cotter who says much less than needed regarding the matter. He would not betray his “principles” in the boy’s presence. Did the Flynn sisters, then, know it all? I’m afraid not. Their ignorance combined with good, pious intentions hinders them from delving into the matter. The narrative surface becomes murkier, the closer we look.

These very layers of narrative hindrance render the story compelling for readers. But the reader’s job of signification is never easy. There is little to confirm about the priest’s enigma. Is he a pederast as some critics argue? (Marilyn French is one (448).) If so, did he routinely victimize the boy? Is it a sort of sexual simony, so to speak? (Flynn sold neither monetary nor spiritual favors. So we should not call him “simoniac” (Benstock 33).) Was he continually harrowed by a guilty-conscience, leading to his final breakdown? Each detail of the story lends plausibility to such a reading. But nothing is certain. Readers are caught in between. We can at least say that the narrative web of “The Sisters” is impenetrable. Like so many classic, first-rate short-stories, “The Sisters” tantalizes, or even encourages, readers to explore the dark, dense, indefinite narrative surface but never provides any real key. Radical imagination on the readers’ part can take us far, but the narrative surface recedes still farther. That is the unavoidable conclusion. Readers, either fortunately or unfortunately, cannot escape the endless trap of the hermeneutic circle. Fortunately, they are lured to read. Unfortunately, there is no

final, definite interpretation. That is the *final* lesson of “The Sisters.” Our struggle to finish its unfinished sentences ends with a failure that is not so painful.

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Abstract**Finishing Unfinished Sentences:
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“The Sisters” is a short story about the decline and death of Father Flynn. It is also a story of how such characters as the boy-narrator, Cotter and Eliza interpret the priest’s gradual breakdown. The narrative consists of the three different versions. Readers must assign meaning in their own way to what really happened in the narrative. This task proves frustrating because Cotter is reluctant to betray what he seems to know of the real cause of Father Flynn’s case. The boy-narrator provides readers invaluable hints but adroitly avoids telling all. Eliza interprets her brother’s case with good, faithful intentions. Readers therefore fumble in deciphering the scanty, unwillingly-given data. To unravel the cause and effect of Flynn’s case is not this paper’s concern. Much has been said about it. Rather, this paper concerns the task of a reader preoccupied with interpretation. We ask again and again how various guesses, imagination and reasonable doubt are justified? We also ask if a definite, final meaning of the narrative exists? This leads nowhere exactly, yet it is worth pursuing because, as we well know, that is what reading is about. Rereading “The Sisters” is no exception. Dense and opaque as its narrative surface may be, it yet provides great joy and encouragement for us willingly intrigued readers.

■ **Key words** : Father Flynn, readers, interpretation, signification, hermeneutic circle

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