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# THE POTENTIAL SYMBOLISM IN JAMES JOYCE'S "A PAINFUL CASE"

Among his literary heroes was Flaubert, every line of whose writings he claimed to have read and pages of whose work he could recite by heart; he could not have been ignorant of Flaubert's remark, recorded by the Goncourts, about his methods of composition:

When I write a novel, I have in mind rendering a colour, a shade. For example, in my Carthaginian novel I want to do something purple. In *Madame Bovary* all I was after was to render a special tone, that colour of the mouldiness of a wood louse's existence.

[...] The notion of a relationship between colours and sounds, or colours and styles, was a commonplace in late nineteenth-century literature, and Joyce was familiar with it. (Peake 1977)

## 1. THE POSSIBLE COLOUR SYMBOLISM IN THE STORY

Although it might seem that in "A Painful Case" by James Joyce, there are not many enigmas or puzzles, the story offers numerous opportunities for possible interpretations and interweaving of different symbols.

Dark colours permeate both Dublin and the reality of Mr Duffy, one of the two main protagonists. The name of the Irish capital **Dublin** means *black pond* and it comes from the Irish words **dub** or **dubh** [*black, dark*] and **linn** [*pool*]; **linn** also means *period*. This adds new meaning to **Dublin** (*nomen est omen*) and its turbulent history. A **Pond** is a *small area of still water*: there is no motion, merely stillness – a kind of paralysis.

James Joyce scrupulously portrays Dublin at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as "the centre of paralysis" (Joyce 1992: 83). Mr Duffy, in Joyce's story, is emotionally and spiritually paralysed but the reasons for his peculiar disposition are rather obscure and hidden – in other words they are kept dark.

Duffy or Duff is a common surname in Ireland (it is also used as a first name) and "comes from the word *dubh*, 'black', which would either have been a

short form of one of the many names starting with this element [...], or a nickname for a dark person” (Cresswell 1999: 98). In addition to many implied inextricable connections between Mr Duffy and Dublin, there is another, chromatic one; and certainly, it seems that almost everything in his life is predestined.

Black is the predominant colour in “A Painful Case”, along with other colours close in shade to black; blackness and deep dark tones permeate both the city and everyday living of Mr Duffy. **Black** means *complete darkness, dark – something almost black, deep in shade, hidden, obscure – to be full of sorrow and suffering; also sadness and gloom, melancholy, something bad or evil.* “As the colour of death and mourning, black has been adopted by Christians as a sign of death to this world (mortification) and thus of purity and humility” (Ferber 2003: 29). It could also symbolise a mortal sin. The death of Mrs Sinico (the word *sin* is hidden in her surname) seems to be the result of some kind of transgression or tragic flaw; her false step or *hamartia* leads her to her unfortunate downfall and untimely end, and Mr Duffy’s intellectual arrogance, narcissism, and hubris, expressed in the destructive “rectitude of his life”, lead him to the very edge of the deep and dark abyss of his own loneliness and despair. He gains possible cathartic experience. He grows in emotional awareness.

The darkness of the evenings that Mr Duffy and Mrs Sinico spend together in her cottage outside Dublin seems to be a very important element in the rather slow process of establishing their relationship. “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” (Joyce 1996: 123-124). Deep, warm darkness as a screen of secrecy, and as assistance towards intimacy, intensifies their still undefined longing, the vibrations of music, the entwining of their lives and entangling of their thoughts; it seems that it is a necessary element in the process of stirring Mr Duffy’s numbed emotions and essential component in Mrs Sinico’s attempt to find emotional and personal fulfilment – her husband captain Sinico “had dismissed his wife so sincerely from his gallery of pleasures...” (122)<sup>1</sup>.

Mr Duffy lives “in an old sombre house...” (119): *sombre* means *dark in colour, dull (sad and serious, too)*; then, there is a black iron bedstead in his room, also a black and scarlet rug (*scarlet* often represents sin), and his hair is black, too. The black, cold night, when he realises that Mrs Emily Sinico is dead, “when he gained the crest of the Magazine Hill [...] and looked along the river towards Dublin...” (130), is of crucial significance. It is a painful, epiphanic moment: the dark night filled with flashes of insight, the point in time when he finally sees and understands “how lonely her life must have been” (130), and when he finally *feels* that he too is alone. For a moment, “She seemed to be near him in the darkness” (130).

There are some other colours which could provide the gamut of possible meanings in the story. “His face, which carried the entire tale of his years, was of the brown tint of Dublin streets” (120); and in Christian symbolism, brown is the colour of spiritual death and degradation. Brown is also a combination of black, yellow and red and thus some new possible layers of meaning in the story of Mr Duffy’s life or the history of Dublin streets may be added: yellow in Christian symbolism may represent corruption and degradation, but also as the colour of

light, it may be used to represent a divine being or virtue<sup>2</sup>, and red, as the colour of blood, love, desire, anger, roses, fury, thereby can possibly signify the opposite extremes throughout the history of Dublin, and it "can also represent Christian martyrdom" (Ferber 2003: 175). Mr Duffy "looked along the river towards Dublin, the lights of which burned redly and hospitably in the cold night" (Joyce 1996: 130).

On the Magazine Hill, with a flash of piercing insight, Mr Duffy realises the magnitude of his difficult situation. Then "He turned his eyes to the grey gleaming river, winding along towards Dublin" (131). The river Liffey is grey: grey means *darkish, dull, dreary, dismal, old*. It is a *mixture of black and white*; among other things, it could be the colour of ash, and thus it is sometimes used to represent repentance, which is evident in Mr Duffy's words when he catechises himself in Phoenix Park<sup>3</sup> – "Why had he withheld life from her?" (130). The river is undoubtedly an important symbol of time, it can represent boundary, confines, but also movement, fluctuation, life or even spiritual rebirth; and Liffey is grey and shallow (almost paralysed) – it is "the shallow river on which Dublin is built"(119).

Mrs Sinico has dark blue eyes – blue is *the colour of the clear sky, the deep sea*, sadness. "Because it is the color of the sky [...], blue is traditionally the color of heaven, of hope, of constancy, of purity, of truth, of the ideal" (Ferber 2003: 31). Mrs Sinico certainly has some of these qualities: she is compassionate, a constant and loyal friend, she probably hopes (but not openly) that her love will be requited; her motives are pure.

The bookshelves in Mr Duffy's room are of white wood; also a description of white **bed-clothes** and a white-shaded **lamp** is given. Although it seems that *white* is not so important in the structure of Mr Duffy's surroundings, it could be interesting to reveal its possible meanings, because white is distinctly used in the depiction of the objects in Mr Duffy's room; furthermore, it should be emphasised that Mr Duffy bought himself every piece of furniture in the room.

White stands for innocence and purity in Christian symbolism; it could refer to the purity of Mr Duffy's thoughts, because books are usually associated with thoughts and ideas (intellectual aspects), and the books in his room are on the **white** wooden shelves. The lamp is **white**-shaded and thus it can furnish good bright light, which could signify *a source of knowledge, wisdom, or spiritual strength* (Mr Duffy tends to be impeccably intellectual). **White** bed-clothes are certainly associated with bed, which is not only *a piece of furniture for sleeping on* but also the *place regarded as the scene of sexual intercourse*. The white could be an allusion to Mr Duffy's chastity (celibacy, purity) or negatively, to his repressed or dead sexuality; furthermore, the substantive religious issues are probably being raised, and a damaging split between body and soul or intellect and emotions could be an important matter to be discussed.

## 2. THE (IR)RELIGIOUS CONNOTATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS, SEXUALITY AND ISSUES OF GENDER

In an attempt to avoid every possible bond – "every bond, he said, is a bond to sorrow" (Joyce 1996: 124) – Mr Duffy nearly incarcerates himself; his life is the bondage of isolation, desperation, and desolation; his "freedom" is terrifying and

ghastly; his life is sterile. Mr Duffy walks straight into his own trap in his attempt to avoid the potential pitfalls of involving himself spiritually and emotionally in family ties, love, friendship, or active life. Also, it is quite obvious that there is a split between the intellectual and emotional, the philosophical and sensual aspects of his character – a dissociation of sensibilities.

Although Mr Duffy "had neither companions, nor friends, church nor creed" (121), there is a certain note of possible religiousness (or religious conservatism), both in his ritualistic, routine conduct and particular attitude towards his fellow citizens; even though "he lived his spiritual life without any communion with others" (121), an unconscious need for a close friendship of some kind exists in him, considering the fact that, at the first chance meeting with Mrs Sinico, he "tried to fix her permanently in his memory" (121) – her intelligent, oval face with strong features and dark blue eyes; but Mr Duffy, fearful of emotions (in his state of stasis) repudiated his new companion, and:

One of his sentences, written two months after his last interview with Mrs. Sinico, read: 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 intercourse. (125)

It seems that sexual relationship, that is, sexuality itself, is for Mr Duffy morally vicious, corrupt, and for some obscure reason, completely unacceptable. Is he confused about his sexuality? Is he a latent homosexual? Perhaps he is merely afraid of women? Is he still a virgin? What is the reason for his uneasiness and repugnance regarding physical contact? Adult behaviour is often patterned by disturbing and painful childhood experiences (which could be examined in some of the other stories in *Dubliners*), thus the major causes could probably be found in the period of Mr Duffy's infancy or adolescence. Perhaps a kind of covert theological dualism (the body being inferior to the spirit) has an effect on his actions and reactions; also, it might be an element of Catholic dogma working at a subconscious level that influences Mr Duffy's decisions and behaviour. However, these are merely speculations as we do not know all the (important) facts about the events in his life before his coming to Chapelizod. Nevertheless, possible answers are deducible from the available evidence, and several unexpected conceivable directions can be found. Mr Duffy's words could be an echo of Augustinian doctrine. According to the fifth century theologian St Augustine, concupiscence is rather sinful and transmits original sin; "Adam through his perverse desire in original sin bequeathed concupiscence on all his descendants..." (Neal 1989) – although "Concupiscence, for Augustine, is not just sexual desire but any disordered or exaggerated desire or appetite" (Neal 1989). According to the Bible, it was Eve who tempted Adam into committing a sin; and now, it seems that Mrs Emily Sinico plays the (traditional) negative role of the first woman – perhaps she is, indeed, the first woman in Mr Duffy's solitary life; and she appears to be the malefactor, the transgressor, the temptress, the one who although the married woman dares to grasp his hand passionately and press it to her cheek! She attempts to find emotional and personal fulfilment by making a determined effort to "cross

the line”, the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in a moral system imposed by men. She goes beyond the limit of what is morally acceptable in a conservative, sanctimonious society dominated by men. Her husband is Captain Sinico, and it is clear that his first name, as the sign of personal individuality, is not as important as his high rank: he is simply **Captain**, *a chief, commander, the person in command of a ship, authority* – his personal identity is expressed as authority, and his first name is utterly unimportant. ”Her name was Mrs. Sinico” (Joyce 1996: 122). It appears that she does not have her own identity; she belongs to her husband, she also has the role of a mother, but she is not Emily (herself) yet. Thomas J. Gasque in his *the Power of Naming* cites the words of Claire Culleton:

Any name acquired through marriage, then, identifies the woman in terms of what she is not [...] The wife becomes, by name, and inferiorized version of her husband, a Mrs. Him. She shares his identical name, but she is forever diminished because the name is not her own. Thus, the married woman metamorphoses into a forgery of the husband. (Gasque 2000)

Emily Sinico certainly feels that she is merely a forgery of her husband and makes an attempt to escape from his shadow. Ironically, the first time in the story her given name is mentioned in the newspaper paragraph, when she is dead ”... knocked down by the engine of the ten o'clock slow train...” (Joyce 1996: 126). It is grotesque and shocking that Mrs Sinico is almost on posthumous trial<sup>4</sup>; and there are statements, testimonies, witnesses, a jury. Mr Finlay, as the representative of the railway company, says that ”the deceased had been in the habit of crossing the lines late at night from platform to platform and, in view of certain other circumstances of the case, he did not think the railway officials were to blame” (127). Captain Sinico, the husband of Emily Sinico, gives evidence saying that ”...his wife began to be rather intemperate in her habits” (128). The daughter of Emily Sinico, Mary – her name is probably a reference to the Virgin Mary as identified with the Catholic church – says that ”her mother had been in the habit of going out at night to buy spirits. She, witness, had often tried to reason with her mother...” (121). The overall impression is created that no one is genuinely in deep emotional distress after the death of Mrs Sinico, not even her daughter (are they all emotionally paralysed?). Dr Halpin states that ”The injuries were not sufficient to have caused death in a normal person. Death, in his opinion, had been probably due to shock and sudden failure of the heart’s action” (127). Metaphorically speaking, this is clear and accurate; she had been left with a terrible sense of desolation and had drifted into death via drink owing to a profound shock and deep, severe depression. According to the moral systems and standards of a male-dominant conservative culture, any unconventional behavior, especially of women, is stigmatised. Mrs Emily Sinico attempts to escape from the emotional and spiritual paralysis in her dismal marriage. Captain Sinico, her husband, is frequently absent on his voyages, and apparently liberated from the routine and bondages of everyday domestic life. It is emphasised that ”He was not in Dublin at the time of the accident” (127). Her daughter, oblivious to the real reasons of her mother’s suffering tries to reason with her. She states that ”she was not at home until an hour after the accident”

(128). It seems that no one is responsible and Mrs Emily Sinico deserves the opprobrium heaped on her.

Finally, the driver of the engine, James Lennon, is exonerated from all blame. It is curious that both the driver of the engine and Mr Duffy have the same (biblical) name.

Is Mr Duffy responsible for Emily Sinico's death? In his state of numbness and insensibility, having a strong and peculiar sense of rectitude, he cannot consider the possible consequences of his unfortunate decisions. He is emotionally sterile; he is also most certainly another victim.

It might be of significance that the New Testament Epistle of another James contains the following verses: "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation" (James 1: 12) and "Do not err, my beloved brethren" (James 1: 16). Mr Duffy resists the temptation to love (both physically and spiritually); he makes determined efforts to avoid any possible mistake that could threaten the false security of his quiescent, reclusive lifestyle of self-destructive self-sufficiency.

A copy of the *Maynooth Catechism* stands "at one end of the top shelf" in Mr Duffy's room. The *Maynooth Catechism* (published in 1882) is "a modified edition of *Butler's catechism*" (Jones 2003) written in 1775, by Dr James Butler (another James), Archbishop of Cashel. It seems that Mr Duffy shows a certain amount of interest in religious issues, although he has neither "church nor creed". Ironically, he lives in a Dublin suburb called **Chapelizod**. The name Chapelizod means the Chapel of Isolde, and comes from the Irish word **séipéal** (chapel) and the Celtic name Isoude or Isolda (Iseult). Isolde, of course, falls in love with Tristan, and the legend of Tristan and Isolde is seen as "an important expression of the ideals of romantic love" (MacKillop 2000: 413). Such ideals are unacceptable for Mr Duffy in the reality that he chooses.

### 3. THE POSSIBLE LOCUS SYMBOLISM

Mr Duffy lives in an old house "and from his windows he could look into the disused distillery or upwards along the shallow river on which Dublin is built" (Joyce 1996: 119). The distillery: the disused distillery resembles some kind of solitary monument, or a skeleton (as a sign of lifelessness, or a bad omen). Distillery is, of course, *a factory where strong alcoholic drink is made*, that is, whiskey or in Irish **visce beatha**, which means *water of life*. Water, as a symbol of female principle associated with emotions, sexuality, fecundity, change, and life, is reduced to the minimal amount: the river – the Liffey – is shallow, and the distillery is disused; and at the same time, "As rivers mark territorial boundaries, crossing them is often symbolically important" (Ferber 2003: 170). Mr Duffy decides not to cross the line of his own isolation, apparently oblivious to his own needs. The river Liffey could symbolise movement or flux in contrast to Dublin's stagnancy, stasis, or emotional paralysis of Mr Duffy.

After all, Mr Duffy meets Mrs Sinico for the first time in the Rotunda – the point at which his life could have been turned around. The name Rotunda means *a round building or hall* and it comes from the Latin word *rotundus* akin to *rota* which means *wheel*; this could point ambiguously either to going around in the circle or to moving forward.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The introduction belongs to the portrayal of Mr Duffy's surroundings (external structure) and the conclusion belongs to the depiction of his deepest inner self (internal elements). The colours and the surroundings depicted in the story give the specific character and atmosphere of Dublin and make a strong connection between external and internal reality of Mr Duffy's life.

This is a story of alienation, of a fractured experience of life, and the disunion and imbalance of emotions and intellect, which is common in the modern world. This could be a contemporary story. The intellectual aspect predominates in Mr Duffy, although his feelings are stirred only after the death of Mrs Sinico; in the end, he begins to **feel**: "He began to feel ill at ease [...] at moments he seemed to feel her voice touch his ear [...] he felt his moral nature falling to pieces [...] he felt that he had been outcast from life's feast" (Joyce 1996: 130). Although it seems that he could change, he is still paralysed, and his formidable narcissistic intellect predominates, it is his plenty, his plethora.

In *Metamorphoses*, at his moment of epiphany, Narcissus says: "My very plenty makes me poor" (Ovid 1976: 86). The same kind of poverty is one of the essential elements of Mr Duffy's affliction. He suffers fragmentation, a deep sense of futility, and vast emptiness.

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1 The numbers in brackets which follow mark the number of page from the same source.

2 Cf. the text about colour symbolism in *Liturgical Colours: Christian Colour Symbolism* (2004-2007).

3 Cf. West & Hendricks (1977: 701).

4 Cf. Lowe-Evans (1995).

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#### SUMMARY

##### THE POTENTIAL SYMBOLISM IN JAMES JOYCE'S "A PAINFUL CASE"

This paper analyses the significance of colours and certain places in James Joyce's story "A Painful Case", and includes references to etymological roots. It also examines certain religious connotations and issues of sexuality and gender, the use of symbols and possible directions of interpreting the events and characters depicted.

**KEYWORDS:** symbolism, colours, dark, black, sexuality, religion, paralysis.