



History, Politics,  
and Life in *Dubliners*

# Joyce's City

JACK MORGAN



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and Life in *Dubliners* ,  
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*To Anne Cotterill for her friendship, help, and encouragement*

*For myself, I always write about Dublin,  
because if I can get to the heart of Dublin  
I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world.*

—Joyce

## Acknowledgments

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## Abbreviations

Joyce's works are cited parenthetically in the text using the following abbreviations.

- CW     *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*. Edited by Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking, 1959.
- D       "Dubliners": *Text and Criticism*. Edited by Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- FW     *Finnegans Wake*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- P       "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man": *Text, Criticism, and Notes*. Edited by Chester G. Anderson. New York: Viking, 1968.
- SH     *Stephen Hero*. Edited by John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon. New York: New Directions, 1963.
- SL     *Selected Joyce Letters*. Edited by Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking, 1975.
- U       *Ulysses*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler et al. New York: Garland, 1984.



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# CHAPTER 1

## Dubliners Overall

### A Walk-About

This chapter is introductory, an overview of *Dubliners* undertaking to identify resonant themes that weave through Joyce's text. A few things might be mentioned beforehand, however—the problematic publishing history of the book, for example. Though less historic than what Joyce confronted in the case of *Ulysses*, the publishing tribulations in connection with *Dubliners* were considerable—the manuscript languished for almost a decade before printing hitches and issues of censorship, or fear of censorship on the publisher's part, were resolved. When the collection finally appeared in 1914, to no great reception and only modest sales, it was soon eclipsed, before it had established itself, by *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which, when published in 1916, immediately became the front and center Joyce work in terms of critical and popular attention. Considered less distinctly modernist and innovative than *A Portrait*, *Dubliners* was marginalized and for years drew what interest it did mostly in light of *A Portrait*, *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). The year 1969, however, saw the publication of Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz's "*Dubliners*": *Text and Criticism*, and, in the same year, Warren Beck's *Joyce's Dubliners: Substance, Vision, and Art*. From then to 2006, when the Norton Critical Edition, edited by Margot Norris, appeared, and up to now, *Dubliners* has received abundant critical attention in its own right and has come to be regarded as clearly a major part of Joyce's oeuvre. The contemporary American novelist Michael Chabon, in a 2012 *New York*

*Review of Books* article, for example, in which he is unstinting in his praise of *Ulysses* and "The Dead," cites also "Araby," "A Little Cloud," and "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" as each a masterpiece, and finds *A Portrait*—who would have thought it in 1916?—rather flawed.<sup>1</sup>

Chabon's article briefly revived the debate that has long gone on concerning the hopeless obscurity or not of *Finnegans Wake*, but the piece is perhaps more valuable in terms of its affording Joyce's work from *Dubliners* through *Ulysses* the kind of reading it did not often receive from the late sixties to very recently. Granting that *Dubliners* criticism during the heyday of theory benefited greatly from high critical scrutiny and discussion, the present study tracks more in the direction of—for want of a better word—relatively "humanistic" readings such as Chabon's, or Terence Brown's exceptional introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Dubliners* (1992), or Michael Levenson's invaluable essay "Living History in 'The Dead'" (1994); other examples could of course be cited.

Working back from Joyce's later books, critics in the past few decades have made the case, or strongly reinforced it, that previous to *A Portrait* Joyce was not simply an Irish Zola or Ibsen, but they have then sometimes turned to overly strenuous revisionist, antirealist readings. It is true that the term "realist," as traditionally understood, is unsatisfactory in Joyce's case, that in *Dubliners* as in the later works, "a mirage of language ... at once real and transubstantiating"<sup>2</sup> blends elements of the lyrical and poetic, the mythical and magic-realistic, the dreamlike and nightmarish, with a realist's passion for precision. Critiques of realism such as Robert Scholes's in *The Fabulators* (1967), however, rejected the concept of literary realism entirely, or came close to doing so, and have tended to establish a radical dichotomy between "surface" and substance in readings of early Joyce. Where once the view had tended to be, as John V. Kelleher argued in 1965, that the stories in *Dubliners* were nine-tenths naturalistic,<sup>3</sup> now the naturalistic soil, once it was sifted for its symbolic gold, was, as it were, tossed aside as dross. Where roughly speaking most everything in *Dubliners* had been taken as it appeared, now, in influential critical circles at least, nothing was to be taken as it appeared.

Kelleher and later Levenson called attention to the way in which the individuals and events in "The Dead" are historically contextualized. Levenson in 1994 affirmed that, since Kelleher's 1965 article, the historical specificity of "The Dead" could not be ignored—nor in recent criticism, for the most part, has it been. Levenson noted that in the circulation of words, beliefs, and

emotions between personal and public life, "The Dead" "forcibly brings the question of history inside the terms of its personal narrative."<sup>4</sup> The present study views the entirety of *Dubliners* in that light. The historic expansion and consolidation of Catholic Church power in Ireland, for example, considered in chapters 5 and 8 of the present book, bears on *Dubliners* throughout. While it would not do, following upon the once common assumption that Joyce wrote an hermetic, art-for-art's-sake fiction, to go to the other extreme, characterizing him as an essentially political writer, Irish historical and political realities are indeed woven into the fabric of *Dubliners*, so much so that the present book could have been subtitled *Dubliners and the Question of Ireland*. That question pervades "Two Gallants," for example, and even shadows character studies such as "A Little Cloud" in which Chandler's reaction to Gallaher's condescension in the pub is notable: "Gallaher was only patronizing him by his friendliness *just as he was patronizing Ireland by his visit*" (D 80, italics added). The question of Ireland is always near like this, brooding over the consciousness of *Dubliners*—a book that Joyce in fact characterized as a chapter in the moral history of his country. Defending the collection from editorial censorship, he wrote to Grant Richards in May of 1906 regarding points Richards had objected to in the manuscript: "I fight to retain them because I believe that in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it *I have taken the first steps towards the spiritual liberation in my country*" (SL 88, italics added).

The present chapter will cite, for example, the "stifled back-answer" in disadvantaged colonial discourse, the kind of stifled answer Margot Norris has noted in feminist terms in "The Dead" (see chapter 8), but the theme is noted here occurring earlier—in "Counterparts" and "Clay," for example. Joyce's sense of the humiliating nineteenth-century workplace as it figures in "The Boarding House," "Clay," "Counterparts," and even "Eveline," is viewed as well in terms of its particular colonialist and Irish edge, as presenting an aspect of spiritual captivity and as part of Joyce's project to make manifest a historical and contemporary syndrome wearing upon the city and having its worst effects on a certain underclass populace. Even in "Araby," against the fair's initial bright promise, the street balladeers sing of "the troubles in our native land," and intimidating British voices intrude at the end. "Araby" might be seen as informed by what Brian O'Doherty, in a discussion of Jack B. Yeats's work, identifies as a dominant myth in Irish culture "of a collective identity which was sentenced by history to travel for centuries between the

futile harbours of promise and regret."<sup>5</sup> So does "After the Race" inscribe that myth, and most of the other stories in one way or another do as well. The following chapters also take note of the historical period in which *Dubliners* itself is set—the city in the throes of the aforementioned Catholic conservative surge, in the wake of the Irish "Devotional Revolution" begun a few decades before, politically and emotionally exhausted after Parnell's fall, and suffering from a century-long economic decline.

Given the questions presently being raised about the future course of literary criticism, we find ourselves in a period of reassessing. The discussions following try not to trail off into theoretical controversy, however—though the "Clay" chapter may represent a slight exception to that. Nor is there any attempt here to provide an exegetical march through the stories one by one; rather, representative narratives are selected that together, it is hoped, create a meaningful nexus of personal lives and historical issues.

If one may anticipate the question, why another book on *Dubliners*? The present study frames the stories in ways—literary, historical, popular-cultural—that they have not been previously. American literature, for example, often ignored in Joyce criticism, is cited frequently in forthcoming chapters; "The Dead" indeed is presented as suffused with American influences. Time goes by, of course—these days, for instance, the word "epiphany," so exercised in Joyce criticism for so long, is cant, a popular usage one hears everywhere employed by people who have never heard of James Joyce. The centennial year of the publication of *Dubliners* is in the offing as this is being written; new readings of the work are inevitable and called for, and there will presumably be many more books to come addressing these compelling stories.



The poet Edward Dorn, writing of the United States at a certain juncture, describes a culture in which there is nothing ennobling—"no purity, no endeavor / toward human grace."<sup>6</sup> His lines would aptly describe the culture of Dublin in Joyce's story collection, his notes from underground portraying the major city of a dejected Ireland he judged to be "destined by God to be the eternal caricature of the serious world" (CW 177). Although the stories, as Ezra Pound noted early on, deal with common human emotions, Joyce's subject is life on Dublin's streets, and the universality of his work emerges

from its radical localism.<sup>7</sup> It is through the “givenness of the real, in time and place,” as Terence Brown notes of the book, that its “psychological, social, cultural and moral realities ... reveal themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Allowing for their many variations, typically these narratives do offer glimpses, however slight, of a banished spirit welling up—reflected importantly in Ireland’s brief hint of glory under Parnell, for example, but also in more everyday endeavors toward grace by individuals in the city’s work districts, offices, and rooming houses attempting to get by with a degree of equanimity and dignity. Most of the lives in *Dubliners* are thwarted, however, and stunted like the houses Chandler sees as he looks downriver from Grattan Bridge (*D* 73). Joyce chose to ameliorate this dreariness in “The Dead,” it is true, through the spirit of hospitality and festivity portrayed in that concluding story.

“Joyce opened up the city as a legitimate Irish landscape,” Dillon Johnston observes, and nullified the privileged position of the peasant in Irish literature. Joyce considered Irish ruralism moribund as it had theretofore found literary expression, Johnson notes—too often devoted to selling local-color on the mass-markets.<sup>9</sup> While Joyce’s sense of the city and of cities themselves was more nuanced and less desolate than that of Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Eliot, and other modernists, for the most part, *Dubliners* represents a walk on Dublin’s dark side, though the book is informed by the recognition that much of the wear and tear on the city’s vitality owes to its colonial legacy.

Should we be tempted to think that the inert, provincial Dublin Joyce portrays—a limping, dismal municipality for the most part—merely reflects his own jaundiced view; the American writer Harold Frederic, *New York Times* London correspondent through the 1880s–1890s, an Irish nationalist and an avid and careful student of Irish life, wrote a decade before the time frame of *Dubliners* that in Ireland, especially in Dublin, a third, or perhaps half, of the male population was most of the time ensconced in a pub, “body and soul at the service of the publican.” Mr. Kernan in “Grace” exemplifies this population when, after his drunken fall down the stairs at the pub and having bitten a piece off his tongue, he has in mind yet another drink: “ant we have a little ... ?” (*D* 152). Frederic noted in Ireland a permanently idle class that was spreading “a murrain of vagrancy and drunken example through the better ordered youth about them.” Jack, the caretaker in “Ivy Day,” himself a drinker, complains about the “drunken bowsy” his son is at nineteen years of age: “I sent him to the Christian Brothers and I done what I could for him, and there he goes boosing about” (*D* 119–120). Regarding those youths who

survive in spite of such an environment, Frederic observes that these exceptions will not remain in their maturity, "they will sail off for America or the Antipodes." In terms of Ireland, even the expression "social life" returns to one like a boomerang, he writes. Joyce's "A Mother" depicts the indolence and discord that prevail in the Dublin social-cultural world; the concert series Mrs. Kearney is so concerned with ends up a poorly attended, amateurish failure. And in "A Painful Case" Mr. Duffy first meets Mrs. Sinico at a similar Dublin concert, where "the house, thinly populated and silent, gave distressing prophesy of failure" (*D* 109). "What is there of the social," Frederic further questioned, in an existence "where the taking of food, either at home or in a hotel, is racially regarded as something to be slurred over."<sup>10</sup> The meals portrayed in *Dubliners*, with the exception of the dinner in "The Dead," reflect this kind of disregard. In "Clay" the fare presented at the Donnelly's gathering consists of nuts—there is no mention of a thing more in terms of food (*D* 104). Maria may have anticipated this sparseness and hoped the plum cake would enhance things a little.

Frederic noted as well the carelessness defining Dublin's middle-class neighborhoods. "Go through miles of dingy, shabby genteel residences which house the trading, professional, and general middle classes of Dublin ... and the rarest sight of all will be a place conveying the impression of a cheerful, tidy, well-ordered, self-contained home. Everywhere instead there is the dominant suggestion of a temporary make-shift lodging place ... not worth anyone's while to essay any of the little comforts and graces of domesticity." The interior spaces portrayed in *Dubliners*, to the extent they are portrayed at all, are of the perfunctory, careless sort, Frederic remarks. The committee room in "Ivy Day" has apparently been the beneficiary of as much aesthetic care and inspiration as a barn or a warehouse, and the sense we have of the home to which Farrington returns in "Counterparts" is that it is no more graciously cared for than the dingy committee room (*D* 97). When Chandler in "A Little Cloud" returns home and surveys his residence, for all the identification he has with it and its furnishings, he might as well be in a dentist's waiting room (*D* 83). The boy in "Araby" lives in a house that seems to have more of the former tenant about it than it does the present inhabitants; it is as if his quasi-family is there only provisionally, not settled in. The waste room behind the kitchen is "littered with old useless papers" that belonged to the priest who formerly lived there (*D* 29). If there is little sense of the graces of domesticity in *Dubliners*, Joyce heightens the impression of this lack,



notably in "Araby" and "The Sisters," in that the young protagonists have only uncles and aunts as their caretakers. Frederic remarks "the common, universal blight of helplessness" in late nineteenth-century Ireland—"hopelessness, stretching its sterilizing touch to the very hearthstone of the family."<sup>11</sup> It is within this atmosphere of national lapse, early in a period when, as Frank O'Connor put it, it seemed that "the intellect of Ireland had been driven into the wilderness," that the characters in *Dubliners* attempt to live their lives.<sup>12</sup> A line in "Ivy Day" that seems to detach itself from the immediate context, is haunting in its spiritual implications: "'What are you doing in the dark?' asked a voice" (D 110).

### Sweet Rosie O'Grady

While Joyce in *Dubliners* does exhibit the antihumanist severity characteristic of what Hugh Kenner has called the "great Irish nihilists," the book has a vitality to it, a remarkable energy despite the insistent dreariness of the subject matter. If this were not so, Joyce's liberation project would be lacking an important element, the sense of a spirit, captivating and elusive as music—indeed often residing *in* music—surviving and holding forth the possibility of recovery. The stories, as is often noted, are not the final word on Joyce's sense of the city; for the most part they examine a particularly debilitated demographic reflecting the historical slough of despond that were the years following the decline in Dublin's economic stature and importance as a city through the nineteenth century, the decline appearing all the worse in the aftermath of the Parnell troubles, when colonial subjugation weighed especially heavily. Joyce famously wrote to his brother in a 1906 letter that he felt he had been unnecessarily harsh toward Ireland in *Dubliners*, and had reproduced "none of the attraction of the city," confessing that he had never been comfortable in any city outside Dublin except Paris (SL 109–110).

Early on, Joyce's evident love for Dublin and the city's life, however irritably expressed, was noted. The novelist Filson Young, who read *Dubliners* in manuscript in 1905, was struck by Joyce's portrayal of the city "with sympathy and patience."<sup>13</sup> William Empson observed similarly of *Ulysses* in 1954: "I have long thought my view of that book is not only much less dismal than what critics usually say about it, but also allows you to think that the author had decent feelings in writing it, instead of nasty ones."<sup>14</sup> Even Stanislaus Joyce initially missed the positive energies in that novel, only years later coming



to recognize "that vigour of life that is packed into the seven-hundred-odd quarto pages of *Ulysses*."<sup>15</sup> Harold Bloom notes in *Dubliners* a "Paterian 'flare of radiance' against darkening backgrounds," and Marilyn French cites the book's humane sympathies, "a peculiarly Joycean synthesis of irony with compassion."<sup>16</sup> Michael Chabon remarks particularly of *Ulysses* and "The Dead": "Between them those two works managed to say everything a pitying heart and a pitiless intellect could say about death and love and literature, loss and desire, friendship and animosity, talk and silence, mourning and dread."<sup>17</sup>

The vitality of *Dubliners* would seem to derive primarily from the ardent sense of life animating the writing, the accuracy and lucidity of Joyce's prose, and the acutely depicted lives in the stories as the characters look for something heartening in the rainy reality of their Dublin existence and try to move toward that. "Eveline," a narrative of inertia if any is, turns on Eveline Hill's yearning for a decent life: "Why should she be unhappy?" she asks herself. "She had a right to happiness" (D 40). While many of the characters in *Dubliners* are, like Lenahan's voice in "Two Gallants," "winnowed of vigour" (D 50), Gabriel Conroy considers in "The Dead" that years of routine and habit had *not* quenched Gretta's soul nor his, "had not quenched all their souls' tender fire" (D 214). He is emotionally overwhelmed as he sees the possibility of renewed romance unfolding out of the couple's morning excursion, a setting aside of their routines: "The blood went bounding through his veins; and the thoughts were rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous" (D 213). Things don't go well in the immediate situation, it is true, but this concern with the spirit not failing informs *Dubliners* overall and in this particular case implies something deeper than the sexual yearning that is part of it. Joyce's concern with the sacredness of the life energy and the calamity that is its destruction comes to the fore powerfully, for example, in a dream he once had that stemmed, he believed, from the death of his younger brother, Georgie, at fourteen:

There is no dancing. Go down among the people, young boy, and dance for them. ... He runs out darkly-clad, lithe and serious to dance before the multitude. There is no music for him. He begins to dance far below in the amphitheatre with a slow and supple movement of his limbs, passing from movement to movement in all the grace of youth and distance, until he seems to be a whirling body, a spider wheeling amid space, a star. I desire to shout to him words of praise, to shout arrogantly over the heads