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“It was that chalice he broke...”: James Joyce’s Dissatisfaction with Religion in His Short Story, *The Sisters**

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Abstract

This paper examines James Joyce’s dissatisfaction and frustration with the established religion and the Catholic Church in this earliest short story *The Sisters*. In so doing, the paper focuses upon two strategies or two conditions used by Joyce in the story to represent his relentlessness with the church and the priesthood. One of them is his use of “pederasty” between the priest and young children, by which Joyce disgraces the image of the priesthood and the church. The second one is the “broken” image of the “chalice” as an important symbol. By means of these two strategies, Joyce not only deconstructs the trustworthy image of the church and the priesthood but also becomes able to create a free space outside the influence of the border of the church for his artistic vocation.

Key Words: Religion, church, pederasty, chalice, and freedom.

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Introduction

James Joyce's dissatisfaction with religion, church and priesthood in his short story *The Sisters* could be better understood if the relationship between the "nets" of Irish society and his view of artist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) was properly comprehended (1961: 327). One of the "nets" in the Althusserian sense is religion and the Roman Catholic Church with its traditional, stagnant, restrictive and "paralytic" nature and structure, which obviously inhibits the self or the artist from what Joyce metaphorically calls "flight", a "flight" which would avail an artist of chance or opportunity to be free and creative by going beyond ordinary aspects of life shaped by the "nets" of society (327). Michael Seidel rightfully points out that "Among the topics that weave their way through all of Joyce's writing[,] few are more prominent than the vocational choice Joyce makes to reject the Catholic priesthood and forge a career as an artist" (2002: 14). In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus, the chief character of the novel, expresses inwardly the moment at which he has to make a choice between the acceptance of an offer by the Catholic Church to join the order and his own independent artistic quest based on rejection:

All through his boyhood he had mused upon that which he had so often thought to be his destiny and when the moment had come for him to obey the call he had turned aside, obeying a wayward instinct. Now time lay between: the oils of ordination would never anoint his body. He had refused (Joyce, 1961: 298-9).

In this epiphanic condition, Stephen Dedalus suddenly realizes that the church will not be the right place and right vocation for him in his future life because it has an ordered and limited way of life sanctified by the church but decides to seek his "wayward instinct" as being difficult, unpredictable and rebellious, even though it brings about marginalization and exclusion from the common-sense way of life. Contrary to what the church imposes, the "wayward instinct" suggests a sense of freedom, individual quest for his identity and voice on his own in life. Moreover, while dreaming of "A new wild life in his veins" and crying upon his refusal "to greet the advent of the life that had [constantly] cried to him" (301, 303), Stephen Dedalus starts an instant conversation with his friend Davin over Ireland, nationalism, religion, and language, and Davin wants him to look up to Ireland, learn its language and "be one of us", but Stephen feverishly rejects his offer and says:

This race and this country and this life produced me...The soul is born...It has a slow and dark birth, more mysteriously than the birth of the body. *When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, and religion. I shall try to fly by those nets* (327, emphasis added).

In another conversation with Cranly, furthermore, he speaks more frankly once asked about his “point of view”, concerning his rejection of the church:

Look here, Cranly, he said. You have asked me what I would do and I would not do. I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. *I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use - silence, exile and cunning...* (362, emphasis added).

Like James Joyce himself, Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* attempts to get rid of “nets” – “nationality”, “language” and “religion” – which, he thinks, not only attempts to control his life but also prevent him from expressing himself “in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can”; he longs to “to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (367). But Stephen believes that these established restrictive traditional “nets”, particularly religion, are big barriers before him to achieve this purpose due to their inflexible, stagnant and corrupted nature and views; for him, particularly religion has lost its original values but oppresses the soul to the point when he realizes there is no salvation and “flight” not only to express himself “in the smithy of my soul” but also to achieve “an aesthetic end” or a sense of freedom, in which he can be distant, indifferent, and creative as an artist with his “wayward instinct” (330).

First published in the “Irish Homestead” on 13 August 1904 and then included as the first story in the 1914 version of *Dubliners* with different revisions, Joyce’s short story *The Sisters* obviously seems a forerunner of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Joyce similarly represents his frustration with the Catholic Church and priesthood and then artistically deconstructs the basis, image and authority of the priesthood through different ways and strategies in the story to escape from the dogmatic nature and restraining climate of the religion, even though he is not as radical as he is in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In both works, he artistically stresses the view that the Catholic Church and Dublin are imbued with “the special odour of corruption which, I hope, floats over my stories’ in *Dubliners* (Joyce, 1966: 122-3), or they are the “centre of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects – childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life” (134). Indeed, “the special odour of corruption” and “paralytic” nature of the city and religion does not inspire freedom physically and mentally but favours spiritual imprisonment in life. The way he views the city and religion as having “the special odour of corruption” as well as being “the centre of paralysis”, in fact, represents one of deep predicaments of modernist writers mainly caused by the “discoveries of science” and other developments in the last quarter of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries – “Kepler’s laws, Darwin’s theory of evolution, Freud’s explorations of the unconscious [which] gradually made

[them] realize that” they are “but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe” (Glücksberg, 1960: 16). This new condition not only undermines “the foundations of religions and destroyed the very possibilities of faith in life” but also leads modernist writers to suffer profoundly from “a sense of cosmic alienation”: “once the belief in God is scrapped, human values were inevitably subjected to a process of dissociation and revealed as fictions. Perhaps consoling and beautiful but not borne out by the nature of empirical reality” (16, 27). Hence it is possible to see Joyce’s early dissatisfaction and “alienation” from religion, the Catholic Church and the priesthood in *The Sisters*.

However, *The Sisters* has not drawn attention of critics, concerning the ways in which Joyce deconstructs the very “foundations” of the Catholic Church and defames its image by showing it in an unscrupulous, stagnant, corrupted and “paralytic” condition, which not only advances no one in life but also stops the artist from achieving a sense of artistic freedom and creativity. Joyce critics have examined and scrutinized *The Sisters* in general and thematic ways (Benstock, 1966; Kennedy, 1975; Glasheen, 1977, Robinson, 1987, Albert, 1990, Leonard, 2004 and Spinks, 2009). For example, Fritz Senn argues that “even in his earliest published prose Joyce wrote in a most complex, heavily allusive style, different from its later convoluted intricacies in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in degree only” (1965: 66). Senn also continues to state that during the 10-year difference of two different publications, the story underwent a process of distilling and brought about a very dense text, “full of echoes, allusions and quotations”, yet the story loses its straightforwardness in its narrative and becomes a very elusive on its deeper level of meaning (71). For Senn, then, there occurs a view that while the story of *The Sisters* still offers some opportunities for a comparative study of different versions, there also skulks the danger of taking “Joyce’s words too far in an unwanted direction” (66). Moreover, Florence Walzl focuses upon the two versions of *The Sisters* in its publications of both 1904 and 1914 in that he compares and contrast two versions of the story and characters (1973: 375-421). Finally, Therese Fisher explores the narrative strategy of Joyce in *The Sisters* through his representation of the unnamed boy and maintains that the narrator “can [...] be defective and reliable at the same time. It is defective, because of his limited intellectual abilities [due to his young age], and reliable, because of his naivety” (1971: 87).

Although there may be some interception points with the critical views above, however, this paper focuses upon Joyce’s dissatisfaction and frustration with the religious establishment in *The Sisters* not only in compliance with the current mainstream of anti-religious views, attitudes and temperaments among intellectuals, writers and artists during the modern period in the early decades of the twentieth century but also in a way that his dissatisfaction with the established religion is closely linked to his view of the artistic freedom and creativity without submitting to constraining “nets” of society: that is, Joyce regards the established religion as an important impediment, which, he thinks, does not allow the artist to

create a space of his own to manoeuvre his artistic vision of “flight”, vision and vocation beyond the borders of “nets” of Irish society. In so doing, the paper examines two strategies or two situations, which Joyce artistically employs in *The Sisters* not only to illuminate his discontent with religion as one of “nets” in Irish society but also to see the direction of Joyce’s artistic vocation, which becomes much clearer in his mature works.

The first strategy or situation is his use of “pederasty” or “paedophilia”, “the condition of being sexually attracted to children”, which is related in the story to a possible sexual relationship between the unnamed young boy and Father James Flynn in particular and between young children and the priest in general. As represented in *The Sisters*, this possible pederastic relationship and its crippling psychological and spiritual burden cause a total unrecoverable “paralysis” not only in the image of the Catholic Church but also in Father Flynn’s personal life, together with his strong priestly obligations and beliefs since “From the evil seed of lust”, as Joyce writes in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* “all other deadly sins had sprung forth” (1961: 253).

Secondly, the paper also examines in connection with the first strategy Joyce’s use of the “chalice” as a robust religious symbol, which Father Flynn “broke” as a result of his psychic conflict and “paralysis” caused by his abuse of priestly duty and divine promise. In this “paralytic” condition, Father Flynn comes to realize the fact that the chalice “contained nothing” for him from now on (Joyce, 1993: 18); it is useless and empty of meaning, even though it obviously stands for Christianity and its tradition. As the paper discusses, Joyce employs these two strategies of “pederasty” and the broken “chalice” to disparage and undermine the very basis of the traditional institutional religion and then show it meaningless; he represents in *The Sisters* as in his other works his own dissatisfaction and anger with the traditional theology, yet what is also important in these two strategies is that he represents his fictional characters in a way that he, through his representation of them, distances himself personally from the text and the debate of religion and becomes artistically indifferent to the established religion for “discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by [Father Flynn’s] death” in *The Sisters* (11). By this attitude, Joyce, in his earliest story, artistically indicates the track of his own life in the future as well as what he seeks in life as a writer and artist, which finds its meaning in his mature works.

When *The Sisters* opens in 1895, in Dublin, Ireland, the unnamed boy comes down to dinner. The boy immediately witnesses the talk of the family friend Old Cotter, his uncle Jack and aunt about his mentor Father James Flynn, concerning his death after “the third stroke” (7). Since he used to be the student of Father Flynn, who had taught him how “to pronounce Latin properly”, together with other subjects, he immediately recalls the priest and his teaching:

I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said the night before, he had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte, and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest (11-2).

But the talk shifts at once from the death of the priest to another subject, a subject related to the priest's possible sexual attraction towards young children, and Old Cotter and his uncle Jack share the same view that the priest should not have been allowed to approach children in such a close way. The boy finds himself at once in a situation that what Old Cotter, his uncle and aunt are actually talking about concerns him closely, a concern related to a possible pederastic relationship between the priest and children, and he as a former student of Father Flynn and a young boy falls at once into a situation of suspicion. As seen below, even though there is no clear indication or evidence deriving from the narrative and the talks in the story, there arouses a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with the attitude of the priest and his priestly duty, which is, in fact, Joyce's own discontent and disparagement of the Catholic Church and its role in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century as in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this first published story, Joyce is not much explicit in the way he disparages religion and priesthood, yet he, as stated below, artistically employs the strategies mentioned above to imply it in its overall effect upon the reader. The first one of them is Joyce's use of pederasty or paedophilia, which allows him not only to mock the priesthood and church but also to show its corruption, worthlessness in the eyes of people. Just at the beginning, therefore, *The Sisters* starts casting doubt on the reader about the possibility of such a relationship between the boy and the priest, whose first implication is given through the conversation between Old Cotter, who sits at the fire, smoking and the boy's uncle Jack: "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..." (7), and he continues to state: "I have my own theory about it," he said. 'I think it was one of those...peculiar cases...But it's hard to say...' (8). Although Old Cotter implicitly claims a possible pederastic relationship between the priest and the young boys, his half-told sentences and three dots suggest a sense of vagueness and incompleteness in meaning; even Old Cotter does not explain his "theory" about the relationship, yet the boy is very much disturbed by Old Cotter's talk, and he thus calls him "tiresome old fool", "tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!" (8-9). In order to complicate the situation further, the boy's uncle naively tells the boy that "your friend [Father Flynn] is gone, you'll be sorry to hear" (8). From the talks of both Old Cotter and his uncle Jack, the boy is sure that he is "under [close] observation" and acts "as if the news had not interested me" (8). The situation also deteriorates further once the boy's uncle tells Old Chatter that the youngster and the priest used to be "great friends. The old chap taught him a great deal of, mind you; and they say he had *a great wish for him*" (8, emphasis added). Old Cotter closely observes the boy and his attitudes, and the boy thus feels that Old Cotter's "little beady black eyes were

examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate” (8). Moreover, Old Cotter is also intent on talking about the priest and his possible relationship with young children: “I wouldn’t like children of mine,’ he said, ‘to have too much to say to a man like that’. ‘What I mean is,’ said Old Cotter, ‘it’s bad for children. My idea is that: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be...am I right, Jack?’”, and Jack immediately replies, “That’s my principle, too...Let him learn to box his corner,” (9).

As seen in these quotations, the fragmented vague modernist narrative does not invest us with a clear evidence and information that there may have been pederastic relationship between the boy and the priest, or between the priest and other young boys; like the boy, we as reader just strive “to extract meaning from [Old Cotter’s] unfinished sentences” (9-10), yet all the talks, along with the boy’s timid and sceptic attitudes, may suggest the possibility of such a sexual attraction from the priest’s side towards the boy in particular and towards other young children in general. In the quotations above, nevertheless, Joyce not only uses his fictional characters Old Cotter, Jack, the boys and aunt, together with their talks in the Bakhtinian sense, to imply this possibility, one of main strategies of modernist narrative, in which he distances himself from the scene, but he also gives rise to suspicion, doubt and question in the mind of the reader through the talks of his characters: could it be really possible? The possibility of such a question and doubt is obviously a negative view about the Catholic Church and its priest in the sense that the church in general and the priest in particular are supposed to be the upholders of morality and divine responsibilities with their pioneering roles and functions in life, but Joyce, having general anti-religious sentiments, illuminates the idea that even the doubt of such a rumour clearly defiles and defames the image and reliability of the Church and the priest in the eyes of Christians. In *The Sisters*, therefore, having heard the conversations between Old Cotter and Jack, the boy’s aunt waits for a while and then asks Old Cotter, “But why do you think it’s not good for children, Mr. Cotter?, and he says: “it is bad for children...because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...” (9).

The “effect” seems to have already occupied the mind of the boy. He gets very uncomfortable and “puzzled” with Old Cotter’s words, which obviously alludes to him, so that when he is in his bed, the boy tries “to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences” of Old Cotter (9-10). Yet it is evident that there is something wrong with the priest, and the boy gradually starts to give meaning to the words of Old Cotter and then visualizes inwardly the priest’s “the heavy grey face of paralytic”, which “still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something...It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why his lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of *paralysis* and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve *the simoniac of his sin*” (10, emphasis added). In this quotation, there seems a close relationship between the words “paralysis” and “the simoniac of his sin”, in which both words

are linked to the idea that the priest might have committed a sin against his divine promise, along with the order and teaching of the Church, which has led to the psychological and spiritual “paralysis” of the priest. Father Flynn’s “heavy grey face of paralytic” symbolically represents the “paralyzed” Catholic Church in the story, together with the possibility to paralyze Christian principles and morality through the immoral practices of Father Flynn, even though the “paralysis” is also linked to other aspects in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. That is, the Irish people seem divided, frustrated and disappointed in their views and thus feel unable to entrust their children to the priest for their religious and moral education, which used to be among his reliable activities in the church since the very beginning, yet now it becomes a matter of fun, immorality and dispute. In addition, the word “simony” also associates with the view of corruption within the church as it sells blessings, pardons or other favours by the Roman Catholic Church to its member as in the Middle Ages. Through these acts, it seems that the corrupted church has already deviated itself from its original divine tenets and thus becomes unable to play its leading trustworthy spiritual role not only in teaching religion and morality properly but also in leading its members and society to new situations and conditions in life due to its stagnant, paralyzed and corrupted situation. Eventually, the boy also seems in a position that he feels as if the priest were trying to confess this “paralytic” situation to him for acquitting himself of the possible dishonest deed.

The following morning, the boy, under the influence of the words and “paralytic” image of the priest, visits Father Flynn’s house and finds a “card pinned on the crape” which announces the death of the priest (10), yet he does not have courage to knock on the door:

I wished to go in and look at him but I had not the courage to knock. I walked away slowly along the sunny side of the street, reading all the theatrical advertisements in the shop-windows as I went. 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. I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said the night before, he had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte, and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me *how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts*. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely

printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions (11-2, emphasis added).

As this long quotation suggests, the boy, though he gets angry with Old Cotter and appears as if he were not interested in the subject under discussion, wants to see his dead body of the priest; there is something which drags him towards the priest – love or something. But just after the death of the priest, he observes that no one mourns for the priest, even though he is an important figure not only in the church establishment but also in the eyes of the Christian people; there is also an atmosphere that everyone seems happy for the death of the priest, so that the death of the priest strangely fills him with “*a sensation of freedom*” as if he acquitted himself of what his uncle had said one night before: simply he “freed” himself from the suspicion and disturbing inner feeling. Although “It filled me with fear”, the boy strives to give meaning to the “paralytic” condition of priest and his life; he remembers his words, “I am not long for this world” and constantly reiterates the word of “paralysis”: “It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being” (7). As seen here, the boy mentally grows up, gradually builds up his identity and perception and thus tries to conceptualize the words of the priest with their new meaning and understating. Through his representation of the boy, Joyce may mean to say two things concerning “*a sensation of freedom*”. First, as Joyce represents the boy, his doubtful attitudes and worry, may imply that there could have been a pederastic relationship between the boy and Father Flynn, or at least there could have been such a relationship between the priest and other children, and thus since the boy is also young, he also feels himself under a possible suspicion as seen in the following quotation: “as I pattered, he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and *let his tongue lie upon his lower lip - a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well*” (12-3, emphasis added). In the quotation, the way the priest *let his tongue lie upon his lower lip* implies sexuality, which obviously disturbs the boy, so that the death of the priest rescues him for ever not only from the guilt-ridden feeling but also from his “uneasiness”, and thus, he, like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, romantically longs to be “very far way, in some land where the customs were strange – in Persia, I thought...” (13) as the priest takes all the blames and suspicion with him to the eternal residence.

Secondly, the death of Father Flynn represents symbolically the death of the Catholic Church in the lives of Irish people, and even the death of the priest may trivialise further the prestige of the Catholic Church in life or represents an idea that there is no need for the church in life any more. In addition, Joyce also makes fun of the religious establishment through the words of the priest since he once told the boy that “the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the

newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions” (12). What Joyce implies here is that no one pays serious attention to these thick “books”, which are unreadable due to its thickness and thus dusted on the shelves; they are not interesting and appealing but full of cataloguing with uselessness information and empty meaning. It illuminates not only the trivialized views related to the holy Scripture, but it also indicates people’s diminishing concern and interest in the holy book. All these direct and indirect negative views and implications Joyce shows about the Catholic Church and the priest are, indeed, what Joyce himself wanted to do in his own life and in his works, and he managed to do so in his mature works. In his representation of the boy, as in that of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce frees him from the psychological and spiritual tutelage of the “paralytic” priest to enjoy “a sensation of freedom”.

Once the boy gains “*a sensation of freedom*” after the death of Father Flynn, the boy’s aunt takes him on a formal visit to the house of mourning. Nannie, one of Father Flynn’s sisters, receives them in the hall, and then they are taken to the room where the dead body of Father Flynn lies in an open casket “*with his large hands loosely retaining a chalice*” (14, emphasis added). The boy pretends to pray but he comically “could not gather my thoughts because the old woman’s mutterings distracted me. I noticed how clumsily her skirt was hooked at the back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side. The fancy came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin” (14). Here Joyce belittles and satirizes the religious rituals and customs in an artistic and humorous way once the boy is unable to “gather” his thought as Nannie’s mutterings and clothes distract his attention from praying. When they come downstairs, the boy’s aunt and the priest’s two sisters, Nannie and Eliza, start cryptically a conversation about the deceased priest, implying that the priest was mentally unstable for some time before dying and that he may have been involved in some improper acts, causing him to have “the third stroke” and eventual death, which implies the spiritual end of the services the church and the priest normally offer to the public, yet his sisters strangely seem eager to continue this traditional and rituals by offering their quests “wine” and “cream crackers”:

I groped my way towards my usual chair in the corner while Nannie went to the sideboard and brought out *a decanter of sherry and some wine-glasses*. She set these on the table and invited us to *take a little glass of wine*. Then, at her sister's bidding, she filled out the sherry into the glasses and passed them to us. She pressed me to take *some cream crackers* also but I declined because I thought I would make too much noise eating them. *She seemed to be somewhat disappointed at my refusal and went over quietly to the sofa where she sat down behind her sister. No one spoke: we all gazed at the empty fireplace* (14-5, emphasis added).

By offering “sherry and some wine-glass” and “some cream cracker”, Nannie longs to keep intact the religious rituals and tradition just after the death of the priest, yet that the boy refuses to take “wine” and “some cream cracker” due to the fact that he thinks that he “would make too much noise eating them”. The boy’s “refusal” shocks Nannie and then sits down

behind her sister without pressing upon him. In fact, why they are all shocked by his “refusal” is the fact that it is one of main rituals of Christianity, and normally speaking, children die for such things. This is also another artistic strategy employed by Joyce, concerning the end of the long-standing church tradition or concerning the worthlessness of such rituals in life, and it is “the third stroke”, which ends this tradition.

“The third stroke” has eventually brought about the death of Father Flynn, and the dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense between the boy’s aunt and the priest’s two sisters, particularly Eliza, is really essential for us not only for information about the last days and hours of the priest, because the sisters are the only source, but it also provides the reader with the view about how Joyce represents his detachment from the text, which is the one of modernist narrative strategies, and frustration with the Catholic Church through the ways the priest has acted in this last days and finally dies. In the room, the dead silence is broken by the boy’s aunt. She says, “Ah, well, he’s gone to a better world” and then she asks Eliza: “Did he...peacefully? (p. 15). Eliza answers:

‘You couldn’t tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be praised.’

‘And everything....’

‘Father O’Rourke was with him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all.’

‘He knew then?’

‘He was quite resigned’

‘He was resigned,’ said my aunt

‘That’s what the woman we had in to wash him said. She said he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. No one would think he’d make such a beautiful corpse.”

‘Yes, indeed,’ said my aunt...

‘Well, Miss Flynn, at any rate it must be a great comfort for you to know that you did all you could for him. You were both very kind to him, I must say’ (15).

As the quotation suggests, the way Father Flynn has died is actually what is normally expected of a pious person or of the people like the priest – a comfortable, easy, and peaceful death. And the relatives are supposed to be good and care for the patient during the period of illness, and after passing away, they are also expected to carry out certain religious responsibilities and rituals according to the tradition, and the priest’s sisters have done their best in this respect. Besides, as it is normal behind the dead, Eliza also mourns for her brother

and seems very unhappy and sad, yet the boy's aunt tries to console her on the death of her brother:

'Ah, there's no friends like the old friends,' she said, 'when all is said and done, no friends that a body can trust.'

'Indeed, that's true,' said my aunt. 'And I'm sure now that he's gone to his eternal reward he won't forget you and all your kindness to him.'

'Ah, poor James!' said Eliza. 'He was no great trouble to us. You wouldn't hear him in the house any more than now. Still, I know he's gone and all to that....' 'It's when it's all over that you'll miss him,' said my aunt.

'I know that,' said Eliza. 'I won't be bringing him in his cup of beef-tea any me, nor you, ma'am, sending him his snuff. Ah, poor James!' (16-7).

However, Eliza constantly also appears uncomfortable and downhearted; she also often tries to tell something as if there were something wrong about the death of her brother, so that she often sighs deeply during the conversation with the boy's aunt. Eventually, she tells that she noticed something strange in her brother's behaviours in his last days, which had obviously paralyzed the priest: "Mind you, I noticed there was something *queer* coming over him latterly. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open" (17, emphasis added). She continues to state:

'But still and all he kept on saying that before the summer was over he'd go out for a drive one fine day just to see the old house again where we were all born down in Irishtown and take me and Nannie with him. If we could only get one of them new-fangled carriages that makes no noise that Father O'Rourke told him about, them with the rheumatic wheels, for the day cheap - he said, at Johnny Rush's over the way there and drive out the three of us together of a Sunday evening. He had his mind set on that.... Poor James!'

'The Lord have mercy on his soul!' said my aunt.

Eliza took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes with it. Then she put it back again in her pocket and gazed into the empty grate for some time without speaking.

'He was too scrupulous always,' she said. 'The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed.'

'Yes,' said my aunt. 'He was a disappointed man. You could see that' (17-8).

The quotations above illuminate that even though the meaning is, again, very vague and ambivalent, the priest's sisters, who are the only source about his last days, notice something *queer* and *wrong* with their brother, and Eliza often finds him "with his breviary

fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open". It is obvious that he was praying with his "breviary" to divest himself of something which seems to have disturbed him very much internally and morally. There is a dramatic irony here that although the reader could guess the possible problem of the priest, his sister is unable to give meaning to his situation, because he, in her view, "was too scrupulous", yet she says that "The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed." The boy's aunt derives meaning from the talk of Eliza that Father Flynn "was a disappointed man. You could see that". These views, though very covert and vague, imply that the priest was very "disappointed" in his priesthood duties, and it may be possible to connect his situation with what Old Cotter and Jack talk about him at the beginning of *The Sisters*, the talk linked to the pederasty. Most probably, he ironically realizes his unscrupulous behaviour and its heavy spiritual impact on his psyche, together with its scandalous social implications and outcomes, so that he becomes weary of life and profoundly isolates himself from public; he may be crushed under the heavy burden of this unscrupulous attitude, or even its rumours not only disgrace the image of the duties of his priesthood but also deconstruct and fragment the stable foundations of his very identity: simply, the way he is paralyzed could be associated with the "paralysis" of the Catholic Church, the "paralytic" image of morality and prestige in Irish society.

In fact, the view of "paralysis" occupies the reader's mind from the first sentence to the last sentence of *The Sisters*. The attention is always geared to this view, and the view of "paralysis" is always related to the priest, duties of priesthood and church. As soon as *The Sisters* begins, the narrator unnamed boys tells something of Father James Flynn, which arouses at once a sense of suspicion and doubt about him and his "paralytic" condition. The priest is fatally sick, and there is "no hope for him this time", and he dies of "the third stroke". The boy seems very much concerned and worried about the priest's health, and thus he constantly passes the house where he lies sick and tries to see the light because "If he was dead...I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse" (7). As the boy's attitude and words suggest, there is something hidden about the priest which disturbs the boy as well; it could be the boy's love and pity for such an important religious figure, yet he had often said to the boy: "I am not long for this world," (7). Although the boy initially considers his words "idle", he inwardly tries to give meaning to these words now once he gazes up at the window and murmurs the word "paralysis", which always sounds strangely in his ears, "like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism" (7). At once there occurs a relationship between the words "paralysis" and "gnomon in the Euclid" and "simony in the Catechism", regarding the official responsibility of the priest in the church. The narrative is not clear enough, yet these words may imply that he might have abused his religious duties contrary to the common expectations from a priest because now the word "paralysis" strangely sounds to him "like the name of some maleficent and sinful being" (7).

This “paralytic”, “maleficent and sinful” condition eventually causes Father James to break “the chalice”: “*It was that chalice he broke....* That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that *it contained nothing, I mean*. But still.... They say it was the boy’s fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!”. “And was that it?” said my aunt. “I heard something....” (18, emphasis added). The chalice is the most important vessel in the tradition of the Catholic Church used in the Eucharist, which, as *OED* defines, is “a ceremony in the Christian Church during which people eat bread and drink wine in memory of the last meal that Christ had with his disciples” or “the bread and wine taken at this ceremony”. According to the church tradition, the chalice contains the blood of Jesus Christ. It must be blessed by a bishop and is closely associated with the parish priest. Eileen Kennedy argues that after administering the Eucharist, “the priest prays that ‘no stain of sin remain[s] one me...whom these pure and holy sacraments have refreshed’” (1975: 365). Moreover, Florence L. Walzl also maintains that “Joyce...was...thoroughly conversant with traditional symbols in art and religion” (1973: 400). By breaking “the chalice”, Father James Flynn symbolically breaks his traditional vows and commitment to the Catholic Church; now “it contains nothing”, and it has no meaning for him at all. Also, that “it contained nothing” may imply the falseness of the long-standing fallacy about the positions of both the church and the priest, together with their public image and respect. As seen in the quotation, the breaking “the chalice” is also closely connected with “the boy’s fault” and eventually with the sexual implication on the priest’s side in Eliza’s words.

This realization leads the priest to a complete seclusion due to the psychological burden and disturbance, and thus, he, like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, seeks purification and salvation by confessing his sin in the chapel:

‘That affected his mind,’ she said. ‘After that he began to mope 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 still they couldn’t see a sight of him anywhere. So then the clerk suggested to try the chapel. So then they got the keys and opened the chapel and the clerk and Father O’Rourke and another priest that was there brought in a light for to look for him.... And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide- awake and laughing-like softly to himself?’ (18-19).

Here the ways Joyce represents Father Flynn suggest the priest’s quilt-ridden psychology and corruption, in which he mopes by himself, talks to no one and wanders about by himself; he hides himself from public, and eventually he is found in the chapel, where he sits up himself “in the dark in his confession-box, wide- awake and laughing-like softly to himself”. If the “confession-box” is linked to what Old Cotter says at beginning of *The Sisters*, the picture, though still vague, gives us an idea about the priest’s sin: the misuse of the priestly duties and responsibilities. Then Eliza stops immediately as if she were listening to something

in the silent room, and the boy also listens, but “there was no sound in the house: and I knew that the old priest was lying still in his coffin as we had seen him, solemn and truculent in death, *an idle chalice on his breast*” (19, emphasis added). In the end, Eliza ends her conversion and story as well: “Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself.... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him....” (19).

In conclusion, all the views above as well as the words such as “paralysis”, “gnomon”, “simony”, “the paralytic death of priest”, “something gone with him”, and “an idle chalice” which “contained nothing”, illuminate that Joyce represent his own position, dissatisfaction and restlessness with one of the “nets” of Irish society – religion and the Catholic Church – in his earliest short story *The Sisters* at the turn of the twentieth century. The way he disgraces the images of both the priest and the Catholic Church in the story is strictly related to the general position and sentiment of the modernist artist, who endeavours to get rid of all the restrictive, narrow, and stagnant “nets” of society for the sake of freedom and artistic creativity as clearly represented in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: simply, the modernist artist attempts not only to eliminate all the obstacles which constrain him/her from crossing the borders of all the “nets” but also to go beyond them in order to be objective, free, and creative as part of modernist art as well as critical of all the conventional values of society. In his article “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, for instance, Louis Althusser, Marxist French Philosopher, regards “religion” as one of the repressive state apparatuses such as “school, family, political parties, trade-unions, mass media, and art” (1971: 143). For Althusser, the “church” is one of “suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection...to ‘discipline’, not only [state’s] shepherds, but also [state’s] flocks” (145). Moreover, he also argues that “*the Church*” concentrates not only upon “religious functions” but also upon “educational ones” with “a large proportion of the functions of communications”, by which the “church” attempts to “discipline” and control deeply the lives of people (151). In *The Sisters*, Joyce artistically shows his earliest will and insistence to deconstruct the basis of the restrictive, multi-functional roles and functions of the church in life by crossing its borders and walls, which had gradually ruined the church for ages. Within its ruined function and roles, Joyce comes to realize that the church physically and spiritually imprisons individuals, intellectuals and writers when they come to write and express themselves. The second important result derived from the deconstruction of the Catholic Church and priesthood is the view that the boy, like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, becomes able to create a space of his own where he practices his “sensation of freedom” and creativity, even though there is not much about the boy’s creative attempts, rather than his self-realization, in *The Sisters*. Finally, the way the priest and the “chalice” are represented in the story gives the early glimpses of Joyce’s relationship with the religious establishment, which turns into a total rejection as in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

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