A Phoenix Entrapped in Dublin
— Mr Duffy’s Painful Case in *Dubliners* —

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William Trevor (b. 1928), one of the finest living writers of Irish origin and a master of short fiction in his own right, remarks in a recent interview that ‘*Dubliners* is the best of Joyce’ (1). The verdict adumbrates the juror’s concept of literature as much as enunciates the quality of the artifact under examination. Whether the best of James Joyce’s oeuvre or not, *Dubliners* (1914) is certainly a superb piece of work which marks the highest plateau of fiction writing. In a letter to the London publisher Grant Richards, the author disclosed his purport and modus operandi concerning the work:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the center of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order. I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness . . . . (Ellmann, 134)

A collection of fifteen stories subtly integrated into a thematic and structural unity, Joyce’s first published fiction deals with slices of Dublin life tinged in one way or another with frustration and disillusionment. Each tale is endowed with a different protagonist of a different age and background but uniformly of middle or lower-middle class social standing. Beyond the ordinary lives of ordinary people looms Dublin as ‘the old sow that eats her farrow’ (*Portrait*, 470). A mordant spiritual presence, the city infiltrates the subconscious of her citizens and erodes their lives from within, mostly with grievous results. The collection rivets its gaze upon her ‘deadly work’ (*The Sisters*: D, 7; hereafter page numbers alone). Only in the poignant precision of the unnervingly lean prose is the author’s muffled affection for his ‘dear, dirty Dublin’ (*A Little Cloud*, 82) betrayed.

[105]
I

‘A Painful Case’, the eleventh story in *Dubliners*, could well have ended up as a pathetically tawdry episode of platonic love at a lesser hand. Out of a material of overt banality and limited artistic promise, Joyce spun a vignette of extraordinary depth and resonance. Still in his early twenties, the precocious writer probed deep into the inner workings of a middle-aged couple with the insight of a mature artist and managed, with emotion and expression under tight control, to capture moments of an excruciating epiphany about ‘the soul’s incurable loneliness’ (124). John Gordon avers that ‘By conventional Edwardian standards, Mr Duffy’s story is the best-written of *Dubliners*, with the most refinement and tact’ (22). Composed in the established narrative mode of Naturalism, ‘A Painful Case’ appears to be a traditional story that poses little difficulty in appreciation. The truth about it, or more aptly the problem with it, is, however, that what is left unsaid in the text tells as much as, if not more than, the text itself (Rice, 30–1). The narrative simply refuses to be confined within the bounds of Naturalism, Symbolism, Realism, or all combined. It instead claims to be a succinct verbal representation of human experience and perception.

‘Scrupulous meanness’ refers not to the style of language alone but also to the mode of storytelling. In addition, it is incorporated with Joyce’s incapability of ‘using words in one single bare sense only’ (Senn, 66). The result is a formidable reading that constantly challenges the reader to comprehend the nuances of emotion and the shades of meaning. John S. Kelly hence issues a warning on the basis of his narratological analysis of the entire collection:

In *Dubliners* the narration frequently foregoes omniscience to take on the limited consciousness of the characters it is describing. Sometimes (as in ‘The Sisters’) it is perplexed by not having access to the full facts. (xvii)

The reader will easily be led astray unless he listens to the cadence and breathes in the atmosphere. Indeed, in ‘A Painful Case’ as in any other story of the collection, profound feelings ooze from between the lines, from behind the scenes, from the margins of the pages. The predicament of the protagonist is felt more acutely in the voids and silences, while the bleak landscape of his spiritual life grows more vivid after his tale is told. Meagre portion as it may be of a chapter of the moral history of a nation,
‘A Painful Case’ adds a new page to the literary representation of the sorrow of being.

The theme of solitude and alienation is no stranger to modern literature, but ‘A Painful Case’ takes it to the height of rendition rarely seen in the genre of short fiction. The feat is accomplished primarily by virtue of the accumulated effects of the style, the characterization, and the thematic scheme of ‘a double test’ of humanity. In the brief course of the plot, Mr James Duffy, the protagonist, is tried twice for his capacity for mercy and compassion and fails twice due to his puritanical harshness of spirit. The focal point of the narrative hinges upon how he fails each time and how he comes to terms with himself. The trials differ delicately in quality and gravity. They are contrived for Mr Duffy with meticulous care, while his personality and private life are depicted with no less caution. The story is otherwise alarmingly simple: there are only two characters (and one dies halfway), the plotline is as bare as the protagonist’s room, and the narration, equipped with minimum speech and no dialogue apart from a perfunctory legal interrogation, addresses neither rhetorical ingenuity nor metaphysical complexity. In fact, hyperbole is avoided, luridness removed, and sensation kept in check, all deliberately to coordinate with the subdued lifestyle of the reclusive protagonist (Faherty, 381). Even the long newspaper article inserted in the middle of the story may be construed to be less an element of technical novelty than a further attempt to render the prose as drab as the city, to blunt the impact and sharpness of what is reported.

Under the semblance of humdrum, however, ‘A Painful Case’ crystallizes the harrowing interior of a soul writhing in the darkness of its own. Mr Duffy, at the end of his saga of a prematurely terminated courtship and nothing else, emerges as a sobering evocation of the ultimate solitude of the mind. An indelible image is formed of deserted humanity by his solitary figure roaming aimlessly in the wintry scene of a park and listening to the fading drone of a train. In the darkness and rawness of the night, the old days spent with a dead woman encroach on his consciousness and bring him into scrutiny of his own moral fibres. Eventually, he lets all her memory pass away from his mind and goes back to his solitary life with a deeper resignation to his ingrained tenet that ‘we are our own’ (124). The real pain of ‘A Painful Case’ is double-pronged, meant for both of the ill-fated lovers (Magalaner, 87–8). It cannot be felt until the end, until the low-keyed narration melts into the silence of the
night. When it is felt, it pierces the reader to the quick and leaves him in a painful recognition of the hopelessness of human frailties.

The concept of circularity that pervades _Dubliners_ makes inroads into the protagonist’s daily routine and the trajectory of his entire life. Each tale in the collection contains an allusion to an expedition to a certain part of Dublin or a prowl around her streets. The repetitive or circular movements, symptomatic of a stunted state of growth, culminate in the recollection of Patrick Morkan’s mill-horse ‘Johnny’ plodding endlessly around the statue of King William III (‘The Dead’, 236–8). Mr Duffy’s trip to and from the City Centre is no less mechanical or subservient, though it is bereft of such political innuendos as embedded in the tragi-comical episode of Johnny. The apex of circularity in ‘A Painful Case’ is reached in the resuscitation and mutability of life implied in the myth of the Phoenix. What is disconcerting about the narrative is that it executes its own ‘deadly work’ by compensating a death with a birth in a caustic twist of irony. Despite its brevity, ‘A Painful Case’ exhausts the history and humanity of its protagonist and sinisterly hints at the demise of his inner being at the end. Although Mr Duffy’s daily excursion is expected to last until his retirement, there is absolutely no more tale worth telling about him. Hardened in his own bigotry, he will proceed to bury himself in the ethos of Dublin, to yield himself to the city’s perennial descent into morbidity and decrepitude. The mature, intelligent protagonist is lucidly aware that he is damned to eternal sterility and loneliness and that he is the author of his own damnation. The city has tamed his unruly, wayward spirit to no other doom. Another Dubliner is born.

II

Unlike the protagonists of the other stories in _Dubliners_, Mr Duffy evinces no obvious wish to escape from his present circumstances. Nor does he accept his status quo unconditionally. At the opening of his tale, his citizenship floats precariously in between, in a nebulous psychic zone of domestic exiledom. His perverse sensitivity protects itself by crafting a cocoon of its own design and nestling in it in virtual isolation. He shuns ostentation and abhors anything that brings about physical and mental disorder. His dislike of the city and her citizens has taught him to keep as much distance from them as might be allowed to a person of his social and financial position. Visits to his relatives at Christmas and participation in a funeral when they die are all the extent to which he makes
concession to society. Such is the way Mr Duffy compromises with the force of the customs and mores that the old city imposes on her citizens. Curiously, and uncannily in a sense, this uncongenial attitude to the environment, a sort of rebellion in the guise of conformity, has engendered so steady a relationship that it is far from easy to determine whether Mr Duffy’s proclivity to isolation and obscurity is the cause or consequence of his preference for the psychological and geographical periphery of city life. It can be conjectured that, unawares, he already has a vital part of himself trammelled by the city’s unseen net of paralysis.

The issue of where to live is crucial to Mr Duffy and his tale. His characterization is initiated by description of his living quarters. Of all districts in Dublin, he picked Chapelizod out for the single reason of its location in a less pretentious suburb. The village, deriving its name from ‘Chapel of Iseult’ (Gifford, 81), arouses a premonition of tragic amour. Seen in the vicinity are the upstream of the Liffy, a disused distillery, and Phoenix Park. Serenity, accentuated by a sense of desertion and inertia, constitutes the ambience of the area and prevails over the potent symbolism of ‘Phoenix’ at this stage. Mr Duffy’s abode is ‘an old, sombre house’ (119) typical of Dublin buildings. His room, which has been remodelled thoroughly to accommodate his taste and disposition, is devoid of anything flimsy and flippant. The floor is uncarpeted, and the high walls undecorated. The bedstead is made of iron and painted in black. Given his lifestyle and personality, Mr Duffy’s nightly rest in the metal bed harks back to the permanent sleep of Father Flynn coffined in ‘The Sisters’ (13) and anticipates the ghastly habit of monks sleeping in their coffins in ‘The Dead’ (229). The cold, steely feel of the furniture also connects with the tramcar which kills Mrs Sinico and the train which toils away with her memory in the final scene. The mental orderliness of the occupant is further enhanced by the layout of colours. Everything is unified in black and white with the single exception of a rug of black and red, the only item indicative of passion and blood. Joyce, renowned for his sharp ear for music, here exerts his mind’s eye (and not his weak sight) to envision the protagonist’s inner world through impressionistic touches of his verbal brushes.

Another thing that attracts attention in Mr Duffy’s room is the bookcase. There are two noteworthy items among the books stacked neatly according to their bulk. One is *Maynooth Catechism*, the standard text for Catholics at the time. The author extracts the essence of the religion and
transplants it in the spirit of *Dubliners*. The Catholic atmosphere and allusion, salient throughout the collection, envelop the anti-clerical protagonist in rigid stoicism and mortification (Ghiselin, 104–11). Edward Brandabur argues that celibacy is a state of life chosen by the monkish Mr Duffy (57–8). The other item of consequence in the bookcase is a complete Wordsworth, which lends testimony to his romantic and reclusive inclination. His Wordsworthian fling at socialistic movements was wrapped up with a dismal prediction that ‘No social revolution, ... would be likely to strike Dublin for some centuries’ (123). It later turns out that the prediction applies to the prophet with greater urgency and adequacy than to the city.

The focus of narration then shifts to small things on his desk and lands on an over-ripe apple kept inside it. The narrator discreetly says that it ‘might have been left there and forgotten’ (120), but it is inconceivable that the extremely wary, methodical tenant should leave and forget something that might produce an olfactory disorder. It would be more appropriate to think that the forbidden fruit is left untouched ‘intentionally’ as Cynthia D. Wheatley-Lovoy suggests (182). Without being relished, the precious source of nutrition is left mellowing and rotting in its own fullness. The neglected apple casts a revealing light on the core of the protagonist’s personality and possibly on the outcome of the plot as well (Bowen, 77). Joyce adds a savour of bitterness in his appropriation of Biblical symbolism here, and a wry humour and a smack of pathos later in ‘The Dead’: the fruit, whose tree grows in the center of a garden in ‘Araby’ (29), becomes redundant in ‘Clay’ (113) and totally wasted by the time *Dubliners* reaches the last story, in which Aunt Kate’s face is likened to ‘a shriveled red apple’ (204).

The survey of Mr Duffy’s domicile is followed by a glimpse of his physical and mental features. Quite blatantly, he substantiates in his appearance what he most loathes. With a face brown, hair black, eyebrows and moustache tawny, and a stout ‘hazel’ in his hand, he is stained with the tinctures of Dublin, another sign of the insidious process of his assimilation with the city. His name shares the same etymological root with the city’s: both ‘duff’ and ‘dub’ connote brown or dusk in Irish (Gifford, 81). As for the protagonist’s mental and psychological peculiarities, the narrator takes notice of his habit of objectifying and describing himself through an interior monologue of the third-person, past-tense narrative mode. A tale of a storyteller weaving a tale about himself,
‘A Painful Case’ is meta-fictional. Another denizen of *Dubliners* with the same peculiar habit is Mr Chandler: ‘He began to invent sentences and phrases from the notices which his book would get’ (‘A Little Cloud’, 80). While the latter is indulge[d] in literary narcissism and dilettantism, the former practices his biographical observation and application of aphorisms on himself to such a drastic degree that his body and mind are drifting apart. As a matter of fact, Mr Duffy is on the verge of ceasing to live a life of his own and becoming its chronicler. He suffers an advanced form of self-alienation, the endemic to Dublin — and any modern city for that matter. This aspect of his characterization is brought to bear on the passing yet pregnant description of another of his habits in ‘He never gave alms to beggars’ (120): his self-alienation makes him aloof to both others and himself. The stark absence of pity and generosity in Mr Duffy rapidly gains significance as the narrative begins to unfold an adventure in his ‘adventureless tale’ (121).

Secluded though it is in an almost pathological intensity, Mr Duffy’s private life still preserves a narrow channel of communication. His attempt to translate and annotate Hauptmann is, as it were, a small window open to society at large and can be aligned with his attendance at the socialistic meetings of workers. Both activities betoken a wish for involvement with other people, or a desire for escape to freedom in the context of *Dubliners*. The protagonist does not acknowledge it as such, but it is undeniably there, though suppressed and dormant, in the subliminal domain of his mind. Only from time to time does it become active and seek an outlet. It once erupted into a ridiculous idea of robbing the bank where he was employed and had to be subdued quickly in his moral probity. His subsequent return to normality, however, does not necessarily ensure the extinction of such desires in him. Underneath the crust of discipline and decorum, Mr Duffy’s spiritual phoenix lurks in the ashes of his old dreams and longings in wait for the next opportunity to soar. This rather strained state of being expresses itself, as tentatively and passively as everything else with him, in one of his physical features. Set in the face that looks anything but amiable, his eyes alone exhibit a wish ‘to greet a redeeming instinct in others’ (120). The narrator deliberately keeps silent about their colour on the assumption that, blue or brown, it will undermine the intended effects. Stranded in the wilderness of misanthropy and anarchism, Mr Duffy has not yet completely lost his belief in the goodness of humanity. His malcontented self is still on the lookout...
for a saintly soul that could comprehend its sorrow and guide it out of
the dead end of its spiritual life.

III

The 'redeemer' comes Mr Duffy's way by a chance encounter. He has
a predilection for Mozart's music and allows himself occasional visits to
an opera or concert. 'The only dissipation of his life' (121), needless to
say, represents another tiny window open to society in his hermitage: it
can be noted that a trace of a feeling of guilt, which is actually inveterate
in Mr Duffy's mentality, emanates from the selection of the word 'dissi-
pation'. At a concert which happens to be shabbily attended, a woman
sitting next to him looks around the desolate hall and gives vent to her
sincere sentiment:

What a pity there is such a poor house to-night! It's so hard on people to have
to sing to empty benches. (121, emphasis added)

The casual remark tells volumes of the speaker, especially of her hu-
manity. In an unassuming display of concern for the musicians, Mrs
Sinico is poised as an emblem of the spirit of mercy and generosity, quite
unlike Mrs Kearney of 'A Mother'. This benevolent woman is what Mr
Duffy is not (Hyman, 113–4). The definition of 'pity' offered elsewhere
in the Joycean canon might be of some help here: 'Pity is the feeling
which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and con-
stant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer' (Portrait,
471). Mrs Sinico feels it natural to sympathize with anyone who suffers.
Truly, she seems 'so little awkward' (121) with Mr Duffy, as if he were
one such sufferer, when he starts to chat with her. There is little reserva-
tion on his part, either. The fact that her words murmured to nobody but
herself sound to him like an invitation attests to his sustained anticipa-
tion of a redeeming force in others. Mrs Sinico's dark blue eyes enkindle
a small flame of hope in him. She is registered permanently in his
memory.

The chance encounter grows into an acquaintanceship when repeated
twice and into a relationship when solidified by an appointment. Mr
Duffy's daily visitation to the City Centre is disrupted with a welcome
and extended over to Mrs Sinico's cottage in Sidney Parade Avenue. This
middle-class residential area is a part of the village of Merrion located on
Dublin Bay and diagonally across the city from Chapelizod. Topography
and nomenclature serve as signposts and landmarks in the verbal labyrinth of *Dubliners*. The land of promise lies for Joycean Dubliners invariably in the East (and not in America, which was in reality the most popular destination of emigration at the turn of the twentieth century [McMahon, 133–4]). No port of departure can therefore be gained without traveling eastward to the bay. Mrs Sinico could be a gateway to a new life for Mr Duffy. As the unknown priest of ‘Eveline’ emigrated to Melbourne, so Mr Duffy sets out on his journey eastward to ‘Sydney’ to seek after his liberation. But, alas, the protagonist’s venture remains a sham voyage empty of any realistic outlook for crossing the Irish Sea. In ‘A Painful Case’, the real eastward voyage is conducted habitually — and vicariously — by Mr Sinico, a free soul released from the thralls of marriage and family. One kind of usurpation is recompensed with another, perhaps to underscore the irony of life rather than to administer poetic justice. Mr Sinico’s seafaring, carefree lifestyle makes a striking contrast with the earth-bound, beleaguered life of his wife and her companion (Wright, 16).

Like two innocent children, Mr Duffy and Mrs Sinico embark on a friendship which is ethically irreproachable. But it is not long before their friendship turns into a courtship which inevitably involves emotional entanglement although the couple never cross the pale of propriety and temperance. Each assignation deepens their exaltation in each other’s company. Mrs Sinico’s passionate nature gradually works its way into Mr Duffy’s asceticism. Multiple streams of images and symbols converge in her portrayal: she is an incarnation of bountiful motherhood (remember her ample bosom and ‘maternal solicitude’) whose role it is to provide nutriment for his impoverished soul; she is at once his disciple and his confessor by listening tirelessly to his confidential talks; she is a warm soil of tropical fecundity that invigorates his withered gregariousness. With his intellectual superiority and her maternal generosity, their relationship attains a felicitous equilibrium at its happiest moments.

The rendezvous of Mr Duffy and Mrs Sinico is normally held in surroundings of darkness, quietude and isolation, the tripartite attributes of the protagonist’s being. An ominous note might be perceived here. For all the alterations that have befallen him, Mr Duffy’s personal space remains unaltered in its fundamental texture. In fact, he never ceases to hear his own voice whispering, ‘We cannot give ourselves, . . . : we are our own’ (124), and calling him back from his growing attachment to
Mrs Sinico. His communion with his own self feeds on itself and annihilates his union with her when conjoined with another subversive factor. His rapid ascension to a godly stature in her adoration already threatens the balance of their relationship. In the course of their penultimate meeting, in which she exhibits every sign of undue emotional excitement, Mrs Sinico takes up his hand and presses it to her cheek on the spur of the moment. The outburst of passion hurls her down to the base station of corporality in his view and shatters their spiritual equality to pieces. His rigid world of logos proves incompatible with Mrs Sinico's expansive universe of pathos, as is indicated in 'Her interpretation of his words disillusioned him' (124: Parrinder, 61). Their first physical contact becomes their last. Her altruistic offer of good will and worship is spurned in the withdrawal of his hand. Mr Duffy's spiritual atrophy is far advanced, far beyond cure and solace.

The end of the affair, too ethereal to be called an affair, is as maudlin as its beginning was mundane. It has run its course mapped by Mr Duffy's other doctrine of life: 'Every bond, ... is a bond to sorrow' (124). The lovers wander around Phoenix Park for hours and agree to break off in the mutual understanding that there is no future for them. The man judges that the lasting misery of a solitary life torments him less than the immediate anguish of their hopeless union. But the woman collapses under the unbearable weight of the days of gloom and solitude that await her. Her despair triggers an uncontrollable physical perturbation, which disillusions Mr Duffy further. Mrs Sinico's violent trembling is akin to Michael Furey's, a symbol of sacrificial love, in 'The Dead': '... there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden, shivering' (253). Mr Duffy bids farewell brusquely and walks away from the one who has meant so much to him in an existential sense. By literally deserting her in her pitiable state of distress, he ethically commits a sin of mercilessness and figuratively sentences her to living death. The protagonist's humanity, manhood and citizenship are all exposed to obscene bareness.

IV

The old habits return, and the familiar routines settle back in Mr Duffy's solitary life as if nothing had occurred. Merely the few pieces of music and Nietzsche's volumes added to his collection bear witness to the passage of time. His outings in quest of musical pleasures are forsaken, and his project on Hauptmann is nowhere seen. Without a Muse
in his private pursuit, he feels no inspiration, no verve, for literary creation. Neither does the narrative itself, much to the dismay and astonishment of the reader. The ‘buff Mail’ is suddenly in charge, and the crisp style that reverberates with the protagonist’s spirituality gives way to an insipid prose of coarse journalism. What a fall it is for a revolutionary socialist-cum-atheist to read such a paper as the right-wing, pro-English Dublin Evening Mail (Gifford, 86)! On one of its brown pages, Mr Duffy discovers an article that reports the death of an inebriate woman in a train accident. He hurries back to his cell and re-reads the details of Mrs Sinico’s mishap. Moving his lips like a priest, he peruses the lines composed of ‘threadbare phrases, inane expressions and cautious words’ (128). The technique of ‘collage’ in visual arts is employed here to meet the thematic requirement of interrupting the stream of Mr Duffy’s consciousness. The temporary hiatus spawned by the structural aberration plays a key role in providing him with an opportunity to retrace and readjust his relationship with Mrs Sinico.

The closing section of ‘A Painful Case’ traces the process of the protagonist’s mental fluctuations and moral crisis in the aftermath of the startling news. It is intriguing how the newspaper article he finds grossly offensive makes clear where he stands initially in the second trial of his humanity. The account of Mrs Sinico’s ‘commonplace vulgar death’ (128), which Harry Levin (32) and Edward Brandabur (75) reckon as suicidal, rests in a large measure on the ‘sympathy’ of ‘a reporter won over’ (128). Her tragic end is pitied, if in posture and expression alone, by a total stranger whereas it nauseates Mr Duffy. The protagonist is more concerned with the truth of the accident than with the death itself. Mrs Sinico’s immolation by a means of transportation, on one hand, bespeaks her latent wish for mobility and, on the other, presents itself as a desperate form of protestation against Mr Duffy’s impenetrable, steely ego. The protagonist is alerted to the recognition that she has degraded him as well as herself and then to the suspicion that he might have been deceived of her real person. This in its turn assures him of the rectitude of the decision he made four years ago. As the instant emotional reactions subside in him, however, waves of a repercussion gradually engulf him in remorse. His mind begins to drift back to bygone days. A reverie about the dead woman besets him as if to plead with him for reconsideration of his self-righteous reasoning. At the beckoning of the memory, Mr Duffy puts on his overcoat and hat and goes out quickly, to resume
his soul-to-soul dialogue with Mrs Sinico, to relive the days of their courtship.

Met outside by the bitter air of the night, Mr Duffy succumbs to the lure of a public house. He inadvertently tries to steady his nerves by what wrecked Mrs Sinico's. Their mutual love for music and literature once brought them together, but now they draw close to each other by the help of the social malaise of the nation. The shared 'dissipation' somehow helps to neutralize the incisive tone of Mr Duffy's twice-repeated 'What an end!' (128, 129) and 'unfit to live' (129). His senses remain benumbed to the presence of people around him: they are haunted and possessed by the wraith of Mrs Sinico. A gleam of pity and compassion, certainly a remnant of her old influence, enters Mr Duffy's mind and shepherds him into a contemplation of how lonely her life must have been after their breakup. He is not what he was before his courtship with her. Their lives are united again in terms of their loneliness. The notion that she lives on in his memory, that she is at least not forgotten, soothes his guilt-ridden consciousness. Dead or alive, Mrs Sinico is the touchstone of his humanity. A communion with the dead has commenced.

Mr Duffy leaves the pub and wanders into a borderland between the past and the present with the future not too far away. He walks through bleak alleys and under gaunt trees to the land of death. A rendezvous with the dead is held at the same place, in the same season, and during the same hours as it was with the living. In his pilgrimage to the temple of moral redemption, the protagonist traverses Phoenix Park 'eastward' from the first gate to the Magazine Hill. He feels Mrs Sinico closer, with her imaginary voice and hand softly touching him. His pity for her, deepened further, gnaws his conscience to the point of disintegration: 'He felt his moral nature falling to pieces' (130). Even the distant red lights of the city appear to him as beacons of hospitality. Peering deep into himself through the lens of sympathy for the dead, he apparently prefigures Gabriel Conroy of 'The Dead'. Mr Duffy has arrived at the threshold of spiritual resurrection.

Reconciliation with the past, however, eludes the embrace of 'A Painful Case' and flies toward 'The Dead'. Reality freezes Mr Duffy's mellowing sentiment with a vision of 'venal and furtive love' (130). The pull of the present, far more powerful to him than the call of the past, shakes him violently back into his old self. He finds himself unable even to accept the present, let alone reconciling with the past. Mrs Sinico's
memory, now fused with the monotonous sounds of a departing freight train, still stalks his re-awakened senses and taps rhythmically on his conscience. Yet Mr Duffy, immovable in his own rigidity, lets it fade out into the dreary silence of the night. He lets it travel 'westward' along with the train — the locomotive to the West Country and her memory to the land of death. When the mighty engine envisaged as a worm 'winding through the darkness, obstinately and laboriously' (131) becomes inaudible, Mr Duffy's spiritual cocoon is left empty of his 'soul's companion' (128).

His distrust of the reality of memory signals his second abandonment of Mrs Sinico. When he allows her tender voice and touch to evanesc from his innermost sphere, Mr Duffy sentences her to death for the second time. By so doing, he of his own accord relinquishes his last and only human bond and casts himself out of 'life's feast' (131). His spiritual rebirth is thwarted at its final stage by his own hands (Corrington, 190). The future is pushed back beyond horizon. It is a natural corollary that Mr Duffy should go back the same way 'westward' to his coffin-like iron bed. Unlike him, Gabriel Conroy presides over 'a feast' and afterwards feels 'a strange friendly pity' (254, emphasis added) for his wife. His soul approaches 'that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead' (255) and accepts positively that the time has come 'for him to set out on his journey westward' (ibid.).

On Mr Duffy's epiphanic experience, Patrick Parrinder opines that 'What he does experience, at a level of visionary intensity, is an awareness of the life he has missed by standing aloof' (64). Heyward Ehrlich maintains: 'Duffy suffers . . . pain at understanding the emotional costs to him of his refusal to risk' (94). A psychoanalytical approach leads Suzette A. Henke to conclude that ' . . . he at last confronts the reality of existential isolation' (37). Thomas J. Rice voices a harsher verdict: 'Mr Duffy's recognition of responsibility is nothing but self-pity' (430). The protagonist's pangs of conscience seem to be genuine in the light of the religious strain of the narrative: an awareness of responsibility, isolation or lost opportunities is overshadowed by a far more piercing, corrosive perception of guilt. He is stunned by the realization that he has committed an irreparable sin against humanity through his failure not only to give life and happiness to another lost soul but also ever to attempt to redeem his own. This ultimate understanding of his selfhood is the spiritual gift the protagonist receives from Mrs Sinico upon their second and
permanent separation. In the midst of loss of everything that makes man a social being, he has acquired a traumatically profound insight, in the wake of which life no longer has much to offer. It is in this respect that Mr Duffy's 'living death' is distinguished definitely from that of Maria of 'Clay'.

Mr Duffy's phoenix flutters but never rises. The northern city chills it to lethargy and stasis in its ashes. The heart of 'A Painful Case' remains encapsulated in the lingering resonance of the last line: 'He felt that he was alone' (131). There would be no more appropriate epitaph for the soul that denies itself love, life, and even the hope of becoming a memory. It is a pity that it rests without knowing that its story is inscribed permanently in the memory of the reader.

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