The Sisters

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce was born into an Irish middle-class family in 1882. From a young age, Joyce excelled in school, and was particularly interested in classical studies. After graduating from Jesuit high school, Joyce attended University College Dublin, where he studied English, French, and Italian. Joyce was baptized in the Catholic Church, though his father was critical of the institution and Joyce began to distance himself from the faith at an early age. While in college, Joyce wrote essays and literary criticism. He also began writing *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but temporarily abandoned the manuscript after it was rejected. After graduating from his university, he met Nora Barnacle, who would become his wife, and the couple moved to continental Europe. While much of Joyce's work centers on Dublin and Irish politics, he actually didn't live in Ireland for most of his adult life. In 1914, he published *Dubliners*, his first major work, which tells the stories of middle-class Dublin citizens. This was followed by the publication of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, based on the university manuscript he had abandoned. His most notable work, *Ulysses*, was published in 1922, and takes as its inspiration Homer's *Odyssey*. Joyce died in 1941 in Zurich after falling into a coma after surgery.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most notable historical movement at the time *Dubliners* was written and published was the rise of Irish nationalism. Although Ireland didn't officially gain independence from Great Britain until 1937, in the early 20th century many of the Irish people were already advocating for a separation from the British Empire. Brief references to Great Britain throughout "The Sisters"—like Father Flynn's house on Great Britain Street—point to this growing desire for Irish independence. The year *Dubliners* was published, Britain issued the Government of Ireland Act, which granted Ireland self-governance. However, this was suspended for the duration of World War I. The year 1916, just two years after *Dubliners* was published, marked the beginning of a period of great political violence for Irish independence, instigated by Easter Rising, a militia's failed attempt to take over the state.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Sisters" is part of Joyce's canonical short story collection, *Dubliners*. The collection was written at a historical moment when Irish nationalism was an extraordinarily strong movement, and the collection as a whole grapples with questions relating to the formation of an Irish national identity, both cultural and religious. "The Sisters" interrogates the role of the Catholic Church in Irish society, and subtly argues that perhaps the Catholic Church should no longer have a strong role in Irish culture as Ireland struggled to form itself as a nation. William Butler Yeats was another Irish author living and writing at the time, and in particular, his poem "To Ireland in the Coming Times" speaks to his Irish nationalist sentiments. In it, the speaker declares his loyalty to and love for the soon-to-be independent nation. Joyce was good friends with and stylistically very influenced by poet T.S. Eliot. *Dubliners* was published just a few years before Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Thematically, Eliot's poem loosely relates to *Dubliners* in that it demonstrates the collective struggle to transition to the modern world. However, the important similarity between the two works is that they served to define the modernist literary movement.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Sisters"
- **When Written:** 1914
- **Where Written:** Dublin, Ireland
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Modernist, Avant-garde
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** The narrator visits Father Flynn's house and sees his dead body.
- **Antagonist:** The Catholic Church
- **Point of View:** First-Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Preamble to Ulysses. James Joyce was originally going to call *Dubliners*, *Ulysses in Dublin*. He ended up choosing *Dubliners*, publishing an entirely separate—and much more famous—book called *Ulysses*. What's more, many of the characters in *Dubliners* also appear as minor characters in *Ulysses*.

Lifelong Interest. Joyce's father was an advocate of Irish nationalism and educated his son on the matter. When Joyce was nine years old, the death of a prominent Irish nationalist inspired him to write a poem, in part inspired by what his father had taught him about the corrupt relationship between the Vatican and the British Conservative Party. This is one of the most important themes he addresses in "The Sisters."

PLOT SUMMARY

Father Flynn, a local priest with whom the narrator has a close relationship, has suffered several strokes and is likely to pass away soon. Every day, the young narrator passes by the church where the old priest lives to see whether he is still alive. While he does care for Father Flynn, the narrator also anticipates the priest's death with a sort of excitement, as he is curious to see the effects of paralysis on Father Flynn's body.

One day, the narrator's uncle and Old Cotter explain to the narrator that, after suffering a third and final stroke, Father Flynn has finally passed away. Of all of the members of the narrator's family, he is the only one who seems upset. Old Cotter and the boy's uncle think Father Flynn was a "queer" old man. Old Cotter especially disapproves of the relationship the narrator had with the priest, saying that young men should explore the outdoors or spend their time with people their own age rather than dedicating themselves to religious studies, as the narrator did with Father Flynn. The narrator feels frustrated as he listens to the older man criticize his relationship with Father Flynn.

Later, though, when he has the opportunity to reflect upon the priest's death, the narrator himself doesn't seem to upset about it. Indeed, he admits to himself that he feels he has been freed of something—even though Father Flynn taught him many things about Catholicism, the priest made the narrator feel uncomfortable sometimes. The narrator recalls in particular that he had to help Father Flynn to open his **snuff** packets, as the old man's strokes reduced his mobility. What's more, the narrator was never certain that what he was learning from Father Flynn was really useful. It seemed like Father Flynn liked to complicated teaching about the Catholic Church that the narrator had thought were really simple.

When the narrator and his aunt arrive at the wake, the narrator observes a poorly dressed woman praying, and, as he approaches the coffin, tries to pray himself, but finds that he is distracted by the sound of the other people's prayers. Peering into the coffin, the narrator notices that Father Flynn's face is grey and almost translucent, surrounded by hair that looks more like white fur. The priest is loosely holding a **chalice**, and the narrator imagines that he is smiling softly—but is startled to see that the priest is not, in fact, smiling.

The narrator and his aunt talk with Nannie and Eliza, the two sisters that looked after Father Flynn in his old age. Contrary to the grotesque image the narrator paints of the priest's corpse, the sisters comment several times that he had a "beautiful death" or was a "beautiful corpse." They express their grief over Father Flynn's death, saying he was really no trouble for them to care for—although they had noticed prior to his death he was beginning to lose his mind. Nannie thinks the priest's poor health all started when he broke a **chalice**. Eliza shares that she once went to give the priest his soup and found him sitting up with his mouth open, his breviary fallen to the floor. She also remembers that the end of his life, Father Flynn had the idea to get a carriage and drive back to the house where he grew up.

The narrator, uncomfortable with all of the stories, listens closely in the house to hear if anyone else is walking around, but then remembers that the priest is still in his coffin. Eliza resumes her story, explaining how she once came across Father Flynn wide awake and laughing to himself in his confessional in the chapel, and that that was when she knew "that there was something gone wrong with him."

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The story's unnamed narrator and protagonist, who is a young boy. The narrator has a close relationship with Father Flynn, a local priest, who is on the brink of death at the beginning of the story. While the narrator is, for the most part, upset that the priest who taught him so much about Catholicism is going to pass away, he also thinks about Father Flynn's death with an excited sort of anticipation. Before Father Flynn has died, the narrator passes his house every day to see whether the priest has finally passed, specifically curious to see the effects of paralysis on the older man's body. Additionally, once the narrator learns that Father Flynn has died, he isn't entirely upset. He feels he has been liberated from something, and recalls that during their lessons, the priest would often complicate what the narrator had originally thought of as simple. The narrator also remembers being made uncomfortable by Father Flynn's sloppiness when he would help the older man to open **snuff** packets. At the wake, the narrator notices and details Father Flynn's grotesque appearance as he lies in his coffin and seems not to know how to respond to the death of someone who on the one hand taught him so much but on the other made him so uncomfortable. Indeed, the narrator's discomfort around the priest serves as one of several hints that the priest may have been pedophilic. Old Cotter, a friend of the narrator's aunt, implies that the narrator should spend less time with the priest and more time with people his own age, which also suggests that there is something strange about the relationship between the two given their difference in age. Ultimately, however, Joyce leaves the nature of the narrator and Father Flynn's relationship up to interpretation.

Father James Flynn – The narrator's friend and mentor. At the time the story begins the elderly priest has already suffered two strokes and is in deteriorating health. A third and final stroke kills the priest, and over the course of the story the characters reckon with his death and their complicated feelings around his character. While the narrator and the priest's sisters, Eliza and Nannie, seem to have at least some positive memories of Father Flynn and are upset about his death, the

other characters have more negative impressions of the old man. The narrator reports having spent hours with the priest learning Latin and about the Catholic tradition, recalling the Father Flynn often made even the simplest rites and rituals very complicated. Father Flynn had a **snuff** habit, and the narrator would often help him to remove the snuff from the packet. In the process of using snuff, Father Flynn would sully his "ancient priestly vestments," and this was one of many ways in which his remarkable inelegance is at odds with the divine authority that one might expect a priest to emanate. Nannie and Eliza claim not to have been bothered by caring for the elderly priest, but they imply that, in the time leading up to his death, he was in extremely poor health and going mad, sharing memories of him laughing to himself at night in a chapel or breaking a **chalice**. The narrator himself believes that the priest may have been engaged in the illicit practice of simony, or the purchase of entrance into heaven. The most damning characterization of Father Flynn comes from Old Cotter, who worries about a young man like the narrator spending so much time with the priest and implies that the Father Flynn may be pedophilic. Though Joyce leaves this unresolved, the narrator's own memories of how Father Flynn made him uncomfortable add some weight to the Old Cotter's suggestion. As Father Flynn represents the Catholic Church more broadly, the problematic aspects of his character symbolize the problematic aspects of the Church as Joyce saw them.

Old Cotter – Old Cotter lives with the narrator and the narrator's aunt and uncle. He is only present in the story at the very beginning, when the narrator first learns that Father Flynn has died. Old Cotter expresses marked disapproval of the narrator's relationship with the priest, saying that a young man should spend time with people his own age, and should focus more on things like exercise than on religious or esoteric studies. Notably, Old Cotter also seems to imply that Father Flynn may be pedophilic. He says that there was "something queer" about the priest, and that he thinks it was "it was one of those…peculiar cases…" implying that the priest has engaged in some sort of immoral activity. Old Cotter's comments about Father Flynn irritate the narrator, who thinks to himself that Old Cotter is a "tiresome old fool." However, not long after this, the narrator admits to himself that Father Flynn did make him somewhat uncomfortable, which leads readers to question if Old Cotter's suspicions may have been merited.

The Narrator's Uncle – Like Old Cotter, the narrator's uncle lives with him. And, also like Old Cotter, the narrator's uncle believes that his nephew should not have spent so much time with Father Flynn. The uncle is the one who breaks the news to the narrator that the old priest has passed away and joins Old Cotter in his comments about the type of education that young men should receive: namely, one that is practical rather than religious. Joking about the amount of time the narrator dedicated to religious studies with Father Flynn, the narrator's uncle calls him a Rosicrucian, referring to a cult of individuals dedicated to esoteric and spiritual study.

Eliza – Father Flynn's sister. Eliza took care of Father Flynn in his old age along with their other sister, Nannie. While Nannie immediately falls asleep when the narrator and his aunt join her and her sister after the wake, Eliza remains awake and begins to share memories of Father Flynn. She comments that he had a "beautiful death" and was a "beautiful corpse," although the narrator's descriptions are ample evidence to the contrary—when he sees Father Flynn in the coffin, he describes the priest's face as "very truculent, grey and massive." She shares stories about Father Flynn's deteriorating health in his last days—particularly notable is her recollection that she went to give him soup and found him lying back with his mouth open and his breviary fallen to the floor. Since the breviary is an important text for the priests to read and recite every day, Father Flynn allowing it to fall to the ground suggests that he was no longer able to successfully complete the responsibilities of priesthood. Eliza and her sister seem to believe, superstitiously, that Father Flynn's poor health began when he broke a **chalice**, a belief that characterizes both her and Nannie as somewhat irrational and superstitious in their religiosity.

Nannie – Father Flynn's sister. Nannie and her sister, Eliza, both took care of Father Flynn in his old age. Nannie goes to greet the narrator and his family when they arrive at Father Flynn's wake, and the narrator notices that her skirt is clumsily tied in the back, which distracts him from praying. This moment suggests that the narrator is unable to use religious ritual to deal with or overcome the ugliness of death. Presumably exhausted from having to care for the old man and deal with the logistics of his death, Nannie falls asleep soon after everyone sits down to talk after the wake.

The Narrator's Aunt – The narrator's aunt goes with him to Father Flynn's wake. When she gathers with the narrator, Nannie, and Eliza after the wake, she speaks highly of Father Flynn, and praises the two sisters for having cared for him. Her seemingly unquestioned high opinion of the old priest suggests that she may not have shared the suspicions of the narrator's uncle or Old Cotter, who seem to think that Father Flynn was corrupt and had an inappropriate relationship with the narrator.

TERMS

Breviary – In Roman Catholicism, a breviary is a book that contains the service to be delivered each day, which includes certain prayers, hymns, and lessons. **Father Flynn** spent a lot of time studying the breviary; however, in an important moment in the story, **Eliza** walks in on him half asleep, with the breviary having fallen from his lap. This scene stands out because Father Flynn's loss of physical grip on things relating to

Catholicism—most notably, the chalice, but also the breviary—represents his loss of metaphorical grip on religious teaching that are relevant to the community.

Rosicrucian – A Rosicrucian is a member of secret society that centered around the study of alchemy and metaphysics and first emerged in the 17th century. They claim to have access to spiritual wisdom handed down from ancient times. At the beginning of the story, **Old Cotter** jokingly accuses **the narrator** for being a Rosicrucian because he spends so much time on his religious studies with **Father Flynn**. In this context, the use of the word Rosicrucian is meant as an insult; Old Cotter doesn't value religious studies and esoteric knowledge, and thinks the narrator should spend more time outside, with people his own age, learning things that are more practical.

Simony – Simony refers to the (now-defunct) practice in the Catholic Church of paying for entrance to heaven, which was particularly rampant in the 9th and 10th centuries. Early in the story, **the narrator** dreams that he is smiling at **Father Flynn**, absolving him of the sin of simony. The implication that Father Flynn participated in the illicit practice of accepting money from parishioners to secure their entrance to heaven is one of several hints in the story that the deceased priest may have been corrupt in multiple ways.

THEMES

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THE UTILITY OF EDUCATION

In James Joyce's "The Sisters," the narrator is a young man dealing with his complex emotional response to the death of Father Flynn, a local priest, who served as a mentor to him. While the narrator seems to have, for the most part, admired and enjoyed the company of Father Flynn, other members of the community didn't seem to have had the same respect for the elderly priest. The narrator's family members disapprove of him spending time with Father Flynn, believing that the young man should be educated in ways that are more practical and less esoteric. In the story, then, Joyce presents two conflicting views about the ways that young people should be raised and educated—while one school of thought prioritizes religious education through the Catholic Church, the other espouses a form of education rooted in real-world practicality. Over the course of the story, the characters are far more critical of religious education, which Joyce portrays as full of superficial, esoteric rites that are unrelated to people's real-world needs.

Readers are first introduced to disapproval of Father Flynn when Old Cotter, who lives with the narrator and his aunt and uncle, begins to talk about the narrator's relationship with the priest. Old Cotter seems to think that Father Flynn's religious lessons don't prepare the narrator for success in the real world. While Old Cotter acknowledges that Father Flynn taught the narrator "a great deal," he is quick to add that he wouldn't want his own children "to have much to say to a man like [Father Flynn]." The narrator's uncle agrees, referring to the narrator as a Rosicrucian, and emphasizing the importance of physicals exercises in a young man's routine. As an afterthought, he adds, "Education is all very fine and large…'" In this moment of dialogue, the adult male figures in the narrator's life other than Father Flynn demonstrate their distaste for formal, religious education. Rather than book smarts, they seem to value physical fitness and resilience. In referring to his nephew as a Rosicrucian, the narrator's uncle references a 17th- and 18th-century secretive group dedicated to studies of alchemy—the magical process of converting one substance to the other—and the metaphysical, or studies related to God and other supernatural beings. These branches of study are about as far from physical exercises as it gets. The men's disapproval of Father Flynn seems to stem from the belief that his religious teachings aren't practical for the real world, and therefore, aren't suitable for a young man to be learning.

While the narrator does grieve Father Flynn's death and seems to have fond memories of him, he also doesn't seem to have received a useful education from the priest. In some ways, the education the narrator receives from the priest seems to unnecessarily complicate things rather than clarify them. In one moment, the narrator writes that "[Father Flynn's] questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain intuitions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts." Father Flynn's style of imparting knowledge to a young person stands in stark contrast to Old Cotter and the narrator's uncle's views on the ways that young people should be raised. Rather than basing his lessons in what is practical, Father Flynn seems to prioritize making what initially seems practical more complicated than it is at a first glance. At no point does the narrator imply that being exposed to this level of complexity is beneficial to his studies. Rather, Father Flynn seems to simply confuse the narrator rather than teaching him anything worthwhile. What's more, Father Flynn seems to value the complexity, and therefore the inaccessibility, of the Church's teachings. He tells the narrator that "fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Dictionary*, and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper." The choice to emphasize the spacing of the lines underscores the extent to which Father Flynn equates complexity with intellectual value. There is no reason for anyone to brag about lines being close together other than to highlight the literal density of the text, the quantity of words written. Joyce casts Flynn's view of education as archaic, and silly in its

superficiality.

While the narrator claims to have enjoyed spending time with Father Flynn, his unemotional reaction to the priest's death betrays the possibility that he, too, may not have found a great deal of meaning in Father Flynn's lessons. Immediately before divulging the details of Father Flynn's lessons, the narrator admits that "neither [he] nor the day seemed in a mourning mood," suggesting that he is not as sorry as he thought he would be at the priest's death. Because this admission immediately precedes the narrator's discussion of his education, there is an implication that the narrator is relieved to be rid of these long-winded, archaic lessons. Joyce and many of his contemporaries were highly critical of the Church's corruption and its teachings that were inaccessible to common people. While Joyce does not do much to support Old Cotter and the narrator's uncle in their strong advocation for a practical, secular education, he does heavily criticize and question the value of the religious education that the narrator receives from Father Flynn.

AUTHORITY AND CORRUPTION

In "The Sisters," James Joyce follows the young unnamed narrator and his community as they deal with the death of Father Flynn, a local priest. However, the local people have mixed feelings about the priest's passing: he was a divisive figure in the community, largely because many characters no longer see value or even integrity in the Catholic Church. While on the one hand the narrator admired Father Flynn, he also felt uncomfortable around him at times, which raises the question of if the priest's character was immoral. By illustrating Father Flynn's incompetence as a religious leader, as well as his implied spiritual corruption, Joyce undermines the authority of the Catholic Church more broadly, implying that it is no longer able to provide the support that Irish communities need.

The descriptions Joyce provides of Father Flynn while he was alive lead readers to believe that he was an ineffective religious leader. While alive, Father Flynn constantly used **snuff** as he gave the narrator his religious lessons. Because the priest is elderly, he isn't able to use snuff gracefully—the narrator observes, "Even as he raised his large trembling hand to his nose little clouds of smoke dribbled through his fingers over the front of his coat. It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look…" In this moment, the way the priest's clumsiness is described is vulgar, and causes readers to feel embarrassed for him. The word "dribble" in particular characterizes the priest as particularly helpless and infantile, which, in an old man, is disturbing to observe. The narrator's conclusion that this is what spoils Father Flynn's "ancient garments" subtly undermines the priest's authority. While the garments are meant to be beautiful, inspiring respect and admiration from observers, Father Flynn's are ugly and covered in snuff. In addition, Father Flynn undermines his religious or spiritual authority through his addiction to something in the material world.

At times, Father Flynn's crudeness makes the narrator feel uncomfortable. The narrator describes that when the priest would smile, "he used to uncover his big discolored teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip – a habit which had made me feel uncomfortable in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well." This description of Father Flynn is also grotesque, and his lack of awareness of his own body, and of how to present himself, further undermines his authority. His behavior causes the narrator to feel secondhand embarrassment, rather than admiration.

Joyce doesn't stop at implying that the priest's work is ineffective: there are several implications in the story that Father Flynn is a corrupt leader, both in terms of the way he relates to the narrator specifically and in the way he leads his church. When the narrator's family members tell him that the priest has died, they don't seem too upset about Father Flynn's passing. The narrator walks in on a conversation in which Old Cotter, "returning to some former remark of his," says, "No, I wouldn't say he was exactly … but there was something queer … there was something uncanny about him […] I think it was one of those … peculiar cases …" Old Cotter's trailing off and exaggerated beating around the bush in this instance subtly points to the implication that the priest may have been pedophilic. The uses of the word "queer" in particular speaks to this, as at the time it was already used as a pejorative term for homosexual relationships. Old Cotter goes on to suggest that the narrator ought to spend more time with people his own age, which further supports the idea that communities suspect Father Flynn of pedophilia. The fact that the narrator is young shouldn't necessarily mean that there would be anything wrong with his spending time with a priest—unless, of course, that priest is rumored to violate the young people who he spends time with.

There is also an implication in the story that Father Flynn takes advantage of his parishioners. In a dream that the narrator has after the priest has died, he sees Father Flynn's smiling face and feels "that [he] too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin." Simony refers to the illicit practice of buying entrance to heaven. The implication that Father Flynn may have been engaged in this practice, which is explicit in its corruption, serves to further criticize his character and moral authority. This, in turn, undermines the authority of the Catholic Church.

Through his use of grotesque language to describe the priest and through subtly describing the other characters' aversion to him, Joyce effectively casts Father Flynn as a suspicious, potentially corrupt character, and in doing so undermines the authority of the Catholic Church in the story's community.

However, his criticism of Catholicism doesn't stop just at the local level; Father Flynn lives on Great Britain Street, which adds a layer of political corruption to the spiritual and moral corruption that is already present in the story. Great Britain only granted Ireland their independence in the early 1900s, around the time the story was written. Father Flynn is then linked, symbolically, to a force that oppresses and abuses the Irish people. This expands upon the implication that he takes advantage of, and maybe even abuses, the people in his local community and parish.

DEATH, GRIEF, AND MOURNING

"The Sisters" is the portrait of a young man and his community as they navigate the death of Father Flynn, a local priest who was admired by some and distrusted by others. And because Father Flynn was such a polarizing figure, people respond to his death in a whole host of ways. All of those who mourn the priest equally struggle with feelings of relief, disgust, and other emotional responses to death that are not traditionally associated with mourning. Through presenting all of the complexities of the characters' reactions to death, Joyce creates an honest portrayal of human grief and mourning.

At the very beginning of the story, the narrator anticipates Father Flynn's death not only with fear, but also with a nervous sort of excitement. The narrator observes, "Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softy to myself the word *paralysis* […] It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work." Here, the narrator reveals both an expected and an unexpected emotional response to death. Readers can reasonably expect that a character would be afraid of paralysis, but not that he would experience a voyeuristic and perverse longing to witness its effect on the body. This ending to the opening passage sets readers up for an exploration of human responses to death that goes beyond simple grief.

Indeed, as the story progresses, the narrator admits to feeling relief that Father Flynn has passed, further complicating the story's portrayal of grief and mourning. After he hears the news that the priest is dead, the narrator thinks to himself, "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." This reaction is surprising, because at the beginning of the story the narrator thinks about the priest as if they had been very close. Additionally, other characters comment on the close relationship—even the strangely close relationship, which other characters seem to think may have been pedophilic—that existed between Father Flynn and the young man. However, in admitting that he feels freed by the older man's death, the narrator demonstrates a more complex emotional relationship to death. He draws readers' attention to the possibility that the narrator's growth was in fact inhibited by Father Flynn's influence, and that the priest's death doesn't only present him with occasion to mourn, but also the opportunity to grow in ways he hadn't been able to while the older man was alive.

When the narrator and the other characters are paying their respects to Father Flynn in his coffin, Joyce makes it clear that none of them are sure how to act in the situation. They aren't able to acknowledge the raw ugliness of death, and thus attempt to disguise this ugliness with performative religious rites and nostalgia. The narrator describes Father Flynn's corpse as "solemn and copious, vested as for the altar […] His face was very translucent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils." In doing so, he paints a horrifying portrait of the dead body. However, Eliza, one of the women who took care of the priest in his old age, later says Father Flynn made a "beautiful corpse." Here, Eliza's blatant exaggeration—if not outright lie—betrays her own tremendous discomfort with acknowledging the reality of death.

While the narrator seems to have the emotional bandwidth to acknowledge even the most disturbing elements of death, the other characters try to ignore this discomfort, masking it with an appreciation of Father Flynn and his corpse that they imagine is appropriate. The narrator then approaches the coffin at the altar, where he sees that Father Flynn's "face was very translucent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a scanty white fur. There was a heavy odor in the room — the flowers." In this moment, Joyce's description of Father Flynn's body is extraordinarily grotesque. The language "fur" and "cavernous" make it seem like an animal rather than a human being is the object of the description. At the moment of the funeral, Father Flynn has been dressed in his best robes, and yet this was still not enough to mask the grotesque ugliness of a dead, aged body. The last sentence perfectly captures the attempt and failure to beautify death: odor is a word used to describe unpleasant smells, and yet the flowers, presumably, were placed at the altar to beautify and perfume the space. Description of them as an odor epitomizes the failure to make beautiful what is intrinsically grotesque.

The grotesque style that Joyce employs in narrating the story serves both to expose the ugly, dark, reality of death and, by contrast, to highlight the average person's aversion to it. Through this contrast, Joyce is able to portray both an honest illustration of death itself and a thorough representation of human response to it. What's more, death as it's portrayed in the story isn't only a bad thing. The narrator himself directly says the he feels "freed" by Father Flynn's passing. Indeed, in many ways Joyce paints death as a liberating force, one that frees the local community from a man who espouses a type of religion that no longer serves them. Rather than portraying death as something to be mourned and dreaded, Joyce casts it as something to be honored when the right time has come. Not only are some of the characters relieved to be rid of Father Flynn; the priest himself laughs more and more often as his

health deteriorates. This implies that rather than seeing death as something that is purely negative, the characters are able to see it as force that liberates humanity from what no longer serves it.

PARALYSIS, DETERIORATION, AND THE OBSOLETE

While the narrator and other characters are genuinely upset at Father Flynn's passing, in some ways, they are also relieved. This is because the elderly Father Flynn is characterized as a relic from the past, whose influence on young people and religious teachings are no longer relevant. The death of the priest, then in some ways represents the death of the brand of Catholicism that he espoused. James Joyce himself was a lifelong critic of the Catholic Church, particularly the teachings and practices that he considered obsolete. Through portraying Father Flynn as old fashioned, overly esoteric, and physically deteriorating, Joyce argues that the teachings of the Catholic Church are obsolete and that, like the priest himself, the time has come that they cease to exist.

Father Flynn is characterized as being someone whose beliefs and practices are not relevant to the time period in which he lives. When the narrator learns of the priest's death, he feels a sense of "freedom, as if [he] had been freed from something by his death" even though the priest "had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and had taught me how to pronounce Latin properly." Here, the narrator's chooses to share that the priest had taught him Latin immediately after admitting that he is, in some ways, relieved that Father Flynn has died. It is as though the narrator is trying to convince himself that he should feel worse that Father Flynn has passed, because he learned so much from the older man. However, it is clear that the narrator does not necessarily value the lessons he learned with Father Flynn, because those lessons weren't necessarily useful. This is made evident by the choice to give Latin as an example. Indeed, at the time the story was written, Latin itself was already a dead language. At first glance, it seems that the narrator is remembering the Latin lessons in the context of feeling grateful for the priest and everything he taught him. However, upon further analysis, it seems that the link between learning Latin and the priest's death is that both the language and the person have become obsolete.

After Father Flynn has died, the sisters who looked after him share stories about his old age that subtly link the deterioration of Father Flynn's body with the process of his view on religion becoming obsolete. Eliza, one of the man's sisters, shares that when she brought Father Flynn his soup, she'd "find him with is breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open." Here, it is clear that Father Flynn's old age has caused him to lose control over his body. However, Eliza first mentions the breviary—a book of recitations to be practiced daily, mandated by the Catholic Church—which draws readers' attention to the deterioration of Father Flynn's religious practice before they notice the deterioration of his physical body. The fact that these two things are linked together suggests that Father Flynn's perspective on the Catholic faith was perhaps as obsolete, as ready to die, as his physical body was.

Father Flynn's strokes caused him to become paralyzed at the end of his life, which is deeply symbolic in the story. Joyce chooses paralysis because it implies the end of movement. Since Father Flynn is the symbolic embodiment of the Catholic Church in the story, his paralysis represents the Catholic Church's inability to move with the times, its inability to evolve in order to remain relevant. There is also the implication that the Catholic Church can paralyze those that become involved with it. The narrator, for example, feels "freed from something by [Father Flynn's] death." This implies that Father Flynn, who connected the narrator to the Catholic faith, had a paralyzing effect on the narrator's life. Catholicism, the story implies, kept him stuck.

This analysis is further supported by the symbolism of the **chalice** in the story. Eliza mentions that she and her sister, Nannie, really noticed that Father Flynn's health was deteriorating when he accidentally broke a chalice. This moment also has superstitious overtones: Nannie didn't just notice that the priest's health was deteriorating because he broke the chalice, but also believes that his poor health may have come as a superstitious sort of consequence for breaking the chalice. This, in turn, paints the Catholic faith as superstitious and irrational. The priest has also been buried with "his hands loosely retaining a chalice." The detail that he is *loosely* holding the chalice invites readers to draw a parallel between the loose grip Father Flynn has on the chalice in death and the time that he dropped it while he was alive, demarcating the beginning of his illness. Because the chalice is such an important instrument in Catholic rituals, this symbolism links Father Flynn's physical death with his inability to function as a religious leader. In Roman Catholicism, chalices are used as the cup in communion ceremonies and in Mass. Thus, the idea that his hold on the chalice is loose suggests that his hold on the Catholic faith is loose—and, by extension, that the grip that Catholicism has on Irish culture is loosening as well.

Father Flynn's death is met with such a complex, largely ambivalent emotional reaction because it is, so to speak, his time to pass. But not only does this idea refer to his physical body; the education he provides for young people, his approach to Catholicism, and his religious ideologies were no longer suitable for the time in which he lived. Towards the end of his life, Father Flynn was not only physically deteriorating, but also mentally unstable. The narrator and the women who took care of him refer to moments when he was smiling or laughing to himself seemingly for no reason. For example, towards the end of his life, the priest had the delusional idea to "go out for a

drive one fine day" to see the house where he was born. By characterizing Father Flynn not just as physically unwell but as having lost his mind, Joyce drives home his criticism of the Church. If Father Flynn is the symbolic embodiment of Catholicism, then the religion is not only obsolete, but is so nonsensical that it is as mad as the priest himself.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CHALICE

The chalice symbolizes the relationship between the Catholic faith and the community portrayed in "The Sisters." In Roman Catholicism, chalices are used during Mass and in communion ceremonies. They are used in moments when priests convene with their parishes, when members of the church are invited to partake in religious ritual, which creates the possibility for the chalice to represent the harmonious union between a priest and his parish. But in this particular story, the chalice is only introduced when readers learn that the priest in question, Father Flynn, has accidentally broken it—presumably due to his deteriorating health. The chalice also appears during the priest's wake, as he has been placed in the coffin "loosely gripping" the chalice. In both of these moments, the priest's poor treatment of the chalice symbolically represents his poor treatment, or inability to properly tend to, the relationship between the Catholic church and the people of the local community.

Father Flynn's loss of a grip on the Catholic faith parallels his loss of grip on his health. Indeed, Eliza, one of Father Flynn's sisters, seems to believe that the priest's mental health began deteriorating as a sort of divine punishment for having broken the chalice. Joyce parallels Father Flynn's health with the priest's ability to function as a religious leader in order to drive home the point that just as it is time for the priest to die, it is also time for the Catholic faith to metaphorically die. Indeed, other characters such as Old Cotter and the narrator's uncle seem to think that religious education and religiosity don't have practical value in the modern world and discourage the narrator from spending too much time with Father Flynn. It is clear that the priest has been unable to effectively share the importance of the Catholic faith with his parishioners, demonstrating his inefficiency as a religious leader.

FATHER FLYNN'S SNUFF

Father Flynn's snuff represents the priest's corruption, and, by extension, the corruption of the Catholic Church as a whole. In the story, the narrator relates to readers how he would often supply the priest with his snuff, often helping him to prepare it because the older man's deteriorating health prevented him from opening the packet himself. The narrator describes Father Flynn's clumsiness as he uses the snuff, which causes him to spill snuff all over his "ancient priestly garments" and also gives him discolored, ugly teeth. In brief, Father Flynn's snuff habit is extraordinarily inelegant, and undermines the objective of his traditional priest's clothing, which is to make him appear to be a respectable, spiritual figure. However, Father Flynn's addiction to a material substance, which sullies his garments, prevents him from embodying that role. In a way, this serves to humanize Father Flynn. Although he is supposed to be such an important religious figure, his snuff habit demonstrates that he is just a human being like all of the other characters, subject to the same vices and bad habits as everyone. Still, even this characterization serves to undermine the authority of the Catholic church, suggesting that the Irish people shouldn't elevate priests to such positions of power when, ultimately, they are human beings, just as imperfect—if not more so, in Father Flynn's case—than the parishioners who idolize them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Dubliners* published in 1993.

The Sisters Quotes

❝ Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *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. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the narrator is contemplating the possibility of Father Flynn's death. Although at the beginning of the same paragraph the narrator expressed sadness and remorse that his friend and mentor would soon die, in this passage he reveals a certain curiosity about death and about Father Flynn's sickness that is more voyeuristic than

it is empathic. This is the first moment in the story that Joyce establishes a character's response to death that goes beyond the expected sadness, grief, and mourning. In demonstrating this aspect of the narrator's reaction to Father Flynn's passing, Joyce deepens readers' understanding of the many ways in which human beings respond to death.

On another note, the introduction of the word simony—the practice of buying and selling entrance into heaven—in this passage subtly sets readers up for one of the most important themes of the story, which is interrogating Father Flynn's moral integrity. Given that simony is considered abhorrently sinful in the Catholic faith, the fact that the narrator—who is only a young boy—would suggest this about Father Flynn implies that the priest is just as human and flawed as the people of his community who look to him for moral guidance.

"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…"

Related Characters: Old Cotter (speaker), The Narrator, Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator has walked in on a conversation between Old Cotter and his aunt. Although the narrator doesn't yet know that Father Flynn has passed, the two are discussing the priest's death and questioning his moral character. This is the first moment in the story that Joyce introduces the possibility that Father Flynn was pedophilic. Old Cotter's use of the word "queer" in particular points to that—at the time Joyce was writing, the word was a pejorative term for homosexual people. Old Cotter's use of this term in reference to Father Flynn implies that Father Flynn's relationship with the narrator may have been inappropriate, with sexual or romantic undertones.

Though Joyce leaves the nature of the narrator and Father Flynn's relationship up to the reader's interpretation, even subtly introducing the possibility of Father Flynn's pedophilia has significant implications. Joyce uses the immorality and incompetence of Father Flynn's character as a representation of the Catholic Church's corruption on a broader scale, and so suggesting that the priest may have abused children in his parish speaks to Joyce's view that people's trust in Church authorities tends to be misplaced.

"Let him learn to box his corner. That's what I'm always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that's what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large…"

Related Characters: The Narrator's Uncle (speaker), The Narrator, Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's uncle and Old Cotter are still discussing Father Flynn's death in this moment. The two men both agree that the narrator shouldn't have been spending so much time with the old priest. Here, the narrator's uncle suggests that religious education isn't practical for young men. He refers to his nephew as a Rosicrucian—a member of an esoteric sect dedicated to obscure studies of mysticism—in order to emphasize the point that religious studies don't have real-world applicability. His descriptions of intense physical activity and hardship in his own youth draw a stark contrast to what he imagines the narrator does with the priest, which is endless study of ancient Catholic texts that have little to do with the reality of the narrator's day-to-day life. His seemingly ironic admission that education is "fine and large" clarifies his dismissive attitude toward formal, religious study. Given that "The Sisters" critiques Catholicism as something obsolete and more harmful than beneficial to society, readers can make the leap that the views of the narrator's uncle align with those of Joyce himself.

"Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child I puzzled my head to extract the meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Old Cotter, Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator seems to be grappling with the possibility that the old priest wasn't a wholly positive figure in his life. His anger at Old Cotter for referring to him as a child is interesting, and suggests that he may not be as aware of his own youth or immaturity as those around him. This may have made him particularly vulnerable to Father Flynn if the priest were pedophilic, as Old Cotter subtly suggested earlier in the story. If the narrator didn't seem himself as a child in relation to the older man, he may not have seen anything wrong with sexual or romantic undertones in their relationship.

Secondly, the contrast between Father Flynn's "heavy grey face" and Christmas is interesting here. On the one hand, the ugly image of the old priest serves as an unflattering representation of the Catholic faith. On the other, however, it seems that the narrator tries to distract himself from thinking of the priest's immorality and grotesque appearance by remembering Christmas, one of the most positive aspects of the Catholic faith. In this moment, the narrator struggles with negative feelings about the priest, and, by extension, Catholicism, and tries to cling to what he views as the positive aspects of the religion. In this sense, Joyce acknowledges the fact that people are sentimentally attached to their faith but challenges the notion that tradition and nostalgia should undermine people's sensibilities about religion's downfalls.

"But the grey face still followed me [...] It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the 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."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator is still in bed, haunted by memories of Father Flynn. His language in describing the image of the priest's faith remains grotesque. The description of the spittle on Father Flynn's lips, particularly, serves to undermine Father Flynn's authority as a religious leader. While he is supposed to be an admirable source of religious wisdom, his appearance is that of a sloppy old man in poor health, which draws a stark contrast to what one would expect of an authority figure and particularly of a holy man. The narrator's implication that he was absolving Father Flynn of a sign further undermines the priest's integrity. If he was, indeed, a simoniac—someone who accepted money from his parishioners in order to guarantee them entrance into heaven—then he was a corrupt leader of his own parish.

"It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of the week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Old Cotter, Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the narrator reveals the extent of Father Flynn's snuff habit. Here, his description of the way the snuff would dirty Father Flynn's "ancient priestly garments" demonstrates the extent to which the priest seems to have disregarded his need to maintain a respectable appearance. Allowing his sacred clothing to become dirty suggests that the priest was likely also lax about other rules of the faith and had an overall lack of respect for Catholicism, perhaps rendering him unsuited to be an authority figure in the Church. Father Flynn's snuff habit also serves to humanize him—although he is supposed to be a deeply spiritual figure of religious authority, he struggles with addiction to a material substance, just as anyone else could. This, in turn, implies that perhaps those who admire Father Flynn shouldn't put him on a pedestal, as he struggles with the same types of concerns that average people do.

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

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the narrator explicitly admits for the first time that his reaction to Father Flynn's death is not exclusively one of sadness. The fact that he feels "freed from something" because of the priest's death suggest that the narrator was, in a way, metaphorically just as paralyzed by the priest himself. He suggests that his relationship with the priest in some way prevented him from being free, from growing or learning in the way that he needs to. This invites readers to consider that the Catholic faith is also becoming obsolete. The young narrator's involvement with the religion did nothing to prepare him for his future in a practical sense. Instead, all of the time he spent in religious studies with Father Flynn prevented him from being or feeling as free as he does once he is relieved of the burden of the priest and his lessons.

"I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Dictionary* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Father Flynn reveals an unusual way to evaluate the quality of religious texts. The narrator is describing the various religious lessons he would have with Father Flynn, and has emphasized that the priest liked to complicate even what the narrator had thought were the simplest Catholic rituals. This quote from Father Flynn epitomizes this tendency for overcomplication. He brags that father of the Church write books that are, essentially, complicated and hard to read. This demonstrates that Father Flynn is in no way concerned with making the teaching of the Catholic Church accessible, and therefore, even making them applicable. Rather, he appreciates religious writings that are long and complex. This betrays an elitist standpoint—he does not care about making the teachings comprehensible to the people of his community and prefers that they only be available to those who have the luxury of access to quality education. This serves as yet another piece of evidence that he is an ineffective religious leader and, by extension, that Catholicism as a whole is becoming obsolete.

"There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hand loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a scanty white fur. There was a heavy odor in the room—the flowers."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Eliza, Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is describing Father Flynn's appearance as the priest lays in his coffin at the wake. Here, the narrator strongly emphasizes the ugliness of death. The description of Father Flynn's face is grotesque, and contrasts with what Eliza will later say about the priest—that he made a "beautiful corpse." The contrast between the narrator's interpretation of the priest death and Eliza's represents Eliza's struggle to bypass the difficult realities of life and death through her religious beliefs. This sentiment is also encapsulated in the narrator's description of the flowers—although flowers at wakes exist to beautify the environment to honor the dead, the narrator experiences their smell as a "heavy odor." In other words, the flowers try and fail to beautify death, which is inherently an ugly experience. The narrator's candid description of the priest's body thus allows readers a glimpse into a realistic portrayal of death and suggests that religious beliefs and ceremonies often coddle people away from facing difficult truths.

"It was that chalice he broke…That was the beginning of it."

Related Characters: Eliza (speaker), Father James Flynn

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Father Flynn's sister Eliza is sharing the story of the beginning of Father Flynn's poor health. She has just shared that, toward the end of the priest's life, she and her sister, Nannie, were aware that there was something off with him, that he was losing his mind. By linking his ill health with his accidental breaking of an empty chalice, she reveals her own superstition: she seems to believe that God has chosen to punish the old priest with poor health for disrespecting a religious instrument. By characterizing Eliza and Nannie as superstitious, Joyce by extension characterizes Catholic believers as irrational.

What's more, the chalice in the story serves to represent the harmony (or lack thereof) that exists between a priest and his community. Chalices are often used in religious ceremonies that unite the priest with his parish, such as communions. The priest's inability to hold and properly care for the chalice, then, represents his inability to properly maintain the relationship between the Church and the community. In the story, Father Flynn's death represents Joyce's opinion that the Catholic church needed to metaphorically die. At the time the story was written, Joyce believed the Church was no longer of service to the Irish people, just as Father Flynn was no longer able to be an effective leader in the story.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE SISTERS

A local priest has suffered his third stroke, and the narrator suspects that this will be his last. Every night, the narrator passes the house where the priest lives to discover whether or not the time has finally come. The narrator is curious about the priest's paralysis; to him, the word is just as mysterious as certain words in the Catechism, like *gnomon* and simony. The narrator both fears paralysis and is curious to see what effects it has on the priest's body.

Here, although the narrator is close to Father Flynn, his response to death isn't just sadness, but also a cold sort of curiosity. This sets readers up for an analysis of death in the story that includes the most unexpected of emotional responses to it. What's more, the narrator's mention of simony—the practice of buying one's way into heaven—is the first hint in the story that Father Flynn might be an ethically corrupt priest.

One day, the narrator goes downstairs to supper and hears Old Cotter speaking about someone, saying "there was something queer…there was something uncanny about him." The narrator is frustrated by Old Cotter's rambling, thinking to himself that Old Cotter is a "tiresome old fool." Old Cotter goes on to say that it was "one of those peculiar cases…" and, the narrator's uncle, realizing that the narrator doesn't know who they're talking about, tells him that the priest, Father Flynn, has died.

In this moment, Old Cotter is alluding to the open disdain that the community feels for Father Flynn, which complicates his mysterious relationship with the narrator. His comment that Father Flynn is a "peculiar case" could even be interpreted as an implication that the priest is pedophilic. Interestingly, the narrator doesn't seem to have been perturbed by Father Flynn's old age, but becomes easily irritated by Old Cotter for his own old age when he refers to him as a "tiresome old fool." This demonstrates the narrator's attachment to Father Flynn, regardless of what has occurred between the two of them, which contrasts the first moments of the story when the narrator seemed more detached from the possibility of the old priest's death.

The narrator's uncle shares with Old Cotter that his nephew and Father Flynn were "great friends." Neither man seems to approve of the narrator's relationship with the older priest. Old Cotter says, "I wouldn't like children of mine […] to have much to say to a man like that," and then explains that he thinks young people should spend time with people their own age. The narrator's uncle agrees, jokingly referring to his nephew as a "Rosicrucian" who ought to exercise more and spend less time on his religious studies. Although he says nothing, the narrator is irritated by the older men's opinions.

Here, both the narrator's uncle and Old Cotter express their opinions on how young people should be raised. By referring to his nephew as a "Rosicrucian," the uncle alludes to a sect of mystics dedicated to the study of the esoteric. It's clear that he doesn't approve of esoteric or religious study that the narrator has been doing with Father Flynn—the implication that the two men make is that such education isn't as practical for the narrator as spending time outside, for instance, or with people his own age.

Later that night, the narrator is struggling to fall asleep. He tries to put together Old Cotter's cryptic words from earlier but is unable to. He keeps visualizing Father Flynn's "heavy grey face," and, to avoid thinking of the dead priest, he "[tries] to think of Christmas." But the narrator is still haunted by images of the dead priest, and imagines that the man's smiling grey face, with lips "so moist with spittle" was trying to confess something to the narrator. The narrator imagines that he smiles back at the face, "as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin."

The language that the narrator uses to describe Father Flynn paints a grotesque portrait of the old priest, which serves to undermine his credibility as a positive influence on the narrator's life or, indeed, an effective religious leader. The narrator's reference to simony later in the passage emphasizes Father Flynn's lack of moral authority—if he accepted money from parishioners under the guise of granting them entrance to heaven, then he was not an ethical functionary of the Church. Finally, the narrator's mention that he tried to "think of Christmas" demonstrates his own desire to cling to the Catholic faith as a source of comfort. Even though he is reckoning with the possibility that his religious mentor may have had a corrupt character, he seeks to comfort himself by thinking of a holiday from that same faith.

The next morning, the narrator walks over to Father Flynn's house on Great Britain Street and reads the death announcement. He thinks that, were the priest still alive, he would likely have gone in to give Father Flynn some **snuff**. Due to his strokes, the priest wasn't able to take the snuff without "spilling half the snuff on the floor." The narrator reflects that "it may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look."

Joyce's subtle choice to have Father Flynn live on Great Britain Street is a reference to the Vatican's compliance with the British Conservative Party, which opposed Irish independence. This is further evidence that Father Flynn is not only morally corrupt, but also politically. What's more, the narrator's description of Father Flynn's snuff habit further serves to challenge the priest's moral authority. The priest's clumsy application of the snuff makes it difficult to admire him, and his addiction to the substance has caused him to soil his priestly robes. The priest's clothing represents his authority, but the stains of snuff on it represent his inability to properly engage with that authority.

The narrator considers going in to see Father Flynn's body, but feels too shy to knock. So, he walks away, surprised to find that "neither the day nor [he] seemed in a mourning mood." He goes on to think that he feels, in fact, that he "had been freed from something by his death." The narrator is surprised at these feelings, because Father Flynn had taught him many things. The priest had studied in Rome at the Irish College and had instructed the narrator in Latin. The narrator recalls that many of Father Flynn's lessons focused on the most complicated aspects of the Church—even those which the narrator himself had thought were simple. Father Flynn would quiz the narrator on how to handle various situations, the severity of sins, and the duties of various church figures. Indeed, Father Flynn appreciated the complex aspects of the Church, and at one point told the narrator that "fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Dictionary*."

For the first time, the narrator overtly admits not to feel only sadness in response to Father Flynn's death. His admission that he feels "freed from something" implies that Father Flynn—and, by extension, the Catholic faith—kept him stuck. The idea that Catholicism immobilizes its practitioners draws a parallel between the faith itself and Father Flynn, who experienced literal paralysis after his strokes. When the narrator goes on to describe the type of instruction he received from Father Flynn, it becomes clear that feels relieved in part because what he was learning with the priest is not relevant to his life—nothing about Latin applies to the narrator's daily reality. It appears from this passage that Father Flynn was more concerned the teachings of the Catholic Church being complicated than he was with them being useful.

The narrator remembers that Father Flynn used to ask him to recite portions of the Mass, and as he was speaking, the priest would use snuff and smile. The narrator remembers that the priest would "uncover his big discolored teeth and let his tongue lie upon his upper lip – a habit which had made [the narrator] feel uneasy in the beginning of [their] acquaintance before [he] knew him well."

Again, in this passage, the narrator's description of Father Flynn is grotesque. The image of "big discolored teeth" and the priest's open mouth is disturbing and serves to further characterize Father Flynn as an authority figure who may not deserve the power that he has over the people that respect him. Additionally, the narrator's mention that Father Flynn made him uncomfortable invites readers to consider why a young man would be uncomfortable about a mentor figure, and whether Old Cotter's earlier implication that the priest was pedophilic may in fact have been the case.

Later that evening, the narrator goes with his aunt to visit the house where Father Flynn had lived. Upon arrival, they are greeted by Nannie, one of the two sisters who took care of Father Flynn in his old age. The three of them go up to kneel before Father Flynn's coffin. The narrator attempts to pray but is distracted by the sound of Nannie's prayers. He also notices that she has dressed herself very clumsily.

Here, the narrator's mention that he is distracted by the sound of Nannie's voice and by her clothes suggests that his attempt to engage spiritually with Father Flynn's passing ins unsuccessful. He tries to honor the deceased priest by praying but is too distracted by his material surroundings to effectively practice the religious rite of praying for the dead. This is yet another example of the ineffectiveness or impracticality of Catholicism in the story.

As he kneels before Father Flynn's coffin, the narrator imagines that the priest is smiling. However, when he stands to look at the corpse, he sees that Father Flynn, although "vested as for the altar" with "his large hands loosely retaining a **chalice**" is not smiling, nor is his appearance very elegant—the narrator observes the same huge, grey face that he visualized the night he learned the priest died. He notices, also, a "heavy odor in the room – the flowers."

The fact that Father Flynn is smiling in the coffin suggests that he was ready for death, which creates the possibility for readers to consider dying as a natural transition rather than something to be dreaded. What's more, Father Flynn's loose grip on the chalice is an analogy for his loose grip on the Catholic faith. The chalice is commonly used in Catholic ceremonies, such as communion, that unite the priest with his parish. However, Father Flynn has been unable to adapt his teachings to the needs of the community that he is supposed to serve. Thus, his loose grip on the chalice is symbolic of this failure.

As they leave Father Flynn, Nannie, the narrator, and his aunt bless themselves and meet Eliza, the other sister who cared for Father Flynn. Nannie offers everyone sherry, which the narrator accepts, as well as cream crackers. The narrator, afraid that he would "make too much noise eating them," declines. The group sits in silence, gazing at the fireplace.

In this moment, the narrator's hesitation to accept the cream crackers reflects his discomfort with Father Flynn's death. Joyce's implication is that the narrator is afraid that by making too much noise as he eats, he will somehow be disrespectful of the priest's death.

Eventually, the narrator's aunt breaks the silence by saying that the priest has gone to a better place. Eliza nods and agrees, and then shares with the room that Father Flynn had a "beautiful death." She shares that Father Flynn looked peaceful after he had died, that he had a "beautiful corpse." The narrator's aunt assures Eliza that she and her sister treated Father Flynn very well while he was alive. Nannie has fallen asleep, and Eliza acknowledges that although she and her sister had help from other members of the community in preparing Father Flynn's body and the church for the funeral, it was Father Flynn himself who made most of his own arrangements before he died.

Here, Eliza's insistence that Father Flynn made a beautiful corpse directly contrasts what the narrator has shared about the dead body, which is that it is grotesque in appearance. This demonstrates Eliza's desire to ignore the ugly reality of death. Her willingness to pretend that Father Flynn made a beautiful corpse also suggests that she may also have looked past some of his unethical behavior in life due to her devout Catholic faith.

Suddenly, Eliza's tone changes. She acknowledges that "something queer [came] over" Father Flynn toward the end of his life. She recalls how she would bring him his soup and "find him with is breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open." What's more, she adds that he dreamed of getting a carriage to drive over to the house where all three siblings were born. Remembering this, Eliza begins to cry, and then shares that the "duties of the priesthood were too much" for her brother.

It is in this moment in the story that Joyce most clearly hints that toward the end of Father Flynn's life, the priest went mad. This passage serves to further prove that he was unsuitable for the position of authority that he occupied. What's more, the detail about the breviary falling to the floor underscores that Father Flynn had begun to neglect or fail at performing his priestly duties. The breviary is something to be studied and read from every morning, and Father Flynn dropping the book to the ground represents his inability to continue and respect this tradition.

After a silence, Eliza observes that Father Flynn's poor health began after he broke an empty **chalice**. After Father Flynn broke the chalice, he became so nervous that he began to walk around aimlessly One day, he disappeared, and no one could find him for hours until a clerk suggested they tried the chapel. There, Eliza shares, they found Father Flynn "sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself." At this, she stops to listen, and the narrator does too. He reminds himself that Father Flynn is lying dead in his coffin, "an idle chalice" perched on his chest. Eliza continues, saying that it was at that moment when they knew "there was something gone wrong with him…"

Here, the sisters understand Father Flynn's madness as God's punishment for him having broken the chalice, an important religious symbol. This absurd logic characterizes them as somewhat foolish and deepens Joyce's portrayal of Catholic believers as superstitious and irrational. The connection between the beginning of Father Flynn's ill health and the breaking of the chalice also suggests that it is because he is no longer able to appropriately serve his community as a priest that his health begins to deteriorate. In other words, Father Flynn demonstrates that he is no longer able to complete his function as a priest, and so it is time for him to pass. The end of the story drives home Joyce's criticism of the Catholic faith, solidifying his characterization of the religion as obsolete.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Ogunseitan, Coryna. "*The Sisters.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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Ogunseitan, Coryna. "*The Sisters.*" LitCharts LLC, November 15, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-sisters.

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