Dante's Literary Influence in *Dubliners*: James Joyce's Modernist Allegory of Paralysis

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Dante’s literary influence in *Dubliners*: James Joyce’s Modernist allegory of paralysis

by

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Dante’s Literary Influence in *Dubliners*: James Joyce’s Modernist Allegory of Paralysis

I. INTRODUCTION

The influence of the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri on the work of early twentieth century Irish writer James Joyce is a subject that has often been noted by literary critics. The majority of critical attention has been devoted to defining Joyce’s adaptation of Dante and his use of allegory as they operate in his major works, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and, to a lesser extent, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The importance of Dante in Joyce’s first work, *Dubliners*, is often overlooked. Regarding the book’s fifteen short stories as sketches of immorality and despair, critics often relegate the influence of Dante to a mere list of allusions meant to remind the reader of a convenient framework for categorizing various types of sins, as Dante does in the *Inferno*, his version of hell and the first volume of *The Divine Comedy*. *Dubliners* is glossed over as a stepping stone to a larger, more complex Dantean allegorical vision that does not emerge until Joyce’s later work, and the hopeless moral depravity that pervades its stories is set aside as a product of the pessimistic frustration of a young writer who had not yet established his own artistic and aesthetic vision.

A closer study, however, reveals that the *Inferno* plays a much more crucial allegorical role in *Dubliners* than that for which critics have previously given it credit. Not only does the book contain more allusions to the *Inferno* than have previously been noted, but it also adapts key features of the poem’s structure, language, and imagery, indicating that Joyce intended to use Dante for more than a basic framework. It is clear from Joyce’s personal correspondence that he also intended *Dubliners* to do more than just portray moral
depravity. In a letter written to his friend Constantine Curran, Joyce claimed, “I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (Gilbert 55). And in a letter to his publisher he argued that he intended to give the Irish people “one good look at themselves in [his] nicely polished looking glass” (Gilbert 64), a look that would expose the need for change, which he felt was necessary for the “spiritual liberation” of his country (63). Adapting Dante’s moral scheme is certainly one of the strategies Joyce used in constructing his “looking glass,” but it is just the first step. By incorporating elements of the *Inferno*’s structure, setting, characterization, and imagery, Joyce demonstrates a conscious awareness of and participation in the tradition of allegory. Joyce shares with Dante an interest in conveying human nature truthfully through art, and it is in his portrayal of human nature that Joyce’s use of Dante is perhaps most complex and meaningful.

But while Dante intends his allegory in *The Divine Comedy* to demonstrate to readers how to reform themselves and achieve salvation, Joyce, as a Modernist, does not go that far. Aided by the wisdom of Virgil and other guides, enlightened by sights of eternal punishment of sin and reward of virtue, and strengthened by the word and love of God, Dante will, by the end of the *Comedy*, be saved. In *Dubliners*, Joyce depicts sin, but there is no sage guide explaining the eternal consequences of those sins or urging on the characters, or the reader, with hopeful promises of God’s love and salvation; the definitive assurance of God’s word is, in fact, nowhere to be found. Characters seeking change and guidance continually fail or are denied. The immorality, corruption, and frustration depicted in *Dubliners* amount to a larger allegorical representation of paralysis—physical, psychological, political, social, spiritual,
and artistic. Dublin becomes a vision of a city and a people incapable of breaking free from old patterns of behavior, incapable of achieving personal, national, and artistic authenticity, incapable of forging, to borrow the words of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a new conscience for the Irish race.

Thus, while Joyce uses Dante’s allegory to enrich his representations of human nature and make an important critique of the state of Dublin’s soul, he also challenges that allegory at every turn. Joyce’s Modernist aesthetic raises questions about the lack of guidance in the modern world, the instability of human language and relationships, and the apparently impossible hope for salvation, or freedom from old habits and ways of living life. Ambiguity rules. As dismal as *Dubliners* may often seem, there are indications of hope for change, movement, and salvation, but Joyce ends each story ambiguously. He gives no literal indication whether “spiritual liberation” or paralysis will ultimately prevail. At the same time, while there is literal ambiguity in Joyce’s stories, a closer look at the Dantean intertext often suggests other levels of meaning. The connections Joyce makes between Dante’s structure, settings, characters, and imagery of paralysis and the questions he raises about absence, instability, and uncertainty culminate in a vision of seemingly inevitable stasis and misery. By confirming some aspects of Dante’s allegory and subverting others, Joyce in *Dubliners* ultimately distinguishes his own artistic vision and creates a more radical allegory of the modern world as paralysis.
II. CRITICISM OF DUBLINERS

A collection of fifteen short stories, *Dubliners* depicts, in the words of Gerald Gould, one of the first critics to review the book, the ‘dirty and crawling’ activities of a city that, in Joyce’s view, was paralyzed in a state of moral depravity (63). In “Two Gallants,” a young man seduces a young woman, conning her out of a gold coin that he will spend with his waiting friend. In “Counterparts,” a man is berated by his boss in front of his coworkers, gets drunk with his friends in a pub, loses an arm-wrestling match, returns home, and beats his son. In “A Painful Case,” a woman rejected by her male companion and potential love interest commits suicide by walking in front of a moving train, leaving the man to despair over his perpetual loneliness. In story after story, the citizens of Dublin are presented as manipulators, misfits, failures, hypocrites, and sinners in general, trapped within their own self-made hells.

To Joyce, the harsh honesty of his stories was necessary for portraying the reality of human nature, for constructing a “looking glass” in which his readers could recognize themselves. His publishers and printers disagreed. Publisher Grant Richards, who initially accepted *Dubliners* for publication in 1905, grew concerned that its frank content, particularly its treatment of sexual matters, would bring charges of indecency and, furthermore, that its references to real people and establishments of Dublin would bring charges of libel. Giving up on Richards, Joyce took the manuscript to a new publisher, Maunsel and Company, in 1909 (Brown “Intro” vii), but after the first edition was completed, the printers burned all of the 1000 copies produced, citing the same fears of indecency and libel (Gilbert 72). Joyce returned to Richards, who finally published the book in June of
1914. Throughout the nearly ten-year struggle to get *Dubliners* published, Joyce remained adamant about the need to maintain the realistic detail of his stories, what he called “a style of scrupulous meanness,” because only a “very bold man” would “[dare] to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard” (Ellman 134). To deny publication of the book or to revise its content would, he claimed, “retard the course of civilisation in Ireland” by obscuring the clarity of his “looking glass” (Gilbert 64), or, in other words, obscuring his truthful representations of human nature. Joyce’s insistent focus on realistic detail was among the characteristics of *Dubliners* most commented on by the book’s early critics and today remains central to readers’ and critics’ resistance to understanding it as allegory. But, as shall be seen, reliance upon realistic detail, despite the imagined setting of hell, is equally important to Dante’s representations of sin and human nature in the *Inferno*, thus aligning the two works with a common goal—to convey the truth about human nature in order to expose the need for change.

**Early Reviews**

Although *Dubliners* did not actually draw legal charges of indecency or libel, early critics of the book, as outlined by the reviews collected in Robert H. Deming’s *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, tended to focus on its sordid subject matter,¹ and Joyce’s objective

¹ An anonymous reviewer in the November 1914 issue of *Irish Book Lover* “naturally shrinks from such characters,” finding them “not quite suited *virginibus puerisque,*” and although he admits that “one cannot deny the existence of their prototypes,” he “wish[es] that the author had directed his undoubted talents in other and pleasanter directions” (68-9). An unsigned review published in the June 20, 1914 issue of *Athenæum* argued, “Life has so much that is beautiful, interesting, educative, amusing, that we do not readily pardon those who insist upon its more sordid and baser aspects. The condemnation is the greater if their skill is of any high degree, since in that case they might use it to better purpose” (61).
treatment of such subjects led many to classify the book as realistic or naturalistic. This
critical foundation, as mentioned, has been a major factor in continued understanding of the
book as conventionally realistic, causing most contemporary critics to see it as being
dramatically different from Joyce’s later, experimental, and more clearly allegorical works,
such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Early critics often emphasized, as did Joyce, the book’s
remarkably realistic detail, structure, and characterization.

Ezra Pound was chief among critics who praised Joyce for the book’s realism—for
avoiding sentimentalism, refusing to follow “the conventional form of a ‘story,’” recognizing
that “life for the most part does not happen in neat little diagrams,” “giv[ing] us Dublin as it
presumably is,” and choosing as his subject matter “normal things and . . . normal people”
(67-8). French critic Edmond Jaloux found Joyce’s realism so flawless that he described it as
creating the almost “scientific” effect “of a cinematographic apparatus or of a microphone
recording reality” (70). In fact, the intensity of Joyce’s realism led many to categorize
*Dubliners* as an example of Naturalism at its finest. Critics saw in the book an emphasis on
objectivity in the description of characters and violent events, pessimism about human nature,
and an amoral, deterministic approach to human struggles, all typical characteristics of
Naturalism (Holman and Harmon 322). Gould describes the stories as being narrated “quite
calmly, quite dispassionately,” contending that Joyce “seems to regard this objective and dirty
and crawling world with the cold detachment of an unamiable god” (63). John Quinn called

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2 In a 1930 essay published in *Post*, a reviewer signed J. C. claimed that Joyce, as a young writer just beginning
his career, “conformed . . . to convention” in his “realist, analytical studies of everyday people in everyday
surroundings” (75). French critic Valéry Larbaud similarly claimed in a 1922 review that Joyce did not try “to
break away from this [Naturalist] discipline, but to perfect it,” in his attempts “to write without appealing to the
public, to tell a story while turning his back to his audience” (256). This view of Joyce conforming to
convention early in his career has continued in current criticism.
Dubliners “the work of a writer who was moved by what he felt and saw, but apparently remained as cold as stone” (103).

These early critics were right—as are contemporary critics—to note the realistic, objective nature of the book, since these are strategies necessary for presenting readers with an accurate reflection of themselves without pronouncing explicit moral judgment against them. Modris Eksteins asserts in Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age that amorality is a fundamental characteristic of Modernism. He argues that with the first performance of the radical ballet, The Rite of Spring, on May 29, 1913, modern art, characterized by a lack of “reason, didacticism, and a moral purpose,” was born (15). Artists, musicians, and composers became fascinated with social outcasts, the poor, criminals, prostitutes, and the mentally unstable as part of a search for a morality “without sanctions and obligations” that would “eliminate restrictions on the human personality” (42-3). Not necessarily immoral, Modernism was amoral. It broke away artistically, morally, psychologically, and spiritually “from central authority, from patriarchy, from bourgeois conformity” and from European tradition in general (48). Dubliners, although written almost ten years before it was published in 1914—the year designated as the beginning of the Modernist period in English literature, as well as the start of World War I—clearly displays these characteristics. But without considering Joyce’s own statements about his intentions for Dubliners or its Dantean intertext, this heavy critical emphasis on realism and objectivity tends to close doors to understanding the work as having multiple and complex allegorical meanings.
Contemporary Criticism: Dante in *Dubliners*

At least one early critic, whether consciously or not, seemed to pick up on a Dantesque theme or undertone in *Dubliners*. The author of an unsigned review published in the July 3, 1914 issue of *Everyman* noted the “ruthless callousness” with which Joyce “damn[s]” his characters, calling the book “the records of an inferno in which neither pity nor remorse can enter,” written by one who “seeks inspiration in the hell of despair” (64). Although this is yet another example of praise for Joyce’s artistic ability undercut by an aversion to *Dubliners*’ dismal subject matter, this critic has constructed a metaphoric interpretation of the book, complete with an allusion to Dante, indicating the possibility for the presence of another level of meaning. Recent critics have investigated more seriously Dante’s influence on Joyce’s work, but it has been a common trend for many to devote their attention to his later work, overlooking *Dubliners*. Joseph Campbell, for instance, the famous proponent of universal myths and archetypes, recognizes the structural, thematic, and even mythic influence that Dante had on Joyce. In his book *Mythic Worlds, Modern Words: The Art of James Joyce*, he devotes a section of his introduction to “Joyce’s Dantesque Model,” and yet declares: “Joyce imitates Dante. Joyce’s first work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is the equivalent of the *Vita Nuova* and imitates it in all of its basic themes” (19). Whether Campbell excluded *Dubliners* because he did not find it relevant to Joyce’s Dantesque imitation or because he did not consider it worthy to be designated as Joyce’s first work is unclear, but in any case, it is a glaring oversight.

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3 Campbell goes on to designate *Ulysses* as Joyce’s version of the *Inferno*, *Finnegans Wake* as the *Purgatorio*, and the book he planned but was not able to write as the *Paradiso*. 
Other critics who have written insightfully about Dante’s influence on Joyce have demonstrated an equally fickle dismissal of *Dubliners*’s relevance. Stephen Sicari, who draws extensive comparisons between Joyce and Dante in his 2001 book, *Joyce’s Modernist Allegory*, in order to construct an argument for allegory in *Ulysses*, brushes *Dubliners* off as the work of a young writer adhering to conventions of Naturalism and finding himself frustrated by the genre’s form. He claims that *Dubliners* “emphasizes randomness and mere sequence of events,” and that the book was useful in that it provided the young writer “with an important lesson about the realistic or naturalistic style, that what it does best is present failure, limit, confinement, and death” (33). The focus of early criticism upon the book’s naturalistic tendencies continues to be emphasized in current criticism and thus continues to severely limit interpretive possibilities. Had Sicari approached *Dubliners* with the same attention to Dantean detail as he does Joyce’s later work, he surely would have found in its stories more than random sequences of events.

Even critics who do find connections between Dante and *Dubliners* tend to interpret them rather superficially. This type of critical commentary on *Dubliners* often relegates Dante’s importance to a compilation of allusions that add up to a basic conceptual framework for the book—the “records of an inferno” alluded to by the anonymous *Everyman* reviewer. It has been common, for instance, for critics to analyze “Grace” as a miniature parody of *The Divine Comedy*, ever since Joyce’s brother, Stanislaus, first suggested this interpretation in 1958: “Mr. Kernan’s fall down the steps of the lavatory is his descent into hell, the sickroom is purgatory, and the Church in which he and his friends listen to the sermon is paradise at last. In ‘Grace’ the pattern is ironical with a touch of suppressed anger” (S. Joyce 228). By far
the two most frequently noted allusions are the first and last sentences of the book, which Jackson Cope is credited with first identifying in his 1970 article “An Epigraph for *Dubliners*” (Reynolds 156-7). The opening sentence of “The Sisters,” which refers to the young narrator’s recently paralyzed priest-mentor, reads: “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke” (Joyce 1). This is seen as an allusion to the inscription above Dante’s gates to Hell in the *Inferno*: “Abandon every hope, all you who enter” (*Inf.* III.9).  

The last sentence of “The Dead,” which conveys Gabriel Conroy’s sadness following his realization that his marriage lacks passion and love, reads: “His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” (225). Due to its emphasis on falling snow and death, this sentence has been connected with the imagery of frozen, traitorous souls trapped in ice in Cocytus, the ninth circle of Dante’s hell and his final image of hopelessness.

These allusions are crucial to understanding Dante’s influence in *Dubliners* because they are the first literary connection likely to draw attention to the presence of Dante in the book and because they set up a conceptual and structural framework for it. But seemingly every piece of criticism written on Dante in *Dubliners* since Cope’s article includes an obligatory reference to these two allusions. This has resulted in an unbalanced critical focus upon attempts to trace a chronological progression from hell’s gated entrance to its frozen center by matching the basic sins in *Dubliners* to their corresponding circles in Dante’s hell. Consequently, critics have tended to identify one-to-one correlations between any given story in *Dubliners* and any given canto in the *Inferno*, causing a multitude of more complex and

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4 Joyce read Dante in Italian (Reynolds 20-1). For this thesis, I use Mark Musa’s 1971 translation.
unexpected Dantean connections to be overlooked entirely. This is precisely the concern Samuel Beckett raised about such interpretation in his 1929 essay on the influence of Bruno, Vico, and Dante in *Finnegans Wake*, known at the time as *Work in Progress*, when he warned, “The danger is in the neatness of identifications . . . Literary criticism is not bookkeeping” (495).

Mary T. Reynolds, whose 1981 book *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination* is the most comprehensive and in-depth study of Dante’s influence on Joyce to date, is nonetheless guilty of taking this somewhat superficial approach to *Dubliners*. Reynolds spends about nine pages on *Dubliners*, in which she essentially outlines a Dantean framework for the book by noting key allusions and drawing obvious associations between the central sin in each story and its corresponding canto in the *Inferno*. This brief section is complemented by a section in her appendix on Joyce’s allusions to Dante, which follows the same pattern. The appendix entry on “Counterparts,” for instance, the story that concludes with a drunken man, Farrington, beating his son, includes two quotations from the story, each paired with an accompanying quotation from the twelfth canto of the *Inferno*, in which Dante encounters souls damned to the Plegethon, the river of boiling blood, for the sin of violence to others.6

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5 See, for instance, Coral A. Norwood’s 2003 essay “Dante in *Dubliners*: The Theme of Romantic Hopelessness,” in which the author summarizes six stories, places the characters in four of these stories within their obvious circles of Dante’s hell, and then aligns them with a particular facet of “romantic hopelessness,” such as the failed ideal of love, domestic drudgery, love betrayed, etc.

6 This is certainly one possibility, but Reynolds overlooks others. Farrington’s “anger,” “revengefulness,” and “fury” (Joyce 93), could, for example, place him in Dante’s fifth circle with the wrathful. Because he beats his own son, he could also belong with the traitors in Dante’s ninth circle. The fact that the beating occurs while the son is attempting to cook his father dinner may be an ironic reminder of Count Ugolino, the traitor who was condemned by Archbishop Ruggieri to starve to death, along with his children, in a tower and who, in Dante’s hell, gnaws Ruggieri’s skull (*Inf.* XXXIII). In both instances, children are the innocent victims of their fathers’
Although Reynolds establishes Joyce’s interest in Dante as a desire to “form a narrative pattern similar to the scheme that makes Dante’s Inferno a drama of passion and action shaped as a moral critique of society,” and admits that “to make a full demonstration of all Joyce’s connections is matter for another book,” her analysis of Dante’s presence in each story is brief and rather simplistic (158). Reynolds does pave the way for understanding Dubliners’s place in Joyce’s larger allegory of art, an allegory which developed throughout his entire body of literary work, but she does not see Dubliners as standing alone allegorically, other than its basic function as moral critique.

The general implication of existing criticism on Dubliners, which Deming noted in 1970 and which still largely remains true, is that “two Joyces—the Joyce who wrote Dubliners and A Portrait, and the Joyce who wrote Ulysses and Finnegans Wake—have emerged” (9). Early critics, unused to the Modernist experimentation Joyce would offer in his later works, generally preferred the first version of Joyce; one called his reflection upon the fact that Dubliners and Ulysses both “came from the same hand” a “disconcerting experience,” regretting that Joyce would not return to the earlier version of himself and produce “another volume like Dubliners” (J. C. 75-6). The opposite has been true in more recent criticism. Critics such as Reynolds and Sicari, who have been the most sensitively aware of Dante’s influence upon Joyce and have done the most to further arguments for Joyce’s work as allegorical, have treated Dubliners superficially or ignored it altogether, preferring to focus on his supposedly more complicated, innovative, and challenging works.

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sins, but while Ugolino is heartbroken over his children’s suffering, Farrington purposely harms his child. Joyce may intend to evoke all of these associations.
A closer reading of *Dubliners* will reveal not only more complex Dantean connections than have previously been identified, but also more substantial evidence for allegorical interpretation. Such an analysis may further illuminate *Dubliners*’s place as the first articulation of a Dantean vision that developed throughout Joyce’s work, but it will primarily demonstrate that, because it uses Dante to construct a new allegorical representation of paralysis, *Dubliners* can, in fact, stand just as strongly on its own.
III. THE INFLUENCE OF DANTE: UNDERSTANDING JOYCE’S ALLEGORICAL INTENTIONS

Before embarking upon a close reading of Dante’s presence in *Dubliners*, it is necessary to understand the scope of Dante’s literary influence, particularly among Modernist writers, as well as why Joyce found the *Inferno* relevant to his own undertaking of presenting his allegory of Dublin as “the centre of paralysis” (Ellman 134). Dante has long been admired for, among other things, his visions of idealized spiritual love and his linguistic and literary innovation, but Joyce seems to value above all else Dante’s pursuit of truth in art. Both Dante and Joyce find in human nature much to deplore, and, as will be seen, it is this common concern for representing in art true human nature that makes Dante’s allegory Joyce’s most important literary model for *Dubliners*.

**Dante as a Model for Literary Innovation**

Joyce began studying Italian language and literature in secondary school at the age of twelve or thirteen; he read Dante at University College, and his fascination with the medieval poet never ceased (Reynolds 20-1). Joyce and Dante share a certain disapproving attitude towards their native cities of Dublin and Florence, respectively, often expressing in their literary work and personal correspondence outright contempt for their inhabitants and institutions. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was first published in serial form just months after *Dubliners*, the novel’s protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, declares, “When the

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7 Stanislaus Joyce said that his brother valued Dante more highly than Milton and “placed Dante over Shakespeare—another heresy” (qtd. in Carrier 213). Padraic Colum claimed that in his early career Joyce had little interest in Homer, designating instead *The Divine Comedy* as “Europe’s epic”; Joyce is also supposed to have told A. Francini Bruni that Dante was his “spiritual food, the rest is ballast” (qtd. in Carrier 213).
soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (220). Similar sentiments permeate *Dubliners*, although not quite so explicitly. Irish politics, movements to restore Irish culture and language, and the Catholic Church are all exposed as causes of the social, political, psychological, spiritual, and artistic paralysis that Joyce portrays in the book. Joyce saw this paralysis as preventing the people of Dublin and Ireland as a whole from achieving authenticity and from leading meaningful existences—whether on a personal, social, or spiritual level. In his book *My Brother’s Keeper*, Stanislaus Joyce recalls his brother (in the midst of one of the habitual drunken binges of his youth) accusing him of this very failure: “What’s the matter with you is that you’re afraid to live. You and people like you. This city is suffering from hemiplegia of the will. I’m not afraid to live” (247). As a close reading of *Dubliners* will later elucidate, Joyce’s criticism of the people and institutions of Dublin is subtly and complexly informed by Dante’s similar condemnations of the people and institutions of Florence in the *Inferno*.

The interactions that Dante the Pilgrim has in hell—the construction of Dante the Poet—are primarily with actual historical figures of Florence and other major Italian cities. Thus Dante famously immortalized the political scandals and strife, religious corruption, and general moral failings of his homeland. So disgusted with his native city was Dante that in his “Letter to Can Grande Della Scala,” written to his friend and patron in 1318, he referred to himself as “Florentine by birth, not by character” (Musa 7). The two writers were also figures of exile. Dante was exiled from Florence in 1302, when the Black Guelfs, political rivals of the White Guelf party, in which Dante was a prominent figure, came to power. Joyce,
believing that authentic artistic creation could not occur in the stifling atmosphere of Ireland, chose a life of voluntary exile abroad; he wrote most of *Dubliners* while residing in Trieste, Austria. But it was more than a shared pessimism towards their native countries and exile that excited Joyce’s interest in Dante, and these similarities do not explain the enduring literary influence that Dante has had on countless other writers.

According to George Bornstein in his essay “Yeats’s Romantic Dante,” Dante fell into disfavor with writers and critics after Chaucer and was neglected for centuries until being rediscovered by the Romantics, who admired Dante’s detailed, original imagery and ability to convey personal emotion and mental phenomena (Bornstein 15). Dante’s popularity increased in the Victorian era; after the appearance of new translations of his work into English, he became established as a staple of Victorian education. In 1887 literary critic E. H. Plumptre observed that “no man aiming at literary reputation thought his education complete unless he had read Dante” (qtd. in Bornstein 14). Dante was especially favored among pre-Raphaelite poets and artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose father was a Dante scholar and who added “Dante” to his given name. Dante’s Beatrice was particularly popular among this group, becoming once again a literary and artistic muse for such works as Rossetti’s poem “The Blessed Damozel” and his paintings *Beata Beatrix, Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*, and others.

Not all Victorians, however, were inspired by Beatrice or the heavenly imagery of the *Paradiso*. James Thomson, a Scottish poet and early precursor of Modernism, wrote *The City of Dreadful Night* in 1874. Sometimes called by his contemporary critics “The Poet of Doom,” Thomson in this poem incorporates imagery and themes from the *Inferno* to create
his own allegorical vision. The speaker wanders through a frightful, miserable city—perhaps an allegorical representation of London—of “dead Faith, dead Love, dead Hope” (Thomson II.48). In one particularly Dantean scene, the speaker of the poem approaches the entrance to hell, but is denied access:

I reached the portal common spirits fear,  
And read the words above it, dark yet clear,  
‘Leave hope behind, all ye who enter here:’

And would have passed in, gratified to gain  
That positive eternity of pain,  
Instead of this insufferable inane.

A demon warder clutched me, Not so fast;  
First leave your hopes behind!—But years have passed  
Since I left all behind me, to the last. (VI.19-27)

The speaker longs to enter hell, but is dismayed to learn from the boatman Charon that he does not meet the only requirement. One must have hope to enter hell, so that the subsequent loss of that hope will make eternal punishment all the more bitter. But because of the absence of faith, love, and hope in the “City of Dreadful Night,” the speaker has long since abandoned all hope, thus preventing him from enjoying the welcome relief of eternal suffering in hell. He stands outside the entrance, begging souls if they might spare “a morsel of [their] hope” (50), but to no avail; he is forced to return to the city, trapped in “Limbo,” in a state of living death on earth (56). The thematic parallels between Thomson’s poem and Dubliners are striking. It is uncertain whether Joyce was familiar with this poem, but T. S. Eliot likely was; critical comparisons have been drawn between The City of Dreadful Night and Eliot’s The

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8 The poem was poorly received by most of Thomson’s contemporaries. One reviewer commented in The Spectator (June 1874) that “Dante delirious might have written ‘The City of Dreadful Night’” (qtd. in Crawford 26).
Regardless of whether Joyce knew the poem, it is crucial to note that thirty years before *Dubliners* was published, Thomson was already subverting Dante’s allegory and beginning to shape a Modernist vision of hopelessness. Joyce’s allegorical subversion, then, is not entirely new.

Given the heavy emphasis of Modernism on rejecting the old and creating the new, it may in fact seem strange for Modernists to choose to attach their work so deliberately to another writer’s allegory. But Joyce and Eliot are just two of several Modernists who were fascinated with Dante. Dante’s presence can be found in the work of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, Wallace Stevens, and W. H. Auden as well. Reed Way Dasenbrock has claimed, “One of the ways we could describe an aspiration of virtually all the Modernist writers in English is that they were all trying to write the *Commedia* of the twentieth century” (qtd. in Boldrini 3). It is important to note, however, that the goal of these writers was, to use Pound’s phrase, to “make it new”—to transform Dante’s work and make it relevant to their own understandings of the modern world. Stuart Y. McDougal points out in his preface to *Dante Among the Moderns* that Dante’s presence can be seen in “citation and allusion,

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9 Robert Crawford, in his essay “James Thomson and T. S. Eliot,” argues that Thomson influenced not only *The Waste Land* but also the “general context of Eliot’s thought” (23) and the context in which Eliot read Dante (32).

10 “In a broad sense *modern* is applied to writing marked by a strong and conscious break with traditional forms and techniques of expression. It employs a distinctive kind of imagination, one that insists on having its general frame of reference within itself . . . it believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it” (Holman and Harmon 308).

11 Pound used this phrase for the title of a collection of essays in 1934. It also appears in Canto LIII of his *Cantos*, the poetic work which can be considered his attempt to rewrite *The Divine Comedy*: “Tching prayed on the mountain and / wrote *MAKE IT NEW* / on his bath tub / Day by day make it new” (qtd. in Sultan 100).

12 In *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in Finnegans Wake*, Lucia Boldrini speculates that Modernists may have seen Dante as a particularly fitting model because of his
imitation, parody, and the development of a host of Dantean literary strategies,” but also that each writer responded differently to him (ix). They either found in him or projected upon him their own personal and artistic needs and beliefs (x). Yeats, who in his career adapted Dante’s work for at least ten poems, three plays, and one short story and referenced him more than ninety times in his published prose, saw Dante primarily as a figure of a romantic quest poet and used that figure in his work in an attempt to position himself as the last link to Romanticism (Bornstein 11-12). Stevens and Auden, on the other hand, took a more pessimistic approach to Dante’s theology, and Beckett used Dante much like Joyce, with a particular emphasis upon citation and allusion (McDougal xi).

Eliot, in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” quotes Dante as an epigraph to the poem: “S’io credesse che mia riposte fosse / A persona che mai tornasse al mondo, / Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse. / Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo / Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero, / Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo” (3). The quotation is from Dante’s canto of the deceivers; the sinner agrees to tell his story only because he believes Dante to be dead and therefore unable to tell the living of his shame. The epigraph is fitting, as the poem’s narrator, in what could be considered a revelatory moment of private introspection, agonizes over his inability to express himself or act on his feelings, for fear of rejection. Both Eliot and Dante demonstrate an interest in the contrast between honest
expression and what people will say in order to control how others perceive them—a tension that is a fundamental part of human nature. This is a concern that Joyce also shares.

The significant impact of Dante on Modernist works demonstrates that, as Stanley Sultan puts it in *Eliot, Joyce and Company*, Modernist concerns with the new were not just about “innovation but also . . . renovation,” remaking what literature has already given. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot in fact claims that the most individual parts of a poet’s work are often “those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality” (784), and that one makes the old new by always being informed by a “consciousness of the past” (785). Joyce was also of this mind, and some critics claim that he best achieved the goal of making Dante new. Boldrini argues that because Eliot and Pound always treated Dante with “reverence,” they never achieved “real independence” from him as a literary model; instead, “Dante always remained the standard of excellence to which the modern poet could only aspire” (“Intro” 9). But because Joyce sometimes takes Dante seriously and other times parodies, satirizes, or subverts Dante’s work, he better achieves “plurality” of meaning and literary independence, thus distinguishing himself from his fellow Modernists (10). Boldrini’s claim that Joyce demonstrates a plurality of meanings by both upholding and subverting Dante’s allegory raises questions about how Modernists view allegory and how Joyce uses allegory in *Dubliners* specifically. Since allegory as a genre and form has been defined in many different ways, it is important to explore how allegory fits into Modernist

14 Eliot goes on to discuss emotion in poetry, using Dante’s scenes of Brunetto Latini, Paolo and Francesca, and Ulysses in Cantos XV, V, and XXVI, respectively, as an extended example of ideal expression of emotion in poetry (786).

15 Boldrini, like Stanislaus Joyce, points to Joyce’s parody of *The Divine Comedy* in “Grace” as one example of his “playful and complex relationship with Dante” (10).
views of art, in order to reach a more precise understanding of what Joyce finds useful in Dante and how he makes Dante new by creating his own modern allegory of paralysis.

**Joyce’s Modernist Allegory**

By incorporating Dante into *Dubliners*, Joyce makes a conscious choice to participate in the tradition of allegory. Reynolds argues that this choice consequently results in assimilation and “mimetic attachment of Dante’s literary allegory to his own fiction” (13). In his “Letter to Can Grande,” Dante explains the “polysemous, that is to say, ‘of more senses than one,’” design of his *Divine Comedy* (122). He had already put forth a theory of literary interpretation in *Il Convivio (The Banquet)*, written between ten to fourteen years earlier, in which he identified four senses for understanding literature—the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. He defines the literal sense as “the strict limits of the letter,” the allegorical as “truth hidden under a beautiful fiction,” the moral as having a didactic purpose for the “profit” of readers or listeners, and the anagogical as “spiritually expounding” matters of “eternal glory” (Alighieri *Convivio* 121). Applying this theory, in part, to his *Divine Comedy* in the letter, Dante identifies the work’s literal sense to be “the state of souls after death” and its allegorical sense to be “man, as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of the freedom of his choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing justice” (Alighieri “Letter” 122). The ultimate end of the *Comedy* is “to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity” (123).

The comments Joyce made in letters to Richards about his intentions for *Dubliners* in some ways echo Dante’s letter and contribute to understanding the book as allegory. As
mentioned, Joyce called *Dubliners* a “nicely polished looking glass” that would give the Irish people “one good look at themselves” (Gilbert 64). The mirror is a common image in allegory, as it represents the act of seeing oneself; moral allegory generally intends to reflect moral problems in order to demonstrate the need for reform. *Mirror for Magistrates* is just one of many examples. This sixteenth century collection of poems recounting the failures of historical figures uses the image of the mirror in its title to suggest the purpose of holding a mirror up to contemporary leaders, so that they may see in themselves the errors of others and learn to avoid them. Joyce’s statement places him within this tradition. He also claimed to have a moral purpose for writing *Dubliners*. Writing again to Richards, Joyce called the book his “chapter of moral history” and proclaimed that by writing it he had “taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation” of Ireland (Gilbert 62-3). This declaration is, of course, somewhat facetious and influenced by Joyce’s frustration with Richards’s resistance to publishing the book. Nonetheless, it indicates that he had a larger plan for *Dubliners*. Furthermore, Joyce wrote Richards that he intended to portray Dublin in “four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life” (Ellman 134). Metaphorically ascribing stages of human development to a city indicates that there is another level of meaning at work; this organizational structure reveals other insights about the people living in each stage and their moral state. Together these statements begin to build a case for understanding *Dubliners* as allegory.

On one level, then, *Dubliners* can be read as a Dantine allegory, in which the particular situations of the characters in each story serve as allegorical representations of the immorality and paralysis in Dublin, with the purpose of demonstrating the need for change,
which must occur in order to achieve “spiritual liberation.” Given the amoral stance of Modernism and Joyce’s disenchantment with Ireland and Catholicism, and also keeping in mind his chastisement of Stanislaus, mentioned above, for being afraid to live life, this notion of “spiritual liberation” may best be understood as the ability and willingness to experience life to its fullest, to find, even amidst the ambiguity and disorder of the modern world, some sort of meaning in life. As a Modernist, Joyce does not engage in explicit moralizing or exposition, as Dante sometimes does, but the action he presents is enough for the reader to see the error of each character’s ways. The key difference between the two works is that Dante the Poet, who is writing the Comedy after having already learned as a pilgrim the path to heavenly salvation, intends to show his readers how to achieve salvation. He assures readers that they, too, can learn this lesson; he remarks in the opening canto of the Inferno that even though recalling his journey “brings back all [his] old fears,” in order to “show the good that came of it / [he] must talk about things other than the good” (Inf. I.6, 8-9). Joyce makes no such guarantee.

In order to fully understand, therefore, the implications of Joyce’s adaptation of Dante’s allegory to his own work, it is equally important to examine what elements of the Inferno he chose not to incorporate. There are, of course, significant differences between the two texts. The mere fact that the two are separated by roughly six hundred years makes it “impossible to find Joyce in the same position spiritually [and culturally] as Dante” (Reynolds 18). In the Inferno, the protagonist, Dante the Pilgrim, must embark on a journey through hell with his guide, Virgil, in order to learn about the nature of human sin; by the end of the Inferno, he is ready to pass through Purgatorio and eventually Paradiso in order to
achieve spiritual salvation. In *Dubliners*, on the other hand, there is no single protagonist on a journey. The collection of short stories portrays different characters at different stages of life and severities of moral faults. The reader is the only person playing the consistent role of journeying, as he or she progresses through each stage of moral depravity. Furthermore, there is no character serving as a guide through the city. There is not even one consistent narrative perspective, as some stories are told by first-person narrators and others by third-person narrators. Lacking a guide and the explicit moralizing sometimes found in Dante, neither the characters nor the reader are shown any examples of how to overcome their immorality or any obvious hope for salvation. If Joyce’s carefully constructed allusions and parallels to the *Inferno* are intentional, then these major omissions must also be, and together they are significant enough to indicate that Joyce is attempting to communicate a more radical vision: Dublin as an allegory of paralysis.

Allegory, in its most basic sense, has been defined as “otherspeech,” or to speak with a meaning other than the literal one. Northrop Frye simply stated that “A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying, ‘by this I also mean that’” (qtd. in Reynolds 149). But there is often a stigma attached to allegory, particularly since Samuel Taylor Coleridge made a distinction, which is now seen as traditional, between definitions of allegory and symbol in *The Statesman’s Manual*, published in 1816. He argued:

> . . . an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses . . . On the other hand a symbol . . . always partakes of the reality which it renders

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16 As defined in the seventh-century by Isidore, Bishop of Seville (Martinez 25).
intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative. (468)

As a Romantic, Coleridge believed in innovation and spontaneity in literary style and the genius of the individual poet; he therefore found allegory an artificial, outdated form characterized by abstraction and restrictive structure. Despite later theory on allegory that has redeemed the value and complexity of the genre, this stigma can still be found among contemporary writers, readers, and literary critics. Allegory is still often thought of as mere metaphor, personification, and abstraction—as, essentially, a simplistic, medieval mode of thinking.¹⁷

Sayre Greenfield, although crediting allegory with more than the abstractions listed above, may share some of this sentiment, as he denies the genre’s ability to be radical. He argues in his book, *The Ends of Allegory*, that allegory is ultimately conservative in nature and only becomes truly radical when the allegorical structure of a work breaks down. Because the structure of allegory relies upon metaphors, it “reproduces culturally accepted patterns of association” rather than replacing them with new ones (17). Greenfield explains, “Examples of behavior and consequences, like Machiavelli’s in *The Prince* or those in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, can teach a system of morality, but a moral allegory can only

¹⁷ This contemporary resistance to allegory can be seen, for example, in Jeri Johnson’s introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Dubliners*, published in 2000. Discussing the symbolic nature of Joyce’s characters, Johnson is careful to make a distinction between Joyce’s work and allegory: “To see the difference between Joyce’s enterprise and those of his precursors, examine for a moment Bunyan’s ‘symbolic’ or allegorical depiction of character in *Pilgrim’s Progress*: there we have Christian, meant to stand for every Christian. He has no character in the modern sense . . . He is a type, not an individual. Joyce always insisted on particularity. In *Dubliners* Joyce gives us multiple distinctive individuals who collectively stand as representative; their precise particularity belies any allegorical blandness while their composite collectivity renders them dynamically metaphoric. They are at once ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’” (xvi).
reinforce a known system” (72). Because Joyce adapts in part the system of morality already established by Dante in the *Inferno*, Greenfield’s view of allegory would classify *Dubliners* as an essentially conservative text. Furthermore, Greenfield argues that often “the radical force comes not from the allegory’s meaning but from the way the text displaces that meaning to an unusual context” and that when this happens, allegory breaks down (113). This argument can be applied to Joyce, who through the use of allusions, imagery, and structural parallels, deliberately keeps enough of Dante’s original allegory intact to make it recognizable to readers, but whose Modernist concerns destabilize that allegory. The ambiguity introduced by concerns about the instability of language and the lack of guidance and hope for salvation challenge Dante’s traditional moral scheme. But while these concerns inevitably break down some aspects of the original allegory of salvation, that does not mean that the genre of allegory itself must break down in order for Joyce to make a radical statement about the modern world; instead, he uses the genre to shape a new allegory of his own, one of paralysis.

In fact, some Postmodern theorists see allegory as an inherently radical genre and have speculated about how it fits with Modernist views about both literature and the uncertainty of life. Deborah Madsen argues in her book *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre* that allegory in Modernist literature was an appropriate form for representing “the sense of perpetual crisis instilled by modernity” and thus became “an interpretative mode of perception, a way of registering the absences that characterize the modern world” (109-10). Jürgen Habermas maintains that allegory simultaneously embodies the opposing Modernist ideas of the nostalgic desire for an “immaculate and stable present,”
by providing an organizational form or structure, and the belief that this desire is unattainable because reality and everyday life are transitory, elusive, and disjointed, by providing multiple possibilities for interpretation (qtd. in Madsen 124).\textsuperscript{18} It becomes a way for Modernists to employ a traditional form while at the same time rejecting it. As Madsen explains, “Habermas’s sense of modernity as ‘ab-normative’ is in agreement with some allegorical strategies: a strategic preference for multiple metaphorical or fabulistic interpretations minimizes the danger of totalizing textual meaning—of presenting any single interpretation of morality or utility as normative—through either figural or literal metonymy” (124). Joyce, already drawn to Dante’s allegorical vision of hell and familiar with his four-fold theory of interpreting literature, may also have seen allegory as a way of avoiding one-sided meaning, an overly simplistic approach to literature inappropriate to his understanding of the modern world.

Another theory about allegory that has been applied to Joyce’s work comes from Dante himself. In addition to the four-fold theory of interpretation that Dante explains in \textit{The Banquet}, he also makes a distinction between two kinds of allegory: that used by poets and that used by theologians. When discussing the allegorical sense of interpretation, Dante writes, “Theologians indeed do not apprehend this sense in the same fashion as poets” (121). Because he does not elaborate specifically on this difference, this statement has been the subject of much critical debate. It is popularly supposed, however, that the distinction lies

between fiction and truth;¹⁹ poets devise allegory in order to hide truth under the literal level of meaning—the “beautiful fiction”—whereas in scriptural allegory the literal meaning is taken by theologians as historical fact. The example Dante uses in the “Letter to Can Grande” is that of the Exodus, in which the literal meaning is the children of Israel departing Egypt and the allegorical meaning is “our redemption wrought by Christ” (“Letter” 122). The Exodus is not fictional, but is historical fact. Several Dante scholars, applying this distinction to The Divine Comedy, have concluded that in his masterpiece, Dante separates himself from the traditional medieval understanding of poetic allegory in favor of the theological understanding, which would make his recounted journey not fictional, but factual. The events of his journey, then, are truth, but they also suggest other levels of meaning. Charles Singleton famously declared in 1954 that “the fiction of the Comedy is that it is not fiction” (qtd. in Martinez 29).

Some critics, particularly Sicari and Reynolds, have applied this notion, referred to not by Dante but by Dante scholars as “allegory of theologians,” to Joyce’s work. Sicari argues that Joyce uses this approach to allegory in Ulysses, ultimately constructing a “‘modernist allegory,’ a kind of writing designed to present truth in plain words” (xiv). In an attempt to clarify the problem with the “allegory of poets,”²⁰ Sicari explains that this traditional conception of allegory relegates the literal level of meaning to a mere device that

¹⁹Martinez explains, “The view that the Convivio assumes two distinct kinds of allegory has dominated American Dante criticism but has not gone uncontested. Scott (1990), for example, observes that Dante never clearly distinguishes between two different fourfold systems and never employs the phrase ‘allegory of theologians’ at all. The Convivio discussion might well be read as proposing one fourfold system of interpretation for all texts (scritture), with subdistinctions accounting for the different status of Scripture” (28).

²⁰That is, Dante’s concept as explicated by Singleton, which seems to echo Coleridge’s understanding of allegory.
does not have validity on its own, because it is meant to suggest a different meaning. Critics often object to calling *Ulysses* allegory for this very reason; they do not want to deny the validity of the literal level of meaning. Sicari argues that:

The ‘literal’ or the ‘historical’ or the ‘naturalistic’ sense of *Ulysses* is designed to be accepted as real and not merely devised to be effaced by some symbolic ‘truth’ . . . the ‘allegory of theologians’ allows Joyce, as it allowed Dante, to work on the literal level of meaning in such a way as to enlarge its significance, to expand its meaning, to find within the literal another, equally valid, level of meaning. (Sicari 13-4)

Similarly, Reynolds contends that in *Dubliners*, Joyce adheres strictly to realism because he wants the literal level of his work to have valid meaning, but at the same time he “created successive levels of meaning by insistent symbolism” (150). Thus, she claims, *Dubliners* can be considered the same kind of allegory as Dante took his *Comedy* to be, which was outside of “the medieval category of lying fictions” and within the category of literal truth (149).

Another Dante scholar, Robert Hollander, sees the concept of “allegory of theologians” in the *Comedy* as a radical rejection on Dante’s part of poetic tradition because to present his journey as historical fact is essentially to align himself not with human poets, but with God; Dante’s work is an imitation of God’s writing, written for the salvation of others (Martinez 28-9). Hollander maintains, for instance, that the inscription above the gates of hell in the *Inferno* is an immediate reinforcement of the idea that these words literally written on the page are not made up, but real. They are not the invention of Dante the Poet;
they are the word of God. And, therefore, everything that follows for the rest of the Comedy is also the word of God (Hollander 71-2).

Because Joyce chooses to begin Dubliners with an allusion to these famous words, “abandon every hope,” Hollander’s point has important implications for Joyce’s allegory. Juxtaposed with this Dantesque allusion is the image of the story’s narrator, a young boy, looking up at the old priest’s window, pondering not just the condition of his paralysis, but the word itself: “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” (Joyce 1). Just as Dante must speak of the terrible things he saw in hell in order to show the good that came from his journey, the boy in this story and the readers of Dubliners must look upon the terrible consequences of paralysis in order to recognize their own moral state and see the need for change. If we are to apply to this passage the notion of “allegory of theologians,” then paralysis is not just a word. It is real. It is an evil being. It is Dublin. And yet, Joyce does not assert in this passage his presence as a character or poet-narrator as Dante does. The word “paralysis” is not physically carved into stone by the hand of God, the way Dante’s inscription is; it is not anchored in a concrete image or the spiritual authority of God. It is a strange sounding, unstable word that passes in and out of a young boy’s consciousness. If, then, the artist does not assert his presence, concrete reality and the word of God are absent, and language is unstable, to whom are we to look for
authority? From where are we to find guidance? Joyce’s Dantine allegory of paralysis is thus
simultaneously established and subverted in the first paragraph of *Dubliners*.

Sicari and Reynolds introduce “allegory of theologians” in their criticism as a way of
defending their readings of Joyce’s work as allegory to those who still view the genre as
artificial and medieval or who view Joyce’s work as too realistically detailed to be
allegorical. Hollander uses it to establish Dante’s divine authority. But this notion of literal
truth raises a more important question about truth and allegory, as they relate specifically to
both the *Inferno* and *Dubliners*. In applying the concept of “allegory of theologians” as literal
truth, one must ask precisely what truth Dante intends to convey. The *Inferno* is not primarily
concerned with presenting the truth about Biblical events or doctrine because this theology is
already regarded by his readers as truth. Instead, Dante is attempting to portray the
fundamental truth about sin and, therefore, about human nature itself. As Musa points out:

> The reader will soon see that not much is said about particular sins in any
circle or *bolgia* of the *Inferno*. Most of the time there is simply a description
of the state in which the sinners find themselves, after which the sinner will
usually talk about himself (or herself, in the case of Francesca da Rimini . . . ),
or about something that appears to have nothing at all to do with the sin being
punished there. What the reader discovers, however, is that the torments
suffered by the sinners represent, in one way or another, the sins themselves.

(48)

This strategy of allowing the punishment or the sinner’s own words to convey the sin reveals
much about human nature. The soothsayers and fortune-tellers, for instance, must walk with
their heads facing backwards because it was their nature in life to disrespect God’s plan for
them by trying to see ahead into the future. Traitors in Cocytus act out their sin by telling
Dante the names of their fellow sinners, who do not want to be known. Although Dante
defined the purpose of his allegory as showing others the way to salvation, and although
salvation depends upon God’s love and forgiveness, what readers need to understand in order
to change and find their way back to the “straight path” (Inf. I.3) is not God’s transcendence
but the nature of their own depravity.

In this way, Dante is connected with Modernist ideas about truth. Although
Modernists, plagued as they were by doubts and uncertainties, generally avoided making
pronouncements about truth, Joseph Conrad, in his 1897 preface to “The Nigger of the
Narcissus,” set forth an idea about truth in art that is in line with both Dante and Joyce. He
told readers that his purpose for writing the book was not to arouse passion or sentimental
emotions, not to be didactic or moralize, as Romantics or Victorians would, but to:

. . . make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.

That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there
according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you
demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have
forgotten to ask. (Conrad xl)

While Dante may at times purposely evoke emotion and moralize, his primary goal is the
same, as is Joyce’s. Joyce articulates this goal in his bold claims that Dubliners was a looking
glass that would, by accurately portraying human nature, provide Ireland with its first step
towards spiritual liberation. It is this common goal of conveying in art the truth about human
nature and experience that is perhaps the most important connection between Joyce and Dante. With this goal in mind, Joyce attaches his work to Dante’s allegory through more than just a series of allusions, but also through structure, setting, characterization, and a persistent repetition of imagery of paralysis. But by raising questions of absence, instability, and uncertainty, he also subverts that allegory at every turn, thus creating something new.
IV. JOYCE’S DANTEAN ALLEGORY OF PARALYSIS: AN OVERVIEW

Despite the general oversight in existing criticism of the depth of Dante’s presence in 
Dubliners and the allegorical nature of the book, Warren Carrier, one of the first critics to recognize a Dantean influence in Dubliners, wrote in 1965: “In a larger sense, Dubliners, like Dante’s Inferno, is both literal and allegorical. Joyce is presenting Dublin literally, realistically, but the state of paralysis in which the characters reside is, as it were, the state of souls after death, a state which they merit because of their betrayal of values” (214). He explains that the sinners in both Dante’s hell and Dubliners “do not recognize their sins,” but know that they are trapped and that Joyce’s characters are “painfully cognizant, through epiphany, of their mean estate” (214). The persuasiveness of his argument is, unfortunately, undercut when he insists that there “is not . . . an elaborated pattern of analogy to The Divine Comedy at work in Dubliners” (215). While some critics, as cited above, have begun identifying that there is indeed a Dantean pattern throughout the book—one which I argue is even more elaborate than has been previously recognized—Carrier’s argument for the book as specifically an allegory of paralysis has apparently not been taken up again by Joyce scholars.

Reynolds, as mentioned, has been central in outlining a basic Dantean framework for Dubliners, based on “match[ing] each story with an episode in the Inferno, either by subject matter or incident, in a catalogue of moral death” (159). Although the arrangement of sins in Joyce’s stories does not perfectly match the order of Dante’s circles, Reynolds sees a similar progression of the severity of sin in each work. Both Dante and Joyce begin their works with episodes of lesser sins, such as lust and appetite (“Araby” and “After the Race,” for instance),
which in Dante are punished in the second and third circles of hell. Both see sins of malice and fraud, of deliberate injury to other human beings, as the worst kind of sin; hence, Joyce’s final stories deal with such sins as graft, simony, and betrayal (“Ivy Day in the Committee Room,” “Grace,” and “The Dead”), which in Dante are punished in the eighth and ninth circles. This progression of severity also makes sense given Joyce’s scheme of presenting Dublin in its childhood, adolescence, maturity, and public life, which is essentially a movement from innocence to corruption.

Reynolds provides an important structure for beginning to understand how Dante influences *Dubliners*, but one must acknowledge the simple connections of “subject matter or incident” while also looking beyond them to find more unexpected connections, in order to see how truly complex is Joyce’s reading and incorporation of Dante. Joyce’s use of Dante is often quite subtle, reliant upon specific images, plays on language, and repetition. A Dantinean image may not be immediately recognizable, as Joyce must find modern substitutes for such fabulous images as winged demons, rains of fire, and souls trapped in flame or ice, but the adaptation, the suggestion of the image is always present. Reynolds admits that Joyce’s “economical use of Dante often involves an echo so very minute and spare, or so remotely connected, that it seems almost to be a private reference” (150). Frequently, multiple and quite different Dantinean images are associated with any given event, location, or character in a story. A more productive and complete way, therefore, to understand not only how Joyce incorporates Dante, but also how he subverts Dante’s allegory of salvation in order to construct his own allegorical vision of paralysis, is to examine how Dantinean imagery, language, and themes manifest themselves in Joyce’s structure, settings, characters, and
images of paralysis, particularly imagery of Cocytus—Dante’s frozen center of hell and ultimate image of paralysis.

**Structure**

The structure of Joyce’s stories is primarily circular. The repetitive circular structure of each story appropriately complements the circular construction of Dante’s hell, through which Dante and Virgil must descend in a large spiral in order to see sinners who are literally trapped in circles. Circularity also implies eternity, as a circle is an unbroken shape in which one could continue forever, unlike a traditionally linear narrative structure that has fixed points of beginning and ending, providing a clear progression of action. Necessary to an allegory of paralysis is a narrative structure in which there is an essential lack of action. Thus, Joyce’s stories are about people who, despite whatever hopes they may have or actions they may attempt to take, never really succeed in going anywhere or accomplishing anything. Although they may have made some sort of gain or suffered a loss, by the end of the story the characters still find themselves in basically the same place from which they started. Often this is dramatized by an “epiphany of frustration,” to use Reynolds’s term, in which the character realizes his or her inability to fulfill a hope, satisfy a desire, or change his or her circumstances (163). The boy narrator of “Araby,” for instance, having fallen in love with his friend’s sister, becomes obsessed with buying her a gift from a bazaar; after arriving too late and being brushed off by the woman running the only open booth, he is forced to leave, still empty-handed, with nothing to offer his love, just as he started. In an epiphany of frustration, the boy sees himself “as a creature driven and derided by vanity,” and his eyes “[burn] with
anguish and anger” (Joyce 28). Interestingly, despite the relative lack of productive action in the stories, there is throughout the book an insistent sense of movement—both external and internal—that makes the ultimate paralysis of each character stand out all the more ironically and their epiphanies all the more painful.

“Two Gallants” is certainly an example of a story in which Joyce creates an insistent sense of movement, but it is movement that, because of the story’s circular structure, ultimately leads nowhere. In this story, Corley meets up with a young woman, with the intention of flirting or being intimate with her and asking her for money, while his friend Lenehan roams the streets of Dublin, anxious to learn if the plan will succeed. Upon his return, Corley produces a gold coin that he has apparently extracted from the woman. The most basic Dantian connection, as Reynolds has identified, of the men in this story is to the panderers and seducers of the first round of Malebolge. These sinners are damned to walk forever in a circle, making the circular structure of this story particularly appropriate. Both the story’s circularity and its connection to Dante’s seducers are established in the first paragraph. Dante first describes Malebolge from his aerial view as he “descends a spiral path” (Inf. XVII.116), riding with Virgil on the monster Geryon’s back, before landing and noticing souls “crammed into the depths of the first ditch” (XVIII.24). Joyce opens “Two Gallants” with similar language: “The grey warm evening of August had descended upon the city and a mild warm air, a memory of summer, circulated in the streets. The streets, shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily coloured crowd” (Joyce 43).

21 The paragraph continues: “Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening air an unchanging unceasing murmur” (43). Both passages, notably, are written from an aerial perspective.
Although by the end of the story Corley and Lenehan have achieved their objective, they have essentially made no progress; since they seem to rely upon this sort of activity to make a living, once the gold coin is spent, they will have no choice but to start over. The circular structure of this story is reinforced and exaggerated by Lenehan’s circling of the city while he waits for Corley, and it is here that the sense of internal and external movement in this story comes into play.

Lenehan wanders through Dublin’s streets, sometimes “listlessly,” sometimes ruminating on his money troubles and general frustration with his station in life (50). After walking aimlessly for quite some time, he stops for a quick meal of peas and ginger beer. Thirty-one years old, unemployed, and without a home of his own, he wonders as he eats if he still might be able to “settle down in some snug corner and live happily if he could only come across some good simple-minded girl with a little of the ready,” or in other words, a woman with enough money to support both of them (52). Lenehan then mindlessly crosses and re-crosses the same streets, retracing his steps, circling the city and the square in which he and Corley are supposed to meet. Finally pausing to lean against a lamp-post, “his mind [becomes] active again,” and he worries that Corley might cheat him out of his end of their bargain. Lenehan’s walking accomplishes nothing, and it is only when he is physically still that his mind is active, anxiously fretting about the same problems that his doubtful moral nature will never help him solve. An ironic contrast is established between physical and mental movement and stasis.

The sense of motion created by insistent references to the acts of walking and thinking, as well as to the actual names of city streets, is in fact so insistent in this story that it
builds up to a larger theme of movement and navigation that is present throughout the book. Since navigation implies guidance, this theme draws attention to the problems of misguidance and lack of guidance that are evident in every story. Despite their ability to navigate the city streets, Lenehan and Corley are unable, internally, to find their way—psychologically, morally, and spiritually—and there is no one to help them. How are the characters—and the reader for that matter—to navigate the moral depravity of Dublin without a guide providing instruction and, considering the failures of the Church, Irish nationalism, and human beings in general, no reliable source of wisdom? The impression of a paradoxical juxtaposition of motion and stasis, created by the circular structure and theme of navigation, serves to underscore the inevitable paralysis in each story and to subvert the authoritative guidance of Dante’s allegory.

Even in stories that do not have such a persistent emphasis upon physical movement, the sense of internal movement is still strong, and the circular structure still leads to ironic juxtapositions of motion and paralysis. The stories that tend to focus on characters’ psychological progress best demonstrate Joyce’s Modernist interest in the theme of the internal quest—a theme dramatically different from the concerns of Naturalism; logically, it is often these stories that contain the most intense and painful epiphanies. “Eveline,” for example, begins and ends with images of physical stasis; the story’s circular structure develops the protagonist’s internal journey. The story opens with Eveline sitting still at a window, contemplating her decision to run away from home with her lover, Frank, a sailor who wants to take her to Buenos Aires. Torn between her responsibilities at home and her desire to live life and find happiness, Eveline tries to “weigh each side of the question” and
after a long time is still unable to get up from the window (30). The most obvious of Eveline’s multiple Dantean connections is to the indecisive, those “who lived a life / but lived it with no blame and with no praise . . . who undecided stood but for themselves” (Inf. III.35-6, 39). These souls reside in the vestibule just beyond hell’s gates, rejected from both heaven and hell. To both Dante and Joyce, indecision is in itself a paralytic state.

Without describing how she leaves her home, Joyce suddenly places Eveline with Frank in the station from which their boat is to depart. As she stands still, gazing at the boat, she is seized with fear, and although as her panic increases she “pray[s] to God to direct her, to show her what [is] her duty,” she gets no answer (33). She has no guide. Unable to move, she “grip[s] with both hands at the iron railing” (34). Images of motion and paralysis are ironically juxtaposed; as Eveline stands frozen, Frank is “rushed” by the crowd “beyond the barrier and call[s] to her to follow” (34). While Eveline has been physically stationary for the entire story, she has internally progressed through a complete, circular journey, from a reluctance to leave her family, to a desire for freedom and escape, to a final, paralyzing fear that prevents her from acting on that desire and taking her chance to experience life. In a poignant and intense moment of epiphanic frustration, she “send[s] a cry of anguish” over the seas for the life she will never have (34). Eveline ends in the same place from which she started, still in Ireland, immobile. Repeatedly, the circular structure of Joyce’s stories inevitably leads to characters that are trapped in their own self-made paralytic states.

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22 Setting plays a key role in the final scene of the story. Just as the indecisive are not allowed to enter hell, which requires crossing the River Acheron in Charon’s boat, Eveline is unable to board the boat that would take her to a new life.
Setting

One of the distinctive features of *Dubliners* is that its setting is so specific to Dublin. Joyce fills the book with the names of actual city streets, businesses, neighborhoods, monuments, and other landmarks. Fewer pubs, shops, and businesses in the story are fictional than real, and the fictional ones are generally based on real establishments. As mentioned, one of his publisher’s original concerns about the book was that proprietors, finding their establishments named in the stories alongside such sordid subject matter, would sue for libel. Joyce expected his readers to be familiar with the historical and cultural significance of each city landmark he included. As Johnson observes, “Joyce uses the sedimented historical layers lying upon the material streets, buildings, greens of the city to expand the meanings of the stories beyond the small circumstances of individual lives” (19). This insistence upon portraying Dublin down to the last minute detail is characteristic of all his work. He once remarked of *Ulysses*: “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (qtd. in Johnson 18). That he paints so thoroughly realistic and specific a picture of Dublin is one reason critics resist calling *Dubliners* allegory.

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23 Joyce saw this as one of many attempts to drop publication of the book altogether. He wrote Richards in 1914: “As regards libel actions as I think I told you I offered the manager of the Dublin house to hire a car and go round to the firms named and show them the allusions and ask them whether they had any objection. The manager refused my offer—knowing (as I knew) what would be the result. The excuses put forward day after day are easily seen through and I find it difficult to come to any other conclusion but this—that the intention was to weary [sic] me out and if possible strangle me once and for all. But in this they did not succeed. In conclusion I wish you good success with my unhappy book” (Gilbert 75).
Dante, whose descriptions of the physical environment of hell are so memorable, populates hell largely with Florentines to criticize the moral state of that city’s citizens. In effect, he depicts Florence allegorically as hell. Campbell argues that “Joyce reverses this idea: he depicts hell as Dublin. Dante pitches us out of this world and into the mythological dimension. Joyce brings the mythological dimension into the world” (19). If indeed Joyce is trying to depict hell—or paralysis—as Dublin, then it makes sense that to create an equally memorable physical environment, it is necessary to portray the city in specific, vivid detail. Both writers use allegory to convey the truth of experience, to the point that, as Conrad describes, the reader can hear, feel, and see it. And while Joyce is working with realistic, factual details, Dante often influences what type of setting within Dublin Joyce chooses for each story.

The scene in “An Encounter” in which an old man appears and approaches the young narrator and his friend, Mahony, is a perfect example of Joyce developing his setting from multiple images of the physical environment of Dante’s hell. Having skipped school in order to fulfill their desire for a “real adventure . . . abroad” (Joyce 12), two young boys, after a long day of meandering through the city, decide to stop and rest in a wide field: “We both felt rather tired and when we reached the field we made at once for a sloping bank over the ridge of which we could see the Dodder” (16). Reynolds has identified this sentence as an allusion to the opening of Canto XV, in which sodomites are among the sinners punished in a plain of burning sand. Dante and Virgil, having just crossed the River Phlegethon, must walk on “stone margins” near the “river’s vapors [that] hover like a shade, / sheltering the banks and

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24 Campbell makes this argument of Ulysses, not Dubliners.
the water from the flames” that fall from the sky (Inf. XV.1-3); the margins are similar to “dikes” (6) or “walls” (10). This allusion clearly associates the old man, who behaves like a “queer old josser” (Joyce 18) near the boys, likely—although we are not told for certain—masturbating, and talks to the young narrator about “whipping” (19) naughty school boys, with Dante’s sodomites. This is certainly a valid connection, but it is the most obvious one to make based on the action of the story; Reynolds has overlooked another, potentially more meaningful, allusion. Looking at the text literally, the boys are not on a stone dike or wall; they are in a field, sitting on a sloping bank. Joyce repeats the words “slope” or “sloping” and “bank” several times for emphasis. The setting of this scene actually more closely resembles Dante’s description of the eighth circle of hell.

Dante’s eighth circle, called *Malebolge*, is a pit consisting of ten separate ditches or valleys called *bolgia* that hold ten separate groups of sinners who have committed various kinds of fraud: “Right at the center of this evil plain / there yawns a very wide, deep well . . . and all this space / is divided into ten descending valleys” (Inf. XVIII.4-5, 8-9), in between which “jut spokes of rock, / crossing from bank to bank, intersecting ditches” (16-7). This description also contains a plain and a sloping bank, and although there is no river, there is a valley full of sinners. Joyce may be playing with Dante’s language here; the well opens wide, like a yawn, just as the “tired” boys lay on the bank, “lazily” watching the old man approach (16). But what makes this allusion significant are the types of sinners contained within the first round of *Malebolge*: panderers and seducers. As previously mentioned in relation to “Two Gallants,” the panderers and seducers are in two separate lines facing each other and must walk for all eternity in the path of a circle—the circumference of the pit—while “horned
devils with enormous whips / [lash their] backs . . . with cruel delight” (XVIII.35-6). By alluding in “An Encounter” to the physical setting of Malebolge, Joyce has also established connections to the old man’s disturbing talk about whipping and to the real danger of the story—seduction.

This allusion better fits Dante’s seducers than it does his sodomites. The sodomites must always be in motion, but they wander in whatever direction they please. The seducers, however, never stray from their eternally circular path, just as the old man constantly speaks in circles:

He began to speak to us about girls, saying what nice soft hair they had and how soft their hands were and how all girls were not so good as they seemed to be if one only knew. There was nothing he liked, he said, so much as looking at a nice young girl, at her nice white hands and her beautiful soft hair. He gave me the impression that he was repeating something which he had learned by heart or that, magnetized by some words of his own speech, his mind was slowly circling round and round in the same orbit . . . He repeated his phrases over and over again, varying them and surrounding them with his monotonous voice. I continued to gaze towards the foot of the slope, listening to him. (Joyce 18)

The immediate danger in this story is not that the old man may or may not be a sodomite; it is that he is attempting a seduction. His language is frightening, not just because of its content, but because of its hypnotic potential to create confusion and snare the listener in a continuous spiral. This is the nature of seduction. The man must speak this way because if he were to be
direct about his intentions, he would surely lose his prey. Dante’s choice of punishment for the seducers reflects his understanding of the circularity of seduction and is thus fitting for Joyce’s own dramatization of a seduction in action.

The young narrator almost gets lost in the old man’s language: “. . . his voice, as he led me monotonously through the mystery, grew almost affectionate and seemed to plead with me that I should understand him” (20). This sentence contains another allusion to Dante that critics have not recognized. In the third canto, immediately after passing through the gates of hell, Virgil senses Dante’s fear and silently encourages him to continue the journey; Dante writes: “Placing his hand on mine, smiling at me / in such a way that I was reassured, / he led me in, into those mysteries” (Inf. III.19-21). The old man thus becomes a horribly perverted version of Virgil, attempting not to silently lead his pupil to salvation but to use language maliciously to seduce him. Dante’s allegory is subverted. Adults should be reliable figures whom children can trust to provide guidance, but this adult is far from it. Proper guidance is lacking, and Joyce has again drawn attention to the instability, even the danger, of language, when used fraudulently by those who intend harm.

Setting in this scene provides one more important insight to Joyce’s story. Dante first describes Malebolge as he sees it from above, before he and Virgil are “shaken from the back of Geryon,” the monster that has carried them down to the pit (Inf. XVIII.20). He has not yet entered the first ditch of sin. Similarly, the narrator throughout the scene remains on the sloping bank, gazing toward the foot of it. It is as if he sits on the threshold of sin, on the precipice of the first valley of Malebolge, in which the panderers and seducers are circling. The old man tries to seduce him into crossing that threshold, to lead him “through the
mystery,” as Virgil does Dante, but he does not succeed. The boy, frightened, stands up, walks to the top of the slope, and runs with his friend to safety. Youthful and still relatively innocent, the boys are able to escape. It is the old man who remains, immobile, at the top of the bank. This emphasizes an important distinction in Joyce’s allegory; whereas the sinners in Dante’s hell are already damned, Joyce’s characters, particularly children and adolescents, still have the chance to escape a fate of paralysis. The elderly seducer is locked within his own self-made hell, and he has the dangerous potential to corrupt the children, but the innocent can still escape. A careful investigation of one sentence describing setting in “An Encounter” has, therefore, pointed to at least three references to Dante, revealed insights about Joyce’s use of setting as well as character, and provided another example of how his subversion of Dante’s themes of guidance and language relates to his larger vision of paralysis.

Character

Joyce’s characters are also developed in particular detail and depth, with complex and ambiguous motivations for their actions. As with setting, the complexity of the characters in these stories provides another reason for critics to shy away from applying the term allegory to *Dubliners*. Often critics see them as being highly individual, yet also symbolic—representative of the moral problems to which Joyce is calling attention. Reynolds asserts that “Dante’s sinners are true to their natures: they are embodiments of the fault for which they are imprisoned in hell,” and notes that Joyce’s characters, while too complex to be considered pure embodiments of sin, also fit the sins they commit (163). She argues that the central
action of each story seems inevitable because it is “completely integrated with the personalities portrayed, and so sparsely and so accurately drawn that it seems to preclude any alternative solution” (163). Again, this approach is one that, even if unintentionally, encourages one-to-one correlations between characters in Joyce and sins or characters in Dante and neglects other connections.

Another problem with this approach, one that is repeated by many critics, is that it underestimates the complexity of Dante’s characters as well. Musa clarifies the complex nature of Dante’s characters by distinguishing them from those typically found in medieval allegories:

Dante does not call his characters by symbolic names, such as Reason or Revelation or Sodomy. His is a much more sophisticated symbolic allegory. With the exception of his mythological characters, his sinners and saints and guides are above all flesh-and-blood figures, historical characters who really existed at one time or another . . . The characters do not always represent single qualities. Virgil is not always human Reason; he can shift roles: there are moments when he is merely a traveling companion of the Pilgrim’s . . . or simply Virgil, the great poet of antiquity. There is even a time when he is unreasonable, during the mysterious medieval drama in front of the gates of Dis. (44-5)

Similarly, each character in Joyce’s stories—not just the main character involved in the central action—will often be associated with multiple sins, characters, or images from Dante, like the old man of “An Encounter,” who is connected to both sodomites and seducers. Once
again, the portrayal of complex, sophisticated, and even historically real characters is necessary to allegory that intends to demonstrate the truth about human nature, and this is true of both Joyce and Dante. While Joyce’s characters may at times represent an implicit moral warning against the behaviors they display, and they also serve a subversive function as figures representative of the various failures Joyce so often complained about—those of the Catholic Church, Irish nationalism, and human communication and interaction in general—they are most importantly human: fallible, mutable, sinful.

Take, for instance, the paralyzed priest of “The Sisters,” the Reverend James Flynn, who at the beginning of the story has passed away. He is essential to establishing the allegorical theme of paralysis, since he is the only character who is literally physically paralyzed, a condition the boy ponders in the first paragraph, as discussed above. Because the priest is the boy’s spiritual mentor, one of his functions in this story is to serve as a figure of Dante’s Virgil. Indeed, the narrator’s recollection of how the priest had taught him Latin, told him stories, and quizzed him on the nature of various sins and other facets of Church doctrine sounds similar to Dante’s descriptions of how Virgil teaches and guides him, especially in those portions of the *Inferno* where they pass the time by discussing theology and God’s design for hell. The boy’s reflection about how much the priest had taught him about “how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church” again seems to echo Dante’s lines quoted above about Virgil leading him into the mysteries of hell (Joyce 5). But by the end of the story, he is shown to be an inappropriate and ineffective guide. Apparently having become mentally disturbed after breaking a holy chalice, an event that “affected his mind,” the priest had taken to wandering alone at night and was once found in a dark confessional,
“wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself”; his sisters claim that this was when they realized that “there was something gone wrong with him” (10). And after his third stroke, he is paralyzed, rendered completely inadequate. His sisters’ descriptions of him are not the only signs that he is an inappropriate guide; Joyce’s Dantean allusions are as well.

In addition to associating the priest with Virgil, Joyce provides an obvious connection to Dante by making two literal references to the sin of simony, first when the boy thinks about how strange the word sounds and later when he dreams of the priest, envisioning his grey face wanting to confess something and himself as “smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin” (Joyce 3). Dante, in the canto of the simoniacs, stands over the souls “like a priest who is confessing / some vile assassin” (Inf. XIX.49-50). Dante regards simony as a particularly grievous and unforgivable sin. This is evident from his angry rebuke of Pope Nicholas III’s tortured soul and lengthy lecture on the evil nature of simony. Dante the Pilgrim rarely demonstrates such outspoken anger and repulsion in the Inferno; Dante the Poet even reflects, “I do not know, perhaps I was too bold here” (XIX.88). Joyce, too, devotes extra attention to simony in Dubliners. The sin reappears in more explicit detail in “Grace,” when Father Purdon, reputed to be a man of business, advises his parishioners that he is their “spiritual accountant” and they must “open the books of [their] spiritual [lives], and see if they tallied accurately with conscience” (Joyce 174). The corruption of the Catholic Church as portrayed in these stories and throughout Dubliners is a theme often commented on, but there is a crucial difference between Dante and Joyce. Dante, although disgusted by the corruption of the Catholic Church, still believed in its divine authority and power. Joyce, on the other hand, had in his early twenties so thoroughly lost his faith in the Irish Catholic
Church that he refused entirely to acknowledge that institution’s authority. Because he is a figure of the Catholic Church, the priest in “The Sisters” serves a central role in Joyce’s subversion of Dante’s allegory of salvation; associated with the sin of simony, he is an allegorical representation of the Church’s corruption and inability to serve as a spiritual guide in the modern world.

But there is something else troubling about the character of the priest, something in his nature or attitude that makes both the characters in the story and the reader feel uneasy. The narrator remembers how the priest used to make him feel uncomfortable: “When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip—a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well” (Joyce 5). The focus on the man’s tongue and mouth seems to suggest a sexual tension or threat. It is difficult to pin down the reason for the uneasy feeling the priest inspires because Joyce does not literally explain it. Throughout “The Sisters,” he employs stylistic techniques, such as ellipses and unfinished sentences, that introduce uncertainty into the text and challenge the stability of language. It is also important to note that because the priest is already dead at the beginning of the story, the only descriptions of him are second-hand accounts from the boy and the other characters; this is another way in which Joyce destabilizes language by making it ambiguous. For instance, Mr. Cotter, who is of the

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25 At the age of 20, Joyce wrote to Lady Gregory of his plan to flee Ireland and study medicine in Paris, declaring “I want to achieve myself—little or great as I may be—for I know that there is no heresy or no philosophy which is so abhorrent to my church as a human being, and accordingly I am going to Paris” (Gilbert 53). Three years later he remarked to his brother Stanislaus in a letter from Trieste: “[The English teacher here] says I will die a Catholic because I am always moping in and out of the Greek Churches and am a believer at heart: whereas in my opinion I am incapable of belief of any kind” (Ellman 89).
opinion that the narrator spent too much time with the priest, says, “When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect. . .” (3). The reader wonders, ‘See things like what?’ . As Johnson puts it, “We gaze deeply into those ellipses, certain that if we look long enough significance will emerge. We assume that the unspoken ‘queer’ and ‘peculiar’ things must be sexual, and so make this leap. But we so leap at our peril: the story does not say” (xxx-xxxi).

Although Joyce wants to avoid definite, one-sided conclusions and therefore does not provide a literal explanation, looking more carefully at Dantean imagery reinforces this assumption.

After learning of his mentor’s death, the boy recalls what his recent visits to the priest had been like. His third stroke had made it difficult for him to enjoy his habitual snuff because of his shaking hands:

“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 for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of a week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious” (Joyce 4).

This image of the priest is a clear allusion to Dante’s description of the burning sand of the seventh circle, where souls are tortured by a never-ending rain of fire: “And over all that sandland, a fall of slowly / raining broad flakes of fire showered steadily . . . Without a moment’s rest the rhythmic dance / of wretched hands went on, this side, that side / brushing away the freshly fallen flames” (Inf. XIV.28-9, 40-2). Joyce substitutes the realistic image of the snuff, which in the trembling hands of the priest produces a messy shower of black grains,
for Dante’s image of falling flames, but the similar brushing motions are enough to suggest the image. Joyce’s language makes the allusion unmistakable, first because of the almost identical phrasing, and second because of his construction of a long, periodic sentence marked by interrupting appositives and prepositional phrases. The sentence structure mimics that of Dante, particularly the interruptive “this side, that side,” which attempts to evoke the “rhythmic dance” of the sinners’ perpetually moving hands.

Punished in the plain of burning sand are the blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers. Joyce narrows down the possibilities by describing the priest’s clothing as looking green and faded; Dante associates the color green with the sodomites. When his former teacher, Brunetto Latini, has finished speaking to him, he runs off “like one of those / who run Verona’s race across its fields / to win the green cloth prize” (Inf. XV.121-3). Musa points out that Dante chooses an appropriate simile here, as the race he alludes to was traditionally run naked (213). The allusion reinforces the speculation that there is something sexually amiss or threatening about the priest. A reader aware of the Dantean context cannot help but wonder what may have happened inside that confessional in which the priest was found. That Joyce uses Dante to make this implication but does not tell us for certain if it is true only strengthens the argument for allegory being attractive to Modernist writers because of its inherent suggestion of multiple possibilities for interpretation. Furthermore, this allusion provides yet another perspective from which to view the priest as an inappropriate mentor, since he becomes associated with Dante’s own teacher, who, despite the respect and admiration evident from the conversation between Dante the Pilgrim and Latini that Dante the Poet recounts, he places amongst the sodomites in hell. The priest, just one character from
a single story, thus becomes a modern allegorical representation of a simoniac, a sodomite, Brunetto Latini, Virgil, and the Catholic Church, reinforcing in five different ways, either through connections to specific sins or through the subversion of Dante’s authority figures, the state of spiritual paralysis that Joyce sees in Dublin and the inability of the modern world to provide spiritual guidance.

The Catholic Church, of course, is not the only institution or source of authority that Joyce condemns in *Dubliners*. Irish Nationalism, a movement that intended to regain Irish independence from England’s political and cultural control, is attacked for its superficiality and inability to provide the Irish people any real guidance or help them achieve any real agency. In “A Mother,” Joyce focuses on the Irish Revival, which sought to reestablish Irish as the vernacular in literature, music, and daily life (Brown 292), as a particularly superficial and unproductive venture. In this story, every character involved with the movement is associated with various sinners in Dante, creating the effect of rhetorical accumulation, forcefully accentuating the inadequacy of the movement. Mrs. Kearney, the mother who gets in a dispute with the organizers of an Irish Revival concert about terms of payment in her daughter’s contract, is associated with Dante’s sowers of discord; these sinners, for causing “scandal and schism in life” (*Inf. XXVIII.35*), are punished by having their body parts severed. Mrs. Kearney’s stubborn arguing literally creates a physical schism by pitting two groups against each other in opposite corners of a backstage room. When she loses the argument and the men refuse to pay her daughter, she stands “still for an instant like an angry stone image” (Joyce 147), a reminder of Medusa, who, called by the Furies in Canto IX, arrives at the gates of the city of Dis to turn Dante into stone; ironically, the mother, the
furious sower of discord, is the one turned to stone, becoming the victim of the men’s unfairness.

The men, who have cheated Mrs. Kearney out of their contractual agreement, are associated with various sinners in Malebolge guilty of fraud, including grafters, liars, and counterfeitors. Mr. Holohan, for instance, who limps and hobbles everywhere (138), is a reminder of Master Adamo, the counterfeiter in the tenth and deepest bolgia whose “useless legs” prevent him from moving (Inf. XXX.81). Their debate is rather like the childish argument between Adamo and Sinon the Greek in this same canto. Virgil scolds Dante for becoming interested in the argument, telling him that “engaging in this kind of futile wrangling, / . . . is vulgar” (146-8). The implication is that Joyce’s readers should also be ashamed of being interested in the petty debate, which completely overshadows whatever cultural or national significance was intended by the concert in the first place. In Joyce’s mind, the Irish Revival movement in itself is vulgar and absurd. Just as in “The Sisters,” the physical traits, words, and actions of these characters reveal the nature of their sins and provide a means for Joyce to satirize the inadequacy of, in this case, Irish Nationalism as a guide. At the same time, the detailed specificity with which Joyce develops his characters is essential to portraying human nature truthfully and makes each one’s particular form of paralysis distinctive.

**Imagery of Paralysis: Joyce’s Cocytus**

A more thorough investigation of Joyce’s imagery of paralysis is the last key element to understanding his use of allegory. Although several examples of paralytic states have been
noted, it is also necessary to look at specific images that by themselves may not suggest paralysis, but when seen within their Dantean context become allegorical representations of paralysis. Several sinners throughout the *Inferno*, such as Master Adamo, mentioned above, are damned to various kinds of immobility, but Dante’s principal interest in paralysis occurs in Cocytus—the frozen core of hell that confines those who have betrayed their kin, country, guests and neighbors, and finally their lords, the most evil of whom, Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius, are chewed in the three mouths of Lucifer himself, the most infamous traitor of all time. As Dante’s ultimate vision of eternal damnation, the imagery of Cocytus is by far the most striking. An allusion to the *Inferno*’s final cantos of Cocytus can be found in nearly every story of *Dubliners*, whether it is by way of a connection to an image, a sinner, language, or Dante’s reaction to this terrible region of hell. These allusions, logically, become more numerous and explicit as Joyce progresses through his scheme of childhood to public life, innocence to corruption and evil, so that by the ending of “The Dead,” Ireland is literally snow-covered, frozen, paralyzed.

To return to “Eveline,” the main reason she doubts her decision to run away is because of a promise she made to her mother on her deathbed to keep the family together. She recalls how, in her mother’s final, mad moments, she repeated “constantly with foolish insistence: ‘Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!’” (Joyce 33). This could be an allusion to the nonsense uttered by Nimrod, one of the giants imprisoned by chains in the ninth circle of

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26 The significance of this repeated phrase has been much debated by Joyce scholars, some of whom regard it as pure nonsense, some who think it corrupt Gaelic for such phrases as “the end of pleasure is pain” or “the end of song is raving madness,” and still others who think it gibberish meant to sound phonetically like Irish (Brown 255-6). Apparently no one has considered the possibility of a Dantean parallel.
hell. Nimrod, who built the Tower of Babel and is thus responsible for God’s punishment of the confusion of languages (Musa 360), upon seeing Dante and Virgil shouts, “Raphel may amech zabi almi!” (Inf. XXXI.67). After Virgil scolds Nimrod, the giant Antaus, the only one who is not chained, lowers the pair to Cocytus, the lake of ice; in the outermost region of this lake, Caïna, are punished traitors to their kindred, which is just what Eveline thinks she would be if she ran away. She stays, instead betraying Frank and her own chance at potential happiness. In “After the Race,” the prodigal figure of the narrator and his friend Villona board a yacht for a night of carousing with a wealthy racecar driver, mechanic, and others. The story is set in summer, but Joyce writes that “the harbor lay like a darkened mirror at their feet” (40). This is an allusion to Dante’s description of Cocytus as “a lake of ice stretching beneath my feet, / more like a sheet of glass than frozen water” (Inf. XXXII.23-4); he later calls it an “icy mirror” (53). Even before the narrator goes on to feel frustrated and ashamed of his drunkenness and substantial loss of money playing cards, it is clear that he is trapped in a pattern of behavior that will inevitably lead to some sort of personal paralysis.

Whereas Joyce’s stories of childhood and adolescence may only have one or two, if any, allusions to Cocytus, his stories of adulthood and public life often contain several different references, sometimes within the same paragraph. The second to last paragraph of “A Painful Case,” for example, contains at least five allusions to the final cantos of the *Inferno*. After learning of Emily Sinico’s suicide, James Duffy thinks about how he rejected

27 The only other place in the *Inferno* in which nonsense is uttered is in Canto VII, when Plutus, the god of wealth, yells “Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn aoplee!” (VII.1). While the repetition and rhyme of this line more closely resembles “Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!,” the connection of Eveline’s mother to the canto of the prodigal and miserly does not seem particularly relevant to the story.
the one person who may potentially have loved him and realizes that he will be alone forever. As he wanders through a park, he “gnaw[s] the rectitude of his life” (Joyce 113), just as Count Ugolino “gnaw[s]” the head of his betrayer (Inf. XXXII.130). Twice he thinks that he is “outcast from life’s feast” (Joyce 113), a phrase that recalls the sinners of Tolomea, the third region of Cocytus, who invited guests to their homes for grand feasts, only to betray them. He notices “prostrate creatures,” a couple lying in the grass, much like those sinners trapped underneath the ice of Cocytus, “some lying flat, some perpendicular” (Inf. XXXIV.13), who look “like straws worked into glass” (12). Finally, Duffy sees a train and regards it as “a worm with a fiery head,” noisy with its “laborious drone” (Joyce 113). Virgil describes Lucifer as “the hairy worm / of rottenness that pierces the earth’s core” (Inf. XXXIV.107-8), and the repetitive rhythm of the train could be a parallel to the rhythmic flapping of Lucifer’s wings (50-2). In this story and throughout Dubliners, image after image of paralysis accumulates, so that it becomes almost impossible for the reader to see any potential outcome for these characters other than one that ends in immobility, stasis, and hopelessness.

As previously mentioned, the most widely recognized allusion to Dante, along with the first sentence of the book, is the final passage of the “The Dead.” Gabriel Conroy, after hearing his wife’s story of her teenaged love, reflects on the lack of passion in his life and the inevitability of death. The physical imagery that follows of tears, falling snow, crosses, and headstones, emphasizing coldness and death, firmly aligns the ending of this story with the closing cantos of the Inferno. In addition, Reynolds describes this final section of the story as “a coda that epitomizes the dialectic of living and death and thus significantly stands for the
book as a whole” (157). She observes the allusive parallel to Dante’s final canto, in which he relates his reaction upon first seeing Lucifer: “I did not die—I was not living either! / Try to imagine, if you can imagine, / me there, deprived of life and death at once” (Inf. XXXIV.25-7). Gabriel, too, feels not quite alive but not quite dead: “His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling” (Joyce 224-5). He is caught in between life and death, in a paralyzed state. Having earlier in the story sinned against kin, country, guests, and lord—each kind of betrayal punished in Cocytus—by mocking his hardworking grandfather, declaring, “Irish is not my language” (189) and “I’m sick of my own country, sick of it” (190), and behaving rudely to guests at a party, he certainly seems to deserve his punishment.

Most critics take the closing of “The Dead” as a final confirmation of the hopelessness that pervades Dubliners. Boldrini, however, by looking for more than the obvious connection to Cocytus, finds in this ending an indication of hope. She recognizes an allusion to imagery from the third canto of the Inferno, in which Dante must pass the souls of the indecisive and cross the River Acheron in order to begin his journey through hell towards salvation. Approaching the river, he sees a crowd of people who, like “in autumn when the leaves begin to fall, / one after the other . . . drop from that shore to the boat, one at a time” (Inf. III.112-13, 115). Similarly, Gabriel, realizing that “one by one they were all becoming shades,” concludes that it is “better [to] pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age” (Joyce 224). Not wanting to be one of the indecisive, living life without passion or commitment, he decides that “the time [has] come for him to set out on his journey westward” (225). Boldrini argues that this imagery and
Gabriel’s determination to “pass boldly” indicate his readiness to embark on his own journey of salvation, that it reinforces the “pattern of circularity in Dubliners, confirming that the journey will have to start again,” but this time with success (236).

Is this an indication of hope? Or is it a confirmation of the eternal imprisonment of circularity that leads to paralysis? Are these few lines enough to undo the allegory of paralysis that has been building with increasing intensity throughout the book? Gabriel’s decision to “pass boldly” still means a decision to pass through hell, and if the circular structure of the book is reinforced, then there is no certainty that Gabriel will be successful and will not just repeat the circle of damnation and paralysis. Because Gabriel is a writer, an artist, who by the end of the story seems to be the first character in the book to finally have had an epiphany leading to an authentic artistic vision, this indication of hope may be better understood as the first hint of an allegorical theme that Joyce would develop in his later fiction, beginning with Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man—the artist as the guide that is lacking in Dubliners, the guide who, like Stephen Dedalus, has the ability to “encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Portrait 275-6). In Dubliners, however, Joyce’s use of Dantinean structure, setting, character, and imagery is so insistent and powerful that his allegory of hopeless paralysis still predominates.
V. APPLYING THE ALLEGORY: “A LITTLE CLOUD” AS ARTISTIC PARALYSIS

In order to gain a more coherent sense of how Dante influences Joyce’s allegory of paralysis, it is useful to apply the criteria of structure, setting, character, and paralytic imagery established above to one of Joyce’s stories. “A Little Cloud” is an interesting example to study because of its multiple Dantean associations, its subversion of Dante’s allegory of salvation, and its contribution to the larger allegory of paralysis, and also because of the microcosmic development within the story of a more specific kind of paralysis—the paralyzed state of art in Ireland.

This story is also a notable example because in it Joyce literally participates in the Modernist rejection of previous literary models, particularly Naturalism and Romanticism. Joyce satirizes Naturalism through the character of Ignatius Gallaher, the successful expatriot journalist who tells Little Chandler stories of the sinful cities he has visited: “Ignatius Gallaher puffed thoughtfully at his cigar and then, in a calm historian’s tone, he proceeded to sketch for his friend some pictures of the corruption which was rife abroad. He summarized the vices of many capitals” (Joyce 73). Given that Gallaher is understood in the story, even by Little Chandler, to be arrogant, “vulgar” (72), and “patronising” (76), it would seem that Joyce found something lacking in Naturalism and did not intend to perfect that style in *Dubliners*, as some critics have contended. Little Chandler, on the other hand, represents Joyce’s view of the typical Irish writer—overly sentimental, romantic, and melancholy. Joyce once complained in a letter to his brother, “What is with all these Irish writers . . . what the blazes are they always sniveling about?” (Ellman 78). Little Chandler believes “the melancholy of his soul” (Joyce 79) makes him well-suited to be a poet, and imagines critics
praising the “wistful sadness” and “Celtic note” of his work (69). He also admires a particularly poor Romantic poem by Byron, “On the Death of a Young lady, Cousin of the Author, and Very dear to Him,” written when the poet was just fourteen years old. Little Chandler’s unrefined literary taste and weak talent make him a figure of ridicule in the story as well. After eschewing these literary traditions, only Dante remains as a viable literary model, which Joyce uses to construct his ironic allegory of artistic paralysis.

Structure

The first of Joyce’s stories of adulthood, “A Little Cloud” perfectly demonstrates the typical circular structure of *Dubliners*. Little Chandler, the meek and mild protagonist, bored with his job at the King’s Inns, longs to be a poet, to be accepted and understood by “a little circle of kindred minds” (Joyce 68). He goes to Corless’s, a high class bar and restaurant, to meet with his old friend Ignatius Gallaher, who has made a name for himself abroad in journalism and is returning to visit Ireland for the first time since he left the country eight years ago. As they talk, Little Chandler grows jealous of his friend’s success. He returns home late, and his wife, annoyed with him for having forgotten to bring home tea and sugar, places their sleeping baby in his arms and leaves to run the errand. As Little Chandler tries to read Byron’s poem, the child wakens and begins to cry; in an epiphany of frustration, he realizes that he will never be able to accomplish anything artistic and shouts at the baby to stop crying. The baby screams and cries so loudly that Annie runs home and snatches him up.

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28 See Corinna del Greco Lobner’s article “A ‘New Life’ for ‘A Little Cloud’: Byron, Dante, and the Meanderteller,” for an interesting discussion of the romantic influence of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* in both “A Little Cloud” and Byron’s poem.
with an angry, accusatory glare, and Little Chandler backs into the shadows of the room with “tears of remorse” in his eyes (81). By the end of the story, he is in the same static state as he was in the beginning, still unable to realize his poetic ambitions; the only change is that he is slightly more regretful and bitter about his circumstances in life as a father and a husband to an unloving wife, which he cannot change. He is paralyzed.

Setting

Critics, including Reynolds, have identified the title of the story, “A Little Cloud,” as an allusion to Dante’s canto of the deceivers and false counselors, in which sinners—most famously Ulysses—are each trapped inside a flame. Dante includes a biblical allusion in this canto. He likens the flames in which the sinners are concealed to the prophet Elisha, who, trying to watch Elijah depart for heaven in a fiery chariot “could not see more than the flame alone / like a small cloud once it had risen high” (Inf. XXVI.38-9). The imagery with which Joyce first describes the setting of the story reinforces this Dantean connection; reflecting on how Gallaher has become a “brilliant figure on the London Press,” Little Chandler gazes out of his office window and sees that “The glow of a late autumn sunset covered the grass plots and walks . . . it flickered upon all the moving figures—on the children who ran screaming along the gravel paths and on everyone who passed through the gardens” (Joyce 65-6). The imagery is similar to Dante’s as he describes his first view of the flames that crowd the eighth _bolgia_, which resemble fireflies “flickering in the valley down below, / . . . with just so many flames all the eighth _bolgia_ / shone brilliantly . . . each flame moves itself along” (Inf. XXVI.29-32, 40). Using setting to establish this particular correlation to Dante is important
because Little Chandler, reflecting as he walks to Corless’s on his desire to become a poet, decides to ask Gallaher for advice; the immediate situation of “A Little Cloud” within a Dantine atmosphere of false counselors serves as a warning that Gallaher may prove a misleading or inadequate advisor.

**Character: Ignatius Gallaher**

Indeed, Joyce likens Gallaher to Dante’s Ulysses. Just as Dante’s Ulysses is “concealed within [this] moving fire” (*Inf.* XXVI.47), Gallaher “emerg[es] after some time from the clouds of smoke in which he had taken refuge” (Joyce 73). Just as Ulysses sets out on his journey because obligations to his family could not “quench deep in [himself] the burning wish / to know the world and have experience / of all man’s vices, of all human worth” (*Inf.* XXVI.97-9), Gallaher does not want to marry, insisting, “I’m going to have my fling first and see a bit of life and the world before I put my head in the sack—if I ever do” (Joyce 76). And just as Ulysses exhorts his tired crew to push their voyage further by urging, “do not deny / yourself experience of what is there beyond, / behind the sun, in the world they call unpeopled” (*Inf.* XXVI.115-7), Gallaher puts Little Chandler down for being “the very same serious person” he has always been and urges him that he should “knock about a bit in the world . . . Go to London or Paris: Paris, for choice. That’d do you good” (Joyce 71).

In Dante’s fictional addition to the traditional epic tale of Ulysses’s journey, Ulysses deceives himself about his own human limitations and attempts to push his crew to sail farther than humans have ever gone before, straight to the “mountain shape” of Purgatory (*Inf.* XXVI.133); as they approach the mountain, the ship gets caught in a whirlwind and goes
under. Ulysses’s self-deceiving hubris causes him to lead his men to their deaths; he proves to be an inadequate guide and is thus punished in this *bolgia* of hell as a deceiver and false counselor. Gallaher is equally arrogant, “patronizing” to both Little Chandler and Ireland, fascinated with the vices and immorality he has experienced abroad, and in a way almost cruel in the repeated advice to travel and experience life that he gives to a man who he knows is naturally timid and tied down with a family (Joyce 76). Little Chandler becomes “disillusioned” with the “brilliant figure” he had looked to as a guide (71). To emphasize in yet another way Gallaher’s inadequacy as a guide, Joyce also associates him with Virgil, particularly in his physical appearance—a logical choice, since Ulysses, hidden inside his flame, cannot be seen. Little Chandler, who has not seen his friend in eight years,29 notes that “his face [is] heavy, pale, and clean-shaven”; he has an “unhealthy pallor,” and his lips are “colourless” (70). This seems a clear reference to Virgil, who, as a shade, is obviously pale; as Dante first sees him coming towards him in the dark wood where he has become lost, he describes him as “one grown faint, perhaps from too much silence” (*Inf.* I.63). Little Chandler had hoped that Gallaher could give him advice about how to become a successful writer. Thus, by associating him with Virgil, who is not only Dante’s spiritual guide through hell, but also his most highly revered stylistic and poetic model, Joyce subverts a central source of authority and guidance in the *Inferno*, calling attention to the lack of both spiritual and artistic guidance in the modern world and particularly in Ireland.

29 Joyce repeats several times that Gallaher has been gone for eight years, reinforcing his connection to the deceivers and false counselors, who are in the eighth pocket of *Malebolge*. 
Interestingly, Joyce also connects Gallaher with Dantean imagery of another group of sinners, one that has even more serious implications for his vision of the paralyzed, inauthentic condition of art in Ireland. Gallaher physically resembles Dante’s usurers, who are punished in the burning sand of the seventh circle of hell for being violent to art and nature. Describing the usurers, Dante notices that “around each sinner’s neck a pouch was hung, / each of a different color, with a coat of arms, and fixed on these they seemed to feast their eyes” (Inf. XVII.55-7). Ignatius Gallaher’s “eyes, which were of a bluish slate-colour, relieved his unhealthy pallor and shone out plainly above the vivid orange tie he wore” (Joyce 70). Joyce highlights the man’s eyes to suggest the intensity of the usurer’s feasting eyes, and he uses the orange tie as a modern substitute for the money bags tied around their necks. Although the allusion is quite subtle, it is repeated for emphasis; later in the story, Little Chandler tells Gallaher that he thinks he’ll “put [his] head in the sack,” or marry, someday, and Gallaher “turn[s] his orange tie and slate-blue eyes full upon his friend” (76). The allusion makes sense, as both the usurers and Gallaher are obsessed with money. Gallaher initially leaves Ireland because he has money problems and has gotten mixed up in “some shady affair, some money transaction” (67), and he now seems to enjoy the success his career has brought him primarily because it allows him to lead an extravagant lifestyle of travel and “gaity” (71). He toasts Little Chandler, wishing him joy and “tons of money” (74), and he claims that if he ever does marry, he will only marry “money,” a woman with a “good fat account at the bank” (76), insisting, “When I go about a thing, I mean business, I tell you” (77). He seems to be motivated entirely by money and to think that anything he has to do to get more money is just a matter of business.
As Virgil explains earlier in the *Inferno*, usury is offensive to God because “From Art and Nature man was meant to take / his daily bread to live . . . but the usurer, adopting other means, / scorns Nature in herself and in her pupil, / Art—he invests his hope in something else”: money (*Inf.* XI. 106-7, 109-11). And furthermore, usurers sin violently, which is why they are forced to squat upon the burning sand, subjected to the eternal fiery rain. While Dante takes “Art” in an Aristotelian sense to mean “human industry” (Musa 175), the concept of violence against art, applied to Joyce, has important implications for his allegory of paralysis. Although he apparently has considerable “talent” (Joyce 65), the writing Gallaher does now is not truly art, and the attitude with which he does it could be considered violent against true art; even Little Chandler at one point thinks bitterly that all his friend writes is “mere tawdry journalism” (75). Gallaher is thus an example of a poor guide for Little Chandler and of a sinner against art, as well as a representation of what results from the paralysis of art in Ireland; only capable of finding success as a journalist outside the country, he has become “vulgar,” even in Little Chandler’s admiring eyes (72).

**Character: Little Chandler**

Little Chandler’s meek, hesitant nature and constant questioning of his own ability to succeed as a poet places him amongst the indecisive, much like Eveline; these stories are similar in that they are primarily focused on the interior journeys of their protagonists. Yet Little Chandler’s indecision seems to have more severe consequences, since he is plagued by a jealousy that is not seen in “Eveline.” Despite feeling disillusioned with Gallaher’s “new gaudy manner,” he regards him “enviously” (72). His envy even turns to pride: “He felt
acutely the contrast between his own life and his friend’s, and it seemed to him unjust.

Gallaher was his inferior in birth and education. He was sure that he could do something better than his friend had ever done, or could ever do . . . if he only got the chance” (75). In the canto of the indecisive, Virgil explains to Dante: “these wretches have no hope of truly dying, / and this blind life they lead is so abject / it makes them envy every other fate” (Inf. III.46-8). A character representative of Dublin’s adulthood, Little Chandler, feeling his time running out, regards his own indecision much more bitterly and with more awareness than does Eveline, an adolescent. Whereas Eveline, not fully understanding her own fear, looks to God for an answer and is disappointed, Little Chandler does not even think of God, clearly recognizing that what holds him back is his own “unfortunate timidity” (Joyce 76). One gets the sense at the end of the story, when he despairs, “It was useless, useless! He was a prisoner for life,” that it is not the first time he has had such an epiphany of frustration (80). Not only does the severity of sin progressively increase as *Dubliners* progresses through childhood to public life, but so also does the intensity of the paralysis and the profundity with which characters understand their own fates.

In fact, this profundity at the end of the story may seem unexpected, given how unassuming and naïve Little Chandler appears to be at the beginning of the story. But understanding that there is another layer of Dantean complexity to Little Chandler’s character illuminates how he arrives at such a hopeless conclusion. Because of his gradual development from naivety to acute understanding and because of his notion of himself as a poet, Little Chandler becomes a highly ironic allegorical version of Dante himself. From the beginning of the story through his meeting with Gallaher, Little Chandler resembles Dante
the Pilgrim, as he appears in the first two cantos of the *Inferno*. He is thirty-two years old, close enough to being “midway along the journey of our life,” as is Dante at the opening of his poem (*Inf.* I.1). And, although timid and temperate, not disposed to sinful excess, his outlook on life suggests that he, too, is “in a dark wood,” having “wandered off from the straight path” (*Inf.* I.2-3). Looking out his window at the autumn scene makes him “[think] of life; and (as always happen[s] when he thought of life) he bec[omes] sad” (Joyce 66). He is easily frightened and sometimes at night “court[s] the causes of his fear,” walking down dark, narrow streets, only to be so troubled by the silence and the wandering figures that he “tremble[s] like a leaf” (67), much like Dante, who, lost in the dark wood, feels “his heart plunged deep in fear” (*Inf.* I.15).

Walking towards Corless’s to meet Gallaher, Little Chandler imagines that the houses are like a band of tramps huddled together for warmth; since it is his dream to be a poet, “the thought that a poetic moment had touched him [takes] life within him like an infant hope” (Joyce 68), and he believes that he has the ability to succeed. Dante, too, feels hopeful when, emerging from the dark wood, he sees a “hilltop shawled / in morning rays of light” that promises salvation (*Inf.* I.16-7). But Dante’s way is blocked by a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, allegorical figures of fraud, violence, and appetite, and he loses hope; fortunately for Dante, Virgil appears, sent on a divine mission to guide him through hell and show him the way to salvation (Musa 73). Little Chandler, expecting Gallaher to be a helpful source of advice, finds him an inappropriate guide. An ironic perversion of Virgil, Gallaher also

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30 “The imaginary date of the poem’s beginning is the night before Good Friday in 1300, the year of the papal jubilee proclaimed by Boniface VIII. Born in 1265, Dante was thirty-five years old, which is one half of man’s Biblical life span of seventy years” (Musa 72).
embodies the dangers of all three of Dante’s beasts through his inadequate counsel, his violence against art, and his lifestyle of “immorality” (73). Little Chandler loses confidence in his poetic ambitions, just as Dante in the second canto of the *Inferno* doubts that he is worthy of the journey and fears that if he should undertake it “it might turn out an act of folly” (*Inf.* II.35). To encourage him, Virgil tells Dante about the three heavenly ladies, Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice, who have pitied him and judged him worthy of the journey and asks, “So what is wrong? Why, why do you delay? / Why are you such a coward in your heart, / why aren’t you bold and free of all your fear” (*Inf.* II.121-3). Hope renewed, Dante sets out on his journey to salvation. Little Chandler, lacking a guide, is forced to ask himself, “What was it that stood in his way?” and, recognizing that it is his own timidity, “boldly” takes a final drink, gets in a jab at Gallaher for not wanting to marry, and heads home, ready to embark on a poetic journey of his own (Joyce 76). But, consistent with the circular structure of frustration and the allegory of paralysis, his journey is not to be successful.

**Artistic Paralysis: Ironic Epiphany and the Unreliability of Language**

Despite the envy and pride that Little Chandler displays in his thoughts about Gallaher, he has up to this point been quite similar to the lost and naïve version of Dante at the opening of the *Inferno*, and despite the absence in his life of a guide and a muse, he has not lost all hope; he still thinks of what doors could open for him “if he could only write a book and get it published” (79). But the tone of the story changes in the final scene, becoming gradually more regretful and hopeless, and it is in this scene that he becomes a truly ironic representation of Dante. Once at home, Little Chandler is confronted by his wife,
Annie—an inversion of Dante’s Beatrice, the heavenly muse and protector. Rather than offering Little Chandler inspiration and encouragement, Annie seems to be the source of much of his insecurity. Virgil describes Beatrice as having “eyes of light more bright than any star” (Inf. II.55); Little Chandler looks at a photograph of Annie and finds her eyes cold and passionless (Joyce 76). The disappointment caused by Gallaher is something that Little Chandler can brush off, but his growing disenchantment with Annie and his domestic life is clearly more debilitating.

Little Chandler’s frustrated epiphany at the end of the story finally turns him into an ironic version of the Dante of the Inferno’s final cantos, the pilgrim who is receiving his last lesson about the nature of sin and human depravity and now has a clearer understanding of how divine justice manifests itself in hell. The clarity with which Little Chandler understands his fate—his imprisonment in the roles of husband and father that will always prevent him from achieving his poetic goals—matches the clarity of understanding that Dante has gained by the end of his journey through hell. But the knowledge they have gained has very different consequences. Usually so timid, Little Chandler, in a moment of pure frustration, shouts at his son to stop crying. This sudden outburst of anger is rather like Dante’s outburst in the Antenora region of Cocytus against the shade of Bocca Degli Abati, who in life had betrayed Florence. Dante tries to get him to reveal his name by fiercely pulling out his hair (Inf. XXXII.103-5). But Dante’s anger is a righteous condemnation of a justly damned sinner; Little Chandler’s anger is purely selfish, and is thus ironic. He becomes a traitor to kin, as is clear from the imagery in the story’s closing paragraphs. He looks into Annie’s “eyes and his heart close[s] together as he met the hatred in them,” and “tears of remorse” start to his own
eyes (Joyce 80-1). Dante says that in Caïna each sinner’s “mouth gave testimony to the cold, / the eyes, to sadness welling in the heart” (Inf. XXXII.37-8); he sees two brothers stuck together, whose tears freeze in the cold, “locking the pair more tightly” (48). Kinsmen who betrayed each other must suffer together, just as Little Chandler feels imprisoned by his family, and his outburst has made his situation worse. The quickness with which his son’s cries cause him to understand his condition of paralysis implies that Little Chandler has had this realization before and that throughout the story he has been deceiving and lying to himself; he is, in a sense, no less a deceiver than Ulysses.

Joyce’s incorporation of imagery and themes from the canto of the deceivers and the canto of the traitors to kin and country establishes another important connection to Dante that is central to his theme in this story of artistic paralysis. In these cantos, Dante demonstrates concerns about his poetry being able to convey accurately what he has seen and learned in hell about human nature and divine punishment of sin. He calls attention in the canto of deceivers, for example, to the dangerous power that language can have when used with the intention of deceiving or manipulating others, as Ulysses does to convince his crew to continue the voyage and to convince himself of his own infallibility. Preparing to describe what he has seen in the eighth bolgia, Dante cautions himself, “more than ever I restrain my talent / lest it run a course that virtue has not set; / for if a lucky star or something better / has given me this good, I must not misuse it” (Inf. XXVI.21-4). Dante’s concern about misusing his talent creates yet another ironic contrast to Little Chandler, who is never quite sure “what idea he wishe[s] to express” and has to strain so hard to achieve even one poetic moment (Joyce 68). More importantly, Dante’s warning about the misuse of language is exactly the
same as the Modernist concern about the unreliability and instability of language that Joyce has raised consistently throughout *Dubliners*, as when he illustrates the circular, seductive language of the old man in “An Encounter.”

Similarly, when Dante tries to describe Cocytus for the first time, he calls attention to the serious and difficult nature of his task: how can human language accurately capture the horror of the deepest region of hell and the suffering of the most evil sinners to have ever existed? Joyce asks the same fundamental questions about language, but rather than asking them directly, he implies them through the use of ellipses, unfinished sentences, fragmentation, and narrative ambiguity, as demonstrated, for instance, in “The Sisters.” Preparing to put into words the terrible things he has seen, Dante writes, “To talk about the bottom of the universe / the way it truly is, is no child’s play, / no task for tongues that gurgle baby-talk” (*Inf.* XXXII.7-9). Joyce could not have chosen a more ironic obstacle to Little Chandler’s artistic aspirations than to have the cries of an innocent child destroy his entire endeavor. Clearly, Little Chandler is incapable of authentic artistic invention, not only because of his familial imprisonment and lack of guidance, but also because of his own deficient talent. His artistic paralysis comes in part from without, but more from within. But because he fails to recognize his own artistic inadequacy, blaming his frustration entirely on external circumstances, Little Chandler is trapped, as are all Dubliners, within the circular structure of hell, doomed to repeat the cycle of frustration and failure over and over again. Developed through Joyce’s use of Dantecan structure, setting, characters, and imagery, the theme of artistic paralysis in this story is complete, as is another episode in the book’s overarching allegory of paralysis.
VI. Conclusion

A close reading of the Dantean intertext in *Dubliners* clearly reveals that James Joyce finds in Dante Alighieri much more than a convenient framework for categorizing sin. He finds a literary forefather who in his own time revolutionized the Italian language, medieval definitions of allegory, and religious emphasis on the personal responsibility of individuals to understand their own moral depravity in order to reform and achieve spiritual salvation. Sharing Dante’s concerns and interests in language, allegory, and art’s fundamental purpose of truthfully conveying human nature and experience, Joyce assimilates Dante’s work into his own in order to construct a looking glass in which the Irish people—and all readers, for that matter—can recognize themselves and realize the need to change. Joyce’s Modernist understanding of the world forces him to imbue his text with ambiguity, creating a vision of a world in which language is unstable and there is no clear moral or spiritual guide to follow and no certainty of salvation. But it is Joyce’s respect for Dante, reflected in his meaningful incorporation of Dante’s themes and imagery into his own structure, settings, characters, and imagery, combined with his subversion—sometimes ironic and even satirical perversion—of Dante that differentiates Joyce from his Modernist contemporaries and indeed all of his predecessors who shared a fascination with Dante. True to Modernist ideals, Joyce forges his own original vision, an allegory of paralysis. But without Dante’s influence, *Dubliners* would not have come close to being the complexly ambiguous, polysemous, and rich work of art that it is.
VII. WORKS CITED


